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Theatre(s) of Resistance: Those ‘Other’ Performances in Simulation

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Abstract

The word “performance” is one laden with immense—if sometimes only theoretical or even metaphysical—possibilities which stretch the known boundaries of conventional representation. “Performances” can be mimetic, and in certain cases, ones based on simulation. Ideologically motivated theatre for activism is too common for our own times, but the ramifications of present global power relations demand ephemeral forms of protest, opposition and self-expression. This article attempts to present a relatively uncharted terrain of performance studies: the Virtual Theatre, its Siblings and undertakes an enquiry into the ethos of simulated performance and the implications thereof that challenge essentialist conceptions of the Self and Personality. In addition, it also tries to unearth the hidden possibilities of such types of performance which might prove to be influential forms of ‘affirmative action’ for the future, in trying to arrest the unrestricted growth of forces that assist globalization and its resulting cultural legacy.

[**Keywords:** Performance Studies, Virtual Theatre, simulation, resistance, online]

“The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none...the simulacrum is true”—Baudrillard quotes *Ecclesiastes* as he begins ‘Simulacra and Simulations’. (Baudrillard). For the simulacrum is never merely a replica of the real order; it is what masks, with increasing degrees of accuracy, the presence of the “real” as it is not. Presence, as it is not, in other words, absence—its objective is not to reveal, but to conceal. It is precisely the inability to differentiate appearances and reality which forms the basis of the hyperreal. Baudrillard’s essay itself is of course a predecessor to an equally illustrious, if not more visionary book by Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* where the author’s trip to Disneyland leads him on to discover the collective presence of the United States within Disneyland, which itself is situated within the United States. By projecting the values inherent within the hyperreal maze that is Disneyland, the United States unconsciously conceals the fact that it itself is a larger and certainly more ‘original’ Disneyland of which the latter is only a more diminutive and imperfect replica. (Eco)

The age of globalization itself is marked by what critic Paul Virilio calls the “industrialization of simulation” where cyber-media and visual images leads to a

“dissuasion of perceptible reality” and instead gives rise to new perceptions of reality and the sense of the real. (Virilio) The introduction of the virtual dimension in modern life demands a radical reorganization of cartography to take into account these simulated spaces which he calls the “cybernetic space time”. This not only creates new space and time but leads to an expansion of individual identity and self through creation of virtual bodies or Bodies without Organs (BwO)ⁱⁱ. The expansion of the self occurs through different modes of representations, notably through different imaging technologies which lead to the performative matrix being cluttered with simulated personae usurping the role of organic self-presentation. As representation, the body is displaced from its sovereign position leaving behind its image available for appropriation and allowing itself to be placed in different sign networks. This leads to constant reinvention of one’s own character identification so that all essentialist conceptions of terms such as “self”, “personality”, “body” are challenged and the person takes roles within the dramaturgical grid of everyday life. Abstracted representations of the self and the body, different and separate from the individual, are present simultaneously in numerous locations, interacting and recombining with others, beyond the control of the individual and often to his/her disadvantage. However it is this floating, delocalized quality of the virtual self that makes it especially suitable for combating the liquid flow of power in the virtual realm.

According to Arjun Appadurai contemporary globalization takes place through the shifting disjunctures between social landscapes of technology, media, ethnicity, ideology and finance. (Appadurai) In this context the Critical Art Ensemble contend that in such a situation of liquescent capital and cultural flow, power becomes nomadic and hence progressively difficult to resist. The retreat into the “invisibility of non-location” of authority ensures that those resistant populations caught up within the panopticon form a defining site of resistance—a theatre of operations. CAE believes that in face of the challenge posed by nomadic power the traditional forms of resistance fails. According to them nomadic power must be resisted nomadically.

The new geography created by the deterritorialization of power is a virtual geography and hence “the core of political and cultural resistance must assert itself in the electronic space.” A small, but coordinated group of hackers, they argue, could introduce electronic viruses, worms and bombs into the data banks programs and networks of authority bringing about prolonged inertia, thereby effecting the collapse of nomadic authority in a global scale. (Critical Art Ensemble)

In their book *The Electronic Disturbance* (1993), Critical Art Ensemble used the metaphor of the nomadic community of the Scythians described by Herodotus in his *Persian Wars*. The warlike community of the Scythians never settled down in one stable location, nor did they build up a sedentary civilization at one place. They were always on the aggressive and it became impossible to trace until the

moment of their appearance. They did not build up a 'civilisation', in the conventional sense and protracted their nomadic condition during a period when many other civilizations of Antiquity had already evolved themselves into stable polities. In Herodotus' words, they had no cities but were *pheroikoi* (like the snails in Hesiod). Their nomadic condition is described by Herodotus as a political and economic strategy of survival rather than an externally imposed condition of life. They maintained a system of floating borders, never settling down at one place; it was movement that preserved their autonomy. Consequently, the impossibility of locating them to a stable spatial point also meant that effectively, they could never be colonized. Using this metaphor of the Scythians, the nomadic nature of power systems of the elite in a global economy of late capitalism is emphasized. The added efficacy of this power model is due largely to the advent of technocracy and the opening of the cyberspace where speed/stability and presence/absence always collide in a domain of hyperreality.

The performative aspect of the act of resistance here is not to be missed. In the case of theatre to be particular, the tendency is to lean to the construction of the virtual theatre. At present the form may be regarded as acting on two fronts: the use of the information technology as a new display technology for older media intersecting performance practices. For example, the streaming of pre-recorded video technology over the net. The second front is the virtual theatre proper, which manifests itself within the virtual community through any text based or a graphic user interface creating a simulation of sociability. Through the use of the virtual self it eliminates the mediation of the body and thus escapes authority. Information Communication Technologies virtually extend the spatial codings and parameters of theatrical space and allow for otherwise impossible simulations—technology here being used as a unidirectional performative component for the use of projections; for example, CAE's performance at Rutgers University to call attention to sperm and egg donor recruitment on university campuses for the use in neo-eugenic practices. CAE provided the illusion that a Reprotech company visiting Rutgers was actively recruiting a sperm donor for a woman who was monitoring the process online from Florida. In actuality the performer was in a back room of the building. The effectiveness of this technology was due to the looping back of the virtual into real space and a surrendering to interactivity in favour of participation. The virtual theatre itself, however borrows heavily from the earlier model of Recombinant Theatre, consisting of performative environments through which participants may flow—like the Theatre of Everyday Life including street theatre, Allan Kaprow's Happenings or Utpal Dutt's People's Little Theatre. However, the very dominant tradition of political theatre, making pre-determined narratives for the people is debunked to produce performances that invent "ephemeral, autonomous situations from which temporary public relationships emerge that can make possible critical dialogue on a given issue." (Critical Art Ensemble) But while the earlier forms such as Happenings were systematic performances in a predetermined narrative trajectory in which the

artist occupied the central position, recombinant theatre attempts to include compelling anti-authoritarian models of performative explorations. Participation, process, pedagogy and experimentation are the key components for further recombination and in the process the privileged position of the auteur is done away with.

The resistance to nomadic power was exemplified through an illustrative example by CAE in the essay “The Recombinant Theatre and the Performative Matrix”. Let us consider this hypothetical scenario (A): A person (P) walks into a bank with the purpose of securing a loan. In order to present himself as a trustworthy and responsible loan-applicant, on whom the bank can depend with respect to getting back the loan to be granted, P dresses himself/herself adequately so as to feign a guise of respectability. P also memorises a pre-determined narrative (one which we might call the “script”), combined with affirmative behavioural gestures (say, and open stance, a smiling face, a warm handshake). When he meets the bank manager, P employs all of his skills to use and convinces the bank manager to interview his/her electronic double, the body of data that contains P’s past credit statements. P’s performance, which has been largely successful till now, passes onto its second phase. In fact, it is now P’s electronic double, the body of data that has taken centre stage and is controlling the performance right now. It is also the only body of P’s existence which interests the manager. The bank manager reviews his credit statement, which states(say) that P has been late in his/her payments in the past. The loan is denied; end of performance.

Now the performance could have just as easily ended as a successful one had P’s credit statement been otherwise. But it illustrates, within the virtual domain, the ability of electronic body doubles to control performance. Now, let us consider another typical situation (B):

A hacker is seated on a stage with a computer and a modem. His objective is enter databases and corrupt/alter them. The individual hacker changes, erases and manipulates his electronic body-double (his body of data) so as to suit his purposes in everyday life. The performance ends when he has adequately achieved his set objective and the computer is shut down.. The action of the hacker creates a loop nomadically interlocking at once the theatre of everyday life, traditional theatre and virtual theatre. The resistant performer here adopts two strategies:

- a. Contaminating and calling attention to corruption of data structures.
- b. Passing counterfeit data.

A third situation (C) might be called up to understand more clearly the complexities of such performance. A female hacker enters a governmental website, calls up his/her electronic body of data and manipulates it, so as to change is gender from “female” to ‘male”. Now, she leaves the stage, dresses up and accessorizes as a man and walks on to the streets. The gender of her choice i.e.

“male” is the same as the gender indicated in her electronic body-double, the body of data. No other contradictory data resource exists, so as to call into question her gender. Now the performer walks about the streets shirtless. For convenience, we shall consider her to be a citizen of a country where roaming about shirtless in a public space for a woman is considered illegal. Now, the performer will be immediately arrested by the police, but she will claim, in her defense, to be a “man”. The officials will now turn to the body of her electronic data and will be dismayed to find that she is described as a “man”. Biologically, they will notice that there is clear proof from her organs that she is a woman. But they will be forced to release her, since it is not illegal for a man to roam shirtless on the streets. This is of course, an exaggerated and extreme example of the limits to which the potential of performance can extend. There are practical dangers involved in it, and it is highly unlikely that in real life, the performer will actually be released. Yet these extreme examples outline the necessary mode of resistance which a postmodern theatre can adopt.

The use of virtual theatre and simulated performance, commencing in the successful act of resistance is perhaps best illustrated by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation Movement of January 2000. There were two aspects of the movement. In the first stage the Zapatistas bombarded the federal barracks of the Mexican Army in the Chiapas by throwing paper airplanes, each carrying a discursive missile: messages and poems for the soldiers themselves. One year later, a companion digital Zapatista Air Force was set to flight by the Electronic Disturbance Theatre through the Zapatista Tribal Port-scan (ZTPS), later known as “the FloodNet” which is an interactive software by means of which artists and activists could mount their attack on any website— the US government or the Mexican military through the ports open to the cyber network. The automated features of FloodNet were used:

- 1) To reload a targeted web page several times per minute.
- 2) For the conceptual-artistic spamming of targeted server error logs.

The messages were drawn from a bilingual poem about the Zapatista struggle for peace with dignity. With each port scan fragments of the poem were sent ensuring that the targeted system would log the text. The system thus begins to rewrite the poem at incredible speed, ensuring the collective presence of the Zapatistas in the publicly accessible spaces of the internet.

However, this form of protest pioneered by the EDT does not, as a rule, take recourse to illegal action. Instead, what is exploited in this case is the decidedly public spaces on the internet (access ports) to reiterate the conviction that cyberspace is a public space, and therefore is liable to be governed by the same rules as public spaces offline. EDT does not promote any form of action carried out “in secret” but instead “proposes a transparent, public act of protest.” (Jill Lane). Transparency ensures that the act of protest is also in an instance of collective

public presence, which would be hampered if the act were to surreptitiously carried out.

Both the performances of Zapatistas combine, as Jill Lane concludes, “political protest with conceptual art in the act of social revelation.” (Lane) The simulated act of airplane flight and digital protests reveal the way in which cyberspace itself is occupied and organized as a commercial and private, rather than public space guarded by full force of the law and the military. The EDT through their marshalling of the Zapatista protests, have put forward a new set of possibilities for understanding the relation between performance, embodiment and spatial practice in cyberspace. The Zapatista movement revitalized abandoned notions of “traditional” civil disobedience on behalf of indigenous peoples. The particularly theatrical character of their actions like the use of the innovative “pasamontanas” (black ski-masks) and wooden rifles as props further emphasized their tactical use of embodied as well as theatrical presence. Such a use of the internet as a means to build a global grass-root support network was described by Dominguez as “virtual actions for real peace in the real communities of the Chiapas.” (Dominguez) Thus the digital Zapatista’s own recombinant theatre of operations meshed virtual and embodied practices in a struggle for real material and social well-being in Chiapas.

Both the real Zapatistas and the digital Zapatistas rely on simulation to create a disruptive presence in the material, social and discursive contexts in which they operate. In both cases, simulation occurs at the level of semantic disturbance----- simulated versions of airplanes disturb a semantic code making visible the underlying and hidden relations of power on which government operation demands. Semantic resistance here functions as an effective and viable form of contesting power from the margins.

In 1996, CAE published their seminal book, *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas*, where the ideas of “civil disobedience” as put forward by Henry David Thoreau in his 1848 essay “Civil Disobedience” are carried over to the virtual domain. Electronic Civil Disobedience refers to any form of protest that is non-violent, yet disruptive and protracted, carried out with the help of information technology. ECD typically adopts the virtual counterparts of popular methods of conventional protest such as the “sit-in”, used extensively during the Civil Rights’ Movement of the 1960’s in the United States. The “virtual sit-in” attempts to recreate the traditional “sit-in”, whereby hundreds of activists attempt to access a target website simultaneously and repetitively, causing it to run slowly or even collapse entirely. This act of protest therefore, uses the technique of the “distributed-denial-of-service attack” (DDoS) whereby a large majority, or even the entirety of the bandwidth of the targeted system is used up by multiple attackers, attacking from different spatial points. Collective attack is harder to track down and withstand; and the behavior of each individual attack machine can be ore and more deceptive, causing a host of “unknown errors”.

In 2001, CAE's *Digital Resistance* identified virtual theatre as still a budding form of recombinant theatre, the deployment of which in manifold situations depends upon the increase of computer literacy beyond the technocrat classes. Experiment with the form of virtual theatre is still in its infancy and it has to go a long way to realize its full potential as delineated by CAE. Though it is still premature to claim the mode of virtual protest as the most potent antidote to the nomadic power of global capital, movements like that of the Zapatistas have proved beyond doubt that in future it will emerge as a force to reckon with.

The 2011 Border Haunt Project, organized by Alan Paul serves as a modern example of digital resistance. On 15th July, 2011, 667 participants from 28 countries joined in a collective act of protest against the policing the U.S.-Mexico border. In the words of its chief coordinator Ian Alan Paul,

“Border Haunt is an attempt to bring two different databases associated with the U.S.-Mexico border into contact with one another for the duration of one day. It is an invitation to join a temporary network of people from across the world and participate in an aesthetic and political experiment, in what I'm calling a border database collision.” (Networked Performance).

The first of the two databases in question is an archive of “illegal” migrants who have died through the act of undocumented crossing of the U.S.-Mexico border due to extreme environmental conditions and/or “the anonymous violence of the vigilantes and abusive law enforcement officers”. The database contains over 2000 entries. The second database is a record of undocumented crossings of the border and is created by volunteers to police the border by watching videos of the border to suspect any such undocumented crossings. The Border Haunt project sought to collide the two databases for the duration of a single day (15th July, 2011). By the surreptitious mixing up of the data of the dead and the data of border security structure the project successfully coordinated “a collective and networked “haunting” (Paul) of the border”. The project can be seen as a collective performance and intervention that reflects on the atrocities committed on the “illegal” immigrants across the borders as well as a form of disruptive action that interrupts surveillance mechanisms used in the border territory.

Virtual protests have thus, not only opened up new vistas in the field of performance theory, but have also created an alternate geography of struggle, an alternative embodiment against the nomadic powers of authority. The social segments in this type of theatre lead to varieties of knowledge spheres interacting with each other, leading to newer varieties of political interconnectedness. The resistant potential of such a theatre does not end at the close of the theatrical event, but extend into the performative matrix of everyday life, creating a never-ending theatre of becoming.

Endnotes

ⁱ The word “performance” has a definitive function for this article and is used here inclusively. It covers not only theatricality in a restricted sense but also other forms of simulation including, but not restricted to, hacking, data corruption, re-encoding, etc. The Electronic Disturbance Theatre has coined the word “Hacktivism” to describe such performances.

ⁱⁱ Borrowing the metaphor of the “Body-without-Organs” (BwO) from Deleuze and Guattari (who in turn borrowed it from the schizophrenic playwright Antonin Artaud), the authors of *The Electronic Disturbance* describe the electronic body-double as replicating the organic body through a mode of excess. Every organic body has a set of actual traits, habits, affects and movements which are limited in nature. But the virtual dimension of each organic body also contains a reservoir of potential traits that can be activated only when the fixed identity of the organic body is made mobile in essence and experimented with through a recombination with other virtual doubles. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) The electronic body here serves as a BwO, in sympathy with the organic body but also arousing envy within it since the markers of fullness and excess abound in it in a sense it can never inhabit the organic body.

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