

“Who is there?”

Performative distance and the intermedial audience in cyberformance

“Quem está aí?”

Distância performativa e público intermedial na ciberformance

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Abstract

Cyberformance, a hybrid practice mixing physical and virtual environments, challenges traditional notions of audience participation and performative distance. This essay investigates how intermediality shapes the dynamics of these performances, leading to the emergence of an intermedial audience. Drawing on classical theories from Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, and contemporary scholars like Freda Chapple, Chiel Kattenbelt, and cyberartist Helen Varley Jamieson, the essay bridges historical and theoretical perspectives and practical examples of cyberformance.

The paradigm shift enabled by internet technologies allows for convergence between artists and audience, transforming individual artistic creations into collaborative processes. Hamlet's question “Who is there?” symbolizes the enduring awareness of the audience, now reframed within digital and mixed-reality contexts. This article explores how cyberformance negotiates interaction, authorship and agency, examining the balance between performer control and audience participation.

Keywords: Intermediality – Intermedial audience – Performative distance – Cyberformance

Resumo

A ciberformance, uma prática híbrida que mistura ambientes físicos e virtuais, desafia as noções tradicionais de participação do público e de distância performativa. Este artigo investiga como a intermedialidade molda a dinâmica destas performances, levando ao surgimento de um público intermedial. Baseando-se nas teorias clássicas de Bertolt Brecht e Antonin Artaud, em académicos contemporâneos como Freda Chapple e Chiel Kattenbelt e na prática da ciberartista

Helen Varley Jamieson, este ensaio estabelece uma ponte entre perspectivas históricas e teóricas e exemplos práticos de ciberformance.

A mudança de paradigma possibilitada pelas tecnologias da internet permite uma convergência entre artistas e público, transformando criações artísticas individuais em processos colaborativos. A pergunta de Hamlet “Quem está aí?” simboliza a consciência duradoura do público, agora reformulada dentro dos contextos digitais e de realidade mista. Este artigo explora como a ciberformance negocia interação, autoria e agência, examinando o equilíbrio entre o controle do performer e a participação do público.

Palavras-chave: Intermedialidade – Público Intermedial – Distância Performativa – Ciberformance

Author’s Short Bio

Clara Gomes is a performer, filmmaker, journalist, university lecturer and full integrated researcher at ICNOVA – New University of Lisbon, where she presented her PhD. thesis entitled *Ciberformance - a performance em ambientes e mundos virtuais* [*Cyberformance – performance in virtual environments and worlds*] (published by Leya, 2015). She conducts research on the use of virtual platforms and multimodal interfaces for the arts. She is involved in the mixed reality performance project Senses Places and in the development of the cyberformance platform UpStage. Some of her video-art works have been exhibited internationally in several galleries, museums and festivals.

| Introduction

Cyberformance is a narrower category of digital performance, which is defined for taking place through digital means. However, cyberformance happens *live* in cyberspace – its performers and audience are geographically dispersed, sometimes around the globe, in physical venues, but endowed with a virtual presence online. It is a risky activity, dealing with post-modern subjects and is liminal in its experimentation. It uses different sources and is mainly digital and dependent on the computer (Gomes 2015). It is an example of a hybrid multimodal practice that coalesces actual and virtual reflecting upon the technological conditions of its own production and taking distance communication in general, and performance art in particular, way further. These experiments that have been developing for over thirty years can serve as an example for mainstream art and for all those who are now embarking on the use of virtual environments in the arts and beyond.

The artist Helen Varley Jamieson created the term “cyberformance” which I adopted in my research since it encompasses the performative actions that for the last decades have bridged the physical world and the Internet, connecting performers and geographically distributed audiences. Early chat rooms and text-based gaming environments were the first

spaces utilized by cyberperformers, who later created specific platforms or appropriated existing Multi User Virtual Environments (MUVE), like virtual worlds, and even adapted gaming and medical devices to their practices (Gomes 2015).

Since cyberformance takes place in live actions that mix virtual and actual environments, it deals with participation issues such as performative distance. This essay poses the question of how much distance there is – or is even desired to exist – in this type of intermedial performance and what kind of audience(s) is/are created in the process. Hence this text explores how intermediality affects performative distance creating an intermedial audience in the case of mixed reality performances such as cyberperformances.

I draw on Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud to approach the complexities of the performance-audience dynamic, followed by contemporary views on participatory experiences that question notions of interaction and even the extent to which the audience desires authorship and agency. My analysis extends to the challenges faced in cyberformance, highlighting the tension between preserving control and embracing audience agency in a process that Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi called *orchestration*. Such is undertaken by exploring the establishment of different levels of openness or constriction in the performer-audience relationship.

When scrutinizing certain cyberperformances from this perspective, this essay adopts Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt's version of intermediality to explain the notion of the *intermedial audience*, emphasizing the convergence of physical and online audiences in cyberformance. The idea is explored further by using Helen Varley Jamieson's position, which takes the audience to be a dynamic entity existing in a liminal space in between the physical and virtual realms.

| The Performative Distance

Antonin Artaud's concept of the Theatre of Cruelty (1938), called for the cancelation of the distance between the spectator and the actor, the audience and the stage. Both would be participants in the event, being integrated into the process that would take place within the body of Man, to the detriment of verbal theatre. This idea has been inspiring theatre, dance, and performance for decades, implying the dissolution of performative distance. However, is this desirable in today's cyberformance? To what extent should this distance be shortened? And to what extent should the performer control the audience?

“Who's there?”, the opening line in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, shows that in traditional theatre there has always been an awareness of the existence of the audience as well as need for it to exist – if nothing else, for commercial reasons. However, deeper concerns about the audience/performer distance began in the early 20th century (cf. Artaud, Brecht, Piscator, Meyerhold) and have developed, in the last decades, around the theme of participation with the advent of the Internet (cf. Auslander, Blau, Bennet, Bruns).

Although as early as 1915 the Futurist Enrico Prampollini predicted that the audience would become the actor, it was with the Russian Formalists and the concept of *ostranenie* – or estrangement – and especially with Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* – or distancing (1949), that the separation between actor and audience became the focus of attention. In these well-known theoretical perspectives, the audience is invited to maintain a certain distance from the work to comprehend its illusory nature and develop a critical perspective. Despite the desire to make the audience cognitively active in the reception of the work, neither Bertolt Brecht nor the Formalists aimed to eliminate the physical separation between the producer of the work and the audience.

Throughout the 20th century, from the Dadaists through Happenings, the Living Theatre, and Live Art, to more extreme contemporary experiences, the coincidence between performer and audience has never truly been achieved. For some it is indeed an impossibility, since performance only exists in this distancing. Susan Bennet (1997) asserts that the distance is intrinsic to art; Philip Auslander states that “performance is based on difference, on separation and fragmentation, not on unity” (1999, 57), emphasizing that live performance itself can only occur when there is a gap between performer and spectator; in the same spirit, Richard Schechner (1998) argues that theatre implies a separation from everyday life and a performer/audience relationship (authors qtd. by Jamieson 2008, 70).

However, with the advent of the Internet and its artistic applications, the idea that this distance should disappear re-emerged, supported by the medium's fluidity. Scholars such as Janet Murray (2001) and Marie-Laure Ryan (1999) even hypothesized the emergence of interactive dramatic environments in which participants, referred to as “interactors,” would develop their own narratives. However, these perspectives were applied to experiences in which a single individual creates the work in isolation. Consequently, they lack the simultaneous presence and shared temporality that characterize theater and performance. As the artist is not presenting them there can be no question of a gap. In fact, Murray and Ryan,

among others, reduce the interactive experience to the interpretation or aesthetical fruition in the reception of the works online.

| How much agency?

For Helen Varley Jamieson, the first proponent of a definition for cyberperformance and an internet artist with whom I collaborate, cyberperformance maintains the distance between the audience and the performer but always implies their copresence. However, it includes another gap: that which occurs between the codes and conventions of traditional theater audiences (albeit in a state of flux) and an almost hyperactive expectation from some users to not only participate but also have authorship and agency within the work.

For cyberperformance creators like Jamieson, this raises important questions: “[...] how much creative authorship do we want to give away and how much do we want to retain? Do we still want this gap between performer and spectator, and if so, how wide? And, do we still have a choice?” (Jamieson 2008, 71). In cyberperformance, we witness the establishment of different levels of openness or narrowing of this relationship by authors and performers, but also different levels of desire or capability for agency on the part of the audience, which influences the performative distance.



Figure 1 – *Dress the Nation* (2003) by Avatar Body Collision in The Palace.

The audience is in the bottom left corner.

Source: www.creative-catalyst.com/abc/lysis/lysis.html

In a staging of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* using Desktop Theatre on the 2D graphical platform The Palace, in 1997, an avatar from the audience presented itself as Godot, abruptly ending the play since the character is never meant to arrive. In another performance by Avatar Body Collision, *Dress the Nation* (2003), in the same environment, a “palace dweller” decided to erase part of the set, altering the course of the performance and leading to the ejection – or eviction – of his avatar by the performers [Fig. 1].

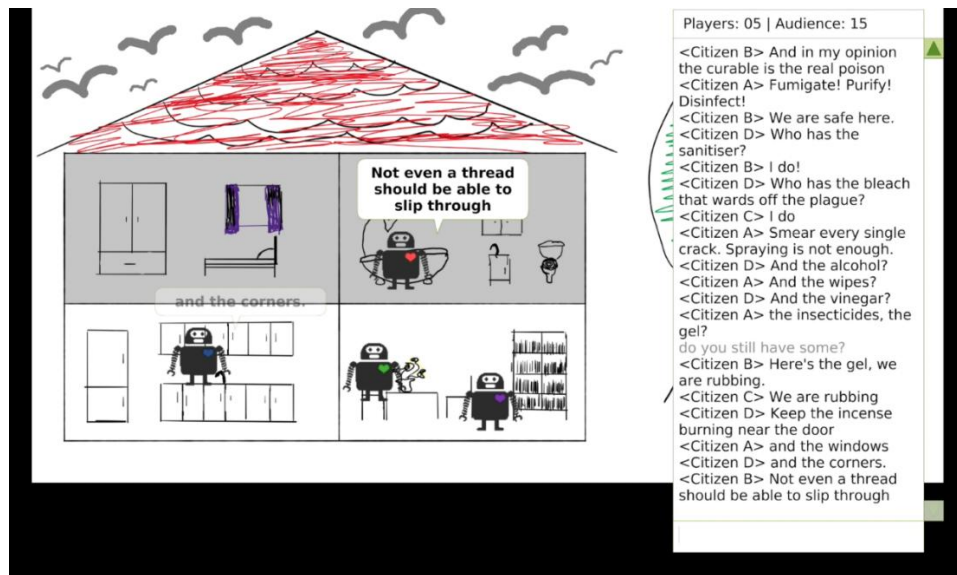


Figure 2 – *Jeux de Massacre* (Gomes, Jamieson, Papagiannouli and Peric 2020-2021).

Based on the homonymous Ionesco play in an allusion to the pandemic. Presented at Magdalena Festival - Bodies on Live (2021) and the Network Music Festival (2020). Avatars perform in the Upstage environment while the audience participates in the chat window.

Written interactions by the audience can be echoed on stage, orally or written.

Source: Clara Gomes

In cyberperformance based on textual interaction with the audience, such as that practiced on the UpStage platform,¹ (e.g. *Jeux de Massacre*, 2020-2021; *Mobilise/Demobilise*, 2021-2024) the performative distance is perfectly delineated by the sole means used for participation, which is text. This was a conscious choice by creators and performers after experiences like those described above, in more open environments. “What Ryan describes as ‘the age-old dream’ of abolishing the differences between author, characters, actors, and spectators [...] is not necessarily a dream shared by everyone,” proclaims Helen Varley Jamieson (2008, 77). Together with other artists that use that platform for cyberperformance, she decided to restrict the

¹<https://upstage.org.nz/>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.

audience participation to the text window. Yet, even when the performers retain control of the action there is always an intrinsic intended experimental element to cyberformance, and audience interventions can end up being disruptive and difficult to integrate into the performance anyway.

Conversely, the audience may not intervene at all. In 2010, in one of the sessions of the ongoing *Senses Places*² project (2010-2025) at the Ler Devagar bookstore gallery in Lisbon, and in the L.E.A. space in Second Life, where I performed with this collective, the online audience, despite being predominantly composed of artists, did not descend into the virtual performance space nor understood that they were being asked to dance with the performers' avatars. Despite the intention of creators and performers to narrow the performative distance, in this case the lack of agency on the part of the audience increased that distance, with participants remaining as lurkers, passive observers.

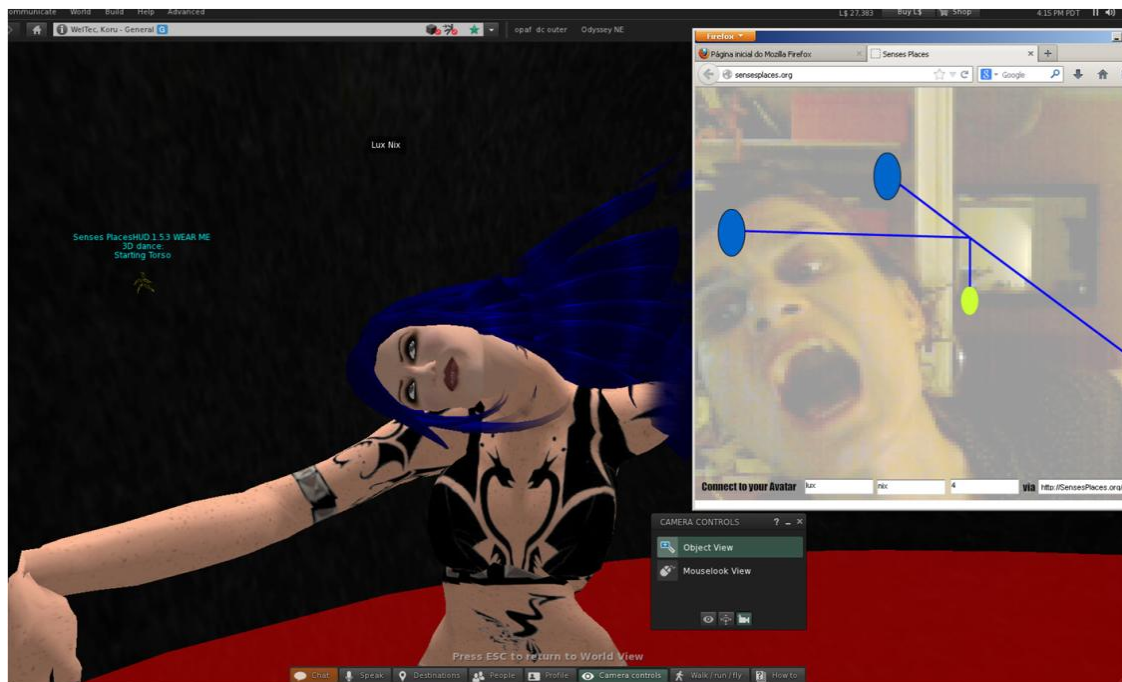


Figure 3 –*Senses Places* (Valverde and Cochrane) ongoing participative mixed reality project (2010-2025) that uses several interfaces (motion tracking, remote gaming consoles, wearables, video streaming) some of which can be used by the audience(s). Here we see my avatar animated by motion tracking with the webcam, in the rehearsal for a performance at ICLI – International Conference on live Interfaces, Universidade Lusófona de Lisboa, June 2022.

Source: Clara Gomes.

² <https://sensesplaces.wordpress.com/>. Accessed 15 Nov.2024.

| Orchestrating the audience

Steve Beresford and Gabriella Giannachi (2011), in relation to mixed reality performances, refer to the action undertaken by creators and performers backstage to shape participants' experiences as "orchestration work." This is carried out by writers, programmers, designers, and directors – the so-called "puppet masters" – in "behind-the-scenes" actions that shape the experience of "participants and players" and its impact on traditional performance roles (Beresford and Giannachi 7). The acknowledgment of orchestration work leads us to the complex question of audience participation. As pointed out earlier, throughout history, in fact since Futurism, past Brecht and well into the experimental performances of the 1960s and 1970s, the role of the passive spectator has been challenged, transforming the audience members into participants or even interactors: "[...] in mixed reality performances, audiences are often encouraged to shift from one role to another within the same work, thereby gaining multiple perspectives on a given experience" (Benford and Giannachi 2011, 13). This characteristic of "command and control" performances – such as those by the group Blast Theory – has attracted criticism regarding the degree of freedom granted to the audience.

Ultimately, in mixed reality performance/game there is greater control exercised over the audience members – who are transformed into players/performers but remain constrained by the rules of the game – and there is less freedom for cocreation than in cyberformance, where there are no levels to surpass, and the rules are minimal and easily subverted. Nonetheless, the issue of orchestrating or guiding the audience is also relevant in cyberformance. What conditions are provided for the spectator/participant to interact? What degree of restriction is imposed on the space/time of the work? On the other hand, does this "orchestration" sometimes fail, with spectators not realizing they can become participants (precisely because there are no fixed rules), thus limiting themselves to a marginal, observational role as lurkers?

| Jamieson's Intermedial Audience

Beyond the performer's intention to remain in control or the audience's capacity for agency, another factor interferes in the relationship between these two parties. Indeed, the intermedial audience exists at the confluence of performers, online audience, and proximal or physical audience, influencing the performative distance. Cyberformance takes place online, on a virtual platform or world, but simultaneously in a physical space, such as a gallery, a theater, or any public or private space like a residence.

These audiences cannot be generalized as homogeneous collectives, just as the traditional theater audience cannot. I agree with Jamieson that it is difficult to align with extreme concepts of the online audience. For example, according to Steve Dixon (2004), participation via computer renders the audience “disembodied” (qtd. by Jamieson 78), a perspective I find illusive because I do not agree with post-human disembodiment; or simply makes them obsolete, according to Marie-Laure Ryan (1997). In fact, an opposition between the concepts of proximal and online audience is not very productive in cyberformance because an audience still exists, but one that needs to be redefined.

Faced with this issue, Jamieson, in her MA dissertation, aptly drew on the concept of intermediality by Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt (2006) to characterize an audience as being open and mediated, just like the type of performance in which it participates. The idea of a mediated audience applies to both physical and online audiences, with “mediatization” understood as Fredrik Jameson’s concept of “the process whereby the traditional fine arts come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system” (qtd. by Jamieson 78).

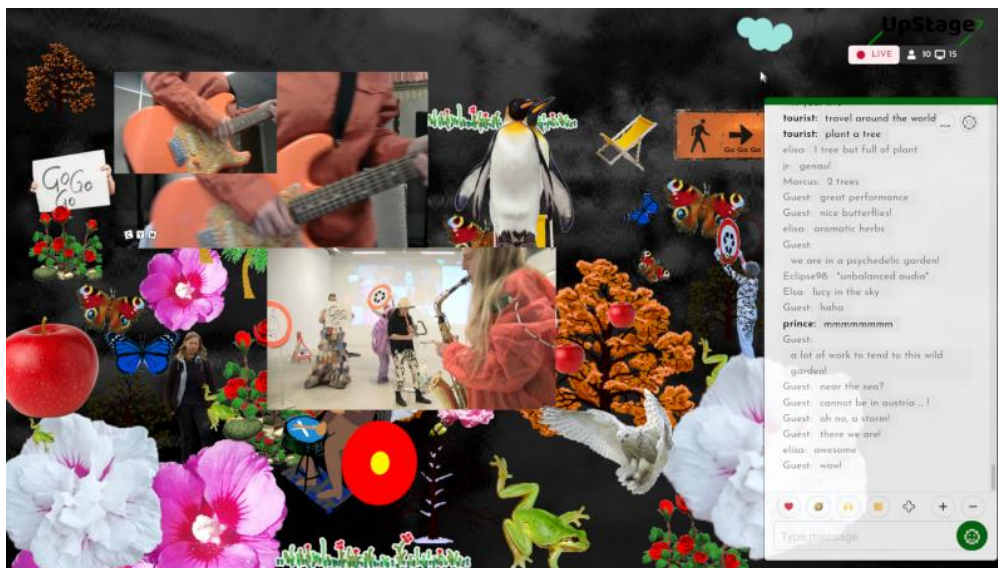


Figure 4 – *Mobilise/Demobilise* (Jamieson and team 2021-2024). In the “stage” of the platform for cybformance *UpStage* we see avatars, photos, props and live drawings. On live video we see performers in different parts of the world. On the right is the text box through which the online audience participates.

Source: Site of the project *Mobilise/Demobilise*

The two types of audiences are aware of each other. In some forms of cyberperformance, where online interaction is primarily textual, the audience *in situ* can see the projection of the dialogue box in the physical venue, with interventions from the online audience, but the

projection of the virtual space in the gallery or theater is common to all types of cyberperformance. In other cases, the online audience can also see the performers and the physical audience through the projection of their image on the online stage, whether on a platform like UpStage or in a virtual world such as Second Life. That is the case with *Mobilise/Demobilise*³ (2021-2024), *Senses Places*⁴ (2010-2025) or *Extract/Insert*⁵ (2012). The physical audience, then, sees itself represented on the screen of the virtual space.

This “screenography,” as Jamieson calls it (2008, 49), allows the audiences to catch glimpses of each other. Both audiences – which, in fact, may be more than two when there are multiple physical spaces – are, occasionally, aware of each other, but this feeling is not permanent. The two types of audiences coexist, therefore, at a distance or in a limbo between the physical and the virtual, the spectator and the performer, assuming multiple roles in a gap or an “in-betweenness” (Pethő 2020) mediated by the computer.



Figure 5 – *Extract/Insert* (Chafer, Upton and Stelarc 2012).

Visitors to the Herbert Gallery talk and dance with ‘holographic’ 3D and infrared projection of avatars in Second Lifeworld in that Multi User Virtual Environment, avatars interact with the projection of the visitors.

Source: Video of the project posted by the Herbert Gallery on Youtube.

Considering the factors above, the concept of intermedial performance by Chapple and Kattenbelt is the most appropriate to extend to the cyberperformance audience. These authors

³ <https://mobilise-demobilise.eu/about/team/>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.

⁴ <https://sensesplaces.wordpress.com/>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.

⁵ <https://youtu.be/vKanHILj6X4?si=a70bLFLt9UmhBBNC>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.

describe the intermedial as a space where boundaries between spaces, realities, and media are blurred and where the process of performance operates by creating something different (2006, 12). The same happens with the cyberperformance audience since, as Jamieson puts it, “[W]hen the audience is also transformed between spaces, media, and realities, I propose that the audience itself is intermedial” (2008, 79). And she goes on, stating that “[...] the role of the audience extends beyond that of interactive participation, firstly through the mediatization of the audience and then through the confluence of the simultaneous audiences” (2008, 79).

The intermedial audience includes both nearby and online audiences, both active participants and lurkers, both performers as members of the audience and their own representations. There is a fluidity of movement (individual and collective) between all these and any other permutations of the audience that may emerge within cyberperformance or other forms in which the intermedial audience exists (Jamieson 2008, 79).

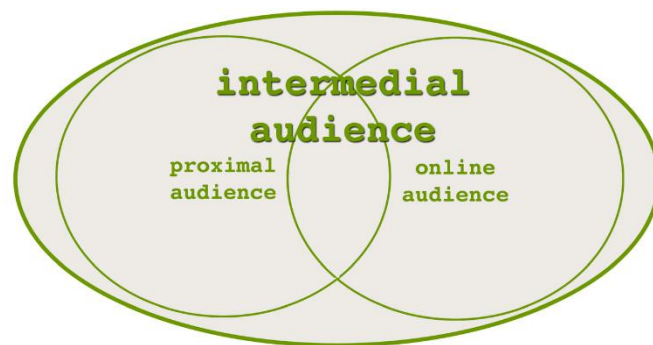


Figure 6 – A representation of the intermedial audience according to Helen Varley Jamieson.
Source: Jamieson (2008, 79).

Thus, in this conception of the audience, the passive spectator is elevated to the status of participant without eliminating the performative distance, in a process that is open, unfinished, evolving, and as liminal and hybrid as cyberperformance itself.

| To Conclude

After years of researching, creating, and participating in different types of performance, I have developed a taxonomy with three types of cyberperformance: Word, Code, and Body cyberperformance (Gomes 2015). The intermedial audience is constituted differently in each type of cyberperformance. Equally, the performative distance is managed differently in relation to the expectation of agency by the audience(s). The means and forms of participation vary – words in a text window, avatars constructed by code, effects in the virtual world created

by movements of the participants' physical bodies – but it always results in a liminal, hybrid and intermedial audience. This concept, proposed by Helen Varley Jamieson, based on the paradigm of intermediality developed by Chapple and Kantenbelt, seems to be, to date, the best to account for the hyper-audiences that exist in the in-betweenness of virtual and actual.

After the COVID pandemic, with mainstream performing arts starting to realize the possibilities of online performance, with new cyberformance experiences, and with new virtual tools resulting from Artificial Intelligence, we will soon need to rethink and reanalyze these issues of participation and perhaps extend the concept of the intermedial audience itself.

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