

Internet Performances as Site-Specific Art

Julia Glesner

1.

Since the occidental concept of 'theatre' has come to existence, one parameter in the manifold histories of theatre remained untouched. Even the most radical experiments did not challenge it. It was the physical co-presence of performers and spectators. Until today, the spatio-temporal unity of both performers and spectators represents one of the commonly accepted defining criteria for the term theatre.

With the advent of telematic technologies and especially the Internet as the medium that (potentially) integrates diverse media, the so-called 'telematic' or 'distributed performances' as a new type of performance emerged. [1] Telematic and distributed performances dissolve the spatial (but not the temporal) unity between performers and spectators and distribute the scenic space into diverse remote sites. The number of these remote sites and the location of the audience vary depending on the projects' concepts. The remote sites are linked via diverse Internet services, such as the Internet Relay Chat (which is a textual environment used for drama performances) [2] or the World Wide Web (with telematic media integrating visual components into the performances). Internet Performances as a generic term designating a heterogeneous field of theatrical activities can be regarded as a sub-category of distributed performances.

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on telematic Internet Performances. Here, the performers' corporeality and the scenic space are mediated via telematic media such as videoconferencing systems and web cams. The three-dimensionality of the performers' bodies and of space are represented two-dimensionally on the PC or a surface serving as projecting screen (see screenshot of *World Wide Simultaneous Dance* by Laura Knott) [3]. This telematically mediated status of the performers' corporeality is called 'telepresence' and – together with the notion of 'liveness' – a highly controversial topic in the state-of-the-art discussion on performance and new media. [4] All three projects that I am going to discuss belong to this category. [5]

2. Internet Performances as Site-Specific Art:

The following analysis is driven by the thesis that Internet Performances should be approached through site-specific art and its theory. [6] To approach Internet Performances as a site-specific art is a – both theoretically and historically – promising premise. First, this positions Internet Performances in the 20th century tradition of experiments between both the performing and fine arts on the one hand and media technology on the other hand. Second, the concept of site-specific art emphasises the transformed modes of perception in telematic Internet Performances. These transformed modes of perception are influenced by the Internet's mediality. [7]

Generally, site-specific art is defined as being conceived for a special environment from which it cannot be separated. Whereas already this definition might be very promising for approaching Internet Performances, Nick Kaye, however, has pointed out the connection between site-specific art and performance by referring to site-specific art's historical background. Historically, site-specific art can be rooted in minimalist sculpture of the 1960s. [8] Referring to Michael Fried, Kaye demonstrated that in “emphasising the transitory and ephemeral act of viewing in the gallery, minimalism enters into the theatrical and performative.” [9] Kaye points out that

it is *performance* which returns to define site-specificity, not only as a set of critical terms and as a mode of work, but as a way of characterising *the place* these various site-specific practices reflect upon. [10]

Applying this theoretical premise to Internet Performances leads to the perspective of *the Internet as a specific site*, being defined as such by performativity. In addition, this point emphasises the performative elements both in the *production of the performance* (for example the performers' corporeality, the status of telepresence etc.) and in the *reception of the performance* (for example the constitution of an audience collective in the Internet etc.).

The analysis of this paper focuses on the Internet as a specific site, challenging the dissolution of the spatial unity between performers and spectators from a structural perspective and asking how the newly established communication between the diverse remote sites of production and reception can be described structurally. Nevertheless, understanding Internet Performances as site-specific art should not

lead to arguing in favour of media specificity. Following Noël Carroll's argument, media specificity is an essentialist strategy to legitimise a newly established artform.

Medium specificity arguments are attractive for the purpose of transforming a new medium into a new artform, because they appear to provide a way of individuating arts and, thereby, isolating new ones. [11]

Carroll does not deny that this perspective can lead to reasonable results, [12] but instead intends to avoid a medium-essentialism which regards the

medium as an essence in the sense that it, the medium/essence, has teleological ramifications. That is, the medium *qua* essence dictates what is suitable to do with the medium. [13]

Furthermore, this structural analysis questions the potentially established possibilities of interactivity, a highly influential theoretical concept in the field of performance and new media. The following three projects all belong to the field of web dance: Sarah Morrison's *Leaping into the Net!*, the New York-based *Cassandra Project* and Laura Knott's *World Wide Simultaneous Dance*, are selected because they can serve to demonstrate three different structural concepts, and hence three different types of scenographic structures in the field of Internet Performances.

2. Reinventing the Proscenium Stage: *Leaping into the Net!*:

Sarah Morrison's production *Leaping into the Net! An Original Internet & Dance Experience* was conceived of two components. Beside a so called "live physical performance" in the Cleveland Public Theatre on September 4th, 1997, a "live Internet broadcast" of her performance took place on the same day. [14] Driven by the idea to "look what happens when art and technology come together," four choreographies were performed: *Within the Order of Chaos*, *VCL.BLIEB.1725*, *Sketches of Rodin* and *Metamorphosis* (which was created by Susan Edwards). The three classical scenographic forms as named by Patrice Pavis – the scenic space, the dramatic space, and the *espace ludique* [15] – all took place on a traditional proscenium stage with one part of the audience being physically present. In presence of the Cleveland audience, the performance was recorded and streamed in real time over the World

Wide Web. For this purpose, the newly developed Real Player was used. Whereas the Cleveland audience perceived a traditional production, the online audience followed the performance on Morrison's web page like a kind of real time, televisual transmission of a dance performance, yet with time lags in the transmission.

Before discussion the structural analysis of this project's scenography, it is necessary to refer to the media-theoretical perspective on Internet Performances. Generally, the mediality of Internet Performances is characterised by the merging of the Personal Computer first with the Internet, and second the traditional theatre media such as space and body. Principally, the computer and the Internet – or more precisely: the network of computers – can be used both in its instrumental function as a mere transmitting instrument or in its medial function to structure modes of perception. Gradual shifting between the instrumental and the medial function depend on the specific way of usage by both the producers and the spectators. This usage is mainly influenced by the scenographic structure of the performance and the interactivity it allows. The notion of interactivity has been largely discussed in the field of performance and new media. [16] Andy Lippman defines interactivity as a

common, simultaneous activity from two parties that can lead to an objective, but not necessarily. [17]

Following Lippman's definition, the mere possibility of a reaction should be sharply distinguished from an alternation of reactions between producers and audience on one side of the potential continuum of interactivity or a potential change of the structure of the performance on the other side.

In Morrison's *Leaping into the Net!* production, the performers and the online audience were separated by the PC screen and their browsers as interface. This one-dimensional communication channel did not allow interactivity in any definition, neither in Lippman's advanced understanding nor as the mere possibility to react. While using the Internet in its instrumental function to transmit the moving images of her choreographic work, the scenographic structure underlying *Leaping into the Net!* was copying the traditional Western concept of the proscenium stage with its clear separation between performers and audience. While being among the first web dance performance ever produced and while using the Real Player in its very early days, the scenographic structures of *Leaping into the Net!* reinvented traditional scenographic structures of Euro-American theatre history.

It was Martha Wilson from Franklin Furnace, New York, who expressed her astonishment about the artists' unwillingness to experiment with new technologies:

I was struck by how artists (often dancers) were unwilling (perhaps because they view their bodies as their instruments) to make the leap from the human body to the body of the net, with its parallel circulatory system and interactivity. The netcasting experience was sometimes viewed as means of broadcasting existing work, rather than a new art medium to be explored. [18]

Morrison, however, without any restriction, decided to confront her choreographic work with its transmission over the Internet. This transmission led to a dissolution of the theatre public and their shared experience. From the perspective of the online audience, Morrison used the Internet and its graphical user surface, the World Wide Web, as a specific site to allow a distributed perception of her dance performance, which would otherwise have not been possible.

3. Dissolving the Scenic Space: The *Cassandra Project*:

The *Cassandra Project*, [19] based in NYU, is part of "Navigating Global Cultures" [20], a long-distance learning effort. It was initiated by John Gilbert, Associate Professor and Dinu Ghezzo, Director of the Music Composition Program at NYU's Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions, in 1996. The *Cassandra Project* originally consisted of musicians and poets interacting live over the Internet. Lisa Naugle, a dancer and choreographer who worked at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, [21] joined the project in the same year as artistic director and has introduced dance into the performance. Since 1996, several concepts of the *Cassandra Project*, including partners from other places, were performed. As performed in 1996, the *Cassandra Project* used the video conferencing system CUSeeMe over the Internet.

Computer networks connecting performers in real time with other performers and audiences at remote sites allow for text, dance, and music to serve as improvisational material during the performance. The physical space in which the performers are actually located is a specifically designed area equipped with at least one projecting screen, controllable lighting, and enough clear space for approximately three to five dancers and, in some cases, musicians. Video cameras, placed at all locations to capture the

performers, feed the live images into an Internet-connected computer running Cornell University's CU-SeeMe software. Monitors display the incoming images so that the dancers and technicians can view all other performers at the remote sites. A video projector enlarges the images during the performance. [22]

The scenography of the *Cassandra Project* dissolved the scenic space and spread it out on diverse remote sites. Audiences were present both off- and online. During the performances, the online spectators could communicate with the performers on the remote sites via a chat room, contributing their ideas to the performance. Depending on what point the performers were, in the structured-improvisation performance, they could choose to respond or not. This concept of interactivity could potentially lead to a change in the process of the performance. Whereas the *Leaping into the Net!* performance did not touch the conventional roles of theatrical production, the *Cassandra Project* used the connectivity among the performers and the audience to establish the concept of what Lisa Naugle called the 'distributive choreography'. [23] Here, the responsibility for the choreographic work is distributed among all participants who contribute their ideas to the choreography as improvisations during the ongoing performance. By this, the notion of distributed choreography leads to a reconfiguration of the conventional roles of production: Beside merely dancing pre-fixed movements, every dancer may contribute to the creation of the performance. While being allowed to watch the contributions from the different remote sites, the spectators gain insight into the performative dimension of the production process. Both effects – the reconfiguration of the conventional role of the choreographer and the insight into the performative dimension of the choreographic process for the spectators – depend on the usage of the Internet in its possibility to connect participants from several remote sites.

4. Multiplying the Points of Perspective: *World Wide Simultaneous Dance*:

The *World Wide Simultaneous Dance* project was initiated by Laura Knott, a choreographer and director of dance pieces for electronic media, and performed on June 7th, 1998 at noon GMT. [24]

The project consisted of two components: live dance performances happening at the same time in 12 countries around the world and a live Internet video conference that linked participants and allowed audiences to interact with the event. [25]

Laura Knott asked the sixty participants to dance “in locations that were meaningful in their own cultures or to dance movement that carried cultural meaning for them.” [26] Knott sees herself in the tradition of site-specific art with its “primacy of the artist’s relationship to the site itself”. [27] The dispersion of the scenic space in individually controlled scenic spaces increased the reconfiguring of the roles of production which the *Cassandra Project* had initiated. The scenic spaces which are globally dispersed are brought together on the PC screen. [28] *World Wide Simultaneous Dance* used the Internet as a site in its distinguishing feature to link the globally spread out dancers and audiences in an Internet Performances.

Yet, with inviting the performer-participants to dance in locations and styles that are culturally meaningful for them, Knott introduced another criteria into Internet Performances. Whereas, for example, Laura Knott and Pam Raff danced at Do While Studio in Boston, USA, [29] Prakriti Kashyap danced the traditional ‘Seraikella Chau dance’ in Mumbai, India, [30] and Andrea Baker Domenici improvised in her kitchen in Rome, Italy. [31] Due to the global perception of the Internet as a commercial medium, Jeffrey Shaw defines the *net_condition* as “a circumstance, a contingency and a predicament” [32] of our time. Web artists, such as Laura Knott, question the *net_condition* by confronting it with its usage in an aesthetic context. In addition, the concept of *World Wide Simultaneous Dance* allows local notions of culture and dance to enter into the Internet, and, hence, to introduce its local meanings into the spatiality of the Internet.

5. Conclusion:

Theatre studies are challenged by Internet Performances and its dissolution of the physical co-presence between performers and spectators. This affects especially scenographic questions, as every project might establish individual scenographic structures. In contrast to other net.art projects, such as interactive web installations which can be accessed with out any time restrictions, Internet Performances introduce the notion of ephemerality into net.art. Once the Internet Performance is over, it has vanished. No reproduction is possible anymore.

Telematic performances in general redefine the role of space in performance with telepresence both as an emerging model of corporeality and as spatio-temporal structure. Telepresence as a specific form of embodiment replaces real proximity between the performing and perceiving bodies with their visual representation and, thereby, transform the role of the physical performing body in performance art. The physical copresence between performers and spectators is still credited to be the defining criteria for all historically and culturally contingent forms of theatre. Internet Performances, which are much easier to appreciate for participants with a certain competence in new media, question this essentialistic view on performances. Whereas telematic performances in general challenge the concept of liveness and the performers' presence, Internet Performances additionally incorporate the Internet's role as a site in its various social, technological and esthetical components. The telematic space in Internet Performances can be seen metaphorically, commenting on one of our society's main features, the telecommunication society. Internet Performances offer theatre artists the potential to critically comment on today's cultural disposition, the *net_condition*. On the one hand, theatre is a product of society, but on the other hand, it also plays a crucial part in the construction of society. Internet Performances can be seen as the particular mode of spatial organisation which reflects and is reflected by the *net_condition*.

As Henri Lefebvre emphasises, our conceptions of space, which are contingent and socially constructed, imply an immense potential of control and power in the construction and perception of cultural representations. [33] Following his argument, Internet Performances are not only adding new dimensions to the theatrical process, but by the omnipresent role of technology in Internet Performances, it seems likely that new powerful constraints (such as the affordability of the technology or its accessibility) are entering the performance process. Performance studies should pay attention to this correlation when working on Internet Performances. But this argument leads to a different field of research, the area of cultural studies, where the question of space in Internet Performances is directly linked to questions of politics and power.

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(c) Julia Glesner glesner@mail.uni-mainz.de

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- *Leaping into the Net!*, Sarah Morrison: <http://www.MorrisonDance.com> (as of 2000)
- *Cassandra Project*, NYU: <http://pages.nyu.edu/~jg12/cass.html><http://www.nyu.edu/pages/ngc>
- *World Wide Simultaneous Dance*, Laura Knott: <http://www.wwsd.org>
- ZKM:
http://on1.zkm.de/netCondition.root/netcondition/start/language/default_e or <http://www.zkm.de>

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- [1] The term 'telematic' (composed of 'telecommunication' and 'informatics') was coined by Alain Minc and Simon Nora. It refers to the growing intertwining of computers and telecommunication media and the increasing importance of information as a means of power. In their report for the French president which was published in 1978, Minc and Nora prophesied the advent of a new cultural model as consequence of the growing importance of telematic media. Their report initiated the "*programme télématique*" and the successful implementation of the so-called *minitel* in France. See Bollmann, Stefan (ed.): 'Kursbuch Neue Medien. Trends', in *Wirtschaft und Politik, Wissenschaft und Kultur*. Mannheim: Bollmann, 1995. p.17.
- [2] Beside the IRC also another type of text-based environments, the so called MOOs (an abbreviation of 'Multi User Dungeon Object Oriented'), have been used for experiments with drama in the Internet. See <http://www.hambule.co.uk/hamnet/about.htm> for the IRC-productions of the *Hamnet Players* and Schrum, Stephen (ed.): *Theatre in Cyberspace. Issues of Teaching, Acting, and Directing*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999. (= Artists and Issues in the Theatre; Vol. 10) for MOO productions. In both categories, the performers, space and action are represented by text. There is no representation of the performers' corporeality outside the text. Often, participants are allowed to take over roles of the play.
- [3] <http://www.wwsd.org/artifacts/artifacts.html>
- [4] Among others see Phelan, Peggy: *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge, 1993. And Auslander, Philip: *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- [5] Beside text-based and telematic Internet Performances, also a third category of Internet Performances can be distinguished. The group *Desktop Theater* has used the 2D-chatsoftware *Palace* for their improvisational performances such as *waitingforgodot.com*. Here, the performers and the scenic space are represented by the so called *avatars*, comic-like figures with balloons for the replays. See Jenik,

- Adriene, 'Desktop Theater. Keyboard Catharsis and the Masking of Roundheads', in *The Drama Review* 45,3 (T171) Fall 2001. S.95-112.
- [6] Compare Knott, Laura: 'World Wide Simultaneous Dance: Dancing the Connection between the "Cyberplace" and the Global Landscape', in: *Leonardo* Vol. 34, No.1 (2001). pp.11-16. p.14f.
- [7] Mediality can be understood as the disposition of the technologies used in a performance, the performing and perceiving bodies, and the symbolic forms resulting from them. Such a disposition alters existing modes of perception and through that the constitution of meaning in the performance.
- [8] Kaye, Nick: *Site-specific art. Performance, place and documentation*. London: Routledge, 2000. p.2.
- [9] Ibid. p.3.
- [10] Ibid. p.12. His examples are works by artists such as Robert Morris, Allan Kaprow, Meredith Monk, Vito Acconci and the performance group *Station House Opera* among others.
- [11] See Noël Carroll: *Theorizing the Moving Image*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996. p.3, 7.
- [12] Ibid. p.34.
- [13] Ibid. p.47-50. Ibid. p.47-50.
- [14] See <http://www.MorrisonDance.com> (as of 2000)
- [15] Pavis, Patrice: 'Espace (au théâtre)', in: Pavis, Patrice: *Dictionnaire du Théâtre*. Paris: Dunod, 1997. p.146. p.146.
- [16] See among others Dinkla, Söke: *Pioniere Interaktiver Kunst von 1970 bis heute*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1997.
- [17] Quoted in Brand, Stewart: *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT*. New York: Viking 1987. p.71ff.
- [18] Wilson, Martha: 'Martha Wilson, Franklin Furnace', in: Hill, Leslie & Helen Paris.: *Guerilla Performance and Multimedia*. London: Continuum, 2001. S.147-155. S.154.
- [19] See <http://pages.nyu.edu/~jg12/cass.html>
- [20] See <http://www.nyu.edu/pages/ngc>
- [21] Lisa Naugle is now Assistant Professor for Dance and Technology in the Dance Department at the School of the Arts at the University of California, Irvine.
- [22] Naugle, Lisa: 'Digital Dancing', in: *IEEE MultiMedia*. October-December 1998.

p.8-12. p.9.

- [23] Ibid.
- [24] See <http://www.wwsd.org>
- [25] Knott, Laura: 'World Wide Simultaneous Dance: Dancing the Connection between the "Cyberplace" and the Global Landscape', in: *Leonardo* Vol. 34, No.1 (2001). pp.11-16. p.11.
- [26] Ibid.
- [27] Ibid. p.14.
- [28] See <http://www.wwsd.org/artifacts/artifacts.html>
- [29] See <http://www.wwsd.org/dancers/laura/laura.html>
- [30] See <http://www.wwsd.org/dancers/prakriti/prakriti.html>
- [31] See <http://www.wwsd.org/andrea/andrea.html>
- [32] Shaw, Jeffrey: 'Radical Software', in: Weibel, Peter & Timothy Druckrey (ed.): *net_condition. Art and Global Media*. Boston: MIT, 2001. pp. 172-174. p.174. - Originally, *net_condition* was the title of an exhibition at the *Centre for Art and Media Technology*, Karlsruhe, Germany, challenging "the artist's look at the way society and technology interact with each other, are each other's 'condition' ". See http://on1.zkm.de/netCondition.root/netcondition/start/language/default_e and www.zkm.de.
- [33] See Lefebvre, Henri: *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. (Originally published as *La Production de l'Espace*, 1974) – Concerning the contingency of space conceptions. See Wertheim, Margaret: *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace. A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*. London: Norton&Comp., 1999.