

Making sense of no body

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Abstract

The reconfiguration of the sensing system as the body encounters the digital image deterritorialises the body's everyday modes of proprioception and spatial orientation. The assumption here is the increasing 'instability' of the body in a contemporary world where the digital screen image mediates and renegotiates our physical encounters. In prioritising the body through dance and somatic paradigms, in these screen environments, there becomes potential for rethinking a body politic for performance and somatic practice.

My strategy is to reconfigure the multi-modal processing where the screen dominates the visual faculties in the mind/body/screen relationship.

This investigation into the screen/body opens up new possibilities for the spatial and corporeal, as the body and the screen fold into a mesh of multiplicity and 'in-between-ness'.

Introduction

The question at the centre of this paper is to consider how we can strategise new possibilities for performance and somatic practices, shifting the perception of body in the encounter with screen in multiple spatial and temporal arrangements. The assumption here is acknowledging the increasing 'instability' of the body in a post-modern world where the role of the digital screen image mediates and renegotiates our physical encounters. In prioritising the body in these screen environments, there becomes a collision with the digital screen image that exposes new possibilities for a body politic in/of the screen/body.

The negotiation of the screen in our everyday living mediates our social, physical and sensory encounters. While the notion of screen is not new, our use of the screen as a prosthetic extension in everyday living is accelerating as we connect to networks using language, symbols and image. In the use of cell phones, and screen based electronic devices, the eyes, the ears and language take precedence and the physical experience is compromised and diverted through the externalisation of the senses. We defy distance and time and *connect* with other 'minds' in diverse social and spatial arrangements through such social networking tools as Facebook, Twitter and Skype. What occurs to the body and our proprioceptive capabilities in these environments? It appears that while we once relied on our bodily responses to navigate distance, in more recent years we have substituted the eyes and semiotics to 'defy distance'. Time, space and the body relations have entered a genesis. Investigating the complexities of the body's negotiation through new social, ontological, sensory and spatial terrain in relation with the digital image brings us to question essential human conditions reinforced in the Western Capitalist structure. The impact of these digital and remote technologies begs us to reconsider notions around the body and the relationship it makes with technology.

How do we transcend the limitations of the body and screen and prioritise an enquiry that engenders the screen image into a somatic practice and the 'thinking body' ¹ into the screen? Film theorist Vivian Sobchack ² proposes "that we need to engage with sensing bodies that experience the world beyond the confines of the sense of vision and image-making capacities" (Jones 2006, 20). Deleuze transcends the limitations of the corporeal and technology and poses the question 'What can the body do?' (2005).

¹ 'Thinking body' is used here in reference, firstly to Antonin Artaud's inscription of a new kind of body where 'the pain of life would burst out' (Artaud, 1976). This notion was taken up by Hijikata (1985) in his inception of a Butoh body. Hijikata does not take the body as given; in his Butoh body there is an interrogation of the perception of materiality and a constructing of the body specific to its qualities.

² Amelia Jones quotes Vivian Sobchack: "our bodies become increasingly lived as 'things' to be seen, managed, and mastered" (2006:19). Sobchack's premise is that we should resist the idea of body as object, viewing the body as 'other' and that we must engage with sensing bodies that experience the world beyond the confines of the sense of vision and image-making capacities.

Making sense of no body

'Making sense of no body' experiments with dance paradigms to examine the destabilisation of the body as it intersects with the digital screen image. Examining the borders between dance and screen exposes the indeterminate characteristics of the body and screen relationship. This investigation into the screen/body opens up new possibilities for the spatial and corporeal. The perspective from which this work investigates notions of the body focuses on the intersecting conditions of choreography, performance arts pedagogies and new technologies. To position this investigation, the historical and social contexts of both body and screen must be identified. This paper does not attempt to create an overview of the history of the body (or the screen), but it can indicate some key notions around Western theatre and dance pedagogies that position the body specific to this practice. There are three key areas that assume a point of departure for this proposition.

1. The Cartesian body; a binary position of mind and body, dualistic, 'concrete' and a commodity.
2. The performing body in a historical context embodies 'discipline' for 'productivity' through specific training synonymous with Western modern colonist doctrines.
3. The dancing body — a 'being towards movement', where there is a continuous 'agitation' aligned with displays of 'spectacular motion', produced by a 'fit to dance' and 'ceaseless motility' in a passing of 'one form to the next'.

These ideas problematise the 'body' I am attempting to reconfigure as it intercedes with the conditions of the screen in search of a new body politic. There is a tension and slippage in reconceptualising the body, a defaulting to body as material — subject and binary. Constituting the ontology of dance in pure movement facilitates a critical and theoretical framework for the dancer's body in this research. Theorists Andre Lepecki (2006) and Amelia Jones (2006) support the notion that dance's ontology continues to be located around a constant state of agitation or production, and thus stands with one foot in a modernist regime. In dance made for the conventional theatrical framework there exists a representation of the body for the consumer, for the consummation of displays of 'flexibility, mobility, youth, athleticism, strength and economic power' (Siegmond 2003, 84). We could assume that in any dance motivated by capital gain there remains a tendency towards a 'modernist' position of a 'being-toward-movement'. Throughout the last century dance artists and performance artists have challenged this 'modern' ontology of a relentless moving from form to form. Forging new ground and challenging theatrical and social conventions performance artists propose social and political polemics that question the framing of the body in contemporary society.

Investigating the complexities of the body's negotiation through new social, ontological, sensory and spatial territory in relation with the digital image brings us to question the essential human conditions reinforced in the Western Capitalist structure. The modernist tendency towards 'production' proliferates in a world where technological devices adorn our bodies to augment a more 'productive' living.

Extending our physical form, new technologies defy the limitations of our corporeality. The paradox is that in the urgency for extreme motility through prosthetic extensions, the body experiences hyper reality and a numbing of sensation. The seductive nature of capitalism targets the efficacy of new technologies over the potentiality of the carnal. The impact of these digital remote technologies begs us to reconsider notions around the body and the relationship it makes with technology.

The hidden, thinking, virtual body

Avant-garde performance practitioners Antonin Artaud and Tatsumi Hijikata offer a reconceptualisation of the body respectively. Artaud's 'Body Without Organs', and Hijikata's 'thinking body' offer new possibilities for 'thinking' the performing body as it intersects with conditions of the screen. This 'screen/body', 'thinking body' or 'virtual body' is made manifest in response to 'post-modern' choreographic conditions that dismantle conventions in contemporary dance and the arts. Artaud's and Hijikata's philosophies for the body and performance overlap in overcoming the conditioning of the dancer's (or performer's) body that prescribes a history, a language and a discipline of kinaesthetic 'production'. Hijikata, like Artaud, rejected the modernist movement that, in his case, grew out of a post war Japan of consumerism and a focus on materiality. He recognised the need to present the real in a time when our sense of 'real' is mutating at an accelerated pace through the influence of technological invention.

Surfacing out of this investigation is a pivotal text "Bursting Bodies of Thought" by ex patriot performance artist Michael Hornblow who examines Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) concepts around Artaud's body without organs (BwO) and the virtual and actual body as a mechanism for examining Hijikata's practice of Butoh dance. Hijikata's intensive explorations of the Butoh body perform a sense of the 'virtual body' through kinaesthetic arrangements of 'matter and movement' intercepted before the moment that external physical articulation takes place (Hornblow 2006, 27). The body undergoes a process of transformation, "through the use of internal imagery, proprioception (internal perception of muscular position, contraction and release), expressive restraint, and the imaginative yet no less precise tracing of somatic phenomena at the molecular level of sensation, circulation and pressure" (Ibid). Hijikata's process for the dancing body is remarkably synergetic with the conditions of digital media. The meeting of Hijikata's virtual body and the virtual body of the screen are crucial to this enquiry. Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" and Hijikata's "Butoh Dance" both brought the concept of a 'virtual body' into performance practice. Hornblow describes Artaud's idea that the theatre is a place where the 'virtual' and the 'real' exist simultaneously, an interstitial space where incorporeal relations morph with the 'thinking body' and, as Hijikata describes: "can be born, can appear, living and dying at the same moment" (Stein 1986, 125, cited by Hornblow 2006).

Adopting these ideas of the 'virtual body' and folding this into a practice employing the body and the screen offers a tactic for rethinking the potential of a 'screen/body'. Guattari and Deleuze help to decipher these ideas and Hijikata's work is influential in finding a practice for working with the body in these 'virtual' environments. This becomes the process of the 'thinking body' or the 'virtual body', or the BwO as it coincides with the screen image. In Butoh, the body and the space are of equal

significance, which resonates with the Deleuzian notion of the body's relationship with matter and our minds. Kinetically, Deleuze suggests that the individual body is defined by "the relations of motion and rest, of slowness and speed between particles" (2005, 60). Deleuze's question "What can the body do?" (2005) brings thought to the body, not unlike Hijikata's notion of the 'thinking body'. The body is not defined by form, rather it is the potential of motion and rest and the effects of the body's motion and rest in relation to other 'bodies' (this body could be screen). In this case, a body is considered to be "infinite arrangement of particles" (Ibid), which could be anything; an animal, an idea a collection of things or people. The 'body' thought of as a collection of particles liberates the potential for (re)presentation. With this proposition in mind, consider the (re)presentation of the body via video or digital technology to the screen where the body 'becomes' an arrangement of another set of particles. Here Deleuze's epistemology helps us reconsider the body's representation on the screen as being on the same 'plane of immanence' as the corporeal body.

A screen/body performance practice

Drawing from the provenance of my own movement training, and through examining the avant-garde of dance and performance arts, concepts of Butoh dance and improvisation practice are used in performance tests and are innately essential to this practice ³. Based on Hijikata's practice, methods for 'imaging' the body are appropriated, using characteristics of the site, through representation via the digital screen image. Methods of training for Butoh dance ⁴ are organised around the notion of a virtual body. These systems are customised to dismantle and reconfigure the sensing system, interrogating the space, the body and modes of representation.

Using wireless cameras attached to the body and improvisational structures for performance, divergent spaces are connected and collected through the body, screen and the camera. As the body and screen intersect, the corporeal and the image converge and manifest through the imagination and screen. Collections of 'low-res' security camera footage are interpreted, intercepted, embodied and performed. Modes of seeing, hearing and feeling these 'body-scapes' are explored through readings of the space, which are made using the senses and converted through the body and the screen. The performing body, with headphones and a monitor strapped to the body, ventures into a transitional space, a non-theatrical place. The headphones transmit a passage of text, converted to audio using 'text to speech' software. The text was devised via my improvising body using the wireless

³ 'Body Weather Laboratories' began with Min Tanaka's training programme for Butoh and are now being practiced globally. I have practiced Body Weather Training in various forms through choreographer/dancer/performance artist Charles Koroneho, choreographer/dancer, Michael Parmenter, choreographer/dancer, Lyne Pringle, and choreographer/dancer, Frank van de Ven.

⁴ 'Body Weather' training was started in the 1970's by Min Tanaka and eventually established itself as a Laboratory based on a farm in Hakushu. Here, Tanaka developed training for dance and artists motivated by an investigation into imagery and the imagination, about the potential of the inner body to transform the body.

camera attached. The recorded footage was then transcribed, abstracted through the framing of the lens, fragmenting the space through the tones, shapes, lines, angles and textures of particles re-presented on the screen. The effect is a disassembly of conventional temporal and spatial boundaries and a re-imagining of the space. In the 'live' event the body is augmented through the screen image and the space enters the body through a kind of metaphrastic process from image to text.



Figure 1. 'ÆFFECT' Masters of Art and Design Exhibition – St Paul St Gallery, AUT (August 2009)

Working with the method of transferring the audio into the imagination and putting the images inside the body, the embodied state comes into what could be described as a 'being present' or a what Hijikata terms 'thinking body'. A collection of places and time intersect in both 'live' space and the 'recorded' space to make multiple spaces via the body. Proximity is reflected through the field transmission, as my body 'roamed' closer and further afield from the radio transmitter. The level of disturbance

occurring in the transmission was dependent on the location of the body. Proximity of the body became a determining factor in the clarity of both sound and image.



Figure 2. 'GLITCH' Performance Symposium – St Paul St Gallery, AUT (November 2009)

In these performance tests the camera intercedes to recode and transform the site through the sensing organs folding the body and space into one another. There becomes a layering of codes of practice in these divergent spaces. In the architecture, in the use and in the history of the spaces, diverse spatial, social and artistic politics intersect and create a sense of disorientation. Early performance tests proposed questions around duration, beginnings and endings, social codes and performance conventions in time and space. If we accept the established order for temporal and spatial traditions, and audience-performer relationships in 'theatre' and 'performance', there are expectations and behavioural 'maps' within these conventions. In this liminal space (liminal spans multiple contexts), of foyer or corridor gallery/event location, opening event/performance, screen/body, performer/spectator, image/movement; codes for behaviour are dismantled and confused.

Further performance tests position the body in a gallery space as a strategy for addressing conventional spatial codes of both the gallery environment and performance conventions. Placing the work in the gallery context provokes new possibilities for; beginnings/entrances, endings/exits and the body acting out duration.



Figure 3. 'ÆFFECT' Masters of Art and Design Exhibition – St Paul St Gallery, AUT (August 2009)

The indeterminate nature of 'performance' or 'performer' within this spatial arrangement challenges our perception of what it is to perform. The performer herself becomes unsure of what determines 'performer' and as discussed earlier in this text, asks what is it to 'perform'. The sound score and the imagination motivate motion, manifested through the body and the moving screen-based image. The question arises around motility. In stillness what becomes of the body and the screen image? Without the performer's body transforming the sound score, the 'live' projection portrays a 'fixed' frame. A shift in the 'live-ness' of the images occurs, in the flickering and glitching created by the radio frequency and the automatic movements of the body. The actual radio frequencies, invisible to the naked eye are materialised in the image, and the subtle, automatic movements of the body magnified by the lens and the size of the projection. The technology used in these spaces exposes the hidden, allowing us to perceive that which is invisible. The performer's role becomes elusive, the body flattened and reconfigured by the camera, divided and existing simultaneously in two places at once as both body and conduit for arrangements of pixels.

The question 'What is live?' is conceived as a problem through shifting indeterminate relationships between time, place and the body. Spatial codes slip and slide and boundaries leak. Duration is deliberately ambivalent, the video and sound loop running for an hour and twenty minutes with no clear beginning or end, beginnings and endings fold over and into one another. For the spectators, beginning and end can only be determined by their own entrances and exits.



Figure 4. 'GLITCH' Performance Symposium – St Paul St Gallery, AUT (November 2009)

This configuration of the work in a formal gallery setting determined the body's relationship to the space as an artifact, a living sculptural component of the work. The work undergoes three modes of presentation; opening night, exhibition, and performance event. The social context of these modes plays a significant role in affecting the reading of the work, for both spectator and performer. Within these variations of presentation, the reading of the body fluxes with the shifting codes of the space, from formal gallery to a live and responsive performance space. The multiple bodies' presencing in the space helps to enforce the shifts in spatial and social behaviour.

Conclusion

This fluxing body could be described as an ephemeral skin that is occupied by space. The body itself is not seen as a mass ⁵ that fills the space, but as a mass of single particles relating with one another. The digital screen can also be defined in this way, as an arrangement of patterns and randomness (Hayles 1996). The body is fragmented and transformed and like a 'virtual skin' (Hornblow 2006, 32). This outer membrane (the conditioned social body) is rejected for the inside, or the layer beneath the surface and in accessing this hidden layer the body is in a sense turned inside out. The idea of the 'destabilised' body has evolved as a re-sensing or reconfiguring of the body's kinaesthetic responses, modulated by interaction with the

⁵ In theorist Katherine Hayles' text "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers" she suggests that in digital environments an emphasis towards pattern/randomness eventuates in a "devaluing of materiality and embodiment" (1996, 276). Hayles reconsiders presence and absence in the digital world, which she defines as pattern and randomness.

screen image. Recalibrating the balance of the sensory system through technological interference subordinates the body's mediated proprioception. Massumi refers to this mediation in his discussion around perception and awareness. He suggests: "perception is an intensive movement back into and out of an abstract 'space' of experiential previousness" (2002, 97). Movement recognises its full potential in this modulatory affect. Destabilisation is rethought into deterritorialisation as shifts in awareness and encounter occur through the modulating boundary condition of intersecting screen and body. Through unhinging the body and the screen, multiple possibilities emerge in an insoluble space between the flat two dimensional surface of the screen which is manifest by a patterning of pixels (Hayles 1996) and the fleshy, breathing, feeling, sensing body, a complex possibility. This seemingly inconclusive chasm splinters into multiple spaces, intersections, borders and boundaries of body, image and imagination where time and place fold into one another.

Lepecki suggests a political reframing (or 'deframing') of the body in which contemporary philosophers Deleuze and Guattari offer an account of the corporeal not as a "closed entity, but as an open and dynamic system of exchange, constantly producing modes of subjection and control, as well as of resistance and becomings" (Lepecki 2002, 5). This is a significant notion that is explored by Artaud and Hijikata in overcoming the conditioning of the dancer's body that prescribes a 'discipline' of kinaesthetic boundaries. What can the 'body of thought' do to embody a discourse through acts of stillness, through decentralising 'productive performativity' and reconfiguring proprioception? The 'thinking body' turns itself inside out, colliding with the imagination and the image, fragmenting and multiplying into the liminal in a destabilised somatic experience of digital image.

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List of Figures

<i>Figure 1. 'ÆFFECT' Masters of Art and Design Exhibition – St Paul St Gallery, AUT (August 2009).....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Figure 2. 'GLITCH' Performance Symposium – St Paul St Gallery, AUT (November 2009)</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Figure 3. 'ÆFFECT' Masters of Art and Design Exhibition – St Paul St Gallery, AUT (August 2009).....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Figure 4. 'GLITCH' Performance Symposium – St Paul St Gallery, AUT (November 2009)</i>	<i>9</i>

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