Corpus Project

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ABSTRACT

The (female) body is a site of story, and interactive technological amplification of story can be intrinsic to the body. Using live performance as the medium, and using the live body as both an interface and a metaphor, CORPUS PROJECTI is an exploration of storytelling as real-time information transmission in this moment of hyper-mediated human interactions. Parsing the personal, the historical and the political, the performance situates the live female voice and body within a matrix of information only accessible through human touch.

“[I]t is not the body-object described by biologists that actually exists, but the body as lived in by the subject.”

somewhere between Meat and Screen
i misplace my mind
and in their war
my body
is collateral damage

tendrils of technospace
pulling at me
a postmodern torture device
i am seized and strangled
caressed and cut off
i am torn apart in the wanting

i am not Here because i am There, and There, and There
and when i stand before you
i am receiving a package, receiving a bill, receiving an invitation
and when i stand before you
i hear the radio waves and the car alarms and the vibrating phone.

your face is captured
your voice is lost in the mail
your handwriting is broken
and your touch
is the phantom
in the machine.

i’m not sure if you got my last message
it’s been too long
no reception here
let's find some time
some time soon.
BACKGROUND

My primary inspiration for this interrogation is my discomfort with technology and its distancing of the body. When a face-to-face interaction is lost, in lieu of a technologically mediated one, we are inevitably implicated in a Brechtian distancing that reveals that, as cultural critic Mark Dery would say, “the body is a vestigial appendage no longer needed by late-twentieth-century Homo sapiens—Homo Cyber” (Davis, 17). In this age of Homo Cyber, the body has been reduced to an appendix, in both its biological and literary definitions. While technology can bring together people who are far away, it can paradoxically make distant those who might otherwise be physically close to one another. In his book *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Eric Davis suggests that “mass media and information technology actually deepen the mind-body split by fixating our flow of attention on alienated information rather than the direct, face-to-face, and embodied experiences of material human life…” (116)

While Davis may not have intended a Marxist reading, it is clear that information, alienated from its context, is not dissimilar from Marx’s worker alienated from the product s/he produces. If information is disembodied and non-material, then it would seem to exist in the realm of the mind, rather than the body, and this speaks to a particularly Cartesian view of identity and perception of self. Descartes forged an identity of ego with mind to the detriment of how the body as a whole was perceived. In turn, this dichotomy between mind and body made it easier for an Enlightened society to see the virtue of working for money at the expense of the health and needs of the body. However, in art, particularly postmodern art that uses the body, information (often seemingly alienated from the body altogether) becomes necessarily embodied, material and face-to-face. In Amelia Jones’ preeminent study on the body art practices of the
1960s and forward, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, she argues, “body art practices solicit rather than distance the spectator, drawing her or him into the work or art as an intersubjective exchange…” (Jones, 31) The intersubjectivity of performer and audience member, alternately transmitter and receiver, is therefore the locus of a simultaneous alienation and intimacy. Within these perspectives articulated by Jones and Davis exists my investigation of technology and the body through art. My research for this interrogation is situated between body art practices of the latter 20th century, the articulation of the technobody in art, embodied performance, feminist performance, postmodern aesthetics, and communication through information technologies.

**Information, Technology and/in Performance**

I insist on a deep interrogation of technology in art. I do not believe that technology should be employed solely for the sake of technology, but rather it should be incorporated when it is deeply connected to the conceptual vision of the work. Technology should be used in the facilitation of telling a story, it should not be the story. Davis proposes, “… groups and individuals also find room to resist and recast the dominant technological narratives of war and commerce, and to inject their fractured postmodern lives with digitally remastered forms of community, imagination, and cosmic connection” (Davis, 8). I take this challenge to recast the narrative of war and commerce very seriously, and find within it the articulation of a reappropriation of technology, specifically through art.

In a seemingly constant struggle between the physical and the mental, Davis argues,

Though an essentially incorporeal and ‘mental’ element, information nonetheless seems to derive from the external physical world, tightly bound to mundane materials like newsprint or a thermometer or sound waves emerging from a herald’s mouth. (81)
His invocation of the herald’s mouth acknowledges the very real, very necessary presence of the human, in fact, the performing human, in the transmission of information. The herald’s mouth is the material and the embodiment, while the sound waves are the ephemeral performance medium through which the data is transferred. Diana Taylor explores this performance of data transfer in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire*. She states,

Performances… replicate themselves through their own structures and codes…The process of selection, memorization or internalization, and transmission takes place within (and in turn, helps constitute) specific systems of re-presentation…They reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next. Embodied and performed acts generate, record and transmit knowledge. (Taylor, 20-21)

Taylor’s performance is one of codes and transmission, and clearly illustrates the very real correlation between performance and, if not technology itself, technological metaphor. If it is possible to “catch our reflections, even our spirits, in the movements and mentations of machines,” (Davis, 129) then the metaphors of science and technology are aptly suited to the performance genre. Taylor reminds us “…it is imperative to think of performance as a practice that persists and participates in the transmission of knowledge and identity…” (174). As technological elements are added to storytelling, often the primary vehicle of communication, the human body, is lost. And while this can be compelling and conceptually relevant, it is my goal to examine this phenomenon. Technology can be an extraordinary layer in performance work, but without a strong concept, it is merely a red herring. Therefore, my primary investigation is of amplification of the body through interactive technologies, rather than technology as a proxy for the body.
The Female Body in/as Art

Amelia Jones articulates the necessity of the feminized body in art by stating, “it was crucial to embody the female subject publicly in order to politicize her personal experiences. The enacted body/self is explicitly political and social in that it opens out onto otherness and the world in general” (Jones 46-7). The particularized female body, therefore, has the capacity to be political in its public, personal performance, with “the personal as political” as the very basis of the rights movements of the 60s and 70s.

The female/feminist artists Maureen Connor, Orlan, and Hannah Wilke all embody Jones’ assertion that “rather than Brechtian distanciation, body art proposes proximity…” (50). Through images and video, Connor uses her body, as a site of political commentary and asks her audience to interact with, and essentially access her body through these media. Her installations, including The Senses (1991), use the sensory experiences of her audience as metaphors for her inherently female perspective. Her work allows access to her perspectives, through the senses of her audience members. Jones describes Connor’s work as the negotiation of “the ‘world as flesh’ through interactive installations and sculptural pieces that restage the body in explicitly sexually coded ways and compel the experiencing subject to engage corporeally/mentally/emotionally…in their body politics” (210). Her “…work enacts the phenomenological notion of flesh as connection rather than boundary…” (206). I would argue that Connor’s techno-body, as it exists on screen, is not physically present flesh, but rather a flesh for the eyes, that may be accessed through touching a screen.

Orlan, in contrast, is an artist who uses her very real, very present flesh in a live experience for her audience. Through her theatricalized real-life plastic surgeries, like the work Omnipresence (1993), Orlan “…returns us to the inexorable corporeality of the self, revealing
the tenacious refusal to abandon the body as a site of interpersonal exchange and interaction…” (228) The grotesque and hyper-dramatic redesign of Orlan’s physicality via the surgeon’s blade is shown on large screens for her audiences who attend her surgeries. Using only local anesthesia, and speaking to her audience, Orlan claims her feminized body as a site of performance. Jones argues that by “…enacting herself (and literally rearranging her body/self) through technologies of representation as well as medical technology, Orlan produces herself as posthuman: her body/self is experienced (both by herself and by her audience) in and through technology” (227). While Orlan’s performances hit the mark of the body and technology in performance, I am less interested in the shocking nature of the work, than in her ability to truly incorporate the audience into her body/self. Though, perhaps, it is through the very shocking revelation of her interior that allows the audience to be incorporated.

Through her photographs and installations, including the So Help Me Hannah series (1978), Hannah Wilke also used her particular female body as a site of political commentary. Her photographs of her body/self show her open to the world, exposed as beautiful and violent. But the irony of the beauty, shown through temporary tattoos of guns on her bare breasts for example, complicate and problematize the female form in art. Jones states, “Wilke’s life project involved exploring the metaphoricity of her body, its meaningfulness as a “picture” of her self—as a signifier of the “content” of her personality that could never be fixed or predetermined: by its very nature as a picture/object-of-desire, her body/self is always already implicated in the desire of the viewer” (191). The desire of the viewer and the objectification of Wilke’s form paradoxically made Wilke’s body the site of politicized action, by directly addressing desire, beauty and the fetishized female body.
Aestheticization and Postmodernism

Adrian Piper, like Wilke, has been criticized for the aestheticization of the feminized political performance. In his book, *In the Break*, Fred Moten asks the questions,

…what about the question of beauty, not only for Piper, but of Piper? What about the beauty of Piper and of Piper’s work, the beauty of Piper as Piper’s work? …Piper’s work is not a suspension of the aesthetic but a kind of return to it, precisely by way of its materiality. You don’t have to privilege the ethical over the aesthetic in art if the aesthetic remains the condition of possibility of the ethical in art (Moten, 249).

Moten’s answer to the aestheticized (beautiful), politicized female body in art, is essentially that the art needs to be made regardless of its aesthetic nature. If the vehicle for the radical act is through the aestheticized body, it remains a radical act. Jones presents the argument that “the negative attitude toward body art on the part of many feminists then, seems to have stemmed from a well founded concern about the case with which bodies have, in both commercial and ‘artistic’ domains, been constructed as an object of the gaze” (Jones, 24). And while this concern is, as Jones puts it, “well founded,” she argues that,

The wholesale dismissal of body art practices… fails to account for the strategic force of body art projects in the 1960s and 1970s and for the contingency of all meanings and values of cultural products on the social political contexts of reception as well as on the particular desires of the interpreter in question… (25).

As Jones has articulated, the female body must not be dismissed as a site of strategic politics, because the apprehension of the body is contingent upon so many contexts. The articulation and inclusion of these contingencies and contexts is the very basis of postmodernist art and are also intrinsic to our hypertextual, hypermediatized, technofetishized here and now. Davis invokes this postmodern sentiment when he claims,

Communicating information is not simply a matter of cramming data into an envelope and sending it off; information is also something constructed by the receiver. In this
sense, an element of “subjectivity” eventually enters into any communications circuit, because the question of how much information is received depends in part on how the receiver … is primed to parse the incoming message and code (Davis, 85).

While Davis is referring to the postmodern communication paradigm, it is just as pertinent for postmodern art. The postmodern condition is defined by the lack of objective meaning, and therefore necessarily facilitates the agency and interpretation of both the artist and the viewer. Within, and perhaps through this subjectivity, exist the very real, very present correlation between postmodern art and technology.

**The Female Voice**

Returning to Davis’ idea of “sound waves emerging from a herald’s mouth” (81), a brief analysis of the voice is necessary within the larger context of performance. The female voice requires specific attention because wherein “both language and society are structured by codes of sexual difference, both the body and its voice are inescapably gendered” (Dunn and Jones, 2). Janet Beizer addresses female vocality in her essay entitled *Rewriting Ophelia: fluidity, madness and voice in Louis Colet’s La Servante*. She argues, “Following Kaja Silverman’s work on female voice in cinema [see *The Acoustic Mirror*], we can say that the process whereby female voice is embodied—interiorized or infused as body fluid potentially expressible through various organ holes—is more accurately repressive… The feminization of embodied voice is then a gesture of projection (and rejection)” (Beizer, 163). Just as the presence of the female body “exacerbates to the point of absurdity the Western fixation on the female body as object of a masculine ‘gaze,’” (Jones, 50) the female vocality, as necessarily projected from the body, is
therefore an act of rejection and resistance. Ironically, of course, the projection from the female body could be seen as a metaphorically male act, but problematically,

The anchoring of the female voice in the female body confers upon it all the conventional associations of femininity with nature and matter, with emotion and irrationality. More concretely, it leads to associations of the female voice with bodily fluids (milk, menstrual blood) and the consequent devaluation of the feminine utterance as formless and free-flowing babble, a sign of uncontrolled female generativity. (Dunn and Jones, 3)

Diamanda Galás, who uses her vocality as both an aestheticized and politicized projection from the body, is in effect, a perfect example of the emotional, irrational feminine utterance. A performance by Galás is clearly a performance of otherness, often as alienating as it is hypnotic. The beautiful sirens of Greek lore who lures sailors to their deaths with their songs are certainly the appropriate metaphor, because “like the body from which it emanates, the female voice is construed as both a signifier of otherness and a source of sexual power, an object at once of desire and fear.” (3)

**Approaching the Project**

As a performance artist who incorporates the live, performative body into my artwork, at one time, I worked primarily in the physical world. The live, apprehended body was an imperative in the work. One project in which I participated, entitled *Woman Chorus*, was a collaboration of performance artists, actors, and activists who used only the sounds, the vocalities, of women, from sadness, to ecstasy, to silence, as they slowly descended a grand staircase and emptied into the street. In contrast to the vocal examination of *Woman Chorus*, a scene from a performance entitled *14 UnNatural Acts*, focused on the silent female body. I was wrapped in shrink-wrap from neck to knee by my male partner and left alone on stage to cut
myself out. Bound in plastic, the body is distorted, suffocated, and struggles to negotiate its confines. The tiny razor blade in my hand made several agonizing, awkward passes through the plastic until I was able to break free and shed my synthetic skin.

As a performance artist approaching techno-media, I began experimenting within the online space as a stage for the body. This process began while I was getting my Master’s in Performance Studies at NYU. In a class vaguely entitled, “HTML conceptualism,” I was introduced to Ricardo Dominguez of the Critical Art Ensemble, once actor, turned “hacktivist,” who charged us with making conceptual gestures online. He redefined for me the online space as a stage for performance. In 2003, not knowing much more than how to check my email online, I created my final project for his class, entitled Beautiful Woman. Beautiful Woman used a drawing of a woman as an image map; above the drawing was the instruction “touch me” (an unconscious reference at the time, to performance artist Lynn Hershmann’s Deep Contact which I would not hear of for another two years). By rolling over parts of her body with the mouse, animated gifs would pop up related to that part of the body. The images were disturbing, amusing, strange, and relentless, silently advancing through their tiny serial narratives. As would be later noticed by someone else, CORPUS PROJECTI clearly had its roots in Beautiful Woman.

Two years after Beautiful Woman, I was still experimenting with the same themes, but in other digital media, including Flash, instead of HTML. Chakra Woman was inspired by the last painting my Grandmother made when she was dying. The painting was so beautiful, so moving, that I wanted to see if it could be emotionally effective in a digital space. I used only hand drawings, and contextualized it with a handwritten description of the time when it was made.
When a user traced the spine of the woman with their mouse, the chakras faded in and out. If the user held the mouse over a chakra, it would show what the chakra represented.

These projects of both live and virtual body, contextualized within my performance theory studies and my growing technological experimentation, all brought me to the development of my thesis project: CORPUS PROJECTI. Between performance as transmission of information, the postmodern contingency, the aestheticization/politicization of the female in art, and the technological alienation of the body from the mind, approaching a project that addresses technology and the female body is problematic at best. If “body art splinters rather than coheres the self…” (Jones, 51) and information is “reconstructing, perhaps dangerously, our images of the self and its cosmic home” (Davis, 82), the process is surely a difficult one. But by situating my work within these contexts, and articulating their conflicts, convergences, and correlations, I can locate my project within the ocean into which all these streams empty.
THE PROJECT

Through a performance rooted in body art, performance theory, techno-theory and postmodern aesthetics, CORPUS PROJECTI is an interactive, technologically amplified experience of body, voice and story. The project uses the database, the image map, and the hypertext webpage as an approach to the living body. In his exploration of the database as the defining rubric of postmodern era, Lev Manovich states, “the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we would want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database” (Manovich, 219). However, my desire is not to become the machine, nor embody the machine, but rather find within the machine, the metaphor for myself. As Davis articulates, “The machine thus comes to serve as an interactive mirror, an ambiguous Other we both recognize ourselves in and measure ourselves against” (Davis, 132).

In this performance, the live female body becomes a matrix of stories, accessed through human bodily touch. Users enter the space one at a time and encounter the body of a woman. They touch the performer's body on illuminated points and she tells them a short story inspired by that body part. The stories themselves are transmitted vocally, live, straight from the throat of the performer to the ear of the user.

To hear a story, a user must make continuous physical contact with the performing body, as she will only vocalize while the user’s hand is touching her. The walls are blank until she begins speaking, and based on the voice of the performer in real time, the user sees cellular growth projected before them on the walls, directly caused by the transmission of the story. The cells dancing are ambient and scenic, elemental, and open to interpretation, as opposed to literal depictions of the stories being told. Just as cellular growth evokes DNA, reproduction, disease
transmission, and other microbiological functions, the cells growing on the walls represent the transmission of story and memory, and emphasize a biological, rather than mechanical connection between user and data. When the user removes their hand from the body of the performer, she stops speaking, and the cells stop growing and fade away.

As an interactive piece, the user may access any or all of the stories, in any order they choose, thus designing a unique narrative. Some of the stories may seem to oppose one another, others may only be metaphor, but each story is a small expression of a larger narrative that inhabits the body as a whole.

**Project Design and Implementation**

As I was designing the project, I knew that interaction meant non-linear narrative. A user needed to be able to enter at any point, leave at any point, and be able to move from one point to another without linear entanglements. In an earlier incarnation of the project, not shown here, each story was wholly self-contained, much longer, and did not necessitate any of the other stories for contextualization. There was no grand narrative that contained these stories, other than the context of my body. While this approach was useful for non-linearity, there were no consequences, no stakes, to hear the other stories.

In this recent staging of the performance, rather than being self-contained, each smaller story was more of an impression, an articulated moment in a larger narrative. If a user only heard three of the total nine, they would have a very specific impression, but if they listened to all nine, they would have a complete narrative. The nine stories were told in present, past and future tenses, as one half of a telephone call, memories, looking to the future, a phone message,
speculations and an argument. Because of the temporal, spatial and emotional difference in each story, a user could move through the stories in any order, and assemble the narrative for themselves.

Interactivity will always change the story, so my ability to improvise quickly was absolutely necessary. Some people would listen to just a few words of a story before moving on to the next, some people would listen up until the end and then change, others would just listen to the first word, and make patterns out of the sound of my voice. These different ways to access the narrative revealed that people wanted different things from the experience. Aside from the mental gymnastics, the piece is also physically difficult for me. It requires a great deal of concentration and focus, extended performance “presence” and necessitates almost constant speaking. Strangers continuously making physical contact with my body also have a psychic impact that resonates with me long after the show is over. Techno-artist Stelarc addresses the very real consequences of these technoconceptual projects by stating, “the strategy is to construct and perform with intimate interfaces that are experienced then articulated. Ideas need to be authenticated by actions. You have to take the physical consequences for your ideas” (Hill and Paris, 85).

The psychic impact of human bodily contact also resonates for many of the users in the space. Because many people are uncomfortable with or intimidated by this very present, very bold performing body before them, the projection serves as an additional layer through which to access the content of the performance. Conceptually, the imagery of cellular growth is a metaphor for transmission within the body. But visually, the projection acts as a dynamic counterpoint to the monolithic body, offering not an escape from the body, but rather an alternative access point to activate the stories and concepts behind the piece. For some, the
projection is a visualization of simple cause and effect - pretty designs are caused by the sound of my voice, thereby motivating continued participation. For others, the projection is merely ambient, and just a scenic layer to the piece. Everyone participates in the experience in a different way. Some are actually interested in the technology, some are interested in the sensuality, the intimacy, the secrecy, or in the narrative unfolding before them. By offering multiple access points to the experience, through touch, through vocality, through narrative, and through imagery, users are able to access the information in any or all of the ways they find provocative.

*Corpus Projecti: the body projected... into space, into time, into story. My body is a site of story, it is an interface where memory is received, stored and transmitted. If you touch me, you will experience a moment of that story. Listen to my words and feel the memory beneath your hand. Listen to each moment, or only one. Together, these moments are a hurricane; alone, they are but one raindrop. And you decide how long you want to stand in the storm.*

For photos and performance clip, please see attached DVD. For more information, please visit http://www.lianamaris.com/corpusprojecti/


**ADDITIONAL SOURCES**


