

## Introduction. Attention, Agency, Affect: In the Flow of Performing Audiences

O to write a play without an audience – *the* play. But here she was fronting her audience. Every second they were slipping the noose. Her little game had gone wrong.

...  
Blood seemed to pour from her shoes. This is death, death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind; when illusion fails. Unable to lift her hand, she stood facing the audience.  
(Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*)

If the audience is not altogether an absence, it is by no means a reliable presence.  
(Herbert Blau, *The Audience*)

Whether celebrated as ‘travelling concepts’ across an impressive array of disciplines or denigrated as inflationary and all-too-fashionable labels, performance and performativity have increasingly, even perhaps equivocally, marked the cultural scenario of the last five decades, contributing to a disruptive investigation of identity and culture no longer in terms of given products and theoretical abstractions but as living, embodied practices and contingent, situated events. Since their very ‘beginnings’ around the late Fifties and early Sixties, and then through the various controversial stages of their institutional consolidation Performance Studies have indeed emerged “less as stably referential terms than as discursive sites on which a number of agendas, alliances and anxieties collect”.<sup>1</sup> The new field has thus triggered a convergence, at one time fruitful and suspicious, of different disciplinary fields – speech, drama and theatre studies, sociology, anthropology, linguistics and the philosophy of language, to name just a few – and of different artistic practices – from the experiments of John Cage and the militant happenings and ‘call to action’ of the Living Theatre and the Open Theatre to the ultra sophisticated and multi-media environment of contemporary performance art and digital literature.

One of the distinctive characteristics of this field has always been the ‘liminal’, Jon McKenzie has even suggested two modelling phases of liminality for this restless conglomeration: the first phase revolved around “the theatricalization of ritual and the ritualization of theatre” (one may think of the seminal collaboration between Richard Schechner and Victor Turner),<sup>2</sup> whereas the most recent phase has shifted to the critical interplay of “the theory of practice and the practice of theory” (the impact of deconstruction and its radical critique of text, sign and subjectivity).<sup>3</sup> In particular, the disruptive reworking of John Austin’s seminal categorisation of speech ‘acts’ by Jacques Derrida (1988) and Judith Butler (1993 and 1997) among others, together with the development of a number of new branches of cultural studies (from media and visual to gender and postcolonial studies) has set in

<sup>1</sup> Shannon Jackson, “Professing performances: Disciplinary Genealogies” (2001), reprinted in Henry Bial, ed., *The Performance Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 40.

<sup>2</sup> See, above all, Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, with a Preface by Victor Turner (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania U. P. 1985) and Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, with a Preface by Richard Schechner (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Jon MacKenzie, “The Liminal Norm”, in *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London: Routledge, 2001), 49.

motion an extraordinary proliferation of the 'performative' paradigm across any interdisciplinary engagement with the processual, hybrid and translational aspects of culture – a truly 'performative turn' which was also key to the unfolding of the postmodern.<sup>4</sup>

If its "most compelling" potential nowadays is to provide a critical tool to imagine what Peggy Phelan has termed "a post-theatrical, post-anthropological age",<sup>5</sup> no less influential has proved the challenge of adopting a performance trope in the field of literary studies. As one of the undisputed pioneers of Performance Studies makes clear, "to treat any object, work or product 'as' performance – a painting, a novel, a shoe, or anything at all – means to investigate what the object *does*, how it *interacts* with other objects or beings, and how it *relates* to other objects and beings".<sup>6</sup>

As is well known, the turn to performance within the domain of drama and theatre studies has contributed to enliven an old debate over the contentious relationship between texts and their stage productions, sharpening the focus on the limits of their mutual 'representation-ability', while promoting the emergence of the groundbreaking conceptualisation of 'post-dramatic' theatre.<sup>7</sup> Actually, given the increasing porosity among visual, performing and literary arts, the question is no longer to oppose a performativity paradigm vs. a textuality paradigm, rather to exploit the former to decenter the hegemony of the latter, by conceiving the very "disciplines of the text" as "sites of performance".<sup>8</sup> In other words, a performative investigation of texts goes hand in hand with a number of critical readerly procedures which concentrate on the endless process of actualisation of writing-and-reading, from Barthes' notion of text as an inter-textual field of "play, activity, production, practice" and reader-response theory (Stanley Fish) to Jerome J. McGann's emphasis on texts' 'material' and 'processual' condition or John Gavin's explicit reference to Schechner's theory for the activity of reading as belated, "restored behavior",<sup>9</sup> not to mention the forceful conjugation of a performative and affective ethos in the recent work by Derek Attridge.<sup>10</sup>

Analogously, projects based on the challenging adoption of a 'performative writing' keenly responsive to the very interstices of theory and practice continue to proliferate, from the radical production by performance theorists like Peggy Phelan and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – who strive to "make writing/textuality *speak to, of, and through* pleasure, possibility, disappearance, and even pain. In other words, to make writing *perform*"<sup>11</sup> – to the provocative playful textual performances by a media artist and theorist like Mark Amerika. As the latter case amply demonstrates, it is the vertiginous diffusion of digital technologies in the culture of the new millennium which has largely contributed to a renewed interdisciplinary focus on the interactive, performative and affective aspects of all kinds of artwork including the literary. Social media, hypertexts, e-books and other on-the-fly postproduction processes necessitate new browsing and reading habits, what's more in such "a network-distributed environment" the very concept of writing and reading has been crucially extended to require "a more proactive resourceful approach to 'making' things, often collaboratively,

<sup>4</sup> See, among others, Philip Auslander, "Postmodernism and Performance", in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. by Steven Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2004), 97-115.

<sup>5</sup> Peggy Phelan, "Introduction: The Ends of Performance", in Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, eds., *The Ends of Performance* (New York and London: New York U. P., 1998), 5. The scholar has stressed the palimpsestic and revisionary complexity of the claim as follows: "Such a post-age, like all postage, is reinscribed, written over".

<sup>6</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Third Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 30. Italics added.

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006 [1999]).

<sup>8</sup> I refer to W. B. Worthen's article, "Disciplines of the Text/Sites of Performance", *TDR*, 39.1 (1995), 13-28.

<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text", in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 162. John Glavin, *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1999). See also Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Derek Attridge, "Once More with Feeling: Art, Affect and Performance", *Textual Practice*, 25.2 (2011), 329-343.

<sup>11</sup> Della Pollock, "Performing Writing", in Phelan and Lane, eds., *The Ends of Performance*, 79. Italics added.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Amerika, "Expanding the Concept of Writing: Notes on Net Art, Digital Narrative and Viral Ethics", *Leonardo*, 37.1 (2004), 9. See also his *Remixthebook* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 2011).

<sup>13</sup> See, among others, Stuart Moulthrop, "Travelling in the Breakdown Lane: A Principle of Resistance for Hypertext", *Mosaic*, 28.4 (1995), 55-77. See also Lucia Esposito, "The Body and the Text: Performance in Cultural and Literary Studies", *Alicante Journal of English Studies*, 26 (2013), 27-43.

<sup>14</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004 [1996]), ix.

<sup>15</sup> Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

with computers", thus "becoming more performative".<sup>12</sup> In the age of cultural remix, readers of a book (as well as spectators of any play or artwork) are called increasingly to act, behave, or perform as 'inter-actors' making their own choices and finding their own way through the dynamic and open arrangement of the texts as 'performance spaces'.<sup>13</sup>

Ubiquitously invoked in the fluid 'post-age' scenario of global and digital interactions, the conceptual network of performance entails, in Marvin Carlson's words, "not just doing or even re-doing, but a self-consciousness about doing and re-doing on the part of both performers and spectators",<sup>14</sup> thus calling attention to a heightened or even exasperated awareness of both readers and spectators. If the two exergues from Woolf's last novel, published posthumously in 1941, seem already to strike a cautionary note against any facile claim to audience's participation, it is only in the wake of the performance turn briefly outlined so far that a rising number of studies have turned to 'the spectatorial' question, a question as slippery as it is essential. As Gareth White has recently summarised with reference to the theatre, but also pointing to a larger cultural scene, audience participation may prove a mixed blessing:

There are few things in the theatre that are more despised than audience participation. The prospect of audience participation makes people fearful; the use of audience participation makes people embarrassed, not only for themselves but for the theatre makers who choose to inflict it on their audiences.

This is true not only among theatre's traditionalists, but also among those with broad horizons, aficionados of theatre informed by a century of experiments with theatre form, by the influence of 'performance' practices originating in fine art, and by an understanding of non-western theatre traditions. Audience participation is still often seen as one of the most misconceived, unproductive and excruciating of the avant-garde's blind alleys, or otherwise as evidence of the childish crassness of popular performance.

Meanwhile techniques, practices and innovations that ask for the activity of audience members and that alter the conventions of performance and audience relationships proliferate and garner critical and popular support.<sup>15</sup>

In light of the theoretical framework sketched above, the present issue of *Anglistica AION* attempts at offering insights into the fractious, contested concept of 'participation' as it has emerged from the recent cross-fertilisation of literary and cultural studies with an array of performance theories and practices. In particular, it aims to investigate how a critical focus on the 'travelling' and interstitial concepts of performance and performativity can help to reframe, revise and challenge existing notions of publics and audiences (both as spectators and as readers). The very title chosen for this collection suggests a trio of keywords – attention, agency, affect – which represent the privileged, albeit problematic indicators of audience participation on one hand, and on the other highlight the character – both elusive and situated – of any spectatorial act as a flowing process whose limits are hard to pin down. Obviously, each of such terms also evokes a constellation of related ideas, agendas and anxieties due to the overlapping of all the different cultural theories and practices mentioned so far. For instance, the call to 'attention' has

---

long been a priority of any avant-garde project vs. the homogenising effects of a consumer-oriented culture through the various stages of modernity and its fraught legacy; whereas ‘agency’ immediately triggers a more nuanced scenario informed by postcolonial and minorities discourse in which any cultural act is no longer analysed through clear-cut dichotomies but is deeply enmeshed in the hybrid space and translational potential of the contingent. Similarly, the requisite of bodily attention vs. the canon of normative logo-centrism has been deconstructed and reconfigured in more holistic terms in favour of the emotional and affective capabilities at stake in any cultural reception. The contributions published here reflect, each with their distinctive concerns and specific case studies, a limited but significant sample of the richness and variety of the inter- or trans-disciplinary dialogue tensely taking place among different artistic and critical perspectives on the issue of performing audiences. Ultimately, they all contribute to the further unfolding of lines of entanglement amid attention, agency and affect from their own specific research perspective. Ranging from installation artworks and reality shows to photography and antithetical forms of theatre, including Deaf performances and embodied narrative, all the contributions engage – to a lesser or greater degree – with the hybrid and vulnerable space of performances’ fruition as a potential translational catalyst between ‘re-creative’ intention and political and social action at large.

While the title of the present issue alludes to the privileged keywords for this investigation of audience participation, the sections discriminate among the conceptual dilemmas discussed in the essays. The first section revolves around the ‘interstices’ between art and matter, body and technology, memory and erasure as they are brought to the fore in two forceful cases of site-specific installation: *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, presented by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller at DOCUMENTA 13 (2012) in Kassel, and Rory Macbeth’s spray paint installation, *Utopia* (2006). The former is discussed by Andreas Hudelist and Elena Pilipets in the wake of the recent debate on ‘relational’ art and accordingly situated as an ‘in-between’ frame of media and space which blends the affective with the performative and the visual with the material. This is followed by Marco Pustianaz’s essay which, drawing on affect theory and Rancière’s radical notion of “aesthetic regime”,<sup>16</sup> interprets Macbeth’s act of copying the text of Thomas More’s *Utopia* on the walls of a derelict building destined to demolition as a ‘dissensual site’, powerfully engaging the contingent and performative nature of the literary and its suppressed ties with event, affect, and *aesthesis*.

The central section has a distinctive focus on all kinds of real and figurative ‘transactions’ between the stage and the audience, theatricality and performativity, illusion and reality, role-playing and social roles – especially in the case of works which stage the very process of reception and participation. Thus, the essay by Lucia Esposito highlights the interplay of traditional pre-scripted roles and the parodic outbreak of a chaotic anti-conventionality as it unfolds in Tom Stoppard’s one-act comedy, *The Real Inspector Hound* – written in 1968 in reaction to the first experimental wave of happenings. A reflective ‘inspecting’ approach to the role and

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).



---

agency of the audience is also at work in the contribution by Amaya Fernández-Menicucci on the growing popularity of TLC reality show, *19 Kids and Counting*, based on a Christian fundamentalist family, the Duggars. The unexpected success of the series offers an intriguing case study to investigate the delicate negotiation at stake among producers, performers and spectators while assessing to what extent the Duggars' identity is constructed on and off stage in a succession of performative acts against and for the expectations of both mainstream and alternative viewers.

Orality, physicality and affect dominate the section on the risky 'exposures' of body and writing. Starting from the intrinsically performative and theatrical character of Deaf culture, Elena Intorcia underlines the powerful corporeal expressivity of sign language literature (through the poets-performers' fluid movements of face, hands, head and chest) and the contrasting effects of digital technologies on the composition, transmission and reception of a type of literature which was remarkably tied to a 'live' audience. If in Deaf performances it is the body itself which becomes writing, Giuseppe De Riso's discussion of the recent novel by Geetanjali Shree's, *The Empty Space* (2011), shows how a 'haptic' writing is 'made flesh' by virtue of its extraordinary demands on the reader's bodily perceptions. Drawing on affect theory and the deconstruction of performative acts, the narration of a terroristic attack is explored as a sort of relocation of that traumatic event from its unidentified geographical place to the very body of the reading public.

The journal's traditional section devoted to 'discussion, debate, dissent' here hosts the essay by Sue Lovell and Teone Reinthal on the nexus of performativity, agency and affect as they are 'embodied' and interrelated in experimental forms of improvised performance, and Annalisa Oboe's intriguing conversation with South-African photographer Pieter Hugo. The latter focuses on the performative potentialities of photography and on his viewers' vexed response to his bold combination of activism and provocation.

The two reviews which close the present issue further dwell on interstices, transactions and exposures. Natale's review shows how the joint publication by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013), engages with the performative arena of identity formation and resistance in social conflict, while dismantling the neo-liberal brutal logic of property and ownership as the constitutive features of subjectivity. With Amideo's review the focus shifts to a sort of 'performative' experiment of conference proceedings arranged by Marco Pustianaz, Giulia Palladini, and Annalisa Sacchi as editors of *Archivi affettivi. Un catalogo/ Affective Archives. A Catalogue*. Their collection deliberately alludes – in its hybrid and dynamic layout and structure – to a radical shift from the common notion of archive with its centralised acquisitive underpinnings in the past to the risky openness and contamination of a pluralistic and relational modality virtually committed to the future.

A firm commitment to the transformational power of theatre has always marked Tim Crouch's work as one of the most interesting cases of British playwriting of the new millennium.<sup>17</sup> In conclusion, I would like to recall a piece this forceful

<sup>17</sup> See, among others, the section on Tim Crouch in Dan Rebellato, ed., *Modern British Playwriting 2000-2009: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 125-144.

theatre-maker has recently co-authored and performed with his long-life friend and collaborator Andy Smith. The play, *What happens to the hope at the end of the evening* – premiered at the Almeida Festival in July 2013 – stages the meeting of two old friends after a long while in a manner which continuously implicates the spectators in a tangle of embarrassment, hostility, familiarity and solidarity. Eventually, the hope reclaimed in the title is not only about ‘these two friends’ but about the revolutionary project of another ‘living theatre’ also off stage. As Andy reads to the audience:<sup>18</sup>

I want to start a revolution here.

I met this woman in a bookshop once. I was reading a book about The Living Theatre. She told me she had been at one of their performances in the sixties. She told me how, at the end of the performance, the audience were led out onto the street and encouraged to shout ‘Paradise Now! Paradise Now! Paradise Now!’<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Andy ‘sits’ on the left and ‘reads’ from a script, often addressing the spectators like a ‘performer’ or a lecturer avoiding his friend’s gaze. Tim ‘speaks’ only to him and nervously ‘wanders’ the stage on the right. Their ‘contrapuntal’ attitudes thus trigger a trenchant sense of proximity and distance with the audience.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Crouch and Andy Smith, *What Happens to the Hope at the End of the Evening*, in Tim Crouch, *Adler & Gibb* (London: Oberon Books, 2014), 46.



Fig. 1: Tim Crouch and Andy Smith, *What Happens to the Hope at the End of the Evening*, 2013. Photo credit Katherine Leedale. Courtesy of Tim Crouch.

\*\*\*

On a closing note I would like to thank Anna Notaro for her invaluable assistance and support while editing this issue.