1-20-2000

The New Performer

Sheila A. Malone
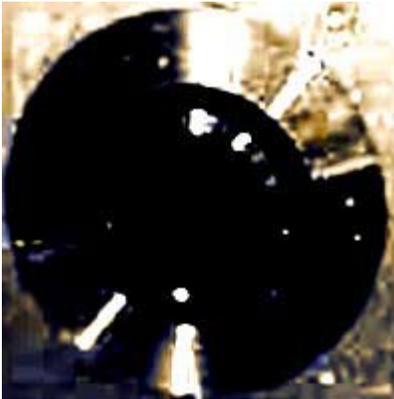
Recommended Citation

The New Performer

Sheila A. Malone on Jan 20 2000   **issue 13**

Data as Performer and Performance

I.

Introduction: In pursuit of the virtual performer
The nature of all performance includes the elements of time-based experience and space as "stage". I use the term "stage" as a simple reference point to describe the space in which a performer performs and not as reference to the theatre. The nature of performance in the computer age includes these elements of time and stage as space. A simple definition of performance is : that which is feigned or pretended. It is action. It is speech. It is anything performative. The nature of the performer includes any entity who/which feigns, pretends, acts, and speaks. So, it is natural to include non-human entities, such as robots, cyborgs, and databases in this discussion of performance. Baudrillard might describe performing and the performer as more real than real, so real that they are virtual. "Of course we have a multitude of objective, real proofs, but what does one do with historical reality in a system which itself has become virtual? "(1) New media's complex nature has influenced the nature of performance to become something many don't consider performance. Anything involving action, interaction, time, and space is performance. Therefore, performing is both real and virtual, becoming more real than real through the very nature of simulation. Performance on and of the net includes everything from virtual actors (interactors) interacting with real actors, Moos, Mud's, Mucks, Games, Chat groups, telepresence, Database as performance. The performer is data. The performer is virtual. The history of virtual performance begins with interaction between the real and hyperreal in time-based experience in a space referred to as the stage.

II.

Humans have romanced with the real since the beginning of our existence. With cave drawings, petroglyphs and Egyptian hieroglyphs, ancient civilizations marked stone with symbols and icons representing the world around them and their beliefs about the world. And so, through the centuries human bodies have invented new ways, new mediums to describe the world around and inside them. Each medium used through the ages has acted as a vehicle for the performer or describer. In the past 75 years our romance with the real has become even more intense. We have seen the most explosive and dynamic changes in performance as a direct result of the invention of the vacuum tube, the transistor, and most recently the silicon chip. Radio, sound effects and actors' voices performed images on audiences' ears, exploring the medium to convey the ideas in the scripts. With the advent of television, visual information created a way to mimic reality and record reality. The family situation shows of the 1950's were a hyper reality, reflecting back to the public their own "perfect" image. With the age of the computer, visual, aural, and text are combined as mediums for the performer to describe and rescribe the world around and within. What is real becomes virtual through the act of performing. What does this mean in terms of the performer? It means there is a new kind of performer, stage, and performance.

III.

The Early Years: Technology and body
According to Village Voice writer Cynthia Carr, John Jesurun's play, "Deep Sleep" (1985), was one of the first performances to illustrate Baudrillard's concept of the loss of the real or how virtual is more real than the real. In "Deep Sleep", film projections of actors and live actors argue over who is real or alive. "The youngest actor, a boy of perhaps twelve (Michael Tighe) who responds with the most conviction...is certain he's not a projection."(2) The presence of real actors and projected actors and the subsequent interaction begins to warp the line between real and hyperreal. The audience is forced to question their own perceptions of real. Performance and computers have a somewhat recent past with the personal computer's short history paving the way. One of the early crusaders of performance art using computers was Joe Lowery. In 1983, in the piece titled, "Discrete Packages", Lowery uses his newly acquired Atari 800 microcomputer to generate designs of some of the ideas and philosophies explored within the text and structure of his performance. "(He) was interested in the different metaphors society uses to view itself, and ended up intertwining computers, performance, and Kabbalah..."(3) Lowery believed that the programming aspect of computers was a metaphor for performing. Lowery says, "...the questions are basically who's being programmed and how do you respond to the programming?"(4) Lowery was exploring issues that are still at the heart of computer interaction.

IV.

The Recent Years: Virtual performers
More recently, the use of virtual performers can be seen in George Coates' Performance Works. According to George Coates, "(The George Coates Performance Works) produced a show called the "Nowhere Band" that included an inter-actor named Ralph who arrived on-stage via the internet every night at 8:30 PM PST for a five week performance run - This was the first distributed live performance ever to occur as part of a regularly scheduled theater run. Audiences in our theater would see Ralph blow into his pipes to sound a `C' note in Australia establishing the musical key, as the Nowhere Band in San Francisco tuned their instruments to his bagpipe for the first number played in the show. This show premiered at our civic Center theater in San Francisco in 1994."(5) The idea of space and real are connected with the idea of a time-based experience. The relationship of live characters is absolutely dependent on the interaction with the virtual characters. George Coates takes these ideas of real and hyperreal and completely mesmerizes audiences with the production of "20/20 BLAKE: The Visions Of William Blake." George Coates describes the performance, "at one point we had even hacked a way to make two SGI graphics engines run simultaneous stereographic interactive animation programs enabling audiences wearing polarized glasses to experience stereo 3D illusions of volumetric space interacting in real time with live actors on a stage. (This enabled, for example, a flock of birds to appear to hover over the stage and audiences, swooping down to harass the live actor, chasing the actor around the stage wherever the actor chose to go - in real time)."(6) Here Coates and his company of actors, technicians, and virtual images are merged with the audience into a space created and controlled by the computer and its operators. The definition of performer has changed. But the presence of space and time are consistent common denominators in the performance.

V.

Virtual Verbiage: Textual performance of Moos and Muds
Performance in real time made virtual is exactly the environment found in Mooing. Moo stands for mud object oriented, which is a hybrid of Mud, multi-user dimension. Mud is a text based virtual reality world. A moo is an electronic "place" where people log onto a network or server and talk simultaneously, electronically through the computer. In order to Moo, one needs a way to telenet, i.e. a computer system at a university. Mooing and Mudding are descendents of the computerized game "Dungeons and Dragons". Participants can Moo by teleneting through the Internet from a host computer to another host computer, which is the domain of the Moo. Users can also access Moo's through the Internet, using a client server program, such as "mutt" which will actually allow the user to log on to several different Moo's at once.(7) As in "Dungeons and Dragons", the participants can take on many personas in one session and thus actually interact with themselves. This is truly virtual performance. "Craggy Island" is "... a Lambda-based MOO, themed around the Emmy Award-winning British Channel4 sitcom, "Father Ted". "Craggy Island" itself sets to capture some of the atmosphere and stunning scenery of Ireland, as well as the general inanity of its administrative staff. Here you will find many things, some of which will amaze you, others may just scare. There's online login and character requests, links to other great "Father Ted" sites, a guided tour of the Island, archived mailing lists, and best of all,

drink!"(8) The virtual creative performance potential of Mooing is limited only by a person's imagination and language skills and of course programming skills and access. The popularity of Mooing is huge, with classes offered by distinguished English professors, and departments specializing in Moo and Mud creative writing. The result is a Mooing and Mudding frenzy across the nation and across the university circuit. People take on personas, describe themselves how they want to be perceived, accomplish tasks, and interact with other participants. They can visit make believe places, interact with 3-dimensional objects all through Mooing and Mudding.

VI.

Virtual Bodies: Robots, cyborgs, and artificial intelligence as performers

The new 3-dimensional graphically represented self comes in the form of robots, cyborgs, and artificial intelligence. After all aren't we the real intelligence? Or are we the virtual intelligence? The intersection of real and virtual is similar to the intersection between audience and performer. It is precisely this intersection in time and space that Suzi Gablik calls, "the key that moves art beyond the aesthetic mode."(9) Eduardo Kac, an artist with roots as a performance artist, is working with this idea of the intersection. His work encompasses telepresence and interactive robots. Most recently his project "UIRAPURU", a combination of local network, remote network, virtual space, and real space, was named one of the top three entries at the ICC (InterCommunication Center, Tokyo, Japan) Biennale '99 exhibition(10). Kac uses the mythical and real Amazonian bird as a structure and vehicle for the work. Kac says, " (his) version of the legend reinvents Uirapuru's dual status as a real animal and a mythical creature through an experience that is at once local and remote, virtual and physical. The flying telerobotic fish is a blimp that can be controlled both through a local interface and through the Web."(11)
For over 20 years Stelarc, an Australian based performer has been working with robotics, artificial intelligence and their relationship with the human body. "(Stelarc's) work explores and extends the concept of the body and its relationship with technology through human/machine interfaces incorporating the Internet and Web, sound, music, video and computers."(12)
From 1968-1970 Stelarc created what he calls "Multimedia Performances."(13) His romance with the body and technology is evident in his subsequent work. From 1972 - 1975 Stelarc worked with " sensory deprivation events"(14) suspending the body with harnesses. By 1976, he was investigating the impact of artificial intelligence on the body "real." Stelarc has recently been performing interactively with the Internet. "While the body is under the control of the flux of information streaming through the Net during these performances, live images are uploaded and samples have been archived for viewing."(15) Stelarc's work is most significant to all of the mutations and form performance has taken in the past twenty years. His innovation and continued exploration moves new media forward with each new project he envisions and executes.

VII.

Data Performer: The most true and most real performer on the virtual stage

The most natural performers in cyber environments are databases and the data itself. In her essay, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?" Allucquere Rosanne Stone describes the nature of the cyber-experience. " The "data" in some of these virtual environments are people--3-D representations of individuals in the cyberspace."(16) Data can also function as the stage or environment for performance. Data can also bring time notions together, holding a performance together by its own processing. In the book, "Technoromanticism: digital narrative, holoism, and the romance of the real", Richard Coyne discusses the nature and function of data in virtual reality. "(Performers) use computers to represent space, as in computer-aided design, virtual reality, and geographical information systems. Such systems employ databases in which numerical and other attribute data based on some coordinate system or other are stored, which can be manipulated according to the rules of mathematics and geometry. The prospect of immersion in three-dimensional virtual worlds captures the romantic imagination." (17) The group Knowbotic Research uses data environments to create simulated and network experience for participants. Working for over 6 years in the field of computers, research and art Knowbotic Research has collaborated with other scientists and artists in VRML experience making. In 1996 Knowbotic Research's "SMDK Simulation Space Mosaic of mobile Datasounds" brought performance into the definition of database as performer and data as stage. Knowbotic describes this project as a complex self-organizing system that is processed on, thus creating a new system for the visitor. "The chaotic basic structure of SMDK, the self-organization feature, the real-time composition of public sound material and its fragmentation, the continuous visualization of (mathematical) processes and the openness of the entire system to the

outside world through data networks represent a complexity that challenges the visitor to construct his or her own orientation system, within an interactive database.(18)
David Rokeby is an artist working with computerized interactive sound and video work. He uses data as "the real performing body"(19) and data processed on as a virtual experience provided through computers. In a recent work, "Universal Translator", "the interface ... is a microphone with a micro video camera embedded in its head so that the camera looks directly at the mouth from very close up. The sound of the voice and video of the moving lips are captured by computers. These sounds and images provide most of the content, and are used to control most of the interactivity of the work. A computer monitor faces the interactor and displays the processed mouth images."(20)

VIII.

Conclusion: The politics of virtual performance or virtually performing in the future of the hyperreal

"... Today enters into the same domain of indeterminate, undefined interpretations or into the principle of indeterminacy. And this not only applies to the past, but also to the future as well as to the present."(21) Baudrillard's comment on history and the past can only point to the future. And the future is marked by the ability to become what it will become, real or not.
According to Peggy Phelan in her book, "Unmarked: The Politics of Performance", "Performance art usually occurs in the suspension between the "real" physical matter of "the performing body" and the psychic experience of what is to be em-bodied. Like a rackety bridge swaying under too much weight, performance keeps one anchor on the side of psychic Real. Performance boldly and precariously declares that Being is performed (and made temporarily visible) in that suspended in-between."(22) The "psychic experience" becomes synonymous with the virtual experience, and the "performing body" is no longer synonymous with the human body. The body is changing from that of the person to the body of the computer. And at times the data particles of the information being acted upon becomes the performing body.
Cyberperformance has many different characteristics from that of traditional performance. But, ultimately it is still a time-based experience in some sort of space we can call the stage or cyberspace. We are still in the Lacanian "Mirror Stage" in which we use our virtual selves to perform actions, ideas, and language. " A never-resolved assemblage of virtual and real (making) up the very fabric of human subjectivity."(23) The politics of cyberperformance are embedded with data representing and unrepresenting the world around and within us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Auslander, Philip, From Acting to Performance: Essays in modernism and postmodernism. (London: Routledge, 1997) 90-1.
Banes, Sally, Subversive Expectations: Performance Art and Paratheater in New York, 1976-85. "Joe Lowery logs On" Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1998)261-3.
Batchen, Geoffrey, "Spectres of Cyberspace," an essay from the book, Visual Culture Reader, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff. (London: Routledge, 1998)273-8.
Baudrillard, Jean, from CTheory interview "Vivisecting the 90s: An Interview with Jean Baudrillard" by Caroline Bayard and Graham Knight
Blau, Herbert, To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance. (London: Routledge, 1992) 152-3.
Carr, Cynthia, "Realms of The Unreal" from On The Edge Performance At The End Of The Twentieth Century, (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1993) 219-20.
Coyne, Richard, Technoromanticism:digital narrative, holism, and the romance of the real (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999)73-4.
Gablik, Suzi, The Reenchantment of Art (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991)151-2.
Goldberg, Roselee, Performance:live art since 1960 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Publishers. Inc.,1998)190.
Phelan, Peggy, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London: Routledge, 1993)167.
Stone, Allucquere Rosanne "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?" An essay first published in the anthology Cyberspace: First Steps, edited by
Michael Benedikt (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991): 81-118.
URL BIBLIOGRAPHYhttp://www.georgecoates.org/who.html
http://www.cas.usf.edu/english/walker/spring/articles/art90s.html
http://necro.mcc.ac.uk:6666/ Craggy Island
http://www.ekac.org/uirapuru.html
http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/
http://www.t0.or.at/~krcf/smdk/smdk1.html

http://www.interlog.com/~drokeby/trans.html
http://www.simulation.dk/articles/a24-vivisecting_90s.html
http://www.t0.or.at/~krcf/

 1. Jean Baudrillard, from CTheory interview "Vivisecting the 90s: An Interview with Jean Baudrillard" by   Caroline Bayard and Graham Knight (http://www.simulation.dk/articles/a24-vivisecting_90s.html)
 2. Cynthia Carr, "Realms of The Unreal" from On The Edge Performance At The End Of The Twentieth   Century, Hanover, New Hampshire, Wesleyan University Press, 1993. Pp. 219-20.
 3. Sally Banes, "Joe Lowery logs On" from the book, Subversive Expectations: Performance Art and   Paratheater in New York, 1976-85. Ann Arbor, MI, The University of Michigan Press. 1998. Pp.261-3.
 4. Ibid
 5. http://www.georgecoates.org/who.html
 6. Ibid
 7. http://www.cas.usf.edu/english/walker/spring/articles/art90s.html
 8. http://necro.mcc.ac.uk:6666/ Craggy Island
 9. Suzi Gablik, The Reenchantment of Art. Thames and Hudson, New York, New York, 1991. Pp. 151-2.
10. http://www.ntticc.or.jp/special/biennale99/preface_e.html
11. http://www.ekac.org/uirapuru.html
12. http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/biog/biog.html
13. Ibid
14. Ibid
15. http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/
16. Allucquere Rosanne Stone, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?" An essay first published in the anthology   Cyberspace: First Steps, edited by.   Michael Benedikt (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991): 81-118.
17. Richard Coyne, Technoromanticism:digital narrative, holism, and the romance of the real. The MIT Press,   Cambridge, MA, 1999. Pp.73-4.
18. http://www.t0.or.at/~krcf/smdk/smdk1.html
19. Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance, Routledge, London, Great Britain, 1993. P.167
20. http://www.interlog.com/~drokeby/trans.html
21. http://www.simulation.dk/articles/a24-vivisecting_90s.html
22. Peggy Phelan, Pp.167-8.
23. Geoffrey Batchen, "Spectres of Cyberspace", an essay from the book, Visual Culture Reader, edited by   Nicholas Mirzoeff. Routledge, London, Great Britain, 1998. Pp.273-8
.
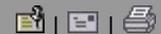
::CrossReference

last 5 articles posted by Malone

:: An Interview with Christiane Paul - Feb 12 2002

:: The Man Behind The Bunny: Interview with Eduardo Kac - May 15 2001

:: Report on Sins of Change - Jun 14 2000

:: The New Performer - Jan 20 2000

:: Interview with the Kitchen, NYC - Jan 1 2000

about | **contact** | **credits** | **subscribe**