

LIVE ART/MEDIA ART: JOHN GILLIES, PERFORMANCE AND THE TECHNO-LIVE

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The recent exhibitions of Nam June Paik's video art work in this year's Sydney Festival – I'm thinking of the pieces installed at the Art Gallery of New South Wales rather than the compromised works in the Opera House forecourt – are a useful reminder of the imbricated histories of video art and performance. New media art obtains a seemingly perverse specificity from this generation old conversation. Live art and hybrid media art coalesced in Paik's work with the Charlotte Moorman 'cello' performances and Paik's media installations featuring variations on the instrument. The tension between these forms: the anarchic physicality of Moorman and the techno-precision of Paik, the modernity of video and the antiquity of the cello, provides much of the energy in these works. Twenty-five years on they still register this aesthetic force perhaps because the effect they produce engages with the experience of liveness. In this context we can construe liveness as an interaction with a spectator which is not predominantly about representations or narratives but instantaneous sense perceptions. This essay will examine some of John Gillies' video works through this optic of what we might call the techno-live.

In Philip Auslander's study *Liveness* he suggests that the construction of live as opposed to mediated performance is a 'competitive opposition at the level of cultural economy' not at the level of intrinsic or ontological differences. (Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, London & New York, 1999, p.11). It is a matter of different industrial and technological practices and institutions and not a difference in perception or consumption. In aesthetic terms the effects of a mediated piece on a spectator may be just as visceral as those produced by a performance event experienced in the same physical space/time as that in which it is produced. Take Adam Geczy & Mike Parr's recent work *THE MASS PSYCHOLOGY OF FASCISM, Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay* (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004) as a recent example of artists combining the techniques and aesthetics of video art and body art to dismantle this opposition: live v. mediated. Geczy and Parr reveal the processes by which these separate traditions produce a similarly live effect for the viewer. The close ups on Parr's face as the needle bites into the skin are no less affecting for being screened and looped. If anything, the mediation of these acts enhances their effect.

Alternately a live performance can be as dull as a test pattern. No names but we've all experienced that kind of liveness as well. Auslander's view is that the live and the mediated are mutually dependent for reasons that are both historical and experiential. His reasons focus on the institution of television, and its insistence on the value of the live moment to construct a sense of *communitas*, a shared experience for an audience: so the studio audience is a metonym for the larger space of reception etc. Consider also the ubiquity in the news broadcast of the live read and the prominence given to 'live' dialogue with reporters. The experiential effects of 'going live' include the generation of effects of intimacy and immediacy, and interactivity with an audience, something reality programmers use to great effect. The increasing prominence in the use of media in live performance also underscores this point, through the ineluctable modality of the projection. Even in live contexts such as sports events, the spectator's perceptual apparatus is geared towards a cinematic and/or televisual vocabulary, of repeats, close ups and tracking shots. Theatre spectators can be observed laughing and applauding on cue, just as performers in stadium concerts attempt to replicate recorded versions of their material. To unpick the live from the mediated in the age of information is a particularly problematic and probably doomed enterprise.

John Gillies' career as an artist is a testament to this mutual imbrication of liveness and media. He trained at the then Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education from 1978 to 1980 (now the University of South-east Queensland) at a time when a cross-disciplinary program of theatre, music and fine arts was fed by a lively cross cultural engagement. Balinese music was part of the curriculum. Gillies recalls videoing guest artists from places such as Japan, India and Bali. Let's face it, Queensland at that time, the fag end of the Bjelke-Petersen era, gave backwaters a bad name, so the achievements of this little institution in these areas appear twice as remarkable in retrospect. In 1981 Gillies headed for the Sydney College of the Arts then in its heyday with Parr and Adrian Hall on the staff. He worked as a musician in a number of improvisatory jazz bands, did solo performance art work and trained in movement at One Extra where he met Clare Grant, later a member of The Sydney Front (1988-1993) and a long time collaborator with Gillies - see *Techno/Dumb/Show* (1991) and *The Mary Stuart Tapes* (2000).

Techno/Dumb/Show (1991) shows a side of The Sydney Front that all their video documentation cannot. It reveals the members in their youth in close up and we feel the strange hit of 15 years passing in a few frames of video. For me their work momentarily disappears in this piece, taken over by their faces. The video here works as a kind of mobile portrait.



Techno/Dumb/Show, 1991, videotape (made in collaboration with The Sydney Front)

In lingering on close ups, facial expressions and gestures we see these artists divorced from the content of a particular piece of work, cut off from its logic and simply forming the episodic structure of an improvised montage, a deconstructed actor training video, a 'catalogue of gestures' as Gillies calls it. Gillies makes no attempt to simply record a performance. What he is doing is unleashing the performativity of the gestures themselves: the autonomy of an action broken into its component parts. At its root this is what montage performs. In this sense it is perhaps even the performativity of the medium of video itself that he is working on. Editing this work involved the physical manipulation of tapes, switching between takes and selecting the best of the improvised edits to achieve a pulsing effect which is almost organic. In this sense Gillies' approach to montage is not unlike that of a video jockey.

He says in an interview undertaken with the late Nicholas Zurbrugg in 1993 that this work was consciously critical of the emergent discourse around video art which had become 'very self-referential, constantly referring to video art as if other forms didn't even exist. While a lot of early video artists, such as Nam June Paik, came from Fluxus and music, this wasn't spoken about very much.' (in Nicholas Zurbrugg, ed., *Electronic Arts in Australia [Continuum: Journal of Media and Culture 8/1]*, 1994, p. 202) Tracking a genealogy of new media art back to the fluxists and Cage (rather than to avant-garde film which is also possible) reveals new media as an emergent art practice that is engaged with a variety of other performative practices in a way that is entirely experimental. Gillies uses the term 'exploratory', a process the outcome of which is unknown. Performance Space has been the centre of this kind of experimental performance/art practice in Sydney for 21 years so its apt that Gillies' retrospective should be seen here and that it should feature a collaboration with one of Sydney's most influential experimental performance companies.

The Sydney Front galvanised the Sydney performance scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The group were heavily influenced by European and Japanese performance techniques especially Pina Bausch and Tadashi Suzuki. (Nigel Kellaway was famously the first Australian performer to undertake the rigours of the Suzuki training in TOGA in Japan in the 1980s). With a

combination of Expressionist and sometimes Surrealist aesthetics and the militaristic precision choreography of Suzuki, they made deconstructive dance theatre at the Performance Space a popular alternative to more conventional theatre practice in Sydney.

In pieces like *John Laws/Sade* (1987) and *The Pornography of Performance* (1988) both referenced in *Techno/Dumb/Show* they enacted the farce of the socialised body with its repressions and channelisations. The middle class behavioural set of the mainstage theatre company repertoire became the basis for melodramatic exaggeration, rendering it a ridiculous spectacle of empty gestures. In *Pornography* a performer opens a can of dog food and slowly and enthusiastically consumes the contents, cupcakes are forced up the anus of a performer, violent rape scenes are enacted and abreacted. In all their work The Sydney Front continually returned the consciousness of the audience to the codes of their participation in the performance event, often by breaking up a sequence of actions into the constituent gestures before a narrative can take over, or repeating a series of gestures until they become detached even from the logic of the live work itself, thereby confounding the ontology of liveness in their own unique way. Just thought I'd mention all this...

The episodic and gestural quality of the work of this company partly explains the presence of their members in a number of these pieces. But its more than that, this was, after all, some of the most vibrant artistic work in any medium in the country in the late 1980s. The Australian moment of experimental performance came late but at least it came. John Gillies' video work is not a document of this moment since it forms part of that moment. It both reproduces and relaunches it. Gillies himself had been inspired by seeing a Wooster Group performance in the early 1980s in New York. The Woosters as you may know are famous for deconstructing classic American drama and finding media analogies for the thematic material they are presenting. For instance in *Route 1 and 9 (The Last Act)* from 1981 a TV drama version of Thornton Wilder's 1938 classic *Our Town* – a play beloved of school curricula in the U.S.A. – is displayed on overhead monitors, while onstage the white male actors of the company wear blackface and play the roles of stagehands hysterically abreacting the play's repressed racial themes.

Or in *House/Lights* from 1998 in which Russ Meyer's *Faster Pussycat Kill! Kill!* (1966) becomes the visual accompaniment to a version of Gertrude Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. Gillies' direction of Clare Grant in the performance of *Mary Stuart* (Performance Space, 1998) suggests a slightly different approach to this use of video. Rather than the media image as the set against which the live work takes place here it becomes an analogue to the live work and one which effectively occludes the presence of the performer.

In this piece the audience members in the Performance Space theatre watch a screen on which is displayed CCTV images of the space around the building and in the changing rooms. They hear Clare Grant's voice live through speakers and occasionally glimpse a shape moving past the cameras which track Grant's eventual approach into the theatre itself down St. James's lane outside and through the changing rooms. She finally enters the theatre wearing the elaborate costume you can see in the video version and, noticing the audience, cries out as the lights go down to end the piece. The mediated image is the only way the audience can receive the character of Mary Stuart. Presence fails and the lights go out.



The Mary Stuart Tapes, 2000, videotape
performer: Clare Grant

The video version of this performance only partially captures this sense of the necessary, because ubiquitous and unavoidable, perspective of the media image. It is more suggestive of the physical spaces through which Grant/Mary Stuart moves. Kings Cross at night is not such an odd choice for this unlikely

character seeking her time to reappear on the world stage cut off even from what she is saying. Schiller's text – *Maria Stuart* (1800) – comes through in discontinuous fragments reinforcing the sense of radical displacement this character suffers as her permanent condition and rendered an ontological fact through the use of video. This piece exemplifies Gillies' approach to video as one in which live art and media are mutually implied. Performance moves into video and the video into performance, testing each other's boundaries like a long time married couple.

In an extension of the Woosters use of media as the permanent set against which we live our lives, Gillies seems to be saying that its not a matter of televisual clutter obscuring our vision of things but a more complete merging of perception with media. In this piece Gillies shows how mediated interventions in performance also feed back into media art especially video installation in ways which often destabilise both the concept of performative presence (cherished by theatre) and the sense of media as abstraction. It also examines how the modes of reception required by video installation reflect similar concerns in performance, that presence is no guarantee of identity and memory. Our images, as Chris Marker says, have taken the place of our memories.

The de Quincey Tapes echoes these concerns here in relation to Tess de Quincey, the major figure in butoh in Australia. Butoh is a form which lends itself well to mediated interventions such as video projection as it presents the dancers' bodies as evacuated shells empty of personality or identity. They form part of the image landscape in which the work occurs. De Quincey has developed a radical form of site specificity since her early work with Min Tanaka's Mai-Juku company in Japan between 1985 and 1991 and in her Body Weather workshops and group performances such as the Lake Mungo performance project *Square of Infinity* (1991-1994) in far Western New South Wales. Her early solo performances were firmly within the butoh tradition in pieces such as *Movement on the Edge* (1988) and *Another Dust* (1989) both of which were performed at Performance Space. Her company De Quincey Co continues to make butoh inspired work. Gillies' video loop uses the image of de Quincey herself as a point of



The de Quincey Tapes, 2001, video & sound installation, (made in collaboration with Tess de Quincey)

departure for the work which, as in *The Mary Stuart Tapes*, suggests the evacuation of performative presence through the spectrality of the butoh dancer. These works show Gillies' sensitivity to the central questions which performance poses to new media art concerning liveness and interactivity while acknowledging the essential displacement of presence that occurs within any representational context. His work shows how performance continues through the differentials of changing media environments and how video art achieves its autonomy by interrogating performance in an age where media is ubiquitous and every experience is mediated.

Unlike the pieces I have been discussing above, *I Need You* (1982-1986) uses no mixing of live performance but generates a performative effect through its use of found footage from TV cut up with images of what appears to be magnified water droplets falling onto the screen. Fran Dyson describes this as 'creating a depth within the surface.' Dyson has written eloquently about this piece and Gillies' other work in language which I think nicely evokes those aspects of it that have preoccupied me here. She says that it accesses 'the warm of cinema and the real of

TV' – which we might call the live effect – 'by re-inscribing the two-dimensional screen with the three dimensionality (the scene) of both - a technique specific to video, and one which, whether intended or otherwise, appropriates and transforms their seductive appeal. Because this appeal directly engages the senses, and is directed towards privileged representations of the substantial; the body, the real, and their various metaphors, video art must similarly address the body/the real in order to get warm.' (Fran Dyson, 'Pneumatic Video', *Scan+ 1*, 1988, pp.10-11) The singularity of Gillies' video art is certainly in its transposition of these other forms but what is missing from this discussion is performance, probably the central problematic Gillies addresses in a body of work which probes the limits of liveness through the necessary perspectives of the video camera.

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