

The performer and the video screen

Beth Jackson speaks with video-makers about performance

Beth Jackson in conversation with John Gillies (Sydney), Ellen Pau (Hong Kong) and Eder Santos (Brazil), guest artists with the tele:VISION project, Metro Arts + Experimetro, Brisbane, April

BJ Let's discuss the difference between video that is made for screen, and video that is made as part of performance.

ES My first video-performance work used live performers and musicians behind large screens, like Chinese shadow theatre, with projections onto the screens. Pre-edited tape was mixed with live performance from behind the screen, and there was also live mixing and switching that I was doing during the performance. However, at the end of the performance the audience thought it was all filmed. They couldn't realise it was live, even the sound!

BJ So the audience went into a practice that's familiar to them, fulfilling a pre-given set of expectations:

ES Ellen said to me that perhaps video was not being used as a tool for performance, but rather performance was being used to enhance video.

BJ Did that mean that the work somehow failed?

ES Yes. In the second performance of the work we decided to open the screen at the

end so the audience could see all the performers.

JG People forget that film was originally a performance event with live music and sound. In Japan, benshis stood at the side of the stage and did all of the voices from the film and it's a fantastic performance. There are still a few benshis left. The space of cinema is theatrical.

ES It's important that performance is not lost in the middle of image and technology. But for me it's difficult to think of performance as actors with pre-programmed scripts, because for me performance is also a thing that happens. In my work I place everybody in a 'net', and they stay looking at it, and in the end you have something.

BJ All of your works address, in a self-reflexive way, the technologies that you're using and the references that you draw upon. Is self-reflexivity an effective strategy in making work? Is it important to declare yourself as a video artist?

JG I think self-reflexivity for me is just there. It's just part of the way that we make things. It's not the only element, but it's one among many in the work. Self-reflexivity is important, but it's not the only strategy in the work.

BJ In an ethical sense do you think?

JG More as a question of representation. I want work to be something in itself rather than to represent something else, so it has self-reflexivity built into it.

ES Whether I work in video-performance, video installation, or single channel work I always want to say the same thing: "this is alive, this is not alive, this is image, this is film, this is video, this is an object".

BJ How does that sit with collaborative work, where meanings get propelled beyond your arrangement and become part of someone else's arrangement?

ES I think it's still the same, you have one more person, another variable that is also trying to say the same thing, otherwise we can't work together. But we maintain our own identity—it's important to maintain identity.

JG For me no. I find working with other people lets you express other parts of yourself.

EP I feel similar to John.

BJ It strikes me that there may be two different notions of identity here: for Eder identity seems to be a unity, for John and Ellen it is a multiplicity, or it is fragmented.

EP I don't see it as fragmented, but rather open-ended. In a collaboration, I may contribute more in video, but I will also contribute to the performance if I can, and I want the performer to know what's in the video, what I am doing.

JG Rather than being hired as the artist to create the video for the performance.

EP Right. I don't write a script for the performer, we work at it together. I want to have the 'sense' of performance coming from both the video and the performance. I think one of the major problems for collaboration is that you can't put a strong identity into the work right from the beginning. Because, as a video artist, I have a certain technical skill and a machine, I find myself in a position of power. I think most performers are not used to working on one channel video, or with video installation, or with questions of space and structures. I have the privilege to do it, so I don't want to force people to follow.

JG In some of the videos I've done with performers, I've been interested in creating a kind of screen-based form that is not representational. The aim is to try and shutter the representation of the performer so that the performing body breaks through the apparatus of representation.

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Realtime, June - July 1997