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Scott, JE

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Dispersed and Dislocated: The construction of liveness in live intermedial performance

Abstract

This article focuses on an analysis of the live intermedial performance, *The Mark of Affect*. Using the theories of Philip Auslander (2008), Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) and Roberta Mock (in Power 2008) as a starting point, three moments from the performance are analysed in relation to liveness; specifically, how it is constructed and manifests itself within this performance. In all cases, the combinations of live and mediated acts are seen as creating hybrid forms of liveness, which exist both within and through the technology employed on stage.

Introduction

When I first started developing an intermedial performance medium, my concern was much more with how the technological tools I was employing could serve the content I wanted to present on stage. However, as I started to work with these tools, both in preparation and performance, something started to shift and I became much more interested in what such tools were able to *do* in combination and in the moment of performance. What became evident was that, as a solo performer, my intermedial kit offered me a number of diverse opportunities to 'make things live'; that is to construct intermediality in the moment of performance. This led me firstly to occupy a dual role on stage, both performing and activating the various elements of performance. It also led me to want to investigate how liveness manifested itself on a stage, where the performer/activator could construct the performance in real time and in the presence of the spectators and where the mechanics of this intermedial construction were part of the performance.

Live Intermedial Performance

Live intermedial performance is a medium of performance I have developed through practice-as-research and which now I am employing specifically as a space and vehicle to research and test theories of liveness within intermediality. Live intermedial performance can be defined as performance whereby the performer is also the activator and manipulator of the various elements which make up the intermedial *mise-en-scène*. My use of the term *mise-en-scène* relates directly to Andy Lavender's (2006) definition of such, in that it represents not just what is "put on stage", but also, "the continuum that gives staged elements their effective relation one to another" (in Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006: 63). The notion of continuum and placing elements not just in space, but also in time, is particularly relevant to this practice, in that the decision-making of the performer/activator within the unfolding real time of performance represents an engagement with both time and space in terms of where, when and how to position the elements of the performance.

The elements of the live intermedial *mise-en-scène* are live and recorded projected images; the live voice – amplified, looped and layered; objects and the performer's body in space. Sitting loosely within a compositional framework, the different 'movements' of the performance are defined by combinations of the above elements, which, as mentioned, are generated by the performer/activator in real time and in the presence of the spectators.

As part of my ongoing research in this area, I developed a piece of live intermedial performance called *The Mark of Affect*, which was performed at Central School of Speech and Drama on 4th and 5th July 2011. The piece took place in a large studio, where a traverse staging arrangement was used to define the space of performance, but also to make a clear separation between one end of the traverse, where the technical equipment was located and the work or 'activation' of the performance was taking place and the other end, where a large projection screen displayed the results of the image manipulation (see Figure 1).

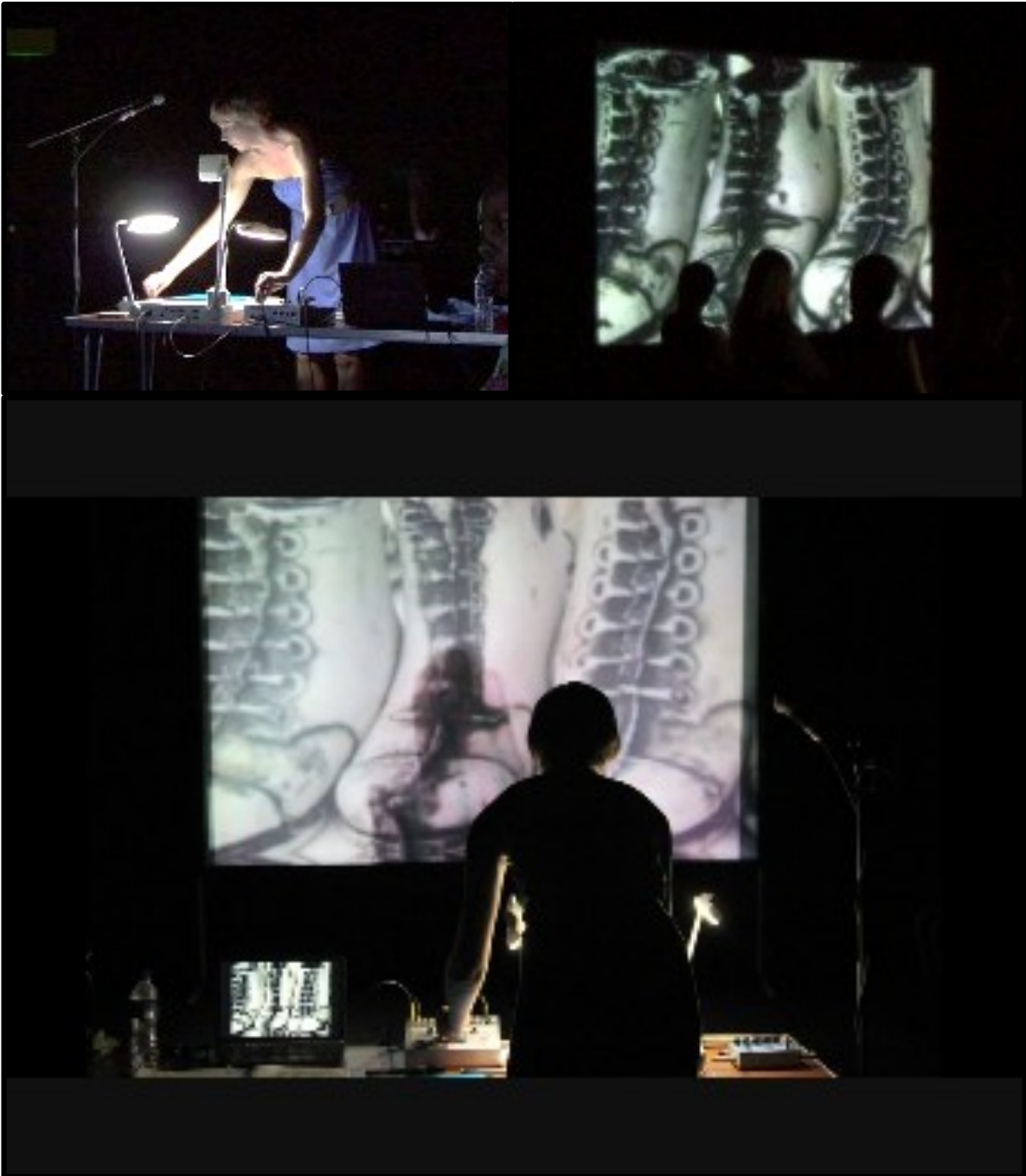


Figure 1

The image in the top left hand corner shows the performer/activator in the 'technical area' at one end of the traverse. On the right, the screen displays the images created at the opposite end of the stage.

The image below shows the performer's eye view down the traverse. The audience are seated between the technical area and the screen, on either side of the stage.

(Images taken from a recording of *The Mark of Affect*, performed at Central School of Speech and Drama, 05/07/11 – recording by Mark and Nadia Swetz)

The content of the performance was 'marks of affect', which were defined in my original research proposal as 'expressions, representations or triggers of affect' (Scott 2011: 1), using James Thompson's definition of affect as 'emotional, often automatic, embodied responses that occur in relation to something else' (2009: 119). The 'marks of affect' were gathered through correspondence with friends, families and colleagues and took the form of film clips, images, songs, objects and texts.

The thirty minute solo performance presented these marks to the audience in a variety of different forms and combinations. Pre-recorded images created on a computer were combined with live feed images of objects and the body of the performer/activator, using a vision mixer. These images were, in turn, combined with a live soundscape, created entirely through the performer/activator singing and speaking into a microphone and then looping and layering the resultant sound, using a loop pedal. Finally, the live body of the performer/activator was also used as a medium of performance, at points stepping into the central performance space between the technical area and the projection screen, interrupting or adding to the sound and images which had already been established.

As mentioned above, a live intermedial performance is constructed as a series of movements, within which sound, image, body and object are arranged in a variety of combinations. In the case of *the Mark of Affect*, though such movements were planned and rehearsed, their content was not fixed and through the use of the vision mixer and loop pedal in particular, variation and flux were enabled, as was the construction of each movement within the real time of performance. As noted by Robin Nelson (2010), such tools allow the performer to be 'more processual in the moment' (in Bay Cheng et al. 2010: 16); this is a key feature of live intermedial performance and its activation of dislocated liveness.

Liveness

In considering 'liveness' it is impossible to avoid Philip Auslander's (2008) text *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, which famously grapples with the term, particularly in breaking down what he sees as a privileged binary between live and mediatized, where live performance is seen as 'ontologically pristine' and operating in 'a cultural economy separate from mass media' (2008: 40). Auslander responds particularly to the definitions of performance posited by Peggy Phelan (1993). He sees Phelan's argument that performance 'becomes itself through disappearance' and 'in a strict ontological sense is non-productive' (1993: 148) as the privileging of performance over other media on the basis of its liveness; what he refers to as a 'devotion to the "now"' (Auslander 2008: 44).

In response, Auslander highlights elements of liveness within the media. "Classic" liveness, according to him, does involve both 'physical co-presence of performers and audience' and 'temporal simultaneity of production and reception' (2008: 61). However, he also highlights the 'temporal simultaneity' involved in a live television broadcast in terms of its production and reception by an audience and points out that in the case of a live recording, 'the audience shares neither a temporal frame nor a physical location with the performers', yet it still provides 'a sense of participating in a specific performance' (Auslander 2008: 60).

Cormac Power (2008) cites Roberta Mock's response to Auslander's contentions regarding liveness. She highlights what she sees as the key aspect of the liveness of a performance, as opposed to a live recording or broadcast, which is 'the *potential* for discourse between the processes of presentation and the processes of preparation...and reception', which 'are never finished until the performance is "finished"' (in Power 2008: 157). This concept of live performance as constantly unfinished, subject to change and discourse relates directly to Erika Fischer-Lichte's theories of the autopoietic feedback loop. Fischer-Lichte claims that in the simultaneous production and reception of a performance, an 'ever-changing feedback loop' (2008: 38) is created and that this 'self-referential autopoietic system' (2008: 39) ensures that 'performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree' (2008: 38).

Taken together, Mock and Fischer-Lichte both suggest that the performance's 'unfinished' nature and the 'unpredictability' which is engendered through it unfolding live in space and time, are key elements of liveness within performance. Crucially, both theorists see the co-presence of spectators and performers in the 'here and now' as intrinsic to this, with Fischer-Lichte claiming that mediated performances 'sever the co-existence of production and reception' which 'invalidates the feedback loop' (2008: 68).

Despite their divergence, the theories of Mock and Fischer-Lichte can be combined with the breakdown of elements of liveness suggested by Auslander. Three broad aspects of liveness in performance emerge from this debate, which could be summarised as follows:

- **At the same time** – the 'temporal simultaneity' cited by Auslander, Mock and Fischer-Lichte, where spectators' and performers' temporal experience of the performance coincides
- **In the same place** – Auslander's 'physical co-presence' of spectators and performers sharing the same space, which is echoed by Mock and Fischer-Lichte
- **In real time** – Mock and Fischer-Lichte's assertion that the performance unfolding in the moment of its reception by the spectator makes it variable, 'unfinished' and engenders 'unpredictability' or 'liveness' because of this

Cormac Power however claims that 'liveness is *not* an ontological property of theatrical performance, but a constructed, mediated experience' (2008: 161). He also asserts that liveness 'as a term is concerned with a narrow and rather idealistic notion of unproblematic immediacy', suggesting that it 'is a relatively limited notion that applies only to events within a technological context' (Power 2008: 166).

Building from such notions of liveness and Power's contentions, I will argue in this analysis of a live intermedial performance, that it is specifically the existence of liveness 'within a technological context' on the intermedial stage, which extends and expands the possibilities inherent within the term. Within this context, liveness is indeed both 'constructed' and 'mediated', but it is also through this process that liveness is allowed to inhabit performance in a distinct and dislocated format.

The Construction of Liveness in *The Mark of Affect*

With regard to the performance of *The Mark of Affect*, I have chosen three moments to analyse in relation to how liveness is constructed and manifests itself. The first moment involves the live voice of the performer/activator, which, at various points within the performance, is amplified through a microphone and transmitted through speakers. This amplified version of the voice initially corresponds to the live action onstage; the sound is clearly coming from the mouth of the performer/activator. However, this sound is then recorded and instantly looped, so that the live recorded voice is transplanted from the live body and dislocated in space and time, creating its own spatial and temporal conditions in the process. In this way, the voice can be seen to be ruptured from its source and 'cited' within the performance space. This dislocation of sound is accentuated and furthered by the act of duetting, where the digital live record of the voice, which is now playing independently of its source, is actively merged with the sound being created live by the performer/activator.

The voice is 'remediated', where the definition of such, according to Bolter and Grusin and cited by Kattenbelt (2008) is 'the representation of one medium in another' (in Kattenbelt 2008: 25). As already explained, this act represents dislocation in space, time and also, through the voice subsisting beyond its origin in a different medium. However, this dislocated voice is also a *live* recording of the original sound created by the performer/activator and one to which the spectators are party, in that they hear and see that recording being created on stage and then hear the result being played out beyond the body of the performer/activator. Such an act complicates the elements of liveness established above. The 'temporal simultaneity' of the live voice in particular, which is produced by the performer/activator and simultaneously received by the spectators, is then disrupted and dislocated by the live recording subsisting beyond the act of its production.

However, an awareness of the liveness of the voice is also heightened by its immediate live recording and playback through the loop pedal, with the medium remembering and imprinting that liveness aurally within the continuum of the intermedial *mise-en-scène*. Its separation from its origin makes constant reference to that origin - the live body of the performer/activator - which is present in the space. In addition, the unpredictability involved in singing live is also heightened by the voice being 'remembered' and fixed within the technology. The spectators being party to this process increases that sense of unpredictability and, arguably the sense of co-presence, through complicity in the moment of performance and the mechanics of its creation.

When the live recording of the voice is actively merged with the live voice itself and the performer/activator is essentially duetting with herself, the dislocation of the live takes on a new quality. The unfolding of the performance happens in real time, as sound is produced by the performer/activator and merges with its own live recording. This creates a hybrid form of liveness, in that all the elements of temporal simultaneity, co-presence, real-time unfolding and 'unpredictability' are present within the act, but these are simultaneously heightened and dislocated because of the technology employed and the layered and live 'remediation' of the voice.

The second example or act from *The Mark of Affect* involves the merging of 'live' and recorded images on the projection screen, with the aid of a vision mixer. The

movement of the performer's hands is remediated into a two dimensional digital image, through a live feed camera, attached to a bookreader. The movement is spatially dislocated from itself through this image being projected onto a screen at the opposite end of the performance space. In addition, it could also be argued that this act represents a temporal dislocation of sorts in that the spectators, because of their positioning in the traverse staging between the movement of the hands and its remediated representation on screen, can never see the physical action of the hand moving in real time at the same time as also seeing the resultant image projected on the screen.

Further complication of such dislocated liveness is enacted when the vision mixer is used to merge this 'live' image with a pre-recorded image. Here the live image of the moving hand can be seen to touch its pre-recorded counterpart and as such, impart liveness to this recorded image. Liveness is multiple on stage, in both the acts of the performer/activator and the resultant merged image on the screen. The act of mixing the two images and the physical movement of the hands both unfold in real time before the spectators and the results of such live manipulation are accessible in the same time as their production. However, there is clearly a spatial and temporal dislocation of liveness which occurs specifically because of the real time, 'live' manipulation of technology, which in turn engenders liveness of image and object. Neither can be experienced simultaneously as they are positioned at opposite ends of the traverse and therefore the live unfolding of the moment of performance is dispersed in both space and time.

The third moment involves the performer/activator placing herself next to images from the film *Some Like It Hot* (1959), which are projected onto the screen. The performer/activator then describes a scene from another film, where it is clear from the verbal description that the perspective adopted is one of a viewer of that film and that the spectators are being asked to share this particular viewpoint. The scene which is described is never shown in its original form, therefore the only perspective allowed of it to the audience is one which is placed outside the frame of action and dislocated from it. The live body of the performer/activator is firstly an active counterpart and also counterpoint to the images from the film shown. In addition, what she is doing - describing a completely different scene - asks the audience to imagine or picture something else altogether.

Unlike the previous examples, in this case, the performer/activator places herself in relation to the media, not within it. In addition, the performer/activator and what she represents are deliberately divorced, with her description of the film scene asking the spectators to imagine something completely different to what is on stage. Rather than being remediated, the live body of the performer/activator being positioned in relation to filmed images, while describing a scene from another film. Dislocation is enacted by the spectators seeing the live body and recorded film images on stage, yet being asked, through the text delivered, to imagine a completely different scene. In this context, liveness is not represented within or through the media, but in relation to it.

The live voice of the performer/activator addresses the spectators directly and as such, represents what could be seen as the most uncomplicated example of "classic" liveness (Auslander 2008: 61) so far, with the bodily co-presence, temporal

simultaneity, unfolding of time and elements of unpredictability all in play. However, even this is an actively dislocated form of liveness. The apparent physical co-presence of audience and the performer/activator for example is disrupted through the appeal on the part of the performer/activator for the spectators to see something completely different; a scene beyond the live body and the filmed images and crucially, a scene which is never shown. In many ways this represents, in heightened form, what much representational theatre asks of its spectators - that is to simultaneously see one thing and imagine something else - which is being represented by that person or object. This is heightened in this instance through the fact that what is on stage bears no relation to what is described; there is an active gap created between the 'here and now' of the live body on stage and what the spectators are asked to imagine. The "classic" liveness of the live performer addressing the audience is therefore complicated and dislocated both by the gap created by the address and the configuration of the body in relation to moving images from a completely different film scene.

Conclusions

Within live intermedial performance, liveness exists within, through and in relation to the media employed and is enacted and engendered by manipulation of such media by the performer/activator in the real time of performance. Far from detracting from or decreasing the liveness of the performance, it is the media themselves, such as the loop pedal and vision mixer, which facilitate and engender liveness. Without such technological tools, liveness would still be present, but their contribution to the continuum of the *mise-en-scène* is to allow merging and combinations of different elements to occur within the time and space of performance, unfolding in the presence of the spectators. The liveness generated through this process is a dislocated, distributed form of liveness, with its constituent parts simultaneously inhabiting different areas and times within the *mise-en-scène*. As such, these forms of liveness actively multiply the present moment of performance, both questioning and expanding upon notions of "classic" liveness in performance.

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