

Editorial

Digital Cultures Lab 2005

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This issue of the *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* publishes a selection of essays originally presented as lectures for the international ‘Digital Cultures’ Lab and Conference, organized and hosted by the editor at Nottingham Trent University and the Sandfield Theatre in late 2005.¹

The international Digital Cultures Lab offered a major platform for practitioners in dance-technologies, a field that has emerged over the past 15 years. Several large-scale conferences took place in the US and Canada, under the name IDAT (International Dance and Technology), with a last meeting held at Tempe, Arizona in 1999, while a range of smaller residential, intensive peer-to-peer dance and media workshops (including Digital Dancing and DigiLounge in the UK) had begun to set the pace in the growth of contemporary digital-based performance world-wide, not to speak here of large-scale electronic arts festivals, media exhibitions and computer music events which along with academic conferences have helped to shape our questions about technology and human creativity.

The ‘Digital Cultures’ structure was three-fold, conceived as a one-week international laboratory with interconnected agendas: a) workshops/master-classes, demonstrations and research experiments; b) public exhibitions and concerts; c) a public conference. The objective was to bring together established and emerging choreographers, composers, dancers, performance artists, digital artists and researchers from around the world, to create an open atmosphere of exchange that would culminate in public exhibitions and conference debates staged as a catalyst for cross-cultural research into different approaches to, and perceptions of, digital performance-cultures. A ‘language of new media’, to use Lev Manovich’s book title, is being learned, but it is not a common language. Rather, embodying knowledge and learning how new categories and concepts

are derived from the computerization of culture suggest processes that make us more fully aware of new sources in our (traditions of) cultural expressions.

As its title indicates, the lab focussed not on tools and technologies, but on the impact of an evolving *digital aesthetics* on diverse cultural forms and practices, as well as on perceptual processes as such. Digital technologies challenge our disciplinary knowledge of dance and performance, customary perceptions of culturally embodied knowledge and sensory processing, and assumptions about choreography, composition, design, and the relations between maker, performer, and audience. The project, for example, aimed at developing a better understanding of interaction design, real time synthesis and physical computing through critical engagement with the consequences of interactivity on contemporary cultural forms. We also tried to locate a workable definition of what digital cultures are, how software, design, programmability and discrete digital coding transform older continuous media, and how we can grasp art and performance within increasingly technological and globalised contexts in which we live.

If the fact of collaborative team-work is undeniable, as the provocative dance and science research partnerships shown in the workshops indicated and the installations and dance works themselves confirmed, can we see interactive and distributed performance (e.g. two telematic dances linking Nottingham with Sydney were staged on one day) as a new principle of ‘collaborative culture’, beyond older aesthetic conventions of concert dance and live art? Has the ‘network become a stage’, as one conference panel asked, or do new locative media, wearable computing and location-based interactivity indeed ‘augment reality’? How ambiguous are such notions of mixed reality or interactivity, or the notion of ‘instant conductors’ within the global empire of ‘generic humans’ (Sally Jane Norman) and late industrial ‘standardisation’ (Jaime del Val)? How do ‘interactive mediated spaces’ (Sue Hawksley/ Simon Biggs) blur distinctions between performer and audience/user, between performance, play, ritual, game and utility, between voluntary and involuntary action, and what new memories of the human figure or what new ‘conceptual metaphors’ (Ivani Santana) are generated when ‘mathematical operations and

calculations' are used in the artistic composition of dance and the 'technical machine' (Stamatia Portanova) provokes un-thought-of ideas of movement?

The essays collected here help us to think through some of these questions, even if they cannot fully recapture the intensity of the physical encounters in the workshops, and the unexpected cross-overs between disciplines and sensibilities which took place when, for example, a philosopher from Montréal (Erin Manning) taught a tango lesson to interface and fashion/textile designers who had just explored the tactile and sensory capacities of 'breathing' intelligent fabrics (Thecla Schiphorst) after listening to a Caribbean scholar's exposition of her research on the Diaspora and migrant processes, i.e. the ways in which new forms of dialogue and expressions, exemplified in popular cultural forms and visual and textual culture, become modes and sites of articulation for theories around hybridity, syncretic cultures, cultural borders, re-locations and re-negotiations (Yvonne Watson).

This articulation was not always accomplished, and S.J.Norman reminds us that the 'implications of the knotty ethical and anthropological questions' arising in physical research workshops are not always fully grasped in the moment but can fire 'a longer-term need to explore the expressive strengths of otherness in the normative environments afforded by digital media'. The fire, in our case, started on the first day of the lab when Jayachandran Palazhy taught a 'pure' movement class based on complex algorithms derived from martial arts and traditional Indian dance techniques, and Ran Hyman taught a West African dance formula (AFOTEK) grounded in heavily repetitious digital pulses of 'Tekhno music'. Rhythms, it turned out during a contentious debate, were not perceived by everyone in the same way at all. Although the Lab proposed to examine western knowledge of digital interactivity through non-western concepts of rhythm and interaction, assumptions about techno music and African-based dance differ, and so do our ideas about categorizing movement sequences, as it was beautifully demonstrated in Palazhy's presentation of his new DVD *Nagarika*, an integrated information system which uses the oral histories of Indian masters to explicate principles that govern Bharatanatyam and Kalarippayattu, such as the role of the gaze (eyes) and highly specific emotional gestures in augmenting the movement.

Jaime del Val's plea for the recognition of unreplaceable specificities is a crucial political reminder of our tasks, if indeed we search for non-colonial 'languages of new media'. Non-western articulations of processual media – e.g. Hélio Oiticica's multisensory installations or Lygia Clark's relational objects; Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's relational architecture; Dumb Type's collective multimedia art design; Olu Taiwo's 'Return Beat'; Ibrahim Quraishi's use of the sonic space of Kathak; and, particularly, the political efforts of independent arts organizations to form their own workshop, research and exhibition platforms, such as Palazhy's Attakkalari Center for Movement Arts in Bangalore, the 798 Factory in Beijing's Dashanzi District, the NU2'S association in Barcelona or the new TECHNE Platform in Istanbul – provide frameworks for fresh interpretations of participatory design and situated performance research. The *cultural questions* in this bottom-up research derive from observations of multi-level collaborations between artistic, theatrical, technological, and academic research partners from different cultural backgrounds and locations. It is necessary to deepen the dialogue with Latin, Afro-Caribbean, African, Asian, Middle-Eastern and Australian artists on divergent perceptions of the sensory processing of the digital and on software-as-culture, especially since software development so often tends to originate in advanced hi-tech countries of the North and is generally administered by the corporate standardisers.

The theoretical scope of the 'digital cultures' project is wide-ranging, and the essays published here form a starting point for further investigations that link critical reflection and speculation with the practical studio work and the unpredictable 'mappings' which can emerge when systems, data, and bodies are combined and recombined (as shown in the lab experiment directed by Hawksley and Biggs). The nexus between interaction design and digital cultures is provided by dance as the pre-eminent artform of recent years willing to extend its corporeal techniques, proprioceptions and cognitive processes via digital technologies. I am indebted to all those practitioners who came to Nottingham to support the philosophy of the Lab, and I thank PADM for giving us this intellectual platform.

The list of featured artists and scholars participating in the Lab, the exhibitions, performances, screenings, and the weekend conference would fill several pages. We therefore refer you to the website and research archive of the event:

<http://www.digitalcultures.org>. All of the workshops and exhibitions events, the research questions and panel discussions, and an extensive online library of bibliographical references are archived on this site, and future additions to its continuing research platform will keep it alive and offer a valuable resource to all those involved in interdisciplinary performance and pedagogical practice. A stronger critical debate of emerging practices and positions, one that includes multiple languages and cultural perspectives, is vital for our understanding of how human beings, hybridized by hi-tech, are being redefined. Such debate is also essential for the kind of meetings, exemplified, by the Lab, which strive to be collaborative, non-competitive, and explicitly motivated by dialogue and cooperation among practitioners.

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