Amorphous Bodies: The Uncanny in Performance

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This paper explores the relationship between live and virtual bodies in performance and how 'digital doubling' and the morphing of body images can produce an uncanny effect. I apply Freud's theory of the uncanny ('*Das Unheimliche'*) to contemporary performance pieces arguing that the uncanny is an increasingly common occurrence in our digitised world and can be used as a framework for analysing how bodies are reconfigured and re-imagined through performance. Relating to my wider research on gender and the female body in performance, I will consider if the uncanny (with its visual stimuli often including animated dolls and disembodied body parts) is more likely to be provoked by the female body or the body in transition between genders. I will be illustrating these ideas with reference to the Polish performance group SUKA OFF, considering how its integration of morphing techniques via digital video evokes *das unheimliche* and how the employment of both digital and analog technologies render the bodies of the performers uncanny. The use of Polaroid photos of audience member's faces alongside the images being created and manipulated through digital technologies also complicates the performer/spectator roles. I relate the work of SUKA OFF to the theory of Laura U. Marks and her insights on the relationship between digital and analogue technologies and morphing. The combination of the morphing of body images through digital video technologies and the corruption of the body boundary through blood-letting and piercing in the performance render the live body abject and uncanny. The political potential of these techniques lies in the ability to destabilise traditional gender binaries and to consider a space in between male and female bodies in performance. In its aim to create a 'third gender' in their performances, SUKA OFF explores the liminal zones between male and female bodies and liveness and virtuality.

In recent theory on technology and the body (in particular the work of performance theorist Matthew Causey) the concept of 'the uncanny' has been employed when considering performances that feature technology and the body. The uncanny was first theorised in an essay by Ernst Jenst in 1906 and then developed by Freud who explored the concept in his 1919 essay '*Das Unheimliche*'. The literal translation of this is the unhomely, with connotations of secrecy and unfamiliarity. Freud states of the uncanny: 'This uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud, 2009: 148). For Freud, it is this aspect of the uncanny that is unsettling; this idea of something that was once familiar made unfamiliar, something known made strange. It is because of this that the idea of the double is so frequently linked to this concept. Avital Ronell, in *The Telephone Book*, writes of Freud's notion of *das unheimliche* and how this phenomenon recurs through the subject's experience of displacement within technology. She remarks that: 'The more dreadfully disquieting thing is not the other or an alien; it is, rather, yourself in oldest familiarity with the other, for example, it could be the Double in which you recognize yourself outside of yourself' (Ronell, 1989: 69). I think that this idea of recognising yourself outside of yourself is key to the uncanny and I will return

to this with my performance example. In this paper I use the uncanny as a framework in order to explore the images of women as reduced to 'eerie dolls and abject monsters' in the words of film theorist Susan E. Linville (2004), and I want to consider how the uncanny can perhaps offer another mode of thinking about unconventional cultural critique and a consideration of it as a way to re-evaluate representations of women's bodies. I agree with Causey that the concept of the uncanny has been made more relevant due to technological doubling and I wish to make these links between the aesthetic connections and gendered connotations surrounding the uncanny, and the work of artists exploring doubling apparent. In doing this I hope to provoke discussion surrounding gender, technology and performance and make visible some of the issues that breaking down these demarcations provoke.

Causey's argument is that the uncanny is a more prominent occurrence due to our growing relationship with technology. He claims that we are more likely to encounter our 'digital double' to use Steve Dixon's term (2007), than ever before. With CCTV images capturing our movements almost every second of the day, and many people using avatars to move within virtual worlds, our experience as subjects shaped by technology is undeniable. When we consider this in a performance context, it is the witnessing of a performer and their technologised double that brings about an uncanny effect. Causey argues that: 'The experience of the self as other in the space of technology can be read as an uncanny experience, a making material of split subjectivity' (Causey, 1999: 383) In his argument Causey's move between the experience of seeing your own double and viewing another body with agency in a performance space and their double is too easily made. Rather, I want to ask how this experience is phenomenologically different and whether or not this experience of uncanniness is personal and individual. How can seeing your own image recreated by technological means be the equivalent of seeing another body and its double? For one, the live performing body and its virtual double are instantly recognisable as a body and its simulacra, however, the experience of seeing your own double is different – you do not always immediately recognise the body you are confronted with when faced with an image of yourself. Upon applying the idea of the uncanny to performance examples, there is an aspect of Nicholas Royale's description of the uncanny that really struck me in relation to this particular topic, as he states: 'We speak of having had an uncanny feeling or experience, as something that came to an end, something now past' (Royale, 2003: 320-1). I think that this is important when we consider the ephemeral nature of performance and the notion of the uncanny in this context. Ernst Fischer discusses how in the performance moment objects and spaces are in a space of flux: 'of not yet – or any longer – *being* either absent or present but, potentially, being *both and also*' (Fischer, 2001: 119). As Peggy Phelan describes the performance moment, it: 'becomes itself through disappearance', as does the uncanny (Phelan, 1993: 146). Experiencing the uncanny in a performance through doubling, is almost equivalent to *experiencing it doubly*, as the two moments pass; the moment within the performance and the moment of the uncanny.

This analysis led me to the work of Laura U. Marks – specifically her discussion of video technologies and performance in her study *Touch*. A useful aspect of Marks's study, within this context, is her idea of morphing, and I would argue that when integrated into performance, the morphing of images of bodies/faces evokes the

uncanny. I relate these ideas to the work of SUKA OFF who are operating within the liminal zones between male and female, exploring the blurring of boundaries between image, identity, gender, and also exploring the abject body in their very visceral and physical use of the body through piercing and blood-letting in performance.

Two of the key aspects of the uncanny as outlined by Freud, are: the experience of meeting your own double (as also discussed by Otto Rank), and the experience of confronting something that is at once familiar but also not familiar. The third aspect that I want to add to this definition is that outlined initially by Jenst and reiterated by Freud in his essay and it is when one: 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate' (Freud, 2009: 132). I relate these discussions to SUKA OFF who employ images of audience members within its performance practice, so within the audience, there are people experiencing watching the doubling of the live and virtual bodies of the performers, but also a select few that are experiencing witnessing their own double. As I said I do not think that this distinction has been made yet in discussions surrounding the 'double' in performance. Performing since 1995, SUKA OFF outline some of its main recurring themes as; exploring human carnality through all its biological and physical aspects, and investigating the possibility of the creation of a third gender by blurring the codes between male and female genders. It attempts to create this third gender visually for audiences through the use of various technologies within the piece I am going to look at. The company are made up of a male and a female performer (Piotr Wegrzynski and Sylvia Lajbig – in *tranSfera* they were collaborating with female masochistic performance artist Trauma Unit) and as well as performing for performance art/live art contexts they also perform in various clubs including fetish clubs and create video works (including collaboration on music videos). I am using their performance *tranSfera* as an example of how virtual and real bodies can be hybridised in performance through technology, and also wish to draw attention to how SUKA OFF problematise traditional gender roles in performance through its explorations to find a 'third gender.' I also want to discuss how, in doing this, SUKA OFF situates its work in a very complex position regarding the use of gendered bodies throughout the performance: in how the female body is manipulated, technologised, and how the women themselves (very often) *appear* to not be party to this. Finally, I want to consider how SUKA OFF involve the spectating body in its performances, both literally (through their photographic techniques) and also phenomenologically and viscerally through its incorporation of blood-letting and piercing throughout and how its manipulation of body images using technology evokes the uncanny. I saw *tranSfera* in 2007 at the Intimacy festival in London (which in this case was to an audience of contemporary performance makers/ researchers/academics and artists). The company have been touring this piece since then internationally and I am going to discuss an excerpt of the piece in order to illustrate the evocation of the uncanny.

Perhaps the title of the piece *tranSfera* could partly be referring to the transferral of roles throughout the piece. Firstly, Wegrzynski sits in a seat with a black leather mask over his face. He then puts Lajbig in the seat and there is a lengthy sequence of taking photos of audience members and sticking them on a white wall. This image is being filmed by a live feed camera and so we see this image projected onto a screen. Lajbig then sits in the seat with another camera pointing at it and then we

see her image appear on the screen. Wegrzynski then mixes the images so that they morph together creating an uncanny image of the photographed face and the live female performer. The female performer puts on lipstick and then this sequence is repeated using another image of an audience member that has been pinned to the wall. The male performer moves in between the audience taking pictures and pinning them to the wall, and the body of Lajbig, moving her and doing things to her body to alter the images that are being projected. As the images are being projected a number of text statements appear over the images. The messages refer to infection, contamination, identity confusion and so on. This goes on for around ten audience images; in between taking these, the male performer is cutting the woman's clothes off (so her breasts are exposed), manipulating her body, covering her head in cling film, piercing her, painting her and moving her face to fit the frame of the picture. After this sequence Lajbig is manoeuvred over to the floor where a white body bag lies empty. Wegrzynski puts her in the body bag, before turning the camera on himself and taking his own picture. He then places it on the wall next to the photos of the audience members. He positions the camera on this so that now the image of his face in the mask is projected onto the screen. Wegrzynski then sits on the seat again with the live feed video camera focussed on him and removes his mask. This is slightly ambiguous as it seems to imply that he is now ready to be subjected to the 'tranSfera' of identity that that the woman experienced, and there is the sense that perhaps he is next on an assembly line of manipulation and transferred identity.

However, I think this is refuted by the fact that the male performer has held the camera for the duration: he has chosen who to photograph, he has had the agency throughout, and has chosen what to do to the female performer's body. At the end when he turns the camera on himself, he is still in control and his image has not been transferred in the way that hers was. The image that he morphs into is the image of his unmasked face from his masked photo, whereas the female performer was subjected to a morphing into a multitude of images, male and female. Her identity was visually diffracted throughout and her body manipulated while she remained devoid of agency and while the male performer subjected her to violence and pain. Relating this to the theory that I outlined initially, we have the double – the female performer and her projected virtual double appear - however, as I said earlier, this is instantly recognisable as a double. We also have the developing Polaroids which incorporate audience images. I think that this evokes the uncanny - as an audience member, you might see your own image appearing out of the greyness of the image – this is projected on the screen, so perhaps this is the moment of the familiar being rendered unfamiliar. There are also those moments where the still image of the Polaroid is disrupted by the projection of the live feed face – the still image is now moving, the fixed eyes are now shifting - what was inanimate is now animate.

The use of an 'old' technology (Polaroid photography) alongside digital technologies deserves comment at this stage. Catherine Waldby states of the photograph:

> Photographic images are traces which point back to a once real event by recording a reduced version of it, a two-dimensional pattern of light on emulsion. Digital images...are three dimensional simulacra which approximate a visual cloning of the fleshly body, a one-to-one reproduction which effectively substitutes voxels for organic cells. (Waldby, 2004: 417)

Waldby's claim that digital images are the simulacra of the image rather than the evidence of the original link directly into Baudrillard's claim that we are no longer in the realm of the double or the mirror-image since: 'Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal' (Baudrillard, 2001: 166). When we consider the situation of a real without origins, the analogy of the photograph compared to digital technologies is an effective one – SUKA OFF utilise both of these things. I would argue that the fact that a Polaroid camera is used so that the images gradually appear adds to the uncanniness of this section as we have the double appearing – at first only ghostly and then becoming recognisable as the image develops and becomes complete.

As well as the transferral of image, I would also suggest that the *tranSfera* of the title refers to the transfer of bodily fluids throughout. The blood-letting and blood painting as well as the insertion of needles into the face and body (a number of times throughout the performance) are a physical representation of the fear of the body boundary being broken. By mixing the digital and analogue technologies to evoke the uncanny, body boundaries are traversed and the contamination of the performer's face with different faces echoes the fear of a fluid identity, particularly between genders. In the section where the woman performer's face is being pierced and a face of an audience member is being morphed into it, the words on the screen flash up: 'She had been in contact with an infected person.' References to infection, disease, and contamination in the text that appears in front of the screen reinforce the images of the disruption of the skin and the fluids that come from within. As Julia Kristeva states in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*:

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (Kristeva, 1982: 4)

The performer's bodies become abject through the body modification techniques that are practiced within the performance but while they enact the ease at which the body boundary is broken, they are also destabilising other fixed notions of identity. I would argue that by bringing to our attention the abject body through the breaking of the body boundary, SUKA OFF are emphasising how we read other bodies in light of abjection as we try to maintain boundaries round ourselves. I think that this idea of 'the in-between, the ambiguous and the composite' are at the heart of SUKA OFF's work as it explores these liminal areas between bodies and technology. In *tranSfera*, there is the binary of the live bodies in the space and the static Polaroid images; however, the space in between these is explored through the morphing of the images. The gender distinctions of male and female are traditionally seen as oppositional, but SUKA OFF specify that one of its aims is to explore the potential of a third gender, a marrying of the male and female to create a visually ambiguous and androgynous 'body' in its work in an attempt to disrupt the binary system of gender. In *tranSfera*, however, I think SUKA OFF fall short of achieving this, as despite the steely futuristic aesthetic and the visually androgynous image of the clothed figures, once the performance progresses beyond the initial few minutes, it becomes very clear that the gender roles and demarcations of the bodies are falling into traditional roles, and are reinforcing the image of the female body as passive, masochistic and submissive to male violence and authority. The male performer comes across as sadistic, voyeuristic and violent. These portrayals – combined with the sinister

camera work throughout and the exposure of the women's breasts by cutting her clothes off with scissors, asphyxiating her, piercing her face and breasts as well as the props of body bags and leather masks – create an ambience of sexual violence and death.

To watch this is also very physically affecting as your own body reacts to watching the performer's pain. As a spectator watching *tranSfera*, your own sense of embodiment is heightened as the aesthetic of the work and how the bodies are being presented through the medium of the technology (I am thinking in particular of when we see a close-up of the face being pierced projected onto a large screen) viscerally affects your own spectating body as you identify phenomenologically with the performing bodies in front of you. While the performer's faces often remain deadpan, unflinching, my own body was cringing, wincing and looking away as the body boundary was continually broken, both literally through the bloodletting, but also through the visual technique of morphing the images. As my own body flinched and turned away at this point, I was aware of a number of other bodies doing the same. The empathetic relationship that you have as a spectator with the performing body stimulates a response in your own body. However, some spectators did not flinch when observing the piercing and blood-letting, which reminded me of the subjective nature of a bodily response to masochistic performance. It is impossible to quantify these responses that are not my own; I can only state that a range of reactions to the piercing sections occurred, and that a number of bodies responded visibly with physical discomfort as a result of the actions of the performer.

The use of the morphing technique of moving between the live feed focussed on the Polaroid of an audience member that has been pinned to the wall, and the image of the live female performer is one of the most visually uncanny moments I have experienced in a performance. The gradual morphing makes the ghostly face of the audience member appear like an apparition onto the face of the live female performer, and as she slightly moves and the photographed image remains static, there is a sense of the features shifting, so that her face moves from being recognisable one moment to being rendered uncanny the next. At the point where the male performer is cling-filming the female performer's head, he jerks her head around so that the projected image of the two faces – one static and one animated – evoke the uncanny. This morphing of the faces visually literalises the transference of identity that the performance is exploring. As Laura U. Marks writes:

> The uncanniness of morphing speaks to a fear of unnatural, transformable bodies. If digital video can be thought to have a body, it is a strikingly queer body, in the sense that queer theory uncouples the living body from any essence of gender, sexuality, or other way to be grounded in the ontology of sexual difference. Untroubled about its naturalness (is it indexical or simulacral?) digital video refuses the doomed search for origins. (Marks, 2002: 152)

Here Marks is reiterating Waldby's assertion about the lack of origins of digital video and politicises the morphing technique as used by SUKA OFF. The origins of the image of the photographs that SUKA OFF use are the live bodies - the photo acts as a frozen moment of a body in action, however, the digital video elements, manipulated, morphing and constantly moving, have no such origins - they are a fiction of the real, a simulation of the function of the photo. The nightmarish qualities

of the morphing sections are perhaps due to this combination of the real and the virtual, as the repressed hyperreal of digital video comes to haunt the older medium.

In *tranSfera*, SUKA OFF play with digital and analogue mediums, as by mixing the 'moments' captured by the instant Polaroid camera with the more sophisticated live feed digital camcorder, the two mediums are played off each other. The static image from the instant camera is unalterable: the moment has been captured and cannot be recreated. The images from the digital live-feed camera are constantly manipulated, altered, the image shifting continually. This relates to Marks' discussion on the idea of digital mortality. She states: 'Digital media are as fragile as analogue, if not more. Digital video's vulnerability is most evident in low and obsolete technologies' (Marks, 2002: 157). Marks word choice here links the medium of digital video to death and I think that in exposing the vulnerabilities and the differences in the technologies we can also see how these work together to create an uncanny effect. Marks continues her discussion of digital and analogue technologies:

> Machine error creates new opportunities for randomness, which is the source of life. Digital video knows its body is not natural but is nonetheless mortal. It perceives for us humans the uncanniness with which it is possible to slip out of life and into virtuality. (Marks, 2002: 159)

Once more we return to the uncanny experience of a marrying of the live and the virtual, of the liveness of the body, and of the death-in-life of the recording. There is also the potential for the uncanny in the digital doubling of the performer's body, as I looked at initially, as well as in the female performer's body itself. I think that the work of SUKA OFF – in its hybrid, abject and ambiguous performance style – illustrates the liminality that exists between these things.

I want to return now to the idea of the uncanny and to see whether the work of SUKA OFF can be explored within this framework. The three aspects of the uncanny that I outlined initially were – the double (we have this with the live and filmed version of the performer – and the live version of the audience and their Polaroid double), the idea of the familiar and unfamiliar inhabiting the same space – in *tranSfera* we have the inclusion of the images from the audience and therefore the experience of seeing your own face as an audience member, or in my case (I was not photographed) – looking around the audience to recognise the live face whose image had just developed before my eyes. Finally, there is the inanimate being made animate or appearing to come to life. In *tranSfera* the combination of old and new technologies, of Polaroid camera and digital live-feed filming allow for the still Polaroid photograph to be brought to life and creates these uncanny moments of the still face becoming animated. What is also interesting in this piece is how the female performer's body becomes a blank canvas for a range of projected identities while the male performer maintains his control and agency. In their quest for a 'third gender' it seems that SUKA OFF have succeeded in visually merging genders via technology, however, this surface trickery hides a familiar gender politics underneath. The literal use of the woman's body as a surface on which to project these images of different identities within this performance compared to the *tranSfera* that the male performer goes through seems to speak less to the notion of a third gender and more to a reiteration of existing ideas of male and female bodies while rendering specifically the female body as uncanny.

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