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Performance: *Mirage*

James Cunningham and Suzon Fuks

Australian Choreographic Centre

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Reflected Presence in dialogue

By Jody McNeilly

The crinkled white walls of a makeshift installation seduce audience members, first singly then in pairs, to approach the fragile booth and embody the principles underwriting dancer/choreographer James Cunningham's and video artist Suzon Fuk's interactive dance installation *Mirage*. The foyer of the Australian Choreographic Centre hosts and provides reprieve for audience members who choose to enter and exit the looped performance taking place over two 45 minute cycles within the black box theatre. For those willing to interact with reflective mirrors casting images and affecting neurological states of body disjuncture (enabled through instructed positioning of limbs and perspectives of vision) the ante-chamber of white generously prepares the audience member to wade into the black pool of this piece's exquisitely constructed mythology.

Moving into the main performance area registers a distinct change of inhabitation from this earlier inviting injunction to interact. To walk freely as audience within a space when the performance as installation offers such freedom, places a new form of demand on our responsibility to witness. Both I and other audience members filter awkwardly, together, adjusting our positioning with hesitant maneuvers to finally make a decision about how we wish to view the performance in all its measure. I see James crouched, limbs tucked, buoyant upon a shimmering surface area. I wonder how this film of liquid can be so deep and solid, supporting this man who dances on water. I move closer and see a rubber lip circumference containing the fluid as a shallow pool, my first perceptual illusion broken, though not shattered.

An interesting element for consideration in mediated performance or new media artwork is the degree of *transparency* in the way that props or technology function to generate an illusion. The intention for creating illusion by a performance maker may be sought in order to extend beyond the limits of the physical performance arena, taking the audience into new spaces and landscapes of the fantastical, mythical, hyper-real, or psychological (to name but a few). Two approaches to being in audience of an event that promotes such methods are to either pay attention to the origin and machinations involved: exposing the system's transparency; or to become swept up in the effect. Of course both may apply, which is indicative of my own experience of *Mirage*. The former preponderance of seeking out the source with strained observation in the

dark nonetheless permitted an efficacious corporeality and vital otherness to a reflected video presence.

A duet lived and layered with choreographed intention and streamed from data projectors high in the theatre's ceiling starts to unfold.

James, with his life-size, light weight, triangular scrim-stretched capsule pulled over him shares his isolation with the projected image of himself, both men alongside the other with reflected synchrony. There is a simple, yet powerful distal initiation of the head. Live James peels away to the left, his silver other responding with some delay to the right. They enter into a play of mixed timing, a slight delay instigated by temporal manipulation, shapes formed into a mesmerizing relief. Images of antiquity come to mind. The sound score is reverent to the composition. Is video James streamed live/ delayed, with the image flipped for directional purposes? Or is it a pre-recorded James? These questions fall away as the dance resists its mediatisation to draw me towards the bodies, one a mere virtual reproduction.

The duet between the live performing James and the video presence raises important questions with respect to the relationship between live and mediated elements in performance, in this instance a live body and projected image. Philip Auslander contentiously argues in his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999) that these two elements are not 'ontologically distinct because they participate in the same cultural economy'.¹ Despite my own perceptual work that vivifies video James as this corporeal other creating a similitude in such terms, there is something in the experience that reminds me of the manufactured illusion that I participate in whether an intention exists to suspend my disbelief or not. Ontologically, James is intended in my consciousness quite differently. Such differences are reckoned through the complex relationship shared between performer and audience: an intersubjective soup. Anatomically the pair is identical by nature of recorded reproduction. But as I move closer, I hear the breath of James and see the droplets of water slide freely across his skin. There is a subtle flicker of consternation and timeliness in his performing gaze. These are all cues of a body lived: moving, rolling, crouching, and constrained by an empirical reality felt by us all. James lies face down in the pool (*a narcissus never asks how deep, only sees themselves outside themselves and back toward*) whereas; his former dancing partner has dissolved momentarily with the flick of a switch.

In the program notes James' withered limb "swung" effortlessly between and around the frame of his dancing form, is bestowed with choreographic power: "his partially-paralysed limb...necessitates the rest of his body to creatively

¹ My discussion here forms part of a much larger philosophical project to restore ontology in studies of the relationship between live and mediated performance.

serve.”² I see the tensions and dialogue between media being orchestrated by James, a dominance that again questions the parity of elements as argued by Auslander. It is always my understanding of any mediated experience that a ‘live’ human agent is the original source that begets the ‘Being’ of a technological form in its genesis from design to production to interface. It is our inalienable inculturation into a postwar virtual world that allows us to question the differences between humans and machines. We forget the primacy of human will, and inevitably responsibility which is so readily deferred.

Mirage demonstrates within its artistic choices a conviction of will. It is the strange and beautiful presence of forces and intentions emanating from a bodily limb of absence that are reflected in and deeply responded to by the functioning parts of this well crafted *mise en scene*.

² *Mirage*, James Cunningham and Suzon Fuks, Igneous Collaboration, The Australian Choreographic Centre, Canberra, 18 November 2006, program notes, p. 2.