

# ACTING AND ENACTING: STAKES OF NEW PER- FORMING ARTS

By Sally Jane Norman

norman@world-net.sct.fr

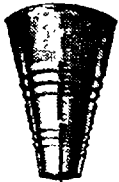
**P**erforming arts history is marked by an ancient, profound tension which is assuming growing importance in the realm of new representational technologies, namely the tension between seeing and acting, or between viewing and doing (theasthai = see -> theater; dran = do -> drama). New participatory, immersive live art forms are emerging at the dividing line between these two states. Whether they comply with existing definitions of theater is debatable, and closely hinged on how the “doing/ viewing” components are gauged, although pedantic comparison with existing categories of spectacle is of limited value when dealing with unprecedented perceptual arenas. Irrespective of how new performing arts end up being designated and categorized, the real task at hand is recognition and creative exploitation of nascent representational systems (*repraesentare* in Latin meaning to “make present”) in situations involving live action and actors.

## WHEN THE EYES NO LONGER HAVE IT

Harbingers of new technologies announce more or less virtual feasts of the senses which solicit sight, audition, haptics, and kinesthesia. Longstanding western theater traditions, where staged visions and verbal renditions are essentially based on a literary starting point, are thus challenged by radically new ways of building and communicating multisensory works. Given the vertiginous possibilities opened up by new representational technologies, attempts to resuscitate aesthetic principles from obsolete performing art forms are to a certain extent useful and understandable. A major pitfall, however, is that over-zealous, over-hasty appropriation of defunct models exhumed as stock formulae leads to neglect of other models which, while not as obvious or readily transposable, may point the way to richer, more meaningful lines of experimentation.

An instance of sadly shallow recuperation of bygone theater practice can be seen in attempts to move historically upstream of cerebral, script-based drama in order to rediscover archaic, immersive traditions. One can choose to read the past two thousand years of performing arts history as a process whereby the public undergoes an insidious “passivation”, via increasingly visually-focussed stage configurations which end up trapping the spectator in the seat providing the best view. This process was launched within a period of just a few decades: Greek spectator-communicants united around the altar (*thymele*) actively participated in rituals officiated by the

isea95@er.uqam.ca T : (514) 990-0229



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Dionysiac priest until emergence of the protagonist or first hypocrite (*hypokrites* = actor), followed by the deuteragonist under Aeschylus, then the tritagonist under Sophocles. As the growing troupe of actors took over the dialogue, the public was held increasingly aloof, and condemned to live the celebrations by proxy. This gradual separation was of course tightly enmeshed with the construction of a physical amphitheater, and the constitution of formal dramatic literature. Theater architectures were gradually configured and solidified to promote this aesthetic, the epitome being reached with the late 16th century Italian proscenium arch stage designed to ensure spectacular illusions, although only the ideally placed Prince really got to enjoy them (his courtesans had to make do with skewed, anamorphic perspectives). Subsequent reforms until the late 19th century, including naturalist "slice of life" or "fourth wall" stagings, where physical objects and sets replaced previously painted objects and sets, perpetrated the principle of the self-contained stage, viewed at a respectful distance from beyond the footlights (the French equivalent for this term, *la rampe* - which also designates a launch platform - is more open, and loosely usable to signify the vital zone separating viewer and doer).

In their desire to create works which go beyond conventional theatrical emphasis on "viewing", a number of artists using new representational technologies have sought out forgotten models which emphasize "doing". Eureka ! Overnight Hellenist converts have been illuminated by the Dionysiac rituals and phallographic processions of archaic Greece (participatory aesthetics which likewise fired Nietzsche's and Wagner's enthusiasm). Yet those who adopt such models wholesale and pretend that the alternative to over-sophisticated dramatic narrative is pristine neo-bacchanal frenzy are definitely barking up the wrong tree.

Notions of participation and immersion in early Greece are indissociable from a culture where the notion of the individual is still embryonic. Archaic man, with his loose, labile identity, probably threw himself whole-heartedly into collective celebrations, as a fragmented being readily dissolved by the mass. Immersion in hecatombs and Eleusinian mysteries doubtless allowed him to affirm his identity as part of society. The Greeks of pre-classical times did not have the integrity of their contemporary counterparts (integrity here meaning totality). Their intellects had not been cast by the "cogito" which has molded the mindset of the modern individual ever since Descartes. Our ideas of independence and liberty of movement were unknown to them, mere playthings in the hands of a pantheon of malicious gods. They mastered neither their destinies nor their acts, whether free men or slaves (Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method* provides a superb analysis of this situation). It took painstaking centuries thereafter to build the autonomous individual of modern times, who had to relinquish divine medieval order in order to emerge as a thinking humanist, draw up civil codes and human rights to claim for social enlightenment, vie for imaginative and intuitive supremacy to burst forth as an

impassioned romantic, etc. For these reasons and many more, it simply does not make sense to pretend that new technologies will miraculously allow us to recover and rediscover pure, untrammelled, archaic sensibilities. Immersive and participatory aesthetics of twenty-five centuries ago are no longer accessible to us. On the other hand, by comparing sociocultural contexts and aesthetics at a little depth, we can glean valuable insight into the functioning of present and nascent art forms.

## MOSAIC IDENTITIES AND SHARED SELVES

One of the most revolutionary features of today's immersive technologies lies precisely in their breakdown of individual integrity and holism, due to the implementation of mosaic, interchangeable forms of existence, and shareable physical and sensory experience. Borrowed or fragmented identities can be subtly generated and communicated by intimate interface appeal to eyes and ears, inner ears and touch. Cogito-hardened individuals steeled by materialism and determinism are thus subjected to a kind of psychophysical dismembering or cleavage. To underestimate obduracy of the modern identity in this situation is just as foolish as to ignore malleability of the archaic Greek identity. The more so in that the interstices between familiar, supposedly constant selves and momentarily adopted, foreign experiences seem to harbor powerful potential forms of theatricality.

For example, many virtual environments engender a singular situation of self-voyeurism, by reflecting a splintered mirror image of the actor/enactor who penetrates them. In numerous immersive worlds, one's deambulations are facilitated by an iconic representation, initially and often still just of the hand, but sometimes of the entire body. From NASA wireframe butterfingers of the pioneering era, current trends are moving towards gripping, fully-fledged 3D clones, which may be realistically individualized using data phagocyted by scanning the actual subject. Relations with one's clone differ substantially from relations with a standard mirror image, insofar as the former is viewed as an effector, an operative incarnation within the virtual world. Hence, a fundamental gap or discrepancy, a difference in kind, alienates the human subject from his or her agent. Moreover, clones can be multiplied, made to meet, set into competition, granted different levels of adaptive intelligence and behavioral autonomy. They are imbued with a quality of otherness which withholds as much latent drama as the actor estranged by the stage (performance space Bauhäusler Oskar Schlemmer aptly described as "enchanted"). The split, mosaic selves induced by immersive technologies thus bring about an uncanny shift and refocus in the traditional actor/spectator relationship.

To tax systems of this kind as narcissistic is to miss the point: self-projection and identification to varying degrees have always influenced spectator gaze. What really merits attention is the question of inherent theatricality of such representations: if the crux of live spectacle is the actor/spectator relationship, i.e. the vital tension between viewer and doer, to what extent

can these new immersive realms be said to institute such dramatic tension, albeit through cloned doubles? Another key issue is how much importance should be attached to virtuosity of the projected actor/ enactors: are casual deambulations through a virtual environment sufficiently enthralling to maintain subject involvement, and if not, how can dramatic interest be enhanced? A more challenging environment will theoretically elicit a higher performance level, and thereby heighten tension, but there are numerous ways of enriching virtual environments. Unfortunately, recourse to literary models on the one hand, and game models on the other, has so far tended to dominate virtual performance experimentation. Artists of the “story-telling” persuasion have busily built up complex arborescent scenarios based on interactions with other characters or environmental features—purebred virtual chimera or clones of fellow human players. But these narrative webs generally wear thin fast, and their laboriously calculated “nodes” or turning points quickly become too obvious (then again, most contemporary endeavors in interactive literature still pall by comparison with Raymond Queneau’s *Exercices de style* and other *Oulipo* undertakings). Artists who opt for the “game” mode keep subjects in their virtual environments engrossed by exploiting the good old teleological will to win, an emotion quite distinct from those at work in the performing arts.

Strangely enough, these lines of research dodge or ignore one of the most significant features of new representational technologies, and one which might conceivably serve as a starting point for truly innovative live art forms. This feature is the appeal to haptics and kinesthesia afforded by various accoutrements and mechanisms (data gloves and suits, mobile platforms, etc.). Whereas numerous theater theorists, including Russian composer Alexander Scriabin, considered that the spectator’s kinesthetic enjoyment of staged action constitutes an essential element in performance aesthetics, we are now in a position to impart kinesthetic and tactile experience to a subject directly and physically, rather than just as an ocular-derived percept. Yet investigation in this uncharted territory remains extremely limited, and the visionaries who seem to have prophesied such tools and designed works in anticipation of them have apparently been relegated to oblivion.

Such visionaries include Oskar Schlemmer, whose *Metal Dance* and *Glass Dance* constitute stagings of “portraits” of these two materials. Schlemmer builds up living visions of metal and glass, by having a dancer incarnate and express their physical and metaphysical qualities in the course of brief, hallucinatory choreographic sequences, set within a visual and acoustic environment carefully wrought to consolidate these “material visions”. For the time being, we can merely dream of how this kind of approach might be adapted in technology-mediated immersive environments, perhaps providing us with semi-physical, semi-symbolic encounters of the elements, at the full-scale, macro or micro level. Schlemmer’s *Stick* and *Hoop Dances* are created along singular lines, to try and bring out kinetic speci-

ficity of spaces wrought with respectively linear and circular forms. Exploration of immersive minimalist environments bearing distinctive geometric or material features might enhance our apprehension of virtual worlds, and help us learn how the body responds to different species of spaces.

Other approaches bent on communicating new categories of performance space have been formulated by artists concerned with the primacy of physical sensation such as Swiss Emile Jacques-Dalcroze and Austrian Rudolf Von Laban. Through their theoretical and practical undertakings (Dalcrozian “Rhythmics” and Laban’s “Choreutics”), they predict bodily mediation to produce moving architectures, manifest through the play and interplay of constantly evolving, fictive weights and spaces. They prone new types of experience of the space and time worlds generated through live art, anchored at least as much in kinesthetic and rhythmic bodily sensation as in ocular enjoyment. Virtual dance spaces are explored by bodies that “see” with every pore according to exploratory modes that seem to offer richer and more novel forms of immersive enjoyment than pseudo-narrative structures with more or less enticing, more or less convincing scenarios.

The above-mentioned examples come from relatively recent western traditions, but countless cultures propose live art forms based on experience of symbolic spaces, and on interactions between different registers of existence. Staying within the context of formal theater, for example, the Japanese tradition of “mugen” or fantasmal Noh, which dates back to Zeami, is based on interplay between an unworldly protagonist (a fantom, divinity or demon) and the human characters in the play. Apparitional Noh finely orchestrates tensions between these two planes of existence, with subtle acoustic signals enhancing the visual clues. This timeworn art might well inspire designers of virtual apparitions which are supposed to interact with the human explorers of immersive environments, thus playing on multiple registers of presence.

#### **PERFORMERS AS CATALYSTS FOR THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS**

Performing arts are unique in that they offer up for contemplation an *in vivo* model of existence. At an era where intimate interfaces and technologies are operating ever closer to the bone, if not the cortex, an era of data flesh, chip minds, and all the other processes of usurpation of the archaic bio-logos which only yesterday still functioned as a viable *raison d’être*, this contemplative distance would seem to be all the more valuable and necessary.

In our secular society, there is a tendency to consider performing arts as being fortunately and definitively laicized, and to preemptorily dismiss their original ritual dimension. Archaic religious immersion is scoffed at. But this attitude tends to be simplistic and demeaning, in that it overlooks a basic function assumed by directly human-mediated art as a means for pro-

jecting alternative modes of existence. Theater is a spawning ground for models and ideals, and a vital catalyst for the collective imagination. Ardently realistico-materialistic paranoiacs invariably underestimate this deep, irrational basis of live spectacle. Throughout our societies, theater has continuously been more or less ritually employed to stage transgression of the human condition and of our physiological limits. Refusal to recognize this function does not just undermine history of the performing arts, and limit their potential expression via new technologies. It moreover jeopardizes collective ability to project ourselves beyond our mortal present.

The actor who stands before us is condemned like us to mortality, weighed down like us with his Newtonian mass, but is momentarily blessed with superhuman prowess by virtue of his stage setting. The quality of otherness his stage existence bequeaths him allows the actor to vanquish his fellow men, but above all to conquer death and defy the elements. He arises from his ashes like the phoenix, soars through the heavens, disappears, multiplies, etc. In short, the stage lets him accomplish with impunity feats denied to common mortals. The act of flying, for example, has been a spectacular mainstay for thousands of years, as evidenced by the first *deus ex machina* on the Greek stage, by flying angels who adorned medieval and Renaissance glories, and by airborne romantic ballerinas. Such "impossible bodies" have always sparked off collective jubilation, and no doubt always will. The model incarnated by the live actor, who acts as proof of its viability, nourishes our ability to transcend current physical limits. The impossible, hybridized, metamorphic bodies borne by new technologies, partially culled from reality and partially conjured up by sheer calculation, are gearing us for as yet untapped, barely conceivable modes of existence. In this manner, impossible staged bodies build up a kind of survival mechanism, firmly entrenched in the collective consciousness.

The stakes of new performing arts are thus intricately bound up with those of a nascent civilization: performing arts devise and convey living images of tomorrow's lives. Building up art forms grounded in new representational technologies demands substantial resources, both technical and creative. But since VR specialists concur that there are only two limits to building VR representations, namely CPU cycles and designers' mental cycles, we can only hope that it is not the latter that will ultimately prove to be the stumbling block. It is today's visions which fuel our dreams for the future. A whole new dramatic art has to be forged, with sufficient conviction to allow us to abandon depleted, inappropriate forms. We have all seen stereoscopic programs in state-of-the-art IMAX cinemas where filmmakers have brashly applied the usual formulae of "2D" screenplay: dissolves and other standard editing techniques suddenly seem silly and meager when employed in vivaciously 3D image fields, for which they were never intended and are totally unadapted. New editing languages have to be invented, based on previously unfathomable visual scales and depths. The same

goes for performing arts implementing hitherto unknown, massively empowering technology: to fully exploit these new tools in a truly creative manner, we must have the audacity to get beyond anachronistic conventions and dare to venture into uncharted territory. This, despite overbearing socio-economic pressure: it is obviously far easier and financially safer to design virtual architectures for Hollywood movie spin-offs than to embark on the formidable quest for future art forms.

We need to learn to identify and exploit the sensitive loci of new media which are most apt to convey new forms and registers of aesthetic experience. The fringe of interference between acting and enacting, a fringe which has persistently housed potent dramatic forces, is assuredly one such locus. Kinesthetics and learning to grasp and evolve within qualitatively different spaces form another area that calls for enlightened exploration. The protean registers of existence enabled by immersive technologies have boundless implications for new performing arts. The onus is on us to recognize and use them.

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