IMMERSION
AND THEATER

By Sally Jane Norman

Q uerying the compatibility of immersion and theater is like querying the compatibility of narration and interactivity: deciding whether or not such notions are antithetical ultimately depends on how one chooses to define them. If narrating means telling a story, to what extent does the story keep a recognizable core when subjected to the umpteen bifurcations, ramifications and other convolutions that supposedly testify to interactivity ? Can infinitely splintering, unforeseeable scenarios be called "narration", or do they announce a form of collective writing for which we have yet to forge a term ? Similarly, if theater implies dramatic representation, to what extent is representation recognizable as such for the wholly immersed subject, no longer an onlooker or bystander, but caught up in the action ? Can totally overwhelming situations still be called "theater", or do they announce a form of collective experience for which we have yet to forge a term ? This text in many respects testifies to "work in progress", and contains far more questions than answers. Then again, perhaps trying to pose the essential questions is the most urgent task at hand.

INVOLVING ONLOOKERS AND BYSTANDERS

For several years, the Japanese theater troupe Agua Gala has chosen to work at the fringe between theatrical performance and interactive works involving spectator-participants, thereby raising many questions central to the theater/ immersion debate. In its latest work, *VALIS in the Victim*, Agua Gala recruits half a dozen spectators upon arrival at the performance site. Dressed in sackcloth cloaks, they are asked to undertake a number of simple actions while ten members of the troupe execute rigorously preordained choreography in a complex sound environment. The novices begin by walking around the performance space, resolutely indifferent to the sometimes aggressive dancers. Apparently contradictory actions are programmed: the volunteers have been instructed to pick up and carry shoes thrown into the arena, but the dancers immediately tear these objects out of their hands; the volunteers lined up on one side of the space are successively pulled into the center by a performer, and instantly hauled back into line by another. Such situations generate dramatic tension, as does the very coexistence of two different actor categories: virtuoso professionals (Agua Gala has a strong butoh background) versed in the planned work, and more-or-less bewildered outsiders trapped in what is for them totally unpredictable action. But over time, negative ambivalence is particularly felt by the third category of persons, namely the spectators who identify strongly with the volunteers, while scrutinizing them with a vague sense of voyeuristic guilt.

Those physically involved in the action are "blinded" by their implication, and unable to really watch what is happening: their emplacements and postures rule out a state of passive observation comparable to that enjoyed by the audience. Nobody would doubt that they are living a powerful aesthetic and emotional experience, but the problem is how to qualify that experience. Is it theater, and if so, for whom ? Can you see a work you are a part of ? What happens to theater when all become actors and there are no spectators, as in Rousseau's ideal ? ("...donnez les spectateurs en spectacle; rendez-les acteurs eux-mêmes; faites que chacun se voie et s'aime dans les autres, afin que tous en soient mieux unis." *Lettre à d'Alembert*).

The situation created by *VALIS in the Victim*, where spectators are the rather embarrassed (but perhaps also rather smug) witnesses to amateur antics of their hapless fellows, resembles that encountered in certain interactive, immersive environments. People observing a peer empowered to effectively interact with fictitious elements (characters, objects, forces, etc.) in a virtual space, while they can only look on and listen, are in a potentially ambiguous voyeuristic situation. In a world of sports or warrior-type activity using gestural interfaces, physical dexterity is good value for spectators, just as with any direct transmission of a major sports event. A chess tournament or the likes elicits appreciation of intellectual agility, as do certain fantastic games calling for quick-wittedness. We are quickly bored by clumsy amateurism in such fields, which may make us feel awkward and intrusive, but eagerly resume enthralled spectatorship when confronted with prowess. Virtual interactive environments for *homo ludens* constitute a flourishing industry, but they only have spectator appeal if taken over by expert players.

RECONCILING THE CONTEMPLATIVE AND THE CORPOREAL

With immersive constructs designed to aesthetic ends, things become more complicated. There are no clear-cut, conventionally imposed and accepted rules, although playfulness may be rife, and there is no teleological drive as in win-or-lose situations of the game kind. In the art world, we as spectators have no yardstick when passively observing a peer empowered to interact with virtual constructs. But assessment of earlier aesthetic approaches to immersion, including concepts formulated outside the realm of theater, may help to understand the specificity of current synthetic spaces, and shed new light on problems of bodily involvement. In "Notes on Sculpture" (1), written almost thirty years ago, Robert Morris considers contemplating minimalist sculpture as tantamount to being immersed in the space it exudes, i.e. the aesthetically and organically charged space which includes the spectator. Morris refers to *apprehension of the gestalt* to explain the uncanny perceptive impact of sculpture which is gauged in terms of size and distance to generate an intuitive, quasi-visceral apprehension of scalar relations between the work and bodily spectator presence. It will take much experimentation for us to begin to gauge and differentiate the perceptive impact of virtual objects as a function of distance and scale. Fleeting digital forms are light-years away from obdurate minimalist structures, but this does not mean that they cannot and do not impress themselves upon our senses.

In the domain of recent creation calling on virtual reality technology, the twofold "private/public" configuration adopted for Char Davies' *Osmose*, an environment for an active "immersant" (term coined by the artist) and an onlooking audience, has the immense merit of raising the issue of bodily engaged versus passively spectatorial involvement in new aesthetic spaces. The "immersant", wearing a head-mounted display and an upper-body harness fitted with position detectors for motion control (ensured via torso position and breathing movements), moves through a virtual world comprised of a number of different poetic spaces (such as a forest, a stream, a clearing, strings of alphanumeric characters). Each immersant's itinerary is unique, being determined by individual body movements. In the public version of *Osmose*, the immersant's journey is displayed in stereoscopic images on a large screen in a room adjoining the virtual traveler's "chamber" (the immersant's helmeted, cabled silhouette is poignantly visible against the fabric wall of the booth in the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art set-up). Equipped with liquid crystal glasses and headphones (sound is a key feature of the installation), we accompany the immersant on his/her exploration, discovering the virtual spaces he or she penetrates.

In some ways, this active/passive differentiation is reminiscent of that instigated at the CAVE developed by Dan Sandin et al at the University of Illinois, in which head movements of a "leader" wearing an HMD fitted with position sensors allow impelling interaction with vivid stereoscopic images, observed by a flock of neutral spectators wearing standard stereo glasses. But the CAVE mainly serves the scientific community (works like artist Rita Addison's *Detour: Brain Deconstruction Ahead* remain the exception), for whom handing over the head-tracked system to the most competent analyst of the given visual data seems logical. *Osmose*, on the other hand, is an adamantly aesthetic undertaking, which moreover strives via powerful image technologies to manifest the immersive qualities Char Davies earlier sought to reveal through her painting. One problem is that another person's introspective meandering through unknown terrain does not necessarily withhold much interest for would-be art viewers, regardless of quality of the immersant's own experience (conversely, certain dancers who feel hampered by the immersant's trappings prefer to view *Osmose* as what they consider to be an audiovisual art, thus defeating the work's kinesthetic purpose). While challenges presented by a virtual scape which opposes resistance to the explorer (e.g. through geometry or textures) may heighten spectator attention, such features also jeopardize or undermine more quiescent aesthetic objec-

tives (*Osmose* offers an all too rare alternative to the usual war games and other VR simulations designed to boost adrenalin levels). This work raises some knotty questions: how enthralling and aesthetically stimulating are other immersants' journeys ? How involved can the passive spectator become as the virtual explorer's mere shadow, the more so in that discovery of creations like *Osmose* is patently body-bound (in this case, literally dependant on individual inspiration) ?

These questions will assume growing importance with the development of virtual art designed for various sorts of interaction, via increasingly intimate interfaces. New modes of perception will emerge as we learn to grasp unprecedented spatial and dynamic relations set up by new forms of bodily implication in our environment. It is paradoxical that emphasis on full-body perceptual response to aesthetics, as encountered in Morris's seminal work, should now be acquiring such pertinence in the realm of virtual technology-based creation, since the emerging technologies result from decades of platonic clean room research, accomplished in pure digital bliss far from the lure of the flesh. The current phenomenological plunge into sense experience is taking us by storm, and many artists are falling into traps that will perhaps seem obvious with hindsight, but are proving treacherous right now. One of these traps concerns communicability (and incommunicability) of certain kinds of sense experience: interactive virtual environments solliciting such privy functions as kinesthesia and proprioception profoundly modify traditional conceptions of collective aesthetic experience. Bystanders who revel in a subject's exploration of virtual space are delighting not in sensations being felt by the immersant, which necessarily remain confidential, but rather in the actual miracle of interactive immersion. In such cases, idolatry is at work just as much as aesthetics.

DIFFERENTIAL MODES
OF PERFORMANCE PROJECTION

The theatrical potential of interactive immersive systems is debatable, and adjudged non-existent by many persons. One reason is the fact that, unlike the vagaries of a virtual immersant, even the most wilfully monotonous performance, staging the most banal gesture and action, is designed first and foremost to communicate aesthetic experience to an audience. The public is not just incidentally integrated as collective witness to an essentially private situation, despite the fact that many performers deliberately trap their spectators in voyeuristic roles (Grotowski's seating arrangements for *El Principe constante*, in 1965, push this tactic to extremes). Deliberately inexpressive actors can project extraordinary dramatic presence, and there is a world of difference between a performer's intentional vacuousness and a non-performer's ingenuous blandness (Yvonne Rainer, a leading conceptual dance figure in the sixties, used to despair at how the audience would invariably read teleological structure and virtuosity into her flattest choreography). Interactive immersive environments may also be deemed inherently non-theatrical because their specificity tends to be sacrificed when they "go public" via strengthened visual and auditory components, since the real novelty of such systems lies in their capacity to call on more intimate (notably haptic and kinesthetic) forms of sensory intercourse.

Kinesthetic experience is an essential source of aesthetic enjoyment in dance and circus arts, where spectators are mesmerized by physical marvels. The ballerina who crosses the stage executing a series of fouettés generates a complex geometric figure which belies all reasonable modes of displacement. Swift, minute, precise foot movements of long-gowned Georgian dancers endow them with supernatural gliding grace. Trapeze artists engender heretical spaces where the body repeatedly defies physical law. Break-dancers whirling upside down on their heads like spinning-tops, legs spread-eagled in the air, convey disturbing visions of ambiguous morphologies, at once familiar and alien. Such performing arts appeal to our intuitive recognition of corporeal prowess. We are spellbound by sheer immediacy of the miracle being accomplished before our very eyes, i.e. transcendance of the mundanely cumbersome body. When such feats undergo media processing for screened transmission, techniques have to be developed to transpose into film and audio language the gut impact of live action. Artful use of visual and acoustic resources must compensate for the absence of flesh and blood, a point clearly made in Eisenstein's writings, hard-won from his grounding in experimental theater (to take a less prestigious example, *The Greatest Show on Earth* is cinema and not circus, the gripping suspense of aerial numbers being rendered via judicious editing techniques - interspersed low and high angle shots, rapid reverse shots, etc.).

Another crucial point to be borne in mind when trying to instigate new participatory aesthetics with immersive technologies is the extreme diversity of live performance registers, each being characterized by gestural and dramatic specificity. There is a tendency in recent technology-based research to treat totally unlike and immiscible elements en bloc, the word "theater" being abused as a blanket term to cover purportedly homogeneous arts. This lack of discrimination leads to inability to even recognize the respective techniques operative in the art of the clown, acrobat, actor, dancer, magician, or mime. Yet each of these performance areas is subtended by distinct corporeal models, and each implicates both artists and spectators in its own distinct way. Physical danger communicated by a trapezist, astonishment triggered by an illusionist, mirth sparked off by a buffoon, and anguish provoked by a tragedian give rise to keenly different senses of immersion in live performance. A telling passage by Victor Shklovsky describes the essence of circus as residing in (physical) difficulty: strong men must wield authentic weights and break authentic chains, whereas theater, having "canonized" the art of make-believe, calls on other devices to captivate its public (2). Shklovsky's differentiation between circus performance which impresses through indubitable

physical prowess, and dramatic performance where shammed physical action is part of the game, is focal to the theater/ immersion debate. In order to really tackle an issue as sensitive and intricate as kinesthetics and communicability, an incursion into corporeal performance categories and techniques would seem more than worthwhile. A useful dance-based taxonomy of motricity drawn up by Jean-Claude Serre differentiates between "teleokinetic", "semiokinetic", and "morphokinetic" forms of bodily expression (3). Eugenio Barba's theater anthropology offers insight into how performance space is invested across different codes and techniques in a wide array of cultures (4). Such lines of approach will hopefully be taken into account in the quest for new kinds of performance-based art.

THEATER AS A TOOL FOR SOUNDING IMMERSION

In the context of immersive virtual environments, we are dealing neither with cinema, nor with a live art form akin to any kind of theater as we now know it. The problem of how to communicate aesthetics founded in visceral involvement must therefore be posed in totally new terms, as must the problem of what place (if any) can feasibly be ascribed to a collective audience. Attempts should be made to draw the dividing line between active performers and passive bystanders, and to define what constitutes an actor, as opposed to an interactor or an enactor or an actuator. The latter terms sound frigid compared with usual theater terminology, but convey differences in acting modes which may prove helpful when studying new performance environments (moreover, these seemingly barbaric terms can be productively analyzed with reference to acting theories propounded by commedia dell'arte, Elizabethan, kathakali or kabuki traditions, by Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, by Stanislavsky, Craig, Brecht, Schechner, Kantor, etc.). For example, where prime importance is given to interacting with other players, involvement is not of the same kind as where emphasis is on individually enacting or acting out a role; the actuator is yet another species of performer, and can be seen as the impassive AND/OR//NAND/NOR push-button controller of an overall process. Distinctions may be subtle but are potent nevertheless, and many attempts to build up new forms of virtual theater are doomed to failure from the outset because vitally different modes of involvement are blithely lumped together.

Theater culture is vast and varied, and provides an excellent heuristic tool for sounding emergent immersive, interactive aesthetics. The dangers of research blinkered by productivist goals are obvious to most people, but the dangers of brandishing reductionist notions of theater as a cultural alibi are more insidious. A problem with much of today's experimentation bent on developing new interactive models for virtual worlds is that it is totally devoid of aesthetic value, even when hallowed by cultural institutions. This is because art is generally not laid down as a premise but tagged on as an afterthought, a potential cultural market strategy. Dazed by the myth of optimization -

optimized perceptive parameters, optimally coherent virtual spaces, i.e. the ideal of performance in its most mechanistic sense - we tend to forget the simplest home truths concerning immersion in non-functionalist, creative contexts. Hence, when VR perception analysts state that breadth of the visual field is directly proportional to the immersive power of a virtual world, there is a stampede to extend breadth of the visual field in all immersive constructs, whatever their end use. There's the rub. One of the most immersive performances I have ever seen was that of a flea-training clown, playing to a packed little theater. He mimicked and gesticulated dramatically as he ordered the flea to leap in a sweeping arc from one forefinger to the other. Hundreds of people were totally enthralled by the act and totally intent on the flea, which was not just tiny. Worse, it did not "really" exist. Immersion in the realm of creative performance is, fortunately, unfathomable.

References

(1) Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture", *in* Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art, A Critical Anthology*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1968, pp.222-235; see also S.J. Norman, "Du *Gesamtkunstwerk* wagnérien aux arts des temps modernes: spectacles multimédias, installations minimalistes", *in L'Oeuvre d'art totale*, studies grouped by Denis Bablet, presented by Elie Konigson, Paris, CNRS Editions, 1995, pp.273-289.

(2) Victor Chklovski, *La Marche du cheval*, Paris, Champ Libre, 1973, pp.129-131 (Shklovsky's *Hod Konja* has apparently not been translated into English).

(3) Jean-Claude Serre, "La danse parmi les autres formes de la motricité", in *La Recherche en danse*, Paris, numéro 3, 1984, pp.135-156.

(4) See Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *Anatomie de l'acteur*, Bouffonneries Contrastes, Cazilhac, 1985.