Introduction: Amelia Jones

Harmony Bench

In her 1997 essay "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," arts scholar Amelia Jones offers a précis of her 1998 monograph *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, while orienting the discussion toward the problematics of analyzing live art exclusively through its documentation. Listing her age when Yoko Ono, Vito Acconci, Valie Export, and others were performing key works, Jones reflects on the impracticability of her presence at these events—she was 10, or 12, or 15, etc. Her absence does not deter her, however, from critically analyzing work she did not witness. She notes, "I approach body artworks through their photographic, textual, oral, video, and/or film traces. I would like to argue, however, that the problems raised by my absence (my not having been there) are largely logistical rather than ethical or hermeneutic. That is, while the experience of viewing a photograph and reading a text is clearly different from that of sitting in a small room watching an artist perform, neither has a privileged relationship to the historical 'truth' of the performance . . ."[1] Aside from dance documentaries and documentations that fill dance history professors' shelves, screendance has not generally been concerned with the truth-bearing mark of authenticity that Jones describes. As a discipline, however, dance is haunted by that rhetoric.

Like live art, body art, and/or performance art, dance as a scholarly and practical discourse clings to the 'live' dancing body against the onslaught of media—even when choreographers integrate video or projected media elements into their stage-based performances. Fidelity to the "live" comes, on the one hand, from studio-based practices that refine bodies into articulate and agential skeleto-muscular subjects, and on the other, from scholarly corrections to a Western dance history that first asserted dance's ephemerality and then lamented its disappearance in time (as opposed to emphasizing the lived histories or bodily memories of dancers, for example). As performance theorist André Lepecki notes, the characterization of dance as ephemeral and as lack—in need of a stable supplement such as the photographs and films from which Jones analyzes body art performances—has been reworked through theoretical discourses such as deconstruction into "a powerful trope" for dance scholarship and analysis.[2] Though Jones is located within a visual arts discourse, she nevertheless seems to speak to the situation of dance and screendance scholars:

> It is my premise here, as it has been elsewhere, that there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art. Although I am respectful of the specificity of knowledge gained from partici-pating in a live performance situation, I will argue here that this specificity should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledge that develops in relation to the documentary traces of such an event. While the live situation may enable phenomenological relations of flesh-to-flesh engagement, the documentary

> exchange (viewer/reader ↔ document) is equally intersubjective. Either way, the audience for the work may know a great deal, or practically nothing at all, about who the performer is, why she is performing, and what, consequently, she "intends" this performance to mean.[3]

If ephemerality is key to dance's ontology and physical co-presence is key to dance spectatorship, then scholarship has as yet been unable to fully reconcile dance's disappearance with technologies that allow its preservation, duplication, playback, and broadcast—even as scholars rely on the rejected technologies in order to conduct their own analyses. I therefore cannot help but see a parallel between Jones's defense of her historico-analytical project and the legitimation screendance artists and scholars seek from a discipline aesthetically and politically committed to the "live" performing body.

Screendance scholars are not, by and large, bypassing the medium of representation looking for an originary live dance event hidden behind a cloak of edits. Indeed, since Maya Deren wrote on the topic in the 1940s, screendance works have been considered more or less hybrid entities unaccomplishable within a dance or screenic medium alone. Jones's emphasis on documentation of performance events requires some translation before her arguments can be applied to works that are created specifically for screen media. Luckily, Jones initiates this translation herself, reminding readers of Rudolph Schwarzkogler's 1966 work in which he appeared to mutilate his penis—a performance fabricated after the fact through the circulation of photographs that supposedly attested to the event's occurrence.[4] The performance, however, did not take place as such: the photographs created a fictional event from images of a "male torso with bandaged penis (a razor blade lying nearby)."[5] The photographs became the site of performance. Likewise, in screendance, the screen is the site of performance. This is not to say that the contents of the screen are unrelated to preexisting choreographies or stagings of a work (think for example of William Forsythe's *One Flat Thing Reproduced* variously incarnated onstage, onscreen, and online), but that each entity supplements and grounds the other. Quoting Derrida, Jones notes that nothing can be seen in and for itself, except through mediation, and it is the multiplication of "supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence . . ."[6] Neither dancing body, nor choreography, nor screen is self-sufficient.

Jones's article allows us to consider screendance practices from a related discipline and perhaps offers a workaround for some of the aesthetic assumptions that, spoken or unspoken, persist in dance and screendance scholarship. I have asked Hannah Kosstrin, Jason Farman, and Melissa Blanco Borelli to consider "'Presence' in Absentia" in relation to their own work to see what further terrains of bodies and screens, embodiment and mediation, may be opened up by this article. In this way, we can better situate screendance—already a multiplicity of screenic and choreographic convergences—within a context of historical, analytical, and artistic projects as well as within a context of both intersecting and divergent disciplinary vocabularies. I have thus asked Kosstrin to reflect on written dance notation as a form of documentation that "presences" dance in its own right. I have asked Farman to speak about the movement of bodies and real-time screen experiences in mobile media narratives. Finally, I have asked Blanco Borelli to discuss the modes and politics of "presencing" and "absenting" in music videos.

In Kosstrin's exploration of written dance notation, she suggests that co-presence, that ethico-ontological index of "live" performance, can be created between a dance notation score and its reader in a manner similar to that described by Jones encountering body art performance through its documentary traces. Kosstrin hinges this co-presence on the performativity of the notation score. Though written, the document does not fix the choreography it records. Rather, by trying to record what remains consistent in a dance (documenting a choreography rather than just one performance of it) the score leaves room for later interpretations. Indeed, the score as such is already a site of multiple interpretive possibilities that have congealed into a fluid representation of a dance.

There are obvious mediational differences between dance notation and screendance, but a dance notator's attendance at rehearsals and performances is not dissimilar from a videographer's take upon take, edit upon edit that finally takes shape as something like the choreographic event it records (or like the event that never fully existed as such) but which is distinct from it. Each format requires a process of distillation, the notator peeling away performers' individual affectations, mistakes, and quirks to reveal a consistent choreographic structure underneath the performers' executions, and the filmmaker sorting through shots to assemble the film or films buried in a choreography (whether performed by dancers or objects in motion). It is difficult to know whether screendances remain open in the way Kosstrin argues notation scores do;[7] it is difficult to know whether notation scores can truly be open if they are an endpoint for a choreography rather than an inspiration for new movement (in the way that many performing artists use scores as puzzles for performers to work out during performance). It seems to me, however, that screendances and notation scores share an inherent instability—they are always "like" something else, an object of representation, but never fully coincide with any work to which they might refer as a documentary trace.

What most interests me in Kosstrin's response to Jones's essay is her description of the notator moving to the inside of a work, occupying a space within the movement, and embodying a choreography before committing it to the page. Can a filmmaker or screen artist work from inside a choreography in the same way (without excessively prioritizing the dancers or their movements—if one uses dancers at all)? How do screendance makers defeat surface images that wrap a choreography in a plastic sheen? Can we describe screendance works in terms of interiority and exteriority, not of characters but of choreography? Are there methodological distinctions we might make between screendances made from the inside versus those made from the outside (without falling into an easy trap of asserting commitments to dance on the one hand or film/video on the other). Are there extremes to these interior/exterior positions such that they might be differentiated aesthetically as well as philosophically? So-called haptic images that blur and escape the full command of the eye (of the camera or of the viewer) might be one example, but surely there are others.

In his discussion of *Rider Spoke*, a participant-activated, mobile device-enabled performance by the London performance group Blast Theory, Farman raises the question of embodiment in asynchronous engagement. Whereas Amelia Jones describes having an affective relationship with body artists through photographic and video documentation, Farman suggests that encountering the recorded voices and documentary traces of other participants in *Rider Spoke* fosters intimacy with anonymous persons. This intimacy exists not in spite of technological mediation, but because of it. The soft whisper-hiss or confident

fluidity of a recorded voice in the listener's ear foregrounds what Farman calls a "sensory-inscribed" body. As a site of sensory inscription, which is to say, a site of organized and culturally-mediated sensations, the listener's body supplements that of the recording by receiving sensuous signals asynchronously—their transmission carried forward after the cessation of their broadcast from some now-absent body.

Sensory inscription, a repertoire of culturally determined and practiced sensations, similarly allows screendance audiences to affectively participate in a screen choreography. But more than establishing kinesthetic empathy for a screen-body, a viewer participates in the screenic movements that take place through camera motion and editing. Over the course of a century of cinema, viewers' bodies have been attuned to synthetically as well as organically induced/produced sensations. Given the body as endpoint, is it possible to distinguish among these sensations and their (culturally, socially, technologically, bodily) mediated sources? While we cannot be said to experience the same sensations as one another (since each person individually registers sensation through the unique configuration of their corporeal apparatus), do our bodies as affective repositories predetermine a finite number and type of sensation that may be registered, or is our ability to sense infinitely expandable, provided we can find means of producing sensation? As screendance practices continue to expand to include Internet sites, mobile devices, and imaging technologies, what new kinds of sensory experiences can screendance open up through its experimentations with body, movement, image, and screen? What will be their relationship to temporality and spatiality, to "presence" and embodiment? If screendance holds under its umbrella works in which screen and dance found and ground one another, can it also contain works in which screen and dance repel or even reject one another, refusing to act in a chain of supplementarity, reaching instead toward a choreography of strange and disorienting images-in-movement, a hallucinatory choreography of optical effects?

Borelli reflects on learning choreography from Janet Jackson's music videos in her youth. The corporeal engagement she describes is similar to that suggested by Kosstrin in reading notation scores, with the crucial distinctions that the dancer (not a director) is making the translation from screen to body, and that such a transfer of movement happens on a much larger scale by virtue of circulating through popular media. In her attempts to dance like Janet, Borelli shows the privileged access that what she calls "popular screen dance" (including Hollywood dance musicals, music videos, and dance on television) has to the intersection of body and screen. But not only is popular screen dance a privileged site of corporeal and screenic negotiation, it is additionally a site of spectacle, which, Borelli notes following Debord, is a social relationship mediated by images. Learning a dance from a Janet Jackson music video, the young Borelli participates in the music video as spectacle, moving the social relationship from a visual to a more fully corporeal register, mapping Janet's moves onto her own body, incorporating them in order to re-perform and reproduce Janet and the capitalist structure that supports her.

Borelli finds Amelia Jones's argument that there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship particularly useful, even as Borelli suggests that as a fan, learning choreography from a music video gives her the feeling of knowing a celebrity more intimately than she actually does.[8] This mediated intimacy offers the possibility, Borelli suggests, of an intersubjective relationship. Yet, the relationship that is established is not between Melissa Blanco Borelli and Janet Jackson, it is between Borelli-the-fan (a construct of the corporate

machine) and Janet the icon/brand (also a construct of the corporate machine). Like Jones, Borelli thus gives no benefit to a supposed unmediated encounter: "it is that mediated self, i.e., Janet-as-celebrity-brand/body, that allows for a social relationship to exist between Janet and her fans."

Borelli's analysis of popular screen dance begs the question, what kinds of social relationships are fostered by dance onscreen, since the screen as a site continues to change and proliferate? Are there anti-spectacle screendances, and if so, does that mean, again following Debord, that they destroy the image as such, or that they challenge the social relationships created through the circulation of images? If, as Borelli suggests in her encounter with Janet Jackson, the accessibility of celebrity is contingent upon the presence of a literal and/or metaphorical screen, what kinds of screens and frames must be in place to access non-celebrities, and do anonymous or unknown performers promote or prevent the kinds of relationships Borelli describes? How do screendance audiences accommodate these alternate modes of engagement?

Each of the authors I have asked to comment on Amelia Jones's essay give us new tools to think through the hybrid practices that fall under screendance. I find Kosstrin's notion of working on the inside of a choreography, Farman's negotiation of sensory inscription in relation to a screen, and the social relationship Borelli establishes between bodies and images to be especially fruitful additions to a conversation on the possibilities of dance onscreen.

References

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Notes

1. Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia," 11.

2. Lepecki, "Inscribing Dance," 131.

3. Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia," 12.

4. Philip Auslander has also written on performance artworks that have been staged only for a camera. See his essay, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation."

5. Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia," 15.

6. Jacques Derrida, "That Dangerous Supplement," *Of Grammatology* (1976): 154, quoted in Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia," 14.

7. Experiments in net.art and interactive installation offer examples of maintaining the openness of a screen-based work.

8. Readers of Hollywood gossip magazines would also claim an intimate knowledge of the celebrities they follow, which suggests that the ability to move in tandem with a video is only one example of media providing a platform for (uni-directional) intimacy.