AT ARM'S LENGTH

By Lacey-Law-Lobwein
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Essay by Simone Hine

At Arm's Length is the product of a series of collaborative experimentations between the three artists that comprise Lacey-Law-Lobwein (LLL): Olivia Lacey, Briony Law and Guy Lobwein. LLL used motion-capture and photogrammetry equipment at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) as a catalyst to articulate their own collaborative process. The movements recorded in each motion-capture session were the product of the three artists imitating performances, across cinema, music videos and performance art, that involved an artistic collaboration between two people.

This approach to art making is reminiscent of the early days of video art, where artists experimented with the formal possibilities generated by new moving-image technologies. Video art developed a symbiotic relationship with consumer technologies, such as the Sony Portapak. Technological developments created new possibilities for the production and distribution of video art by placing moving-image technologies in the hands of artists. [1]

Video art emerged at a time when the Modernist preoccupation with self-referential formal experimentation was dominant. While Modernist painting and sculpture was concerned primarily with the material conditions of the medium, video was focused on process, owing to the time-based nature of the medium which allowed the representation of process to unfold. [2] The inclusion of documentation of motion-capture sessions at QUT, in *At Arm's Length*, is indicative of this tendency, as audiences are presented with documentation of the collaborative process in action.

However, unlike early video art technology, motion-capture and photogrammetry technology is cumbersome. The infrastructure of the university is required as a physical, economic and institutional support for the project. This operates in direct opposition to the utopian ideals of early video art, which sought to free art and artists from these restraints via the employment of consumer-grade technologies that were relatively affordable and portable. [3] Early video artists embraced the failures of non-professional technology to reimagine the moving image.

The disjuncture between early video art technology and the technology used to construct *At Arm's Length*, is made explicit via the appropriated source material. Take for example Marina Abramovic and Ulay's *Rest Energy* from 1980. This low-tech performance hinges on the psychological and physical tensions between the two performers as they interact with the ancient technology of the bow and arrow. The arrow is notably absent from *At Arm's Length*, because the motion-capture technology does not require the presence of the arrow to adequately record the body's movement when replicating the performance. As such the reconstruction does not contain the elements of danger and trust that forms the locus of the original performance. Instead, the performance is transformed via elaborate technology and reconstructed as a virtual rendition of the exchange that has more to do with its historical significance, than with the dangerous exercise in trust between two people for which the work is famous.

The original performance of *Rest Energy* contained a small microphone placed external to the body at the position of each performer's heart. The sound of the heartbeat increased as the performance evolved. One can imagine that over the four minutes and seven seconds duration of this action, the ability to maintain equal force and grip would diminish, increasing the chance of the arrow piercing Abramovic's heart if Ulay was unable to maintain his position. The low-tech use of microphones to make present for the viewer the innerworkings of the terrified and strained body, is replaced by data-collecting motion-sensors that will be used to transform the actions of the body into visual data. The corporeal presence of the performers in space is replaced by pixels that represent a human body. This process reduces the body of the performer to only those elements that can be captured by sensors and transcribed as data. Instead of focusing on the human body as the origin of a singular, physical and emotional exchange between two collaborators. *At Arm's Length* utilises data drawn from the movements of each artist to construct a virtual copy of a re-performance. What results is many times removed from the original performance and the original moment of collaboration.

Amelia Jones famously articulated in her article '"Presence" in Absentia', the need to account for performance documentation as a primary mode of performance consumption. Central to her argument was that while physical presence at a performance provides a different experience to the delayed consumption of documentation, neither should be privileged as offering a more authentic experience of an original moment. [4] Jones is of course referring to the photographic-based documentation of a performance, designed as an archival record of a transitory live performance.

At Arm's Length extends this question to consider what happens when a performance is re-performed, not to an audience for the purpose of reconstructing a live event, but for the purpose of data collection that will later be used to reconstruct a virtual performance using substitute performers. This proposition places into question the very idea of an authentic experience, as the re-performance, in this instance, is located within a virtual model from which different forms of documentation can be produced.

Jessica Santone has argued that artists use re-performance as a method by which to re-imagine established histories via the production of contemporary art as a mode of critical interpretation. [5] This approach understands history as incomplete. This would suggest that re-performance is less concerned with a verbatim rendition of the original performance, and more concerned with the historical context of the performance as a site for re-interpretation. Within this context we might think of *At Arm's Length* as addressing, not the original performance, but the circulation of images that have proliferated around the original performance.

Each performance is painstakingly reconstructed as virtual replications of the original, historically significant, performative collaborations. In art historical terms, these virtual replications are presented as collages, and in popular cultural terms, they are mashups. Either way, they are united by the common theme of collaboration and organised according to the keyword-logic of an internet search.

We might think of this work as highlighting or even questioning the role that mediation plays in human exchange. The use of a third person amidst the reconstruction of duets in At Arm's Length, emphasises the awkward transition to mediated 'team' conversations and interactions. As we are plunged in and out of lockdowns that require us to move our lives online and offline at will, it seems imperative to reflect on the ways in which somatic experience is translated and reproduced across technologies.

[1] Hanhardt, J. (1990) 'Dé-Collage/Collage: Notes Toward a Re-examination of the Origins of Video Art', Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art, Aperture in association with the Bay Area Video Coalition.
[2] Elwes, C. (2005) Video Art: A Guided Tour, Tauris & Company, 22.
[3] Meigh-Andrews, C. (2006) A History of Video Art, Bloomsbury, New York, 18.
[4] Amelia, A. (1997) '"Presence" in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation', Art Journal, Vol. 56. No. 4. p. 11-18.
[5] Santone, J. (2008) 'Marina Abramovic's Seven Easy Pieces: Critical Documentation Strategies for Preserving Art's History', Leonardo, Vol. 41, No. 2, p. 147.

This exhibition is part of Common Ground: Bus Projects x Metro Arts. An adapted version of the exhibition will be exhibited at Bus Projects (Melbourne) in October, 2021.