

E-Interview

Philip Auslander talks to *Performance Paradigm*

Performance Paradigm: *One of the most provocative and useful arguments you raise in your book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Society* (London: Routledge, 1999) is the view that the opposition of live and mediated performance is a 'competitive opposition at the level of cultural economy' and not at the level of intrinsic or ontological differences. (11) The case-studies you use are from pop music and legal contexts as well as staged art performance. Has there been any development in this latter area of practice since you wrote that book that for you underscores the notion that live and mediated forms of performance are mutually dependent? (This might include specific productions or genres of performance).*

Philip Auslander: One of the most interesting works with which I have become familiar since writing *Liveness* is Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle. I consider Barney to be one of the most important performance artists working today. This may seem to be an odd statement, since Barney's main activity is filmmaking and he never presents live performances. From my point of view, however, it is far more interesting to situate his work in the tradition of performance art than that of cinema or video art. This is particularly true with respect to the activities Barney himself performs in his pieces, which are rooted in task-based performance and endurance art, among other things. His work also reflects current trends in performance art, particularly in its engagement with fashion and design.

In *Liveness*, I talk a great deal about how various forms of live performance have become more and more like mediatised events. Barney represents the other side of that equation: a provocative example of work in a mediatised form that is most meaningful, at least for me, when understood as a version of live art.

PP: *One aspect of the discussions from the Roundtable on 'Liveness' at the ATHE 2000 Conference in Washington DC concerned the revision of the formula you developed in the book to the effect that 'Dance + Virtual = Virtual'. Given the ubiquity of projection in dance performance and the work of Company in Space among others in telematic dance, can the distinction of such categories be maintained? How do you think the emergence of multimedia technologies has disrupted such traditional categories of performance as dance or even narrative theatre?*

PA: The original context in which I said 'Dance + Virtual = Virtual' is important. It was in a section of *Liveness* devoted to how different media interact in multimedia performances. The statement reflects the belief, which I continue to hold, that cultural media do not enjoy equal degrees of cultural presence or prestige: some are dominant, some subordinate, and these positions shift over time as new media arrive on the scene. The theatre had a strong cultural

presence prior to the advent of film, which usurped the theatre's position. Film's position as a culturally impactful medium was largely usurped by television, and so on.

Different media therefore do not interact with one another as equals. I said in the book that, if you have live bodies and projections on the same stage, most people are going to look at the projections. This is partly a perceptual matter: the projected images are usually larger and brighter and therefore attract more attention. But it also has to do with the cultural dominance of the screened image at this historical moment. What I meant when I said that 'Dance + Virtual = Virtual' is that, because video and digital media currently possess greater cultural presence than live bodies, they become the framing elements of any performance that incorporates both. The live elements will be perceived through that frame—they will be seen in terms of the video or digital media, not the other way around.

Some people have disputed this point with me, arguing that there are multiple possible relationships among live bodies and electronic media in performance and that the balance of power between them can shift at different moments. I agree that there can be moments in a multimedia production in which all attention is focused on a live body and other moments when that body all but disappears into a digital image. Such interactions certainly can be used thematically to comment on the relationship of our selves to our technologies. But I don't think we can overlook the fact that culturally dominant media are much more likely to be perceived as a performance's primary frame, a term sociologist Erving Goffman used to identify the context that fundamentally defines what is going on in a situation.

My analysis supposes that multimedia technologies have not destabilised the definitions of traditional media and forms very much: to speak of interactions among cultural media assumes that they retain individual identities. I believe that dance, music, theatre and other forms basically retain identities rooted in modern definitions. What's interesting to me is that multimedia technologies invite us to rethink what a *performer* is. A dancer no longer has to be possessed of a physically present human body: the dancing body can be a real body dancing elsewhere, a real body that is present before us, but whose movement is influenced by data from elsewhere, a virtual body, a virtual clone of a live body that is also present before us, and so on. I don't think we've changed our minds fundamentally about what dance is, but I think there's a great potential now to reconsider what kinds of entities can be considered dancers. I focus on dance here because it is a realm in which a great deal of experimentation of this kind is going on; it is also happening in film and music. The theatre remains more conservative: there is much less enthusiasm for virtual stage actors than for virtual dancers.

PP: *What do you think is the fate of narrative theatre or television in the information society?*

PA: Looking at theatre and television today, I would say that traditional narrative is alive and well. So-called 'reality television' is the perfect example of how strong the force of traditional, linear narrative remains. In many of these programs, real-life activities—ranging from courtship to travel to weight-loss—are narrativised on two levels. First, the real-life activities are staged for the camera, usually in the context of a competition of some kind. The narrative of competition is exceedingly familiar, of course, and one that television has always exploited through sports coverage, quiz and game shows etc. Second, the staged material is edited into familiar narrative structures that include an ever-more standardized set of roles and routines (e.g. nice guy, villain, backroom conspiracy) and a conventional narrative progression toward climax and resolution. Whatever impact non-linear forms may have, there is still plenty of room for conventional narrative.

PP: *One of the emergent emphases of the mediatised society you wrote about in Liveness is the place of information. The mediatised society has become, in certain important respects, an informational one. For instance, the screens that saturate public space relay data and information about stock exchange listings, weather and news bytes etc. In this context, has the perception of the live event changed again? Does liveness now need to be understood in terms of global informational media or is liveness again asserting an ontological separation from this experience of the world and a return to local community-based intimate experiences? What do you consider to be the status of live art in the information age?*

PA: The historical antecedents in the 1950s and 1960s for current live art (Happenings, for instance) were strictly art-world phenomena. As I argued in my 1992 book, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*, that started to change in the 1980s as the gap between the worlds of art and entertainment shrank somewhat. Laurie Anderson and Spalding Gray exemplify this transition: each brought a kind of performance that originated in the avant-garde into more mainstream contexts.

The current situation is the legacy of that moment. It's impossible to say that live art enjoys any single status in the information age—there are versions of live art that are still primarily art-world phenomena, others that appeal to much broader audiences. The Burning Man festival is a case in point—an event featuring performance that is itself a performance, which partakes simultaneously of frontier mythology, a counter-cultural impulse, and popular cultural visibility.

Historically, live art was always an art of information. This was literally the case in the work of someone like Bernar Venet, who presented lectures on abstruse mathematical or scientific topics as art events, but it is also the case for all the

work that was actually performed for a very small audience and exists primarily through documentation—most of the landmark events in the history of performance art fall into this category. In that sense, live art was often more concerned with producing and circulating information about an event than with the event itself. Perhaps we are now seeing this process loop back on itself: whereas earlier live art was often fundamentally about the generation and transmission of information, much live art today is involved with the consumption and recirculation of existing information (in the form of appropriated images, historical references, digital signals, live video feeds, etc.).

PP: *We are examining, among other things, Stelarc's provocation 'We have always been prosthetic bodies, augmented and extended' (1999) If this means we are now in a cybernetic age, what according to your observations has been the response from the performing arts in terms of the characterisation and representation of 'human' motivation and emotion? Is it still meaningful to talk about a kind of media-human dichotomy in performance?*

PA: Not only do I think it's meaningful to continue talking about in terms of a 'media-human dichotomy', I think it's essential to do so.

The Rodney King trial in 1993 brought home to me very vividly that bodies do not speak for themselves. I'm thinking of the way the videotape of the beating was used at the trial: it was shown in slow motion and the lawyers told the jury how to understand what they were looking at. The record of bodily experience was not simply presented as self-explanatory: it was explicated, articulated through discourse. It was not allowed to signify at a visceral, empathetic level.

We need to remain alert to what happens to the body when it is mediatised. Too often, the mediatised body is an anaesthetised body. I would be the last person to argue that the body signifies at some basic level that precedes or transcends its cultural inscriptions. Nevertheless, there is an ethical imperative not to conflate the body with its representations and mediations, but to remember that there is an actual body there somewhere, experiencing the consequences of what is being done to it.

As far as human motivation and emotion are concerned, I assume that everything we human beings create is expressive of those forces—how could it not be? The work on performance and technology that I have done since *Liveness* revolves primarily around questions having to do with machine performers. Partly, this work advances an argument that it is possible to think of machines, not only as performers, but also in some cases as *live* performers (even though they are not organically alive). I touch as well on the idea that machine performance can address human feelings and desires in meaningful ways that are different from performances by human beings.

One piece I find intriguing in this context is Sergei Shutov's *Abacus*, which I saw in the Russian pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2001. The installation consists of over forty crouching figures draped in black, which face an open door and pray out loud in numerous languages representing a multitude of faiths while making the reverential movements appropriate to prayer. Nearby, video monitors display the texts of the prayers in their many alphabets. Many people at the Biennale spoke of the 'performance' in the Russian pavilion, but the figures in *Abacus* are not human beings—they are robots programmed by a computer to engage in reverential movements accompanied by the recorded sounds of ecumenical prayer.

This piece clearly is very poignant in light of current global conflicts. It lends itself to two levels of interpretation. At the first level, one can think about the installation as a representational work and consider what it might be saying about human beings and the idea of religious faith. But a second level opens up if one acknowledges the fact that the figures are not just representations of human beings, but in fact machines, mechanised surrogates who can pray perpetually while their human counterparts do worldly things. Is the piece a prosthetic extension of the prayerful human body, or is it a kind of outsourcing of that function to a technologically sophisticated entity capable of doing it more efficiently? It isn't my purpose here to offer an interpretation of the piece. I just want to point out that the fact that the 'performers' in it are machines raises powerful questions about *human* motivation and emotion around the issues of faith and prayer that would not come up if the performers were human beings.

PP: *Have developments in media and information technology really made new modes of performance possible in areas such as time-based art, new media art and multimedia performance, or is the rise of DJs and VeeJays as performers attributable to the proliferation of the discourses of performance? For instance, the digital installation piece 'Modell 5', by the art collective Granular Synthesis, is described by the artists in the company as a 'live performance'. The live component of the performance consists in the mixing of images and soundtrack and controlling the levels of sub-bass. It's hardly the stuff of conventional performance aesthetics, but it is nonetheless linked to the notion of presence.*

PA: This is an intriguing if slightly tricky question, because the concepts we use to describe the fundamental modes of performance are themselves moving targets. For example, it follows from my proposition that the word 'live' refers to a historical position, rather than an ontological condition that the concept of 'liveness' changes over time. I have argued that the earliest uses of the word 'live' initially distinguished between two discrete categories—live and recorded—that have become less discrete over time. For instance, the idea of a live broadcast constituted a redefinition of liveness such that performers and spectators no longer had to be physically co-present for an event to count as live. What had been a physico-temporal relationship thus became a purely temporal one. The use of the phrase 'go live' (originally a broadcasting term) to describe

the initiation of websites suggests that we are now prepared to extend the concept of liveness to non-human entities (websites) with which we nevertheless interact in real time. The idea that liveness is a fundamental mode of performance remains unchanged over this history even as the definition of what counts as a live event changes in response to technological innovation.

PP: *In the 1960s Marcuse wrote that ‘domination has its own aesthetics’. Technologically-oriented new media art is the emergent dominant aesthetic form of the mediatised society and the impact of this on performance culture has been immense, but there is a perception that this dominance also reflects the absorption and containment or colonisation of the oppositionality of art through the application of an administrative and managerial logic. Is there any evidence that this is occurring? Are there, in your view, aspects of media technologies that restrict the parameters of experimental performance in terms of, for instance, the scope of critique—e.g. the way LACMA developed its Art and Technology program in 1966 illustrates the problem?*

PA: I try very hard to steer clear of technological determinism, so I would not say that there are aspects of new technologies themselves that ‘restrict the parameters of experimental performance’ or ‘the scope of critique’. I have long maintained that any technology can be used either to articulate a critique or to reinforce the status quo. I think there are problems in these areas with respect to new media, but they have to do with contextual issues, not with the technologies themselves.

One problem is simply the cost of the technologies, which means that artists often have to rely on corporate largesse, government funding, or university support just to do the work. I do not criticise artists for accepting such assistance, but it would seem to lead to an understandable reluctance to bite the hand that feeds you. In order to obtain funding, artists often have to make at least a pretense of collaborating with scientists or engineers. This is not an intrinsically bad idea—though the cultural differences among artists, scientists, technologists, and critics need to be addressed more honestly—but it does have the consequence that art projects are now often assessed in terms derived from science and technology, rather than aesthetics: there is an emphasis on ‘findings’, ‘deliverables’, ‘knowledge transfer’ and the like, rather than artistic or specifically cultural or political value. In some cases, artistic production is treated more or less as the research and development phase of transferable technologies and techniques.

I frankly think that the main restriction on the use of technology in experimental performance is that this work is still at an early stage and that much of it is relatively crude. It is so often confined to formal experimentation, to seeing what the technology can actually be made to do, that the question of its content or potential for critique is distinctly secondary. I would add that a sustained and

sophisticated critical discourse surrounding this kind of work also has yet to appear: it is too often evaluated more for its technical accomplishment and novelty than for what it is actually saying or doing.

PP: *One of the functions of the media, as Frederic Jameson suggests, is 'to help us forget', to relegate events as quickly as possible into the past. Live performance could once be seen as a guarantor of organic memory, of the exchange of embodied memories and the handing on of tradition before an audience. Does it continue to operate in this way in the information age? How does new media performance address the memory problem?*

PA: In keeping with my resistance to technological determinism and ontological characterisations of media, I'm going to quibble with the phrasing of this question because of the way it aligns memory with live performance and forgetting with mediatisation as if there is an intrinsic connection between the two terms in each pair. I think I know what Jameson meant, and I would be inclined to agree that the way the news media, in particular, narrate current events makes it seem as if those events are done deals in which one could not possibly intervene. But this has to do with how media technology is used to construct narratives and the interests those narratives serve, not with the technology itself. Whereas it makes sense at one level to say that the news media use video technology to make us forget, it is equally clear that an organisation such as the Shoah Foundation, which collects testimony on video from Jewish Holocaust survivors, is using the same technology to make us remember.

In a similar vein, there is nothing intrinsic to live performance that promotes the cultural transmission of memory, though it certainly functioned that way in pre-literate cultures. Richard Schechner argues in 'The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde' that the avant-garde theatre of the Vietnam War era failed to produce a 'living tradition of experimental theatre'. (Schechner 1982) Even though this kind of theatre generally emphasised liveness, presence, and authenticity above all else, it did not succeed in transmitting what Schechner calls 'performance knowledge'. As Schechner points out, such knowledge must be communicated 'body-to-body', and such communication requires time and a cultural situation that respects the process. I'm suggesting that 'the exchange of embodied memories and the handing on of tradition before [or to] an audience' doesn't simply happen automatically as a direct result of live performance. Absent the necessary cultural context, it won't happen at all no matter how assertively 'live' the event is.

I think the question of whether or not new media performance can create a living tradition in Schechner's sense of a community of artists exchanging ideas and techniques on a continuing basis over generations is a worthwhile one to ask. It's probably too soon to say, but I don't find the early signs especially propitious. One thing that has been frustrating me a great deal recently as I travel is finding

people who are exploring the same technologies in relation to the same performance techniques in various parts of the world with no awareness of one another and, therefore, no dialogue. There are many reasons for this, including the institutional issues I discussed earlier, but the result is that the same wheels are being reinvented over and over again.

PP: *Shimizu Shinjin, from the post-butoh company Gekidan Kaitaisha, describes the first Gulf War as the 'war without bodies'. The second Gulf War has seen a return of the body with the explosion of images from Abu Graib. What are some of the issues for the status of the body in light of the second Gulf War?*

PA: The question for me is: Will the return of the body in the representational economy of the current Gulf War make any positive political difference? From what I see in the US, I can't hold out much hope that it will.

Whereas the first Gulf War was indeed a simulated "war without bodies," the second Bush administration is using nothing so sophisticated as simulation in managing public perception of the second war. I describe the current strategy as one of *assertion*: the administration simply tells the public that signs that seem to mean that the war is a disaster on multiple fronts (e.g. images of abused prisoners, dead and injured soldiers and civilians on all sides) actually mean that the war is going well, that victory and democracy are close at hand. If simulation is a postmodern trope, the current Bush administration has returned us to modernism: its strategy of assertion is more akin to Orwell's concept of the Big Lie than to anything in Baudrillard. It seems to be effective: as far as I can tell, the majority of the American public accepts the war, either as a good cause or as something we cannot turn our backs on now that we're embroiled. There may come a point, as happened with the Vietnam War, when the body count will outweigh the public's commitment. If and when that will happen, I cannot say.

My general point about the status of the body in light of this development is the same one I made in response to an earlier question you asked. The body does not speak for itself: its meaning is always constructed through discourses that serve specific interests.

PP: *Viewer interactions with media artworks tend to be dynamic and spontaneous as if to counter what Lev Manovich calls 'totalitarian interactivity', the way that new media art manipulates viewers' subjective engagements to follow an established network of links rather than make their own associations with an image or an artwork. (<http://www.manovich.net/TEXT/totalitarian.html>) Whereas theatre spectatorship outside experimental contexts is still largely a passive affair. Is interactivity, even the totalitarian kind, going to be an important aspect of the experience of live performance in the future?*

PA: There was a cute article in the Atlanta *Journal-Constitution* (my local newspaper) for 19 December 2004, in which columnist Cynthia Tucker described taking her six-year-old niece on her first trip to New York City. Tucker reports that

the little girl was bored by the New York City Ballet's production of Balanchine's *Nutcracker*, but found the revolving door at the hotel endlessly fascinating. One obvious way of explaining the girl's preference is through the dichotomy of passive and interactive audience positions: she clearly preferred something that engaged her actively and physically to a performance that asked her to assume the mien of a traditional theatre-goer.

Interactivity is a cultural dominant at the moment; as such, it is a very important point of reference for live performance. As young people who grew up in a cultural environment dominated by interactive media come of age, they may demand that kind of relationship from all of their cultural experiences.

That said, I think there are two points that need to be made here—points that Lev Manovich addresses in the text to which you referred me and I generally agree with his positions. The first is that there is no such thing as a passive audience. There is no such creature as the so-called 'couch potato', who watches television in a completely inert, purely receptive state. Audiences always engage actively and critically with what they're watching, even when that activity is not externalised. Anne Ubersfeld, for example, describes audiences for traditional theatre as engaged in bricolage: spectators select their own objects of interest and attention from the materials offered by the production, and order them into an experience of their own devising that is meaningful on an individual level. For me, the characterisation of audiences who aren't pushing buttons, manipulating joysticks, moving, or touching something as 'passive' is ideological: it serves the interests of those promoting interactive technologies by willfully misunderstanding what spectators for traditional media and art forms actually do.

The second point has to do with our understanding of interactivity. I think Raymond Williams got it right thirty years ago in his book on television, when he pointed to the difference between interactive and reactive systems. Any system that asks you basically to make choices from a menu is reactive, not truly interactive. When the menu is large enough, we have the illusion of interactivity, in which our input has a structural impact on the system itself, but it is an illusion. There's nothing intrinsically bad about complex reactive systems: they can provide a wide range of pleasurable and edifying experiences. But the users' relationship to the system is finally not that different from traditional theatre, film, and television audiences because they are still choosing from among materials provided to them.

References

Schechner, Richard. *The End of Humanism: Writings on Performance*. (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982)