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Encountering the Digital in Performance:
Deployment | Engagement | Trace

Preamble

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This might sound paradoxical. Digital practices are increasingly embodied. They are turning back to analogue styles. Sometimes they appear to cancel out technology. And they provide us with new encounters with each other and ourselves.

This special issue explores theatre and performance in digital culture – recognizing that digital technologies are now in a second and even third generation of common use. In particular, then, it examines how changes in digitally-enabled practices are affecting the way we make, participate in and think of performance.

The notion of 'encounter' is central here. It concerns physical engagement, where the digital is a context for embodied practices, rather than simply a virtual realm. 'Encounter' also means coming across something for the first time. Whilst the digital is all around us (at least in much of the developed world), our current encounters with theatre and performance often involve this sense of experiencing afresh – as practitioners find ways of shaping work (and encounters) differently. The digital domain presents new stages for spectatorship, and ever-changing interactions between participants.

We have organized the special issue around three key terms that focus on different aspects of these encounters.

Deployment conveys the deliberate acts of organisation, structuring, curation and application by which digital theatre and performance is presented. It evokes the *manifest* of any given digital performance production – its software and hardware solutions, its multi-dimensional arrangements of space, time, task and action. The notion of 'deployment' allows us to rethink theatrical paradigms, and discuss the shifting combinations in play – of dramaturgy and mediaturgy, *mise en scène*, creative and production processes, along with fluid kinds of participation and consumption.

Engagement conveys the acts of involvement and experience that characterise digitally-enabled theatre and performance events. There is often a turn to the personal and private realm, or a deliberate reach into the public realm (and sometimes both) on the part of those making performance – meaning that 'engagement' can variously mean negotiations of privacy, socio-political positioning, and cultural intervention. In parallel, there is often a choice to enter a world, put your body in the mix. 'Engagement' describes the modes of experiential encounter invited by digitally-enabled performances.

Trace concerns both the curse and the promise of digital transactions: that everything is trackable, recordable, storable and retrievable. This phenomenon has helped to change the set of tools available to artists in creating their work (so that what used to be post-production, for instance, is now routinely embedded within production process). It has also

changed how we conceive our relationship to the record in the first place. The archive is a site of production and negotiation. The presence of the digital trace has led to different forms of encountering theatre and performance.

Our chapters and documents explore overlapping territories. We are interested in the ways in which digital performance *exhibits* itself – presents itself to its users, and attracts sensory uptake by way of its visuality, sonic interfaces or engagement protocols. We explore an extension to theatre through a refiguring of spaces for presentation and involvement. We also consider how the deployment of digital theatre and performance changes a scene, makes an intervention, helps express or explore an identity. Lastly, we are concerned to develop a critical framework appropriate to performances amid the changing category of the digital. As Maria Chatzichristodoulou outlines in her introductory essay, the various instances here open into discussions of emergence, participation, memory and digital materialism. This returns us to our longstanding engagement with theatre. We consider how digitally-enabled performance moves technology – and is moved by it – into new stages and scenarios. Given the extent of change, it seems timely to take stock of these developments.