Web-Dance's Era of Ecstasy

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Perpetual Motion: Dance, digital cultures, and the common by **Harmony Bench**

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020; 228 pp.

DOUGLAS EACHO

The Web, writes Harmony Bench in the timely *Perpetual Motion: Dance, digital cultures, and the common*, is now 'arguably the single most important means of accessing dance' (72). Yet as the pandemic made this inarguable, let us not forget that this claim has long been true. Instagram and YouTube make many dancers' careers. The social media fad and geopolitical target TikTok is an engine for creating screendance. The video game Fortnite makes much of its revenue by selling animated dance emotes copied, without credit or compensation, from Black artists. Dance's propulsive energy drives an accelerating cycle of techno-corporeal citation, invention, attention and surveillance, all to the profit of an elite group of platform owners. The intertwined promise and peril of online dance in 2020 can overwhelm thought: it is thus felicitous that Bench's history focuses us on the near-but-distant shores of the early 2010s. To learn what online dance – and online performance – *is*, we must begin by understanding what it *was*.

Perpetual Motion examines a series of videodances that circulated through the World Wide Web. The first chapter considers what Bench calls 'hyperdances,' interactive browser-based videodances that many established concert dance companies produced in the late 1990s and early 2000s; her second, third and fourth chapters all discuss videodances disseminated through YouTube between 2008 and 2016. With an unmatched skill at plain-language engagement with dense philosophical problems, Bench lays out a wide-ranging case for the radical possibilities inherent in the online dissemination of even the corniest dances, while avoiding neoliberal language of democratization and universality.

The central image is the *common*: encompassing liberated comportment in offline public spaces, worldly exchanges of intercultural understanding and an ethics of gifts and non-capitalistic indebtedness (4–6, 157–87). Bench borrows her phrasing from the autonomist theory of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, for whom the 'common' names a new 'immaterial' surplus generated by capitalism (particularly by computational capitalism) but the property of all, with attendant subversive potential. Prizing small-group collectivity, cultural labour and the spontaneity of networked individuals, the attraction of this model for performance theory is plain – yet despite this popularity, *Perpetual Motion* is to my knowledge the most thorough autonomist theory of web-based performance. Autonomism has also attracted diverse critiques – claims for a humanist 'immateriality' countered by a return to materialism such as found in this issue – and Bench supplies some of her own (97–8, 135–6). What can be done with the circulations of internet dance?

What can be done, in particular, with the exuberant, participatory, feel-good dances of the Obama years – dances such as Anne Marsen's *Girl Walk//All Day* (dir. Jacob Krupnik, 2011–12), an album-length music video in which a young hip white woman ventures up Manhattan, taking a wide array of popular dances into a jerky modern body, while exhorting those around her to join in the fun? Encompassing references to Occupy, questions of racial appropriation and a narrative of aleatory group formation, the dance gathers much of what Bench compellingly shows are central problematics of digitally distributed performance (57–71, 83–6). (Bench has a sharp eye for web-focused debates that illuminate broader issues of the 'digital'.) Another problematic: the dominance of pop. Like other major case studies *Where the Hell Is Matt?* (2005–12), in which a white guy does a dorky dance in global tourist destinations, and *24 Hours of Happy* (2013), the Pharrell Williams music video, *Girl Walk* is exhaustingly upbeat. These dances, now performing through the Web-as-archive, seem irrevocably distant to a 2020 viewer primed to suspect the politics of hope – and of YouTube. Bench proceeds delicately, balancing her theoretical investment in the world-making impulse inherent across these oddities of American pop culture with acknowledgement of their individual limits: albeit a balance weighted, all told, on the side of the ecstatic.

Bench mines a different affective stratum with Chapter 1's enthralling look at interactive early 2000s 'hyperdances'. Allegories of confinement, compulsion and involution, these dances allow Bench to intervene in critical discourses that equate 'interactivity' with disalienation, and to complicate the cherished performance studies axiom that

repetition produces difference: here, as with so much web experience, regulated interactivity affords '*indifferent* differences' that performatively *produce repetition*' (27–34, 41). The resulting 'crisis' of 'perpetual motion' invokes both the neoliberal exhortation of ceaseless labour and the post-9/11 belief in the inefficacy of aesthetic performance: endless dancing in a bound cycle (30, 35). (GIFs, TikTok, Fortnite emotes: is the loop the *grammé* of digital dance?) Bench suggests that the Web's shift towards fan participation resolves this crisis, but this 2020 reader wonders if we have ourselves affectively looped back to the anxious style of 2000s web art, of 'repetition without agency and difference without concept' (47). The history of web-based dance thus opens up the deepest issues of contemporary performance; for Bench, utopian ecstasy and nervous nihilism are found intertwined at their base. Trapped in the Web today, I expect no less.

Productive Ruptures

The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics

Edited by **Peter Eckersall & Helena Grehan**

New York: Routledge, 2019; 364pp.

DIANA DAMIAN MARTIN

In shifting between public discourses of crisis management and private micro-performances of my own body this year, I was in companionship with Peter Eckersall's and Helena Grehan's edited volume *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics* (2019), and its commitment to 'how we can be political now' (1). In the multiple artistic, activist, disciplinary, methodological and conceptual orientations of the political that *The Companion* brings together, I found a deliberately dissonant collection of strategies to rearticulate and resist a moment of global transition. The politics of companionship felt like a productive mode to engage theatre and performance within the political, to occupy their interdependence.

Divided into eight parts – Post, Assembly, Gap, Institution, Machine, Message, End, Re. – *The Companion* proposes these as 'keywords for cultural activism' (2). Each provokes a different orientation on paradigms central to contemporary political discourse, from governance and institutionality, to surveillance and occlusion. For example, Gap articulates an area of enquiry concerned with the politics of exclusion, building on Shannon Jackson's *Social Works* (2011), while Machine recalls Maurizio Lazzarato's work on the production of subjectivity to query affective dramaturgies. The keywords act as connective tissues to a wide range of explorations constituting a political ecology; it is, to return to this issue's topic, a diffractive dramaturgy.

The Companion dialogues with recent publications of similar editorial politics: Maaike Bleeker's, Adrian Kear's, Joe Kelleher's and Heike Roms's *Thinking through Theatre and Performance* (2019), Tony Fisher's and Eve Katsouraki's *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, performance and radical democracy* (2017), Marilena Zaroulia's and Philip Hager's *Performances of Capitalism: Crises and resistance* (2015) or Ana Vujanović's and Livia Piazza's *A Live Gathering: Performance and politics in contemporary Europe* (2019). Although *The Companion* returns to tensions between efficacy and consensus, agency and commons, there is a deliberate shift to interrogating the ecologies of late and neo-capitalism rather than returning to constitutive debates on liberal democracy. Contributors return to theorizations of agonism (Chantal Mouffe), dissensus (Jacques Rancière), communicative capitalism (Jodi Dean), affect (Lauren Berlant) or governmentality (Michel Foucault) as well as sociality (Shannon Jackson) or the utopian performative (Jill Dolan), disputed across a range of geographic locations enmeshed in global power relations: the Philippines, Indonesia, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Singapore, Japan, Beirut, Syria, Egypt, Eritrea, alongside work from Western Europe, Australia or New Zealand.

Throughout *The Companion*, ruptures offer opportunities for resistance or reconfiguration of systems of power, modes of attention and listening or artistic practices: the pause as shift or a change of direction (Alexa Taylor); political ambivalence as cloudy subversion (Melissa Wansin Wong); decadence as a form of innovation (Adam Alston); end and interval – a decline at once 'entropic and political' (Kelleher, 278); a mode of appeasing the 'un-resting spirits of the dead' (Hayato Kosuge, 292); speculative collectivity (Verónica Tello); loudness as a shift towards a new 'political dramaturgy of silence' (Ugoran Prasad, 38); human