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Digitally Live:

Performative Presence in Times of COVID-19

Introduction: From the Future (Already Present)

The end of Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else* features excerpts from disastronaut Jane Challenger's lecture at a "world conference on extra-disciplinary performance" in a session titled "The Age of Global Performance: Some Perspectives" (McKenzie 2001, 265). The conclusion of the lecture includes a note about future researchers who:

> will take as given something that we can only dimly perceive today—and then may be too horrified to admit: namely, that **all performance is electronic**, that the global explosion of performance practices coincides precisely with the digitalization of discourses and practices, and that this coincidence is anything but coincidental. (267; emphasis in original)

In what follows, I will be performing the role of an artist-researcher from the future, not as someone who has some kind of special insight or intuition, but as someone who observes and participates in the future that is already present. The future that McKenzie referred to in his 2001 book is already happening, and its unfolding, I will argue, has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This article unpacks the idea that "all performance is electronic" in light of the shifts expedited by the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on the transformations of performative presence produced through "the incorporation of media technologies into live performance and vice versa" and the "hypermediation of social production via computer and information networks" (McKenzie 2001, 42).

This essay investigates the transformations of performative presence in times of COVID-19 with an eye to what the call for papers for this *Performance Paradigm* issue has termed "the impacts of techno-performance on our work and our experience as scholars, artists and citizens" (Willis, Hay, Cheng 2020). It asks: What does presence mean in "the age of global performance" (McKenzie 2001, 249), which is also the age of "post-truth" and Big Data? What does presence mean in the context of "Zoom fatigue"? What does liveness mean online, and does performing *live* online matter? To address these questions, the first part of this essay provides an analysis of the "digital limen" (McKenzie 2001, 94) in times of COVID-19. The second part turns to theatre performance across the "digital limen," specifically to *Left and Right, Or Being who/where you are*, an experimental live online

performance that I co-created and directed, presented by the Brown Arts Initiative (now Institute) and by Re-Fest, an art and technology festival organized by CultureHub, in 2021. Developed in collaboration with researchers from the Beyond Verification team of the Digital Democracies Institute at Simon Fraser University and an international team of artists and creative technologists, this was a site-specific performance: an online piece about being online in times of pandemic. As I wrote elsewhere, "*Left and Right* participates in research-creation and sits within the tradition of Practice as Research/Performance as Research" (Jucan et al. 2021), where "the theoretical, technical, and creative aspects of a research project are pursued in tandem, and quite often, scholarly form and decorum are broached and breached in the name of experimentation" (Chapman & Sawchuk 2012, 6) as well as—to add to Chapman & Sawchuk's thought—the boundaries between these aspects are unsettled. In the role of an artist-researcher from the future, in what follows, I aim to present some of the findings of this research-creation project through the lens of a "reading machine" informed by McKenzie's *Perform or Else*. In the first part, the focus will be on the broader context around the performance and, in the second, on the performance itself and the associated research-creation process.

The Digital Limen: The Performance Stratum and the COVID-19 Pandemic

> At the turn of the twenty-first century, the citationality of discourses and practices is passing across an electronic threshold, a digital limen. Words and gestures, statements and behaviours, symbolic systems and living bodies are being recorded, archived and recombined through multimedia communication networks. (McKenzie 2001, 94)

At the most abstract level of his articulation of a general theory of performance in *Perform or Else,* Jon McKenzie defines performance as "a stratum of power/knowledge that emerges in the United States after the Second World War" (19-20). The "sites of passage and transformation" of the performance stratum are "a digital limen," "an electronic threshold" (94). The performance stratum is notably structured and sustained by information technology: "hypermediating media" such as "digital media and the Internet" (22, 18). It is this kind of media that the three different performance/research paradigms analyzed by McKenzie—cultural performance, organizational performance, and techno-performance—have in common, the other commonality being the context of neoliberal capitalism. The Internet is where they all meet, and the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and furthered their imbrication.

Across the spheres of cultural performance, organizational performance, and technological performance, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of the digital and its expansion into different areas of life and activity. As physical proximity became dangerous, lives moved even more fully online, from interactions with friends, to certain forms of work and cultural production, to education and business. While we already see a return to in-person interactions in certain areas such as education, some of the shifts accelerated by the pandemic are expected to be long-lasting and irreversible. In business, for instance, "COVID-19 has pushed companies over the technology tipping point—and transformed business forever," according to a survey conducted by McKinsey & Company (LaBerge et al. 2020). Over just a few months, companies "accelerated the digitization of their customer and supply-chain interactions and of their internal operations by three to four years" and "the share of digital or digitally enabled products in their portfolios … by a

shocking seven years." According to a more recent MIT Sloan School of Management study, the pandemic challenged several deeply ingrained assumptions, such as that "customers value the human touch" (Stackpole 2021). In fact, argues the study: "COVID-19 proved that a well-architected digital experience can offer an equivalent or even a more personalized transaction than an in-person engagement." As an effect of the pandemic, "consumers and organizations" are now "finally ready to embrace digital change at scale." The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that digitization is necessary—because it is good for business. Digitalization benefits businesses because it makes potential consumers easier to reach and reinforces consumerist habits.

As in business, in the realm of social life, education and work, the pandemic has strengthened the role and importance of what McKenzie has termed "hypermediating media" and—at least for the first months of the pandemic—fulfilled his prediction that "the entire university machine is going online" (2001, 184). In the context of the social distancing and withdrawal from in-person social life required to contain the spread of the virus, education and many kinds of work moved online. At the same time, electronic connections became necessary to keep in touch and maintain a semblance of a "new normal" life. A *New York Times* article from April 2020 on how "The Virus Changed the Way We Internet" writes about a rise in the use of video chat as a mode of connecting (Koeze and Popper 2020). This mode of connecting facilitates co-presence in time and (virtual) space—which is one definition of liveness (Auslander 2012, 5). Video conferencing was also one of the common modes of conducting synchronous classes and work meetings. But, as it has been widely experienced, video chat (or conferencing) can be exhausting, especially for extended periods. Studies of the phenomenon that has come to be termed "Zoom fatigue" have shown that part of the reason for the exhausting nature of video conferencing is that it requires us to perform (communication) to a much greater extent than in-person exchanges. In the words of psychology scholar Jeremy Bailenson:

> On Zoom, one source of load relates to *sending* extra cues. Users are forced to consciously monitor nonverbal behavior and to send cues to others that are intentionally generated. Examples include centering oneself in the camera's field of view, nodding in an exaggerated way for a few extra seconds to signal agreement, or looking directly into the camera (as opposed to the faces on the screen) to try and make direct eye contact when speaking. This constant monitoring of behavior adds up. Even the way we vocalize on video takes effort. (Bailenson 2021; italics in original)

Being present on video chat with the camera on is a matter of performing, which takes effort. This performance is exhausting also because the performer is simultaneously a spectator to her/his/their own performance. According to Bailenson, this condition of self-spectating, its frequency and duration, are unprecedented in history, with perhaps the exception of "people who work in dance studios and other places that are full of mirrors" (2021).

Being online carries with it the imperative to perform in a different way as well: that of constantly checking for the latest updates and of "acting" through the use of "social buttons" such as "like" and "share" (Gerlitz & Helmond 2013). During the pandemic, "hypermediating media" became the source of ongoing, live updates on an evolving situation riddled with uncertainty and unknowns, a go-to for making meaning in the midst

of crisis. "Doomscrolling"—"trawling through feeds without pause, no matter how bad the news is or how many trolls' comments" one reads—became so common and widespread that the Oxford English dictionary included it in its "Words of an Unprecedented Year" (Klein 2021; Oxford Languages 2020). The compulsion to check for always the latest update, in-built into social media's programming of behaviour, thus became intensified. Along with it, so did the need (or compulsion) to be digitally present—or live—understood in the "sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated temporal co-presence with others known and unknown" (Auslander 2012, 6).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mediation and media saturation (the two being arguably linked, as McKenzie's term "hypermediating media" suggests) have arguably increased, even though some have argued that the pandemic itself escapes mediation. In his book *Mediated* (2005), anthropology scholar Thomas de Zengotita theorizes mediation in terms of optionality, in terms of (an appearance of) unlimited—yet pre-packaged, attention-grabbing, and purchasable—choice.[1] If mediation equals optionality for de Zengotita, reality, by contrast, means "something that has to be dealt with, something that isn't an option. We are most free of mediation, we are most real, when we are at the disposal of accident and necessity" (de Zengotita 2005, 14). Working off this argument, in an interview from April 2020, de Zengotita argued that the COVID-19 pandemic defies or escapes optionality, and hence mediation, because it is incomprehensible and uncontainable; it is impossible to cover due to its invisibility and everywhere-ness (in Wilkinson 2020). In de Zengotita's words, the COVID-19 pandemic:

> presents itself as something that isn't optional. You're being forced to exercise all kinds of decisions about how to live, little options that you have to decide among in order to cope with it. But it's all under duress. You're still online. You're weirdly as free to be where you "were," but it's now like you're in some kind of prison of option.
> (de Zengotita in Wilkinson 2020)

A "kind of prison of option" seems an apt description of how the pandemic has felt for many people, and the point about being online as a matter of necessity rather than choice is well-taken. But I disagree with de Zengotita's assessment of the pandemic as something that escapes mediation because it is impossible to be covered, just as I take issue with the reality/mediation divide that he posits. As McKenzie's characterization of the performance stratum suggests, the real is mediated through and through. And so is the COVID-19 pandemic. While perhaps impossible to thoroughly contain (representationally and otherwise) and fully comprehend, the pandemic has been intensely and incessantly covered by established news outlets and on social media. Optionality emerges to a large extent in relation to this coverage and pre-existing political divides—both optionality of belief (whether to believe that there is such a thing as a COVID-19 virus or a pandemic or not) and optionality of action (whether to wear a mask or not, whether to get a vaccine or not).

According to recent studies, the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in U.S. newspapers and televised network news has been highly politicized and polarized from the outset and may thus "have contributed to polarization in U.S. Covid-19 attitudes" (Hart et al. 2020, 679). In addition to polarization, certain kinds of coverage of mediatization of the pandemic have brought about what some have called "an information apocalypse"

(Silverman 2020). In a *Buzzfeed* article from May 2020, journalist, author and fake news expert Craig Silverman writes about *The Plandemic*, a short film that, in the first few days after its release, "racked up more than 8 million views across YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, peddling outright falsehoods and conspiratorial claims about the origins of the current pandemic" (Silverman 2020). Silverman argues that *The Plandemic,* and the wealth of mis- and disinformation proliferated around the pandemic, have ushered in an information apocalypse. In Silverman's words, referencing disinformation expert Renee DiResta: "there's little need for deepfakes when you have a pandemic to exploit" (Silverman 2020). Sophisticated technology is not necessary for an information dystopia; the Internet is enough. In order to underscore their reality-making effects, media scholar Ganaele Langlois has called the disinformation and other "information disorders" (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017) that have abounded in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic "real fakes" (Langlois 2021, 5). If anything, such "real fakes" have only amplified the so-called "post-truth" world in which we live.

The problematic notion of "post-truth" has gained currency since 2016.[2] However, "post-truth" does not begin with the Internet; it far precedes it, and in the United States it is intimately tied to racial politics (Mejia et al. 2018).[3] I evoke this broader socio-historical context for "post-truth" as an important reminder to hold onto as we zoom in more closely on the Internet, the digital limen of "the age of global performance" (McKenzie 2001, 249), which is also a "post-truth era." It is a "post-truth era" not only in the socio-historical sense described above but also in a theoretical-philosophical sense: The performatives that make up the performance stratum were introduced by philosopher J.L. Austin as a class of statements that are "the doing of an action" (Austin 1975, 5). As such, they are not "either true or false," even as they may "masquerade" as statements of fact and even as they may nonetheless serve to "inform you" (1975, 5, 6).[4] This seems an appropriate description of the speech acts that populate and structure the Internet, including the (dis)information around the COVID-19 pandemic. At one level, what information— "as a genre"—does is "keeping you *in touch*" by being ubiquitous, "always there," as media scholar, Mary Anne Doane wrote (2005, 251). In the case of information networks, the temporal mode in which this keeping in touch happens is crisis-become-ordinary, which according to media scholar Wendy Chun—building on Lauren Berlant— turns the present into an "affectively intense cul-de-sac" (2016-a, 3). This affective intensity has arguably been amplified in the context of the fear and unknown surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. "Information disorders," which encompass disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017), play off the inherent ubiquity of information and the affective intensity built into the networks' temporal mode. Information disorders are performative in the sense that, while they may masquerade as statements of fact, their effect (and often their goal) is to elicit emotion and trigger a reaction (in the form of a share, like, comment, etc.) —in other words, to spread. This is one of the reasons why media researcher Tommaso Venturini finds the notion of "fake news" problematic: it implies that "fake news" is about falsity when in fact, it is about circulation (2019). He thus proposes "junk news" as a more accurate, alternative concept. In his words: "'Junk news' is dangerous not because it is false, but because it saturates public debate;" it "proliferates by transmission and transformation" (Venturini 2019, 126). On the Internet, the logic of performativity meets the logic of virality, and they feed off each other.

The programmed proliferation machine that is the Internet taps into the reinforcement machine that is the human mind. In a report titled *Lies, Damn Lies, and Viral Content,* Craig

Silverman identifies seven phenomena that make debunking mis- and disinformation challenging. These phenomena concern how "our stubborn brains" process information and how repetition breeds and reinforces belief and believability (Silverman 2015, 51). They include cognitive habits such as confirmation bias, defined as cherry-picking data to reinforce what one already believes, and group polarization, which refers to the reinforcement and radicalization of beliefs when in conversation with a like-minded group of people (Silverman 2015, 53, 55). Social media algorithms arguably automate these phenomena through the creation of echo chambers. Consider, for instance, how Facebook's and Twitter's algorithms focus on "likes," "retweets," and "reshares," thus profiting off and reinforcing confirmation bias (Seneca 2020), or how YouTube's recommendation algorithm has been found to steer viewers to increasingly extremist content in an attempt to keep them glued to their screens (Roose 2019). The recent revelations by Francis Haugen regarding Facebook (now Meta) also show how its algorithm optimizes for "engagement, reaction;" this optimization is guided by Facebook/Meta's own research, which shows "that content that is hateful, that is divisive, that is polarizing" garners more engagement (Haugen in 60 Minutes 2021). Driven by the imperative of profit maximization, the performativity of "hypermediating media" thus feeds off and amplifies the performativity of thinking. The latter is a form of thinking as acting that (re)makes reality through repetition/reinforcement. The notion of performativity at play here draws on Derrida's reading of Austinian performativity, which construes performativity as a matter of communication of "a force" (as opposed to semantic content) that "produces or transforms a situation" and that operates within a system of "conventions" grounded in "iterability" (Derrida 1977, 13, 14, 17).

Algorithm-driven "hypermediating media" feeds off and amplifies the performativity of thinking by tracking online behaviour. The age of global performance theorized by McKenzie is also the age of Big (Social) Data, in which the subject is the consumer par excellence and experience is reduced to data to be mined for profit.[5] As Chun has noted: "we are now characters in a universe of dramas putatively called Big Data. This universe … is coproduced transnationally by corporations and states through intertwining databases and unique identifiers" (2016-b, 363). By now, following projects such as Amalia Ulman's Instagram performances and public denunciations of social media by influencers,[6] it is well known that online behaviour on social media is performative—a matter of crafting a persona, of putting on a character.[7] But a character—and character traits—are put on a user/consumer in another way, as well: in the background, algorithmically. While this mode of putting—or forcing—a character onto a user depends on her/his/their past online behaviour, such online behaviour matters for predictive systems "not in isolation but in relation to others" who are deemed to be like us (Chun 2018). Undergirding this is homophily, "the idea that similarity breeds connection" (Chun in Chun and Cotte, 2020). By virtue of the homophily that grounds recommendation systems and social media networks, liking a curly fries page on Facebook comes to mean high intelligence. Computer scientist Jennifer Golbeck explains: "by the end, the action of liking the curly fries page is indicative of high intelligence not because of the content, but because the actual act of liking reflects back the common attributes of other people who have done it" (2013). Liking a curly fries page is thus performative in the Derridean sense highlighted above: it is not the actual semantic content that matters but rather the communication of a "force" within a system of "conventions" grounded in "iterability." Based on such an action and on the homophily programmed into networks, a user will be shown content that users deemed to have the attribute of high intelligence have liked or should like.

The construction and performance of identity/character across the "digital limen" in the age of Big (Social) Data brings to mind the notion of a "networked self"—"[l]ess an autonomous individual and more of a construct of the relations it has with others," "an aggregator of information flows, a collection of links to others" (Varnelis 2010); or, in Deleuze's words, a "dividual" (Deleuze 1992, 5). This is also McKenzie's "performative subject," "constructed as fragmented rather than unified, decentered rather than centred, virtual as well as actual" (2001, 18). As a dividual, the performative subject is always digitally present, by proxy: as a portrait built out of extracted and correlated demographic and behavioural attributes, hailed (or mined) by algorithms and targeted with never-ending messages. These messages are essentially ads for both products and ideologies, ranging from the dominant consumerist ideology to specific political messages.

The construction of the networked self depends on connectivity and the capture and prediction of behaviour, both of which have been aided by the (more fully) online switch across diverse areas of life that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about. But life online is hard. (Hyper)connectivity comes at a price: information overload, fatigue and confusion, an increase in one's digital footprint, and an expansion of the "minable social" (Langlois, Redden, and Elmer 2015, 2). How to inhabit the mined online space and come together through the proliferation/reinforcement machine that is the Internet so as to think and feel across difference and counter the twinned logics of performativity and virality? (How) Can the performative/digital subject be called to presence and put into (theatrical) play in this space? To address these questions, I now turn to theatre performance in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, I turn to *Left and Right, Or Being who/where you are,* an online devised performance I recently co-created and directed, an experiment presented with findings.[8]

Performing Live across the Digital Limen

> I'm baffled! I'd say my life proved to me, once again, to be a wolf in sheep's clothing! And just when I was about to stop crying wolf… I can't believe I have to put a halt to my acting career just when I was getting warmed up! It's not about me, it's a pandemic, I know, and I do know I am a licensed medical doctor, but in my little world of perpetual compromise, of constant negotiation and petty success, I was just beginning to think I could actually find my way to free expression!
> (Elizalde et al. 2021)

While the COVID-19 pandemic may have intensified the pressure to "perform, or else" and made performance more pervasive through the even deeper penetration of the digital into diverse areas of activity and daily life, it also dealt a severe blow to theatre performance as physical theatre venues were forced to close and shows were cancelled. As happened in education and across different industries, what followed was a shift to online. In the area of artistic performance, this shift was accompanied by the development of what media artist, composer, and programmer Mark Coniglio, of Troika Ranch fame, called "remote theatre"—"a new form that is facilitated by technology but fueled by the pandemic," different from both TV and theatre as commonly understood (in Coniglio and Ragan 2021). A form of digital performance that encompasses "performance works where computer technologies play a *key* role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics,

or delivery forms" (Dixon 2007, 3; italics in original), remote theatre is distinctive in that its conditions of production and viewership are dictated primarily by the pandemic situation rather than other considerations. Out of necessity, theatre artists turned to the Internet as both a tool to interrogate and a space to explore and treat as a stage. They asked: "As artists, how are we performing the internet? … Can we reconceptualize our relationship to the internet by dismantling, questioning, and addressing the internet in our creative work?" (Bergstrom 2021). As theatre director and multimedia designer Jared Mezzocchi stated: This situation "is a really great opportunity to hone our craft, to tell stories no matter what condition, as site-specific performance" (Fuchs and Mezzocchi 2021). My impulse was similar, and I found fellow artists and researchers based in Brazil, Canada, the United States, and Romania who shared the feeling.[9] In collaboration with an interdisciplinary team based out of the Digital Democracies Institute at Simon Fraser Institute, led by Wendy Chun, we devised a site-specific performance: *Left and Right, or Being who/where you are*—an online piece about being online in times of pandemic. The performance featured both human and machinic actors (bots) engaging in dialogue about sometimes divisive topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Left and Right was a devised, interactive, live online performance developed over eleven months (March 2020-February 2021) and presented by the Brown Arts Initiative (now the Brown Arts Institute) as part of their *REMAKING the Real* series of programs (February 10-14, 2021) and by Re-Fest, an art and technology festival organized by CultureHub (March 13, 2021). This interactive performance took place on the virtual event platform **ohyay**, and it could only be experienced *live*, where liveness is understood in terms of the spatial and temporal co-presence of the actors and audience—even as, it turns out, the time and space will not be exactly the same. Regarding the temporal co-presence, all the *Left and Right* team members gathered at the same time to rehearse and perform, but the time was not same: There is a seven-hour time difference between the East Coast of the United States and Romania (six between Romania and the region of Brazil in which our Brazilian performer was located). In addition, our audience members were located in different parts of the world with their time zones, such as Brazil, Canada, Germany, Portugal, Romania, South Korea, Turkey, and the United States. While located in different physical spaces, the actors, members of the production team, and audience members gathered in the same digital space (staged) designed and hosted on **ohyay**. However, within this digital space, the audience members were only visually present on the screen at the start of the performance if they chose to "step on the stage" by selecting a pre-arranged box and turning on their cameras. Due to technological limitations (having to do with how many camera feeds could be displayed on the platform simultaneously without crashing the platform), we restricted the number of boxes available to audience members to 16. Still, the audience members had the option of making their presence known at different points in the performance: in the first scene, through an avatar in the form of a coloured dot to be placed on the digital stage (see fig. 3); in scene four, by interacting with the bots; and in the last scene, through their anonymous responses to a quiz (see fig. 5). Apart from this, throughout the performance, the audience members had the option to make their presence known/felt by using the chat function.

Throughout the ninety-minute performance, the actors stepped in and out of their characters as they interacted with each other, the bots (on which more later), and the audience. As introduced by the actors at the beginning of the performance, the human actors and characters were (fig. 1):

MARCELA: My name is Marcela Mancino. I am a Brazilian multimedia artist and creative technologist currently living in Brazil. Tonight, I will be performing Maitê Stédile. She's 22 years old, Brazilian, and was studying acting in the US until the pandemic hit. She is a white, cisgender woman, proudly bisexual, feminist, antiracist, vegan, and zero waste. She is a big fan of Djamila Ribeiro, Sabrina Fernandes, and Grada Kilomba. …

PATRICK: Hi everyone, my name is Patrick Elizalde. I am a recent college grad who studied theatre arts and economics and was born and raised in New York. I will be playing Sean Lin, who became friends with Maitê through their mutual involvement in college theatre. He is 24 years old, Christian, a 2nd generation Taiwanese-American from Flushing, NY, and is now working at a top consulting firm in Boston. …

FABIOLA: My name is Fabiola Petri. I am a Romanian actress. Tonight, I will play Mara Stan. Mara is a 29-year-old Romanian woman, secretly bisexual, Eastern Orthodox by birth. She is a psychiatrist but wants to become an actor. She doesn't believe in political identity. She sometimes follows popular people without thinking of their political orientation, just by default. She prefers to research more about theatre. She loves nature and supports recycling. Mara represents the Exhausted Majority. In this show, I am many. …

ANDRA: Hi everyone. My name is Andra Jurj. I am also a Romanian actor and a trained physician. I also play Mara Stan. Another version of Mara Stan than the version portrayed by Fabiola. My version of Mara is disillusioned, detached, ironic, empathetic and poetic. But we are both the same character representing the Exhausted Majority. (Elizalde et al 2021)

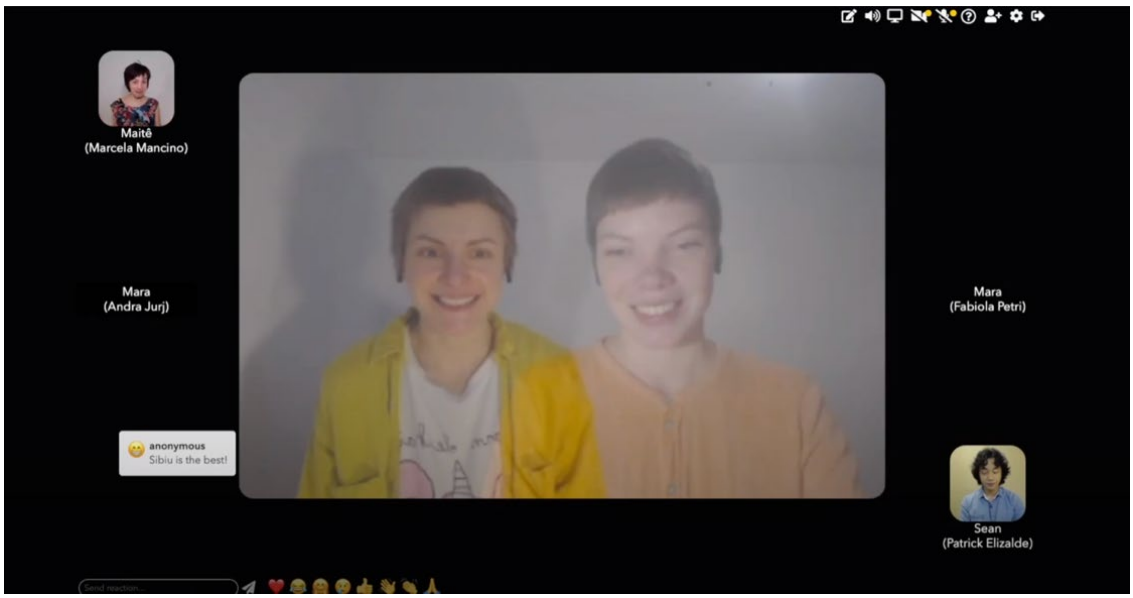


Fig. 1 The *Left and Right* actors introduce themselves and their characters.

In the world of the *Left and Right* play, the three characters —who met at a theatre festival in Romania the year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic—reconnect online after the pandemic outbreak and share their lived experiences and opinions related to the pandemic. As discussed earlier in this essay, the mediatization of the pandemic has been highly politicized and polarized from the onset. Thus, engaging in topics related to the pandemic has involved reproducing archetypical political beliefs and identities. As defined by media theorist and *Left and Right* dramaturg Melody Devries, the notion of the archetype refers to "scripted ways-of-being-(political) that limit our ability to express political life beyond mainstream or hegemonic notions of capital and power" (Devries et al. 2020). Recently, the use of political archetypes—constructed from "Facebook data harvested from a personality quiz app and purchased from a third party" (Devries 2022, 156) —came to public attention through the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which their use ostensibly enabled "psychographic microtargeting" (Resnick 2018). To dispel the "essentializing logics" undergirding the deployment of archetypes and to show how the scripts and patterns underlying them are not natural but rather maintained through "a process of homophilic performativity that solidifies" users' "identities and its political features," Devries theorized the concept of the "homophilic avatar" (Devries 2022, 168, 160). Similar to Deleuze's "dividual," the "homophilic avatar" is a character aggregated via homophilic networks. It comprises patterns that reinforce archetypical political beliefs and identities, which online users reproduce and embody in various ways and to varying degrees (Devries 2022). *Left and Right* repurposed the concept of the homophilic avatar towards an artistic end. It took as its data different kinds of coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic across the political spectrum, including the kinds of "real fakes" (Langlois 2021, 5) that raised alarms about an ensuing "information apocalypse" (Silverman 2020) mentioned earlier, as well as scripts for homophilic avatars discerned through research and analysis. The performance aimed to undo these scripts so as to imagine more capacious ways of being (online) and being political. It sought to arrest the circulation of "real fakes" and counter the twinned logics of performativity and virality that sustain the production and spread of "information disorders" (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017) through theatricality understood as "a *problematic process of placing, framing, situating*" (Weber 2004, 315; italics in original) that gestures towards its own staged nature and through liveness understood as the co-presence in space and time of all the participants in the performance, both actors and spectators—albeit a co-presence that is mediated, multilayered, syncopated.

The figure of the archetype lay at the centre of *Left and Right's* "lecture machine" (to borrow McKenzie's phrasing 2001, 21). It did so both conceptually and quite literally: the eighth scene of the performance, titled "Profile of … an Archetype", was an extended lecture on the archetype and its (de)construction in the performance given by the two actors playing Mara (fig. 2). The archetypes we worked with in *Left and Right* were drawn from a recent study of the United States' polarized political landscape, titled *Hidden Tribes* (Hawkins et al. 2018).[10] This study identified seven homophilic groups, or "tribes," based on "commonalities in aspects of their psychology, beliefs and behaviours" (Hawkins et al. 2018, 27). These groups, or archetypes, are: Progressive Activists, Traditional Liberals, Passive Liberals, Politically Disengaged, Moderates, Traditional Conservatives, and Devoted Conservatives. The Traditional Liberals, Passive Liberals, Politically Disengaged, and Moderates form what the study calls "the Exhausted Majority" (Hawkins et al. 2018). More in Common, the organization that produced the study, also developed a quiz meant to help a quiz-taker determine which "tribe" he/she/they belong to.[11] *Left and Right* audience members were asked to take this quiz prior to the beginning of the performance.

During the first scene, based on the label they had been assigned from the quiz, they were invited to position themselves on the virtual stage through an avatar in the form of a coloured dot (fig. 3) and to comment through the live chat on whether they found that label to be suitable. This placing of archetypes from across the political spectrum on the same digital stage was meant to theatrically push against the algorithmic construction of echo chambers online. Through audience interaction, it also aimed to problematize the construction of political archetypes.

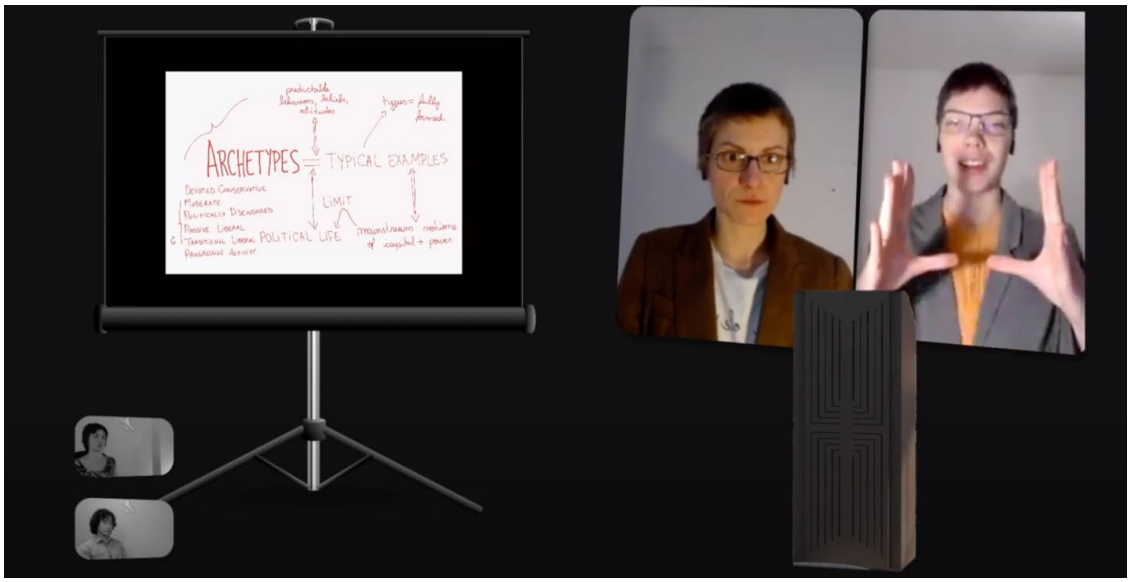


Fig. 2 Andra Jurj and Fabiola Petri, playing Mara, lecturing on the archetype

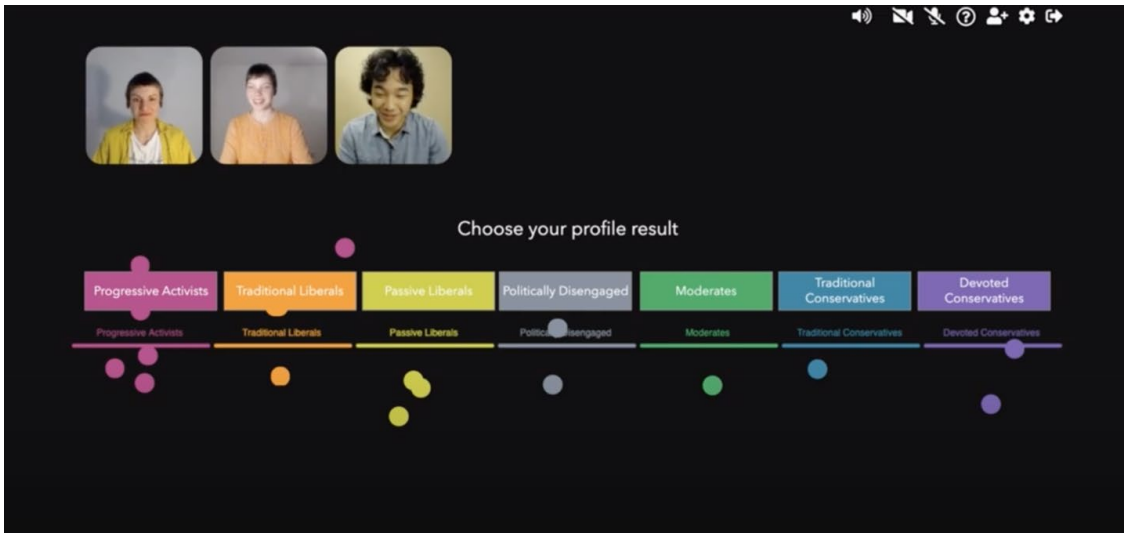


Fig. 3 Audience members positioning their avatars on the digital stage based on the political archetype they were assigned in the quiz

Over the course of the performance, the human actors, and the characters they performed, played with and against the *Hidden Tribes* archetypes: Maitê—the Progressive Activist, Sean—the Devoted Conservative; and Mara—the Exhausted Majority. The performance

also featured two machinic actors created by media artist, computer programmer, and researcher Roopa Vasudevan, with media scholar Anthony Burton serving as a consultant. These were bots trained on news articles about the pandemic, immigration, and climate change from the beginning of the pandemic to the end of 2020. One of the bots, Nick, was trained on articles that a Progressive Activist would read, while the other, Kimberly, was trained on a dataset consisting of articles that would appeal to a Devoted Conservative.[12]

The machinic actors, Nick and Kimberly, were intended to perform an over-identification with the respective archetypes they represented to the point of absurdity. However, it took our team a lot of work and active manipulation of the datasets to arrive at some semblance of the polarized positions that the bots were meant to (over)represent. We originally started with a dataset comprising nearly a thousand articles (per bot), collected based on "algorithmic sorting and categorization of Twitter users into different locations on a horizontal political spectrum" (Burton in Jucan et al. 2021), using the online media-tracking database Media Cloud.[13] The result, however, was a high degree of "randomness and factual-sounding statements" that reproduced the "objective" (sounding) tone of journalistic writing in the bots' output (Burton in Jucan et al. 2021), rather than the polarizing exchange we intended. Thus, we shifted our approach to the careful curation of the dataset, consisting of the selection of 50 hand-picked articles (per each bot) based on the profiles of the archetypes that the bots were designed to represent (the profiles were drawn from the *Hidden Tribes* study). While this careful curation helped give some sense of the different, polarized archetypes that the bots were designed to embody, the overall effect was—as media scholar and *Left and Right* collaborator Anthony Burton put it—that the bots "in a sense talk past each other, they share the space, but they're not necessarily listening, and that's what ultimately the question on political dialogic spaces is about: it's about the production of utterances versus the question of listening" (Burton in Jucan et al. 2021). Circulated online, such utterances are performative: they are speech acts produced for effect to elicit a reaction. In *Left and Right,* we aimed to counter performativity through theatricality by staging them through live interactions between the machinic actors and the human actors as well as between the bots and the audience members in ways that aimed to counteract their force (their intended emotionally charged, divisive effects). Especially in the case of the audience's interaction with the bots, the sense of liveness that usually emerges through the bots' responsiveness to the audience's input (Morse 1998, 15; Auslander 2012, 6) was troubled by their frequently random/nonsensical output, which betrayed their programmed nature and the fact that they were not really "listening." Both intentionally and as a result of the technical challenges we encountered while trying to have the bots (over)represent polarized positions, rather than optimizing for engagement and immersion, our performance thus optimized for disengagement and (critical) distance (fig. 4).

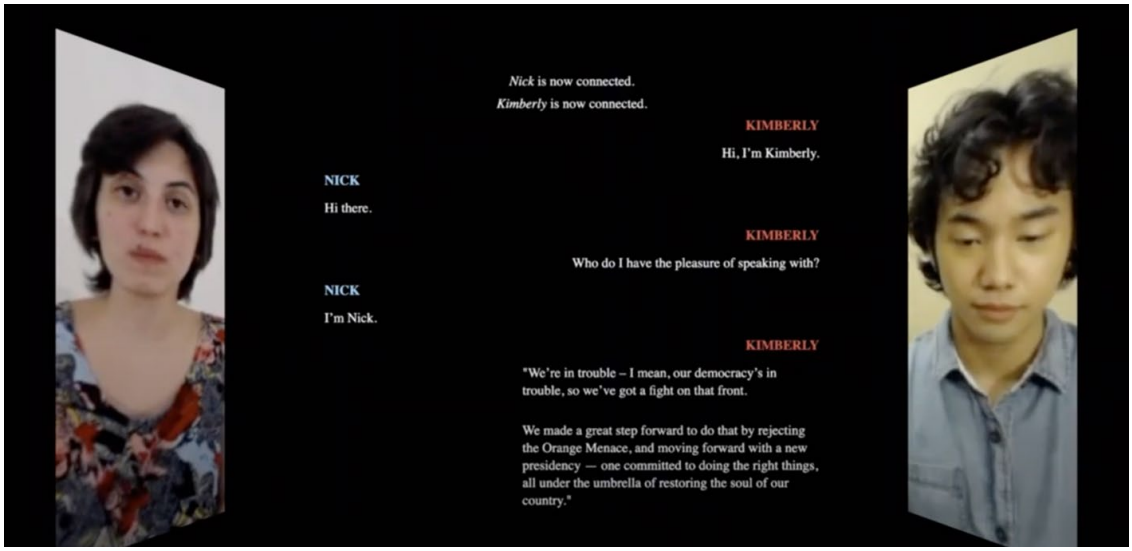


Fig. 4 Nick and Kimberly conversing with Maitê and Sean

The characters played by human actors too sometimes talked past each other, especially when they rehearsed ideas about the lockdowns or immigration that had been so often repeated on the Internet that they became a sort of ideological ready-mades. In theatrically replaying these ideological ready-mades through both the human and the machinic actors, we aimed to point to the broader information ecosystem surrounding them and to the inter-play discussed earlier in this article between the programmed proliferation machine that is the Internet and the reinforcement machine that is the human mind. But, rather than simply reproducing them, the ultimate goal was to push against archetypes, to point to the performative processes undergirding them, and to interrupt the inter-play, however momentarily. We employed several strategies for this purpose, such as: having the actors step in and out of their roles to expose the construction of the archetypes; displacing the archetypes through a transnational perspective that drew on the actors' national contexts (Brazil, Romania, and the United States); and having the actors create their self-descriptions and poetic articulations of their characters' political identities and inviting the audience to do the same for themselves. Regarding the latter, Figure 5 below shows some of the audience members' responses to the question: "If you were to label yourself, what would you be?" from the end of the performance.

Fig. 5 Some of the audience members' responses to the question: "If you were to label yourself, what would you be?"

Another strategy we worked with was that of inhabiting the space(time) between what Jon McKenzie has termed "discursive performatives" and "embodied performances", and the possibilities opened up by liveness and embodied gestures in the context of online performance. According to McKenzie, "[d]iscursive performatives and embodied performances" form the building blocks of the performance stratum (2001, 20). McKenzie theorized performances as "territorializations of flows and unformed matters into sensible bodies" and performatives as "encodings of these bodies into articulable subjects and objects" (177). This distinction is not meant as an absolute separation, for the two are intimately imbricated in practice and experience. In the space(time) between them, the possibility for displacement or destratification arguably opens up. McKenzie calls one such possibility the "catastoration of behaviour" understood in terms of seizing an "arrangement of forces and processes," putting it "'between quotation marks'," and reinscribing it "elsewhere and elsewhen" (215). In *Left and Right,* we aimed to enact a sort of catastoration of political belief and the habitual actions that sustain it.

In *Left and Right,* the space(time) between discursive performatives and embodied performances was inhabited by the actors' bodies through choreographed movement developed in collaboration with choreographer Adriana Bvrză-Cvrstea and with the aid of the digital design by Tong Wu, Yuguang Zhang, and Nuntinee Tansrisakul. In one scene early in the performance, for instance, Sean—played by Patrick Elizalde—is shown scrolling through YouTube. The video recommendations on display suggest the beginnings of what may turn out to be a rabbit hole of alt-right content, becoming ever more extreme the further down one goes (fig. 6). While Sean makes an effort to maintain attention, his body gets in the way, falling asleep and pulling him away from the screen (this is enacted through choreographed movement). Fatigue sets in. The fall down the rabbit hole is interrupted, for the moment. It will be enacted later, towards the end of *Left and Right*, both aurally—through a sound piece featuring a collage of soundtracks from YouTube videos of prominent alt-right figures—and through choreographed movement that suggests both the

fall down the rabbit hole and resistance to it. Here, the actor's body resists its encoding into an articulable subject within the alt-right ideological matrix. This (virtually) embodied (re)enactment also aims to counter the logic of virality that drives YouTube and other social media platforms by theatrically arresting the spread, the circulation of the videos.

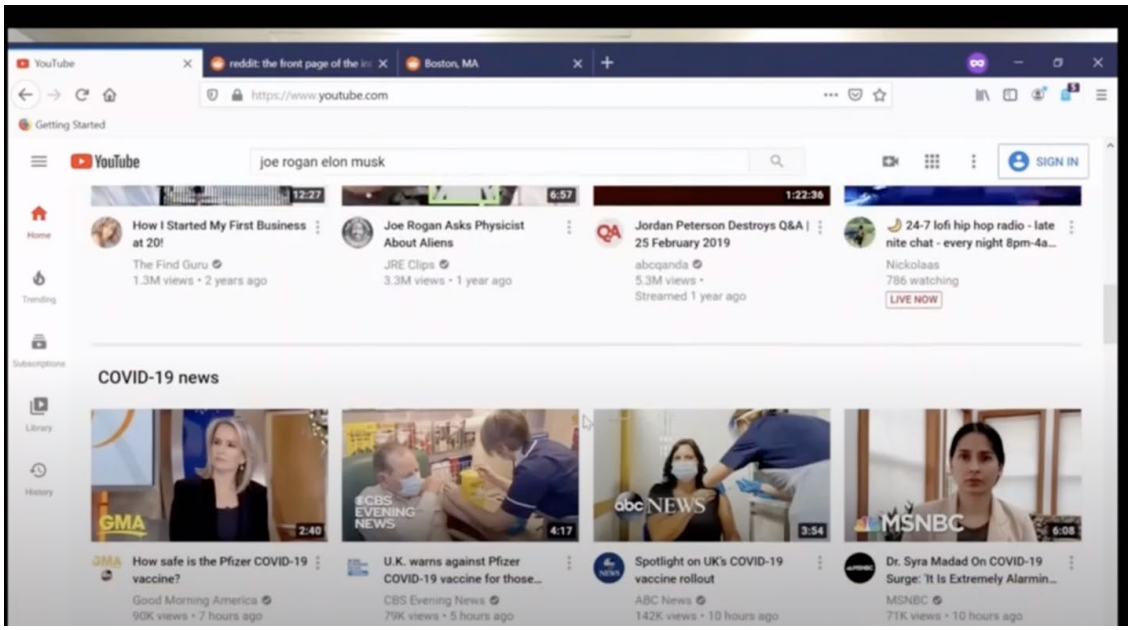
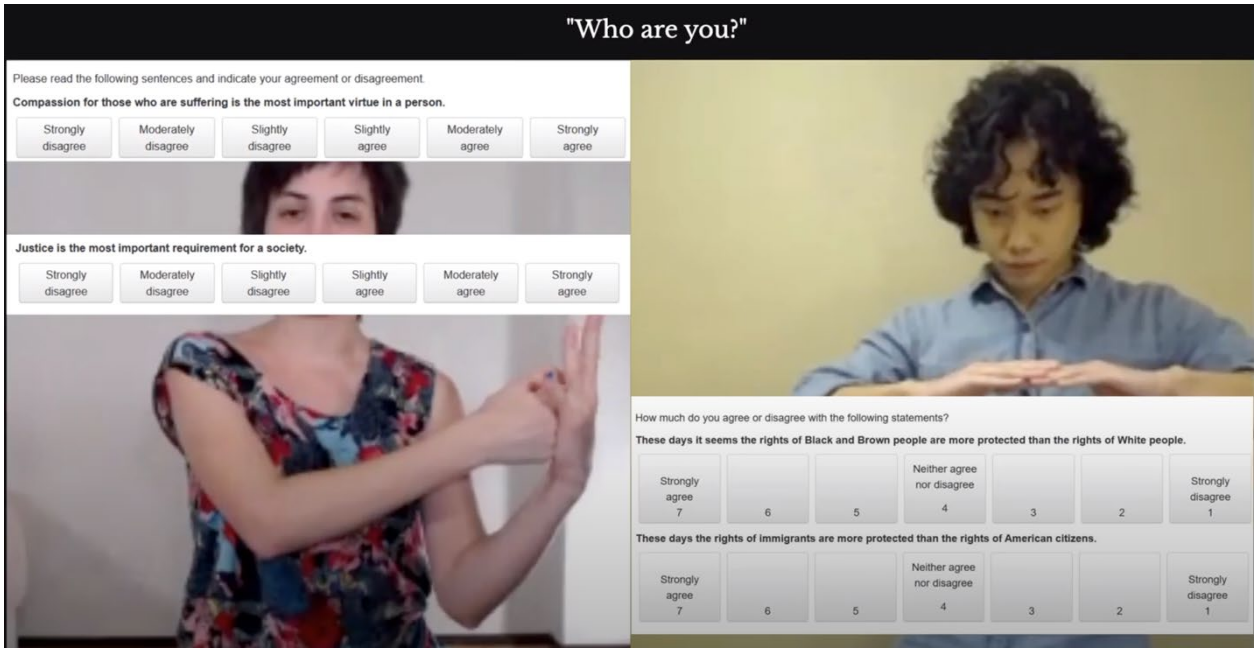
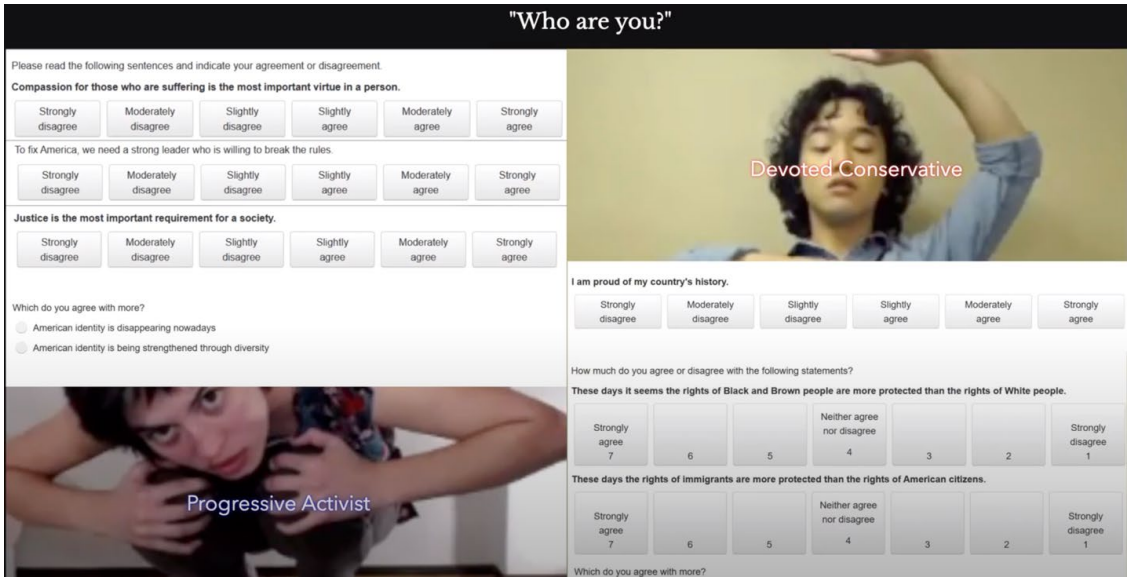


Fig. 6 Sean scrolling on YouTube

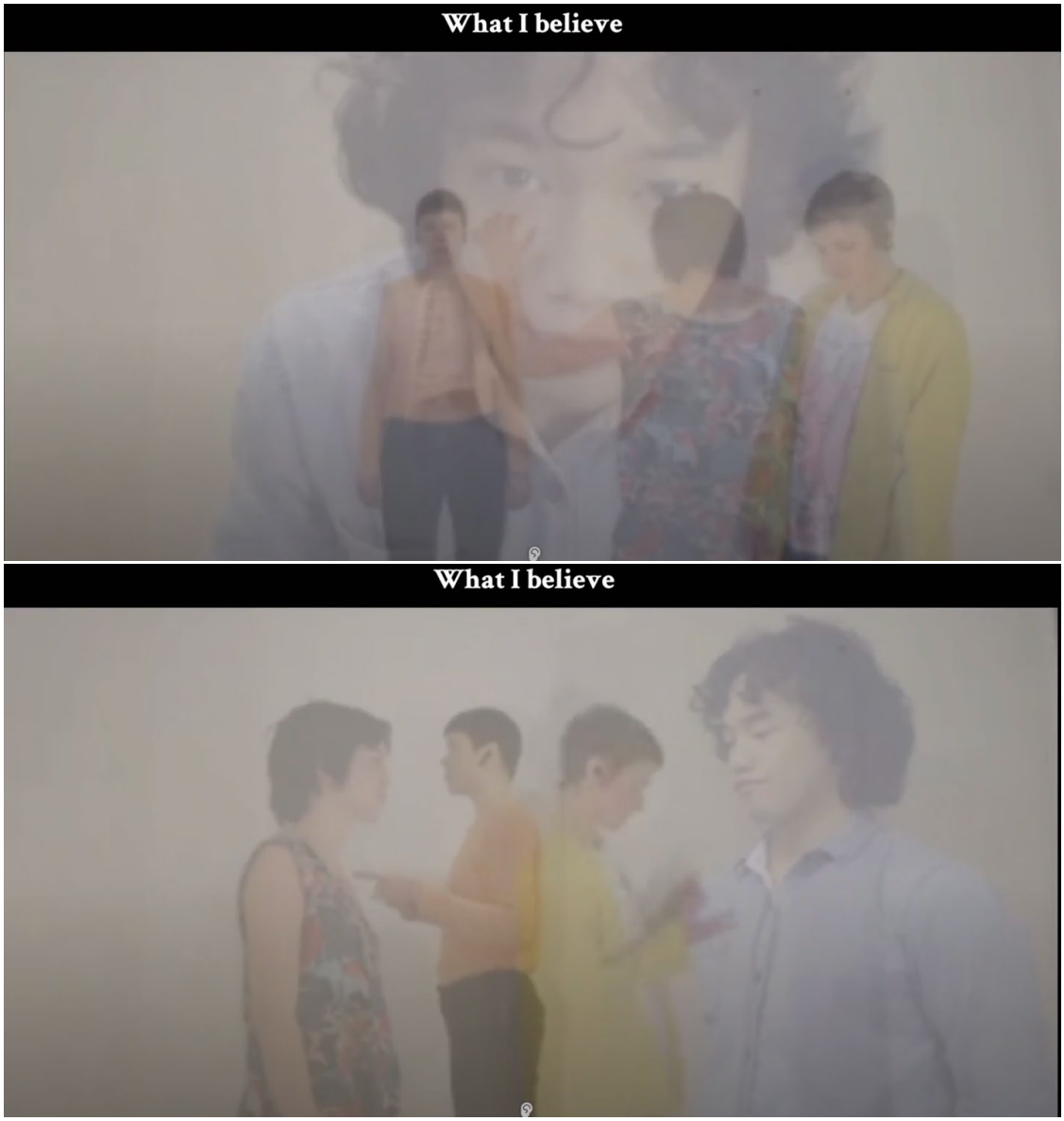
In another scene, titled "Who are you?", Mancino, playing Maitê, and Elizalde, playing Sean, are shown taking the *Hidden Tribes* quiz. They take it in an embodied manner, physically and verbally pushing against it as they interrogate the assumptions embedded into its questions and reductive response choices. The latter are theatrically displayed on the virtual stage as "tangible blocks" encroaching upon the performance space of the actors (Zhang in Jucan et al. 2021) (figs.7&8). The quiz reproduces archetypical beliefs—or "core beliefs driving polarization," according to the *Hidden Tribes* study (Hawkins et al. 2018, 71). These beliefs are further contested and nuanced in the next scene of *Left and Right*, titled "What I believe." Here, the separation between the actors' live feeds is eliminated by overlaying them, thus creating an impression of being in the same (physical) space and expanding the possibilities of relating to each other in a more (fully) embodied way, despite the ideological differences they are given to enact (figs. 9 & 10). One such belief stated by Sean, drawn from the *Hidden Tribes* profile for the Devoted Conservative archetype, is: "Being of my religion is important to me" (Elizalde et al. 2021; Hawkins et al. 2018, 10). In *Left and Right,* this belief is displaced and reinscribed elsewhere: R.E.M's *Losing my religion* is sung by the actors, who also dance to its tune. The singing is then taken over by a sound composition by Peter Bussigel suggestive of the universe of social media platforms. The actors' camera feeds are again separated, and as they become immersed in the aural universe, their bodies gesturally enact the programming behind these beliefs through "nonconscious and habitual actions," which, as Chun has argued, count more than words in the drama of Big Data (2016-b, 363). As the sound becomes more intense, the ensuing disorientation and distortion are made palpable through the live manipulation of the image

with the aid of HSV (Hue, Saturation, Value) filters, which enabled our digital designers to dynamically adjust the colours and vibes of the actors' webcam feeds (fig. 11).





Figs. 7 & 8 Mancino, playing Maitê, and Elizalde, playing Sean, take the *Hidden Tribes* quiz



Figs. 9 & 10 “What I believe”

Fig.11 Gesturally enacting the programmability of belief

Staging embodied movement on a digital stage in *live* online performance is challenging. It is challenging primarily due to the limitations imposed by technology, the condition of being physically remote, and the time differences that come with being located in different parts of the world. These limitations have to do with the confines of the frames within which the camera feeds are displayed, manipulatable only to a certain extent, and with the delay, the time lag, built into networked communication. Liveness, understood as co-presence in time and space, troubled by "the advent of broadcast technologies" such as radio and television (Auslander 2012, 5), undergoes another modification in the context of "hypermediating," networked media. In this case, the space and time of the live performance are and are not the same.

In *Left and Right*, while the actors, members of the production team, and audience members gathered in the same digital space on **ohyay**, their levels of presence (participation) differed. As described earlier, the audience members' co-presence in the same space spanned a range of options, from simply logging into the performance space and "silently" watching (or perhaps doing something else on the computer at the same time) to actively interacting with the actors through the chat function. As for the actors' spatial co-presence with one another, they mostly remained confined within the separate box-like frames within which their camera feeds were displayed. To push against these restrictions, we altered the actors' presence "by applying live visual manipulation to their feeds" (Zhang in Jucan et al. 2021) (see figs. 9&10). In this way, we were able to imbue the performers with a "digital performative existence" that is "not subject to their physical restrictions" (Zhang in Jucan et al. 2021). It is also not subject to the actors' immediate control. In a sense, this is a form of alienated presence (Wu in Jucan et al. 2021). At play here is the "embodiment of digital virtualities" that McKenzie argued would be what "performance" would come to name for future researchers. This implies the undoing of the "live bodies/mediatized bodies" opposition (2001, 267, 262).

As for the temporal co-presence, all the *Left and Right* team members gathered simultaneously to rehearse and perform, but the time was not the same. Co-presence, in

the same time and virtual space, across geographic distance, has time difference built into it, from the usually small, often imperceptible delay to a difference between night and day. While we could organize our schedules and find rehearsal times that worked for everyone without having to rehearse very late nights or early mornings, the performance time was less flexible. If we wanted to have a larger U.S. and Brazil-based audience, it made sense to hold evening performances in addition to matinees (i.e. evenings for a European audience), which meant very late nights for the Romanian actors. While not necessarily visible to the naked eye, these actors' bodies carried into the performance the experience of a day already past and the tiredness that comes with it. The time—and sense of time—of the different actors, members of the production team, and audience members were thus not the same by virtue of the different geographic locations in which they found themselves.

The time—and sense of time—of the different actors, members of the production team, and audience members was also not the same by virtue of the delay built into communication networks, whose smooth run depends on a good Internet connection. While often small, during the run of *Left and Right* this lag was at times perceptible enough to interrupt and even disrupt the rhythm of the performance, at least for some audience members. In a recent article on XR (extended reality) experience, Thomas Vits writes that the delay, the "latency" built into communication networks "is driven by four factors: protocol latency, errors causing retransmission, congestion and distance" (2021). In our own experience of performing *Left and Right,* we noticed that those who had older computers often experienced greater delays and glitches, which is also a contributing factor. The delays that an actor or audience member experiences will differ from those that another actor or audience member experiences and from the delays (potentially) experienced by the same person on different nights of the performance. In this way, the performance becomes a quite personal(ized) experience, not by choice or design but by virtue of taking place *live* online.

Vits emphasizes that reducing (and ideally eliminating) latency is essential for "truly immersive XR experiences" (Vits 2021). XR encompasses virtual reality, augmented reality, and mixed reality. Of the three, AR—understood in the very basic sense of a "simple combination of real and virtual (computer-generated) worlds"; the augmentation by technology of a "real-world image with extra layers of digital information" (Maxwell 2010) —is the most relevant in the case of *Left and Right.* The "real-world" image of the actors' real-world performance spaces and bodies was at times augmented with extra layers of digital information, as shown above. But the intended effect in our case was not that of immersion. This is, in fact, one of the reasons we specifically decided not to create a gamified experience and not to use humanoid avatars for the actors and the audience. The manipulation of the actors' feeds and their overlay was not intended to create a more natural sense of being in the digital space—of feeling "like we're in the same place, even if we're in different states or hundreds of miles apart," something that Mark Zuckerberg has spoken about in his vision of the "metaverse" (in Newton 2021). On the contrary: It was intended to keep open a space for critical thinking and feeling, to inhabit the different forms of spatial, temporal, and ideological distance and difference with attention and care in a shared present moment, an "interval by which one time is not another time even as the times coexist" (to borrow the words of Rebecca Schneider; in Schneider and Ruprecht 2017, 112).

One time is not another time, even as they may coexist in another sense, one that media and cultural studies scholar Sarah Sharma has theorized in terms of "power-chronography" (2014, 9). This approach to time "is about the micropolitics of temporal coordination and social control between multiple temporalities," where temporality refers to "awareness of power relations as they play out in time" (Sharma 2014, 7, 4). These power relations, inscribed and reproduced through the different positioning "within a larger economy of temporal worth" and the labour performed within it, account for the differentials and unevenness in the lived experiences of time even as the times may coexist (Sharma 2014, 8). While it does not, just by virtue of being *live*, reveal the power relations at play in temporal coordination, live online performance does reveal synchronization as a matter of labour, albeit to different extents for different participants. For instance, audience members may have to occasionally refresh the page or imagine the parts of the performance they missed due to glitches, or they may have to juggle multiple things in their physical and/or digital space while watching the performance. Given the default latency, the actors' labour to be in sync with each other involves continuous attention and effort, even when there are no major tech issues (for instance, the pause that naturally occurs in-between lines in face-to-face exchanges would have to be eliminated or drastically reduced to account for the default delay; the movement of one actor would have to be started faster for coordination with another actor to be able to occur). Being in sync also requires careful and sustained viewing of oneself on the screen throughout the performance. As discussed in the first part of this essay, being a performer and simultaneously a spectator to one's performance can be exhausting.

That "the present … is not primal, but rather, reconstituted, that … there is no purity of the living present" (Derrida 1978, 212) is thus amply evident in live online performance, even as the different temporalities at play may not be. This reconstituted present moment is filled with both complexity and possibility, and here is where another sense of liveness comes in: the sense that anything can happen.[14] This sense, I would argue, is intensified in the context of live online performance in which the time lag is an inescapable condition and technological failure a constant possibility. We repeatedly experienced this in rehearsals and during performances for *Left and Right*. While admittedly not desirable and potentially very frustrating, across the spheres of techno-performance, organizational performance, and cultural performance, the time lag and the possibility of technological failure troubles the supposed smoothness of connectivity as well as technological effectiveness, organizational efficiency and social efficacy. According to McKenzie, these three constitute the "performative valorimeters" in the name of which the world is challenged to perform (2001, 195). In the context of live theatre performance, the time lag may serve as a reminder of the many layers of mediated embodiment, distance, and difference, which are not to be smoothed over.

Gathering live across the "digital limen" in the reconstituted present, punctuated by delays, as part of a theatre performance, can thus be an experience of both connection and disconnection, of feeling some sense of togetherness without immersion, across distance and difference. In my view, live online performance opens interesting possibilities for interrogating what it means to perform online while performing online. As a form of site-specific performance, it has the potential to cast light on the connections between global performance, Big Data, and post-truth. It also has the potential to expand access, bringing together actors and audiences from different parts of the world, as well as to counter the logics of virality through theatricality, through the careful staging (framing) of the

(dis/mis)information that circulates online and the performative processes that sustain its spread to counteract their effects. However, as a performance that takes the Internet as its stage, it also risks replicating some of the problems inherent in "the system of digital virality" (Venturini 2019, 137) or simply losing the audience, whose attention may turn to more engaging online offerings, especially if the latency and technical issues prevail during the performance. Whether this kind of remote theatre has a future beyond a pandemic context remains an open question.

Notes

[1] While a comparative reading of de Zengotita and McKenzie is beyond the scope of this article, it bears noting here that there is some resonance between de Zengotita's theorization of mediation in terms of optionality and McKenzie's characterization of the nature of desire in the performance stratum as "excessive" (2001, 19), for optionality feeds and modulates desire, or at least is designed to do so.
[2] For a compelling argument about why the notion of "post-truth" is problematic, see Venturini (2019).
[3] Media and cultural studies scholar Robert Mejia and his co-authors have argued that "the empirical experience of the post-truth has long been in existence", and it is only due to "racial amnesia" that one can claim that "only now do we live in a post-truth era" (Mejia et al. 2018, 110, 109).
[4] Austin's theory of performatives is mentioned in McKenzie's *Perform or Else* (2001), especially in the context of Judith Butler's deconstructive readings of Austin.
[5] The concept of "big social data" is drawn from Ganaele Langlois, Joanna Redden, and Greg Elmer (2015, 1).
[6] See, for instance, the news reports on Instagram star Essena O'Neill quitting Instagram (Garcia 2015).
[7] On Ulman's performances, see (Connor 2014); on influencers denouncing the performative character of social media, see, for instance, (Hunt 2015).
[8] The section that follows is in conversation with and extends a series of recently published video essays on *Left and Right* created by some of my collaborators and myself (Jucan et al. 2021).
[9] The performance team consisted of Marcela Mancino, Patrick Elizalde, Andra Jurj, Fabiola Petri (performers); Tong Wu, Nuntinee Tansrisakul & Yuguang Zhang (digital design and development); Marcela Mancino (theatrical design); Roopa Vasudevan (bot design); Roopa Vasudevan, Anthony Burton (bot concept); Adriana Bвrză-Cвrstea (choreography); Peter Bussigel (sound design); Madeline Greenberg (production manager); Melody Devries (dramaturgy); Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Alex Juhasz, and the Beyond Verification Team associated with the Digital Democracies Institute at Simon Fraser University (performance consultants).
[10] We used the findings of the *Hidden Tribes* study with permission from More in Common, the organization that produced it, but this organization was not a partner of *Left and Right,* and the performance does not represent the views of More in Common.
[11] The quiz is available here: https://hiddentribes.us/quiz/.
[12] To interact with the bots, check out: http://bots.left-and-right.art/. To see the bots narrating their mode of functioning, watch Roopa Vasudevan's video essay "Just Bots" (in Jucan et al. 2021).
[13] For a detailed account of the construction of the bots, see the video essay by media theorist and bot consultant Anthony Burton (Jucan et al. 2021).
[14] In a recent panel discussion on "Digital Rehearsal and Remote Performance Spaces", Mark Coniglio emphasized this very sense of liveness (in Ragan and Coniglio 2021).

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