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Notes On The Intersection of Dance and Technology

Four (questionable) myths:

New technologies are better than old technologies

New technologies will solve cultural problems such as inclusion, communication, etc.

New technologies are an unstoppable force, i.e., there is a foregone conclusion that one must adapt or be left out/behind.

The body is obsolete.

As I write this I am teaching in a summer workshop in telematic performance at Arizona State University with a number of artists who work at various intersections of dance and technology. The Summer Workshop in Performance Telematics, or SWIPT, was organized by John Mitchell. As this workshop begins I immediately confront my own dissatisfaction and impatience with the genre of technologically mediated dance/performance. The battle of wills between the two (dance and technology) asserts itself from the start in various forms. My initial reading of the problem is this: dance is of the ego, the body is literally on exhibit, the focus of attention and adoration. Technology, while a prosthetic of the body is/wants to be void of the ego. Contemporary technology celebrates the death of the author. The internet and the web eschew authorship and invite a kind of masking that hides the body. Negotiating these disparate personalities is at best difficult.

I will state at this point that I am not an “early adopter.” I wait until a technology has evolved to the point where I feel it is worth my time and has something to offer that I can not accomplish using existing tools.

As a member of ADAPT, The Association for Dance and Performance Technology, I have grappled with these and other related issues as well. Our “contacts” as we call them, have been generally unsatisfactory, though have offered some moments of

transcendence. Those moments have been few and far between however, often coming out of a mire of confusion.

For me the persistence of improvisational techniques, (a holdover from dance practice) has kept us as a group from progressing beyond the level of play to a level of meaningful art-making. We have, after four or five on-line collaborations progressed little, and certainly have broken no new ground other than to say we have successfully linked four sites (using the internet) at once in almost real time. We have essentially repeated the experiments of others working in the newest media of their time and migrated those experiments to our own current technologies. As I watch two students waving to each other, one in the space I occupy, one on screen from a distant location, I can't help but feel that we are performing the equivalent of Alexander Graham Bell asking "Watson can you hear me?" The fact that we can do this across space and time using the internet is not enough. The excuse that this technology is in its infancy is unacceptable.

As we begin to institutionalize the marriage of dance and technology, I am afraid that we are doing so in a way that ignores history and accepts as worthy of institutionalization an area of experimentation that is as yet unformed. The question is, "why do we do this, what draws us to this new technology in the first place?"

"All new technology initially mimics its predecessor."

The unattributed quote above is true, however the period for which we can use this as a reason for our inability to create new paradigms must be shortened if we are to progress artistically as rapidly as new technology is progressing.

As a video artist I can not break with my knowledge of the history of video, the important experiments from the late 1960's and beyond. As a consumer of contemporary media culture, I can not remove from my personal data bank, the vast store of failed but well-intentioned experiments in media. Many of those experiments had the egalitarian, visionary appeal of the current technological era.

Live simultaneous performance as we all know has been the foil for each emerging technology since Marconi's wireless in 1901.

Marconi as well as Edison, the Lumieres et al, situated their technological advances/inventions/explorations with the overarching context of “communication”. A three way telephone conversation or a so-called conference call enables individuals to communicate simultaneously from locations around the globe, (or for that matter from space). Precisely due to the lack of a visual component, the communication relies solely on language-based performance for the transmission of content. All of the nuance, emotional color etc. must be conveyed through the speakers’ performance of text, or we would all agree the “conversation” goes nowhere. In telematic or web-based performance, the introduction of visual images, or the possibility of web-casting a sort of documented performance seems to negate the possibility of “meaningful” communication. It does, in a sense regress the performers ability to, using the body, articulate any issues that are able to rise to the level of the technology that enables the performance. The idea of the body displaced in time and space though “performing” in a present, virtual space is not enough (in my opinion) to support the rhetoric and hyperbole that drives much of the web-based activity we are speaking of. The descriptions of web based performance often are far more interesting than their reification, reminiscent of early conceptual work. The medium is no longer the message.

The language to describe many contemporary media-based performance speaks of “the body” as if bodies are neutral, uncoded, have no ethnicity or other markings. It is a language that is vague, vaguely suggestive of political issues, yet unspecified. It is a kind of rhetoric that seems to be a shorthand for something unspoken. Further the term “performance” is also used without acknowledgement of its attendant issues; performance is a practice which is not without its politics. Yet rarely do I find in the description of web based performance, (including that of our own ADAPT project) any language that tells me about the politics of the participants, the institution, or the work and often I find a considerable lack of “meaning” beyond the obvious; that technology

allows us to simultaneously experience alternate realities and spaces in virtual time.

I have been thinking about issues surrounding contemporary practices of web based and new media work and would like to make the following statement in the hope of generating discussion on the issues I have addressed.

A claim among numerous theorists is that the web minimizes difference, elides gender, ethnicity and race. "Invisibility" is, in the rhetoric surrounding the web, seen to be a positive force, i.e. race, etc. is neutralized as is disability, gender, etc. While this may seem to be a liberating factor in web activity, it seems to me to be a step backward in regard to the politics of feminism, gender studies, etc. To mask one's identity is to attempt to pass, freely giving power over to the hegemonic culture. In a sense, to elide difference on the web is to actively participate in one's own assimilation into whiteness. I use the term "whiteness" to mean not only non-ethnic, but also as a description of a space that is politically white, (read empty/absent) and "pure" in its negative context. The claim that the web is a somehow neutral space is (in my opinion) delusional; it is a space that is undeniably privileged, where politics be they racial, gender-based or otherwise are not liberated but oppressed. Certainly one can't exercise bias based on the above if one can't "see" one's antagonist. However, even reducing web communication to its text only form, difference is still present, as difference is always present in language of any sort. Obfuscating difference by applying electronic whiteface does not level the playing field; it merely allows one to operate on a playing field that remains skewed. In other words, de-politicizing the web does not neutralize or democratize the space, it perpetuates cultural norms as one "passes" in cyberspace.

As I have been thinking a great deal about identity lately, I am interested in what I perceive to be a fetishizing of cyber-identity. While the web allows one the privilege of masking identity, it also allows one the privilege of asserting identity. E.g., I am a male Jew in cyber/virtual space as I am a male Jew in "real" space. My maleness as does my Jewishness raises issues that are not entirely resolved within contemporary culture. If I mask those identities in cyber-space, or attempt to assimilate by positioning myself as a

formalist, or simply do not address identity, then what becomes of my politics? Web based work continues to be, in my opinion, a largely formalist, apolitical milieu and raises numerous questions in that regard. Foremost is, the performance of what? A performing body, be it in cyberspace or otherwise is always in the process of performing its identity at least. So if identity is as such is backgrounded and technology is foregrounded then what are we witness to? The performance of what?

So, while I am supportive of experimentation and research of any kind, including its application to the digital domain, my concern is that while the rhetoric surrounding cyber-culture codes it as progressive, it seems to be that it is largely politically regressive. Additionally the language surrounding web-work and its product are tediously generic. A recent announcement for an on-line performance describes itself as, a "simultaneous live interactive performance". In other words, the makers are telling us what it is but not how it is or why it is, or how is this work different than and progressive from any other similarly described web-work?

I know that many makers of web based works are as tired as everyone else of having to use the same tiny lexicon over and over. I would urge our community to begin to invent a new lexicon or to begin to radically challenge the one that currently exists.

Lisa Cartwright in her book, "Screening the Body" offers an interesting perspective on the use of film technology in the early part of the century to "monitor" human movement and the neo-eugenic results of the practice. She says,

"One of my primary claims is that cinematic apparatus can be considered as a cultural technology for the discipline and management of the human body". She also makes note of the technological determinism that characterized historical accounts of cinematic technology, "In the first moments of the history of the cinema, it is the technology which provides the immediate interest: what is sold is the experience of the machine, the apparatus". That early cinematic practice began as a scientific accomplice to indexing bodies and metamorphosed into entertainment is a history that is closely aligned with the practices of contemporary dance and technology. In ignoring historical models, dance and technology hybrids are especially regressive.

There is a reference in the Cartwright book that is particularly apt. She describes "...hundreds of little machines...destined for a more or less clumsy reproduction of the image and movement of life, waiting for the factor of exhibition on which hinges the status of the cinema machine as a social technology"

As the SWIPT workshop has progressed, there have been moments of clarity both in the process and the practice of siting work in a technologically mediated environment. These moments are hard won and rare. "The body" resists mediatization.

Having stated my observations above, I will suggest three possibilities for elevating our work in the hybrid dance and technology arena.

1. Critical analysis

We must develop and adapt a method of critical analysis in regard to emerging forms and new representations of mediatized dancing bodies.

2. Theory

We must create new theory that lives at the intersection of dance and technology but privileges neither.

3. History

We must insist on integrating an historical continuum into the above and institutionalize that history.

Finally, for me, at the intersection of dance and technology as at any intersection, we have a choice as to the direction we may take. The decision is not a foregone conclusion if one is open to the possibilities of becoming "lost". Perhaps we are holding on too tightly to our need to be in familiar territory, to take the direction which we know best. Perhaps we need to sit a bit longer at this particular intersection and ultimately take the route we know least.