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Random Space | Culture Council | UMa 2024

Encoded Movements: A Performance at the Frontier Between Artificial Intelligence and Contemporary Dance

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URL: <https://conselhodecultura.uma.pt/er-videos/>

DOI: 10.34640/ervideouma2024reis

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Data do documento: março 2024



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Encoded Movements: A Performance at the Frontier Between Artificial Intelligence and Contemporary Dance

António BAÍA REIS

This intervention proposed the idea of feeding the “machine-beast,” namely a customized ChatGPT4 fueled by the concept of creating a choreography with the fundamental condition of associating and combining as little historical, technical, and other conventional dance-related information as possible. The aim was to deceive the machine-beast, programming it to optimally deceive us in return. The machine-beast had to create a choreography with a theme resulting from its “creativity,” as if it had “artistic consciousness,” a notion currently impossible but perennially discussed in techno-futurist discourses and prophecies.

The choreography created, ironically themed around the creation of the universe and the origin of Man - which seems curious to me because of all the themes it could explore, artificial intelligence (AI) opts for something profoundly genealogical, even telluric - I became the receptacle, the intermediary between the machine-beast and the dancer David Sousa, a student at the Conservatory of Madeira. Interestingly, in the history of human-technology relationships, the intermediary was always, or almost always, the machine, facilitating human-to-human communication. Here, the roles were blurred. I, a man, was the medium between machine and human. From machine to human to human. I felt almost like nothing because, in the end, I neither created nor interpreted. I felt artistically on barren ground.

The performance began, and as I conveyed and recited the choreography to David, he brought it to life, giving it an expansion that even made my mere role as the machine's receptacle gain another dimension. The fluidity of David's performance movement transformed the seemingly inhospitable and apathetic choreography created by AI into something deeply visceral and organic.

The event took place at the Quinta Magnólia Cultural Center in Funchal, Madeira Island, in a spacious room hosting the painting exhibition “The Lady's Room - Take 2” by artist Filipa Venâncio. This “coincidence” seduced me. The presence of dance among Filipa's works added another layer to the inter-arts relationship that was at the origin of this work. David improvised the AI's choreography under the attentive gaze of Filipa's canvases. This exhibition explores the appropriation of places and objects, where the latter invade unlikely spaces, drawing influences from cinema that blend into the architecture of places and historical mansions on the island of Madeira. Similarly, David and the AI's performance invaded Filipa's exhibition, bringing an unexpected symbolism. As if parallel universes, not dependent on linear time and space, opened to our perplexity. A feast of dance, techno-philosophy, architecture, space, objects, cinema, sound, breaths, momentariness.

After the performance, it was time to open the discussion to those who experienced it, and the dialogue was rich, provocative, hesitant, but above all, there was a sharing of ideas among Conservatory students from the areas of dance, theater, and media, teachers, and guests. I highlight David's honest account, who shared his feelings, exalting the beauty of dance and movement as something profoundly free, open to being the artistic clay of anything that challenges it, whether organic or artificial.

Questions linger in the air, sparking the desire to do more, to transgress further: How does the interaction between contemporary dance and AI or other emerging technologies redefine the limits and possibilities of artistic expression? To what extent can AI be seen as an independent creative agent in dance, and what are the ethical implications of that autonomy? How does David's experience, serving as an intermediary between AI and physical dance expression, transform our understanding of the artist's and performer's role in the digital age? What impact does the location and artistic context, such as the performance occurring among Filipa Venâncio's works, have on the interpretation and experience of dance? What new forms of movement, expression, and narration can emerge from this collaboration between humans and algorithms? How does the exploration between dance and AI influence future choreographic practices and the training of dancers and choreographers? How do we define ourselves as creators and spectators of art at the intersection of organic and artificial realities? What possibilities arise from the intersection of disciplines in artistic creation, and how does this challenge our perception of traditional artistic categories? What new philosophical and aesthetic territories emerge from the fusion between technology and human artistic practices? What meanings can we find at the crossroads of all this? How do we define ourselves as creators in the face of futures that may lean towards utopias or dystopias? I'm not interested in hypes or buzzwords enticed by *Return On Investment*; I'm interested in feeling, thinking, the artistic becoming.

I want more and will do more. It felt insufficient because I suffer from an insatiable artistic gluttony and the desire to cross disciplines and grow in this hybridity where intellectual, philosophical, creative, and human matter momentarily meet at the crossroads of making art as an act of absolute truth and dialogue.

Note: This performance was originally conceived by António Baía Reis, Petr Vašků, and Sára Solmošiová in 2023, during a workshop and artistic residency at the JAMU Theatre Faculty in Brno, Czech Republic. Its initial presentation took place at the Theatre Conference JAMU 2023.

Acknowledgments: This work was only possible through the collaboration between the Council of Culture and the Experimental Performance Laboratory of the University of Madeira, the Professional Course for Contemporary Dance Performers at the Conservatório Escola Profissional das Artes da Madeira – Eng.º Luiz Peter Clode and the Quinta Magnólia - Cultural Centre.