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102

103

The relationship between theater and media discourses is still characterized by tension and distrust between 'camps'. In the one camp, media experiences of film, television, and computer are regarded as inauthentic and vicarious where in the other, contempt usually reigns. Here the theatre, if it is regarded as a medium at all, is seen as 'old', something that has had its day. Perhaps the key experiential factor separating the two camps is that of space. *Theatrical and performative space*—terms that I will use interchangeably as I proceed—is usually defined by a notion of contiguity between performers and spectators. The fact that both share the same space is regarded as the crucial, if not defining, element of the art form. *Mediatized spaces*, on the other hand, are created by visual and/or acoustic technology. They are always virtual and often overtly fictional while purporting to be real. Performance practices that dissolve such a sharp distinction bring this generally accepted dichotomy into question.

Theatre has seldom existed either apart from or independent of what we could call the media—be they ocular, print, acoustic or digital. Theatre and performance have always fed off innovation and developments in technology. An interesting question is to what extent technological advances affect the practice of performance. My thesis is that two main phases can be discerned. The first

phase is one in which artistic experimentation is directed at exploring the new technology on a formal and perceptual level and in which exploration is an end in itself. In the second phase, this more ludic approach is superseded by efforts to harness the technology to more specific social and political questions. I shall explore this proposition by examining recent experiments with acoustic media, whereby spectators explore *space* through receiving verbal instructions and musical accompaniment. The technological media required for this have changed over time. Beginning with the Walkman, or headset used by museums in audio-tours, the same principle was extended to the iPod and now to the omnipresent smartphones with earpods. The first example, *Kanal Kirchner* 2005, sent spectators/participants on an extended audio-tour of a Munich inner-city suburb, guided by a fictional murder story. The second example, *Call Cutta* 2005, staged by the performance collective Rimini Protokoll, sent spectators on a walking tour of Kolkata, or Berlin but guided by a call center in Kolkata. In the final section of my paper, I shall discuss both of these performances within the context of site-specific theatre. Despite the changes in technology, audio theatre still draws on the insights discussed in Shuhei Hosokawa's 1984 seminal essay: *The Walkman Effect*.

Urban theatre and the Walkman effect

At first glance, the spatial effects of the stage and the Walkman would seem to have little in common. The stage structures space along two main perceptual axes, the fictional space of the represented world and the collective space uniting spectators and performers in a variety of ways ranging from baroque theatre boxes to the fluidity of street theatre. The Walkman, on the other hand, seems to embody an individualized listener rather than a collectivized spectator and, as a medium, appears to be directly opposed to the fundamentals of theatre. Yet in his essay *The Walkman Effect*, Shuhei Hosokawa described the Walkman as a form of 'secret theatre' 1984, 177. According to Hosokawa this secrecy, or what he terms its "triple cryptic expressivity" *ibid*, 178, manifests itself on at least three levels. The first is one of form. Walkman users and those who behold them are aware that the listeners have secrets, the content of which is irrelevant. While the content of the music listened to may be different, the form is the same. The second level concerns "the expressivity of the music tied up with corporal movement, the walk act" *ibid*. Walkman listeners are affected corporeally by an invisible

acoustic source, which makes them interact differently with their surroundings. The third level is the music itself, its own secret that "... even the holders do not know exactly." *ibid*.

Hosokawa argues that the act of listening to the Walkman elicits an aesthetic response in the original meaning of *aisthesis*; objects are rendered perceptible to the senses and transformed in particular ways. This has nothing to do with aesthetics in the sense of beauty or value but refers to "provoking certain reactions. .. and transforming decisively each spatial signification into something else." *ibid*. This "something else" can have both semantic and theatrical dimensions. The Walkman / listener "is able to construct and / or deconstruct the network of urban meaning." *ibid*.

Hosokawa is referring here to Michel de Certeau's 1984 notion of "walking the city," or creating an individual arrangement of paths and spaces out of abstracted and schematized 'place'. De Certeau says that in its relation to place, space is like the word spoken, which is transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions. Spaces are determined by historical subjects, by the users of places, thus, the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into space by walkers.

The theatrical dimension comes into play because the Walkman walker is extended and draws attention to him/herself. The Walkman renders the listener an actor, and the uninvolved bystanders into (unwilling) spectators:

Thus, with the appearance of this novel gadget, all passers-by are inevitably involved in the Walkman-theatre, as either actors (holders) or spectators (beholders). Hosokawa 1984, 179

In a related publication Hosokawa examines *The Walkman as Urban Strategy* and concludes:

The Walkman makes the walk act more poetic and more dramatic. .. We listen to what we don't see, and we see what we don't listen to. .. If it is pertinent to the speech act it will make the ordinary strange. .. It will transform the street into an open theatre." Hosokawa 1983, 134

In his essay *The Aural Walk*, the cultural critic Iain Chambers 1994 extends Hosokawa's analysis to bring it within the framework of cultural and media theory:

With the Walkman there is simultaneously a concentration of the auditory environment and an extension of our individual bodies. *ibid*, 49

Here we are reminded of McLuhan's famous dictum of media as extensions of man, and according to Chambers, the meaning of the Walkman does not lie in itself, its technological specificities or special design but rather "in the extension of perceptive potential" *ibid*: 50 . The Walkman also seems suspended in a curious paradox, signifying manifest isolation, with the listeners apparently oblivious to the surroundings, but in fact creating a sociability of a different order:

In the manifest refusal of sociability the Walkman nevertheless reaffirms participation in a shared environment. It directly partakes in the changes in the horizon of perception that characterise the late twentieth century, and which offers a world fragmenting under the mounting media accumulation of intersecting signs, sounds and images *Chambers 1994, 50* .

This 'participation' takes the form of a creative activity in which each listener creates a personal soundscape of musical fragments. Thus, each listener/player selects and rearranges the surrounding soundscape, and, in constructing a dialogue with it, leaves a trace in the network. For Chambers, like Hosokawa, the Walkman is the proto-typical postmodern technology. It is, like the mobile phone and credit card, a symptom of contemporary nomadism, of migrant populations finding their way in cities and simultaneously reconfiguring these spaces:

As part of the equipment of modern nomadism it contributes to the prosthetic extension of mobile bodies caught up in a decentred diffusion of languages, experiences, identities, idiolects and histories that are distributed in a tangentially global syntax. The Walkman encourages us to think inside this new organisation of time and space" *ibid*, 52 .

Both Hosokawa and Chambers regard the Walkman primarily as a cultural practice in which individuals listen to music. Its aesthetic potential is recognized only in terms of a general aesthesis; a change in perceptual practices but not in the narrower sense of an artistic practice directed by artists. In keeping with their observation of the Walkman as a cultural practice, Hosokawa and Chambers do not consider that individuals listen to anything other than pre-recorded music. Yet the aesthetic effects and features they describe—the ambulant/ambient practice, the altered perception of familiar spaces and places through the intensification of aural senses, the theatrical ostentation created by an individual evidently experiencing phenomenon—are not accessible to other passers-by or to bystanders. All of

these elements are in no way dependent exclusively on music. The potential of a mobile listener has, of course, long been recognized by museums who quickly adopted, for an extra charge, the Walkman technology for their audio tours. Anyone who has viewed exhibits with a voice telling one 'what it means' or 'how the artist came to create it', is familiar with the informational function of the Walkman. The two performances described below take as their starting point precisely this openness or neutrality of the medium.

Kanal Kirchner—
Real space made virtual

Following performances in Giessen and Frankfurt in 2000, the performance collective Hygiene Heute (Hygiene Today) created a third part to their project *Kanal Kirchner* in 2001. ¹ Consisting principally of two former theater students from the University of Giessen—Bernd Ernst and Stefan Kaegi (the latter went on to co-found Rimini Protokoll)—they term their concept an 'audio theatre play', where the viewer/listener, equipped with a tape player and headphones, takes an urban journey. Following the instructions on the tape, the viewer/listener wanders through the real world of Munich and through the fragments of the story provided by the authors. The audio experience and real visual impressions combine to form a private experience on the streets of Munich. The story itself is only of minor importance but can be summarized as follows:

The librarian Bruno Kirchner has been missing since 12 May 1998. One year later, his daughter Beate finds in her mailbox a package with a tape inside, and then she disappears without a trace. On 20 May 2000, the body of the cardiologist Markus Schlömer washes ashore on the banks of the Main River in Frankfurt. The police find the second tape under the Honsel Bridge. On 25 May 2001, Simone S. is handed

1 The title is ambiguous in German. 'Kanal' can mean either a conduit for water or a broadcasting channel. Kirchner's Channel would be an approximate translation.

an envelope in a massage parlor in Munich. Inside the envelope is a Walkman. She walks through Munich, following the voice's instructions on the tape, step-by-step. The prostitute Simone S. was last seen on the evening of 25 May in Kunstpark Ost in Munich. ²

The performance began in a public toilet in the festival center. Every 10 to 15 minutes a spectator/auditor, equipped with a Walkman, sets off on the one-hour tour, following a route that took them to various sites near the festival center. These included the Gasteig, a large multi-purpose arts center, an old church, along various streets, and into an underground car park.

The relentless beat of the music combined with the urgent voice directing the spectator's attention to sights, fragments of reality, or innocent bystanders who do not appear so innocent, function to redefine and reconstitute space. Hans-Thies Lehmann ²⁰⁰⁰ described it as a "narrative in a no-man's land between X-Files and Kafka." *ibid*, 28 The verbal script paid detailed attention to the spatial surroundings of the tour. It drew the spectator's attention to minutiae of the path to be followed. This continual interaction with the real world, as opposed to Kirchner's world, resulted in strange and unforeseen adaptations of the real world to the performance as the environment was subjected to a continual stream of Walkman listeners moving through exactly the same spaces. In my own case, while walking through the arts center I briefly lost orientation. Fortunately a group of window cleaners noticed my momentary disorientation and pointed me towards the right door. In this way, we can see how real life space is de-stabilized, and on occasions even totally replaced, by the virtual and where it is sometimes necessary to be returned to the virtual world by the inhabitants of the real.

Urban space made political:
Rimini Protokoll Call Cutta

My second example with which to interrogate the relationship between performance and the virtual sphere is *Call Cutta*, an audio performance coordinated by the German-Swiss performance group Rimini Protokoll in 2005 that involved city tours of Calcutta and Berlin during which

² See www.hygiene-heute.de. Last accessed 29.10.2015.

the participants were being directed from a call center in Calcutta. Rimini Protokoll is a performance collective made up of Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi and Daniel Wetzel.

The performance is a further variation on *Kanal Kirchner*. *Call Cutta* followed roughly the same idea but expanded the concept from an exploration of perception to include political and economic dimensions and real-time mobile phone communication. In February 2005 the three artists staged part one of their idea at the Goethe Institute in Kolkata in conjunction with local artists and call center workers. I quote from the Indian website:

The world's first mobile phone theatre takes place in Kolkata from February onwards. The theatre that transforms the city into a stage. A mobile stage. Or into a game. Or into a film. You start off as the audience, but you might become the player, the user, the hero, of your personal scenography: Kolkata. Calcutta. . . the city you thought you knew becomes a movie which you shoot with your own eyes. The soundtrack is the conversation you are having with a person you have never met, who nevertheless is remote controlling you within a certain matrix. Or it could turn Kolkata into something like a computer game but this time for real. No screen, no keyboards, just you and the city. ³

In April 2005 the experiment was continued in Berlin where spectators also went to the theatre, this time the historic Hebbel Theater, and were also guided on a walk from Kreuzberg to Potsdamer Platz by call center employees located in Calcutta. The guides had never been in Berlin but they provided the participants with detailed instructions, initially in German and then in English. Special city maps were developed for the project. All necessary information was prepared for the performers in the call center in the form of a Power Point program on a monitor in front of them.

If the weakness of *Kanal Kirchner* lay in its trivial narrative line (the detective story without resolution) then *Call Cutta* more than compensates with its concern for global and historical interconnections as well as explorations of the theatrical relationship between client and

³ http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project_143.html. Last visited 29.08.201.

agent in the special dynamics of call center business. Participants are guided from a garbage bin to a section of an old pre-war wall on which photos are visible. They show the Indian national hero “Netaji” (“leader”) Bose, first next to Gandhi, and then Hitler. The Indian Berlin expert on the telephone explains Bose’s significance for the struggle against British colonial rule, in which a pact with Hitler was just as expedient as the ideology of non-violent resistance.

Another important level is the relationship between participant and call center employee. In the *Kanal Kirchner*, the audiotrack was pre-recorded and hence locked the participant into a fixed itinerary without dialogic interaction. In *Call Cutta*, the point of departure is the supposed theatrical relationship on which this form of economic activity depends. In reality call center employees are trained to simulate propinquity, even though the caller and agent may be thousands of miles apart. It begins with carefully trained accents and proceeds to the point of genuine role-playing. The agents do not just speak German or English but they even engage in small talk about the local weather or the football results in the customer’s country. They sometimes even assume in real life their fake Western names in order to strengthen the illusion that they are direct neighbors of the American or English customer on the phone. In the call center economy, immediacy and authenticity, even when only simulated, are good for business. Perfect role-playing and identification with character, long since derelict in postdramatic theatre itself, are being resuscitated and revalued, it seems, in the service of the global economy.

The relationship between client and agent or between participant and performer was integrated into the performance. The intimate relationship between two subjects, although separated by several time zones and difficult cultures, could become particularly intense, as many participants confessed.⁴

Like all of Rimini Protokoll’s work, *Call Cutta* is predicated on the fundamental idea of situating performance in the real world and thereby problematizing the borders between reality and fiction. While such performances invariably begin in or around the theatre, they either move out into the real world or the public sphere in the spatial sense of the term, or they bring the public sphere into the theatre.

In terms of its relationship to public sphere, *Call*

4 See Krampitz (2005), for example.

Cutta would seem to take the exact opposite approach to traditional concepts of the public sphere aiming at maximum impact and a media presence on all media channels—newsprint, radio, television, internet—*Call Cutta* reverses this dynamic. The performance reconfigures the normal relationship between space and spectator and between performer and audience by focusing on maximum intimacy under conditions of extreme spatial separation. It needs little effort to see that *Call Cutta* is concerned with a new reformulation of the intimate sphere. Instead of the intimacy of the family as its focus, we experience the creation of intimacy between strangers under the conditions of globalized capitalism and communication. The question is then: if the consolidation of the intimate sphere in the sense of the conjugal family was a precondition for the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere, what is the logical consequence of the newly defined and experienced intimate sphere demonstrated by *Call Cutta*? What will emerge in a world of intimacy without face-to-face communication or at least in face-to-face communication without physical propinquity?

The use of the mobile phone and the geographical and cultural separation between performer and spectator establishes a paradoxical relationship of extreme separation and intimacy at the same time. Also important for the discussion of distributed aesthetics is the unclear allocation of roles—who is the performer, then who is the spectator here? *Call Cutta* is an essay on the medium of theatre where we have to consider the nature of our roles? What is the relationship between intimacy and distance, between immediacy and remoteness, between the live and the telematic?

Sound and body-space

The final question to be addressed concerns the theoretical assessment of such performances in terms of their spatial semantics. First we must look at the similarities and differences and ask whether the medium of the Walkman provides the decisive link between the two performances or if it is a mere technical device facilitating quite diverse spatial effects? The obvious defining common element between the two performances is the use of specific, pre-existing spaces. Both conform to the broad definition of site-specific performances, i.e. performances that take place outside pre-existing and pre-defined theatrical spaces. Site-specific performances utilize natural features or historical spaces and buildings to provide a spatially determined semantic frame for the actual performance.

Needless to say, the defining aspect of site-specificity is its rootedness in a particular place and hence the impossibility of transferring such performances to other locales. That such performances do, in fact, get transported has meant that the category itself has become too broad to accommodate the various experimental forms emerging under its conceptual umbrella. Indeed, a new subcategory has emerged, that of site-generic performance. These are performances that require a specific *category* of space but are not tied to one place.

Kanal Kirchner and *Call Cutta* were site-specific in the strictest sense of the term. The texts led spectators through a precisely defined urban trail, in the course of which concrete references were made to buildings, streets, bus stops etc.. The slightest deviation from this path led to complete disorientation and ultimately to a failure of the performance. Although the performance has been carried out in different locales, it has been adapted in each case to the actual site.

A crucial factor in such experimentation with the borders between reality and fiction is the role that modern media play. If the function of media technology in the theatre has been to intensify the experience of immediacy, then a performance such as *Call Cutta* is continuing this tradition with the important difference that it is not content just to create immediacy and then make the medial means invisible. The medium—in this case the mobile telephone—becomes foregrounded rather than effaced because our experience of the world in the sixty-odd minutes of the performance's duration is determined by the medium. ⁵

5 An interesting post-script: *Call Cutta* was presented at the 2006 CEBIT in Hannover (discussion, without performance) in association with DESCON Limited: Hall 6, Stall K53.5. 8th-15th of March 2006. Descon is the software and telecommunications firm that provided the call center technology and personnel.

An important effect of this *Walkman-induced* or *directed theatre* was the almost complete effacement of the narrative in the traditional diegetic sense. The fictional story—the adventures of our search for Mr. Kirchner—moves out of focus as the listener/spectator struggles to follow the spatial instructions: “turn right, now left—watch the people carrying bags” etc.. The overall effect of *audio theatre* is to intensify *spatial perception* in the sense of basic physical orientation. This links with what Hosokawa calls *the walk act*, the essential, corporeal aspect of the medium's effects. Walkman theatre is *body performance* of a special kind, focusing as it does on a moving body that is itself perceiving, rather than being perceived. On this physical level *Kanal Kirchner* and *Call Cutta* do, in fact, meet; they share this fundamental feature of foregrounding *corporeal experience within a spatial environment*.

The second common element resulting from audio theatre concerns the *ontological* status of the space represented and experienced. In traditional theatre theory there is a clear phenomenological distinction made between *physical* and *fictional stage* space. Although in fact they may be identical as objects and constitute a kind of duality, the performance transforms the physical space into a fictional or metaphorical one. ⁶ Much contemporary theatre and performance practice challenges the dominance of metaphorical (fictional) space by making use of what Hans-Thies Lehmann has termed a trend towards ‘metonymical’ space; i.e. the fictionally or aesthetically organized space remains connected or contiguous with the real space of the spectator instead of being clearly metaphorized and thus distanced.

The consequences of this trend towards spatial metonymy are manifold and fundamental for our participation. They lead, according to Lehmann, to a destabilization of the borders between work and frame, perception and participation. They highlight in particular the spectator's own presence as a central moment of artistic practice (Lehmann 2000, 27). In both of the performances considered here, the spatial organization is metonymical rather than metaphorical; we find no clear moment where a metaphorical space can be set apart. Yet, at the same time, the influence of verbal texts, music and sound effects do result in a transformation of the spaces, as we have seen.

If we return to Hosokawa's statement cited above:

“*The Walkman makes the walk act more poetic and more dramatic. .. We listen to what we*

6 See McAuley (1999, 24-28).

*don't see, and we see what we don't listen to. ...
It will transform the street into an open
theatre"*

We can see that the technical medium of the Walkman and its technological successors, far from creating a media experience distinct from the theatre, in fact returns to the theatre's most fundamental property; its ability to effect a transformation of perception. For theater makers, the crucial question is what to do with this powerful tool. Should they just delight in its ludic properties Kanal Kirchner or can they harness this potential for more specifically political agendas? *Call Cutta* is symptomatic of the latter and more broadly a trend in postdramatic theatre to enlist audio theatre and the Walkman effect for more focused social and political questions.

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