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# Liveness and Its Pandemical Other

Nenad Jovanović

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Laura Bissell and Lucy Weir (eds.). *Performance in a Pandemic*. London: Routledge, 2021. 164 pp. ISBN 9780367761349.

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Ever since Peggy Phelan (1993) and Philip Auslander (2008) expounded their respective understandings of liveness, much of our thinking of theatrical performance has been shaped by their opposed views on the subject. Phelan emphasises the ephemerality of performance, arguing that the locus of its ontological specificity lies within the coterminous yet temporary presence of the performer and the spectator in a shared physical space. Disregarding the specific type of performance that Phelan focuses on (performance art or artistic action), Auslander questions that notion, stressing the age-long dependence of conventional stage on technology.

During the period when both books were published, a novel kind of technologies – digital ones – began proliferating, with the commercial World Wide Web as one of their most pervasive manifestations. The applicable *Merriam-Webster*'s definition of 'live' as referring to 'a performance, heard or watched at the time of its occurrence, as distinguished from one recorded on film, tape, etc.' (MERRIAM-WEBSTER 2022a) allows Auslander to categorise as live performers the non-alive chatterbots – the internet's software applications that simulate human conversations (AUSLANDER 2008: 71). This expanded understanding of liveness indirectly dispels the commu-

nal mysticism that is often attributed to conventional theatre spectatorship.

Proponents of the framework that see the relation between the liveness and medi-ality of theatre not as antithetical, but as mutually reinforcing, appear to have been growing in number with the ongoing transition to partial or full virtuality within so many spheres of our life, as testified by the subsequent appearance of multiple volumes on digitally mediated theatre performance, including *Shakespeare and the 'Live' Theatre Broadcast Experience* (AEBISCHER et al. 2018). From the perspective of the smugly postmodern West of cell-phone and internet subscriptions – the geopolitical context of Phelan's and Auslander's theorising – to deny the known and yet-unknown potential of theatre to form creatively and commercially productive relationships with everything from YouTube to Tweeter was to occupy a position of obstinate nostalgia.

When COVID-19 hit, however, rendering face-to-face performances impossible for most, the highly mediatised forms of live broadcasts and recordings became the only options. That is the context in which Laura Bissell and Lucy Weir's *Performance in a Pandemic* was conceived and published. A collection of fourteen shorter texts that aim to 'capture, analyse, and disseminate digital creative output in

Scotland, the wider UK, and across the world during the first wave of [the] crisis' (2), the volume is organised into four thematic sections: 'Precarity and Vulnerability', 'Art in an Emergency', 'Outreach and Inclusion', and 'Curation: Performing the Archive'. Among the diversity of topics addressed by the texts ranging in style from scholarly to informal, 'liveness' operates as a central one, its revisiting and renegotiating prompted by the pandemic.

Inevitably and incessantly, the worldwide spread of the disease has been politicised and aestheticised (the example of both that most blatantly corresponds to what Walter Benjamin (1969) calls the aestheticisation of politics is a product of American soil: the public removal of the protective mask by President Donald Trump after his 'miraculous' treatment for COVID-19 in 2020). If we agree with Benjamin that the aestheticisation of politics calls for political art (BENJAMIN 1969: 242), then it seems apt to consider the texts comprising the book from the perspectives of their overlapping yet distinct aesthetic and political implications.

The first chapter to follow the editors' introduction, Katherine Nolan's 'Life on Pause: Entanglements of the Maternal and the Mortal in a Global Pandemic', dramatically sets the stage (and the computer/TV screen) for the remainder of the volume, centering on the transformation of Nolan's face-to-face performance *Fluid Flesh* (2019) into a live stream one – a process of broad interest to Nolan as a practitioner and scholar of creative digital media and live and lens-based performance. Transformation is crucial not just for the meta-level of the piece, but also for its thematic one, predicated on the performer's interactions with flesh-coloured slime (a vis-

cous children's toy made from guar gum), which materialises Nolan's experience of gestating a child as she was witnessing her mother's decay and demise (9). Animated by the performer's movement, the slime appears to be 'at the threshold of "aliveness"' (11) – a phrase that applies equally to the interstitial status of the piece as one initially envisioned to be performed in person, and remediated for the Web due to the COVID-19-induced lockdown.

The extra-artistic circumstances of the condition imposed by governmental authorities strongly influenced also the dance-based methodologies of the artist Faustin Linyekula, as Tamsin Hong details in the chapter 'Recording My Body, My Archive at Tate Modern: A Collision Course of Curating on the Eve of COVID-19'. Hong, assistant curator at the gallery, describes documenting on video what was supposed to be a live retrospective of dance-based performers Linyekula, Okwui Okpokwasili (based in the United States), and Tanya Lukin Linklater (based in Canada), all of whom come from colonised or formerly colonised cultures. When the latter two artists were unable to reach London and when the exhibition was cancelled, Linyekula's performance – originally intended to demonstrate Linyekula's highly collaborative method and take place every day during the exhibition's run – needed to be refashioned as a one-off show for the camera. While the event might be tragic in light of the three artist's preoccupation with the body's resilience in the face of colonisation (123), Linyekula's forced (dis)embodiment in the form of two-dimensional moving images appears to imbue the project with added topical poignancy. Linyekula's reminder that Europe (and, by implication, the en-

tire world) could learn from the instability of the pandemic that we are always invariably fragile (130), implies also a statement of defiance and hope.

Among the accounts of the projects that underwent structural changes as a result of the pandemic, the most sadly amusing is the one by the multidisciplinary artist Shona Macnaughton. Macnaughton, who explores the interaction of artistic labour and other labour (45), describes in 'Here to Deliver: Conversations with the Ghosts of Gig Work' her intention to offer an unofficial taxi service during the 2020 *Glasgow International Festival*, which would be exchanged for the users' agreement to be filmed during the ride. The COVID-19 outbreak thwarted the plan, though. Lacking a source of income while also wanting to research the working conditions after the lockdown's lifting, Macnaughton then applied to be a driver for Deliveroo. Despite the initially positive response by the company's team, she subsequently received no calls from it, leading the artist to ask a question that evokes at once naturalist and absurd drama: 'What's an artist to do when they can't even get the gig work to make artwork about gig work to make money from gig work because artwork about gig work money has run out??' (48).

Macnaughton's contribution to the volume is not the only one to foreground class politics, which had occupied a backseat to a range of identity politics until the promise of neoliberalism revealed itself to be irreparably broken with the 2008 stock market crash and the subsequent – and ongoing – developments aimed at upholding the doctrine. Class consciousness is increasingly central to political activism in what is commonly referred as the West, but what is in actuality not the global but

Eurocentric economic 'First World'. One can safely hypothesise that the explanation of the fact lies in the failure of the various small-scale, identity-driven struggles that started supplanting the large-scale one for economic equality in the early 1970s (the period that David Harvey identifies as the beginning of the neoliberal era) (SKAERLUND RISAGER 2016) to effectively challenge the contradictions of contemporary capitalisms.

That failure appears unsurprising in light of the enormous fissure separating the self-identification and programmatic statements in Judd Morrissey, Mark Jeffery, and Abraham Avnisan's 'The Tenders: Cover to Cover – Line Notes' as a supremely clear example. In his section of the article, Avnisan describes himself as a 'cis, white, queer, Jewish, American/Israeli man – citizen & heir to not one but two settler colonial societies' (41), and acknowledges his understanding of bearing a special responsibility in that regard. While one cannot help but admire the ambitious activist promise implicit in the statement, it is difficult to see a link between it and the descriptions of Avnisan and the other two writer's practice as artists, which – in the case around which the article is organised – involves conceptualising a fictive album of covers, 'a record with only a jacket' (37), with the country hit 'Rhinestone Cowboy' as A1. The persistence and determination professed in the chapter for making the work and continuing the show in the eye of the pandemic is inspiring, but is *that* the work that poses a threat to '[w]hite supremacy as origin & telos' (40)?

A different question applies to the densely argued and politically explosive 'Embrace Your Vulnerability: Cultivating Art, Theatricality, and Performativity in

Times of Catastrophe' by Denise Espírito Santo and David Gutiérrez Castañeda. Proceeding from the fact that the pandemic has only worsened the conditions of Brazilian and Mexican indigenous populations, brought about by the double helix of capitalism and colonialism, Espírito Santo and Gutiérrez Castañeda respond to the array of social ills stemming from the twin forces in care: 'guiding efforts that intensify awareness, affection, and action bodily, assuming that, as beings and entities, we depend on each other' (34). It is not clear, however, what qualifies the commendable activist practice at the chapter's crux as performance – understood as 'a public presentation or exhibition' (MERRIAM-WEBSTER 2022b). The final paragraph refers to 'a video made by women of different ethnicities who [...] seek to emphasise ways of cultivating potential lives' (35), but the project is not delineated in any detail.

On the other hand, such chapters as 'Not Panicky' by Rachel Clive (in collaboration with Hughie McIntyre, Euan Hayton, Chloe Maxwell, and Alison Mackenzie), and 'Invitation: On Making Together, Apart' by Gudrun Soley Sigurdardottir strike a fine balance between the descriptive and the discursive, thereby illuminating the loci of the respective politics of the artworks discussed (the former is a neurodivergent-led performance inspired by the rivers Forth and Clyde in Central Scotland, whereas 'Invitation' reflects on Soley Sigurdardottir's experience of facilitating *A Way of Passing Time* and *In Tune*, performance-based works co-created by the inmates of Polmont young offenders institution in Brighton, Scotland).

Liveness, its doubles, and its opposites reveal themselves to be pivotal for both the

aesthetics and politics of performance in extremis: there are scarcely any contributions to the book where the related themes do not hold a prominent place. In tackling (non-)liveness, the contributors display markedly different attitudes toward the realities and practicalities of performing for an audience technologically removed from the playing space. Marc Silberschatz, the author of 'Exploring Mars and Other Impossibilities: Liveness as Labour', takes his cue from Auslander to argue that the spectatorial labour required from the user of his deliberately contradictory digital work constitutes a form of liveness. Conversely, for Kat – one of the practitioners interviewed in 'Recorded Performance as Digital Content: Perspectives from Fringe 2020' by Chris Elsdén, Diwen Yu, Benedetta Piccio, Ingi Helgason, and Melissa Terras – recorded performances are not a good substitute for live theatre (69).

This pair of conflicting examples reveal what is perhaps the greatest value of *Performing in a Pandemic*: timely and urgent, the book presents a gamut of views on the eponymous subject, rekindling the debate on liveness by casting a new light on the variously understood concept. When compared with the equally recent and accomplished *Pandemic Performance: Resilience, Liveness, and Protest in Quarantine Times* (CAPECE and SCORESE 2022) – which limits its focus to the United States – the Bissell and Weir possess an added value of drawing case studies from different parts of the world, a place to which the virus temporarily brought a sense of unity of the most undesired kind. It is this reader's hope that future studies on the subject will place an even greater emphasis on cultural contexts that are underrepresented in English-language scholarship.

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