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The Bond Between Live Art Actions and a Deeply Mediatized Culture

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This essay takes as its anchor my third research project *Sky-field* as an example of mediatized live art action. I would like to argue that the division between mediatized and live experience cannot be affronted in base of the deployment of the medium as such. Mediatization is a relatively new term that refers to the deployment of media with technological timbre into live experience. In order to support my position, I will make a brief excursus on concepts around performativity with reference to P. Auslander, P. Zarilli and W. Benjamin among others. The aim is to unravel and offer a map of the debate around the issue of mediatization and liveness.

Is it possible to speak about live art actions in contemporary practice without considering that technological means will be acting as a support or creative agent? Following Philip Auslander in his argument regarding liveness: 'Initially mediatized events were modelled on live ones. The subsequent cultural dominance of mediatization has had the ironic result that live events now frequently are modelled on the very mediatized representations.' (Auslander, 1999 p.10) Auslander notes that despite this fact, 'Performance theory continues to characterize the relationship between the live and the mediatized as one of opposition' (Ibid, p.11). In this respect, within *Sky-field*, (which has been my third research installation) I was inquiring upon the modalities with which the video projection might eventually enhance or disrupt the bodily engagement of the participants.

Sky-field has been the third research installation of my practice-based research. The research has been articulated around three major performative installations that inquired upon the bond between the body and its environment. Performative installations (*Seabed*, *Waste-is-land* and *Sky-field*) were focusing on different modalities of interaction with the participants as well as a diverse use of media. *Sky-field* was a video install-action (Connolly, 1999) which was activated by the participants' collective action. It comprised a white canvas sheet (3x 4m) with a blend of rice and wheat flour, a video projection addressing the canvas sheet, soft lighting and an audio that ran partially during the action. Through *Sky-field*, I have been experimenting with the potentiality of the video (mediatization) to enrich the live experience of the participants (live art) by inserting the video projection within the physical structure of the install-action. In *Sky-field*, the participants were asked to enact an aesthetic response to the installation by manipulating the blend of rice and flour. They were encouraged to pay attention to their physical presence and collaborate with each other in a spontaneous way.

According to Auslander, 'live performance now often incorporates mediatization such that the live event itself is a product of media technologies.' (Ibid, p. 24) He is quoting Jacques Attali's description of the current cultural economy in which performance locates itself, whereby a distinction is drawn between representation and repetition as normative trends of that economy (Auslander 1999). Attali states that 'representation in the system of commerce is that which arises from a singular act; repetition is that which is mass-produced. Thus, a concert is a representation,

but also a meal à la carte in a restaurant; a phonograph record or a can food is repetition.' (Attali 1985, p.41 quoted by Auslander 1999, p.26). Therefore, Attali is suggesting that in order to inquire into liveness, we should rather direct our attention to the way that an event is crafted—and experienced—instead of focusing on the presence or absence of the technological elements that form it.

Furthermore, Auslander is referring to Michael Kirby's definition of performance art and experimental forms of theatre as 'non-matrixed representation, in which the performer does not embody a fictional character but merely carries out certain actions that nevertheless can have referential or representational significance.' (Ibid, 28). More light is shed on the relation between Live art actions and mediatisation in Kirby's statement that 'in non-matrixed representation the referential elements are applied to the performer and are not acted by him.' (Kirby 1984, p.100 quoted by Auslander 1999, p.28). Kirby in his essay *On acting and not-acting* claims that: 'Although the performer seems to be acting, he or she actually is not. Nonmatrixed [sic] performing, symbolized matrix, and received acting are stages on the continuum from not-acting to acting.' (Kirby 2005, p.42). Hence, once more, the attention is directed to the ways these performers (and in *Sky-field*, the participants) are relating themselves to other human and/or non-human bodies in order to enact an action. In this sense, according to Kirby, since acting is not any more the case, all props might become legitimate collaborators—even the video projection. Similarly, my research focused and encouraged a deepening of the relationship between our body and its surroundings. The surroundings referred to the props (rice, wheat flour but also video projection and lighting) as well as other participants' physical compresence during the action.

However, Auslander is not arguing that 'all instances of live performance art reflect an incursion of the mediatisation in the same ways or to the same degree' (Ibid, p.32), concluding that scale could be considered as one differentiating factor. *Sky-field* is unfolding in an intimate setting and this preserves a subtler effect upon the perceivers. But as Auslander explains, mediatisation 'pervades even these small-scaled events' (Ibid) drawing also from Benjamin's discussion upon the 'auratic' (auratic from the Greek word aura which means either breeze or aureole) and the mass-reproduced ones (Benjamin, 2008 [1936]). According to the definition auratic, it is pointed out the physicality and uniqueness of an artwork which calls for the lived and subjective experience of the audience in its (artwork's) closeness. In addition, Benjamin, in his essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (Ibid), emphasises that 'human sense perception is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.' (Ibid, p.31 quoted by Auslander 1999, p.34). According to Benjamin, the auratic or unique experience is gradually banished as distance has been overcome in mass culture; more effective media of transportation and television broadcasts bring closer what before was far away. As Auslander highlights, 'even in the most intimate of performance art projects in which we may be only a few feet away from the performers, we are still frequently offered the opportunity of watching the performers in close-up on video monitors.' (Ibid, p.34). In the latter case mediatised performance is competing with live art action over the degree of primacy and intimacy it can offer to the audience. *Sky-field*, whilst being a mediatised live art, has been carefully designed so that the mediatisation is not overwhelming to the action itself; therefore it has respected a hierarchy between the live action and the media deployed and in doing so it has preserved the auratic experience.

Other drama theorists such as Robert Edmond Jones and Robert Blossom have consequently argued about the effects of liveness in mixed media environments. Jones (1941) would see the film representing the unconscious and the live actors

representing consciousness. This ensemble for Jones was considered to ensure its complementary function between different aspects of the psyche. On the contrary, for Blossom (1966), who might see the film as representing consciousness and the live actors as representing corporeality or physical existence, there was a competition between these elements. Blossom acknowledged that this conflict among live bodies and filmed images in a mixed-media performance setting was somehow inequitable since the film might be more compelling. Auslander concludes that 'we now experience a mixed-media work as a fusion, not a confusion of realms. A fusion that we see as taking place within a digital environment that incorporates the live elements as part of its raw material.' (Ibid, p.37). Auslander argues that, in a way, we are more accustomed to the compresence of the mediated and the live in this historical moment.

Among performance theorists, there is quite often a dispute about the integrity of live art and its corrupted nature when mediated. Peggy Phelan is a performance theorist who argues about liveness in performance art. She believes that 'performance's devotion to the now and the fact that its only continued existence is in the spectator's memory enable it to sidestep the economy of repetition.' (Ibid, p.39). Nevertheless, Auslander takes an opposite position because any cultural discourse could nowadays sprout out of the ideologies of capital and reproduction which characterise our media-based society. He mentions that there is still a strong tendency to foster the tension between live performance and technologized forms: 'live performance is often identified with intimacy and disappearance whereas media with a mass audience, reproduction and repetition.' (Ibid, p.41). Nevertheless, for Auslander, repetition is not an ontological characteristic of either film or video; the latter are bound to deteriorate due to their material nature exactly as live art actions - which are strictly connected to the vulnerability of our corporeal self - might easily fade out.

Ultimately, the current state of live performance is that of being wrested from its 'traditional status of being auratic and unique.' (Ibid, p.50). Auslander proposes that live forms of art are functioning in relation to their mediated environment, therefore the 'live is an effect of mediation; (Ibid, p. 51); the very enchantment of live performance in a mediated culture is principally fostered by the desire for live experiences which is also a product of mediation. Finally, it is arguable that both liveness and media are interconnected and interdependent; either in a competitive or collaborative manner, when co-existing in mixed-media environments they support each other by being different. Moreover, they channel our attention towards the mechanics, rather than to the narration, of the event.

Giulio Jacucci and Ina Wagner, in their essay *Performative Uses of Space in Mixed Media Environments*, quote Schechner claiming that 'while anything can be studied as a performance, something is a performance when social context and convention say it is.' (Schechner, 2002 quoted by Jacucci and Wagner 2005 p.3). Alastair MacLennan's ritualized actions are a good example of this. MacLennan has often performed everyday actions by moving them to the special context of a gallery. For example in *Days and Nights* (1981) he was walking backwards at ACME Gallery for six days and nights. In *Days and Nights*, an everyday action such as walking becomes a performative event because of its duration, modality and the location where it is performed. With this example, I would like to point out the significance of the context and subtext of an artwork in opposition to the medium it is crafted with. Adopting this point of view it becomes clearer that the gap between live art and mediated art is not insurmountable. If we identify *auratic-ity* (my term), as the quality of utmost salience for the artwork we could switch our attention from the formulation of criticism based on definitions relating to medium.

According to Jacucci and Wagner, Happenings emerged out of the evolution in structure and complexity of traditional environments: 'Kaprow defines this approach to Happenings as being through 'action collage.' (Ibid p.4). They argue that some mixed media environments explore 'immersive and technologically innovative environments diverging from the conventional screening formats.' (Ibid p.5). Therefore, again, what is being pointed out here is the deployment of the medium, rather than the medium itself, in order to speak about its influence upon artistic practices. This essay argues that *Sky-field* would hopefully constitute an example of mediatised live art action where the action collage (research design) has not affected intimacy and uniqueness of the experience (*auratic-ity*).

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