# Moving without a Body: Digital Philosophy and Choreographic Thoughts by Stamatia Portanova. 2013. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. 200 pp, 15 b&w images. $32.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780262018920.

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Recent developments in the fields of digital technology, dance, game design, and medical engineering enable us to extract, store, and abstract human movement through its transformation into digital data. Numbers, as the hidden actors of computer software and scripts, are challenging movement produced by human bodies. The Forsythe Dance Company's 2010 *Motion Bank* is one of the projects that makes explicit the capacity for digital technology to bring new inputs into the discipline of dance and into the understanding of moving and choreographing.

In *Moving without a Body: Digital Philosophy and Choreographic Thoughts* Stamatia Portanova examines shifts in choreographic thinking and understanding due to the emergence of digital technologies. She asks "what really happens when the physicality of our movements is translated into numerical code by a technological system (or when this physicality becomes *numbers*)" (orig. emphasis).[1] Portanova expands Forsythe's important question underpinning the *Synchronous Objects* project, regarding the possibility of choreography "to generate autonomous expressions of its principles without the body."[2] She queries: "Is it possible for a choreographic image, object, or structure to possess a body of its own?"[3] If yes, how can the technology that has invaded the expanded choreographic process be re-thought and potentially redesigned in order to address this kind of choreographic development?

Portanova understands choreography to be more than "the creative process of joining movements together and of planning changes in speed and direction through a detailed script."[4] Instead, she places choreography in a larger conceptual context, which refers to any kind of movement organization or connection between points and positions arranged in space. Through this lens, organizing live bodies in motion

becomes only one of an infinite number of choreographic manifestations. Human technological achievements in the areas of video dance, motion-capture, and software design can also be understood as choreographic. For Portanova, "to think movement is to cut it in perception, to capture it in memory, to count and compose it, in thought."[5] In other words, to think choreographically involves capture, storage, and manipulation of movement through its abstraction and transformation. Portanova concentrates on dance artists such as Antonin De Bemels, William Forsythe, and Merce Cunningham, whose collaborative, choreographic practices have incorporated video making, motion capture, and interactive software design. Further, she draws on theories from radical empiricism and digital technology, as well as the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Alfred North Whitehead.

For Portanova, moving manifests through what she calls a "choreo-nexus" (digital composing and cut of images), as well as "mov-objects" (digital objects derived from movement), and "compu-sitions" (movement composition software). Following Whitehead, Portanova defines a nexus as "a series of disconnected occasions held together by the uniqueness of an idea. This idea integrates the movement, as a multiplicity of different perceptual sensations, into the imagined togetherness of a dance nexus (or a choreo-nexus)."[6] The concept of the chore-nexus highlights the revolutionary role of the (digital) cut in video editing. Via the digital cut, a movement sequence on screen can become disarticulated and its continuity redistributed into discrete, independent units.[7] In regard to the creative storage of movement, Portanova proposes the invention of mov-objects, i.e. digital objects that are created through desubjectifying movement from a human source, and then converting it into a reproducible path or shape, with potential for transformation. So doing involves compu-sitions, a term Portanova derives from the words computation and composition. According to Portanova, compu-sition is a way of composing movement through technological intervention, for example of algorhythmic software systems, and it facilitates "a way to creatively think the dance as numbers."[8]

As the title of the book implies, Portanova's focus is on the essence of moving in an expanded choreographic context; moving understood both in a passive and an active tense. Moving in a passive form is something that "occurs *in* the body (rather than being performed *by* it)" (orig. emphasis).[9] Moving in the active form can also involve composing abstract movement without perceiving the source of movement. To this end, Portanova discusses the work of Merce Cunningham, in which screendance avatars are constructed using *LifeForms* and *DanceForms* software. This approach is also evident in the 3D film version of "Loops" created by OpenEndedGroup. Here, moving renders choreography as an act of digital or mathematic execution that demands the choreographer to *think* movement rather than to feel or embody it. Portanova states that movement concepts are "to be thought separately from actual bodily movements,"[10] and further, that "a body performs a movement, and a mind

thinks or choreographs a dance."[11] Arguably, the latter has been the case with a number of Cunningham's choreographies. However, Portanova seems to occupy an inconsistent position in relation to the body-mind split within digital choreographic making, as evidenced in her statement that:

> The thought of movement is not separated from the movement itself and situated in a different point, or temporarily delayed, but coincides with it in the very moment of a motor sensation. This simultaneity of body/mind only appears in the distribution of thought-motion in the body, when thought and action coincide in their bodily spreading or delocalization.[12]

In instances where choreography is generated with a computer software program, there is the danger that Portanova's statements will be misinterpreted. This point of view prioritizes the choreographer's mind over the dancer's body by placing the choreographer in a position of power and the performer in the role of an obeying tool for executing movement. Disregarding notions of choreography where the potential of choreography has been minimized to the act of composing virtuosic steps, but extracting from the medium of choreography the idea of movement composition and organization, can help rethink statements which provoke body-mind misinterpretations of Portanova's arguments.

In *Moving Without a Body*, Portanova aims to articulate how the software structures that underpin video dance, motion capture, and choreographic software might help us rethink the perception of movement and choreography in a larger context. She elaborates a conversation on the multifaceted nature of choreography that is already in motion, as initiated by Susan Foster's *Choreographing Empathy*.[13] Although Portanova does not acknowledge this discourse as it accumulates in Xavier Le Roy's notion of *expanded choreography*,[14] she manages to recontextualize choreography. She succeeds to offer a perspective that bears in mind the problematic of digital dance and the choreographic/organizational practices of movement disarticulation.

## Biography

Ariadne Mikou is an interdisciplinary and independent dance artist, movement educator, and emergent dance scholar from Greece interested in dance-making inside theatrical and non-theatrical settings, screendance, dance installations, and photography. She is currently pursuing her fully-funded PaR PhD in Choreographic Research in the Dance Department of The University of Roehampton, London, UK.

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## Notes

[1] Stamatia Portanova, *Moving Without a Body*, 2.
[2] Idem., 139.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Idem., 97.
[5] Idem., 135.
[6] Idem., 31. For example when the linear progression of a dance sequence on screen is manipulated by the camera and video editing process to construct relational moments of connection between past and present, cause and effect, and stimulus and response.
[7] The outcome is a choreography of digital frames where there is no beginning and end, but rather a trace of movement, an amorphous diagram which Portanova calls the *presentational nexus*.
[8] Idem., 99.
[9] Idem., 102.
[10] Idem., 134.
[11] Idem., 5.
[12] Idem., 102.
[13] Susan Foster exemplifies the shift in the understanding of the notion of choreography from its establishment during 17th century by Raoul-Auger Feuillet until more recently.
[14] Expanded Choreography. / Xavier Le Roy / Macba, 2012

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