Jamming Performance with Media Materiality in *Glitchbody/ Nanostalgia [1454-2015]*

Tensión en la superficie: Improvisando el Performance de la Materialidad Tecnológica en la Obra *Glitchbody/Nanostalgia [1454-2015]*

Tensão na superfície: Improvisando o Performance da Materialidade Tecnológica no Trabalho *Glitchbody/Nanostalgia [1454-2015]*

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*Artículo de investigación: The article repeats the frame of a piece called *Glitchbody/Nanostalgia [1454–2015]** by performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña to argue that new media technologies, in addition to being part of the socio-situated milieu for performance, must be seen as bodies with which to contend and improvise.
Este documento repite el marco de una pieza llamada *Glitchbody / Nanostalgia [1454-2015] ** para al artista del performance Guillermo Gomez-Peña. Yo argumento que las nuevas tecnologías mediáticas, además de ser parte del medio (milieu) socio-situado para el performance, deben ser vistas como cuerpos con los cuales contender e improvisar.
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Abstract

Over the spring of 2015, UC (University of California) Davis invited the performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña to collaborate on a piece called *Glitchbody/Nanostalgia [1454–2015]. Glitch* intended to engage social-surveillance technologies such as Google Glass with the meats, movements, and imaginaries of human bodies. The final performance was preceded by a week of intensive performance games and workshops, a rehearsal done in collaboration with many from the UC Davis community.

This paper begins by repeating the frame that *Glitchbody* enacted: one that separated the affective and improvisatory play of the rehearsal space from the more representational, and at times fetishistic, deployment of technology in the performance. By segregating the processes for developing work in rehearsal from digital technologies and networked connections that formed both the occasion for, and atmosphere of, the performance, the performance framed technology in a "prosthetic" mode, neglecting the embodied potential and material consequences of digital media. In this paper I argue that new media technologies, in addition to being part of the socio-situated milieu for performance, must be seen as bodies with which to contend and improvise. 'Performance jams' are the pedagogical methodologies developed by Gomez-Peña (2011) in conjunction with the trans-disciplinary arts collective "La Pocha Nostra". The jam is utilized to germinate new ideas, images, and personas for the night of the final performance. In these improvisatory spaces, differently-trained bodies touch and move with one another in innovative ways. By intersecting thinkers such as Lipsitz (2013) and Goldman (2007) with work from media studies on prosthetics (Sobchack, 2004) and glitches (Krapp, 2011), and science and technology studies on materiality (Rubio, 2014), I argue that the political necessity of improvisation in both the arts and activism must include a wider nebula of touching that includes the non-human bodies and scales of digital technologies. Engaging the surface tension that exists at the borders of skin and screen requires us to attend to how rehearsal practices foreclose possibilities through framing technology outside of technics.

Keywords: glitch; improvisation; prosthetic; google glass; technology.

Resumen

En la primavera de 2015, UC (Universidad de California) Davis invitó al artista del performance Guillermo Gomez-Peña a colaborar en una pieza llamada *Glitchbody / Nanostalgia [1454-2015]. Glitch* intentó involucrar tecnologías de vigilancia social como Google Glass con las carnes, movimientos e imaginarios de cuerpos humanos. La performance final fue precedida por una semana de juegos y talleres intensivos, un ensayo realizado en colaboración con muchos de la comunidad de UC Davis.

Este documento comienza repitiendo el marco que Glitchbody promulgó: uno que separaba el juego afectivo e improvisatorio del espacio de ensayo de un más representacional y en ocasiones fetichista, despliegue de tecnología en el performance. Al segregar los procesos para desarrollar el trabajo en el ensayo de las tecnologías digitales y conexiones en red que formaron tanto la ocasión para, como la atmosfera del performance, éste enmarcó la tecnología en un modo "prostético", descuidando el potencial incorporado y las consecuencias materiales de los medios digitales. En este escrito, yo argumento que las nuevas tecnologías mediáticas, además de ser parte del medio (milieu) socio-situado para el performance, deben ser vistas como cuerpos con los cuales contender e improvisar.

'Performance jams' son las metodologías pedagógicas desarrolladas por Gómez-Peña (2011) en conjunción con el colectivo transdisciplinario de arte "La Pocha Nostra". El jam es utilizado para germinar nuevas ideas, imágenes y personas para la noche del performance final. En estos espacios de improvisación, cuerpos entrenados de formas distintas se tocan y se mueven entre sí de maneras innovadoras. Al interceptar pensadores como Lipsitz (2013) y Goldman (2007) con trabajos de estudios de los medios sobre prótesis (Sobchack, 2004) glitches (Krapp, 2011), y estudios de la ciencia y la tecnología sobre materialidad (Rubio, 2014), yo argumento que la necesidad política de la improvisación tanto en las artes como en el activismo debe incluir una nebulosa más amplia de contacto y del tocar que incluye cuerpos no humanos y escalas de tecnologías digitales. Involucrar la tensión superficial que existe a los bordes de la piel y la pantalla requiere que atendamos a cómo las prácticas de ensayo excluyen posibilidades a través del enmarcar la tecnología fuera de las técnicas.

Palabras clave: falla; improvisación; prótesis; google glass; tecnología.

Resumo

Na primavera de 2015, UC (Universidade da Califórnia) Davis convidou o artista performático Guillermo Gómez-Peña para colaborar em uma peça chamada Glitchbody / Nanostalgia [1454-2015]. Glitch tentou envolver tecnologias de vigilância social como o Google Glass com as carnes, movimentos e imaginações de corpos humanos. O performance final foi precedido por uma semana de jogos intensivos e workshops, um ensaio em colaboração com muitos membros da comunidade da UC Davis.
Este artigo começa por repetir o quadro Glitchbody promulgada: um que separava o teste espaço emocional e improvisação uma implantação de representação e por vezes fetichista, da tecnologia no jogo p performance. Segregando processos para desenvolver o trabalho em testar tecnologias digitais e conexões de rede que se formaram tanto a ocasião como a atmosfera da performance, ele estruturou a tecnologia em um modo de "prótese", negligenciando as construídas potenciais consequências e materiais de mídia digital. Neste artigo, argumento que novas tecnologias de mídia, bem como sendo parte do meio (milieu) socio-localizados para o desempenho deve ser visto como corpos com os quais lidar e improvisar.
'Performance jams' estão ensinando metodologias desenvolvidas pela Gómez-Peña (2011) em conjunto com o coletivo de arte transdisciplinar "La Pocha Nostra". A jam é usada para germinar novas idéias, imagens e pessoas para a noite da apresentação final. Nesses espaços de improvisação, corpos treinados de diferentes formas se tocam e se movem uns com os outros de maneiras inovadoras. Ao interceptar pensadores como Lipsitz (2013) e Goldman (2007) com trabalhos de estudos de mídia sobre próteses (Sobchack, 2004) Glitches (Krapp, 2011), e estudos de ciência e tecnologia na materialidade (Rubio, 2014) defendo que a necessidade política de improvisação nas artes e ativismo deve incluir um contato mais amplo e vago toque incluindo corpos não-humanos e escalas de tecnologias digitais. Envolver a tensão superficial que existe nas bordas da pele e da tela exige que abordar como práticas de teste excluir possibilidades de enquadramento através de tecnologia fora de técnicas.

Palavras-chave: falha; improvisação prótese; google glass; tecnologia.

When you first enter the main room of the Art Annex at UC Davis, there is not a particularly welcoming quality to the expansive space. Industrial, warehouse-grade concrete floors, opposite to exposed, red-metal girders – crisscrossed 12 feet overhead like so many repeating geometries of targeting – sandwich rows of movable student desks, numerous old couches in varying states of decay and a diverse array of electronics and forgotten art, which like flotsam have deposited around the edges of a room that alternately serves as a lecture, meeting, and storage space. In a week, the room will be empty save for a sacred circle composed of chairs, framed by projection screens, chiaroscuro lighting, and a DJ-cum-shaman at the southern point of the compass. For now, it is sober and lifeless, the antithesis of the techno-fetishistic event soon to be conjured. Performers pile desks into a large cubist structure in the corner of the room before stretching, running, and dancing about the space. One room over, in a small 15x15 foot classroom with a long tab at the center, various computational and electronic devices sit: a laptop, a Macintosh tower, a flat screen monitor, 2 wearable computers called Google Glass, and tendrils of power cables and connectors. The sinuous tangles of cords are visible indicators of the forces flowing through the room, as the dance of electrons, inaudible clicks of magnetic drives, pulses of radio waves, and glow from light emitting diodes fill the room with a palpable heat. The differences between the two rooms couldn't be starker, as the very focus, posture, movement and energy cultivated by bodies shifts demonstrably in the space.

A motely group of artists are there to collaborate in a series of workshops towards the production of *Glitchbody/ Nanostalgia [1454–2015]** (*Glitch*), a performance developed in collaboration with performance artists Guillermo Gomez-Peña, John Zibell, Caro Novella, and many others from the UC Davis community of artists, dancers, filmmakers, writers and scholars. Developed with funding from the UC Davis Mellon Initiative in the Digital Humanities, and UCD's ModLab, *Glitch* was meant to engage social-surveillance technologies like Google Glass with the meats, movements, and imaginaries of human bodies. But due to a perfect storm of compounding technical problems and a formal division made between the technics of performers and those of digital technologies, the performance itself was largely infelicitous in mining that intersection. As one of the technical advisers and performers in the project, I partook in that failure.

Figure 21: Glitch mediation. Photo: courtesy of Regina Gutiérrez. 2015.

Failure, like falling, can be productive in its ability to index a rupture in time, as it blocks the flow of business as usual, seizes upon manifolds of technical systems, and agglomerates force from certain components into other collectives. I reckon *Glitch* "failed" in two ways, signaling a problem with a particular practice of interfacing computational with biological bodies. First, in the formal separation of technical play from performance games, *Glitch* rehearsals removed the "room for error" necessary to manipulate or exploit the contingency in all technical systems (Krapp, 2011, 76). Second, because network technologies require a system of support both infrastructurally and affectively distinct from other technical forms, the performance neglected the scales of time and displacements of space endemic to computational interaction, instead utilizing social-surveillance technology as semiotic vehicles. Due to these failures, *Glitch* performed an image of technology in a fetishistic, or *prosthetic* mode, wherein very material interactions were unaccounted for. This paper argues that the technics used for associating entities and forces in performances must attend to the specificities of the computational medium and the historical-material relations of the device. If a performance wants to engage "new media", a shift is required in both the bodies of the performers, and in the time and space of rehearsal.

What is the prosthetic mode? This is the tendency to articulate technology along a trajectory of tool-use; the object thus conceived is a way to extend the capacities and senses of human subjects, rather than an already-embodied technic for "making sense," or a dynamic, material relationship of incorporation and interaction. Network technologies are particularly susceptible to this ableist abstraction: connecting through this device or software will increase human ability, imagination, and even possibility. In "A Leg to Stand On", Vivian Sobchack traces the promiscuity of the prosthetic metaphor, which neglects the incorporative practices of those who live with (and render invisible) prosthetic devices, while transferring agency to the technical artifact: "the scandal of the metaphor is that it has become a fetishized and "unfleshed-out" catchword that functions vaguely as the ungrounded and "floating signifier" for a broad and variegated critical discourse on technoculture that includes little of these prosthetic realities." (2004, 209) In its functioning, Sobchack argues, the prosthetic returns everything to normal, obfuscating disability for a discursive fantasy of technology (2003, 211, 223). With Sobchack, I argue that the images we use to discuss, rehearse, and work with the technics we mobilize are fundamentally flawed if their semiotic function doesn't take into account the heat, components, software, infrastructure and modulations folded together within the system of relations.

If a prosthetic is isolated from its system of relations, the critical analysis it permits must be named as a subtraction, or objectification, of a particular medial history. For example, when movement, targeting, and capture were collapsed into a medium, as in the convergence of the camera and the gun for Étienne-Jules Marey (1895), we can situate cinema within a wider history of ballistics and warfare. Likewise, if we can interrogate the rhetoric of early digital networks as virtual playgrounds through the Orientalist, identity tourism outlined by Lisa Nakamura (2001), we can complicate an image of the Internet as fundamentally democratic, with differentials of mobility and asymmetries of power. Thinking technology as means, or as prosthetic, permits us to see ways in which a particular imbrication of the body with architectural media, founds certain politics or forecloses alternative futures (Winner, 1980). But as a modular abstraction, it conceptualizes technology as somehow apart from, or added-to, embodiment. On the one hand, framing wearable technologies like Google Glass apart from their history of use and emplacement as literal lens for encountering the world reifies a natural essence for the body and an original wholeness (Sobchack, 2004, 210). On the other, it celebrates what Terry Harpold calls the "upgrade-path" of technical innovation (i.e. planned obsolescence), where continuous consumption and iteration are required for human interaction (2009, 3). It is not the object, but the performance of all of the interfacing elements that comes to matter. If different narratives or functions (or politics!) are desired, however, play is required.

Improv. Jam. Glitch.

Glitch took place on "Picnic Day" on April 18th of 2015, but was preceded by a series of conversations, collaboratively-constructed documents, workshops, rehearsals and performance jams that occurred with increasing frequency and duration throughout the week of April 12th. 'Performance jams' are the pedagogical and rehearsal methodologies that Gomez-Peña has developed in conjunction with the trans-disciplinary arts organization "La Pocha Nostra." Through a series of intimate rehearsal games and practices, culminating in collaborative improvisational jams, performers develop new materials, images, and personas for the performance. Gomez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes explain that these practices are more than just productivity exercises; they serve to cultivate space for the community. Beyond the proximal place, performers enter a ritual time, "an enhanced present in which past and future appear to be inconsequential." (2011, 58).

> *For two days we had been playing games of status and trust. An early exercise named "the gaze," involved 2 players locking eye contact for sustained periods of time. 15 performers stood in a circle, enveloped by echoes of electronic music. The 'maestro' walked around the circle, and one-by-one took a person by the hand to face them with another; he partnered me with Synduname. Prolonged, purposeful, present eye contact was uncomfortable for me, as I maintained her gaze for increasing lengths of time (5…6…7 minutes). The sustained focus exhausted my eyes as blurs and phantom images condensed and evaporated through refractions of light. The following day, we incorporated movement. With silent, stoic gazes we shuffled about the room – diverging over great distances, approaching close enough to feel each other's breath upon the mirrored face, and changing heights and angles, our bodies serving as camera gimbals. When debriefing with Synduname, I was surprised by how she both reciprocated and diverged from my affective demeanor. What happened between and upon our bodies was not the same.*

Figure 22: Mediated bodies. Photo: courtesy Regina Gutiérrez. 2015.

"Part Aikido, part chess." This is the game Gomez-Peña introduced on our third evening of rehearsal. Gazes now anchored "moves" such as a change in proximity and height, or a push/pull of force towards/away from one's partner. Players would respond by redirecting their partner's force, trying to unsettle them in unexpected ways. The rising and falling crescendos of movement – fingers to faces, arms around torsos, feet upon chests – called attention to the trust that had accumulated between performers, grounding this exercise. This was not a zero-sum game, and players were not competing for finite resources. Across synapse and musculature, membranes and memories, play generated that which was not there.

The improvisatory workshops and performance games had a dual-effect in that it solidified this "temporary community" for experimentation (Gomez-Peña, 2011, 3), while generating new ideas and images for *Glitch* in the process. Improvisation, or extemporization (*extempore*: from/out of time), whether as a jazz musician or a theatre performer, is a reflexive practice par excellence. Performers, building upon prior training, jam with one another in a combinatory space wherein possibilities emerge through the repetition of the various methods, knowledges, bodies, and materials in circulation. The shared history of playing together in turn feeds back into the process, foreclosing or revealing futures. While this is not always experienced as egalitarian or liberating, connections between artistic uses of improvisation in performance and strategic uses for activism aren't incidental. It is explicitly acknowledged as part of La Pocha's pedagogy (2011, 10–11). Danielle Goldman, likewise traces how contact improvisation is explicitly indebted to nonviolent training workshops developed during the Civil Rights Era. Bus protests and sit-ins were improvisatory spaces where participants experimented with stillness, falling, and various postures for "physical non-cooperation with the situation" (2007, 63). "Improvisation in both expressive culture and social-movement mobilizations", note Daniel Fischlin et al., "can keep us attentive to our responsibility to build the world we hope to inhabit." (2013, 29) Beyond a fecund intersection of different bodies drawing upon past experience in an intentional time and space, improvisation becomes a way of attending to, and experimenting with, a future yet to come.

With this in mind, interfacing with computational technologies becomes an essential practice for those who wish to expressively and politically improvise in an increasingly algorithmic era. Central to my argument here is a refusal to accept as natural any original division between human and machine technics, or between methodologies incarnated in skin and muscle with those embodied in silicon and signal traffic. For a performance that cites the year of Gutenberg's press (1454) in its title, John Law's definition of technology is helpful here: "Technology [is] a family of methods for associating and channeling other entities and forces, both human and nonhuman." (1987, 115) Law's definition complicates lines between agent and system, while also emphasizing the importance of bringing ecological awareness to methods. Practically, however, the proclivity of technological artifacts to shroud

histories behind functions often makes critical analysis difficult. How might we engage a black box that folds together computer, point-of-view camera, networking interface, global positioning system, accelerometer, prismatic display, bone-conduction speaker, microphone, sensor array, software platform and geeky fashion accessory? Interacting with those manifold possibilities, whether at a screen's surface or the software's prose, requires shifting the frame of time to one that is thoroughly nonhuman, and often disorienting, to users. Rehearsal starts to look more like tinkering and troubleshooting; in my experience performers tend to defer to technicians or engineers, looking for plug-and-play options to circumvent the room for error. Yet in accepting this division, improvisation is closed off to human-computer "jams" which might seize, interrupt, scramble or otherwise hack contingent techno-cultural milieus so that something new may emerge. Glitches have emerged as cultural signifiers for the chaos and chance that complicate the order of all computational systems with contingency, or, "whatever is neither impossible nor necessary" (Krapp, 2011, 86). Smoothly operating media devices equal the determinacy of those that are buggy to the point of being bricked. Glitches, however, index very material spaces of interaction, often experienced as a break in functionality. If the only improvisation with technology comes via a discursive frame, new possibilities will always be truncated.

"Too Hot"

On the night of the Glitchbody/Nanostalgia [1454–2015]* performance, I was positioned at the outer ring of the sacred circle, a live video composer amidst the techno-fetishistic spectacle. From my position I combined, edited and transmitted pre-recorded images and live video both online, and to three local projectors, all whilst observing and occasionally broadcasting) the entire process through Google Glass to create feedback loops. Towards the latter half of the evening, there was a vignette informally titled "Love conversation with my laptop." Gomez-Peña rhythmically commingled spoken-word poetry over the physical movements of performer Brandon Gonzalez, as he manipulated a blue, industrial dolly. Wearing protective boxing headgear, an oversized boxing jockstrap and a scarlet backpack, Gonzalez moved with and against the lines of the steel object, presenting it in ways both familiar and foreign; the peculiar dance was reminiscent of the primate's discovery of the bone-tool at the opening of Kubrick's 2001. As the bodies moved together, Gomez-Peña engaged in an erotic dialogue with his laptop, adding staccato layers of language to the image: sexual puns, double-entendre and intimate revelations of a history engaging with the computer that contained the prose. As technics mingled with poetics, metonymic associations formed between dancer and speaker, laptop and dolly, as fetishized objects revealed subjects operating along a continuum of desire and functionality.

Figure 23: Mis en abyme in Glitch. Photo: Audra Lynn. 2015.

Amidst the centering movements and sounds, I was perched at my station, "pushing" images to 3 screens. Two screens alternately displayed a barrage of pre-recorded and live video, complicating Glitch with a collage of military strikes, handheld performance footage, and scophophilic YouTube videos of feet, breast, and hair. The remaining screen, which was largely unobserved due to its unfortunate placement at the far corner of the room, displayed my attempts to capture and display content via the Google Glass device upon my head. During a particularly salacious line from Gomez-Peña, while Gonzalez squatted with his dolly, Glass augmented my vision with the message "Glass has become too hot" and the following instructions "Please remove Glass so that it can cool down." It was such a brief moment, and few other than I observed it (it repeated for another in the finale), but it erupted across the surface of the event to signal something out of place. Amidst Gomez-Peña's sexual declamations, and the masculinized body extending against the borders of a utility-object, Glass was overwhelmed by far too much stimulation. It would be foolish to attribute to this malfunction, if we wish to call it that, any sort of sexual responsiveness. The implication of intimacy was brought forth through a confluence of thermal energy upon my sweaty brow, increasing temperatures in a proximal ecology of moving bodies and processing technologies, and the playful language that prodded the device with a shroud of sensuality. Immediately a laugh erupted from my belly and escaped through my lips – in a performance entitled Glitch, this was the only one that appeared.

It is often at the break in smooth-functioning systems where matter comes into focus. When they fail, the human labor, physical infrastructure and nested layers of technology necessary for operating and maintaining systems present themselves. In a lecture entitled "MoMA and the Collapse of Things," Fernando Domínguez Rubio depicts museums as machines for stabilizing art as object, arguing, "Ecologies specify objects." (2013) Drawing examples from multiple media, Domínguez Rubio reads artworks as slow events; that is, as materials drifting away from aesthetic fixity and objecthood, they require niche environments conducive to their preservation that necessitate the infrastructural capacities of museums. "What is needed", he argues, "is to develop explanations that are able to capture this "material unfolding of culture" as a bottom-up process that emerges through diverse configurations of people, meanings, practices, *and materials.*" (2016, 642) In the case of Glass, we must attend to the material-semiotic infrastructures that render wearable technology durable, functional, or meaningful. Or alternately, in the case of *Glitch*, we have to look at the ecology of interrelations whose interface led to this glitch. A central problem in the week leading up to the performance stemmed from network infrastructure; in Spring 2015, UC Davis was updating their campus wireless network. "Moobilenet" was giving way to "Eduroam." Due to network connectivity errors the week of rehearsal all across the Art Annex, we had to bootstrap together numerous individual wireless hubs to support the radio waves bouncing around the performance hall. The lack of technical expertise, combined with the taxing on the network due to UC Davis Picnic Day (where tens of thousands of additional users swarm Davis, utilizing guest logins), sharpened a division already made between computer and human performance space.

There is a surface tension that exists at the interface of elements in a system. For bugs on the water, it is at times strong enough to stand on; others fall through. As technologies settle into prescribed use, and methodologies give borders to bodies, we forget these tensile forces and negotiations that have allowed us to draw things together into a greater whole. The surface of contact – whether screen with finger, radio wave with transceiver, or human forehead with wearable computer – is a precarious node that distinguishes where improvisation is possible. Falling does not equal failure, as plunging below the surface reveals nested levels of material interaction and historical contingency where things might be different. Failure signals the need for new technics.

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IMPROVISATION