

I, Myself and Me Again

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Abstract

This text presents a study of the piece *I, Myself and Me Again* and aims to reflect on the possibility of displaying on stage an image of the contemporary subject based on the use of interactive technologies. The strategies devised by the dancers in this interactive environment consist mainly of generating a range of alterities. This gives way to a notion of the subject as a multiple rather than indivisible concept, one who is in the process of constructing himself through an emerging dialogue between the multiple facets of his identity.

I, Myself and Me Again

This text presents a study of the piece *I, Myself and Me Again* by the group *LaborGras*, performed for the first time in April 2006 at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, and aims to reflect on the possibility of displaying on stage an image of the contemporary subject based on the use of interactive technologies. The work provides an ideal platform from which to consider the construction of the identity of the contemporary subject, the image of his body and the temporality in which he develops his actions, as it offers the dancer access to the temporal and fragmented visual simultaneity of the varying aspects of his individuality. The stage, equipped with interactive technology, is far more than a mere setting for the action; it instead plays a leading role through its contribution to the development of the action on stage, a role that is equal to that of the main dancers. What makes this piece so interesting is the fact that the 'other', the space which the dancer explores through their improvisation, returns images of the self, initiating a dialogue with the surroundings – a monologue with one's own self. The dancer is therefore confronted with the intimate and personal world of his own subjectivity in a dialogue in real time with himself, which actually constitutes the performance.

I, Myself and Me Again is an interactive installation lasting four hours which the audience can visit for any period of time they wish. From a spatial perspective, the setting is composed of five rectangular panels, measuring four by three metres, placed in the form of a pentagon to define the area jointly shared by the dancers and audience. This space is divided by a diagonal line drawn across the floor from the top to the bottom angle; this line marks the stage and ensures that spectators do not enter into camera range. The wall panels also serve as projection screens. The space outside of the pentagon also has a function as this area is occupied by those controlling the performance. Arthur Stäldi, co-director of the group *LaborGras*, operates the computer, and Ralf Krause, musician and composer, is responsible for the sound. Both have assistants and, in this way, all those involved simultaneously create the piece alongside the dancers in real time, both from outside and within. Solos were performed every afternoon by three dancers: Renate Graziadei, David Hernández and Romeu Runa. Each dancer presented two forty-minute performances. The performances, music and the treatment of the images are generated by pure improvisation so that the overall work materialises as it is being

presented, within a basic framework, and with no prior knowledge of the exact nature the dance and sound will acquire.

The space reserved for the confrontation with the self, with the own subjectivity, has traditionally been the mirror.ⁱ In terms of digital technologies, the mirror becomes the image captured by the camera and projected back. The interactive space fabricates a double which takes on a similar function to that of a mirror, in that it returns one's image, the so called *digital double* (Dixon). The qualitative difference offered by interactive technologies is, on one hand, the introduction of a double which, time-wise, is out of synch and, on the other, the proliferation of figures which enable the performer to confront simultaneously multiple facets emanating from his own self.

In *I, Myself and Me Again* this is possible thanks to an interactive software: The dance is captured by the camera, sent to the computer and manipulated in real time using *Kalypso*, a image-processing programme by Frieder Weiss.ⁱⁱ This software was designed specifically for stage applications and works in real time, thereby enabling interactivity. This comes through pointing a camera, connected to a computer, at the stage. The programme shows the video images in real time and offers a range of tools to manipulate them. These are then sent to a video projector and reproduced on the screens. Although the software offers a wide range of options, *LaborGras* decided to work exclusively with the temporal manipulation of the projected images of the dancer. Using the *delay* function, it is possible to choose the number of images per second captured by the camera; the standard is twenty-four although this number can be modified in order to slow down or speed up the movement projected. This function makes it possible to determine whether the copy shown on the screen projects the real movement in parallel with the dancer or a delayed image of the movement, thereby altering the relationship between the timing of the performance and that of its reproduction. It is also possible to further complicate the process by reproducing the movement captured at the same time and using different layers to show a number of virtual dancers (up to six per screen) appearing simultaneously, each of them with different delay periods, in different directions, and even moving from screen to screen. The dancers themselves are also able to interact and manipulate the projected figures. Based on their position on the stage, they can generate a delay in one of the projected images of themselves and control the speed of the reproduction. The temporal levels created in this way are almost infinite and therefore the complexity of the staging is extreme.

Therefore this piece, more than existing as a work with a predefined dramaturgy, is presented as a space in which the dancer is forced to confront his images. The stage, above all, provides the setting for the unfolding of the dancer's subjectivity, a world that is laid open for the audience to access. The installation exists as a fluid system which gradually emerges and creates itself. This processual focus is an essential characteristic of interactive works which, rather than presenting a finished piece, emphasise a process in continuous evolution. The work presents not a solution or a summary of the best moments of the rehearsals, but a still active and real time investigation, carried out by the dancer, the computer operator, the musician and the rest of the crew.

In this installation, the setting places the dancer in a kind of arena where they are enclosed in an interactive space and given a period of time to develop an improvisation. In this sense, the stage consists purely of an space that is empty and

void of any previously created content; there are no explicit indications or suggestions for the ensuing performance, nor are there textures or objects or other dancers with whom to share the burden of action. When an element with which to build the piece does finally appear on the screen, it is the image of the dancer himself, showing the actions and movements that he has performed since taking the stage. Almost every action carried out on this place is reproduced with different levels of delay so that the dancer is successively accompanied by images of himself, obliging them to relate to them as they are the only elements available. In *I, Myself and Me Again* all the content is provided by the dancer and, as a result, his ensuing actions force him to confront the copies he sees of himself projected on the screens. The interactive system therefore acts as a device with which to generate and shape the dialogues and the performance as a whole. The installation is primarily conceived as a space in which to shape possibilities which come to be as a result of the strict laws which determine them.ⁱⁱⁱ In the space described, the interactive possibilities are not given as options which can be accepted or rejected, instead the system creates coercion whereby the dancer is forced to confront the situation and is given the sole option of continually relating with the images they have generated since entering the stage. The only substance which fuels the choreography and dramaturgy of the performance is limited to the kinetic dialogue between the dancer and his images projected on the screens.

As is evident from this piece, interactive systems propose a new and particular relationship between the dancer and the stage. Through the performer's exploration of the interactive stage in search of the 'other' (the space, the surroundings) the dancer in fact only finds himself and is confronted with his own movement and own dynamic as the responses given by the setting are completely determined by the actions of the dancer moving within the space. The interactive technology does not therefore grant the dancer access to a virtual world, one that is strange and unknown, but rather enables a consideration of their own presence. In *I, Myself and Me Again* the surroundings, the 'other', turns the interactive stage into a mere projection of the dancer's image, a translation of their movements to other mediums. The opposition between subject and object is diluted to give way to a dialogue between the identity and itself, an exchange which materializes through the mediums applied. The dancer sees his own image projected back to him, manipulated by time delays and dispersed across the screens throughout the improvisation. The dancer's subjectivity is thereby fragmented and displayed within the surroundings. This system inspires reflection about one's own subjectivity, through generating a process of dialogue between one's self and the images of the own. The identity of the dancers is therefore displayed exponentially, creating a fragmented time cloud which holds the different aspects of their identity. Seen from this perspective, there is no exterior, no alterity or no 'other' for the dancer to confront, or with which to confront the desire to improvise; instead the stage represents the personification of the 'I', except the dancer is no longer an 'I' but an 'us'. In this way *I, Myself and Me Again* questions the so called *fantasy of the subject's unity*, sustained by the isomorphism and the functional equivalence between presence, visibility, character, name, body, subjectivity, and being (Lepecki, 2006: 50). Instead the installation offers an alternative image of the subject defined by notions like fragment, opacity, multiplicity and process.

It is precisely the time lapse already described which gives rise to the dialogue between the performer and the other snippets of their identity. From the perspective

of the dancer's physical sensation, it is taken that a delay of up to three seconds will enable the reproduction of one's movement to be perceived as being one's own, while a greater delay will render the reproduced image unrecognisable. In this way, the delay in the projections becomes the source for the 'otherness'. The difference between the image of one's self and the projected image, however, does not make communication or the dialogue between the dancer and their 'copies' impossible; is actually the very thing that makes it possible. The play between identity and the dissimilarity between the different modes of appearance generate a dialogue which determines the path the dancer must follow in the creation of the piece.

Each of the performers developed a series of resources and strategies aimed at confronting this scenic situation. One of the most obvious possibilities to creating this necessary difference which provides the source for a dialogue, and the first to be explored by the dancers during the rehearsal process, revolves around the ludic creation of a rival or opponent. This is something which immediately creates a situation of confrontation through the unfolding appearance of the player and their rival, thereby dramatising the element of opposition. Thanks to the extraordinary memory the dancers have developed in this piece, they can remember the exact sequence of steps they performed in the improvisation and are therefore able to respond several minutes later to that movements which now a copy performs. This first way of approaching the scenic interactive space has been put into practice in a variety of ways through the representation of actions mostly based on mimes, such as those associated with a boxing match or a game of tennis, etc. In this way, the 'other' is represented, not only in a confrontational or competitive situation, but also through a postural dialogue in which both players respond mutually to the changing positions and sequences that result from the reaction of each to the other.

The only tool the dancers had in the otherwise empty space were different garments. The dancers have chosen different garments for each improvisation and can change their clothing throughout the performance to generate a variety of appearances, creating an opposite with whom to create a dialogue. The different costumes also enable an exploration and investigation of the bank of movements, habits and gestures taken from everyday activities to which each dramatised individual belongs. The movement identities displayed by the dancers are not reproduced intact but instead serve as raw material to be manipulated and distorted. After this first approach, more playful and narrative, the dancers concentrated themselves on other aspects of the installation; in this case the costume changes mark the passing of time more than offer deviations between social identities.

After having explored this two more obvious and ludic ways of confronting the scenic situation displayed by the interactive stage, the dancers arrived to another phase of the improvisational work, this time far more abstract, and based on the dancer's different kinetic identities. The improvisation in this case is based exclusively on the contrasts that exist between movement dynamics and disciplines that are deposited on the body. As G. Siegmund states, all present dance contain an active past which is inherent and revealed in each movement (Siegmund, 2004: 52). In accordance with this concept, it is possible to consider a dancer's body as an historical document which stores a series of dance traditions, each body contains a personal history where prior movements are *programmed*, where a variety of kinetic identities are accumulated. But is important to make one remark related to improvisation: while choreography relies on an organised, rehearsed and above all, a sequence of *controlled* movements, it is improvisation, due to its spontaneity, the way *per*

excellence that allows the movement identities stored in the dancer's body to emerge. In *I, Myself and Me Again* the necessary oppositions between the medial appearances required to motivate the kinetic dialogue between them are instigated by the different corporal languages accumulated in the body that are present in the improvised movement.

This gives way to a notion of the subject as a disparate rather than indivisible concept, one who is in the process of constructing himself through an emerging dialogue between the multiple facets of his identity. The subject can therefore only be understood from a relational perspective and is conceived based on their actions which are generated through the contrast, communication and collaboration established with the other presences of the self. *I, Myself and Me Again* investigates the visual, corporeal and scenic ways of questioning the presumed stability of the subject and his singularity, proposing instead a reflection on the contemporary subjectivity conceived as 'continuous processes of unfolding multiplicities' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1997:254).

A further resource to create the otherness in this piece revolves around using cinematographic means, thereby exploiting the medial nature of the installation. The use of slow or fast motion or opposing timings between the movements recorded and those projected are effects which are commonly used in film-making and, in the case of the installation, were generated both from inside and outside the pentagon. David was the dancer to most thoroughly explore all the possibilities afforded by close-ups. At the beginning of his improvisation, he stood close to the camera and placed different parts of his body in front of the lens. In this way he created detailed shots of the characters who would enter the stage, gradually revealing the characters little by little. The spectator therefore began to piece together the figure's identity until finally seeing a close-up of the face, the clearest sign of identity. This same method was also used to create a background for the screens on which the copies could move; this background was mainly formed of skin (for example projecting a shot of his back) by placing different parts of the body in front of the camera for a few seconds. The result of this was a fragmented body which existed in the boundary between the figure and the background, a body which literally became the environment. This would be an adequate image to depict visually the body of the already described subjectivity, an appropriate image of the *body without organs* theorised by Deleuze and Guattari (1997: 155-173). This installation rejects the notion of a body with sharp boundaries, an individual and unrepeatable body, proposing instead a shapeless mass, a polymorphic figure that doesn't respond to the hierarchy, *stratification* and order of the individual traditional body. This unfamiliar image of the body is also reached through superimposing the copies of the figure in the same position. To do this, the dancer must remain in one place until a number of copies are gradually placed, depending on the respective delay in each case. The copies accumulate in the same space with a minimal time delay; however, the positioning of the reproductions can never be exact and therefore there is a subtle movement of the torso while the figure remains fixed to the spot, thereby representing a distorted body with imprecise boundaries. This possibility was further explored by superimposing the copies in the same way, also without changing position, but this time using larger and more dramatic movements of the limbs. This creates a superimposition of 'dancetexts', thereby generating a polymorphic figure, a *kinetic palimpsest*, the *body without organs* or boundaries, one that merges with the environment.

This could be a valid image of the body correlative to the subject described before. As it was already mentioned, this subjectivity is characterised by its processuality, what necessarily implies a temporal development, a development which could be neither teleological nor linear. Let's see how to display it choreographically. The dancer is faced with his own present image along with some of the past actions he has performed in the interactive space. The dialogue between the dancer and his images usually took form in the selection of different kinetic developments based on the same choreographed sequence. This procedure offers a wide range of possibilities; the actual dancer can, for example, reassume the steps performed by a copy. Here both follow the same series of steps, but one of them breaks the sequence, thereby generating two possible continuations or solutions to a single dynamic and, as result, exploiting the dramaturgy of the piece through creating diverse alternatives for continuing the same kinetic proposal. The real dancer replaying the movements of a copy also adds a sense of contagiousness between past and present actions; interestingly, the present once again becomes the past as soon as one of the virtual dancers follow the real dancer's movements. Independently of the dramatisation of specific situations, the repetition of movement sequences, both by the virtual and real dancers, leads to the creation of a time spiral in which the gestures appear charged with a temporal complexity and where the movement is burdened by continuous references from the past (the repetition of a sequence of movements), the present (the contrast between the real or complementary movement) and the future (the dancer reassumes the actions performed by the copies in order to continue the improvisation). The time parameters associated with continuity and temporal succession infect one another on a range of levels, giving rise to the possibility of retaking the actions of the past and determining an already familiar future development which has, in fact, already taken place. A standard notion of time is replaced by dispersed snippets of non-linear time, thereby creating a complex and baroque temporal structure in which the subjectivity deploys. What also becomes evident in analysing the forms the dialogues take in this interactive installation is that both the performer's action and the projected figures' movements only acquire meaning in their confrontational and relational nature. Each gesture, whether medial or real, forms part of a mechanism whereby, when seen alone, seems incomplete.

To summarise, the interactive system used in *I, Myself and Me Again*, rather than representing a stage, constitutes a space that inspires new reflection about some fundamental aspects of the modern subject, his body and the temporality in which his actions take place. In the performance, the dancer forgoes the creation of an invariable choreographed discourse to generate a continuous dialogue between himself and his images, in a process of definition of the self. This interactive space therefore generates self-reflection, through being objectified in the medial reproduction of the own image. The dancer gets to confront himself through his complementary modes of appearance: the virtual, real, present and past modes, in different outfits or through certain gestures or movements which draw on a variety of dance disciplines. This interactive space juxtaposes the extreme aspects of a series of opposites: the real and the virtual; the spectator and the performer (the dancer observes himself before being able to act); the identity and the 'otherness'; authenticity and the copy.

This installation does not propose a common stage setting but instead reveals a system with its own processuality and a novel methodology, as it usually happens

with interactive stages. The system does not aim to offer a choreographic or interpretive recipe that will function on a scenic and dramatic level; nor does it establish a language or style. Instead it shows a system of laws within which the dancer confronts himself, his answers to the questions raised by the scene, his proposals to the situation displayed.

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ⁱ Particularly in literature, the figure of the mirror has served to formulate crisis in the modern subject. This can be seen in the work of Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, among others.

ⁱⁱ Frieder Weiss is an engineer who, throughout his career, has developed a number of interactive systems for dance. The most well-known is perhaps *EyeCon*, a programme which enables interaction

in the acoustic medium. Further information can be found on: Wechsler 2006: 60-77; Wechsler, Weiss, Dowling 2004 and also on his website: www.frieder-weiss.de.

ⁱⁱⁱ This installation presents the characteristics which define interactive medial art, as put forward by Söke Dinkla; it is based on a system that comes with no instructions or previously generated content and which favours a specific kind of action (Dinkla, 1997: 11,12). The obvious exception here is that the person who is confronted with this system of empty rules, devoid of content, is not the spectator but the dancer. This is one of the fundamental differences between interactive art in the field of plastic arts as opposed to the scenic arts. In the case of the former, it was developed through considering the role of the spectator in order to promote their participation in the work. In the scenic arts, however, the interactivity is not based on achieving the emancipation of the spectator, but instead aims to create a more motivating experience for the dancer, favouring a changing environment which comes about through the actions of the dancer on stage.

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