

Virtually Yours: Presence, Liveness, Lessness

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THE ACTUAL HUMAN BODY BECOMES OF LESS IMPORTANCE
EVERY DAY.

—Wyndham Lewis, "The New Egos," in *Blast* 1

I began to wonder at about this time what one saw when one looked
at anything really looked at anything.

—Gertrude Stein, "Portraits and Repetition"

Little body little block heart beating ash gray only upright. Little
body ash gray locked rigid heart beating face to endlessness.

—Samuel Beckett, "Lessness"

Before the opening of the Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center in New York, as we were finishing up the lights for the first preview of *Danton's Death*, what was then (in 1965) the world's most advanced switchboard couldn't quite control the "ghosting" on stage—that is, the trace of lights after dimming, the aura here or halo there, the stubborn residue of illumination that wouldn't, for all the electronics, go entirely dark. Designed by George Izenour, the computerized system was something remarkably new, though the technology still worked at the time not through the mysteries of software but—as with the archetypal Colossus, the vacuum-tubed first electronic computer—by means of a quite hefty pack of punch cards. We shuffled the cards, or read them like tarot, but when the ghosting persisted, we called Izenour, reputed sage of techno-theater, down from Yale to see what he could do. That didn't quite solve the problem. Each time we'd set up the lights and turn them down, he'd look at the luminous trace that everybody could see and give us a theoretical explanation as to why it couldn't be. Even then, I had no indisposition to theory, "But George," I'd say, "look again!" and again he'd look and explain why it couldn't be, as if we were somehow hallucinating. As it turned out, our technical director José Sevilla managed to operate the switchboard without the computer, running the entire show—the preview was not cancelled—by taking the dimmers between his fingers and moving them up and down the otherwise hapless console with exquisite precision on cue. The technology was primitive, but the ghosting had disappeared.

Or at least as it was in the lighting. What I'd overlooked then, however, in the urgencies of the moment, is what remains a crucial distinction in the ontology of performance, as we think of it now through the media and the prospects of cyberculture. For once you *look* in the theater, no less *look again!* (as the Furies chant in the *Oresteia*, seeming to initiate specular-

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ity as the theater's compulsive tradition), then with or without lighting, the ghosts are already there, and once the lights are up (over the mound or in the movement from Plato's Cave to the dialectic of enlightenment, or even with Clov in *Endgame*, who sees his light dying), no matter what's there, or not, it's with the look of being looked at. Which is, in performance, the anxious datum of "liveness."

performance
of theater

As for liveness in the theater, which seemed to be its distinction, that's been complicated in recent years not merely by the hyperbolic computerization of Broadway scenic effects, but by widening magnitudes of performativity, pageants, and ritual forms of other cultures, performance seems to be moving beyond the ethnographic, with its residuum of the aesthetic, through technology and corporate management into outer space. I'm not merely referring to media events circling the globe by satellite transmission, but in the ever-increasing panoptic vision of performance studies, to everything from the operations of the Hubble telescope to some nomadic or dysfunctional rocket in the ionosphere, or some years back, the atomization of the *Challenger*, the radiant image of which, played over and over on television, virtually transfigured disaster as did, in those brain-draining bursts, the resplendent aureoles of the collapsing towers before they became a sepulcher. Yet remote from Ground Zero, even spaced out, through the "strange loop" phenomenon of missile guidance systems,¹ if there is anything theatricalized, it requires a *site* of performance; and if the scale is reduced again, down to what's basic in theater, not the old two boards for a passion or, for that matter, what Peter Brook had in mind when he said theater begins with an empty space, luring the actor in.

performance as a
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"There's no such thing as an empty space," said John Cage, "or an empty time."² That was the premise of an early essay on experimental music as the becoming of theater, which "is continually becoming that it is becoming" (14), which is to say, a space of performance, subject to the look, which for more than a generation has been, as folded into "the gaze," the subject of deconstruction. But with the obduracy of the gaze in mind—and a sense of its *gradations*, as with presence itself—I've written elsewhere that in the apparently empty space you don't even need the actor, the space no longer empty so long as there is someone seeing.³ As for the semblance of time in space, we may not have been seeing the same, since the same can never be seen, not in a temporal form, but what Cage didn't say, looking through music to theater, is that it's the *seeming* in the becoming that invites and escapes the look, which in the consciousness of looking, as at the substance of seeming itself, suffuses time with thought—which is what theater does, even when troubled by it.

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For the liability in the suffusion is a metaphysics of seeming, perpetuating in appearance the future of illusion. Less disturbed by that than the theater tends to be—or at least its canonical drama, in its congenital distrust of theater—the minimalist aesthetic of conceptual art, and the installations that followed, evolved in *theatricality*, which for an unregenerate

formalist (specifically, Michael Fried) seemed to be the end of art.⁴ The beginning of the end could be said to have occurred in that ur-setting of the atriality, the anechoic chamber at Berkeley, in which, through the absence of other sound, Cage listened to his nerves and heart, then thought of himself listening, out of which came the performance, itself canonical now, of 4'33"—a silence lasting four minutes, thirty-three seconds.

Some years after, there were repercussions of this silence, inflected visually, in a primitive manifestation of media art: Nam June Paik's prototypical Fluxus film, made in the early 1960s, picking up on Cage's Zen. Paik's later video installations were, with a sometimes monumental array of monitors and his usual visual cunning, extravagant displays, baroque, but back then, if the aesthetic was minimal, it was somewhat out of necessity because of minimal cost: no actors, no expensive effects, optical or otherwise, no film stock to edit either. What Paik projected, inside a TV set, was nothing more than a thousand feet of unprocessed sixteen-millimeter leader, which ran imagelessly on a screen for thirty minutes, the effect on the viewer being—if not a sense of malfunction or unreflective indifference—a participatory impulse.

That was, in any Fluxus event, the performative prospect at least, presumably canceling the inertia of the passive observer, with consciousness itself emerging as the sine qua non of performance. As if Baudelaire's boredom, recycled, had been activated on the screen, the (seeming) tabula rasa of the illuminated space was, in subsequent viewings, complicated and enlivened, minuscule as they were, by dust and scratches on the leader stock. The liveness there, of course, was in the consciousness solicited by those chance "events," though it's possible to argue that the events themselves were symptoms of liveness, even in the absence of any human image on film, just as the "miscellaneous rubbish," the rising and falling lights, the sounds of inspiration and expiration, and the faint cries, each "instant of recorded vagitus," convey a more poignant absence—the liveness of it, no actors there on stage—in the performance of Beckett's *Breath*.⁵

On a larger scale, the notion of liveness entered the agenda of performance theory through film and (even more) the televisual, and the "remediation" that Philip Auslander has tracked from stage to screen to stage, and through the recording industry: from the lip-synch scandal of Milli Vanilli to CDs, DVDs, and back through rock concerts, where the performance of Madonna, U2, or Eminem, the truth of liveness there, is determined and authenticated by what's been seen on MTV. If this merely updates, according to Auslander, what we should have known all along, "that the live can exist only *within* an economy of reproduction," what's all the more true in the technological versatility of the dominion of reproduction, the fantasy-making apparatus itself, "is that, like liveness itself, the desire for live experiences is a product of mediatization."⁶ Meanwhile, as the vacuum tubes were miniaturized, first by transistors, then integrated circuits, and afterward silicon chips, with fiber-optic bundles enabling globalization, it was to be expected that the question of liveness would extend to virtual reality, as well as to futurological fantasies of a

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digitized human race that, with whatever forms of intelligence in a dematerialized body, would certainly alter our thinking about the meaning of presence in liveness.

Until that millenarian day, however, we'll still be contending with the banalities about "living theater," which attribute to real bodies on a stage more presence than some of those bodies may actually have in performance, no less anything like a charismatic wholeness, which this or that body may *appear* to have, if nothing more than appearance. Yet, if there was no point to stressing liveness before the advent of photography and the phonograph—though even the Festival of Dionysus or a chorus at Epidaurus was part of an economy of reproduction—the notion of living theater also has to be historicized. When we used to speak of living theater, before the insurrection of (what the French call) *the Living*—with "polymorphous perverse" bodies proclaiming *Paradise Now*—what we had in mind, by contrast, was the appearance of theater on film, though the incursion of the Living, in the dissidence of the 1960s, was also a claim to liveness as opposed to the dehumanized. And that was a condition just as possible in the theater as it was on film, or later television, not to mention the prospect that dehumanization will be, in the apotheosis of virtual reality, the (im)material condition of liveness. Relieved or distraught by the absence of presence, relentlessly demystified in theory, some who see liveness alive and well in the media—which mediatize themselves in remediation—are essentially making a defense of another kind of presence, an electronic presence, as we pass to the Internet, where, instead of metaphysics coming in through the pores, as Freud and Artaud thought, it comes in, rather, in bytes.

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When we think of the age of information, and digital traffic around the globe, there's a tendency to imagine the networks as a ramification of the "superhighway" of image culture, or as the hypertrophy of image, its proliferous reification, from the age of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin) to the society of the spectacle (Debord), with its investment in, or investiture of, the precession of simulacra (Baudrillard). But the virtual realities of information are something else again. While the photographic, filmic, or televisual image is still attached to the material site of representation in a legacy of realism (however the image is produced, indexically or analogically), the substance of the virtual, digitally produced as it is through the wobble of one and zero, may appear to be three-dimensional, but in the electroluminescence of the apparency of a stage, there is only an "empty display,"⁷ nothing to feel, nothing to touch, only the phosphorescent presence of what—unlike the object of the camera, however abstracted—was never there to begin with. In some interactive continuum of the cyberized space itself, the sensation may be that of a body virtually there, but that's it, virtual, maybe quickening apprehension in its shimmering subjunctivity, with a certain charm or enchantment, perhaps, like an alibi of the spectral wishing it could be more, maybe even mortal, but with evacuated gravity, never meant to be.

The space is interactive, and the virtual is a lure, but the real agency

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is the artificial intelligence, the prior programming, that creates the virtual scene. If, through the resourcefulness of a database, that scene is analogous to the real, one can be immersed in the analogy, which is cyberspace, without the visceral sensation of being there, since there is no there *there*—not even, as things are, the appearance of it, which is with all its impediments, however unaccommodated, the vexing thing itself. With all the promise of digitality, there is also something poignant: the subtext of the virtual is that it really wants to be real.⁸ And whatever that may be, the index of its truth—as with any manifestation in whatever performative mode, across any stylization or cultural practice, ritualized or mimed, masked or mediated, even performed with puppets—will always be subject to that wanting, as the body of information will be referred to the body itself, that body, the real body, and I don't mean a social construction, no less what they're calling a bot.

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Still, somewhere in all this, there seems to be a new reality, as the seemingly manipulable but abstracted world of data, supradiaphanous, immaterial as it is, bears upon life as we've known it, material as it is, and unlikely to go away, unless the genetic codes are somehow added to the data, ending life as we've known it in a life without end. Which, however that may be, may vex us even more—if performance theory survives—by making liveness moot. Be that as it may, this is certainly a view of the future that Bertolt Brecht didn't anticipate when, after the bomb on Hiroshima, he revised his Epic theory in the *Short Organum*, to take cognizance of nuclear power, beyond the "petroleum complex," even before which he had thought, "Some exercise in complex seeing is needed."⁹ In the world of feedback loops accelerated by microcomputers, and with cyborgs on the scene about to take over performance (or even, since queerer than queer, what is called "performativity"), Brecht's critique of "culinary theater" would seem to be arrested in history, without any object at all, since the disappearance of an organic body with conventional subjectivity makes the culinary a non sequitur: out in cyberspace, nothing to cook and nothing to eat. But if the audience in the bourgeois theater is there to digest its dinner, so it might all the more in front of a computer. Still, if what's programmed there is in a postculinary world, immersed in virtuality, there's no guarantee whatever that its values are improved by the data with which, in the absence of anything else, we may identify in performance. Meanwhile, for cybernauts and cybernerds, and all us foreseeable cyborgs, there seems to be—except for incompetence on the computer—no digital equivalent of the Alienation-effect. Which is to say, we're no better than ever, through all the information, in the complex seeing we need, when time must have a stop, for a reflective look, wherever we are in the virtual, at the reality passing by, susceptible to illusion, maybe nothing but appearance, all the more in the paranoia of a world besieged by terror, with "weapons of mass destruction" like a refrain on the evening news.

Even so, when performance occurs at a digital distance, out there in cyberspace, where power is a function of remote control—in a world in-

conceivable without its image, or in the unstoppable seeming, an obscenity of image—remoteness itself is the sticking point, hardly reducible to a Brechtian *gestus*. As with the smart bombs of the Gulf War or in the Shah-i-Kot Valley after Al Qaeda, in or out of the caves, or even the scandal of Enron with the shreadings at Anderson, for all we see, we don't see it, though we may be watching all the time. As opposed to the theater, or even film, what we have on television is a virtual allegory of the remote. What we see there, as we move from channel to channel, is the liquidity of culture, both in the sense of gathered, processed, edited, and collaged images, screened as they are from the cathode tube, and in the sense of commodification, with the illusion of liquidity there, the images presumably at our disposal, the remote like a magic wand or scepter, giving access to the Imaginary. Yet, for all that imperial remoteness—programs on and off at will—it's an illusion of power out of hand, a lot more feeble than fabulous, more like impotency after all. Nobody forces anybody to watch television, but very few resist, and putting aside what's brainless, or what we know we've seen before, no matter how new it appears, it's hard to watch for any length of time without feeling the saturation of apparent news, the ad nauseam of the commentary, and even if the screen is small, a frustrating diffusion of thought. Not only in surfing channels, but in what we do when we watch, the experience is that of modernity in the Eliotic sense, distracted from distraction by distraction.

In this regard, the mediatizing of culture is not only a matter of how it is represented, or who represents it, but how that is factored into a virtual ontology of distraction, which bears upon what we think and how we see ourselves in time. Or for that matter, out of time, because our sense of temporality is increasingly preempted by the allure of the televisual, and with it telepresence,¹⁰ which may encounter time in its occurrence, but not in any perceptible cycle of duration, stasis, motion, or decay. Time on television—where we rarely see the process of time—is processed, and what just happened will move instantly into the archive, to be reprocessed, even images of the past susceptible, as Margaret Morse points out, to a sort of digital updating or "electronic revision to meet today's expectations," so that the grainier black-and-white documentations of the past are not preserved as access "to flickering shadows in the cave," but are rather shaped up to the "spatiotemporal and psychic relations [of] the realities it constitutes."¹¹ Which are, as they now impinge on performance, realities of distraction.

At the same time, there is a certain tactility in the mediatizing of culture that has not so much to do, as we tend to think, with the formation of attitudes or the maneuvering of public opinion—the commentary on the polling that inevitably determines the polls—but rather with the activity of perception at the heart of representation; or in reverse, the activity of representation that forms perception, and therefore, indeed, the way things are thought. Thus, in the operations of television graphics, as in the close-ups of a television interview, we may have the sensation of proximity to an object, seeing it closer—in the case of virtual images, as if they

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were, in extreme nearness, eliciting our sense of touch, as with fabrics on home-shopping channels or, in the magic world of the law, sexy legs on *Ally McBeal*. If what is called "blue-screen technology" can create virtual sets that make small-market studios, and their unknown anchor people, look prime-time, so complex motion design, enhanced by the computer, makes it possible not only to define but to move around an object in discursive space, with diverse angles and points of entry, the sort of topology that defies the burdensome laws of gravity in the cinema as we know it, no less on the theater's stage. Sometimes the sense of motion is such, in computerized graphics on the screen, especially in fantasies of outer space (transposed to selling the Lexus), that the ground of representation itself seems to be taken from under us. Yet the fantasies of weightlessness are competing, as they did way back in Ibsen's *Lady from the Sea*, with the deadweight actuality of our actual bodies. It may be that virtual worlds are preparing us psychically for the zero gravity of outer space or some virtual interior life, but for the time being or, irreversibly, the reality of being in time, our bodies inhabit a space (even floating out there in a capsule) that is irreparably down to earth.

In Datek ads or HelloMoto, Motorola's Datamoto, it might seem it could be reversed, and every now and then we hear that either biogenetics or some high-tech implant is going to bring it about. Actually, there is considerable speculation, and some pontification, more or less idealistic, about the out-of-body promise of digital worlds, and the status of the virtual in the reality that remains, what—according to theorists from Benjamin to Baudrillard—may only be a remainder amid the ruins of time. Given that ruinous context, seeds of history upon the ground, what is virtual reality? The truth is that, psychically and otherwise, no less realistically, we know very little about its cultural substance and prospects, its possibilities for performance, nor its eventual effect on what we take to be human. And when we advance through electronic culture to this impasse, we're somewhere beyond the horizon of performance in the media, even those films they're now trying to make, with actors replaced by the ingenious animation of digital tech, leaving us with the question: is the increasing likeness to be thought of as liveness? And by what criteria do we determine that?

To be sure, it was the escalation of mediatization that appeared to bring into the theater itself, and to the live bodies there, reflexes and habits of mind that seemed less natural or organic than mechanically reproduced—not by some postmodern offshoot of Meyerhold's biomechanics (which was actually derived from Taylorism) or by some recidivist sign of passion from the repertoire of Delsarte. If we've long been aware of the stale predictability of Broadway's assembly line, and of actors repeating themselves, that was because, as in digital culture, it was possible to process behavior and homogenize it as code. This is all the more so today in the precession of simulacra, where it's possible to think of liveness as playing roles on screen, precoded parts written for us in advance, so that we're signs of what we appear to be, not even representations but

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their merest facsimile. And if this is so, then the actor who appears on stage is the redundancy of a redundancy, performing an otherness that only pretends to be, so well known has it been that it can only be rehearsed, the image of an image of something that, coded to begin with, has otherwise never been. That, I suppose, is the worst-case scenario. As for actors repeating themselves, that was in any case to be expected, despite all versatility, from those who achieve stardom on stage or screen. As for any appearance in the flesh, whatever the quotient of liveness, it may of course be augmented, as well as credibilized, by previous celebrity in the media, which function in visual culture by their long-belabored expertise, whatever else they may be doing, in commodifying the look—not quite that of being looked at, in the sense I've been talking about, which seems brought into being by another liveness, the liveness overlooked, that of perception itself, as it makes its way through appearance.

If that's not always what it appears to be (or even if it is), that's also due to perception, which in abrading upon reality also makes it theater. As if he were enunciating Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy, William Blake said that the eye altering alters all. And any way you look at it, the body on stage is suffused with the vicissitudes of appearance, which complicate the question of liveness, all the more because you look, offstage, onstage, with more or less reciprocity during the course of performance—the irony being here that sometimes less is more. Which is to say that the quality of liveness, the felt sensation of it, may not necessarily diminish as it moves from the interactive or participatory to a more contemplative mode. What mediates culture there, beyond any previous accretions, is the activity of perception, however rigorous or involuntary, or intently voyeuristic, "lawful espials" or "seeing unseen" (Hamlet 3.1.32–33), or, with one or another mode of alienating distance, the seeing or unseeing in an impersonal or clinical look. "Am I as much as . . . being seen?" says one of the figures in the urns of Beckett's *Play*, which wouldn't be as much of a question—being seen or being seen? (how should the actor say it? and how much is he being seen? depending on how he says it?)—were you to see the figure on film.

As we reflect on the difference in being, as Heidegger might have seen it, from being as being-seen, it would seem that the affectivity of presence—its liveness, so to speak—might better be thought of, through the undeniable palpability of its metaphysical absence, as gradations of presence escaping itself in a sort of microphysics. About which you can say, as the greatest of dramas do, you can only see so much—even if you put it on film, or with a video monitor, or by storing it as information in a computer's memory bank. If the theater, as I said in *Take Up the Bodies*, "is the body's long initiation in the mystery of its vanishings,"¹² I wouldn't count on computer memory, ready for instant messaging, to keep track of where it went, or even to serve for cultural memory, since in the mysteries of digitization it somehow erases the difference between where we were and where we are, as well as now and then. There are those, to be sure, who are hardly disturbed by that, and some of them, who have

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grown up with or into cyberspace, are developing modes of performance that have already gone online, like the Creative Outlaw Visionaries or Law and Order Practitioners or, mobilizing micronetworks for an agit-prop agenda, Ricardo Dominguez and the Electronic Disturbance Theater. If Dominguez prefers the Internet to the stage because of the subversive possibilities, on quite another scale, one can imagine computer types who might indeed prefer the protocols of digital exchange, whether anonymously or otherwise, to the regimens of performance as we've known it through the impediments of flesh and blood. One of the capacities of digitality is not only to speed up exchange across unconscionable distances, but, as if it were some new outreach of ritual drama, to occult it once again. It may very well be enticing to a performer who could, in the theater, only imagine shadows, doubles, and the traces of ghostliness, to dematerialize online and resurface in code and image in a new Theater of the World, where liveness came from elsewhere than being born astride of a grave.

If then, coming back to earth, liveness comes as well with a certain paranoia, that's because—mediated or remediated as the theater might be, not only in the recyclings from film or television, but in the infinity of its repetitions (what drove Artaud mad) from whenever the theater began—there is in all the remediation something irremediable, the disease of time in a time-serving form. It can be put in various ways, more or less anodyne or evasive, but there are times when liveness itself is exalted by its most disheartening truth: it stinks of mortality, which may be the ultimate subtext of stage fright—no virtual reality that, but ineliminably there, however disguised, or (as actors may say) made use of in performance, in any case encroaching on or reshaping presence, and even if it doesn't stink, bringing us back to what, as reality principle, ghosts us after all. Even on the cybernetic threshold of a cyborgian age, "we really do die," which is what, in simple truth, Donna Haraway said when she stopped short on the utopian prospects and warned against "denying mortality."¹³

What is, then, the material condition of liveness, its inevitable "lessness," will continue to be so until our nanotechnology produces—as K. Eric Drexler promised when he started manipulating materials that are utterly out of sight—self-replicating subatomic engines that will not only remove diseased DNA from our perishing bodies, but also repair our aging cells, making us (nearly) immortal. Which is not to mention the visions of robotic bodies of a postbiological age into which, as into computer memory, we can download the forms of thought and desire that once went into our drama. As we might have guessed, the media—as in AT&T's "You Will" campaign¹⁴—are encouraging these prospects as something more than fantasy, not dreamt of in our philosophy, maybe, but in the more numinous spin-off from *Blade Runner*, the techno-transcendentalism or epiphanic redemption of entropy (not to mention social justice)¹⁵ that comes with being Wired. Whatever the liveness dreamt of, it's not quite that which the newspapers were conscious of in NBC's prime-time coverage of the Winter Olympics in Utah. The relative reality

there was "live live" (designated "Live" in the upper left corner of the screen) or "nearly live" (a skeleton, skateboard, or bobsled event that happened, say, an hour before) or the "live that looks like live, yet is not" (Bob Costas in the studio chatting with Jim McKay) or the "nonlive, which does not mean dead, just taped."¹⁶ Or, as we've seen it in Afghanistan, on tape, maybe alive, maybe dead, and if no "Live" up in the corner, maybe a ticker of news at the bottom, keeping the options alive, or announcing a vote on Osama bin Laden's liveness, as they've done on CNN.com.

If there is, whatever the vote, something simply obtuse or a bad puerile joke in that, the suffusion of our reality by the media, live live, nearly live, nonlive, is such that, even when you turn it off, it seems some-astating moment of history we might wish would simply go blank. Or how to be on, as if there were channels in our heads, which at some dev-give us a moment's respite. But, as if the media were itself a function of our manic obsession with image that in its stupefying excess is the matrix of the real, that isn't meant to be. Nor can we separate the superfetation of image from the mesmeric redundancy of the noise that passes as information, which is not what Lionel Trilling once meant by "the hum and buzz of implication," to which, judiciously, you might turn an attentive ear. Nor is it even the noise that John Cage talked about, and deployed, as early as 1937—"The sound of a truck at fifty miles an hour. Static between the stations. Rain"—about which he said, "Wherever we are what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we later listen to it, we find it fascinating." And with electronic control of amplitude and frequency, it is possible to take "any one of these sounds and to give it rhythms within or beyond the reach of imagination."¹⁷ This is not the noise we hear on the media every day.

Thus, for all the depth of grief and mourning after the disasters of September 11, the one inconceivable testament to its unspeakability would have been, at ground zero of sensation, darkened TV screens and, for one unmediated day of quiet reflection, no anchors, no talk shows, no *Imus in the Morning* or *O'Reilly Factor* at night, no Leno, no Letterman, no *Crossfire* or *Hardball*, or speaking of liveness, *Larry King Live*, no profusion of replays: *silence*. Which is, perhaps, when history hurts, the only reliable echo of liveness. That the media, however, saturate culture, both inducing and preempting what we feel, is by now, even when on their best behavior—the relief of absent commercials after the towers collapsed—an inarguable fact of life, as it is of the theater, which even before Pirandello could no longer think of art imitating life, for life is no longer the referent, but only life as mediated, as if theatricality were appropriated on its own terms, as the pure Imaginary. If it's long been apparent that anything that goes on in our minds, almost every gesture we make, what passes as love or longing, just about every instinct, has either been determined, foreseen, programmed, or mimicked by the media, so it seems, too, that in an age of information virtually everything to be known is out there on the net for the asking, and with the savvy of software accessible on the computer. Yet the more we ask, the more demoralized we may be.

Meanwhile, the World Wide Web is the global space of performance, where the notion of living theater seems the merest anachronism, if nothing more than because the intensities and energies producible (never mind reproducible) on film, video, CDs and DVDs exceed in their cumulative affect or outright sensation anything achievable by flesh and blood on a stage, except insofar as the body's vulnerability, the weak flesh itself, becomes in its mortality the literal issue. For all the recycling of liveness, or the remediation (carrying rather insensibly the notion of a remedy), it's hard to imagine any image on the screen, however violent, lustful, demonic, barbaric, no less intimate or lyrical, that could match the close-up effect upon spectators of an actor who, as in the extremities of performance art—Gina Pane up a ladder of razors, Chris Burden having himself shot, Fakir Musaphar's self-impalings, Orlan's cosmetic surgeries, Schwarzkogler's bandaged suffocations, with live wires exposed, on the edge of suicide (which he eventually did, by throwing himself out of a window)—actually cuts his wrist or slits another's throat or (as a friend of mine did) swallows a bottle of pins, or a scene in which the lovemaking or fucking is not merely simulated, but nakedly there, cock into cunt, right there before your eyes, not garrulously so as in *The Vagina Monologues*, making up for lost time and the carnal by merely talking about it. I've seen people wince at pictures of Stelarc suspending himself by fishhooks, as they do with some of the more perilous things on *Survivor*, or recently on *Fear Factor*, when certain minor celebrities were crawled over by worms, roaches, and snakes. But suppose that were done close up, live, as in a gallery space or intimate theater, and you were sitting right there. Never mind the factitious violence as it comes with popcorn-boggling credibility from Hollywood's editing rooms—if what they apparently do in "snuff films" were done on a stage there'd be no doubt whatever about the difference in liveness, dead or alive, to use our president's words about the evildoer hiding out, no doubt applicable now to those in Kashmir or Pakistan who beheaded Daniel Pearl. As for the videotape not yet on the networks (and quite unlikely to be), that would be difficult to see if they showed it, but imagine it done on a stage, where what's *not* done may be done with a valence that, formed as it is by the media (and reducing the level of sensation), is something else again, like the nothing to be done in *Waiting for Godot* that, in its most elemental liveness, cannot *not* be done. Which is where, if only with the illusion of the unmediated, the most complex performance exists.

The issue remains, however, as performance extends beyond theater or performance art to fashion, politics, pedagogy, corporate management, polymeric composites, rocket boosters or missile defense, whether the narrow circumference of a stage, and *human presence*, can continue to hold attention in ways the other media can't. For the theater, as already suggested, is mediatized too, that is, something other than raw experience, not at all immediate, which in its corporeality we sometimes tend to forget. The mediatizing of culture was surely ramified and accelerated from photography and cinema through television to analog/digital technology,

performance is a live act
 de-mediatised live
 and "a performance as a complex scene"

theater is a live act
 & media is a live act

but its effect upon performance was already registered before the end of the nineteenth century, in the preface to Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, which went beyond the relatively conservative dramaturgy of naturalism—purporting to focus on the documentable evidence of an external reality, its facts and material circumstances—to the multiplicity of “the soul-complex,” which is something like the Freudian notion of overdetermination, a subjectivity so estranged that it cannot fit into the inherited conception of character.

Thus the notion of a “characterless” character. “Instead of the ‘ready-made,’ in which the bourgeois concept of the immobility of the soul was transferred to the stage,” Strindberg insists on the richness of the soul-complex, which—if derived from his conception of Darwinian naturalism—reflects “an age of transition more compulsively hysterical” than the one preceding it, while anticipating the age of postmodernism, with its utterly mediated and deconstructed self, so that when we think of identity as social construction, it occurs as well as a sort of bricolage: “My souls (characters),” Strindberg writes in that proleptic preface, “are conglomerates of past and present cultural phases, bits from books and newspapers, scraps of humanity, pieces torn from fine clothes and become rags, patched together as is the human soul.”¹⁸ And one of the patches is from the theater itself, as it is with the valet Jean, who says, to account for the knowingness beyond his station, that he’s been to the theater often. Unfortunately, if that brings a certain mediated presence to his pretensions, of the sort we might acquire today from film or television, it wilts before the voice of the Count coming down the speaking tube. All through the play, actually, the tube itself is a presence, as that other tube is today: the medium is the message, and it’s still a message of power.

As we move, however, toward virtual worlds, the claims of the body to presence—or attributing presence to the body, as confirmation or affirmation—may appear to be disrupted by the reformative flow of postlinear devices and systems—fast forward, rewind, stop, eject, play, and the whole array of recorders, tapes, CDs and CD-ROMs, as well as the chat rooms and chatterbots on the Internet. And we have seen performance events with more or less impacted technology that seems to parse the body, with real-time digitized contours that seem to be floating in infraspaces, as in the work of Matthew Barney, that is, a performance space of image projectors that may also seem, through computer programming, to be spuming or liquefied, itself floating or hyperextended, with its payload of partial bodies, spindrifted to cyberspace. Here, corporeal identity may appear to warp, reform, dissolve, be refigured there online, but however the body is thus deconstituted and/or restored, its image persists through it all, along with—if not there in actuality—the desire to have it so. If cyberspace itself is the consensual hallucination that is the consummation of virtual technologies, the hallucinatory consensus extends to notions of performance disassociated from the mundane gravity of the corporeal body. But just as cyberspace is unthinkable without the alphabetic and mathematical system of representation that supports and

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sustains the logocentricism presumably displaced, so the dematerialized figures are unthinkable without the bodily presence presumably vanished, nothing occurring in cyberspace that isn't contingent on that which, seemingly, it made obsolete.

Whatever the circularity—the looping of liveness through the space of reproduction—there is no escaping in remediation the *reductio ad absurdum*, which is to say, bereft, forlorn, alienated, replicated by technology, the nevertheless refractory body to which, unavoidably, we refer anything on a screen, in the ghostliness of three dimensions or in the wraithlike space of the virtual. That live presence has been devalued in mediatized culture, and that the degradation of the live has been compensated for in large-scale live performance, rock concerts, or sporting events, by "videation" or Diamond Vision and instant replays,¹⁹ still leaves us the lamentable body in its dispossession, and given the scale of the media, "little body little block heart ash gray only upright," which has been from whatever beginnings the carnal datum of theater. As to what passes through liveness when truly alive, no videation or instant replay can ever get at that, what's there indubitably but invisible, right there before your eyes. Merely the thought of it is sufficient to make theater, in the scenic site of the mind, what beats there, as in the incipient madness of King Lear. Which is not to say that it's realized in the theater as we mostly know it, or even in performance art. Or that the theater as an institution will ever again have the presence of the other media in our lives.

It is only to say that there's not much substance to theater that doesn't occur in the space of indeterminacy between what's tangibly there, or appears to be, and whatever images of mediatized representation are there as a supplement to (the absence of) the real. It may be that we'll eventually encounter some protovirtual version of what Schechner calls "rasaesthetics," opening up performance to the whole sensorium; as if inspired by the *Natyasastra*,²⁰ the technological virtuosity of virtual reality may, in the desideratum of embracing cultures, eventually program synesthetically some aromatic and emotional fusion of proprioceptive experience, bringing it instantly across continents to the entire world. But since—however and wherever the sensorium is expanded—it will still be occurring in anthropocentric terms, the ancient problems of knowing remain, with issues of identity and otherness too. And a major question still to be responded to is the one asked years ago by my KRAKEN group, in a work called *Crooked Eclipses* (derived from Shakespeare's sonnets), its initiatory image of a suspended gaze, mirrored in the moment: "What is your substance, whereof are you made, / That millions of strange shadows on you tend?" (Sonnet 53). What, for all the resources, doesn't exist on film or the electronic media is anything like those shadows, the ghostings, which exist all the more in performance when—whether or not encroached upon by filmic or video images with more seeming presence than the bodies on stage—their presence seems most suspect.

Long before our consciousness of the media, or of mediated consciousness, this paradox was apparent at the outset of Büchner's *Woyzeck*,

which dramatizes what was, in Leipzig in 1821, the equivalent of a media event: "What a murder! A good, genuine, beautiful murder!" as the Policeman says at the end about what started as a strange sensation: "Quiet! . . . Can you hear it? Something moving! . . . It's moving behind me! Under me! . . . Listen! Hollow! It's all hollow down there!"²¹ And so it is in Beckett's *Endgame*, when Hamm is pushed by Clov to the wall, something dripping in his head ("A heart, a heart in my head")²² that, when push comes to shove, you can never get on film—even the film of Beckett's *Endgame*. As for the liveness in that drip, or the hollow, whatever it is that's moving, it can't be remediated (or, as we used to say, represented) because, moment by moment, right before your eyes in the becoming of theater (even if you could hear the heartbeat), it's inevitably something less.

NOTES

1. See Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

2. John Cage, "Experimental Music," in *Silence: Lectures and Writing* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1974), 8.

3. Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 218.

4. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimalist Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), 116–47. "The success, even the survival of the arts," Fried wrote in 1967, "has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater" (139). While disdaining Cage as well (in quality, relative to Elliott Carter, no comparison) Fried's animus was directed mainly against visual artists (Donald Judd, Robert Morris) who were undoing the epiphanic "presentness" or "single infinitely brief instant" that—for Fried, to this day—is grace (146–47).

5. Samuel Beckett, "Breath," in *Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove, 1984), 211.

6. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 54–55.

7. Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 196. Of the various books proliferating in this hyperactive scene, this is the most sophisticated that I've come across—and the most evocatively written—in its own mediation between what media artists are doing, from "telematic dreaming" to virtualizing physical space, and the shadowy means required to do it, the "algorithms and abstract symbols in an imperceptible realm of data" (5). To negotiate its seemingly endless prospects, cyberculture demands a lot of imagination, and Morse respects it when it's there, while keeping a jaundiced eye on its transcendent fictions and not losing sight of those who, in the globalized here-and-now, still have next to no access to the profusion of worlds online.

8. Quite recently we've seen the equivalent of this in the universe of video games, which are deploying their newest technology for an increasing realism, while warding off abstraction and its arbitrary rules. It may be that the credibilizing effects are achieved by numerous buttons, triggers, and toggling switches, and the computer keyboard, but the irony is that the most sophisticated technology, by

Xbox or Nintendo today, is drawn upon for games with an animus against technology or with a sort of primitive reflex, as if before technology, which—in the regulated intricacy of its puzzling or fantastical worlds—departed too much from the real, with its muscular sensations or plain old blood and guts.

9. Bertolt Brecht, "The Literarization of the Theater," in *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 44.

10. Alice Rayner is especially perceptive on the rhetoric of telepresence that, promoting it, fails to recognize that it usually occurs in the language of theatricality ("Everywhere and Nowhere: Theater in Cyberspace," in *Of Borders and Thresholds: Theater History, Practice, and Theory*, ed. Michal Kobiałka [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999], 278–302). Thus, while the community of telepresence is all over the place, or could be, in a global culture, the desideratum is a sense of here and now, the materiality associated with an actual theater space, which remains just that, a "place for seeing," even when the enveloped space of wings and flies, and the binary of stage and audience, is amplified or otherwise transformed by slides, films, video clips, whether for purposes largely scenic or captionlike, or as a kind of dialectical image-source for the actors or the drama. Whatever the apparent dispersal of the event, through the media or, prospectively now, by way of the Internet, most of what presumably occurs in cyberspace is there with an institutional referent and in the "language of dimensionality" (281).

11. Morse, *Virtualities*, 110.

12. Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 299.

13. "Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna Haraway," in *Technoculture*, ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 16.

14. See Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (New York: Grove, 1996), 11–12.

15. For many artists and social theorists, if sluggishly so in the theater, the emergence of a global economy, projecting itself on the web, requires a radical and unprecedented "upheaval in our historical perceptions of society and the subject." If behavior at local levels has not quite caught up with the revolutionary prospects of a net-based economy, much of what's happening in the artworld seems to be focused there. "Net art, from physical local installations to world-wide network computer games, has become the forum in which many of the emancipatory hopes of the historical avant-gardes are being rephrased. Web art is a form of art to which great political hopes are linked." Peter Weibel, "The Project," in *net_condition: art and global media*, ed. Weibel and Timothy Druckrey (Cambridge: ZKM Center for Art and Media/MIT Press, 2001), 19.

16. Richard Sandomir, "In These 'Live' Olympic Games, It's a Matter of Timing," *New York Times*, February 22, 2002, C20.

17. Cage, *Silence*, 3.

18. August Strindberg, preface to *Miss Julie*, in *Strindberg: Five Plays*, trans. Harry G. Carlson (New York: Signet, 1984), 53–54.

19. Auslander, *Liveness*, 35.

20. Richard Schechner, "Rasaesthetics," *Drama Review* 45, no. 3 (2001): 27–50.

21. Georg Büchner, *Woyzeck*, in *Complete Plays and Prose*, trans. Carl Richard Mueller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 111, 137–38.

22. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove, 1958), 18.