Sensualities/Textualities and Technologies
Also by Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon

PERFORMANCE AND TECHNOLOGY: Practices of Virtual Embodiment and Interactivity

Also by Susan Broadhurst

DIGITAL PRACTICES: Aesthetic and Neuroesthetic Approaches to Performance and Technology

Also by Josephine Machon

(SYN)AESTHETICS: Redefining Visceral Performance
Sensualities/Textualities and Technologies

Writings of the Body in 21st Century Performance

Edited by

Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon
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A path is a prior interpretation of the best way to traverse a landscape, and to follow a route is to accept an interpretation, or to stalk your predecessors on it as scholars and trackers and pilgrims do. To walk the same way is to reiterate something deep; to move through the same space the same way is a means of becoming the same person, thinking the same thoughts. It’s a form of spatial theatre …
(Rebecca Solnit, 2002: 68)

There are three beautiful things: bending down while remaining upright, a cry while remaining silent and a dance without moving.
(Rebbe Mendel Kalish of Warka, in Unterman, 2008: 175)

The three central topics of this collection of chapters – bodies, technologies and texts – have constituted the broad conditions of theatre and performance at least since the period of classical antiquity. The relationship between these topics – how they interact with each other, how they might be identified as individual elements in a taxonomy of performance, what cultural values are inscribed in them or ascribed to them, and the variety of affects a particular distribution or arrangement of these terms might produce – is of course as much a focus of the history of poetic, performance and dramaturgical practice as it is of the chapters that follow here.

The classical (dramatic) view of theatre as a theatron, a ‘seeing place’, a prosthesis of eye and ear that privileged the ‘objective’ senses of sight and hearing through which it structured the vision of the audience, has increasingly given way to the more recent possibilities, driven by technological innovation, of performance as a site of immersive (as opposed to quasi-objective) sensual/sensory experience, an experience which is always produced and constructed through an inseparable relationship between bodies, texts and technologies.

The possibility of aligning the ‘subjective’ senses of touch and taste with the objective senses – of effectively merging bodies, texts and technologies – brings the whole human and post-human sensorium into play in ways that would have been unachievable and unthinkable
until recently. And here it is useful to understand ‘sensorium’ as both the reciprocal effect of media on our senses in McLuhan’s terms, and as our capacity to perceive and interact with the environments in which we live.

If from our contemporary perspective the classical (dramatic) view of theatre represents a predominantly fixed and normative set of relationships between bodies, texts and technologies that have remained largely operative until the present and certainly until the mid-twentieth century, then it is because in many senses they have been imagined and practised as discrete systems which allow or acknowledge a defined and disciplined set of interactions. But each of these discrete systems (as McLuhan realized) also informs the condition and understanding of others in what is called a ‘transductive’ relationship. We cannot, for example, disaggregate the effect of print technologies from our consciousness, as Walter J. Ong has pointed out, or perhaps the effect of controlled light from our imagination of performance, or effect of replay on our understanding of narrative. The acoustic technologies of classical theatre – the manipulation of architectural space to enhance the voice – were an integral part of a conception of a polis or what Ranciere refers to as a ‘common term of measurement’ (Ranciere, 2007: 44–5).

The classical conception of the ‘theatron’ is also one through which consensual and idealized notions of polis, citizenship and community were produced. Whilst the conceptions of polis may have shifted, the idea(l) of a common place that might be produced through the interaction of bodies, texts and technologies remains. In the poet and theorist Lyn Hejinian’s formulation, and with regard to a poetics of language, ‘... this common place is political in character. It constitutes polis. The political in this sense is not adjudicating and legislating but coming into appearance, and the polis is the space of appearance; the place for sharing words and deeds’ (Hejinian, 2000: 366). The common measure shifts, and is shifted through, the mutable and fluid relationship of bodies, texts and technologies in any given context.

In her 1977 essay ‘Modern theatre does not take (a) place’, Julia Kristeva argued that theatre’s ‘only inhabitable place – locus – is language (le langage).’ and noted that:

[t]he Golden period of the Greek (or classical) community failed to materialize in the 20th century within existing theatrical communities, among totalitarians, fascist happenings and sociorealistic pro-
duction. As its only remaining locus of interplay is the space of language, modern theatre no longer exists outside of the text. (1997: 277)

This ‘failure’ of theatre to ‘constitute a communal discourse of play (interplay)’ as seen from a particular historical moment is perhaps countered by Hejinian’s (1998) invocation of a ‘space of appearance’, which offers a less pessimistic view of the possibility of a ‘communal discourse of play’ with regard to the possibilities of both performance and language as sites of transformation.

That we no longer ‘take (a) place’ in the sense of locating a fixed or static relationship of bodies, texts and technologies, and that both the ‘inhabitable space’ and the ‘space of appearance’ that Kristeva and Hejinian identify, propose the possibility of a potential site of exchange, a moving alignment of text, sensation and technics, is evidence that in the context of an expanded field of performance, we are able to produce a generative and fluid space of inquiry, a ‘thinking on’ as Hejinian put it, that enables us to ‘experience experience’ and identify common measures. Language (by which I understand the inter-activities of bodies, texts and technologies) is the medium that enables us to ‘restore the experience of experience’ and with it a ‘sense of living our life’ (Hejinian, 2000: 345). In the field of performance, bodies become other bodies, texts become other texts, and technologies become other technologies enabling the transformative and liquid flow of content across media. Bodies, texts and technologies then are no longer isolated as elements but are distributed, diffused and disseminated through performance. The body literally writes itself in performance, as Part 2 of this volume suggests. This sense of ephemeral inscription, of transformation, is no longer limited to bodies or texts transforming within a fixed or static scene or place. Recent technology enables a more complex interactivity between the elements that constitute the work, specifically through the digitalization of visual, graphic, sonic and textual data, which in turn effects our conception of bodies, texts and technologies.

I want to propose that a key relationship here is one of ‘insideness’, a relationship to bodies, texts and technologies which extends our engagement with and through performance beyond a static, distanced or objective set of relationships. Writing on poetry as an event in language, Gerald L. Bruns suggests that Hejinian’s statement that ‘the poem is open to the world’ (2000: 43) means that ‘language is not inside the poet as an innate grammar for generating sentences; rather
the poet is inside language – inside, moreover, not as in a control centre but as in an environment ...'; and that ‘the poet in this event does not so much use language as interact with uses of it’ (Bruns, 2005: 30). As the language poets and others have argued and made evident in their work,⁴ we are ‘inside’ language and to be inside language proposes that any text is ‘a medium for experiencing experience’, and that language is never separated from its contexts, but is at any given moment a ‘constructedness’, a play of, with and through language that involves both technics and bodies. As Heidegger noted ‘[w]e cannot ... view the life that we are in from the outside; we are always in the midst of it, surrounded by its details’ (quoted in Hejinian, 2000: 363). We are continually inside language, inside the sensorium and inside technology, and as such constantly mediating and re-mediating our active environments and contexts.

The sense of being a generative and transformative part of the condition that we are in (a field of reference, a context, what gestalt psychology called a ‘geography of requiredness’) has formed a central condition of thinking about poetic form and ‘open work’ since at least the mid-twentieth century. But ‘insideness’ is also a condition, a modality of being, that is linked with being inside technology and inside the constructedness of bodies and texts in the sense of being in a constant transductive interaction with the world. We are not simply outside, in the sense often assumed in thinking about art or performance as forming the production of an object that lets us see into the condition of things. We are the condition of things and the ‘real-time’, and other interactive and digital technologies that we use (and which reciprocally use us) are in many senses what we become. This sense of ‘insideness’ that I am proposing here, of being a dynamic force in a given environment (what Hejininan would call being ‘launched in to context’) is analogous to the sense of the immersive which has always been a part or an aspiration of art experience – that we are taken up or taken beyond in the experience of the work. Its modality (and possibility) has begun to shift radically through more contemporary alignments of bodies, texts and technologies.

How can this ‘insideness’ be described? If in the situation of performance, we are inside language in Bruns’s formulation of ‘interacting with uses of it’ rather than merely using it, then the condition of ‘insideness’ can be understood as a form of textuality. If a text is anything that can be read, from a gesture to a drawing, a dance to a poem, then textuality is how it is read and is therefore also a practice. To practise (as a way of operating or doing things in deCerteau’s sense) is to be
inside language and the varied modes of textuality (of how we interact with language) reflect the ways in which sensory modalities are stimulated: the affect of a particular poetics, or of a specific medium.

In a similar way, being inside bodies – a sensorium which incorporates the effects of media on the senses, and the sum of perceptions, which are always unstable, and constantly in a process of being activated or repressed – is also a practice, a state of textuality, of proprioception which the poet Charles Olson described as ‘the ‘body’ itself as, by movement of its own tissues, giving the data of, depth’ (Olson, 1974: 17). The question of how we are inside the body constantly returns us to the porosity of the body, its continual absorption and expulsion of what it is not, and thus to the sense of the environments and contexts which our bodies interact with as inscription and description. The body literally writes itself in performance: the dancer for example ‘from one second to the next ... forms another body from his body ... [and b]y so doing he destroys what he was in order to attain what he is going to be’ (Roger Lannes, 1938, quoted in Cramer, 2007: 11).

Likewise being inside technology is a condition of being human, which is to say that technologies are not the result of being human. As the philosopher Bernard Stiegler proposes ‘it is the tool ... that invents the human, not the human that invents the technical’ (quoted in Gere, 2006: 19). As with our being inside bodies, our understanding of the world depends on the technical means by which we apprehend it. ‘It is through technics that the human is given access to the ‘already there’, to a past that he or she did not inhabit, and does not otherwise have access to ...’ (ibid.: 19).

In as much then as we operate inside language, inside our bodies and inside technology, interacting with our uses of them, this ‘insideness’ (the sum of experiences that produce the subject) also means that we share a responsibility to understand the way in which we may be increasingly incorporated into triangulations of bodies, texts and technologies where the frames of reference move beyond or outside our control in productive ways or where objective freedoms become eroded. A responsibility to enable us to understand how these intersections and interactivities of bodies, texts and technologies are operating in the field of performance is the aim of this book.

The two quotations that serve as an epigraph suggest a poetic link between iteration and the ineffable, between placement and displacement, between bodies, texts and technologies seen as possibilities of language. The continual rethinking of this relationship, which is both
the utopian and dystopian project of art and performance, is undertaken through putting the relationships of body, text and technology into question, through destabilizing and unsettling their tendencies to inertia, both as practice itself and through a critique of that practice, by inhabiting and activating the ‘space of appearance’.

Notes


2 See Charlie Gere, ‘Interiority and exteriority constitute the terms of what the philosopher Gilbert Simondon called a ‘transductive’ relation: a relation that constitutes these terms, meaning that a term in the relation cannot exist outside of that relation, and is constituted by the other term of the relation’ (2006: 19).

3 Ranciere further argues that this ‘common term of measurement’ has subsequently been lost or replaced by the ‘common factor of dis-measure or chaos that now gives art its power’.

4 See, for example, the work of Charles Bernstein, Allen Fisher, Lyn Hejinian, Rosmarie Waldrop, Barrett Watten.

References


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Stelarc explores alternate, intimate and involuntary interfaces with the body. He has performed with a Third Hand, a Virtual Body and Exoskeleton, a six-legged walking robot. He is surgically constructing an ear on his arm that will be internet enabled, making it publicly accessible to people in other places. He was appointed Honorary Professor of Art and Robotics at Carnegie Mellon University. He also was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Monash University. He is currently Chair in Performance Art at Brunel University, West London, and is Senior Research Fellow in the MARCS Labs at the University of Western Sydney.

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Olu Taiwo is Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Art at the University of Winchester. His post-doctoral studies are concerned with performativé nature regarding the relationship between ‘effort’, ‘performance’ and the ‘performativé’ in different arenas. He aims to propagate twenty-first-century issues concerning the interaction between body, identity, audience and technology. Publications include *The Return Beat*, in *The Virtual Embodied*, ed. Wood, (Routledge, 1998); *Music, Art and Movement among the Yoruba*, in *Indigenous Religions* (Cassell, 2000); *The Orishas: The Influence of the Yoruba Cultural Diaspora’,* in *Indigenous Diasporas and Dislocations*, ed. Harvey and Thompson (Ashgate, 2005).

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Ruth Way is Senior Lecturer and Head of Theatre and Performance, University of Plymouth, and Programme Leader for BA Dance Theatre. Ruth has had an extensive career as a dancer and choreographer performing with Earthfall and Lusty Juventus Physical Theatre and has presented her practice as research through performativé papers, articles and performances internationally. With Russell Frampton she is co-director of Enclave Productions and their most recent film, *Utah Sunshine*, has been selected for screenings in France, Poland and Brazil. Current research is exploring connections between somatic movement practice and the sentient body in her performance and film practice.
Paul Woodward is a Senior lecturer in Drama and Physical Theatre at St Mary’s University College. He has worked as a director/performer/writer for a variety of physical/experimental theatre companies in the early 1990s. Graduating with an MA (distinction) in Theatre at Royal Holloway, he consolidated his research into body/sign systems in Theatres of Asia and its application to Sign Language Theatres of the Deaf. Paul remains active as a professional director/dramaturg and has collaborated with Maxine Doyle (First Person dance/theatre) and Dr Josephine Machon (Brunel University) investigating the interface between the body, popular cultures and technology. He has delivered physical theatre workshops nationally and internationally, including the international festival of therapy and theatre, Lodz, Poland, and in Knysner, South Africa, working with HIV positive children in the townships. Paul is currently working on a practice as research PhD investigating the performativity of HIV (dis)closure.