

# “So Close and Yet So Far Away”: An Attempt to Retroactively Chase the Evasive Live Experience in Contemporary Performance

Tomaž Krpič, tomaz.krpic@guest.arnes.si

*Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance. Interdisciplinary Perspectives.* Editors Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof.

Routledge, 2016.

Quite some time ago, I became interested in the work of American performance artist Chris Burden. While I was searching for documentation about his work – mainly books, articles, videos and various Internet documents – I noticed a certain split between his early art projects, where he explored and pushed forward the performance boundaries in terms of the performer’s body, and his later works, where he entirely focused on art installations. While the later period of his artistic life was quite well-documented, I had problems acquiring visual documents, images and videos about his body art performances. His seminal performance *Shoot* (1971), for instance, was not fully documented as perhaps it would be, if it were to take place today. One can find only several images of poor quality and something like a “sound track” of the performance. But nothing more. The same goes for his *Bed Piece* (1972) too, a performance which is even more intriguing on so many levels, as well as for many of his other performances. The allegedly negligent behaviour regarding the documentation process of so many artists in the 1970s, the so-called golden era of performance art, has little to do, however, with the less-developed means of technical reproduction at the time, but more with the deeply engraved belief of artists and performance scholars, like Amelia Jones and Peggy Phelan, that the only true and honest performance is a live one, and “that the performance cannot be wholly captured by documents, that it flashes into existence only to fade away” (see 192, Westerman; 115, Lu). Such scholars believe that in order to achieve a state of liveness in performances, two groups of people need to be simultaneously present at the venue – the performers on one side of the “fourth theatrical wall”, and the spectators on the other – and that the performance actually originates from the visual, and sometimes also haptic, interaction between these two groups.

But perhaps it is time to question whether this is really necessary for creating live art. The latest book published in Routledge’s collection *Routledge Advances in Theatre*

*and Performances Studies*, edited by Matthew Reason (York St John University) and Anja Mølle Lindelof (Roskilde University) contests many of the quiet and invisible assumptions about liveness in contemporary (theatre and) performance, by taking a critical distance from views and theories of some contemporary scholars like Erika Fischer-Lichte, Richard Schechner and Peggy Phelan, and understanding performance as something essentially and necessarily bodily in its character (see, for instance 224, Eirini Nedelkopoulou; 230, Anja Mølle Lindelof; 191, Westerman), and something which is thus spatially and timely more than less strictly located. The book contributors shift the research interest of liveness towards Philip Auslander's understanding of performance as an eternal phenomenon, as something which does not fade in time, but stays with us due to the use of (above all, modern) media technology: from printing books to the Internet. With more than thirty contributors, the book represents a valuable insight into new trends in producing and researching liveness in contemporary (theatre and) performance.

The book is divided into two parts in which two different issues related to liveness are addressed: "audiencing" and materialising. Each part of the book is further divided into two segments: one, in which the authors talk about the theoretical dimensions of liveness in contemporary performances, and another, in which various prominent performance artists and critics depict and explain their own experiences with liveness. I find this structure of the book, in which theatrical experiences and examples of performances support and upgrade the concepts and theories about liveness, and vice versa, extremely suitable for the reader's deeper and wider comprehension of the object of the book's interest. However, the reader should not expect a clear division among the articles on theory and practice. The editors seem to follow a structural rule that accentuates one or another principle and, in my modest opinion, that makes the book even more coherent.

The first part of the book on audiencing puts in front the role of the audience for gaining liveness in contemporary performance. A state of liveness cannot be reached solely by the performers' agency onstage (4, Reason and Mølle Lindelof). On the contrary, the audience, whether in a theatre or musical performance, is as much, if not even more, an important element of liveness than the performance itself. I cannot agree more with this point of view. Anyway, as I have demonstrated elsewhere in my analysis of the Slovenian theatre play *Feng Shui in the Theatre without an Actor* (*Feng šus v gledališču brez igralcev*, 2012) on the absent phenomenal body of the performer and the spectator's attempt to cognitively substitute it (see Krpič "Spectator's"), the actors and performers can be in some sense absent even from dramatic theatre, yet the same cannot be true for the spectators or the listeners. Although this book indeed goes beyond the still-affirmed traditional understanding of the spectator's role in contemporary (theatre and) performance; I suggest that the reader consider, for

example, the contribution of Anja Mølle Lindelof, Ulrik Schmidt and Connie Svabo (232–39) as it illustrates the non-representational, unpredictable and durational character of dehumanised environmental performance. That the presence of the spectators and listeners at a venue is nevertheless essential for the establishment of liveness in contemporary performance is excellently exposed and dissected in Katja Hilevaara’s essay, where she proposes an actual, though “inadequate memory of the original event [...] as a starting point for a new creative act” (38). It is not that important whether the spectator or listener actually correctly remembers the performance; it is far more important that one builds a private cognitive and emotional venue in which one constructs one’s own private performing event (see also 110, Lu). The reader can find another, somewhat similar, approach to the question of liveness in contemporary performance in Mathias Maschat’s and Christopher Williams’s contribution to the volume, except here, the traces of performances are not stored in memory, but in the transcription of the event, the so called “second performance” (246). Simply by the act of reading, a reader is temporarily transformed into a “participant”. In this sense, the epigraph “This book is theatre” noted at the beginning of Livia Pandur’s seminal book (*Pandur’s Theatre*) about the early works of Slovenian theatre director Tomaž Pandur is prophetic.

The second part of the book is on the materialising of contemporary performances and its impact on liveness. In some sense, a face-to-face performance can be technologically very simple. All one needs is a doubled performing body – the body of the performer and the body of the spectator – in a shared space and time. And, as a matter of fact, it is not even necessary that two distinct physical bodies are present. Under certain conditions both performing bodies can be “united” into a single human body, like in the case of Burden’s *Bed Piece*, when during his durational performance the performer fell asleep and his dreams turned the common external theatre stage (the performer–spectator relationship) into a private stage inside the performer’s body, and as a consequence, he also became a spectator (Krpič, “Sleeping”; see also Hrvatin “Terminal”). This situation somehow resembles the case of Imogen Newland’s (117) concept of dancer-as-spectator. A dancer moving through space and time stores one’s own somatic and social experiences of dance inside one’s mind, which is actually placed in one’s body in such a way that the dancer becomes an archive of one’s own art. In general, in order to be preserved, memory deserves a place to be stored in. Either in a human body (on the level of having a body contrary to being a body, see Turner *Body*), or in some modern (media) technology (150, Schneider), but both can serve the purpose well. Yet, as we can see above, not only can the dancer-as-spectator provide the kinaesthetic archive of the performance – members of the audience can use their bodies in such a way, too. They store their experiences as members of an audience (144, Reading) and then when appropriate, they sync with the performer by the use of mirror neurons in a process of building a selective empathy with the

performers on the stage (110, Lu).

However, despite the fact that in the immersive and applied theatre or in a one-to-one performance the spectator or participant can simultaneously become the producer and the consumer of performance (137, Hogarth and Bramley), the application of the observer's body in order to gain a state of liveness through physical contact does not necessary guarantee success (141, Hogarth and Bramley). After all, the physical, that is, the carnal body of the observer (the spectator or the listener) is not the only body which is contested in the process of performance in terms of technology, for the body of the performer can be problematised as well (as we already have seen above). Or it can be substituted with another body, even with the body of a hired performer, like it was in Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present*. This automatically raises question if the artist is still "present", and if the answer is "yes", then the question arises as to how this can be possible at all in terms of liveness and hired labour in the neoliberal economy (202–04, Newman).

But what if the performance takes place in zero gravity, as did Dragan Živadinov's performance *Biomehanika Noordung* carried out at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre? Just to place a performance into the setting to achieve zero gravity and to gain there a performance liveness in a more traditional theatrical way, one needs quite a lot of advanced technology and not just the bodies of the performer and the spectators or the listeners. However, Živadinov pushes the boundaries of liveness even further with his theatrical project *Noordung: 1995–2045*, where bodies of the deceased actors will be replaced with their bio transmitters located in 14 satellites and their texts replaced with distinctive rhythm (for actors) or melody (for actresses). The satellites will then be launched into space and orbit the Earth.

The question here is not about how the construction of the audience and, as a consequence, the performance's liveness, in such a case is possible without modern communication technology. The only sensible answer is the online audience, who "are an absence that has a presence" (54, Bennett). The transmission of music from performer to the audience, as well as its mechanical reproduction, has a long history. Ever since the introduction of the first phonographs and gramophones, the issue of liveness was in the forefront. It was in the realm of music that the medium of the artwork itself first become less important than it was in the past (178, Tromans), yet the improvement of technology for visual reproduction of the fine arts followed very quickly. Modern communicational technology, especially mobile phones and the use of various applications, resurfaces a new social dimension of performance's liveness. Once, the relationship at a concert or in the theatre was limited almost entirely to the relationship between the audience and the performers, but now mobile applications open up a wide space for communication among the members of the audience, and

enable an exchange of their experiences during the performance (69, Pitts).

Audiencing and materialising in contemporary performance are certainly important for establishing liveness. However, the link between both is on the level of epistemology. The central epistemological pivot around which the book revolves is the question whether liveness in contemporary (theatre and) performance is actually accessible to the participants, that is, to the audience, and if it is, under what conditions. This epistemological problem is excellently reflected in the editors' short introduction to the book, in which they define the concept of deadliness, that is, the opposite state to liveness, according to which "deadliness is the product of a failed relationship between performance and audience" (2, Reason and Mølle Lindelof; see also 99, Soloski). Lay aside the "unusual" split of the subject between the performance (the art form) and the audience (the social category), as most authors in the book include the audience (spectators and listeners) as an element of performance, the bottom line is that liveness is a momentary and terminal event that fades away as soon as it ends, like a musical note which must eventually end to be properly performed (178, Tromans). Strictly speaking, every contemporary performance terminates as an absence of the event that constitutes it (164, Peters). This characteristic of performance is also called "the terror of the live event" (75, Scannell); the audience is literally forced into the painstaking process of trying to catch the endless number of chunks of a performance art. Small wonder some of the participants rightly speak about the post-acknowledging of the artistic event, while the event itself is "uncatchable" (175, Peters).

Although I find the book very valuable and one step further towards a better understanding of the liveness of contemporary (theatre and) performance, a few words of criticism, nevertheless, are needed. For instance, the book hardly mentions the puppet theatre; it only incidentally pops out in a short chapter by Allen S. Weiss (280) on serendipity. But it would be rather useful to know more about the presence of non-presence of puppeteer and his or her relation to the spectator. Another rather surprising fact is that not a single author in the book comes from Central or Eastern Europe. Why? Is it possible that the entire region cannot produce one scholar who could address the issue of liveness in theatre and performance? This is something hard to believe. Unfortunately, the editors do not tell us anything about the process of the undoubtedly careful selection of the contributors.

In addition, the book unfortunately does not explain why, for such a long time, liveness in theatre and performances has been considered as something that is a simultaneously timely and spatially necessary close relationship between the performers and the spectators or the listeners. Or why a new theory of liveness is so urgently necessary other than because of the application of new communicational technologies. However, a reader can find two "stories" that reflect this issue: one that empowers a more

traditional understanding of liveness and another that enables shifting the concept of liveness towards new directions. Walter Benjamin's concept of auratic art ("Work") is briefly mentioned a few times in the book. Until recently, the idea of the extinction of the artistic aura was very strongly present among scholars of art, mainly as a result of the devastating development of the means for the reproduction of art. In the past, performance art was considered as an opportunity to regain that aura. However, the evolution of modern (communication) technology seems to be unstoppable and there are only a few spots out there where, in the future, art will be still in the position of successful resistance to its application. Whether art in general will benefit from a new comprehension of liveness is yet another, still unknown, territory.

## Bibliography

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Art in Theory: 1900–1990*, edited by P. Wood and C. Harrison, Blackwell, 1993, pp. 512–20.
- Hrvatín, Emil. "Terminal SpectActor." *Janus*, no. 9, 2001, pp. 62–67.
- Krpič, Tomaž. "The Spectator's Cognitive Substitution of Absent Performer's Phenomenal Body." *Amfiteater*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2016, pp. 28–41.
- . "The Sleeping Spectactor in Her/His Body-Home. Some Reflections on the Public Performance of Private Dreams." Unpublished.
- Pandur, Livia, editor. *Pandur's Theatre of Dreams*. Sevenheaven, 1997.
- Turner, Bryan S. *The Body and Society*. SAGE, 1984.