

João Onofre: Experimental Machines

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There is a longstanding connection between visual and performing artists, from Stravinsky, who commissioned ballet sets from artists like Matisse, Gontcharova, Chagall and Picasso (who also did sets for Cocteau and Erik Satie's "Parade" and a curtain for Diaghilev's "Le Tricorne") to Noguchi and Martha Graham and more recent opera and dance sets, like those created for Trisha Brown by Robert Rauschenberg and Terry Winters. But in these collaborations, art usually plays a supporting role. A set, after all, is a *background*, not the main event.

Joao Onofre explores the relationship between visual and performing arts, but he also does something very rare: he reverses the standard relationship, using performers as contributors to a visual artwork. Their talents and skills are not merely a backdrop in his work, but serve as primary structuring elements. Like a Minimalist choreographer studying a gesture or movement, or a composer isolating a tone or rhythm, Onofre breaks things down and reconstructs them, creating a new form in the process.

The videos on view here, "Instrumental Version" (2001) and "Pas d'action" (2002) illustrate this fusion of visual and performing arts. "Instrumental Version" features the Chamber Choir of Lisbon performing an *a cappella* version of the song "The Robots," from the German electronic pop group Kraftwerk's 1978 album *Man Machine*. Clad in black—the attire befitting a classical vocal ensemble—and holding musical scores, the vocalists sing all the parts of Kraftwerk's song, transforming the original electronic version into a choral work for sopranos, altos, tenors, and baritones.

"Pas d'action" draws from another, traditional wing of the performing arts: ballet. In the video, dancers in their work-out attire stand in rows before the camera. An off-camera cue is given and they rise as a group on demi-pointe (Fifth Position demi-pointe in the Cecchetti method, to be more precise). The dancers hold the position as long as they can, then lower individually and stand quietly, waiting for some kind of *dénouement*. When

all the dancers have descended, there is a pause; another off-camera signal is given and their bodies slacken; they relax, stretching and shaking out their limbs as the picture fades to black.

This emphasis on performance is evident from the earliest of Onofre's works. In "Untitled (We will never be boring)" (1997), for instance, a man and a woman in formalwear walk on treadmills, facing each other in a gymnasium. The white ceiling and white floor of the space contrast with their dark clothing and serve as a framing backdrop for the walking figures, their feet falling (the woman in high heels) like musical beats. Rhythm is also an important component in the performance-based "Untitled" (1998) and "Untitled" (1999). Both videos feature a man and a woman, on opposite sides of the screen, separated by a white space in the center. In "Untitled" (1998), the man and woman are alternately propelled across the screen, into the body of the other. (The video runs as a loop, so we become partially, if not completely accustomed to the rhythmic impact of the bodies and the woman's defensive gesture in the moment before impact.) In "Untitled" (1999), videotaped footage of a man and woman—athletes or dancers, perhaps—flipping themselves over on the floor is rotated ninety degrees and run at a staggered interval, so the rhythm created by the bodies is syncopated. The flipping motion, turned vertically, makes the bodies look as if an invisible force is throwing them away from and then pulling them toward the wall.

Performance skills increase in later videos. In "Nothing will go wrong" (2000), a gymnast dressed in white scales a traffic signal in a Lisbon square at night. As the light changes, he presses his body into a handstand on top of the post, spreading his legs to make a Y-shaped form against the dark backdrop of the city. The gymnast holds the handstand for the period of a traffic signal, then dismounts, and then repeats the pattern. An astonishing physical feat is turned into a graphic and rhythmic visual art work.

But think of ballet, chamber music, even gymnastics: there is something serious at the core of these pursuits. There exist comedic ballets—even comedic ballet troupes—and lighthearted moments in opera and chamber music. By and large, however, these are

forms that concentrate on the seriousness of the endeavor and correct execution of a fixed set of skills. Training and effort are rigorous and performance is generally dedicated to showcasing skills acquired in the process.

What Onofre does is take these skills and skew them in an odd direction—not to ridicule the performers or their chosen art forms, but to create an entirely new object. Fragments of movement or voice are extracted from their normative “functions” (the aria, the oratorio, the danced solo or *pas de deux*) and reassigned, gaining new meanings in the process.

Take “Instrumental Version:” in this work, the formalism of classical voice is reconfigured into a funny, lighthearted (and yet perfectly and seriously executed) rendering of a pop song. The choice of song itself is key, since Kraftwerk was fascinated with the idea of “machine music”—technology harnessed by humans to create music—and the original lyrics take the perspective of anthropomorphic robots, singing, “we’re functioning automatic/ and we are dancing mechanic.” The choir, in turn, singing the reconfigured composition without lyrics, gives a human aspect to the composition, while erasing the textual/communicative qualities of the song.

“Pas d’action” is similar in the way it reconfigures, or “rewrites” classical ballet language to create a video-object. The title of the work borrows playfully from the (generally French) language of ballet, which is full of “*pas de’s*” (*pas*, for passing one’s foot to assume one of the five basic ballet positions, *pas de deux*, steps performed by a couple, to *pas de bourrée*, *pas croise*, *pas marches*, *pas simple*, *pas de chat*, *pas de cheval*, *pas de Basque*, and so on). Isolating the 5th position on demi-pointe, Onofre playfully rechristens the *pas d’action*—generally defined as a “dramatically styled ballet”—into a kind of static action, or “no movement.” Rising like a flock of birds (an overused metaphor, but aptly applied to his long-limbed corps from the Companhia Nacional de Bailado Portugal), the dancers assume the position. Rather than remaining static, however, the viewer senses subtle movement; the shifting of the individual dancers on pointe becomes a

collective movement, like that of a large object—the wavering of an unsteady piece of furniture or the tilt of a listing ship.

In many ways, Onofre’s work recalls the early years of video art, the 1960s and the Sony Portapak, when art videos were generally performative in nature. Both “Pas d’Action” and “Instrumental Version” showcase performance, but the video-space serves as a mediation between the performer and the audience—an anti-stage in which the performers are displayed in tight, correct rows, rather than spaced out on a concert stage. The video becomes an expression of an even larger collective identity and endeavor—the artist working with his performers, drawing from mutated elements of the performers’ vocation to create an object very different from what, in other hands, might become a slick video showcase for the talents of the Chamber Choir of Lisbon or the CNB.

Onofre veers away from the technological-critique offered by early video artists, but this doesn’t mean that technology is ignored. Instead, we see another view of technology, indicated by the choice of “Robots” and the treatment of performing groups as a kind of machine or mechanism, tuned here by the artist. One of the distinctions, of course, between a performing artist and a visual one is that visual artists are responsible for creating, while performing artists are essentially translators of a text; one is an inventor, one a mechanism for delivery.

Inventor, translator, mechanism: these all sound very technological. But in reality a choir or dance troupe *does* function like a machine, an entity composed of parts, characterized by its strictly molded and trained divisions of labor. Sopranos, tenors, baritones; principals, soloists, *corps*. But what if the “machine” is directed—or, in Onofre’s case, *redirected*—to perform a function other than the one it was designed for? It is an experiment poised to go horribly wrong, the “machine” turning back on its operator, like the oft-copied image of Charlie Chaplin in “Modern Times” (1936), being devoured by an errant piece of Industrial Age equipment.

In Onofre's case, however, this doesn't happen. His works are a successful human-technological experiment; the best kind of experimental machines. Human effort is both celebrated and subsumed into something larger, into artworks that are both performative and mechanistic/technological. The richness of the human voice and the subtlety of human movement exist here in reconfigured, but not certainly not cyborg form. (And anyway, human voice and movement haven't been perfectly replicated, despite the advances of the digital revolution. One might hope flawless human simulacra will never exist, but undoubtedly they will one day.)

In the meantime, Onofre has harnessed what are, for now, solely human trademarks: the organic, the idiosyncratic, the "natural." Fusing them with technology, he creates objects that are, in their own way, impeccably organic and mechanistic. Simultaneously serious and funny, skilled and flawed, perfect and imperfect, Onofre's videos build up from this multiplicity of contradictions to create an object that successfully integrates visual and performing arts, as well as technology and formal, skilled human endeavor.

Where human ends and machine begins (or visa versa) is left open-ended. The *Man Machine* (to revisit the Kraftwerk album title behind "Instrumental Version") is both a frightening and beautiful notion. But in Onofre's works, technology and humanity interact gracefully, supporting each other's weaknesses, borrowing and learning from each other to create something beautiful and new.