Encountering the Digital in Performance: Deployment | Engagement | Trace
Introduction
Maria Chatzichristodoulou

> Today, no staging of bodies, no performance can be without its control screen.
> (Jean Baudrillard)[1]

The Introduction to this special issue performs a dual role. Firstly, it unpacks the main notions we bring forth through our title, specifically those of the 'encounter' and the 'digital', as well as the three words we have identified as key to digital theatre practices, namely: deployment, engagement and trace. The introduction examines how the contributors respond to those ideas, which preceded the articles and documents herein. Secondly, it offers observations that span across and connect the articles and documents, identifying key trends in current critical thinking and creative practice with regard to contemporary theatre in and through the digital. The observations that emerge suggest connections that allow us to reflect more broadly on developments to our understanding of the digital, and indeed to the larger ecosystem of performance in digital culture.

The collection consists of five articles and three documents. In her article, Sarah Bay-Cheng offers a stimulating discussion on the circulation of digital imagery within contemporary culture, to address our current obsession with documentation in relation to memory. Bay-Cheng uses Rabih Mroué's work as a case study to argue about the dangers of mistaking the document for the act, and our mediated engagement with the digital image for political action. Andy Lavender studies 'instances of theatre on and through the Internet' to consider the matter of temporality in performance. Addressing a wide range of practices he asks questions around liveness and presence, to argue for a 'distributed present' as an important feature of online performance transactions. Eirini Nedelkopoulou asks how information-

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[1] Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988 [1986]), pp. 36-7. I suggest that the term 'screen' here should not be taken literally (indeed digital performance practices are increasingly moving beyond two-dimensional screens to offer immersive experiences) but metaphorically, as that which facilitates mediatisation.

intensive environments shape our ways of attending (or not attending) to our experiences. She uses case studies by Blast Theory and Dries Verhoeven to examine how digital performances respond to that issue within the context of the attention economy. Rosie Klich looks at the recent proliferation of headphone technologies on stage to suggest that their popularity indicates a shift of interest from telepresence to the 'somatosensory modalities of media technologies.' Klich argues that, immersed in those sonic environments, the audiences become more aware of 'their own body schema and being in the world,' as well as the relationship between their interior space and the external environment. Finally, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck identifies a trend in performance practice that uses 'modes of mediatised channeling techniques on stage' in order to reactivate stories that 'bring to the fore traces of past events and people'. Looking at a range of relevant practices, Parker-Starbuck suggests that 'karaoke theatre' provides a form of twenty-first century storytelling, through which we can both remember and reactivate the past, and question our relationship to the very technologies that facilitate this 'looping' of time.

The Special Issue also features three documents, each of which studies a particular practical project. Elena Marchevska's document presents the activist actions of a group of 'Singing Skopjans' who appear unannounced to sing in politically pertinent public spaces and then use social media as a means of amplifying their message. Kate Sicchio and Alex McLean offer us an insight into their co-authored practice, through the piece *Sound Choreography<>Body Code (SC<>BC)*. *SC<>BC* 'brings choreography and computer programming together in live performance' incorporating both human and computer actors, and engaging across dual practices, notations and bodies. Finally, Chris Salter offers an enthralling insight into his piece *Futile Labor* (developed with SymbioticA and Devon Ward) that uses 'tissue-culturing techniques to create a "living machine".' The artist-author employs this case study to explore 'the relationship between the biological and digital in a post-humanist context.'

The Encounter

Theatre is an encounter. In his later writings, political philosopher Louis Althusser takes an approach that he has described as a 'materialism of the encounter.'[2] Althusser's principal thesis is that there exists a little-acknowledged materialist tradition in the history of philosophy that is opposed to the materialisms of the rationalist tradition, which he considers a 'disguised form of idealism'.[3] He attempts to expose this through reflecting on the writings of a range of philosophers, including Marx, Democritus, Spinoza, Rousseau, and Heidegger. The 'materialism of the encounter' becomes a method for returning to what is well known and familiar in the work of those philosophers in order to meet it anew, and demonstrate a repressed thread of continuity in philosophical tradition. It is employed to open up new possibilities in what is otherwise a given, and to liberate texts from dominant or canonical readings. In effect, Althusser *performs a conscious re-turn,* which allows him to encounter these texts afresh, as if they have never before been met.[4]

What interests me here is establishing the encounter as a methodological approach for performing a return, which constitutes a new meeting with what has been there already. This special issue approaches theatre as an encounter, that is, a return to the new through that which might appear ancient, durable, or taken for granted (society, politics, the cultural establishment, theatre as an institution, oneself). The practice of live theatre and performance facilitates this approach as it is in theatre's nature to perform a return to the old through an encounter that is always new. Live theatre and performance – the singular moment, the specific encounter, my/your body in it – can never be repeated; however, perhaps paradoxically, theatre is rooted in repetition through its return to texts and contexts that are often ancient, and its re-enactment of familiar actions: that is, its ability to 'begin again'. As Joe Kelleher suggests, with reference to Alan Read's notion of 'beginning again': [5]

> [If] theatre has anything at all to offer to contemporary troubled times, it is […]
> its capacity to 'begin again' by provoking us to take notice of the forms of life

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[2] Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, ed. by François Matheron and Oliver Corpet. trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London and New York: Verso, 2006), p. 167.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87,* pp. 163-207.

[5] Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement*: The Last Human Venue (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 275.

to be encountered there, and to consider just how much these encounters might matter, in relation to our lives and also to lives other than our own.[6]

This resembles what Althusser establishes through his methodology of the encounter: a 'beginning again'. However, whereas in his writings on the 'materialism of the encounter' Althusser begins again in order to prove a thesis[7] – that is, the encounter is used as a means to an end that is beyond it – theatre facilitates this 'beginning again' as an end in itself: it facilitates encounters with life as a means of revisiting life and opening up new potentials for our lives, and for lives other than our own.

The Digital

The encounters studied by the contributors to this special issue are particular in that their return, their beginning anew, is facilitated by the digital. The term 'digital', as employed here, means as media theorist Charlie Gere argues, 'far more than either discrete data or the machines that use such data.'[8] In his book *Digital Culture*, Gere suggests that 'to speak of the digital is to call up, metonymically, the whole panoply of virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media and global connectivity that constitutes much of our contemporary experience.'[9] Thus, when referring to the digital, we do not refer to a specific technological paradigm but look to address a wider set of sociocultural phenomena that cannot be reducible to computer technology.

Gere builds his argument on the co-dependent, two-way relationship between culture and technology, with reference to Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet's assertion that 'the machine is always social before being technical'.[10] Deleuze and Parnet explain that a tool (whether this is technical or technological) remains 'marginal, or little used' until 'there exists a social machine […] which is capable of taking it into

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[6] Joe Kelleher, 'Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement: The Last Human Venue (review)' *TDR: The Drama Review*, 54.2 (Summer 2010), 181-183 (p. 181).

[7] Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87,* pp. 163-207.

[8] Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture*, second edition (London: Reaktion books, 2008), p. 15.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson, Barbara Habberjam and Eliot R. Albert (1977, rpt. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 70.

its "phylum".'[11] Gere extends that assertion to argue that 'it would be more accurate to suggest that digital technology is a product of digital culture, rather than vice versa.'[12] He considers the term 'digital' as referring not just to the effects and possibilities of a particular technology, but also to 'defin[ing] and encompass[ing] the ways of thinking and doing that are embodied within that technology.'[13] Furthermore, he discusses 'digitality' as a 'marker of culture because it encompasses both the artefacts and the systems of signification and communication that most clearly demarcate our contemporary way of life from others.'[14]

This approach to the digital as a set of sociocultural phenomena – a digital culture – is essential to our understanding of the editorial selection of contributions to this special issue. Several of the articles and documents look back, towards encounters that are facilitated or informed by pre-digital (analogue) technologies. Klich's article, for example, studies contemporary headphone productions that use digital binaural and surround sound techniques by referring to Shuhei Hosokawa's discussion of the analogue 'Walkman effect.'[15] Her focus is not on the technology *per se* (whether analogue or digital), but on the quality of encounters that different types of headphone technologies can facilitate between self (listener), other, and environment. Parker-Starbuck's article performs a return to the old or familiar more overtly, introducing the notion of 'karaoke theatre' in response to what she has identified as 'a growing trend of performances' that trace 'a pre-digital lineage' to 'reactivate stories' anew. Some contributors consider other current developments, such as interactive works' strategies of engagement (Nedelkopoulou), the live streaming of theatrical productions (Lavender), or recording and archival practices (Bay Cheng). Other contributions offer a glimpse into possible digital futures; Salter's *Futile Labor,* for example, studies the intertwinement of the biological and the digital (biotechnology), playing with our expectations (whether as visitors to the exhibition or readers of his piece) about 'what artificial life is and can be and (…) how it can

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[11] Ibid, p. 71. Deleuze and Parnet borrow the term 'phylum' from biology to denote an evolutionary category, which also involves the idea of a 'common body-plan'.

[12] Gere, *Digital Culture,* p. 17. Gere's argument that culture precedes technology is not specific to the digital: earlier on he suggests that 'the human is only human in so far as it is technical,' and that technology (including digital technology) is 'a pre-condition of the human existence rather than a product of the human beings.' Ibid, p. 8.

[13] Ibid, p. 17.

[14] Ibid, p. 16.

[15] Hosokawa suggests that music listened to over headphones allows the user to gain better control of their environment. See Shuhei Hosokawa, 'The Walkman Effect', *Popular Music* 4 (1984), 165-180.

perform and be experienced.' His work points to what Karen Barad has labeled 'posthumanist performativity', to gesture towards a future of theatre where human and non-human, technical and biological, become intertwined, and perform alongside other 'performative agencies' that are 'natural-cultural […], social and scientific'.[16]

Key Trajectories

The second section of this Introduction examines the three key words the special issue has identified as particularly pertinent to the encounters between performance and technology, namely, deployment, engagement and trace. Those keywords have, here, morphed into trajectories, as a result of the encounter between the editors' original ideas and the way those were challenged and expanded by the contributions received. These trajectories are non-linear, and do not indicate a singular direction of travel or a sense of progress from one idea to the next; rather, they indicate lines of flight (in the Deleuzian sense), and returns.[17]

Trajectory One: Deployment – Emergence

In his seminal essay 'Question Concerning Technology', Heidegger challenges the 'current conception of technology, according to which it is a means.'[18] This instrumental definition, he argues,

> conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology. Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means. […] The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control.[19]

Theatre and performance practitioners often deploy digital technologies strategically, as a means to an end. This end can differ: it might be to produce an awe-inspiring

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[16] Karen Barad, 'Posthuman Performativity: Towards an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28. 3 (Spring 2003), 801-831.

[17] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 3.

[18] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. By William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), p. 5.

[19] Ibid.

spectacle; generate interventions that cut through the fabric of everyday life; personalise the theatrical event; reach out to wider audience constituencies by shifting the action from the theatre stage to the familiar and deeply personal space of people's mobile devices; explore different types of liveness and live interaction; disrupt geographical divides and their social counterparts; facilitate the active engagement of participants; attain new economies of scale; or embed documentation as an organic trace. Across the desirable effects or outcomes, the deployment of digital technology in theatre indicates a will on the part of a theatre practitioner to harness and manipulate technology.

The well considered, strategic deployment of digital technology as a means to a specific end is conspicuous in the work of *Raspeani Skopjani* (Singing Skopjans), the activist performance group discussed by Marchevska, whose performers sing, unannounced, in strategically chosen and politically pertinent public spaces in Skopje, Macedonia. The use of digital technology allows the group to design performance encounters not only with those incidental audiences of passers-by who 'happen upon' them in the public locations, but also with mediatised audiences who engage with the work online. Technologies of documentation are embedded, as both a dramaturgical intention and a performed reality, in the live act; which in turn becomes pregnant with its mediatisation. *Raspeani Skopjani* then deploys networking technologies as amplifiers, to increase the power of performance acts that might, otherwise, have faded into insignificance.

Another example of the strategic deployment of digital technology as a means to an end is in its use for the live broadcasting of theatre, as in the case of Metropolitan Opera Live in HD and NT Live, discussed by Andy Lavender. Live broadcasting allows theatre to become distributed as a 'live' experience (though broadcasts are not always live streams but can be pre-recorded to fit into appropriate broadcasting time slots in different parts of the globe); but, as Lavender suggests, 'presentness (liveness) is privileged over presence (being there)'. Technology is deployed as a means of both reaching out to wider and more diverse audience constituencies that might not, otherwise, have access to theatrical venues, and achieving efficiencies of scale. Theatre as a live act is no longer restricted to accommodating limited numbers of audiences that are present in the flesh, but can aspire to the wide distribution channels and mass appeal of cinema or television,

while still attempting to hold on to the impression of its 'liveness' as a distinguishing characteristic.

A different notion of the term deployment is introduced by Sicchio and McLean, who refer to the computer science usage of the term as the process that follows the development of a piece of software, and which involves releasing this software to the public – or, as the authors put it, 'the point at which a system is placed "in the wild"'. This could be compared to the opening night of a theatrical performance, when the work moves out of the enclosed, safe space of its development, and interfaces with the public for the first time. In this sense, deployment is understood as the point at which the work is being activated and tested within public discourse. Here, it is less aligned to a series of strategic objectives and more akin to the presentation of the work in public; an act that might entail curation as a different type of strategising.

Heidegger asks us to suppose that 'technology were no mere means' and to consider 'how would it stand with the will to master it?'[20] The essays included herein address the strategic deployment of digital technologies in theatre as a means to achieving a range of social, dramaturgical, aesthetic, or financial ends; however, they also consider practices that *emerge* through interactions between the distinct but – as Salter has shown in his book *Entangled* – historically interwoven practices of theatre and technology.[21] The concept of emergence has become popular through chaos and systems theories. Complex systems often display what is called 'emergent behavior': behavior that does not depend on or derive from the system's individual parts in isolation, but from their relationships to one another; that is, from their encounters.

Studying the contributions to this special issue, it is possible to identify practices that bring together theatre and technology as equal partners (rather than subjugating one to another as a means to achieving an end result) in what Matthew Causey and Gabriella Calchi Novati call the 'bio-virtual' (the phenomenon of living life between the physical and the virtual).[22] Those practices often emerge organically, through a 'rubbing of shoulders' between technology and theatre, but can also be the

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[20] Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, p. 5.
[21] Chris Salter, *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).
[22] Matthew Causey and Gabriella Calchi Novati, 'ID/entity: The Subject's Own Taking Place', in *Performance, Identity, and the Neo-Political Subject*, ed. by Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 33-50.

result of organised experimentation when performance artists and technologists work from an equal basis. Blast Theory's work, as discussed by Eirini Nedelkopoulou, is an example of practice where live theatre and digital technology converge in order to develop new forms and languages of digital or digitally informed practice. Blast Theory's piece *Karen* (2015) is presented as 'part game, drama and self-help quiz' and is, effectively, an app: it is a theatre of its digital times. [23]

Deployment and emergence are not positioned here as a binary but rather as a non-linear and discontinuous trajectory. Many of the works studied in this special issue demonstrate instances of both approaches. For example, *Raspeani Skopjani* spontaneously comes together – that is, it emerges – as an activist choir; then goes on to deploy networking technologies for its specific ends.

Trajectory Two: Engagement – Participation

Mark Deuze identifies 'participation' as one of the principal components of digital culture (alongside remediation and bricolage).[24] Although participative culture has by no means emerged solely as a result of the digital revolution, the democratisation of technologies such as personal computers and the Internet has led to publics that are no longer content to consume culture and information but have an expectation of active participation, otherwise known as the 'prosumer' effect.[25] Deuze suggests that as citizens – that is, media users – of the twenty-first century accept that 'reality is constructed, assembled and manipulated by media', they realise that the only way to make sense of this mediated world is to 'adjust their worldview accordingly,'[26] which leads to a participative culture. He stresses the political dimensions of participation, as the identity of citizens in Western democracies shifts from 'a rather passive "informational" citizenry to a rights-based, monitorial and voluntarist citizenry.'[27] This results in:

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[23] Matt Adams, 'How we made experiential life-coaching app, Karen', *The Guardian*, 14 August 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/2015/aug/14/how-we-made-life-coaching-app-karen-blast-theory> [accessed 17 February 2017].

[24] Mark Deuze, 'Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture', *The Information Society*, 22.2, (2006), 63-75.

[25] The term 'prosumer' was first introduced by Alvin Toffler in his book *The Third Wave* (New York: Morrow, 1980), exploring the idea that, in a post-industrial age, the producer and the consumer paradigms merge into one.

[26] Deuze, 'Participation, Remediation, Bricolage', p. 67.

[27] Ibid.

a notion of citizens who have become increasingly willing and able to voice their concerns and claim their place in society – but do so (and often only) whenever they feel their personal (including familial, communal, and sometimes regional or global single-issue) interests are at stake.[28]

Many of the works discussed in this special issue divert from traditional forms of audience engagement in theatre (audience as cultural consumer) to experiment with new possibilities: Parker-Starbuck's 'karaoke theatre' democratises theatre and performance practice through what the author calls a 'non-virtuosic turn'; many of the online performances discussed by Lavender are interactive; Klich discusses headphone theatre as a practice that 'stages the physical encounter of the body and the world'; Nedelkopoulou's case studies engage participants in intimate one-to-one interactions that challenge and unsettle accepted boundaries between private and public; the work of *Raspeani Skopjani* as discussed by Marchevska 'turns towards society' to engage with socio-political realities that are pertinent on a local level, activating strategies of resistance.

Participative culture came with promises for the democratisation of cultural assets and opportunities, wider access to culture and information for a wider range of people, and the empowerment of communities across geographical boundaries. However, it is perhaps telling that whilst all the practices discussed engage audiences in particular and often unexpected ways, very few prioritise participation *per se*. Headphone theatres are immersive but not participative, engaging audiences sensuously and affectively without inviting contributions; karaoke theatre allows the amateur to claim his/her space in the cultural happenings, but there still is a distinction between those performing (whether amateurs or not) and those watching; New Paradise Laboratories' *Extremely Public Displays of Privacy* (2011), discussed by Lavender, takes theatre outside the theatrical venue (audiences are invited to a promenade, a concert, and a film) but predominantly maintain a one-way relationship with audiences. Extending into the cultural sphere Deuze's suggestion – that participative culture has led to a new breed of citizens who proactively claim their space in society, but only when it is necessary for them to defend the single-issue interests of their communities – it is worth asking what is at stake for artists and participants when audiences are invited to contribute to or shape the work. Why is it

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[28] Ibid, p. 68.

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that the majority of practices studied herein activate nuanced and subtle types of audience engagement that use participation – one of the main characteristics of digital culture – sparingly and with care?

Critics such as Jacques Rancière and Claire Bishop have challenged the notion that participation is a *de facto* empowering process for the participants involved.[29] In his influential book *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière suggests that empowerment is not the result of active involvement (that is, participation as a form or a function) but comes through an understanding that everyone is equally capable of inventing his/her own translation of a work of art, thus activating a particular set of meanings (that is, participation as a process of meaning and sense making, in terms of intellectual and affective engagement on the part of the participant). This is the type of participation primarily studied in the articles in this special issue. This type of arguably 'deep' participation, which is also often invisible (that is, not necessarily evident in form), is what we allude to with our key word of 'engagement'. Indeed, in his book *Performance in the Twenty-First Century*, Andy Lavender suggests that 'engagement' describes the mode of theatre today:

> A theatre of engagement […] suggests a set of performances that are turned towards their society, deliberately invested in social process, political perspective, matters of import to gathered groups of people. This is a theatre that is socially committed.[30]

Trajectory Three: Trace – Memory

Sarah Bay-Cheng's article discusses traces, pointing to 'the compulsive, even obsessive desire to capture and translate every experience – […] however trivial – into digital images for recording, searching, and re-searching in the future.' Digital theatres, as well as all theatres embedded within digital culture, are both gifted with and hounded by an often inherent capacity to capture and document themselves or be captured by others. Though live performance is often seen as tied to the present, digital performances are tied to their past: they are performances of documentation,

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[29] See Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009); and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Arts and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).

[30] Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (London and New York: Routledge), p. 26.

which have technologies of documentation embedded in their make-up. In Blast Theory's *Karen*, for example, discussed by Nedelkopoulou, the personal data that participants disclose through their interaction with the work is logged and processed, resulting in a profiling report that is sold back to participants who wish to own it. The event self-generates numerous traces in the form of private data disclosed by the participants or intercepted by the app, and the processing of this data for the report, as an integral aspect of the piece. Though participants can opt for their data to be destroyed at the end of their interaction with the work, the traces of their interactions with the system are still analysed by the artists on a meta-level, through a set of quantitative reports. Once you have encountered *Karen* through the digital, your trace remains present in the work. *Karen* remembers you, even when you're gone.

This 'compulsive […] desire to capture […] every experience', as identified by Bay-Cheng, defines both our daily lives and our performance practices. Our detailed records of live events function, as Bay-Cheng suggests, as an 'augmented memory system'. In 'embodying' our memories, digital images filter and curate our different versions of any one event, and shape our memories of it. But while our memories are increasingly stored in bits and bytes that reside outside of our bodies, scientific studies demonstrate that memory is so fundamentally bound with embodiment that an illusion of being outside of one's body while experiencing an event results in a form of memory loss.[31] Can storing our memories outside of our own, embodied materialities entail some form of memory loss too? And how do we remember performance, when performance memories become inadvertently embedded in the materialities of the digital rather than the carnal? Do the different qualities of matter *matter*, in that respect?

Bay-Cheng also accounts for the trace of the photographic evidence not as a prompt for remembering, but as a means of seeing anew, a fresh encounter, or a return. She discusses the photograph of a performance as a means of seeing an 'otherwise unobservable event'. The document or trace, here, ceases to perform the function of a record, and takes on, instead, the function of a performance – it performs afresh something that was hidden from view, or which escaped attention, in our original encounter with the live event. Anecdotally, I recall this realisation 'hitting' me while

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[31] See, Karolinska Intitutet, 'Outside the body our memories fail us', *Science Daily*, 10 March 2014 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/03/140310152150.htm> [accessed 1 November 2016].

watching Dominic Johnson being tattooed in his piece *Departure (An Experiment in Human Salvage)* (Fierce Festival, Birmingham, 2011): a photographer was capturing every detail of the work throughout the duration of the performance piece, obscuring mine and others' fields of vision, and largely shaping the audience experience. In that instance, documentation could be perceived to boldly claim its space as embedded within the live act, not as a record or a trace that becomes relevant only post-event, but as part of the actual experience. *Departure* became partly a performance of documentation.

Digital images, like analogue images, affirm who we are and our position in the world. However, argues Bay-Cheng, in 'digital domains (…) the boundary between image and performance erodes' under the pressure of social media and performances that turn to documents for their inspiration. She argues that, when the real and its representation become confused, and when documentation is mistaken for its performance, this constitutes a misrecognition that has political consequences: 'the audience [remains] comfortably ensconced away from the danger and willfully in thrall to glowing screens while elsewhere in the world cities burn'.

Young Man with Typewriter

The last sections of this introduction make some observations about the state of digital and digitally informed theatre and performance today. Those observations cut across the articles and documents included herein, by identifying two main 'returns' in current encounters of performance, with and through the digital.

In 2016 media theorist Florian Cramer wrote an essay entitled 'What is 'post-digital'?'[32] The inspiration for this came from the picture of a young man typing on a park bench, which was uploaded on the popular wesite *Reddit* in 2013 and immediately went viral. The catch (which undoubtedly is also the reason for the picture's immense popularity) is that the young man is not typing on his laptop, palmtop or mobile device, but is instead using an analogue typewriter (which looks considerably bulkier and more awkward to carry around than any of the digital devices he could have chosen for that purpose). The 'young man with typewriter' sighting points to a phenomenon that is pertinent throughout this special issue, and

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[32] Florian Cramer, 'What is "Post-Digital"?', 2016, <http://www.aprja.net/?p=1318> [accessed 1 November 2016].

which signifies an encounter with the digital as a return to our contemporary condition afresh: the return to the analogue through the digital.

Cramer points out that using a mechanical typewriter rather than a computational device in contemporary culture does not mark one out as being old-fashioned; instead, it registers as 'a deliberate choice of renouncing electronic technology, thereby calling into question the common assumption that computers, as meta-machines, represent obvious technological progress and therefore constitute a logical upgrade from any older media technology.'[33] He further calls our attention to the fact that typewriters are not the only analogue media to have been 'resurrected' in contemporary digital culture, pointing to the revival of vinyl records as another example of the same return, alongside practices such as analogue photography and artists' printmaking.[34]

Cramer uses this image as a springboard for his ideas around the notion of the post-digital. Acknowledging the problematic nature of the term 'post-digital' at a point in time when we remain decisively embedded within a digital culture – a condition that would be both unwise and dangerous to ignore – he goes on to suggest that the phenomenon of returning towards the analogue (as a technology, aesthetic, or life practice) might indicate 'either a contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets, or a period in which our fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical'.[35] Thus the term 'post-digital', he suggests, should not be understood in a technical-scientific or media-theoretical sense, indicating a condition that follows one which has ceased (that is, that which comes *after* the digital), but as the prefix 'post-' is used in popular culture to point to a condition or situation that continues, albeit in a different form or through different systems (as in 'post-punk', for example).[36] Challenging the very divide between analogue and digital technology, Cramer suggests that the 'post-digital' indicates a

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[33] Ibid.

[34] See Richard Osborne, *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record* (Oxford and New York: Ashgate, 2012); Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); and Jenna Wortham, 'Just When You Got Digital Technology, Film is Back', *New York Times*, 30 May 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/31/technology/personaltech/film-photographys-revival-in-a-digital-world.html?_r=0> [accessed 20 October 2016].

[35] Cramer, 'What is 'Post-Digital'?'.

[36] Ibid.

crisis of systems (rather than a crisis of the digital *per se*) and the upsurge of a desire for agency on the part of the individual.[37]

The paradox is that, although the crisis of systems that Cramer identifies becomes manifest through a 'disenchantment with digital information systems,'[38] both the systems and ourselves are still very much embedded within a digital culture. Indeed, in the second edition of his book *Digital Culture* Gere suggests that 'our culture is becoming so thoroughly digital that the term 'digital culture' risks becoming tautological.'[39] The tension between analogue and digital (or digital and post-digital), then, does not manifest a struggle between two separate systems, but one that is both embedded and contained within a single system: digital culture as our only vantage point. This has shifted from the vision of a virtual utopia – as exemplified by John Perry Barlow's famous 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' – to dystopian narratives of the Internet as a playground for online predators and paedophiles, and a hotbed for objectionable activities such as cyber-bullying, cyber-terrorism, identity theft and 'dataveillance'.[40] Although, following Gere, 'resistance is futile' as a means of abandoning, exiting, or refusing our digital condition, certain forms of resistance are crucial as a means of critically engaging with and challenging aspects of it. The post-digital is thus positioned here as a condition that, though firmly embedded within the digital, is marked by a critical shift, or a return, in our modes of being and of engaging with others, with technologies, and with others through technologies in digital culture.

The question then posed by this special issue is: can theatre and performance practices that directly engage with digital culture deploy the digital in order to facilitate encounters as a return to life anew – a new beginning? Theatre as an encounter can perform a return to the old or familiar (the analogue, for the lack of a better word) as that which is situated at the tip, or the edges, of digital culture. This return, as performed by practices studied herein, is not regressive – it does not seek to go back to a nostalgic, pre-digital past. It is instead, more often than not, an act of

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[37] Ibid. Since the analogue was only named as such post-event in relation to the digital, several scholars – most notably, perhaps, Lev Manovich – have argued that the two are co-dependent and, in some ways, inseparable. See, Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

[38] Ibid.

[39] Gere, *Digital Culture*, p. 7.

[40] John Perry Barlow, 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace', Electronic Frontier Foundation, 8 February 1996 <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence> (accessed 11 October 2016).

critique, which challenges the systems and conditions that define digital culture from the inside. Like the young man with typewriter, performance encounters in and through the digital can, and do, expand, challenge, resist, and/or subvert aspects of digital culture. In doing so they facilitate a critical engagement with our digital condition not just in theatre, but also in life.

Digital Materialism

Theatre and performance encounters are materialist, because they are embodied and actualised. The digital encounters discussed herein are also, in their majority, materialist in the sense of a carnal embodiment. Resisting, for the most part, notions of the virtual that are linked to disembodiment (that is, the virtual as something that does not physically exist but computer software makes it appear *as if* it does), they can, nonetheless, be considered virtual in the Deleuzian sense: Deleuze and Guattari, following Bergson, suggest that 'the virtual is the mode of reality implicated in the emergence of new potentials.'[41]

The contributions in this special issue consciously foreground embodied and co-present practices, even when these are embodied differently than in conventional theatrical situations – for example, through distributed, fragmented presences; across geographical boundaries; and through bodies that are simultaneously 'here/now' and 'elsewhere/some-other-time'.[42] These encounters are, to a large extent, corporeal, experiential, and sensory. This could indicate that, following the early-era disembodied practices that were primarily taking place online in virtual chat environments like The Palace and the virtual world of Second Life, the digital now facilitates a return to embodied, materialist encounters, in theatre as much as in life.[43] The extremely popular augmented reality game for smartphones *Pokémon Go*, which

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[41] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari cited in Brian Massumi, 'Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible', *Architectural Design*, 68.5-6 (May-June 1998), 16-24 (p. 16).

[42] Maria Chatzichristodoulou, 'When Presence and Absence Turn into Pattern and Randomness: *Can You See Me Now?*', *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, 16.4-5 (May 2009) <http://www.leonardo.info/LEA/DispersiveAnatomies/DA_chatzichristodoulou.pdf> [accessed 1 November 2016].

[43] Companies such as Desktop Theatre and Second Front were among the many pioneers who developed works for online virtual environments. For more information on the histories of online theatre see Andy Lavender's article in this special issue; also see Toni Sant, 'A Second Life for Online Performance: Understanding Present Developments through an Historical Context', *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 4.1 (January 2014), 69-79; and Maria Chatzichristodoulou, 'Cyberformance? Digital or Networked Performance? Cybertheatres? Virtual Theatres?... Or All of the Above?' in *Cyposium: The Book,* ed. by Annie Abrahams and Helen Varley Jamieson (Montpellier: Link Editions and La Panacée, 2014), pp. 19-30.

was released in 2016 and immediately developed into a 'monster mobile hit,' is an example of this return to the body, which is now facilitated through the digital. [44] In *Pokémon Go*, rather than playing on their own consoles, gamers play by walking around the real world in search of virtual Pokémon characters (which has resulted in scientists enthusing about the positive health consequences of playing augmented reality games).[45] In this way the two realities, physical and virtual, merge into an 'augmented' space. Though *Pokémon Go* became a phenomenon in 2016, artists such as Blast Theory and Active Ingredient have been producing digital performance works that turn to the body through the use of locative media and augmented reality technologies since 2001.[46] These encounters take up what I would loosely term a 'new materialist' approach.

In articulating what such an approach might be, feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti points to Gilles Deleuze's practice of 'thinking through the body, and not in a flight away from it,' as a perspective which 're-emphasises the materiality of the bodily self.'[47] Braidotti and Iris Van der Truin explain that new materialist approaches are necessary today because 'matter is not what it used to be': elsewhere, they add, 'technological advances, notably the convergence of information and bio-genetic technologies, the growth of 'smart' materials and their complex social and political consequences, are forcing a reconsideration of what counts as "matter."'[48] In theatre and performance, new materialist approaches engage with objects, which might have previously been perceived as inanimate, empty vessels waiting to be

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[44] David Lee, 'Pokémon Go: All You Need to Know', BBC News: Technology, 12 July 2016 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-36770488 [accessed 28 September 2016].
[45] See, Texas A&M University, 'Health Benefits of *Pokémon Go'*, *Science Daily,* 15 July 2016 https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/07/160715181715.htm [accessed 11 October 2016].
[46] See, for example, works such as *Can You See Me Now?* (2001) by Blast Theory, a virtual chase game that combined players online and performers (called 'runners') in the real city using GPS technology; *Heartlands ('ere be dragons)* by Active Ingredient (2005), a hybrid game-performance that can be seen as a precursor to the Quantified Self movement, which used GPS technology to trace users' routes and monitor their heart rate; and the site-specific work *Flypad* (2009) by Blast Theory, created for The Public Gallery in West Bromwich, which used augmented reality to create a collaborative experience for players.
[47] Braidotti in Ramón Reichert and Annika Richterich, 'Introduction: Digital Materialism' in *Digital Material/ism*, ed. by Reichert and Richterich, *Digital Culture and Society,* 1.1 (2015), 5-20 (p. 7).
[48] Iris Yan der Truin and Rosi Braidotti, 'New Series – Call for Proposals: New Materialisms', Edinburgh University Press, n/d <https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/media/wysiwyg/pdfs/CFPs/New_Materialisms_-_Call_for_Papers.pdf> [accessed 28 September 2016]; Iris Van der Truin and Rosi Braidotti, 'New Materialisms', Edinburgh University Press (2016) <https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/series-new-materialisms.html> [accessed 28 September 2016].

imbued with life, finding instead that they can 'initiate and choreograph behaviour'.[49] This begs the question; what counts as life, and what counts as being alive in this context?

The movement of new materialism has also brought forward a 'material turn' in the field of digital media theory and studies. 'Digital materialism' challenges cybernetic fantasies of immateriality 'tak[ing] into account the materiality of digital computation'.[50] It follows from the premise that 'digital culture consists of heterogeneous bodies, relations, intensities, movements and modes of emergence.'[51] This return to materiality is particularly pertinent to theatre and performance practices that explicitly engage with digital technologies. In 2002, for example, Steven Connor wrote in response to Wooster Group's production *To You, The Birdie (Phèdre)* that technologies such as those deployed by the company 'effect kinds of technological disembodiment, […] displacements and derangements of physical worlds and actions.'[52] Connor's discussion demonstrates how the use of digital technologies in theatre was often assumed to be disruptive ('displacing', 'deranging') of the materiality of live performance. From the telematic performances of Station House Opera that seek seamlessly to merge and project actors across distant geographic locations, to Stelarc's radical embodiment of networks in works such as *Fractal Flesh*, artists have historically grappled with the tensions between carnal embodiment and fantasies of technological disembodiment through tele- and avatar-presence, and have produced work that embodies and challenges literatures and popular imaginaries of posthuman and cyborg bodies. [53] Despite its use of technology that 'is often thought of as disembodying,' a practice that comes about by the 'splitting of the seams of

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[49] Robin Bernstein cited in Rebecca Schneider, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 59.4 (Winter 2015), 7-17 (p. 10).

[50] Nathalie Casemajor, 'Digital Materialisms: Frameworks for Digital Media Studies', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 10.1 (2015), 4-17 (p. 6).

[51] Jussi Parikka, 'New Materialisms and Digital Culture – Symposium', *Machinology*, 30 April 2010 <https://jussiparikka.net/2010/04/30/new-materialisms-and-digital-culture-symposium/> [accessed 20 October 2016].

[52] Steven Connor, 'Watching the Birdie', Steven Connor's website, May 2002 <http://www.stevenconnor.com/birdie/> [accessed 20 October 2016].

[53] In the performance *Fractal Flesh* (2006) Stelarc's body was remotely actuated, responding 'not to its internal nervous system but to the external stimulation of globally connected computer networks'. Stelarc, 'Fractal Flech', Medien Kunst Netz <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/fractal-flesh/> [accessed 29 September 2016].

space and time,' Connor is complimentary about the Wooster Group's production, because in their work, 'technology converges with the world of matter'.[54]

Here I suggest that digital materialism, coupled with sociotechnical developments such as augmented reality, facilitate a return to the material realities of the body and its environment (and indeed, other matter that matters), challenging prejudices concerning the use of technology in theatre. Encountering the digital in performance, as well as performance encounters through the digital, has always been dependent on matter – even when those encounters were or are effected with, within or through what we might call the materialities of the digital.

Taken together, the contributions to this Special Issue reveal connecting threads concerning two types of return: a return to the analogue through the digital, and a return to the material through the digital (as well as the materiality of the digital *per se*). Those returns shift our modes of encounter with and through the digital in performance, allowing us to 'begin again' – in performance, as well as in life.

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[54] Connor, 'Watching the Birdie'.