The Performance of an Encounter: The Body, Video

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The performance in question is made up of only a single element: a giant screen installed in the back of a dark room. Video images of floating blocks of light are projected on a black background, progressively replaced by electronic snow, which scans the screen from bottom to top and from top to bottom. The audio track emits a continuous pulsation resembling the constant but rapid beating of a human heart. The crucial element of the installation is the placement and disposition of this screen, which is installed close to the ground, and conceived within human dimensions. The screen solicits the body of the viewer in its entirety. In front of this electronic ROTHKO the viewer is enveloped in a sonorous oscillation between the visible and the invisible. He or she is drawn into the screen, and a landscape or a human figure is formed in the light of subjective experience of potentiality, which is impossible to see, or be made perceptible. 

These Interférences ménoniques (Mnemonic Interferences), created by Ariane Tché, in 1982, are an image production machine, images which cancel each other out, like a fleeting memory. They plunge us into the universe of what we now call the new images, defining them as fragments. In this work, one doesn't know exactly how to view and which ceaselessly disturb the gaze (through the insertion of hallucinations and phantasmal imagery) and the body (whose limits are becoming increasingly hybridized with the electronic). As such they are like questions thrown out at the spectator: What is it to see?, What is the body?, To whom does the being belong?...

So what do we mean by - different body? One must first specify that the body of La desserte is not just any body, since it is the body of woman (in an iconography borrowed from MATISSE). This means that the dematerialization of the image is not just another project or reference to the body as a new body emerging from a pre-existing one. It means that the body is constituted of a body that exists prior to its representation. The videographic performance of the body is the movement made by the body as biological unit, it is that which does not cease to call into question the meaning of the body as an image produced by a skin, and which is based upon the skin itself, of whose functional nature based on which one distinguishes the so-called sick body from the so-called healthy body) is to ensure a coherence, a distinction and distance between the self and the other.

The destabilization of the body in video may take on different forms, but mostly it takes on the form of two simultaneous operations: on the one hand, a putting into question of the body's constitution, and on the other, an always failed attempt to reconstruct its borders. It is as though it were no longer possible to fully and permanently ensure the impenetrability of the body, its impenetrability, its distinctiveness, its difference. The destabilization is, therefore, and this is my hypothesis, that which triggers an uncertainty as to its limit; it is an image which raises these questions: Where does the body end and where does technology begin? How does one distinguish identity from alterity? These are questions which Mnemonic Interferences, and video in general, try to answer and end in a confusion of sorts, but a failure which I would nonetheless qualify as productive.

This question of the limit also brings with it the question of the visible. The destabilization is not yet developed on the level of image production of content. It is not only to make visible a different body, but it must also put into play a difference which modifies the status of the visible. In video the visible, as the field of that which is seen, is that which can be seen, that which can be perceived, or is made perceptible to the senses, is that which is constituted precisely where the body fails to maintain itself as a unit. In other words, the video destabilization of the body does not consist of a - different body (those bodies which the norm excludes from subjectivity - women, gays to name but two groups), but also of a - body - called into question by the vaccination of the visible, that is a body, which although it appears as actualized in an image, fails to be stabilized by this actualization. The key question, within the context of this inquiry into the destabilization of the body in video, is there something that the folio which represents a different body? Or to put yet another way, and here I paraphrase and reformulate the Italian philosopher Giorgio AGAMBEN: How can one confer the visibility of the body, the incorrigible (the dimension in which the image would be thought in the light of what must exist as potentiality) but an - ethics? It is in the end a matter of thinking the image in the light of subjective experience of potentiality, through a laying bare of the inactuality which is proper to being.

A second video, La desserte blanche (1980) (The white sideboard by Thierry KUNTZEL, is a realisation in this respect. Here again we are dealing with a representation of the body which is being formed directly out of the tension of the visible and the invisible. In a process of materialization and dematerialization. Here, the images' workings are taken as a clue to a figurative body which is the body's failure to stabilize the visible. If this failure is what allows for the body's future actualizations, it is because it corresponds to the body's incapacity to ensure its border - the - skin - which is not to be confused with the grain of the image and the electronic scanning. Through this electronization of the body, the visible does not only bring the body into view, it also shows dissolution, which is, moreover, never irreversible.

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For Judith Butler the body is the materialization of the norms with which the subject identifies in order to constitute him/herself. But it also corresponds to that which exceeds these norms, to the extent that it is this element which never completely explains or exhausts the body: it materializes. To put it differently, the body fails to be the linguistic or visual sign which describes it. It is incapable, in a culture where the dominant sexual organization is heterosexual, to reproduce, for example, the signifier "the feminine" which it seeks, by necessity or obligation. This means that the body re-signifies, re-constitutes the signs which it is supposed to reproduce in the moment in which it materializes.

This failure to imitate the norm makes evident the performative dimension of language and for Butler as for Phelan (the two theorists cross paths here) it is here that the condition for a possibility of change resides. Thus, for Phelan, if the function of representation is to reproduce the referent, performance is a representation without the possibility of reproduction. This definition of performance is an elaboration of the one developed by John Langshaw Austin in his book How to do things with words (1962), in which he establishes the famous opposition between constitutive and performative statements. On the linguistic plane, this constitutive statement describes things in the world, while the performative statement endows language with a particular power: saying something in fact corresponds to doing (instead of describing) that which is said. The performative simultaneously becomes the act to which it refers, as I promise, I authorize you, which is a promise, an authorization as such.

In video, one can thus speak of a performance of the body (and not just simply a representation) when the image is what makes, the body, that is to say when it produces the body, makes it act. Several years ago Jean-Paul Fargier spoke of the "machine beings" of video. He was right to mis­ taken: that these bodies are ghostlike is of no matter since their effects are real, as in THEZE's Mnemonic interferences and Kuntzel's La desserte, in which the body is seen as the active receptor by the subject, whose corporeality is put into question, even if the signer fails to produce that which it promises to produce. Interferences and La desserte, moreover, integrate this failure, since here the truth of the body is always confused (in varying degrees, and more manifestly) with the body it represents. The failure, the obviousness of the sign - body, is that which is opened up on its corporeality, re-identification and variation.

In following an ethics which joins an aesthetics of video, Butler argues in the end run that the new images must allow for the infinite diversity of the body's re-actualizations, to which the individual is accustomed in relation to the signs which it seeks but fails to materialize. This diversity is a part of logic of connection, to the extent that it disturbs the unity of the subject which is the domination of the discrete other and also to the extent that the materiality of video is always confused (in varying degrees, and more manifestly) with the body it represents. The distance which separates language, video and the body, is the question of identification. Identification is a doubt on the plenitude of what we see; it is perhaps at this precise moment that the image, according to Didi-Huberman's formulation, is beginning to look at us:8 and thereby destabilizing us.

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10 Ibid., p. 135.


15 PHelan, p. 3.


17 Butler, p.103.


Translated from French by Bernard SCHÖTZE.