



## Presence and Absence in Online Performance: Configurations in the Problematics of Access

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### Response to *cosine*

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#### **New performance spaces generate new performance modes, newer ways to make meaning.**

Putting this performance experiment online not only enables access to a larger audience than the original, it places performance - including audience - in a new habitat, a virtual habitat that I would argue can be experienced as shared. Virtual performance space calls into question traditional notions that only "live" performance is immediate, intersubjective, experienced as simultaneous and even at times reciprocal. Virtual performance for this audience of *cosine* was encompassing and transformative.

The new habitat is similar to familiar media habitats; the performance is constituted only by what we see and hear; not by what would come to us from our other senses in actual immediate, live, reciprocal performance. But this feels different. It's not a simple case of presence or absence. I experience this performance event as virtual - it is the product of ones and zeros, its mode of reality is code. What is my substance as I engage with it? I'm not code, I'm watching a screen, listening to music and sounds, and as I click the mouse I move the performance forward. Why does this feel like shared space to me? Is it this simple interactivity of a mouse click? It feels like more. Where is the space within which we meet? What is the sound of a virtual hand clapping?

Yet in its textuality, this installation is also an artifact of an originating performance. The need for language to explain, transition, explicate and reach out is intriguing to me - especially in its uses in *cosine*, which is so replete with non-linguistic modes of communication [sound in so many dimensions, shapes, colors, line, mass, images in so many dimensions, in infinitely changeable sequences]. My hunch (though I don't know this for a fact) is that there were more discursive uses of language in the online performance than in the performances in the physical spaces. I wonder - I think I believe - that an embodied audience member inhabiting the physical environment, encountering with all senses the action and progression of this complex piece - would not need this discursive language, explanations [the needs and demands of the ego who is conjured by the particle] but would succumb to the subconscious, the subliminal mode of being conjured by the wave. In the absence of this sensory bath, the mind retains its dominion, requires its due.

As a dis-embodied audiencer of *cosine* I appreciated the Introduction in which Raikes explained her intentions, processes and (to some extent) the outcomes of this project. This gave me a cognitive framework upon which to support my sense-making of the pieces of the online performance as I experienced it, click after click after click. The language also provided an architecture, a pathway through the dazzling colors, sounds, forms, mass and accumulations of nondiscursive movement and meaning.

As a dis-embodied audiencer of *cosine* I reveled in the personalized voices of the various artists as they took us through the seven scenes of *cosine*. This language performed a completely different function for me than did the Introduction, which oriented and framed what I was to see, and later what I had seen. Here these voices allowed me a vicarious experience, a way into embodied experience. This was especially true in the voice of the performer Daniel Russell Kubert. I want to thank you for being my surrogate whole body, my self-expressing avatar.

**Online performance can problematize modes and methods of scholarship; it complicates the tidy binaries of transitory performance event and artifactual document. It blurs the boundaries of process and product.**

Scholarship is "made public" in myriad ways - not all of them sanctioned by the academy. As Conquergood explicates so clearly, the written text is privileged in the academy. The traditional exemplar of scholarship is still refereed publication. In what ways can one be published? What is it to be published? And who counts as a referee?

When I was coming up through the tenure and promotion processes, I adapted and directed numerous productions. I was consistently told, like other of my colleagues who created performances for audiences, to "write it up" to get credit for it. Implicit in this advice was that we should turn our attention to explaining what we set out to

do, describing what we did, and evaluating the fit between intention and execution. As if we were running a lab experiment, the production process was only the beginning. The report for a journal was the quintessential product of scholarship. A member of my promotion committee put it very succinctly for me: I needed to produce something "kickable;" a material artifact.

The performance itself was a moment in time, transitory, fleeting, and in its capacity to transform audiences, too immediate to be rational. As Plato feared, performance can be subversive, even incendiary. And audiences, as Plato insisted, could be seduced and therefore could not be referees. We were told, "Take yourself out of the heat of the creative moment, wring it out and write it up as a report." Then give it to someone untouched by its magic, let her/him judge this scholarship. This premise and its practices have been challenged and often defeated in tenure wars, but the traditional discursive scholarly article is still privileged.

Digital publications such as these significantly open up the possibilities for alternatives. The ability to better represent the physical life of the performance - in image and sound - allows us to be less dependent on the word, the description, the explanation and explication in language. Written language is a technology; we now have more technologies to represent those aspects of performance that transcend language.

### **Online performance challenges boundaries on several planes and levels.**

I'm fascinated with the commentary by Raikes and Architect Matthew Davis on the *cosine* environment, on their "idea for a space in which the relation between performance and audience would be minimized to the point of disappearance," where "... the field of performance would become its participation." I can well imagine (and only imagine) how that was accomplished in the physical time, space and experienced duration of the originating performances. In the online performance, it seems to me, we've gone to the other extreme to the point where the result is the same -- that online, the separation between performance and audience was maximized to the point of disappearance. Because of what's required of my imagination as I encounter the online performance, I am enmeshed in the field of performance; the performance is an event occurring in the "empty space," to appropriate Brook's famous phrase, that is in me.

I don't engage in this mediated record of a performance the way I would engage in a viewing of Masterpiece Theater, or a videotape of a live performance. Why is this so different? I think partly because this is not a record of a performance, it's a performance that uses a prior performance to achieve its own ends.

### **Online publication opens up political and ethical questions, of "who gets to**

### **speak?" and "who gets to listen?"**

Anyone with access to a computer can create and distribute performances at little cost. We've moved from the "one to many" mode of traditional media - television networks for instance - to a "many to many" mode of Internet and home-made media. Anyone with access to hardware and software, able to maneuver through it, can become a filmmaker, a record maker, an author, a publisher. As audience we are no longer constrained by what the few media producers determine is worth our attention; there is a tremendous diversity of voices, materials, methods and modes at our fingertips.

Digital media is infinitely reproducible, with no loss of integrity or quality. There is no "generational loss" in copying a file, as there is with copying an analog tape, where with each copy, the quality erodes. The Internet enables a wide and anonymous distribution of media [unless John Ashcroft has his way; and it looks like he will]. With a simple "save as" command, what's yours can be mine, to manipulate and send on, as I will. This feature of digital media has huge economic, political and ethical implications - for producers, providers and end users.

I can't not address the economics of technology - for artists, for producers, for audiences. Who has access to the multimedia hardware and software that enables *cosine*? My neighborhood does not yet have broadband, I attended *cosine* on modem. Difficult but not impossible; it was worth it to be in the comfort of my own home. I own a computer able to handle shockwave, to hold multiple frames in memory; I have speakers equal to the quality of the soundtrack, a monitor able to deliver a resolution worthy of the images. For that matter, who has access to the theory of particle and wave, of the rheomode, of the Lucas sequence? Fascinating to view the two online pieces, with their different performance methodologies and technologies, in light of these questions of economic and educational privilege.

### **Response to *Joker Runs Wild***

These questions are even more interesting in juxtaposition with *Joker Runs Wild*, focusing on the work of Augusto Boal, whose Theater of the Oppressed, at least as it originally developed, was as low tech as is humanly possible. Literally, an actor walking across a space in front of an audience - though with the objective of activating that audience, moving them to transform from spectators to "spect-actors."

Boal's innovation - perhaps revolution - was to remove the privilege of the actor, the elite position of the artist. He reminds us of the archaic, communal foundations of performance: "Theatre is a language to be spoken, not a discourse that must be listened to." Theatre of the Oppressed was developed in Brazil as a real world

performance methodology; the participation it requires is immediate, physical, reciprocal, intersubjective. Its code is the interaction of physical bodies enacting actual challenges, obstacles, oppressions in multiply open-ended, imaginative ways. In this performance method the "empty space" disappears in the corporeal encounter of reciprocal bodies. How does one express that virtually? I can't imagine how to accomplish that. Therefore, it's not surprising that the two online performances, *cosine* and *Joker Runs Wild*, engendered two very different audience experiences for me.

As an online performance, *Joker Runs Wild* provides an interesting contrast to *cosine*. In online pedagogy we talk about "web-based" courses, which are designed and produced for online participation in their every component. In these courses the syllabus (course description, schedule, assignments) include interactive components - perhaps a pre-test or a data sheet, online assignments such as readings/viewings or quizzes, links to outside sources, chat rooms, even scavenger hunts online. Here the course material is redesigned in order to be delivered through various online components - some synchronous (e.g., chat, instant message, interactive video) and some asynchronous (newsgroups, video lectures etc.). What was once delivered in paper and in person is reconfigured for delivery in code and at distance. This is analogous to *cosine*.

Another kind of pedagogy is "web enhanced" coursework, in which the components of a traditional classroom are supplemented with online additions, such as a posted syllabus and other materials (lecture notes, a course newsgroup, a listsrv etc.). The material is constructed as usual -- in written documentation -- and then delivered online. This is analogous to *Joker Runs Wild*. *cosine* is a web-based performance; *Joker Runs Wild* is a web-enhanced essay. Both raise interesting questions and provide different modes of online experience. For me, *Joker Runs Wild* was experienced as a traditional essay I would read from a journal -- with the difference that I could chart my path through the links with more freedom than usual. I could click out, then come back. Ultimately though, I read it as an essay rather than participated with it as an online installation. My response therefore focuses on the ideas of the essay first, and then on the workshop performances that were published online.

### **Expanding the boundaries of jokering; kudos and some cautions.**

I agree, there is a certain piety that can too easily creep into doing TO work, particularly in Forum Theatre. A dedicated search for ways to examine and overcome oppression is serious business. It's difficult, complicated, consequential work. For many of us, we see it as a life's work. I and others I know who work in these methods would wholeheartedly agree with Schutzman's eloquent statement, "I am interested in a collectivity of the liminal, an unpredictable and unreliable coming together inspired by civic responsibility and social need."

I also agree with Schutzman that "anyone who says they are prepared to joker a TO session is, fundamentally, fooling themselves." I have heard this sentiment from others; I've experience it myself -- that sinking feeling of "how did we get to here??" during a Forum session, for instance. I understand her concern about "what seems to [her] to be a too rigid duality in the structure of forum theatre." I applaud her impulse to intervene, to shake it up, dis-orient our ways of working. Looking for ways to disrupt our habits, to unearth and scrutinize our assumptions and practices is completely in line with Freire's critical pedagogy and Boal's originating methods. A dedication to provisionality, a search for reversals, for unpredictability does open up whatever action one is working on.

I think the approach Schutzman describes here can work well in academic settings, among people who are trained to step back from a situation, to detach, to find new ways of seeing things, interpreting things, examining actions and consequences. It's also a natural for theatre artists, who thrive in an improvisatory environment, and delight in the rise of the unexpected, the strange and new. This is clear in the videos of the exercises -- the participants are having a great time, it's clear. This is at the heart of improvisation, and as demonstrated in the workshop videos, it can also be a lot of fun.

However, I wonder what preparation a lay audience -- a group of non-unionized workers, a group of battered women for instance -- would need to move from being in the thick of a situation to standing back to analyze it, to examine it through comedy and paradox and put it back together on stage. Comedy, trickstering, clowning, joking as Schutzman expands the definition, are all intricately tied into relations of power; indeed, the basic subversive function of all of these is refusing to be subdued -- or named or defined -- by those in power. But the consequences of this subversion differ for individuals according to circumstances and situations -- not everyone can afford the joke, much less find it. Schutzman acknowledges this in her Post Workshop Reflections: "I have learned that a trickster can disarm authority but s/he can also aggravate authority ... It works in some instances and in others it backfires."

I disagree with Schutzman's position: "I find the efficacy yardstick disturbing and inappropriate in realms of art (and I believe that TO lies there fundamentally)." My view is that art -- like any symbolic action -- is inherently efficacious in that it somehow influences an audience who experiences it. I believe this is inescapable. Thus, I believe that where TO lies is not an either/or proposition, it is both art and politics, that we need not choose between these poles of an imagined continuum. As we say in Communication Studies, saying you're apolitical is itself a political statement.

Additionally, comedy itself enforces power. So many jokes are at others' expense -- even some included in this essay are based in superiority, antagonism, perhaps even cruelty. In the improvisations we see here, as in the ones my students do in class, it's often easiest to go to the stereotype, the caricature, to get a laugh. That laugh is too often at someone's expense. My challenge then as a teacher is to ask, "okay, that was funny. Now what have we learned from that joke?"

My favorite joke of late is from a comic strip that runs in the LA Times. *Get Fuzzy* features a cat, Bucky, and a dog, Satchel, who live together with their owner, Rob. Bucky is working on a stand-up comic act and trying it out on Satchel. Bucky says, "Satchel -- knock knock..." and Satchel answers, "woof woof." Bucky says, "no, it's a joke -- knock knock..." Satchel replies "woof woof..." and on it goes. What I love about this joke is that it's innocent of judgement. I like what it demonstrates about one's standpoint, one's positionality, about how interpretive communities work, through Satchel's response. This is the kind of joke I want my students to generate, not just the easy ones.

### **The Workshops: still a mystery to me**

As audience for these, I experienced the workshop exercises from afar. This was partly because I had little framework or context for them, beyond the description on the exercise's page. I needed more description of the setup for the exercises and also their moment to moment progressions; as presented, these were moments in a longer sequence that I was ignorant of. I think it was also because these exercises were self-contained, the actors were contained within the frame and focused on each other. I wanted a way into what was happening in these workshops; I'm not sure that would be possible but I felt like I was watching a portion of the action from a far distance, or behind glass. This is not surprising to me in retrospect, but it was a surprise as I watched them online.

Rehearsal itself is an inward, self-centered process; it has to be in order for the cast to do their collaborative work I now wonder, is there really such a thing as an "open rehearsal" or are all rehearsals by definition "closed," whether or not an audience is present? I hadn't thought of this before viewing the workshops. My experience of these videos clarified for me this insular aspect of the rehearsal process. Self-absorption is an essential characteristic of the process; this is why self-reflexivity is so crucial.

We are given Post Workshop Reflections which seem to be the author's. These are insightful and appreciated. I am interested in the reflections of the participants as well; I wanted to hear the thoughts and feelings of the actors I watched in the videos. I wanted some kind of access to their embodied experience. I wanted a view from within the action of what was occurring, or at least some insight into what each learned in the process. I imagine that the participants would bring to this

reflection a multiplicity of experiences, a heteroglossia of voices to express these experiences, and polysemic images and terms to articulate what they learned. I would like to hear this rich discussion, and to see what new questions it generates.

### **Author Note**

Christie Logan is Professor of Communication Studies at California State University, Northridge. She teaches a range of Performance Studies courses, one of them Performance & Social Change which focuses on Theatre of the Oppressed methodologies. She also teaches Communication and Technology, focusing on modes of experience, interaction, and communality available in various online interfaces. In her thirty years as a director, she's run the gamut from traditional dramatic productions to Chamber Theatre productions to streetside Boalian theatre to interactive multimedia performance installations.

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