Text and Performance Quarterly
Vol. 25, No. 2, April 2005, pp. 156–170

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Remembering Praxis: Performance in the Digital Age

Marcyrose Chvasta

For nearly two decades, performers have been engaging in digitally mediated performance practices. Though performance theorists have been debating the ontological status of performance that relies on digital and information technologies, practitioners have carried on without waiting for a scholarly verdict. In this essay, I interrogate the central ontological condition of the live body in performance theory in light of digitally mediated performance, making a call for a renewed commitment to performance praxis. Furthermore, I argue that performance practitioners have understood the virtual long before the advent of digital technologies.

Keywords: Virtuality; Liveness; Digitally Mediated Performance; Praxis; Pierre Lévy

In a recent issue of this journal, Mindy Fenske introduces a provocative way of thinking about performance—whether live or mediated—in her essay "The Aesthetic of the Unfinished: Ethics and Performance." Fenske does a fine job of reviewing the ways in which live and technologically mediated bodies tend to be perceived in opposition to each other within performance discourse. Fenske makes a compelling argument that performance theorists need to move beyond the perceptual habit of placing corporeality and virtuality in a hierarchical binary and instead work from a Bakhtinian aesthetic that values "the dialogic and discontinuous connection between form and content, corporeality and virtuality" (15). Furthermore, she argues that such valuing is an ethical stance that, in practice, allows for "possibility, movement, and change" (17). Dwelling on the ontological debates of what constitutes "performance" is not necessarily productive, Fenske argues, especially if the interrogations lead to

Marcyrose Chvasta is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida where she teaches performance, cultural, and media studies. The author thanks the reviewers, and especially Michael Bowman, for all of their helpful input. Correspondence to: Marcyrose Chvasta, Ph.D., Department of Communication, University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Ave., Tampa, FL 33620. Email: mchvasta@cas.usf.edu

ISSN 1046-2937 (print)/ISSN 1479-5760 (online) © 2005 National Communication Association
DOI: 10.1080/10462930500122815

stasis. As a "specific path through" and an "escape from" the debates, Fenske offers a framework for producing and responding to "ethically engaged aesthetic acts" (1).

In this essay, I hope to maintain the spirit of Fenske's essay and provide another approach to considering the possibilities of digital mediation for performance. As Fenske points out, performance theorists have been debating the ontologies of liveness and mediation for some time, perhaps starting with Philip Auslander's response to and critique of Peggy Phelan's ontology of performance which limits "performance" to the ephemeral copresence of live performers and audience. While it is important to learn the details of Phelan's and Auslander's arguments, and the positions of those who work from their arguments (e.g., Baker; Causey; Reason; Saltz), we can also learn much from performers who have been incorporating digital media in their work for over a decade without stopping to wonder whether or not what they are doing is "performance." Perhaps more important, we can also learn from each other and our students who increasingly perceive digital technology as an integral component of everyday life and art.

I have two primary goals for this essay: to convey the experiences of some performers who utilize digital technology; and to encourage my colleagues to embrace, explore, and extend the possibilities of using digital technology in their performance work so that we may join current conversations about mediated performance. Despite the fact that performers (mostly international) have been working with digital technology for nearly two decades, this journal has presented few accounts of digitally mediated performance (DMP); neither has it dedicated a significant number of pages to the theorization of digitally mediated performance. I hope that this essay helps to increase the production and presence of such work.

After a brief review of the Phelan-Auslander debates, I will note some of the ways in which the notion of the live body has dominated our talk about and understanding of performance. Next, I will survey the work of just a few of the many performers who work with digital technology. These performers have come to understand the body in ways that potentially challenge and extend many conceptualizations of the body in live performance theory. Finally, I will introduce the work of digital media philosopher Pierre Lévy to argue that performance practitioners have understood a philosophical sense of "the virtual" long before the development of electronic or digital media. Ultimately, this essay serves as a reminder to myself and others to remember and perform the kind of work that we do. As performance studies scholars, we engage in praxis: the theoretically informed practice that yields further practice and theory—our own kind of grounded theory designed to share with others what we have come to know through our *doing*. I see no reason not to engage in the practice of and conversation surrounding digitally mediated performance, and I hope that this essay will encourage others to do so.

What's the Matter?

Nestled within Phelan's book, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, amidst the Lacanian critiques of visibility and oppressive gendered practices rests a chapter

entitled "The Ontology of Performance." To open her discussion, Phelan asserts: "Performance's only life is in the present" (146). Its only reality is an immediate reality. Any attempt to capture this reality (documentation) is not the performance itself; therefore, claims Phelan, performance "becomes itself through disappearance" (146). Ephemerality, then, becomes a defining feature of performance. Phelan furthers her definition, reinforcing particular spatiotemporal and corporeal conditions of performance:

> Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies. . . . [L]ive performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally charged present—and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control. (148)

The complexities of Phelan's ontology become evident in the attempt to discern the conditions of her "presence." One map of the conditional relationships that constitute Phelan's presence might read: Performance depends upon the presence of live and visible bodies. This presence is necessarily short-lived, for live performances never, nor could they ever, go on for countless days, weeks, or months. Thus, for Phelan, presence is characterized by *close space* (and *closed space*) between *live bodies* (performers and audience) covering a *short duration*.

Though he had been writing about performance and technology since the 1980s, Auslander, in "Liveness: Performance and the Anxiety of Simulation," directly addresses Phelan's ontology of performance in order to problematize implicit and explicit distinctions she makes between "live" and "mediated" performance. According to Auslander, one cannot (except in terms of exclusion) account for multimedia performance within Phelan's ontology, and this inability is problematic. To make his case, Auslander calls upon the work of Jean Baudrillard to argue that live vs. mediated is a false dichotomy. Auslander explains: "Far from being encroached upon [as Phelan would have it], contaminated, or threatened by mediation, live performance is always already inscribed with traces of the possibility of technical mediation (i.e., mediatization) that defines it as live" (199). That is, we can only understand "live" in terms of mediation, and vice versa—"mediatization is now explicitly and implicitly conjoined to live experience" (203). To isolate performance outside of technological influences is (or, must be recognized as) an impossibility.

Appealing to two other performance theorists, Patrice Pavis and Herbert Blau, Auslander states that "we cannot realistically propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of mass media" (197). Then, in a move reminiscent of Derrida's work to problematize the perceived primacy of presence, Auslander argues that the live is, "in a sense, only a secondary effect of mediating technologies" (198). That is, until the development of technologies of reproduction, there was no need to name anything or anyone "live" as it denotes a contrast to "mediated." The concept of liveness is thus a technocultural construct. Given this reading, Phelan's inclusion of "live bodies" in her ontology is an unrealized presupposition, rather than a successful exclusion, of the mediated bodies of performance. But Phelan persists in her perception.

In her 1997 book *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, Phelan recognizes the complexity of corporeal presence in a culture that is perhaps seduced by "the claims of virtual reality and electronic presence" (2). Phelan urges performance theorists "to think more seriously about what theatre and performance have to teach us about the possibilities and perils of summoning the incorporeal" (2). From these statements, we can infer that "virtual reality" is the realm of "the incorporeal," and "electronic presence" is qualifiably different from the presence of her "performance." Furthermore, although the word "incorporeal" contains "corporeal," Phelan seems determined to keep the terms opposed: "Performance's independence from mass production, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength" (149). For Phelan, it is imperative that we perceive performance as constituted only by the short-lived copresence of live bodies. And I understand, if not fully accept, her position.

In his *Theatre Annual* monograph, "Unstoried: Teaching Literature in the Age of Performance Studies," Paul Edwards traces a disciplinary history from elocution to expression to oral interpretation to performance studies. Throughout his history, two fundamental features of performance stand out: text and embodiment. These features are regulars in any review of the field (see, e.g., Denzin; Shields; Strine, Long, and HopKins; "Symposium"; Taft-Kaufman), though how we understand "text" changed over time. In "A Paradigm for Performance Studies," Ronald J. Pelias and James VanOosting note the nominal shift from "oral interpretation" to "performance studies" and the accompanying extension of the notion of "text" from literature alone to "all human discourse" (222). The element of embodiment, however, remains relatively stable for Pelias and VanOosting. Based on their observations of and experiences in the discipline, Pelias and VanOosting claim that the methodology of performance studies "depends upon personal responsiveness, somatic engagement, and cognitive analysis" (222). Like that of oral interpretation, performance studies' "mode of inquiry demands physical, sensuous involvement in a performance event" (221–22). However, in relation to the oral interpretation of literature, "performance studies yields new understandings of enactment" (222). According to the authors, this "new understanding" comes from broadening our definitions of performance elements such as "text," "event," "performer," and "audience" (222). It is unclear, however, whether Pelias and VanOosting endorse a copresence of live performers and audience members as a necessary condition of performance. One can be sure, however, that the authors were not considering digitally mediated performance as they pondered the state of the field in the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, when they insist upon physical involvement in performance, they do not imply that such involvement is not without complexity.

Physical presence in performance, or "the body," is not—or should not be—an unqualifiable term. Many scholars have been interested in locating and exploring the definitional boundaries of "the body." In his essay "The Actor's Bodies," for instance, David Graver argues that the actor's body on stage is multifaceted, if not multitudinous. For Graver, "Actors are (to greater or lesser extents depending on their activities, appearance, and histories) characters, performers, commentators,

personages, members of socio-historical groups, physical flesh, and loci of private sensations" (222). Furthermore, Graver argues that each of these bodies is composed of an interiority and exteriority—what is felt by the performer and what is perceived by the audience.

Graver's discussion of the actor's many bodies echoes many performance theorists' explications of the body in performance. In these discussions, one central question is: Whose bodies are valued in our culture? In *The Explicit Body in Performance*, for example, Rebecca Schneider analyzes several performances by and of women who are naked. She contrasts artwork generated by men depicting naked women with the live performances of women who chose to make their own bodies visible on their own terms. Schneider questions the degree of agency these performers have, as performances are never fully controlled by the performer. As audience members will read performances through their own experiential screens, the significance of any performance is negotiated between performer and audience. Phelan writes about similar issues surrounding the gendered body in *Unmarked* and *Mourning Sex*. Lynda Hart focuses on the queered body in her essay "Doing it Anyway: Lesbian Sado-Masochism and Performance." Robbie McCauley reflects on her own raced body in "Thoughts on My Career, *The Other Weapon*, and Other Projects." Each of these theorists recognizes that the physical body is constituted by a complex weave of signifier (initial physical appearance) and signified (sociohistorical placement). As Derrida continually points out (e.g., *Margins*), every sign carries a chain of signifiers that have material effects on human beings. All of these theorists, and many more, seek to highlight the ways in which certain bodies are valued in this culture—to determine how and why certain bodies are more present than others. Many of these theorists, including Phelan, examine mediated bodies (on film and in photographs) in order to ponder the material conditions of organic bodies. While Schneider is most explicit about the inextricable relationship between "live" and "mediated" bodies, it seems that all of these performance theorists recognize that the body on screen has a presence that matches that of the body on stage—or on the street, for that matter.

For the past ten years, performers in the United Kingdom have been pursuing the possibilities that information technology (IT) could have for live performance. The Arts and Humanities Data Service (AHDS) of London has a website containing information to help visual and performing artists use digital technology to archive and enhance their work. Within this site, one can find a "Guide to Good Practice" for performers. In the introduction to this guide, "Dramatic Forays into IT: Working Computers with a Broom Handle," editor Barry Smith acknowledges the reluctance of performing artists to develop techniques for incorporating digital technology in performance practice: "Performing arts as in theatre/drama/live-art performance more than any other field of study save perhaps sports, inevitably puts at its core 'live performance'" (par. 3). Indeed, the copresence of live bodies *has* been a defining feature of performance. It is in the *practice* of performance, however, that this proclaimed ontological feature has been challenged for years.

In this next section, I will highlight some of the many performers who work with digital media and the resources that are currently available to those interested

in following suit. Ultimately, this next section is a testament to the ways that performers are *doing* in an effort to reach *understanding*.

Doing IT

Since the early 1990s, performers in the United Kingdom have been producing DMP—or, in the terms of performance archivist Barry Smith, taking "dramatic forays into IT"—despite the fact that many performance artists in academia were faithful to the notion that performance is executed only by "live" bodies (pars. 2–3). The bias against DMP still exists, Smith notes, but he argues that perceptions are changing, for IT

> . . . has gotten "better" and more relevant on all fronts—in its functionality and practicality within performance practice and events, as a medium for studying, recording, analyzing and then recording and disseminating conclusions, as a storehouse of research documentation for future generations and, not of least importance to academics and teachers, as a novel and potentially vibrant and massive teaching and learning facility. (par. 5)

It is Smith's hope that more traditional performers will recognize the ways in which they already depend upon technology (e.g., sound and lighting) and consider the benefits and costs of utilizing IT.

It is at this point that I want to acknowledge that digital technology is not available or accessible—financially or cognitively—to everyone. However, colleges and universities can afford items such as digital cameras and projectors, and guides such as the aforementioned are plentiful online or on library bookshelves. In many ways, the academy is the perfect place to explore the possibilities of DMP. Performers outside the academy have to rely on their own finances or the generosity of institutions or governments to grant them money to support their work. Such is the case of the Desperate Optimists (DO), a performance duo who transitioned from touring their work around the UK to creating DMP for wider exposure and extended avenues for creativity.

At a 2002 conference held by the Wooster Group, a US performance ensemble that employs electronic and digital media in many of its productions,[1] DO members Joe Lawler and Christine Malloy prefaced their commentary on the development of DMP with an anecdote:

> [A]s recently as 1998, we were told by the nation's principle [sic] arts funding organization, the Arts Council of England's Drama Department, that using video wasn't really the stuff of theatre and that although they would support our bid they communicated to us that there was anxiety from the panel that we were spending too much money on video and that we should be doing more to get real, human beings on stage. (Lawler and Malloy par. 2)

The DO were so dismayed by the Council's response that they have not toured "live" since that particular funded show, and they have not returned to the Council for further support. They admit that the Council's position may have changed since their last exchange; however, they clearly remain disappointed—even put off—by the

"suspicious reaction" to mediated performance (par. 3). The DO find that using media technology is a perfect way to include more performers and audiences in their work, and that the financial expense of new technologies is far outweighed by the recurring benefits (i.e., increased creativity, as they see it, and the permanency of audiovisual recordings).[2]

In an interview with Ben Slater, Lawler and Malloy discuss their experience with and perceptions of traditionally live performance:

> Performance, at least the end of it we were involved in, is very hermetically sealed and actually quite academic (and apparently pleased with itself in this regard). We find that very uninteresting and dangerously inward looking (it can be a very small gene pool the academic world). Much better, we think, to be developing moving image and digitally based initiatives which have a relationship to communities both on-line and especially local and real. Did we say "real"?, we [sic] meant outside of formal institutions. (Slater, par. 4 of "Answer One")

It is fair to say that the "academic world" to which Lawler and Malloy refer would align itself with Phelan's "ontologically pristine" (Auslander 127) conceptualization of performance. It is unfair of them to condemn academe as populated by self-serving inbreeds who see no farther than the Ivory Tower will allow them. Nevertheless, I tend to agree with Lawler and Malloy's belief that investigations of digital technologies and their capabilities can lead to a mundane enlightenment regarding the everyday effects of media on the human condition. They state, "Perhaps by foregrounding the digital aspects of our work we've invariably found ourselves hanging out where the more interesting and current cultural and social debates are happening" (Slater, par. 3 of "Answer One"). The issues they historically have been interested in are poverty, urban space, survival strategies and coping mechanisms as they affect and are used by citizens of the UK. Their work, however, accessible via the Internet, is applicable to other Western societies. This accessibility is paramount in their desire to work with cameras and computers rather than through touring live performances. They comment on their experience with such touring:

> When you're making live work you're constantly traveling and not really engaging with any context other than the black box one. How many times did we (and this is echoed by others also) travel to a city and just do the gig and go on to another one. Never really getting a sense of where we were or what the local terrain was like. It's an important thing we were missing out on there. (Slater, par. 2 of "Answer Four")

Of course, sharing your work online does not afford a good sense of the location of the viewer. However, viewers have the ability to respond to the work via email and engage in dialogue with the artists over an extended period of time. In this way, DMP allows for the possibility of a more intimate exchange with audience members than does live performance. The DO have created a way to facilitate dialogue that exceeds their ability to do so when they toured.

The digital performance collective, Underscore, of which I am a part, relied on webcasting for their performance *Shock & Autonomy*. We, like the DO, hoped to include as many people as possible in the event without having to rely on costly live appearances. We also wanted to have a performance that would be accessible beyond

its "live" life. Instead of flying performers from across the United States to one locale, live performers in Illinois and Minnesota were webcast into a live performance taking place in New York. The entire performance was webcast live to audience sites not only in New York, Illinois, and Minnesota, but also California, Wisconsin, and Florida. Our goal was to use technology to reach a mass audience (at least, more massive than a performance with copresent performers and audience members in a shared space for one show) to critique the dissemination of messages produced by our government post-September 11, 2001. At the same time, we hoped to highlight technology's power to make more information accessible to more people—without losing sight of more critical perceptions of information technology. The entire performance is archived on a server at Hofstra University (whose technical support we could not have done without) and is accessible online—if you have the proper media player software, and if the server decides to download the file for you. Indeed, I write this essay with full knowledge of the difficulties that come to those who hope to use technology in performance. Nevertheless, I reassert that it is within the academy that performers have resources and support beyond those who work outside the academy.

Steve Dixon is another DM performer who is also an academic. However, he is not, as the DO might characterize, a member of the "inward looking" set of academe. As director of the Chameleon Group, Dixon has developed performances that interrogate performance theory and lead to insights that serve both traditional and more contemporary conceptualizations of the performer and audience. In his contribution, entitled "IT and the Audio-Visual Theatre Essay" to the "Guide to Good Practice" mentioned above, Dixon explains:

> The interrelationship between the two modes of the live and recorded performance is central to our Group's artistic philosophy, and links to Artaud's concept of the double. Whilst this notion of the double is complex and multifaceted, in simple terms, our mise-en-scene enables the live performer to act out a character and narrative on stage whilst inhabiting a wholly different persona on screen. The screen dialectisizes the subject, allowing simultaneous expression of the external and the internal, the social and the primitive, the conscious and the unconscious, the body and its double. (par. 1, "Voice Over Commentary" section)

While the dual subject seems to enforce a simple distinction between the live and mediated bodies, Dixon argues that the media enables his performers to point toward a more complex perception of space and time, and hence, the body. For Dixon, there is no power differential between the live and the mediated body—both are equally forceful embodiments of human experience. Furthermore, in a separate essay, he argues,

> In contemporary cultural and cybercultural theories, the body has been increasingly conceptualised as an object divorced from the mind, and emerging discourses on the virtual body and "disembodiment" reinforce and extend the Cartesian split. The bifurcatory division between body and mind has lead to an objectified redefinition of the human subject—the "person"—into an abstracted, depersonalised and increasingly dehumanised physical object. ("Absent Fiends" par. 7)

For Dixon, neither the body located in front of the screen nor the body on the screen experiences disembodiment, for both are conscious and feeling beings. Even more to the point, a conscious body is a feeling body and a feeling body is a conscious body. Cyberenthusiasts, who valorize the mind as somehow separable from the body, are just as faulty in their logic as the performance theorists who believe that DMP showcases disembodiment and who valorize the live and present body over any other type of mediated body, thereby embracing a corpocentrism, if you will.[3]

As DMP is often captured digitally in its entirety, DMP is often archived online, thereby existing in contradiction to Phelan's desire to keep performance independent from mass mediation and recording. Materially, the DMP archived is not wholly different from the "original" DMP—especially if the DMP had no live audience to begin with other than the performers and producers on-site during its creation. While not all—or even the majority—of digitally archived performances are of high resolution quality, the technology and performance direction continue to improve and more archive sites are in the works. Examples of current digital archives include: the Center for Performance Research at Aberystwyth (http://www.thecpr.org.uk); the WWW Virtual Library for Theatre and Drama (http://vl-theatre.com); the Arts and Humanities Data Service (http://ahds.ac.uk); and the Live Arts Archive of Real Art Ways (http://www.realartways.org/arch_livearts.htm). I cannot promise that any of these digital files will download or run perfectly. I can, however, promise that, by visiting these sites, you will get a sense of the work that self-proclaimed performers who utilize digital media technology consider to be "performance," despite what some performance theorists may have to say about it.[4]

We Knew it All Along

In her consideration of the relationship between the body and technology, Fenske calls attention to our understanding of the virtual and the real. She turns to the OED Online to define "virtuality in its broadest sense: 'A virtual (as opposed to actual) thing, capacity, etc; a potentiality'" (2). While this definition serves Fenske well in highlighting the ways that virtuality—a concept, she notes, originating long before the appearance of computers—is commonly understood in opposition to corporeality, I believe it is important to consider a more complex conceptualization of the virtual in order to remind performance theorists of what we already know but can easily forget. I turn to philosopher Pierre Lévy to help me toward this end.

In *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*, Lévy, like Fenske, notes the common perception of the virtual: "Consider the simple and misleading opposition between the real and the virtual. As it is currently used, the word 'virtual' is often meant to signify the absence of existence, whereas 'reality' implies a material embodiment, a tangible presence" (23). Lévy, dissatisfied with these connotations, seeks to determine more precisely the complicated nuances of "reality." Much like the French philosophers Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, Lévy challenges perceptions of reality that are founded in metaphysical binaries. Lévy states, "the virtual, strictly defined, has little relationship to that which is false, illusory, or imaginary. *The virtual is by no*

means the opposite of the real" (16; emphasis added). Lévy continues, further defining the virtual in relation to the physical: "[The virtual] is a fecund and powerful mode of being that expands the process of creation, opens up the future, injects a core of meaning beneath the platitude of immediate physical presence" (16). This "immediate physical presence" or "tangible presence" is what is often mistakenly construed as "reality."

Extending Guattari's work in *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, Lévy defines four ontological elements: the real, the possible, the actual, and the virtual. Each of these elements—or "vectors," in Lévy's terms—operates "almost always" in conjunction with the others (176). Lévy is not interested in these vectors as stable modes of existence. Rather, he is interested in "*the process of transformation from one mode of being to another*" (16; emphasis in original). Specifically, he engages in the "study of virtualization that ascends from the real or the actual toward the virtual" (16). According to Lévy, this transformation moves in the opposite direction from the transformation that always has been studied in the philosophical tradition, that is, from the virtual or actual to the real. This is significant, for while actualization moves from problem to solution, "virtualization [moves] from a given solution to a (different) problem" (27). While the real is present oriented, in the temporal and spatial sense of the term, the virtual is future oriented, though not teleologically. The virtual is neither "here" nor "there." It is the in-between.

In my "Performance and Technology" seminar, one of my students illustrated this spatial liminality of the virtual in a class performance. Dava used digital communication technology by interacting with her children in a chatroom and with her mother via email while performing on stage for all of us. Her intent was not only to show the ways in which her family communicates during a typical busy day, but also to demonstrate how they often exist in more than one realm and context at any one point in time. That is, at 6:30 p.m. on March 1, 2005, Dava simultaneously was a student in class, a performer on stage, a mother to her children at home, and a daughter to her mother who also lives with Dava and her children. Dava's children and mother felt no less present than Dava in her performance. We were all acutely aware of their participation in the performance before us. The following week, we asked Dava how her family felt performing. She replied without pause, "They were so nervous!" For Dava's family, the ambiguity—or liminality—of being both there and not-there during the performance was no less effective or affecting than Dava's performance before us. The virtuality of the performance was highlighted in the not-here/not-there, not-not-here/not-not-there of her family. The real as present oriented was called into attention and problematized by the virtual.

In the following passage, Lévy offers his reading of Deleuze's distinctions between the possible and the real:

> The possible is already fully constituted, but exists in a state of limbo. It can be realized without any change occurring either in its determination or nature. It is a phantom reality, something latent. The possible is exactly like the real, the only thing missing being existence. The realization of a possible is not an act of creation in the fullest sense of the word, for creation implies the innovative

> production of an idea or form. The difference between the possible and the real is thus purely logical. (24)

This difference, however, is not often recognized in everyday life. There is a tendency to mistake the possible for the real—to concretize that which, technically, is without existence. This is perhaps most notable in our perception of electronic images—images that *seem* real, but are not. This misperception is troublesome for two main reasons.

First, concretizing the possible is a dangerous reification that leads to misperceptions such as stereotypes. Sara, another student in my "P & T" seminar, demonstrated this perceptual process and effect by incorporating audiovisual digital technology into her live performance. Dressed in white, Sara sat elevated on stage, hunched over, clutching her knees to her chest, with her back to the audience and facing a large projection screen. Her laptop was fed into a digital media projector that showed images of poverty—contrasting between the black and white aesthetically formal images of poor people of color with the mocking and cartoon-ish portrayals of "white trash"—on the screen and her back. Her use of digital media projection was an effective way to show how poverty—in addition to being a material condition—is a kind of discourse and subjectivity that, with the help of mass-mediated imagery found on the Internet, is a possibility concretized and projected onto bodies causing material effects. The images literally appeared to weigh on her—an effect she had hoped for in her expression of her experience growing up poor and white in the South, and her critique of common perceptions of lower class white people. Her performance was an instance of virtualization. Sara highlighted the ways that we tend to concretize the possible ("white trash") in order to problematize our own perceptions. Furthermore, her performance asked us how we might differently perceive socioeconomic classifications (from a "solution" to different problem).

The second danger of possibilizing electronic (or digital images) precedes, in a way, the first. We have a tendency to concretize the possible. The virtual *resists* concretization. Lévy seeks to emphasize potentiality and process overperceived stasis or reification (the mistaking of the sign for the signified).

The relationship between the four vectors of reality is transformative, the movement circular. The virtual tends toward the actual, which tends toward the possible or the real, which—for the sake of resisting reification—should be conceptualized virtually. Though the movement is circular, there is no closing off of the circle. That is, the transformation is a constant becoming-other. *This is not to say that there is no real*. Rather, the real is more a process or an event than a thing. It is to say that reality, like the possible, when perceived as concrete, strips away at potentiality—the essence, perhaps, of life. Lévy uses evocative language to caution against concretization:

> Only in reality do things have clearly defined limits. Virtualization, the transition to a problematic, the shift from being to question, necessarily calls into question the classical notion of identity, conceived in terms of definition, determination, exclusion, inclusion, and excluded middles. For this reason virutalization is always heterogenesis, a becoming other, an embrace of alterity. We should not confuse heterogenesis with alienation, its intimate and menacing opposite, its

> enemy sister, which I would characterize as reification, a reduction to the thing, to the "real." (34)

As we move through the world, we tend to favor the here-and-now as "the real," as the "truth," despite—or even, in the case of Phelan, because of—the increasing presence of electronically and digitally mediated bodies, scenes, and events. It is understandable that performance theorists like Phelan would assert the equivalency of body = physical presence = truth. But this equivalency is a reification that works to devalue companion binary terms (e.g., what is perceived to be mediated, absent, and false). As Derrida notes, "[I]n a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other, or has the upper hand" (*Positions* 41). *The reification of the physical body in performance—corpocentrism, as I have termed it—eliminates potentiality.* Rather than mis-taking the live body as "the real" or "truth," we should consider the body as a site of virtualization, constituted by potentiality and heterogenesis. Lévy explains: "The virtualization of the body is . . . not a form of disembodiment but a re-creation, a reincarnation, a multiplication, vectorization, and heterogenesis of the human" (44). Performance scholars and practitioners know this virtual body perhaps better than anyone else. The essence of performance is virtual—real and not-real, possible and actual.

In recent years, we may have come to accept theories of performativity (*à la* Judith Butler) that argue the existence of an identificatory or discursively material stability; however, we also believe that performance—whether on the stage or street—generates possibility and, by its very nature, encourages the resistance of stasis of any kind.[5] Such is the power of performance, whether appearing in the copresence of live bodies or with the aid of technology. As more and more performers employ technology in their work, we must remember that reality/liveness association is not as simple as it seems. We must also remember our loyalty to praxis and accept that our bodies, whether in front of or on the screen, come to know through doing. Believe me, this is easy to forget.

Why Does it Matter?

Right now, it is the spring of 2005 and I am teaching a graduate seminar entitled "Performance and Technology." This is my second time teaching this course, my first attempt being in the spring of 2002. The reading lists are nearly identical; however, the differences between the first time and now are extraordinary. In 2002, I assigned written responses to the theoretically dense texts that, for the most part, were investigations and articulations of the ontologies of performance and various technologies (many of which are cited here). Most of the students struggled with the theory and wrote responses that betrayed their expressed assurances that they understood the essays and the reasons for reading them. This semester, I did away with the written responses and assigned performances that responded to, extended, or engaged the theories and arguments of their assigned authors. While it is only the

midpoint of the semester, I have concluded that this version of the seminar is more successful than the earlier one.

Several factors no doubt have contributed to this success. My current group of students, unlike the first, contains several experienced performers who have taken several performance studies courses prior to this one, and it may well be that I now am more experienced and confident teaching in the graduate classroom. I believe, however, that my shift in pedagogical practice—from writing about to performing our engagement of theoretical debates around "liveness" and "mediation"—is the main reason for the improvements over my 2002 attempts. Surely, no performance studies scholar would find this belief revelatory. We have long argued that students who embody what is on the page come to know it differently—or even better—than those who limit their textual engagement to reading and writing. Of course, writing is an embodied act of its own kind, and I do not intend to suggest that performing is somehow better than writing. I do, however, want us, in the current theoretical debates surrounding performance and technology, to remember what I forgot.

While submersing myself and my students in the sea of media and performance theories of the last fifteen years that debate whether digitally mediated performance is "actually" performance, I forgot to invite my students to engage in the embodiment we call performance as part of our inquiry. As the preceding pages here make evident, I am in no way suggesting that we should abandon or devalue written theory—no matter how dense—or writing as a mode of engaging it in our efforts to study performance. But, for whatever reasons—and, as I note above, I believe there are more of these than just a steadfast belief in "liveness"—I also know that few performance studies scholars in the US, particularly within the field of communication, are developing digitally mediated performances as part of our efforts to understand it. I would like to see more. I hope that this essay does something to make that happen. I hope my words here will be taken virtually.

Notes

[1] From their website: "The Wooster Group has played a pivotal role in bringing technologically sophisticated and evocative uses of sound, film and video into the realm of contemporary theatre, and in the process has influenced a generation of theatre artists nationally and internationally. The Group's work is unique because it attracts not only the theatre-going community but also artists and enthusiasts of many other cultural disciplines, such as dance, painting, music, video & film" ("About" par. 3).

[2] Samples of the Desperate Optimists' work can be found at their website (*do*).

[3] Auslander has argued convincingly that "all performance—if not electronically mediated—is mediated by language. Because language mediates our experiences, any presentation of one's self is not one's Self. Auslander employs Derrida to argue that the "mind cannot communicate the body without being defined by 'the rules of language as a system of difference,' and the body cannot express the mind without being defined by its system of differences" (36). In short, any presentation of self—"live" or "mediated"—is mediated. Every mediation is intertextual, containing a multiplicity of texts that are mediations themselves.

[4] The mediated performances I discuss throughout this essay are not all-inclusive of what could be considered DMP. For example, while I believe it is worthwhile to investigate the ways that performance theorists consider online textual activity to be performance (e.g., Murray; Rayner) and the ways that media theorists (e.g., Barbatsis, Fegan, and Hansen; Nakamura; Turkle) employ the language of performance to explain digitally mediated phenomenon such as Multi-User Domains, MUDs-Object-Oriented, and other various forms of computer-mediated communication, such endeavors are beyond the scope of this essay.

[5] See Butler's *Bodies that Matter* for her detailed differentiation between performance and performativity: "In no sense can it be concluded that the part of gender that is performance is therefore the 'truth' of gender; performance as bounded 'act' is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists of a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'; further, what is 'performed' works to conceal, if not disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake" (234).

References

"About the Group." *The Wooster Group*, Rev. Dec. 2004. 7 Mar. 2005 ⟨http://www.thewoostergroup.org/twg/about2.html⟩.

Auslander, Philip. "Liveness: Performance and the Anxiety of Simulation." *Performance and Cultural Politics*. Ed. Elin Diamond. London: Routledge, 1996. 196–213.

Baker, Martin. "Crash, Theatre Audiences, and the Idea of Liveness." *Studies in Theatre and Performance 23* 1, (March 2003): 7 Mar. 2005 ⟨http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals.php⟩.

Barbatsis, Gretchen, Michael Fegan, and Kenneth Hansen. "The Performance of Cyberspace: An Exploration Into Computer-Mediated Reality." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 5.1 (1999): 7 Mar. 2005 ⟨http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol5/issue1/barbatsis.html⟩.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex.'* New York: Routledge, 1993.

Causey, Matthew. "The Screen Test of the Double: The Uncanny Performer in the Space of Technology." *Theatre Journal 51* (1999): 383–94.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia, UP, 1994.

Denzin, Norman K. "Performance Texts." *Representation and the Text: Reframing the Narrative Voice*. Eds. William G. Tierney and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Albany: SUNY P, 1997. 179–217.

Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. 1972. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.

—. *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.

Dixon, Steve. "Absent Fiends: Internet Theatre, Posthuman Bodies, and the Interactive Void." *e-PAI: Performing Arts International Online Journal. Presence Issue*. 2001. 7 Mar. 2005 ⟨http://www.mdx.ac.uk/www/epai/presencesite/html/dixonA00.html⟩.

—. "IT and the Audio-Visual Theatre Essay." *AHDS's Guide to Good Practice*, 7 Mar. 2005 ⟨http://ahds.ac.uk/creating/guides/performing-resources/section3-1.htm⟩.

—. [Desperate Optimists.]. Ed. Christine Malloy and Joe Lawler. 7 Mar. 2005 ⟨http://www.desperateoptimists.com⟩.

Edwards, Paul. "Unstoried: Teaching Literature in the Age of Performance Studies." *Theatre Annual 52* (1999): 1–147.

Fenske, Mindy. "The Aesthetic of the Unfinished: Ethics and Performance." *Text and Performance Quarterly 24* (2004): 1–19.

Graver, David. "The Actor's Bodies." *Text and Performance Quartely 17* (1997): 221–35.

Guattari, Félix. *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*. Trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.

Hart, Lynda. "Doing it Anyway: Lesbian Sado-Masochism and Performance." *Performance and Cultural Politics*. Ed. Elin, Diamond. London: Routledge, 1996. 48–61.
Lawler, Joe, and Christine Malloy. "Are We Getting Somewhere?" [Notes for talk at Wooster Group Conference.] *e-PAI: Performing Arts International Online Journal. Presence Issue* 2001. 7 Mar. 2005 ⟨http://www.mdx.ac.uk/www/epai/presencesite/html/desp02.html⟩.
Lévy, Pierre. *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*. Trans. Richard Bononno. New York: Plenum Trade, 1998.
McCauley, Robbie. "Thoughts on My Career, *The Other Weapon*, and Other Projects." *Performance and Cultural Politics*. Ed. Elin Diamond. London: Routledge, 1996. 265–82.
Murray, Janet H. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York: Free Press, 1997.
Nakamura, Lisa. "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet." *The Cyberculture Reader*. Ed. David Bell. New York: Routeledge, 2000. 712–20.
Pelias, Ronald J., and James VanOosting. "A Paradigm for Performance Studies." *Quarterly Journal of Speech 73* (1987): 219–31.
Phelan, Peggy. *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
—. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
Rayner, Alice. "Everywhere and Nowhere: Theatre in Cyberspace." *Of Borders and Thresholds: Theatre History, Practice, and Theory*. Ed. Michael Kobialka. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999. 278–302.
Reason, Matthew. "Theatre Audiences and Perceptions of 'Liveness' in Performance." *Particip@tions* 1.2 (May 2004): 7 Mar. 2005 ⟨http://www.participations.org/volume%201/issue%202/1_02_reason_article.htm⟩.
Saltz, David Z. "Live Media: Interactive Technology and Theatre." *Theatre Topics 11* (2001): 107–30.
Schneider, Rebecca. *The Explicit Body in Performance*. London: Routledge, 1997.
Shields, Ronald E. "Disciplinary Narratives for Change: The Emergence of Performance Studies with ATHE and SCA." *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration 3* (1994): 185–91.
Shock & Autonomy By Underscore: A Performance Collective. Digital performance project. 1 May 2004. 7 March 2005 ⟨http://www.underscore-collective.net/shock.htm⟩.
Slater, Ben. "Are We Getting Somewhere?" [Interview with the Desperate Optimists.] *e-PAI: Performing Arts International Online Journal. Presence Issue*. 2001. 7 March 2005 ⟨http://www.mdx.ac.uk/www/epai/presencesite/html/desp01.html⟩.
Smith Barry. "Dramatic Forays into IT: Working Computers with a Broom Handle." *AHDS's Guide to Good Practice*, 7 Mar. 2005 ⟨http://ahds.ac.uk/creating/guides/performing-resources/intro1.html⟩
Strine, Mary S., Beverly Whitaker Long, and Mary Frances HopKins. "Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Practices." *Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Speech Communication Association*. Eds. Gerald M. Phillips and Julia T. Wood. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1990. 181–204.
"Symposium: The Place of Literature in Performance Studies." *Communication Education* 42 (1996): 89–117.
Taft-Kaufman, Jill. "Oral Interpretation: Twentieth-Century Theory and Practice." *Speech Communication in the 20th Century*. Ed. Thomas W. Benson. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1985. 157–83.
Turkle, Sherry. "Constructions and Reconstructions of Self in Virtual Reality: Playing in the MUDs.", Home Page. 21 Nov. 1999 ⟨http://web.mit.edu/sturkle/www/constructions.html⟩.