

## Virtual Bodies

Let's take a deep breath before approaching this particular subject—virtual bodies are capricious, enigmatic, and highly problematic entities. Where should we start? Perhaps with this:

Perhaps the most vivid change is coming in the art that is closest to the human body: dance. If dance is the art that is most embodied, dependent intimately on the state of the body . . . and each art form is heading for its opposite, then the future of dance must be found in disembodiment.

—MARCOS NOVAK<sup>1</sup>

Or with this:

And far from vanishing into the immateriality of thin air, the body is complicating, replicating, escaping its formal organization, the organized organs which modernity has taken for normality. This new malleability is everywhere: in the switches of transsexualism, the perforations of tattoos and piercings, the indelible markings of brands and scars, the emergence of neural and viral networks, bacterial life, prostheses, neural jacks, vast numbers of wandering matrices.

—SADIE PLANT<sup>2</sup>

Or perhaps this:

In the cultural bestiary, the body is pulverized and splayed apart, like a "lap dissolve"; a traveller in time where from the viewpoint of the advanced cybernetic technologies of the mediascape, the body is always a big failure in desperate need of supplementary technical prosthetics."

—ARTHUR KROKER<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, cultural theory defies the body and resists the difficult truth that in point of fact the Cartesian split in culture and society is widening, as we sit like Foucault's malleable "docile bodies" watching screens and monitors, becoming ever more psychologically, but certainly not physically, disembodied. Foucault reminds us that this is by no means a passive activity, but is willful, mental;<sup>8</sup> and McLuhan was early (as ever) to recognize the flickering images of television for what they were, an electronic wedge to prize open and deepen the mind-body divide:

As electric media proliferate, whole societies at a time become discarnate, detached from mere bodily or physical "reality" and relieved of any allegiance to or a sense of responsibility for it. . . . The alteration of human identity by new service environments of information has left whole populations without personal or community values.<sup>9</sup>

Daily dosages of empathetic, mental transference have grown as passive, receptive modes such as television have transformed into active and interactive cyber-wanderings, meeting "real" people to create fictional (MUDs and MOOs) and nonfictional (e-friendship) relationships. While these can be celebrated as liberating, proactive, and creative collaborative encounters, the fictionality and performativity of e-life and communication also poses serious questions about schizophrenic self-representation and consequent problems of relating with others outside artificial environments. Jon Stratton stresses the Cartesian division at play in his analysis of email affairs, what he calls "the increasing acceptance that the 'self' can exist apart from the 'body'" in online activities and remote erotic encounters such as phone sex.<sup>10</sup> Peter Lamborn Wilson provides Stratton with additional ammunition: "Cyberspace . . . involves a curious form of *disembodiment*, in which each participant becomes a perceptual monad, a concept rather than a physical presence," citing phone sex as a preview to this development:

The deep purpose of phone-sex is probably not really the client's masturbation or his credit card number, but the actual ectoplasmic meeting of two ghosts in the "other" world of sheer nothingness, a poor parodic rendering of the phone company's slogan, "Reach out and touch someone," which is so sadly, so finally, what we cannot do in cyberspace.<sup>11</sup>

Allucquere Rosanne Stone points out how "compared to 'real' space, in virtual space the socioepistemic structures by means of which the meaning of the terms 'self' and 'body' are produced operate differently."<sup>12</sup> Stratton suggests that a consequence of this difference is

a radicalising of Cartesian dualism. Where, in modern thinking, the body served to contain and limit the self, the singularity of which was guaranteed by the continuity of the mind in the body, there is now an increasing acceptance of the idea that not only are selves separate from the body, they are not limited and determined by the mind's containment in the body.<sup>13</sup>

But against this background, what is vital to understand in relation to digital performance is that the mind-body split is generally at complete odds with the practice of artists and performers. Their work involves—indeed is totally reliant upon—a close harmony and connection between mental creativity and physical skill and dexterity. The fundamental goal of most performers is the eradication of distinction between mind and body—the fluid and unmediated bridge between the inner and the outer—mental or emotional impulse spontaneously combusting as unique and pure physical expression. As Richard Schechner put it in 1977, "His entire effort is in making his body-voice-mind-spirit whole. Then he risks this wholeness here and now in front of others. Like the tightrope walker on the high wire, each move is absolutely spontaneous and part of an endless discipline."<sup>14</sup> Regardless of the medium, performance artists explicitly explore and enact their holistic autonomies and interiorities (gendered, spiritual, emotional, and political), not simply their bodily corporeality. If this process takes place within a recorded electronic or digital environment, it is the medium that is virtual, unreal or disembodied, not the human performer within it. In the performance arts, whether in a theater, on a street corner, or on a computer monitor, the medium is not the message (and never has been); the performer is.

But much cybertheory and digital performance studies have tended to miss this point, to relate instead the metamorphosis and fragmentation of the body in virtual realms to an *actual*, corporeal transformation; or worse still, to a belief in disembodiment. The dislocation and fragmentation of the body in digital performance is an aesthetic praxis which deconstructive critics have hungrily grasped and mythologized, holding up the virtual body as the central icon (immaterial, disembodied), whereas in actuality, it operates as an index, as another trace and representation of the always already *physical* body. The emperor's new clothes of the virtual body are thus being lovingly admired, theorized, and proudly hung up in a wardrobe of theoretical self-deception, as the too-solid flesh of the sweating performer lumbers exhaustedly to the theater bar.

We take a different view, and believe that audiences cognitively and empathetically perceive the performing virtual *human* body (as opposed to a computer simulated body) as always already embodied material flesh. Irrespective of the medium, performance's ontology has for centuries been virtual and simulacral, and the flesh of even the virtual performer remains too solid, and will not melt. Performers generally also share this perception, since their actions in recording images for their virtual body manifestations constitute fully embodied actions of body and mind. Contrary to prevalent critical assumptions, we do not believe the performing virtual body is either less authentic than the live, nor is it disembodied from the performer. What possible use is disembodiment to a performer, or the very idea of a mind and body split?

Bolter and Gromala raise a similar point in relation to digital art, arguing that artists' explorations of the relationship between the virtual and the physical "help to combat the myth of disembodiment":<sup>15</sup>

Digital artists in particular insist on the materiality of their work. They will never abandon or disparage the ways of knowing that the senses give us. For them, even the experience of seeing is not disembodied; it is visceral. Seeing is feeling. What fascinates digital artists is the ways in which their embodied existence is redefined in cyberspace. So they use digital technology to examine the interaction between the physical and the virtual. . . . Digital design oscillates between the physical and the virtual, just as it oscillates between the reflective and the transparent.<sup>16</sup>

### Susan Kozel: Dreaming the Telematic Body

I seldom feel without thinking, or think without feeling.

—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE<sup>17</sup>

In a notable article from 1994, "Spacemaking: Experiences of a Virtual Body," one of Britain's leading dance and technology artists, Susan Kozel, reflects at length on the digital body and telepresence following her experience "performing" for four weeks in Paul Sermon's seminal installation *Telematic Dreaming* (1992). Working for several hours a day over a sustained period as a simultaneously corporeal body (on her own bed) and a virtual one (her image projected onto a gallery visitor's bed) and interacting with others' telematic presence, Kozel explored in depth the relationship between her flesh body and its virtual counterpart (figure 10.1). Video cameras, monitors and projectors link together beds in two separate rooms using a videoconference ISDN line. Each person's image, lying on a blue bed, is separated from its background using chromakey blue screen techniques, and is trans-



Figure 10.1 The image of Susan Kozel is projected onto a bed occupied by a gallery visitor in Paul Sermon's installation *Telematic Dreaming* (1992).

mitted and projected onto the other's bed, and the composite image is shown on monitors. The two bodies (one real, one virtual) thus mutually meet on both beds, and prerecorded video imagery—rich colors and textures—is mixed into the scene to enhance the dream-like quality. But Sermon deliberately avoids providing an audio link so as to concentrate attention on the meeting of two bodies separated in real space but virtually conjoined: "human interaction was reduced to its simplest essence: touch, trust, vulnerability."<sup>18</sup>

Kozel begins by describing the initial strangeness of the relationship between her actions moving her arms and body alone on her bed "as if in some sort of hypnotic ritual dance," yet simultaneously engaging in an intense and intimate improvisation with other unknown bodies projected on the bed. She felt "little electric shocks" in response to virtual caresses and very soon the real impact of the telematic connections became apparent:

Movement usually began in a hesitant way with hand contact taking on excessive importance. The impact of slow and small movement became enormous. . . . When the movement progressed from these early stages to a sort of full body choreography the piece became an emotional investment which shocked and sometimes disturbed people. . . . The occasions when the movement worked well felt very much like good contact improvisation: a hypnotic feeling of not knowing what is coming next but letting the strong flow of movement carry you onward. When the movement moved through us in this way, based on openness and trust, the distinction between which bodies were real and which were virtual became irrelevant.<sup>19</sup>

But over days, as Kozel became increasingly engrossed in her telematic body as she watched its duet meetings with scores of visitors on the monitors, the "irrelevance" of its status as flesh or data was brought into crisis and reevaluated, as her real body rebelled. Her back, neck, and joints became stiff and painful, and even more disturbing for her, her digestive system and internal organs were beset by aches and cramps:

My real body asserted its presence as a response to the virtual image which had come to dominate my movement while performing. The invisible elements of my body began to take on a new, demanding significance, as if needing to assert themselves to balance the scale. Digestion does not appear on the screen. Admittedly it does not appear through flesh, but it is even less present in a context where the body has lost its three-dimensionality. The more I ventured into the visual, virtual world the more my non-virtual body called attention to itself like an anchor, like ballast. I seemed to be pulled between the two extremes of an imaginary spectrum: the abjection of flesh and the sanitization of technology.<sup>20</sup>

Kozel's experience of her split body becomes like a mythical rite of passage as she recounts tender sexual experiences which thrill her but also fill her with guilt ("would [I] be desensitizing myself to the detriment of relations with my real loved ones[?]") and are punctuated by incidents of violence and defilement. Someone on the other bed produces

a knife, which sends a distinctly corporeal shiver down her spine: its virtuality does nothing to disguise or lessen the psychological and emotional coding of a man wielding a blade over a supine woman on a bed. Another visitor elbows her hard in the stomach, and she doubles over "wondering why since I didn't actually feel it. But I felt something." The only occasion she admits to completely separating her physical and virtual selves was in the worst incident of "cyberviolence" she encountered, when two leather-jacketed men jumped on the remote bed and attacked the image of her head and pelvic area. But even here, she relates her dissociation from her virtual body in relation to a phenomenon that can equally occur in the physical world when people are subjected to rape or brutalization: "I found myself watching my image in the video monitor, paralysed with horror at what they were doing to the woman's body—no longer *my* body . . . a primordial reaction in a sophisticated technological context."

But all other violent incidents and betrayals of trust shake her emotionally and hurt her physically, forcing her to refute popular theories that the virtual body is disembodied or futile. Rather, she theorizes the virtual body as an alternative, yet still material body, inescapably connected to its corporeal embodiment. Crucially, she draws a distinction in her conception of "alternative materiality" between living, moving human bodies and inanimate objects. She describes how sometime after sharing a fifteen-minute improvisation session, a man returned and presented her with a rose. Her inability to grasp it (she could only trace its outline in virtual space or pass her hand through it) rendered it fundamentally immaterial; its lack of kinetic or emotional response (in stark contrast to the bodies of her virtual partners) made it a metaphorical rather than a material presence. She concludes that "the distinction between materiality and immateriality in the technology is movement: as moving beings people take on an alternative materiality, while objects become immaterial in their inertia."<sup>21</sup>

Kozel's article is a definitive phenomenological expression of the part-split, part-organic experience of the relationship between the corporeal and virtual body. In fluid and intensely experienced waves, she vacillates between feelings of separation and oneness—of losing ("the ability to disappear is central to the experience of the body electric") and then being sharply reminded of her physical body ("then without warning the flesh of my body would reassert its presence"). We are struck by her discourse's closeness to Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (discussed in Chapter 6) both stylistically in its soul-searching, subjective scrutiny, and philosophically and epistemologically in its conclusions. Where Barthes is categorical about the palpable reality of the Photograph, so too is Kozel about the materiality of the virtual body, as seen, for example, in her discussions of the virtual sex she experienced. She adamantly maintains that these encounters were "not a substitute for sex" or a "technological replica," but "undeniably real, not a compromise." Kozel also echoes Barthes's suggestion that the Photograph can be "more real" in its potency than the physical moment it captures, when she discusses the "stilted" and "wooden" encounters she had in the gallery coffee bar with the frequently returning

"virtual lover," who gave her a rose. "Although both contexts were real, our virtual relationship seemed to be more meaningful . . . *not* because our bodies were digitalised and abandoned . . . [but because] our virtual rapport had a greater physicality and intimacy than our real engagement."<sup>22</sup>

As with the question concerning the reality of theatre, that of the reality of virtual experience becomes spurious, with no adequate grounds upon which to test it. In some respects, the advancement of virtual technology will help to render the claim that theatre is an artificial reproduction of reality even more non-sensical. . . . It becomes more and more difficult to sustain a clear distinction between truth and falsity when the phenomenology, or direct experience, of technology is taken into account; when, according to Marshall McLuhan, the contours of our own extended bodies are found in our technologies.<sup>23</sup>

She draws on McLuhan's notion as well as Frederick Brooks's research into "Intelligence Amplification" to stress the electronic body as an amplification and extension of the flesh body to which it is intimately entwined. Rather than rendering the corporeal body obsolete, telematics offers it a fourth dimension, where it is able to do things the physical body cannot "such as map itself onto another or disappear . . . [and] challenging existing ideas of what it was possible for two bodies to do. We could pass through each other. . . . Our bodies seemed to be infinitely mutable, while they never ceased to be *our* bodies." As the Photograph for Barthes is a return to and spiritual reanimation of the real, telepresence is the same for Kozel in relation to the body. "Telepresence has been called an out-of-body experience," she says, "yet what intrigues me is the return to the body which is implied by any voyage beyond it. Once plunged back into flesh, what has changed?" It is thus not the body's voyage out into virtual embodiments that most radically alters human perceptions of the body, "but the inevitable return and the lasting effect that the outward motion leaves on the reunited body. It is here that the political dimension of VR resides."<sup>24</sup>

Kozel's experience of direct connection and physical and psychological empathy with her virtual body provides an important perspective, but it should not be forgotten that it is a performer's perspective. That is not to suggest in any way that it should be mistrusted, and Kozel is a performer (and an intellectual) of great integrity and sensitivity. But it is in both the performer's psyche and job description to open themselves physically and emotionally, and to welcome vulnerability in order to experience virtual pains and pleasures "as if" (in Stanislavski's phrase) they were real. Is it the same experience for the nonperformer, the visitor on the other bed? The simple answer is "sometimes," depending on who they are and how much they too are prepared to open themselves, be vulnerable, and "perform" with intimacy and sensitivity.

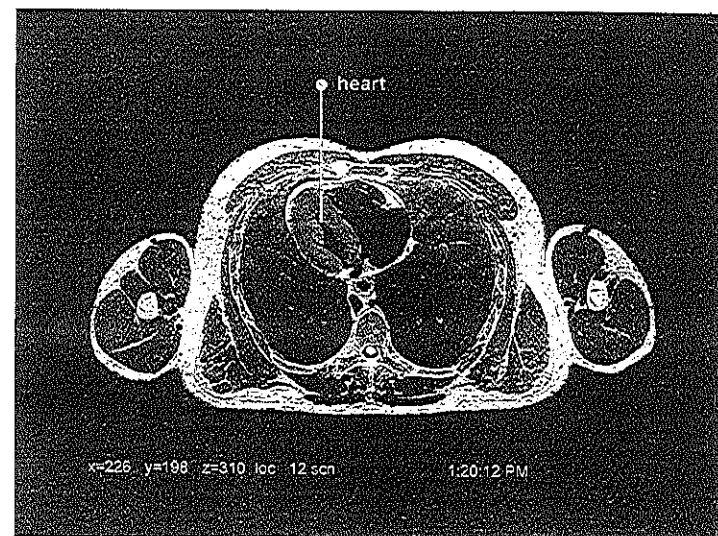
The fact that each visitor interacts with Kozel, a trained dancer and performer, means that she can guide and lead the virtual contact improvisation, but the use of a performer

on one of the beds during this four-week installation in 1992 was actually a rare incarnation of *Telematic Dreaming*. Since then, the two beds in two rooms have been meeting places for gallery visitors only. The piece has become a popular installation classic, exhibited in more than twenty different galleries and locations, including for a year at London's Millennium Dome during 2000 and over many years as a permanent exhibit at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, England. We have watched and participated in the installation numerous times in different galleries and have seen a vast range of different types of exchanges and "performances" (which is, of course, one of its charms).

But the fact that others in the gallery also stand close to the beds and observe tends to inhibit extreme behaviors or intimacies, and people in one room tend to wait for a friend or partner to get on the other bed before they get onto theirs. Children are far less inhibited, and are also most prone to virtual fisticuffs, but their blows are playful, and reactions to virtual impacts are melodramatically performed rather than "felt." But whatever the age or sensibility, and whether improvising with strangers or friends, we observe almost universal pleasure, wonder, or delight on the faces of those who venture onto the beds to make contact in the same space and time with someone else's projected body image. Whether or not visitors identify as intensely with their virtual bodies as Kozel, Paul Sermon's wonderful, exquisitely simple and groundbreaking installation creates a type of magic, a sort of lucid dream. *Telematic Dreaming* is an example of where digital technology and performing bodies are combined to create something unique and unprecedented; something genuinely and distinctly new. Few people would dare to venture onto the same bed as the real Kozel (or other stranger) to commence a physical improvisation, but her virtuality enables it. Over years, tens of thousands of people have, like Kozel, "luxuriated in the physical intimacy and sheer decadence of it all," and they will continue to do so as the work is destined to stand the test of time.

### Digital Dissections (or, Project-ing Visible Humans)

The digitization of the body reached an historic moment with the multimillion dollar National Library of Medicine's *Visible Human Project* (1994). Biomedicine, medical imaging, and computer technologies were brought together to create an immensely detailed digital dissection archive of two human bodies: a male prison inmate executed by lethal injection (Joseph Paul Jernigan), and an anonymous fifty-nine-year-old housewife who had died of a heart attack. Dubbed "Adam and Eve" by the project team, their corpses "were MRI scanned, frozen in gelatine to  $-85$  degrees C, quartered, scanned again, sliced through (into thousands of slices between 0.3 and 1 mm thick) and photographed repeatedly, as each layer of their bodies was planed away, turning to dust."<sup>25</sup> The digitized images of the successive, minute layers of the bodies' compositions were arranged into various programmed data sets to enable reconstruction and viewing of all cross-sections



**Figure 10.2** One of the *Visible Human Project*'s bodily cross-sections used (with graphical overlays added) by Paul Vanouse for his installation *Items 1-2,000* (1996).

within any plane; detailed examination of organs, body parts, skeletal and circulatory systems; and even animated body "fly-throughs" (figure 10.2).

In her book about the project, Catherine Waldby suggests that while the *Visible Human Project* has provided a clinical benchmark for human anatomical study, the figures also "prefigure some new future for the human body, they imply the possibility of frightening, rather than consoling, transformations."<sup>26</sup> These "exhaustively visualized" bodies are "perfectly co-operative image objects . . . available for all forms of display and penetration, without recalcitrance and resistance."<sup>27</sup> Unlike real bodies, they are endlessly replicable, transmittable, and divisible. She also notes their disconcerting presence as "virtual apparitions," the dead reanimated into life once more through the miracle of biodigital science, or perhaps "virtual vampires" and "cyber-zombies" dwelling in the netherworld somewhere between life and death: the digital undead.

In line with many other writers, Waldby draws attention to the male subject, Jernigan, whose execution as a convicted murderer places his clinical dissection within long historical traditions of medical and anatomical experimentation on criminals and vagrants. His status as prisoner is eternalized through the *Visible Human Project*, where he is once again condemned to "an afterlife of arrest, incarceration and punishment."<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, David Bell draws parallels with the digitally created Sid 6.7 character in the film *Virtuosity* (1995), a composite serial killer computer simulation created by the police, who