A ghostly light gradually cuts up the darkness at the center of the stage revealing an other–worldly figure bounded by an opaque background and a translucent foreground – a scrim, with two more, angled back on either side. As your eyes adjust, you see Isabelle Choinière posed in profile like a statueque high-priestess in her sacrarium. You might think a Roman–pagan term like that archaic when talking about Choinière, the techno-temple of dance.

She choreographs with and dances with technology in collaboration with multimedia artists, Jimmy Lakatos, and sound artists, Alexandre Burton and Michael David Smith. Working with these collaborators, she places her minimalist choreography at the heart of a highly technologized mise en scène that is at the same time strangely primal, spiritual, mythic and futuristic.

Based in Montréal, not heaven or Mt. Olympus, she uses terms like sacrality, from the word sacré – relating to that which is holy. In describing her work and its intentions, she mixes terms like ritual, electronic scarification, and braidiality, stopping short so far, of using a word like transubstantiation.

Yet transubstantiation – the changing of bread and wine into body and blood – is, on one level, at the heart of the title of Choinière’s half-hour performance, Communion (in a related earlier work, Le Parage des Peaux, she makes the claim that she is electronically transferring her skin onto screens). I refer throughout to a performance of Communion I saw at the International Dance and Technology conference in Tempe, Arizona. Her title further suggests the artist’s connection with humanity from its inception and into the future. With at least these two meanings, I find it helpful to view Choinière in two separate ways before I reconcile the views. She is the goddess/earth mother – ancient, fecund and organic, and the explored scientist – probing, testing, incorporating, and discarding.

I was more aware, at first, of the aural events than the visual. Electronic whispers called upon the goddesses Isis, the feminine life giver; Diana, one of three virgin Roman goddesses and Apollo’s twin; and Hecate, the eluthronic, Greek goddess of the crossroads. From time immemorial, spiral dances have been used to evoke the goddess spirit. As the whispers died down, Choinière slowly revolved while reproducing her image on the fore scrim in the ceremony she calls “electronic scarification”.

By now, she has begun to twist with serpentine deliberateness. Her muscular micro-movements, like stop-frames in a film, referenced a virtual roll call of 20th century dance and performance. I thought of Louie Fuller, who “dematerialized” herself with lights and gauze, and Mary Wigman, who brought German Expressionism to dance. Her vocalizations brought Meredith Monk to mind. When a red light began to glow from inside her cheek, she plunged her fingers into her mouth and pulled the light out like a stream of hot lava and with it a sound as molten as any Diamanda Galas ever emitted.

In slow, film-like dissolve which she controlled by her light sensors as much as by movement, she reveals the temple dancer and the body builder. A flick of the right heel suggested an exotic dancer deflating the train of her gown. It also suggested that Choinière could have been kicking aside the wire to her sensored leotard, which, she says, at one time she did. But the technology is further advanced now. Now she is unplugged. Her body housing operates by remote sensors, the heel flick a primordial habit from an earlier time in technology history.

Other writers on Choinière apprehend her earth mother aspects. André Martin in two publications describes her as having “a sensual, even motherly-looking body” and earlier says the curves of her body are “at times almost maternal”. Another writer of her pre-Columbian body — the archetypal model of the earth mother. And still another states that the space in Communion is simultaneously a camera obscura (ultrasound?) a video monitor and a uterus. Quite so. It is a matrix (wombs) for the past, present, and future.

Choinière’s dancing is full of male imagery too; that of the discus thrower, or of Atlas who must support the weight of the world after revolting against the gods. All this imparts a classical formality to the movement. This classical element affirms that her use of technology is not a revolt. It is instead an extension of what the physical body can do and has done. She asserts, in an interview, “In several places in the work, I am invoking the technology (image, sound) – that is a shifting of my self. I wanted this for [my] personal experience and to create a critical point of view about the shifting of sacrality toward technology. The technology is used in a very performative way, even a very macho way”.

Of course the “macho” aspect of her work reminds me of Nijinsky’s masculinity and anthropomorphically. His Afternoon of a Faun kept coming to mind. Like him, Choinière made a statement from the very first sounds and images, and relentlessly did not deviate from it. She once wrote
about the different strata of consciousness inherent in trance—the altered state or physical intelligence. And though the tableau-like setting and pacing may have restricted the work from developing in other ways, Choinière explored every level of richness at her physical and technological command.

Other writers note this as well as her use of interactive technology, comparing her to Marie Choinière in L'Après-midi d'une Femmed who describing Choinière as a "post-modern" "data suit"—a wiring system that allows her to control the sound and lighting, her voice thickening thighs looking like, or like child-bearing thighs.

As the explorer-scientist she invents and destroys, employing only that which is useful in the development of the new form of the investigative (as others are in her field), and thus remaining within an evolutionary framework.

For Choinière, several technologies linked together are essential to her performative intent. "Video and computer animation permit my skin and inner experiences to be transferred onto a synthetic membrane in a way that is an experience of electronic flesh."  

Further, with sound and voice transformation she amplifies the organic quality of the real body, while with the interactive system (sensor box and flex sensors) she creates an intimate and organic link with light, voice transformation and sound.

"The flex sensors," the toys, "calculate the angle of my body's movement and the variation of the data gives continuous information control. The flow of organic and electronic is transferred from the inner body to the outer body." She effects the voice transformation by instinct and by "using the natural sound that I make when I move, but the choice of the right voice transformation was always supported by instinct."

At the moment, Choinière and two new collaborators are working on La Mise de l'ange, a continuation of her explorations of the relationship between the real body and the synthetic body. Composer Thierry Fournier controls the software programming and develops the network interactivity, while François Rouspin designs the motors and the robotic lighting. It says it is "A network choreographic exploration that presents the real body, the sonic body and the luminous body which is composed by light and video." La Mise de l'ange premiered at October 1999 at Théâtre La Vérité in Montreal, and will be performed in February 2002 at Un Monde de Maëls in Quebec.

By immersing herself in the technology, Choinière becomes naturalized in its language. The more naturalized she becomes in this language, the more instrumented it appears. The work translates to the audience as a hybrid event, at once organic and technical. Remembering the human invention of the technology, we acknowledge that the technology takes the visual and aural aspects of Choinière's performances beyond what the human body can do. Finally, Communion, La Mise de l'ange and all of Choinière's work is, like the Maze, a celebration of the body. No matter how dazzling the technology may seem, the body remains the challenge of meaning.

Marilyn Jackson

NOTES

2. Linda Howe-Brook, Metro, January 11, 1996.  