

The Body Electric: Cathy Weis at Dance Theatre Workshop**Jennifer Parker-Starbuck****Performing Arts Journal, #74 (May 2003, Volume XXV, No. 2)**

Electric Haiku, (premiere) conceived and choreographed by Cathy Weis, performed by Scott Heron, Zane Frazer, Ksenia Vidyaykina, and Parnell Klug, sound design by Steve Hamilton, Animation by Phil Marden, Interactive Media Design by Ruben Puentedura. *An Abondanza in the Air*, by Lisa Nelson and Cathy Weis. Dance Theatre Workshop, New York. November 21-December 1, 2002.

There is always an element of memory in Cathy Weis's work. As she and her work mature, elements of past pieces re-appear and are recycled, juxtaposed against an increasing clarity and with a sharpened eye towards the integration of video on her stage. The pre-show for *Haiku* and *Abondanza* sets a humorous tone as Weis and set designer Jonathan Berger yell and scream, roll down stairs and clumsily appear on stage to chastise and warn the audience to turn off their cell phones. Weis, elegantly dressed in a little black dress, wearing her leg brace and with an elaborate upswept hairdo/wig, hooks up her now familiar puppet *doppleganger* body to a TV monitor projecting her videotaped face—for those of us who have followed Weis's work over the years, this cyborgian puppet is symbolic of the sort of work Weis creates. She experiments with often humorous, yet innovative, fusions between the live bodies on stage and different forms of technology—live and pre-recorded video, Internet feed projections, and live animated images that interact with the bodies on stage. The pre-show's clowning and absurdist atmosphere however, are more a reflection of past work than an indication of the piece to follow. With *Electric Haiku*, Weis has found a way to develop her vision to a point of sophistication, elegance, and wit, while retaining all that has made her a pioneer in what has been variously called "Interactive, Technological, Cyborg, or Multimedia Performance."

Weis has been experimenting with video and new media techniques for the last decade, part of a journey that began as a teenage soloist with the Louisville Ballet. From there she went to Bennington College, toured with a bluegrass band, went through a period making stained glass objects, and ultimately returned to dance as a freelance videographer and cameraperson for an impressive array of dance and theatre performers. Diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 1989, Weis went through a difficult period of personal searching and finally found her way back onto the stage through her interest and skill with modes of technology. Her struggles and successes are often (and perhaps unconsciously) chronicled in her work over the years and she has intuitively merged body and technology into a unique performance style. Working largely with equipment she

considers “low tech,” Weis has merged projected body parts with live ones to “dance again,” and she has developed this cyborgian integration through her innovative Live Internet Performance Structure, or LIPS. Using live Internet connections, Weis has created several pieces in which performers from across the globe are choreographed to partner her “usual group” of dancers in United States locations via an Internet feed. (Of her usual collaborators—Jennifer Monson, Jennifer Miller, Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Anne Iobst, Heron was the only one available for this show, which lead Weis to find a new “company” for this piece.) Taking a break from LIPS in order to focus one-on-one with this new company of dancers, for this new piece Weis has stripped away what she calls “any excess” and has built on the discoveries from the large and complicated Internet pieces. To Weis, this stripping down felt like writing Haikus.

Electric Haiku is comprised of seven segments. They are haikus in the sense that they are mostly brief and thematic, they are electric in their meditations about contemporary society, technology, scandal, disaster, and memory. These “haikus” are all somehow linked but also open for question and thought, laughter and astonishment. The sequences begin and end with the escape and recapture of a buzzing red light that seems to fly out of a laptop, pushed out on a clunky cart by twelve-year-old dancer Zane Frazer. In Haiku #1, *Pandora and the Facilitator* the petite Frazer was paired with the tall Parnell Klug. Frazer labors to push the large cart across the stage as Klug at one moment leaps by in a flash of green light, and in another prances up to her. In a conversation with Weis, she described to me that in fact her thought process began by thinking about the ideas of the Golem and Frankenstein’s Monster—of making the inanimate come to life. But within these tales, as lumps of clay, or pieced together body parts are brought to life, they develop a force of their own and become incapable of being controlled by their creator. Sparked further by the Enron scandal, Weis began to ponder the question, “when you let these things out, how do you get them all back in again?” Weis explained that the piece then began to shift towards the idea of Pandora’s box and hence came the title of the segment.

Haiku #2, *The Bee Keeper*, opens with a fantastically playful image of the talented Scott Heron on stilts wearing an elaborate headdress with curtain rod-like extensions protruding from the side of his head and a costume of long, white, flowing pants that more resembled “Afternoon of a Faun meets Louis XIV” than that of a bee-keeper. Heron enters slowly to the sound of a buzzing bee and dripping water. Bathed in a deep blue light he brushes and kicks the bee (in the shape of a light) away but it continues to return. Heron moves through the space nimbly on the stilts, like a strange animal at a pool of water. The dot alights on him and he hastily swats it and the one erupts into many. Heron finally leaps away as the buzzing sound grows into a swarm and many lights pursue him off stage.

When we open Pandora's metaphoric box, what escapes? With winds of change come both dark moments and great advances. Weis maintains a delicate balance throughout this spectrum, asking for a consideration of each side within the work she presents. The next segment, Haiku #3, *With a Shadow of Turning*, is Weis at her most sophisticated. Performed by Ksenia Vidyaykina, this segment marks Weis's subtle understanding of the aesthetic boundaries of the body and technology. Performed to a live sound score by Steve Hamilton, sounds of wind rushing through the space set the tone for this poignant section. Two huge eyes appear on a large screen that fills the upstage wall as Vidyaykina slowly comes into view, backing carefully away from a camera in the wings. She backs into the space until her live body and screen body are similarly sized. Cameras are positioned on her from different angles and as she begins to move her screened image is doubled and the two projections seem to move within themselves. Vidyaykina, wearing only a pair of white, feather-covered, knee-length pants, controls the image with her movements; arms and torso stretch backward so the images look at each other while conjoined at the hips, a tall rising movement of embrace with arms twined around and through the other, and finally, she slowly sinks into a crouch, legs moving like a crab's to a popping sound, as she meticulously walks sideways across the stage. One of Weis's strongest skills is her deep understanding of how the technology she uses can be used in conjunction with simple bodily gestures to create a complex and meaningful image.

Weis explained to me that for her, the Haikus point to a poignancy in the choices we make. Each choice we make limits other possibilities that we might have experienced but with each new development and progression forward, we allow the outside in, changing us and in turn, the face of the world. Weis's attempt to work through these ideas remains on a personal level for her, although in her work certain tropes of technological growth and political circumstance seep through. In Haiku #4, *The Trickster Gets His Comeuppance*, for example, Heron, here representing Weis the trickster, subverts the audience's expectations of "seeing." Heron enters in a black trenchcoat and hat (perhaps hiding from the bees) which he defiantly discards to reveal a little white cap, white tights, and tutu-type skirt. A drum roll plays as steps up to a platform at the side of the space. As he is about to step forward and begin his routine, a huge projection of his toes appear on the screen. Caught off guard, the audience's laughter continues through the piece as Heron's commanding live presence captures enough attention to be a distraction from the camera's positioning. He slowly bends forward and his cap tip and then upside-down forehead and eyes suddenly appear on the screen. With this moment, Weis flips the opening of the previous Haiku's image, in which the beauty and ease of the performer's integration with technology provided a meditation of contentment within technology. When the image of the large eyes is flipped over, I am reminded of the responsibility that comes with the use of technology as a tool to be manipulated and controlled. Weis furthers this thought as Heron flips right side up again and to the screechy sound of a balloon's air being slowly let out, Heron backs away from the camera, looking like he is falling down the side of a tall building. A film gimmick to be sure, but also a reminder of the choices available within the human relationship to the technology we develop. Weis adds a final meaningful moment as a toy airplane buzzes in front of the camera, swooping

around Heron's image on the screen. The idea of an airplane's acting as a catalyst to chase Heron off stage reverberated with post-September 11th memories and wariness.

The next two Haikus, *The Circle Dance*, and *Painting and Stripping*, include the animation and interactive media design team of Phil Marden and Ruben Puentedura. Weis moves beyond technique and camera tricks and here begins to make the technology literally come to life in the shape of animated monkeys that compete and interact with the live performers. *Circle Dance* is a competition between Zane Frazer, who dances with increasing fervor around a pool of light on one half of the stage while an animated monkey looks on and then "apes" her actions on the other half (projected on that half of the upstage screen). The monkey's eyes watch Frazer, who turns to catch the glance before the eyes are averted. The interactive nature of technology is a tease in this piece. Weis seems to pose provocative questions about humanity's relationship and balance with nature, animals, and technology. The next haiku complicated the ideas of the "post-human" even further. *Painting and Stripping*, Haiku #6, features Vidyaykina once more as she slowly re-emerges from the wings and enters a saturated projection of light. She tests it first with her arm, which is immediately illuminated a deep, bright red. Her body darts in and out of a large blurry figure projected onto cloth at the side of the stage. As the dance progresses Vidyaykina seems almost gripped by the light, joined with it and yet pulling from it. The projection then shifts to the upstage wall and a large red, animated ape comes into focus. As the animated image pulls away from the live figure and they appear on their own, I wondered whether Vidyaykina had been (metaphorically) within the technology, the animal, or had it been a part of her? The separation was like a birth of sorts and as they stood apart I felt a momentary sense of tension between them. Suddenly, a shot rings out and the fluttering of wings is heard. Vidyaykina rips a sleeve off of her costume and then an arm disappears from the ape. Another shot rings out and a pant leg is ripped off as the ape loses a leg. This goes on until Vidyaykina is bare and the ape is a few red dots on the screen. The red dots shift to light upon her flesh and the piece is over.

Just as Weis seems to have come full circle a huge mass of scaffolding is wheeled onto the stage. For this final Haiku, *Getting the Toothpaste Back into the Tube*, Heron is trapped at the top of the scaffolding, first rolling and convulsing and then jumping up and down as a large white rectangle of paper drops from just beneath him on the scaffolding and rolls out onto the floor beneath. The squeaking springs are amplified and onto the white roll of paper a projection reveals close-up shots of the springs moving and stretching as Heron jumps up and down. Suddenly his face is illuminated on the screen, looking intently down and directly at the audience. (At this moment, during one performance a child's voice loudly proclaimed, "wow!" as he suddenly realized how this magic worked) The cameras pointed at Heron from beneath capture his frustration and commitment to the movement as the ominous sound of a buzzing plane returns. The lights dim and the long rectangle of white glows as Zane Frazer re-appears, moving in slow motion across the stage. The red lights buzz onto the white panel and then freeze onto her. In a flash, she slaps the light and with a "pop" she re-captures the "bees."

Perhaps Weis leaves it to the youth to recognize the power and potential of the technology constantly being “unleashed” into the world. Perhaps the haikus are mere meditations on expressions of movement in a techno-driven world. Either way, Weis has developed a unique style that continues to build upon her experiences and experiments while cleverly asking provocative questions.

Also included in the program was *An Abondanza in the Air*, a collaboration between Weis and Lisa Nelson which was originally created in 1990 and re-worked for this production. The piece explores the relationship between the live performers and two glowing and content-shifting television monitors (complete with handles on each side for easy mobility). Weis and Nelson begin as absent partners for these glowing screens which appear as eyes in the dark and begin to dance around the space. The screens combine with a varied musical and sound score to project images from walking feet, to a tree and woodpecker, to fire, and even a short clip of Pris, the cyborg from *Blade Runner*. The monitors are lifted, rolled, sat upon, and pushed, but Weis has choreographed this piece to indicate that the monitors also manipulate the handlers. Weis and Nelson try to act independently from the screens at times but they are always drawn back to them. One series of black-outs leaves the glowing TV’s in different locations as the lights come up to find Weis and Nelson strewn lifelessly about the floor, as if the battle with the monitors had been lost. In another segment, Weis and Nelson roll on top of each other away from the screens only to have Weis reach desperately out of the embrace toward the beckoning glow of the screen.

By re-working *Abondanza* Weis re-positions herself on stage. Unlike *Electric Haiku*, where Weis’s vision and thought motivate the choreography, *Abondanza* highlights her own bodily relationship with the technology she uses. As the MS has gradually weakened her right side, it has strengthened her focus and ability to use video, animation, and other forms of technology to merge in a symbiotic relationship with the live form. Weis’s personal haikus are her poignant memories—both physical and psychological—that have inspired her work. In searching for new ways of seeing, Weis has created a new piece that retains the essence of her own body working through the movements, and asking questions about life, technology, and the relationships around us.

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All slides taken by Paula Court

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Scott Heron in *Electric Haiku* (Haiku #7 Getting the Toothpaste back in the Tube)

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