

## **Re-corporealizing the Body Via Screen Dance**

By Ellen Bromberg

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The dictionary defines corporeal as “having a material body; tangible, physical.” Therefore, I would interpret the title of this panel as the “re-materializing of the body via screen dance.” For me it does not mean “replacing” the body but rather, creating a different materiality, one that is made of light, celluloid, electromagnetic particles or digital information rather than of flesh, bone and sinew. Both forms of materiality create image, one dense, the other etheric; one has a limited life span, the other a potentially timeless one; the corporeal body’s movements are replicable, but not exactly repeatable, while the screen body’s movements are unchanged from viewing to viewing.

I would like to include in my comments this afternoon, a perspective from a panel on which I sat at last year’s International Dance and Technology Conference at Arizona State University. The title of that panel was “Content and the Seeming Loss of Spirituality in Technologically Mediated Work.” While these two panels might differ somewhat, issues of corporeality and spirituality can be viewed as distant points on a continuum of existence. As a duality, they define each other. The word spiritual is defined as “not material; incorporeal, of or pertaining to the spirit or soul, not physical.” It has been my experience that this duality of the corporeal and the spiritual can find unity, balance and expression in the process of making and appreciating art. Today I will discuss further some issues inherent in the duality of corporeality and spirituality as they relate to screen dance, and I will also discuss and present a short video of a creative project that I feel explores this duality in a novel way.

In his book “The Awakening Heart,” John Welwood describes two fundamental tendencies in human nature: the desire to realize one’s individual nature and the strong need to merge with or be a part of something larger than oneself. These two tendencies of human nature can be conceptualized as the individual, or corporeal self, and the transcendent or spiritual self. For me, it has been through the creation and appreciation of art, through the aesthetic experience, that integration of the individual and the transcendent, the corporeal and the spiritual can occur. And it is through this integration that a simultaneously individual and collective understanding of what it is to be human emerges.

Metaphor is a means by which we can recognize something of both our human and transcendent natures. When a work of art resonates (and of course what comprises that resonance will be different for each of us), the boundaries of our individuality soften and we can seem to merge with the object, or the experience of the performer or performance. We experience a unity that transcends our physicality while at the same time being defined by it. That is, our very materiality is the basis from which transcendence can occur. Corporeality therefore, is essential to our understanding of the non-corporeal, or transcendent self.

Knowledge derives in part from such experience of resonance and this experience can be a most meaningful teacher. Knowledge is not solely based on an understanding of abstract concepts or beliefs, but rather, on embodied experience as well. I believe that while knowledge may begin at the factual or conceptual level, in order for something to be truly known or understood, the experiential component is essential. When viewing a work of art that resonates, it is the embodied knowledge held within both the viewer and the work of

art (the manifestation of its creator's embodied knowledge) that resonates and it is that resonance which facilitates the experience of transcendence. There is mutuality in the process, a reciprocal relationship through which is satisfied the desire to realize one's individual nature and the strong need to merge with or be a part of something larger than oneself.

In 1992 I began a collaborative relationship with video-artist Douglas Rosenberg. We have created two works together, each spanning a number of years, each integrating video and technology to varying degrees into live performance. The project I'd like to present is the first of the two, titled "Singing Myself a Lullaby," which was a multi-media performance work performed by Bay Area dancer John Henry. Created in collaboration with Doug, and composer Victor Spiegel, the stage piece was an evening length work examining the image of the self as one individual prepared for his death from AIDS. AIDS was not the primary subject of the piece, but rather the catalyst for self-examination. An investigation of identity, "Singing Myself a Lullaby" presented numerous vignettes from John's life, interspersed with more universal movement rituals. This layering of the personal and universal presented life as the construction and dissolution of various identities over time, the overriding metaphor being that death is the dissolution of our identification with the body.

I had worked with John ten years earlier in the Bay Area, and when he first approached me about collaborating with him on a work about AIDS, he said that he'd lost many friends to the disease and that he wanted to respond to these experiences in a performance piece. He never mentioned that he was ill. It wasn't until later that he revealed his illness, and with that piece of information, the nature and meaning of the project was instantly changed. John and I worked together for quite some time until the main themes of the work started to take shape. These themes were taken directly from John's life experience, and while his individual experiences might trigger some identification by audience members, I knew that these personal experiences needed to be encompassed by more universally accepted truths. This was addressed by placing vignettes from John's life within a greater, more expansive context, one that created non-narrative space and facilitated reflection. In this way, there was a gentle oscillation between the individuality of John's corporeal self and the potential for connection with his non-corporeal, transcendent self.

We premiered the work in Tucson in 1995 and during the next year it was performed at New Performance Gallery in S.F., at P.S. 122 in NYC, and again in S.F. at the Cowell Theater, as part of The Edge Festival for New Performance in the spring of 1996. John died two weeks after the final performance. Each performance of the work was different as video footage was used increasingly to replace John's live performance, as he grew weaker from the illness. It was our intention that the final work would result in a video piece, which has indeed come to pass. The Open Society Institute's Project on Death in America (part of the Soros Foundation) has funded the creation of this video/dance/documentary and it has also been supported by Wisconsin Public Television, which will broadcast the work some time this year.

Early on in the process we began video taping the material in the piece, knowing that at some point in the future John would not be able to perform the more rigorous dancing sections. The future existed for us only abstractly and we approached this issue as both a practical and an artistic matter. Over time however, what was at first abstract and poetic became very real for all involved. As the illness progressed and John's body diminished in

size and vitality, the contrast between his real image and his video image was striking. We realized that embedded within the artistic vision of the work, was a visual chronicle of a dying man, and that with each performance, that chronicle became more complete. Like an extended cross-fade from flesh to projected image, the ultimate completion of the work was predicated on the death of the performer. The irony of this experience was that as a friend, watching John's body diminish in size and vitality was devastating. And yet at the same time, as an artist, I was fascinated by the gradual displacement of his corporeal being by his projected image on stage.

On stage, the scale of the video images gave new form to the larger-than-life projected energy that had so characterized John as a performer. The scale and the close-up shots also brought us into a more intimate relationship with John's body, which was the source and arena for the work. The video also allowed us to see aspects of his illness that might not have been readily visible from a proscenium stage. It was of critical importance that we make a work of art that defined John not simply as a dying man for whom we feel mainly sympathy, but rather as a man offering us an opportunity for our own self reflection. And, by participating in this way with John, we experienced the work not only as a meditation on death, but an affirmation of life.

I have learned and continue to learn so much from this project. This work has given form to issues of identity, loss and transformation, which are universally important themes. What I have also learned from the aesthetic experience of creating the work, was the power of the projected image to infuse the performance space with both energy and metaphor, adding layers of information not possible through a purely choreographic language. I have also grown to see the camera as a tool with which to magnify and reveal the human and corporeal. Like the amplification of an acoustic instrument, there become available certain pitches and timbres that were previously below the level of perception in a theatrical performance of dance. The increased scale of close-up shots projected to a large size, along with the variety of camera angles available, reveal nuance in gesture and facial expression often not seen from the stage. Previously, much of my fascination with movement was, either its emotionally expressive capabilities, the sympathetic kinesthetic response it stimulated, or the construction and development of a choreographer's unique movement language and choreographic structure. Over the years I have found that fascination waning, and in its place, a growing appreciation for the simple authentic movements of human expression. The camera's eye has infinite potential to reveal, magnify and intensify that simplicity and as such has augmented and expanded my palette of expression.

Doug and I begin editing the final video/dance/documentary next week. As we embark on the final phase of this project which we began eight years ago, we will be creating the final fixed document in which we layer together all of the images from the process. John died four years ago and yet, in this new materiality of light, electromagnetic particles and digital data, the image of his flesh and bone will have a new and lasting life, a re-corporealized life on the screen. Moreover, John's re-materialized image offers, to a much larger audience this time, an opportunity to address once again, the larger issues of identity, loss and transformation.