

Theatre, Networked Performance, and Notions of ‘Democratised’ Spectatorship

20 Minute Paper Presentation, Telematic Encounters Panel, 18 June 2015

The potential to cultivate new relationships with spectators has long been cited as a primary motivator for those using digital technologies to construct networked or telematic performances or para-performance encounters in which performers and spectators come together in virtual – or at least virtually augmented – spaces and places. Today, with Web 2.0 technologies such as social media platforms becoming increasingly ubiquitous, and increasingly easy to use, more and more theatre makers are developing digitally mediated relationships with spectators. Sometimes for the purpose of an aesthetic encounter, sometimes for critical encounter, or sometimes as part of an audience politicisation, development or engagement agenda. Sometimes because this is genuinely an interest, and sometimes because spectators or funding bodies expect at least some engagement via Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. In this paper, I examine peculiarities and paradoxes emerging in some of these efforts to engage spectators via networked performance or para-performance encounters. I use examples ranging from theatre, to performance art, to political activism – from ‘cyberperformances’ on Helen Varley Jamieson’s Upstage Avatar Performance Platform, to Wafaa Bilal’s *Domestic Tension* installation where spectators around the world could use a webcam in a chat room to target him with paintballs while he was in residence in a living room set up in a gallery for a week, as a comment on use of drone technology in war, to Liz Crow’s *Bedding Out* where she invited people to physically and virtually join her in her bedroom to discuss the impact of an anti-disabled austerity politics emerging in her country, to Dislife’s use of holograms of disabled people popping up in disabled parking spaces when able bodied drivers attempted to pull into them, amongst others. I note the frequency with which these performance practices deploy discourses of democratisation, participation, power and agency to argue that these technologies assist in positioning spectators as co-creators actively engaged in the evolution of a performance (and, in politicised pieces that point to racism, sexism, or ableism, pushing spectators to reflect on their agency in that dramatic or daily-cum-dramatic performance of prejudice). I investigate how a range of issues – from the scenographic challenges in deploying networked technologies for both participant and bystander audiences others have already noted, to the siloisation of aesthetic, critical and audience activation activities on networked technologies, to conventionalised dramaturgies of response informed by power, politics and impression management that play out in online as much as offline performances, to the high personal, social and professional stakes involved in participating in a form where spectators responses are almost always documented, recorded and re-represented to secondary and tertiary sets of spectators via the circulation into new networks social media platforms so readily facilitate – complicate discourses of democratic co-creativity associated with networked performance and para-performance activities.

Bree Hadley is Head of Postgraduate Coursework Studies in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. Her research investigates the construction of identity in contemporary, pop cultural and public sphere performance practices, and concentrates in particular on the way spectators act as co-creators in such performance practices. Hadley's research has appeared in many scholarly journals, including *Performance Research*, *About Performance*, *Liminalities*, *Australasian Drama Studies*, *Brolga: An Australian Journal About Dance*, *Journal of Arts & Communities*, *M/C Media and Culture Journal*, *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, *Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management*, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, in books, newspapers and online publication platforms such as *The Australian*, *ArtsHub* and *Australian Theatre Online*, and most recently in her book on 'Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship - Unconscious Performers' (Palgrave MacMillan 2014). Hadley is currently working on a book on Theatre, Social Media and the Democratisation of Spectatorship, which examines aesthetic, critical and audience development uses of social media platforms in theatre in tandem. Hadley is also currently President of the Australasian Association for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies (ADSA), a Director of Performance Studies international (PSi).