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Leah C. Vendl
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Leah Vendl

Introduction

In creating a dance piece where I moved in front of black and white footage of myself as a five-year-old living room improvisationist,¹ I didn't realize I was magnifying my interaction with the whole of contemporary digital interface, and much less that I was creating a piece that spoke to a larger body of works by primarily female choreographers presently using video projection. I set out seeking to understand the impulse of choreographers to make such works, and to look at the effects of combining two such visual and physical media. I found that such works, by enlarging the performer's relation to digital space, examine inner impulses such as self-perception, extreme self-consciousness and make it possible to inhabit imagined environments and dream-states, and as performative media, extend the same participation to the audience.

For this discussion it will be important for the reader's visualization to understand what combination of video and modern dance I'm examining in this project. I am not looking at Dance Film, dance that is choreographed specifically for camera and that becomes a recorded work separate from the performance in itself, often with heavy shot manipulation.² Nor am I looking at dance performances where the screen on which footage is projected is several feet *above* the stage with an abundance of theatrical lighting takes place on the dancer.³ I am considering dance performances where the dancer and video inhabit or potentially inhabit the same vertical plain. I

¹ "Am Was: A Meditation on Mod'n Art." Jen Davis, Lana McMullen, Leah Vendl, Jacki Ward (2010).

² Such as "Smoke," Choreographed by Mats Ek from Sylvie Guillem's *Evidentia* (1994).

³ An example of the screen above stage is locust's "convenience" (2005).

have tried to focused my research to performances I saw person, despite the availability of performance footage I could have found on the internet or rented on DVD, so I could evaluate the pieces as closely as I could to how they were meant to be experienced.⁴ These limits also became the focus of my research because I was keeping in mind the second half of my project—another performance, the reasonable limitations of which, based on timeframe, funds, and spatial parameters, were a projector mounted more or less within the height of a standing human. I was intent on creating a piece in addition to recording my findings in paper form because it is important to me to be able to stand in both worlds of writing and waiting on stage. That is, not to be a critic who has not tried what she is critiquing, or a performer unable to think critically. I hoped in this project to take the stance of the academic-artist, and extending my investigation by conducting performance as research.

That being said, because I come at this project as a movement artist, an insider to of one of those fields, this perspective colors my interpretation of what makes a successful performance. From that insider's perspective, the focus of a dance performance is the movement of the bodies on stage interacting with their environment and each other. If a dance-video performance starts to veer away from focus on bodily movement and gives in to the allure of video and taking the attention away from the movement on stage, it seems, for my purposes, like a dance that's trying to take on too much. Such a piece could be conceived as a more theatrical approach, and using video in performance as background or object-augmentation is a burgeoning mixed media field of its own, even in Seattle.⁵ But again, not the focus of my discussion. Essentially, if the movement of bodies on stage and how those bodies are affected physiologically and

⁴ Although the performances discussed were centralized in Seattle, I believe they provide an accurate climate reading for the current state of the video and dance medium infusion.

⁵ See The Satori Group's *Making of a Monster* (2010).

psychologically by the video is overshadowed by plot depiction on video, the performance is less strictly about the body and instead aims more at interdisciplinary performance art, too vast a subject for me to cover in this paper.

The Media Compete

When setting out to combine the mediums of dance and video on stage, a choreographer must combat the fact dance and video are very different mediums materially. Therefore, they compete for your attention. Dance is corporeal and tangible, while video is digital, intangible, digital, and made of light.⁶ Film theorist Colin McGinn suggests that “dance is uniquely suited to film...because film can accentuate its freedom and lightness” (McGinn 127). He says, “In movies human bodies are super-active, antigravitational” (127). His thought is a plausible one insofar as starting to explain our fascination with the body on screen, not being made up of body but of light, and is not restricted to the same forces as is the dancer-body on stage, or as we ourselves are in real life. In video there is a liberation from gravitational force as well as a perfection in its two-dimensionality that contrasts greatly with the fallibility of a live dance—the fleshy, potentially stumbling human body on stage. The video is finite, concrete and will be the same each time you return to it. These properties could explain our temptation to privilege video over its tangible counterpart when we are presented with both on stage. Therefore, the goal of a dance performance which uses both video and dance should be to somehow navigate the contrasting media from which it is made so that the film and dance elements are not only well-

⁶ A relevant experience is from my own dance-silhouette piece in *Am Was: A Meditation on Mod'n Art*. Both my own experience of watching footage of the performance and the response of many other audience members I spoke to was that the tendency of the eye was to watch the flat video-in-creation—the silhouette against a white wall—instead of the dancer herself, as if the flatness, almost “perfection” of two-dimensionality is preferable to the three-dimensional body.

integrated, but enhance each other on the basic principle on which dance is predicated: movement.

The danger of the media detracting from one another appears to be one-sided, though. When I witnessed performance weaker than the others, it was because it became for a few minutes a film screening, caught up in the video's narrative and not for the time being, concerned with dance. On the other hand, it doesn't seem like a performance can have "too much dance." That is, I was never concerned with dance movement distracting from the video. In fact, the performances that were most successful in terms of integrating the two media were those in which the choreography itself was particularly compelling and could have stood on its own without the video. When the video became the primary conscience of the dance, the piece became disjointed, and the difference in media—the corporeity versus incorporeity—was accented rather subsumed into the overall thrust of the piece, examples of which I will discuss later in the paper.

Loïe Fuller: The First Film *Danseuse*

Loïe Fuller at the turn of the twentieth century was one of the first modern dancers, slightly pre-dating Isadora Duncan, and one might say the first to incorporate cinematographic elements in her performance. In a dance called *La Danse Serpentine*, she would use theatrical lighting of varied and shifting colors and shine lights up through glass plates in the floorboards (a technique which she patented) to create what we can only now imagine to be a prismatic, enchanting display (Brannigan 8). She would take yards of silk fabric attached to dowels that extended from her arms and whip the material around herself creating an ever-morphing figure looking something like the ribbon-thin undulating edge of submerged sea-creature. She used

light to illuminate her hypnotic, fluid figure. I place Fuller at the beginning of where the video-dance performance impulse begins is because it was precisely during Fuller's time where movement outside the stage was stirring: film was being invented. Fuller brought the technological developments of the time to the stage, just as a century later the same holds true. In her time, instead of projecting video on a screen in back of her, she wore the it; the material she whipped around her body in *La Danse Serpentine* became a liquefied movie screen.

The Combination Plays Out an Emotion-Environment Interior

It is not a far stretch to conceive of the moving body as “a medium of the expression of the unconscious,” a physicalization of amorphous undertones of the sub-bodily existence, as the art plays out *on* the human body (Brannigan 2). It is a step further to conceive of video in the same manner. This jump becomes possible when using video in conjunction with a dancer-presence on stage and in concurrence with Marshal McLuhan's conception of human senses—“of which all media are extensions” (McLuhan 21). Through the use of figural representation on the screen, video manifests either as an enlarged emotional reality or an dream-like environment, but most often an intimately merged form of the two.

In *Sonic Tales*, Haruko Nishimura's character in the “Mother Mothra's Visit” sits in a red dress at a table facing the audience. On the screen to her right is a door that she opens through singing, “Knock knock, knock knock,” and reveals her grandmother, played by Nishimura herself, against a backdrop of night sky. The grandmother is dressed in bold, ritualistic make-up and different garb. The two begin a choreographed duet that mirrors each other and correlates to the song Nishimura sings, except that Nishimura's character remains sitting. It is clear that the grandmother figure has sway over the granddaughter's self-perception which we garner from the

two characters being played by the same person. In an almost nightmarish sequence, the screen-grandmother mocks Nishimura's character with exaggerated movements. The situation becomes more threatening as the grandmother begins throwing kitchen items at the granddaughter.

Nishimura ducks and shields herself even though the objects cannot hurt her as they remain on screen. The stratification of the two media is made obvious in the inability of the grandmother's weapons to reach Nishimura on stage, and the presence on video is made all the more threatening because her character could not actually control it. The threatening sense of the scene intensifies as the grandmother's head is enlarged and becomes a backdrop for the normal-sized grandmother, so her presence is doubled. The large head at Nishimura and has a low unsettling voice when it continues to sing. The enlargement makes the physical similarity between Nishimura and grandmother more obvious and implies that the video grandmother is somehow representation of Nishimura fighting with herself—perhaps the most unsettling and uncontrollable part of our human capacities.

An additional representation of self-conflict is portrayed in Amelia Reeber's solo piece "this is a forgery." The piece is more explicitly dream-like, as conveyed by the dreamy hypnotized look Reeber maintains in her gaze, the deep stage often spattered with spots of star-like light, and the strangeness of the characters on video. The Reeber on the video sometimes appears in a white doctor's jacket seems to try and diagnose the Reeber on stage, scolding her. There is also a character, played by Reeber, that appears very much larger in scale than the dancer and wears a wig and ridiculous high-waisted red pants. This character blatantly makes fun of Reeber, physically mocking her movements or sticking out her tongue, the emotional impact—embarrassment, shame—is exaggerated as it would be in a dream. Sometimes a cat appears on screen; a case for how the cat represents an aspect of her self-perception I will not try

to make. (I think the cat is just a cat.) However, the cat, who occasionally would paw at the Reeber on stage, is certainly part of the emotional landscape—Reeber feeling bullied by parts of her own consciousness.

A literal example of using video as non-figurative landscape is a short solo piece called “The Beach,” by Susan Vandenbrink. Vandenbrink used a screensaver of an idyllic, high-saturation beach scene and projected it on the screen in back of her. To more fully integrate herself into the digital environment she connected the screen to the floor with a loose piece of unstretched painting canvas so the projection continued onto the floor. Echoing movements of the soft approach and recession of waves, she blended into the environment by mirroring its flow with her body and because her shadow became near-realistic within that environment. Based on the shadow play and imperfect surface of the canvas, there were moments when her feet’s presence on the beach were particularly believable. Also aiding in this believability was that the footage was shot at an angle, the shoreline receding into the back left corner instead of presenting a horizontal line to the audience. This angle in the landscape introduced a depth to the stage that it could have by no such believable means as video.

An incredibly well-managed and integrated use of video and dance is the work of Amy O’Neal with her company *locust* and solo project *amyo/tinyrage*. She addresses, in part, her impulse to use video on an artist profile on her site: “The stage bores me. A lot of *locust* stuff we create is about bringing [external] situations into the theater, so you kind of forget where you are... you’re taken somewhere else.”⁷ In her pieces “crushed” and “too,” the video takes a backseat to the phenomenal dancing, providing if anything an overlaying landscape to explore, but one that is intrinsically connected to the dance movement in intriguing manner that is not

⁷ Artist profile made for the Seattle Channel in 2008. <http://www.tinyrage.com/about/>.

over-stimulating. Where Reeber's video took on a sticker-book style of its own that at times separated it from the performance, O'Neal's pieces utilize video as a much more plastic means that is less concerned with itself and wraps itself around the dance.

In "too," the most visually striking moment is not when the two dancers on stage are almost perfectly matched up with the two dancers on screen (a process that is often more frustrating than gratifying) but when the overall movement sensation—not choreography—on the video is mirrored on stage. On the screen, a figure slides back and forth on a park bench while the dancers frantically run back and forth, slamming themselves into either side of the walled-in stage. "Crushed," a green-themed meditation on different conceptions of being "crushed" (grasshoppers, fighting, love) opened with a humorous video-only sequence alternating between shots of a farmer running out of his house and a macro shot of a grasshopper waiting on gravel to be squished; live beat-boxer Zeke Keeble provides sound effects. The performance uses video differently in almost every scene. At one point a green-tinged male figure looms tall leaning against a wall, mostly passive except for his voyeuristic capabilities as he overlooks the dance play out on stage. In the most movement-aggressive scene on stage, the video is of dancers fighting to get into or get out of (somehow, and quite ingeniously, it's not clear) an alleyway. However, the shot puts the dancers in such perspective that they appear to be the size of grasshoppers and as if the action is taking place in the space behind a kitchen counter and the wall. Meanwhile, on stage, the dancers mirror the video in a strenuous almost-fight to stay in or out of a rectangle of light projected on the floor from above. Though again the impossibility of the dancers lining up with the video is at times frustrating, the comparison of humans to grasshoppers is curiously but not overtly achieved and the impossibility of lining up

media adds to the audience's engagement with the scene as they will the stage-performance and video-performance to synchronize.

The most striking video-dance contrast in "crushed" is the last scene. O'Neal gets up and sings with Keeble, a sappy yet hopeful (and self-professed karaoke-style) ballad. A single male dancer struggles against himself in vulnerable then embarrassed alternation, while square frames of video of the other dancers' heads on screen at random start and stop convulsing, shaking in a fast-forwarded "no." The video is behind the dancer who stays mostly in one place, facing the audience, and is in ironic opposition to the hopefulness of the love song. It makes the audience acutely aware that the dancer's love life is bound to be frustrated, a reality the dancer is separated from, literally by the video, or that he knows but does not want to acknowledge.

Video grants the audience and access to places of the dancer's emotional movement that would be otherwise visually inaccessible. Reeber's self-critical dream-space and Nishimura's enlarged perception of herself illuminate the tension of longing to see and confront our internal selves but at the same that reality can be terrifying. Vandenbrink's digital landscape, though in itself void of figure-narrative, held calm emotive content through repetition of consistent form. O'Neal's pieces are an intricate weaving of emotional force and additional physical landscape and stand out from the others because of their special attention to connecting the video and dance based on the sensation of movement itself. Just as Loïe Fuller "'embodied" the changing perception of physicality" in relation to film in the early 20th century, Nishimura, Reeber, Vandenbrink and O'Neal have done the same in our body's relation to digital interface today by pressing the two media up against each other and engaging them in conversation on stage (Brannigan 3). Just as movements in dance are dramatizations of movements in real life, the screens these choreographers present are body-size enlargements of the twelve to twenty-inch

computer screens we encounter every day. Their performances suggest, both in their successes and failures at combining the media of dance and video the both inevitability of our attempts to tie our lives into the digital world and our inability to do so. Dance performance is uniquely suited to address this conflict because of the very ‘liveness’ that sets it apart from a recording or video happened across online; performance offers a real-time engagement of media and of bodies that share the qualities even of sitting in the audience.

Why should we pay attention to the impulse to integrate video into modern dance performance? If Marshal McLuhan is right and “the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter... patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance,” these performances are indeed valuable indication of digital media’s subversive force; we can read the information such performances are giving us as performative of how we conceive of ourselves situated to technology—still in front of it, but being sublimely subsumed into it (McLuhan 18). This prospect is disturbing from the perspective of a naturalist who is wary of our intensifying draw to integrate our bodies into the artificial digital realm. The impulse to do so, particularly in the realm of art-making and performance, makes sense especially if we understand as McLuhan does “any medium... as an extension of ourselves” (McLuhan 7). The notion becomes disconcerting because, as these performances project, we are gravitating towards reliance on digital narrative to complete our perceptions of ourselves, physical and emotional.

The “Two-Channel Blues” Experiment: Performance as Research

Bringing the media of dance and video into conversation myself in the process of creating a performance revealed to me the way that the media were most powerfully linked: through the human figure. In almost all or all of the performance I’ve seen at one point uses the figure of the

dancer, on the footage itself. The footage was always figure narrative-based. Initially for my own performance I wanted to experiment with not using figure-based narrative on the film. Instead of relying on the dancer (myself) to provide augmented narrative, I wanted to create directional fields of force on the screen that would add to or contrast the overall sensation of the dancer's movement on stage. For instance, holding the camera at different distances from the cracked-pavement ground visually felt like flying in an airplane, or footage of water droplets sliding off a window played with the double flatness of the screen and then the window. Using primarily water-based imagery, I wanted to see if I could integrate video and dance on the level of pure movement sensation.

When I removed any kind of figure or narrative from the footage in effort to focus on the sensation of movement, though there were occasional moments of sensory interest, the media were actually *less* integrated. I had removed an element to the performance that was evidently a useful tool to the unity of the two media based on content—the human body. In my resistance to simply copy what I had seen in most of the performances and use a person-based narrative, I was moving away from what these choreographers had found to be a strong connection between video and stage-movement—footage that by its form and content had an inherent connection to the dancer.

I thought the footage 'purified' of an additional narrative persona would enhance the audience's experience of the dancer's movement, lifting them to a stage where they could feel a similar visual feeling that the dancer felt physically. As it turns out the *movement sensation* of person-less video, possibly as a result of its incorporeity, was not strong enough to act as another presence on stage. Additionally, the content that replaced the video character had its own presence and, not connected to the dancer in any way but by the fickle sense of movement,

became detached, abstract images with no relation to the dancer that the audience could visually puzzle out. Even though the person-based video if not managed well can easily dominate the audience's attention, so could the person-less.

My conclusion was to stop fighting figure-based footage and to find the power in it. Concerned with the paradoxical allure of our ever-deepening digital interface—often that it literally divides us from what we desire to be close to—I decided to marry the two-person format of the dance to the video, and provide “two-channel” (that is, split-screen) footage above the dancers (myself and a Seattle dancer Tian Yu Yen). I had encountered the use of two-channel video primarily in music videos⁸ and it started to make sense in terms of the theme I was exploring in the piece: inevitable separation. (Thus the name of the piece, “Two-Channel Blues.”) Each dancer would be contained only in his or her screen and the narrative on screen would be the dancer's self-perception or awareness.⁹ But because the stage-dancer and video-dancer would almost never line up (in fact, they never do in terms of choreographic movement), there was a contrast embedded—just as there is a contrast embedded between the two media. I used the contrast in content and in form to portray when a person is ‘of two minds,’ or when they are conflicted. For instance, at a time when my character is bound up by her own arms and facing the corner of the stage, her screen-presence flails and thrashes out past her dividing screen towards her partner's screen, conveying that which might be her real emotional inclination to do, but for whatever rational or bodily reasons, she cannot. When Tian Yu's character is exhausted on screen and has lain down, his stage-presence continues to act out towards my character a frustration at the inability to reach her.

⁸ Brooke Waggoner's “Live for the Sounds” (2008) and You, Me, and Apollo's “Opener” (2009) are two examples.

⁹ The exception to this rule is the beginning and the ending sequences of video, walking around the circular pond, in which the dancer's screen becomes what he or she is literally seeing, instead of his or her internal perception of himself/herself.

In the ending sequence of the piece provides an ultimate contrast between action on the screen and stage: the dance relinquishes control to the video, and the primary expectation of movement to be located in the dance is displaced into the video. Even though the dancers settle into their final places and the positions correlate to the action on the screen (my character standing in the corner, Tian Yu's sitting behind me looking at me), as always, there is a contrast preserved in both form and content, though more subtle this time. While the action of the film-narrative—my character backing away—takes over, the movement on stage becomes reduced to breathing, and this is the last choreography.

Just as there was a tension between the two dancers, between the two channels, between the two mediums, between the dancers and the cellist, in all these binaries' inability to fully connect, there is a partnership that allows for alternating relinquishing of control. But because this alternating control is never so absolute that one side is loosed from the other's grasp; instead, the video is so completely integrated into the dance (or vice versa) that one is never left completely without remnant sensation of the other.

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