

## Live Ends. Performance in the Information Age

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To be or not to be? Yea, verily. Because if your business isn't making use of our customised e-services, you might be history. [1]

For the last decade or more media technologies and live performance have become increasingly interrelated and interdependent. Debates about this critical nexus have resulted in a diversity of views. While there is broad acknowledgement that this interpenetration has resulted in widespread innovation, there is also evidence of a certain anxiety about the status of live performance. Questions have often focused on the resultant status of the live body, the changing nature of the performance experience and of technology itself. The experience of the 'live' based on notions of presence is often promised and reinforced by the effect of a mass audience, but it is increasingly susceptible to digital subversion by the temporal disintegration and restructuring of audio and visual data.

This is the landscape in which we are staging this inaugural issue of *Performance Paradigm*. The articles and interviews we have assembled here ask questions as to how we can best use the heightened audio-visual experience offered by media technologies and what might such performance experiences communicate? Does the performance come to be about the media interface alone or are other possibilities suggested?

In the Australian theatre and performance scene we see evidence of both the rise of new media performance and a rejection of overt mediatisation in the performance space. Thus, we can see at one end of the spectrum experiments in hybrid 'virtual' performance and, at the other, a kind of 'poor theatre'-'return to roots' theatre, ironically popular among a new generation of theatre makers.

The Australia Council of the Arts, funded by governments of neo-liberal persuasion, has been, until recently, a strong supporter of new media arts not only for their intrinsic sense of innovation, or interrogation of contemporary culture, but also because of their close alignment with new media culture industries. The uncertain status of new media arts in the new arrangements endorsed by the Australia Council of the Arts reflects both a sense that its specificity is compromised, since many if not all art forms are interrogating the effects of contemporary technological shifts on their traditions, and that new media, considered in this sense of hybrid, technologically orientated, time based art forms, is both not a form and not so new.

In Yuji Sone's essay, the genealogy of this aspect of the council's work is given alongside a critique of the mono-culturalism implicit in the Council's activities as producer of an industry in new media arts. For Sone multi-cultural practices are also multi-media practices given the linkages between forms and traditions and the places from which they were generated. His example of

Bunraku as an inchoate multimedia form is instructive of how his notion of 'embodied mediatisation' problematises both the cybernetic discourse of media art and the discourse of 'liveness'.

It also a reminder of the everyday and altogether ordinary symbiotic relationship that media technologies have shared with performance from the beginning of recorded time. Performance cultures rapidly and vicariously absorbed the latest in stage technologies, illumination devices, prosthetics, projections, etc. Theatre historians have shown how concepts of space, time, and self have undergone various transformations in response to such innovations in theatrical presentation.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, rapidly evolving media technologies moved from servicing the performance, or being a source of spectacle or renewal for the medium, to becoming essential to understanding what the medium was about. They have become fundamental, a form of dramaturgical material as powerful as text, bodies, stage design, etc. Media has transformed and subsumed such dramaturgical elements. In many examples, media technologies have been used to challenge the authority of text, the presence of the actor and the temporality of the performance space. As a result many performances have become fluid, virtual, transgressing borders of space, time and identity politics.

In the interview published here, Philip Auslander discusses the example of Matthew Barney's Five part film *Cremaster Cycle* as a key instance of live art in a mediated context in way which is illustrative of these developments. Auslander's seminal work in tracking the evolution of performance forms from representational character and narrative based drama to a notion that live performance is itself an unstable site of mediated imageries and corporealities makes his contribution especially significant to the theme of this issue.

Christy Dena's essay extends Auslander's trajectory from acting to performance to interactive online drama. Her discussion of the specific kinds of interactivity afforded by the example of *Jupiter Green*, a recent web based drama, represents an important piece of scholarship on an emergent form which suggests that the notion of spectatorship in digital performance is more active and assertive than in conventional performance forms. Her elements of interactive drama will serve as a useful guide to other scholars and practitioners working in the field of new media performance, digital narrative and drama.

In the information age, the desubstantiation of the body in media culture is a key problematic. An example of a performance which stages this very directly might be Gekidan Kaitaisha's *Into the century of degeneration* (2000). As images of war are projected onto the performers, their bodies are washed over, erased and propelled as if by a powerful disciplinary vortex. Each principle element of the mediatised space seems to be complete in its ability to dissolve the body (*ningen jokyō*). According to Kaitaisha director Shimizu Shinjin, this performance responds to the fact that war and media-communications—primary manifestations of globalisation, condition the body.

He notes “It was a shock for theatre, that a war without bodies has raised the curtain of the 1990s.” (Gekidan Kaitaisha 2001: 71) Both Stelarc and Auslander respond to this statement in the interviews published here. A parallel critique is developed in Jean Baudrillard’s essay *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* wherein the author analysed the war in terms of flows of capital and media; “abstract, electronic and informational space, the same space in which capital moves” (Patton in Baudrillard 1995: 56). Shimizu argues, that we must retrain our imagination to see the bodies that have been evacuated from the scene by media and ideology, an observation that has only intensified in the present-day so-called “war on terrorism”. Kaitaisha’s work centrally includes media in order to demonstrate and simultaneously resist media’s effect.

Media technologies, however, not only control, but also enhance our world. Most of us indulge in media states in one way or another. Some artists have not viewed media technology as dystopic or the body’s erasure as a political crisis, rather the global economy of images is viewed as a new possibility. In the work of performance artist Stelarc the body’s mediatisation is viewed with a sense of excitement and inevitability. He proposes a body “not as a subject but as an object- not as an object of desire but as an object for designing” (2000: 562). Stelarc explores this notion through experiments with surrogate bodies and posthuman evolutionary couplings with technology. In his *Fractal Flesh: An Internet Body Up-load Event* (Telepolis, Luxembourg 10, 11 November 1995) participants could initiate involuntary movement in the artist’s body from a remote location by activating a touch screen interface connected to electrodes implanted in Stelarc’s muscles. “There was video back. I could see the face of the person moving me”, notes the artist. “They could see the body involuntarily perform their choreography” (e-mail correspondence, see also <http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/fractal/index.html>). Of this and other performative experiments, Stelarc writes: “This would be a more complex and interesting body—not simply a single entity with one agency but one that would be A HOST FOR A MULTIPLICITY OF REMOTE AND ALIEN AGENTS” (2000: 568, capitals Stelarc).

As his comments in this issue remind us, his is arguably the most comprehensive theorisation of the concept of the cybernetic body in performance arts. In events such as *Movatar* (2001), in which the artist’s body became a prosthesis for the virtual avatar, the interconnections between an organic host and a virtual entity were so thoroughly engineered, no specific behaviours unique to each could be determined. This is the essence of cybernetics and of Stelarc’s aesthetic strategy. Through media technology the body in Stelarc’s performance is transformed into a kind of playstation, simultaneously present, deferred, and made virtual. His radical theorisation of the post-evolutionary trajectory for the body is to some critics dangerously utopian, or politically naive, nevertheless, the work points to the extent that the body has already become an occupied and virtual space. The central lesson of this performance might be that we are witnesses to a body taken over and controlled by external ‘benign’ agencies.

Not Yet It's Difficult's (NYID) *Scenes of the beginning from the end* (2001) is likewise concerned with questions of agency in contemporary culture. In this work images of surveillance were projected onto large video screens. Smiling operators at computer terminals gradually switched between surveillance images of the city, the venue and finally real-time images of the audience. The corporate surveillance represented here was intended as a form mass persuasion. Slogans such as "CCCTV: a city under surveillance is a safe city" were projected into the space. Some audience members were filmed wearing confessional signs around their necks saying, for example, "I once imagined I was thinking. I atone for my transgression". These people were then removed from the space and the remaining audience watched a final scene in which they were punished.

Investigating media technology and surveillance have long been political concerns for NYID. Artistic director David Pledger, interviewed here by Rosie Klich, has defined surveillance as a "kind of organisation of power and capital ... which determine the way that we organise ourselves in space, our emotional lives, our thinking (cited in Murphet 2001). Pledger's most recent collaboration *Eavesdrop*, the subject of the interview, literalises this by constructing the viewer, alone on a mobile plinth as both the surveiller and the surveilled.

As in Kaitaisha's work above, Jon McKenzie, author of *Perform Or Else*, (Routledge 2001) posits media technology as an organising principal, a dramaturgical device and a tool for dissent. His analysis of the work of tactical media collectives Etoys and Critical art Ensemble reveals the real world effects of performance art work which seeks to intervene in and to transform the cultural economy/political reality of the media technology-globalisation nexus. His reading, in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the machinic assemblage, identifies the theoretical underpinnings of the kinds of nomadic aesthetic strategies of groups who construct work by occupying media spaces and reconfiguring their operations with creative possibilities which become moments of political resistance. In this way he suggests how, through digital media especially, we might deconstruct the media economy and make media function more pluralistically.

Andrew Murphie explores the philosophical dimensions of interactivity in performance art in similarly Deleuzian terms. He sees interactivity as a process of constant negotiation between the work and the viewer, proliferating multiple possibilities of encounter. For Murphie, all art is fundamentally interactive and therefore contains a germ of performativity.

Appropriately the book review in this issue makes these connections between installation art and performance more apparent. The performance review by Professor Peta Tait, suggests the inverse of this, ie., the ways in which a live performance such as *Alladeen* constructs mediated imagery which fuses, telephony, documentary, karaoke and workplace performance codes into a 'quintessentially post-dramatic work'.

Ray Langenbach's 'Theatre of Agencies' is a fictocritical construction which defies attempts to categorise its combinations of intellectual biography, narrative fiction, high theory and performativity. As Murphie's essay suggests, the function of this kind of writing is surely to 'transform rather than to communicate the statements of imperial language...'. The writings published here all suggest the multiple potentials for performance forms across new media environments in the age of information and the destabilisation of genres and disciplines that this entails.

### **Endnotes**

[1] Text of advertisement for corporate sponsor Fujitsu used for the Bell Shakespeare Company's production of *The Comedy of Errors* (National Tour, Australia, 2002)

### **References**

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- Stelarc web-site: <http://www.stelarc.va.com.au>