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Moving or Morphing Target? Hypermedial Hybrids, Diller+Scofidio-Style

Abstract

Given the double consciousness it stimulates, the principle of morphing arguably provides a platform to reflect on matters of authenticity in the digital age due to its dramatization of metaphysics in process. This is especially the case with the collaboration between choreographer Frédéric Flamand and the architects Diller + Scofidio on *Moving Target* (1996), an encounter between physical bodies and a techno-architectonic stage environment where performers morphed 'live' on stage.

Introduction

What is normal?
(Vaslav Nijinsky)¹

At the end of the 1990s during his collaborative work with superstar architect duo Diller + Scofidio (now: Diller Scofidio + Renfro), Frédéric Flamand created a series of encounters between live bodies and technology-infused stage environments. This Belgian choreographer's interest was particularly geared towards bringing dancers face to face (and body to body) with unusual surfaces and technological materials. For this purpose, Flamand had originally approached Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio after reading the former's claims that 'Architecture is everything that happens between the skin of one person and the skin of another' (Ahmed, 2014) and that, by extension, she liked to see 'architecture as an event that can be choreographed' (qtd. in Weinstein, 2008: 26). Diller + Scofidio accepted Flamand's invitation on the back of their interest in investigating the schizophrenic body in an architectural space, and more specifically the movements of bodies unbounded by physical and virtual space (deLahunta, 1997). While blurring internal and external spaces through a combination of digital effects and live computer graphics, their joint creations eventually allowed the dancers alternately to *morph* between real, dream, virtual, and material conditions.

Architectural Morphing

Almost as common in contemporary culture as hybridization itself and arguably just as prone to stimulate reflexivity, the principle of morphing provides a particularly pertinent platform for reflection on mediatized bodies, multimedial dance, or posthuman perception due to its 'uncanny dramatization of a *process* metaphysics' (Sobchack, 2000: xii – emphasis added). Denoting a paradoxically 'transparent' graphic special effect, morphs create linear yet simulatenously surreal transformations by combining the cross-dissolving and the warping of images. Even if it can be found in different guises throughout history, morphing has flourished in the computer age (Wolf, 2000: 83). Now no longer dependent on laborious replacement animation, it has increasingly become less expensive and more sophisticated. This, in turn, has brought about a shift from serving mere spectacular purposes to occasional meta-

artistic integrations. Precisely because morphing reflects at once embodiment and fluctuation, it is an illusive practice, which, like dance, communicates via the prism of elusiveness. By refusing stable reference points, it shifts our attention from artistic product to signifying process. In this way, the principle of morphing becomes just as ostensive and/or theatrical as the hybrid it embodies, relying upon the spectator's cognitive complicity to concretize its state of 'in-betweenness.'

Prompted into constant semiotic repositioning, the spectator of dancing bodies and morphing hybrids witness how, within a technological environment, the distinction between materiality and immateriality is driven by affective movement. This is at once both physical and cognitive and is therefore infused with the interpreter's humanity. Diller + Scofidio's interest in dance, combined with Frédéric Flamand's enthusiasm for architecture, can be explored in this regard. Ever since Marcus Vitruvius' recommendations on temple proportions 2000 years ago, the human body and its movements have played a pivotal part in architectural treatises and theories, just as histories of modern architectural movements would be incomplete without recognizing the influence of choreographer Oskar Schlemmer at the Bauhaus (Benevolo, 1977: 414, 417, 421). However, two further factors more explicitly explain the reciprocity between architecture and dance. Firstly, both are allographic practices in the sense that they can be reproduced at a distance from the original author by means of notation. More significantly, though, is the borrowing of concepts and methods from one discipline to organize meaning in the other: the architect's reliance on models of movement to conceptualize complex spaces, and the choreographer's use of architectural techniques to determine mapping of space and action, often work in close connection with scenography (Weinstein, 2008: 25).

Mediatized Hybrids

When an actor or dancer repeats a certain performance, the outcome is 'similarity' rather than 'sameness.' Not so, however, with electronic media – the output of which is infinitely repeatable. But when electronics meet live performance we end up with a kind of hybrid highlighting both 'liveness' and 'mediation' without clarifying either (see Auslander, 2000: e1). The performing arts in effect have always thrived on what performance theorist Marvin Carlson has called 'a consciousness of doubleness' (1996: 5-6), with their typical intensity deriving not from clear distinctions but rather from tensions, ambiguities, or associations. The work of Frédéric Flamand thereby constitutes a case in point due to continuous collaborations with architects and electronic engineers while conceptualizing his hypermedial hybrids.² In contrast to previous partnerships like the well-known venture between Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg for *Travelogue* (1977), where each artist worked separately before collating the different constituents (Weinstein, 2008: 32), Flamand consistently targets complicity with associates and audiences alike. His choreographies reflect a holistic approach to both performance and scenography that stimulates reflection across the various referential frameworks and creative practices involved in weaving together the complex fabric of the performative event – yet they also examine the principle of hybridity itself.

In a general sense, a hybrid could be termed a self-conscious case of hybridization on behalf of its ostensive hybridity – i.e. the theatricalization of its hybrid nature. Since hybridization has been dubbed a ‘maddeningly elastic phenomenon’ it carries distinct heuristic value for the performing arts (Kraidy, 2005: 3). After all, both hybrids as well as theatre productions revolve around the reasoning that distinctions are porous, that absolute ‘truth’ is relative, and that essentialist thinking thus has no place within the setting of performance. As products of constitutive exchanges, hybridity and live performance both simultaneously evoke an end product and the process that shaped it, and thus can be perceived as intrinsically in flux. Both, moreover, blend convention with invention. For as meaning making begins by recognition and interpretation requires referential focus, these qualities can effectively usher our imagination across various layers of meaning. The key here is the joint reliance of these qualities upon ostension, which arguably allows both performance and hybridity to be perceived as ‘a process rather than a state’ (Burke, 2009: 46).

Attending live performance constantly reminds us that the referential frameworks at play allow for a fluctuating interchange of information. The hybrid constellations produced on a stage thus reject essentializing taxonomies. Not quite conforming to a genre, nor representing an artistic medium among others, staged performance makes for problematic classifications by constantly mixing up conceptions of actuality and make-believe. Finally, since spectators as well as performers ‘live in the blend [of performance]’ (McConachie, 2008: 48), one could argue that *all* stage productions necessarily are hybrids.³ Grounded in what dance scholar Gerald Siegmund termed the ‘momentum of elusiveness’ [*Momentum des Flüchtigen*] (2006: 49), ‘live’ performance like no other artistic practice dramatizes the perennial flux of impulses, insights, and inscriptions that constitute a creation. However, this ‘ecology of relationships’ (Giannachi and Kaye, 2010: 6) could not be as palpable were it not for its one key constitutive element: the human body, present on stage in the here and now.⁴ As a meeting point between the artist and the audience, the event of performance resists easy encapsulation because it simultaneously targets illusory effects as well as affective responses, and so actually short-circuits any attempt at rational reasoning.

When supplementing technologies to the live body on stage, its hybrid quality of overdetermined signifier finds itself all the more underscored. It becomes what Izabella Pluta has called a ‘mediaphoric body’ [*corps médiaphorique*]: a posthuman hybrid born from the interaction between a performer and the scenography’s medial constituents, which hence can only be described metaphorically (2011: 122-126). To the seasoned spectator of contemporary dance, though, this reasoning is nothing new. Long accustomed to hybrid duets between the real and the virtual, this particular kind of live performance ‘has always been most successful in marrying the mediation of semiotic meaning with the performance of physical and sensual motion’ (Boenisch 2006: 151).

Moving Targets

Frédéric Flamand’s personal interest in architecture incidentally dates back to the early days of his choreographing career when he already privileged the organization of space and the creation of images over the elaboration of

specific routines. For this reason, dance critic Anna Kisselgoff maintains that Flamand is above all 'a conceptualist whose collaboration with architects offers intellectual underpinnings for his mixed-media pieces' (Kisselgoff, 2007). After all, his movements and arrangements in the early 1970s were not even designed for the stage, but took place in spaces 'unbound by the frontal relationship between spectator and spectacle found in conventional proscenium theatres', such as in the streets, a decommissioned Brussels sugar refinery, or an abandoned swimming pool (Weinstein, 2008: 26-7). Since then he has also worked with architectural luminaries like Jean Nouvel (2000-2001), Zaha Hadid (2000 + 2007), Thom Mayne/Morphosis (2003), Dominique Perrault (2005), and the Campana Brothers (2007) on what he calls his various conceptual 'obsessions' about bodies, spaces, and technologies (Weinstein, 2008: 25).

As Flamand's notoriety started to grow, his company Plan K (later: Charleroi Danes) received ever more invitations to tour. Of course, because up until this point their productions were all site-specifically designed, touring was somewhat problematic. This led the choreographer to seek conceptual support from architects in creating contexts that could be reproduced without threatening his trademark 'obsessions' (Weinstein, 2008: 27). His very first such collaboration was with Diller + Scofidio in 1996 on the production *Moving Target*, an adaptation of Vaslav Nijinsky's uncensored diaries revolving around the question 'What is normal?' A shared 'obsession' for Diller + Scofidio as well as Frédéric Flamand was the questioning of conventions. From this point, their work quickly took a hybridizing turn in the most literal sense of the term.

As a piece combining dance, music, narration, and video projection, *Moving Target* set out to challenge the epistemological expectations of its audiences. Indeed, by interfering in the spatial and temporal 'liveness' of the perceived event, the creators sought to confront the spectators with the distinction between 'live' and 'mediated' as a means of undermining the presumed precedence of live over mediated experience, thus revealing 'live performance' as an essentially mediated experience in its own right. *Moving Target* was conceived as an attempt to collapse the designations of 'live' and 'mediated' altogether into the aforementioned kind of 'process metaphysics' – here rendered into a device that interrupts the 'live on stage' by interfering with the frontal, holistic gaze of the audience. In this sense, a performance that refuses to deliver itself as a commodity remains simultaneously present and absent, both framed and elusive at a crossroads where a passive look is transformed into a dynamic gaze.

The main element Diller + Scofidio specifically relied upon for this purpose was a semi-transparent mirror, tipped above the stage. Accordingly, live performers could now be disengaged from dictates of gravity and liberated from the horizontal site of the floor. In combination with a projected video image, this mirror helped to organize the bodies according to the morphing potential of video rather than along those of everyday operational space. As a result, live performers in front of the mirror could combine with video bodies illuminated behind the mirror within a hybrid space. The gigantic mirror-screen mounted at a 45-degree angle which Diller + Scofidio called the *interscenum* not only split the spectators' gaze between a 'mediated' upper stage and the

'real-live' action on the ground, it also simultaneously offered glimpses of the structure of the dance itself through its plan while elevating bodies from the ground so that they appeared to float. In addition, variations on the dancers' moods were supplemented into a live/mediated hybrid *pas de deux* via the projection of pre-recorded video-images, thus suggesting the intimate interconnection of double consciousness with a fluctuating body. An optical flow camera-based sensing system developed for this purpose in conjunction with artist/programmer Kirk Woolford allowed the performers to be followed with an animated crosshair, thus generating yet another taxonomic tension between the dancing body through architecture and 'a dancing architecture itself' (Goldberg, 2004: 203). Finally, while the live performers were seen dancing and morphing into their electronic doubles, amped up advertisements for an imaginary line of 'normal' pharmaceutical products to regulate self-esteem, libido, and desires keep clashing with the visual fluidity on stage (see also Dimendberg, 2013: 106).

Humanist Habitats

Diller + Scofidio's 'morph' dancers shared a mutual yet impossible space with the virtual dancers reflected in the mirror and the phantom dancers behind it. As such, spectators could no longer assume binary classifications such as male/female, normal/pathological, or even natural/artificial as well as live/mediated, let alone apply these to the schizophrenia of the mediaphoric body. Moreover, by contemplating these 'freak' characters' dynamic hybridity, we, the audience, are cognitively forced to oscillate between phenomenological, epistemological, meta-artistic, and affective considerations. After all, by ostensibly taking up a marginal position in-between referential frameworks, the principle of morphing in its most general sense stages the tension between the need of 'becoming other' and the impossibility of an absolute identity.

The dance-architectural hybrid that is *Moving Target* confirms Philip Auslander's dictum that 'liveness is not an ontologically defined condition but a historically variable effect' subject to our own ever-morphing mindsets (2012: 3). Of course, such an argument is void if the mediatized artwork fails to engage the spectator. Here, then, lies precisely the relevance of the performing arts for the study of morphing hybrids and hybridizing processes. Given that the 'mediaphoric body' cannot fail to connect – visually as well as viscerally – with an audience physically present in the same place at the same time, a reverse implication, ironically, would relate to the improbability of wholesale relativity, and this despite our affective response to 'live' morphing. After all, aside from its real-time ontological fluidity, Flamand's morphs aim at creating cognitive dissonance, and thus operate by contrast – a metareferential effect fuelled entirely by our own reactions, and thus mirroring (pun intended) the hybridizing performativity on stage. I personally find this a comforting thought, especially considering today's relentlessly evolving techno-infested culture in which we strive to distill meaning from a context awash with hybrids but no certainties. For even if we now know that 'essences' can no longer be captured in unmediated form, post-human perceptions infused with mediatized or even morphing hybrids still hold the body as prime signifier. And because, culturally speaking, 'there is nothing more coded than the body' (Blau qtd. in Auslander, 1997: 91), placing it in the

elusive setting of a staged performance relying most extensively on the spectator's cognitive input, allows even the most 'mediaphoric' hybrid to retain humanity as its habitat.

Notes

1 As a signifying system capable of integrating an infinite amount of other communicative media 'without being dependent on [either] of these' (Kattenbelt 2006: 32), the staged performance functions *de facto* as a hypermedium, and as such also commands a unique position in being both an inherently hybrid artistic product and an ostensibly elusive practice.

2 To McConachie, the world created on stage is not entirely fictional given that its chief components are actors/characters and audience members, i.e. a blend of real people and the fictional figures physically present at the same time in a shared space. Theatrical performance, accordingly, 'mixes up our usual categories of actuality and make-believe all of the time' (2008: 48).

3 On a phenomenological level, Giannachi and Kaye posit that any 'presentation implies a positioning of presence in space and time, a positioning that forms an ecology of relationships between the "I am" and that which is in front of or before' (2011: 6). To them, such an 'interactive mechanism' between the 'I am' and what is in front of or before is crucial to the operation of presence in performance since it activates a panoply of *inter-acting* signifying systems in turn feeding the act of signification, hence their use of the term 'ecology'.

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Biography

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