

Nancy Reilly-McVittie

A Postmodern Performer Prepares

INTRODUCTION

In 1996 I mounted an English public art project, *Self, Site, Screen; Technical Reflections (Step Into the Limelight)* in collaboration with British visual artist, Ondre Nowakowski, and Creative Arts students from Manchester Metropolitan University (England). We built an interactive performance space which included a thirty-two foot outdoor video projection shot onto a screen on a public building, an outdoor stage and microphone. We worked between scripts, improvisational structures, pre-recorded and live footage. We made use of video art with music tracks, public scripts in which the audience participated, and solo material. The outdoor performance lasted for two and half hours for two consecutive nights. One student artist, Abi Groves, a third year Creative Arts student, was particularly astute in formulating agendas about subjectivity, technology and performance. Using basic technology; a video playback, mirror image, self, and vision mixer, Abi manipulated a three way dialogue between her organic self, her video projection, and her mirror reflection caught in the video projection such that it became a tug-of-war for authenticity. Who was the real Abi? This wrestle for authenticity between the actress/ actor and her projection, and her reflection within a projection, surfaces a new performance agenda as the cyborg performer emerges and takes the stage in the late Twentieth century. This article will attempt to raise some fundamental questions about the impact of technology on the actress/ actor. Philip Auslander identifies the process of machine/ performer merger in his astute article, *Intellectual Property Meets the Cyborg*. Here he describes a performance by American Performance artist Laurie Anderson entitled, *Home of the Brave*, and how she incorporated American novelist William Burroughs into her performance.

*The Burroughs we see in Home of the Brave, is simultaneously present and represented, live and recorded, with no clear distinctions between those terms and no privileging of the live presence over the recorded or simulated versions.*¹

INSTRUMENTAL BODY

In virtual environments the performance artist's role is profoundly problematised in relationship to the staging of the body. What becomes of spectatorship? The traditional relationship of passivity and receivership seems to lose its dynamic in the virtual performance world and is replaced by a direct interactivity. The job of the performance is shared between the spectator and the performer.



It would be difficult to find a theatre trained performance artist who has not been dutifully ushered into their craft via the stalwart cliché, “your body is your instrument”. This “good ole” adage has withstood the test of time and the incessantly curious pressure of all forms of experimentation. Since the early 90’s this axiomatic pillar of thought has been emptying its wisdom into the turbulent winds of change. In fact the very definition of what it is to be human, to have a body, is embroiled in a profound ontological debate. The question has been ignited by the fiery progression of technological development. Most importantly for the actress/actor is the way those technical advancements are inscribing themselves onto organic life in an unprecedented way. Anne Balsamo, an American academic, in her introduction to *Technologies of The Gendered Body; Reading Cyborg Women*, articulates the perspective shift we humans are facing about our bodies;

... by the end of the 1980’s the idea of the merger of the biological with the technological has infiltrated the imagination of Western culture, where the “technological human” has become a familiar figuration of the subject of postmodernity.²

It may be useful to think of your grandmother. She would not have any trouble in drawing a firm dividing line between a person, a pig, and a machine. We do not have the same luxurious clarity with which to draw categorical distinctions in the late Twentieth century. Men and women have extended life spans due to the augmentation of pig valves grafted on to the human heart. Genetic engineering also promises us a harvest of animal parts for interchange with humans to extend human life spans. An increasing horde of workers spend their working hours communicating in cyberspace. Surgical intervention is accepted as another

part of the beauty machine. This escalating technological revolution brings into play the notion of the human as a boundary figure. A creature who roams the recently opened border zone between the animal and the machine. Balsamo further elaborates the concept.

For whatever else it might imply this merger relies on a re-conceptualisation of the human body as a “techno-body”, a boundary figure belonging simultaneously to at least two previously incompatible systems of meaning - “the organic/natural” and “the technological/cultural”. At the point at which the body is re-conceptualised not as a fixed part of nature, but as a boundary concept, we witness an ideological tug-of-war between competing systems of meaning, which include, and in part define, the material struggles of physical bodies.³

CYBORG PERFORMATIVITY

From the year dot, the performance artist has been in the business of interrogating and expressing what it is to be human. Any dynamic change in the definition of subjectivity therefore necessarily pricks up the ears of the performer and works overtime on the artistic imagination. The term currently applied to a human body which functions in intimate relationship with a technological interface is “cyborg”. Donna Haraway in her essay, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, defines cyborg as:

... a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.⁴

In the most fundamental sense this paradigmatic shift in being human accomplishes two things:

a) our ability to use our bodies to express ourselves takes on radical new dimensions;
 b) the utilitarian function of the humanist notion of self as a stable, fixed, character which operates within certain universal truths about human nature, is eradicated.

Certainly classical training strategies for performance practitioners such as the Stanislavsky Approach and Method Acting lose their philosophical groundwork in this epistemological crisis. Western thought has embraced the psychological perspective that the self was unknowable due to Freud's "unconscious", but the limits of the flesh were fairly incontestable. Death was death. Organic life and machines served as binary opposites offering clear categorical distinctions with which to negotiate reality. All of these certainties now melt into the electrifying air. This raises the question of how you create performance art when the long, sustained waltz with humanism falls into obsolete silence. The performance artist of the Twenty-first century has to re-examine how s/he reformulates her/his new found powers of expression and reflects the new post-human paradigm. If you consider the avatar as a theatrical extension beyond the realms of masks, puppets, and other theatrical devices, you run into more disruption. For three-dimensional avatars that humans can pilot through virtual realities change the entire nature of the operation of space/time/action in performance. "The body is your instrument" has mutated to the body as one channel of distribution among multiple other "imaginary constructs" which may be technologically assisted.

Walter Benjamin laid bare the fundamental triumph of this postmodern *trompe d'oeil* in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

*The equipment-free aspect of reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.*⁵

When faced with such a seismic shift in the nature of subjectivity, and therefore the nature of performance art, it is momentarily fruitful to formulate a general list of possibilities to dazzle the imagination. The performers' Twentieth century embrace of psychology begins to change position. The notion of the surface/depth model is problematised by mutating signs of psychological perception. It is possible that sticky technology (micro chips that work within organic forms) will be available in the near future. There may be internal devices to boost and aid memory through the insertion of a computer chip. What does such a possibility mean to the inner life of a performer? Most importantly, how does a performer work between her/his interior (non-verbal) thought process and her/his exterior performance if her/his inner life is machine assisted?

When the body is able to extend its physical capabilities through hardware or sticky technology, there will be a need to redefine the notions of stamina, endurance, presence, and persona, when executing a role. The time structures for performance will begin to dynamically alter. If as a performer, I can suspend my body into space to cross the stage and have my "body without organs"/projected body embrace my physical body when I reach the other side, if I can hit and hold a perfect soprano high C for thirty minutes while formulating my thoughts on a screen, then the view, use and training of my body as a performative tool is in need of an extensive reconstruction.

Even if you opt for the "good ole" three dimensions of theatrical space in the near future, you will still be able to so radically alter your physical abilities that it will fundamentally affect the nature of performance. There is no way to foretell what you need to prepare for the art of performance. This

bodily transformation makes the surgically altered media stars of today primitive archetypes of how performers (and others) will use technological intervention to change physical characteristics.

Pat Cadigan in her novel, *Fools*, offers the reader a vision of the physical and mental life of a method actress somewhere in the near future. The main character, Marva, goes to a head shop called *You Must Remember This*, to have her memory boosted as she is suffering from more than a mild personality disorder from her Method work;

“Don’t point that thing at me”. I tell her, and pop out my left eye. She’s got the holding tank ready for me and I hurry up and do the other eye before she thinks I’ve decided to leave the job to her after all.

Her system connections are brand-new, I can tell by the way they latch on to my optic nerves, no pull, no jerk, just smooth. Am I the first person she’s used them on? I’d ask but the sensory cut-off’s kicked in, and that’s a relief ...⁶

Let us return to Abi’s work in the interactive performance. The viewer knows that without the organic body, assisted by technical equipment, the second image would not have been possible. Therefore the quibbling and inter-physical relationship she sets up between the three could easily be dissolved through the audience rejecting the theatrical conceit. However, in the mind of the spectator those assumptions are abstract and necessarily dissolve from what-is-necessary-to-pay-attention-to in conscious reception. For centuries the viewer has readily accepted masks, puppets, automatons and other duplicities to stand in for the actor or the character. In accordance with the same principle, the viewer readily accepts the actress/actor projection “standing in” for the actress/actor who is standing in for the character.

For all intensive performative purposes the video image, the mirrored video image, and the organic Abi can be received as equal representations of “Abi” for the viewer.

Enhanced visualisation technologies make it difficult to continue to think about the material body as a bounded entity, or to continue to distinguish its inside from its outside, its surface from its depth, its aura from its projection. As the virtual body is deployed as a medium of information and encryption, the structural integrity of the material body as a bounded physical object is technologically deconstructed. If we think of the body not as product but rather as a process and embodiment as an effect, we can begin to ask questions about how the body is staged differently in different realities. Virtual environments offer a new arena for the staging of the body, what dramas will be played out in these virtual worlds? ⁷

Of course with any ground breaking change there are always a portion of ideologues who holler doomsday, in so many words. There are those who would argue that the cinema was actually the beginning of the end for the actress/actor’s job. If in future performance the ability to do will not issue from what has hitherto been allocated to the mysterious term “talent”, then anybody can utilise sticky technology to accomplish tasks that in the past relied on physical skill and internal approaches to “make believe”. Most importantly, if everyone can have access to virtual worlds via her/his own self styled avatar and their own virtual reality rig, then everyone can do the actress/actor’s job. Interactivity is the buzz word for today’s audience relationship with mass entertainment. Can we not view the technological advancement as a great leveller of the actress/actor’s and the audience’s role?

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becomes of spectatorship? The traditional relationship of passivity and receivership seems to lose its dynamic in the virtual performance world and is replaced by a direct interactivity. The job of the performance is shared between the spectator and the performer. As the possibilities cast mutating shadows from the future, Scott S. Fisher notes in his article, *Virtual Environments: Personal Simulations and Telepresence*.

*The two users will participate and interact in a shared virtual environment where each will view it from their relative, spatially disparate viewpoint. The objective is to provide a collaborative world space in which remotely located participants can virtually interact with some of the nuances of face-to-face meetings while also having access to their personal data space facilities ... With full Dolby tracking capability it will also be possible for each user to be represented in this space by his or her own life-size virtual representation in any chosen form - a kind of electronic persona ... These virtual forms might range from fantasy figures to inanimate objects, from different figures to different people.*⁸

As Abi asked in *Self, Site, Screen, Technical Reflections, (Step Into The Limelight)*, are we no longer extending the craft of acting but formulating a simulation of what it means to act? The organic body, as the actor's instrument, faces a crisis of authenticity. Andy Warhol said that in the future everybody will be famous for fifteen minutes. It may be true that in the future everyone and her/his double may be an actress/actor anytime, and anywhere s/he wants. Abi was attempting to interact with this scenario in *Self, Site, Screen; Technical Reflections (Step Into the Limelight)*, a drama of technically multiplied, electronically eviscerated subjectivity. Was the video capture less real because it was Abi "without organs"?



*Self, Site, Screen, Technical Reflections
(Step Into The Limelight)*

The organic and the mechanical, the real and the fictional, bond and re-figure in the pixels which now dot the haze of the suspension of disbelief. The question has deep rooted implications for the future development of performance art. As Philip Auslander in his article, *Intellectual Property Meets the Cyborg*, articulates in his analysis of Burroughs' involvement in Laurie Anderson's, *Home of The Brave*.

*The homosexual junkie misogynist Beat novelist and the heterosexual feminist postmodernist entertainer-performance artist achieve a strange and unstable unity of the kind described by Haraway for the duration of the song by speaking through a single voice that belongs to both, yet neither. To further enrich and complicate matters, the line "Listen to my heartbeat" reappears ... Again a peculiar and provisional unity of very different entities is achieved through the mediation of technology. The two voices sound alike and say the same thing: they could belong to the same person, yet neither actually belongs to anyone. To whose beating heart are we being asked to listen?*⁹

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NANCY REILLY-MCVITTIE (U.S.A.) is a writer and performer, and Senior Lecturer on the Contemporary Arts Degree at Manchester Metropolitan University (England). Nancy lived and worked in the New York performance scene in the late '70s and in the '80s with, amongst others, Richard Schechner and the Performance Group, and Liz Lecompte and the Wooster Group. Subsequently Nancy wrote and performed several monologues and three full scale works.

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1. Auslander P. 1992, p. 121
 2. Balsamo A. 1996, p. 5
 3. Ibid. p. 5
 4. Haraway D. 1991, p. 147
 5. Benjamin W. 1992, p. 235
 6. Cadigan P. 1994, p. 35
 7. Balsamo A. 1996, p. 131
 8. Ibid. p. 128
 9. Auslander P. 1992, p. 122