

PHANTOM LIMBS: AFFECT AND IDENTIFICATION IN VIRTUAL PERFORMANCE

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In the concept of a “phantom limb”, an amputee relates feeling, often pain, from the absent limb. But in the era of ubiquitous mediation (the fin de millennium), embodied expression itself has become a site of contestation. What can be said for the veracity of a mode of expression when the traditionally conceived distinctive qualities of that medium are removed? What happens to embodied art when the body is removed?

In the concept of a “phantom limb”, an amputee relates feeling, often pain, from the absent limb. The process of amputation delineates the borderline of presence, the liminality of separation, the phantom effect the feeling for that lost presence. Performance art inscribes space with presence, with flesh, bone, and sinew; wasn't it supposed to be a final authentic site of immediacy and authenticity in art following the dematerialization of the object in contemporary art after Formalism in the 1960's? But in the era of ubiquitous mediation (the fin de millennium), embodied expression itself has become a site of contestation. The body had become the repository for direct expression in art with the coming of Performance Art. With the recontextualization of seminal works by Marina Abramovic with her *Seven Easy Pieces* [1] the meanings of the works as immediate, site-specific happenings became circumspect. This was further compounded by artists Eva and Franco Mattes, self-proclaimed “haters” of Performance Art, who remediated other seminal works, including those of Abramovic in the online virtual world Second Life. What can be said for the veracity of a mode of expression when the traditionally conceived distinctive qualities of that medium are removed? What happens to embodied art when the body is removed?

Virtual performance art should not function, but it does. The process of draining the site of performance through decontextualization then disembodiment should have destroyed the event of meaning. Where there was blood, there are now only pixels. Where there was presence, there is only the feel of a mouse in the hand. When the avatar shoots the other with a gun, we still flinch. What are the qualities left that connect us to the when avatar when we sever the flesh from embodied performance? I posit that there are three aspects to performance that remain after the virtualization/removal of the body in the creation of virtual performance. These are affect, desire, and mirroring/identification in relation to the avatar. These correspond to the prepersonal, productive and neurological identifications with the proxy. This presentation will explore a phenomenology of affect, desire and identification in the virtual and discuss the importance of these qualities as intrinsic criteria of synthetic performance.

1: Affect

Brian Massumi, in *Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation* speaks extensively on the autonomy of affect. “Affect is the virtual as point of view” [2 Massumi, 35], he says, relating to his assertion that the virtual begins with the event that is too immediate to be perceived, and thus elicits that event's autonomy from the body. What is happening in the site of virtual performance is the precognitive conversation of “the simultaneous participation of the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual, as one arises from and returns to the other.” The virtual as site of immediacy begins in the moment of the imperceptible, opening the synesthetic space of autonomy (from the body) while retaining the intensity of the moment. Affect implies, “a participation of the senses in each other: the measure of a living

thing's potential interactions is its ability to transform the effects of one sensory mode into those of another." Can we say that this potentiality is the precursor to emotion, to identify with the potential of a living thing's interaction with a *mise en scene* (through an avatar?) One axis of virtual performance's efficacy is the disconnection of affect from the body as eliciting of synesthetic effect, suggestion that affect may have more to do with action and intensity, perhaps evoking desire, which brings us to Deleuze.

2: Desire

Second Life is an online 3D multi user virtual environment, or MUVE, that owes its existence to the aggregate contributions of tens of thousands of online participants, who construct the buildings, socialize and perform in virtual space. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari posit that desire is not to be linked with the gaze, or signification, but with production in the social field. The avatar represents, by its very existence, an evident desiring-machine that, through its production of virtual capital in the form of artifacts, buildings, codes, and interactions, manifests reality through the consummation of desire via material and social expression. As affect and its translation into the virtual is opened by the preperceptive moment, it is the unconscious and the libido that are the engine of desire. But in their text, their deconstruction of desire signals the aggregate Body without Organs that assemblages of desiring machines, which then represent, "the nonhuman sex, the molecular machinic elements, their arrangements and their syntheses, without which there would be neither a human sex specifically determined in the large aggregates, not a human **sexuality** capable of investing these aggregates" [3 *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 294] It is this nonhuman sexuality of the desiring-machine, the Krokerian "sex without secretions"[4] that then creates an effusive concrete production in the virtual. From this, we can say that the production of the aggregate world of Second Life is a desiring-production in the virtual socius that is product of the deanthropomorphized libido. As such, it begins with the birth of the avatar, manifests in the production of the virtual world, and is consummated in the performative gesture of everything from the cocktail party to execution of code to virtual (machinic) sex. Therefore performance art in Second Life could be said to be the production-manifestation of desire made manifest in the virtual. And to playfully quote the Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, "How could be otherwise?" It appears that the desires of the machinic mirror the body to some extent and this is the next subject of our discussion.

3: The Mirror Cortex

We have discussed the issues of the affective and desire, but I would like to return to idea of the phantom limb metaphor and the identification with identification with the avatar. As there are times when a person with phantom limb disorder can be soothed through seeing a limb be massaged, there are theories that humans empathize with human-like forms through neurological empathy, Neuroscientist VS Ramachandran has popularized neurobiological research of the existence of "Gandhi Neurons"[5] or what he calls the mirror cortex. These neurons are thought to be the basis of many aspects of human existence, such as empathy, learning, and culture. Mirror neurons fire in sympathy with the observation of another person's action. One thing that is ironic that Ramachandran uses the metaphor of watching a virtual reality simulation of the other person's actions, and this brief aside is the opening for our discussion. To put forth the idea that we identify, empathize and project action or touch through the engagement of the mirror neurons, and the idea that we simulate action and touch through projection through perception is very important. To do so explains empathy for the other in a performance space, but in our case, the projection of the self upon proxies such as dolls or avatars. Where this is shocking is when we consider Ramachandran's example of soothing phantom limb pain by massaging another's limb by proxy. What I propose is that neural identification through the mirror neurons is a fundamental cognitive act mitigates performance, and also translates to proxies and poppets. For the next section of this essay, we will look at examples of virtual performance that will attempt to illustrate aspects of affect, desire, and mirroring.

Sites of Engagement: Affect

Saveme OH [6] is a Dutch virtual artist who works in invective and narcissistic grandeur reminiscent of the New Media artist formerly known as NN, who often dominated listserv traffic on lists like Nettime and 7-11[7]. Her art, as mentioned before, consists largely of narcissistic excess through the colonization of the space around her, whether it involves declaring herself “President” of Second Life or imposing herself verbally or visually into situations, often getting her banned. In reaction to bans, Saveme’s reaction is frequently to stage an outcry about censorship. Her strategy is a cross between “trolling” (disruptive aggravation) and tactical intervention, but her tactics inflame an immediate affective response. This is due to the fact that Saveme’s visual appearance often dominates an entire screen through use of huge “worn” devices that create an optical disruption that open the door for her virtual psychodrama. What is most important here is that her domination of a milieu creates a synesthetic disjuncture where there can be no other focus than her gesture and the potentiality of action, engaging affective reaction (albeit frequently negative).

Another group of artists that have elicited an affective immediacy in virtual spaces is that of the performance group Second Front. Founded in 2006, Second Front are a dispersed set of individuals ranging from San Francisco to London who engage in NeoDadaist/Fluxus-based interventions in Second Life. For a piece entitled “Wall-ker Art Center”[8] (or *Dancing About Architecture*), Second Front appeared with huge cement walls, disrupting the visual field, where they engaged animations to gyrate the structures erratically in space, creating an architectural performance. The result was a disorientation for many on-lookers, as the ephemeral walls swung around, appearing to hit the avatars, but passing through them. An anecdotal report during the performance related that the experience was jarring to the point where they had to “teleport” out of the space because of the visceral reaction, reifying Massumi’s assertion of translation of sensation in the affective. Both studies depend on the virtual as point of view and utilize the immediacy of the visual to create effects that translate into the visceral. This bodiless visceral reaction brings us to the site of desire.

Sites of Engagement: Desire

It could be said that using the Deleuzian model of desire, manifestation of being in Second Life is self-sufficient for the description of efficacy of the avatic desiring machine as engine of production or signifier of the libido. To expand from Deleuze, desiring-production is not making love to become one, or two, but thousands. The fecundity of the Body Without Organs, literally or semiologically, is to unchain the repressed libido in revolutionary fashions that the flesh can never attain. This unfettering of the Freudian unconscious takes place in two pieces, Eva and Franco Mattes’ *I Can’t Find Myself Either*[9], and various incarnations of avatar Vaneesa Blaylock’s installations. In the first of these two, as part of their *Synthetic Performances* they suggest that the infinite gesture of becoming is to stay at home and play video games, like Second Life. In this piece, a bed with embedded sexual animations for is activated in the performance space. Eva and Franco’s avatars gyrate on the bed, and soon other avatars join in the cyber-orgy. Soon the bed is packed, and the avatic bodies obscure one another to the point where the piece’s name comes into play. No one can find themselves, but there they are. And, the gesture of the Body Without Organs on screen belie that the avatar is no one and yet everyone, the production of a null body implies the birth of all possible bodies in the virtual.

Another artist who explores the multiplicity of production in virtual space is that of Vaneesa Blaylock, whose name closely mimics that of performance installation artist Vaneessa Beecroft. Her motto is that she is an individual, and so is she, suggesting a self-reflexive stance about her multiplicity. Much like Beecroft’s installations of nude bodies in gallery spaces, Blaylock stages arrays of nude avatars in space under some sort of framing mechanism, Various pieces[10] explore general topics of identity and

cloning, the average parameters of avatars in Second Life, “the girl next door”, and replication of form as production of desire. In each installation, Blaylock arranges the avatars as manifest desiring machines in the unfettered frame of the virtual, inferring that her production is but a sample of infinite permutations and endless emanation. The nude avatar, as signifier of basic sexual desire is here emptied and used as a proxy, a placeholder for our own projections of desire, but since they have been machinized and dehumanized, they stand for an infinite space of nullified machinic desire, and infinite fecund potential, potential being essential for affect. Vaneesa’s installations also engage the doppelganging the body in configurations like Beecroft’s, which takes us to the idea of Mirroring.

Sites of Engagement: Mirror

Macarthur Foundation Director of Connie Yowell said at the 2007 Second Life Community Conference that the first move into the virtual is recreation of the real, called orienteering. Performance artists like Scott Kildall, and again, Eva and Franco Mattes have done “remediations”, or restaging of classic performance art pieces. In Kildall’s *Paradise Ahead* series of recreations[10] include Chris Burden’s Shoot, in which he allowed himself to be shot in the arm in the gallery, or Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, in which she allowed her dress to be cut away a piece at a time. But these are not merely recreations, but empathic mirrors of the gallery, as Ramachandran might argue that we will still feel as Kildall’s avatar fires the virtual rifle, there is a still a flinch when the other avatar is hit. This is not mere signification, if neurological mirroring applies to proxies of the body, then our feeling for the virtual phantom limb of the avatar is real.

The eponymously named AM Radio recreates pathos in the recreation of a trompe l’oeil of David’s Death of Marat[11]. The original, which depicts the radical French journalist Jean Paul Marat dead in his bath after being murdered by Charlotte Corday is recreated sans the body of Marat, upon which the visitor clicks upon the bath, and their avatar fills that position. Therefore the projection through the avatar is further extended into the David painting, specifically into the position of Marat. Here the interactor becomes the subject of, as Baudelaire mentioned, David’s “drama... vivid in its pitiful horror”. This scene’s abjection and the user’s requirement is not isolated; its requirement to participate affectively projects the self into that horror and peace concisely.

Site of Engagement: Affect/Desire/Mirror

Although we have examined sites of engagement that have dealt with the unfolding of Massumian affect into the profusion of virtual desire to the projective identification of the mirror, there are many virtual works that address any and or all of these modes of engagement. Micha Cardenas and Elle Mehrand’s *Technesexual*[12] performance engage all three loci of this discussion. *Technesexual* involves the two engaging in erotic acts in a physical space while equipped with biometric sensors. The output from these sensors is fed into Second Life through an interface using the programming language Pure Data, which is reflected in actions by their avatars in Second Life, which are projected in the performance space. As Cardenas and Mehrand play on stage, they engage the immediacy of the body and the affective lag of translation into Second Life, virtualizing their acts. Their unleashing of the libido into the machinic body creates a manifestation of desire-production in the virtual through gesture and translation of the physical into the virtual and the transmission of that experience to the online participants. And lastly, their doubled bodies, both in world and in the performance spaces powerfully create the projective connection between the two, and the connection of virtual space. Perhaps the introduction of live bodies into the milieu either negates or amplifies the argument for performance in the virtual, but from this author’s perspective, *Technesexual* appears to consummate (metaphorically and literally), affect, desire, and projective identification, and is the pinnacle of the elements of our conversation.

Denouement

In this essay, I have sought to construct an argument for the understanding of affective engagement in the genre of virtual performance through the thought of Massumi, Deleuze & Guattari and Ramachandran as played out through the work of many artists. This is not to say that there are not other artists who also fit this discussion, like Joseph DeLappe's Gandhi project[13] and Stephanie Rothenberg's work in virtual labor[14] and Elif Ayiter, Selavy Oh, and Max Moswitzer's collaborations in virtual textuality with Roy Ascott[15]. The choice of works in this essay are merely a brief archipelago designed to create an epistemic arc to explore the visceral connection to the virtual. There are far more examples to me touched on, and this presentation is designed as the opening note of an ongoing conversation regarding virtual performance.

Conclusion:

By all rights, we should not care about virtual performance as performance art is intrinsically tied to the body as last bastion of creative authenticity. Upon severance of the flesh from the performative gesture, it would make sense that our affective relation for the virtual body should cease. But our phenomenology of virtual performance through affect, desire, and projection suggests otherwise; virtual action creates real responses. In this text, I have sought to explore the role of affect, desire and mirroring-identification with the avatar as evident site of engagement. Although the case for virtual performance's connection to the flesh through our desires, projections, and empathies, it is easy to hold these forms circumspect. Is virtual performance new enough that it constitutes a nostalgia for the flesh, and echoes of the body as phantom limb, or merely grown up poppet play? One could argue that this genre is a fetish for performative dollplay, but regardless, virtual performance contains a combination of echoes of the real and real affective response. This is seen from phenomenology to prepersonal cognition to neurology. Our affect for the avatar exists, and it appears to be acculturated and hardwired into our beings. But as genres such as MMO's and virtual environments like Second Life continue to mature, it will be curious as to whether virtual performance will be a momentary affectation or an emergent genre that merely reflects the virtual as a primary mode of human existence.

References and Notes:

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