Introduction

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An interface is the boundary or shared space between two areas or systems. It allows for interaction between two entities that would otherwise be unable to communicate with each other. In that sense, an interface offers another perspective of seeing, experiencing and considering one’s given state, through interaction with an ‘other’. In calling this collection Interfaces of Performance we are gesturing towards the myriad aesthetic, experiential and interdisciplinary opportunities offered by contemporary performances that ‘dare’ interact with an ‘other’ system of disciplines by integrating technologies into their practice. Marking a shared space of exchange and dialogue as well as a site of contestation and tension, the interfaces proposed herein are positions inhabited by critical cultural theory and innovative interdisciplinary works. In profiling and examining current manifestations of such works, we demonstrate models and strategies practitioners are developing – or frequently appropriating – as a means to their artistic ends, which disturb boundaries of traditional performance and create new paradigms of emergent practice and discourse. The interfaces in this volume reflect social as well as cultural and technological attempts to enhance, question and strengthen the scope of the relationship between one and other in the sphere of performance-making and as such point towards wider relational matters of embodiment, alterity and mechanisms of connectivity.

As technologies become increasingly integrated into theatre and performance practice, this volume aims to investigate emergent paradigms while at the same time consciously avoids offering or imposing taxonomies upon such varied practices. Taxonomies require the classification of things into groups based on their formal characteristics and often entail hierarchies. Interfaces of Performance has been designed to extend current discourse in a field that is, on occasions, led by formalist analysis focusing on technology per se. Such analysis runs the risk of approaching practices as static outcomes rather than (a)live cultural phenomena that are always in the process of becoming themselves – and of becoming other. The proposed approach intends to unpack conceptual, aesthetic and societal elements of performance practice, investigating the strategic use of a diverse spectrum of technologies as a means to artistic ends. The focus of this analysis is neither on the formal characteristics of these practices, nor on the types of technology employed. Instead, we embark on an investigation of the practitioners’ ideas, objectives and concerns; we ask how these artists employ technologies in order to research new
dramaturgies and methodologies for the creation of more e/affective experiences for, and encounters with, their audiences.

In order to align the structure of this analysis into the process of integrating technologies into current performance practice, we began by identifying five core elements that we consider integral to the make-up of all performance, namely; Bodies, Affect, Environment, Politics and Audiences. Exploring diverse types of current digital, networked, virtual or technologized performance, this volume asks what becomes of these core performance elements once information and communication technologies become integrated as a sixth core element of practice. How do technologies expand, extend, (re)present, dislocate, disperse or invade bodies in performance? How do they shift the role of the audience? How do they enhance or limit the affective power of live performance? Which are the habitats of such artistic practices? And finally, how does such work deal with its social plexus and current issues of social insecurity, injustice and unrest?

Following this rationale, Interfaces of Performance seeks to re-examine key elements of performance practice through showcasing current works that trip the line and trouble the boundary between technological advancement and emergent performance (and performative) processes.

This volume brings together an international selection of leading practitioners, academics and cultural professionals who, through their work, are exploring the boundaries, crossovers and common grounds, but also the tensions, contestations and conflicts between theatre, performance, digital technologies and broader cultural happenings to challenge expectations and further discourse across the disciplines. We invited a number of leading figures who have had lengthy engagements with the subject matter, together with a new generation of writers and artists who are groundbreaking in their approach and their articulation of new interfaces for performance. The volume is a collection of essays, interviews and poetic fragments, illustrating our endeavour to foreground practice by inviting artists to speak in their own voices, as well as offering theorists the opportunity of sharing their enthralling analyses of current practice.

Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska launch the volume with an inspiring call for a fresh approach to talking about media studies. Taking the form of a ‘live essay’ that by its own admission slides into the realm of ‘a manifesto of sorts’, Kember and Zylinska attempt to reconcile their academic writing and creative practice through their proposal of a ‘Creative Media Project’. In breaking down perceived divisions between forms of media to perform knowledge differently, they propose creative media as an emergent paradigm at the interface of performativity and performance. Whilst retaining an independent strategy for making ethico-political performance, Kember and Zylinska’s discussion also encourages cross-disciplinary exchanges and dialectic enquiries that are furthered and interrogated throughout the course of the volume.

The first subject matter we tackle is the ‘Environments’ of cutting-edge, technologized performance practices. In examining the sites of these practices we find that they are shifting from traditional theatre venues to a variety of
spatial contexts such as ORLAN’s operating theatre, Critical Art Ensemble’s laboratories, Gob Squad’s mediatized, in-between spaces, Blast Theory’s fusion of urban cityscapes and online worlds, and igloo’s uncanny virtual, immersive environments. In his chapter, Chris Salter interrogates such logistics of location in his discussion of the old division between human and technical worlds. He argues that although more artists are turning towards performance in their effort to understand and manipulate the environments we both find ourselves in and help create, they do not necessarily turn towards the stage; instead, ‘laboratories, the interior of bodies, the skins of buildings and the air we breathe’ become new contexts for performance that brings together human and technical beings. Salter further argues for the performativity of the environment itself. His chapter is followed by Janis Jefferies’s interview with artists Ruth Gibson and Bruno Martelli, known as igloo. Igloo create virtual worlds and novel performance experiences for their audiences through the use of three-dimensional environments, game engines and motion capture. Their virtual environments/games/choreographies challenge the division between ‘real’ and virtual space and attempt to translate liveness into the virtual world.

The section headed ‘Bodies’ is designed to profile innovative practice and critical analysis that foregrounds technologies’ advancements on constituents of corporeality in performance. In mapping the manoeuvres contemporary artists are making to reclaim malleable discourses offered outside of their given bodies, the gestures of critical writing contained within this section trigger questions around the efficacy and impact of technologies in manipulating the body’s form and enhancing/disturbing its received presence. Simon Donger introduces his interview with ORLAN with a personal response to the artist’s work he had some ten years ago at which he felt vertigo through her close-up (mediatized) image. Donger uses this sense of confusion, ambiguity and dislocation to embark on an interview concerned with foregrounding what he describes as ORLAN’s affective ‘effacement of carnal and technical delineations of experience and the critical collapse of internal and external modalities of (re)presentation of the body’. Allucquère Rosanne Stone also writes from personal experience to tell a story that reflects on technology as a transformative tool in the theatre whilst interweaving her musings on questions of definition and transformation in the site of her transgendered body. Platforming practice that demonstrates the implications of incorporating a diverse array of technologies into the (performing) body, the contributions in this section stretch notions of discourse around issues including embodiment, corporeality, prostheses, hybridization to question and reconsider the human body’s relation to and use of technologies as examined by prolific performance practitioners.

Delving into current heated discussions on participatory media practices and user-generated content, in the third themed section of Interfaces we question how technologies shift the role of the ‘Audiences’ within contemporary performance practice. We ask whether audiences are being placed at the core of the thinking, dramaturgy and structure behind practitioners’ work. We consider whether
technologized performance succeeds in actively involving and engaging its audiences and whether it also has the ability to distance and isolate them. Finally, we ask whether audiences can still be framed as what we traditionally call ‘audiences’—or whether they have become participants, interactors, collaborators, co-authors of such events. Philip Auslander opens this section offering an enthralling account on audience perception in a mediatized environment. Focusing on the point of reception of the mediatized event, Auslander suggests that ‘the reproduction discloses the original as an event occurring in the here and now’ and argues for our dialogical interaction with historical texts/performances. Auslander’s chapter is followed by Patrick Primavesi’s experiential analysis of Gob Squad’s performances. Primavesi demonstrates, through Gob Squad’s work, the exchanges and interrelations between diverse media. He discusses the group’s playful explorations of notions of ‘liveness’ (often presented as ‘fake’), ‘intermediality’ (‘a ghostly withdrawal of presence’) and the reversal of roles between performers and audiences. The final piece in this section is Maria Chatzichristodoulou (aka Maria X)’s interview with Matt Adams from Blast Theory. Blast Theory create gaming performances/experiences that consistently situate the audience centre-stage, demanding active engagement, courage, trust or commitment. Adams discusses the dramaturgies, strategies and social politics behind Blast Theory’s complex but accessible work, which aims to demystify both art and cutting-edge technology and reach out to wide audiences through intense, surprising and playful interactions.

The three contributions grouped together under the ‘Politics’ section address how technologies impact on and critique a diverse array of political ideologies. In wanting to investigate how performance works are employing various technologies to deal with very contemporary issues of (in)security, the contributions from Sher Doruff, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Lorena Rivero De Beer and Nicola Triscott have produced texts that grapple with state, national and governmental politics as well as aesthetic and disciplinary manifestations of politics. Interrogating the notion of the biogram — the ‘living complement’ of the diagram, Doruff proffers a critical study of aesthetic politics, infused with practical analysis that examines and foregrounds this curious zone’s manipulations of borders, territories and boundaries. The second contribution is made jointly by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Lorena Rivero De Beer. Gómez-Peña introduces three of his recently performed performance texts with the highly political question of access to new technologies. Rivero De Beer takes this idea forward to theorize Gómez-Peña’s ‘Ethno-Techno Politics’ as emerging from his politicized position as a minority Chicano and asserts that his playful analysis of new technologies in the texts critiques Chicanos’ relationship with dominant US culture. Nicola Triscott of The Arts Catalyst concludes this examination into the relationship between technologies and politics with a contextualized account of the case of Steve Kurtz of Critical Art Ensemble. Framing Kurtz’s biotechnological artistic practice and the ensuing reactionary claims of bio-terrorism, Triscott reaffirms vital questions of surveillance, civil rights and state control that continue to affect practitioners crossing the science/art divide.
The last part of this volume explores the subject matter of ‘Affect’. In 1990, Roy Ascott’s seminal article asked: ‘Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?’ A pertinent question, we think, for every type of mediatized, distributed, (dis)embodied performance. Brian Massumi has further discussed affect(s) as ‘virtual synaesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actual existing, particular things that embody them’. Questioning whether technologies expand, restrict, diversify the embodying subject in itself and, as such, in its perspectives, we ask how technologies merge with sense-led interactions to create techno-phenomenologies of digital/visceral sensorium. This final part opens with a chapter by Bojana Kunst on the work of Igor Štromajer and Intima Virtual Base. Kunst focuses on the Ballettikka Internettikka series of tactical, low-tech, robotic guerrilla performances to discuss daily technological practices of connectivity, which, she argues, ‘deeply influence our anticipation, desire and imagination around … the experience of our (connected) intimacy’ and explores how protocols become ‘infected’ with desire. Melinda Rackham skilfully closes the volume with two parallel narratives intertwined in her performative essay ‘Love at First Byte’. Rackham exposes private instances of falling passionately in love online while introducing the term limerence, ‘an involuntary cognitive and emotional state in which a person feels an intense romantic desire for another person’ and attributing this to ‘chemical process[es], brain patterns and defined behaviours’. Rackham eloquently argues that digital limerence opens up myriad possibilities due to the freedom from everyday human singularity.

And as all this is yet to come, we urge you to immerse yourself in the performance interfaces offered herein: ‘Let go. Let yourself drift, without resistance, into realms that exceed all expectation’ (Rackham, ‘Love at First Byte’).

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