S. J. Ewing's TECHNE: On Artistry, Technique, Computer Coding and Hyperreality

"Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle."
— Jean Baudrillard

By Lisa Traiger

Spend time reading French philosopher, cultural theorist and media critic Jean Baudrillard and his words ring prophetic at this moment. We've spent a year at a distance, isolating ourselves from friends, family, coworkers, classmates. We connect through pixels and soundwaves. We eat dinners virtually with parents or children miles away in other states. We go on first dates over Zoom. We do meetings on Google and Slack. All this happens from the comfort, discomfort or stasis of our homes.

During a year of closed studios and shut down theater spaces, the question loomed – even as we begin to reopen: What is real and what is virtual? Does it matter, or make a difference? In a world of online social transactions, the hyperreal, which Baudrillard wrote so provocatively about, has become our present state of being with mediated interactions, rather than live and fully lived ones. Virtual dances replaced living breathing, heart-beating dancers. Is this a new normal?

District choreographer S. J. Ewing has been experimenting with video and computer projections for several years, recently adding hyperreality and virtual reality to her wheelhouse. Her latest foray into virtual reality – crafted in collaboration with multimedia designer Dylan Uremovich and filmmaker Jonathan Hsu – came to fruition with support from a week-long in-person residency at Dance Place with additional support from CityDance. During a period when the great majority of dancers and dance companies have through necessity turned to new technology like Zoom classes and performance events, online revivals of archival performance footage, or reinventing their creative process for a virtual environment, Ewing had a foot in the door already. She had worked in projections, video, film, coding and gaming with Hsu and Uremivich in previous choreographic projects for stage, film, site-specific and virtual performance. In March 2021, *TECHNE* – pronounced tesh-nay – a tightly crafted 15-minute virtual reality, physically distant presentation was performed 18 times over a week for audiences of between four and eight socially distant viewers. Each viewer was masked and donned a (sanitized) virtual reality headset to experience the immersive work in socially distant fashion.

Ewing's initial plans and the resulting virtual reality performances of *TECHNE* resemble a "How it started/how it's going" meme. The choreographer explained: "*TECHNE* was originally going to be a live performance at Dance Place with projections. The original concept was to look at some research I did about [dance] class elements – the repetitive nature and very logical structured way of taking each step, which accumulates and becomes an artistic work." Ewing finds form and structure fascinating and plays with threading together phrases into solos and

varying groups of dancers. Her choreography often unfolds in a kaleidoscopic shape-shifting of bodies. The rehearsal process turns into one big lab experiment, she said: “You come up with a creative expression from whatever you’ve made.”

In tandem to her preference for formalist structures, Ewing expressed a great affinity for computer programming, something she picked up during high school – hers provided computers for all and required a computer course. Growing up in Melbourne, Australia, she joined a serious ballet program as a teen, then after a hiatus shifted to contemporary dance, even dabbling in choreography before moving to Montreal, then settling in Washington, D.C., all by the time she turned 20.

“I thought that coding was really interesting,” she said, but it fell by the wayside in favor of the demands of dance. Until, that is, while working at CityDance in Bethesda, she was assigned to a database project. Her conception of the relationship between coding and choreography converged: “The little steps that you take while you’re writing code are very logical and quite repetitive in structure, but when they accumulate, they can create something really beautiful.” She patiently explained: “As I was building the database, I was visualizing in my mind where all the connections were and where the data was …. It occurred to me that it’s very similar to how I imagine a dance piece. For me, space is probably the most important element that I think about when choreographing …. Where a dancer is in the space is one of the strongest communication tools in my toolkit.”

“All societies end up wearing masks.”
— Jean Baudrillard

When COVID-19 happened, Ewing had to re-invent her choreographic process in light of closed studios and theaters. While five years ago her evening-length work *Analog,* and its variations from 2016 to 2018, seemed super technological with an evolving backdrop of geometric and abstract video projections, she revealed they were pre recorded. For *TECHNE*, the choreographer dug deeper into new technology. Teaming up with tech guru Uremovich, for his serious computer programming skills, they decided to take the multimedia backdrop further by making it interactive and filming dancers in the round. After editing, audiences watched the 3D filmed and edited dance on VR headsets.

Uremovich utilized machine-learning tools to program the backdrops and moving projections. “That means,” Ewing explained, “the projections can actually learn from the person [on stage]. I think that’s super interesting; there’s a shared data point and also a very shared power dynamic where both sides – performer and computer-generated projections – are actually leading each other, responding to each other and creating something to give back. I’m really excited about the potential of that.”

Using gaming software, Uremovich built two programs connected to motion-capture sensors he attached to the dancers’ bodies – ankles, knees, hips, elbows -- while four onstage sensors “read” those bodies in space. New – and thrilling – for Ewing, because the four sensors were connected to an X-box, was that they could perform full skeleton tracking. That meant instead of getting

flattened bodies, the sensors knew when dancers turned and determined where a person was in space and where they were facing. “This is new and very cool that Dylan did that,” she said.

With *TECHNE* Ewing, Uremovich and Hsu were intent on connecting and engaging with audiences, no matter how small and distant due to social distancing restrictions. Each of the four dancers – Shanice Mason, Abby Farina, Grace Cho, and Diana Amalfitano – was pre-recorded on the Dance Place stage during the weeklong residency, separately and following stringent COVID-19 restrictions. That meant deep cleaning, emptying and airing out the space between each dancer’s recording session.

“Everywhere one seeks to produce meaning, to make the world signify, to render it visible. We are not, however, in danger of lacking meaning; quite the contrary, we are gorged with meaning and it is killing us.” ― Jean Baudrillard

Ewing conducted the pre-filming dance rehearsals over Zoom. When it came time to shoot, just a single dancer, Ewing and Hsu were in the building at a time. The camera Hsu used, an Insta360 Titan with eight separate lenses, recorded everything in 8K resolution. Filming days in January were long and extended into the evenings. Hsu took about 180 different shots from varying angles and levels, but the bulk of his work came during post-production. There, he said, he “stitched” together sections of the piece electronically so it appears as if the dancers enter and exit in tandem or perform virtual duets, trios and quartets – even when they couldn’t dance together in real life.

I’ve been attending performances at Dance Place’s Brookland studio/theater since 1986; almost every corner of the building feels fully familiar and simultaneously new to me, particularly following its most recent 2017 renovation. Sitting on stage became an immersive and breathtaking experience as scrolling pixelated computer designs washed over the back wall and floor – a gushing river of light and shadow, and dancers scrolled in and out of my VR gaze. If I caught movement in my peripheral vision and turned my head toward it, there was Farina parsing through a sequence of slicing arms as her torso curved over like a question mark.

Occasionally I instinctively flinched in my chair, like when Mason felt close enough that the toes of her lifted leg could have grazed my nose if she were actually dancing in front of me. But she was only there on the VR headset. Other times, my viewer’s perspective completely shifted; I’m seated upstairs in the audience, and later watching from above, or, most uncanny, when it felt I was below floor level, in a non-existent orchestra pit perhaps. Most fascinating was the spatial depth. Seated in the audience at a traditional live performance, the dancers can feel distant, even two-dimensional, depending on your location and perspective of the stage. The VR experience provided the impression of hyperreality – these dancers seem turbocharged, their movement captured and projected as fully dimensional, larger than life, closer than expected – no boundaries existed between performer and viewer. The sensation – as a first-time VR user – felt uncanny, heightened by the long isolation of adhering to social distancing practices.

And the experience reminded me of another Baudrillard quote: “All societies end up wearing masks.” While he wasn’t referring to our present pandemic restrictions, in this context the mask concept suggests the VR headsets that invite us into this hyperreal viewing experience.

Altogether no more than a dozen people were in the building for each *TECHNE* presentation – from the four to eight audience members (if a couple attended, they sat together in one corner), the tech director, a staff member and Ewing, the choreographer.

"It is the simulacrum which ensures the continuity of the real today, the simulacrum which now conceals not the truth, but the fact that there isn't any …" — Jean Baudrillard

The philosophical term technē – which derives from the ancient Greeks – can be translated as either craft or art. It can suggest the making or doing of something. While Ewing admitted that she didn't spend much time considering the ancient term as it related to her own choreographic craft, it's hard not to note how much her choreography leans more to abstraction and technique rather than emotion and expression.

From choreographic production to technical invention to virtual reality, the ancient concept technē is replicated in a novel manner by Ewing's *TECHNE*. Art, craft, technique and technology merge choreographic structures, computer science, gaming, film, and interactive projections in stepping toward new creative possibilities. It's a brave new dance world where engagement and interactivity are individual rather than communal experiences.

Ewing isn't finished with merging interactive technology and technique, coding and choreography: "I really liked the platform. I think we'll keep working with it … For *TECHNE*, when the lights [went] down, we wanted to honor how dedicated Dance Place is to presenting so many of us in the space and honor how dedicated audiences are coming to see what we make."

She correlates her choreographic process with her computer work: "I thought it was interesting, especially as that relates to [computer] coding, that the little steps you take while you're writing code are very logical and quite repetitive in structure. When they accumulate, they can create something really beautiful. I sensed that as well with dance: You can break down dance to … specific movements. But it's the sum of the whole that is the beautiful part."

An arts journalist and critic since 1985, Lisa Traiger wrote the dance column for *The Washington Post* Weekend section from 1999 to 2014, and she was a freelance dance critic for the *Post's* Style section from 1997-2006. Between 2017 and 2020, she directed Dance Metro DC's DC Dance Journalism Project, introducing locally based writers to dance writing and publishing their work. Lisa has interviewed many dance luminaries, among them Merce Cunningham, Anna Sokolow, Alicia Alonso, Paul Taylor, Arthur Mitchell, Suzanne Farrell, Twyla Tharp, Bill T. Jones, Liz Lerman, Ohad Naharin, Savion Glover, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and Misty Copeland. She has written for many publications, including *Ballet Review, Dance Magazine, Washingtonian, The Forward, Creative MoCo, Pointe, Dance Studio Life, Stagebill, Sondheim Review, Asian Week, New Jersey Jewish News, Bethesda Magazine*, and *Washington Review*. Traiger is an adjunct professor at Montgomery College and was a long-time member and former co-president of Dance Critics Association.