

(ai)

performance for the planet

new circus

reinventing the big top

salif keita

afro-pop grows up

technology on the line

performance and new media

spoken word

dub and eritrean poets take the stage

fair use?

composer carl stone on
intellectual property

plus:

wim vandekeybus & david byrne

spoleto festival 2001

patty chang

orlando gough

mark morris

\$5.95/u.s. \$6.95/can.

spring 2001



4. ECG (HEARTBEAT)
5. EMG (FLEXOR MUSCLE)
6. CONTACT MICROPHONE (HAND MOTORS)
7. PLETHYSMOGRAM (FINGER PULSE)
8. KINETIC ANGLE TRANSDUCER
9. POSITION SENSOR (BENDING LEG)
10. EMG (VASTUS MEDIALIS MUSCLE)
11. ULTRASOUND TRANSDUCER
12. ... (BY BLOODFLOW)
13. ... (LIFTING ARM)

BY BETH COLEMAN

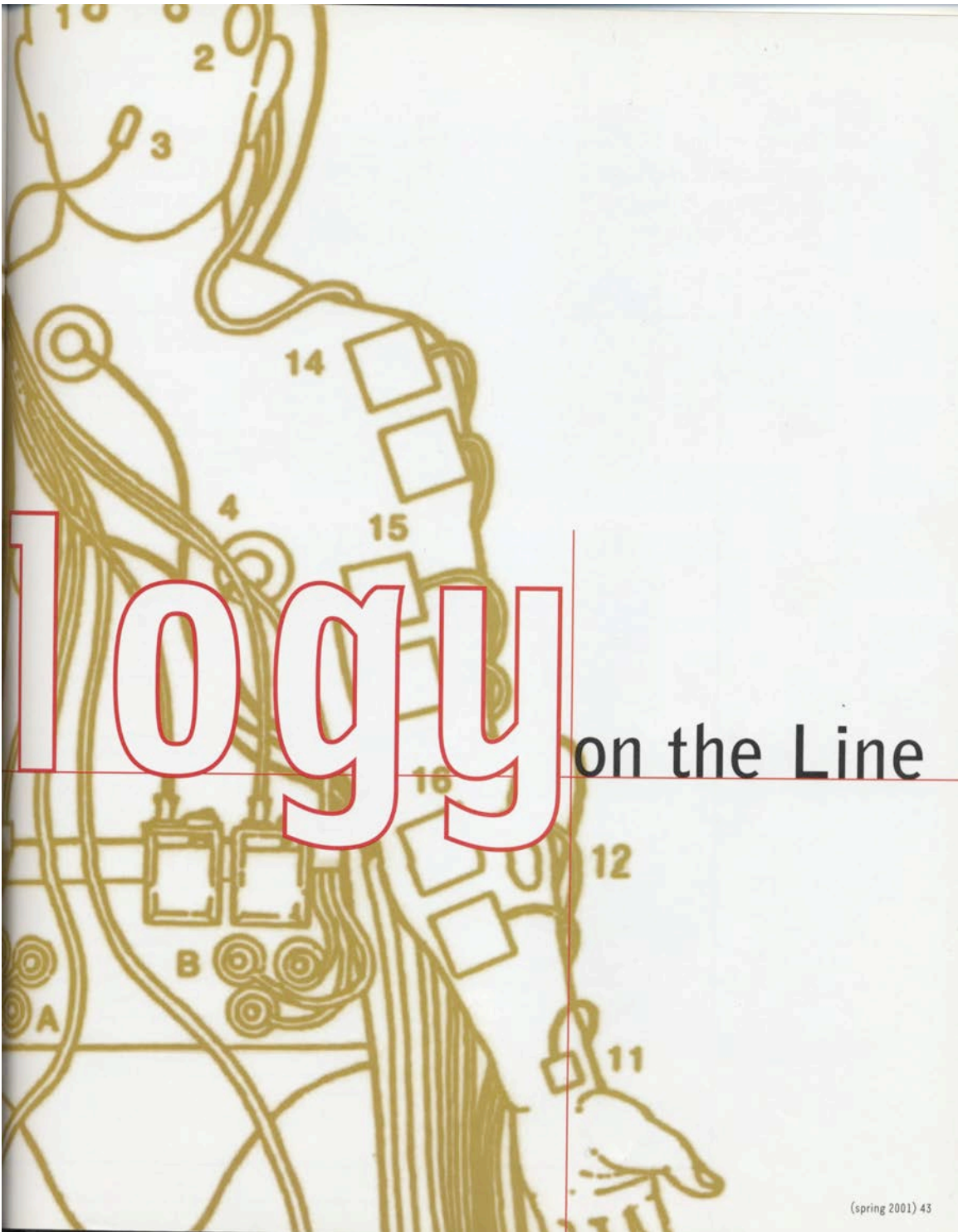
INVOLUNTARY BODY

13. STIMULATION RHS BICEPS
14. STIMULATION LHS DELTOIDS
15. STIMULATION LHS BICEPS
16. STIMULATION LHS FLEXORS
17. STIMULATION LHS HAND STRINGS
18. STIMULATION LHS ...

Techno

the feedback loop between digital communications and media perform





There are tiny Bell Labs in the guise of ateliers and rehearsal studios worldwide, where artists investigate not only how we can use new media to further our ends, but also how technology has changed us. Performance, in the case of computer-mediated art, has transformed both artist and audience into "user."

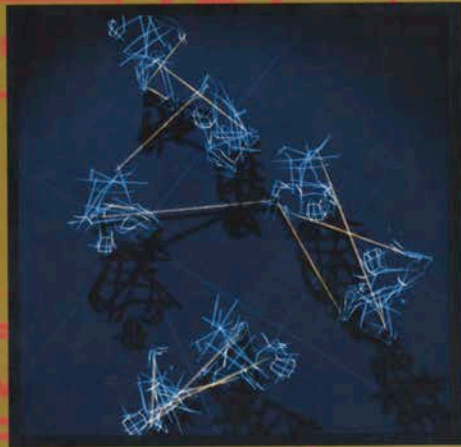
It can be argued that the first media performance took place on July 2, 1875. When Alexander Graham Bell made his fateful transmission, "Watson, come in here! I want you," there was a shift in technology that forever altered our concepts of communication and physical boundaries—and therefore performance. Little did Bell know that the communications revolution would one day carry with it the heated subtext "I want you"—a sentiment that describes the feedback loop between technology and performance today.

Not only has technology become inflected with aspects of performance, but the concept of performance has been altered by technology. Brenda Laurel, in her 1991 book *Computers as Theater*, analyses all human-computer interface design in terms of theater, arguing that performance has changed computers. The development of "user-friendly" interfaces in the late 70s and early 80s was based on the idea of allowing people to intuitively connect with their computers. For example, the Windows application that first appeared on the Apple operating system enabled users to run programs without writing command lines; suddenly, computers could interact in more human terms. In effect, the information age has also become the age of responsive machines, such as the "smart pets" that have reached the market. These miniature electronic dogs or pocket monsters actually play with us.

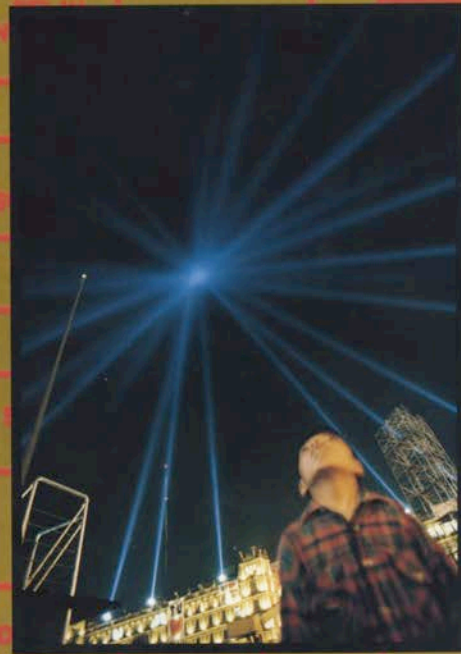
Considering the intimate relationships we have developed with machines in our daily lives, it's not surprising that computers and technology hold a deep fascination for contemporary media performers, who work at the forefront of these new lines of communication. There are tiny Bell Labs in the guise of ateliers and rehearsal studios worldwide, where artists investigate not only how we can use new media to further our ends, but also how technology has changed us. Performance, in the case of computer-mediated art, has transformed both artist and audience into "user."

Laurie Anderson has long been on the forefront of media performance. Her 1981 song "O Superman,"—which included an answering machine message from mom and references to big science (like the U.S. military)—was broadcast across the pop radio waves. Anderson sang about technology holding out its "electronic arms," conveying the sense that the machines want us too. For over a decade, Anderson has been telling multi-media stories (music, visual and performance work) in a contemporary techno-grammar. She has used electronic Harmonizers to "detune" her voice and different forms of media "masks." In *United States*, her 1983 performance piece, Anderson took the audience on a journey through the American landscape by way of video mix and digital audio manipulation. It was her use of technology to enhance her stories about the effects of technology on our culture that made the piece so captivating. The image of a spiky-haired Anderson, grinning with a small orb in her mouth that electronically illuminated her face from the *inside*, has become an icon of media performance.

right, background: *Involuntary Body/Third Hand*, Melbourne 1994. Diagram by Stelarc.



Still from *Ghostcatching* by Bill T. Jones, Paul Kaiser, and Shelley Eckhart (c) 1999



Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture #4 by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Interactive installation where online participants from 89 countries transformed Mexico City's Zócalo Square, using 13 robotic searchlights controlled with a 3D Java interface at (www.olzodo.net). The piece was commissioned by the Mexican Council for the Arts for Millennium celebrations and took place every night from 12/26/99 to 1/1/00.

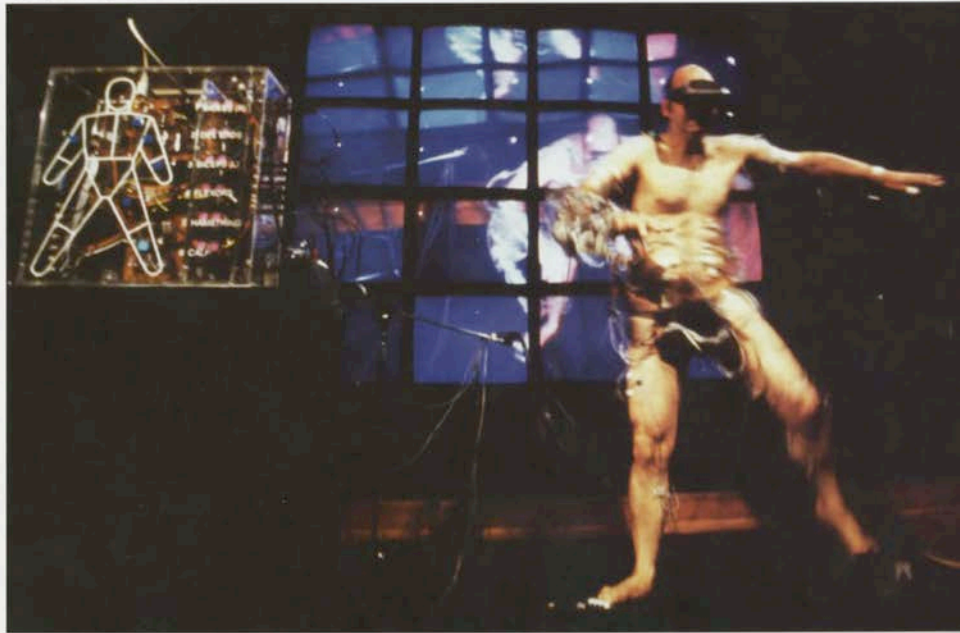
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<http://www.marlin.com.au>

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PING BODY INTERNET ACTUATED & RECORDED PERFORMANCE



Ping Body; Artspace, Sydney 1996. Diagram by Stelarc.



background: Involuntary Body/Third Hand, Melbourne 1994. Diagram by Stelarc.



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UNINARY BODY / THIRD HAND

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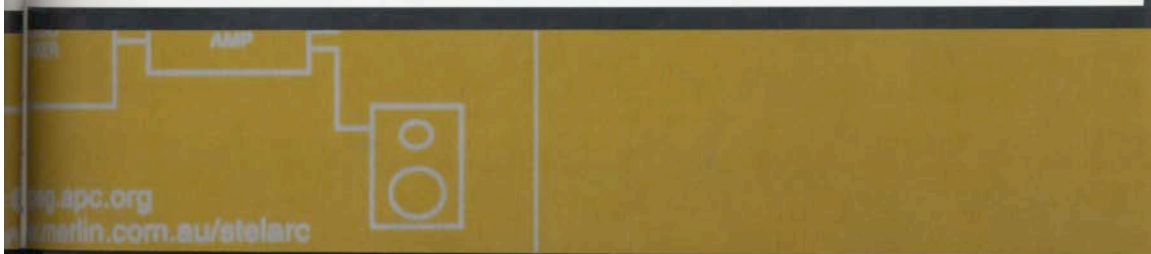


Since the 70s, Anderson has experimented with boundaries that have traditionally separated the quick from the dead, human from machine. She has brought the technology physically closer to her body—microphones and audio triggers are no longer held at an arm's distance, but literally attached to the body to create performances both startling and more personal. Performance critic RoseLee Goldberg notes, "United States made it clear that Anderson's use of media and her analysis of its role and meaning in American culture would become a yardstick for measuring this debate in the future."

In 1996, Australian artist Stelarc took the interaction between performer and technology to another level, by giving us the figure of a man actually being driven by technology. On April 10th of that year, the culmination of his work involving human-machine interface took place at Artspace, Sydney, with *Ping Body: An Internet Actuated and Uploaded Performance* (www.stelarc.va.com.au). Stelarc literally wired himself into the Internet; the movement of net traffic was charted on his body in the form of 60-volt "pings," which forced him to convulse.

In *Ping Body*, Stelarc charts the desire and anxiety that accompany an expanded media theater—where works can exist beyond the parameters of the stage or performance space and simultaneously among viewers throughout the world. Bodily autonomy is no longer a given. This freedom is also evident in the digital work of choreographers Merce Cunningham and Bill T. Jones. Cunningham has used complex motion detection systems in performance, charting ghostlike images of the dancers in motion on large screens surrounding the stage. Jones was one of the first to take dance—the most embodied of the arts—to an entirely virtual realm. In 1999, he attached multiple sensors to his body and then danced while a computer calculated the quality of each motion as an algorithm. The performance itself occurred on a website where Jones's signature style of movement was created by a virtual dancer (www.cooper.edu/art/ghostcatching). Both *Ping Body* and the work of Cunningham and Jones suggest that what is at stake in these efforts to take control of media is also the control of corporeal representation—the material experience of our bodies and identities.

It's not just individuals, but communities and even cities themselves that have become theaters in the electronic age. Digital artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, winner of Ars Electronica and SFMoMA prizes, created a sublime piece of electronic architecture with his *Vectorial Elevation*. Last winter, Lozano-Hemmer designed an interface by which remote viewers controlled the play of searchlights in the central square of Mexico City (www.telefonica.es/fat/artistas/rlh/eproyecto.html). And for the "City Vision" section of the *Media City* exhibition last fall in Seoul, Korea, curator Hans Ulrich-Obrist commissioned video works that he displayed on 75 giant screen panels distributed through the city. Flashing across the screens, between commercials for film and soap, came encrypted visual messages—the city talking to itself. The lines of communication that technology has opened for performance are now feeding back into the entire cityscape.



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But the most widespread form of media performance today is net.art, or art created for the Internet. It's the one on one engagement between the user and her screen that begs the question, "What is performance now?" "The world of net.art is almost as diverse as the rest of the contemporary art world," says Mark Tribe, who runs the digital art community Rhizome.org. "I can think of examples of political net.art, narrative net.art, conceptual net.art, etc. That being said, there are some things that are truly new and different in net.art practice, and these tend to involve code." Although the realm of net.art is strictly organized by the logic of code structures (i.e., HTML, Javascript, PERL), these structures can give rise to an incredible sense of freedom.

What's at work in net.art is design that begins to use the tools of virtual reality in increasingly subtle and conceptual ways. This "reality" is becoming less about the technology and more about the lives that people find and create for themselves online. Media performance, in general, reflects this growing identification between people and their phantasmal computer lives. Benjamin Weil, founder of one of the first net.art sites, adaweb (www.adaweb.com), and curator of new media at SFMoMA, emphasizes the performance-related element of all online art. "People seem to always invoke Conceptual Art [when discussing net.art]," Weil says. "But these artists are interested in issues of audience and issues that have risen from network technologies. Reaching an audience beyond the traditional art audience was something that these artists were concerned with all along."

Mark Napier is one net.artist whose site, www.potatoland.org, blurs the lines between audience and artist. In *P-soup*, a "primordial participation visual soup animation," the viewer becomes the player. *P-soup* functions as a multi-user instrument. It triggers geometric patterns embedded with audio samples in response to prompts from mouse and keyboard. At any given time, a solitary player or remote group of players can command a chorus of competing, commingling waves of sound and visual. The effect is a kind of virtual skipping stones in a pond, the shift in color, shape, and speed depending on the "turbulence" of the system. *P-soup* is an elegant demonstration of the disappearance of the Cartesian grid. Time has become subjective—the performance starts when you get there and is over when you leave, while for someone else it's just started. Physical space has likewise become malleable; a performance like *P-soup* happens across a dispersed network of users and servers, so geography itself becomes a variable. On his site *An American Work of Art in Progress* (www.restlessculture.net/americanart—see also—www.progirl.com), new media/performance artist Cary Peppermint invites us to "RSVP to a party that never ends." The artist leads his users through a lattice of commercial sites—Evide, eBay, mp3.com—that he's subverted to create fake events or auctions or music. The lessons of the Surrealists are remixed daily in net.art such as Peppermint's, which takes chance occurrence as its first principle of composition.

Media performance has expanded the boundaries of traditional performance not only in terms of the images and sounds it can produce; it also rearranges the basic tenets of "here and now," "beginning and end," "artist and audience." In *Diamond Age*, a novel by the writer and digital theorist Neil Stephenson, there is a scene where a man is literally pushed into a theater piece. As the man grapples with his disorientation, he realizes that the "performance" is happening all around him and that he has become a key player in the synthetically mediated environment. Stephenson reminds us there is no safe distance anymore. We are already enmeshed in a network of communication systems. Media performance looks at the way the machines have started to talk to us. ●



Vectorial Elevation

(ai) interview with SFMoMA new media curator Benjamin Weil

Beth Coleman: There's been much discussion on how "technology driven" net.art is as an art form. What's your sense of online art or new media work today? Are artists more interested in design and effect of the "object" than the kind of coding innovation that has been so highly regarded? Are we able to look at digital art yet without considering the formal, i.e. technical, aspects of these works?

Benjamin Weil: I think we can look at the work of such artists as Mark Napier, Thomson and Craighead, and Entropy8Zuper, just to name a few. They're looking at the mediascape and reflect upon it critically, offering new approaches to the network and communication in general. Now, it is certainly true that artists are probably more concerned about formal issues than they have been in the past. But this does not mean technique has prevailed! We are still in a wave of conceptual art forms, I believe.

BC: Can you discuss what is happening now in net.art? For example, what do you think catches the imagination of the digital art community about a team like entropy8zuper? How do you feel they are using the medium differently?

BW: I think that what they are doing is closer to cinema. It is participatory cinema; it recalls these crazy experiences carried out in the 50s and 60s, when you had 3D movies where everyone had to wear glasses or odorama movies where spectators had to scratch cards. This time, it is about appropriating the rhythm of the narrative. It offers a different take on getting immersed in a story. There are new tricks to be invented. In the same vein, I really like Nick Crowe's "Discreet

Packets," which plays with the same idea of a participatory narrative structure (www.nickcrowe.net). There's only a few artists approaching the Web that way. Strangely enough, maybe, I would also include in this category the very elegant and compelling Quake interface developed by JoDi... (even though this may not entirely qualify as online art).

BC: All of the big American art institutions have started collecting net.art and creating digital forums. The debate over the preservation of net.art indicates the anxiety (primarily from the artists) that the uncharted and open system of the network is quickly being commodified to fit into an institutional space. What are your feelings about the potential of net.art to disrupt the standard practice of cultural institutions? Do you see the future as repeating the high art vs. low art distinction with media art?

BW: I do not think it is about commodification. I think it is about preserving cultural processes and experience, and what the museum is learning is how to evolve its traditional approach. Call me an optimist or a naif, but I really think the interest museums have for online art and other digital dematerialized forms is profoundly changing the way the institution perceives its job or mission. This is quite an important step. Trying to find ways that are satisfactory to preserve byte-based art will force a complete re-examination of what museums are collecting, how they preserve the integrity of the art work, and this is way more conceptual than object-oriented. We have yet to see what will happen. There's already a lot of positive effect I can see from the inside, but, of course, I may be biased!

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