The Body of Dance and Its Interactions with the Machine

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A metallic structure is being filled up with images, light, and sound, while a dancer seems to be orchestrating the whole event with her movements 1. Le Partage des Peaux : What is it all about? I kept wondering for a while. And after that day, I kept wondering and thinking on what you will hear, "I told myself. Before our first conversation took place, I already had several ideas in mind, those I had availed myself of in order to understand, to see, to remember what had only lasted 25 minutes. As any one does, of course. What had I seen? What had I heard? Had I experienced anything that was not respected from the work? There was the body...the choreography...the chorographies...and some technological mediations I could not really explain. The mystery would be resolved later: there was no mystery, they were the most elementary videographic and infographic techniques.

One thing was clear to me since the very beginning: the materiality/immateriality of the body, the core of the experience of the performer and the technological devices were there to amplify its qualities, the lived ones. Thus, one should be suspicious of any discussion of the work which does not acknowledge the presence of the body and its experience of the technological in terms of its relationship with the technological devices in an integrated way. I realized that questions such as: What is this performance about? What does it mean? How does it mean? - could only be answered by going through that site in which all originates and for which the exploring into the virtual world are valuable: the lived body of dance, which unfolds the message from appearance to disappearance always concerning a threat of loss and a sense of limitedness.

I want to restore to the performer that space of signification from which art historical and social-cultural discourses have her/him banished. In this way: "...what else ought to be done if we are talking Art?" The following reflections are meant for contemporary works which both resist categorization and devise a framework for discussing the experience of the performer. The representation and the projection of the body of dance has been put into a state of crisis.

To write about performance is an acknowledgment of our impossibility to fully grasp what the experience of reality is. Despite our efforts to approach the work in its totality or to gain more knowledge of it through the interactions with the performer, we are constantly faced with the limitedness and failure in securing a complete reading of the work. To render an experience meaningful becomes an exercise on loss and a continuous attempt to move beyond one's own boundaries.

Bodies acting beyond appearance: between the visible and the invisible

C'est un paradoxe de relais des peaux, naturelles et artificielles, que l'amplification du langage physique aura lieu. Le relais, ou ce partage des peaux, redonna un caractère [...]. 2

1 The last documentation of Stephane DECOSTERE. Lecons en Moderaty, was to be shown in March, 1995, on the occasion of the 10th Biennale in Venice. DECOSTERE has worked on this project with Arthur and MarieLouise KROKER, Paul GROOT, Gert LOVINK, and MARJELE ANTHI. Henri-Pierre JEUDY, Ch. A. KLEIN, PHILIPPE GRANDIEUX and Thierry KUNTZEL.
2 Godard-Sollers: L'entretien de Jean-Paul FARGIER, Hong Kong Song de Robert CAHEN, and most recently J'étais Hamlet, a portrait of Heimer MULLER, by Dominik BARBIER. The political, the social, the theoretical, brought together the past few years in America under the express signature of the term ‘infographic’. The first set produced in France, Déjà vu was co-produced by BRT (Belgium), VPRO (Holland) and the INA. It was broadcast in Belgium and Holland; in Paris it was presented in the framework of programs from the Association in the field of Communication and the Centre for the Comparative Study of Art and Technology, headed by Georges-Georges POMPIDOU 1. In fact, television preserves in its turn its independence from television: in Canada, where the cultural landscape is socially and politically engaged, the CBC English Network refused to broadcast Three Ways to the Horizon by DECOSTERE. Coming from the Wrong Side, which treats the economic links between Western Canada and the tourism generated by the people of the First Nations.

3 The broadcast of X WORKS took place in March, 1994, and at the Centre George-Pompidou in June, 1994.

Traduit du français par Richard RIEWER

Can the body of dance be thought only in terms of surface? Is it surface? Does it become surface once it is translated with video and in the photographic image? These questions are projected onto the two transparent screens hanging from the structure? Are we to deal here with a body-self or a skin-self? Does this distinction conflict with the object of our concern? It does, since at the heart of the experience of the performer, the representation lies the lived body of dance, one of whose phenomenal appearance, and psychological effects, extend beyond the level of surface. This is where bodies with their respective dimensions constitute the motifs of the multimedia event according to CHOIENIE: the real body, the videographic body and the infographic or virtual one. Their respective dimensions, it is worth adding, are specific. Their dimensions, as the audience experiences it, but of four dimensions, four spatial variables none of which is time. Thus, the event unfolds within a conceptual realm whose impossibility (for our senses) already points towards that notion of the body lying beyond mere perception and visible completeness: the body-in-progress, the body which is in a state of becoming, the lived body: the simple notion of surface (as skin, as screen) must be expanded.

Our point of departure is then a body dressed up in cables, playing the game of interactivity. The sense of the performance lies in the audience avid for high-tech deployments. The body of dance is too demanding and complex for the actual state of technological development. High-tech's empty promises are made evident. The illusion of totality is encouraged, the organic and the synthetic which defies the idea that the machine devours the body, that the lived body disappears into the machine. A body in action seems to be lost, not to disappear, but to unfold into a virtual world which unfolds into a virtual world which unfolds into a virtual world, to extend its prolongations, to provide it with equally existential representations. The body of dance— lived, in flux— cannot be thought of as an alienated object and the organic/synthetic dichotomy is broken into a constitutive one which is exchange and amplification evolving around the body of action whose autonomy is confirmed. Thus, the lived body ought not to be thought of as something external to technology, nor as an extension of it, but intimately linked to the realm of the experience of the technical itself.

The lived body is the offcenter location of the experience of the body. It is the site of exclusion and acceptance of the possible. The notion of an original representation is thus permanently undermined. Nevertheless, despite this multiplicity, the body of dance is grasped as an empirical subject, a sensory object, a technological device, and if we were not for the fact that the lived body permanently enacts all the realm of the possible it would be cancelled as a performative referent, as one which achieves representation in the place of it.

Once the body/dance dichotomy is overcome, a sense of agency is recovered by the performer. It is an individualized one, non-idealized, which is meaningful only in multiple ways, not just as an instrument for repetition and imitation. The performer as imitator ceases to be a creative agent and just perpetrates the transmission of a norm, and only becomes one when she/he is able to enact her/his creation with her/his own body/sense of self. It is the body's lack of definition and the constant state of becoming which provides it with new significations. The body is in the making, thus it is the body as transparent medium to the body as an opaque site of production.

The lived body is the condition for the technological amplification, which becomes a site of representation and of the ‘thought’ of the body. With this, the question of visibility emerges. We strive to know the body we see, and the body we know is there despite not seeing it. The gap between the representation and the body that is available through our visual apparatus. Our senses fail to successfully prove that what we see is. The world cannot be equated to our experience of it, nor the notion of the body to the one we think we
The lived-choreography and its translations are the expression of constraint and overcoming of that constraint through a constant state of becoming and not-yetness which open up a horizon of futurity — the possible — for the performer. Under the condition that the reproduction is other without reproduction, that they escape the confirmation of a fixed given — norm, movement, state of being — which would constitute the ultimate limitation in the order of interactivity. Using choreographies and representing the relational choreographies appear as the enactments of the realm of the possible selves of the performer’s dance as processes of selection and exclusion.

The object and subject of the performance is thus a visible and invisible body at once. The former dressed up in cables and sensors, covered by a make up of phosphorescent lines, which point towards the artificial and synthetic screens. But beyond that metaphoric construction of a sense of body as surface — skin screen — one encounters the latter, not necessarily deeper, which is revealed to the imagination and the senses through the set of interactions that serve to question the reversible notion of the body which encourages such a voyage into the insubstantial.

The spatial metaphor enacted by the performer is one that stems from a notion of space as a human lived quality, as an element that cannot stand by its own or outside dance itself. The notion of hyper-space is proposed as a medium through which the technologically mediated lived body becomes new mobile and new immune. The performer is placed within a privileged view point within such a spatial configuration. The lived body of dance itself and the spatial configuration within which its infinite signification unfolds make such possibility possible to be taken. The body may be thought in terms of interactions, continuous displacement, discentment, accommodated by the sense of constraint and limitedness and the instability of being and passage of diction, a process of materialization which is never fully stabilized in time.

A perpetual state of becoming: an emergent condition of the interaction

The body of the performance escapes the repetitiveness of registration, of something that has already been crated, through its own possibility of action and reproduction breaking away from mere repetition. The process through which the dancer moves beyond herself overcoming her own limitedness is amplified and made visible to our eyes through the technological devices. The dancer is captured in that larger-than-self psychogeographic display in which a tension between the lived body and its representations is maintained within a horizon of total openness.

The performer is thus located in some external relation to technology since it is grounded in her. Technology is part of the performer’s concern with the being at play. The limits of the self or body boundaries are thus pushed by therapists and the whole of the performer’s body is amplified — or body — knowledge is extended through the continuous redefinition of the self — or body — boundaries. A larger identity appears as the performer meets all the possible selves — in the interaction dance/electronic medium. Consequently, selves that are not yet might be real made through recognition as well as misrecognition while dancing and interacting with the machine.

The effect of the center position of the body of dance is further stressed in the performance by the interaction between the lived body and the technological devices. In particular, a unified choreography is displaced in favour of a non-synchronized and interactive one. Chance acquires a new meaning as the product of an intentionality allowing for discovery through disturbance of the sense of rhythm and symmetry in the process of translation. This expresses the entire space of the body of self, and the endless ways in which the body lived existence might be within an expanded field of experience. The electronic amplification is the representation of the amplification of the body that already takes place in dance and the condition of existence (escaping cancellation) of the self/fes in the performance. It opens up a redefinition of vision parallel to the enactment of the body’s capability of moving beyond a specific being condition through the technological intervention.

The lived body is experienced as a boundary condition — yet not a surface — because of constant flux and exchange between what already is and what might be. As an unlimited site of definition and questioning, and as a body that accounts for change and continuously escapes the falling edge of cancellation through repetition, it challenges the machine and its capacity to overtake its autonomy. Overcoming the menacing limitedness imposed by a complete interactivity the openness of the body is further amplified. The boundary between it and the devices becomes a site of mutual excitability, challenge and definition through the other. Finally, its complex phenomenological acknowledgment of a technology is one of the possible achievements of the performance as a process of selection and exclusion. The performance is an infinite site of freedom and the wholeness of it can only be achieved going beyond an oculocentric and fragmentary regime within the given set of interactions.

Le Partage des Peaux is a multimedia collective work organized by the choreographer and dancer, Isabelle CHÖNIÈRE, the video artist Jimmy LAKATOS, the sound designer and computer graphist Michael David SMITH and the infographicist Lucie MARCHAND. It was presented several times in Galerie La Centrale on September 1994.

1 Isabelle CHÖNIÈRE, Le Partage des Peaux,

2 Budget limitations are not the only determinants for an artist to explore a field of interaction between the body and technology. If it is true that real interactivity is extremely expensive, it is also true that the performer’s body must be almost immobilized in order to map its dimensional and minimal movements and this last factor plays an important role in determining the path an investigation into the area will take. Chance is also amplified as if — interactivity were achieved (and desired), the artists are exposing the blind desires to use up-to-date technologies for their own sake in the contemporary artistic realm and refute the theories that state that the human body, in any of its interactions with the machine, is alienated.

2 The two conditions the human being faces vis-à-vis technology are exemplified by the works of Marshall McLUHAN and François LARUELLE respectively. It is the second one which has served as a premise for the explorations undertaken by the artists in Le Partage des Peaux.

13 Éric LÉTOURNEAU, Interactive multilingual version translation: NP LETrans no insufficient memory undefine result of fetching command text.