

An Avatar's Broken Memory

Olu Taiwo

Introduction

This article aims to introduce my concept of 'creative dimensionality' in response to Johannes Birringer's conceptual debate concerning the emergence of a post – choreographic cultural practice suggesting a new audio/visual/textual/interactive language. I will discuss these ideas with respect to my recent production of 'Interfacing with my Interface' *fig 1*, presented at the Digital Recourses for the Humanities and the Arts conferences (DRHA 2010). The production is now called '*An Avatar's Broken Memory*'. This piece highlights the fragmented nature of remembering past images and events, bringing in to sharp focus a way of working with interactivity that draws on transculturation (Ortiz: 1995, 102-3) that is the fusion brought about by different cultures. Birringer's debate on the DANCE-TECH.NET examines the interface between performance practice, media technology and cultural innovation. In defining the post-choreographic, he says,

Although the notion of 'choreography' has not disappeared in the context of contemporary 21st Century performance and virtual art, it has certainly undergone a re-evaluation in terms of how bodily movement/physical intelligence produces data or how performers or immersants engage with an interface environment which is programmable and networked, and how environments instruct moving behaviors. (dance-tech.net/forum/topics accessed 27 Feb 2009)

In an attempt to define this audio/visual language and offer some critical tools, I have arrived, through the process of my performance practice, at the term 'creative dimensionality' as a way to articulate and conceptualize new cross-dimensional possibilities for devising. A post-choreographic context focuses on ourselves as refracted through technology: It is neo-Artaudian in its desire to manifest and articulate an innovative language for performances and their doubles (Artaud: 1964). My practice of devising over the years has shifted its focus from product oriented outcomes to process oriented transformations. Transformational processes in this context are bound by my attempt to re-engage with fragments of a post colonial heritage; the remains of a Yoruba man born in Southeast London. This schism of 'double consciousness' (Gilroy: 1993, 1), from British and Yoruba cultures, are complex and motivates my creative practice and practice as research: Choreologically, I uses non-verbal language as the prime device for relaying narrative. My practice advocates poetic transformation through movement, action and performance in productions, in an attempt to articulate this complex refraction. Artaud articulates this idea in his second manifesto when discussing 'form',

Furthermore, theatre's need to steep itself in the wellsprings of infinitely stirring and sensitive poetry, to reach the furthest removed, the most backward and inattentive part of the audience, achieved by a return to ancient primal Myths, not through the script but the production, will not be solely required to incarnate and particularly to bring these ancient conflicts *up to date*. That is to say, the themes will be transferred straight onto the stage but incarnated in moves, expressions and gestures, before gushing out in words. (Artaud: 1964, 89)

The pre-expressivity underpinning this performative language perceptually shifts and reconfigures the utility of improvisation from an aesthetic tool, towards an instrument that reveals and explores what Turner and Broadhurst calls liminal space (Broadhurst: 1999, 12). This space exists as a moment in an emotionally charged transitional and digital environment, lying between two key states of being, providing an atmosphere for change to occur. The concept of *An Avatar's Broken Memory* was to bring the audience's experience closer to this potential moment lying just prior to a significant action or decision by highlighting the collective inter-subjective instance within the installation through improvisational performance and emotional risk: Drawing attention to a heightened experience of choice; a dilated now-ness.

Regions of Exploration

My exploration in this project extends and develops an extensive presentation of my trans-cultural framework for performance, called the Return beat (Taiwo: 1998, 157). The specific regions of exploration in this performative installation are;

- 1) To develop my transcultural (Gilroy: 1993, 4) movement style with a particular focus on improvised expression by embodying my second life persona, *Lock Weatherwax*,
- 2) To explore the nature of interactivity and how to utilise it effectively through artistic practice using interactive sticks to trigger rhythmic sound as well as pressure pads to trigger visual content: furthermore I wanted to explore the interactive relationship between moving body and video projection paying particular attention to structural significance.

Creative practice

Last year at DRHA, I presented a paper called 'Creative Dimensionality within a Post-choreographic Perspective' in which I discussed the concepts of creative dimensionality and its different artistic dimensions. *An Avatar's Broken Memory* is a practical development of these concepts. *Lock Weatherwax Fig 1*, is my second life avatar and provided the right set of behaviours to explore and deepen my practice of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Butoh, Body popping and Capoeira as a result of refracting my second life digital double back into embodied form. In general some performances can represent an expectation that rightly puts pressure on performers to be virtuosic; however this

shared pressure is felt as a series of tacit assumptions that are underpinned by our increasing consumption of winners and losers. This can discourage consumers from a creative practice, as a thing that we do in and of its self, preferring instead to observe. My work explores the notion that practice is not only for 'something', but a goal in and of itself. Creative practice can become something we share from time to time in sacred or secular spaces designated by the participants, to celebrate our experience of skill and fluency; with fluency being a consequence of artistic action created by efficient movement. Fluency is effort encoded, embodied and demonstrated. Choreology (Laban: 1966, viii), a study started by Rudolph Laban, provided a useful tool for me to understand and analyze fluency since choreology begins its inquiry from the perspective of the performer's physical journal. It assumes that any performed act involves movement originating from the artist/performer's embodied effort. As a result, my concept of a 'perceptual flux', which contextualizes our embodied experience of fluency in motion, defines an active spiritual dialogue with the out-there, focusing on the perception of fluency, embodiment and faculty, resulting from an ongoing creative practice.



Fig: 1 Olu Taiwo as Lock Weatherwax in Interfacing with my interface: image by Sally Trussler

What is Creative dimensionality?

In creating a this language augmented by interactivity, I needed to review existing assumptions concerning artistic dimensions with regards to Euclid's concept of lines, surfaces and Polyhedrons as well as Bergsonian duration and extend them to include the artistic nature of networks and avatars, which facilitate particular behaviours in the act of rendering their material appearance (Dixon: 2007, 259). We are talking of descriptive tools concerning measurement from the perspective of the performer.

I attended Exeter College of Art and Design 1985 -1988, where apprehensions regarding the artistic practice of figure drawing made by Artists was frowned upon by the artistic establishment. There were heroic exceptions like Lucian Freud whose fleshy figurative subjects seemed to overtly contradict the conceptual orthodoxy. Figure drawing was not totally rejected as non-linear intuitive processes whose methodologies based on abstract evolution were encouraged. This was a very useful way to become sensitized to a pure artistic process. These esoteric artistic skills developed a personal aesthetic that utilized feedback processes where concepts such as texture, tone, and surface among others were in experimental dialogue with form, space and duration. We voyaged into subjectivity, an encounter with an abstract language where metaphors emerged but was not necessarily intended. The structure of the various departments were broken down into 2D, 3D, 4D; including traditional discipline presented as Painting/drawing/printing, Sculpture and performance/live art/video. The idea encouraged interdisciplinarity with a dimensional focus and is a pretext for my concept of creative dimensionality

In characterizing creative dimensionality, I want to begin by referring to its exclusive role in artistic presentation and representation; my definition of 'being creative' in this context is any self organising body in a state engaged with a process that generates something from real or virtual substances: That 'something' can be a product, a thought, an argument, a plan, a spatial form, a sequence of temporal space or a process facilitating transformation among others. Creative dimensionality is primarily made up of various 'artistic dimensions' which combine in various ways to aid expression. With the concept of creative dimensionality there lies distinctions between what is 'actual' in the material sense; measurable, what is 'virtual' in the projected sense; perceived as illusion and what is potential in a sense of having capacity; perceived as expectation or apprehension; all within the presentation and representation of an artistic event. To clarify these distinctions from a somatic and choreological perspective, it is important to examine; what is perceived as having artistic substance with a degree of magnitude in our shared *out-there-ness*, what is perceived as being imaginary, an illusion existing within our private and personal *in-here-ness* and what is perceived as having artistic potential with a degree of expectation due to a dormant capacity in our shared sense of common experience. If something artistic is a result of a series of creative acts that

manifest in productions based on the interface between material, virtual and potential worlds, questions can be raised apropos the nature of artistic dimensions concerning the event produced. These parameters, which have been extended by technology, have produced a situation where a digital studio has given rise to a digital social space with a shadow. The virtual and its perceived vectors are not manifested materially but have paradoxically emerged from it, consequently what is perceived and conceived as actual events, can move between the 'material', 'potential' and 'virtual' through a series of artistic dimensions ranging from an instantaneous series of points with no duration, height, width or length to an avatar that facilitates behavioral properties for an individual within an environment with 5 AD rendered in 3 AD. Creative dimensionality acknowledges the fact that the boundaries between art and science have not only collapsed back to its original state of unity; a kind of alchemy, but that the dimensional canvas for an artist to explore theatre's double has just got exponentially bigger. Steve Dixon comments on a new Artaudian dialectic and says;

For Artaud, the double of theatre is its true and magical self, stirring other dark and potent shadows which rail against a fossilized, shadowless culture... Discourse on cyberculture now reinscribe this Artaudian dialectic, where a romantic utopianism hailing spiritualized virtual realities is pitted against a dystopian skepticism, which attacks the soulless, alienated and schizoid nature of digital irreality. (Dixon: 2007, 241)

As a result, information environments, as points of reflection, need to be revisited and revised. Information environment with 5 AD from a performer's perspective require a specific logic of interactivity, an example being the mixed reality experiments of 'Blast Theory'. The significance of 5 AD is what defines the degrees of freedom associated with each moment of interactivity. Part of this redefinition involves the concept of a print and its template concerning what is artistically repeatable. These new artistic dimensions shift form from what is fixed in temporal space, to fixed networks and strategic behaviours; to what Steve Benford calls 'Trajectories of interaction'. Human computer interactions HCI, provides an evolving context where fixed labyrinthine networks control the trajectories of interactivity but not the individual local experience.

Over recent years, HCI has extended its focus to consider what might be termed "cultural applications" of computing and the new challenges posed by an emerging generation of artistic, entertainment, leisure, heritage and social experiences. The term "experiences" is carefully chosen here to reflect a further shift in focus beyond conventional usability to also consider concerns such as affect, sensation, pleasure, aesthetics and fun, and their contribution to the idea of there being an overall *user experience* (Benford: 2009, 1)

The concept of 'an overall *user experience*' is crucial as we have passive and interactive ways of engaging with artistic material, which blur the boundaries between the 'artist' and 'audience/user'. The construction of personal avatars can bridge the divide and connect the two to create a digital spectator.

Artistic Dimensions (AD)

Below is a brief breakdown of the artistic dimensions within creative dimensionality, which is loosely influenced by the incremental logic of standard geometry focusing on a context for artistic expression as distinct from measurement.

- 0 AD = **Potential** – a latent potential space marking out a place for creation with a point of focus
- 1 AD = **Line** – distance between two focused points with static instantaneous connections, which are open ended
- 2 AD = **Surface** – a flat enclosed line creating a static plane; a window into an illusionary world; picture; mirror
- 3 AD = **Spatial form** – a static structure with enclosed surfaces creating temporal space; real and or virtual; volume
- 4 AD = **Duration** – a sequence of events in temporal space with a beginning middle and end; progression and continuity enclosed by two moments in a lived past
- 5 AD = **Network** – Non linear systems with potential real-time choices inside an arrangement of temporal spaces that are fractal in nature
- 6 AD = **Avatar** –The construction of a persona, quality or alter ego that facilitates or exemplifies particular behaviours with real time choices; a particular flux of behavior that operates freely within a network.

Each artistic dimension contains all the previous layers and provides the main structural constituent for the next. With this taxonomy of artistic dimensions in mind, we can start to discuss and redefine the structural concepts associated with the construction of a print and its template; referring to what was mentioned above, that which is repeatable. Repeatability does not preclude change, there are fixed algorithms that when rendered visually, produce ever changing fractal forms the most famous being the Mandelbrot set but also the work of Torsten Reil's Natural motion who;

By coding computer simulations with biologically modeled nervous systems ...breathe life into the animated characters inhabiting the most eye-poppingly realistic games and movies ... (http://www.ted.com/speakers/torsten_reil.html accessed 20/Jan 2011)

It is tempting to return to Plato's concept of an ideal original form, in which successive imperfect prints are made. Let us not fall into this philosophical trap. When I am

addressing the idea of repeatability in creative dimensionality, I am referring to the practice of using artistic dimensions in the act of creating and presenting objects, events and or processes for the sole purposes of artistic expression in temporal space(s), which is not a result of being a copy of a hypothetical perfect form.

Working assumptions

- All artistic dimensions simultaneously exist in a dimensional inter-layered universe and that creative dimensionality is only an analytical tool to aid a practice as research methodology, which seeks to articulate the 'how we know-ness' concerning contemporary performance practice, to a wider community. This analytical tool will hopefully enable the deconstruction and reconstruction of inter-dimensional multimedia content within events.
- As artists, both separately and simultaneously, we can conceive and perceive of content whose blueprint will consist of 6 or more different artistic dimensional layers
- All artistic blueprints; objects with 2 & 3 AD, events with 4 AD, processes and avatars with 5 & 6 AD respectively, exist performatively in duration (4 AD) as it takes time to perceive things in existence: Temporal space is the context for all lived experience as all the above forms will have some kind of physical journey in terms of becoming and formation

Extended analysis of the artistic dimensions

0 AD: This is where a context is cleared. Blank canvases full of potential are present before known rules are employed. Any empty space needs a viewer/artist to have a point of focus in order to set or perceive the space as empty; pure observation in a flux of duration, full of potential but empty of content is required. The static point of focus, anchors the perception of place in nothingness.

1 AD: Two open static positions with one point of origin and another point that is terminal: Two abstract points of view without any duration, space or surface just distant connecting points at a distance: Artistically this template is represented as a single line, paradoxically however, a drawn line is constructed and perceived through duration, both objective and subjective for its existence to be recognised.

2 AD: This is a static surface with distance and width but no thickness, height or duration, which can only exist as abstract idea: Artistically this concept can manifest symbolically, from the 'potential' to the 'actual', in the form of a print; photography or painting. The form acts as a window into an imaginary, illusionary or memorial world; all of which need duration to read the complexity of what is being portrayed.

3 AD: This is a stable sculptural form with no duration, which can only exist in the abstract; artistically however this concept can symbolically manifest, as a piece of sculpture, an architectural or environmental form that is fixed and or a semi-fixed in nature. *Fig 2*



Fig 2: Lock's Frozen trace forms at the Second Salon; Kube; Poole 2009: Sculpture and Image Olu Taiwo

Duration is required to look around and to be inside these forms. The concepts of artistic dimensions 1, 2 and 3 exist only as potential ideas and are abstract. This is important as when they are represented actually, they exist as static form in duration.

4 AD: A trace form refers to a single event in temporal space, motion or stillness with regards to an object, event or process with a single timeline. A trace form remains after an improvised movement or action has occurred not only 'in', but 'of' temporal space: *Fig 3*. It also contextualises a single action of memory recall both neurologically and digitally. The curious thing about memory is that it can change, as things are remembered, forgotten, re-observed, re-evaluated, de-constructed and re-constructed; however, this being the case, the resulting story tends to be constructed posterior to the event, even if the content refers to the future. We are at the level in which 'motion' can be manifested as a product to be viewed and reviewed; however, the concept of 4 AD can only exist as an abstract idea as an event is the result of many interlocking timeline and is fractal in nature; artistically this concept manifests symbolically as events through prints, that are static with 2 or 3 AD explicitly viewed over time, or moving images that is a recording or a live performance.



Fig 3: Lock Folding Space at Bodyscapes Weymouth 2009: Image by Dan Reid

5 AD: Networks provide parameters of choice between different temporal spaces presenting user/participants and viewer with various crossroads. These crossroads provides liminal moment of uncertainty before an active choice is taken. Within a flux of potentials, constituted by an awareness of multiple temporal spaces, we can see shadow of something approaching superposition. This also can only exist as abstract idea, however we are now at the point just before real-time decisions are taken at the crossroads prior to a choice being made; artistically however this concept can manifest symbolically as environments that have multiple event trajectories and are hyperlinked in some way. Individuals can choose by interfacing with the appropriate information within a dormant environment by making a choice within a spatio-temporal field with trigger points that require,

- A strategic plan of choice within the field or court of temporal space
- A clear set of trigger points and links that are 'strategic acts of choice' for interaction with rules of engagement.
- An artistic agent, persona, a performer or user that can understand the strategic acts of choice and is able to improvise with their physical journal; embodied knowledge and memory, within the field creating an artistic experience for the performer, another participant or passive observer within the situational real or virtual context.

6 AD: An Avatar is an abstract principle embodied: The construction of a persona that facilitates particular real-time behaviours; a performative role in imaginative or virtual space, where a player can personify and be represented by in a real-time. *Fig 4*



Fig 4: Lock outside Brunel University in secondlife 2010: image by Olu Taiwo

An avatar exists as an abstract idea that is underpinned by the notion of a networked self providing the context for a performance of multiple selves. This artistic dimension can be symbolically manifested as an avatar with behavioural qualities embodied by a player acting within a fictitious trajectory in real-time. A blueprint/template with 6 AD, demands the viewer/player/performer to embody an avatar by improvisationally playing the role in real-time with choices; in new contexts and situations while not necessarily repeating choreographic or devised phrases from memory or digital recordings.

Within this creative form with 6 AD, the player can neurologically project themselves, using various avatars with potentially different physical journals. This is the subject of my project *An Avatar's Broken Memory* which through a performance Installation, explores the notion of a Secondlife avatar Lock Weatherwax coming alive in my first life body. Lock Weatherwax's melancholy, as a result of disembodiment and fragmentation, is refracted back into my physical movements. I am forced to express feelings of loss, delusion, myth and confusion that come from being in multiple worlds by constructing a performance installation for the avatar. These extreme efforts are a vain attempt at reconstructing broken memories from digital and mythic fragments drawn from a contemporary Yoruba world view. Steve Dixon makes a point about the complex nature of playing an avatar when he says;

The computer *avatar*, a graphical stand-in for the human body within virtual worlds, links the notion of the double as a spiritual emanation to our final category of digital double, the manipulable mannequin. The term *avatar* derives from the Hindu scriptures, being the bodily incarnation of deities. The Sanskrit

Avatara translates as a descent, the passing down of the gods from heaven to the material world... (Dixon: 2007, 259)

Throughout the event there is a mixture of rhythmic audio/visual content using interactive technology and a transcultural movement style that includes: Butoh, Body popping, T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Capoeira and object manipulation. My movement style underpinned by a Return beat and digital interactivity has developed and is now integrated into this installation. There was a video mirror where the audience could see themselves reflected. By activating sensor pads on the floor, the audience's reflections appeared, disappeared and re-appeared, triggering memories on the screen. This was accompanied by interactive sticks triggering an urban soundscape using rhythmic codes as the embodied Lock Weatherwax attempts to express the complex relationship between his real and virtual identities. The installation started with the audience picking up a programme at the entrance, which invited individuals to choose a Fibonacci number and read its corresponding proverb, posture and stance. The intertextual associations between the text, posture and stance were subjective, however within the meta-structure of these correspondences were hidden, arcane ideas about the body and its choreological (Laban: 1966, viii) association to the performative. I stood behind the first interactive pad facing the video mirror, a video screen projecting a live video feed via the VJ software, ArKaos. The first interactive pad triggered a live feed with an accumulating ripple effect, like rain falling perpendicular to the screen thereby distorting the screen. My physical position was static at the start, holding both interactive sticks down by the side of my side. The feeling was one of expectation. I was aware of playing with the difference between concepts of 'character' and 'avatar', defined by the construction of behaviour regarding the creation of a character and the agency that comes from playing an avatar. There were three projectors with the first, a video mirror being the central focus. The second was perpendicular to the video mirror forming a video screen corner. The image projected from the second projector was taken from a camera that was pointed towards the corner where the two screens met creating a video feedback loop forming an acute angle. I have been exploring this 'uncanny' effect of infinity for a number of years to create an experience much the same way a moebius strip does with its single surface *Fig 2*. The third screen was by the laptops, the contents of which, displayed real-time information relayed from the percussive rhythms I played on the sticks.

The audio landscape which the audience came into was generated using super-collider; which rendered a digital Return beat sounding like a 'shekere', a West African instrument. This was an attempt at creating an atmosphere of rhythmic expectation. I tapped out a binary code with eight potential beats representing a bite and synchronized the percussive rhythms with the binary code produced by supercollider. Different bites linked with different rhythms. A beat of the stick is registered as '1' while silence was registered as '0'. This system, developed with Simon Blackmore's Owl project, created a genuine rhythmic interface. The sticks were prototypes, made longer and wireless to enable more freedom while playing. They are still under development as we intend to incorporate accelerometers to measure the flux movement. The possibilities felt endless standing behind of the first pad. After a while I started to tap out some codes which triggered rhythms stored as 'potentials' in supercollider, creating rhythmic layers around

a digital Return beat. Later I switched to a DVD prepared in the summer with Lock Weatherwax as the subject. The nature and subject of the piece was based on the flux of improvisation that we edited in blocks. The relationships between the camera persons David Rolf as well as Corin Pritchard with my movements were crucial as there was an intuitive dialogue between us; in other words there was an improvised relationship between myself, the camera operators and the Avatar's improvisation. So as a final product no pre-choreographed form were part of the set up apart from those stored as part of my physical journal as a syntax for non verbal expression. While the movie was playing, which uses 4 AD, I moved slowly and repetitively in a crouched position around the space ending up in front of the screen that played the movie. This marked the end of the performative installation and the start of a new journey for *An Avatar's Broken Memory*

Conclusion: Avatar, a liminal art Form

The definition of an avatar has evolved over the Millennia becoming an early 21st century digital art form raising issue about Globalisation, just as architecture was for the latter part of the 20th century initiating the debate on post modernism. Art rendered in 6 AD, with the structural parameters, which in the main continues it's 'becoming' for a particular 'duration', affords an artist/handler, real-time agency. An image identified by individual properties range from personal identifiers in web 2 activities, to the possibility of silicon based automata; AI, agents performing specific tasks set up by a company for users or participants. Will this frame contextualize new debates on Global interactivity and participation?



Fig 5: Lock Weatherwax showing the set design by Johannes Birringer of Ukiyo in secondLife. designed by Kabayan, a Japanese media artist <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/dap/ukiyo.html>

I argue that there is an essential flux, from a performer's perspective, that is experienced as a flow of change in movement and being. This flow of change oscillates at different frequencies each with a return beat a kind of strange attractor creating different forms and states. This idea is similar to Spinoza's concept of substance with his different modes; e.g. thought and extension. This essential flux compels an inner need 'to be and to do'. The notion of a body as a complex system of relations both 'internally' as well as 'externally' does not preclude the notion that this essential flux could be alive. This is different to Stelac's position who insists that we are operational systems, Zombies, whose abstract intelligence does not see being, becoming and performance, as something essential with a perpetual operational agent. Instead he sees the body as a functioning system that hosts complex algorithmic calculations that is not essential in the spiritual or philosophical sense, but emergent; a nothing, which evolves in to something as a result of calculations. He skilfully argues that the mind-body has already been enhanced, improved, extended and that avatars are merely extensions of a person's mechanistic reach. This is not my transcultural experience (Gilroy: 1993, 4). I agree that we are not limited to our physical membranes and that technology can offer our body's operational enhancements; however this does not explain my corporeal experience of the sublime or my desire to communicate internal feelings in ethical and philosophical terms to other people out-there using a liminal performance aesthetic. Why my desire to improve is driven by a need to experience and understand more, in order to partake in the essential flux of creation. Sue Broadhurst says:

In a review of aesthetic theorization, the sublime is crucial to an analysis of liminal performance. The feeling of disquiet produced by certain aesthetic features of the liminal, especially in the experimental aspects, is closely allied to Kant's description of the sublime as a 'negative pleasure'. (Broadhurst: 1999, 8)

Lock Weatherwax as a persona, has been lurking in my creative consciousness for a long time. As part of my 'practice as research', I engaged in a deeper praxis, practicing different movement forms resulting in a transcultural practice which also included studying expressive movement at the Maison d'Artaud in Tokyo, as part of Johannes Birringer's and Michelle Danjoux's Ukiyo project *Fig 5*, exploring metaphysical ideas to do with embodied effort; with Hironobu Oikawa, a Japanese movement master. Oikawa has his own technique based on Artaud's original vision. A deeper transcultural language was the consequence of colliding as these different movement syntaxes. Lock Weatherwax provided a suitable artistic form with 6 AD for these moving behaviours, to engage with an audience in real-time. In this regard it was very important that I installed the installation myself, as an expression of the avatar's agency interlacing 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 AD to construct an environment where the refraction from the virtual double is explored as a theatrical real.

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