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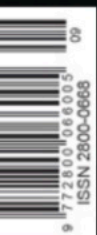
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On the Subject of Movement in an Age of Technology

The Mobilized Body, the Still Body

Kim Hyemi

Today, dance is expanding its expressive range and exploring new possibilities through moving-image media and interactive technologies. In media art, meanwhile, advances in technologies such as extended reality (XR) have led to a growing number of works that probe bodily boundaries and the performing body. As technology becomes increasingly integrated into different artistic media, art forms are crossing disciplinary boundaries and drawing on one another's methods. Against this backdrop, I approach the meeting point of dance and media art as a media artist, a researcher, and an outsider to the dance world. This essay considers contemporary works that engage with the body and movement, raising questions about the coupling of body and technology and issues of subjectivity that dance and media art might explore together.

An exhibition that comes to mind here is Jesper Just's *Corporéalités* (2020). Held at Perrotin in New York from January 14 to February 15, 2020, this solo exhibition presented LED sculptures displaying multichannel video. Seven dancers from American Ballet Theatre were filmed for the work, with electrode pads from modified TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) units attached to their bodies. TENS is used in physiotherapy to relieve muscle pain. In the video, the dancers lie or stand with their bodies relaxed, moving involuntarily in response to electrical stimulation. A hand contracts, a shoulder twitches, a leg folds inward and straightens again.

Just converted *Pavane*, Op. 50 into MIDI signals and sent them directly to the dancers' muscles through electrode pads from hacked TENS units. The dancer thus shifts from an active subject who interprets music through movement to a body passively controlled by a signal. Within the video installation, the body is fragmented once more, appearing in close-up across five LED panels rather than as a single, complete figure. Just sought, paradoxically, to erase choreography and eliminate movement in the ballet dancer's "hyper-abled body." Through electrical stimulation, he envisions a body that moves in other ways.

Attempts to set a motionless body in motion through electrical stimulation have a long history. This history can be traced back to Luigi Galvani's experiments with bioelectricity in the 1780s. Galvani observed that the muscles in a severed frog's leg contracted in response to electrical stimulation and proposed that living organisms possessed an intrinsic "animal electricity." His experiments inspired the idea that a dead body could be reanimated through electricity and the vital force inherent in living beings. This fascination with electricity and the body also found expression in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and in the photographs in Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne de Boulogne's *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression* (1862), which documented his experiments using electrical probes to elicit facial expressions.

Similar experiments can be found in media art. In *Ping Body* (1996), Stelarc linked internet traffic (ping) data to a muscle stimulation system that triggered movement in his body through wires wrapped around it. He called this the “involuntary body.” Daito Manabe, who has cited Stelarc’s work as an inspiration, similarly used a low-frequency therapy device in *Electric Stimulus to Face* (2008) to convert electronic sounds into electrical stimuli delivered to participants’ facial muscles. He tested whether applying the same signal to corresponding points on different faces would produce the same expression. Yet the same stimulus produced different expressions in each person. These experiments explored whether copying a facial expression could also reproduce the emotion behind it, though Manabe acknowledged that they yielded no clear answer.

What is compelling about these works is less the technology itself than the way they unsettle the relationship between body and movement. Movement does not necessarily originate in the subject’s will and find outward expression, nor does a still body necessarily imply the complete absence of movement. These works raise two questions. First, before the signal arrives, is the still body merely passive, waiting to be moved, or might it possess another form of agency? Second, when technology drives the body, who is the subject of that movement, and where does control over the body reside?

Addressing the first question requires us to consider what it means for a body to come to a standstill. To understand stillness, I begin by considering movement, drawing on the work of Peter Sloterdijk and André Lepecki. In *Infinite Mobilization* (1989; English translation, Polity, 2020), the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk argues that modernity was defined by movement itself. He characterizes modernity as a pure “being-towards-movement,” in which subjects understand freedom as freedom of movement and progress as increased mobility. Yet what appears to be an advance toward freedom can give rise to movements that escape human control and become destructive. Sloterdijk argues that the subject is, in fact, endlessly mobilized, caught in movement for movement’s sake—a cycle of self-intensification.

The dance theorist André Lepecki brings this discussion into the realm of dance and the body. In *Exhausting Dance* (2006), he argues that Western dance became increasingly aligned with modernity’s demand for continuous movement, producing bodies and subjectivities suited to that demand. He critically examines the claim that modern dance discovered movement as its essence. He also examines choreography as an apparatus that sets bodies in motion and disciplines them through the authority of writing.

Lepecki turns to stillness—specifically, the “still-act”—as a way to rethink dance and mobility. The still-act, a concept proposed by anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis, describes moments when a subject interrupts and questions the flow of history. For Lepecki, it entails a performance of suspension—a bodily interruption of imposed flow. The still-act calls attention to the controlling regimes of capital, labor, subjectivity, and mobility, revealing possibilities for acting in other ways within them. In doing so, it exposes the political imperative to move that modernity imposes on the body and “exhausts” the convention of equating dance with movement. Stillness also allows what has been buried, discarded, and forgotten in history to resurface in social awareness. This opens dance to a critique of its own assumptions and of the dancer’s participation in mobilization, while inviting a reconsideration of the conditions of choreography.

But do the dancers in Just's work perform such a still-act? This brings us to the second question: the body's agency, and who has the power to still it or set it in motion. In the works Lepecki analyzes, dancers choose to perform still-acts, resisting the imperative of continuous movement and mobilization. In Just's work, by contrast, the dancers perform stillness by remaining motionless as instructed. Their bodies are fully relaxed or held in everyday postures. The body comes to serve as a medium through which electrical signals are transmitted. Stillness, minute vibrations, and tremors are visible, but the subject's agency within them remains unclear. Just explained that he had been exploring how to erase choreography from the dancer since *Interpassivities* (2017), his first collaboration with a dance company. Yet removing choreography does not liberate the body. Instead, technology takes its place as another system that commands movement.

What matters here is that the distinction between human and technological agency becomes blurred: it is no longer clear who or what initiates and controls movement. Technology transmits electrical signals, but the resulting contractions and spasms occur in the human body, through its nerves and muscles. This connects with Just's interest in expanding the boundaries of bodies and categories. He has also cited Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" as an inspiration for the work. How, then, can we identify the subject of movement?

Intriguingly, in Just's work, the viewer emerges as an active subject of movement. Just suggested that visitors could create narrative and emotion through their movement in the gallery. Stacks of white blocks work in conjunction with the LED video sculptures to shape the gallery space. They act as both obstacles and guides, directing visitors through the gallery. Fragmented images and sounds are dispersed across the panels. Visitors navigate among the structures, piecing these fragments together. Through their movement, they reconstruct the narrative. The active role shifts from the performer to the viewer, reversing the usual arrangement of conventional performance. This offers another way to think about the relationship between body and movement through media art.

The question of sovereignty over a body integrated with technology is not confined to Just's work. As technology permeates social structures, human agency becomes harder to understand apart from it. AI, for instance, now plays a role in creating choreography, raising practical questions about copyright in the resulting works. In a creative environment increasingly accelerated by AI, the question is not how much, how fast, or how efficiently we can move. Rather, we need to pause and consider what mobilizes us to move and how sovereignty over movement is exercised.

Technology already extends our bodies and forms part of our sensory and cognitive experience. In this sense, the bodies in Just's work can be read as manifestations of the contemporary technological condition. Rather than concluding that technology is taking away our subjectivity, we must keep asking how agency and subjectivity are being reconfigured through the integration of body and technology. This question is especially important for dancers and choreographers, whose material is the body and its movement. This essay has explored several works and questions concerning the body traversed by technology, a shared concern of media art and dance. I hope it has offered a moment to pause and reflect on the subjectivity of the body and where we now stand.

IMAGE CAPTIONS

Jesper Just, *Corporéalités* (2020). LED panels, multi-channel video, sound, steel, and cement. Image courtesy Galleri Nicolai Wallner.

Video still from the same work.

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