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Book
Reviews

Sharma

Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology

Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology. by Susan Kozel. 2007. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 362 pp., notes, works cited, index, and illustrations. \$35.00 cloth. doi:10.1017/S0149767711000076

Here the reference to Freud is important in that when, in the *Studies on Hysteria*, he asked his patients to describe what they saw, the images disappeared in the course of their very description. So the description was an instrument for making the images return but at the same time for making them disappear, since what happened was that the description substituted itself for the image. (Damisch in Bois, Hollier, and Kraus 1998, 12)

To judge by the many attestations found in *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*, Susan Kozel believes passionately in the centrality of the human body in the world. Her attention “to a cyclical corporealizing of the thought of our predecessors” stems from an undoctrinaire approach to phenomenology and phenomenologists, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In Kozel’s case, such an approach, or lack of one, allows her an interpretative freedom to explore “the performative experience of particular configurations of technologies.” The performing body in and with technology lies at the center of her concerns as an author and a performer. Nor should this come as a surprise, considering that her primary identity, prior to writing this book, has been as a dancer, or as a performance artist who makes extensive use of dance and choreography in her performance work—work that combines or brings into interaction dance performances with aspects of new media technologies. This book extensively describes and illustrates her combinatory dance and technology practices. In a section of chapter 3, “Strange Meanderings: An Embodied Poetics,” Kozel describes *trajets*:

an installation with bodies moving in moving structures. A convergence of people, robotics, and computer sensing, it is an example of full-body human-computer interaction. Although not a game, people play in it; although not a performance, there is an element of performativity; although not VR, it is immersive. It is a fluid space, a space of interactivity inspired by the kinesthetic trajectories of dancing bodies, as such it has its own poetics, structures of meaning, and social interactions. (178)

Such a prose style, one that cites proliferations of things referenced through lists of nouns and qualifying adjectives, occurs throughout the book. For example:

This initiative along with the increasing array of wearables projects that engineer innovative convergences among biometrics, fashion, performance, and design of smart wireless devices, finds itself within a contentious political domain: that of biometric tagging, public and private surveillance, and the acquisition storage and interpretation of personal data by governments and corporations, all in the interests of that ethical and political black hole called national security. (272)

In chapter 4, Kozel discusses her work in motion capture performance—a tool used in CGI movie animation, most famously in the character of Gollum, performed by actor Andy Serkis in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In film, the digital description of the body in motion results in the disappearance of the literal or representational image of the body in favor of a form of animation. In Kozel’s performance, the body also disappears, as projections of her dancing form overwhelm her actual physical

being. Light traces against the screen dissolve the corporeality she insists upon in her theorizations. Similarly in chapter 5, Kozel describes the effects of wearables, i.e., technological apparatus that attach to the body and perform as extensions of its perceptual or reactive faculties. Kozel claims that these wearables insert affective states into the wearers, thus making them more tuned in to that which otherwise could not be sensed without technological enhancement.

These various practices of the physical and purported affective enhancement of the performing body do several things. First, they insert the body in the tradition of filmic projection, particularly its experimental use by French and American avant-garde visual artists in the late 1960s. Then, the effects of dematerialization gained through projection are used to criticize a society increasingly overwhelmed and controlled by mass media and the commodification of contemporary life. Put another way, the use of film in artistic practices self-consciously manipulates “the real” in order to reveal and to criticize its actual political intentions. In stark contrast, Kozel’s intentions in these technological manipulations of the body may be termed interiorized. Rather than operating at the level of avant-garde critique, they relate her performances to the cyborg, a hybrid of machine and organism. It could be said that in the successful cyborg, the line between the body and technology disappears. The emphasis in cyborgian identity lies in the complete assimilation of technology into the world. This goal determines the increasing invisibility in the technologies of the prosthetics used by the body to insert itself in the world. Ideally, for example, the viewers of the performance cannot discern the apparatus attached to the dancing figure of Kozel. Thus, at the moment that the successful cyborg becomes part of the world, it cannot be recognized by that world, although it continues to recognize itself in the world. This is the position of the character of Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings*, and it is the reason that his evilness eludes the heroes of the film for so long. Yet, Gollum’s self-recognition of his earlier, pre- or proto-cyborgian self, known as Sméagol, causes his “real” identity to emerge in the story, and garners sympathy from other characters and the viewers who recognize in him, e.g., in his original identity, a common humanity. In *The Lord of the Rings*,

the melding of the body with technology in the character of Gollum provides a complex, cautionary lesson. On the other hand, Kozel’s narrative in *Closer* about her cyborgian performances celebrates the technologies and their effects upon an extreme interiority, one removed from her audience. This status of interiorization brought about through a combinatory dance and technology practice leads, in the book, to an explanatory mode reliant upon extensive description—one that causes her prose to mirror the lack of release that layers of self-reflection produce.

The striking materiality of the volume mimics the surfeit of descriptive passages, with the minutiae of performances described, just as it appears as the retort to the dematerialization called for by Kozel in her practice. The commonplace in performance studies of the extensive use of photographs in publication has been taken to new and strategic lengths in *Closer*. Grainy black and white photographs—many of them video grabs of digital images—of the author’s performances run across the top half of the book’s pages, often without interruption from left to right, through the gutters of the facing pages. The bodies—or parts of bodies—captured by photography usually appear as blurred passages of light against a dark black ground. These images taken from performances are often paired with an unruly selection of textual citations taken from a variety of philosophers and theorists, also printed in white against a black ground. Interspersed with these quotations, chapter titles and subtitles appear on facing pages, their inky backgrounds always running through the gutter. The result of this illustration design separates the top half of the volume’s pages from the lower halves, with text appearing as a ghostly apparition of thin black characters against a creamy white page. If this high contrast visual imagery and textual citation dominate the text, they also give an unruly, at times verging upon incoherent, appearance to the volume as a whole.

The stress in the book on purely visual repetitions—the alternating black and white photographs, the alternating black and cream pages, the proliferation of different textual fonts against black and white, etc.—draws attention to itself, underlining the textual description found throughout. Just as stylishness may be

termed style for the sake of style, so too the visual and textual “descriptiveness,” in *Closer*, may be termed description for the sake of description. Both the level of style in the design of the volume and the level of description in the prose indicate Kozel’s intentions, stated in the Preface: “The chapters are phenomenologies, and they contain phenomenologies: layers of reflection are enfolded in each chapter, and some passages directly describe sensations of being in a particular system, while others are devoted to extrapolating these through the philosophical concepts of a range of thinkers” (xvii). Whether the descriptions the author finds necessary to such a confluence of reflection and sensation can adequately convey a coherent point of view, or indeed, adequately provide the intellection necessary to convey the relationship of theory to the body in movement with digital technologies, remains in doubt. While overt stylishness in contemporary culture may well signify a locus of extreme interpretative interest, as Dick Hebdige (1979) has suggested, the celebration of stylishness serves to enhance its apparent impenetrability. If affectivity and empathy are her goal, as Kozel at times seems to say, then descriptiveness only prevents the transfer of these elements from dancer to audience, or from text to reader.

Who better than a dancer, she asks, to describe the human body in the world, or the relationship of the body to the world? She says, “It is my contention that being able to describe the human body in the world, particularly as the world changes dramatically and rapidly with the proliferation and dissemination of technologies of all sorts (from smart wars to internet shopping to genetic engineering) can’t help but be a useful skill.” The kind of description that Kozel has in mind pertains not only to the multiple passages of extended textual descriptions found in *Closer*, but also, to judge from the way the dancer employs digital technologies in her performances, to repetition through simulation and projection in those performances. Thus, Kozel takes the performativity of description to the ends prophesized by Freud, e.g., to the disappearance of its referent.

In the quotation with which I began this review, the art historian Hubert Damisch relates Freud’s use of description in psychoanalysis to the significance of description for the study of images, which may be extended here to the

field of performance studies (Damisch in Bois, Hollier, and Kraus 1998, 12). Freud understood the effects of extensive description in psychoanalysis as a useful means of situating the hysteric’s body in the world. As Damisch inferred, the description, which the analyst works so hard to get from the analyzed in order to achieve a cure for hysteria, can be related to the effects of textual description in the history of art. Description causes the image to come back and to come alive, while at the same time it acknowledges the absence of the image as it disappears. How, Damisch asks, can a discipline reliant on description keep the image so essential to its methods in view? How can it operate in the linguistic realm of description, while at the same time not reproducing a void, or a silence, as Merleau-Ponty called it in the essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” (1993)? If the goal of traditional representational genres is to reach “the thing itself,” as Merleau-Ponty seemed to say, we will constantly misrecognize (and misconstrue) the very thing if we overdescribe it. Kozel often insists throughout *Closer* that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology lies at the heart of her practice. Both she and we should not be surprised that an extreme, and recursive, style, whether in performance or in writing, can only betray the impossibility of taking that path towards knowledge.

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