DATA BODIES AND THE AWESOME APPARATUS OF TECHNOLOGY

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Super Vision, a multimedia theatre collaboration by The Builders Association and dbox, directed by Marianne Weems, text by Constance De Jong. BAM Next Wave Festival, New York City, November 29–December 3, 2005.

The Builders Association has undertaken a daunting and courageous task: to spin from the force field of global computer technologies an alternative technological world, a hyper-linked perspective from which the agendas of technology-in-the-service-of-capital are called into question. Though the recent production at BAM of their new work, *Super Vision* (conceived with the digital design group dbox) is the primary subject of this commentary, it is worth noting that there is already an immaterial archeology of their work, an accrual of digital creation, a trace unusual in the ephemeral world of theatre, that layers on to this newest production. To experience the totality of the work of the Builders is to sit in front of the screen traveling toward what one hopes is a "not this, but that" intervention in global cyberspace. I refer here, in particular, to a Builders Association Website created as one of the three parts of a work collectively known as *Alladeen*, which was created in association with the British company **moti**roti. *Alladeen* also included a stage performance, produced at BAM 2004, and, as a whole, investigated the outsourcing of telephone operator jobs to India [see *PAJ* 77, 2004—eds.]. One hopes, one is even invited to expect, that the experience of this travel into and through the *Alladeen* Website will be one of estrangement, a defamiliarization, a collision, a discomfort great enough to make me *move*: aside, ahead, behind, over, below, anywhere, but not here, where I am. Here, I am obeying, like routine, like it's the given world, the new dynamics of virtual circulation: of capital, and of me. But computer-driven technology, even in the hands of director Marianne Weems, who is intent on raising provoking, critical questions about it, seems to resist tampering with its structures and its effects.

Super Vision is an elegant, compelling, and often funny 75 minutes in the theatre. As we wait for the show to begin, there are six or seven people (are they actors?) sitting, chatting, at a long

table on the floor of the theatre. Above them, the proscenium opening, the stage/screen. Each has his or her own computer, linked to a monitor and live feed Webcam. The space is sparse, clean, the bare bones of what is to come, what is to be made by the innocuous bodies before us, those computers. A disarmingly entertaining monologue then opens the play. A woman stands in front of the audience and identifies, according to our zip codes, where we are likely to be sitting in the theatre, what is known about us and how we live. (That is, those of us who bought our tickets with credit cards.) Thus we are routed, through the specter of our own data bodies, shaped by corporate data mining, into *Super Vision* where, according to what Weems—in interviews—has termed "data space," becomes visible. This is the space where data bodies, those selves that are collections of a multitude of electronic information, circulate.

The stage/screen then sweeps into motion, becoming a virtual world. The proscenium is a hybrid of a cinemascope film and a TV screen. Beyond this portal is an acting space for live bodies behind and in front of which screens receive the projections that create three dimensional but immaterial worlds, dataspheres, through which the live bodies of actors slide. The table below remains fully visible, as actors and technicians watch the show, or fragments of it, on their computers.

There are three narratives in the text, written by Constance De Jong. Although each narrative is performed in a series of fragments, the actors use a surprisingly realistic performance style to show us very materially experienced pain, dislocation, alienation, love, and longing. Even as they are at risk of disappearing in the turning off of a camera, whether they appear digitally or in person their states of being are familiar and recognizable. They are states with which we empathize. A young professional Sri Lankan woman living in America, hooked on her cell phone and her two computers, depends on these technologies for daily visits to her failing grandmother back home. A father, in an compulsive relationship with *his* computer, steals the identity of his own son to borrow the money that is building around his wife and child a home that fills with expensive furniture, sleek design, the latest in kitchen appliances and countertops. A South Asian business man from Africa attempts, in various airports, to convince immigration officials, who are privy to a seemingly bottomless well of data about him, that his business trips are just that, innocuous, necessary travel.

Each of these scenes has its own theatrical/virtual machinery for creating stage effects. Both the grandmother/granddaughter and traveling businessman sequences rely on an actor (grandmother and immigration officer), who remains at the table below the proscenium, acting for the live feed camera. The actor becomes an image, projected onto an onstage screen, with which another live actor (granddaughter/businessman) interacts. In the granddaughter/grandmother sequence, the granddaughter actor leaves her post below the stage and reappears in a virtual set, surrounded by the computer gadgetry through which her life proceeds. She is accompanied by her grandmother's very large image, with which she is conversing via Webcam that she turns on and off, depending

upon what she wishes her grandmother to see or not see. In the father/son sequence, both mother and father are played by live actors. The series of interiors that is their home, though, is virtual, and the child appears only as a video projection. The businessman appears live. However, he is so immersed in projections of the cyberspace data junk that reveals and incriminates him, and so dwarfed by the overscale projection of the officials, that he seems comprised, overwritten by, the virtual. In a layering of liveness, all the immigration officials are played by the same actor who uses the time he is "offstage," in this case meaning at his computer but without its apparatus projecting him, to make himself up into the next character.

The production seems deliberately to stage all the possible varieties of the ways that the human body can be seen to be appearing and disappearing in a relationship with a hyperlinked global datasphere. There are, in *Super Vision*, so many levels of presence, absence, visibility and invisibility, or, rather, dissolution, dissolving, teasing appearances. These add up to questions about the ontology of what we are, now, as fully participating members of the data world. The title of the piece suggests to us that we need a new way of seeing to glimpse these networks of disappearance and reappearance, and what is animating or driving them.

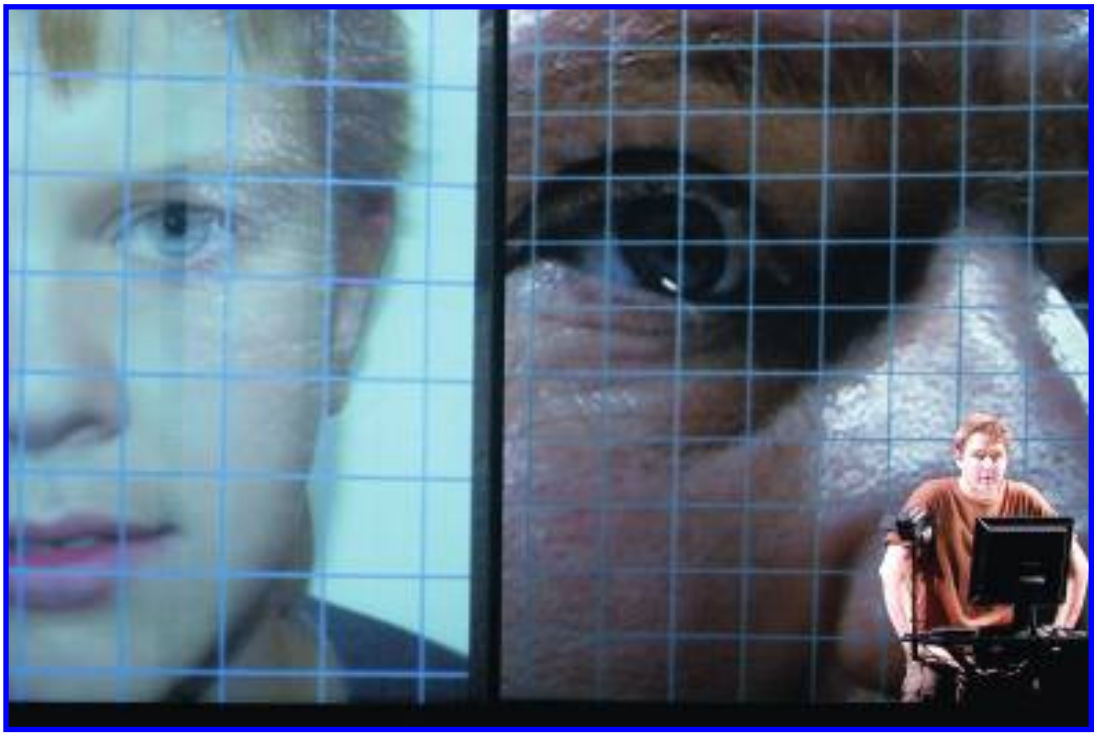
Weems seems to believe in the theatre, and its living bodies, as the point at which this vision might become possible. She uses the word "frictive" to describe theatre's potential to bring living bodies into disjuncture with the data body, to show the way that the living (theatrical) body can move against the grain of the data body, escaping (at least in part, or temporarily), its immaterialities and circulations in cyberspace. The reason for deploying theatre at the heart of technology is that the live body can be seen to reappear: to make an appearance that stages its alienation with and return from the datasphere. To stage its stubborn materiality is to stage the hope of escape, or at least of gaining clear-sighted access to the datasphere as well as a political stake in its effects on us and on the world.

And yet, despite the edgy political commitment of the Builders, despite the skill and the originality with which they work, it seems to me, as I noted earlier, that the global electronic matrix escapes here from any deep critique. The question, then, is Why? Why, linked to theatre's own deep investments in questions of presence and absence, the making, unmaking, and remaking of the person, in the slide from one being to another and back again, does this production, and the immaterial archeology into which it is layered, not move further toward a clear political challenge to incorporate capital's deployment of technology in the restructuring of the human itself? Certainly, *Super Vision* deals in questions about what we become or how we are assembled in and through electronic technology. At its best, *Super Vision* asks, How does the nature of what it is to be human change? What, now, is the nature of our attachments, or empathy, our capacity for love?

The granddaughter, for instance, cares deeply for her grandmother, but she is also curiously detached. She uses the same technology that links her to the grandmother to undermine her as she angles for possession of the grandmother's

Scenes from *Super Vision.* Top: A scene showing "the traveler"; Bottom: The live mother and virtual son. Photos: Stephanie Berger. Courtesy Builders Association and dbox.

Scenes from *Super Vision*. Top: Grandmother in Sri Lanka, granddaughter in New York; Bottom: Father and son. Photos: Stephanie Berger. Courtesy Builders Association and dbox.



real estate. The grandmother—a lively, vivid character who, given the sketchy nature of the vignettes is surprisingly "fleshed out"—keeps asking the girl, despite the Webcam visits each day, when the girl is coming to see her. The grandmother doesn't seem to count the virtual body of the granddaughter as the granddaughter herself—as the girl must hope she will—and there is a sense that her precipitous fall into dementia (shown on screen) is triggered by the absence of bodiliness: the absence of the corporeal, solid body of the granddaughter. It's as if that body could hold back the disintegration of self into utter absence. The last glimpse we have of the grandmother is of her video image disintegrating into its component pixels.

It is clear that the father has been taken over, become near monstrous, by the obsessive hours spent in front of his computer. As he "takes over" his son's identity, and uses his son as a player on the Web, delivering monologues about how the son and he are together, working together, partners, he ignores his actual son. He never once comes close to his body. But the body of the son, in any case, never does materialize. The video projected boy has a virtual relationship with his mother. Although she attempts to generate hobbies for him, she feels always on the edge of losing him to a boredom which seems to signify the denuded, flat tonality of a life lived as a data body. Does the body of the son remain immaterial because, without his father's love he can never become real? Is it because he can exist only as his father has made him—a made-up, virtual being circulating along with financial flows through the Web world?

Do the deliverance monologues at the end of the play imply that we can remake ourselves free of technology? Does the appearance of the real boy at curtain call announce the emancipatory potential of the live body? The mother's monologue, staged in her virtual living room, announces the remaking of the boy through her arduous effort, driven by a mother's love. The father ends the play escaped from his fraud to the Arctic Circle, the last place on earth that is still data free. The promise is that both boy and father will be instantiated differently in technology-free spaces. But even here there is the threat of the malignancy of technology as the father, in Arctic space, sees the birds, the only presence in the sky, and his metaphorical link to his son (his son and mother found something real and tangible in the world only in studying birds), turn into bits of data. Suddenly frightening, they fly close to him, seeming to begin to assemble in the shape of his body, threatening him, like his son, with translation into the virtual.

The news about technology here is grim, through mitigated by these live bodies and their emancipation monologues, by the grandmother's funny nose twitching imitations from *I Dream of Jeannie*, by the highly entertaining impersonations of the immigration officials. But the grimness of the message, and its potentially wide-ranging questions about the making of the human in an age of global capital and its technologies, are overtaken by awe at those very technologies. The union of theatre and technology is not new, of course. Technologies are the way that theatre has always created its spectacles, the theatrical magic which in many cases can be a principle source of spectator pleasure. It is the

gasp, the wondering, How did they do that? It is the fun of speculating with friends afterwards what was real, what wasn't. It is the pleasure in the theatre's unique way of being both in the real and simultaneously playing in the made-up.

But this way of making theatre, and this way of seeing, has also been named, by Brecht and many others, as mystifications, obscuring social relations in the very act of obscuring the means of production of theatre itself. It is telling that, watching the father in front of the projected Arctic, imagining his own flight from his bondage to the data-sphere, I could think of nothing so much of the famous photograph, from the melodrama *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, of Eliza crossing the frozen river to freedom from slavery. Both the father's Arctic and Eliza's river are produced as feats of awe-inspiring theatrical spectacle. In both of them the spectacle itself seems intended to signify for us the point of leave-taking, freedom.

And, indeed, the conversation among those with whom I saw the production, as well as the general conversation in the lobby afterwards, was that pleasurable speculation about "how they did it." One person, argued, for instance, that the performers we saw acting in front of their computer were not actually appearing as a live feed on the screen but were pre-taped. In other words, that digital transmission which was supposed to convey a simultaneous liveness, a movement of the real body from the live into the virtual, (one of those many layerings of materiality and immateriality), may have been "fake," or could be perceived to be so. (They are, in fact, live feeds.) In other words, even though we saw the computers, saw the two men at the table who never left theirs and so, presumably, were orchestrating what we saw (or were staged to be seen as orchestrating it), still the internal structurings, the driving forces of technology remain hidden from our vision. We still don't know how the technology that is absorbing us, in its invisibly circulating vortex, works. Even though we engage in lively discussions of all the instances we know of data mining as we leave the theatre, we still don't know much more than we did when we arrived at the performance about why computer technology is being made, for whom.

And yet, maybe this is itself a "super vision" that we can gain from the production, and even from our travels through the *Alladeen* Website. Perhaps we should begin to think that we have arrived at a technological form that is fully able to mask its own apparatus: no exposing the stage machinery, the pulleys and trap doors and gears. Invisible, ungraspable, we cannot alter its function, but only become more and more facile at using its mechanism, helping it along. We are not, like Chaplin, the victimized little tramp, caught in the cogs but thereby able to expose the workings of a voracious capitalism. Perhaps this is what a super vision alerts us to: that we have become technology's agents—fully participatory in creating and acting out its spectacles, its performance of itself as magical, inevitable, and awesome, a departure point toward new freedoms. The very idea of super vision becomes ironic. For all the prosthetic seeing, the seeing across the globe, that technology offers us, we remain without insight into its structuring apparatus. And the theatre . . . well,

the theatre has, perhaps, offered its live bodies, not so much as frictive presence, but as its own deep tradition of the pleasure taken in disappearance, and translation into otherness, here into the data body playing its fictions in between projection screens that wrap it into an agreement to go on performing on a global, digital stage.

The Builders Association Website: <http://www.thebuildersassociation.org>.

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