

The interactive choreography boom in Canada

by Andrée Martin

ISABELLE VIRTUELLE

FROM REAL TO VIRTUAL WORLDS

The application of new technology of dance serves no other purpose than to stage complex physical worlds and open up new areas of sensitivity for the performing body while also stimulating, even deceiving, the audience perceptions.

Whilst in the 1980s the use of technological interventions in choreography was widespread in North America, Europe and Japan – with film projection, video installations, lighting and sound effects used by practitioners such as Edouard Lock, Giorgio Barberio Corsetti and Bob Wilson – the last five years or so have seen how in Montréal a second wave of artists have come to the fore with a fine touch for dialogue between the dancing body and technology. It's hard to pick out the real reason why such numbers of Québec choreographers have taken such a fierce interest in the integration of technology in stage events. The 'LifeForms' programme developed under the guidance of Dr Thomas Calvert at the Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, that Merce Cunningham has been using since 1989, is only a provisional although world-famous example of the special interest shown in Canada in technology as a component of choreographic creation.

The way they demolish the historical and ontological contradictions between humanity and machine is a common factor linking choreographers Isabelle Choinière, Marie Chouinard and Michel Lemieux and his *PPS Danse*, all from Montréal and all in their own way unique visual experimenters in physical poetry in relation to interactive technology. The real body is directly confronted with the virtual (*PPS Danse*), the aural (Chouinard) and the energetic (Choinière) body and thus creates many-layered spaces in which the human being can replicate itself, lose its original form, take itself to the vanishing point.

As the above-mentioned artists, only a representative selection, suspend the traditional elevation of humanity above machine on stage they manage to interweave technology and dance technique so intimately that it becomes difficult to distinguish them.

At the centre of a circular space, opaque at the back and transparent at the front, surrounded by projection surfaces, Isabelle Choinière in 'Communion' shows futuristic images constantly referenced to her body; through her own

actions the projections create bright red waves of light, electric blue snow like a TV test card – or dancing silhouettes reminiscent of pulsating magnetic fields – a theatre of images worthy of the next century. With her custom-made technical equipment – microphone, sensors, cabling – the sensual, even motherly-looking body of the dancer remains firmly in the foreground of events; inasmuch as Isabelle Choinière releases and modifies the majority of sound- and lighting effects through the actions of her own body she presents a direct interrelationship between body and environment in the constant flux of projected images and her own dance. The intimacy between dancing body and electronics sets in motion imperceptible changes in her being: sometimes human, sometimes animal, sometimes prehistoric.

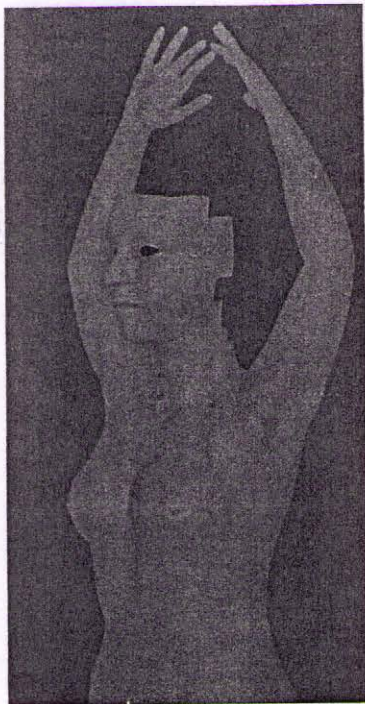
REVEALING THE INVISIBLE

One result of efforts to integrate the separate media – dance and technical effects – is the growth of the organic character of the performing body. In spite of a series of shifts in identity and some excursions it is still the dance and the human frame which forms the centre of events, the model and matrix in the work of these choreographers. With *PPS Danse*, Marie Chouinard and Isabelle Choinière, dance retains

its presence, sensibilities and rhythm; technical interventions are perceptible as a complementary dynamic and an extension of the central body. In that they start with the body and lead back to it these stagings of technology lead to an inversion of the impersonality and arrogance with which technology is usually charged; here, the machine seems 'humanised' and one can speak of organic technology in virtual areas with a clear conscience. In the intelligent, poetic approach of these artists to the body with the aid of technology one wish seems constant: revealing the invisible, making other faces tangible and visible, other dimensions, other images of the body as it moves. To them is granted the use of technology to penetrate the internal workings of the human being, to reveal both its organic and spiritual particularities. Beyond the demonstration of what is not immediately visible or audible there emerges a multifarious layering within the space, a multiplying of the senses and an increase in the sensitive locations on the dancing body. In practice the work of Marie Chouinard as well as that of *PPS Danse* and Isabelle Choinière all spread the resonances of the body across the theatrical space and beyond.

The form of the body and its homogeneity is interrogated and shaken up. With the implosion

of reality that their works imply, these artists offer not only an unfamiliar perspective of the form but also a questioning of the sense of the dancing body in the way they reflect another view of the world. Each of them distances him- or herself more or less consciously from the conventions of theatrical performance. Here, not only the body is shown but also its substitute, its aura, its symbols and metaphors. Time and space converge, dissolve or crystallise to lend the stage a fourth dimension. ◀



RADIANT ISABELLE

Sorceress of electronic stage dance Isabelle Choinière is smothered in fluorescent paint. The observer who thinks he knows the score would assume that a camera can read the fluorescent colours and pass the information to a sound and light computer for decoding. Nothing so complex; the colours have no technical function any more – they're just quotations from earlier works that now, as video, show the dancer as gleaming projection screen. The phosphorescent dancer on tape, projected onto soft cloth, dances a duet with her live counterpart. The actual interaction with Isabelle Choinière happens in the crooks of the knees and elbows – sensors that measure the angle and transmit the information. As once Loïe Fuller seemed to be bathing in a sea of multicoloured material, Isabelle Choinière dances in a no less colourful cosmos of microscopic particles, spiral figures and cascades of light – dazzlingly beautiful computer animation – while her pulse flickers on an electro-cardiogram across the stage ... then she swallows a lamp and starts to glow in the dark like an alien.

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photograph by Cie. Choinière