Creative Space and Interdisciplinary Practice in Digital Fashion Performance: An Artistic Reflection on "Beyond Fantasy"

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an evaluation of the impact of new media on dance with a brief historical overview of the field while developing the link between virtuality, cyberspace and dance. In doing so, I will develop the key implications of new media applications for dance. I will also draw on contemporary practices of leading choreographers in Europe, such as Ultima Vez, Frankfurt Ballet, and Random Dance Company. Based on the historical survey, I will develop a thematic focus on the issue of identity and privacy in surveillance society as presaged by George Owell’s 1984. Based on this conceptual foundation, I will present a summary of my own performance project (Beyond Fantasy). This digital fashion performance work tries to capture the problem of wrestling with the mediatised environment. Furthermore, it is a piece that utilises new media technology in a way that it reveals both the fantasy and anxiety of looming technopia. Therefore, my primary motivation behind this work is to explore the interface between digital media based performance, fashion and dance improvisation.
1. Introduction

Since the late 1960s when a computer programme was first used to create a work of art interest has grown in understanding the ways in which technology influences creativity and vice versa (Candy and Edmonds, 2002). The degree of interaction between the artist, the artwork, the environment and the audience has attracted much attention as digital technologies have developed. From so-called “static interaction” to the dynamic-interactive relationship, as devised originally by Cornock and Edmonds (1973), the relationship between artist, artwork and audience has become unpredictable and malleable where the intervention of an “agent” can modify the specification of the art object, such that its “performance” varies according to its history.

The focus on interaction has also resulted in discussion of notions of collaboration and control in the production of modern technology-based art. As technology develops so too do the demands made on it by the artist. Consequently the dependency of the artist on the technologist to provide greater flexibility, control and functionality of the technology in question also increases. No longer is it simply a question of substituting one art medium for another, e.g. oil paintbrush for an electronic one, but a question of shifting modes of thinking and approach to art generation that requires an artist to be much more collaborative in their work (Candy and Edmonds, 2002).

Candy and Edmonds (2002) have also identified that the need for artists to be in control of the creative process can be problematic in the field of digital art. The issue of ownership and control of a programme that manipulates or enables an interactive artwork can be sufficient to cause an artist to abandon a particular direction if he/she feels that they have relinquished control of the artwork to another person. These issues of control are closely related to the complexity of the software applications used in the generation of the artwork and imply that the artist must become an expert in programming if they are to retain full control to be able to realise highly ambitious projects without abrogating ownership or accountability.

In the field of dance, researchers like Skulstad et al. (2002) have shown a great interest in the ways that research can be understood as and through performance. In fact they consider that “dance may be an important player in the building of the interdisciplinary links between practice and theory, which are needed in the study of ICTs in culture and context”. Whereas
performance acts in general are seen increasingly as event-oriented expressive discourses constructed by the performer, be he/she a dancer, artist or actor electronic performances involve the audience to an even greater extent. Thus the effect of the digital medium is to increase the level of interaction between the performer, performance and audience overall.

Such observations have led some researchers to consider the role of information and communication technologies as both compositional and mediational tools in the environments in which they are used. Clearly, there are implications for the nature of the creative practice involved in generating the cultural event, be it a dance or a museum exhibition or an installation. In this context important questions arise, for example, as to how dance improvisation might evolve across distances to create meaning. How might we dance with remote partners in "real time"? Or, if we want to use images as live projections, how do we bring the digital back into "real space"? The "intelligent stage" of the future will not be a theatre but the network itself. Yet in order to transmit movement images, a dance has to "happen" at some point in real time/real space. Telematic performance thus harbours beautiful paradoxes, as transmittable data have to be produced and processed in synchrony between different locations which may involve different environments.

In this paper, I will evaluate the impact of new media on dance with a brief historical overview of the field while developing the link between virtuality, cyberspace and dance. In doing so, I will develop the key implications of new media applications for dance. I will also draw on contemporary practices of leading choreographers in Europe, such as Ultima Vez, Frankfurt Ballet, and Random Dance Company. Based on the historical survey, I will develop a thematic focus on the issue of identity and privacy in surveillance society as presaged by George Orwell's 1984. Based on this conceptual foundation, I will present a summary of my own performance project (Beyond Fantasy). This digital fashion performance work tries to capture the problem of wrestling with the mediatised environment. Furthermore, it is a piece that utilises new media technology in a way that it reveals both the fantasy and anxiety of looming technopia. Therefore, my primary motivation behind this work is to explore the interface between digital media based performance, fashion and dance improvisation.

2. Relationship between Dance and New Media during the 20th Century
Dance, closely associated with visual forms and rhythms, is fundamentally a multimedia system. Since the beginning of photography and motion studies, performances were staged exclusively for the camera. Eadweard Muybridge's serial photographs of the human figure in motion, originally intended as a scientific study, were first published in 1887, and they became a famous source book for artists, animators, and filmmakers. Ethnographic filmmakers and choreographers later discovered that dance-on-film or video dance is a composite medium in its own right; that choreography is editing of frames. Making dances for the camera has become not only a cinematographic alternative to live dance, but motivated choreographers to reconceive the aesthetics of dance for the theatre.

The advent of film, radio and television during the 20th century was rapidly taken up by several artists as a means to reconcile popular public tastes with avant-garde art and explore the potential of the new media "...to create image and sound experiences that have never been seen or heard before..." (Daniels, 2004). The political uses of the new media quickly became apparent as the Fascist and Communist regimes that emerged in the early decades of the 20th century quickly harnessed film and radio as highly effective propaganda channels. In these situations the audiences were very much passive observers of the events occurring on the screen or radio. The manipulation and control of the medium and the event being described either aurally or visually lay very much in the hands of the artist. Only after the Second World War did the use of new media lose their overt political attractiveness and revert to once more being alternative devices for artistic expression. At this stage the ability of the audience to interact with the artistic event being performed began to develop significantly. Cage's famous experiments with silent pieces illustrate this point, whereby the audience defines the experience for themselves with the radio being used simply as the communication channel (Daniels, 2004).

For dance the relationship with the visual media of film and television has proved to be a particularly close one. Dodds (2001) describes the relationship as a reciprocal one: "screen images intercept dance performance and dance is translated to, or designed for, the screen". Similarly the line between the live and the virtual becomes ever more indistinct under the influence of digital technologies.

Since the late 1970s the role of dance appears to have evolved from being mainly entertaining or documentary to being one in which the dancer constructs a discourse with and on behalf of the audience and thus places him-/herself in a position to exert much more than a purely
aesthetic influence over the spectator. During the last three decades the growing use of televisual technology, particularly video, in informing the design and performance of dance routines has been significant for dancers and choreographers alike. For choreographers like Merce Cunningham video has proved not only to be an alternative, less expensive medium for demonstrating dance, but an experimental tool that provides insights into the relationship between the audience and the dancer (Dodds, 2001). Cunningham admits to how his stage choreography has been affected by video, encouraging him to give more attention to detail in his live stage performances from having seen how video can amplify movements and expose their precision more clearly than a live performance. Here we see technology’s role as a tool influencing the creative process clearly demonstrated; it does not however describe what structuring effects (if any) the technology has had on the relationships between artists and technologists within the context of the dance company itself.

Other choreographers and dancers have gone even further with their experimentation with digital media to focus specifically on the interaction between the medium in question and the dancer. Dance companies like Troika Ranch have developed considerable expertise in the use of technological tools to compose digital dances. Typically this involves the use of "sensory devices, worn on the body or placed on the ground that allows the computer to track and respond to a dancer’s movements on stage". (Farley, 2002: 2).

In such examples the dance company has often collaborated with artists schooled in software development to produce tools designed to facilitate the making of digital dances. These include graphic programming languages designed to aid the authoring of routines using multi-source inputs and sensory systems that track a performer’s movements and translate them into digital signals. In turn these signals can be used for a variety of purposes including the control of lighting or as triggers for the selection of audio or visual files. Other digital media such as the Internet are being adapted by dance companies not only as cheap promotional vehicles, but also as actual performance platforms that enable collaboration between geographically distant sites to produce a distinct work of art. (Dodds, 2001: 15).

In another example Skulstad et al. (2002) discuss how digital dance can be instrumental in understanding the cultural effects of technology through the medium of a collaborative project between a ballet school and a group of researchers and designers of new media technologies. Although the importance of the role of the dance choreographer in the project is emphasised,
issues of reflexivity and her perceptions of the technology (except as a means to create new interpretations of existing relationships and realities) are not directly discussed. Issues of power and control over the creative process are only tacitly addressed in references to the teacher’s “…experimental, free-form approach” to choreography, which enables a democratic relationship between teacher and pupils to be established in the creation of a performance.

In this context important questions arise, for example, as to how dance improvisation might evolve across distances to create meaning. How might we dance with remote partners in "real time”? Or, if we want to use images as live projections, how do we bring the digital back into "real space”? The "intelligent stage" of the future may not be a theatre but the network itself. Yet in order to transmit movement images, a dance has to "happen" at some point in real time/real space. Therefore, the artistic form and content of the dance still matters critically to digital media based works. Telematic performance thus harbors beautiful paradoxes, as transmittable data have to be produced and processed in synchrony between different locations which may involve different environments.

3. Cyberspace, Virtuality and Identity

Cyberspace is a generic concept for the imagined world within the world’s computers: virtual space of computer memory, digital media and the telecommunications networks which connect them. It has been conceived as “a globally networked, computer-sustained, computer-accessed, multi-dimensional, artificial or “virtual” reality” (Benedikt 1992: p. 122). This computer matrix produces “a programmed illusion of a potentially infinite, spatialized present” (Hillis, 1996: p. 94). The social implications of major changes in the techno-economic sphere have been presaged by Arendt’s insight on human condition:

In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions, which their human origin and their visibility not withstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things (1958: p. 9).

Novelist William Gibson coined the term cyberspace in his book Neuromancer:
cyberspace ... a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators ... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data’ (1984: p. 67).

Virtual reality (VR) is central to the idea of this matrix. It may be regarded as the “means of access to the parallel, disembodied and … networked world called cyberspace” (Hillis, 1996: p.71). The aim of VR is to suspend a complete sense of disbelief in a computer simulated experience. It enables the realisation of the human dream of transcending the material world.

The development of the idea of cyberspace may be seen as a symbol for the breakdown of modernity, the possible death of the nation state (Drucker, 1992; 1997) and the ushering in of a new post-modern age. It has been said that postmodernism is a condition that “derives its unique status above all from technological change” (Hillis, 1996: p. 89). Nguyen and Alexander (1996) quote Emberly:

[The old vocabulary of forces, pressures, bodies, plane surfaces, densities of mass, uniform motions, action-reaction - in short the language where cogs, wheels and springs compose a thing in uniform space and time classified by the detached observer - has been relinquished. In its place we have the organic metaphors of process, feedback, biopower, waste disposal, data environment patterns, and entropy. Or the metaphors of field theory - displacement, circuits, differential equations of motion, exchanges, and relations. Thus our electronic media-data come to be nothing but an extension of our central nervous system. [.....] The old economy of production, of industrial policy, of state initiative, of discrete and singular actors and audiences, of centres and margins, form and contents, in brief, the greater order of referential finalities where the world was compartmentalized, taxonomically ordered, and prescriptive - all this is over. (Italics added)

The early post-war years in the West saw the tension between the individual, the institutions of the state and the large monolithic organizations which were emerging. The existentialists rejected the idea of organization and its inherent system of shared values. This view may be contrasted with that of the structuralist philosophers:
What most repelled the existentialists, the domination of man by systems, is from the structuralist point of view, not only inevitable, but even desirable. ‘Man’ is dead - whether as a subject who is the source of meaning and value, as a capacity for freedom or as a being whose centre is “lived experience”, or as a bearer of deliberate intentions (Passmore, 1982: p. 27).

Where did the idea of a single indivisible self originate? Passmore explains that the European idea of "self" historically equated personal identity with the continuity of memory: "identity" was linked to our ability to think of ourselves as being one and the same indivisible self at different times and different places (Passmore, 1985: 18) Derrida rejects the construction of metaphysical systems predicated on their being something absolutely present, which may be taken as a starting point for the systems’ construction (Passmore, 1982: p. 27). One consequence of Derrida’s ideas is the loss of identity. Gibson is seen as describing a postmodern social scenario in his novel (Gephart, 1996: p. 36). In his conception of cyberspace people find their identity in the matrix in a totally artificial world. As McLuhan and Powers wrote “carried far enough man thus becomes a creature of his own machine” (1989: p. 1).

Even with the increased rate of change that is being seen today, Gibson’s world is still far away and the technology of VR still in its adolescence. His work depicts a world where ‘decay, scarcity, and conflict become the “stable” features of society’ (Gephart, 1996: p. 40). We think this view is too pessimistic and suggest a more balanced perspective on human adaptation and adjustment to environmental uncertainly and existential anxiety. There is plenty of ongoing debate as to whether the technological changes will alter the nature of human society and what the future shape of change will be like. There is no doubt that we are undergoing a major societal transformation, for better or worse, but it is difficult to determine the directions and mean by which we can shape these changes. On a modernist note, one

must find a way of anticipating the future..... [They] can no longer, through fear of the unknown, expend so much energy translating anything new into something old but must do what the artist does: develop the habit of approaching the present task as an environment to be discussed, analysed, coped with, so that the future may be seen more clearly (McLuhan & Powers, 1989: p. viii).
Virtuality has a fundamental impact on the nature of social interaction and relationships in internet based culture. The impact of these changes on the emotionality of everyday life is an emerging area of research in the social sciences and humanities. The increasing application of digital technologies and media in the arts has also aroused extensive debate on the nature and direction of changes in artistic practice and innovation. Late twentieth-century thinking, art, science, and world view, are all eclectic. Our concepts and ideas are littered with parts and pieces from other civilizations, past and present. Gablik (1977: 81) argues that the ability to “recognize the existence of a plurality of perspectives . . . is to be already in some sense beyond all of them”. This abiding awareness of pluralist realities - multiple points of view - prompts informed viewers to question the completeness, if not the veracity, of any world view that can be fully depicted from a single viewpoint (Carrier, 1985). "I don't think there is one Western culture", insists Jacques Derrida - who gave us deconstruction, the word and the strategy - "It's plural" (cited in Stephens, 1991: 14). Consequently, the indivisible Cartesian self seems to have become an anachronism at the close of the twentieth century. Consciously or unconsciously, contemporary artists and critics insist on a new structure in art forms and practice, a pluralist structure of fragmentation that reflects beliefs and perceptions which relate to a more fluid construct of identity and self.

Modern artists, as a last tribute to their disappearing sense of continuity and their Cartesian sense of an indivisible self, composed paintings in a manner that was structurally similar to traditional composition as practised since the Italian Renaissance. These paintings were designed to be viewed from a specific location; compositions were cohesive and monolithic. Fredric Jameson maintains modern artists insisted upon the creation of an image as personal and as unique as a fingerprint: this signifies, he concludes, that the modern aesthetic was irreversibly linked to the concept of a unique and separate self and a private identity, which could "be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world" (Jameson, 1983: 114).

Leo Steinberg depicts the essence of post-modern image by what he calls the "flatbed picture plane". One of the two primary characteristics of the flatbed picture plane is the post-modern tendency to fragment the painted image by structuring multiple perspectives around pluralist viewpoints (Steinberg, 1972: 82) These multiple perspectives generate a series of fragmented Derridean apostrophes, digressions - footnotes rather than a unified indivisible central text - each in turn turning away from the main body or text. Each visual apostrophe generates
another viewing location, or a separate spectator, thus presuming a divided or pluralist viewer, rather than a single indivisible viewer.

4. Beyond Fantasy: A Digital Fashion Performance Project
5. Digital Performance: Current Practice and Future Prospect

‘Digital Performance’ is a type of live performance art that is incorporated with computer technologies. Basically, live art is exemplified as gallery installation, computer-based net.art, CO-ROM, as well as digital games in which visitors’ performances constitute the contents and forms of the games. But the concept of digital performance is arcane and thus confusing. The term of ‘digital’ refers to a specific technology that encodes sensory databases (i.e. sound, music, moving, sets and costumes), manipulates and interprets them in a complicated intelligent way. But unlike such a narrow definition, the term is used very widely to refer to all the applications that adapt a silicon chip.

The same goes with the term of ‘performance’. It initially meant qualitative capabilities that are measured in the process of testing cars, aircrafts, and other machinery. It later implies more specifically the speed and accuracy of data processing of a computer as well as the ‘architecture’ of it. If one search for information on the digital performance, one would come across not only the sites of performance art, but also those of checking and improving the speed of data processing of a home PC. In relation to art, digital performance has been identified as a universal term that encompasses all type of performing art. Anything one identifies as digital performance can actually be considered as such given the wide application of the term of performance.

Academically, there has been a constant trend to study performance since the 1990s. The so-called ‘Performance Studies’ has emerged as an interdisciplinary area that includes not only philosophy, linguistics, history, culture and social sciences, but also comprehensive human activities in a daily life of which the importance was previously emphasized by Joseph Beuys. Since 2000, digital performance started to be dealt with more frequently in the field of performance studies.

According to Dixon (2007), the origin of digital performance can be traced to several examples that range from the deus ex machina in the Greek tragedy to Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk (‘the totality of stage design’) in the 19th century. It is for sure that the development of digital technology on the 20th century has accelerated the growth of digital performance. It has been used as an invisible tool behind the stage for the purpose of spectacular dramatic staging. New media such as movie, television, and video have been incorporated into the performing art as well. For the past four decades, especially, digital processing technologies conjoined with image and sound media started to be utilized to enhance creativity.
The Internet has dramatically changed the form of performing art. Two main features are noted: the provision of enormous amount of databases and the realization of collaborating and redistributing performing activities. Irrespective of temporal and geographical barriers, one can organize ‘creativity collaboration’ that enlivens the ‘shared creativity’ (Carver & Beardon, 2003: 1). As a result, the performance actors are diversified: not only the theatrical personnel but also any individual can either participate into MOOs, IRC, or chatting rooms, or create their own homepage or blog on the Web. All of them are basically related to performing activities.

Digital performance offers a potentially new cross-disciplinary paradigm in theatre and performance and thus offers a way out of the somewhat stale debate about the role of technology in performance in exploring the part that digital technology plays in the aesthetics of a performance. The fundamental questions on the creative process that both artists and researchers face are twofold. The first is concerned with the ways new technology and media affect the interaction between artists (i.e., performers) and the audience. This reflects the increasing trend that involves the participation of the audience into the performance. The “virtual reality/performance work” invites the audience/viewers/users to participate in or interact with an art work that involves being able to navigate freely “within” a three-dimensional environment created by computer software. This entails the use of sensors and devices to register input from the user/audience member to be integrated with the computer generated 3-D environment (deLahunta, 2002: 105).

The second is related to the coordination and control of the creative process that becomes increasingly more cross-disciplinary and collaborative in terms of the relationship among the artists (e.g., directors, choreographers, designers, musicians and technicians) involved in the planning, production and performance of a “digital” work. This also has important implications for trust and power relations among them that are bound to be altered by the appropriation of new technology and media.

Both aspects of change in the creative process and outcome point to a reordering of artistic components as well as a remediation of interrelationships in performing arts. Even the arbitrary boundary between performing arts and performance arts (or new media arts) has already become blurred. The kind of cultural shift that pop art brought about in 1960s is quickly emerging on the digital horizon where arts and technology meet, thus generating new hybrid platforms, contents and practices. Paradoxically the advent of digital media signals a renaissance of performing or performance arts (rather than its demise), only if they come in new clothes.
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