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html_butoh

By alexandra boutros - 11/05/2007



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lost in metamorphosis: ursula endlicher's html_butoh

Butoh is enigmatic. Sometimes characterized as dance, sometimes as theatre, sometimes as meditation on what it means to be human, butoh seems to resist definition and easy categorization. Undeniably, however, butoh is about movement. Butoh emerged in post world-war II Japan, in part rising out of dissatisfaction with the prevalence of Western dance movements and influences in that country. Some have

suggested that the goal of butoh is for the dancer to cease being him/herself, to stop being human, and to become instead another entity altogether. If butoh drives the human out of the dancer through movement, Ursula Endlicher's [url:http://transition.turbulence.org/Works/html_butoh/html-movement-library/]html_butoh[url] "a web-driven performance piece" raises questions about humanness in the realm of the internet.

Html_butoh is based on Endlicher's movement library, "a web-based repository of short video clips and images by various performers who use html tags, such as,, as a starting point for generating movements." Anyone can submit a video clip to the library. Uploading a video allows you to be integrated into not only the movement library, but also html_butoh's code recital. The performances of html_butoh come to fruition when a particular website is enacted or read. What results is a five by five grid of video clips from the movement library, each clip corresponding to a particular line of html code (,, or for instance). The websites that form the basis for these performances are culled from the 'global top 500', a listing ?updated daily" of the most popular websites based on traffic.

In the collaborative, mutable play of html_butoh, all the web is a stage and the performers flit from page to page. One of the webpages on which both they and I landed was [url:http://msn.foxsports.com/]Fox Sports[url]. With a click, I surfed away from the hypnotic movement and sound of html_butoh, to the steely gray and blue of the Fox Sports website, peppered with images of athletes. It was hard to remember that what I saw in each was the product of the same code interpreted two different ways. I had to force myself to see the Fox website differently, imagining in it the invisible structure that was being so vibrantly performed on html_butoh. The video performers of Endlicher's work make visible the invisible workings of web surfing, embodying and humanizing it. It is the interpretative work, the decoding, executed by the web-butoh dancers, that drives html_butoh. And it is their work that makes the web-performance so fascinating, no two individuals moving, acting, or looking alike. Some of the html_butoh dancers are costumed, one in toga like robes and head wrap, holding a spear, like Athena, rising fully formed from the net itself. Some, in contrast, are dressed in street clothes, one wearing a

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A person who cannot stop adding numbers together.

bulky coat and carrying a large green purse while she moves in looped translation of the command. The juxtaposition of stage and street is intriguing in a work that is at once randomly generated and wholly constructed.

It is tempting to think of what html_butoh offers as a simple translation, the rendering of code into movement through a sort of 'open-source' improvisational dance troupe. Certainly, translation seems to be central to some of Endlicher's other web-driven works.

[url:http://www.ursenal.net/websitewigs/ww_interrupted/]Websitewigs[url] for instance, renders the hypertext structure of the web into a series of interconnected wigs, each braid based on links and codes that underlie what we see when we look at websites. Singing Website Wallpaper enacts a form of double translation, reinterpreting html code first as sound, then translating that sound into a visual symbol. Although the movement library develops an 'expandable movement alphabet of the html library', translation is only part of the equation in html_butoh.

Endlicher makes visible what for many is an unnoticed and unintelligible structure operating behind what we see in a web browser. As we watch, the ways in which browsers scan html code in order to display its content is performed as movement. But what is it that we are really watching? Butoh dancers do not simply imitate, they become. Recalling the ethos of butoh, what takes place in Endlicher's work is not just translation, but metamorphosis. Websites are not simply reinterpreted; rather they become something else altogether. If Endlicher is humanizing the web, she is also mechanizing humans, their movements and bodies caught in digital code, endlessly looping as we watch. Endlicher's piece takes place at the intersection of the organic and the inorganic, human and machine. The work shifts seamlessly from the human act of looking to the calculated act of scanning. Endlicher's work challenges the seeming separation between us and the machines we use, asking questions about the inner workings of both.

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