Immaterial Bodies, Embodied Materials
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So I wanted to talk today about the past 10 years or so- basically as long as I've been making work–and to address in particular–three moments, which are three moments of questioning, doubting, crisis moments for me– but hopefully the kind of crisis moments that bring up some interesting implications and which in any case have a lot to say about what I'm working on and how I'm trying to work now.

I'll start with crisis moment number one which begins about 10 years ago when I was at Brown University in Rhode Island, around the time I had decided that I wanted to be a dancer and a choreographer. I had trained as a ballet dancer from about seven years old and made a couple of my own dance pieces in High School and was pretty certain by the time I was 17 that I had my career path and that was what I was going to study in college and do professionally afterwards. And pretty quickly, in the first three months or so, what I found was that the dance classes didn't really stimulate me, actually they really depressed me pretty deeply–enough so that after those first three months as a freshman I already decided I was ready to do something else. So I dropped out of dance and I fumbled around and took whatever classes friends of mine were taking–science, art, languages–it didn't really matter– as long as it didn't involve anything to do with dance. And this year of wandering around lead me somehow into literary theory and from there into cultural, and then art theory etc. And this was the context in which I first encountered performance art.

Having danced for over 10 years at that time, seeing performance art for the first time-mostly American performance art from the 60s and 70s– Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Marina Abromavic, Tehching Hsieh, Carolee Schneeman, Dan Grahm et al–was like this big "woa" moment for me.   And I think I hadn't really done the diligence of analyzing yet why it was that I was so depressed with the dance I had been doing–and consequently, why I was so struck by these works which were even then, pretty old–but it was really an eye opener for me at that moment. These works were not about the forms that the body could produce, or the structures within which bodies could produce forms–but about the *meaning* of the body. So I was, ok, like 18, but there was the undeniable fact that there was something so *real* about what these artists were doing. These artists invoked again and again the notion that the body *was real*- I mean corporeal- hairy, bloody, excreting, measurable, sexed, mutable, finite, and so on and that this realness was something that we and the artists themselves had to come to terms with.

It felt at this moment that there was a particular fold between the need then–for these artists some 30 years earlier, to produce these works–and the need for me to encounter them some 30 years later. And this fold is what I find interesting when I look back at this period. And my question is why was there this radical necessity for these artists to represent the body as real in this period and why was there the, I would say, not so radical necessity for me to encounter a representation of the body as real at that moment?

To answer the first question, I'll have to generalize a bit in order to avoid making this a performance art history talk, or a philosophical one on the potentially complicated term 'the real'. But I think these artists were espousing that the body was real in relationship to a particular environment where the beginnings of what I would call a *de-realization* of the body was happening on a massive scale–not really for the first time, but in terms of its scale and pervasiveness I would say for the first time. I mean that this was the period where unreal bodies, mediated bodies especially but many other kinds of unreal bodies were also prevalent and were overtaking real bodies–this was *Night of The Living Dead*–and the movement that

these performances were a part of was for me, first and foremost a resistance movement. So, it *was* necessary to insist then that no, the body *is* real–it's physical, corporeal, and scatological definitions, capabilities and limits need to be staged because they cannot or should not merely be erased by culture. Fiction being one of the means by which culture can erase, or at least re-write the body, I think that this period of performance was also a lot about the ethic that the realness of the body should not be erased by fiction, and so fiction needed to be rejected as well .

There's a good example of this ethic in the 'No Manifesto' of Yvonne Rainer, the choreographer and filmmaker who was closely related to this movement although more from dance than performance art. In 1965 she writes:

No to spectacle. No to virtuosity. No to transformations and magic and make-believe. No to the glamour and transcendency of the star image. No to the heroic. No to the anti-heroic. No to trash imagery. No to involvement of performer or spectator. No to style. No to camp. No to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer. No to eccentricity. No to moving or being moved.

So again, this need to get at the 'real' where the real is this kind of essential materiality both in terms of body but also in terms of the physicality of one's own practice.

On the other side of this fold, why at this particular moment, did I find,this already somewhat dated work to be so fresh and new? Here I think in retrospect that I was looking for a way of working with the body where the body could be more than an articulation of aesthetic ideas. Somehow ballet never bothered me because with ballet you know what you're getting–you're executing forms and the better they're executed, the better the form, the more beautiful. In the end, its mostly about beauty. The narratives are clearly a vehicle for this. But the mixture of stylized forms and the desire to squeeze them out as evidence of self-expression seemed paradoxical and at the same time solipsistic for me. I didn't know how, but I knew that I was looking for a feeling from dance that something done on a stage could have reverberations in the social reality not only in regards to the lexicon and grammar of the history of choreography.

The second reason why I think I was so taken by my first impressions of performance art was that at the same time I was in that period of university cultural studies where you learn that– you know, nothing is real and everything is socially, culturally constructed. And I think I really disagreed with these theories, even if I didn't have the ability to fully understand or dispute them. For me performance art working with the body insisted that the body *is* real and I think I could lean on the work of those artists to help fend off what I couldn't really articulate myself against theories of a simulacral, artificial, constructed, disappearing (and so on) reality.

And so at this point I started to make some performance art of my own–got together people, places, permissions, whatever and made quite a few works and I think some of them were pretty successful, but pretty soon I found a limit there, where something had happened to the *reality* of the body–or at least to the status of the *poetic* of the *real* body–where it had just really dropped, bottomed out. Partly, I guess that had to do with the exact same theories I was busy trying to resist–reality as a construct, society entering a simulacral order, etc, etc. – being more or less pretty good and true arguments–and partly to do with the fact that the expression of the body's limits, in the end had limits of its own. Using the body itself as the material of the performance can only have so many applications, and maybe this fact was best illustrated by Steve-O, they guy from MTV's show *Jackass*. And I think if it wasn't dead already, performance/body art of any blatantly physical nature was essentially dealt a metaphysical death blow by this show. The show if you haven't seen it, essentially involves Steve-O sticking all kinds of painful things in holes of his and then either lighting them on fire or putting them to electrical shock, or otherwise subjecting himself to extreme conditions of

velocity or painful body propulsion–in any case essentially, what I think Steve-O was saying was–the body is real, *so what*.

And I think he basically had a point and it spoke louder and clearer than Baudrillard had. And inadvertently what it meant was that the body as the primary site of performance was dead. I

mean that if we think about the evolution of performance from Chris Burden being shot in the F space Gallery in '71 to Steve-O taking electrical shocks to his genitals on MTV in 2001–I think we can see that the confrontation with the real of the body, the body as site of the real–became totally banal and meaningless–figuratively and literally there was no more body left to transgress.

Before I came here, I was telling my mom about what I'd be talking about and I was talking about these artists and Chris Burden came up and I start telling her about him and she says–'O, the guy who got shot in the arm?' And I was like, yeah, mom that's him, that performance was called 'Shoot'. And I was kind of surprised that she even knew who he was, and I started telling her about how important he was to the history of art, and to performance art, and to me and then she says– 'oh yeah, I know him. I was there that night in Berkley–we all just thought that guy was crazy.'

And then I guess Mom made me have to go back to questioning the essential differences then between Chris Burden and Steve-O…

My questions continued though and mostly had to do with asking where does the body go from there–from the end of the body as the primary site of performance. I think that the body has a cultural survival instinct as much as it has a biological one–and here, the body had to escape being killed by Steve-O. And this is where I think it kind of went and cloned and multiplied itself–a very good survival instinct of course–in other words it went into simulation, representation, and the idea of the body as a free-floating signifier.

I want to backtrack a bit before I get into that though and go back to the other line of this talk–my own history and how it relates to these changes.

So this was now like 2002 when I moved to Brussels to study dance at the dance school PARTS, and I think then I was really back into *movement* movement. The language of performance art, body art, as I explained already, had exhausted itself for me and it was in abstract dance that I could again see the most possibilities. And so I went with this desire to do *5,6,7,8* again, and I was so happy to come home sweaty and wake up sore and all of that, and PARTS was clearly the right place for this. The irony was that again I found myself in the position where within a few months everything changed and some kind of malaise about the kind of dance I was seeing and doing began settling in and again not satisfying me. So this would be crisis moment number two—where I've moved all the way to Europe with all of his excitement to develop my own movement language and style and I get there only to learn that not only am I not excited by my own movement language and style, but not excited at all by any movement language or style.

Undoubtedly that began quite soon— I remember the feeling the first few days at PARTS of everyone bouncing off the walls of the studio trying to show off their *individuality*, and I remember feeling like I just wanted to go home—but I think it was only a few months later that I saw my first performances of 'conceptual dance'.

Conceptual dance kind of reconfirmed that feeling I was having in my stomach in a way that conceptual art in the visual arts really hadn't, that was questioning—in terms of the body and in terms of presence—authorship and originality, identity and singularity. And these artists, I'm speaking about artists like Jerome Bel, Tino Seghal -his earlier work in choreography- and Xavier Le Roy—these artists weren't doing originality at all, they were doing mimicry, imitation and it was much more about which sources they chose to imitate, why and how. And so it wasn't this real body, but it also wasn't this 'deus ex machina with a touch of its own originality' dance body. These were not new ideas so much as they were really new ways of embodying already existing ideas and this was really exciting. To see something being called dance which at the same time had no essence, no physical fact, no limit between dancing and not dancing, doing and not doing, creating and imitating; just the endless play of the

signification that bodies could produce from their own essential blank slate—this was really exciting for me. So I'll show you here a clip of what I'm talking about, this is ----

(clip "gizelle")

And I think it also produced a problem for me, which was essentially what to do with my desire to move and make movement when everything about abstract languages from their claims to authenticity and originality to their relevance in regards to speaking about culture and society were clearly debunked in my mind and in the work of these artists. So this lead me to try to overcome a fault line I saw between so called conceptual and so called movement-based choreography: (clip "*Limewire*"")

The methodology I worked with in this piece and in several others in this period was to find a problematic social situation—adopting, imitating, embodying however you want to call it—the physical language of that situation, and applying the dynamics of the problem into the form of a choreography. So for instance, in the piece I just showed a group that shares a physical space and an identity breaks up so that the identities and spaces become many. This over-produces, breaks apart, dies, and in the end, reforms into a network. This network is a network of consumption which is always mutating and absorbing rather than producing difference anew. The question of how a group, a physical context transforms into a network and what this changes in terms of behavior and relation became the basis of a choreography.

But since that piece, which I made four years ago, I've found that the language of representation—I mean that of known, recognizable bodies and representational movements—has pretty much run out for me, perhaps in a similar way that the status of the 'real' body went bankrupt for me some 10 years ago. The shift that took me from abstract dance into dance of recognizable bodies and the ways that meaning could be articulated and complexified through embodied signs was very exciting for me for quite some time, and I was very happy to find a way that I could use movement to process concrete meanings and vice-versa. But the identity of signs themselves seem to have become poor, recently. They've become too easily relocatable and moveable, or at least relocating and moving them on stage no longer seems to have anything existentially at stake for itself, not as it once did. It seems like the flow of signs once liberated from any contextual necessity became free-floatingly insignificant. Without being essentially tied to something or someplace, signification seemed somehow inert. My essential question is what's left of the body then, where does this cultural survival instinct I was speaking about before, move, and how does that movement also move my own work next?

I'd like to propose the idea that we no longer have bodies, but we aren't bodiless yet. The biggest problem of all is that we still have bodies. If we didn't have bodies anymore, things would be pretty smooth. If we were completely immersed in a non-corporeal reality we would either have the possibility to deal with the body purely on the level of experience without the necessity to have this physical interface, or to invent wholly other concepts of what a body could be, but I think that most of the kind of Stellarc type ways***photo*** (that's Stellarc with an ear on his forearm btw) to try to address this question are fooling themselves. Rather, I'd say that there's something potentially interesting about this in-between zone because I think it means that nothing can or should be defined in terms of molars, singularities, or wholes. If bodies, things and places are becoming more and more quasi, I think we should look for bodies which are neither/nor bodies, which are bodies that could be but aren't bodies, bodies who are but are also and. Not as a matter of collage because this is no longer the digital order of the photoshop body, but about a body who from many sources becomes an integrated whole. Not this *or* that whole, neither this *and* that whole—I'm speaking about w-h-holes, by the way, not where the wholes respect each other's autonomous spaces—that would be appropriation, a dancer who moves like a monkey, or an athlete. I'm trying to look beyond this appropriation and for the time being I think I'm still totally within it and not at all past appropriation. But I want to complexify the sources, take more of them and to take them at some kind of baby stage before I know what their final form is yet and to try to grow them up within a body together.

Stellarc grew an ear on his arm. But he knew before he did what the ear would look like, and that it would respect the boundaries of his arm. This is not what I'm interested in. Nothing deserves to remain perceivable as wholesale anymore, and ideally their original sources should become unclear or irrelevant. On the other hand we need to beware of the retreat—of force, of clarity, of statement—something quasi should not be something less than. It should not have to avoid its referent out of fear that the referent will always be stronger. It should become stronger than its referent by way of accumulating more depth and dimension via the strange logic of embodiment which imitation should be made to pass through.

So let's say that this kind of synthesis is one way in which I've tried to elude representation, imitation, citation. Another has been to try to work through translation: by which I mean the translation of body signs, practices and qualities into bodies where they cannot be appropriated wholesale because they cannot fit.

This idea was behind the way I worked with a group of eight elderly people, 70 years and older in a piecel made two years ago entitled *Second Life* and with a professional Michael Jackson impersonator in a hologram video installation I made also two years ago entitled *Neverland*. It seemed that the lessons learned from these experiments working with bodies not trained in contemporary dance was that contemporary dancers are essentially too good— they absorb everything so quickly, and they make it fit—making definition of a body a rare thing these days. With the impersonator or an elderly person their physicalities are quite defined, not like a young dancer who's already been trained to become this every body. I'm interested in finding qualities which I think are relevant but which at the same time can't fit into these limited bodies. So it's about translation into a body where things will necessarily be mistranslated, and this is a direction I'm interested to continue pursuing, which brings me to working *with* social bodies rather than with imitating them. The problem then becomes that I want a process. This is much easier to do with people who are retired and on their pension than with, for instance, professional bull riders. But for sure if I could, this next cowboys piece (*The Host*) would be with professional bull riders, if it could be...

But while this has helped me to complexify this issue of imitation, it still hasn't approached the issue of immaterial bodies. This question of what immaterial bodies could be brought me to an interest in virtual bodies, and to *Second Life*, as well as to the idea to produce a hologram but these were still signed bodies. They were bodies from a virtual reality scenario, but they weren't *virtual bodies*. This distinction is important. And so I want to get back to this question of what to do with my thesis that we no longer have bodies.

So, we no longer have bodies, we don't yet not have bodies… The reality of the corporeal body who had to come to terms with its own materiality is gone, it died with Steve-O. The possible meanings and readings of the blank body, who had to come to terms with the freedom of its own essential blank slate and the subsequent power it was given to represent itself as multiple was gone, I think that died somewhere around the moment where you saw the Michael Jackson face-morphing part in the *Black or White* music video and were no longer impressed.

But now I want to get at an immaterial body—not identity-ied bodies, not signed bodies, but un-bodied bodies. How can something be really a body but not actually a body, a presence, a movement… in other words what does it mean to think light, sound, or objects in terms of movement and choreography and how can movement itself be perceived as a medium regardless of its material, body or otherwise?

But this seems to demand a lot of rethinking and reformulating what I'm only beginning to be able to articulate, and the seeming equality of possibilities that this could bring me to more or less defines my crisis number three. Its not a crisis of limitation but a crisis of definition and value—how to define that something 'immaterial' is this and not that when the term immaterial itself seems to suggest that everything could be potentially admissible?

Looking for ways to erase the materiality of the body but increase the sense of its presence through what I'm calling erasure—the question still remains: 'what is left?' And how can this 'what is left' not be the leftovers, not less than, but productive itself, ideally of more. This is one of the questions going forwards and where I would like to continue with the work in holograms. How can I continue to develop this not-a-body, not-either-an-image until it no longer signifies either? And what could be left? Or, are the ghosts of language, such as Michael Jackson, more interesting than the non-signifying, mute phantoms we might imagine?

But this quasi-body also has to be a two-way street. If it has lead me to try to dematerialize the body, it should also lead me to try to embody materials.

This is a second question I have going forwards—leading me back again to translation—and how one translates disparate pieces which necessarily cannot be translated wholesale. This of course forces a mutation which I'm interested in rather than the control one might have over ones' own style. One of the key challenges then will be to experiment with the translation of a lot of what I've developed in terms of body movement, into other bodies—this was the case with the elderly people and with the Michael Jackson impersonator—into elements which aren't normally considered bodies at all.