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Performance without Actors: The Theatrical Docu-Fiction

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Performative practice is based on the presence of at least a single performer and a single spectator. The presence (Brook 1998), mainly tied into the bodies of the subjects involved, becomes a determining factor for the construction and circulation of meaning, a fundamental element of the embodied statement, where the body acts as the instance of the enunciation as well as the statement (Nancy 2000). What happens when a theatre performance without actors is performed? A new aesthetic emerges, consisting of interactions and transformations, the possibility of cooperation/interaction between contradictory elements. The analysis of two contemporary plays, *Perhaps all the dragons* of the theatre collective Berlin and *Nachlass pièce sans personnes* of Rimini Protokoll, will give us opportunity to discuss the growing phenomenon of the presentation, and representation, docu-fiction in the theatre, that is, when the technology generates the appearance (Schein) of an actual presence, without, however, bringing what is actually a manifestation (Erscheinung) – bodies and objects, as it is currently its present (Fischer-Lichte 2008).

Introduction

In the contemporary understanding of performance, from the Eighties onward, the advent of digital technologies has highlighted the relationship between the real body and the medial body. The debate continued around two main interconnected cornerstones: the notion of the live presence[1] of the performer as the first principle

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[1] Discourses on liveness meander, diverge and frequently hit brick walls in the contrasting positions taken by performance theorists such as Susan Sontag, Michael Kirby, Patrice Pavis, Matthew Causey, Johannes Birringer, Peggy Phelan, and Philip Auslander (see Auslander 2008).

of theatrical art on one hand, and on the other the possibility to elevate the binomial space/performer with the reproduction of images, thereby replacing the performer with his image – as we will see later. The image, the gaze, the sense of sight have traditionally been the main characterization of the theoretical analysis concerning the theater. As it's widely known, the word *thèatron*, from which the modern term 'theatre' derives, emerges for the first time in the Greek literary texts of the fifth century BC and stems from the verb *theàomai*, 'to see', and it can not only denote the location where the play takes place, but also the collectivity of the spectators who watch that specific performance, in Italian 'spettacolo'; the term 'spettacolo', from the Latin *spectacŭlum*, comes from the verb *spectare* and refers to the sphere of 'sight'. It must be stressed that there is no reference to a physical and concrete presence of what is seen, but the participation (not the presence) of an actor and a spectator is considered fundamental and constitutive.

Before defining the problem of the concept of theatrical presence sensed by the spectator, it is important to understand what is required to speak of theatre.

> Can the theatre exist without costumes or scenery? Yes. Can it exist without music that describes what is happening? Yes. Can it exist without the lighting effects? Certainly. And without text? Yes, and history confirms it. […] But do theatre exist without actors? I do not know of similar examples. […] Can theatre exist without spectators? At least one is needed, to be able to talk of performance (Grotowski 1975: 41).

To this fundamental definition by subtraction of Grotowsky, it is still possible to add a consideration: the presence is fundamental, but not necessarily in the same place or time; the relation, as an essential component in the definition of a theatrical event, can be also forged at a distance and mediated by a technological device. After all, the presence as theatrical phenomenon, says Lehmann, «is born from interruption, deprivation, deviation» because what is usually perceived as an emphatic presence of the performer «is also a sort of deviation from the usual presence, a non-presence» (Lehmann 1999: 23).

According to the definition listed by Patrice Pavis in the 'Dictionnaire du théâtre' (Pavis 2002: 45), the presence is the quality of a performer capable of catching the attention of the public, whatever role he performs. 'To have a presence' means, in the theatre context, to impose oneself on the audience, and to possess a subtle quality that causes the immediate identification of the spectator. Fischer Lichte, in his *Ästhetik des Performativen*, poses fundamental questions:

> […] the restoration of the aura, in Benjamin's sense, concurs with the presence. Does the presence imply the 'being here' of the body, with no regards for the processes of embodiment through which it goes constantly, as becoming? Or does the presence refer only to some specific processes of embodiment, the processes of embodying typical of a living body? (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 165)

Within cybertheory, the meaning of presence 'shifts to include ideas of telematic and deferred, online presence, relating it to agency rather than to direct witnessing' (Dixon 2007: 132). Presence means many things that include 'repeated transgressions of the traditional concept of the body's physical envelope and of the locus of human agency' (Stone 1995: 16).

The non-univocal definition of presence, applied to the performative context, has been further developed by Italian professor Enrico Pitozzi, taking into account the kinaesthetic level. The presence is firstly established by the coalescence and correlation between the tensions that go through a body, from a physiological point of view, and the dynamics of establishment of space. Three different levels are interrelated in the definition of presence: the cinematic level, that concerns the movement and disposition of various segments in the space, the dynamic level that gives back information on the articulations and muscle intensities used during the movement and, lastly, the aesthetical level that accounts for the degree of adherence of the performer to the execution of the movement (being in the act of). Nonetheless, if the physical presence is determined by a unit of space and time, the mental space-time are multiples. This further aggravates the study of the presence.

It is therefore necessary to try and formulate an analysis of the time and the perception of a presence, by relating to an area that is difficult to define, within which emotions can be built and the connections and hypotheses on the different relational strategies can be verified. These are the factors that flow into a dimension that increasingly shifts its physical essence towards that of a multi-fragmented temporal flow, as well as many times and many places now constitute our multi-dimensional lives composed of physical spaces and projected towards virtual or mediated dimensions, in continuous re-definition (Virilio 1991).

The presence, besides being defined by the relation body-space, is the result of the sum of physical presence (unit of space and time) and the *fictionnaire* projection, that constantly projects an imaginary corporeality in the space that it determines (Pitozzi 2007).

The etymology of the term 'presence' is *prae* – before – and *sum* – to be –; some of the meanings of the derived adjective are: what is before someone, what is in the same time-frame of the conversation, and also as a synonym of imminent, inevitable, immediate. 'Presence' refers to something that exists in its material state, in a specific temporality and in a specific space; as such, it is more appropriate to talk of *effects* or *degrees* of presence, when speaking of intermedial performances – intermedial being a term more specific than 'multimedial', which implies the concept of remediation, the 'representation of a medium in another' and the non-hierarchical relation between media, that equally preserve their specificity, in spite of their collaboration in the creative process.

If, as eloquently stated by Josette Féral, the effect of presence is the impression perceived by a spectator that the bodies and objects presented to his or her gaze (or hearing) are in the same space and time he or she inhabits, though the spectator knows that he or she is in reality alone (Féral, Perrot 2011), we can expand and transfer this process from the physical dimension of the scene to the reception of the figurations of presence in the absence of a body. In any case, this logic inevitably implies a radical shift of the observation point and aims to redefine the analytical strategies.

It is no longer enough to look or to listen to locate and recognize presence in this particular dimension of the scene. It's as if the contemporary scene, also thanks to the mediation of technologies, were to invite the viewer to reconfigure his or her perception and consequently to switch from a modality that proceeds by a representation of the forms to one that scans the manifestation of its intensity, whether in perfomance or installation.

It is the transition from video as a technological element, to be used within the theatrical (and even dramaturgical) practice, to the media as a communication system, which starts its development in the sixties, to determine the turning point from multimedia to intermedia(Giesekam 2007), hereby understood as 'a space where the boundaries soften – and we are in-between and within a mixing spaces, media and realities' (Chapple, Kettenbelt 2006: 12), thus the idea of intermediality could be located as a re-perception of whatever concerns a re-construction through performance.

Whilst agreeing with some key elements of the definition of aesthetic of the performative as given by Fisher-Lichte, in this paper it was decided to deviate from her definition of mode of presence, divided by the scholar in: strong, with referral to the capability of the actor of dominating the space and catalyzing the attention, and weak, which refers to the simple presence of the living phenomenal body of the actor.

For the analysis of the chosen performances, it has been decided to analyze the performative event for its possible considerations on the contemporary reality and on the condition of the individual as modern agent/actor/spectator of the events. In the contemporary scene, between presence and absence, there are a number of increasingly subtle and articulate intermediary realities, that lead to the reassessment of the relationship between the here and now and the notion of performative presence, being it multiple, rhizomatic and polycentric (Auslander 2008).

These degrees of presence do not erase, do not void the experience of the body and of the process of perception in favor of an abstraction as an end in itself. They usher a new relational aesthetics (Borriaud 1998), meant as a critical reflection on the artistic ways of working and on its expressions, which do not belong solely to the

aesthetical component of the experience, which builds the setting it inhabits, where it is fundamental to localize not only the manifestations/sources of presence, but also those that delocalize and blurs such a presence.

Perhaps all the dragons: the presence through the device

Since 2003, the Belgian collective Berlin has developed a hybrid theatre, a cross between documentary performance and video installation, whose main theme is the human coexistence. Bart Baele and Yves Degryse, directors of the company, decided not to opt for a particular genre, but to explore the documentary language instead, and let the places of their raids lead their inspiration. This philosophy has given rise to two design cycles: *Holocene* – the current geological era – where the starting point is always a city or a specific place on the planet, and *Horror Vacui* – fear of emptiness – in which true and touching stories come gently untangled around a table. The Holocene cycle includes Jerusalem, Iqaluit, Bonanza, Moscow and Zvizdal. The first three episodes of *Horror Vacui* are *Tagfish*, *Land's* and *Perhaps all the dragons*.

The performance *Perhaps all the Dragons* unfolds along an oval structure, thirty positions, seats with a screen, that drag the thirty spectators in a surreal atmosphere, almost like a planisphere.

The first choice is casual, everyone sits wherever they want. Somewhat skeptical, we take our seats and await, smiling to those close to us. On the screen of each seat a person-character-not-actor appears and, after settling in and letting the eyes of the spectators grow accustomed to it, tells its story. They are real people, filmed during a video-interview by the two directors, probably aware of the destination of their story. It's a docu-fiction, a dramatic fiction created from real stories. During the performance four other stories follow, in the order dictated by a letter, found in a socket on the table of each seat. The entire dramaturgical structure is based on the six degrees of separation theory that, in the theatrical and cinematographic sphere, fascinated American playwright John Guare, and film director Fred Schepisi, who adapted his pièce for the big screen in the nineties.

You sit along other 29 spectators, yet alone, in a unilateral dialogue with the five people you do not meet or interact with, but still can see and listen to. What are we doing, really, in the eighteenth-century church, side by side with 29 individuals,

while we listen to the story of five strangers? Are we becoming the sixth degree of separation between them? Are we taking part on a reflection on the mode, the criteria, the tools of getting acquainted and communicating? Are we rewriting the connections of theatrical relations? Are we noticing that the world is not so big after all, that we are all potentially connected, nonetheless uncapable of communicating, making a connection, establishing a contact? Yet, the complex device leads us all to take part in a game of gazes, created in *Perhaps All the Dragons*, we are the bonding element and, even though we are turned towards the screens (a rather everyday occurrence), there is a strange energy among the thirty of us.

All the stories we listen to can react to one another, but only if we are there, capable and willing to connect them: this is the reason why we speak of theatre and not cinema. 'Theatre' is hereby intended as a hypermedium and as a stage of intermediality.

Strange but very concrete stories, evidences of life have been patiently collected from everywhere in the world, then gathered and synchronized to create an intriguing digital tale (https://berlinberlin.be/nl/project/perhaps-all-the-dragons/). Thirty stories, eclectic in subject and form, unfold around a round table, thirty screens that talk with as many spectators. An intimate head-to-head meeting which, in time, progressively outlines a universal portrait. The monologue is a dialogue, the chart becomes a world map. In this theatrical installation, the Berlin study the human existence under the microscope.

We are looking at a multimedial and very human theatre, even though it is paradoxically characterized by the non-presence of the real protagonists, a theatre in which the present spectator has to sense and interpret tele-presences and some invisible but still noticeable tensions. The public is urged to engage actively in the play, which is proposed on an increasingly critical rather than illusionistic level. The presented images and bodies are often the results of various deconstructions done by the artist to obtain some particular aesthetical and expressive effect.

The performative practice is based, as said before, on the presence of at least a performer and a spectator. The presence, mainly tied to the bodies of the subjects involved, becomes a determining factor for the construction and circulation of

meaning, a fundamental element of the statement embodied, where the body acts as both the instance of the enunciation and the statement.

Even though the concept of presence is centered around the act of 'manifesting itself' and dismisses the dichotomy between being and appearing, key concepts of many aesthetical theories of the previous centuries, the notion of effect-presence, linked to technological and electronic media, takes this very dichotomy as precondition – based on the definition of McLuhan that 'the media are all extensions and the technologies […] and the individual and social consequences of each medium, namely of each extension of ourselves, and are derived from the new proportions, elicited in our personal problems by each of these extensions and by every new technology' (McLuhan 1964: 43). For the numerous works of Berlin, but especially for this, the technology marks a transition from the object, philosophically long analysed concept, to the event: a transition from the play to the process.

Nachlass- Pièce sans personnes

Behind Rimini Protokoll there is not a canonical theatre company (Dreysse, Malzacher 2012: 39). Rimini Protokoll is a brand, a label used by its three founders to sign the works done together, with just two of them, alone, or even with other partners. The presence of at least one of its members is not enough to allow its usage, rather a specific way of working must be followed: themes and dramaturgical forms can differ, as long as they are postdramatic and distance themselves from the modern theatre tradition, be it mainstream or experimental.

The German collective Rimini Protokoll is made of three authors-directors, who work together since 2000: Helgard Kim Haug and Daniel Wetzel come from Germany, while Stefan Kaegi comes from Switzerland. The three artists met at the University of Gießen, during the course of Applied Theater Science and Performance Studies in the Institut für Angewandte Theaterwissenschaften, and took an immediate interest in the development of specific means of expression to implement in the theatrical sphere, so as to stimulate new perspectives of reality: «their works range from the documentary theatre to radio drama to performances in urban settings, with different kinds of collaborations and partnerships; in particular hiring people and

present time phenomena that are not part of the professional theatrical world, or are not known to the general public, addressing them as experts.

The redefinition of the relationship with the illusion, and thus the reality, that characterizes their way of working and changes the function and laws of being a character and a spectator, needs an introduction. Essence, totality and synaesthesia are often implemented as a renunciation of traditional spaces of the Italian theatre to revitalize, in an expressive and relational sense, places found in daily life and as such characterized by a dramaturgical effectiveness. But for the Rimini Protokoll, the entire space, even the urban space, is dedicated to the representation and to the public (Schechner 1968). It is a process that leads to a non-linear, visual-kinetic narration through unprecedented modes of physical approach to the spectator, up to its inclusion in the play. The increasing technological expansion, made of interactive devices, satisfies a need for action, for proximity and mobility instead of the single or widespread events – a mobility that also deals with the overthrowing of the roles and the interchangeability between actor and public.

In the theatrical installation *Nachlass* – Pièce sans *personnes*, the performer cannot be related anymore to a specific psychological framework, thus to a subject; it is a relational process that reaches the spectator in the absolute absence of the actor on the scene. A theatre without actors, a public arranged in eight locations, in touch with the presence-absence of the protagonists, whose voice and testimony come through audio-visual facilities and objects, that evoke and narrate their life – the legacy after their departure. A theatre where stories that took place in a time and space separated from the representation are narrated. A representation in which the here and are now only apparent in the actual experience of the actual spectator in the theatre. The scene is the transcendental time-space of the body, in which the void takes the form of a gathering point of the sense. The participation of those who experience the play is not only expected in the communicative structure of the play itself, it becomes a fundamental element for the complete fulfillment of its expressive substance.

In the elliptical space, eight doors leading to as many rooms open automatically, each with the legacy – be it objects, audio and video testimonies – of a person.

The spectators choose autonomously the door through which to go, but the time inside the rooms passes according to the evoked story, narrated by a protagonist not physically there. One is involved for about eight minutes in the life of each room, a screen shows how much time is left before the reopening of the doors; a sign of how the theatrical space is not only physical, but also imaginary, virtual, created for and by the representation. Above the waiting room, on the roof, the YouTube channel AsapScience is projected and shows, with tragic irony, what happens every 60 second in the world between Eros and Thanatos.

The chamber of Alexandre Bergerioux is the reconstruction of a bedroom: the spectators sit on the bed, beside a nightstand, or on the chair, or stand beside the plexi-glass window, that shows the shadow of a tree branch. The hoarse voice of a fifty years old man, terminally ill, talks to his daughter, traces back their shared memories, encourages the public, that wears headphones, to open the drawers in the room and to touch his things; then a video of a fisherman (him), surrounded by nature, appears on the roof. The intimacy of the moment and the four walls that embrace the spectator convey a sense of distress for the, by then, almost familiar person.

The space for Nadine Gros is a small theatre, the stalls have two rows with about ten seats; on the stage there is only a stool, with a pure white woman sweater on it. Suddenly, shattering the quiet environment, a confident voice begins to narrate of a play that will never take place, of how Nadine chose to come to terms with her own dignity and signed, so as to put an end to that reality that crushed her and prevented her from acting.

Another space has two screens which show a recording of Celal Tayip, a Turkish trader from Zurich. The voice of the man invites the spectator to sit on the oriental carpet on the floor only after taking off their shoes, and to eat the Turkish sweets in the basket placed in the middle of the room. This is how the public begins to listen to the greatest fear of Celal, his death. The prayer room was arranged by him for his beloved ones: he also thought of fans, as to make the environment more comfortable. The images on the television pass on and show a man who chooses his own casket and the dress for the day of his death; a man who goes through the

streets of Istanbul and visits the graveyard of his homeland, envisioning when he'll come back dead.

Another room is full of classified and stacked boxes: *Photos, Objects, Burkina Faso, Mali, John Paul II, My niece, A village in Senegal*; in which Gabrielle von Brochowsky has put her entire life before the Belgian State, at her death, took 80% of her inheritance: 'a foundation, yes, to not die, or to do it more easily. To keep, at least partly, on living, if not me, my things. May my commitment, my money, continue to travel to Africa, to guide artists, whose name today I do not know. The Africa I love, towards which I guided European delegations as ambassadress. And you? What do you leave in your boxes?' she said. In front of the spectator, a desk and two armchairs, the tale of Annemarie and Güntjer Wolfarth begins, the tale of their family business. An artificial dusk dampens the light in the room and the legacy of the couple appears in each piece of the office furniture, while the businessman encourages the spectator to take one glass of water and leaves them. One enters a narrow, grey space of reinforced concrete: a base jumper tracksuit hangs from a nail, neon lights barely illuminate the spectator, from the grate underneath the feet he glimpses a video, taken on the peak of a mountain. From the point of view of the Go-pro, the gaze of the spectator follows the fall of Michael Schwery. His family awaits him at home. If something goes wrong, he has already agreed with his friends to begin the condolence process.

The last space is chaotic, but also warm and colorful: a table has a hundred photos of different sizes and different subjects. It is the living room of an old French lady, Jeanne Bellengi: her voice encourages the spectator to activate an alarm clock and to stay silent, with closed eyes. To listen. The alarm will ring, perfectly synchronized, together with the end of her story and her life.

In *Nachlass* – Pièce sans *personnes*, the technological scenic expedient changes the real space and merges it with the virtual one, which is not intended as unreal, but as a potential space of actualization. Here the space, formerly a mere mean, has become a theatrical end, an agent of recovery of the character's memory, an environment for the summoning of the past (through video and sound/voice off): the spectator reifies through his eyes the presence of the protagonists who narrate their

own existence in first person. The act of existing, that nowadays tends to become a sort of collective voyeurism, has become on and off the scene a bombardment of mediatic images, a materialization of the experiential collapse caused by the short-circuit between real and virtual, between fictional and real. The intelligence of senses and values is given in the distance from the first perception of the object, therefore in the distance that lives in the images: in the distance that the object, not given in flesh and bones, is instead given only through the image, in the modes of the possibility instead of in those of the existence.

If the same representation of the real is capable of producing a generally destabilizing experience, whatever mean is used (Causey 2006), the double shown through a device does not mark a new technological nature of the presence – because even our own real bodies are always needed as phantasmatic projections for the other, for those use them – and appear in the first place in the phantasmatic screen of the perception. The digital double is one of the possible perceivable manifestations of an ontological decomposition that is true both in the technological presence and in the organic body.

Conclusion

The term 'multimedial', in its general sense, indicates the concurrent use of multiple modes, instruments or technological means of communication; in this essay it corresponds to the technical integration of the media and the related textual, graphical, audio-visual codes, made possible by the digital and conveyed through multimedial computer. In the aforedescribed multimedial plays, different dialogical levels coexist: between material and immaterial, between real and hyperreal and between the different modes of being present. The technological and electronic media create a semblance of the presence of the human body, dematerializing and de-embodying it; an image (phenomenon) without reality (concrete). The more they can make the materiality of the human body, objects and settings, vanish and dematerialize, the more the appearance of their actual presence, completely unhinged from its real and material corporeality, will strengthen (Merleau-Ponty 1964).

A corporeality established by the Merleau-Ponty's concept of chiasm and developed, in the theatrical and choreographic studies, by Michel Bernard: a

corporeality that can be the matrix for the figurations of presence that will be analyzed in this research. (Bernard 1986). Bernard, differentiating the corporeality of the body, makes a distinction between what is body, an organic and uniform totality, limited and self-referring reporting system; and corporeality, a set of intensities and dynamics that move under the surface of what is visible.

Developed at the end of the twentieth century, the studies concerned with the theatrical studies as relation between actor and spectator, during the last thirty years, opened to the dialogue with cognitive psychology, neuroscience, psychology of interactive systems, neuro-aesthetics and neuro-phenomenology, namely all those fields of research born after the discovery of the mirror neurons and developed thanks to the increasing use of the new technologies in every field of life and knowledge. A common thread in these studies is that the concept of presence can't be solely limited to the body in its material state, it needs to be expanded in order to include the various "objective presences", the figurations of luminous and aural matter, which are to be equally found in performance and installation. In order to do so it is necessary to shift one's attention from the body and focus it on the composition of the apparatus, where all the listed figurations of presence take place. It is in the apparatus that the presences manifest, allowing the simultaneous development of a phenomenology of the presence of entities (body included) and the survival of their trace in the ones who observe (Pitozzi 2011).

The concept of presence, in this regard, applies to the technological media that, through digital instruments, recreate action, events and figures on a screen, thereby referring to an interaction that evokes similar reactions in the spectators to those occurring in human beings physically set in the same conditions: intentionality, rationality, thoughtful or random reactions, and occasionally – as in the case of the aforedescribed performances – interactivity. To the spectator, these conditions create the illusion of presence, although the same spectator is totally aware that what he sees happens beyond a screen (Féral 2011).

Keeping in mind different fields of knowledge ensures a multifaceted view, useful on the matter because the question of form-body and of corporeality is not something that can be restricted to a single field, especially if the aim, as in this essay, is to give an outline of an aesthetics developed concurrently between theatre – as

scenic and performative art – and technologies. If it's generally accepted that 'live and mediatized' means "absence of live", however, the concept of "live" is often used in a broader sense, which includes television and video used to create a particular connection between the performer who address himself in an artificially real time to the viewer who is watching him.

In the end, it can be said that in the age of device paradigm the theatre '(re) discovered the special qualities of its liveness' (Kettenbelt 2006: 33) and the presence is replaced with the availability of commodities and this availability is obtained through devices.

Many elements in postmodern performance's ontology might be interpreted as 'refusal to be placed, vacillating between presence and absence, between displacement and reinstatement' (Kaye 1994: 77) and therefore analyzed performances are just a selected example of a wider contemporary theatrical range, more vividly characterized by the aesthetics of absence than the aesthetics of presence.

We have argued that the presence is something ultimately undefined, yet strongly affected by the exogenous conditions – such as the intermediality performance – in which it is analyzed – whilst the beginning and end of the absence are sudden. So the conscious time automatically comes together again, creating a continuum free of apparent breaks, but not devoid of crises that end up taking some of the duration. The 'technocracy' in the contemporary performance does not allow to talk of tension and attention, but of suspension, pure and simple (by acceleration), disappearance and effective reappearance of the real, a departure from the duration Virilio.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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