Interview with Yael Kanarek, Evann Siebens, and Yoav Gal about Portal: a Net.Dance by Helen Thorington, with an introduction by Jo-Anne Green

Introduction

We enter the dance via screens within screens, small pixels within large pixels, rendered pixels. This is a net.dance, the spatial and theatrical dimensions of which are very much about surface. We activate the dance square by square. The dance proceeds at the user's pace as we nudge the traveler along. Rather than being transported by the dance, we navigate the dancer's travels for **her** but there's only so much control we have in this predestined journey, which is hers alone.

The traveler is alien to the Manhattan street. While the music's overall impact is hard and discordant—reflecting the city environment—she exists, perhaps, only in our minds as no one appears to notice her, and traffic does not stop for her. She's submerged in a world of make believe, playfully whipping pistols from her imaginary holsters. Each scene within the larger picture is a dance that culminates in a repetitive gesture, machine-like, robotic. We help the traveler negotiate the fence, and launch her into the in-between with a drag and a click.

There, the traveler is contained and vulnerable but flatness has given way to virtuality. Despite her confinement, we're comforted by her ability to breathe. The music is vocal as if here, though still alone, she no longer feels entirely alien. Still she's caged and unaware of our presence. Her nakedness suggests rebirth: where will she begin? We manipulate her this way and that: as the camera zooms in on her, she becomes progressively fragmented. As she's breaking apart, she suddenly confronts us. The traveler looks right at us and touches our hand—it is this sensory moment that catapults her into the next world.

The traveler is released into a vast desert where, again, she is alone. Once again the vocal music underlines her aloneness, its multiple voices the same voice. She trudges through the heavy sand, going nowhere. Her mirrored image is reminiscent of the corps de ballet: undifferentiated, regimented, and conformed. She becomes an army of reflections that cannot provide solace. She repeats her solitary dance. Her movements ripple through dunes and sky.

Interview

Helen Thorington: PORTAL is an extension of a work you have been creating since 1995. Tell us briefly about the larger project and when you began to think about net.dance as part of it?

Yael Kanarek, new media artist: World of Awe is a schema, a porous structure in which to explore the cultural potential of digital technologies. A traveler's tale in the form of a journal is at the core of the project. The narrative inspires the emergence of projects that inhabit the schema to create a sense of a world.

I began thinking about an interactive cinematic piece about two years ago. When I met Evann a year later we focused it more specifically on dance. Keeping with the principal that each project extends the original schema, PORTAL is the first project to introduce a specific portrayal of the traveler in a cinematic sense and can be considered as the "beginning" of the traveler's tale.

HT: In net.dance a traveler passes from one world to another—from the

material world to the virtual world: were there any models of this kind of passage that you looked at while researching your subject?

YK: I learned about different "techniques" of passing from one world to another at a pretty young age. Mary Poppins, Bert and the Banks' kids go on a vacation by jumping into the chalk pavement pictures, and a bed knob sets off a magical journey in Bedknobs and Broomsticks. Then the less classy: The Time Tunnel, a TV series that ran for one season on ABC in 1967-68 and aired in Israel in the 70s. I loved it. Two scientists, Dr. Doug Phillips and Dr. Anthony Newman, ran into the secret time tunnel they built and kept falling into the past or the future. The crossing was accompanied by a series of explosions. Then of course the all time favorite, the Star Trek Transporter. An 80s reference that comes to mind is the music video for the song "Take on Me" by Norwegian pop band A-Ha, where the girl is pulled into the comic strip by lead singer Morten Harket.

Though, the model I'm most curious about are these less dramatic, yet constant transitions we make throughout the day between what we consider real vs. imagined and how we distinguish between them. It's a strange thing.

Evann Siebens, dance filmmaker: The net.dance narrative was initiated from the Traveler's Journal—we really took some of the textual ideas and tried to make them cinematic. I had literary references in mind when I thought about the portal that the traveler would go through. For example, the wardrobe in "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," Virgil as he slips through cantos in Dante's "Inferno," Oedipus in "The Odyssey" and his journey into various mythic situations, Lewis Carroll's work, the timeless white room at the end of Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey," and that episode of The Simpsons when Homer eats a hot chili pepper and falls into another psychedelic world. In essence, however, the "key" that the traveler held was dance. I felt that dance represented a password or a way for her to move to the next level or world. It became the language that she spoke.

HT: How did net.dance develop: what changes did you and your collaborators make—conceptually and/or in the choice of technologies from the time you first thought of net.dance until its final realization?

YK: Originally, I was thinking of net.cinema. I was curious about the kind of one-on-one experience a user could have with a cinematic narrative online. I was already working with Yoav through a residency at Harvestworks on Music for "World of Awe." Meeting Evann, a dance filmmaker and a dancer herself who was interested in new media, prompted a fluent exchange of ideas. Fortunately, Macromedia came around with Flash MX just in time for us to easily integrate QuickTime into the project. Then from one production meeting to another, Meeyoung would bring in experiments she'd done in Flash, based on the dialog we had, and over time we retained those behaviors and effects that we found relevant to our ideas. In Part 1 the dance came before the music, in Part 3 it was the other way around.

ES: It seems to me that the conception for the piece was initially much simpler —the trilogy or triad of pieces didn't develop until later. We were looking for a way to integrate the text into the net.dance piece—and the progression that occurred as a result of the three-tiered dance piece was related to this. I was initially interested in creating a narrative of sorts— abstract but still leading the traveler with an intention or a "goal." We were looking at the possibility of creating a goal-oriented gaming environment, but this quickly changed.

My background is in film and dance, and the first part is probably the most linear and cinematic of the three. I had trouble letting go of a linear progression, and yet became incredibly excited by the fragmentation of time,

the ability to show multiple images simultaneously and the different facets of dance related imagery. The technology available definitely changed the essence and the face of the piece. By the time we got to the third part, a very different relationship to the technology existed for me, and how I thought about choreography created for the screen—a new type of interactive screen.

Yoav Gal, composer: PORTAL is a convergence of ideas. Yael and I had been working together for a while and there was quite a bit of music already composed. The musical ideas and techniques were becoming increasingly specific to "World of Awe," and the net.dance commission was a perfect opportunity to refine some of those ideas. The soundscape reflects the materials of "World of Awe." There are only two sources of sound. One is an old Atari 800XL and the other is the voice of soprano Sarah Rivkin.

In Part 1 of the net.dance the Atari is used as the sound source, in the other two parts only the voice is used. This restriction helped me to sharply define those different realities. In other expressions of "World of Awe" there is more interchange between Atari and voice. We were also concerned with making the musical pieces more interactive. Different elements of a composition can be presented in distinct blocks that leave some input to the listener and some randomness to the experience. This kind of thinking about music grows out of Minimalism, where music is thought of as an object in time that can be actively observed rather then a journey that a passive listener is taken on by the composer.

The music for Part 1 is comprised of several layers, each with its own individual aesthetic value, and all compatible harmonically and rhythmically in order to work well in different combinations. The layers loop in synch with each-other, even when triggered individually and at different points in time. The resulting piece is fully preconceived and controlled, and at the same time it is random to the extent that in each viewing the musical layers are triggered in different order and heard in different combinations. So it's a different piece each time.

HT: What are the major issues is this work. Talk about this in terms of the work's three sections: What lies behind making the traveler out-of-place (in terms of dress and behavior) in the "real" world? Why was nakedness chosen for the between worlds? And why is the transition between one world and another conceived as being within a box?

ES: The three parts were conceived to show the traveler proceed from one world to another, and it was important to show the difference between these worlds, both in a visual and a conceptual manner. I often choose to film dance in a "real" location, or a place that removes it from a theatrical, proscenium setting. The New York City street achieved this purpose, and the location was actually one that is found in the narrative—419 East Sixth street. The location also influenced the choreography and the structure of how the visuals were shot and edited. We combined pre-conceived ideas with an almost documentary feel —pedestrians and passing cars were part of the mise-en-scène. The choice of the costume was manifold. First of all, we wanted to make the figure stand out from the environment, having just emerged from one world, and about to pass into another one. She needed to be prepared to deal with various environments (and not just the sweltering 100 degrees of an August summer day). We were also initially concerned with keeping the figure genderless. In the text, the figure's gender is always ambiguous, and we wished to keep with that idea— trying to make the figure tough and masculine and yet also with a feminine, vulnerable side.

In Part 2, however, the issue of gender was obviously decided. Having shed or lost her clothes, the figure becomes vulnerable, unsure of place or time, of where she is going and where she has been. The nudity is supposed to make

the viewers feel slightly uncomfortable, as if they are viewing something they shouldn't be. She has also lost her autonomy, as the user has the sense they are controlling her direction. When the figure confronts the viewer with her look into their eyes—through the screen—she makes them question their relation to her.

As the filmmaker, choreographer and performer in the piece, I had to truly question whether I wanted to be seen nude in such a public online forum. My mother would not be (and still isn't) pleased. However, it was important to me that, as one of the creators of the piece, the only gaze that was turned onto my nudity was my own or that of another woman (namely, Yael's). In essence, the "male gaze" was not even an issue here and I don't feel like the imagery objectified me in any way. The nudity felt like it would be a natural way to bring forward the ideas of the piece, and it feels organic, vulnerable and surprisingly beautiful to me.

YK: I was particularly fascinated with the idea of "in between worlds." In most of the models describing crossing from one world to another, the "in between worlds" are not elaborated on. What is that space between worlds? PORTAL is downloaded to viewers' computers via the Internet. It made sense to look at the space between worlds as the space between that which has been downloaded and the viewer who requested it. So, Part 2, breaks the narrative with an inquiry. The traveler is stripped down to the basic, the "box" she's in is not really a box but a diagram of a box—an idea. That box is inside the movie frame, inside the browser window, inside the screen, coming from the computer, inside the room where the viewer sits, which is inside the house or building. Spaces nested within spaces, boxes nested within boxes and somewhere in this sequence there is the traveler and a few "nestings" later, the viewer. What kind of relationship can be formed between the two? Is it possible to break the "walls"? The user in the big box is allowed to "play" with the traveler in the idea box, determining the direction the traveler is spinning. If you play with it carefully, you get the odd feeling of controlling a live person.

Part 3 takes place in the Sunset/Sunrise. It's a digitally created desert terrain. In other areas of the "World of Awe" schema I refer to these landscapes as Nowheres. In Part 3 imagery obtained in the physical world— the traveler—is place against the backdrop of the imagery produced digitally. The tensions in resolution inform the aesthetic. The traveler studies her relationship to the environment through her movements—how to be analog in the digital, gain and loose resolutions, and multiply oneself. Part 3 doesn't really end. When the traveler disappears from the camera range, the viewer remains behind somewhere in the Sunset/Sunrise.

HT: Talk about the spatial and aesthetic relationship between the two worlds.

ES: I had various rhythms and choreographic ideas in my head for the different parts. Part 1 is influenced by the environment: the heat rising off the cement, the texture of the gate, the two-dimensionality of the frame and the surrounding environment. The movement is hard-edged and aggressive. I was trying to look masculine and tough. The editing also informed this aggression, the cuts are hard and fast, creating more velocity to the movement and to the general mise-en-scène. The bluish-gray tone also affects the coldness of the general experience.

Part 3, in contrast, is lyrical, fluid with an adagio feel. Surprisingly, the environment also affected the movement and the dance. Because we shot against a blue screen, I had to create the surroundings in my head, the loneliness and the desert feel, the silence and the voices within my head. The sepia tone also added to the difference. The contrast between the worlds could not be more extreme, and this was an effect we were striving for.

YK: It seems as if Part 1 and Part 3 turned out to be diametrical opposites. Part 1 is dynamic, hard, and rhythmic while Part 3 is warm, slow, long, and vocal.

HT: Discuss the meaning of the music in the third section, and how it relates to the traveler's dance.

YG: To my mind this piece grows out of its lyrics: "Yours forever/Your sunset/sunrise forever yours/Yours forever yours." This phrase is the signature that appears at the end of all the love letters sent by the traveler from the desert of Sunset/Sunrise to a mysterious lover. It's a statement about human presence in a landscape, and this presence can be expressed in different ways, vocally or physically. The traveler exists in the landscape and is also identified with the landscape as her/his constant mindset. The piece is, I hope, long enough to convey the timelessness of the landscape. The fragmentation of the traveler/dancer/singer into multiple images is a metaphor for the dissolution of the individual into the landscape and the merger with it. Musically speaking, it's a polyphonic piece. Polyphony was originally a religious practice, and even though I wasn't fully aware of it while writing, I think I was searching for a way to convey transcendence. There is a technological twist here, however. The different voices in fact originate with the same person, so it's a kind of a lonely transcendence and disintegration.

ES: After initially hearing the music, I thought Part 3 should be more about the sonic environment and the visual mise-en-scéne rather than pure choreography. There is a meditative, lyrical quality to the movement that is almost out of sync with the music. The fragmentation of the figure, the repetition of the movement, the recapitulation of the imagery—all of this was a cinematic answer to the complexity of the sound. The desert environment, the idea of mirage or multiple figures, both within and outside of the traveler's head, also relate to the multiple voices in the music. We discussed, and left ambiguous, whether the voice should be seen as the traveler's own or one that is in the environment, or perhaps even the voices in the traveler's head.

YK: I was particularly interested in integrating principals of computation. Loops and repetitions are the building blocks of both the dance and the music. It's an interesting manifestation of the digital medium as expression and content.

HT: And finally, what's next?

YK: We're looking into ways in which we can develop the live performance based on the online work. I also will be focusing on the manuscript in the upcoming months with support from the Jerome Foundation Media Arts grant and a couple of mixed media projects. Yoav and I continue developing the music to release a CD.

ES: We're hoping to do a live performance or performative installation with the piece which will take it to another realm, both physically and conceptually. Personally, I'm presently continuing my dance-media work with an installation entitled "image/Word.not_a_pipe=" as well as a documentary that will be seen on PBS this summer entitled "American Aloha."

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