# Expressive Bodies and Digital Cultures

## Thinking about the Symposium IX on "Embodied Spaces"



Presented by Audiokinetic and organized at/by the Société des arts technologiques (SAT) in Montréal, *Symposium IX* took place from May 30th through June 3rd, 2017.

**By Dena Davida**

What is at stake for dancers and the dance profession in the face of technological advances? To begin, you might consider the common fear that live performance, by expressive dancing bodies, could one day be eclipsed by artificially intelligent machines and the Internet's burgeoning DIY dance cultures. At the same time, I nurture the hope that sentient human beings will always remain a driving force in the arts world as well as in cyberspace.

The significance of placing human beings at the centre of digital cultures formed the basis for "Embodied Spaces," the thematic orientation of the fourth *Symposium IX* organized at and by the Société des arts technologiques (SAT) in Montréal, founded in 1996 by Monique Savoie (still general director) and Luc Courchesne (also co-curator of this year's symposium). This five-day event is an annual gathering of 350+ creative scientists, artists, curators, researchers, philosophers, industry professionals and computer programmers. Profit-minded industry representatives are brought face to face with open source advocates as, for instance, Walt Disney animators spar with punk performance artists over the politics of new technologies. The vitality of creativity is a common thread. And this year, a remarkable dancer-cum-visionary Internet technologist was the keynote speaker.

It is interesting to recall that choreographic experimentation with digital media, in the city of Montréal, dates back to the 1980s. It was SAT co-founder Courschene who designed Marie Chouinard's original sound-transmitting costume in the iconic futuristic solo *S.T.A.B. (Space, Time and Beyond)*, which premiered in 1986. However, these collaborations were relatively slow to emerge in Québec in the 1980s and 1990s because of limited access to the expensive equipment required (the Musical Instrument Digital Interface and Portapak video camera were notable exceptions). Isabelle Choinière, Michael Montanaro, Pierre-Paul Savoie and, of course, Chouinard were some of the earliest dance artists in Montréal to venture into the use of computer-based creative tools for choreography, having succeeded in locating computer programmers interested in collaboration. At the time, there were also a few local arts organizations, for instance Gallery OBORO (est. 1982) and the women's media collective Studio XX (est. 1996), which provided technical support (and still do) to artists interested in electronic media. In addition, the Fondation Daniel Langlois were instrumental in supporting and archiving media art. And then, experimentation accelerated in 2001 when the university research consortium Hexagram was founded to facilitate research and creation in the media arts, design and technology. Their laboratory studios and performance spaces are today jointly housed at Concordia University and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Local dancemakers have since widely embraced the integration of vibrant computer-generated sound and visual environments in their work, and some have delved more deeply into vital questions about the meaning and impact of interfacing live bodies with virtual worlds.

A large, green Apple desktop computer had been a ubiquitous presence in my personal and professional life since the mid-1980s (subsequently replaced by a MacBook Air), but my awakening to the vitality and impact of the digital arts didn't really occur until 1995. That was the year a global network of new media artists chose Montréal for the annual International Symposium on Electronic Arts (ISEA) — a not-for-profit network founded in the Netherlands in 1990 as a forum for encouraging the development of interdisciplinary academic dialogue among culturally diverse groups and individuals working in the fields of art, science and technology. It was serendipity that they drafted me, as Tangente's artistic director, into the performing arts jury for which I read dozens of performance proposals. At Tangente we presented a series of three interdisciplinary performance works in which computer programming and imagery were central. Daytime activities of the ISEA symposium included personal device demonstrations in a virtual reality lounge, round-table discussions, lectures and immersive artistic installations. As if the survival of humankind was in peril, the delegates debated heatedly the nature of their role and their responsibility in shaping the future of digital culture. Captivated by the delegates' passion and conviction, I took their mission to heart.

The Montréal edition of ISEA in 1995 was clearly a forerunner in form and function of the *Symposium IX* (the letters IX refer to "immersive experience"). My initial involvement with this high-powered gathering was the purchase of a one-day pass in 2016. The twelve-hour program left me breathless and also unsettled. It began with a feisty keynote panel, six workshop/demonstrations of new software programs and a lecture by one of the world's visionary technology philosophers. Throughout the day, we were invited individually to put on the glasses and try out a series of virtual reality programs. The evening offered performances in the Satosphère's 180-degree dome-shaped theatre-in-the-round with eight projectors and 157 audio speakers (think of a miniature planetarium). As I find is often the case, it was the informal networking in the hallways, on the stairways and in the venue's café (Foodlab) during lunch and other break times that was the lifeblood of the symposium.

The theme of this year's *Symposium IX* was the body-centred "Embodied Spaces," and so of particular interest to me as a dance curator. And, much to my delight, keynote speaker Ghislaine Boddington opened the festivities with the unequivocal declaration "I am a dancer!" This "artivist"

is creative director of the interactive design collective body>data>space from East London, a group that has been positioning the living body at the heart of the digital debate since the early 1990s. "The Internet of bodies" was one of the terms coined by Boddington, and her work evolves around the development of body responsive technologies and the staging of massive, interactive installation events with sound, images and movement. Some of the other corporeal and community arts concepts that ground her work are virtual mobility, interauthorship, virtual physical networks, interactive interfaces, user-centred experiences, collaborative sharespaces and the hyper-sensory self. You have likely experienced some of the practical and artistic applications of these ideas and have already begun to imagine what they have to offer to artists and audiences.

Courschene contacted me a few days prior to the opening to ask if I might be willing to assist Boddington in her workshop "Collective Reality: Experiencing Togetherness." An initial half-hour exchange with this prescient artist was invigorating! (And so it was that I became an embedded journalist for *The Dance Current* magazine.) I agreed to lead a warm-up activity in contact improvisation that would sensitize participants for the sequence to follow. As they increasingly moved in unison, they were rewarded with more vibrant, immersive visual projections and harmonious sounds. The workshops, and "group happening" presented at the end of the afternoon, took place in the dramatic environment of the Satosphère. I entered this process with a predisposition to think of computer programmers as disembodied (unless of course avid players of programs like Dance Dance Revolution). It was a revelation to discover that they were contact improvisation enthusiasts, thoroughly enjoying the live, intimate physicality of touch and mutual support.

Musicians have always formed a strong contingent of the *Symposium IX*, with a long history of the music world's engagement with digital experimentation. As dancers and choreographers, we have all experienced computer-generated electronic music compositions and electroacoustic soundscapes. But Atau Tanaka's Friday morning lecture and evening performance opened a new chapter for me in the dance/music connection — the extensive instrumentalization of the sound-producing capacities of the body itself through human-computer interaction. As one of the symposium's elder statesmen, Tanaka is currently professor of media computing at Goldsmiths and a major researcher and performer in the field of embodied musical interaction. His conference "The Body as Musical Instrument" led us through some of the earliest body-activated instruments, from the theremin, invented in 1928, which senses hand movements to determine the pitch and frequency of sounds, to Alvin Lucier's solo "percussion" concert in 1965, in which sounds were computer generated by his own brainwaves. And now, with the increasing sophistication of technologies like real-time digital signals (DSP), MIDI controllers and synthesizers, musicians are able to gesture in various ways to produce sounds in live concerts by simply articulating their bodies.

Through these technologies musicians have become more expressive movers by "playing" their bodies as instruments, and dancers are already adopting these digital strategies to create their own soundscores even as they move. The same evening, along with media artist Lillevan, Tanaka performed three of his short audio-visual studies *Le Loup*, *Lifting* and *Myogram*, which drew on the sounds of howling wolves, whistling oscillators and the neuron impulses of muscle exertion, respectively. A lone, slender figure, he stood in a pool of murky lighting at the centre of the massive SAT dome, with his characteristic bracelet-sensors strapped to his forearms. Lillevan sat off to the side, obscured behind an array of technical instruments as Tanaka performed delicate, structured improvisations of precise and space-sculpting gestures with his forearms and hands. His gaze focused inward, this captivating musician seemed at times to channel an introspective New Music conductor but more often appeared to be a postmodern shaman as he conjured a strange and fantastic landscape of haunting sounds and images.

Live dance performances are a rare occurrence in the Satosphère. This is likely due to the economic and technical demands of producing choreographic works suitable to the capacities of the dome, with its multiple speakers and projectors. During the 2016/17 dance season in Montréal, it was only Peter Trosztmer with his SAT co-creater Zack Settel who ventured into this medium with their mysterious and poetic *Aqua Khoria*. As dancemakers enter into collaboration with digital creators, the challenge is how to maintain the vitality and presence of the live dancer and meaningful content within the mesmerizing effects of large-scale moving images and high-volume surround sound. During this edition of the *Symposium IX* there was but a single choreographic event, *CORE*, offered by a creative tandem from France and local artists veteran choreographer Aurore Gruel (Cie. Ormone) and sound composer Hervé Birolini (Cie. Distortions), along with Canadian videographer Sean Caruso. Their interest is in melding their disciplines (they prefer the term indiscipline in French to interdisciplinary), and this work is the outcome of a sensitive negotiation between their particular aesthetic orientations. For example, Birolini is interested in the idea of a multi-purpose matrix, while Gruel is preoccupied with movement that defines an architecture of space. When SAT commissioned Birolini to create a musical composition for the dome, he invited Gruel to join him in the Montréal residency. It was then they met Caruso, and this encounter pushed them to develop the video imagery for the work. Together they created the study for *CORE,* a formal and poetic narrative that evokes an alternative universe built from glowing white speaker boxes, swirling sounds, pulsing light patterns projected on the stage and a showering of geometric patterns across the dome. Sound and light effects are at times invasive, at other moments they recede into calmness, giving place to the dancer. Gruel moves with deliberate, hyper-articulate feline intensity. Her gestures and postures echo the angularity of the boxes, at the centre of attention, which she arranges, reconfigures and finally stacks into a towering formation as if a futurist totem.

*Symposium IX* has yet to attract the attention of the dance community. It is relatively expensive to participate, but there is always the possibility of volunteering or taking a one-day pass, and the virtual reality demonstrations are free to the public on the last day. It has certainly shifted my own understanding of what is at stake, what is possible, in the future that is quickly being shaped for all of us by the digital arts and its virtual communities.

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For more on how Canadian dance artists, including Trosztmer and Settel, incorporate augmented reality technologies in to their choreography, check out *The Dance Current*'s upcoming September/October print magazine feature, "The Virtual is Sensual" by Hilary Bergen.

https://thedancecurrent.com/article/expressive-bodies-and-digital-cultures/