Title of the article: (No)Body or (Some)Body?

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Abstract

The body is a tool that the dancer uses to perform. The live 'presence' of the body is the conventional basic requirement of the performance. However, the last decade of the 20th century saw a varied range of exploration and experimentation in the field of performance, theatre and dance. The main reason for this is the role computer technology has played in this regard. Choreographers and theatre practitioners across globe started to work with this new-found technological aid of "motion capture." It remained an issue of unresolved debate among artists whether this became useful to the form or not.

This essay will try to attempt in traversing the potency of motion capture technology keeping in mind both the acceptance and rejection of it in terms of it being a choreographic tool, the conceptualization of space, the tension and tussle between the choreographer present in the actual space versus the virtual bodies. It will also consider observations by scholars such as Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, and André Lepecki.

This investigation will require two case studies — one, a very celebrated choreographed work by Bill T. Jones titled *"Ghostcatching"* (1990) and secondly, my own subjective experience of being present at a workshop on motion capture held at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi in November 2022[1] — for exploring all that the technology has got to offer and what it could not.

Keywords: Motion Sensor, Disembodiment, Materiality, Presence, Truth, Text

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[1] "Motion Capture Workshop." Conducted by Sumedha Bhattacharyya and Professor Urmimala Sarkar Munsi. 2022. School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. November 15.

(No)Body or (Some)Body?

Regardless of the medium, performance artists explicitly explore and enact their holistic autonomies and interiorities (gendered, spiritual, emotional, and political), not simply their bodily corporeality. If this process takes place within a recorded electronic or digital environment, it is the medium that is virtual, unreal or disembodied, not the human performer within it. In the performance arts, whether in a theatre, on a street corner, or on a computer monitor, the medium is not the message (and never has been); the performer is.

– Steve Dixon[2] (Dixon, 2007)

Taking a cue from Steve Dixon's statement, is it possible to extend it further to explore to what extent is the virtualization of dance and choreography is very much an embodied phenomenon? There have been persistent debates regarding whether liveness or a recording of the live performance define the essence of 'presence' in both scholarly and performance arenas that make it challenging to settle down the arguments. It is needless to say that the opinions have never been able to give an ultimate judgment for either of the parties but have led to the doorway to several perspectives that have drawn a conclusion of endless possibilities of ways of viewing and experiencing. In fact, Rebecca Schneider in her essay, "In the meantime: performance remains"[3] (Schneider, 2011), explicitly discusses the disagreements of Peggy Phelan[4] (Phelan, 1996) and Philip Auslander[5] (Auslander, 1999) on their positions relating to the liveness of performance. Again, André Lepecki in the chapter 'The body as archive' in his book "Singularities"[6] (Lepecki, 2016) studies the corporeal body of the dancer which in itself is a site of archive through analyses of four performances.

Amidst these multifaceted deliberations, this essay will try to attempt in exploring the potency of motion capture technology keeping in mind both the acceptance and rejection of it in terms of it being a choreographic tool, the conceptualization of space, the tension and tussle between the choreographer present in the actual space versus the virtual bodies. This investigation will require two case studies — one, a very celebrated choreographed work by North American choreographer Bill T. Jones and secondly, my own subjective experience of being present at a workshop on motion capture held at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi in November 2022[7] — for exploring all that the technology has got to offer

[2] Dixon, S. (2007). Virtual Bodies. In *Digital Performance: A history of new media in theatre, dance, performance art and installation* (pp. 210-240). The MIT Press.

[3] Schneider, R. (2011). In the meantime: performance remains. In R. Schenider, *Performing Remains: Art And War In Times of Theatrical Reeanctment* (pp. 87-110). New York: Routledge.

[4] Phelan, P. (1996). The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction. In P. Phelan, Unmarked: The politics of Performance (pp. 146-191). London and New York: Routledge.

[5] Auslander, P. (1999). Liveness: Performance in a mediatized culture. New York: Routledge.

[6] Lepecki, A. (2016). The body as archive: Will to reenact and the afterlives of dances. In A. Lepecki, Singularities: Dance in the age of performance. New York: Routledge.

[7] "Motion Capture Workshop." Conducted by Sumedha Bhattacharyya and Professor Urmimala Sarkar Munsi. 2022. School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. November 15.

and what it could not. Furthermore, this examination will take into account on observations by scholars such as Phelan, Schneider, and Lepecki.

However, returning to the 'medium' that Dixon was taking no regard for or dismissing it as 'unreal' is also, in my opinion, a crucial point of departure to zoom in. The presence of the mediated space needs mentions even after the absence of the corporeal human body that vanishes after the digital technology captures its motion. In the later-half of the 20th century, Indian theatre director Badal Sircar in his essay *'A Thinking Process'* cast light on the potential of the theatre — that will eventually distinguish itself from the potential of cinema — which according to him was the live body of the actors. He opined that if the live bodies disappear, theatre will lose out its uniqueness. The communication thus happens directly with the audience here unlike cinema (communication takes place via a montage of images) and thus should be given suitable attention to the needs of the former. Sircar aims to find liberation in the theatrical language that is incomparable to cinematic language — the indispensability of live bodies. He resonated via a Grotowskian model. Jerzy Grotowski was against the use of technology in the theatre. He was arguing for 'stripping away of the masks' and touching the core within. He profoundly influenced Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook, who waxed eloquently about the 'empty space' and said that a man walking through that space constituted theatre. 'The effort to peel off the life-mask'[8] (Grotowski & Barba, 2002) involves peeling away spectacle and illusory devices in theatre. In the late 1960s, when Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski were ideologically crystallizing the concept of the 'black box', they were inspired by the desire for proximity in theatre and sought to eliminate theatrical trappings, stripping away elaborate technology and sets to expose the actor-audience relationship that they envisioned was the essence of theatre.

On the other hand, many practitioners, for instance, Bill T. Jones, whose work "Ghostcatching" (1990) we are going to look closely from, have been keenly interested in involving the digital in the realms of theatre, dance and performance art. Throughout centuries these spaces have nonetheless been quick to recognise and utilise the dramatic and aesthetic potential of new technology as well. During the last decade of the 20th-century computer technologies played a key role in live theatre, dance and performance particularly in spaces of Euro-American dance theatre. Steve Dixon writes that Robert Lepage, The Builders Association and George Coates Performance Works used digital screens around their actors to manipulate their own images. The Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre[9] founded in 1993 and Kunstwerk-Blend[10] by Sophia Lycouris founded in 1997 worked on incorporating digital technology in live theatre and "video conferencing software to bring performers from remote locations

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[8] Grotowski, J. (2002). Towards a Poor Theatre. In "Towards a Poor Theatre". E. Barba (Ed.), *Towards a poor theatre* (pp. 15-25). New York: Routledge.
[9] *Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre. Retrieved from NYC-ARTS: The Complete Guide*

https://www.nyc-arts.org/organizations/2092/gertrude-stein-repertory-theatre
[10] Untitled document. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from http://www.kunstwerk-blend.co.uk/sophia.htm

together"[11]. "Webcams, webcasts and the virtual environments of MUDs (Multi-User Domain) provided new forms of live and interactive performance via the internet"[12]. This brings us to two interactive systems that analyse and translate movement patterns of the human body into digital representations — 'Motion Capture' and 'Tracking'. Three-dimensional human movements in real-time and space are digitally recorded in this technique. In recent years, the cinema industry has widely made use of motion capture technology. For instance, Tom Hanks' several performances as characters in *'The Polar Express' (2004)*, Andy Serkis' performance as 'Gollum' in the *'Lord of The Rings'* trilogy and of course, the most famous of all — *'Avatar' (2009).*

CASE STUDY 1— *'Ghostcatching' (1999)* - Bill T. Jones, Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar.

It was 1999 when the North-American choreographer Bill T. Jones teamed up with Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar who could be called experts in motion capture graphics and composed a choreographic piece — *Ghostcatching*. Sensors were attached to the body of Jones that extracted his movements and recorded them. The production when it happened as a performance did not have Jones in it as a live body in flesh and blood but his impressions that were captured earlier were projected. The resulting data that the sensors captured is devoid of any muscular movements.

Only outlines of the traces of the movement is caught. This art installation saw impressions of the body of Bill T. Jones **(fig.1)** and several other multiplied clones of him that move around as structures in scribbled lines **(fig.2)**.

Jones is seen to be moving around the space, sometimes crawling on the floor imitating animal movements. His vocal phrases give simultaneous company to his gestures. Both the bodily imprints and the sounds are synced in a way that, on the surface, gives a sense of his 'presence' to the performance. Therefore, it is not that he is nowhere to be found. But Jones himself was not quite contented at the beginning. In fact, Kent De Spain in his essay *'Dance and Technology: A Pas de Deux for Post-humans'* notes how Jones was initially "very frustrated"[13] (de Spain, 2000) with his experience while the sensors were attached to his body while he danced. As Peggy Phelan has argued, time and again, in favour of stating performance as a 'nonreproductive' actuality – 'there are no left-overs'[14] (Phelan, 1996). Because from an ontological point of view, performance is strictly labelled as one that is ephemeral and that is precisely its strength, Jones perhaps was hesitant about the technological re-enactment of his captured movements. In such a thought process, Phelan's attempt honours the presupposed fidelity that the ephemeral contains. It is more specific for her to locate the performing body as a site of 'loss' and therefore valuing that which cannot be

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[11] Dixon, S. (2007). Introduction. In *Digital Performance: A history of new media in theatre, dance, performance art and installation* (pp. 1-33). The MIT Press.
[12] Ibid
[13] De Spain, K. (2000). Dance and technology: A pas de deux for post-humans. Dance Research Journal, 32(1), 2-17. doi:10.2307/1478270

[14] Phelan, P. (1996). The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction. In P. Phelan, Unmarked: The politics of Performance (pp. 146-191). London and New York: Routledge.

reproduced rather than seeing the body as a site of 'archive'[15] (Lepecki, 2016) which when reproduced or re-enacted even with the aid of technology, echoes the embodied traces of the performer.

Jones, thereafter, could see its possibilities. He realised that there is an element of 'truth'[16] (de Spain, 2000) and an emotive quality in this technology. There is no doubt that as an experimental artist, he was certainly quite flexible to newness but what most attracted him was this state of being absent-presence. In no definite way, one can tell that the body is missing. It is certain that the flesh is missing. But the embodiment materialises through its own traces. The unsettled apprehension of being there and not really being there is what pulled Jones' attention largely. The truth manifests itself in this unsettlement. This element of unsettlement certainly has the factor of surprise and awe alongside. Drawing from André Lepecki, I would bring in seeing the body not just a 'true' archival site but also 'as an affective system of formation, transformation, incorporation and dispersion'[17] (Lepecki, 2016). Because the factor of truth or authenticity of embodiment even with the technological aid leaves an affective imprint as well. In one excerpt of the performance, Jones sings the American folk song 'Fare Thee Well'[18] (Livingstone, 2023) which is historically said to be the discovery of folklorist and musicologist John Lomax during his field recordings in 1909[19] (Livingstone, 2023). An African American woman named Dink is said to be singing while completing her household chores which Lomax had heard. The reason Jones' performance becomes affective is because he, although implicitly highlights his identity as a North American Black dancer who chooses to sing Dink's song with relating to her own identity. It is affective and true as Jones personalises his choreography.

However, Jones had considered this format as a 'disembodied' language himself because his opinion stressed more on the absence of the 'live' body which has always been the most essential criterion for any choreographed dance to happen, as I already aforementioned, in a strict ontological sense. This half-hearted acceptance and the hesitancy of the technological prospect reverberated by many as well. My introduction to this essay has already referred to Badal Sircar's Grotowskian way of debunking the illusory methods that the 20th-century naturalistic theatre on the Bengali stage was adapting to give competition to the technology of motion pictures. On the other hand, scholars like Marcos Novak who pioneered liquid architecture[20] in the late '90s tried to pitch in several ways that digital can be used by humans as an advantage. He stated in his work *'Liquid Architectures and The Loss of Inscription'* that,

[15] Lepecki, A. (2016). The body as archive: Will to reenact and the afterlives of dances. In A. Lepecki, Singularities: Dance in the age of performance. New York: Routledge.

[16] De Spain, K. (2000). Dance and technology: A pas de deux for post-humans. Dance Research Journal, 32(1), 2-17. doi:10.2307/1478270

[17] Lepecki, A. (2016). The body as archive: Will to reenact and the afterlives of dances. In A. Lepecki, Singularities: Dance in the age of performance. New York: Routledge

[18] Livingstone, D. (2023). Breaking Blackface: African Americans, Stereotypes, and Country Music. 149-163.

[19] Ibid.

[20] which Marcos Novak defined as architecture that 'makes liquid cities, cities that change at the shift of a value, where visitors with different backgrounds see different landmarks, where neighbourhoods vary with ideas held in common, and evolve as the ideas mature or dissolve'

"Perhaps the most vivid change is coming in the art that is closest to the human body: dance. If dance is the art that is most embodied, dependent intimately on the state of the body . . . and each art form is heading for its opposite, then the future of dance must be found in disembodiment."[21]

For Novak 'disembodiment'[22] (Novak, 1995) needs a celebration as it is the loss of inscription vis-a-vis agency. The digital helps to shed off the mark of one's identity as it has an easy erasure. He declares 'what is undone is as not ever done'[23] (Novak, 1995). The question of agency assumes a bigger point of concern as the material presence of the body brings into the picture the identity of the performer. For instance, when Zora Neale Hurston talks about Black social dancing, she notes a white spectator beholds this dance as "ferocious"[24] (Hurston, 1934) and "aggressive"[25] (Hurston, 1934) because the lens that the beholder uses to view is a Euro-American aesthetic framework. It comes off as a violent one in the observer's eye because the latter has systematically labelled order and symmetry as civilised and sophisticated while for the other it is incomplete and crude. By hegemonizing the performing arts, the Euro-American lens disregards whatever the movement that is spontaneous, is barbaric. Hurston resists this perpetuation. When she writes that the Black social body moves in an animated fashion, she actually tries to claim identity by challenging the cultural hierarchy. It becomes evidently clear at this point that identity is intricately linked to the body. With identity what inevitably follows besides the material presence, is the political presence of the body. When Novak supports disembodiment in the digital, he automatically prioritises the cognitive and cerebral over the corporeal being. He does not give a chance of writing the mind on the surface of the body. And with this loss of inscription, the body might fail to actively participate being a crucial site of historical inscription. This view leads on Lepecki's argument in establishing the body as an archival site but with the interference of the digital medium, the archive perishes. For Novak what remains as a loss of agency is exactly where digital as a technology successfully disembodies the body which is the repository of the archive.

But at the same time, Novak addresses a matter of dismantling one single perspective to examine this technology. In some ways, even Bill T. Jones nearly echoes the same sense that Novak posits. Jones says,

"It's confronting us with what we really believe about the transcendent properties of our art form, and what gives it validity...What is "good" choreography, on any level, and what qualities does it have to really keep those values that we prize so highly in live performance? That question is even heightened by virtual dance...There's something about movement—in time, in space—that must succeed on its own, without the help of the human personality and human performers. And there we go back to the drawing board. What is a gesture? What is space when there is no space? And how does it make us care? That's the

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[21] Novak, Marcos. "Trans Terra Form: Liquid Architecture And The Loss of Inscription." Territories, 1995. http://www.zakros.com/liquidarchitecture/Territories.html.
[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.
[24] Hurston, Z. N. (1934). Characteristics of Negro Expression. In *African American literary theory: A reader* (pp. 31-44).
[25] Ibid.

big one, isn't it? How do we care about dance in the virtual world?"[26]

Jones raises certain questions that hint toward his own hope with this technology in the future. His search is not for an alternative one but rather to push the boundaries of corporeal presence of the body in dance. And in this process of pushing the limits, if any, he is interested in seeing what additions can the technology bring to the table or would it subtract more than giving. Similarly, Novak while claiming the disembodiment of the digital, tries to also introspect the same from other perspectives. Novak makes reference to the 18th-century British Philosopher Jeremy Benthem's theory of the panopticon within a prison cell where the vigil prevails from a single viewpoint. Novak refutes seeing from one angle and instead coins another term "pan+topos"[27] (Novak, 1995) which explains how to see all places from every conceivable angle. This will eventually help to deconstruct the hegemonism that Hurston opposed.

However, it again leads us to another set of debates which opine that because there is no body existing in the virtual space and the recorded images are nothing but volatile impressions tracing their original lineage to the fleshy progenitor, thus, there remains no 'truth' in it. This is an artificially constructed moment where there persists a 'suspension of disbelief'[28] for the sake of the advancement in technology. Steve Dixon mentions at the very outset of his chapter on '*Virtual Bodies'*

in his book "*Digital Performance: A History of New Media In Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, And Installation",* that in the cases of digital production, there happens no disembodiment as the medium is not the message. Dixon seems to have been responding to an ancient scholastic philosophy where the relationship between the actual and the virtual was a dialectical one. In the 18th century, this became a binary with the virtual denoting fake. Marie-Laure Ryan posits, "if the virtual is fake, cyberspace is a virtual space because it creates a sense of place, even though it does not exist physically. And the internet provides this experience of virtuality because it transports the user to the virtual space of cyberspace."[29] Furthermore, she asserts that postmodernism has transformed the negative aspect of virtuality into a positive source of delight where the 'fakeness of the fake'[30] is seen as 'an inherent source of gratification'[31]. Dixon's suspension of disbelief is seemingly an extension of Ryan's way of seeing the oxymoronic modification where the fakeness of the digital avatar in digital technology epitomises itself of going through no actual changeover. The medium changes and the reality live in the fleshy body of the progenitor. Unless the fleshy body of the performer gives birth to another tangible form via a certain external influence (for instance: procreation), the performance remains non-disembodied. The technology changes little to nothing. Just as theatre, if put in Aristotelian terms,

[26] De Spain, K. (2000). Dance and technology: A pas de deux for post-humans. Dance Research Journal, 32(1), 2-17. doi:10.2307/1478270.

[27] Novak, M. (1995). Trans terra form: Liquid architectures and the loss of inscription. Retrieved January 10, 2023, from http://www.zakros.com/liquidarchitecture/Territories.html.

[28] Dixon, S. (2007). Virtual Bodies. In Digital Performance: A history of new media in theatre, dance, performance art and installation (pp. 210-240). The MIT Press.

[29] Ryan, "Cyberspace, Virtuality, and the Text," 8.

[30] Ibid., 90

[31] Ibid., 90

is an imitation of reality, virtual bodies are non-existent entities that imitate a set of movements originally done by a human body. Consequently, Steve Dixon calls this technological form 'theatrical'[32].

Case Study 2—— Workshop on Motion Capture at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU.

This section of the essay will be my subjective exploration of the technology of motion capture through a workshop that was held at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, conducted by Sumedha Bhattacharyya and Prof. Urmimala Sarkar Munsi on November 15, 2022. Two representatives from the school were the human progenitors (Hewagamage Chamanee Darshika and Saumya Mani Tripathi) whose digital avatars on the projection screen were named 'aquaberry' and 'blueberry' (**fig.3 and fig. 4**). The motion capture suits called the Perception Neuron suits were attached to their bodies — on the forehead, chest, waist, upper arms, forearms, palms and fingers, thighs, legs and ankles. These sensors were then connected to the computer with the help of a software called Axis Studio which reads and configures the sensors on the body (because of this the avatars, aquaberry and blueberry, came into existence in the virtual space). Sumedha's colleague Joaquina Salgado, an artist and creative technologist from Argentina, configured the alignment of the avatars in a 3D metaverse space (**fig.3, fig.4**) over a zoom call using a software called the Unreal Engine where both the virtual bodies were transported to a black room that had a geometric squared flooring that almost looks like an endless graph paper. The two bodies appear as faceless white bodies (**fig.3, fig.4, fig.5**).

The demonstration resulted in the actual bodies moving in the classroom space while their avatars duplicated the same movements in the metaverse. Because this was witnessed by the group of students, which included myself, a certain kind of immersive experience availed a number of first-hand observations. Needless to say, the transmission happened live unlike a production like Bill T. Jones' *'Ghostcatching'* where there is no pre-recorded data presented on the projection screen. However, the virtual bodies involved in mapping their real counterparts resulted in a sense of surveillance by the computer-generated imagery.

One specific moment during the demonstration needs particular elucidation. The performers stood in front of the big screen where their avatars were moving. The representatives turned around every time they did a movement to see how their avatars looked when they followed the former. This happened certainly due to their getting exposed to the newness of an environment they were very uncertain about. Every movement produced by their clones came as a stunning surprise for both. The performers would not proceed to any further movement unless they saw their avatars finishing the previous one. Hence, if the movements of the virtual bodies become so important that it hinders the continuation of the movements by the human progenitors, then is the artificially created avatar actually governing the

[32] Steve Dixon, "Virtual Bodies," in *Digital Performance: A History of New Media In Theatre, Dance, Performance Art,* *And Installation*, ed. Steve Dixon (London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007), pp. 210-240.

human originality and her/his unique rationality? Was this bringing us back to Benthem's panopticon vision where the prisoners were told that they were being watched by the guards but from a single perspective so that they internalize this information of being watched and gradually let this thought percolate into the layers of their consciousness and get used to it?

One thing was certain. The human body created controlled movements. Controlled by the virtual bodies who in Dixon and Ryan's opinion are insubstantial and fake. This definitely led, in a way, to the harnessing of the organic potentialities of the human body. I would again go back to Bill T. Jones' immediate reaction after recording his body movements for *'Ghostcatching'* to show both cases do ascertain analogous and similar situations. He said, "The space was not particularly warm … They hadn't really thought out the limitations of the sensors on my body"[33] (de Spain, 2000). What Jones felt as a 'limitation' came in a way as a hindrance for both Chamanee and Saumya. In these lines, the performers are actually getting alienated from the entire performance.

Talking about the limitations, there are certain integral things about performance that this technology of motion sensing could not capture during the workshop. The virtual bodies of aquaberry and raspberry are undifferentiable. The facial expressions and gestures of the real bodies could not be extracted. The senses of touching the bodies were not registered in the virtual space. Still,

the virtual bodies were trying to negotiate their movements, however much they could. Thus, in such a post-dramatic situation, where lies the 'text'? Does it depend solely on movements? Or in a post-human world, the text lies in the technological interfaces where the computer will negotiate more than a human body made of flesh and bones? Does this text recognise pluralism of human bodies or because the virtual counterparts are identical, so there lies no celebration of the individuated bodies? Again, if the technology actually disembodies and alienates the corporeal body, how then in Lepecki's observation the body remain an archival site?

CONCLUSION

There remain many loose ends that cannot be tied together for the enquiry of ideas of materiality and immateriality in digital choreography or performance. And for the sake of a living debate, it should necessarily never be tied at all. American dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham observed that the technology certainly offers the potential of seeing things from a different perspective which has remained unnoticed so far. The prospect of this technology is endless as to which he commented, "I'm sure that when the typewriter came in everybody said it was not human, and then of course you use it and it becomes human"[34] (de Spain, 2000).

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[33] De Spain, Kent. "Dance and technology: A pas de deux for post-humans." *Dance Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (2000): 2-17.

[34] Ibid.

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Fig. 1: *'Ghostcatching'*, **Bill T. Jones, 1999.**

(Source: Youtube URL - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL5w_b-F8ig)
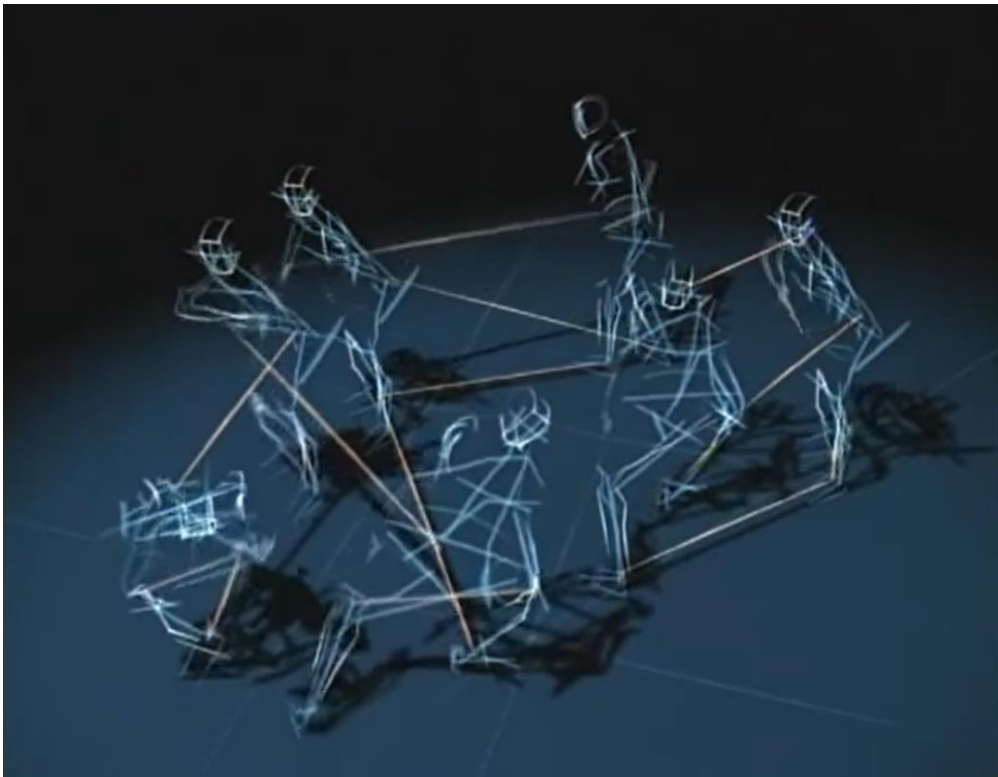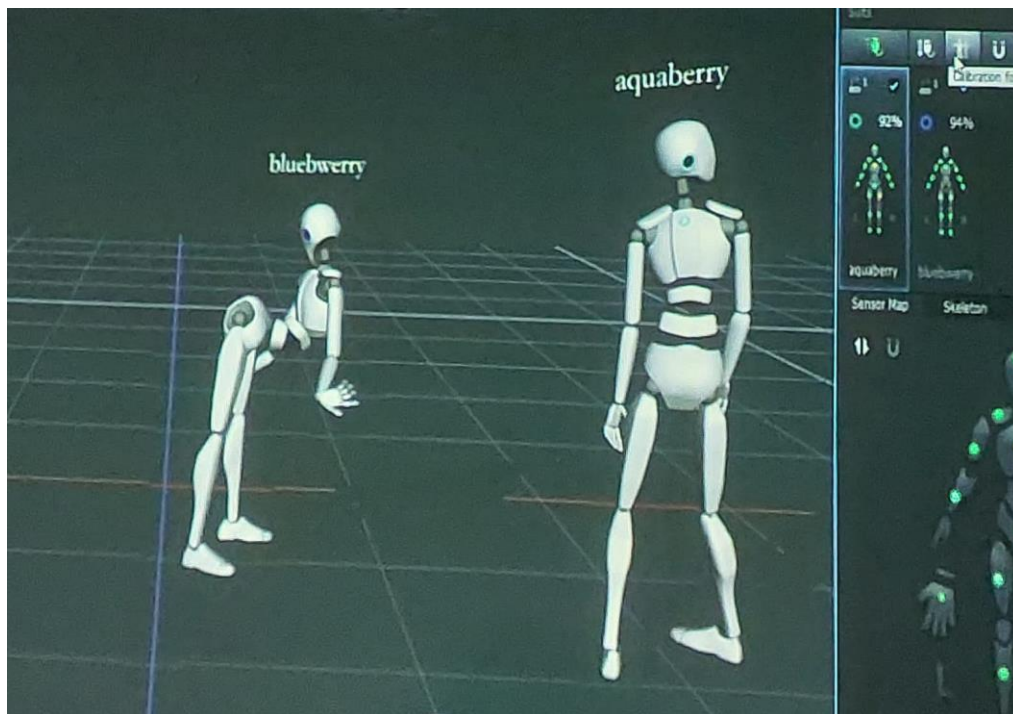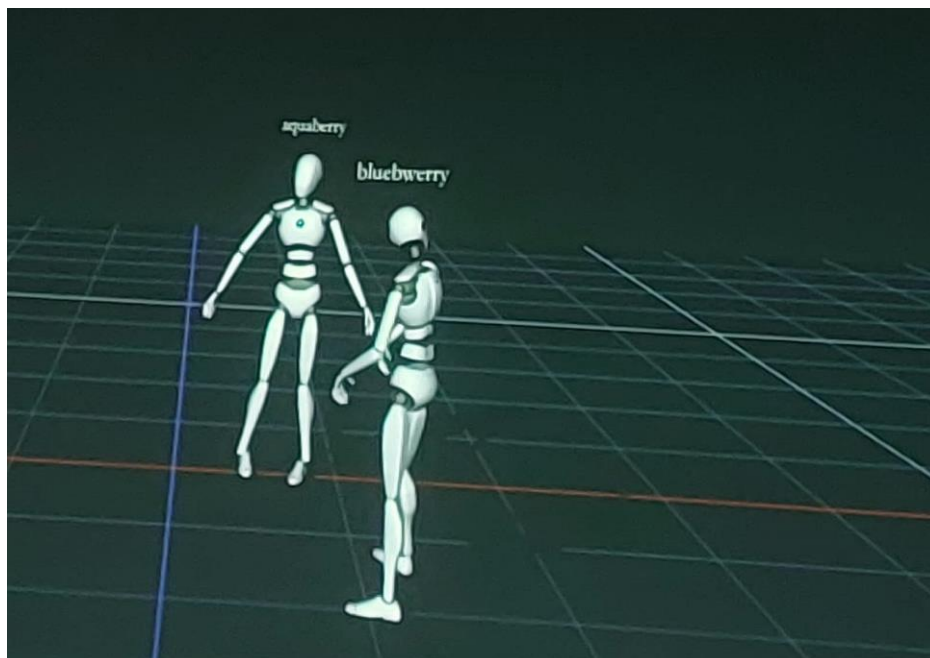

Fig. 2: *'Ghostcatching'*, **Bill T. Jones, 1999.**

(Source: Youtube URL - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL5w_b-F8ig)

Fig. 3: 'Aquaberry and Blueberry' from Motion Capture Workshop at SAA, JNU
(Source: Photographed on phone by Prof. Urmimala Sarkar Munsi.)

Fig. 4: 'Aquaberry and Blueberry' from Motion Capture Workshop at SAA, JNU
(Source: Photographed on phone by Prof. Urmimala Sarkar Munsi.)

Fig. 5: Close-up of 'Aquaberry' from Motion Capture Workshop at SAA, JNU
(Source: Photographed on phone by Prof. Urmimala Sarkar Munsi.)

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