IMMERCE CUNNINGHAM MULTI-MEDIA PROTOTYPE

A VISUAL DATA-BASE BASED ON THE DANCES OF MERCE CUNNINGHAM

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"In one way or another what we thought we couldn't do
was altogether possible,
if only we didn't get the mind in the way"
Merce Cunningham[1]

T he *immerce* Cunningham visual database, is an interactive multi-media prototype based on the dances and the choreographic process of Merce Cunningham.
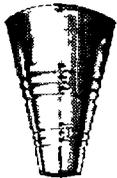
In *immerce* dance material is explored and navigated using an interface metaphor which is based on a process grounded

in Merce Cunningham's working methodology and in the nature of dance itself. Cunningham's process deals complexity, the incorporation of chance procedures, the relatedness of space and time, and multiple points of reference.

The multi-media work explores notions of interactivity, of navigation and of representation related to dance, the body, and the choreographic process of Merce Cunningham. A key part of the design process has been to remain allied with Cunningham's choreographic process. The system design has incorporated the use of chance operations, complexity, and a multiplicity of cen-

ters with respect to both time and space, concepts derived from Zen Buddism. *immerce* allows dance to be re-experienced and re-defined in multiple layers, from multiple vantage points. This way of viewing the system design comes from a position where one is not seeking solutions with known methodologies but instead seeking experience and re-experience through a process of exploring the unknown.

This material can be explored in three different navigational contexts or modes. In the linear navigational mode, selecting identified buttons leads to single logical outcomes. In the chance mode, the system presents an increasingly complex montage of randomly selected material, throughout which any element can be explored by clicking on it. In the associative mode, selecting symbols derived from parts of the body lead to collections of related material, originating directly from the participants choice, and including a gathering of connected yet randomly selected elements. These three navigational modes are flexibly interchangeable and can be switched at any time during the participants interaction.

Tools are available to enable users to create their own menu system or structure, retrace their path through the archive, and to gather their own "body of knowledge" for later viewing. At any time, the user may choose to view the material from the point of view of the computer system itself by selecting the *System Gaze*. This serves as a window into the functionality of the system, a critical acknowledgement of the constructs that have been implemented in order to allow the participant to view the material, and also provides a help feature for the user when required.

Design Goals

1. In order to align the design process of the system with Cunningham's working methodology: incorporate Cunningham's underlying philosophy and creative process with respect to chance procedures, no fixed points in space, multiple events occurring independently of one another. The use of chance processes in Cunningham's choreography means that in terms of both time and space there is possible a "multiplicity of centers" (a concept derived from Cunningham's interest in Zen Buddhism) in which no one element is necessarily more, or less, important than another.

2. In order to provide a rigorous interpretation of, and access to the material in the archive: incorporate a navigation system which enables information to be accessed, viewed, interpreted and perceived from three different conceptual frameworks (the chance-random, the linear-logical, and the associative-gathering modes)

3. In order to interpret the material of dance and of the body in a language which comes from dance itself: utilize systems of mapping the physical body (for buttons and menus) in order to relate non verbal knowledge inherent in physical body systems to the selection of categories of information in the archive. This involves the mapping of body parts to the dance itself, to choreographic notes, dancers, production history, composer, designer, and other archival elements.

4. In order to enable the system participant to create their own context dependent navigation environment: create a memory map enabling the participant to trace their own steps through space and time. This tool enables the participant to produce their own menu system or structure, retrace their path through the archive, and to gather their own "body of knowledge" based on their interactive experience.

5. In order to present a critical context which exhibits the system design itself as a part of what is experienced and observed: provide a *System Gaze* feature which shows "the computer design's point of view". This tool serves as a window (or a veil) which transparently overlays itself, providing a look at the constructs that have been implemented in order to allow the participant to view the material.

Notes

[1] Merce Cunningham quoted in the CNN television series. *Arts and Technology Report*, March 1991.