

THE BODY OF DANCE AND ITS INTERACTIONS WITH THE MACHINE

Maria SUESCUN-POZAS

Montréal. Galerie La Centrale. September 25, 1994. 8 : 20 pm... 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'. *Le Partage des Peaux* : « What is this all about... ? » I wondered for a while. And after that day, I kept wondering and thinking on what had been presented on stage, but this time in the company of the performer, Isabelle CHOINIÈRE, who agreed to regularly meet with me in order to open up a space for discussion and reflection on the work. This was a unique opportunity to start an art historical inquiry into artistic production and create a channel of communication between two parallel discourses.

« If you really want to know about it, then, before saying a word, listen and reflect 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 ? What was expected from me ? There was the body... the bodies, the choreography... the choreographies... 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 was at 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 suspect of any discussion of the work which does not acknowledge the presence of the body of dance or does not reflect on it 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 explorations into the virtual world are valuable : the *lived body of dance*, which unfolds in the passage from appearance to disappearance always overcoming a threat of loss and a sense of *limitedness*.

I want to restore back to the performer that space of signification from which art historical and critical discourses often remove her/him because « ... 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 notions of the technologically mediated and the body of dance which has been put into a state of crisis.

To write about performance is an acknowledgement 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 artists(s), we are confronted with the sense of 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 par un jeu de relais des peaux, naturelles et artificielles, que l'amplification du langage physique aura lieu. Le relais, ou ce partage des peaux, redonnera un caractère [...] organique à cet échange du corps et de la technique. L'interaction des membranes — le tissu corporel, le costume de données, l'écran vidéo, le moniteur d'ordinateur, l'écran transparent — engendre un processus de reconnaissance, d'apprentissage et finalement d'amplification de la corporalité².

Skin-body. Skin-self. Borderline condition. 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 infographic tools into representations and 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 confuse the object of our concern ? It does, since at the heart of the performance's inquiry into representation lies the lived body of dance, one whose phenomenal appearance, and psychological effects, extend beyond the level of surface.

Three sets of bodies with their respective dimensions constitute the motifs of the multimedia event according to CHOINIÈRE : the real body, the videographic body and the infographic or virtual one. Their respective dimensions, it is worth noting, are to be thought not in terms of three 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 interactivity³. But it is neither plugged in nor is it interactive with 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. This encourages an interaction between 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 demands inter-action, not just technical 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 resolved into a state or spatial dimension for exchange and amplification evolving around the body of action whose autonomy is confirmed⁴. 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 center of the experience of the performance⁵. It is the product of exclusion and acceptance of the possible. The notion of an original body of representation is thus permanently undermined. Nevertheless, despite this multiplicity, the body of dance is grasped as one, as a constant and stable body by the technological devices, and if it 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 without mere repetition⁶.

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 and means in multiple ways, not just as an instrument for repetition and imitation. The performer as imitator ceases to be a creative agent and just perpetuates the transmission of a norm, and only becomes one when she/he is able to enact her/his capacity to construct her/his own sense of body/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 the shift from the notion of 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 excess and behaves as a visual rhetorical device. 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 « seeing » and « knowing » is insurmountable through our visual apparatus. Our senses fail to successfully prove that what we sense is. The world cannot be equated to our experience of it, nor the notion of the body to the one we think we

CHOINIÈRE
1994

live as *limitedness*. The gap, the notion of the passage, that space and process of undefinition, not knowing, is a site upon which the notion of the - possible - rests. It is a site where exploration, discovery, invention, death, renewal, loss, failure and achievement fully display their meaningfulness. The passage from one state to another, from one form of representation to another, from one dimension to another, carries with it a sense of danger and fear. Misrecognition and cancellation, the unthinkable and the unseeable, become the unmarked locus where the self is amplified⁷.

Lived bodies of dance in N-dimensional spaces

The space in which the performance is disclosed is defined by a metallic frame rising from the ground. It follows the contour of the shadow of a - hyper-cube - projected on the floor. It is divided into three corridors which represent, according to the performer, the present of the dancer on stage, the past video recording and the timelessness of the infographic body. On a parallel series two transparent screens are fastened to the metallic structure. The third screen is provided by the back wall of the gallery's space. They will become the ground for the two and three-dimensional preregistered — non-interactive in the rigorous sense of the term — choreographies that will accompany the dancers throughout the 25 minute presentation.

We find that the body of dance is interacting with the technological devices within a physical as much as conceptual space. We are obliged to step beyond the *seeable* into the *imaginable* and perhaps even the *unthinkable* yet always possible : to enter a nonreferential realm of experience which challenges our notion of reality. N-dimensional spaces oblige us to go beyond our senses and any empirical knowledge of the world. We are urged to enter into the realm where one *knows not seeing* as part of an offcenter practice.

Invisibility and disappearance are conditions for an understanding of both the concept of hyperspace and the lived body. The conditions of their visibility rest upon the notions of the possible and the perceivable through time and space. Neither the concept of the hyperspace nor that of the lived body is experienced as a unit or whole at once but as processes which entail a continuous sense of loss, exclusion and failure, and rely on more than just a mastering visibility.

The projection of the pre-recorded choreographies takes place on three stages. Once the body of the dancer is stabilized with regards to the projection of two and three-dimensional sinusoidal waves the process of enchantment is initiated : the dancer calls her two and three-dimensional representations. The passage from materiality to immateriality is reproduced in an unsynchronized interplay of images, sound and light, which further complicates the unquestionable possibility of representation as visibility. Although what the spectator sees are prerecorded sets of images, the promises of interactivity is fulfilled through the manipulation of both images and sound so as to produce the effect of intervention. Through the interaction of the organic and the synthetic a process of recognition and amplification of the lived body is sought. The body is given the possibility to multiply, to alter and to recreate itself. It achieves both a playful and critical stance in relation to the tools. In its interaction with the machine the lived body's sense of agency — one that resides in the process of materialization which is never fully stabilized in time — is confirmed.

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 performer⁸. As reproductions of each other without repetition, they escape the confirmation of a fixed given — norm, movement, state of being — which would constitute the ultimate limitation in the order of experience. Ultimately, the lived and representational 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 - artificiality - of 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 hyperspace is proposed as a medium through which the technologically mediated lived body acquires new meaning. The performer is not allowed a privileged view point within such a spatial configuration. The lived body of dance itself and the spatial configuration within which its indefinite signification unfolds make such possibility impossible to be attained. The body must be thought in terms of interactions, continuous displacement, discenterment, accompanied by the sense of constraint and limitedness and the instability of being in a permanent - passage - condition, 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 caught up in that *larger-than-self* choreographic display in which a tension between the lived body and its representations is maintained within a horizon of total openness.

The performer does not stand 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 overcome through amplification : self — 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 realized through recognition as well as misrecognition while dancing and interacting with the machine.

The offcenter 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 unlimited sense of body/self, and the endless ways in which the bodily 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 (ves)

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 this 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 phenomenal appearance is acknowledged while our comprehension of it can only be achieved going beyond an oculo-centric and fragmentary regime within the given set of interactions. ●

¹ *Le Partage des Peaux* is a multimedia collective work organized by the choreographer and dancer, Isabelle CHOINIÈRE, the video artist Jimmy LAKATOS, the sound designer and computer graphist Michael David SMITH and the infographist Lucie MARCHAND. It was presented several times in Galerie La Centrale on September 1994.

² Isabelle CHOINIÈRE, *Le Partage des Peaux*, - Démarche artistique -, 1994.

³ 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 dimensions and minimal movements and this last factor plays an important role in determining the path an investigation into the area will take. Choosing to perform - 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.

⁴ 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*.

⁵ The notion of the lived body of dance has been explored from a phenomenological and existentialist point of view by Sondra HORTON FRALEIGH in the book *Dance and the Lived Body : A Descriptive Aesthetics* (University of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, 1987). Her elaborations on the subject greatly inform my own reflections through out this article.

⁶ For an expanded understanding of the constitution of identity through acts of repetition and representation with our reproduction see Judith BUTLER's *Bodies that Matter : on the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Routledge, New York, 1993), pp. 93-95, and Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked : The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, New York, 1993), pp. 93-111, respectively, although both texts complement each other.

⁷ See the notion of the unmarked in PHELAN, op. cit. p. 13.

⁸ See BUTLER, op. cit., p. 219 for a broadened discussion on the futurity concept.