

Dancing light - Visual Projection in the work of Elaine Summers

by Thomas Körtvélyessy

Since I discovered the work of choreographer, intermedia-pioneer, and kinesiotherapy-pioneer Elaine Summers during my study at the Rotterdam Dance Academy (now Codarts) in 1993, I had been fascinated with her unique blend of dance and film projection.

Summers had been a founding member of the now legendary workshop that is known widely as Judson Dance Theater. Towards the end of her time at this collective, in 1964, she presented the first large-scale mixed media and intermedia concert at Judson Memorial Church, an evening titled *Fantastic Gardens* (Banes, 1983; Mekas 1964). She furthermore is the originator of Kinetic Awareness[®], an approach which researches the fundamentals of movement through open-ended experiments and has as its goal to let the practitioner get to understand and expand their unique ability for healthy and sustainable movement safely and experientially.

I conducted my research on the occasion of *Improvisation with Sun, Moon & Stars*, an intermedia-concert presented at Danspace Project St. Mark's Church, New York City March 18-20, 2010.

Previous and related research

All of the material that I could get about Summers and her work confirmed my interest in her and gave me inspiration for my own goal of developing a dance which is informed by all other human senses and processes of perception, this being for me the very basis of any esthetic, and replacing traditional models and patterns of 'beauty' in a classicistic way, where only certain features or qualities are regarded as desirable.¹ In 1994 I wrote my final paper in Dance History about her work, and since then have been following and researching further. In 1995, I became chief-editor of the *Elaine Summers Improvisational Dance Score Book*, a planned selection of dance scores by Summers, most of them verbal, which at the same time forms a retrospective artist-monography. In the same year I also got involved in the beginnings of her current project *www.SkyTime.org*. Beginning with 2005 I had several opportunities to be artist-in-residence at the Elaine Summers Dance & Film Company.²

All of these experiences have been documented by my observations and quotes from Elaine Summers that further illuminated for me certain details about a certain piece, and more importantly, influenced my own work in the Netherlands.

1 The very origin of the word, aisthesis= literally meaning taking for true, or: perception, confirms this strategy – I came across this understanding in a proposal by German composer Hans Zender (1991) *Happy New Ears*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, p. 50. It is based on the teachings of philosopher Georg Picht ("Die Sinne denken" The senses are thinking..) As stated above, in a more archaic or traditional setting, 'beauty' would need for a phenomenon to fit into a certain code or style of what is perceived as valuable for further development. Thought out further, modern works create alternative styles / systems, postmodern works can move inbetween such styles and systems. According to choreographer and originator of the Six Viewpoints, Mary Overlie, we are currently in a continuum of all three modes simultaneously and alternatively. In such a continuum, "aesthesis" or *aist-thesis* becomes an activity, something that is done in the moment, with a chance to refer to already established canons of what once was felt as beautiful and desirable for further development.

2 The years were 2005, 2007, and 2009. These residencies were all realized through grants by the Kinetic Awareness[®] Center, with the additional invaluable help of several individuals and friends who made it possible for me to temporarily live in New York City, a.o. Thomas Houser, Arturo Vidich, Linda Sue Stein and Paul Vidich, Joshua Bisset and Laura Quatrocchi, as well as Harriet Bograd and Kenneth Klein. I extend my grateful and warm thanks to all of them.

I found that the work of Elaine Summers explores a wide range of possibilities, all coming directly from the practice and understanding rooted in Kinetic Awareness[®]. Therefore there is not one single way of movement that is used as a choreographic signature in every piece, but a wide variety of options, with the one exception that whatever the movement is, it must not be harmful to the performer to do. (A similar tenet is in the use of costumes, which must feel comfortable for the performer to be in, next to fulfilling any other choreographic demand for a specific piece.)

One keyword that I've found would be individuality: not only is there a deep concern for how an individual performer will interpret a dance from her/his unique qualities, but also a concern for the specific qualities of a performance space, the specific needs for a dance in such a space, the needs of a specific piece, etc.

While Elaine Summers insists on an underlying basic freedom to do anything and is interested in variety and liveliness, connectivity can be a second keyword: whether it is between different disciplines, or different professions, or the live-dancing with film-projection. In Summers' terms this latter is made into intermedia: the intentional combination of several media to form a third that can only come into existence from their combination - her favorite natural example of this is the rainbow.³ In multi-media works, no such connectivity is intended or needed. One involved medium could have a more supportive role, while the other dominates, or even not have any intended relation to each other at all.

As a final keyword I would choose innovation: Over the last 50 years Elaine Summers has continuously explored a wide range of options from dance as an everyday activity made into art forms, which can take a great variety of shapes, styles, functions, and interpretations, whether in a more daily or more artistic context. She has choreographed for indoors & outdoors spaces, professional dancers and amateurs ('non-dancers') using film, drama, visual arts, and other related fields in her work.

2010 – a conscious decision

Until last year, my residencies were centered on participating on the sides in the then ongoing projects of the Elaine Summers Dance & Film Company and my study of Kinetic Awareness[®] to become a certified teacher (this eventually happened in 2007). Subsequently, I used these experiences, as well as the inspiration of being in New York and with Elaine Summers and her company, as well as the dance-friends I'd started to make there over the years for the development of my own work and professional network.

In October 2009 Elaine Summers told me of her latest offer for 2010: I could come and visit the company as they realised *Improvisation with Sun, Moon & Stars*, a retrospective concert at Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church New York in March 2010, curated by Juliette Mapp for the series *Back to New York*. It became clear for me that the time was ripe to focus on a very specific aspect of Summers' work, namely her use of live-projection of film or video during a dance-performance.

I myself had always been artistically interested in intermedia as defined by Summers. But after my first experiments in 1995-1998 I had focussed more on the aspect of interdisciplinarity with traditionally given theatrical settings (presence, movement, sound, imagination).

From several collaborations with visual and multi-media artists in the more recent past, and my experience of several of Summers' pieces live, I realized it was time to do more research about her use of projection in her intermedia-work,

³ Program notes from *Making Rainbows*, retrospective of work of Elaine Summers, presented at Anthology Film Archives, New York City (2009)

focussing on the following question: *What is characteristic about the way Elaine Summers uses film/video-projection in her work?*

Method of research: New York & Rotterdam

With this question in mind I went to New York City to observe the production process and performance of *Improvisation with Sun, Moon & Stars*. This time I went as a potential artist-historian and researcher, as well as a professional colleague from the field. My time was spent attending every rehearsal and meeting, conversations with Elaine and participating artists, and seeing all three performances completely. Therefore I would experience her work in this concert as a viewer/audience, but also the making and production process from the inside. This I would connect to my earlier experience as an interpreting dancer and as a choreographic assistant.

My method was comprehensive and accumulative: I went as openly as possible for any related experience along the way and recorded in my notebook whatever I found, without too much reflection. Gradually over time, I hoped that the accumulated experience would form into a clear answer.

This open approach around a defined question was very much in line with my earlier experience how I got more and more knowledgeable about Summers' work: while being a student of Kinetic Awareness[®] and as an artist-in-residence I had also studied several of her pieces as an interpreting dancer and seen several film-dances and recordings of her work over the years. Finally, as editor of the *Elaine Summers Dance Score Book* and beginning with my paper in dance history, I had gotten an accumulated knowledge of the dances that Summers had done while being involved with the group meeting at Judson Church 1962-64 and afterwards, completed with photos, dance-scores, and sometimes film-fragments.

After my return to the Netherlands I wrote an online-article to reflect on *Improvisation with Sun, Moon & Stars* on my choreography-blog *new dance thoughts* (<http://ujtancgondolatok.blogspot.com>).

The reflection process was continued in my choreographic practice during and after the presentation of two works of mine in June 2010, *en cœur* and *walking con-sens-us / skytime™* which both used combinations of live-dance and video-projection and were presented as works in progress in Rotterdam. Here, again, I would essentially not demand recognizable results right away, but first be as open as possible, and then see what would happen, and reflect on it in a later stage.

For writing this article I reviewed all my notes and published materials against this background of experience.

Results

Elaine Summers uses film-projection in her work to choreograph movement and vision into an entity that comes together at the moment of performance from both. Her use of film-projection is as diverse in style and functional for the specific goal of a piece as her dance-choreography overall.

The set-up of light is made to merge with the dancers and their unique individual kinesthetic imagination, made concrete in an improvisational realization of the given dance-score at that specific performance - but as an intermedia-piece the film has an equally important layer of visual elements that are equally in motion, therefore essentially co-dancing, rather than being a mere backdrop for live-action.

This choreographic merging of movement and light also demands of the dancers to acknowledge and incorporate the projections into their performance, which is a skill that I found needs to be learned just as well. For example, by now I have developed a sense of temperature on my skin which tells me whether I am still in a film-projection from a video-beamer or not, together with a more and more clear spatial awareness of the triangle in which a projection of light is happening.

As I described in my earlier article about the production *Hidden Forest* at Lincoln Center in 2007 (Körtvélyessy, 2008), Summers invests much effort to make the interaction of the different kinds of media (dancers, film-projection, performance space, costumes, music etc.) as fully relating, yet in themselves as independent as possible.⁵ Everything counts, every detail, and every element is designed to collaborate with every other by being allowed to unfold its inherent qualities. Two examples of how this was achieved:

In *Improvisation with Sun, Moon, and Stars* the showing of the film-dance⁶ *Absence & Presence* (filmed in 1968, completed in 1984, 8 minutes, black and white, no sound) was at first practically destroyed in rehearsal by the visual counter-effect of the columns of the Church wall against which the film was projected in large-size.

The film is highly abstract: silhouettes of moving body parts were cut through the timing of the actual movement, making *Absence & Presence* the first film-dance that I've ever seen where the relation to the dancing body is, in semiotic terms, indexical and referential to the subject matter, rather than iconic (i.e. showing immediately clearly identifiable body parts and movement in its actual timing)

Because the movie is black and white, showing very abstract moving forms, the vertical lines of the columns would significantly cut through the moving shapes from the film, and therefore severely interfered with the integrity of the experience of the dance for an audience. As a solution to this problem it was decided to present this film-dance as a projection on a small, old-fashioned projection-screen, like those generally used in High Schools.

In *Crow's Nest* (conceived and realized as an intermedia piece to music of the same name by Pauline Oliveros in 1979/1980, film in color, 18 minutes, no sound) the film was originally projected from four sides simultaneously on an elaborate cube-structure of striped-sheeted silkscreens with the dancers moving in and out of the structure. This construction turned out to be too small in relation to the comparatively enormous space of St. Mark's Church and again would not have made it possible to significantly experience the moving images and therefore a part of the dance as intended.

Therefore this original set-up was abandoned in favor of full screen projection against the back wall. Because this time the images of the movie were in a much higher degree iconic (images of nature, in color), the columns were no distraction this time, but as a consequence of the change, the four dancers (Meg Chang, Jill Green, Kiori Kawai, and Gabriella Hiatt, all of different age-groups, and cultural as well as professional backgrounds except for dance) had to adapt their improvisational structures to fit the limitations of a heightened pedestal against the back wall on which they were performing, with a lot less depth, making their spatial interpretations closer to two-dimensional in available space.

Great pains were taken at all times to prevent the projection from visually cutting off performer's bodies (especially feet) and breaking the congruity. By remaining within

5 "I'm in love with light and movement and bodies, and this is why I choreograph dances and make films. I see every human body as an instrument, and through my work in kinetic awareness [sic], I hope to open up the rich and varied possibilities of movement within each individual [...] Exploration of light and movement naturally lead me to filmmaking. Film to me is another form of dance: camera movement and editing are another form of choreography." (Elaine Summers, interviewed by Susan K. Berman, Ms. Magazine, 1975, pp 30 and 40)

6 To my best of understanding, Summers' film-dances are fully valid dance-experiences that are created by means of film. This is not to be confused with simply the depiction or documentation of dance on film. The medium could be 16mm film, a format Summers and others used a lot in the 1960's, or a video or a DVD or any other possible technological set-up that leads to such an experience.

the projection, the dancers bodies made the film become as three-dimensional as was possible under the given circumstances, so that, as described above, both media to create a third from their full interaction.

I could furthermore confirm this finding from the experience of my own work this year (2010): in both cases I broke out of the confines of the video-projection in my solo during *en cœur*, as did the interpreting dancers of *walking con·sens·us / skytime*[™]. These break-moments were at times interesting to watch from the outside, at other times merely unnecessarily distracting from the main intended result of the piece.

Conclusions

I conclude for now that the way Elaine Summers uses film- and videoprojection in her work is very highly congruent with her overall choreographic and artistic approach, which explores and makes myriads of possibilities experiencable from a very basic and deep understanding of moving light and moving human bodies.

Just as Summers has created a great diversity of work in forms, styles, approaches, across disciplines and traditional boundaries, along her more than 40 years of practical exploration combining movement of dancers and movements of light by means of film, she has used many different kinds of film-projection in her work, from visual to kinetic to narrative, indoors or outdoors, working in a continuum that doesn't separate styles, disciplines or categories unless this is interesting for the becoming of the piece. Following her practice of Kinetic Awareness[®], as well as her vast experience as a choreographer, dancer, filmmaker, and kinesiotherapist, Elaine Summers does this from a sensory-based experience and understanding of movement of any kind, be it movement of light or movement of a moving body.

She respects the unique qualities of each element, be that dancer and/or projection and makes sure that their combination can happen as fully as possible and needed for the specific direction of a piece, but the relationship is always equal in importance, never one being a mere backdrop or helping-tool for the other.

To help the inner congruity of a piece I have noticed that, when it was functional, Summers would use a single overall set-up, like one kind of film, one theme, or one overall-shot, which allows a more detailed merging of moving light and moving body. I find a similar kind of focus in how in the first phase of Kinetic Awareness[®] the isolated and very slow, gentle movement of one body part at a time enables the practitioner to experience myriads of sensations and feelings related to that one body part, as it is moving consciously at that moment.

Similarly, in such a construct, the dancers would have different individual ways of interpreting a score, but they would all simultaneously interpret the same score, therefore maintaining a relatively high degree of connectivity which can in turn give more power to the richness of individual interpretations at that moment.

The film projection can be a binding overall factor, or be just as multiple, but here too, there is always a deeper binding structure that connects all diversity. Even in a piece like *Walking Dance For Any Number* (1968), the four simultaneous projections of four different edits of black and white footage of Summers' feet walking in different ways, remain very congruent around the same set-up, which for example would have been completely different if one of the edits had been in color or the film would have shown her head at one time.

The results for the audience are that of openness, liveliness and adventure in the moment: because of the individual interpretation of the dancers each time, one never knows exactly what one can expect next, how a dancer and film-projection will interact at any given time. There is no clue necessarily, no structure that would

prescribe a very narrow range of interpretation in terms of body, space, time, tension, or a pre-recognized style or convention, or a single dance-language. Just as in a sports-match, the audience witnesses of a unique dance happening in the very moment, enhanced, and brought to a different aesthetic⁷ level by its combination with film-projection: it brings the projection into the third dimension of space by the body of the dancer on which it is projected, and it adds an extra layer to the dancers' performance, be that more abstract or providing a more narrative context, for example dancing with the projection of workmen in Buffalo, as they are securing a telephone-mast.

Because of Summers' endless and continuing innovation, she often presents new combinations and uses of dance and light that have no tradition as yet. It is then up to the present witnesses to follow the action as best as they can and want.

As myriads of conventions are meeting each other from all around this planet, and as we are trying to find ways of how we can use them in a way that is making sense on a wider level, the legacy of finding connections across forms, disciplines, traditional limitations, or media, while not giving up on individuality, spontaneity, multiplicity, creativity, and independence, is a task that can be equally inspiring, even necessary for dance-makers today. They are sensorial-professionals and thinkers/dreamers/kinesthetic visionaries who can create ever new and meaningful ways how we can dance and be moving in this day and age, for a lively and living culture that can renew itself while drawing from already existing traditions, and can escape stagnation and therefore eventually obliteration.

The legacy that comes from the work of Elaine Summers, can provide a rich and inspiring resource to help such a development, leading us to ever deeper understanding and practice of movement, be that of light and/or of our bodies...

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⁷ Again, 'aesthetic' meaning an continuing sequence of sensory experiences in-formation, through the act of perception - not a single category or system of what is found or claimed to be beautiful (see first footnote)

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