

**Kerry Francksen**

## **Taking care of bodies ~ tracing gestures betwixt and between live-digital dancing**

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses some findings from practice-as-research into digital dance performance making. In an attempt to re-conceptualize the art of making movement, particularly as new technologies become more and more pervasive in art practice generally, this paper presents a personal perspective of the potential for 'live' and 'digital bodies' to interact. Key to this interaction has been a philosophical appreciation of Erin Manning's concepts of a 'sensing body in movement' and 'relation' (2007, 2011). Using Manning's ideas as a methodology for rethinking the relationship between live and digital dancing, this paper explores how the integration of digital media into choreographic practices can begin to shift our understanding of how best to compose movement simultaneously in live and digital contexts. Furthermore, this paper aims to explore and further understand what it means to move within media-rich environments, moving towards a situation where the idea of 'taking care of bodies' extends to how such performance paradigms can begin to re-engage with performer/audience perception.



Figure 1: 'Betwixt & Between' live-digital performance 2013. Kerry Francksen & Simon Atkinson. Photo: Michael Huxley.

## Introduction

As an artist-researcher and practitioner I have been exploring the potential for creating a more intimate exchange between real-time image processing technologies and movement. Having been engaged in making dance for screen in the late 1990s, which in more recent years has naturally extended to an interest in making art works which engage with both live and digital domains, I have been exploring the potential for each media to interact. More over as I will trace through this paper, what has become most important to my work is *how* to create a greater sense of intimacy and synergy between the two media (live/digital) over and above an interaction, which combines dance and image. By considering what the potential synergies might be between the two media I have become interested in the exchange that takes place betwixt and between a dancer and his/her technological counterpart in the moment of performance. Using real-time image processing technologies within my choreographic practice my aims have been to tackle the intrinsic difficulties of combining live dance with digital media. This comes from an interest in the *nature* of the relationship between the two media and is specifically concerned with the potential digital imaging provides for choreography and the creation of movement.

In an effort to address a greater sense of intimacy and synergy my aims have been to question how 'new technologies (have) impacted on the body in performance' (Ponton, 2005: 6). Through practice-as-research my intrigue in how 'one performs the self' (Ponton, 2005: 6) - especially whilst having to deal with real-time image processing as an implicit element of the creative milieu - is offered here as a point of departure for re-conceptualizing performative behaviour. Using this as a framework and by making my own mediated dance performance I have become interested in how I might engage with the technology as an integral part of the creative and performance process, which in turn informs the dancers' decision making in real-time. Pivotal to this interaction is the possibility for the dancer to imagine, to be present in the transfer of data and to engage with the mediated/digital as it appears and disappears rather than focusing on dancing with or alongside a virtual 'other' as an aftermath or product (Pavis in Dixon 2007).

Those practices, where technologies have filtered into the creative process, such as Anker's *Digital Dance: The effects of interaction between new technologies and dance performance* (2008) along with Broadhurst & Machon's *Sensualities / textualities and technologies* (2009) and Kozel's *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (2007) have been key in defining methodologies and theoretical approaches towards a greater understanding of an epistemology of live and digital dancing. My attempt here is not to duplicate what is now a well-documented area. More, my intention is to offer a perspective that draws upon such discourses as a means of locating potential theoretical and conceptual thinking from a practical/performative perspective. Whilst the potential for integrating media technologies is not a new concept, in reality the very nature of attempting to move beyond the combination of performance and media technologies, what Maria Chatzichristodoulou remarks as those 'opportunities offered by contemporary

performances that “dare” interact with an “other” system of disciplines by integrating technologies into their practice’ (2009: 1), is not so easily matched. As Sophia Lycouris states:

When digital media interact with the traditional practice of choreography (or for that matter with traditional practices in other art forms) ... conditions emerge, and this affects how we create and experience contemporary choreographic work ... what the introduction of digital technology has mostly challenged in our relationship with the physical world is the perception of space (2009: 352).

Lycouris makes the case here for a greater understanding of those spatio-temporal experiences of works that consider the intersection of live and mediated expressions. A situation where the presence of a body, be it live or virtual for that matter can exist in a joint spatio-temporal relationship, in a moment of performative exchange.

As a mover and improviser what has become central to my kinaesthetic and embodied awareness in such environments has been my ability as a performer to be open to the ‘act’ of making movement in ‘relation’ to the mediated. As I have been faced, not only with the ‘materiality’<sup>1</sup> of having to produce movement in what could be considered the ‘live’ context, but as I have been trying to respond to a ‘materiality’ which comes from a ‘digital’ context also, the complexities of having to deal with movement generation simultaneously in both live and digital domains provides the fundamental question at the heart of my research. In effect, my understanding of what constitutes the ‘dance’ has been challenged and as a result I have been rethinking what the relationship between these two ‘worlds’ might be.

This paper therefore foreground the dancer’s experience, which is drawn from my own embodied practice of moving in media-rich environments, as a way to engage more critically with those ‘perceptual processes’ (Vaas Rhee 2010), that might take place within a joint spatio-temporal relationship, or as Manning discusses ‘the body (as) active potential, not tautology’ (2007: 61). In my explorations I have been concerned with how I might move the dancer’s understanding of movement generation towards an attentive awareness, which allows for a more immediate exchange with emerging live and digital gestures or as I propose here as live-digital gestures<sup>2</sup>. In particular I will highlight the significance of those perceptual shifts in attention where media-rich environments open up rather than close down the ‘potentiality’ for live and digital gestures to transform as they continually emerge in the moment of performance. What seemed to be most problematic for this type of work was a tension between the very nature and physicality of the body and the overwhelming presence of the mediated. My own experiences of both watching and then making such work was very quickly overtaken by a sense that, in many ways, the ‘real’ and ‘fleshy’ body was increasingly being left in a position of inferiority compared to that of the mediated. Having initially identified this tension as being problematic, my aims have been to search for a way to make the two ‘spaces’ connect; or better said to conceive of the two

media not as two separate entities, but as a state where a coalescence of gestures, as they appear and collide, become a potential force towards a greater sense of intimacy and perceptual freshness. This in turn, I will argue has the potential to reach out and ‘touch’ (Manning 2007) not only the performer but ultimately the audience as well.

### **Re-engaging with the flow of movement**

As leading scholar Johannes Birringer writes, the ‘gradual embedding of media and digital computation into performance ... or, vice versa, performance (becoming) embedded in an expanding range of media arts’, has real implications for how ‘intermedial composition processes (can) challenge assumptions about assemblages of forms and relations’ (2012: 1). This becomes particularly poignant from the perspective of the dancer who is attempting to negotiate and experience this type of work in both an embodied sense and in terms of responding to her digital manifestation. This also extends to an audience who is asked to grasp the meaning of a performance as it is presented within a simultaneously live and digital perceptual field.

By drawing on my own experiences of making two pieces of work: ‘shift’ (2012) and ‘Betwixt & Between’ (2013), my aim is to discuss how the treatment of movement content can begin to move towards a greater awareness of how such ‘intermedial composition processes’ might challenge and open up new ‘forms and relations’ within live-digital choreographic practice. To do this I also offer an interpretation of some of the philosophical and theoretical concepts derived from the ‘Technologies of Lived Abstraction Series’ published by the MIT Press. This series of books brings together scholars engaged in work ‘of transdisciplinary reach inquiring critically but especially creatively into processes of subjective, social, and ethical-political emergence abroad in the world today’ (<http://senselab.ca/book-series>. Accessed June 2013). I have found myself drawn to Erin Manning, Brian Massumi and Stamitia Portanova’s writings, which engage with the ‘occurrent arts’ and activist philosophical concepts where relation, emergence, complexity, process, individuation and embodied perception, to name but a few, have been useful for analysing the tensions I have experienced whilst making my own performance work. By attempting to re-conceptualize my embodied experiences I use such concepts here as a framework to try and understand how moving as a live-digital ‘being’ might begin to tackle the performative challenges I have faced.

This paper works from Manning’s belief that: ‘There is no unified body. There are skins, receptive surfaces, gestural movements, desires toward another. The body is active potential, not tautology’ (2007: 61). She continues: ‘I realize that I have no self, that I exist in relation, that I am in relation to my own untouchability. My body is not One’ (2007: 75). In effect, what has become fundamental to my understanding of what an embodied exchange might be is that the body is indeed not ‘One’. Using this idea as a framework, my practice takes account of the body and the digital, not as something that is separate, but as a state in which ‘relation’ and ‘sensing bodies’ recognize the body as an emerging live-digital being. Furthermore, this offers the dancer a

way to re-conceptualize her dancing as something which is at once intertwined in the continually emergent 'potentiality' of movement. The idea that 'I have no self, that I exist in relation' then becomes a way to actualize movement in 'relation' to the digital.



Figure 2: 'Betwixt & Between' live-digital performance 2013. Kerry Francksen & Simon Atkinson. Photo: Michael Huxley.

Working from this premise and by trying to consider such concepts in my studio practice I began to try and conceive of my movements as a continuous 'qualitative reiteration' (Manning 2007: xviii) of bodies that are 'moving toward something that is not yet' (Manning 2007: xviii). What I found happened in the process of making my movement was that I began to engage with my 'digital other' not as a mere iteration or even extension of my self, but as a dynamic shifting of bodies as live-mediated bodies. Rather than trying to generate 'live' movement that was then re-presented via the digital I began to consider my movement as a flow of energy that emerged through its expressive potential as both live and digital.

### ***In practice***

With this in mind, it became clear that a more successful exchange might be achieved through the exploration of real-time technologies<sup>3</sup>. I am referring here to a shift away from real-time performance applications that concentrate



on using pre-rendered media and fixed choreographic material to support each other. I am interested in a situation whereby any emerging movement material is in some way connected to the media output, which in return enables the dancer to make a new choice about his/her dancing. A good example of dance and media in a more supporting role can be seen in Motion House's 'Scattered' 2009. The piece presents dancers moving and sliding in front of and on top of a large curved surface placed on the stage. Images of water are then projected onto the surface as the dancers continue to move through the choreography. In one section of the piece a dancer slips over the side of the surface and slides down the structure. As he arrives at the bottom a projected image of him effectively splashing into the water appears. (In that moment the effect is very pleasing and quite beautiful.)

However, in contrast my own practice has been exploring different modes of choreographic thought, (particularly if I am to consider the possibilities of 'potential' and 'relation' as suggested) and therefore assumes a need to both create and engage in movement as it appears and emerges. This is based on technological processes that ask the dancer to be open and ready to continually 'make' and then 'remake' movement in the moment of performance in 'relation' to the digital. As the work developed I began exploring a number of possibilities within the software, including ways of delaying a live feed along with other qualitative manipulations, such as changes to the pixilation and the quality of the image. My overall aims have been to challenge and encourage particular kinds of behaviours that would firstly work with and then beyond the dialogical structures set up in the system. In terms of a methodology it became clear that any developing exchange between the emerging movement material and its mediation needed to occur in the moment of performance. This has been besides setting up more concrete interactions, such as those described early in 'Scattered'. In order to try and engage in the choreographic process from the point of view of enabling the dancer to engage with the 'potential' for movement, it became important to consider a system of 'events' where technological mapping created a situation where any emerging movement material, cut from the emerging milieu of 'bits' and 'points of matter' (Portanova 2013), enables the dancer to make a new choice about the emerging dance.

One particular experience is worth mentioning. During an improvisatory exploration back in 2011 my task was simply to consider my positioning whilst working with a live-feed (i.e. my movements were captured through a camera placed in the ceiling and projected back into the space after a delay of a few seconds) in order to effect a change in perspective. What was striking as I attempted to re-position myself in relation to my *digital echo* (as I thought of it back then) was how this asked me to re-evaluate what it felt like to perform that very same movement, which I had performed only seconds before. As I attempted to re-position myself in response to my digital echo, my understanding of the movement's characteristics (encompassing changes in pace, quality, rhythm, texture etc.) became almost counterintuitive. What became significant instead was the affect this repositioning had on my perception of what the movements should 'feel' like. As my movements reappeared they began to take on a whole new set of characteristics, which

greatly differed from those I tacitly remembered from performing them only moments earlier. I recalled:

I remembered the strain in my neck and the tension needed to maintain my positioning and how I moved from one movement into the next. But I did not have the same experience as my movements were then (re)formed through the digital image. As my movements looped back into space via the digital image I noticed that the intensity and sense of lightness and lack of tension in the digital 'me' was extremely powerful. In that moment of noticing, as my attention was at once drawn to my own physicality manifest as live *and* digital, I found a new sense of connection and motivation for my movements. (Francksen 2011)

The reappearance of a previous gesture, as it permeated and fused with the live material is where something transformative started to take place. As my mediated self looked up through the floor and out into the physical space (see figure 3) the qualities inherent in the digital 'me' became very arresting. This began to heavily influence my movement choices. As I became more intrigued by my 'other' self looking up I was less concerned with moving on a horizontal/vertical plane in order to consider a perspective that was less grounded, less obvious. As the task continued the qualities inherent in the digital 'me' became important as they translated into my grounded physical presence. Those visible features, such as the sense of lightness, began to penetrate what I was doing.

What became important in terms of my practice was a re-emergence of the dynamic qualities of that movement as it materialized through time in relation to the digital. As my screen presence moved from being a residue of the flow of a previous movement to some kind of 'liminal' (Turner 1994: 9) conception of my own persona, I was placed in a strange and intimate position of not being fully 'physical' or indeed 'mediated', but in some way as both live-digital. Furthermore this changed or transformed how I moved, or felt compelled to move.



Figure 3: 'Shift' digital dance performance 2012. Kerry Francksen. Photo: Andy Elston.

What became important was a shift in perception where my screen presence moved from being the residue of the flow of a previous movement, to some kind of 'positive notion of desire as an ontological force' (Braidotti 2011: 2). My 'digital self' as it looked up and off into space took on another quality and force. Effectively what I felt was almost an enveloping of those parts in-between the here of my corporeal self as it spread in a to-ing and fro-ing with what I had considered to be a separate entity – my digital self. The strong embodied resonance between those 'sensing bodies' became a force for re-conceptualizing my own performative behaviour. If one is to conceive of a more transformative relationship between live-digital bodies, then arguably a new cognisance for decoding the materiality of movement, as seen in the above example of my own practice, becomes extremely exciting from the perspective of the dancer. Needless to say, this perceptual shift in terms of what constituted my own multiplicities of self or 'sensing bodies' was a significant moment. It was at these very moments that I found myself having to draw on all of my sensory and emotional intelligence in order to deal with a fresh 'sense' of my emerging dancing.

### **Taking care of bodies**

What I had initially understood as an experience of 'live dancing' alongside a 'digital representation' has gradually transformed into something which is far more permeable than a mere combination, especially as I have been thinking about tracing gestures across the two 'spaces' as a means for 'virtually shape-shifting (within) malleable environments' (Manning 2009: 18). If, as Manning proposes, movement is a process of individuation where 'sensing bodies in movement are not individual bodies; their individuations are always



collective. They are worlding bodies that are one with the potential for movement' (2007: xviii). Then the 'potential for movement' (Manning 2007: xviii) opens up the possibilities for rethinking the very act of digital-dancing. Here the perception of an emerging dance shifts towards something which allows the dancer to blend her own awareness and sensibilities through 'bits, pixels, points, dots' and 'bodies' as fluid and interchangeable' (Portanova 2013). By trying to consider such ideas my dancing (and arguably the dancing of my collaborators) has begun to 'feel' more synchronous, more intimate, or in Susan Kozel's words my 'performance has the power to ignite, not just spaces, but also an ontological sub-stratum of being' (2007: 66).



Figure 4: 'Shift' digital dance performance 2012. Kerry Francksen. Photo: Andy Elston.

In terms of making movement material, the interplay between emerging live and digital gestures as they folded in and around each other resulted in movement content which didn't flow, since I found myself wanting to be still and breathe. Furthermore, it was in those moments that I became aware of altering variants of speed, rhythm, pace, colour, texture and so on, which emerged in both domains. As Kent De Spain writes,

No matter how much we might want it to, creativity does not really flow. The process is, and should be, more encumbered. It contains impedances that resist and redirect intentionality, compelling an often uncomfortable renegotiation with the material of the moment (2012: 26).

Having to engage in a process which did indeed 'redirect' my 'intentionality' meant that a fresh sensibility or renewed awareness of the potential exchange taking place betwixt and between the live-digital gestures was extremely

powerful. As Karmen Mackendrick writes the dancer ‘is fully “present,” fully attentive to this coming absence. And because she knows, and delights in, movement – because, in other words, she turns her full devotion to the loss of the moment that nonetheless absorbs her entirely – the dancer-dancing intensifies ...’ (Mackendrick in Lepecki 2004: 32). My own experiences have meant that the gestures-in-action or bodies as both live and digital potentiality, doesn’t imply a negative tension between the live and the digital, but opens up creative possibilities for those moments where I am touched (not in a physical sense, but in an affective sense) as an intense and intimate exchange, as my own sense of ‘the dancer-dancing intensifies’ (Mackendrick in Lepecki 2004: 32). I would argue that considering ‘how one performs the self’ (and arguably by trying to unpick what the self might *be*) within such realms offers the dancer the potential to shift her perceptual attention or awareness and ultimately exist in both live and digital spheres simultaneously.

Manning’s notion of ‘sensing bodies’ (2007, 2011) has been used here as a reflection on how to touch beyond fixed spatial and temporal realities. Another primary concern for my work has been a sense that I needed to take care of how the work was presented and ultimately exchanged with my audience. If a sense of intimacy can be expressed and experienced by the dancer through a more synchronous perceptual awareness of live-digital bodies, then this provides an important framework for considering the audiences’ bodies also. Jacques Rancière writes:

She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way – by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them (2011: 13).

An experience of live-digital dancing, as it is presented here, then becomes a way for the dancer *and* the audience to participate in the event as ‘active interpreters of the spectacle’ (Rancière 2011: 13). From my own experiences this has indeed been key to generating a greater sense of intimacy, which at once encompasses all ‘bodies’ present.

### **Reaching out to ‘touch’**

If the driving force is the potential for something which is about to take place, something which is ‘not quite yet’, but which is formed from the continual (re)engagement of what has just been, then the permeation of these realities becomes an interesting point of transformation. In other words the work needs to somehow ask those ‘present’ to accept changing states as they are (re)invented in relation to (and beyond) the live and digital. This provides a different way of questioning how one might consider an overall rhetoric. Furthermore, how the live performer relates to her various multiplicities in both live and digital domains then becomes a way to allow the spectators in. I am in agreement with Susan Broadhurst who states:

Finally, although much interest is directed towards new technologies, it is my belief that technology's most important contribution to art is the enhancement and reconfiguration of an aesthetic creative potential that consists of interacting with, and reacting to, a physical body (2009: 20).

I would also add that this consists of bodies which aren't just physical, but live-digital bodies also. As Mark Hansen notes:

It is only with the invention of video that the material image becomes dynamic in itself ... as a technical process, video holds forth the possibility for a fundamentally new contact between perception and the dynamic materiality of the world in becoming (2011: 90).

What returns, in the sense that for me the work is tied up with live and digital gestures looping and shifting betwixt and between the live-digital body, has been important. Although the digital could well be seen as a direct repetition, in fact what returns is perceived as something different, or what could be seen as a new 'materiality of the world in becoming' (Hansen 2011: 90). This also chimes with Manning, who suggests that it is 'not movement become form, but movement unforming ... (it) is less a two-tiered system – performer/image – than the creation of a strange interval through which image and body begin to intertwine in the moving' (2012: 129). What becomes exciting in terms of the multiplicity of the body, as it is first recognized as a repetition via the digital image and then as a re-imagining is where 'every moment becomes a spiral, a swirling of incipient, emerging differences hidden behind a surface of repeated steps' (Portanova 2006: 142). What is pertinent here is not so much the materiality of the image itself, but the idea that video taps into the very processes of perception that takes place in the dynamic world. From a dancer's perspective this idea holds forth the potential for re-engaging with image production in performance, which moves one step away from representational modes or *combinations* of dance and image. In these terms it is therefore possible to begin to think of the dance as something that is not so much stripped of what it was by the digital, but that the 'image' or 'gesture', as it reappears and 'recombines', takes on a force of its own.

By pushing these ideas further, the fleshy, visceral body returns through the grainy and pixelated digital gesture allowing for emerging differences to be recognized as Hansen mentions as moving 'towards conscious consumption' (2011: 90). This in turn can then open out towards a new perceptual, and I would argue, more *intimate* embodied experience. One of my continuing aims has been to determine whether the relationship between the live and digital gesture can somehow counteract what gets lost (what can be seen as a coldness in mediated terms). There are clues here, which point towards a way of tapping into a new sensibility or emotional response for both performer and audience alike as the body continually (re)transforms through the perceptual fusion of 'sensing bodies' as live-digital bodies.

In terms of taking care of bodies, the materialization of the dance doesn't presuppose the live or the digital, but suggests that the digital and physical is somehow set free in an ontological resonance that encapsulates both mediums. By considering the interstices of live and digital gestures as they blur the boundaries between 'bits, pixels, points or dots' (Portanova), my view is that if the performer can hone her awareness as a live-digital 'sensing body' the sharp distinction, as I understood it and felt initially as problematic, can be thought of differently.

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to Brain Massumi's idea that 'the body is the intensive milieu of active-matter indistinction in the midst of which human experience comes to find itself' (Massumi 2011: 27).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'live-digital gesture' to represent a force and rhythm, which is intertwined in both image and movement. This represents a perceptual shift for the dancer where an awareness of the emerging dance is at once intertwined with her sense of the flow between the 'physical' and 'mediated' manifestation of her movements.

<sup>3</sup> In my work I use Mark Coniglio's Isadora software programme. See [troikatronix.org](http://troikatronix.org) for a detailed description of Isadora.

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### **Biography**

Kerry is an active practitioner, choreographer and artist and Senior Lecturer in Dance and Teacher Fellow at De Montfort University, Leicester. She has been working as a professional practitioner since 1997, making interactive installation art, live performance and dance for the screen. Kerry's work has been performed and screened nationally and internationally and she has successfully received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council as well as receiving independent commissions. Kerry holds a Masters in dance video installation and is currently researching for a PhD, which aims to investigate the interrelationship and potential synchronicity of live and mediated dance.