

Northern Visions Independent Film and Video Association Toronto, Ontario

Eight Meditations on Liveness Inspired by a Word Which I Can't Pronounce

[Adapted from a presentation for the panel, Mind the Gap: Technology in Performance Art Practice, April 23, 2004, at the Images Festival. Panelists were: Michelle Kasprzak (facilitator), Dr. Ed Slopek, Johanna Householder, Valérie Lamontagne, and People Like Us.

by Johanna Householder]

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PROLOGUE: I Miss Analog

A few days ago, I was listening to J. Edward Chamberlin speak at the ceremony for the Charles Taylor Prize for literary non-fiction. He was talking about things that had inspired him to write his book, If This Is Your Land, What Are Your Stories. One inspiration was a word which I can't pronounce, because it is the word with which the *!kung* people begin all of their stories. Every story the *!kung san* tell begins with this word. The word means "this is the happening that is not happening."

I do not know what the use of this word as a preface means to the *!kung san*. Perhaps it is a reminder not to lose yourself in the story, not to mistake the telling for the event. Not to miss the fact that a representation is just that, the map not the territory.

On the other hand, maybe it is the opposite; an encouragement to immerse oneself freely in the happening that is not happening (now) or (in this space). An enjoinder to lose oneself in the inability to make distinctions between what is *the* story and what is *your* story; between what is happening and how it is happening.

Because I was also thinking about the vast territory addressed by this panel ("issues related to performance art practices that include audio, video and/or digital images as part of live presentations ... those involving technology at a rapid rate: live video mixing, often in conjunction with audio, web-streaming and real-time digital manipulation with performance, to name but a few."ⁱ) I tried to think about how the things that are not happening (here and now), those things, people, sounds, and sights that are held at a distance from us by technologies, what we might call the mediatised things or the televisual things, has affected our sense of what is happening here and now; what we call LIVE.

ONE

We do inhabit representations, and we are inhabited by them at the deepest levels of the self. The trick is not to misunderstand where we are for too long.

TWO: Etymology Lesson

pro so po pe ia n. (also pro so po poe ia)

1. A figure of speech in which an absent or imaginary person is represented as speaking. [Latin from the Greek: *prosopon*, *face*, *mask*, *dramatic character* (*pros-*, *pros-* + *pon*, *face* (from *ps*, eye)); see *myopia* + *poiein*, to make; see *kwei-2* in Indo-European Roots.]

If you reexamine the roots of *prosopopeia*, you find *myopia* and *poiein*, which is the verb, *to make*, or *to make myopic*: to make near-sighted. So by having an imaginary person represented as speaking you are making your viewers *myopic*, near sighted. This sounds to me like an excellent description of television.

THREE: Plagiarism

Here I would like to plunder extensively a review by Dorothy Chanskyⁱⁱ of Philip Auslander's 1999 book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, with some paraphrasing. I beg her indulgence, but found her selection of passages apt for the purposes of this discussion. (Numbers in parentheses are citations of pages in Auslander's text. Her text is in italics, mine is in roman.)

Chansky foregrounded that "*Auslander's project in Liveness is to consider the status of live performance in a society in which television is not one discourse among many but "an intrinsic and determining element of our cultural formation" (2).* I would like to have us consider in parallel the ways in which artists working in forms of live art have in turn altered the terms of the televisual, mediated presence. One thinks of Paik, Acconci, Campbell and Steele, Wong, Nauman and Metcalfe, who found alternative uses for the box and its contents.

Auslander asserts that *liveness "must be examined not as a global, undifferentiated phenomenon but within specific cultural and social contexts" (3) and that, "historically, the live is actually an effect of mediatization, not the other way around" (51). Prior to the advent of media technology, the concept of "live" as a category had no meaning. Therefore, "like liveness itself, the desire for live experiences is a product of mediatization" (55).* However, in the "*specific cultural contexts,*" for instance with the *!kung san* or the artists/audiences of performance art the concept of "live" has a richer range of meaning than 'non-mediatized.'

FOUR: Auslander

In our *mediatized culture, live performance and mass media are rivals on the scale of David and Goliath. Yet, in assessing the status of live performance, it is inadequate to retreat into mystifications and clichés about the "magic of the live experiences" or the "energy" that supposedly exists between performers and audiences (2).*

"[T]he general response of live performance to the oppression and economic superiority of mediatized forms has been to become as much like them as possible" (7)."

While Auslander asserts that *the alleged "ontological differences between the live and the mediatized are specious... He returns often to Walter Benjamin's thoughts on a popular desire for manufactured proximity in the midst of an environment of reproductions. The mediatized will often satisfy this desire better than the live...*

FIVE: Why People (still) Go to the Theatre

Historically, new media have forced older ones to adjust, to quote Auslander again, early cinema copied the ... acting styles of theatre but like all subsequent technologies, it fragmented the body, dividing voice from vision. It was not until cinema eventually developed its own vocabulary and restored speech to the image that it drew away much of the audience for live theatre.

Television, in turn, did not embrace the camera-driven model of film but, rather, re-turned to theatre, again in an attempt to create a televisual essence centered on liveness (my emphasis.) In so doing, television not only siphoned off yet more of the audience for live theatre but managed to "remediate theatre at the ontological level through its claim to immediacy" (13).ⁱⁱⁱ

SIX: As Above So Below... or maybe not

Auslander again: "*audiences now expect live performances to resemble mediatized ones" (25).*

While the incursion of technology into live performance is true of large-scale events (Broadway musicals, sports, Cirque du soleil, and rock concerts with huge simulcasts) it is not necessarily the same for all theatre or performance art, the sites in which it is proposed that a "media epistemology" operates which influences audience expectation of what is "realistic." But he also points out that the uses of live and mediatized forms are determined by cultural economy, not by intrinsic differences."

For the purposes of this discussion I would interject that the use of mediatized forms also significantly arises through relentless artistic investigation and exploitation, and general intervention (jamming) on the part of artists.

As anyone who has experienced performance art events in which artists engage first hand, and hand to hand with technology, *these can be occasions for community bonding that do not occur among the strangers who gather in the balcony of a Broadway musical.*

SEVEN: authenticity

"Authenticity" was important to the early audiences and artists of performance art predicated on "romantic ideology" (79)...

The Milli Vanilli scandal revealed a generation uninterested in the Romantic authenticity of "paying dues." For those of us happy to participate in simulations of simulations, it is the video that authenticates the event, with live performance – to the extent that it can replicate the video – authenticating the latter.

But video is authentic, video and live to camera is a method, a performance technique, like lip sync, for talking out of both sides of the mouth at the same time, if the artist/performer is in (the) control (room.)

Finally Auslander proposes that it is the courtroom that may be the last bastion of live performance that refuses to be displaced by video. Witness testimony is "defined as a live performance of memory retrieval" (113) in which revision after the moment of testimony is unacceptable and a witness without memory (even, conceivably, one injured in the very assault motivating the trial) is "indistinguishable from a dead witness or a deranged one" (125). Auslander both foregrounds and questions this fetishization of live performance as the equivalent of truth, since it is the "performance of recollection" rather than the information recalled that is then the "essence of testimony" (129). In pitting the un-copyrightable status of aesthetic performance against the "truth status" given to the performance of the retrieval of memory on the witness stand, he suggests both the devaluation of live performance as a protectable commodity and the regulation of spectatorial memory when it is pressed into service by the law (152).

EIGHT

As Richard Schechner has it, the defining characteristic of performance is its status as "twice-behaved behavior" predicated on previous input, activity, observation, and doings.^{iv} Saying for instance that the courtroom privileges live testimony indicates nothing about the way that testimony itself needs to simulate the televisual in order to be credible.

The fact remains that "energy, community, authenticity and magic do have value for performers and partisans of live performance" (2). The point (and Auslander's project) is not to deny this value but, rather, to situate it in the context of the economy of the larger culture in which it is embedded." The rest is prosopopeia.

ⁱ Images Festival catalog, 2004

ⁱⁱ Dorothy Chansky, *"Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*

Philip Auslander. London: Routledge, 1999." in *Modern Drama*, Volume 43 Number 3, Toronto: The Graduate Centre for Study of Drama, University of Toronto, fall 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 1985. Quoted in Chansky.