

## **“Performance Cinema: Merging Forms, Historical Perspective, and ATRA”**

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May 2008

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In defining performance art, Roselee Goldberg states that:

“The work may be presented solo or with a group, with lighting, music or visuals made by the performance artist him or herself, or in collaboration, and performed in places ranging from an art gallery or museum to an *alternative space*, a theatre, café, bar or street corner. Unlike theatre, the performer is the artist, seldom a character like an actor, and the content rarely follows a traditional plot or narrative. The performance might be a series of intimate gestures or large-scale visual theatre, lasting from a few minutes to many hours; it might be performed only once or repeated several times, with or without a prepared script, spontaneously improvised, or rehearsed over many months.”<sup>1</sup>

Goldberg’s criteria for performance art goes beyond the more fundamental concept of “the human body in action.” Whether that action be dance or the technical manipulation of hardware, performance is, in essence, “a body present in time.”

With the foundational support of Gene Youngblood’s *Expanded Cinema*, which was prolific in considering cinema as an art form, *cinema* in this case is considered to be the visual medium of the moving image, made manifest with the use of light. Cinema is inclusive of live manipulation of the medium, as well as a variety of time-based presentations on a surface.

*Performance cinema* integrates player interaction with projected moving images. At

times, similar in style to dance technology, multimedia theatre, or video jockey, *performance cinema* combines the body, light, surface, and a mixture of low and high technologies.

Comparable to Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or Total Artwork, of the mid 19th century, performance cinema unites "theatre, music, singing, dance, dramatic poetry, design, lighting and visual art" but in addition, pays particular attention to the moving image. Because this form of art could be assigned to various categories, from video jockey to dance technology, I will begin by discussing structure and framework.

Structures influence creation in many ways. They allow for methods to be identified, models to exist, and for emerging creators to stand on the shoulders of giants. Creators continue to move forward by both extending established paths and forming hybrids of existing genres. *Performance cinema*, a specific crossbreed of technique, is the focus of this exploration.

New media is made up of a complex ecosystem. However, for the purpose of this discussion, I have chosen to focus on just six relevant conventions--cinema, art, theatre, technology, audio, and culture—which provide the basis for understanding *performance cinema*.

Sub genres within these six concepts that I consider relevant to understanding *performance cinema* include experimental film, video and performance art, video jockey, live and expanded cinema, dance technology, digital performance, multimedia, shadow, and radio theatre. The following sections highlight pertinent historical antecedents within these sub genres.

The concept of performance as art emerged in Italy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the Futurist Movement, which integrated a variety of art media, including theatre

and performance as well as painting, sculpture, and music. In 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, one of the movement's principal founders issued *The Futurist Manifesto*, in which he praised violence while passionately rejecting the past. Likening museums to cemeteries, Marinetti raged that, “To admire an old picture is to pour our sensibility into a funeral urn . . .” Though his message was both reactionary and destructive, Marinetti’s manifesto nevertheless sparked an art movement that laid “the foundations of what today we understand as postmodern aesthetic, melding high and low art.”<sup>2</sup>

Futurism conceived of an integration of art forms. In 1919, in *The Futurist Cinema*, Marinetti coined the term *synthetic theatre*: “Painting + sculpture + plastic dynamism + words-in-freedom + composed noise + architecture = synthetic theatre.”

Not only did the Futurist movement lay the groundwork for performance art, it made invaluable contributions to the origins of technology in performance. The Italian Futurists prioritized technology, speed, and change in their artistic philosophy. They were heavily influenced by mechanized industry, electricity, automobiles, and airplanes. In particular, the invention of cinema confirmed to the Futurists that the mechanical eye of the camera prompted a new view of the world, specifically a mechanical one, “able to observe and preserve time and space in a way beyond normal human capabilities.”<sup>2</sup>

Active at this time, Loie Fuller, who I call *the mother of performance cinema*, began her extraordinary experiments incorporating electricity. From 1889 to 1923, she combined high and low technologies<sup>2</sup> to create spectacular performances, which laid the foundations for performance + technology + art.

Marinetti was particularly interested in aligning the Futurist movement with the Symbolist performance of Loie Fuller. In her article, *Carissimo Marinetti: Letters from Severini to the Futurist Chief* published in Art Journal in 1981, Marianne W. Martin points out

that:

“Marinetti explicitly admired her (Loie Fuller’s) American mechanical know-how. In his *Manifesto of Futurist Dance* of 1917, Marinetti declares that "we Futurists prefer Loie Fuller" to Duncan and Jacques-Dalcroze because of her "utilization of electric light and mechanics."

At one time Loie Fuller was the most famous dancer in the world. Still, some people who saw her perform wondered if what she was doing was really dance at all, and she too had her doubts.<sup>3</sup> Loie Fuller, born in Fullersburg, Illinois, near Chicago in January of 1862, acted and toured throughout her childhood appearing in vaudeville, burlesque, and circus shows. By 1883, Fuller was acting on Broadway and it was there, in 1892, that she introduced her unique and sensational style of the *Serpentine Dance*. The following year she moved to Europe, where she spent the rest of her life.

Loie Fuller experimented with movement, light, and costuming in ways that revolutionized the art of dance. Fuller was fascinated with technology in performance in ways considered ingenious at the time. Her initial innovations utilized gas theatrical lighting equipment. When arc lamps brought electric light into the theater, she pioneered new technologies that integrated dynamic color into her performances. In colleague with chemists, Fuller developed and patented many formulas for colored lighting gels. She also experimented with mirrors, shadow, and especially movement in the lighting.

The huge, silk fabrics of her costumes were coated with phosphorescent salts that reflected the elaborate, colorful lighting of Fuller’s stage designs. As the fabric moved the multicolor, changing, and moving lights created a fantastic spectacle that gained Fuller many admirers.

Fuller, during her life and still today, is hailed a goddess of light and pioneer of artistic technology. Considered to be the first dance technologist, she toured Europe with a team of as many as fifty electricians. Throughout the performances, each technician would operate a different lighting instrument. Audiences were transfixed by the dramatic movement, changing color and effects as the technicians manipulated the lights to illuminate Fuller from above and below as well as from all sides. These lights projected multiple colors and textures onto her costume which became a kind of screen. The lights moved and changed during the performance. Fuller later used shadow effects and film projections to further her ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Loie Fuller has made many significant contributions to the art and performance worlds. Fuller was appreciated in popular culture as well as in high art. Many visual artists at the time were enchanted by her innovations. According to Richard and Marcia Current in their 1997 book Goddess of Light:

“She became the personification of Art Nouveau, the inspiration for artists who, idealizing her, portrayed her more often than any other woman of her time. She, in turn, promoted the work of her artist friends and was responsible for the founding of two art museums. An inspiration for poets as well as artists, she served as a symbol of the symbolist movement.”<sup>3</sup>

Fuller’s practices at the time inspired many creators and critics with her inventions and spectacular performances. Her admirers included William Butler Yeats, Auguste Rodin, James Whistler, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Fuller was the subject of hundreds of oil paintings, watercolors, lithographs, sculptures, and etching.<sup>4</sup>

One might compare Fuller’s artistry to that of a painter. Beginning with her first dance performances, Fuller used lighting as an artistic medium. With the introduction of electricity, her lighting designs achieved the status of a true art form. Similarly, with the development of

motion pictures, movement assumed a greater role within the art world.

Fuller's art evolved simultaneously with the emergence of cinema. Her 1891 performance piece, *The Serpentine*, was one of the most popular subjects of early cinema. Many short, silent, often times hand colored films, were created of Fuller's iconic dance in the 1890s.

Fuller's combination of a natural dance style, her cinematic appeal, and breathtaking spectacle of costume and lights, brought some Parisian audiences to acclaim her work as a new art form. Indeed, the way in which Fuller created new forms of artistic expression is intriguingly similar to the philosophy expounded by Marinetti and other founders of the Futurist movement. Perhaps the spirit of this form, created in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, still exists today.

The technological breakthroughs of the late 1800s that inspired the Futurist movement can be compared to the advancements of digital technologies of the late 1900s. Similar to the advancements in electricity that were taking place at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the innovative technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century surrounding digital machinery recalls the potential of creative synergies that can occur between performance and technology.

Looking back from the perspective of today's technology the Futurists and, in particular, Loie Fuller appeared profoundly prophetic. Her innovations continue to inspire artists to explore new ways to use digital technologies to expand the conventions of art, cinema, music, and dance.

Fuller's live performance techniques are the roots of what Steve Dixon describes as digital performance<sup>2</sup> as well as what is being proposed here as *performance cinema*. The differences between them being, *performance cinema* specifies to include the moving image

while also inviting “low” technologies like overhead projectors or flashlights to produce them.

The live manipulation of technology that exists in Fuller’s productions can be observed when the electricians set the light into motion with colors and textures. This marks the introduction of “liveness” in regards to the performative altering of technology. Fuller’s technicians are the roots of contemporary artistic processes that incorporate the live manipulation of cinema in performance.

As in the Fuller example, enabling tools of *performance cinema* included both high and low technology. *Performance cinema* encourages creative use of accessible means as well as a continual pushing of technological bounds. It also can range in space from a fully integrated theatre to a mobile and modular exhibition.

Earlier, cinema was said to be a moving image. This includes the manner in which film functions, many static frames in luminance and motion create the illusion of movement of the projected image. To extend cinema, consider also the shadow play which has existed for thousands of years, thought to have first originated in China during the Han Dynasty 206 B.C.–220 A.D. Shadow plays created with puppets behind a screen also create the illusion of a moving image.

Kara Walker, who is known for paper cut out silhouettes, in her recent work titled *Fibbergibbet and Mumbo Jumbo: Kara E. Walker in Two Acts*, 2004 begins a turn toward shadow cinema.

“Placed throughout the space are small magic lanterns, whose perforated, rotating shades throw images in color onto the walls and floors. There are also several videos of the artist performing some of the characters we've grown to recognize from previous work: Projected onto the backdrop's moon, she's

backlit and topless, dancing the Charleston a la Josephine Baker...”<sup>5</sup>

Walker, on opening night of the exhibition only, performed live, in silhouette, inside of the installation. This piece marks a dynamic enhancement of her original forms, while further suggesting *performance cinema*.

The manipulation of projected light resembling paint in motion is another contemporary example of cinema that is similar to the shadow performance. Projected moving images can be seen in Joshua White’s performances of the late 1960’s, where White employs “an arsenal of various trailblazing effects, including the now-iconic “liquid light”, the Joshua Light Show catapulted Fillmore crowds into cosmic depths from which many have yet to return.”<sup>6</sup>

The liquid light shows of the 1960’s and 70’s both in America and Europe created techniques that manifest spectacular effects. Liquid light art makes use of PowerPoint’s predecessor, overhead and slide projectors. It replaces transparencies or slides with colored dyes and oils set inside of glass. There were any where from a few to 70+ of these colored dye projections conversing throughout a musical performance. The moving colored light was manipulated live by 10 or more operators at a time, interestingly similar to the Fuller setups 70 years earlier.

Originating from the club scene in the late 60’s and developing in the rave scene of the 90’s video jockeying encouraged the creative advancement of technologies that manipulate video in real time. A VJ or video performance artist mixes live visuals at a social event, often providing a backdrop to a party. What occurs, and I have learned this through experience, is that for the audience the artist and their work is secondary to socializing, dancing and general partying, which devalues the work. However, VJ’s continue to persist, explore and develop

new technologies and techniques.

There are many tools for artists of contemporary performance to use in their creation processes and artistic experimentation. Particularly, in computer software, the options and possibilities hold great potential in the development of new forms of cinema. In regards to *performance cinema*, software like *Resolume* and *Arkaos* are providing stable tools for emerging artistic experimentation. There have also been significant developments in hardware. For example, video mixers are available to artists at the pro-consumer level, which has opened the doors to inventive, more interactive forms of cinema.

The *performance cinema artist* uses video and other materials to create cinematic projection with which one can further engage, interact, and perform with. The interaction between projection and performer may be further observed by a camera and provide additional cinematic resources. The defining essence of *performance cinema* is activated when the loop is closed by a physical observer that joins or replaces the camera in observing the artist's physical body interacting live with the projection.

Fuller's breakthroughs in technology, art, and performance foreshadow current day digital developments. Computers have enabled performers to interact with lighting and cinema during performance in ways striking similar to the aesthetics Fuller was investigating.

Merce Cunningham is a pioneer of contemporary dance technology. In 1989, he began using computer software as a tool in performance. With the software *Life Forms*, he created a virtual dancer that he specifically choreographed and animated to be projected onto the stage during the performance. In his 1999 exhibition of *Bipeds*, the generated dancers were significantly larger than the human performers. The visual aesthetics of the computer generated bodies resembled line drawings or sketches.

*Life Forms* is the most famous and one of the earliest software packages for dance

figure simulation and animation.<sup>2</sup> It is a software program that creates wire-framed figures that are human shaped. These figures can be manipulated in three dimensions and in virtual space.

Bill T. Jones, born in 1952, is a practicing dancer and choreographer who also created early art works using digital technologies. He was different from Cunningham in that the movement of his virtual bodies were significantly more realistic. This is because Jones's actual movements were the resources in creating the gestures of the line drawn body. Jones used a technique called motion capture or motion tracking that allowed him to perform a movement sequence that was recorded and then digitally translated into abstract, virtual representations of himself in movement. *Ghostcatching, 1999* is a digital art installation that fuses dance, drawing, and computer composition.

Mark Coniglio is a pioneer in the integration of live performance and interactive digital technology. His software creation, *Isadora*, is described on the product's website as "a graphic programming environment that provides interactive control over digital media, with special emphasis on the real-time manipulation of digital video."

The revolutionary qualities this application provides are that today an artist can have relatively easy access to a tool that can manifest dynamic, meaningful interactivity in real-time. There are an infinite number of ways in which tools like this can be used. For example with this software, a *dancer* can create and manipulate audio, lighting, and video projections during their performance. Another situation would be that a traditional theatre technician could *play* the media of visual arts, like images, video, or lighting like a musical instrument. This liberates the techie from behind the curtains to potentially being considered an artist and performer.

Stiena Vasulka began working with video in 1969, and is a key artist in the

development of video technology. I first was introduced to Steina Vasulka while screening documentaries for a film festival. She was featured in the movie *Video Out, 2005* which presents the history of video jockeying. She is a seminal figure in defining *performance cinema*.

In 1971 in New York City, Steina with her husband Woody Vasulka founded The Kitchen, a center for video, music, dance, performance, film and literature. Though originally intended to exhibit video art, The Kitchen soon expanded to include performance art as well. The Kitchen, experimental and cross-disciplinary, cultivates for artists exhibition and performance opportunities. The Kitchen has helped launch artists including Vito Acconci, Gary Hill, Cindy Sherman, Bill T Jones, Laurie Anderson, Phillip Glass, Meredith Monk, Brian Eno and Miranda July.

Steina Vasulka was first a classically trained musician, and because of this she uniquely approaches video. She often performs in her technological experiments as seen in several of her works presented at SITE Santa Fe in 2007 at her first national retrospective. Even in some of her more recent pieces, *Warp, 2000* for example, Vasulka, at age 60, is seen performing an interactive dance with cinematic technology that reacts to her movements.

Bill Viola is a seminal video artist who highlights performance in his work. The subject of Viola's work can be seen as holding transcendental qualities associated with mystic traditions including Zen Buddhism, Christian mysticism and Islamic Sufism. Most of his videos and installations absorb the precision presentation of performers. An example of this can be seen in the re-enactment of the New Testament's visitation, titled *The Greeting, 1995*. Two women begin the piece in conversation, a third enters and a greeting takes place. This single shot, originally lasting 45 seconds, is slowed down to 10 minutes, magnifying the subtle gestures and expressions of the figures. In an early video, *The Space Between the*

*Teeth*, 1976, Viola himself performs as the subject of inquiry, which draws focus to his interests in the conversations around performance within cinema.

However, only video art which contains live performance possibility should be contained in *performance cinema*. For example in Viola's *Stations 1994*, five projections reflect onto five polished black granite slabs. Suppose instead the video was reflected onto pools of water; and, further suppose one were allowed to manipulate the surface of the water. This then contains the spirit of *performance cinema*. Video art or experimental film is *performance cinema* if the final work invites live manipulation to extend the conversation back to live performance.

The conversation of liveness is one that begins when film is included into theatre.<sup>2</sup> Where are the lines drawn? Let me suggest that the more blurred they are, the more they are in essence *performance cinema*. The method of *performance cinema* requires a conversation to occur between the media. An interesting model is the video feedback loop that was popular as an early VJ effect. The interaction between performance with cinema or cinema with performance can be further explored in these following examples.

“In 1914, Winsor McCay toured the United States with *Gertie the Dinosaur*. Standing onstage in a spotlight, holding a whip and costumed with a pith helmet and long boots, McCay issued gestural and verbal commands to Gertie, a silent animated film character projected onto a movie screen at the back of the stage. Through McCay's precision timing, the female dinosaur animation appeared to respond instantly to his instructions by nodding or shaking her head, sitting up, rolling over, and performing tricks like a circus animal.”<sup>2</sup>

This is a very early example of performance exerting the illusion of interactive control

over cinema. McCay's lion tamer performance, pretending to manipulate the animated animal, contributes to the conversation of *performance cinema*.

A contemporary phenomenon is the cult following of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which is a comedy film based on the British stage production title *Rocky Horror Show*. Since its release as a midnight movie in 1976, cult audiences have performed the entire show, acting it out in front of the movie screen. These events continue to occur internationally, providing another example of *performance cinema*.

Miranda July is a rising contemporary artist who incorporates the conversation between the mediums into her productions. The main character of July's award winner film titled *Me, You and Everybody We Know, 2004* is played by July, herself. The character in the film is an artist who performs narration in her video collages. However, clear evidence of July's dialog with *performance cinema* can be seen in her theatrical work. In *The Swan Tool, 2000-2002* July performed between two video projection screens. A narrow performance aisle was created with one large screen behind and another shorter one in front, this cinematic set integrated her body into the scene.

With the summation of these artist's examples, the exploration into *performance cinema* can begin to be viewed from this framework. From Loie Fuller to Winsor McCay, from Merce Cunningham to Stiena Vasulka, the work of these historic and contemporary performers has demonstrated a perspective of the formation of a field we can identify as *performance cinema*.

A selection of personal antecedents will demonstrate a push towards furthering the conversation. In 2005, I, along with Alex Oliszewski and LeAnn Brubaker, formed Penumbra Theatre Company. Penumbra being a partial shadow, as in an eclipse, between regions of complete shadow and complete illumination, and theatre defined as a branch of the

performing arts concerned with acting out stories in front of an audience using combinations of speech, gesture, music, dance, sound and spectacle. Penumbra Theatre then is defined as an evolving hybrid of conventions, performance techniques and technological wizardry, which draws upon shadow theatre, audio theatre, mask performance, video projection, ritual performance, and narrative storytelling.

Penumbra Theatre is also identifiable by its use and development of "linguistic gesture" inspired by John Flax and his work with Theatre Grotesco. In addition to the influences discussed previously, the following are also credited with empowering Penumbra: Richard Wagner, John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Robert LePage, Robert Wilson, Cirque du Soleil and Pilobolus Dance Theatre.

Penumbra recognizes that throughout the 20th century technology, such as lighting and film, have been innovatively combined with performance to create an ever evolving style of theatre. Penumbra's goal is to align itself with this history and to continue experiments with the collaborative creation process and the integration of technology in theatre.

Penumbra performances are enhanced by cinema, ritualistic elements, sight specific scene design, gesture as vocabulary, artistic lighting, aural submersion, and shadow play. While all Penumbra productions share a coherent stylistic vision and underlying mythological flavor, each is uniquely shaped through collaboration with the company's actors and designers.

Penumbra Theatre has produced three original performances *Penumbra: A Festival of Shadow and Color*, 2005, *Oblivion*, 2005, and *The Sand Queen's Ceremony*, 2006.

*Penumbra: A Festival of Shadow and Color* is a story of balance. Two worlds, the Land of Bwight and the Land of Color, are thrown into chaos when two rebellious fairies try to leave behind the set ways of their cultures. The land of Bwight, or the land of black and

white is exists in shadow behind a large screen, while the Land of Color exists as performance in front of the screen. In the story, the worlds combine and the actual boundary dissolves by revealing slits in the screen that the performers move through.

Then in *Oblivion*, we experimented with stage configurations that involved modular screens. The traditional large cinema screen could be split into two and arranged in a variety of ways. We also incorporated mobile screens that existed on wheels or as props. In this example, cinema took the role of set, video art, characters, shadow, and traditional cinema.

*The Sand Queen's Ceremony* is a contemporary and participatory ritual that honor's dreams as sacred. Performed at the Fort Lewis College Amphitheatre and at the Dreamtime Festival, *The Sand Queen's Ceremony* takes *performance cinema* outdoors. It uses fire to pay tribute to dreaming, and invites the audience to join in the ceremony through call and response as well as through igniting additional pyrotechnics. The cinematic element is a three part modular, mobile screen that is, at first the queen's caravan in the procession, and then transforms into a shadow screen, and then into a surface for video projection.

*Detained, 2006* though its final form is cinema, has an entangled relationship with performance. I performed the two main choreographed figures both representing different aspects of an individual. The inner section is a performance of me unwrapping from a cocoon of white fabric, set against a white backdrop. Onto this scene was projected a video playing in reverse. This section was recorded, then in editing made to "bounce" meaning to play forward, and then play in reverse, then forward in a continuing pattern. This back and forth, pendulum manipulation of time paralleled the concept of entwining layers and iterations of performance.

The outside character is a video recording of a shadow performance made into a mask, which is filled with the inner section. This graphic, silhouetted form moves in a sequence of

gestures choreographed intentionally to be played both forward and backwards. The two videos play simultaneously though their time pendulums swing opposite of one another, while one video play forward the other plays in reverse. *Detained* endlessly and invisibly loops.

Another personal antecedent to *performance cinema* is VJ-ing. Since 2004 I have performed as a video jockey a variety of venues and events. For two years, I had a monthly gig where I was afforded the opportunity to experiment in social environment as well as exercise music to visual interpretation techniques. This cultivated creative development and dynamic presentations but was not fully observed by the audiences. Rather, the party goers tended to dance and be stimulated by the visuals merely as a variable, but dependent focus. After much effort, I saw little results in the club scene completing the cycle needed to attain quality work in *performance cinema*.

To address the issue of value, I introduced live cinema into concert hall events. In 2007, in collaboration with conductor Joseph Martin and the Lamont Wind Ensemble, I created video for four feature length performances. The fifty piece wind ensemble performed in front of the projection screen, while my video projection played in sync with their music. These events we named Visual Concert Experiences, were performed both at Gates Concert Hall and Magness Arena.

Also in 2007, by special invitation and in collaboration with contemporary jazz musicians and nationally ranked gymnasts, I presented an original performance emphasizing the hybrid potential of performance across music, sports, and technology. In this black tie, one night event, I was staged as a performer mixing moving visual art in conversation with both the acrobatics and the music.

My most recent experiment in the form of *performance cinema* is *ATRA*, 2008. *ATRA* weaves the spirit of performance art with moving images to present a mythological story.

Throughout this discussion I have mostly focused on form and relation, rather than content or narrative. In this example, I will include these components in order to support proposed methods.

Even though the venue for this production was decided early in the process, the show was designed to be highly mobile. The BINDERY | space is a 25,000 sq/ft warehouse located centrally within the Denver community. This unique venue allowed me the depth needed to construct a long-throw, rear-projected performance environment. The parameters of the production fell within the requirements to be mobile and modular, physically fitting into traveling trunks.

The creation of the narrative evolved over seven months of research and experimentation. The story of ATRA has several layers including the processing of my Catholic upbringing, Sumerian myth, the Johnstown flood, and a contemporary, personal narrative.

Having been raised Catholic, I found myself led down a path full of questions. I have realized the stories that accompany the Catholic faith do not add up to a rational truth. In order to come to terms with a personal need to reconcile my relationship with Catholicism and the stories that come with it, I began a quest to understand the source of the church's stories and culture.

Spirituality is an important part of my personal well being and I find therefore that processing my roots in Catholicism is vital in my holistic creative journey as an artist. I have specifically set out to find where the creation story in the book of Genesis came from, which in turn has led me to the study of myth-making in the biblical tradition.

Atrahasis is a Babylonian Genesis, a creation and flood story likely to have existed before the time of writing. The oldest version of the story exists in three clay, fragmented

tablets and tells of a man named Atrahasis who the Sumerian god Enki entrusts with the continuance of mankind. He, like Noah, is warned of the coming flood. This historical evidence was the key that unlocked my comprehension of the origins of the biblical tales of found in Genesis, specifically the flood story.

Both a personal and historical influence, the Johnstown flood plays a significant role in story of *ATRA* seen most clearly in the construction and destruction of a dam. I was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania where in 1889 a neglected dam and a phenomenal storm led to a catastrophe in which over 2,200 people died.

“There was no larger news story in the latter nineteenth century after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. The story of the Johnstown Flood has everything to interest the modern mind: a wealthy resort, an intense storm, an unfortunate failure of a dam, the destruction of a working class city, and an inspiring relief effort.”<sup>7</sup>

“The great Johnstown flood of 1889 is remembered as the worst disaster by dam failure in American history. In fact, it was the greatest single-day civilian loss of life in this country before September 11, 2001.”<sup>8</sup>

In particular, the following story remained with me after my December 2007 visit to the museum:

“A little girl passed under the bridge just before dark. She was kneeling on a part of a floor and her hands clasped as if in prayer. Every effort was made to save her, but they all proved futile. The piteous appearance of the little waif brought tears to the eyes of all beholders.”<sup>9</sup>

The process of developing the story of *ATRA* began as a flood storytelling retreat in

August of 2007, where the founding members of Penumbra came together to workshop the elements of a flood story. We each presented our research on the topic, citing over one-hundred examples of flood stories from around the world.

We meet in the mountains near Blue Mesa Reservoir, Colorado, where upon heading to camp my car became severely stuck in a mud hole. We ended up having to camp there for the night, until the next day a kind man with a big truck assisted us. Much valuable content was derived from this retreat including the concept to create mud as a character in the story.

I left the retreat with a five part flood storytelling map, evidence of our process and structure, both of which laid the foundations for *ATRA*. With this map of narrative elements we improvised stories, which were audio recorded and presented in an eight minute study titled *Flood Stories, 2007*.

With the insight of my partner Alex Oliszewski, I structured a story, in part modeled from the three clay tablets of Atrahasis. *ATRA* exists in five parts: Act I, Welcoming Ritual = performance, Act II/Tablet I, Creation Story = cinema, Act III/Table II, Journey and Destruction = performance and cinema, Act IV/Table III, Transcendence = cinema, Act V, Closing Ritual = performance.

Themes include creation and flood, the reclaiming of ritual, water's relation to power, the moon, as well as an exploration of oral tradition including poetic and musical language, and repetition to promote memory.

Additional influences to the narrative include the cinematic works of Hayao Miyazaki, the methods of John Flax and Theatre Grottesco, *Momo* by Michael Ende, and *The Couple in the Cage* by artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena.

One may ask if *performance cinema* requires a traditional narrative. The answer is no, however I believe meaningful content is powerful. Due to social conditioning, audiences are

naturally receptive to both linear and non-linear story structures. Narrative also assists those with ever shortening attention spans in maintaining active engagement with feature length durations of performances. Spectacle can only sustain educated audiences so long.

The design process for creating the plans for the production included the categories of video, audio, set, lighting, costumes, and props. Both method and material was considered in each.

The element of sound is important in the creation process and exhibition of performance. Both Fuller and Merce Cunningham experimented with the foundational relationship between sound and movement. Fuller stated in her book: “In general, music ought to follow the dance. The best musician is he who can permit the dancer to direct the music instead of the music inspiring the dance”<sup>10</sup>

This idea was new to dance at the time, because in classical dance the music determined the movement. Cunningham continues this investigation of the sound and dance relationship by integrating chance and collaboration into the process of creating sound. Cunningham would invite a musician, often John Cage, to create a score for a dance, but each of the artists worked on the composition separately before then combining the parts on stage. The union of these elements of music and movement would be married for the first time in front of an audience.

For *ATRA*, I decided that the aural style, used previously in the Penumbra productions, would take a form similar to an audio drama. Voice performers recorded the character roles in the script and I retained the role of narrator. Sound effects and audio environments were also recorded for use in audio post production. For the performance, most of the audio was presented as a pre-edited track through a surround sound speaker set up, which left about 15% of the audio to be performed live by Nancy Fiator.

In addition to these elements, generative audio collaborations took place with sound artists Paul DeMarte and La-Mar Sutton. My partner Alex Oliszewski and I have been incorporating Paul DeMarte's audio in our work for the past six years, but it was not until this project that we were able to be in the same geographic location, which allowed for a more motivated, dynamic, and fused collaboration. DeMarte produced over an hour of original work inspired by the script and collaborative conversations.

Sutton is a Denver based audio artist working under the name Aeqlabs. As stated at [aeqlabs.com](http://aeqlabs.com), all sounds processed by Aequilibrium Laboratories are "cost-free to download, listen to, alter, manipulate, sell and/or use as a tool for whatever purposes the user desires." Sutton, an elementary school friend of Oliszewski, creates work highly compatible with video and performance. We have been combining Sutton's sounds with our video since 2004.

A valuable element that was incorporated into the overall style of the production, specifically identifiable in the audio, is Richard Wagner's idea of the *leitmotif*. When a reoccurring theme, whether it be musical, textual or visual, becomes associated with a place, person or concept through the duration of a performance a *leitmotif* is established.

In designing a space configuration, the goal of blurring the lines between performance and cinema was a priority. My exploration in long throw rear projection defines a three dimensional space in which a two dimensional shadow performer interfaces and merges with both static and moving images. This technical investigation of media, time, and space, led to the construction of a compact and modular digital shadow studio designed for endless experimentation and mobility. 24 yards of 55 inch wide Rosebrand front and rear projection screen material was built into a 14' x 23' five-part, modular screen with compact storage intact.

The video for the production was created after the audio was complete. The five acts

were each associated with a formal importance. For instance, the video for Acts I and V is primarily a static image with a variable dynamic component situated inside the dominant backdrop style. This is balanced then with an emphasis on performance during these sections. In Acts II and IV cinema becomes the primary focus, influenced by traditional cinema, video art, and experimental film with occasional cinematically live occurrences. And finally Act III pays particular attention to *performance cinema* through intentionally blurring the lines between the two forms. This is attempted through video compositions designed for a specific shadow performance as well as through the integration of shadow puppetry, liquid light artistry, and manual light operation.

The intent of the video design for Act III was to promote shadow character interactivity with video environments, situations and characters. A theme of this style, which becomes technically evident, is the dialog of macro and micro. Another visual theme was the use of motion textures. Combined with graphic, symbolic areas these textures existed within the bounds of visual elements for example water, mud, space, and grass.

The creation process for Act III resembled a cumulative complex conversation between performance and cinema. In the story of *ATRA* there are several characters that I play that only exist as shadow video characters. These shadow video characters interact with my live shadow performance. This resembles McCay's interactions with Gertie, although instead of an animation, I was cinematically--through shadow--interacting with shadow video performances of my own in order to bring the conversation to a similar two dimensional plain.

In 2004, I developed this creation technique which yields video of moving body characters. My idea was to create a body mask and fill it or fill its surroundings or both with video. Since then, I have continually experimented with manipulating shadows and digital

video. I will deconstruct the technical process used to create these forms and then contextualize the results in *performance cinema*.

The process uses shadows and editing software to manifest video characters. The first step is the shadow recording studio. This involves a large room with plenty of space in front and behind a large shadow screen. On one side of the screen I align a single focusable bright white light source and on the other side, centered and at the same height, a miniDV camera. I then define the playing area with spike tape on the side of the light source. It is very important that all other light be eliminated from the shadow studio.

The goal is to record clean lines with even, high contrast. The camera is set on a tripod in a static position. The frame of the camera should be inside the box of light being projected onto the screen. This cropped area of the camera's composition should correspond to the marked performance area.

In performance I have explored a variety of themes including expressing emotional states like afraid, devastated, excited, or overjoyed through simple linguistic gesture. For the *ATRA* video shadows, I played the role of four town's people, an old woman named Crone, and the large character of Mud. With costuming, each of these characters had a unique silhouette. Because most of the audio was complete at this time, it was used as a resource in rehearsal and recording.

After recording the shadows and dumping them to Vegas Video, I apply a sequence of effects. The first step is desaturating the video of color, then, inverting the video so the black is white and white is black. Next, I adjust the brightness and contrast to gain a solid, even white and black image. This usually means increasing the contrast of the video. I am left with a mask of body movement in which either the black or white or both can be replaced with images, textures, colors or moving video.

By using chroma-keying I make either the black or white part of the video invisible. When applying chroma-keying in Vegas Video I make sure to find the perfect balance of high and low thresholds and to blur the edges slightly to increase the quality of the effect. I now can fill in the body of the performer with any moving image source by simply layering this mask above the video track. At this point I can render out clips of the moving bodies containing moving images and begin to layer them onto one another by using a similar process of chroma-keying. I adjust render settings to minimize digital artifacting, however rendering, layering, and re-rendering risks significantly reducing the video quality.

By starting with performance in shadow, then making it cinema through recoding, and then projecting and adding in live performance, a feedback loop begins. *ATRA*, the performance, was itself recorded both in front of and from behind the screen and edited into a video that can be exhibited in a number of ways, including in galleries and online.

Both the ritual and shadow performance costumes were designed to support the conversation of *performance cinema*. The ritual regalia, which appeared in front of the screen primarily as performance but was also seen in cinema, consisted of actual priest robes and stoles, tribal, feathered headdresses and white face masks. The robes represent my Catholic upbringing, the headdresses are then a contemporary intersection and expansion, while the masks relate back to the conversation of dimension as well as *Penumbra's* origins. The solid color, plastic face attempts a bridge to the flat solid colored surfaces of the silhouette aesthetic.

The costuming of the live shadow performances, specifically the character of *Atra*, our heroine, took on a dualist style. In the story, *Atra* transforms from a little girl into a goddess, specifically into the moon. The designs supported this development. She first takes on the form of an Alice or Dorothy character, then as a woman is seen with much longer hair and

loses the fluffy dress for more functional attire, pants.

Props were important to the execution of the performance narrative, primarily for the rituals in Act I and V. Props included three clay tablets for each performance, inscribed with the story of *ATRA*. These tablets were fragmented with a hammer and chisel during the performance. Additional items used in the rituals included the stone altar for the tablets, a 42 inch white, paschal candle, hand-thrown clay fired bowls, frankincense in a brazier, sage smudge sticks, a water wand made from yarrow, and many votive candles. These ritual items are stored in the trunks mentioned earlier, to support the mobile and organized intent of the production.

The theatrical lighting for the show took a simple, solid formation. Traditional lighting design was only required for the ritual Acts I and V. The design included a cool and warm wash over the stage area in front of the screen. I was careful not to allow much light onto the screen, as to retain the quality of the rear projected video. Three additional spots were used to bring focus and harmony to the three stage sections of water, fire, and the tablets.

I performed the character of Atra live, in shadow. I decided to use my body, a female body, as a major tool in this production for a myriad of reasons. Goldberg defines performance art as being different than theatre because “the performer is the artist” rather than an actor *per se*. In this proof of concept, I aligned myself with this reasoning, and as the artist performed the dominant character of Atra.

I also wanted to personally address issues of the female form in culture, by creating a story where a heroine replaces the patriarchal tradition of heroes like Noah or Atrahasis. I also framed this production to allow for my body to be active, balancing the usual stasis of the body in new media as explored by Michele White, in *When the Sitter Is the User: New Media and the Static Body*, as presented at the New Media Caucus, CAA, New York City, 2007.

In addition, after having been a light board operator and video jockey for several years, I am aware that the distance between technician and performer, although considered by the conventions to be distinct, is in reality--and emphasized in *performance cinema*--as quite intertwined. The concept of technician as performer was considered throughout the production of *ATRA*, and realized in the live performance as digitally manipulated vocals, foley sound effects, shadow puppetry, liquid light artistry, and spot light operation. The visibility and central location of the tech set up allowed the viewer to consider the role of the technician more forwardly than if a traditional, invisible tech approach had been taken.

Each night after a bow, I invited the audience for a backstage tour. Through this interaction, I discovered how wonderfully important this was to their understanding and appreciation of the show. I taught, played, explored, and explained the process and techniques for an additional hour. To my surprise, most people did not know the functionality of the shadow performance; that when I was small in shadow I was closer to the audience and when I was big I was furthest from them. The audiences were very curious, and like children wanted to play in the light. This was an incredibly supportive response for the intended upcoming work-shopping of these ideas.

In critical reflection of the performance of *ATRA, 2008*, I recognize that the five week build time for the show was very ambitious, especially considering the constraints of needing to personally embody practically every role within the production. As the professional artist being considered for a terminal degree, I was torn between retaining versus disseminating creative control. In the end, I maintained sufficient authorship of this work, but feel that in future productions the work will be more collaborative.

I also note that each performance was significantly better each of the three evenings. Alex Oliszewski, Nancy Fiator and I each felt more confident with each consecutive

performance. By closing night, Fiator was positioning vocals and adding a harmonious live component that was not to be missed. This live audio element was a string that wove all the components of the production together.

There is a theoretical discourse that exists between Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes as presented by Steve Dixon, in regards to *value*. This discussion is framed by placing a reproduced image *against* original presence. Which has more value an image or a performance?

Benjamin states that “even the most perfect reproduction...is lacking in one element: it’s presence in time and space.”<sup>11</sup> while Barthes, in regards to the photograph, says “the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation”<sup>3</sup> While Benjamin is seen as the defender of “liveness,” and the preserver of “aura,” Barthes rises to through criticism in attempt to liberate the photograph from merely a reproduction into a memorial equaled in its own right to life.

*Performance cinema* calls for a repositioning of thought. Why place these elements in conflict with one another? To paraphrase Wagner from *The Artwork of the Future, 1849*, artistic woman can only fully content herself by uniting these branches of art into a common form. *Performance cinema* combines both cinema and performance in dynamic ways, defining a media of creative work, while also instigating the development of new, defined genres.

*Performance cinema* presents for me an opportunity to hold workshops surrounding the techniques and methods involved in this form of creation. In the future, I intend to continue developing work in this form, while also educating and promoting its place and value within art.

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