

Life By Design: Everyday Digital Culture
Abstract

By Laura M. Dennis

M.F.A. Graduate Student in Dance and Critical Theory
ldennis@uci.edu

The Conceptual Implications of Dance and Digital Performance

As we engage daily in the technological "advances" in our American culture, digital life has strong implications for the future of the dance world. From the viewpoint of a performer and choreographer, the use of digital technology in dance events should facilitate the artistic concept.

Whether the piece involves interactivity, dynamic systems, or various audio and visual media, the successful performance should seamlessly coordinate each element. Whenever employed, new digital media raises vital issues for this corporeal, performative, in-the-moment concert dance form.

For the "Life By Design: Everyday Digital Culture" Conference, I plan to discuss the conceptual questions of a practitioner-and their theoretical implications, as they relate to two recent telematic Internet 2 events and a current interactive work-in-progress. First, Reverse Patterns, a dance and digital technology event, was performed on October 29, 2002 at UCI and in real-time was projected into the University of Southern California Bing Theatre using the Internet 2. UCI Professor of Dance Dr. Lisa Naugle created the choreographic structure within which Beth Megill and I danced, and John Crawford contributed the video design and created the interactivity between the technology and the dancers.

The second work I will discuss is the November 21, 2002 UCI/New York University presentation of Voyages of Aeneas & Fixed/Not. This work was also a telematic event with live music and dance. Again, I functioned as dancer in the live performance space. I plan first to summarize my personal experiences as the performer whose responsibility it is to make the technology make sense for the audience. Delving into the theoretical implications of interactive media where, as in Reverse Patterns, not only does the image manipulate my corporeality, but now I also have the power to manipulate my digital image onscreen; I hope to address notions of embodiment, identity and power. Voyages of Aeneas & Fixed/Not raises analogous questions related more directly to the power of improvisation and the challenges of translation between various media. The title, Fixed/Not refers to the difficulties we had with our connection with NYU over the Internet 2. Throughout the creative process, we were unsure our connection, or digital bridge, would be established. Therefore, the dancers had to be ready to improvise in the performance space, or possibly change the concept and relate to the dancers and musicians in New York. In my presentation, I will consider the theoretical implications related to the power of improvisation and the ephemerality of live performance-with or without interfacing.

Third, for our thesis projects, UCI graduate student Amber McCall and I are working together on an interactive dance performance using the Isadora software designed by Mark Coniglio. The piece re-imagines "Angelitos Negros," a solo from the Songs of the Disinherited, a famous work from the American modern dance canon by renowned choreographer and UCI professor Donald McKayle. We plan to explore the realities of everyday American culture while evoking a cultural memory of past injustices related to the enforced bondage endured by Africans in the New World. Using video images and interactivity in the performance space, we hope both to evoke images of our historical past as well as to show the psychological implications of our modern digital culture. In addition to our artistic responsibility to use technology as a means to a conceptual end, we hope to ask also: Are we bound to technology? Liberated or enslaved by it? Under the related call for media, we will propose a demonstration and exhibition of our creative work.

With time constraints under consideration, I hope to show brief footage of Reverse Patterns and possibly Fixed/Not.

Brief Biography

Currently an MFA student in Dance and Critical Theory at the University of California, Irvine, Laura Dennis' interest in dance and digital technology stems from the fulfilling experience of performing in interactive, improvisational settings. Her research into cultural memory as it relates to African-American concert dance has been presented at the Dance Under Construction Conference at UC Riverside in April 2002 and the International Federation of Theatre Research Conference in the University of Amsterdam in July of 2002. After receiving her B.A. in Dance from the University of Maryland, College Park in 1998, Laura taught dance full-time in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area and founded the three-tiered 50-member jazz and modern dance company, Olney Elite.