

REMOTE CONTROLLED

a lecture performance

Note: While this lecture is being held, the audience can control the left arm of the speaker via a gamepad, that is connected to an electrostimulation system.

keywords: memtheory, controll, manipulation, cognition, authority, neurophilosophy, emergence, free will, nervous system, electricity, command, parasite, nervous disorder, chicken, kafka

Good afternoon and thank you for coming. I will try to summarize in this talk the work of my collective Senselabor over the last 2 years. Although having an interest in critical theory, I'm speaking here as a practitioner, which makes this event rather prosthetic, since I'm only able to talk about the practice and describing its context. However, I will try to give you as many insights as possible. Feel free to play with my arm using the game pad that controls the electro stimulation system, but please, show at least a bit of respect.

The Interactive Narrative

We started our work in a time of almost utopian believe in technology:1999. It was the peak of the hype cycle and we were filled with juvenile entusiasme about the aesthetic and artistic possibilities of media and interactive technologies. During the last five years we experimented with those technologies in several performance and installation works. We researched the use of interactive system (so called motion sensing) connecting movement to realtime media and our heads were filled with words such as *The new media and technologies by which we amplify and extend ourselves constitute huge collective surgery carried out on the social body.* (Understanding Media , Marshall McLuhan)

It was common among the practioners of dance-tech to see the media as an extension to the body, which was always seen as a benefit: *"To control the environment through the movements of my body gives me a special feeling and this affects my performance. I feel larger-than-life and I think this carries across to the audience. This has an impact that is independent of the understanding they may have of how the technology functions."* Dawn Stopiello

This is the moment where we got suspicious. Were we really extending ourselves? What about the delicacy of the setups the systems forced on us? What about our complete dependence on expensive technological setup? Of course that wouldn't stop us, since we were hooked, to use a term from computer game addiction. Maybe the technology was expanding into us. Maybe we were the extensions. It also come down to the question: I am using the phone or is the phone using me? Which leads to a whole chain of even more complicated question like what is me , am I the phone , why I am using it anyway but this is not the direction I want to take now. Maybe knowing the answer to them could help, since McLuhan also said: *No society has ever known enough about its actions to have developed immunity to its new extensions or technologies.* We ventured out now to develop our own narrative that was somehow juxtapositional to the position of the augmented body (or space). This is where We only do what they are programmed for started.

We Only Do

Let the machines command the human. This was the simple theme of the show. We intended that the computers possibilities to create complex patterns can manifest itself in space and time through the performer's body. Instead of predetermined structures, we wanted to create a choreographic machine that involves both computers and dancers, a system that always recreates itself in a new complex way. It is closer to be a genetic code of a performance, than a performance itself. The next step is always in the dark, for everybody, and every time it is being started, it will create itself in a whole new way. A dreadful thing for the choreographer, for he is not the choreographer anymore. The event doesn't manifest itself out of a set structure, but a choreo-genetic code. The audience sees an actual event happening in front of their eyes, but at the same time we wanted to spark a reflection on the virtual components of the choreography. It was in no moment an improvisation, but an ongoing conversation and stimulation between the dancers and the computers that create the performance as an event. So much for the theory. I will show now a quick clip which was taken in the very first showing after a working period of two weeks: (clip of we only do what they are programmed for is shown)

Ironically enough, we used the motion sensing system eyecon for surveillance purposes in this evening. But now for the actual setup. As you might have already guessed, the three performers are equipped with wireless headphones, the computer monitors the space via digital cameras and motion analysis software. The performance always starts with the announcement of so-called Micros and Macros to the dancer. Those are rules that define how the performer is dealing with the commands that are given to him via the wireless headphones, the space and the other dancers. Those coded commands consist of a body part (there are 13 parts, such as A - the head, or H - the right part of the pelvis) and a point on an imaginative kinesphere that surrounds the performers. This imaginary sphere has 27 points. A command like C - 16, suggests a movement with left shoulder (C) to the point 16, which is the upper left diagonal in the back. In the version we have seen now, this was not yet the case, the syntax was slightly different, and was changed to guarantee a more fluid processing by the performer. A Micro suggests then how the performer interprets and executes this command, a Macro, how to relate at the same time to the space and the other performers. Some Micros and Macros leave a lot of space for improvisation and interpretation, while others are fairly rigid. In total there are seven different Macros and seven different Micros.

A network that consists of the video motion tracking system Eyecon, PD/Gem, Max/Msp and a Flash Server, produces combinations of Micros and Macros. There is a certain possibility for every combination to be produced. It lasts between 30 sec. and 3 minutes, this time is determined by random number generators and previous choices of the network. Some combinations are more likely to happen than others, we based these choices on observations that we made during the rehearsals. There are also other variables determined by the computer: the speed in which the commands are given, are all dancers receiving the same command, etc. Then there are also the Virii which are not connected to the matrix of the Micros and Macros. They consist of commands like stop , copy (movement around you) , make a stupid face , leave the space , and of course the so called crazy dog , a random performative action outside of the geometrical vocabulary of the system. The Virii serve as a radical element of interruption. Some Virii break completely with the formalistic dance language of lines and points and leave big spaces for theatrical and performative actions, which we encouraged the performers to do.

On top of this choreography the movement of the dancers is also connected to the scenography of motiongraphics and the musical composition. Through the motion tracking system, the movement of each dancer is tracked and assigned to a specific instrument. This instrument plays on top of the composition, that changes also with the structures of the Micros/Macros. According to direction and dynamic of the dancer OpenGL objects are transformed and moved. The form of these objects also changes, when different Micros/Macros are developing. The motiongraphics appear both on the floor and on the back wall behind the dancers.

We seek the creation of work that creates the illusion of autonomy and self-organization. So the focus is clearly on the machine or rather the machinery than on the performer itself, since they are alive anyway. At least that's what we are meant to believe. In the case of this performance, we want to create a tool that can create a performance out of code without the involvement of a human choreographer. There is no central artistic authority, beyond the control and predetermination it unfolds in unpredictable forms. Of course the word unpredictable is quite relative. As a maker the role of the choreographer is changed to the role of a metadesigner, who determines behavior in a performance ecology , what creates completely new rules for the rehearsal situation. What does one base his choice on?

(show 2nd video, Amsterdam 2005 version)

This was a the 2nd version of this performance. As you can see, the material is more contemporary, which also has to do with the dancers we worked with, who have all quite an

stronger background in improvisation. Since they opposed the idea of a command strongly, we called the command a movement suggestion and changed the rules slightly. One would not be in the strict limitation, that we had in the first version (get command on the one, execute it on the four), but can take his time. The result is less rigid. But it's still controlling a body, since the degrees of freedom are still limited. So we moved from a disciplinary society of control to a more manipulative form of controlling the body. One only needs to be given the assurance and illusion of freedom. *'Control' is the name (William S.) Burroughs proposes as a term for the new monster, one that Foucault recognizes as our immediate future. Paul Virilio also is continually analyzing the ultrarapid forms of free-floating control that replaced the old disciplines operating in the time frame of a closed system.* Gilles Deleuze

All in all, this is still a quite conventional machine, since it produces, well, contemporary dance. Especially the last version always caused statements like: it looks choreographed so the fact that the machinery produces contemporary dance and not something else beyond that, was to some people a disappointment. I must also say, that I found the work with this project rather difficult in terms of creation. We were bound by our own systematics. Once they were established we became the mere engineers of our system, which was somehow dissatisfying. For our next project we wanted to regain the creational authority again while at the same time push the idea of control as far as possible.

MyMyoMay hem

...started as an idea, that was clearly focused on the historical duality of human and machine. The modernist origins of this narrative were found in the 18th century, where inventors and physicians pursued their mechanist understanding of world, nature and the human body to a point, where they thought a mechanist reproduction of the human body would actually be possible. MyMyoMayhem played in its first stages (research and technical development) with the idea of a hybrid body, where the neuromotorical structures are not anymore controlled by a human self, but only shared between the human mind and an external electronic entity that access the body through electro-muscular-coupling. For that an apparatus of electro-effectors was strapped to the performer's body. The audience were to witness this bioelectrical chimera.

The first real studio work brought in another element: Observation. The performance space consisted of three chambers: preview, encounter, reflection. After a waiting room, that already served as a first step of immersion, one audience member at a time would have an encounter with the performer. From the next room one would be able to see further

encounter of other audience members. The fact the performance room had cameras was only getting clear in this last room. So we had the element of observation (on the side of the visitor) and the element of neuromotorical split in the body of the performer. One of the central questions is the nature of control in systems of communication and interaction. Theatre (in a broad sense) is a small-scale system that is also be inhibited by these principles, although there is a huge variety in the degrees of interaction. But looking at a person is interacting with her. Even through the mediated means of a camera. How can such systems be established, what do they tell us about the current state of our societies, where cameras become an omnipresent artefact, not just in the Orwellian uprising of CCTV and surveillance technology, but also in the use of web cams, video streams, TV studios, photo shootings,...? Since a few years cameras become portals of visual interconnection, and therefore perforate the borders between places. What is this result of this collapse of space? And how does the body react to that? Those were some of the lines we tried to follow in our research.

Then we had of course the electrodes, which represented and were at the same time, an interpenetration of being and tool. Although being a tool using and producing bi-pedal primat for quite a long time now (that's the definition of our species), we never were so augmented. The electrical affectors become a metaphor for our invaded state and are at the same time a reality, causing an artificial state that cannot be reproduced without its specific effect on the human's physiology. This marriage of the artifice and the real stands in an ironic way in tradition with electricity's history itself. From the Leidener Bottle to Edison's Animal Electrocutation Tour through the US in 1903, electrical innovations were always being presented in a very performative way, at the border of science, art fair and freak show. Now our bodies are truly electrical interfaces. Countless communication devices at our disposal, we are using technology almost every second of our existence. But there again the questions I already raised: are we using the technology or is the technology using us? Are we making a phone call or is the mobile phone using us to make a phone call. Of course, the phone has no will on its own, but the idea of the phone and its use, is circling around and is making us use it. This research lead us into the delicate relationship between several motorical and neurological circuits: the body's proprioceptional system, the motorical system, the so called self and then of course the outside effectors and their erratic interruption of the human nervous system and subsystems (noxiar, motorical and proprioceptional).

Here are some pictures of this first trial (show slide show of the first version, July 2006)

For our next step we crafted a nonlinear narrative field, that rather suggested the existence of a story than actually being one. In the first version in June we played with several symbolic

objects and motives such as the bird, the lines and the balls as you just have seen. Our approach was influenced by what we have been doing in former more theatrical works such as *Das Wasser war kalt* or *Des Gesprächsfightfaden*. Wimbledon meets Swanlake, on acid. A postmodern ritual of gestures and imagery, that should fascinate (affect), but never explain or lead to an understanding. In the end we rather preferred to create immersion and confusion. In the second version in Salzburg, the immersive narrative become a more complex and heavy component. That audience entered the space as a group and, one by one, they were lead through various chambers that were filled with images of tight up emperors, real birds, silent butlers and vicious administrative personal. Embedded as before was the encounter with the performer who ran through a cycle of actions and rituals, encounteral approaches and twitching dances, where his body was populated by the electrical shocks and the ideas that were in the other spaces. At all time, there was an audible connection between all spaces. Cameras and see-through pictures allowed the audience to spy on those who haven't reached the last room yet.

In all the elements that were present there was no core, only a force field of the different elements that interpolated with each other, sometimes in the head of the observer, who had to wander through this experiential system, sometimes through the interconnected computer systems that created the electrical stimulation, the imagery and the sound. On the other side, there are very concrete experiences the visitors is pushed through: an administrative procedure in the beginning, that gets more and more rough, the less people are in the room, a tunnel one is pushed through by a silent butler, the encounter with a real chicken that twitches almost as nervous as the performer and of course the encounter with the performer. The performer was playing through a loop of actions that lasted for 3 encounters, so the audience always had a different experience and the observation never became static and repetitive. An uninformed crowd of visitors transforms one by one, into a society of observers that share the possibility of surveillance until there is no one left to be observed.

(show video of MyMyoMayhem, Salzburg version)

I want to add two comments to what we just have seen. First of all, there is a ridiculously complicated technical setup behind it, which was unnecessary in terms of economics. But it seems after several years of making this kind of work we can't even play a simple video without linking it out of sheer joy via networks to be in sync with the sound, the electro-stimulations and everything else. Except the chicken, which was real, yet very interactive. Well, we did a bit of sound processing with the sounds of the chicken. So we had a network of computers whose output is stretched over several rooms. Intransparent and almost

impossible to detect. And another example of who controlled actually what: clearly, the technology made us use it.

One last thought:

After the last show I was starting to clean up behind the installation. I tried to grab several pieces of paper that were laying around, but saw, a bit in shock, that my hand wasn't moving anymore in its normal ways. I couldn't really grab the paper, but my hand was moving in an awkward stop-n-go way. I stopped. Looked at my hand. There it was. This was my hand. And I alone was moving it. For some time, my body was becoming inhabited by an outside pattern, that was brought into my body. I had to regain awareness by perceiving my own body to take back control. Only the combination of regained awareness and regained accessibility to my own motorical system allowed me that. So the central question in further developments of this apparatus is: how can I share such a sensation in a performance?