

Stretching her skin

Performance artist Isabelle Choinière merges body and machine

by LINDE HOWE-BECK

To see Isabelle Choinière perform is to time travel in dance. She is a performance artist who goes beyond even the unconventional into a strange and seductive realm. She creates new experience by testing her limits, pushing frontiers between organics and high tech, stretching her skin into technological dimensions.

Eighteen months ago in a tiny, hot gallery, I first watched the performance artist in *Partage des peaux*, a multidisciplinary work incorporating dance, video, computer graphics and sound. There she was, her stocky, voluptuously pre-Colombian body wired and costumed for special effects, moving through a field in which her electronically amplified heart beat vibrated in blue waves around her and through her computerized twin.

My perceptions have been skewed ever since. As I looked at these aspects of Choinière, I knew I was watching history—or a flower blooming inside my head. My own sensory system reached out of my body to dance through time with hers. I had no idea then how she achieved this unification. I only knew I was hooked.

Choinière's performance in *Communion*, part two of *Partages*, at last fall's Deuxième Manifestation Internationale Vidéo et Art Electronique, elicited the same visceral wonderment. Choinière in the flesh is part of what she calls a "luminous trio" in which presence (her real self), representation (her video self) and simulation (her computer-animated self) celebrate the human body in past, present and future. This fusion of organic and synthetic flesh stimulates and confuses spectators as they struggle with identification.

A graduate of Concordia's dance department, Choinière had just begun to explore an interest in multimedia when she met Jimmy Lakatos, a former pal from her days at CEGEP Maisonneuve where she'd studied humanities seven years earlier. Lakatos had become a sought-after video artist, one of the first wave of the rave creators and co-founder of Synergie, a multimedia production company.

Their coincidental meeting triggered philosophical discussions and questions about electronics and art. They realized they were both interested in exploring technology through dance as a means of communication. They shared the opinion that the body is the cause of technique or technical advances and not the result of it. A partnership was born.

Soon, Michael David Smith joined them to provide sound design and computer graphics. For *Communion* they grew to four with Alexandre Burston on interactive systems. Burston at 22 is what Lakatos, 30, and Choinière, 32, call the "other" generation—the first to be brought up with computers at their fingertips.

Technological demands caused the



dancer to develop a different way of working. Instead of rehearsing alone in a dance studio, Choinière works out in a Betacam studio with machines. This daily contact with the equipment has become an intimate relationship far removed from the fascination she had for the machines when she worked with them infrequently. Through daily contact, she has found a way to merge with the machines, allowing them to dictate the kind of movement she produces.

"It is a kind of ritual, one of the aspects of transforming myself in the Betacam studio. I feel I am transforming my skin. I feel very strongly that it is myself being propelled," Choinière explains. "Having this relationship day to day affects your body. For dancers, it's nice to explore technology but it is very hard to make the transition. You have to find ways to put the body inside the technology."

Choinière's approach to choreography differs from most. While other choreographers may have more people to create for, she has more media. While they deal solely with actual bodies, she is concerned with several realities—actual, virtual and electronic. And she must know each one intimately, so different are their needs.

To do so, Choinière relies heavily on Lakatos. "He is our radar. He is good at detecting new ideas. But I choose. I do the synthesis. I refine." There is a sense of sharing, valuing and respecting of each other's methods of perceptions. And a lot of laughter.

When they begin to work, they have no idea what form the product will take. "It's a total adventure." They stay open to new ideas and disciplines, picking and choosing as they go along. "We know how each of us reads information. I do it from here up," she touches her solar plexus area and then her head, "and Jimmy gets it in his head and tries to bring it down."

Last summer, *Communion* was shown at the international festival of performance art and theatre in Londrina, Brazil, where it generated good critical and popular response. It also gave its creators a clearer insight into international attitudes towards

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technology and art. Choinière says Quebecers bridge a gap between Europeans who fear technology, clinging to their historical roots, and Americans don't consider their roots in their haste to catch up with the future.

"In Quebec, we are in between. We are technologically accessible and willing to see the future" while valuing the past. "We are a type of hybrid and we are in a good position to take the best."

As far as learning from others in the field, it's difficult. There simply doesn't seem to be anybody else working the same way. "We looked," says Choinière. By choosing to make performance art for the general public instead of purists, Choinière and Lakatos have effectively eliminated

most of high tech's intellectual following.

But so far, there has been too much to do to feel isolated. As Lakatos says, they have only just begun to tap their resources. Choinière has "no idea" of what the next piece will look like but she has "flashes—I have to talk to Jimmy," she says conspiratorially. And *Communion* has a big year lined up for '96. There'll be a tour of the eastern United States and possibly Madrid in the spring and another tour of Brazil, Argentina and Mexico in September. These will be followed by appearances in Los Angeles, where Choinière will perform as part of a Tangente exchange called Le Corps Electronique.

She's also planning for January 1997, when she may link into a big international exploration of art and technology. This as yet unannounced project guarantees to stretch Choinière's skin into even newer dimensions.

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Our apologies

We failed to include a credit on a photo of Isabelle Choinière that ran in last week's issue. The photo should have been credited to Stéphane Ballard.