

## ***Getting a Measure of the Other***

### **Embodied Cultural Difference on the Transdisciplinary (Playing) Field**

by Andrew Houston

As a theatre practitioner, an evaluation of the body in performance is a crucial aspect of what I do. I ask myself, how do I know the body in performance? How is the body perceived? How do we evaluate its performance? How do these considerations constitute a measure?

Measurement of the body in performance was a mutual concern between myself and two colleagues I worked with a few years ago at the University of Regina, Kelly Lockwood in Physical Activity Studies and Joanne Bristol in Visual Arts; together, with a small amount of university funding, we embarked upon a collaborative, transdisciplinary (the University's term) performance project entitled *The UnMarked Measure*. I want to address my experience of this project from a cultural perspective because perhaps more than anything I learned about measuring the body or of the different disciplinary approaches toward its animation, I learned a good deal about the relationship between the different cultures of each discipline; in particular, how this relationship is largely constructed through different perceptions of the body.

#### **Overview of the Project**

Kelly Lockwood's specialization in Physical Activities Studies is biomechanics; according to Lockwood, the science of biomechanics can be defined as, "the application of mechanical principles in the study of living organisms" (Lockwood 1). The discipline provides us with a set of fundamental analytical tools that allow both quantitative and qualitative measurement and foundations upon which understanding of the body can occur. Within the context of this project, biomechanics was utilized in order to quantify *what* and *how* movement occurs, in an attempt to define the "measurable measures" of human motion (Lockwood 1).

Why we move and the perceptions of movement are not quantifiable within the scope of biomechanics, and thus constitute the initial outline of the *unmarked* measure of the body in performance. Essentially the disciplines of Theatre and Visual Arts offered the perspective, mediums, and analysis to examine the unmarked measures defined by biomechanics.

Visual Arts offered an exploration of the body in performance through an event entitled *The Performance Art Olympics*, a production of performance art works that used the rhetoric and the structures of both 'the everyday' and of the sports world. These performances investigated concepts such as 'winning', 'losing', 'judgement', and 'competition'. *The Performance Art Olympics* provided the material for biomechanical and dramaturgical study.

#### **Disciplines, Roles and the Question of Culture**

*Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used*

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*for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought (Williams 87).*

Throughout this project Kelly, Joanne, and I had numerous discussions concerning our relative disciplines' approaches to the analysis of bodies-in-action, in an attempt to orient ourselves to each others' tools of analysis, and as a way of navigating the different cultural perspectives coming from each of our disciplines. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, culture has at least three distinct if not discrete meanings: culture is first a process of cultivation and growth, and this relates specifically to its biological reference; culture is also a pattern of living and a way of understanding, and finally, culture is a thing, a product, an art work (Duncombe 36). In so far as each of us articulated the cultural perspective of our respective disciplines, it could be said that these discussions demonstrated if not our respective 'patterns of living' – in the theatre, the visual art studio, or the gym – it introduced us to each other's 'way of understanding'. A familiarity with the way of understanding intrinsic to each discipline was useful in identifying our respective blind spots, and beyond this the identification of grounds upon which new, hybrid approaches for creation could begin.

In pursuit of this transdisciplinary ground, and a possible playing field of creative and perceptual openings, we took up the following roles: Joanne's role was to establish the *Performance Art Olympics* with a senior-level Visual Art Intermedia Studio/Seminar class held in Winter 2001. Kelly's role was to implement a biomechanical analysis of *The Performance Art Olympics* in an early stage of the development of their particular event. My role was to apply a dramaturgical analysis on *The Performance Art Olympics* as a whole. I was assisted to this end by a directed studies Dramaturgy class held in the Spring term of 2001. Essentially the dramaturgical analysis explored each of the Olympic events in terms of how the body-in-action was represented in each. This constituted an examination of the cultural – including the possible political and gendered – representations of the body. According to Peggy Phelan, in these contexts, representation follows two laws: (i) it always conveys more than it intends; (ii) it is never totalizing. The 'excess' meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant meanings possible.<sup>1</sup> Precisely because of representation's supplemental excess and its failure to be totalizing, close readings of the logic of representation can produce theories that question the various cultural readings of the body-in-action, either in sport, in art, or in just about any cultural activity you could name.

### **Lack in the Other for the Dramaturge**

*We overlook the way our act of observing is already part of the state of things we are looking at, the way our error is part of the truth itself (Žižek, Sublime, 59).*

By way of illustrating the kind of cultural clash that was the most prominent part of this transdisciplinary project, I want to focus on a particular event created by a Jessie Dishaw, a Visual Arts student, and how this event was perceived by Carmen Tait, a Theatre student, conducting a dramaturgical analysis. Dishaw's event is essentially an enactment of television viewing, with the viewer (remote in hand) assuming a variety of different positions while watching a television. While this action varied somewhat through repetition, the constant elements of the 'choreography' appeared to be that each time a channel was changed, the viewer took on a new position; the

<sup>1</sup> For further elaboration of this theory of representation, see Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 2.

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viewer was seated on a couch, and an aspect of the action seemed to be focused on seeing the television from unusual angles (upside down and so forth).

Carmen Tait developed a performative response, offering an excellent opportunity to examine 'the error' of the Other for the dramaturge. This error of perception is often compared to the very essence of subjectivity by psychoanalytic studies of cross-cultural interaction, and I think it serves as an interesting insight into how interaction between disciplines and their cultural contexts can help us understand interaction between different cultures. Moreover, Tait's dramaturgical response to Dishaw's event strikes me as an interesting example of how an event we analyze can become a fantasy screen for what we desire the Other to be; in psychoanalytic terms, the Other becomes a kind of desired object or the *objet petit a*.

Jacques Lacan has defined the *objet petit a* as the object cause of desire, and it is significant to dramaturgy because in a sense the dramaturge is always in pursuit of attaining more knowledge about the object of inquiry, either a text or its staging as an event. Unfortunately, though, what we have here is similar to the relation of a subject to an object pursued in a dream, just when you think you've grasped the object in its entirety, you realise there is more. In the case of Tait's dramaturgical response to Dishaw's event, Tait has said:

I was impressed with [Dishaw's] idea, though disappointed that she did not take the event further. She started off watching a television covered in pink fun fur, exploring different positions in which she could watch television [...] I was hoping she would take this event one step further and choreograph her movements. I was also hoping she would develop a plan of how many channels to change in a certain time frame, etc (Tait 8).

In class discussion we had come at our dramaturgical analysis of the *Performance Art Olympics* from a number of perspectives. Drawing upon the readings of Peter Wollen, concerning the relationship between the birth of the modern Olympic movement and art at the time; through readings by Robert Schwartz, Ric Allsopp, and Claudia Jeschke on the body and choreography; through the performance theories of Abigail Feder and David George concerning the political and phenomenological relations between the rituals of sport and theatre, among other media. In short, our context for analysis was far reaching, and Tait's casebook reflects this.

Tait's performative response underscores at least two primary concerns among the dramaturgy class assigned to examine the *Performance Art Olympics*. One, in keeping with the comparison to sporting events, we wondered if it was possible for these events to be repeated – perhaps in competition – by other performers. Second, considering the consumerist resonance of the Olympics for most in our society, in viewing these events, it was difficult for the dramaturges to put out of their minds the spectacular display of what the modern Olympic ideology and movement has become.

Given these two preoccupations of Tait and the other dramaturges on the project, her response is indicative of two things: on the one hand, a desire to know more about the Other, in this case carried further in a performative exploration of the event; on the other hand, an anxiety of how the Other's lack creates a mystery rather than an affirmation of what an 'Olympic' event should be. As if to say, why would anyone create such a bizarre manifestation of an Olympic event? How is the act of watching television athletic? How may it be repeated, judged, and so on? Across the cultural divide between the style, indeed, the very ontology (or being) of the intermedia artist versus

that of her dramaturges, there is a gap, a “differend,” as Jean-François Lyotard might say, or a moment between cultures where

the sides speak radically different languages [...] where the dispute cannot be phrased in either language without, by its very phrasing, prejudging the issue for that side, being unjust [...] The differend marks a point where existing representational frameworks are unable to deal with difference without repressing or reducing it (Lyotard 117).

In this respect, I think Tait's response can be seen as fantasy, a way of navigating the difficult abyss of the differend; indeed, the dance she created in response to Dishaw can be seen as a fantasy screen of desire of the Other.

In her video response, Tait wore the costume of a figure skater, and with remote in hand and a television on a rolling shelf unit, she performed a kind of ballet / ice dance version of Dishaw's event. The movement with the rolling television was comparable to that of a ballerina with her dance partner; her choreography incorporated a similar physical score to that of Dishaw's (i.e.: every time she changed a channel, her movement changed), and there was a parallel sense of connection between the performer's body, the remote, and the television. Everything else was quite different, and quite from another cultural perspective. In her dramaturgical casebook assessment of this, Tait said:

It is a choreographed dance sequence, essentially. I would want to tape this event again, just to make my movements cleaner, and more sure. The event is to music, but I think I would want commentary on this event as well, to make it even more like an Olympic event. I have a costume on, as close as I could come to a figure skating dress with the resources I have. I have slicked back my hair, and piled on the make-up to make this as authentic as possible. It is like a pair's dance, as I dance with the television as if it were my partner (Tait 10).

In this case, desire in fantasy is a defence against desire invested in the Other. Fantasy appears in this scenario as an answer to 'che vuoi?', to the unbearable question or enigma of desire of the Other, of lack in the Other; but it is at the same time fantasy itself which, so to speak, provides the coordinates of our desire – which constructs the frame enabling us to desire something (Žižek, *Awry*, 118).

Dramaturgically, in Tait's fantasy re-enactment of Dishaw's event, desire is not fulfilled, 'satisfied' but constituted (given its objects and so on); through fantasy we learn 'how to desire'. Hence, the paradox of this performative response: Tait creates a frame coordinating desire, but at the same time its a defence against the 'che vuoi?' of Dishaw's event, a screen concealing the gap of the differend, or the split between cultures. This is the *unmarked* measure, the abyss of desire in the Other.

So how do we come to terms with these differends between cultures, between disciplines, faiths, languages, or other? How do we get a measure of the Other, as it is constituted from within and from without the self? Perhaps it is simply an understanding that such a gap exists, and as the Other becomes the object cause of our desire and thereby marked or measured in some way, we must not lose sight of the 'un' in this equation. For me the 'un' in the title of our project, *The unMarked Measure* is that quality of relating which is absolutely necessary to a subject's

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understanding of an Other, or an object of inquiry, and yet cannot be contained, or accounted for in that grasp. However, it may be given a kind of substance through the kind of fantasy constructed in the arts. As the coordinates of our desire are constructed through artistic representation, we may identify with the lack, the ultimately unknowable in the identities of the many cultures that surround us; for it is in this process of knowing, that we may begin to understand each other's differences.

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