

Cybermimetics: Live Performance Archive

Innovative theatre director and theorist Antonin Artaud delicately described theatre as “the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice” (Artaud 75). It is impossible for an actor to replicate a performance with exact precision every time; each performance features its unique, variable and improvised elements. When theatre is documented and archived, the ephemeral nature of each distinct performance is lost. The documented performance becomes a constant, unchanging simulacrum of the original. This is especially noticeable when considering the case of performances that are staged multiple nights in a row for a variety of audiences. The infinite number of performance variables become permanently fixed once captured on video.

Determining what constitutes a successful archive of a live performance is complicated by how performance is affected and mediated by video. I first consider the ways in which video documents mediate live performance and concepts of liveness according to the performance studies scholar Philip Auslander. Then, to explore the multifaceted nature of documented performance, I analyze corporeal mime’s role as an art form that is stringently averse to media. Through my analysis, I also begin to examine corporeal mime through the lens of cybernetic theory, particularly in the context of posthumanism as discussed by the theorist N. Katherine Hayles. Finally, I discuss the performance installation that I created for my capstone project and how these concepts emerge in my work. By exploring the relationship between live performance and video documentation simultaneously, I intend to cultivate a better understanding of how live performance and archive are intertwined. My performance installation project incorporates a live corporeal mime composition performed across from a projected, pre-recorded document of the composition to contemplate these concepts.

The primary characteristic of both live performance and recorded performance that I am concerned with is temporality. Those immediately present at a live event are often assumed to be the only ones who fully experience the event. Theatrical performers rely on their audience to complete the experience of live performance. Applause, gasps, laughter, and even unplanned interruptions all contribute to the depiction of the live event as genuine. Auslander identifies this interpretation of liveness when he contends that “the common assumption is that the live is ‘real’ and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real.” (*Liveness* 3). The depiction of the relationship between live and recorded performance as hierarchical is particularly notable in the way that it assumes that archives are incapable of accurately reproducing the qualities of a live event. Instead, Auslander argues “against intrinsic opposition and in favor of a view that both emphasizes the mutual dependence of the live and the mediatized and challenges the traditional assumption that the live precedes the mediatized.” (*Liveness* 11). Auslander carefully uses the term mediatized rather than mediation in accordance with Baudrillard’s definition of the word; rather than simply referring to the forms of media that produce recorded content, mediatization more specifically refers to “what is reinterpreted by the sign form, articulated into models, and administered by the code.” (*Liveness* 5). In other words, techniques of reproduction must be analyzed in combination with the ways in which they affect how information is processed and understood. This is critical to comprehending liveness and documentation as entangled forms.

The mutual relationship between live performance and recorded performance can be deciphered through the various characteristics of each form. Live performances are often archived through photographs and film from the audience’s perspective, yet so many intimate and improvisatory qualities of performance that an audience experiences are lost when translated

to the screen. The presence of an audience at a live event is explicitly volatile, instead of fixed to the universal perspective of the “master shot.” In 2012, Auslander revisited his work on liveness and revised many elements in the formation of a new concept: “digital liveness.” He summarizes his new understanding of live performance after the influx of digital, recorded media in live performance:

digital liveness emerges as a specific *relation* between self and other, a particular way of “being involved with something.” The experience of liveness results from our conscious act of grasping virtual entities as live in response to the claims they make on us. (*Digital Liveness* 11)

The ability of liveness to exist digitally, according to Auslander, further complicates the distinctions between live performance and recorded performance. If recorded performance can be experienced “live,” a documented performance can no longer be considered secondary to the original performance. Yet, there are still clear distinctions between live performance and an archive of the performance. Most significant is the fact that the existence of the archive is dependent on the event of the live performance.

There are other basic distinctions to be made between live performance and archive. Especially in the case of theatre, performances are variable and ephemeral. Archives, in contrast, enable live performances to take on more permanent, enduring qualities. In practice, performers generally prefer to have their “best” performance captured on film, but this removes the inherent imperfections of live performance that distinguishes it from other mediums. Regardless of technical preparation or the amount of rehearsal hours, the live event will remain different every time it is performed. Variables like audience size, weather, and stray sounds become permanent once the performance document is created. The archived performances are not restricted by

temporality, but they lose any possibility of improvisation. Instead, archives increase access to the work and the impact of its message. The evolution and discussion of performance as an art would be severely limited if performances weren't ever reproduced in some alternate, enduring form. While performance spaces are exclusively accessible by location and attendance, documents can be digitally reproduced infinitely.

The act of documentation in conjunction with the performance itself can often affect the perception of a work. For example, a videographer navigating the performance space, a camera on a tripod behind the audience, or even a spectator filming with a cellphone can remind the audience that they exist as part of the performance. Their participation in the space contributes to how the archive will exist once the original performance is finished. In considering this simultaneous relationship between live performance and its documentation, I pose the following questions: Can an archive accurately recreate the experience of the performance? Or does it exist as its own independent work, with an altered meaning and experience? I consider accuracy to be based on an archive's ability to reproduce the intimacy, variability, and ephemerality of a performance. Auslander argues that there is no straightforward answer, and I agree. In my own project, the performance, in accordance with Auslander, is meant to

exemplify the way that mediatization [in the form of video documentation] is now explicitly and implicitly embedded within the live experience...whatever distinction we may have supposed there to be between live and mediatized events is collapsing because live events are increasingly either made to be reproduced or are becoming ever more identical with mediatized ones. (*Liveness* 35)

I designed my installation to have multiple surfaces that are synchronized but cannot be viewed simultaneously. Documents of the performance are created prior to the actual performance, and

don't become archival until the moment the performance begins. I elaborate on these decisions later in this paper.

According to the founder of corporeal mime, Étienne Decroux, theatre exists as a “synthesis of all the arts,” but at its core, can only be defined by one characteristic: “theatre is the actor art” (26). Theatre in its most commonly recognized form often involves elements like stage design, lighting, sound, props, costumes, makeup, and so on. All of these elements can be examined as forms of media that contribute to constructing and controlling a theatrical world. But when these elements are removed from theatre, all that is left is the actor. Corporeal mime, a style of physical theatre developed by Decroux in the 20th century, centralizes this concept by attempting to place the drama of the actor within the physical body. The corporeal mime does not wear a costume or makeup, perform on a set, or rely on any other elements of theatre that are not their own corporeal presence. Decroux aspired to distinguish corporeal mime as a distinct art form. In doing so, he had to prove that it was self-sufficient according to his own rule of what defines an art form: “every art enjoys the privilege of expressing the world in its own way, without calling on any other art” (23).

There is an exception—Decroux described a way in which working with props is permitted in corporeal mime:

The manipulation of properties and the act of going toward them or leaning over them should, instead of interrupting the action's affective current, provide it with a further opportunity, and the best, to take place. (Leabhart 134)

Thomas Leabhart, a student of Decroux from 1968-1972, has taken this description and extended it into an exercise called “still-moving research.” By interacting with an object in a way that complements the actor's action rather than imposes on it, this style of mime composition

represents one of the first steps mime can take toward interacting with media. To amplify the affective current of corporeal gesture, still-moving research can best be simplified into a two-step process. First, the actor creates a primary text: a series of gestures that interact with the object in a variety of ways. In the case of the rehearsal cube that I use for my performance in my installation, I experimented with gestures that included pushing, pulling, grabbing, stepping, sliding, spinning, and rotating the cube. Next, I created my secondary text: a change of level (height) and geometric plane (corridor) in my body that is inspired by each gesture. The resulting composition is meant to show how the cube and my body act as a single entity composed of two parts that are in constant conversation with each other.

The apparent aversion to media that is inherent to corporeal mime is intriguing when considering the ways in which documentation mediates a performance. Is it possible that documentation could complement a performance without interrupting what Decroux describes as the “affective current”? This question is central to my project and left open to the interpretation of the audience.

The role of the audience in a performance is often considered to be passive and receptive; however, I also wanted to dispute this by creating a space that emphasizes the productive and active forms of observation that audience members perform in the context of any live event. The visual culture theorist Jonathan Crary uses the phenomenon of the camera obscura to articulate many of the qualities that are present in any environment constructed for spectatorship:

What is crucial about the camera obscura is its relation of the observer to the undemarcated, undifferentiated expanse of the world outside, and how its apparatus makes an orderly cut or delimitation of that field allowing it to be viewed, without sacrificing the vitality of its being. (34)

Inspired by the immersive model of the camera obscura, I considered the various ways that observers could create meaning for both recorded and live performance. When audiences both create and observe vision, sounds, movement, and various other observable reactions in a performance space, they become a part of the performance itself. When a live performance is recorded, the effect of the audience often becomes permanently ingrained in the performance as well. Additionally, the framing of a video document is similarly influenced by theories of observation. Lisa Cartwright and Marita Sturken write, “independent of individual identity, the spectator is socially constructed by the cinematic apparatus. . . and by the ideologies that are a part of a given viewing situation” (73). Similar to the structure of the camera obscura, my project is designed to confound the viewing experience of live performance and documentation into the same apparatus and situation. I attempt to represent the videographer’s role as both creating a depiction of an event and participating within that depiction.

I also discovered an intriguing relationship between corporeal mime and cybernetics. The posthumanist interpretation of the relationship between machines and humans considers information to be a separate entity from embodied reality. Hayles confronts this reality, articulating her dream of “a version of the posthuman that. . . recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity” (*Posthuman* 5). Corporeal mime intrinsically recognizes this materiality, as an art form that relies solely on the human body. This emphasis on embodied form also makes corporeal mime difficult to record and document, because video documents translate embodiment onto a linear, flat surface that loses the depth, quality and presence that grant the mime its affective power. Hayles expresses the desire to combine abstract form with embodiment in a way that conflates the two entities in a similar, mutual relationship that Auslander argues

exists between recorded performance and liveness. Corporeal mime effectively achieves this, as an art form that uses non-narrative physicality to express abstract concepts. Corporeal mime answers Hayles' assertion that, "abstract pattern can never fully capture the embodied actuality, unless it is as prolix and noisy as the body itself" (*Posthuman* 22). Mime uses familiar quotidian gestures that are abstract yet still rooted in the embodiment and corporeality. In this way, it accomplishes the Hayles' desire for embedded knowledge that does not rely on narrative form and avoids empiricist or objective structures of knowledge.

Gob Squad, a British-German art collective based in Nottingham and Berlin, has created several theatrical performances that challenge the distinction between live performance and video. "Super Night Shot," conceived in 2003, is a performance that begins exactly one hour before the audience watches it. Filmed in real time in the city of the theater that displays the film, 4 actors loosely improvise a narrative story that ends just as the finished product begins. The performance is then mixed live, via a screen split 4-ways, and turned from live performance to film as the audience observes. This effectively challenges the divide between what we consider to be performance (as the narrative involves several characters who are real people just living their lives in the city) and what is reality. Although Gob Squad presents the video as a video installation or film, it also functions as a lasting documentation of the live performance. Performed several times throughout the years, each film has a different set of characters, yet retains constant fundamental themes.

Gob Squad recognizes how documentation can alter the lens through which an audience receives a performance. "Super Night Shot" is effective because it manipulates the temporality of its archive. By removing any distance between performance and archive, Gob Squad manipulates the time and space that audiences are accustomed to observing in a theater. They use video

recording and the theater's proximity to the live performance in order "to *shrink* time and space, or at least make them highly malleable dimensions of human experience rather than. . . stable, foundational forms of intuition" (Mitchell and Hansen 104). Gob Squad's work combines a performance and its document into the same entity. Inspired by their manipulation of time and space, I ask: what if the order is reversed? What if the document occurs before the event?

The performance art piece *Performer / Audience / Mirror* by the artist Daniel Graham also served as a source of inspiration in considering how a mirror could help highlight the ways in which live performance video documentation is presented as a feedback loop in my project. In the performance, Graham stands between a mirror and his audience and describes his own position in the space as well as the audience's position. The audience watches Graham perform in front of reflections of themselves, invoking similar concepts of observation that Crary writes about. Graham describes his work, "The audience sees itself reflected by the mirror instantly, while the performer's comments are slightly delayed. First, a person in the audience sees himself "objectively" ("subjectively") perceived by himself, next he hears himself described "objectively" ("subjectively") in terms of the performer's perception" (Graham 1991). Using the mirror as an architectural tool that mediates the relationship between performer and audience reveals the ways in which the relationship is infinitely recursive. In my own project, I use the mirror as a tool to express the liminal space between live performance and documented performance.

In an attempt to situate live performance and archive as intertwined experiences, I created a performance installation that draws from elements of corporeal mime and cybernetics. The installation is designed to exist as a fragmented, paradoxical archive of a live performance. To achieve this, I chose to place the installation at the same space where I would devise and rehearse

my corporeal mime performance: Pomona College's Small Studio (a black box theatre). I spent the semester developing a still-moving research composition using a rehearsal cube from the Small Studio, under the guidance of Professor Thomas Leabhart. The installation space is designed to present an oppositional relationship between a live performance and the documentation of this performance, while recognizing the liminal, reflexive and entangled qualities of the relationship between liveness and archive. Additionally, the space is designed with careful consideration of the role of the audience as active participants within this relationship.

I chose the rehearsal cube as my object particularly due to its conventional function within a theatre studio: a multi-faceted prop designed to fill in for blocking out stage directions during the early phases of the rehearsal process. The cube is designed for performances that are in a state of development, unfinished and evolving. The composition itself was devised by exploring how each gesture of touching, lifting, pushing, pulling, spinning, dropping etc. the cube could cause a secondary change of level and plane within my body. Breaking each of these gestures apart and assigning a change of level and plane to each one resulted in an approximately three-minute long corporeal mime composition.

Once this performance was finalized, I created three separate video documents of the performance. These videos were created to document the performance prior to the actual event occurring. Each document was created from a different perspective, to give autonomy to the three primary elements of performance. The first video was taken from a master shot perspective—a familiar cinematic shot that traditional audiences could identify with. I then recorded the performance with a GoPro attached to my head, to represent the performer's perspective as an autonomous participant within the space. Finally, I recorded a version of the

performance from the perspective of the rehearsal cube, by attaching the GoPro to the center of one of its six sides. This video is included to give the object in the performance an embodied perspective, as it is the only other element involved in this performance. While this cinematic decision represents my own interpretation of the performance as the archivist, I also intend for it to represent an objective performance documentation that is situated in neither the performer nor the audience's field of view. In doing so, I am attempting to imitate what Hayles describes as "abstracting information from a material base [so that it becomes] free-floating, unaffected by changes in context" (*Posthuman* 19). The cube, once removed from its connection to my corporeal movement, no longer takes on the same embodied significance that is integral to liveness. It becomes an abstracted prop, a form of extraneous media that has no place in corporeal mime. Additionally, despite this apparent move toward an objective perspective, I included a quick crossfade that stitches two "takes" of my cube video together. This was partially for practical reasons, as the camera would be crushed if it was not moved to a different side of the cube at a certain moment in the piece. But it also was intended to make audience members suspicious of the document. They would have to cycle through each of the other perspectives before seeing the video again, which they could not pause, rewind, and playback. The fade represents one of the many cinematic tools involved in documentation.

These three videos were projected sequentially onto a large screen facing a corner of the Small Studio. In addition to the technical reasons for using projection, I also felt that it was a particularly appropriate medium in relation to corporeal mime.

Corporeal mime compositions, especially still-moving research, are not meant to be literal. Instead, they are abstract in the sense that they allow the spectators to project their own imaginary

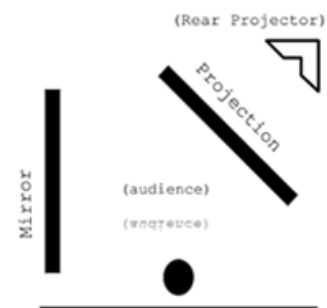


Diagram 1

narratives “onto” the mime’s movements. This projection screen was placed at a 45-degree angle to two walls. One of these walls in the room has large mirrors that are found in most theatre or dance studios. The other wall was covered by a large black curtain hanging from the ceiling. The result was an installation space shaped as a right triangle, in which each surface faces the other two surfaces (see Diagram 1). Although my performance explicitly relied on no performance media other than my cube (e.g. costumes, lighting, scenery, etc.), I lit myself with a spotlight for the sake of visibility and I wore the same clothes in both my document and my live performance for the sake of continuity.

I strongly considered a suggestion to incorporate music or amplify my live performance sounds at my Work-in-Progress presentation. After some experimentation, I realized that this would sacrifice corporeal mime’s resistance to media as well as the liveness of my performance. Auslander articulates how electronic amplification “mediatizes” a performance, “what we actually hear is the vibration of a speaker, a reproduction by technological means of a sound picked up by a microphone, not the original (live) acoustic event” (*Liveness* 25). I experimented with adding in atmospheric sounds or room tone during rehearsals. While it did contribute to the performance environment, it was an element that did not derive from my corporeal action. I ultimately chose to exclusively amplify the diegetic sounds of the performance videos, so that audiences could hear the discordant rhythm between live performance and document. My close proximity to my audience meant that they could hear the sounds of my movement and breathing without any need for artificial amplification.

This installation setup was designed to be conducive to active, variable spectatorship. Audience members enter the installation space find themselves instantly a part of this ternary system. Although the system exists as a constant feedback loop between projection, performer

and mirror, I was inspired by Crary's writing on observation: "There is never a pure access to a single object; vision is always multiple, adjacent to and overlapping with other objects, desires, and vectors" (Crary 20). There is no way to view the performer and the document simultaneously, unless it is filtered through the reflective perspective of the mirror. The mirror also signals to the audience that they are present within the space. I added three chairs that are lined up parallel to and in front of the projection surface for accessibility. These chairs also facilitate a point of view that faces both the performer and the mirror, to challenge the conventional tendency for audience members to directly face a live performance. The videos are rear-projected; however, I did not cordon off the projection area to allow the opportunity for spectators to disrupt this element of the performance. As the performer, I wanted to observe how audiences autonomously navigate the space, even if it meant obscuring the performer or projections from other audience members.

I performed my piece, which was about three minutes long, repeatedly for a duration of about 30 minutes while projected documents of the performance played simultaneously around me. After each cycle of master shot, performer perspective, cube perspective, the projection would cut out for three minutes and the audience could only see the live performer. This was to isolate liveness from documentation and emphasize the idea that the archive of this performance isn't enacted until the moment of live performance in front of this audience. At times, the illusion of synchronous live and documented performance existed, particularly due to the audience's inability to view all three sides at once. However, each time I repeated my performance I grew more fatigued. I wanted to show that my performance accuracy and precision was constantly in flux, while the video documents remained constant on every loop.

The performance installation was presented to the public two days in a row, each for a period of thirty minutes. I limited the room capacity to ten people at a time for two reasons. First, to exaggerate the exclusive accessibility that is inherent to live performance, and second, to allow audience members the spatial flexibility to wander around the room as they pleased. At the second performance, I had a videographer enter the space with a camera to create a video archive of the performance installation itself. His presence had three functions. First, it provided me with footage of the live event to use along with my pre-recorded performance footage so that I could complete an archive of the performance installation to display in the Kallick gallery after the live event ended. Second, it implicated the performance of audience members as observers into this cybernetic system, who were aware that their actions and behavior as an audience would be permanently documented. Third, it affected how other audience members interpreted the space by making people hyper aware that an archive of a performance was being created in real time.

I experimented with my performance installation on several audiences composed of other mimes, theatre and media studies students, peers, and faculty. This was critical to the execution of this project. As the performer in my installation, there was no way I could assume the perspective of an audience member. I received feedback on how my movements interacted with the projections—for example, that I should avoid the tendency to “catch up” to the projections and I should open my gaze out into the space more. I learned about the ways that people navigated the space (initial audiences assumed fixed positions and perspectives), which helped me formulate ways to encourage mobile spectatorship. Speaking to more experienced performance artists who are also fluent in mime was also particularly enlightening. Despite my concern that I would potentially be “ruining” mime by bringing media into conversation with it, both Young-Tseng Wong and Yozmit, artists that began studying mime decades before me, reassured me that

the only way to test mime against media was to experiment with it. Professor Leabhart also respectfully encouraged me to consider simpler performance media (a spotlight, for instance) before leaping to intricate technology, which helped keep the piece cohesive. Because I have not performed a duration piece before, he also suggested that I incorporate one of Decroux's "walks" as an opportunity for rest in the middle of my composition.

I heard some really generative feedback after my performance from some audience members. I was excited to hear many people initially thought that the projections were being live streamed by cameras in the space. This illusion also reinforces the idea that recorded performance and live performance are connected, demonstrating that these two concepts can be simultaneously displayed. Additionally, one person told me that they interpreted the rehearsal cube as representative of a pixel on a digital monitor, which furthers the relationship between embodied performer and digital, mediatized prop.

For the gallery component of my project, I thought it was important to exhibit how I archived this project in accordance to many of the principles that inspired it. I created a 30-minute video that documented the entire performance from start to finish. The video was split into four sections that play simultaneously, to exemplify the qualities of fragmentation and active observation that were present in the installation. One video was the same looping performance video that I used for my projection, two were videos I shot from a camera on a tripod on two opposite corners of the installation (one from each night of the performance), and the last was the handheld video taken by my videographer as he navigated the space. I layered sound from each night and sound from the projected video to enhance the varying rhythms and syncopation between my live performance and my document. Next to the monitor, I mounted the flyer that I hung outside the installation, to situate the audience and give them the same information and

context that the live audience received. I was also able to collect several short videos and photographs that people took of the performance. These clips were only a minute or so in length, so I couldn't include them in my gallery setup. However, I think a fascinating idea to explore in the future would be to create an archive entirely composed of an uninitiated audience's video recordings.

This performance installation is my personal attempt to make transparent the shortcomings of archives without criticizing the value of documentation. Additionally, while I chose corporeal mime as my method of performance due to its aversion to media, I was surprised and fascinated by its nuanced relationship to posthumanism. This wasn't originally a connection I thought to consider, but this relationship seemed to naturally emerge as I studied the role of cybernetics in this context. While I initially thought that liveness and archive were in binary opposition, this misapprehension impeded my desire to pit these two concepts against each other. I often felt like I was struggling with too many loose ends as I developed this project, and I now realize it's because the relationship is much more complex than I first realized. It wasn't until I encountered these words from Adrian Heathfield that I began to realize that I didn't have to create a neat representation of this relationship. He articulates a desire "to produce archival forms whose containment is questioned by their evident divergence and fragmentation, by their presentation of paradox, forms that present their inevitable contingency, opening themselves to what they are not" (Heathfield 33). I do not believe that a comprehensive archive of live performance can be achieved through video documentation. However, the methods explored in my performance installation reveal the qualities that are capable of being extracted from live performance. With these qualities in mind, liveness and archive can continue to adapt and remain in memory.

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