The Disembodied Body: the live, the virtual and the in-between

by

Kerry Francksen-Kelly

As our endeavours into progressive art forms move into the digital realm, it seems that artists are having to move beyond categorization in an attempt to converge the processes and capabilities of different art forms in order to find a new context for making. By reconstructing and reconceptualising the body through the visceral, new perceptual and experiential possibilities are opened up. A significant difference emerging within current dance and technology practice is the question of how embodied experience is mediated. By reconstructing and reconceptualising the body through the digital, its viscerality and physical engagement can get lost. This can tend to result in works that fail to fully engage with some aspects of embodied experience. These issues emerged for me when I attended the symposium 'Arts of the Virtual: Poetic Inquiries in Time, Space and Motion' in Utah two years ago. Ideas such as Marcos Novak's 'production of the alien' and pursuit of a mutant form, provided an interesting platform to consider how the disembodied body, the live and the virtual might move beyond mere representation and highlight the places in-between, resulting in a shift towards an existence within an alter-reality.[1]

Marco Novak (global nomad, artist, theorist and *transarchitect*) provided the context and intellectual pace for the symposium. What struck me most about Novak's keynote was the dimensionality of what he was presenting. Although deemed an architect, his work seemed to defy categorisation moving between anthropology, nano science, architecture and art. Drawing on his concepts of

'*transvergence*', '*transarchitecture*', '*transmodernity*' and '*liquid architecture'* he argued that as the very tapestry of our cultures becomes accustomed to stepping into virtual environments and our experiences of art becomes heightened (or conversely tainted, depending on your viewpoint) by technology then how we experience and comprehend art changes. We increasingly need to make sense of dimensions of space, time and how we deal with unfamiliar experiences, in order to embrace a new way of understanding or accessing a virtual consciousness. This will be one that ultimately has the potential to become experiential and visceral in nature.

We were shown images and footage of liquid architectures that seemed to identify the spaces in-between. *Transvienna* 2000 installation was particularly striking. By physically moving his hands through a space defined as the space in-between a series of infrared sensors and floating carved sculptures enabled Novak to transpose an invisible architectural form through sound waves into liquid forms on screen. His thesis was that the notion of an interactive and liquid architecture 'at once (becomes) an anticipation of a static architecture derived from virtuality, and a premonition of a built dynamic, liquid architecture in which buildings actually move' (www.archilab.org). By working with the inherent contradiction between architecture and liquid, Novak derives a new form in which our perception and experience of his architectural art forms sits within the context of the 'production of the alien'. We are no longer able to draw on our usual perceptual and sensory understanding.

This search for a new context for art experience begins to bring artists, scientists, computer experts and theorists into a new playing field, one that has no clear distinction of each one's particular role. Novak trained to be an architect but is now spanning a multitude of disciplines. That is not to say that he is relearning a new discipline, rather that he is drawing on the existing skills and knowledge of these disciplines and their thinkers in order to find some convergence between them all. Throughout the symposium, this theme of embracing a potential for cross-disciplinary pathways and for thinkers to defying categorization was evident.

Shelley Eshkar (multimedia artist and experimental animator) presented a lecture-demo in which he shared works from 1999 – 2004 and beyond, most notably collaborations with choreographer Merce Cunningham and Paul Kaiser in *Hand-drawn spaces* 1998, *BIPED* 1999 and a reworking of a solo created by Cunningham in the 70's called *Loops* 2004. Eshkar's innovations in three-dimensional figural drawing and animation use motion capture to create digital bodies and spaces. As he gave an overview of his work, again it became clear that the boundaries between art and computer programming became blurred. What interested me most about Eshkar's work was the notion of the disembodied dancer and the seemingly problematic disengagement from the physicalities of the body as the choreography was transcribed through the software. Questions regarding the difficulty of live versus the virtual in terms of a dominant aesthetic were raised. Eshkar described an interesting collaboration with Bill.T. Jones who Eshkar said had a 'healthy suspicion' of him. Jones's difficulty was the very fact that the matter of the body seemed to be taken away. Through this suspicion both artists (and key here is the fact that both Eshkar and Jones were the creative

minds not Eshkar merely facilitating and affecting Jones's artistic ideas) began to find that they were working in a new context and realm of uncertainty, one that Jones described as 'like looking at the back of his head'.

Jones found that he needed to conceptualise the body as a source for evolving images that don't replicate the physicality of the body, but allow an image to form on the back of physical motion, pacing, flow and dimension.
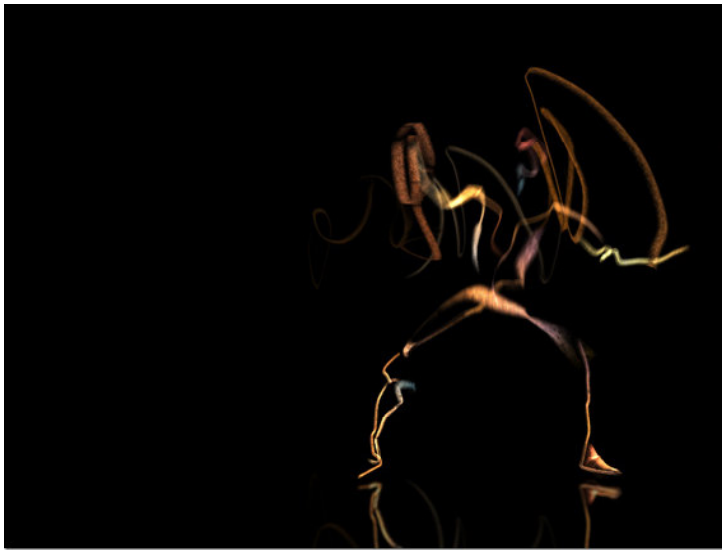
Still 2 from Ghostcatching © 1999 Jones, Kaiser, Eschkar

As a result, the images in *Ghostcatching* 1999 take on their own qualities, ones that are different from those usually perceived when experiencing a live body in motion. The resulting images have their base firmly routed in the viscerality and motion of the body; however the digital body clearly begins to calve and form its own haunting and beautifully crafted movement. From a position of not knowing, Eshkar and Jones came at the project with some givens but moved forwards into the unknown. As Eshkar described them, uncertainty and innocence always seem to nurture some of the most exciting creative results.

Still 3 from Ghostcatching © 1999 Jones, Kaiser, Eschkar

This recalled an issue raised by Novak who argued that, as our technological thinking progresses, our perception of time, space and motion need to be able to conceptualise new planes and states of experience. It seems that our perception of moving will have to evolve in order for us to understand what could perhaps be called a new disembodied bodily experience. Theoretically, I can see how this might work. However, whilst watching certain presentations and demonstrations, my desire to hang on to the aesthetics' of the live dancing body still seemed to grate with the projected virtual body. The ability to perceive and comprehend the live and virtual body all in the same perceptual field seems to be problematic because each one seems to become an adjunct to the other. This in turn makes it difficult to perceive the event holistically as one piece of work. For somebody like Jones, the very fact that the physicality had changed might have predetermined that the project would fail. However, it was clear that Jones and Eshkar had embraced a 'transvergence' and had managed to find a new context for making and perceiving new dimensions of quality, space and form adding another facet to

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the choreography. Also the very fact that I could concentrate solely on the mediatised body alleviated any potential clash between the live and the virtual.

Eshkar's piece *Pedestrian* 2002 seemed to move towards a more physical 'transvergence'. As part of his demonstration he screened clips of audience reactions to the piece. Using an almost infinite library built on his computer of different bits of different people, he developed an installation that was projected onto the sidewalk and onto the floor of public pathways, shown at the Rockefeller Centre and in Harlem.

Photos of Rockerfeller Center & Harlem sites © 2002 Peter Cunningham

The nature of the installation and its construction lent itself to experiences of submersion for the audience. Members of the public appeared concerned for the welfare of the virtual man who disappeared into the path and they seemed to engage with the images as they might had they turned the corner and seen these situations happening in the next street. This resulted in feelings of submersion

fusing the ephemeral act of motion with the virtual. It seems to me that in different ways what some of the artists were attempting was a joint pursuit of a hybrid art, which constituted a move towards submersion rather than merely a juxtaposition between the physical and virtual. Eshkar's future projects at the time included collaborations with Trisha Brown in a new stage piece as well as another installation, which in Eshkar's terms will be intelligent, in so far as a virtual group of children will literally play hide and seek.

Other workshops, such as 'Active Space Workshop' run by John Crawford also enabled audience members to discuss digital videodance. In this particular workshop, interesting issues were again raised regarding the potential for aesthetic polarization. As a dancer and choreographer researching dance video installation myself, I was very interested to see how other artists working with the moving body dealt with the issue of liveness versus the virtual. Audience members were asked to participate in a demonstration allowing them to interact with an image of themselves on screen that was manipulated, for example using effects such as 'echo-burn', to change the aesthetic properties of the image. The idea that one could dance and improvise with one's screen-self, albeit visually manipulated with some nice effects such as the notion of creating a set design which you move through and which doesn't live very long, seemed too vague and superficial. The effects themselves can be 'nice', but in terms of creating an aesthetic and artistic shift, merely projecting an image as a backdrop was disappointingly limited.

John Crawford spoke about the difficulties of enabling technology to help us perceive ourselves, and how technology can work with the dancing body. He

spoke about the need to allow both to be conceived at the same time: a joint conception of technology and dance. Crawford's argument was similar. In order to overcome the problem he argued that the way forwards is a convergence of mediums, which will allow for a new context to form. I however saw no evidence that this was taking place in the practical demonstrations. Speaking from my own perspective as a choreographer I have found that using tried and tested compositional devices and asking somebody else to help manipulate them through computation can create a situation in which dancer and image don't actually coalesce in the ways Crawford suggests. As Eshker implied, the most effective results arise where, through naivety and openness to unknown possibilities, multifaceted artists bring their own skills with them to an empty pallet. This is all very well but how do you come to this? Yacov Sharir, who demonstrated his wearable computer, questioned how you augment and conceive of a piece of work. It seems that the process needs to be based on clear ideas of content and aesthetics. We know how to do both things, i.e. how to dance and how to create the technology in isolation; however, this inevitably leaves a huge void in the middle.

Maybe it's starting with the unknown or the places in-between that will enable these two mediums to find a new 'transvergence'? The ephemeral quality and viscerality of a moving body, as Jones and Eshkar's work implied, needs to be considered and perceived differently. It seems that these two mediums ultimately vie to be the dominant partner and so therefore need to be conceived at the same time. During the practical demonstrations there were some interesting moments, in one a scrim was used to bring the images into the foreground as opposed to

constituting the backdrop. This allowed for some sense of cohesion of the real and the virtual through a shared visual space. But again, this was quite superficial and I still found it very hard not play one off against the other in an obvious and predictable way. I also kept finding myself asking questions during all of the practical demonstrations involving virtual/live dancers about the artistic merits and composite wholeness. As artists continually inferred, maybe this new form of technology art is about choreographing the things that the body can't do?

Helen Sky and 'Company in Space' from Australia demonstrated wearable contraptions which aimed to meld the physical with the virtual. Again, I found myself drawn to the enigmatic performance of Helen rather than to the cumbersome contraption she was wearing; and wondered how such a device could even begin to compete with such a strong 'real' performer.[2]

So, whilst others at the symposium were getting carried away with the potential and excitement of working with the interactive disembodied body, I found myself worrying about the artistic integrity of the conception and purpose of the art. I still feel that because technology is moving so quickly can there be a danger of getting so wrapped up in the amount of gigabytes required that we lose sight of what it is we are doing or where we have come from? I hope not. This seems to be a very exciting time, where artists no longer fall into categories and where computation is seen as an interactive and equal counterpart. Many of the artists from the symposium are beginning to 'transverge' and find new pathways for 'poetic inquiries into a new spacetime continuum'. However, it is clear that the potential for this new art is not without its artistic hurdles. Moreover, my impression from

attending this symposium is that technology is now not merely a means of

adapting art but is becoming and needs to be the art itself.

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[1] Marcos Novak quoted from www.archilab.org/public/2000/catalog/novak/novaken.htm accessed Jan 2004.

[2] Helen Sky's "Liquid paper 1" was first presented at the symposium and has since been published in Extensions: the on-line journal for embodied technologies.