

## Ultra-sensing : moving beyond ‘work’ and ‘venue’ in intermedia art

**Simon Atkinson and Kerry Francksen**

De Montfort University, Leicester, UK  
satkinson@dmu.ac.uk, kfrancksen@dmu.ac.uk

This presentation is born out of a recent and on-going artistic collaboration between a dance practitioner and musician. Digital technologies have become central to both of our practices, now over some considerable period of time. Almost immediately in our attempts to work collaboratively, we left behind more traditional – and what seemed to us more circumscribed – roles of ‘choreographer’ and ‘composer’; rather we have begun *devising* ideas and events collaboratively (including collaboration with other dance practitioners and a professional film-maker). This practice involves: live movement of one or more performer(s); projection of manipulated live video images; projection of pre-existing moving images; and multi-channel acousmatic sound. Exchanges of ideas founded on traditional disciplines of dance and music – and less traditionally, of ‘live-digital’ dance and electroacoustic music – continue to prove rich and stimulating; however we have begun an attempt to understand what we are doing in intermedial terms, leading to engagement with the theories of intermediality and intermedia arts. Initially, this perhaps largely took the nature of practitioners being creatively stimulated by theory, as sometimes happens. An evolving collaborative practice, founded on key concepts of fluidity, field, immersion, emergence, as well as kinaesthetic empathy and intimacy, and a concern for audience experience (that’s to say an emerging and important concept of *intimate exchange*) may in turn have something theoretical to offer, in aesthetic as well as ontological terms. This paper thus represents a first step in a process of developing a framework for a rather more scholarly and philosophical understanding of what we are developing as practitioners.

Firstly, let us attempt to address the conference theme head-on, albeit initially in quite a rudimentary fashion. The tradition of the work in both music and choreography invokes a quasi neo-Platonic ontology, or *ideal form*. The ‘problem’ of the work in electroacoustic musical practices has been discussed and written about quite extensively. This in turn relates to a particular kind of contemporary theorization surrounding choreography, which challenges ideas of movement making (styles or set techniques) merely as a means for fixing performance products or ‘works’. In this context, encounters between live movement practice and visual media, interactive performative digital technologies and acousmatic sound problematise the concept of the ‘work’. The apparent rejection of some of the idealised forms and expressive conventions in dance, namely a move towards ‘movement for movement sake’ through the Judson Church pioneers in the 1960s, gave dance a different means for sense-making. A new “osmosis comes about through *body* consciousness having made itself a *body of thought*”. (Gil 2002:122). The notion of ‘work’ here could be seen besides a pursuit of attaining the perfect reconstruction of the master choreographer’s intention. Rather than dwell

excessively in a tone of “what it is not”, we will go on in the hope of shedding some light on what we have begun thinking about what it *is* we are creating, if not works.

Space in electroacoustic discourse is largely a highly abstract or sometimes poetic concept: mostly highly abstracted. This can also be said of dance, albeit, as with practices such as sound diffusion, dancers will also think about space in a very pragmatic and literal way when it comes to readying for public performance. Our practice to date problematizes notions of a ‘composed space’ (of sounds or moving images or movement) that can be ‘transposed’ into a physical space. Serious pragmatic issues arise in public presentation. For example, the topography and character of performance spaces, for sound, projection, sight-lines, light, ambience etc. etc., all crucially important since the *qualitative* experience of content is so paramount in our aims. Practical challenges need to be overcome. On occasion, serendipities can really positively influence an aspect of the presentation (an unexpected but particularly beautiful ‘bleed’ of a projected image, or shadow, for example). It seems that the pragmatic process of preparing public presentation for a specific venue or space mean that what is at stake cannot really be understood as ‘re-stagings’ of the same ‘work’. In a more philosophical vein, a situation where the concurrent realisation of abstract temporal and spatial relationships of the choreographic or musical work, in some ‘neutral container’ is replaced by the actual *place* of the performance, which will be populated and characterised by the modulating characteristics of this place on all fixed media materials (musical and visual), and on the *sensing bodies* of live performers *and* audience. Moving from a conception of dance as the bodily execution of formal patterns in space and time (and conventional communicative ‘codes’) to one which seeks novel forms of expression through its attempts to heighten perception of the *qualities* of movements, in non-traditional or singular ways, seems to chime with post-Schaefferian practice. Practice with video image out of real-time perhaps too; the technological intervention is in a manner ‘revelatory’, and enables qualitative rather than quantitative facets of bodily movement to be explored, privileged, arranged relationally and controlled temporally, shaping consciousness and perception and ultimately live movement.

From a dance perspective, *interactive* technological practices have proven difficult to resolve in terms of how dancing ‘bodies inhabit space’. How might one reformulate relationships or configure bodies in mediatised environments? In new media-driven practices, dominant choreographic approaches become problematic for the dancer when she is placed *into* an interactive or media-rich environment. In this situation, the basic components of dance: body, space and time, become subject to very different rules and sets of principles. In this type of environment a dancer is exposed to alternative processes and principles, which are based not only in media production but also within the realms of the ‘live’ or the ‘carnal’.

Is there a ‘carnal’ in acousmatic listening? Attempts to better understand kinaesthetic and embodied responses to this music seem to be important in our theoretical discourses. Much work of Rolf Inge Godøy and others working across cognition and psychology is founded in his fundamental hypothesis that *motor imagery* provides what he calls a “deep structure” for musical sound. Might one speculate that within Denis Smalley’s spectromorphological writings, his initial *behavioural* taxonomy, of fly / float / throw / fling / rise / flow / push / drag, would be bread-and-butter stuff in a choreography or dance improvisation class? Roger Sessions wrote in his 1950 book, *The Musical Experience of Composer Performer Listener*:

May we not say that the basic ingredient of music is not sound so much as movement [...] movement of a specifically human type that goes to the roots of our being and takes shape in the gestures which embody our deepest and most intimate responses.

This idea resonates enormously with the concept of “the dance’s body” – i.e. not the dancer’s body – suggested by Susanne Langer, and developed by Dee Reynolds in the context of affect, which we use here as a means for translating “intimate responses” or “the dance’s body” into musical terms. This offers insights into how an “intermedial body” might be understood with the concept of an “irreducible ensemble”.

As the discourse surrounding technology in time-based theatre arts grows, and particularly in light of what Dee Reynolds describes as the current “so-called affective turn (with)in the arts and humanities” (2012:126), we have been exploring the potential for creating an *intermedial multisensory ‘live-digital’ ‘event’*. *Intermedial*; because we are interested in “challeng(ing) assumptions about assemblages of forms and relations” (Birringer 2012:1) in specific relation to composing with sound, image and movement. *Multisensory*; because we believe that, “digital technologies do not simply impact human sensory experience from the outside, but rather materialize a potentiality that characterizes sensory experience from its very origin” (Hansen 2011:105). *Live-digital* (Francksen 2012); because we acknowledge a potential for ‘material’ (sound, body, image) to resonate at the threshold of experience. And *event*; because we find ourselves moving towards a topography that we no longer recognize as distinct to our own disciplines and indeed within conventional venues and contexts. Our emerging model finds us crossing borders, interchanging practices, trading spaces, ideologies and sharing creative impetuses. In consequence, what is becoming central is the potential for acousmatic sound, image and movement to become enlivened beyond the fixed dimensions of each discipline. To that end, we have been creating ‘events’ where in the words of Massumi, “the body, fresh in the throes of expression, incarnates not an already-formed system but a modification – a change. Expression is an event.” (2002: Xvii) Our intention is therefore to stimulate poetic relationships beyond the normal compositional opportunities afforded by each of our respective areas in order to affect a change or modification on our preconceived notions of making the ‘work’; or what we should very well term ‘event’.

The “affective turn” described by Reynolds chimes with a growing discourse whereby notions of *affect* (in Massumi’s terms where affect is “intensity”/“incipient action”) opens up new modes of perception and ways to not only *think dancing* (Forsythe, Manning, Portanova) (from a choreographic perspective), but provides a wider emphasis concerning meaning making across our art forms; an opening up of our ‘languages’, moving beyond conventional and traditional structures at work in our own areas. From a choreographic perspective, this provides a more ‘affective’ means towards understanding movement within a mediatised environment, beyond mere combinations of dance and technology; and interestingly beyond listening and dancing to music *per se*. It highlights an interesting shift of emphasis for the dancer beyond *process as a methodology for creating performance* as such, towards a situation where the process becomes a means for ‘unfixing’ – or what one could think of as ‘un-choreographing’ movement. Or expressed otherwise, in the words of Vivian Sobchack,

Embodiment is a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble*. Thus we matter and we mean through processes and logics of sense-making that owe as much to our carnal existence as they do to our conscious thought. (2004:4)

In these terms, the ‘*irreducible ensemble*’ of sound, image and movement, as we have been exploring it, has the potential for expressing ‘sense-making’ besides a normative arrangement where composer meets film-maker, meets choreographer. Through such concepts as “ultra-hearing”, “ultra-seeing” (Sobchack 2011:113) and reduced listening, what one might consider

‘carnal’ in nature, our explorations so far have asked us to rethink the very processes and logics of ‘sense-making’ within the context of what an *intermedial multisensory ‘live-digital’ ‘event’* might be. By ‘carnal’ we mean, “the embodied and radically material nature of human existence and thus the lived body’s essential implication in making ‘meaning’ out of bodily ‘sense’” (Elizabeth Grosz 2004:1) and we are trying to highlight a shift from higher order consciousness being just in the mind – for a dancer’s knowledge is her body, and arguably a musician’s too – hence what we are doing is of the body, which includes the mind. We are both body and mind. Sobchak’s reversal of Bachelard’s sensory hierarchy in terms of the ‘film’s body’ has strong resonances here because we too are interested in an emerging temporal and “dynamic modulation” (Sobchack 2011:118) where ‘ultra hearing’ gives rise to an attentive ‘body-listening’. The idea of ultra-sensing gives the dancer and ultimately the audience a fresh perspective from which to attend to the emerging dance, or as described earlier, the ‘dance’s body’.

In support, Massumi’ discusses ‘affect’ and the perceptual organization of ‘form’ where he surmises that, “the dimension of the emergent...cannot be understood in terms of form... It can only be analyzed as a continuous but highly differentiated *field* that is ‘out of phase’ with formed entities” (2012:34). In light of our work to date, *intensity* is brought to the fore not as digital representations or reconfigurations, but more as a sensuous and affective resonance that is ‘out of phase’ with the more dominant combinations of music, dance and technology. And, moreover, highlights a fundamental shift towards ‘experience proper’.

Given our long-standing interests in meaning and meaningfulness in our respective disciplines, what of sense-making in this new devised intermedia context? What about the audience? We have not worked to date with musical contents that could be apprehended as ‘codified’ in any traditional musical sense (that thus in-and-of-themselves might largely be understood in terms of kinaesthetic affect which may – or may not – involve mimesis as defined by Simon Emmerson). The movement practice does not contain semiotic or symbolic gestures, or established dance ‘codes’ (that ‘communicate’ this, that or the other between dancer and audience, or between dancers to be interpreted as such by audience); the ‘language’ of music and the ‘language’ of dance are not metaphors of much relevance here. The music in this context cannot be understood as somehow ‘out there’ as the tradition of the musical work would insinuate, in its inseparable marriage with the “dance’s” – as well a dancer’s – body. It displays a mirrored relationship in relation to live performer(s) and audience, simultaneously giving shape to the emergent movement making and its qualities of the “sensing bodies in motion” (as defined by Erin Manning) i.e. performer(s) *and* the sensing bodies of the audience who, as it were, ‘sense the sensing bodies in motion’. In the process of emergence of the “irreducible ensemble”, the music functions as an environment, of ever-evolving (or not) stimuli for the “sensing body in motion”. Perhaps the acousmatic ‘curtain’ affords rich potential relationships between the body-time-space mediatised nexus and the disembodied sound-time-space mediatised nexus (due to the absence of embodied musical gesture and live movement relationships; or, so often the case in contemporary choreography, relationships between surrogate instrumental musical gestures via recording media and live movement)? From a musical perspective, this seems to offer new ways of conceiving of and making, in attempting to relate to listeners in an *intimate* fashion, in creating intimate musical ‘spaces’. (Or in the terminology of electroacoustic music studies, new ‘listening situations’?). From the perspective of intermedia art, it perhaps offers a shift in what might be called a rhetoric of the performative, one that modulates traditional understandings of where rhetoric may reside in such performance. In terms of our emerging poetics, it seems central to the

notion of “intimate exchange” in which people, materials, and sensory modalities ‘reach out’ to metaphorically ‘touch’ each other.

## References

- BACHELARD Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969.
- EMMERSON Simon, “The Relation of Language to Materials”, in *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, Simon Emmerson (ed.), London, Macmillan, 1986, pp. 17-39.
- GILL José, “The dancer’s body” in *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari*, Brian Massumi, London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 117-127.
- GODØY Rolf Inge, JØRGENSEN Harald (eds.), *Musical Imagery*, Lisse (Holland), Swets & Zeitlinge, 2001.
- HANSEN Mark, “From Fixed to Fluid”, in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media*, Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell (eds), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011, pp. 83-111.
- MANNING Erin, *Politics of Touch. Sense, movement, sovereignty*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- MANNING Erin, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*, Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 2012.
- MASSUMI Brian, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2002.
- MASSUMI Brian, *Semblance And Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2011.
- PORTANOVA Stamatia, “Thinking movement and the creation of dance through numbers”, *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 2(2), 2006, pp. 139-151.
- PORTANOVA Stamatia, *Moving without a Body: Digital Philosophy and Choreographic Thoughts*. Cambridge and London. MIT Press, 2013.
- REYNOLDS Dee, REASON Matthew (eds.), *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, Bristol and Chicago, Intellect Ltd, 2012.
- SESSIONS Roger, *The musical experience of composer, performer, listener*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1950.
- SMALLEY Denis, “Spectro-morphology and Structuring Processes” in *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, Simon Emmerson (ed.), London, Macmillan, 1986, pp. 61-93.
- SOBCHACK Vivian, “When the Ear Dreams: Dolby Digital and the Imagination of Sound”, in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media*, Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell (eds), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011, pp. 112-136