

“Our senses define the edge of consciousness, and because we are born explorers and questors after the unknown, we spend a lot of our lives pacing that windswept perimeter.”

—Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*

The body is the vessel for our senses. It carries our thoughts, emotions, and memories, as well as our organs, blood, veins, and channels of energy that establish connections between different parts of our anatomy and human experience. It registers what we see, feel, touch, and hear through currents of sensations and electrical impulses. What happens when these impulses are digitally re-incarnated? As the body is digitally reflected and reborn, are we looking towards technology to experience ourselves in a redeemed form outside of human societal constructs? When technology captures kinetic energy, is our essence embodied in the pixilation, or is our “self” lost in the process?

Whether through motion capture, live processing, animation, or other means of data visualization, the body is the source, referent and inspiration for many digital media artists working with interactive technologies. The exhibition, *Digital Incarnate: The Body, Identity, and Interactive Media*, is an investigation into this confluence. It gazes through multiple lenses in its exploration of the body and identity as they are transformed and represented through the realms of technological evolution. The exhibition was born from questions and awe in witnessing the complex relationships negotiated through new media art and performance works that engage the body and technology. Through the exhibition’s unfolding, we hope to bring forward exploratory ideas that push and pull our perceptions of the body and impulses to move beyond it into uncharted cyber territory.

With skin, sweat, gaze, and heartbeat removed, is another essence of human being revealed? As scholar Sondra Fraleigh suggests in her essay, *Soma Strokes and Second Chances*, interactive technology has the capacity to bring us into another dimension of body awareness and consciousness. Perhaps the body is just one form of consciousness, and technology a portal for new or expanded sense-perspectives beyond the body’s form. In this mode, our identity can be multiplied and malleable as we experience ourselves in the real and digital parallel. The simultaneity of this moment complicates our perception of where we begin and end, what is subject and object, where apparent boundaries exist, and what occurs in between.



Luftwerk  
*Doppelgänger*, 2006  
video still

When examining shadow, as in *Doppelgänger* by Luftwerk, the body in its dependence on light is simultaneously a place of self-recognition and ambiguity. A large-scale video projection, the work exists in two states. Independent of interaction, the first state shows life-size figures as reverse light shadows moving across the screen in stop-motion animation. Pedestrian movements and gestures are seen in a staggered photo montage. When a viewer steps into the space of the work, *Doppelgänger* shifts into an interactive state that triggers the projections into a more fluid and realistic animation coupled with sound samples of inner dialogue. At the same time, light from the projector casts the viewer’s real-time shadow back onto the scrim, merging past and present shadowed existences.

Whether in the reverse light projection, or the viewers’ dark shadow, self and other are navigated through the contours of the body. The viewer becomes both a witness and participant as *Doppelgänger* intermingles the real and the projected. Silhouettes we recognize as our own slide into, through, and past shadow figures, creating hybrid relations between real and computerized light-shadows.

In Troika Ranch’s *Liquid Mirror*, ideas of self and body awareness are propelled into greater abstraction. Using the viewer’s body as the data source, Isadora software reads and regenerates movement into a real-time manipulation of sound and image. The body is cast as an anthropomorphic liquid projected across the walls of the space, with energies and gestures reverberating in virtual reflection. We are the shapers of the work as the work re-shapes us. As we vacillate between subject and object, witness and participant, we can feel most acutely our bodies as agents in the making. At the same time, a displacement of self occurs. Where are we? We are here in the real, then there in a resulting digital parallel form. What is inside feels like it is outside. How do we understand ourselves in this post-corporeal state? As identity becomes soluble, it shifts into uncanny resemblances that complicate our sense of self. *Liquid Mirror* is at once a playful interaction and a cause for deeper sensory reflection.

It is here where we may feel a sense of transcendence, at once disembodied and (re)embodied. The idea of disembodiment

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was widely explored with the advent of virtual and online technologies, referring to a state where one might transcend the limitations of the body and move into an un-gendered or de-racialized space freed from cultural and societal coding. Yet one cannot escape the role of perception and consciousness that may, or may not, lead this revolution. The motivation still resides in the mind and our culturally-influenced tendencies that so often place us in boundaried existences with and from one another. As we enter the technosensual worlds present in works by Luftwerk and Troika Ranch, we navigate this ambiguous terrain, oscillating between solid and soluble, tangible and ephemeral.

In this fusion of the body and technology, can we see ourselves in different ways, liberated from prescribed notions of identity? The OpenEnded Group's Paul Kaiser writes of how he and collaborator Shelley Eshkar "were after a more elusive kind of beauty, the beauty of motion now detached from the body that engendered it." Seeing digital strokes of hand-drawn anatomies as somewhat of a "spectral passage," Kaiser and Eshkar collect movement through data captured by reflective markers placed on key points of a dancer's body. The acquired motion then undergoes the OpenEnded Group's provocative transformation of mapping gesture through evocative drawn lines and sound, as evident in the virtual dance installations *Hand-drawn Spaces* and *Ghostcatching*. Seen alongside one another, the works share technical aesthetics, but reveal striking contrasts in underlying artistic process and conceptualization. *Ghostcatching*, featuring and made in collaboration with choreographer Bill T. Jones, clings to the essence of Jones in revealing a human soulfulness imminently tied to its digital reincarnation. As viewers, we are left to our own intimate processes and reflections in the face of this anthro-digital transmigration. In contrast, reflecting the ideology and practice of Merce Cunningham, with whom *Hand-drawn Spaces* was made, this work shows an intentional detachment and amalgamation of movements based on two dancers, male and female.

A consolidation of the dancers' forms in *Hand-drawn Spaces* erases identity, underscoring dance in its essential form. As the figures move in and out of frames and across the thresholds of screens, walls and boundaries are dissolved. Like spectres of our mind, the figures in *Hand-*



Bill T. Jones, Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar  
*Ghostcatching*, 1999  
still frame

*drawn Spaces* summon our senses as we experience the impressions of choreographic thought in 3-dimensional effect.

In *Ghostcatching*, the movement and energy of Bill T. Jones is inseparable from the resulting eloquence witnessed in the installation. We hear and feel his vocalized breath and the sweep and weight of muscular motion. Visually, we see a volumetric figure moving and navigating through architectural notations. Jones' movement is gradually multiplied, each past essence leaving traces of former lines and kinetic energy. This multiplicity itself references different "modes of being," which Jones used to explore his movements as sculpted through computerized animation. These migrate in and out of "a single complex body," as described by Paul Kaiser, a portent metaphor for the fusional relationship of the body and technology.

Beyond direct interaction with the body, *Synchronous Objects* uses the dancer's form and movement as a tool to ask, "what else might physical thinking look like?" This choreographic digitization project, co-directed by Maria Palazzi and Norah Zuniga Shaw and incorporating a team of faculty, staff, students, and researchers at The Ohio State University, was built upon an analysis of William Forsythe's *One Flat Thing, reproduced*. The group worked to unlock complex structural relationships in his choreography by cycling through its volume from dance to data to object to dance again. In the resulting piece, the body's motion is traced and extracted using such frames of reference as annotation, sound cues, and three-dimensional alignments within the architecture of the dance itself. Each of these components were quantified and analyzed into studied "objects" depicting the body in choreographic creation. As one explores the different stages of the piece's deconstruction and reconstruction, the body's form is newly seen and conceived. The dancers' bodies are transformed into pixelated algorithms undergoing fluid metamorphoses. In this process of digital gestation, the body becomes data in a technological ecosystem. Dynamic and cyber-interactive, *Synchronous Objects* is an open portal to encountering the body as a choreographic element in virtual deconstruction.

From shadow and reflection, to motion-captured line and pixelated light, a return to the recognizable shape and movement of the human body beckons a new sense perspective. The works in *Digital Incarnate: The Body, Identity, and Interactive Media* serve to magnify our sense of self through a technological (re)iteration with expanded parameters. Without question, our body awareness—with all its existential wonderings of consciousness and perception, inside and outside, self and other—is challenged and provoked. In the realm of technology, consciousness is charged with sensing life from the inside-out, sweeping awareness from the perimeters of human nature into the basin of the discerning mind. The curious terrain of interactive media brings questions of cultural, social, and political boundaries into different light, calling upon a reconsideration of what influences such paradigms in the first place. Marveling at the impulse to both transcend and hold onto the body, we see a cycle of dissolution, expansion and return. In the words of T. S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.



Synchronous Objects Project  
The Ohio State University and The Forsythe Company  
image still

## Techno-Sensual: Human Nature in Digital Reflection

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