

Digital Performance Art In The Post-Pandemic Cultural Landscape

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an unprecedented migration of performance art from physical to digital spaces, compelling artists, institutions, and audiences to reconceptualize the ontological foundations of live performance. This paper examines the transformation of performance art in the post-pandemic era, analyzing how digital mediation has altered the phenomenology of liveness, the politics of embodiment, and the economics of artistic production. Through analysis of landmark digital performances by Marina Abramovic, the National Theatre's NT Live initiative, and emerging artists working in virtual reality and livestream formats, the article argues that the pandemic did not merely accelerate pre-existing trends toward digitization but catalyzed a fundamental renegotiation of what constitutes presence, participation, and performance in the twenty-first century. Drawing upon performance studies, media theory, and phenomenological philosophy, this paper maps the contours of a new performance paradigm that challenges the binary opposition between "live" and "mediated" art.

Keywords: - Performance Art, Digital Culture, Liveness, Pandemic, Virtual Reality, Embodiment, Mediatization

I. INTRODUCTION

When theaters, galleries, and concert halls closed their doors in March 2020, the performing arts faced an existential crisis. Performance, more than any other art form, has been defined by the co-presence of performer and audience in shared space and time. Philip Auslander (2008) and Peggy Phelan (1993) famously debated the ontological status of liveness—whether live performance possesses a unique, irreducible quality that distinguishes it from mediated reproduction—but both assumed that the question pertained to the relative value of two coexisting modes of cultural production. The pandemic eliminated one of those modes entirely, at least temporarily, transforming the live/mediated binary from a theoretical debate into a material constraint.

The performing arts responded with remarkable speed and creativity. Within weeks of the initial lockdowns, theaters were streaming archival recordings, orchestras were performing via Zoom, dancers were choreographing for smartphone cameras, and performance artists were experimenting with livestream, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) platforms (Bench, 2020). What began as emergency adaptation quickly evolved into sustained experimentation, as artists discovered that digital spaces offered not merely a diminished substitute for live performance but a distinct medium with its own aesthetic possibilities and limitations.

This paper examines the legacy of this transformation in the post-pandemic period—the years from 2022 onward, as physical venues reopened but digital performance practices continued to evolve. The central argument is that the pandemic catalyzed a paradigm shift in performance culture, one that cannot be undone by the resumption of in-person events. The binary opposition between live and digital performance, which structured both artistic practice and theoretical discourse for decades, has been replaced by a more fluid, hybrid model in which physical and virtual modes of presence coexist, interact, and mutually inform one another.

II. THEORIZING LIVENESS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The concept of "liveness" has been central to performance theory since the field's emergence in the 1960s and 1970s. Phelan (1993) articulated an influential ontological claim: performance's being lies in its disappearance; it exists only in the present tense and cannot be reproduced without becoming something other than performance. On this view, the live event possesses an auratic quality—to borrow Benjamin's term—that is constitutively dependent on the unrepeatable co-presence of bodies in space.

Auslander (2008) challenged this position, arguing that liveness is not an ontological property of performance but a historically contingent category produced in relation to recording technologies. Before the invention of phonography and cinema, Auslander noted, there was no concept of "liveness" because there was no "mediatized" counterpart against which to define it. Liveness, on this account, is an ideological construction that serves the interests of cultural institutions invested in the prestige and scarcity of the live event.

The pandemic disrupted both positions. Phelan's ontology of disappearance seemed to be confirmed by the widespread sense that digital performances, however technically accomplished, lacked something essential—the frisson of shared physical presence, the unpredictability of the live moment, the embodied intimacy of performer and audience breathing the same air. Yet Auslander's constructivism was also vindicated, as millions of viewers reported genuine experiences of emotional engagement, aesthetic pleasure, and communal participation in digital performances that would, on Phelan's account, not qualify as performance at all.

A more adequate theoretical framework might be found in what Steve Dixon (2007) has called "digital performance"—a category that encompasses not merely the digital mediation of conventional performance but the creation of new performative forms that are native to digital environments. Dixon's framework allows for multiple, overlapping modes of liveness: the temporal liveness of synchronous transmission, the spatial liveness of virtual co-presence, the social liveness of real-time audience interaction, and the affective liveness of emotional engagement regardless of physical proximity. Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concept of "remediation"—the process by which new media refashion prior media forms—provides a complementary theoretical lens, enabling analysis of how digital performance both remediates theatrical conventions and generates distinctly new aesthetic possibilities that exceed those conventions.

III. CASE STUDIES: THREE MODES OF DIGITAL PERFORMANCE

Marina Abramovic's 2020 project, performed during lockdown, exemplified the adaptation of durational performance art to digital formats. Abramovic, whose earlier work *The Artist Is Present* (2010) at MoMA was predicated on the physical co-presence of artist and viewer, created a series of meditative exercises designed for remote participation. Viewers were invited to engage with Abramovic through video link, maintaining extended eye contact with the artist through their screens. The project raised fundamental questions about whether the phenomenological intensity that characterized *The Artist Is Present* could survive the transition to digital mediation.

The National Theatre's NT Live program, which had been streaming filmed performances to cinemas since 2009, became a lifeline for theater audiences during the pandemic. The program's success—viewership increased by over 1,500% during 2020—demonstrated that high-quality filmed theater could attract massive audiences and generate significant revenue (Barker, 2013). However, critics noted that NT Live's fixed-camera aesthetic, designed for cinema projection, differed fundamentally from the experience of live theater, flattening the spatial dynamics of the stage and eliminating the audience's freedom to direct their own attention (Reason, 2016).

Perhaps the most radical innovations emerged from artists working with VR and immersive technologies. Companies such as Punchdrunk, known for their immersive theatrical productions, developed VR experiences that exploited the medium's capacity for spatial immersion and interactive storytelling. Punchdrunk's immersive works have consistently pushed the boundaries of theatrical form, creating environments in which audiences navigate narrative spaces autonomously rather than passively observing from fixed seats. Their digital experiments during the pandemic extended this philosophy into virtual space, using binaural audio and interactive design to create intimate, solitary theatrical experiences that could be accessed remotely. Unlike NT Live's reproduction of proscenium-stage conventions, these works were conceived from the outset as digital art, exploiting the affordances of interactive media rather than compensating for the limitations of remote access (Machon, 2013).

IV. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND MACHINE PERFORMANCE

The integration of artificial intelligence into performance art represents one of the most significant and contested developments in contemporary performance culture. AI-generated performance takes multiple forms: interactive installations in which audiences converse with AI agents, choreographic works in which movement is generated or modulated by machine learning algorithms, and theatrical pieces in which AI-synthesized voices and images are deployed alongside or in place of human performers. These works push the ontological boundaries of performance theory well beyond the live/mediated binary that has structured debate in the field (Salter, 2010).

Early experiments in AI performance, such as those conducted by Norman White and his collaborators in the 1980s and 1990s, demonstrated the capacity of computational systems to generate responsive, unpredictable, and aesthetically

engaging behaviors. Contemporary machine learning systems far exceed these early experiments in their capacity for nuanced, contextually sensitive response, enabling the creation of AI performers that can sustain extended dialogues, adapt their behavior to audience responses, and generate outputs that appear, to many observers, indistinguishable from human performance (Manovich, 2001). These capabilities raise profound questions about agency, intentionality, and the definition of performance: can a machine perform in the full sense that performance theory has elaborated? Does performance require the presence of a subject capable of risk, vulnerability, and genuine encounter with an other?

Deepfake technology adds a further layer of complexity by enabling the digital reanimation of deceased performers and the superimposition of one performer's appearance onto another's body. While these technologies have primarily been associated with disinformation and non-consensual intimate imagery, their applications in performance raise genuinely interesting artistic and ethical questions. Projects that have used deepfake technology to stage performances by historical figures—political leaders, artists, musicians—offer new possibilities for historical imagination and critical commentary while simultaneously raising serious concerns about consent, authenticity, and the integrity of the historical record. Kozel (2007) has argued that responsible AI performance practice must prioritize the ethical dimensions of these technologies, developing frameworks for consent, attribution, and accountability that are adequate to their unprecedented capabilities.

V. GAMING ENVIRONMENTS AS PERFORMANCE VENUES

The emergence of video game environments as sites of performance represents one of the most unexpected developments in post-pandemic performance culture. While artists such as Blast Theory had been experimenting with game engines as performance platforms since the early 2000s, the pandemic dramatically accelerated the migration of performance into gaming spaces, as artists sought new venues for mass audience engagement that did not require physical co-presence. The most spectacular instances of this migration were the large-scale concerts staged within the popular game Fortnite: Travis Scott's Astronomical event in April 2020 was attended by over 27 million concurrent viewers, and Ariana Grande's Rift Tour in August 2021 attracted a comparable audience (Jenkins, 2006).

These events represented a genuinely novel form of performance that combined elements of concert, film, video game, and communal social experience in ways that existing genre categories cannot adequately describe. Audiences did not merely watch a performance; they participated as embodied avatars in a shared virtual environment, moving through the space, interacting with other participants, and experiencing the performance from multiple angles and distances. The resulting experience had qualities of both theater—in its communal, synchronous character—and cinema—in its spectacular, image-driven aesthetics—while exceeding both in its interactivity and spatial immediacy (Bolter & Grusin, 1999).

The critical reception of gaming performances has been mixed, with some scholars dismissing them as commercial spectacle rather than genuine artistic practice, and others arguing that they represent a significant democratization of performance that makes high-quality cultural experiences accessible to populations who have historically been excluded from traditional performance venues. Nelson (2013) has called for practice-based research methodologies that can evaluate such hybrid forms on their own terms rather than measuring them against the aesthetic standards of established genres. The challenge for performance studies is to develop analytical frameworks adequate to forms that blur the boundaries between performer and spectator, production and consumption, art and entertainment.

VI. THE POLITICS OF ACCESS AND EXCLUSION

The digitization of performance has frequently been celebrated as a democratizing force, expanding access to cultural experiences that were previously limited by geography, mobility, and economics. During the pandemic, audiences in rural areas, disabled individuals who faced barriers to physical attendance, and viewers in the Global South gained unprecedented access to performances by major institutions and artists. This expansion of access represents a genuine achievement that should not be minimized.

However, digital access is itself unevenly distributed. The "digital divide"—the gap between those who have reliable access to high-speed internet, appropriate devices, and digital literacy, and those who do not—maps onto existing inequalities of class, race, geography, and age (van Dijk, 2020). The assumption that digital performance is universally accessible obscures the material infrastructure upon which it depends: broadband networks, computing hardware, electricity, and the technical knowledge required to navigate digital platforms.

Moreover, the economics of digital performance raise troubling questions about the value of artistic labor. During the pandemic, many institutions made performances available for free or at nominal cost, establishing audience expectations of cheap or free digital content that have proven difficult to reverse. The challenge of monetizing digital performance in a cultural landscape dominated by free platforms such as YouTube and TikTok threatens to further erode the already precarious economic position of performing artists.

Disability studies scholarship has highlighted both the transformative potential and the limitations of digital performance for disabled audiences and artists. For many disabled individuals, the transition to digital formats removed barriers that had previously prevented full participation in performance culture: the absence of inaccessible physical venues, the ability to control the sensory environment of reception, and the elimination of the logistical challenges associated with attending live events. At the same time, digital platforms introduce their own accessibility challenges—interface designs that assume standard patterns of vision and motor function, audio-visual content that lacks adequate

captioning or audio description, and virtual reality experiences that require physical movements that may be impossible for some users (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). A genuinely inclusive digital performance culture requires ongoing attention to these challenges, treating accessibility not as an afterthought but as a fundamental dimension of artistic and technological design.

VII. EMBODIMENT, PRESENCE, AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE SCREEN

The phenomenological dimension of digital performance—the question of how bodies are experienced and represented in digital spaces—deserves sustained attention. Performance studies has long emphasized the centrality of embodiment to performance: the performer's body is not merely a vehicle for expression but the very medium through which meaning is produced and received (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). The transition to digital formats introduces what Cormac Power (2008) has called a "crisis of presence"—a disruption of the phenomenological conditions that enable the embodied encounter between performer and audience.

This crisis is not merely a matter of technological limitation but involves a fundamental reorganization of perceptual experience. When we watch a performance on screen, our engagement is primarily visual and auditory; the proprioceptive, olfactory, and tactile dimensions of live performance are absent. The screen frames the performer's body as an image, flattening its three-dimensionality and severing it from the spatial context in which it acts. The viewer's body, meanwhile, is located in an environment—a living room, a bedroom, a commuter train—that bears no relation to the performance space, producing a perceptual disjunction between the world of the performance and the world of reception (Causey, 2006).

VR technologies partially address this disjunction by immersing the viewer in a simulated performance space, but they introduce new phenomenological complications. The VR headset isolates the viewer from their physical environment, creating an experience of solitary immersion that differs fundamentally from the shared, communal experience of live theater. The viewer's body is present in virtual space as an avatar or disembodied point of view, raising questions about the ontological status of virtual embodiment and its relationship to the corporeal body (Dixon, 2007). Susan Kozel (2007) has developed a phenomenological account of embodiment in digital performance that draws upon the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to argue that the body's capacities for proprioception, kinesthesia, and tactile awareness are not simply absent in virtual environments but redistributed and transformed—present in attenuated or reconfigured forms that require new modes of perceptual attention.

Haptic technologies—devices that simulate the sensation of touch through vibration, pressure, or electrical stimulation—represent the most ambitious attempt to address the tactile deficit of digital performance. While current haptic devices are crude by comparison with the complexity of human touch, research in this area is advancing rapidly, and some performance artists have begun incorporating haptic wearables into their digital work, enabling remote audiences to experience physical sensations correlated with events in the performance. Anne Munster (2006) has argued that these developments represent not merely a technological supplement to digital performance but a fundamental reconfiguration of the aesthetics of presence—one that challenges the ocularcentrism of conventional screen media and opens new possibilities for embodied engagement in virtual spaces.

VIII. HYBRID FUTURES: TOWARD A POST-BINARY PERFORMANCE CULTURE

As venues have reopened and audiences have returned to physical performance spaces, the question is not whether digital performance will replace live performance—it will not—but how the two modes will coexist and interact in the post-pandemic landscape. Several models have already emerged. "Hybrid" performances, in which a live event is simultaneously streamed to remote audiences, have become standard practice for many institutions. "Extended" performances use digital technologies to augment live events with interactive elements accessible via smartphones or wearable devices. "Distributed" performances take place simultaneously across multiple physical and virtual locations, creating networks of co-present audiences (Benford & Giannachi, 2011).

These hybrid forms require new aesthetic criteria. The conventions of theater criticism, developed in relation to the proscenium stage, are inadequate to the evaluation of works that unfold across multiple media, involve audience interactivity, and resist the distinction between performer and spectator. Similarly, the institutional structures of the performing arts—rehearsal processes, production schedules, venue configurations, funding models—must adapt to accommodate forms that do not fit neatly into existing categories (Bay-Cheng, 2010).

Josie Machon (2013) has argued that immersive performance—whether physical or digital—represents the most significant innovation in contemporary theater precisely because it challenges the passive, contemplative relationship between audience and performance that the proscenium stage has naturalized. In immersive work, the audience is not a collective of spectators observing a representation from a fixed position but a community of participants actively inhabiting and co-creating a performance environment. The digital extensions of immersive theater that have emerged from the pandemic period extend this participatory logic into virtual space, creating possibilities for collective experience that transcend the physical limitations of any single venue or geographic location.

IX. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic did not invent digital performance, but it accelerated, intensified, and democratized experimentation with digital forms to an unprecedented degree. The legacy of this transformation is not a replacement of live performance by digital substitutes but a fundamental expansion of the conceptual and material territory of the performing arts. Performance in the post-pandemic era is characterized by hybridity, fluidity, and the productive interpenetration of physical and virtual modes of presence.

The theoretical frameworks developed within performance studies must evolve to keep pace with these developments. The binary opposition between liveness and mediatization, which has structured debate in the field for decades, is no longer adequate to the complexity of contemporary performance practice. What is needed is a relational ontology of performance that recognizes multiple, overlapping forms of presence and participation, and that evaluates digital and hybrid works on their own terms rather than measuring them against an idealized standard of physical co-presence. The post-pandemic performing arts are not diminished but expanded, and the challenge for scholars, critics, and practitioners is to develop the conceptual tools adequate to this new reality.

The questions raised by AI performance, gaming environments, haptic technologies, and hybrid forms are not merely aesthetic but ethical and political: questions about the definition of the human, the distribution of cultural access, the economic conditions of artistic labor, and the forms of community that performance can create and sustain. Addressing these questions will require not only new theoretical frameworks but new institutional structures, funding models, and modes of artistic collaboration adequate to the hybrid, distributed, and technologically mediated character of performance in the twenty-first century. The performing arts have always been an art of encounter—of presence meeting presence in a shared moment. The challenge of the post-pandemic era is to expand our understanding of what presence can mean and what forms of encounter are possible, while remaining committed to the ethical and political stakes of that encounter.

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