



The Choreography of Things by Elisa Rusca

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“A drumbeat began, electronic, like an amplified heart, steady as a metronome. She'd removed her leather jacket and boots; her T-shirt was sleeveless, faint tell tales of Chiba City circuitry traced along her thin arms. Her leather jeans gleamed under the floods. She began to dance.”

William Gibson, *Johnny Mnemonic*, 1981

When William Gibson told us how Molly Millions, a woman with tech implants on her body, fought against a professional killer to protect the data stored into Johnny Mnemonic's head, he described it as a dance. The father of the cyberpunk, in the very second piece of fiction he ever attempted¹, depicted a powerful, synaesthetic scene:

sounds and movements create an arena of mesmerizing scenarios in which the two fighting characters challenge each others. Despite her implants, the cyborg's skills of Molly aren't the elements stressed by the author to celebrate her triumph: beside, it is her kinaesthetic empathy, allowing her to feel her enemy's movements, to feel the floor and the space around her – as well as her physical training – that grant her victory. Gibson's description of Molly's choreography of a fight is a great example of a dance metaphor in contemporary literature. It is also a concentrated storytelling of a moves' sequence: it is about conditioning and training, narrative and dance, which are notions explored by Ka Fai Choy in his piece *The Choreography of Things* (2015).

The Choreography of Things is a performative research structured in a series of experiments; it aims to investigate the neurological narratives of the dancer's body, exploring how memories, creativity, perception and expression through the movement work while performing a choreography or while improvising. Choy thought and developed his tools to detect and interpret both, the neurological traces and the performer's feelings, and how they combine and interact in the process of kinetic expression. For *The Choreography of Things*, three proposals of experiments have been made so far: *Introspective*, *Archetype* and *Triangulation*. Those are organised according to a large palette of possibilities, from the speculative scenario to the workshop, from the demonstration to the performance. By doing this, Choy's intention is to explore some crucial questions about the human physical expression: while following a learned choreography, where is the limit between the repetition of a sequence of movements and its appropriation by the dancer, who then can communicate a very large scale of feelings to the viewer by its personal interpretation? How can an inducted movement become natural? How does the creative process, while building up a choreography, work, both on a physical and on a more impalpable level? Choy structured a real platform attempting to provide empirical insight in order to investigate these and many other questions related to the act of choreographing.

□ Gibson, William, "Source Code: An Introduction", *Burning Chrome*, New York: HarpersCollins, 2003, p.xvii.

The Choreography of Things – Introspective took place for four weeks in Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, as a series of live performances. An air of mystery and suspended time embraces the visitor entering in a soft and quite dark environment. On one table, a computer screen shows diagrams and schemes as for some kinds of seismographic drawings; on one wall, six different coloured lights pulses in different rhythms; on another one, the image reveals a 3-D human silhouette accompanied by short biological and cultural information along with some instructions, as it is for lab-rats during behaviour experiments. A sound of muffled steps: detaching the look from the walls, the eyes are suddenly captured by the gestures of a dancer moving gently in the space. The performer is dressed in green, black and white and wears a strange helmet on the head. Observing the movements of the human body, the viewer quickly realises that the projection on the wall is the description of the dancer - body type, age, education - who is following what's indicated in the file. Akemi Nagao, Tomoko Inoue, Yuko Sato and Yusuke Kimura, four professional dancers with different body types and educations (from classical ballet to contemporary) were literally examined by Choy while repeating or creating movements within the exhibition space for the duration of the show.

Analysing the performer consciousness, thoughts and feelings while moving, the artist could visually map the narrative process of the choreography: the headset that he put on the head of his human guinea pigs measured and recorded their brain waves while performing -and the result was then shown on the computer's screen. The brain waves of the dancers depict what the subject is physically experiencing while executing a determined sequence of moves. Active thinking, daydreaming status, meditation state of mind and learning memory are only a few parameters to read the graphics. The data become therefore a new way to look at the performance, an unconventional reading of the choreography: the human movement was depicted without the human body.

Differently from *Introspective*, that we can see as a live laboratory in which the artist is the leader scientist, in *Archetype* the artist acts as an archivist. The second proposal is

then an exhibition of short documentary films, graphics about the mental states of dancers, brain waves' records, kinaesthetic studies, theoretical hypothesis and other visual experiments on choreographing grouped together and showed as a living research library, aiming to define the thin line between the intuition and the conditioning.

As for his previous projects such as *Prospectus for a Future Body* (2011), Choy legitimise his artistic procedures by showing his research material on the moving body. Thanks to the use of Choy's technology, developed to trace the neurological activities while choreographing and to encode the movements in electric signals, the dancers' bodies are scanned and their physical reactions are recorded and ready to be studied. Comparisons between different styles and eras are then possible: the artist researches the archetypal movements within the progress of dance history while creating a rich and large archive of moves. The tools and the programs created by Choy open towards new possibilities of study and experimentation – as his practice is a generative process: every project evolves from the basis of a previous one and stimulates other questions by taking different angles of analysis.

The last proposal, *Triangulation*, goes one step further and almost reaches the esoteric notion of telepathic communication between two dancers. *The Choreography of Things - Triangulation* is a three-channels video installation with a duration of about 20 minutes, showing two performers situated in two different rooms. Both dancers wear the headset; they cannot see each others, but they know about their respective presence, since they have access to the graphical notation of the other's brain waves. The data are also converted into sound. Following the sonic and visual manifestations of the other's movements, the dancer can speculate on this data. The meta-physical movements can therefore be read and anticipated, engaging the two performers into a meta-communication in which the brain waves data are the vertex of this triangulation, being the mediation between this exchange.

The experiment aims to investigate mind reading between the two subjects and if they can mutually predict the movements of the other by only perceiving the other's brain

waves. *Triangulation* wants to explore the mind of the dancer and its reactions in the process of cognitive anticipation of choreographing; intentions and iterations of the moves are like words placed in a sentence: knowing the grammar can allow one to predict the place of a certain syntax's element. Similarly, *Triangulation* is an experiment about introspection and intuition about the choreography's sequence. Without any direct access to the mind of the other, the dancers may deduce each other's actions, acting as kinaesthetic empathy agents producing a neuro-dance duet. The experience is then an opportunity to develop new hypothesis on reciprocity and how it affects the creation of a choreography, highlighting the interactions between neurons and dance.

The Choreography of Things is the last Ka Fai Choy's apparatus, in which art and technology act together to display what's commonly not visible -or hardly recognisable - when looking at a performance: the deepest feelings of the dancer, the intimate and imperceptible core of the action. By exposing what happens inside the performer's brain, Choy celebrates the art of the action and elevates the dancer to an ultra-human status, according to the original dream associated with the first research on biofeedback movements. Introduced at a conference in Santa Monica, CA, USA, in 1969, the concept of biofeedback has been studied progressively from the beginning of the 20th century until today: it is a technique that allows otherwise imperceptible, internal bodily mechanisms to be perceived as audio or visual data. Thank to an electronic equipment, human beings are guided to a greater awareness and control over their own body. As doctor Donald Moss defined in 1998, biofeedback “encourages the humanistic dream that the human being can become creator of his or her own ever perfecting health and nature”². In *The Choreography of Things*, Choy proves the importance of the reading and the interpretation of the biofeedback.

²Moss, Donald, “Biofeedback, Mind-Body Medicine, and the Higher Limits of Human Nature”, in *Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology: A Historical and Biographical Sourcebook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1998.

The relevance and the originality of Choy's artistic practice, between performing art, video and technology, is that he dissociates himself from the mere use of the biofeedback impulse – as Marco Donnarumma – as well as the pure attention to the choreographic aspect – as Noboyuki Hanabusa, Klaus Obermaier or Anarchy Dance Theatre – or from the *querelle* about social and political use of science in art – as Bruce Gilchrist or Stahl Stenslie. Ka Fai Choy embraces all those problematics while showing a mixed methodological approach to them. Claiming Daito Manabe, Stelarc, Luigi Galvani and Stephen Cray as his illustrious predecessors, Choy affirms his belonging within the long genealogy of explorers of the body and its potential. Bringing together a scientific protocol and experimental artistic practice, his personal focus on dance and performers' activities is a brilliant way to research about the body's non-verbal memory and recollection, creativity and communication: opening the way to other possibilities of physical analysis and contemporary creation.

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