The Implicit Body as Performance
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I
the Body-Image and the Body-Schema

Brian Massumi, in his *Parables for the Virtual*, implores us to put “movement, sensation, and qualities of experience” back into our understandings of embodiment, without “contradicting the very real insights of poststructuralist cultural theory.”“ Our entire vocabulary,” he says, “has derived from theories of signification that are still wedded to structure even across irreconcilable differences.” He doesn’t wish to undo the important work of cultural studies’ linguistic model for understanding race, gender, class or other forms of identification, but is looking for “a semiotics willing to engage with continuity.” Following Gilles Deleuze, who followed Bergson, Massumi points out, “When a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation…. In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own…”

In contradistinction to ‘known’ structures, Massumi avers that “the body is in a state of invention.” It is “an accumulation of relative perspectives and the passages between them… retaining and combining past movements,” continuously “infolded” with “coding and codification.”

This paper is less a focus on new vocabularies for movement (Massumi’s continuity), and more so a thinking-through of this *in folding of the movement*. More specifically, it asks, “How might the body’s continuity, and its potential disruption, be attendant, provoked and contextualized in contemporary art?”

One useful distinction for understanding Massumi’s discontinuous vs continuous dichotomy in embodiment is Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s body-image and body-schema. Mark Hansen defines them:

> Whereas the body image characterizes and is generated from a primarily visual apprehension of the body as an external object, the body schema emerges from what, with autopoietic theory, [he calls] the operational perspective of the embodied organism.\(^{[10]}\)

Embodiment – “the process through which bodies are produced”\(^{[11]}\) – and exteriority – what he calls “tecnicity”\(^{[12]}\) – are transductions: “neither one is the cause of the other.”\(^{[13]}\) Along with Shaun Gallagher and Jonathon Cole, who assert that the body-schema is “a system of motor and postural functions that operate below the level of self-referential intentionality,”\(^{[14]}\) Hansen says “human existence … [is] a *prepersonal* sensory being-with.”\(^{[15]}\) In other words, it includes nonconscious, sensorimotor perceptions and actions. Further, the body-schema is “a flexible, plastic, systemic form of distributed agency encompassing what takes place within the boundaries of the body proper (the skin) as well as the entirety of the spatiality of embodied motility.”\(^{[16]}\) Hansen suggests that it is the entire “scope of body environment coupling.”\(^{[17]}\)

Massumi, Hansen, Gallagher and Cole, along with others such as Jose Gil, Gilles Deleuze and Allain Millon have an understanding of embodiment as “relational,” but “not … relative,”\(^{[18]}\) topological, but not plottable, emergent and incipient. Like an animated möbius strip, the body is: ‘in and around’.\(^{[19]}\)

This paper parallels Massumi’s call. He might say we have a discourse (or several discourses) centred around our varied body-images, but our body-schemata are lacking discussion. My assertion is that we have critical production models and visual vocabularies for making art that challenges body-images, and we need to also find ways of engaging and interrogating body-schemata. In my own practice as an artist, I’ve found it most productive to think of embodiment as performed, so a to be directed.

II
the Body as per-formed

Using a combination of anthropology, cultural theory, postmodern thought, and his practice as a theatre director, Richard Schechner is largely credited with opening up the field of performance studies. Performance, he says, “is a very inclusive notion of action; theatre is only one node on a continuum that reaches from ritualization in animal behavior (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, and so on – to rites, ceremonies and performances [as] large-scale theatrical events.”\(^{[20]}\) Since the inception of Performance Studies, performance has been labelled (and this is by no means an exhaustive list) “processual,”\(^{[21]}\) transportative,\(^{[22]}\) transformative,\(^{[23]}\) and an “activating force or energy.”\(^{[24]}\) It is a “liminal space,”\(^{[25]}\) in “between modalities”\(^{[26]}\) that is not “reducible to terms independent of its formation.”\(^{[27]}\)

My past and future collaborator, Nicole Ridgway,\(^{[28]}\) builds on these anthropological foundations, but uses the “philosophical tradition[s] of… relation and emergence”\(^{[29]}\) to bring new light to performance. She likens performance to Massumi’s “virtuality,” and says that it is not, in fact “‘in the between, but ‘of’ the relation.”\(^{[30]}\) In a study of digital art inter-actions, she juxtaposes Deleuze’s *preformism* - “the already preformed,”\(^{[31]}\) “completely given”\(^{[32]}\) “(rather than produced)”\(^{[33]}\) – with *performance* – “a taking place, something in process and,
by definition, unfinished. [Performance] inaugurates not enacts.”34 “Interaction,” Ridgway says, “is not a meeting of two extant essences, but a movement and unfolding of the [relation] that is always supplementary and incomplete.”35

It is this philosophical definition of performance that I am coupling with the body and embodiment – the body as processual and per-formed, an inter-course in and around the flesh. A body in space “acts” as a site of emergence, a boundary project, and an incipience; and I’m using this understanding of the body towards setting up provocative, artistic encounters.

III
from the Explicit to the Implicit

Schechner avows, “The relationship between studying performance and doing performance is integral,”36 and it is in this space that he and I are in sync. We are both less “concerned with stasis than with dynamis,”37 and “committed… to interference.”38 The end of the last century saw a multitude, for example, of feminist performance art that attempted to question structures already constituted.

The “explicit body” is a term coined by Rebecca Schneider, one of Schechner’s long-time colleagues, to describe such work; it speaks to a “mass of orifices and appendages, details and tactile surfaces … [that] in representation is foremost a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality - all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and deprivilege.”39

The explicit body in performance “explicate[s] bodies in social relation.” Through an “explosive literality,” and with an eye towards the Latin root explicare (or, to unfold), the explicit body is used to “peel back layers of signification,” to “expose not an originary, true, or redemptive body, but the sedimented layers of signification themselves.”40

Schneider’s explicit body in performance “renders the symbolic [as] literal” in order to “pose a threat… [to] implicit structures of comprehensibility.” It is a body which is scarred by a history larger than the bodies’ wearer - we are peeling away to reveal what is already there, but unbeknownst to us.41

In the work of performance and visual artist Karen Finely, for example, the explicit body intervenes in the spectacle of engenderment. In one piece, she challenges Freud’s theory of penis envy, and that women have children as a replacement for the phallus, by literally “strapping on,” and wielding, an infant across the stage. Here the explicit body literalizes the legislative frontier, that aspect of power, which both authorises and invalidates representations, and gestures to that which is un-representable.

Massumi’s reading of the Zeno paradox (taken from Henri Bergson, who follows Aristotle) might illuminate Schneider’s contention further. Zeno’s infamous arrow flies through the air, but never reaches any target. The paradox says that in order for an arrow to reach the bull’s eye, it must first get halfway there; it must also get halfway to that halfway mark; and halfway to that. And so on, inevitably making an infinite number of markers that the arrow must pass through, thus making it impossible to get to its goal.

Of course, movement doesn’t work this way. “Past and future [would become] nothing more than presents in succession. Nothing exists outside of the march of the boxed-in present.”42 To map out all the possibilities of where the arrow must go is to see the arrow as only going between many points of stasis, rather than as in motion. It only ‘is’ when it ‘isn’t doing.’ Imagine many arrows’ paths across 3-dimensional space, post-event, completely mapped-out points of stasis turned into a uniform grid of mediated, understood, unmoving, and ultimately limited possibilities. This, Massumi tells us, is how we’ve unfortunately come to view The Subject in contemporary society.

I argue that artists like Finley use the explicit body to put such gridpoints in quotes; they performatively literalize, ironize and call into question the sacred signifieds of “race,” “gender,” “woman,” “child,” or “phallus,” depending on the explication. Actually, to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, they are “quoting without quotation marks.”43 According to Andrew Benjamin’s reading of his notes on the subject:

In its most general sense, to quote means to restate what has already been stated. Any citation, therefore, must also re-site [with an “s”]… what could be described as a re-situation…. What is given is given again. This re-giving is neither a simple iteration nor a repetition of the Same…. The re-giving therefore needs to be thought of as an iterative reworking…. The process of reworking represents the given in such a way that other possibilities … already inscribed within [what is given are]… able to be revealed.…

The absence and presence of quotation marks… indicates the presence of different moments of historical time – chronological time …The absence of quotation marks signals the disruption of context.44
Explicit bodies in performance put Zeno’s stop-points in crisis. They re-cite and re-situate our structured inscriptions, asking us to look at what is both inside and outside of the quote, its history or continuity as well as its disruption, all the while bringing “ontological and temporal considerations to bear.”

Within the framework of the performance art, body art and Happenings movements that Schneider writes about, this notion of the explicit body is extremely productive. The encountered performance “unfolds” and reveals to us our stories, preconceptions and, perhaps most importantly to Schneider, social boundaries.

In a previous paper, Nicole Ridgway and I argued that under the conditions of digitality, and the work that comes, directly or indirectly, with those conditions, there’s potential for a shift in subject / object and performer / audience hierarchies, and thus a shift in how we might perceive or read such explicit inscriptions. We proposed that the “flesh” can perhaps be thought of as more of a palimpsest, where we inscribe and scratch away, and enfold, alongside our continuous unfolding, in order to not uncover or discover our bodies, but to emerge as bodies (both legible and illegible), as not-yet-bodies, bodies in process - implied bodies, in relation and drawn out. Where the root of explicit is to unfold, to imply is to enfold. And, the relationship between them is neither dichotomous nor dialectical.

For Massumi, “passage precedes position” and process has ontological priority in that it constitutes the field of emergence. Again as Deleuze, he calls it ontogenetic. As did our predecessors, Ridgway and I pondered this continuum as not a binary between emergence and positioning, between regulatory operations and becomings, or between implicit and explicit. It’s a both/and, a co-telling - in, of and by the flesh.

Here, my contention is that where explicit body quotations surround Zeno’s positions and put them in crisis, implicit bodyquotations do the same to the movements between, to their passage and their emergence. They re-cite our body-world coupleings at large, and can more fundamentally incorporate and/or re-situate, specific relations, examples being “body-language,” “flesh-space”, or “social-form,” depending on the implication. To imply in Latin is not only to infold, but also to involve and entwine, and in this case, to re-work or per-form.

IV
the Art Rig, or, encountering performance

The implicit body phrase in my usage is specific to art encounters as used to frame discrete bodily foldings with “sensible concepts,” interrelated transformations and co-emergences that invite us into our own potential to vary. Where the ‘Explicit body in Performance’ uses the stage to put aspects of the objectified body-image in quotes, the ‘Implicit body as Performance’ rigs quotation marks around the emergent body-schema and its contrapuntal relation to something else. My ongoing study will almost entirely lie in the domain of interactive art spaces, attempting to think through such technological art as a proscenium for, and framor of, “embodiment plus X” – X being a variable or variables (an artist text, the gallery space, other bodies) feeding back between the artwork and its participant. This formula is not meant to say that embodiment and X are either separate to begin with, or that they are ‘added together’ per se; it is a heuristic device to show implicit body art as able to contextualize and highlight our bodily performances of / with / in, for example, “text” or “space” or “networks.”

Hansen also directly gives power to digital art; his ‘body in code’ - “the technical mediation of the body schema” – substantially ties exteriority and the evolution of the human (and embodiment) to technology. He says that a “technically triggered experience,” can “stage… the excess of the body schema over the body image to increase [the participant’s] agency as an embodied being.” He looks at the “mixed reality” movement within interactive art to argue that inviting action and enactment, rather than producing illusion and simulacrum, creates more immersive spaces.

As a producing artist myself, I’m not necessarily interested in work or environments that are more illusory or more immersive, but that, rather, explicitly ask us to move in ways we normally wouldn’t, implicitly pushing the boundaries of performativity and affect, interfering with, and putting into crisis, distinct bodily relations. I produce awkward interfaces that ask us to chase or stutter or build or write with our bodies. These kinds of invitational performances are “exploiting the margin of indetermination.” According to VR-guru Char Davies, they “temporarily deautomate habitual perception and facilitate a ‘seeing freshly.’” Says interactive artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, “the real motivation… is the modification of existing behavior… [to] create a situation where… the participants relate in new, ‘alien’ ways.”

It could perhaps be argued that all successful art interrogates our understandings of the world in such a way; but the Implicit Manifesto here is to intentionally open up interactive environments, and more general performance encounters, to new criteria and critique – not a discussion at the interface, but a co-emergence in and around the interval: a driving of, and attention to, the movement in the spaces between. By setting the stage, interactive artists-as-directors create productive tensions between the per-formed and the pre-formed, shifting our experiences of “body”. At stake, are potential strategies for intervention in our understandings of enfleshment, art that contextualizes embodiment towards specific ends.
V
a few samples of work

For example, *Body Movies*, part of the *Relational Architecture* series by the aforementioned Lozano-Hemmer, is a large-scale public installation, which projects an archive of thousands of images taken on the streets of Rotterdam, Madrid, Mexico and Montreal. These are shown using robotically controlled projectors located around a square. In the centre of the square, huge floodlights wash out the images; they can only be seen, therefore, when passers-by block out the whiteness with their shadows, revealing the projection underneath. Said shadows range in size from 2 to 22 meters, depending on a visitor’s distance from the light, and their alignment with the images underneath triggers the next image in the sequence.56

![Body Movies, 2001 - http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/eproyecto.html](image)

A portrait is revealed by shadows; it’s a nonverbal interaction, a literal embodiment of other, a relation between people and site, a small gesture at huge scale, a playing with inside and outside, a question that poses space as representational, material and perceptual, through movement. Like space itself, bodiliness is "susceptible to folding, division and reshaping… open to continual negotiation."57 This accented shift, an unfolding and an enfolding, turns the context of architecture into a situational, sensible concept: “flesh-space.”

There’s also *Front*, a collaborative work by my colleague at Trinity College’s *Disruptive Design Team*, Ralph Borland, along with Margot Jacobs and Jessica Findley. This is “a pair of sound-activated, inflatable ceremonial conflict-suits.”58 Adorned by gallery participants in a ring, the volume of each wearer’s screams inflates their own ‘aggressive’ parts of the suit – pointy horns, boxing gloves or wings – whilst their ‘opponent’ sprouts protective, but constrictive, forms around their more vulnerable flesh. Both armour and disarming, protection and provocation,” these suits and their integral howling matches literalize, concretize and make physical our potential anger, bodily networks and both visible and invisible interactions between them: “social-forms.”

![Front, 2000 - http://ralphborland.net/front/](image)
Finally, a work of my own, enter:hektor, is a more literal performance space – viewers enter a large interactive corridor between black and red velvet curtains – where my goal was to frame text and activity as entwined. Inspired by J.L. Austin’s theory of “performative speech acts,” participants use an abstracted, real-time projection of their bodies to chase after hektor’s text, which, when triggered by their outline, are played as spoken word through speakers in the space. They must literally move, bend, extend and stretch to capture hektor’s continuously mobile phrases, and hear what he and they will say, together. The space asks viewers to “leave behind” their everyday performance of self, and attempts to accent each step and movement as a rich, performative gesture: “body-language.”

These are just a few examples of Implicit Body Art, and a calling attention to the relations they put in quotes. For me, it’s more than a theory; it’s an artist statement. And my ongoing research will unpack existing work, and what we see or experience in it, to help produce new work that pushes at the moving, recursive and topological boundaries between what we know, what we don’t know, and what we do not know we know. The implications are wide open.

NOTES

1 This paper greatly builds on a concept I first introduced with Nicole Ridgway, in a collaborative Chapter entitled “The Implicit Body,” for the forthcoming Cybercultures book put out by Rodopi Press. A few short paragraphs are borrowed and edited from said paper.
3 Ibid, 27.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid, 4-5.
6 Ibid, 103
7 Ibid, 57.
8 Ibid, 98
9 Ibid, 83.
11 Ibid, 79.
12 According to Hansen, technicity can be “understood in its broadest sense as a relation to exteriority, as exteriorization.” Ibid, ix.
13 Ibid, 79.

16 Ibid, 38.
17 Hansen, 20.
18 Massumi, 280.
19 Massumi defines a topology as “the science of self-varying deformation” (Ibid, 134), and asserts that, whether Euclidian (as is the möbius strip) or not (the case for most topologies), topological figures “generate a surplus-effect… due to a transitional excess of movement” (Ibid, 185).
23 Ibid.
28 A former student of Schechner’s; for full disclosure, I should also mention that Nicole Ridgway is my wife.
30 Ibid.
34 Ridgway.
35 Ibid.
36 Schechner, Ibid, 1.
37 Victor Turner, in forward of Richard Schechner, Between Theatre and Anthropology, xii.
38 Ibid, xi.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid, 1-3.
42 Massumi, 200.
44 Andrew Benjamin, Ibid, 50-53.
46 Massumi, 8.
47 Massumi, 206.
48 See Massumi’s chapter “The Evolutionary Alchemy of Reason: Stelarc,” in Parables for the Virtual, for a wonderful reading of his suspensions as, Massumi’s term, “sensible concepts.” These are the “physical experience of ideas” that manifest as “performance” (Massumi, 89-90).
Where, in future papers, I will occasionally venture into areas of more traditional art and the implicit body – be this video, imaging or more “static” installation – it will mostly be digital work, and always be influenced by the discourse around it.

50 Ibid, 20.
51 Hansen, 19-20.
52 Hansen, preface and introduction.
53 Ibid, 30.
54 Char Davies, email to Hansen, quoted in Ibid, 111.