

# THE POINTLESS CHAT-ROOM? COPING WITH ABSENCE IN ONLINE PERFORMANCES

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the role of chat functionality when included in online performances that do not fundamentally require it. The explanation that chats are included to reintegrate forms of co-presence is supported by a series of interviews but immediately challenged by the author. This paper argues that the need for co-presence is not a universal one, but is rather rooted in theatre practice. Online performers with a background in the visual arts tend instead to emphasise a purely visual relationship between audience and artwork. This study also elaborates on the use of chat logs as a form of documentation.

**Keywords:** online performance, chat-room, audience experience, real-time, documentation, liveness, participation

The impact of Information and Communication Technologies on performance practice has forced scholars into a deep investigation of the nature of co-presence between artists and audiences, and on the capacity of technology to produce presence. On the one hand, researchers have identified a series of negativities, for example, the fact that aspects of the artwork get lost when a performance is mediated (broadcasted or webcasted, turned into a screen based experience). On the other hand, they also acknowledge that technology is offering a range of possibilities to enhance the experience of a remote viewer [1]. Sensor and wearable technologies, for instance, can support a mediated feeling of touch across distance, while diverse forms of interactivity allow for an intervention of the audience during the piece.

This paper explores the role of chat functionalities as a basic means to overcome the physical divide between performer and audience. Even though many artists adopt chat as a medium or thematic focus, or choose to perform in chat rooms as a specific intervention in the public domain, the aim of this study is to concentrate on online performances where chat functionality is accessory and does not carry out any essential task in the piece. A lack of literature on the subject suggests a general attitude of taking for granted the need of audiences to participate and the need of artists to let them actively take part in the piece. I will argue that this is not always so and will call upon two distinct approaches in the

performing arts to explain how only performances rooted in theatre, dance or music traditions require the 'being there' of the audience. This is related to the collective and ritual dimension of theatre, which requires mutual awareness and shared feelings between spectators and performers, and between spectators themselves [2].

Performance rooted in the visual arts, by contrast, does not conceive immediate feedback as essential and, as is the case with a video or installation piece, visual artists working with performance are used to dealing with a deferred viewer experience. Such work is mainly interested in a perceptual relationship with its audience. Furthermore, I look at current trends in documentation of live events and explain the inclusion of chat functionalities in online performances as a tool for evaluation and documentation. Following the gradual evolution in contemporary art categorisation of the public from spectator to prosumer [3], a shift in the notion of documentation itself is taking place that embraces audience experience and audience behaviour as part of the work and therefore as worthy of being recorded.

## The Inseparability of Audience and Performer

When a performance is mediated and transferred to a private screen in a private space, even though it is in real time, there are several qualities of the live experience that tend to get lost. These include ambiance, awareness of the same context among audience and performers, physical proximity, shared feelings, the possibility of collectively expressing a reaction on the part of the public (an applause for example) and a potential for intervention. While denying a radical ontological difference between live and mediated performance, Steve Dixon points out that recorded media "can never break out of that frame and personally confront us. Most live performance never actually does this, but it always can; there is a potential for the performer to see you, or speak to you, and break out of the stage frame to confront you directly" [4].

Other theorists address the issue of liveness by claiming the unfinished status of every performance until its direct encounter with the audience takes place: reception is an integral part of the piece [5]. If the co-presence of audience and performer is seen as intrinsic to liveness, it is natural for the performer to look into ways to reintegrate it across the distrib-

uted, remote dimension of the network. I conducted a series of interviews with artists performing online, all of which support the idea that chat functionalities are an effective way to maintain the potential for a spectator intervention, and to overcome the separation between artwork and viewer.

Director and researcher Christina Pagiannouli for instance describes the presence of the public in a theatre setting as a shadow, not clearly perceived by the actor, but crucial for "the magic of theatre" [6]. In her *cyberperformances* the online spectators, by accessing the chat room, become an electronic version of this shadow, and re-introduce a sense of presence.

However, there is another important issue that goes beyond the potential of reciprocal interaction between artist and audience, and lies in the collective, ritual dimension of attending a performance. This is something that can be traced to/recalls Greek classic tragedy, a form of mass entertainment with deep social, religious and educational relevance. The myth depicted in the action in fact tended to directly address the citizens with more or less implicit references to issues relating to the democratic life of the polis (the Ancient Greek city). Furthermore, the well-known notion of catharsis (a form of purification from the irrational passions of the human being reached through the emotional and cognitive involvement in the tragedy) tends to be described as a collective process [7]. Significantly, Dixon recalls this feature of classic theatre in his interpretation of online audience participation as "therapeutic catharsis-overload" [8]. According to Erika Fisher-Lichte, the communal foundations of performance were affirmed by the movement of theatre practices away from traditional buildings and into alternative spaces from the 1960s onwards. Theatre becomes the access point to autonomous social groups, insofar as both actors and spectators were ready to temporarily sacrifice their individualities. [9] As Fisher-Lichte states, by appropriating domains of the everyday life, theatre "create[d] shared communities between actors and spectators, and institute[d] a participatory form of democratic activity" [10]

Creating community is thus a fundamental dimension for theatrical performance, and requires the audience to be able to express and mutually understand feelings and beliefs raised in real time by the performance itself.

Helen Varley Jamieson suggests that the intrinsically participatory nature of the Internet adds a further layer to the collective dimension of performance. The “almost hyperactive expectations of some netizens”, in fact, include the desire “not only to participate but to have authorship and agency within the work” [11]. The performer then, finds himself dealing with his own need for the presence of the audience, and the Internet audience’s expectation of interactivity. The inclusion of chat functionalities in the piece, even though the piece itself would maintain its integrity and meaning without the audience contribution, is to be understood as a response to this double necessity. The influence of Internet conventions on remote audiences however goes beyond its tendency to generate interactivity. The performers Grossi Maglioni point out how the uniqueness of online performances clashes with the web-surfers custom to consider the Internet as a repository of constantly accessible content, available and retrievable at any time. Observing the number of users hitting the webpage of an online performance festival they organised, they noticed how the attendance during the live event was low (on average 14-20 people), while the number of site visitors during the whole day when the event was programmed was in the thousands. This is symptomatic of an approach to the online dimension that contrasts with the effort of the artist to create a tension around an unrepeatable live action [12]. In this framework, online performances need to distinguish themselves from video and other forms of recorded web content, by providing the possibility to verify their real-time dimension [13]. Chat functionalities then can work as evidence of synchronicity and liveness.

### Theatre Vs Visual Arts

Though the expectation of co-presence between audience and performer seems an inescapable factor, the information gathered through the above mentioned interviews demonstrates that this is only partially true, and the unfinished dimension of the piece without direct feedback is not universally valid. Field Broadcast’s practice is based on live streaming of audiovisual content from remote natural settings to a dispersed audience across the Internet. Rebecca Birch, part of this collective alongside Rob Smith, explains that they do not use chat rooms because “We want people to pay attention to the broadcast, to the artist broad-

casting to them; this is the relationship, between artist and viewer, that we are most interested in, so to try and cut across that and interact ourselves with the viewers, or to encourage viewers to interact with each other slightly jars with our intentions” [14]. She also stated that: “Artistically we rather like the sense of the artist staring into the void, and the viewer, somewhere else entirely, staring back at them through the ‘hole’ or ‘window’ of the Field Broadcast screen.” [15]

These statements support the position that a performance can exist as a finished work without any perceivable presence of the audience, and this calls upon a distinction between two traditions and two different kinds of online performance. Works rooted in theatre, dance or music cannot be conceived without an audience, but when the artist’s background is in the visual arts the artist-audience relationship is significantly different. The aim of the artist in this performance strand is to encourage in the audience an act of viewing (and thinking), rather than a responsive action. Thus even when they are engaging with liveness the attitude is not dissimilar to that associated with an object-based exhibition This might be a crude classification as I am polarising what is a rather porous spectrum. However, it is clear that this distinction is a useful one in the context of this study.

The difference between online performance and video is obviously important, but it is also necessary to reclaim the strong association with performance that characterises the origins of video art. If we think of Bruce Nauman’s repetitive performance actions in his studio [16], or Vito Acconci’s recordings of basic physical gestures [17], we immediately get a sense of a genealogy of performance essentially detached from an audience. The potential of video-tape between the 1960s and 1970s, just after the introduction of the first Portapak system by Sony, was explored by artists focusing on the conceptual value of action and gesture, and generated a practice of performing without an audience, in the artist’s studio, for the technological eye only. A case in point to confirm the heritage of these practices today is media artists Jeremy Bailey, who describes his online performances as

“rooted in the history of performance video art. In this early video work, the body’s mediation by this new technology is often investigated. I have always been specifically interested in the reflective

circuit that this ‘performance for the camera’ creates. Specifically in the description outlined in Rosalind Krauss’ *Aesthetics of Narcissism*. Gesture, in this context, can be as simple as a diverted gaze or as complicated as the creation of a persona. In either case, the technology fundamentally shifts our understanding of our bodies (including psyche). It reflects and extends the human body in real time within an electronic circuit” [18].

Krauss explicitly talks about “performance-for-the monitor” [19] and portrays the first experiments in video art as situations of “self-encapsulation” [20], “spatial closure” and “self-reflection” [21]. By using the camera as a mirror, the artist gained a condition of self-sufficiency, where the simultaneous reception and projection of an image produced instant feedback [22].

Acconci’s work is also taken as a case in point by Auslander to demonstrate the performativity [23] of performance documentation. By describing how performers like Acconci or Gina Pane privilege the documentation of their actions that take place in absence of public, he demonstrates that it is the documentation itself which frames the act as performance. The presence or lack of audience is irrelevant to the artistic value of the work. Therefore the audience these pioneers of performance art have in mind is always a deferred one [24].

### Evaluation and documentation

Theories that resist the mediatisation of performance tend to deny the possibility of documenting it accurately or of claiming emphatically that performance exists only in the present [25]. However, since the origins of performance in contemporary art, artists have used photography and video recording as evidence that the action took place, and as archival material to reconstruct the work for future publics or research purposes. Alongside these recordings, chat logs can also become part of the documentation of the piece, and prove particularly useful to research and evaluation purposes, especially for the artist unable to analyse audience reaction during the performance.

Recent studies have addressed the conflict between the ephemeral character of a great part of new media art and the fixedness of documents. Ana Carvalho for instance identifies three essential moments within performance practice: creative phase, action and community gathering. The third one has only recent-

ly begun to be considered relevant enough to be included in the documentation [26]. Performers maintain an ambivalent position in this respect. Some of them still prefer to emphasise the uniqueness of the live action and are very careful to include chat logs as part of the documentation, especially when this means that a text is untied from the audiovisual recordings of the action [27]. In other cases chat logs are adopted as a tool for ethnographic investigation of the audience [28]. This approach challenges the traditional notion of documentation, conceived as a way to reproduce the work for larger audiences rather than to “capture the performance as “interactional accomplishment” to which a specific audience and a specific set of performers coming together in specific circumstances make equally significant contributions” [29].

It is arguably the case that this shift from the documentation of the work to the documentation of the interactional event might be partially motivated by the increasing need for artists to account for their achievements in funding applications [30], where they need to demonstrate their capacity to be inclusive, engage and encourage audience participation.

## Conclusion

This is an exploratory study based on the examination of artworks, chat logs, and qualitative methods. The information gathered by interviewing a small number of artists cannot be taken as universally applicable. It provides, however, a provisional answer to the question of why chat functionalities are included as an accessory to online performances, and opens new fronts for investigation. One of these could concern a reading of the audience chat as an autonomous performance in itself.

Furthermore, the inclusion of chat is explained as a way to attest the synchronous dimension of the work, and to overcome the physical divide between performer and audience. This would allow the performer to feel the audience presence in the background, and to let the communal, choral experience of the audience be expressed. However, it is not clear that it has been demonstrated whether or not the latter goal is actually met by chat interventions. According to the evidence gleaned from both chat logs and interviews, the range of behaviour and comments made by spectators in chat vary extremely. It is often used for technical and practical issues, such as

checking if the connection is in place or asking questions about what is happening [31]. Sometimes people introduce themselves or give information about their location or contingent activities, sometimes they comment on the work or the technology used, sometimes they have side conversations with other users [32]. In addition, “traditional theatre behaviour is often mimicked, with typed responses such as ‘LOL’ or ‘applause’” [33]. The unfamiliarity of a great part of the audience to online performances [34] is responsible for a lack of uniform codes of behaviour that could mediate between the intimidating effect of an artwork and the easiness of self-expression that accompanies online communication. Such a heterogeneous landscape of behaviours makes it difficult to assess whether or not chat functionalities are able to restore the collective, cathartic character of live performance, especially because these elements might not be entirely translatable into words.

From the mid-1990s onwards, online performance had already developed a strong trajectory and its audience behaviour has been subject to a parallel evolution, also in relation to the exponential growth of social networks that certainly transformed people’s approach to online interactions. This development opens up the potential for further research that could not be included within the scope of this paper. Such research could shed more light on the limits of chat functionalities in relation to spectators’ identities - generally reduced to a nickname, agency - restricted to discourse, and sharing of context - where the offline part of the spectators’ environment always remains hidden to everyone else.

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## References and Notes

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2. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (Routledge, 2005).

3. See Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York, NY: Bantam, 1980) and Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006).

4 Dixon [1] p.130.

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6. Christina Papagiannouli, private communication, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

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8. Quoted in Helen Varley Jamieson *Adventures in Cyberperformance: experiments at the interface of theatre and the internet*. (Master thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2008) p.70.

9. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (Routledge, 2005).

10. Fisher-Lichte [9]

11. Varley Jamieson [8] p.71.

12. Grossi Maglioni private communication, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

13. Grossi Maglioni [12]

14. Rebecca Birch, private communication, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

15. Birch [14]

16. Janet Kraynak, *Please Pay Attention Please. Le Parole di Bruce Nauman*. (Milano: Postmedia Books, 2004).

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19. Rosalind Krauss “Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism” *October* 1 (1976) p.56.

20. Krauss [19] p.53

21. Krauss [19] p.54

22. Krauss [19] p.52

23. Performativity is intended here to describe the active function of documentation to frame the performance as an event of a particular kind.

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27. Grossi Maglioni [11].

28. Papagiannouli [6].

29. Auslander [18].

30. Birch [12].

31. Grossi Maglioni [11].

32. Helen Varley Jamieson, private communication, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

33. Varley Jamieson [8].

34. Grossi Maglioni [11].