Flanker Origami

Bianca Mastrominico

Embodying Essence through Absence
Performance practice and pedagogy through digital platforms

Abstract: *In this article Bianca Mastrominico focuses on how to embody liveness through digital platforms within the framework of theatre anthropology, looking at how remote performers and spectators interact through screen technology to discern principles and techniques that can guide online training, and creating work for a digital spectator. Her conclusions envisage a soft technology which fosters participatory practice and includes the non-human in creative processes.*

During the Covid19 pandemic many practitioners encountered an organic digital shift in their performance practice. With the attempt to resume and revert to more usual in-person working dynamics, it would be tempting to dismiss these shifts as a temporary solution to a moment of crisis. Live online performance making - as distinct from broadcasting or live streaming of in-person events - is rapidly changing conceptual and practical notions of spectatorship and participation for artists who had never experimented within the digital field before the pandemic. It is also paving the way towards innovative training and performance practices, and the intimacy with new technologies is redefining the meaning of embodiment and liveness in the context of digital creativity. To discuss the current online shifts, I will use the framework of theatre anthropology, a field of investigation based on empirical performance research developed by the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) founded in 1979 by Eugenio Barba. In the first issue of the *JTA - Journal of Theatre Anthropology* Barba (2021, 12) recapitulates its origins and defines it as an "operative science", which is concerned with "the study of the behaviour of human beings who use their physical/mental presence (body/mind) according to principles different from those of everyday life in a situation of organised representation. This extra-daily use of the body is what we call technique".

To help my analysis, I will attempt to apply some key principles of theatre anthropology to the context of my current practice research, which seeks to explore strategies of performance making, training and pedagogy through digital platforms. I also refer to my experience of participation in the digital course of the International School of Theatre

Anthropology/New Generation (ISTA/NG) in October 2021, in order to elaborate on my research findings and evaluate the impact of the course within the hybrid conditions of in-presence activities in Italy. To begin with, I will focus on the migration of my training practice onto the Zoom platform in the context of Digital HotSpot, a research collective which aims at exploring the soft boundaries between spectatorship and performance on digital. I will then consider the live online adaptation of my performance work through Organic Theatre's digital performance *Flanker Origami*. These ongoing practice research projects are shared with my working partner John Dean, as co-creator, researcher and performer, and have been supported by and developed as part of the research activities of the "Practice Research Cluster: Finding and Understanding Creative Knowledge" within the Centre for Communication, Cultural and Media Studies at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, Scotland.

In order to look at "the galaxy of the digital" (Barba 2021, email message to author, September 5, 2021) through the perspective of theatre anthropology, I will follow the praxis of studying what Barba (1991, 8) refers to as "the human being's socio-cultural and physiological behaviour in a performance situation". In enquiring how my experience of digital (dis)embodiment is impacting on my performance processes, I will refer to the pragmatic laws of presence, energy, the dramaturgy of the performer, and montage in relation to the use of screen technology, to discuss the perception of both performers and spectators that derives from working on specific video applications. I am interested in the challenges and the stimuli provoked by the friction between my embodied practice and digital technology, and to this purpose I question how practical knowledge can be transmitted through the immateriality of the internet, and which kind of corporeality and performer's *techne* can be generated through observing the effects of online performance behaviours. I also aim to demonstrate that digital performance making can produce charged creative spaces-in-between, and that investigating the know-how of working with and through new technologies can have a positive impact on sustaining training and performance practices in a digital context and beyond. Finally, I suggest that through engaging creatively with new technologies and intermedial practices we can reframe our anthropomorphic and anthropocentric gaze on the technology itself, expanding and innovating creative approaches.

Shifting to the Zoom window

For those practitioners world-wide who suddenly lost their creative contexts, working spaces and networks of professional support, shifting practice online was a forced yet conscious decision to retain an artistic continuity, as well as to find a personal space for self-expression within the social restrictions of the lockdowns. At the onset of the pandemic, alongside the professional and high-tech broadcasting of recorded shows, a global proliferation of livestreamed performances began to occur on video conference applications such as Zoom, as pop-up digital theatres, in which the domestic spaces of performers were converted into virtual stages beamed directly into the houses of disembodied spectators. As a performance maker, I too embraced my living space as

a site for digital performance, attending online theatre workshops from home, as well as developing online training in my living room. At that stage, the crucial concern in migrating my own performance practice onto the digital medium became how to retain liveness and keep collaborative processes alive in a way that would contain the essence of the creative conditions I would normally experience in person.

Provoked by the constraints of the pandemic, these alternative home spaces for online performance making contributed to altering the experience and the perception of the ways we communicate with one another through our bodies and our senses. However, as dancer, filmmaker and screendancer practitioner Clare Loussouarn (2021a, 73) states "the Zoom environment was used as a replacement for physical gathering without much reflection on how social interaction and body perception are distorted through the prism of the screen". Therefore, in order to assess how digital platforms can influence performance processes, it is necessary to look at how performers and spectators perceive each other's bodies (as well as their own) through the digital screen, and what sort of behaviour and communication emerges from interacting through the Zoom window. Equally, in examining notions of embodiment and energy transmission through the digital frame, I will seek to discern what technical principles can be found and developed to maintain a level of affect and connection through screen technology, when utilized as a tool for performance making.

Digital presence and spectatorship

To start my analysis, I will refer to "the actor's presence and the perception of the spectator" as the theme of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA/NG), which was addressed and discussed by Barba in collaboration with the ISTA performers and teachers. While observing Alessandro Rigoletti from Teatro tascabile di Bergamo (Italy) in his demonstration of a cycle of dance movements from the Indian kathakali dance-drama, Barba (2021a) spoke about awakening "the kinaesthetic sense of the spectator" and stimulating their nervous system through the "archaic technology of the [performer's] body". He then gave a precise indication of what is programmed to "move" the spectator in the codified scenic behaviour of the kathakali performer: building continuity within the dance sequence in order to disrupt it and make tonic changes in the dancer's body, which in turn affect the spectator's perception (Barba 2021b). According to this, activating the kinaesthetic sense through changes in the muscular tone rests on the assumption that the body-mind is in a performative state. On the Zoom platform, there is a tendency to limit the performativity to the fixed headshot and to the "talking heads" of performers, mainly concerned with an exchange of words (Loussouarn 2021b, 73). Therefore when bodies are passive in online communication, the possibility of stimulating the spectator's kinaesthetic sense decreases.

In the light of Barba's indications, the feeling of disembodiment and disconnection, often considered as an intrinsic dilemma for the creative use of corporate platforms such as Zoom, appears to be characterised by online performers disengaged from their bodies, and therefore refrained by the digital settings in modelling their "natural and

daily behaviour into extra-daily scenic behaviour" (Barba and Savarese 1991, 189). The habit of using digital platforms uncreatively, and mostly for work meetings or for virtual visits to family and friends, seems to hinder the possibility of (re)creating the biological flow of the body in action, which could instead overcome the perceived restrictions of the frame. As Jean-Marie Pradier (as cited in Barba and Savarese 1991, 215) describes "the perception of bodies in movement induces a kind of echo of subtle tonic variations in the observers, who respond to their perceived movement with their own body". Therefore, performance makers who oblige themselves to fit the standard requirements of a video call, renouncing their whole body as a tool for communication, will inevitably become introverted, collapsing into their soma, which in turn will prevent them from engaging the digital spectator kinaesthetically.

Illustration 1

Digital HotSpot: performer training through screen technology

As a performer on the Zoom platform, it is crucial to firstly address how one can break the passivity that sits between the technology and the body, in order to acquire a believable state of digital presence. In the first sessions of my research collective Digital HotSpot, training focused on bypassing physical timidity in front of the screen, also searching for ways to (re)create physical connectivity between participants. Activities designed to imagine oneself going through or beyond the screen were invented, such as an exercise of blowing each other over, based on simple action-reaction tasks which worked to trick participants' brains into believing that there was no screen barrier in front of them. The use of the breath to trigger physical reactions in digitally connected bodies operates as an "extra-daily body and mind technique" (Barba and Savarese 1991, 77) which allows performers to mould and play with their energy online, while sensing the screen not as a barrier, but as a porous membrane one could pass through. The process of connecting with the breath through the action of blowing - which in this context also requires an act of our imagination, a Stanislavskian 'magic if' - triggers participants into a holistic, somatic responsiveness to the in-between spaces of the technology. To further explore physical and vocal reactivity on the platform, other imaginative triggers are employed in order to create lists of actions via the Zoom chat. For example, using an improvisation technique borrowed from the pioneering experiments in network performance by Desktop Theater, a digital performance project created by Adriene Jenik and Lisa Brennels that ran between 1997 and 2002, performers are asked to complete the sentence "what would happen if we…" several times and post them on the chat, as shown below:

14.36:30   From Participant 1: What would happen if we tried to stand on our heads?
14:36:37   From Participant 2: jump up and down
14:36:43   From Participant 3: flew to the moon
14:36:59   From Participant 1: What would happen if we were sick in front of people?
14:37:00   From Participant 3: screamed blue murder

14:37:07   From Participant 2: kiss the wall

14:37:13   From Participant 3: mistrusted each other

14:37:24   From Participant 1: What would happen if we mistakenly believed we were world leading pianists?

(John Dean, Bianca Mastrominico and Madeleine Worrall, July 24, 2020, Zoom meeting, Digital HotSpot)

This task invented for a digital ensemble reflects what Barba (as cited in Barba and Savarese 1991, 250) says, that for the quality of training "it is less the exercise itself than the temperature of the process which is decisive". The timings of the entries, as well as the pauses and the thinking lapses between posts, expose intellectual and creative impulses in completing the sentence, alongside the act of bouncing off each other's ideas. In replicating a cyber-improvisation originally intended for avatars - that is, electronic images representing computer users, who may manipulate them, as in a game - and injecting human energy in embodying the suggestions, participants are compelled to activate their physical intelligence to overcome disembodiment and remoteness on Zoom. While watching each other in the act of *doing on screens,* the ensemble slowly drifts from training into a performance mode. These instances of performativity on the digital medium, generated by exercises intended for experimenting with "the performer's scenic bios" (Barba and Savarese 1991, 188), blur the boundaries between *being* and *doing* on the platform, creating what I define as "an ecology of becoming" (Mastrominico 2021), where participation and creation is fluid and accepting of the online working conditions.

Digital spaces as online stages

In breaking the passive stance and focussing on interactions through the digital platform, the work of the Digital HotSpot collective investigates how we perceive and create space online, as well as how the digital and the physical space connect. Individual houses become domestic spaces of transformation and imagination, and the way they are perceived by the digital spectator, as well as what they communicate, are aspects to bear in mind when working on self-specific sites which are full of our subjectivity. Performers exploring hidden corners and atmospheres within their homes play with light and darkness, using the torch in their phones to create shadows, as well as detached light bulbs and desk lamps to isolate themselves or part of their bodies. Reframing private habitats as a shared digital set, found objects and somatic exploration of the physical space produce filmic imagery, which elevate the creative potential of the Zoom window. Working on the theme of "living solo", three clown-like figures slowly show themselves through

Illustrations 2, 3, 4

Illustration 5

the gaps of a barrier they have built in front of the camera eye with discarded pizza boxes and Lego pieces, toying with the idea of home privacy in a voyeuristic Zoom environment. The addition of randomly selected music styles played by Alexa, a voice-based AI [Artificial Intelligence] digital assistant which works by giving it spoken commands, provides another layer to the improvisations and incorporates the non-human alongside human performers in the digital process. The dialogue between body and space through digital technology, which is played against the domestic and daily life of the performers - often literally through the kitchen and the living room - could be defined as "poor (digital) theatre" in homage to Jerzy Grotowski, as this poverty of means is also what characterises the theatrical strengths of working through the digital frame. As Barba (2021, Zoom conversation with author, December 1, 2021) observed while commenting on the techniques adopted to develop *Flanker Origami*:

> What I find very interesting in all this is that if, on one hand what we are doing is typical of theatre because it's done with very little means - there are no special effects here that blow up an entire city - here there is only a wig, I will take it off and I transform myself […], on the other hand one has this great vehicle of the digital image which means that I can get closer […] and all that is close up has a very strong effect on the perception of the spectator.

Therefore low tech solutions - often discovered by accident in workshops and retained while improvising - can be consciously employed to sustain and enhance the live dimension of the digital.

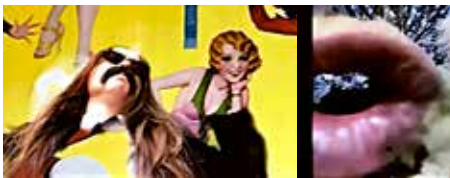## Glitches and backgrounds: an aesthetic of approximation

Illustration 6

Working intentionally without being bogged down by the technology also involves being aware and in acceptance of any technical glitches, which can be disruptive of the space-time continuum in digital processes. As Matthew Causey (2016, 434) states, the glitch is "a momentary fault in the system, an aesthetic of failure, disruption, noise, and interference that promotes spontaneity and randomness". Therefore, glitches can either be considered as a digital defect or as an opportunity, which can be fruitful to performers who are willing to explore them creatively. Glitches on a digital platform can also be provoked by human action - in holding devices and becoming physically

attuned to the technology, any roughness in the framing or handling of the camera will become visible on screen. However, it will not necessarily be perceived as a human error, but as part of the performer's kinaesthetic behaviour through framing themselves and the space around them. The glitches, either technical or provoked by the performers, correspond to an aesthetic of approximation and to dramaturgical ruptures of the flow in digital interactions, which stimulate the brain and refocus the spectator's attention, functioning similarly to the change in the sequence of the kathakali performer, as highlighted by Barba during ISTA/NG. Thus the digital glitch creates a tension and a suspension in meaning, while on the other hand human disruption can be defined and perceived as a glitch in a dialogical exchange through screens. This works as a rupture in the dramaturgy, perturbing the status quo: for example, the heightened presence of a performer disrupting the credible Zoom interaction of an arguing couple.

In the awareness that the performer's body itself can be perceived as *glitchy* in relation to the screen, Digital HotSpot sessions also focus on exploring the frame as an immersive environment which merges with the somatic appearance of the performer. The screen-stage is tested through isolating actions in close-ups, using emoticons as triggers for facial expressions or exposing only one segment of the body to break from the typical Zoom framing of the performer as a talking head. Entrances and exits from all directions of the frame allow to sense the threshold between being *in* and *out* of the screen, as well as the edges and the peripheral space around the window. Backgrounds change the content and context of what the spectator sees in the frame, and a digitally constructed environment overwrites real places, suggesting different locations or a shared space for the performers to inhabit. Images can be static or in motion, working as layers and as backdrops in which the performers display but also displace themselves. Changing the proxemic relationship with the camera gives the illusion of tridimensionality, and of defying gravity. Backgrounds not only create a digital immersive space, but they can also work as a *prothesis*, which "assists the performer's body, dilate it and conceal it while continuously transforming it" (Barba and Savarese, 1991, 219). In this way, a Zoom frame subjected to constant metamorphosis also enhances the performer's process of building their digital presence.
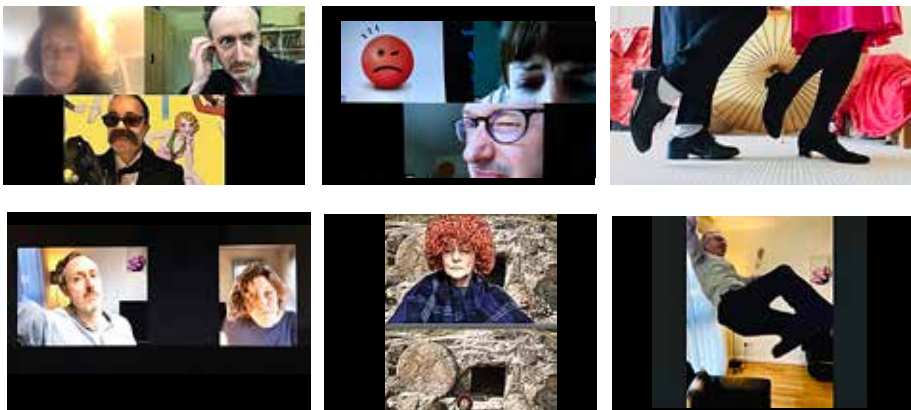
Illustrations 7 to 12

Embodying essence through absence

In the context of theatre anthropology, the performer's presence is a core area of investigation related to the pre-expressive level, which as Barba and Savarese (1991, 188) indicate "deals with how to render the actor's energy scenically alive" in order to make the performer become "a presence which immediately attracts the spectator's attention". Working through digital platforms, the remoteness of the performer-spectator interaction establishes *presence* through what is experienced and perceived as *absence.* This apparent paradox is embedded in the digital encounter and requires experimenting with principles and working techniques that enable performers to embody "essence through absence" in the digital realm (Barba, 2021, email to author, September 5, 2021). Embracing the lack of bodily presence is a *modus operandi* (a way of working) of digital performance practice, which if acquired, learned and practiced through the medium, can lead to the realisation that corporeal absence can generate a *different* state of presence. This is intended as the outcome of an interpersonal need for communication established between two or more individuals *through* the technology, which according to Frank Camilleri (2019, 92) forms part of the sociomaterial dimension for that interaction to happen "within the bigger picture of [...] a sociality big enough to include the role played by non-humans".

Mirror-screen and self-image

Digital presence splits simultaneously between the physical space of performers, their images on screens and the shared online stage. This leads us to acknowledge the impact of screen technology on how performers perceive themselves - or their self-image - through the mirror-screen, also in relation to their embodied experience. Watching oneself performing on the Zoom screen can be compared to the experience of looking into a non-reversing mirror, or *true mirror,* through which, according to the website of the True Mirror Company as of December 23, 2021, "self-communication is enhanced greatly because reflected expressions match what is real". The moving image of the performer is continuously reflected and played from the mirror-screen back into the physical space and then beamed into the screen again, through a pattern which gives way to a gradual process of self-recognition, in that performers witness themselves playing in the moment. In reflecting their image back to them in real time, the digital screen - as a true mirror - turns performers into spectators of themselves, generating a peculiar type of mirror-response. As performance maker Ellie Higgins (October 7, 2021, Zoom meeting) commented during a Digital HotSpot session: "It's like seeing yourself and someone else at the same time. It's really bizarre, it's like looking in a mirror, but actually I am not looking at me."

The split in the visual perception of oneself on the Zoom screen is linked to what Philippe Rochat (2001, 205) calls the "self-other paradox" of the mirror reflection, which is "paradoxical in the sense that what is seen in the mirror is the self as another person". This leads to the consideration of how performers perceive their moving image

on screens as *otherness*, and how their behaviour (auto)stimulates their own kinaesthetic sense, as well as that of the spectators. Due to this, it is challenging to pinpoint exactly where the opportunity lies in triggering the kinaesthetic sense of digital viewers, when we are continuously both *seeing* and *being seen*, in a state of self-awareness which fluctuates between performing within the frame and spectating through it. This shows that navigating screen technology requires a specific understanding of how to bring our vision from the eyes into the whole body, and not to rely exclusively on our sense of sight to orientate ourselves. As Loussouarn (2021,78) puts it, "a dissociation seems to happen between what I'm focusing my attention on visually on screen and what my body is sensing, what I'm experiencing in my body and around it". When working with the digital frame, it is therefore useful to be aware of the constant risk of a narcissistic attraction to our own self-image through the mirror-screen.

Digital dramaturgies and auto-montage

For Digital HotSpot participants, the mirror-screen also works as a compositional tool, according to how the individual dramaturgy of performers evolves through *responsive interaction* with the partners and the medium. The process through which performers weave their actions in the physical space in relation to the screen, as well as how they handle the camera to frame themselves, become part of what Barba (1991, 68) refers to as "drama-ergon, the *work of the actions* in performance". While incorporating the camera - or multiple cameras - into their actions, performers manipulate devices and change the point of view of the camera as part of their digital corporeality, generating a kinaesthetic dramaturgy which *embodies* the technology. In the attempt to inhabit the physical and digital space at the same time, performers develop the ability of reviewing, adjusting and editing their self-image through a process of *auto-framing,* creating a self-montage of their own score, while *being decided* by their actions on camera and how these look on screens. In the process of becoming the camera operator, the performer gains experience of how to put into vision the essence of an action.

To further analyse how performers might compose and elaborate on Zoom, it is useful to consider the distinction that Barba (1991, 69) makes in theatre anthropology between developing the plot - in the meaning of actions - through "a concatenation of causes and effects" or "by means of simultaneity" of several actions at once. As Barba writes, these are "the two poles whose tension and dialectic determine the performance and its life". While these poles can be woven together and find a balance in the performance text staged in person, several actions at work on multiple screens risk producing cacophony, as the perception of the viewer is split between each separate digital stage-screen. Moreover, unlike cinema, it is up to each individual performer to create the logic, becoming "the eye-filter which selects close-ups" (Barba, 1991, 67) and framing each one of their actions for the viewer in real time on separate screens. Therefore, to compose action "into a synthesis which is far removed from a daily way of behaving" (Barba, 1991, 70) the digital performer needs to work with the third pole of a montage technique which is self-directed, and sits between the theatrical and the cinematic. In

this montage, the dramaturgy of the digital performer resists the process of structuring pre-existing material - as would happen in a physical rehearsal space - as performing online is reconfigured into a constant exercise of 'becoming' in front of the camera.

Flanker Origami: leaping into a digital abyss
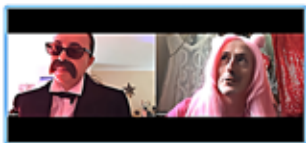
Flanker Origami
@EdFringe
30.9.21

Illustration 13

These working principles were further explored in the composition of *Flanker Origami*, a live online performance first shared with digital spectators at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2021. As a practice research project, *Flanker Origami* is the study of the performer's body in collision with digital technology, and of the dynamics at play in meaning-making through the Zoom platform, with a focus on the immediacy of the experience for digital spectators. Unlike Digital HotSpot, which usually takes place within a Zoom call, *Flanker Origami* is livestreamed from home on a webinar used as a digital stage, made of two (or more) screens manipulated directly by the performers during the livestreaming. In generating scores on two different frames, Dean as Origami and myself as Flanker decided to explore screen technology throughout the devising process, to evaluate how it would influence our individual dramaturgies, as well as to exploit the self-directorial impulse through the mirror-screens. Here is an example of the pre-set list which shows how the performer's attention is split between organising and taming the technology in order to transform the home environment into a digital stage:

Rename Origami [on the Zoom screen] / Gallery view/ Cam & mic off/ No background / Set chat to 'attendees'/ Volume to medium/ Alexa & 2 computers Wi-Fi off / Phone airplane mode / Ice pack, cloth, text in kitchen / Headband on other bathroom door / Bulb and book in cupboard, with text / iPad stand on dining table / Bike gears to 2, tyres pumped / Stool, bike wheel stand [for iPad] (John Dean, WhatsApp message to author, August 30, 2021)

In encountering the medium, we had to confront the impact of disembodied interactions, and of remoteness as a perceived obstacle to *liveness*. As a result, one of the strategies adopted to overcome our cautiousness was to define what was live and what wasn't in the performance, by adding scenes recorded on multiple screens and re-cre-

ating our-selves as 2D rotoscope animations. Designed in collaboration with artist and illustrator Cristiana Messina and inserted in the final montage,

Illustrations 14, 15

the animations were instrumental in refocusing the attention of the spectator through breaking the rhythm of the 'live digital action'.

During the runs of *Flanker Origami*, while performing through screens, at some stages Dean and I experienced a split in consciousness and an *out of the body* sensation. The dialogue with the invisible spectators felt dematerialised to the point that, on camera, we were confronted with what Dean refers to as "a whole reality [which] opened up, and it was like leaping into an abyss" (John Dean, Zoom conversation with author, December 1, 2021). As performers we became sensitive to the absence of the spectators in our physical space, only being able to mentally evoke them, but unable to experience their presence emotionally or sensorially, which led us to refuse the emptiness of the non-human. As according to Schechner (1985, 37) "restored behaviour involves choice", in order to confront the anxiety and resist the impulse to quit the webinar and walk out of the performance altogether, Dean and myself held strongly to 'the illusion of choice'. We both kept performing our scores on our two screens, understanding by instinct that we needed to abide to the 'ritual by contract' to make the digital abyss retreat.

Discussing the risks involved in performing on digital, Odin Teatret actress and director Julia Varley observes how one can give the spectators "the awareness of the enormous effort which one has to make in order to work through digital platforms". This highlights the perceived difference between performance in presence, where "you feel that they [the actors] are risking something because they are there in front of you" and that on digital, where Varley says "it seems to lack or is very banal, because it is about the Wi-fi connection or glitchy backgrounds" (Julia Varley, Zoom conversation with author, December 1, 2021). A digital technology which doesn't run smoothly appears malfunctioning, however in *Flanker Origami* to make the risks visible the decision was to expose the mechanism and the glitches. This fluid relation with the technology echoes the cyberformance practice of Helen Varley Jamieson (2008, 38) which "does not pretend to be real", and where "the technologies employed in the performance are not hidden, they are integrated into the whole", instead of trying to dissimulate them through high-tech perfectionism.

Online participation and embodied pedagogies at the ISTA/NG digital course

In order to explore the crossovers between the embodied pedagogy of theatre anthropology and my practice research, I attended the digital course of the International School of Theatre Anthropology / New Generation (ISTA/NG) held between 12-22 October 2021 on the island of Favignana, off the western coast of Sicily in Italy. The course programme offered a combination of educational films created by Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley in collaboration with Claudio Coloberti. These were broadcast on Vimeo, alongside livestreaming of in-presence masterclasses and activities by Barba and the artist-teachers (also on Vimeo), with the addition of daily interactive Zoom meetings between some of the ISTA/NG performers and the digital participants. During the online sessions facilitated by Leonardo Mancini, scholar and managing editor of the

JTA Journal of Theatre Anthropology, participants were able to meet and listen to the performers and teachers who were working in Favignana, and ask them questions on video or via the chat. While the meetings started with discussing what actor's presence is in a live material space, it soon became apparent that in using the Zoom platform to generate regular online encounters between remote participants, a live space emerged due to the immediacy of the interaction through technology. For example, in the session with the Balinese dancer and performer I Wayan Bawa, we were able to experience embodied transmission of practice on digital through his impromptu demonstration of mask work. Bawa's decision to break the passivity of the body allowed him to perceive, with his physical intelligence, the potential of the mirror-screen for interacting with online spectators, and to play it to his own advantage in the communication.

When explaining the use of the mirror in his process of embodying the facial expression of his masks, Bawa said "I ask the mirror how I can make my face alive or I look myself in the mirror and express myself" (I Wayan Bawa, October 16, 2021, Zoom). He then put a mask on and instinctively used the screen as a mirror through which he adjusted himself to the mask, entering into a dialogue with us in character and interacting *as if* the screen was not there, or as if it was just a stepping-stone to reach us *on the other side*. Without rationalising the process, or showing a cautious attitude towards the digital platform, Bawa's embodied pedagogy shifted organically into performance behaviour. His response to the mirror-screen and to the digital participants also reverberated within the reaction of participants in-person, who hovered around and witnessed the online encounter in what, as Mancini (2021) notices, became "a warm living contact with those who were participating online, so that instead of talking of pure digital presence what was happening was blended learning, in which some kind of flipped activities were taking place". In this instance the Zoom platform also served to blur the boundaries between in-person and digital participation at ISTA/NG, generating curiosity towards hybrid forms of engagement with embodied practice and pedagogy. From this experience, it is evident that a digital space which is *live* and *alive* is therefore a space for participation, which acknowledges digital participants, while stimulating them kinaesthetically through screens. Thus, if participation is guaranteed, liveness is also present on the digital medium in a way that, according to Christina Papagiannouli (2016), is "directly connected to the interactive and participative character of the Internet". These forms of participation can result in instances of *active spectatorship* through the technology, while in their liminality, online spaces of apprenticeship and pedagogy have the potential of "creating a mindset of remote proximity, [in order] to appreciate each other's online presence, despite openly questioning notions of embodiment, both theoretically and in practice." (Mastrominico and de Roza, 2021)

Towards a soft technology and hybrid practices

By working through the framework of theatre anthropology, I have investigated how performers can build and sustain their scenic bios online, and how the making process and the performance can stay alive on digital. Through Digital HotSpot I engendered

an online context for performer training and pedagogy, which engages with the pre-expressive level of the performer, who aims to acquire "a *decided body* ready to leap and act" (Barba and Savarese, 1991, 197) through digital platforms. In devising *Flanker Origami* I tested the creative potential of the platform and my ability to conceive performance through subverting expectations of the Zoom format. When I began my online experimentations, it soon became clear that treating performance on digital platforms as a reproduction of theatre forms, or as a purely filmic experience or an imitation of television were not viable options, but it was crucial to look for working attitudes which were specific to the interface. In provoking a shared online experience between the performer and the spectator, I learned that the goal is to address digital platforms as creative vehicles for effective (and affective) human communication and artistic exchange. This might imply a search for a soft technology, which can generate spaces of creativity and participation no less real or alive because experienced on a digital medium, while considering the work of ground-breaking digital artists and the "long and rich history of online performance, which stretches back to the earliest days of the Internet" (Abrahams, Jamieson and Fuks, 2020).

As we are living immersed in a postdigital culture which forces us to think digitally (Causey, 2016, 432), in shying away from assessing the role of digital technology in our creative practice, as performers and makers we might risk fostering an ontological 'absence' from the 'essence' of innovation, which we need to explore in order to counteract the power of control and exploitation which the digital can also unleash. As the digital medium drives us to reformulate the way we approach our know-how and our role as artists in society, instead of feeling de-humanised by technology, perhaps it is about acknowledging to what extent we are interconnected with the non-human, and how we can give space to hybrid practices and a more balanced relationship with the culture of our times.■

Bibliography

Abrahams, Annie, Helen Varley Jamieson and Suzon Fuks. *Before the first*. Friday, January 22, 2021. A brief glimpse of the diversity of online performance created before 2020. https://vimeo.com/503467731

Barba, Eugenio. 2021. "Dancing Questions." *Journal of Theatre Anthropology* no.1 (March): 9-13

———. and Nicola Savarese. 1991. *The Secret Art of the Performer. A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*. Edited by Richard Gough, translated by Richard Fowler. London, New York and Canada: Routledge.

———. "ISTA/NG - Learning to See - Presence of the Actor and Perception of the Spectator" Livestreaming lecture on Vimeo, October 19, 2021

Bawa, I Wayan. 2021. "ISTA/NG Digital Course, Interactive meeting of the participants." Zoom, October 16, 2021

Camilleri, Frank. 2019. *Performer Training Reconfigured: Post-Psychophysical Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Bloomsbury

Causey, Matthew. 2016. "Postdigital Performance." *Theatre Journal* 68, no.3 (September):427-441 doi:10.1353/tj.2016.0074.

Jamieson, Helen Varley. 2008. "Adventures in cyberformance." Masters by Research thesis, Queensland University of Technology

Loussouarn, Claire. 2021. "Moving with the Screen on Zoom: Reconnecting with Bodily and Environmental Awareness." *The International Journal of Screendance* 12: 72-88 DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/ijsd.v12i0.7827

Mancini, Leonardo. 2021. "Liminal Online Spaces" Seminar on Zoom, December 10, 2021

Mastrominico, Bianca and Elizabeth de Roza. 2022. "A Shift Towards Digital and Participatory Performance Practice Post-Pandemic." *Body, Space and Technology,* 22(1), pp.1-9. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/bst.8047

Mastrominico, Bianca. *Towards an Ecology of Becoming: Digital Performance Research Under Covid-19* (blog). January 18, 2021. https://www.qmu.ac.uk/campus-life/blogs/bianca-mastrominico/towards-an-ecology-of-becoming-digital-performance-research-under-covid-19/

Papagiannouli, Christina. 2016. *Political Cyberformance - The Etheatre Project.* Basingstone: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI:10.1057/9781137577047.0008

Rochat, Philippe. 2001. "Origin of self-concept." In *Blackwell handbook of infant development,* edited by Gavin Bremner & Alan Fogel,191-212. Oxford: Blackwell

Schechner, Richard.1985. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

List of illustrations

Illustration 1 - Blowing through screens: Stephanie Arsoska, John Dean and Bianca Mastrominico on Zoom. Screenshot, Digital HotSpot 2021

Illustration 2 - Shadow play: Stephanie Arsoska, John Dean and Bianca Mastrominico on Zoom. Screenshot, Digital HotSpot 2021

Illustration 3 - Light bulb: Stephanie Arsoska and John Dean on Zoom. Screenshot, Digital HotSpot 2021

Illustration 4 - Lampshade reflection: Madeleine Worrall on Zoom. Screenshot, Digital HotSpot 2020

Illustration 5 - Living solo: Stephanie Arsoska, John Dean and Bianca Mastrominico on Zoom. Screenshot, Digital HotSpot 2021

Illustration 6 - Grooming: Bianca Mastrominico and Madeleine Worrall on Zoom. Screenshot, Digital HotSpot 2020

Illustration 7 - Welded with an audience: John Dean, Bianca Mastrominico and Madeleine Worrall on Zoom. Screenshot, Digital HotSpot 2020

Illustration 8 - Emoticons triggering faces: John Dean and Ellie Higgins on Zoom. Screenshot, Digital HotSpot 2021

Illustration 9 - Body part isolation: John Dean and Bianca Mastrominico on Zoom. Screenshot, Flanker Origami 2021

Illustration 10 - Welded with an audience: John Dean and Madeleine Worrall on Zoom. Screenshot, Digital HotSpot 2020

Illustration 11 - Aussie the Oracle: Karla Ptáček on Zoom. Screenshots, Digital HotSpot 2021

Illustration 12 - Antigravity: John Dean on Zoom. Screenshot, Digital HotSpot 2020

Illustration 13 - John Dean and Bianca Mastrominico in *Flanker Origami*. Screenshot of Vimeo recording at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Organic Theatre 2021

Illustration 14 - John Dean and Bianca Mastrominico in *Flanker Origami*. Screenshot of recorded clip on Zoom Webinar, Organic Theatre 2021

Illustration 15 - 2D rotoscope animations by Cristiana Messina for *Flanker Origami*. Screenshot of animated film, Organic Theatre 2021

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6827-7247