

The World-Producing Body

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This presentation explores various frameworks of embodiment at work in performance projects that use sensed movement to control live media. Engaging a cause-and-effect relationship between the physical and the virtual, such performance works propose alternatives to a centralized, unitary notion of embodiment. At the same time, there is a range of different ideas about embodiment across projects and practices, and within each work. My presentation provides the opportunity to sort through these different ideas, and to look at the implications for how these works use interactive technologies to trouble or relieve the vocabularies of embodiment that underlie everyday life.

The frameworks of embodiment discussed include:

- *The body as image, as memory*

In Bergson's framework, the body is a perceptive interface that is also continuous with matter – produced by and producing the world. Reality is comprised of images: perceptual objects. The body, when perceived from the outside, is this kind of image, “continuous with the images of matter.” But one's own body is a “privileged center,” an image that regulates all other images. Knowledge of matter from the inside moves into the terrain of memory. In interior experience, matter is replaced by memory. [1]

Sensor-based performance projects using a Bergsonian framework of embodiment treat the body-sensor-image as a controller of a database of stored memories. The body's movements access a Proustian narrative: multilinear, multilayered, multichronological.

- *The body as mediation*

Wegenstein's idea of the body as mediation [2] proposes the body itself as the locus of a constant negotiation of images, both internalized and socially projected, in which the body is the edge between inside and outside, self and other, cultural role and individual agency. Wegenstein relates the body as mediating surface to performance/media works that operate critically

within the simulacrum of image culture. Performances that draw on the idea of “the body as mediation” engage the body as a critical surface of image production and negotiation, both wearing and disinvesting itself of culturally circulated images, referencing and commenting on the culture of images that circulate through media and language.

- *The phenomenological body*

In the phenomenological concept of embodiment, the body is outside knowledge [3], but exists as access to experience itself. Inside and outside are not a binary pair, but are understood as a fluid continuum. The phenomenological body privileges presence over memory, with immediate experience as the only possible access to reality. [3]

Projects based on a phenomenological framework of embodiment focus on the relationship between gesture and media as an expression of the continuum between interior and exterior experience, and question the representational image as a wedge between the self and immediate experience, using images as non-critical extensions of the body.

- *The Body Without Organs*

Deleuze and Guattari’s Body Without Organs (BwO) invokes a conception of the body that is disinvested of fantasies, images, projections, representations. But the BwO proposes a very different notion of embodiment, in which the body’s lack of a centralized organizational structure serves a critical function. It is a set of processes, and as such, invokes chaos and fluidity in place of the hierarchical notions of identity that inscribe the subject socially and politically. The fluidities and processes of movement and transformation that describe the BwO imply a continual disintegration and reintegration of embodied coherence [4].

Projects drawing on this notion of embodiment are suggesting that body and image exist in a machinic interrelationship, as fragmentary parts of a never-completed body that fluidly incorporates the other. The image is not a perceptual extension of the body, but is an alienated part that is nonetheless included.

- *Interactional Couplings*

In Francisco Varela’s cognitivist approach, the embodied subject comes into being in a dynamic process of “interactional couplings” with the environment, a “situated” event in which both environment and subject emerge through immediate response to the concrete realities presented by this contact. Like the BwO, the individual subject is an emergent phenomenon, a collection of fragments and processes that “may be brought together, even in a haphazard way, to give rise to what appears to an observer as a purposeful and integrated whole, without the need for central supervision.” [5] However, rather than positing this form of embodiment as a resistance to the centralized subject, Varela draws this model from research in artificial intelligence,

and puts it forward as a pragmatic understanding of cognition itself. Cognition arises by chance as the cognitive agent interacts with its environment. The performer or “cognitive agent” and virtual environment are formed together, in a mutually defining and transforming process. This interaction suggests the mutual creation of self and environment, with the sensed gesture “writing” the graphic environment while the body itself is reframed by this displaced amplification of its actions.

I will use these and other frameworks to explore various performance works and their implications for a contemporary view of embodiment that embraces difference in subjective and social contexts.

References

- [1] Lawlor, Leonard (2003) *The Challenge of Bergsonism*, London and New York: Continuum Press
- [2] Wegenstein, Bernadette (2006) *Getting Under the Skin: Body & Media Theory*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press
- [3] Ibid
- [4] Grosz, Elizabeth (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- [5] Varela, Francisco (1992) *Ethical Know-How*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press