

Disappearing Act: Technology, Creativity and Climate Empathy in the work of Jody Sperling and Time Lapse Dance

by Keira Mayo

A dancer, with arms that extend beyond her finger tips, uses a slight bend at the waist for momentum and sweeps her arms below the hip and then overhead. In profile, it's as if the arms move to form an expansive 'S.' The 'S' marks a path for the billowing silk fabric of the costume to follow behind, as if a ripple in a disturbed puddle. I describe this movement and its accompanying movement vocabulary employed during Time Lapse Dance's (TLD) "Melting Ice/Changing Wind" as a *technology of appearances*. Technology, Jody Sperling reminds us, can be "anything" depending on how you look at it. Etymologically, technology carries a meaning of divine communication regarding or the study of (*logia*) art or craftsmanship (*tekchne*). Sperling expresses that her choreography and TLD's movements are a "kind of technology" that has been created or "invented" throughout her historical, geological, and aesthetic research endeavours. If one were to study this craft through the lens of appearance, they might remark on the appearance of the silk -whether as costume or doubling as costume and projection screen- as unavoidably present. Further, the dancers appear and disappear as they move through angled lighting, their own silks, and the silks of other dancers. An appearance is also illusive: the intermingling of dancers with black and white costumes creates an illusion of negative space that alters depth and shape perception. Considering this movement-technology as a kind of study in appearances allows for, I forward, a reconfiguration of dominant understandings of "environment" and increases the opportunity for developing empathetic relationships with the environment (an expressed goal of Sperling's body of work).

An empathetic relationship asks us to share the feelings of others; often this sort of understanding can be achieved by extending ourselves into the situation of another. Through the extension, we can substitute ourselves as the actor, agent, or object of an event. This is not to say empathy operates in this way exclusively, but it points to some reasons why empathetic relationships are difficult and selective. In conversation with Sperling, we asked specifically about the role of non-human collaborators and, in this work (as seen in a variety of ecofeminist philosophies), empathy is a key component of an ethics of care. For Sperling, this care is extended to the ice with and on which she danced, "I was really trying to listen. What is the environment saying? What are the forces at play here? [...] If I can echo those and somebody sees me, does that give somebody a little more of a connection to this place?" Perhaps through this connection a sense of extension or substitution can be cultivated.

Extension and substitution, however, must be understood beyond a clean cut-and-paste operation. Firstly, there will always be an alteration during substitution (and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* told us this in the 1980's), it is always imperfect, far from seamless, and never 1-to-1. Through the process of extending ourselves, we are transformed. Through the process of extending the dancers body, she is transformed. The size and expanse of the costumes and apparatuses used by Sperling and TLD produce shapes that an unextended human body could not make. However, this shape-making is not an individual project; rather, the dancer collaborates with both costume and environment (though perhaps the costume is part of the environment), and "because it [the costume] is moving through air, it assumes the same patterns of turbulence that you see. It moves in a way that's evocative of things outside of itself." The costume disrupts the air but is also bound to its forces. As the fabric winds through air, its wave-like motions make visible the otherwise invisible air flow patterns. The fabric extends beyond itself as fabric and can be perceived as air flows.

This extension of perception from fabric to air is but one direction of representational or perceptible substitutional flow. There is, I forward, at least a second direction of movement toward the dancer. Through the apparatus and costume, the normatively understood

dancing body is altered: its dimensions change, its weight increases, its ability to move is influenced by different forces...even if only slightly. With these changes there follows a new series of tendencies for interacting with the world through movement. For example, it becomes more difficult to roll on the ground or more tempting to sweep the arms wider. Moreover, this specific S-shaped movement known as the Houdini creates a disappearing act. The dancer vanishes within the ripples of fabric as it collides with the air; suddenly, she is gone. Consumed by the effects of her movement for a moment, as quickly as she left she returns only to disappear again. With each coming and going is a sonic smack as the silks release two belaboured exhales when displacing the surrounding air. *Smack*, and the dancer vanishes; *smack*, and the dancer reappears. Engulfed by the silk, the dancer -if only momentarily- becomes the silk (or perhaps, if you prefer not to go that far, is “upstaged” by it). Thus, a second flow of substitution: if the silk displaces the air, and the dancer is consumed by the silk, then as dancer merges with silk she so too substitutes the air itself.

Though I come to this question retroactively, I am moved to ask after further actions that will engulf, consume, or destroy the figure of the human body. This question then ripples beyond the figure: what actions will be and are responsible for engulfing the actual human? The draught and its fires, the heat and its volatile air flow, the flood and its rising sea level both over and underwhelm the news cycle. The “whelming” is perhaps neither new nor shocking for some -and while I would underline that our division and ordering of time is constructed with human production and labour in mind, the moment at which one comes to reconfigure their relationship to the environment is simultaneously and paradoxically beside the point and its epicenter. What do I mean by this? On the one hand, the current state of the environment required active alterations to the human lifestyle in 1980, particularly as it relates to resource extraction, refinement, and transport. On the other hand, the “natural world” is not an individual issue, nor is it exclusively a human issue. In this respect, it is “too late” *and* this does not mean there is nothing to be done and no action to be taken.

In the last two decades, within scholarship there has come an increased interest in *utopia* and *futurity*. What will happen next? Though I remain a sharp critic of much of the writing on utopia (a topic for a longer rumination), I am routinely swung in and out of my critical pessimism by those who have used and continue to use a hopeful future-oriented praxis, particularly in their art-making and performance work. Perhaps from a place of critical pessimism, perhaps from a place of anxiety, we asked Sperling if she thinks that climate change is going to cause the end of human life. Though the performance work of Sperling and TLD creates a somber affect, Sperling exudes vibrant energy and urgency punctuated by laughter and articulated from a position of “realistic” positivity. “What seems more likely is that it [climate change] is going to cause the end of a lot of human life,” where Sperling aptly reminds us of the propensity toward “life-boat ethics” when allocating resources, empathy, and care. Bleak as this may be, Sperling suggests that the key is “keeping morale up” because the myriad challenges to environment justice “can be heavy,” frustrating, and exhausting. Echoing an earlier [conversation with Joey De Jesus](#) (“What else is there to live for?”) Sperling asks “what are you living for? I don’t view the arts as a luxury,” rather a point of common connection: “I think that people feel really passionately about the dance that they do or see and are moved. Art is something that we all ‘do.’”

Perhaps this shared doing of art, regardless of the form it may take, could become that which engulfs and consumes. In this light, the disappearing act of the dancer or mover (or “human” more generally) might be read more hopefully: creativity, Sperling suggests, “is fundamental for every aspect of human existence.” Further, creativity is critical, “It’s critical for science. It’s critical for law and policy. And for its own sake; for artistic expression, appreciation, and entertainment.” If creativity could be understood as a shared critical methodology, doing, or action that fostered an affect of appreciation, enjoyment, and fulfilment, then maybe it could be seen as a pleasure to be consumed by it. So, while we could read the disappearing act of the dancer behind their apparatus and costume as a comment on the perseverance of matter (Earth’s vast geobiosphere could, and likely will, outlast human consciousness), we could instead reread these movements as a willingness to be consumed by creativity. Importantly, a willingness to be consumed by creativity is not a call to produce art in a vacuum, nor would such a consumption be immune to the very “evils” or ideologies that have brought about climate change (and other interconnected global crises) to begin with.

part II: critical empathy, and interview with Jody Sperling

by Katharine Marais

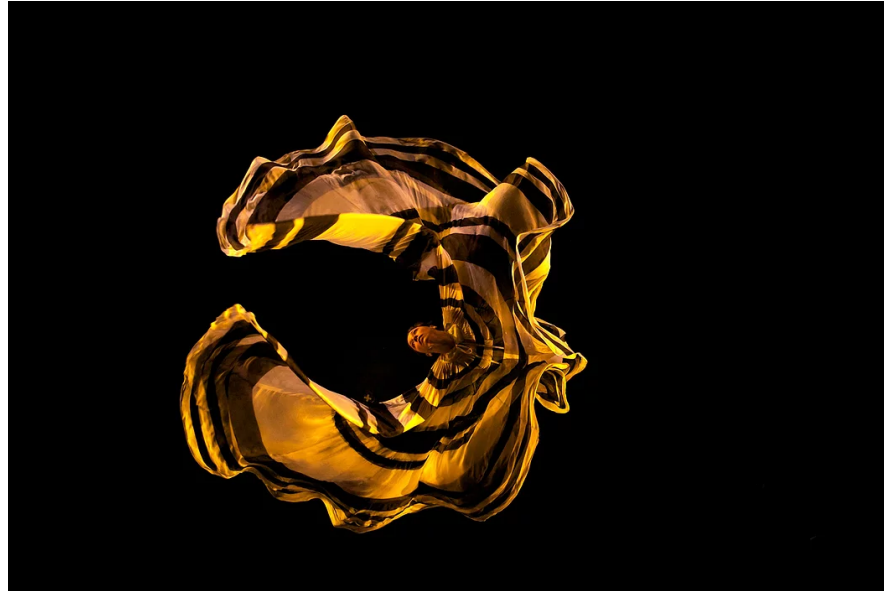


photo copyright 2013, Jody Sperling

For Jody Sperling, dance is embodiment. Jody Sperling, the artist, embodies consciousness. She is woke. She is a choreographer working in the tradition of Loïe Fuller- a mesmerizing dancer from the late 1800s whose lavish costuming and avant-garde choreography were regularly on the playbill at the Folies Bergère, and who was notably portrayed in works by numerous of her fellow artists, including Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Auguste Rodin. When you see the girl whirling her arms in the center of the vast, otherworldly swirls of fabric, in works like *Serpentine Dance*, her dainty footwork evoking the playful and the eerie, it's particularly surreal to mentally contextualize Fuller as a woman born in a suburb west of Chicago.



Toulouse-Lautrec, The Wheel, Loie Fuller, 1893

Fuller's work was described as and associated with the late 1800's Symbolist movement, which, like Fuller, was localized around Paris, though it influenced artists internationally. Symbolism was associated with decadent and evocative visual imagery, specific visual metaphor, semiotic inquiry, and the departure from representation of the real. Images and descriptions were used for the network of associations that they invoked, rather than to create a direct relationship between sign and symbol. (For example, describing pink water to invoke awareness of the womb, of the unknown or of the subconscious, or describing wind to invoke awareness of change).

When discussing her own choreographic process, Jody Sperling dismisses semiotics as “*not her thing*”, or at the very least, “*all the rage in a certain theoretical age, and we sort of moved past it into other realms of exploration.*”

She describes her choreography more as an embodiment, or a process of echoing the spirit of another thing. She describes the boundaries of the body as more fluid than we'd like to believe: when you eat a bowl of quinoa, is the quinoa part of you before it physically enters your mouth? At what point in digestion does it stop being quinoa and become You? The boundaries of the self- whether physical, psychological, or economic- are porous, varyingly transparent, ever-shifting, non-concrete, made of temporary matrices of ideologies and situations, chemicals and weather. We are dependent beings. We are a biome. In Sperling's work, she uses uniquely human characteristics- our voice, our ability to move, our ability to generate empathy in other human beings through acting- to give agency to a less vocal, but immediately endangered, aspect of our biome- melting arctic sea ice.



Reviewing footage. photo copyright 2014, Pierre Coupel



Photo copyright 2014, Pierre Coupel

For her ice dance work, Sperling travelled to the Arctic Circle with the crew of the USCG Healy, as an on-board dance researcher. The opportunity to create the work came about through a series of fortuitous circumstances; she had created a work entitled Turbulence, (an incredible piece, in which dancers, costumed in ethereal swaths of silk, embody patterns of air turbulence). After the performance, a scientist from MIT reached out to her and they began discussing atmospheric turbulence.

I asked him, do you know anybody who studies the Arctic? He set me up with some of his colleagues, including Robert Pickart. Bob invited me to come on one of his “cruises” (they call it a “cruise”). It was a Polar Science Mission- a long one, 43 days in May and June of 2014. That really changed everything. At first, I wasn’t sure that I would be able to go. My daughter was 2 at the time, and it seemed like a long time to be away- but we figured it out.

Sperling has a long-standing interest in science.

I went to a high school (Stuyvesant High School), that had a strong emphasis on science. My father’s a cognitive scientist, and my brother’s in bioinformatics. I think that scientists and artists have a sympatico, and that they are both people who care more about truth than money, who are trying to research phenomena in different ways. When I was on the ship, I felt like I was there to learn as much as possible about sea ice formation. It wasn’t just out there to dance, and I wasn’t even sure I was going to be able to dance on the ice at all. I was primarily there as a dance researcher, but I was also a liaison between the scientists and the public. We had this blog for the mission, and part of my mandate was to blog.

One aspect of doing work like this out in the field is that not everything is 100% predictable. Not everything is under your control. You’re dealing with mercurial phenomenon that change, literally, with the weather. We asked her how she approaches her work with “non-human collaborators”, for example, melting ice and arctic winds.

You try to treat everything as if it does have consciousness- it’s a little like Marie Kondo- there’s a Shinto element, where you cherish objects, and treat them as though they have a spirit. I get this idea from Timothy Morton, who advocates that since we don’t know where consciousness begins and ends, to be ethical, we should treat everything as if it has consciousness.

Sperling harnesses the natural empathy that audiences have while watching other human beings express emotion and feeling, and uses that to direct empathy toward the subject that she embodies- the melting sea ice.



Sperling echoes the turbulent and convergent forces that created the sea ice ridges (the broken piles of ice). photo copyright Jody Sperling.

I think what I've been cultivating in myself is creating empathy between the human and the environmental. Like if we can have a sense of empathy with the ice. I don't want to say anthropomorphize, because that's not accurate- but that impulse to anthropomorphize does have an element of empathy.

When I was out on the ice I was really trying to listen: what is the environment saying? What are the forces at play here, and how can I echo the forces at play? How can I embody the forces I'm hearing or perceiving? If I can echo those, and somebody sees me, does that give somebody a little more of a connection to this place?

Sperling also collaborates with other artists, including costume designers and musicians, to realize the final work.

The costume I brought to the Arctic was handpainted by textile artist Gina Nagy Burns. I had worked with Gina and Mary Jo Mecca who designed and constructed the garment. This costume depicts sea ice at the phase of its coming together, so as I'm moving the pattern creates a sort of time lapse of ice hinting at its formation and dissolution. If I had had an unlimited budget, we would have had like 5 costumes with different phases of sea ice. But it took her a month to paint the costume. It's an incredible work of art.

It's beautiful up close, and it's beautiful far away.



photo copyright 2014, Pierre Coupel

Dance is a way to wordlessly manifest the character of something, without using analytical or semiotic language to point to it. Jody Sperling expresses what ice itself cannot express, in accelerating its experiences to a human time-scale, and animating its character through movement. By giving it greater “voice”, or expressive capability to it through dance, she gives us the chance to relate to it in a way that we otherwise could not; we feel a bodily reaction to it, as if by hearing it crack we suddenly become aware of the fragility of our own bones. Cultivating this empathy is increasingly urgent, as climate change grows ever more dire, more cataclysmic in scope. We asked Sperling, do you think that climate change is going to cause the end of human life?

Well, probably. What seems more likely is that it's going to cause the end of a lot of human life. What we can do about it is ask, how much? Who will we be able to save? It turns into a 'Titanic' type of question, about who gets life boats and who doesn't. You don't need a lot of people to survive for humanity to survive. But I don't know if there's some point where the atmosphere just flips and it's like-

People have their eyes open to what's happening. People are terrified, and we are in a very dire circumstance, and we need to be doing everything in our power to prevent it and build resilience. On a daily basis, it's very frustrating how little we're able to accomplish. The obstacles to our survival can be [an anxiety-inducing emotional weight] for a lot of people. Keeping morale up is important, because the only way we will survive is to create a greener, more equitable, more just future. There's a lot of intersectionality with gender, economic, and racial equality.

Are the arts a luxury, or are they necessary to our survival?

It always comes down to, what are you living for? I don't view arts as a luxury- and if you look at something like Game of Thrones or some pop music sensation, people feel so passionately about a song or a movie that everything else seems inconsequential sometimes. People feel really passionately about the dance that they do or that they see, and are moved.

Dance is something that tends to get cut from school budgets- it's not considered as valued or as important as other things- but it's short-sighted because it really is important - - this is coming full circle to your question about science. Science requires a lot of creativity and resourcefulness- which is why I feel like there's this sympathy between arts and sciences- they [scientists] have to be very creative, and collaborative in how they think and act, and resourceful- if something breaks in the field they have to figure out how to make it work. Both

[art and science] require this deep analytical thinking. This creativity that you need is fundamental for every aspect of human existence but is often not valued or acknowledged. But it's critical. It's critical for science. It's critical for law. And policy. And for its own sake. For artistic expression, appreciation, entertainment.

Sperling notes, “we haven’t had a Manhattan Project for climate” (that is, a large-scale, government-funded, total devotion of our resources toward finding the answer to a problem). We asked her, why do you think we haven’t? What do you think it would take to convince the government to devote that level of resources to addressing climate change?

I think it's mostly a problem of the political system, and I think it's a problem of money and politics. Essentially we've had the fossil fuel industry controlling the political agenda for the last 30 years. And it didn't have to be that way, but that's the way the US political system has worked. I mean you can see things like Citizens United- you look at the big picture, and you see how this has been happening.

I think that the worst thing that happened to climate was in 2000- I had arguments with people in the run-up to the election, who said “there's no difference between Bush and Gore”- they're both global corporate people. (This was the time when global corporate culture was becoming big). But Gore was a preeminent environmentalist, and Bush was an oil tycoon. But 2000 happened. It didn't have to go that way.

The political system that we're in in 2019 is protecting the interests of the fossil fuel industry and corporate interests, against the greater good. And to undo that, and to have a political system that better reflects the interests of the majority, would take some doing.

*In WWII there was a sense of mobilization, like everyone was willing to change what they ate, and live differently, for the sake of nationalism. And I think people still are willing to change what they eat, and live differently, if they felt like it was part of a greater plan that was connected with survival. In war, there's an enemy that mobilizes patriotism. There was a big propaganda machine that created that kind of situation in WWII. I'm not suggesting a propaganda machine for climate mobilization, but I'm suggesting that the idea that people won't change what they eat and how they live isn't true. **People are very flexible in what they eat and how they live, but they have to feel motivated, and personally connected to that change. And they have to feel that the forces that are enacting that change are good. You have to feel like you trust the government and that the government is telling you the truth.** We've had large think tanks who've been doing nothing for the last 30 years other than spewing misinformation and creating cynicism. We're in a very sad situation where there is a deliberate undermining of science and facts by a concerted effort of a few. People are very uneducated. It doesn't mean that they don't know climate change is happening, and most people, despite all this misinformation, kind of know why it's happening. Talk to a Midwestern farmer, and they know that the weather's changed, and they have a pretty good idea about why. People know what's happening, because it's starting to be so obvious you can't ignore it.*

I think we haven't had a political system that supports collective good. We've had a political system that believes in supporting the 1% at the expense of everyone else. I think that our political system needs an overhaul.



Though working in the tradition of Fuller, Sperling’s work is novel in that she sees latent political agency in the act of performing dance, and she brings a contemporary awareness of body politics and intersectional feminism to her work. She unsettles the paradigm of her audience; though dance is inherently pleasing to experience, she’s not offering sugar pills. She’s not presenting herself as a wind-up doll. This type of dance is about power- channeling the spirit of the environment, and extending the agency of movement and the expressive power of the human body to it in kind.



Time Lapse Dance dancers. From left to right: Alex Bittner (in shadows), Carly Cerasuolo (hidden), Nyemah Stuart (center), Morgan Bontz, Jenny Campbell. Photo by Annie Drew.

To find out more about how Sperling is using the medium of dance, movement, and performance to articulate her environmental and aesthetic values, check out her work at <http://timelapsedance.com>. In particular, we recommend checking out the videos of her work at <http://timelapsedance.com/videos/>, including Turbulence and Ice Floe.

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