The International Journal of the Arts in Society

Volume 6, Issue 4

Cyberformance and the Cyberstage

Christina Papagiannouli
Cyberformance and the Cyberstage
Christina Papagiannouli, University of East London, UK

Abstract: Investigating the historical and cultural emergence of grafting the internet technology into the contemporary theatre practice, this paper discusses the socio-political character of the cyberspace use as a theatrical stage, suggesting the term cyberstage to describe this phenomenon. Drawing on Helen Varley Jamieson’s definition of cyberformance, a “live performance that utilises internet technologies to bring remote performers together in real time, for remote and/or proximal audiences” (Jamieson, 2008, p.34), the use of cyberstage is analyzed in the following three online performance cases: Helen Varley Jamieson’s Make-Shift (2010), a networked performance collaboration with Paula Crutchlow, Dries Verhoeven’s performance Life Streaming (2010) and the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production Such Tweet Sorrow (2010). The substructures of an internet-based theatre have already been set, attracting many contemporary artists to experiment with that tool, foregrounding questions about the future of cyberformance and the theatre presence in cyberspace. The paper discusses the developmental potential of cyberformance as dealt with by Dixon (2004), Jamieson (2008) and Kattenheld (2010).

Keywords: Cyberformance, Cyberstage, Online Theatre, Make-Shift, Life Streaming, Such Tweet Sorrow

Introduction

FROM THE EARLY 1990s theatre practitioners have been using the internet to experiment and produce alternative performances, resulting in the creation of a new theatrical form. Although various terms appeared to describe this phenomenon, such as intermedial performance, virtual theatre, cyberdrama, telematic performance, cybertheater; cyberperformance, hyperformance, cyberformance, digital performance, online theatre and networked performance; theatre, and the art of theatre performance as a whole, still does not have a strong presence in the net art movement. However, the development of the internet to a basic communication medium of our era, its interactive and entertaining character, as well as the use of the cyberspace as a socio-political platform demonstrates the historical and cultural emergence of grafting the internet technology into the contemporary theatre practice, challenging the notion of the cyberspace as a space free from socio-cultural influences. Borrowing Helen Varley Jamieson’s definition of cyberformance, as a ‘live performance that utilises internet technologies to bring remote performers together in real time, for remote and/or proximal audiences’ (Jamieson, 2008, p.34), the term cyberstage will be deployed here to portray the use of cyberspace as a theatrical stage. Referring to Make-Shift (2010) cyberformance about the earth pollution, Life Streaming (2010) performance, a rectification of the 2004 tsunami’s media representation and Such Tweet Sorrow (2010) reproduction of Romeo and Juliet story through the social networking platform of Twitter, the paper discusses the socio-political character of the cyberstage.
All the Word’s a Stage

The internet, from its early days to its commercialization, has been used by artists, resulting in the creation of the net art movement (1994) in cyberculture, while terms such as *intermedial performance* (Albersmeier and Roloff, 1989), *virtual theatre* (Lanier), *cyberdrama* (Murray, 1997), *telematic performance* (Salz, 2004) cyber theater (Chatzichristodoulou, 2006), *cyberperformance* (Causey, 2006), *hyperperformance* (Unterman, 2007), *cyberformance* (Jamieson, 2008), *digital performance* (Dixon, 2007), *online theatre and networked performance* appeared to describe this new theatrical form. From 1988, online chat-channel *Internet Relay Chat* (IRC) creation by Jarkko Oikarinen and the 1990 early gaming MOO program development into Lambda Moo online social community software by Pavel Curtisa, a series of online experimental theatre performances began. In the early 1990s, Hamnet Players have performed parodies of text-based Shakespeare’s plays in IRC channels, such as *Hamnet* (1993) and *Pcbeth* (1994), at the same time as the Parkbench (Nina Sobell and Emily Hertz) created live web performances called *ArtisTheatre*. During 1994, the Plaintext Players began performing in PMC Moo, while Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes explored interactivity in online performance. One year later, the first *cyberstage*, ATHEMOO, an online conference and performance MOO was created by Juli Burk. The same year, the PALACE graphical avatars interactive chat room and the CUseeMe videoconferencing application were launched to the public, offering new creative tools to media theatre artists and researchers until Douglas Bagnall, in 2004, created the revolutionary UpStage, a *cyberformance* stage software produced for the Avatar Body Collision theatre group.

However, as Patricia Junk (2005) argues in her article *Performers go Web*; theatre is the only traditional art form that does not yet have a strong presence in cyberspace. Indeed, despite its direct contact with new technologies from the deus ex machina (Ἀπὸ μηχανῆς θεῶς) of the ancient Greek theatre to the revolutionary introduction of electric light in the 1890s and the contemporary multimedia performances, theatre artists, theorists, and reviewers react critically on any new technological change challenging the established theatre’s structure of each era. The term theatre, in this paper, is not used to describe the space where a live performance takes place, but the art of theatre performance as a whole, including all the acts being required for the realization of a theatrical performance, such as the text, the actors and the audience.

The internet has been in existence since the 1960s, and has grown into a key communication medium and a powerful tool of the twenty first century for ideas and opinions, as marked by its recognition in 2011 by the United Nation as a human right (2011, p.4). The invention and growth of the internet had a revolutionary effect on the future of information technologies as the consumers have the option to actively interact by publishing information, rather that being just passive recipients. The United Nations report (2011, p.6) suggests that unlike any other medium of communication, such as radio, television and printed publications based on one-way transmission of information, the internet represents a significant leap forward as an interactive medium. Thus, the internet network, by connecting distant devices, creates *cyberspace*, a shared space where the information resides. Internet users, estimated by the International Telecommunication Union to meet and exceed two billion (United Nations, 2011, p.4), have access to this new Web-world, where everything is easily found, copied and dispersed. The World Wide Web, inter alia, offers games, movies, music, TV programs, newspapers, and even online books and libraries. Thus, the internet has turned into a new
form of entertainment space, leading media commentators to believe that “entertainment would never be the same again” (Walsh, 2009, p.3) or as Heiner Muller says: “Nothing is the way it stays” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 174). Furthermore, as mobile phones are superseded by smart phones, smart communities have developed worldwide, using the internet as a socio-political platform. For example Trikala, the first Greek digital city, offers free wireless internet to its citizens since 2004, while e-Trikala’s (no date) main areas of expertise include e-transportation, e-education, tele-health services, as well as online civil services for the democratic development of its community office. In cyberspace, according to artist, researcher and academic Steve Dixon (2007, p. 463), the personal is political, supporting the view of the web and installation artist, Shu Lea Cheng, that “community” is what the internet is mostly about.

Theatre, not only as a type of entertainment, but also as a social art and consequently as a political act which reflects the world we live in, should make use of that interactive digital world. In this respect, theatre practitioners must look to internet technology for new ways of producing performance, while performance also needs to address these fast changes of the technological advances. By experimenting with chat rooms, webcams and free online software applications, such as Facebook, Myspace, Messenger, Twitter, UpStage, Blogs and web-pages, artists and researchers can investigate new ways of producing low-cost, interactive performances in the socio-political space of cyberspace, allowing the audience to be creative in their everyday life with simple things. This chapter refers to the free character of the internet medium in relation to this low-cost characteristic, rather than to describe a democratic medium, owning to its debatable freedom of speech.

According to Chiel Kattenbelt (2010, p. 29), theatre as a hypermedium pre-eminently provides a stage to media. However, considering the above internet’s characteristics, it can be suggested that the internet and its cyberspace, unlike other media, do provide a stage for the theatre. The Shakespearian quote “all the world’s a stage” becomes feasible through the worldwide internet which offers ‘performative’ spaces, such as chat rooms, IRC channels, MUDs and MOOs, virtual environments and communication applications based on avatars, web cameras and text logs. The term ‘performative’ is used here to describe the ability of cyberspace to bring into existence a performance act because of its interactive character. Birgit Wiens (2005, p.108), rightly underlines that it is not enough to interpret the internet as the “largest theatre in the world” because it is of greater importance to identify and analyze the emergent economic, social and political implications and interactions of the internet with the physical space and society.

All the Word’s a Cyberstage

Is the internet a space or a tool to reflect our self/inside space? Theatre, by using the cyberspace as a theatrical stage, troubles the notion of cyberspace as a space figuring into this endless debate. Thus, according to Helen Varley Jamieson (2008. p. 32), artist, researcher and founding member of the Avatar Body Collision, a third space is “grafted from the real-time confluence of the stage and remote locations”. Conversely to this respect, Dixon (2007, p.462) argues in his comprehensive study of new media in performing arts, Digital Performance, that cyberspace should not be termed as a space at all, as the sense of being elsewhere is mental and metaphoric. However, he acknowledges that the discussion of cyberspace as a space can be useful and highly appropriate, as the chat room is often experienced as a distinct
location and meeting point. This chapter develops this debate about the theatre and cyberspace by exploring the notion of cyberspace as an in-between space and not space, *spaceless*, where the participants are present and absent at the same time, *bodyless*, in a live and mediatised experience, *liveness*. This suggests the use of the term *cyberstage* to describe the phenomenon of cyberspace use as a theatrical space.

In her Master’s thesis *Adventures in Cyberformance: Experiments at the interface of theatre and the internet* (2008), Jamieson proposes and analyses the term *cyberformance* as a “live performance that utilises internet technologies to bring remote performers together in real time, for remote and/or proximal audiences” (Jamieson, 2008, p.34), identifying the above *spaceless, bodyless* and *liveness* notion of cyberspace. According to Jamieson (2008, pp. 34-39), *cyberformance* is “live/ly”, meaning that although it is mediatised, it takes place in real-time. Because it is “situated in cyberspace”, it is “digital” and “distributed” in the geographical sense. It also “has attitude”, owning to the unexpected element of the online performance. Moreover, in terms of technology and context, cyberformance is “resourceful” and “transparent”, as the computer is plainly part of the performance, although still “unfinished” due to its interactive character. Drawing from the above definition, the use of the cyberspace as a theatrical stage is analyzed in the following three online performance cases: Helen Varley Jamieson’s *Make-Shift* (2010), a networked performance collaboration with Paula Crutchlow, Dries Verhoeven’s performance *Life Streaming* (2010) and the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production *Such Tweet Sorrow* (2010).


Helen Varley Jamieson continuously experiments with the internet as a venue for live performance, producing *cyberformances* and workshops on UpStage as well as organising the UpStage festival every year and developing its potentiality. Jamieson’s last production,
Make-Shift (2010), a cyberformance about recycling, approached interactively the subject of the political responsibilities into peoples’ daily actions, which transform the world we live in. The on-site and online audience created kites by using their recyclable rubbish, while a discussion on the earth pollution was taking place on UpStage. Jamieson (2008, p. 35) uses the term “on-site” or “proximal” to describe an audience that exists together in the physical space, where the performance takes place, in contrast to the online, distributed and audience.

Although Make-Shift was staged on UpStage, a commercial streaming company was used for the live streaming of the performance, as UpStage is still a very limited cyberstage. Make-Shift’s focus on the on-site audience members created a distance with the online ones, who were mainly beholders rather than participants of the performance. However, despite the physical and performance distance, the online audience members were all part of the same team, sharing technical problems and information in relation to the performance and weather forecasts. They were even informing each other any time they managed to reconnect on UpStage. The meeting of an audience from different locations and time zones in the spaceless cyberspace, discussing everyday issues, is by itself a very powerful part of the cyberstage’s socio-political space.

The Audience inside the Van-Internet Café during the Life Streaming Performance. Photo by Tim Mitchell

Apart from Helen Varley Jamieson, theatre maker Dries Verhoeven directed Life Streaming in 2010, which was an online performance, looking at the use of the internet as a communication tool for connecting distant people in order to share experiences. Based on a one-to-one online audience-performer relationship, each member of the audience in London “chatted” with a member of the troupe located on a beach 8,000 kilometres away, through an application
similar to Skype. *Life Streaming* is a great example of the use of the *cyberstage* as a socio-political platform. Breaking geographical and cultural barriers, the *bodyless* cyberformance commented on the media presentation of individuals as passive victims, focusing on the case of the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia. The audience was asked to leave their shoes and their personal belongings before entering into a specially built van-internet café outside the National Theatre, next to the Thames River. Although the whole performance was set up in the *cyberstage*, the ending brought the audience back to the real space by having warm water flood the van in London as the performers, 8,000 kilometres away, ran towards the sea. This created a feeling for both parties of being in the same *spaceless* place at the same time and sharing the same experience together, despite the *bodyless* condition.

The ‘Virtual Touch’. *Life Streaming*. Photo by Maarten Van Haaff

In contrast to the above *Make-Shift* example, Verhoeven’s *cyberformance*, due to its one-to-one character, did not leave space for the audience to feel sidelined. Verhoeven’s use of the internet intended to directly involve the spectators in his performance and create a personal contact between the performers and the audience. As a matter of fact, the audience was so attached to the performers and their stories that in the end most of the participants continued to send them messages. Dixon (2006) uses the term ‘virtual touch’ to describe these moments of real contact and intimacy between the actors and the audience across the network, commenting on the performance dialogue between the physical and virtual bodies and the physical and virtual spaces.
On the other hand, The Royal Shakespeare Company presented a modern way of performing *Romeo and Juliet* through the platform of Twitter (*Such Tweet Sorrow*, 2010). The audience followed and interacted with the characters’ life through real-time hypertext updates and tweets, such as video, pictures, web-pages and text logs posted on Twitter for over a period of five weeks. According to Geraldine Collinge, the production manager of the *Such Tweet Sorrow*, Twitter is a way that the story of Romeo and Juliet might be told today (Cavendish, 2010). Thus, the choice of the specific online platform by the Royal Shakespeare Company is a commentary on the digitalisation of contemporary society, where the recording of the event is more important than the event itself.

According to James Barrett (2010), who played Romeo, the great thing about doing the performance on Twitter was audience participation. “It was very strange because in some ways it was the most isolated performance I think I could ever do as an actor— but then there was an immediacy of everything because of the way that the audience could give you feedback straight away”. In fact, notwithstanding the physical distance, the audience is more connected to the performance, due to the interactive and social character of the cyberstage. As Steve Dixon notes in his article *Adventures in Cyber-theatre (or the actor’s fear of the disembodied audience)*:

> although the actual physical distance between performers and audience is increased, interactive communication changes the nature of the spatial barrier since the spectator seems as present and often as prominent as the performers within the performance space of the computer monitor proscenium (2004, p.118).
Conclusion

As an online environment in which communication takes place, cyberstage is a socio-political in-between space and non space, where the participants are present and absent at the same time in a live and mediatised experience. The spaceless, bodyless and liveness characterisation of cyberstage references the binary nature of cyberspace’s materiality and immateriality, while its socio-political character also references its global nature of the online environments. Although cyberformance remained inactive during the last decade, wobbling between Upstage and Second Life software applications, the abovementioned examples expose the scope for improvement and for further development of this experimental form. Notwithstanding the different aspects of the cyberstage use, such as the web-cams streaming in Make-Shift, the one-to-one online chat in Life Streaming and the ‘hypertextuality’ in Such Tweet Sorrow, these cyberperformances discoursed on the ‘performative’ feasibility of the spaceless – bodyless world of the socio-political cyberstage and created alive ‘communities’ in the cyberspace. The substructures of an internet-based, socio-political performance have already been set, attracting an increasing number of contemporary artists to experiment with the internet as a space and bringing into question the future of cyberformance and the theatre’s presence in cyberspace as a whole.

Acknowledgement

I am pleased to acknowledge the valuable contribution of my supervisory team, Professor Haim Bresheeth, Dr. Dominic Hingorani and Dr. Ananda Breed, and my family for their support, especially my father Nikos Papagiannoulis.
References


Royal Shakespeare Company (2010) Such Tweet Sorrow [Twitter, 10 April – 13 May]


About the Author

Christina Papagiannouli

Born in Greece in 1985, theatre director and musician Christina Papagiannouli gained a Degree of Harmony at the age of 17. The next year she entered the Drama Department of Faculty of Fine arts of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) where she studied for five years on different theatre’s specializations: including acting, directing, film studies, light, set and costume design, and dramaturgy, pedagogy and performance theory. In 2006 she studied as an exchange student (Erasmus) for one year at the Drama Department of University of Kent. During her undergraduate studies a research on the use of technology in postmodern theatre was completed, focusing on the work of the Wooster Group. In 2009 she finished her music studies with a degree in Violoncello and she returned to United Kingdom, in order to start her MA in Theatre Directing at University of East London. Continuing her research on the use of technology, her practical dissertation focused on the use of surveillance media. In September 2010 she followed the directing course How to Rehearse at Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). Today she is concentrating on her practice-based PhD at UEL with thesis title: Etheatre Project: Directing Political Cyberformance. The cyberstage, issues of ‘spaceless’—‘bodyless’—‘liveness’ and interactivity.
Editor
Bill Cope, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

Editorial Advisory Board
Caroline Archer, UK Type, Birmingham, UK.
Robyn Archer, Performer and Director, Paddington, Australia.
Mark Bauerlein, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., USA.
Tressa Berman, California College of the Arts, San Francisco, USA; UTS-Sydney, Australia.
Judy Chicago, Artist and Author, New Mexico, USA.
Nina Czegledy, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada; Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.
James Early, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., USA.
Mehdi Faridzadeh, International Society for Iranian Culture (ISIC), New York, USA, Tehran, Iran.
Jennifer Herd, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.
Fred Ho, Composer and Writer, New York, USA.
Andrew Jakubowicz, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.
Mary Kalantzis, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.
Gerald McMaster, Curator, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada.
Mario Minichiello, Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, Birmingham, UK.
Fred Myers, New York University, New York, USA.
Darcy Nicholas, Porirua City Council, Porirua, New Zealand.
Daniela Reimann, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology KIT, Institute of Vocational and General Education, Karlsruhe, Germany; University of Art and Industrial Design, Linz, Austria.
Arthur Sabatini, Arizona State University, Phoenix, USA.
Cima Sedigh, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, USA.
Peter Sellars, World Arts and Culture, University of California, Los Angeles, USA.
Ella Shohat, New York University, New York, USA.
Judy Spokes, Arts Victoria, South Melbourne, Australia.
Tonel (Antonio Eligio Fernández), Artist and Art Critic, Havana, Cuba.
Marianne Wagner-Simon, World Art Organization, Berlin, Germany.

Please visit the Journal website at http://www.Arts-Journal.com for further information about the Journal or to subscribe.
The Arts in Society Community

This knowledge community is brought together around a common shared interest in the role of the arts in society. The community interacts through an innovative, annual face-to-face conference, as well as year-round virtual relationships in a weblog, peer reviewed journal and book imprint – exploring the affordances of the new digital media. Members of this knowledge community include artists, academics, educators, administrators, advocates and policy makers, curators, researchers and research students.

Conference

Members of the Arts Community meet at the International Conference on the Arts in Society held annually in different locations around the world in conjunction with global and local arts events.

The inaugural Conference was held in conjunction with the Edinburgh Festivals, Edinburgh, Scotland in 2006 and in 2007 in collaboration with the Documenta12, Kassel, Germany. In 2007 an International Symposium on the Arts was also held during the Armory Show in New York and in co-sponsorship with the Center for Art and Public Policy, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. In 2008 the conference was held at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK, with a special theme of Art and Communication. In 2009 the Conference was held at Venice, Italy in conjunction with the Venice Biennale. In 2010 the Conference was held at University of Sydney, Sydney College of the Arts, Australia. In 2011 the Conference was held at Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Berlin, Germany. In 2012 the Conference will be held in Art and Design Academy, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK.

Our community members and first time attendees come from all corners of the globe. The Conference is a site of critical reflection, both by leaders in the field and emerging artists and scholars. Those unable to attend the Conference may opt for virtual participation in which community members can submit a video and/or slide presentation with voice-over, or simply submit a paper for peer review and possible publication in the Journal.

Online presentations can be viewed on YouTube.

Publishing

The Arts Community enables members to publish through three media. First by participating in the Arts Conference, community members can enter a world of journal publication unlike the traditional academic publishing forums – a result of the responsive, non-hierarchical and constructive nature of the peer review process. The International Journal of the Arts in Society provides a framework for double-blind peer review, enabling authors to publish into an academic journal of the highest standard.

The second publication medium is through the book series The Arts in Society publishing cutting edge books in print and electronic formats. Publication proposal and manuscript submissions are welcome.

The third major publishing medium is our news blog constantly publishing short news updates from the Arts in Society Community, as well as major developments in the various disciplines of the arts. You can also join this conversation at Facebook and Twitter or subscribe to our email Newsletter.
## Common Ground Publishing Journals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGING</th>
<th>ARTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Aging and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal  
Website: http://AgingAndSociety.com/journal/ | The International Journal of the Arts in Society  
Website: www.Arts-Journal.com |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOOK</th>
<th>CLIMATE CHANGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of the Book  
Website: www.Book-Journal.com | The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses  
Website: www.Climate-Journal.com |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT</th>
<th>DESIGN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of the Constructed Environment  
Website: www.Design-Journal.com |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIVERSITY</th>
<th>FOOD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations  
Website: www.Diversity-Journal.com | Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal  
Website: http://Food-Studies.com/journal/ |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GLOBAL STUDIES</th>
<th>HEALTH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The Global Studies Journal  
Website: www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com | The International Journal of Health, Wellness and Society  
Website: www.HealthandSociety.com/journal |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HUMANITIES</th>
<th>IMAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of the Humanities  
Website: www.OntheImage.com/journal |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEARNING</th>
<th>MANAGEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of Learning.  
Website: www.Management-Journal.com |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MUSEUM</th>
<th>RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum  
Website: www.Religion-Journal.com |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCIENCE IN SOCIETY</th>
<th>SOCIAL SCIENCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of Science in Society  
Website: www.ScienceinSocietyJournal.com | The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences  
Website: www.SocialSciences-Journal.com |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPACES AND FLOWS</th>
<th>SPORT AND SOCIETY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Website: www.SpacesJournal.com | The International Journal of Sport and Society  
Website: www.sportandsociety.com/journal |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUSTAINABILITY</th>
<th>TECHNOLOGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability  
Website: www.Sustainability-Journal.com | The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society  
Website: www.Technology-Journal.com |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UBIQUITOUS LEARNING</th>
<th>UNIVERSITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal  
Website: www.ubi-learn.com/journal/ | Journal of the World Universities Forum  
Website: www.Universities-Journal.com |

For subscription information please contact subscriptions@commongroundpublishing.com