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choreo- graphic encounters volume 2

Published in 2004 by the Institute for Choreography and Dance (icd),
Firkin Crane, Shandon, Cork, Ireland.

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T +353 (0)21 4507487
F +353 (0)21 4501124
E info@instchordance.com
W www.instchordance.com

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Book designed by Nigel Williams at bitedesign.com

Set in ITC Tyfa

ISBN: 0-9538394-3-5

A very special thank you to THE ARTS COUNCIL/AN CHOMHAIRLE
EALAÍON for supporting the Institute for Choreography and Dance (icd).



Institute for Choreography and Dance (icd)
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Arteries and Avatars *by Carol Brown*

We have heard much about 'the other', but perhaps the moment of the through-other should now be proclaimed, if only because it seems to have arrived.

Seamus Heaney, 2001, p.379

We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be.

J.M. Coetzee, 2003, p.1

The body, this organic mix, is for most of us the basis of our human identity. If we listen, we hear it speaking anarchic desires of its own – mutterings, hummings, restless tensions and flows – compelling us to move in unthought of ways. We are restless figures. We live inside the set of relations our movements gives rise to. The corralling of these into choreographies through systems and methods of making underlines the role of the body, *our bodies*, as the keystone of who we are and what we are in the process of becoming. In dance-making we dig around through the bloodmusic of our through-otherness to find something, something unspeakable and we make it present.

An ineffable identity emerges through the substrata of self, shaped through our moving relations with the world, our interconnections, and our dances. There is a concrete thereness about this corporeal presence, no less tangible because unspoken. But this experience is perilous and exists often in troubling and delicate relations with the geopolitical conditions in which we find ourselves. We live in 'glocal' conditions that contract and expand around the dancing figure providing constantly changing site/sight lines for performance.

I make strategic alignments in the interests of pursuing creative drives. And I carry two passports, one for each side of this Earth. My dancing speaks of the disjuncture between blood ties and gestures, and is made manifest through a plurality of identifications. I exhibit all the symptoms of a colonial subject, cultivated in one environment but living in the geography of another. Of Irish descent, New Zealand-born and living in London as a so-called 'British' artist, my triangulated sense of belonging is shot through with a dancing genealogy that incorporates Central European expressionism, North American postmodernism and British contemporary dance theatre.

A history of displacements lived through the experience of postcolonialism requires that I identify with cultures that are physically distant, but no less real than the palpable reality of my present. In this way, an experience of virtuality is not something new. Through the material and immaterial networks of alignments and flows – between periphery and centre, host and home, distant and near – the connective tissue of identity forms: the invisible ink-marked signatures and the internal tattoos of what I am, which can exist in tension with what and where I appear to be.

I jack into other identities and shift through the gear levers. Through the intercorporeal practice of dancing with others, we learn to move in unfamiliar ways and the deep tap-roots of identity become filtered and stretched. Many of these influences I cannot name but I can feel them in my bones as tracings of histories and in skin memories of other-places. But there are ways in which these identities are currently being levered beyond the physical limits of my perishable body. Dancing at the electronic frontier, I am increasingly interacting with the non-physical immaterial flows of the virtual. It is in this context that I would like to mix the physically present (the actual) and the immaterial present (the virtual), casting lines of connection between the cultural hybridity of an individual life and the performance of a mixed reality state.

I have borrowed Seamus Heaney's expression of the 'through-other' (in turn borrowed from the northern Irish poet W.R. Rodgers) to explain the mix: 'through-other' is a compound term in common use in Ulster, meaning physically untidy or mentally confused, and appropriately enough it echoes the Irish-language expression *trí na chéile*, meaning 'things mixed up among themselves' (Heaney 2001, p.366). This sense of 'things mixed up among themselves' suggests a blended event resistant to the logics of imperialism and the ideological complicity of singular identities. It is a dance of interactions, diverse connections and polymorphous play.

The Society of the Hypermobile

Unconstrained by language, dancers hypermobility is not just a physical reality but also a life-strategy. In their desire to dance they frequently make themselves available for work in places foreign to their 'home' and become dance-wanderers, moving from city to city in search of a job and further training. In London I meet them daily, the seekers of opportunity who arrive in the metropolis from Tokyo, Seattle, Wellington, Seoul, Montpellier, Seville, Dublin, Hanover, Melbourne and Stockholm looking for work, and who join

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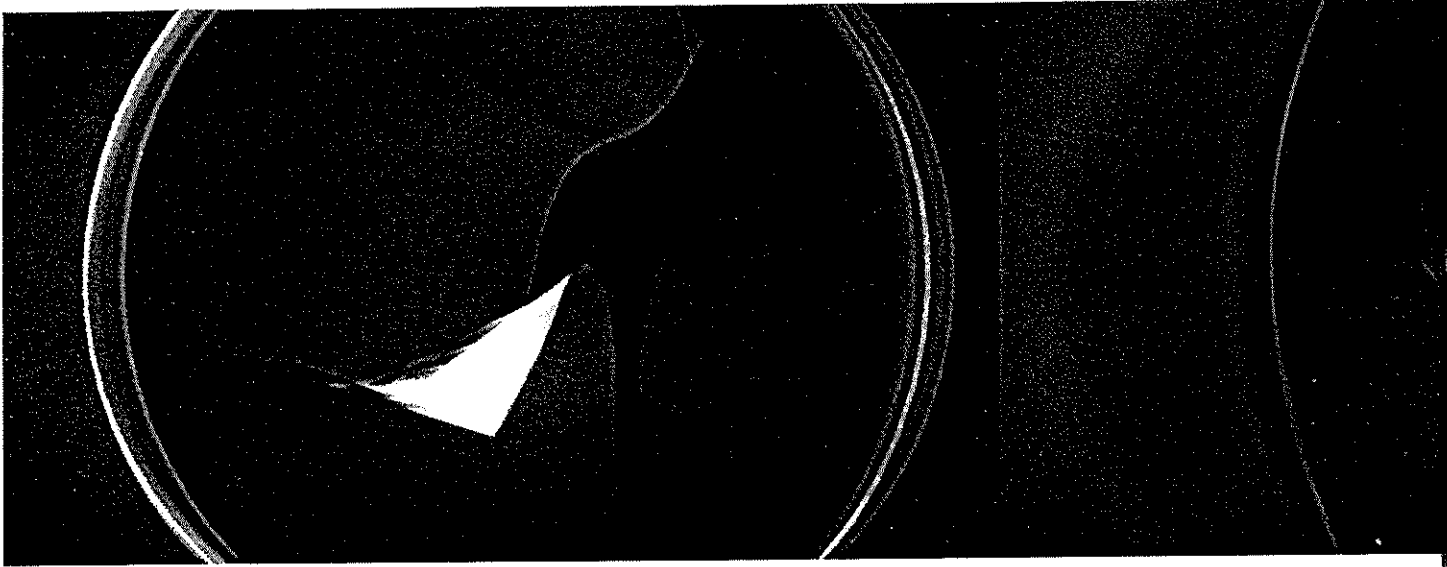
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the independent dance community through the meeting ground of professional dance classes, workshops and auditions. In doing so they join the society of the mobilised and perform dances of 'through-otherness'. Drawn to the big city and to the metropolitan centre, many of us find what we are looking for and stay, mixing in with the locals and using the centre as a base for international touring, for experiencing 'one place after another'. We remain in exile while benefiting from the extra-territorial opportunities of the globe trotter. Provided that is, we have the right (read first world) permit to enter and we can pass at the highly regulated and secured border, and that we can afford to stay.

For those of us for whom the past is literally a foreign country, dancing can be a way to assert a presence and to locate oneself, to move from exiled to installed. I work through installation performances to evolve conditions for these bodies-in-flux. It is often a confused and untidy process. These movement-architectures are made of bits and bytes, of cells and data, of information and movement memories. I am interested in digitally extended performances which interface bone memories with the memory of machines that fuse the gravitational flows of the dancer in space-time with the place-unboundedness of digital forms.

As a dance artist, I am interested in those processes of 'being here' which arise from an awareness of 'being in' the body. This 'being here' as an awareness of 'being in' has become more complicated, more layered, more ambiguous than in previous eras. For those who work in the field of dance at the electronic frontier, the stage has metamorphosed from a physical location – grounded, fixed, actual – to a relational space – ungrounded, fluid, virtual. In this context, performance identities, which were previously place-bound, have become mobilised and de-territorialised through telematic environments, motion-sensing technologies, machine vision, online choreographies, embodied interfaces and emergent systems of computational design.

In a world of diminishing spatial barriers to exchange, movement and communication, 'being here' is not the taken for granted 'thereness' of the grounded and earthed flesh, it is a superabundance of becomings experienced as hyper-realities and multi-focused presence. In this context, the 'being in' of corporeality can be as much virtual as actual. According to Beckman, the virtual is a force that operates and acts in another dimension as 'a continuous unfolding on the road to becoming other'. The primary challenge we confront is to create 'new movements toward the virtual by tripping up repetition, purging habit and reason, and encouraging difference' (1998, p.16). Choreography, as a writing of spaces



through the moving body, embraces this challenge through merging layers, intercutting between dimensions and streaming visceral thinking with 'travels in virtuality' (Thomas, 2004).

We start from where we are and we build on what we know. Dancing, as the articulation of movement in space and through time, has so far taken place within three dimensions, but the space of the present is both actual and virtual in nature. Paul Virilio explains that today there are two inter-related spaces: 'next to actual space, which has been the space of history, there is now virtual space, and the two are interdependent' (2002, pp.67–68). Through dancing, space unfolds. In the refolded space of data dance, we discover a haunting virtuality and a new biodiversity of material-informational figures.

In searching for the something else beyond self and other, what or who is the 'we' that haunts us? Who are the strangers at the heart of the self who disrupt our sanctuary with disquieting moments? Mothers, dogs, sea urchins, whores, mystics, muggers, diseased spores, derelictions and secretions. I spawned multitudinous becomings within a constantly deformable body, a malleable container of anarchic desires. I became so lucid that I, in becoming not-I, could disappear beyond a thousand species of diverse others. My fantasy was to be everywhere and no-one. To cast off this sluggish flesh and become hyper-real. To glide with sea creatures in a rock pool phantasmagoria.

Spawning Identities

Historically, the 'I' of classical humanism emerged through the figurations of an organic human being. But what does identity mean in the context of posthumanism and our dig-

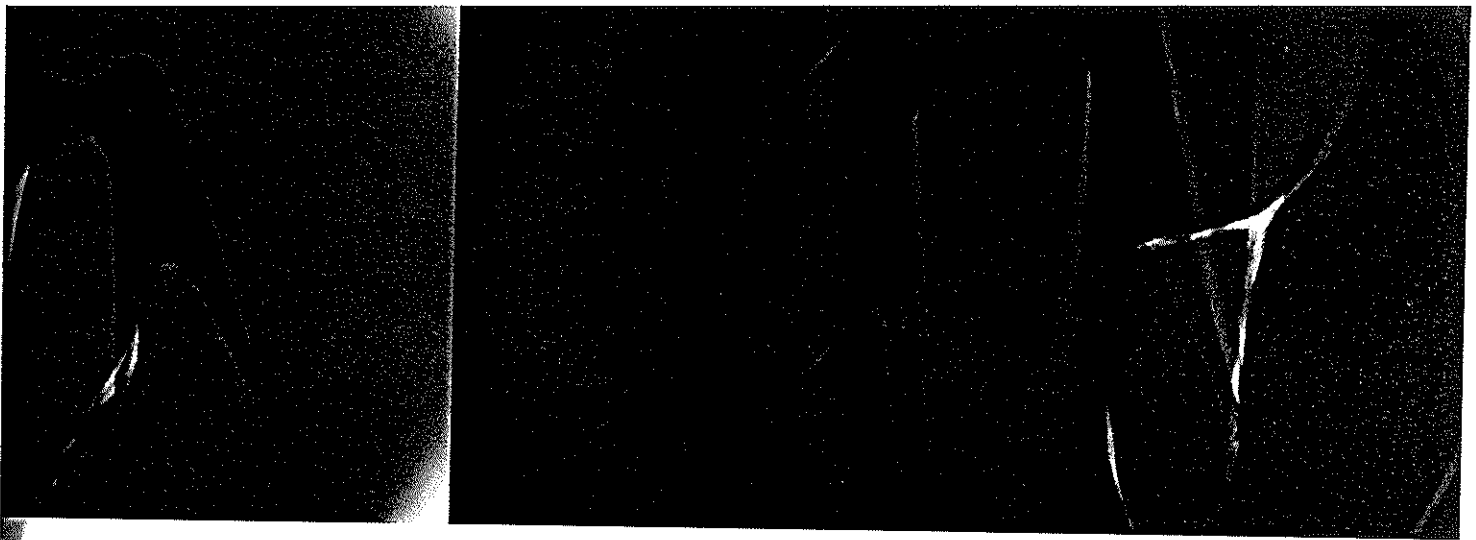
Above: *Spawn*.
Photo by Mette Ramsgard Thomsen.

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1
Spawn was developed through a research residency at the Icd, Cork, in spring 2003, through Digi Lounge in Chelmsford in winter 2004, and through production research at Roehampton University.

ital evolution? Through my work as a choreographer I have been researching how to move within a technological habitat with a digital infrastructure. Through the creation of an embodied interface – *Spawn* – in collaboration with architect Mette Ramsgard Thomsen, we have been exploring what happens to a dancer's identity when working with the spatial logic of the virtual. How might the dancer's centre of gravity and proprioception, which previously orientated itself by tethering earth to flesh, shift, when combining earth, flesh, data and machine?

How can I touch you if you are not here?

In researching *Spawn*¹ through residencies in London, Chelmsford and Cork, the practices of dance, architecture and computer science were combined to conceive an embodied space which merged physical and virtual dimensions, becoming a Mixed Reality. In questioning the limits of the body and its virtual representation, the research fused practices of embodiment and space with the design of creative technologies for the interfacing and performance of digital environments.

So, shall I tell you how we made it? How my cellular and its data hatched a different kind of being and how this being met us with its machine eyes, but only in outline, it missed all the inner lines – the creases of our gestures, the movement of our eyes, the tone of our touch – it made a photofit of our nerve endings and grafted this onto its own skin like virtual tattoo. We trained it to track us like a distant geography, never getting too close, never getting the scent of this skin at close range. It did not imitate, it created, growing children in its body like fish roe. It changed. We made fine calibrations inserting new memories in the iliac crest of the pelvis, in the mastoid bone of the skull, in the cervical vertebrae. We made insertions and we learnt to touch that which we could never hold.

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Spawn takes place on an interactive stage informed by a camera-based interface. The camera tracking system identifies the shifting outlines of the dancers' bodies becoming input for a *virtual other*, a digital morphology shaped by the presence and movement of the performers. The virtual other or avatar is a complex geometry comprising four circles stretching a spline-based membrane between them. As the performers move they affect the virtual other, deforming and reforming, contracting and expanding, folding and unfolding its digital skin. The visualisation of this kinetically modelled avatar is projected back into the physical space of the performance in real time, generating new forms of interaction and creating a blended environment of real and virtual spaces for a mobile audience.

Unlike other computer interfaces for dance performance, such as Hypervision MoCap, the *Spawn* interface does not seek to identify the dancers' body parts and map them onto a corresponding digital anatomy. Instead, a set of statistical characteristics of the silhouette's size and shape are generated and updated in real-time. The digital is conceived as a separate dimension, informed by the embodied presence of the performer, yet retaining an independent morphology and motility.

They set out, like two explorers with borderline personalities in a hallucinatory room. They ascended without abandoning the earth; they awakened energy without capturing it. The contours of their movements were tracked in another dimension, but the inner lines of their postures and intricate complexions of their gestures escaped the seen/scene. From their outlines, statistical data refashioned them in dialogue with a 'sphery thing', a shivering architecture which would never stand up. Their place became the criss-crossing of spaces, a threshold between real and virtual requiring a simultaneity of perception. Because we make a home for ourselves wherever we happen to be, in this virtual and actual habitat they experience a life together. We tracked not far off distant places but the here now moment and its looping back to us in different forms.

Given its radical difference from our own bodies and acquired spatial logics, we needed to learn how to communicate with and through the presence of the avatar. In this process, we came to know and relate to the virtual dimension, attributing anthropomorphic characteristics to its multiple appearances and allowing energies to emerge through interaction between the different states it inspired. It became an Angelfish, a Mollusc, our Virtual Puppet, an Infinite Cage, Tear, an Irish Sun, Iris and Blood Music. As we grew to know our virtual dance partner, our language shifted from the 'sphery thing' to 'It'. This 'It' incited a diversity of images as molecular, planetary, celestial and aquatic forms. Through

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our postural morphing, form enfolded form, contour wrapped and invaginated contour, space swallowed space. We hinged and flexed around and through each other creating a recombinant morphology.

Extreme Width Curdling
Extruding Warped Rotations
Invading Walking Deformations
With Rippling Splines
Head Threading and Knees Spanning
Diaphragm Oscillating and Vibrating
Volumetric Hollowing
Moving Underside Undermind
Lines Inside and Outside
Folding Back Into
And Grafting Impossible Anatomies
Nurbs
With Nervous Architectures

Identity figures virtually in this 'through-otherness'. Through an open relationship between corporeality and virtuality, two distinct spatial narratives, the one, somatically informed embodiment, and the other, spline-based geometry of a digital architecture, overlap and their surface areas are brought into contact through remote touch. Rather than harness the virtual other with its impossible geometries into our existing systems and making it speak as 'other of the same' through colonising and appropriating it, we negotiated the identity of our performance through improvisational processes that incorporated its geometries and spatial forms. This involved moving between a geometric or bilateral body symmetry based on the cross (horizontal-vertical axis and anterior-posterior axis) and a biometric or arthrometric model based on radial symmetry (concentric circles which move from centre to periphery and periphery to centre). Whereas the former is geometric the latter is biological.² In working between these two models we had a device for negotiating relationships between the organic and the inorganic. As tools for improvising and thus relearning embodiment they provided a degree of responsiveness to the forms and images generated by the system.³

² For a fuller description of these models and a guide to their use in experiential anatomy, see Olsen (1991).

³ This follows Luce Irigaray's intervention in phallogocentric discourse. She defies the logic of normative definitions of identity, which are unitary and which privilege the masculine. Her alternative figurations insist on a morphology which is not given but is made meaningful through practices of the self. See Irigaray (1985).

4

The Changing Room premiered at the Ludwig Forum (Aachen, Germany), 5 June 2004. It was performed by Delphine Gaborit, Catherine Bennett and Carol Brown with an original sound design by Jerome Soudan (Mimetic).

Virtual Stages

What happens to our sense of self when it is both embodied and encrypted, when identities figure through relations with a virtual other? How do we stage our dances with avatars? In embodying information, data becomes flesh and flesh becomes data, but only if we have a 'feeling for the avatar' (Woodward, 2004). Collaboratively we have faced a number of challenges in getting this feeling right to the degree that we can present it as a meaningful live performance. Significantly, it has been important to move beyond the idea of a stable relationship between the dancer and the stage environment.

Dance, as a live theatre art, has inherited the scenographic conventions of perspectival vision through front-end stages, proscenium arch theatres and black box spaces. Historically, gravity as a primary structure for dance is expressed in figure-ground relations within the picture plane of these spaces. At its most primal level, this is about the relations and interconnections between body, stage and earth. However, when we add the virtual into this mix we are metamorphosing relations within and between these elements. The groundlessness of the digital requires a reconceiving of the relationship between figure and ground to enable what Virilio describes as our contemporary 'stereo reality' to be experienced by audience and performer alike (2002, p.68).

Spawn is intended as a digital scenographic invention – an interactive stage – designed to challenge the duality of figure/ground relations and provoke a different kind of agency from the performers. Through a set of metamorphosing relations that allow a state of flux to exist between the real and the virtual, the contained and the containing, we leave behind the territory we know and we enter a Through-Place. Dramaturgically, the performance event *Spawn* is staged as *The Changing Room*⁴. Part dance partner and part extended architecture, the performers experience their changing room through a series of transformations: a mirror becomes a screen for their mutations; a curtain, a technological frontier; and their table a platform for the puppetry of the virtual. In replaying traces of otherness embedded in their own memories, they explore the unfamiliar and the strange. Moving at the threshold between the virtual and the real, their gestures are being tracked in another dimension. Embedded within the furniture of their room are a series of screens through which their virtual dance partner is rendered – mirroring, extending and distorting their behaviour.

The everyday transformations of appearance which we experience in changing our clothes become a metaphor for the mutating forms inherent in the choreography. Through

Right: *Changing Room*.
Photo by Mattias Ek.

Arteries and Avatars by Carol Brown

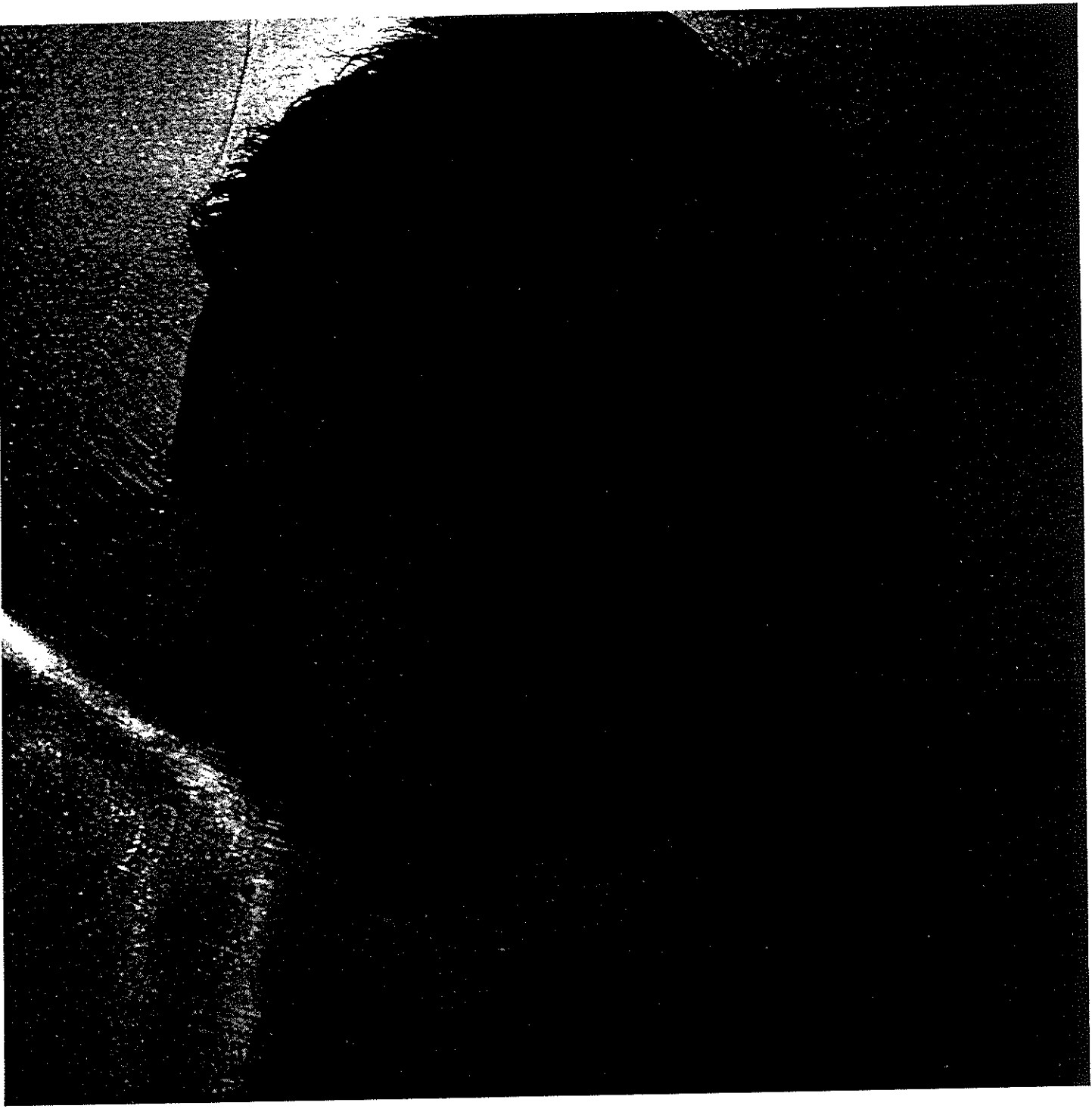
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the mutable qualities of the room, the status of the everyday is extended, altered and augmented. Known cultural objects become transformative moments, enabling the transgression of presence into the extended environment of the digital.

The choreographic score enables a series of contingent and oscillating relationships between the dancers and the avatar. The detachment of gesture through the tracking system invokes an extended presence that is communicated to the audience through kinaesthetic perceptions, sound and vision. This extended presence of live interactive performance shifts the centre of gravity beyond the primacy of the performer as the focus within the staged event, redistributing it between surface projections, malleable furniture and avatar. Similarly for the dancers, their attention shifts and alternates between live and virtual presences as they respond and project the sensations within the room and communicate these to the audience. This effect is further amplified by mobilising the audience. The speaker invites the audience to 'evolve' with the performance by changing their point of view. Shifts in the audience's spatial relationship to the performance open up its readings, allowing meanings to be uncovered in the interconnections between media, spaces and bodies.

Learning to love the Avatar

In working with embodied interfaces, we have a powerful technological tool to dismantle the stabilities of the unitary body-subject, revealing the fissured, and multiple stranded alignments of the dancer whose 'being here' is an unfolding of many differences. In this context identity is reconfigured through choreographies that create new belongings, which are part-real and part-virtual. If, as Brian Massumi explains, 'I am a being in becoming, then through the unfolding of experience, identity is not concrete or fully formed but emerging. In the situation of dancing with avatars, I am a being-in-process prior to that which can be named, marked and branded. There is a liveliness here because we do not know what we are in the process of becoming, we are only making discoveries and producing spaces, not in our likeness but through a metamorphosing of relations between different ways of being and in response to the bio and techno-diversity of the world in which we live. Choreographically, working with this conception of virtuality ruptures classical conceptions of space and time because it does not assimilate the virtual into our own self-image, rather it acknowledges difference through the co-presence of different layers of habitation.

Arteries and Avatars by Carol Broton

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The internal contradictions and deep crevices of identity are not resolved by work in digital environments, but rather made manifest. The incorporation of the virtual other through the inhabiting of unfamiliar dimensions, the redistribution of power in live performance through the mapping of the physical into the digital, and the sense of touching and enfolding the immaterial, informs how and why we move, spawning new identities. This is more than a performance experiment, it is also a potential life strategy towards a more pluralistic understanding of the self.

Outmoded constructs of identity continue to wound with a territorialism that at its worst fosters a nationalism which claims exclusive possession of places to the exclusion of the other, the stranger, the alien. In learning to love the alien, the stranger and the avatar, we are dancing differently.

'To be sure, we will perhaps discover in foreign lands traces of gods that we are lacking. But, without a journey in ourselves, to celebrate with them will not really be possible. Approaching gods is not limited to discovering that they exist. It is in the intimate of ourselves that a dwelling place must be safeguarded for them, a dwelling place where we unite in us sky and earth, divinities and morals. A place where we do not simply invite to come visit us those who dwell far away, but where we discover as proper to us the near that lives in us and that remains foreign to us' (Irigaray, 2002, p.51).

Heterotopias

Life, as an ongoing project, involves carrying a constantly changing figure of the world within us. Were I to make a map from the cardinal points of my identities it would resemble a chart of criss-crossing movements within continents and between hemispheres. It would resemble on a global scale what nomadic hunters and gatherers in pre-European times would navigate on a local scale. We have become global gatherers and collectors of experience. But these are fast and strange times, and we are moving in more dimensions than previously. Our habitat is technological and geographical; we live in a digital infrastructure as much as a physical one. Living in the culture of the contemporary technological habitat, concepts of identity are no longer tethered to the earth but are in freefall as a multiplicity of becomings, hyper-realities and mixed-states.

One of the important aspects of going to see live performance is to be brought into proximity with embodied histories and to be inspired by the invention of new movement memories. In this way choreography is one way to incorporate and experiment with emer-

gent realities. Within the technological theatre the imaginary has a space to play and create that has not as yet always already been written upon by the globalising tendencies of mainstream art practices and the imperialising gestures of the past. Performance events are generative in that they create spaces as action unfolds action, extending trajectories from layer to layer, point to point, contour to contour. As a woman dancing, I can operate a micro-politics of the self here by playing against and beyond phallographic constructions. As alternative body-forms and impossible anatomies emerge through my interactions with the avatar, we begin to inscribe a different history.

The invention of this matrixial system that tells stories and creates different kinds of bodies might constitute a way to create an alternative identity that resists the violence of an imposed one. Working with emergent technologies which enable a play between the real and the virtual through an integrated circuit of bodies and technologies, potentially fosters a negotiation and an encounter between dimensions. As a matrixial space, a place where something originates and develops, this space can allow for cosmographies of different kinds to co-exist and to operate in fertile interactions generating new forms and cartographies of the self. We can leave the ground without returning and this groundlessness is not necessarily a flight from who or what we are but a movement towards a different horizon and a home that, 'lies ahead, in the unfolding of the story in the future, not behind waiting to be regained' (Warner, 1994, p.88).

Embodied interface design for dance can potentially provide opportunities to experience a continuity of presences between the actual and the virtual, the real and the remote, blending the distinction between the two in a fertile, if at times untidy and confused, mix of 'through-otherness'. Such work can also potentially provide a platform through which to play through some of the contradictions of living cultural hybridity by creating the conditions for the simultaneous presence of different spaces and perceptions.

In calibrating different spatial histories through mapping the physical into the virtual, we are challenged to understand that which is outside or beyond a history of classical humanism and western perspectival thought. Dance theatre traditionally, temporally, sequences embodied spaces, on a rectilinear stage. However, through mixed reality systems and embodied interface environments, it is possible to experience the simultaneous co-presence of spaces that are foreign to each other. Such a model of theatre moves from the idea of the theatre as a site to a notion of an extended relational architecture that conjoins spaces that are radically differently constituted. This work can be seen to relate to Foucauldian concepts of a heterotopia.

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According to Foucault, a heterotopia is that mixed joint experience of a 'counter-site', a site that resists being appropriated into a singular entity. He describes this in relation to the virtual point that one passes through in looking into a mirror: 'In the mirror I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent' (Foucault 1986, p.25). This place is experienced as being simultaneously absolutely real and absolutely unreal. Betsky describes how, 'such places are in themselves "other" fragments of a utopian world floating in the real world, distorted mirrors of reality whose floor plans are maps for possible other worlds' (1990, p.31). I would like to think that we are working on this, spacing out and making arterial flows for new dances for 'possible other worlds' of 'through-otherness'.

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Choreographic Encounters captures in text and visual images critical issues on dance and culture within the creative processes of contemporary dance practice. This volume investigates dance and identity.

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T: +353 (0)21 4507487
F: +353 (0)21 4501124
E: info@instchordance.com
W: www.instchordance.com

ISBN: 0-9538394-3-5