

Heterogeneous Kinetic Periods

In the dance performance installation “I, myself and me again” by LaborGras

By Yvonne Hardt

David Hernandez improvises in an installation space consisting of four projection screens. His movements would appear to be simply an abstract play of space focusing on the movements of the arms elongating and flexing, if it weren't for the video projection that shows a mirrored and slightly time-delayed image of him, shifting the composition into another context. The dancer uses the memory of recently executed movement to play a game with himself. By means of a consciously anticipatory relationship with his own image, Hernandez touches and embraces his projected form, puts his hand on its ear to stop it from hearing, engages his image in a fistfight. To prevent this intimate game from becoming predictable, the person at the computer extends the delay on the image, adds another projection, or allows the image to disappear entirely.

In this small portion, the performance's main element of using video of the live performance, feeding it in real-time through a computer program which manipulates the image, and projecting it back into the performance space is already apparent. Because of the overlapping spatial and temporal planes, the audience can experience new forms of receiving information, not just concentrating on newly created movement.

The Setting

The dance installation “I, myself and me again” was created by artistic duo LaborGras (Arthur Stäldi and Renate Graziadei) in collaboration with computer programmer and co-founder of Palindrome dance company Frieder Weiss. “I, myself and me again” is designed as an installation space wherein the audience enters and is enclosed by four projection screens. The dancers are filmed live within the space and at any given time these images will be projected onto the screens inside the performance area. The footage is manipulated in real-time by delaying, mirroring or visually abstracting the images using the computer programs EyeCon and Calypso.

During a period of several hours, the three performers (David Hernandez, Romeu Runa and Renate Graziadei) take turns inside the installation. Throughout the performance, the audience can decide for themselves where to watch it and for how long. The movement cannot be seen from outside of the installation, and appears only on a computer monitor where it is transformed, reassembled and projected back into the performance space.

The first impression of both the performance and of the rehearsal process is that of a clear relation of the dancers to the camera and to their projections as well as the signified search for this relation. The camera limits the plane of movement according to the dancers' proximity to it. For example, it puts forth a clear delineation of an inside and an outside, which is not congruent with the actual space that is visible to the dancers and to the audience. The focus of the dancer is often turned away from possible positions of the audience to favor the camera. To avoid throwing projections onto the wall that serve merely an aesthetic purpose and therefore potentially dominate the environment (as can happen quite easily when video is inserted into dance performance), a process of recognition is encouraged that creates specific comparisons between live action and video projection. LaborGras also seeks to activate a movement in the audience's gaze between the projection screens and the live action.

LaborGras's rehearsal process was shaped by a search for contact with the technology, in which a comparison between live action and projected image could be visualized. The purpose of this movement research was not to create a composition of movement sequences. Rather, they used improvisation to play with and figure out "what works" with the technology. By working with the technology from the beginning, ideas were developed that corresponded directly to what was possible with the software. This also allowed them to rewrite and supplement the programs as necessary. In regard to material, simple movements that focus on the periphery of the body (like Hernandez's distinctive study of the arms) and clear lines through space (as manifested when Graziadei runs in and out of the filmed space) enable the performer as well as the audience to recognize correlations between the projected image and live action. Clear gestures such as laying a hand on an ear, an embrace, or any situation that produces a context or posited meaning also create this type of effect.

This means that the dancer must be constantly alert and focus on the medium, as well as minimize the range of movement material. It is clear in this installation that the dancer develops a distinct attitude within the movement. During the course of the rehearsal process, the performers developed a specific body consciousness that allowed them to focus not only on the projected image or the camera. The dancers' knowledge of the visual effects of the medium and of placing restrictions on performance is well-honed, and manifests itself in numerous ways. The effectiveness of simplicity is not only a concern for the dancers, but also for the artist who operates and determines the computer-enabled manipulations. Extremely dense visual information can confuse the overall impression, producing a feeling of arbitrariness. In order to create the desired effect of enabling the viewer to maintain a gaze that weaves between the

physical space and the projected one, it becomes necessary to commit to each space in succession.

Perception and non-linear time

The alternating gaze is extremely important in this performance, ensuring that the experience is not dominated by any single element (the film, the dance, or the dancer). Perspective changes through this oscillation, and the alertness to specific details is modified, either in relation to movement or to the spatial dimensions. The camera highlights certain movements. It can focus on an extremely precise articulation of the arm, as when dancer Graziadei turns her arm inward and back out again. By freezing the image at a particular spot, it becomes clearly visible that it is not, for instance, the arm that is turning but in fact the rest of the body that coils and uncoils around the arm while the arm stays still in both the film and in the physical space.

The body moving in fragments (no longer as a single unit) is one element that is already inherent in the movement and is strengthened by the projections. The medium of film activates the effect of a dance style that arises from definite movement research and that seeks to sensitize the viewer to the details of movement. Film in this instance does not function simply as an auxiliary mechanism; the interplay does not emerge from a purely functional “division of labor” between camera and performers. An independent space emerges, that also generates a change in the perception of the film.

There is one moment when Graziadei’s projected image appears very small in the background of the projection. By crawling toward the screen, an immense depth is created visually between the real and projected worlds, and in this moment it appears that the two-dimensional projection has a three-dimensional depth; that the space extends beyond the back of the screen. Such elements are strengthened in this concrete performance situation as the gaze is encouraged to wander and find another screen where this movement picks up again in a different temporal and physical space. A possibility arises for the observer to conceive an imaginary performance where the two scenarios overlap. In this overlapping, an integrated multidimensional spatial movement takes on forms that it has never before developed.

By integrating media such as film into dance, it is remarkable how not only perception of space changes, but also perception of time. If dancers reencounter and dance with their own past forms as video projections in order to train their minds in anticipating the possible influences of their previous movements on their current movements, they sensitize themselves to the kind of

movement quality that emerges from reciprocity. It directs the attention to the presence of the past as a basis for the future. Ideally, the dancer holds a dialogue with him- or herself and is driven through a constant process of feedback in a cycle motivated by the medium, in which the dimension of linear time is neutralized. It is no longer about differentiating between cause and effect.

This process requires an adjustment, a minimal alteration in order to make this overlapping of temporality explicit. Although one probably doesn't suppose that the dancer can appear twice in the same time and space, it is not always clear in the interplay with his projection, whether a real-time or digitally time-delayed image of the dancer is being projected. By projecting an image in real time and then a slightly delayed image of an otherwise similar movement, the gaze is encouraged to alternate between the two images. The fact that Hernandez misses his movement by a couple of millimeters but otherwise, despite the improvised situation, performs nearly the same sequence again, brings out the exciting qualities of his interaction with the projection. A movement that would have been not at all remarkable, i.e. the rotation of the arm and holding the hand in first position, becomes a point of interest. In its doubling it seems unimportant which movement came first because without the original movement and its physical presence alongside the image of itself, neither perception would be understandable.

At the same time, new potentials for interpretation also develop through the projections that lend a theatrical dimension to the events. When Graziadei's reproduced image looks longingly behind her, aspects of schizophrenia and living in different worlds spring to mind. A similar charged moment emerges – and is therefore also memorable – when the live projection that appears behind Hernandez's reclining form in real time, suddenly fades slowly from the projection screen as if it is the shape of a sleeper's dream or as if he is watching himself. The value of this correlation increases, beyond that of the individual movements and projections, because neither the dancer lying calmly down nor the projection behind it would have been as effective individually.

The idea to work with a delay and dissolution of time structures from video and dance did not begin with computer-enabled manipulation or insertion of live video camera. The real-time manipulation, however, provokes a specific challenge for the dancers' ability to remember. Hernandez describes that in the rehearsal process his attention was directed especially toward this aspect. The live situation and the previously undetermined relationship between filmed and

performed actions constitute the uniqueness of the computer-enabled real-time manipulation. This is a particular awareness and complexity that would not be conceived through the artistic decision-making process alone. The process is not composed solely of the dissolution of clear temporal influences. When neither the product nor producer of an action can be definitely determined, a distinct questioning process arises regarding the idea of the work's character and authorship.

However, challenging definite choreographic authorship is by no means an issue that is only now emerging through 'new media,' but is indeed part of a longer development of contemporary and particularly post-modern dance. It could be argued that the reason 'new media' are of such interest for the field of dance is their potential to dismantle definitely attributable authorship. The status of authorship has thus long moved away from the plane of movement development and onto the plane of conception and generation for a new realm of possibility.

LaborGras' "I myself and me again" can thus be seen as a reflection of dance by means of a computer-enabled manipulation.