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Who or What Participates in Post-Theatre

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1.

In 2007, Apple released the iPhone. The product was exceptional not just because it put to use high-quality equipment and software. Unlike earlier devices of this kind, the iPhone enabled users to make phone calls, use the Internet or play computer games with the help of a touchscreen, without having to use a physical keyboard. This has made interaction significantly easier and more fluent. The emergence of the iPhone can be regarded as the result of a paradigmatic change in the technosciences at the very beginning of the twenty-first century. Technosciences are no longer focused on producing hardware or software, but instead on creating the user's experience. I specifically mean the phenomenon known as User Experience (UX) Design: the practice of designing the experience of the user of digital interactive technologies. The term 'phenomenon' seems appropriate in this context, in that UX design encompasses new university courses in technology, new website and app-creation management models, and specific techniques and strategies enabling designers to elicit exactly specified experiences. Drawing on the findings of psychologists, neurologists and marketers, experience designers not only write algorithms and construct prototypes of subsequent mobile devices, but they also identify the needs of prospective users, and look to combine software and equipment in such a way as to create a complete environment, granting the user a sense of control over a given device as perfectly as possible.

Taking as my vantage point the smartphone-user experience designed by the technosciences, in the present article I shall consider the experience of audience members in the latest forms of post-theatre, putting to use a variety of human-machine interfaces. The emergence of the iPhone and the rapid development of mobile technologies coincided with the proliferation of artistic phenomena where – as the Canadian new-media scholar Christine Ross has argued – audience members 'are now invited to interact with the screen'.<sup>2</sup> What Ross has in mind is a variety of techno-art and digital-art phenomena, combining traditional theatre and performative strategies with different kinds of cybernetic technologies. Yet it's

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1 This article is part of the research project „Artificial Bodies/Living Machines in the Laboratory of Performative Arts” financed by National Science Centre Poland within Harmonia 6.

2 Christine Ross, 'Spatial Poetics: The (Non)Destinations of Augmented Reality Art', *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* 2, 2010, pp. 19–24 (p. 24).

impossible, in this context, to speak of post-theatre simply as another artistic genre, 'following the outdated medium of theatre'. If anything, post-theatre has more in common with installation art as understood by the German art theoretician Juliane Rebentisch and the American performance-studies scholar Claire Bishop. As Rebentisch persuasively demonstrates in her book *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (2012), installation art runs counter to the objectivist definition of art, questioning the boundary between what's regarded as artistic action and its cultural, economic, social and scientific determinants.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Bishop contends, in her 2005 publication *Installation Art*, that in each individual case, artistic phenomena of this kind bring about a specific spectatorial experience – and, consequently, produce new models of subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> In other words, post-theatre exceeds the established genealogical classifications of artistic genres, making space for producing a new kind of technological experience, which emerges as a result of dynamic negotiation of our being in and thinking about the world.

Still, I should stress that the experience of a post-theatre audience member that is of interest to me in the following deviates significantly from the paradigm that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, along with what German art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann has described as 'the experiential turn',<sup>5</sup> which marked the departure of contemporary art from unchangeable artefact towards artistic process or event. Joseph Beuys's performances and Minimalist installations by Robert Morris have, in their different ways, endeavoured to encourage the audience member's immediate participation in the creative process. She thus came to co-author the piece – by contrast, in light of contemporary theories of digital media, it's no longer possible to claim that audience members, in post-theatre forms of interest to me here, experience the artistic event with the immediacy described by numerous performance scholars, including Richard Schechner, who argued in his essay 'Ethology and Theatre' that:

As society cyberneticizes, programming the contacts people make with each other, theater gains importance as a live activity, oscillating between relatively unstructured interactions, say at a party, and totally formalized or mediated exchanges, say a job interview. Theater can be semi-formal, narrative, personal, direct and fun.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the notion of theatre as formulated by Schechner – and, more broadly, his idea of performance – rested on the belief that artistic event offers audience members an immediate experience of material space, and enables them to physically interact with actor-performers. Suffice it to reference *Dionysius in 69*, a 1968 production by the Performance Group, convened by Schechner, where this type of experience was brought about by the strategy of emphasising the materiality of the found space of a car workshop, and exposing the physicality of

3 Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), pp. 14–15.

4 Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), p. 8.

5 Dorothea von Hantelmann, *The Experiential Turn*, <http://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/experiential-turn/> [accessed on 4 August 2017].

6 Richard Schechner, 'Ethology and Theatre', in Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p. 239.

nude actor-performers.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the work of such artists and groups as Janet Cardiff, Rimini Protokoll and Lundahl and Steitl combines performers' activity in the traditional sense of the term with a range of cybernetic technologies (computers, tablets, smartphones, headphone sets) with which audience members interact. No immediate audience-member experience can be identified in this type of work: an audience member only interacts with space and other humans taking part in the event. In each instance, audience-member experience is predominantly the product of the relation between technologies and audience members.

The aim of this article is to create a model for audience-member experience in post-theatre that is more precise in describing the relation between human and non-human participants of an artistic event featuring cybernetic technologies than the paradigms developed to date. Given that the activities of interest to me stage significant physical, intellectual and affective involvement from an audience member, it's extremely difficult to describe them from a distance, assuming the colonising view-from-nowhere perspective. For this reason, I will take as my starting point the analysis of my own experience as an audience member in a specific project: *Anaesthesia* (2016) by the Polish collective Dead Baitz. This will enable me to grasp the experience of controlling and being controlled that is characteristic of post-theatre forms making use of new technologies. Drawing on contemporary assemblage theory and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, I shall call this experience cyberparticipation. I shall then propose a critical survey of the concept of interactivity, which underlies contemporary thinking about participation.

## 2.

It's 3 December 2016. I'm standing in the foyer of the Theatre Institute in Warsaw, waiting for the start of *Anaesthesia*, a trans-opera by the Dead Baitz art collective. According to the promotional leaflet for the project, the collective is made up of performance-studies scholars Agnieszka Jelevska and Michał Krawczak, multimedia artist Paweł Janicki, software developer Michał Cichy and musician Rafał Zapała. And so the event is to be audio-theatre: installation and concert combined. Instead, the way it begins brings to mind the popular RPG card games, where players start by choosing their character. A staff member comes up, asking us to pick a token with one of two symbols reminiscent of Malevich's Suprematism: one denotes the Pilot, the other stands for Navigator. We are told the results of the draw will determine our way of participating in the event. Pilots will be provided with headphones and special armbands enabling them to create their own narratives from four live scenes broadcast via radio. Navigators in turn will use their silent-disco-style headphones to create their own narratives, solely by listening in on what's happening in the Pilots' headphones. The three Pilots enter the auditorium, while I, along with other Navigators, wait at the door for another ten minutes.

As I enter the performance space, electronic music coming from loudspeakers catches my attention immediately: I can not so much hear it as feel it reverberate all over my body. Only later do I notice the Pilots,

<sup>7</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. by Saskya Iris Jain (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 41.

seated in the middle of the space in profiled wood armchairs, each lit from above by a theatre spotlight. Their arms are outstretched in front of them, and I can see they're wearing armbands made of several inter-linked black plates. One of the Pilots moves his arm suddenly to the right. Some of the Navigators explore the space of the trans-opera, orbiting around the Pilots and peering behind four soundproof screens concealing performers who play the characters in the trans-opera. Unlike my fellow Navigators, I decide simply to take a seat on one of the chairs available to the audience. I put my headphones on, close my eyes and hear a woman's voice. Her name is Aileen; she recounts the events immediately preceding her death. I listen to her monologue for a while, then switch the channel. I hear the voice of a little girl, her lines only occasionally coalescing into a coherent whole. I switch the channel and hear Aileen's voice again. The young woman seems to be standing right next to me, on my left. After a while, her voice begins to move behind my back to the right, fading slowly, replaced by the sound of a saxophone – it's as if someone was playing straight into my right ear. I switch the channel and hear Aileen again. I begin to find her manner of intimate confession annoying. I decide I'll return to the little girl's story, and find out who her character is. I switch the channel: Aileen again. I switch a few more times and keep getting her monologue. The little girl's voice appears in the (sometimes very distant) background time and time again, but I'm at a loss to understand even a single word. Finally, I give up and stop switching channels, listening to Aileen's looped story.

This account of my experience in *Anaesthesia* clearly demonstrates that the sensations felt by a participant in the latest theatre forms using cybernetic technologies diverge from the sensations of traditional spectators. Trans-opera affects the hearing of audience members rather than their eyesight; by doing so, it becomes part of the contemporary strand of performative event described as 'headphone-based theatre'<sup>8</sup> by the performance-studies scholar Rosemary Klich in her essay 'Outer Space from Within: Aural Transitions and Sound Bodies in Multimedia Performance'. The term denotes all manner of art phenomena enabling the audience member to interact primarily with the headphone system. According to Klich, practices of this kind call into question the ocularcentric sensorial regime in place in theatre, triggering in audience members all sorts of acoustic experiences and activating related somatic-sensory links. This aspect of the *Anaesthesia* experience becomes evident when, on entering the auditorium, audience members find themselves surrounded by a soundscape, played live by musician Rafał Zapała using data-driven composition. The technique consists of synthesising in real time sound waves generated by specialist oscillators. In addition, Zapała combines the sound waves with processed sounds produced by a pneumatic instrument of his own design. As a result, sound is produced not only in the form of a sound wave but also as a stream of subsequent amplifications

8 Rosemary Klich, 'Outer Space from Within: Aural Transitions and Sound Bodies in Multimedia Performance', expanded version of the lecture delivered at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków on 11 December 2015. Polish version published as Klich, 'Zewnątrz od wewnątrz. Akustyczne przejścia i dźwiękowe ciała w multimedialnych działaniach performatywnych', trans. by Mateusz Chaberski, *Didaskalia. Gazeta teatralna* 131, 2015, pp. 66–75 (p. 66).

and reductions, causing the body to vibrate. By producing such an intense physical sensation, the creative team divert the attention of audience members from the semantic or intellectual aspect of their activity, emphasising its somatic aspect. *Anaesthesia* does not expose the technology it employs; it doesn't aim to prompt a critical reflection on, say, the increasing influence of technology on our senses – a process that is intensifying with the development of audio technology. Instead, the performance enables viewers to experience for themselves the implications of this process, with a view to creating a new experience of reality: one that nullifies the binary opposition between the (multi)sensual and the technological. To describe that experience, let's examine in greater detail the process which brought about the 'spatialization effect' in the trans-opera characters' voices.

Highly complicated, dynamic and simultaneous human-machine and machine-machine relations were behind the overwhelmingly strong impression that Aileen's voice was coming from nearby. A microphone transformed the voice of each of the four characters into a soundtrack which made its way into a computer. A dedicated programme written by Zapala in the Max/MSP environment synchronized the soundtracks with the operations of the band on a Pilot's forearm. Dead Baitz used special MYO bracelets which respond to users' muscle tension. They can be programmed in any way, to enable the user to control different kinds of devices with specific movements of her hand. For example, the promotional film for the bracelet posted on the manufacturer's website features a DJ who can control the movement of lasers during his performance by raising his arms.<sup>9</sup> In *Anaesthesia*, MYO was responsible for switching soundtracks ascribed to the characters. A Pilot activated her bracelet by clenching her fist and proceeded to switch on subsequent tracks by moving her hand to the left or right. But manipulating the soundtracks with the help of MYO had little in common with using

a remote control. The *Anaesthesia* team employed panoramic-sound technology, spatialising the switch, and enabling Pilots to overlay the voices of their chosen characters, combining them into sound configurations of their preference. These were transmitted via radio to headphones worn by the Navigators, who were able to listen in on narratives thus created. What exactly happened next with – and within – a Navigator's ear?

The experience created using the technology described above resembles the experience of binaural sound – that is, sound produced by recording with a microphone placed inside an artificial head. As it's being played, this type of sound seems rooted in a specific spot of the material space surrounding the listener. As the account of my own experience demonstrates persuasively, the artists who created *Anaesthesia* elicit sensations of this kind with a view to producing a result Klich calls 'embodiment in acoustic space'.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Aileen's voice affected my senses so powerfully that, as I listened to it, I felt her presence behind my back. And yet, the intensity of my experience demonstrates that it

9 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=te1RBQQIH4&feature=youtu.be> [accessed on 24 July 2017].

10 Klich, 'Outer Space from Within'.

wasn't simply about an illusion of presence. Aileen's presence has a clear performative aspect, in that it emerges as a result of the fusion of an audience member's perception apparatus with the technology used in the trans-opera. Thus Aileen is both 'inside' and 'outside' my body. Binaural sound, argues Klich 'reverberates throughout the listener, crossing through the borders of body and world'.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the boundary in question is the boundary between the audience member's body and the headphones which become part and parcel of her perception apparatus. In order to precisely describe the technological experience thus outlined, one needs, therefore, to look for an analytical language which does not regard technology and the human body as separate entities. In analysing this language, I shall reference contemporary assemblage theory.

In his book *Uncoding the Digital: Technology, Subjectivity and Action in the Control Society*, American media scholar David Savat argues it's impossible to distinguish between individuals and the technologies they use.<sup>12</sup> Referencing the philosophy of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari along with Manuel DeLanda's sociological thought, Savat contends it would be more accurate to speak instead of various types of human-machine assemblages. In his view, an assemblage of this kind is a set of components 'that includes the material machinic components, abstract machines, the conceptualization of space and of time, the range of practices and the various manifestations of what is termed subjectivity'.<sup>13</sup> Yet an ensemble perceived in this manner isn't just a sum of its parts. To use the language of the sociologist DeLanda, another representative of the assemblage theory, it would be more accurate to describe an assemblage as the kind of complex entity whose identity is 'characterized by relations of exteriority'.<sup>14</sup> Thus assemblage theory is an inherent part of attempts made by philosophy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to abolish binary oppositions between subject and object and the interior and the exterior – polarities fundamental to modern subjectivity. The specificity of assemblage theory is that it places at its centre various types of relational entities – but not the substantial entities known from Aristotle's metaphysics, always relating in a specific way both to other entities and to the substance they are made of. An assemblage is a relational identity developing from scratch each time, depending on relations between its constituent parts. At the same time, each change of this kind brings about the transformation of every part of the assemblage. In this context, the notion of essential human subjectivity becomes irrelevant: subjectivity acquires a radically relational nature.

Further, what we describe as subjectivity can simultaneously be part of several assemblages. This is what happens today with the coexistence of at least two types of human-machine assemblages performed in larger material-discursive formations that Savat calls the industrial-mechanical ensemble and the digital ensemble. The former emerged

11 Klich, 'Outer Space from Within'.

12 David Savat, *Uncoding the Digital: Technology, Subjectivity and Action in the Control Society* (London: Palgrave, 2013).

13 Savat, *Uncoding the Digital*, p. 76.

14 Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 10.

in the seventeenth century, with the notion of the world as machine. As the sciences developed and industrialisation intensified and the liberal-market economy was established, the modern human subject, conceived of as an individual with an autonomous existence, emerged as part of this ensemble. In this ensemble, machines are but passive instruments, there to be used by the subject for the attainment of goals set by various institutions (the subject obviously needs to be suitably instructed at school or by the factory manager). The digital ensemble came into being as digital technologies developed after the Second World War. Initially, their sole aim was to increase the efficiency of machines within the industrial-mechanical ensemble. Suffice it to mention that what's today a computer was originally devised as a machine for facilitating numerical operations. But as digital technologies developed and the Internet came into being, a new way of experiencing reality emerged, based not so much on the autonomy of the individual as an individual's ability to be connected to machines.

The account of my participation in Dead Baitz's trans-opera, noted above, patently demonstrates that audience-member experience emerges as a result of audience members being simultaneously included in the industrial-mechanical and the digital ensembles. On one hand, the artists behind the opera enable both Pilots and Navigators to use different types of machines (the MYO bracelets, headphones), confirming them in their belief they are capable of controlling an artistic event at will and producing their own narratives. On the other, *Anaesthesia* had nonetheless been devised so as to let audience members experience technology taking control of them, and controlling their behaviour. I became acutely aware of this as I tried in vain to use the headphone switch to listen to the voices of characters other than Aileen – then, in the end, gave up trying to switch channels. An experience of this kind is an inherent part of the trans-opera, where the ostensible lack of restrictions in using technology in fact constrains the user in her attempt to construct her own narrative. In other words, the experience described by the audience member stems from the relation between the controller and the controlled, where controlling doesn't simply mean putting a specific machine to use, but also restricting or expanding the opportunities to interact with technology.

### 3.

The audience-member experience produced in *Anaesthesia* by no means fits into the models of participation dominant in present-day humanities, formulated by academics who examine the relations between art and politics. It's rare for that group to ask themselves about the identity of those taking part in an artistic action, not to mention another provocative question: what participates in the art made today? I would guess the reason for this is their default acceptance of an anthropocentric concept of the democratic community which only includes human subjects. One needs but mention the philosopher Jacques Rancière, who in 'The Distribution of the Sensible' references Plato to argue that:

the stage, which is simultaneously a locus of public activity and the exhibition-space for 'fantasies', disturbs the clear partition of identities,



activities and spaces. The same is true of writing. By stealing away to wander aimlessly without knowing who to speak to or who not to speak to, writing destroys every legitimate foundation for the circulation of words, for the relationship between the effects of language and the position of bodies in shared space. Plato thereby singles out two main models, two major forms of existence and of the sensible effectivity of language – writing and the theatre – which are also structure-giving forms for the regime of the arts in general. However, these forms turn out to be prejudicially linked from the outset to a certain regime of politics, a regime based on the indetermina-tion of identities, the delegitimation of positions of speech, the deregulation of partitions of space and time. This aesthetic regime of politics is strictly identical with the regime of democracy, the regime based on the assem-bly of artisans, inviolable written laws, and the theatre as institution. Plato contrasts a third, good *form of art* with writing and the theatre, the *choreo-graphic* form of the community that sings and dances its own proper unity.<sup>15</sup>

As Rancière rightly demonstrates, for Plato each form of activity in art has a specific political aspect. By determining the sensual condition of taking part in an artistic action, art shapes various models of the sociopolitical system. At the same time, taking part in an artistic practice is a form of public activity and participation in the affairs of the republic. It seems, however, it's somewhat premature of the philosopher to identify this participation with traditional forms of politics, such as democracy (to name one example). Narrowing Plato's philosophy down to a specific political system implies that governance in the Republic must be unambiguously anthropocentric. Because he follows this train of thought, Rancière is forced to assume that participation in artistic action is only relevant to its human actors. If, however, we recognize as the basis of the relation between art and politics a concept of community (or, more broadly, society) which includes both humans and non-humans, the issue of participation becomes much more complicated.

In his book *Reassembling the Social*, sociologist Bruno Latour criticises social sciences in their traditional form for determining in advance who is allowed to belong to society.<sup>16</sup> Thus he formulates a post-humanist concept of society, encompassing (and granting equal rights to) human and non-human actors who interact with each other in different ways. Unlike traditional sociological theory, Latour doesn't recognise the binary division into 'non-human' nature and 'human' society – a polarity established in the seventeenth century, with the emergence of the industrial-mechanical ensemble described by Savat. For that reason, he replaces the concept of 'society' with that of the 'collective', which 'will designate the project of assembling new entities not yet gathered together and which, for this reason, clearly appear as being not made of social stuff'.<sup>17</sup>

15 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 13–14.

16 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

17 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 75.

In a collective in this understanding of the term, the entities of interest to Latour – humans and non-humans alike – become actors; that is, they acquire relational subjectivity and agency, denied them by traditional sociology. In traditional sociology, these entities were regarded either as inert matter or as a set of individuals whose discrete actions are determined entirely by social factors (technologies and institutions of power). But the subjectivity and agency described by Latour have very little indeed in common with being part of a society based on the principles of liberalism and individualism. The actor cannot function and, consequently, doesn't exist independently of the network of connections with other actors. This is why Latour writes of the actor-network, whose actions are never the result of her (its) own will or strength, but turn out to be the resultant of the forces exerted by other actors within the network. As he states in *Reassembling the Social*:

Action is *overtaken* or, as one Swedish friend transcribed this dangerous Hegelian expression, action is *other-taken*! So it is taken up by others and shared with the masses. It is mysteriously carried out and at the same time distributed to others.<sup>18</sup>

During *Anaesthesia*, when I attempted to switch the broadcast channel yet kept hearing Aileen's annoying voice in my headphones, I was faced with just such an instance of action being other-taken.

In light of this outline of the participation-experience model – based on the arrangement between controller and controlled, involving all human and non-human participants in different ways – it's no longer possible to use the term 'participation'. This term relates solely to interactions between human participants of artistic actions. This is why I find it preferable to describe as cyberparticipation the relevant model of taking part in artistic action. Yet my proposed term has little to do with cyberspace understood as a technological facility, enabling the human individual to transcend the limitations set by traditional institutions and pursue her freedom without restraint. This mentality was in place as early as in the 1960s. And yet – to briefly return to Plato – it's worth noting that *kybernētēs*, a term familiar to readers of *The Republic*, is ensconced in the prefix 'cyber-'. This Greek word is the etymological source of the terms 'cybernetics' and 'cybernetic', in use today. This is the name both for the helmsman – the one who steers the ship – and the helm, the navigating instrument. It seems to me that the double meaning of the word used by Plato offers us insight into the situation of human and non-human actors in post-theatre practices, who are simultaneously members of the industrial-mechanical and the digital ensembles. Human actors are often under the impression that they control various non-human participants, or influence the course of artistic action – when in fact it's usually them being controlled, both by non-humans and by other humans (artists). In addition, all these groups are exposed to ever-changing external circumstances, determining their behaviour and reception of a specific artistic action. In order to demonstrate the ideological functions of

<sup>18</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 45.

cyberparticipation (in this understanding of the term) in post-theatre, it's worth referencing a specific example.

4.

To illustrate the mechanisms of cyberparticipation in the latest forms of post-theatre, I shall turn to the example of *Prolog* [*Prologue*, Ochota Theatre, premiered 28 April 2012], a production by director Wojtek Ziemilski. There are two reasons why I'm citing this event. First, *Prologue* (and, from a broader perspective, Ziemilski's work as a whole) is often regarded as the latest example of participatory art aiming – to quote theatre critic Katarzyna Lemańska – 'to convince the audience they are an inherent part of the theatrical, cultural and, in general, human community'.<sup>19</sup> In this context, the technology employed by Ziemilski becomes but a medium, enabling the creation of a community of the performance's human participants. Second, *Prologue* is of interest to me because, unlike *Anaesthesia*, I didn't take part in it: I only know it from film and from accounts of reviewers' experiences. This will enable me to look at the production from the perspective imposed by its makers, who placed the camera in the spot traditionally occupied by the director. Thus I will be in a position to critically examine *Prologue* in the context of the technology deployed in the production.

As in *Anaesthesia*, audience members are given headphones before entering the *Prologue* space. A live broadcast of a moderator's no-nonsense voice can be heard in the headphones: male for the English version and female for the Polish. The moderators not only give instructions to those who take part in the project – above all, they keep asking questions, formulated with a view to making an issue of the participants' role in the event. For example, at some point the moderators tell participants: 'Take a good look around you... [a longer pause]. Did you really look around, or were you just listening to my voice?' The aim of self-referential, performative strategies of this kind is to weaken reception tactics, which is characteristic of this kind of artistic action and consists of rendering audience members' immediate surroundings theatrical. According to performative scholar Josette Féral, this kind of theatricality is born in the gaze of the audience member who distinguishes between the stage and the audience.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, in *Prologue* the voice keeps placing participants in the systematically produced 'here and now', provoking them to reflect critically on the nature of their participation. This performative strategy is a direct reference to participatory projects, particularly ubiquitous in 1990s critical art, whose aim was to present art as a sphere of active participation and make viewers feel included. This aspect is particularly manifest the second sequence of *Prologue*, when participants enter the auditorium, where stage space has been adapted by the artists to resemble a white board. The voice of the moderator orders participants to stand in a spot of their choice – depending how comfortable they are participating

19 Katarzyna Lemańska, 'Teatr rozszerzony Wojtka Ziemilskiego, *Performer* 5, 2012 <http://www.grotowski.net/performer/performer-5/teatr-rozszerzony-wojtka-ziemilskiego> [accessed on 3 August 2017].

20 Josette Féral, 'Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language', *SubStance* 2/3, 2002, pp. 94–108 (p. 97).

in the event. The voice goes on to ask them about their habits as viewers and their behaviour as theatregoers: the questions range from neutral (are they usually late for a performance?) to more intimate (have they ever masturbated during a performance?). With each affirmative or negative answer, the voice orders a participant to take a step forward or back, respectively. The artists thus lead audience members to believe they can influence the shape of *Prologue* by contributing to a sort of performative choreography – regardless of whether they answer questions truthfully or not. What is more, with each question participants begin to watch one another and clearly attune their reactions to the behaviour of others. Thus it would seem that Ziemilski's production does indeed, as Lemańska has argued, create a democratic community of audience members, who believe that, rather than simply follow the instructions given by the voice, they are free to interact with each other.

The cyberparticipatory nature of *Prologue* is revealed in the third part of the performance. After a series of questions, participants are given large white cushions, on which they are to lie down and relax to the sound of Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture*. After a while, the peaceful atmosphere is disrupted by a woman's voice, reading out statistics regarding the answers to each question. While the number of people who answered a question in a certain way is read out, a multimedia projection appears on the screen. In real time, the invisible hand of one of the artists behind *Prologue* directs a streak of coloured light towards participants who gave the same answers, connecting them into a kind of network. With time, the white board becomes a sort of colourful map of links and interconnections between participants. Lemańska interprets the scene:

Participants draw a representation of their imagination on the ceiling. The conjectures in their minds (no one will know our answers, if we do lie, we only lie to ourselves) are 'depicted' in the form of flecks of light, circles and coloured lines overlaying a live recording of the audience.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, the critic regards the multimedia projection as a projection of the participants' individual desires and communal objectives. However, it seems to me that the sequence in question may be cyberparticipatory in nature insofar as it's the projection that 'draws' a community between participants (as the event gets under way, the voice asks them politely to refrain from any interaction with each other). In part three, however, they're asked to imagine they're taking part in group sex. The voice arbitrarily pairs them up as lovers and conjures up vivid erotic images before them. This sequence very clearly demonstrates the cyberparticipatory potential of *Prologue*, managing the attention of audience members to imbue them with a sense of community – while revealing to them how this community comes into being.

From that point of view, it turns out it's only after the artists behind *Prologue* have displayed the projection that audience members' individual answers came to be transformed into an emblem of belonging to a specific collective. What had previously seemed a mere contribution to choreography, giving each viewer the opportunity to influence

<sup>21</sup> Lemańska, 'Teatr rozszerzony'.

the course of the event, turned into a part of the social choreography. As Lemańska rightly argues, ‘the premise of this type of choreography is that audience members will be manipulated – this is how politics applies social-choreography strategies to the way social groups (the governing and the governed) operate’. But the critic is wrong to attribute to *Prologue* the role of initiating a community. The function of the screen on which viewers watch the projection build a network of relations between them (this time without their consent or agency) would seem to reveal to audience members the performative mechanism of creating a community by means of different technologies peculiar to the digital ensemble. This interpretation is substantiated by the *Prologue* finale, which has audience members leave the auditorium not through the foyer, but through the backstage exit: once backstage, they are able to see the computers, microphones and monitors used during the performance to control them. Exposing the cyberparticipatory role of technology in Ziemilski’s production compels us to take an even closer look at the relation between human and non-human participants of the latest theatre forms, and to reconsider the category of interactivity from that perspective.

##### 5.

The striking thing about the art projects discussed so far is that their makers focus primarily on projecting interactions with various types of cybernetic technology, restricting the physical contact between participants that was characteristic of performers’ actions in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus I shall leave aside reflections on interactivity by participation theoreticians such as Nicolas Bourriaud and Claire Bishop. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, for all their disparities, their theories are based on the binary opposition between digital technologies – allegedly objectifying humans – and the emancipatory participation strategies deployed by contemporary artists.<sup>22</sup> To understand the aspect of present-day post-theatre forms that is of interest to me here, one ought rather to examine the concept of interactivity, underlying the development of new media in the twentieth century. To do so, one could reference the experience of coming into contact with various augmented reality (AR) technologies (to name one example): all manner of digital image generating technologies, including devices as disparate as Google Glass-type goggles, a hologram or a tablet. The essence of this experience is not (as science fiction films would have us believe) the user’s absolute immersion in a digitally generated virtual environment. The fundamental characteristic of augmented reality is that it introduces elements of digital technology into the material environment and, consequently, produces experience in the form of an assemblage of virtual reality and the users’ sensations. According to AR technology scholars Oliver Bimber and Ramesh Raskar, the goal of programmers and construction engineers in charge of manufacturing equipment that brings users augmented-reality experiences has been to

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22 Mateusz Chaberski, *Doświadczenie (syn)estetyczne. Performatywne aspekty przedstawień site-specific* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Księgarnia Akademicka, 2015).

make the users' interaction with both the digitally generated image and other users as effective as possible.<sup>23</sup>

The objective of the interactivity of AR technology in this sense of the term is well demonstrated by the example of video games, where the opportunity to interact not only with the game but also with other players considerably increases the pleasure of playing. One perfect example of using games in this way is Kinect, a game console enabling players to control the avatars with their own body rather than a pad or keyboard. Suitably situated movement sensors analyse the player's physical actions and map her movements in real time onto the movement of the character in the game. According to one advertisement for Kinect, the technology in question provides users with 'new opportunities to play **together**'.<sup>24</sup> In an attempt to add substance to their message, the ad-makers show a family of four who regard interacting with the machine as a part of the traditional assemblage of family relations, enabling them to spend time together. Thus the example of Kinect demonstrates that the interactive potential of new technologies is used not so much to create new communities between human and non-human actors as it is to strengthen traditional inter-human relations. It seems that this way of thinking about interactivity is also evident in the latest post-theatre forms making use of digital art features.

Practitioners of digital art have been using this way of thinking about the interactive potential of augmented-reality technologies as a participatory-art strategy. To see how true this contention is, one needs but glance at theoretical reflection on the role of digital media in the work of contemporary artists. For instance, Roberto Simanowski, a scholar based in Germany with an interest in this type of phenomena – indubitably influenced by Nicolas Bourriaud, author of the concept of relational aesthetics – observes that interactive digital art practices are 'important as alternatives to the ideology of mass communications but also to various utopias of the New Man and the calls for a better world to be found in futurist manifestos'<sup>25</sup> In Simanowski's view, interactive artworks enable their audience members to create temporary, makeshift communities, thus releasing their potential for being involved in social causes. He discusses *Vectorial Elevation* (1999), a multimedia installation by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, which enabled Internet users around the globe to design a composition of lights which was then displayed on huge screens in a square in central Mexico City. In Simanowski's view, the role of the installation project was twofold: on one hand, it enabled the Mexican capital to be genuinely included in the global cultural circuit; on the other, it gave Internet users the opportunity to, in a way, work together as a community. The objective here was to create alternative narratives, going beyond colonial preconceptions about Mexico. Thus, Simanowski argues, Lozano-Hemmer, by using an interactive medium, succeeded

23 Olivier Bimber, Ramesh Raskar, *Spatial Augmented Reality: Merging Real and Virtual Worlds* (Wellesley, Mass.: A.K. Peters, 2005), p. 6.

24 Xbox360 Kinect Commercial, online access protocol <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=op82fDRRqSY> (2 May 2015) [author's emphasis].

25 Roberto Simanowski, *Digital Art and Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

in prompting those who look at art to visibly interfere with public space. And yet Christine Ross, when referencing Lozano-Hemmer's piece in the article I quoted earlier, argues persuasively that the artist's work failed to bring about a community granting the status of fully active subjects those who took part in it, or a sense of genuinely participating in a common effort. As Ross observes:

interaction [between humans participating in the Lozano-Hemmer event] is minimal: the recipient is left with the sense of not having much control over the outcome of the piece. More problematically, it shapes communities that **lack in intersubjectivity what they gain in numbers of participants**; they simply amount to a conglomerate of two or more anonymous users: an amenable collective of 'anyone + anyone + anyone + anyone +....'<sup>26</sup>

As we can see, in Ross's view, the interactive nature of digital-art actions by no means guarantees the creation of independent human-to-human communities. Quite the opposite: art that deploys interactive cybernetic media tends to make an issue of the entanglement of those involved in culture in a wider network of sociopolitical interdependencies and force systems aiming to create a sort of illusion of active participation in artistic actions. Referencing the words of Dead Baitz collective member Michał Krawczak, one can describe this facet of post-theatre as 'malicious interactivity'.<sup>27</sup> But, in this context, the adjective 'malicious' doesn't carry a pejorative overtone. It simply describes a situation when an interaction with technology, ostensibly granting individuals the freedom of interacting with human and non-human participants in artistic action, in fact limits their options and, to a large extent, determines their behaviour.

In the latest forms of post-theatre deploying cybernetic technologies that I have described above, the examples of experiences of cyberparticipation and malicious interactivity clearly demonstrate that when it comes to those who take part in post-theatre, participation is not about creating democratic communities. One would say rather that participants are embroiled in a relationship between controller and controlled; a relationship preventing the constitution of the human subject as a free and active participant in artistic action. It follows that the next stage in reflecting on post-theatre forms that deploy the latest cybernetic technologies should be to formulate a new concept of the political in art – a concept that would look beyond democracy as the dominant model for relations between human and non-human participants in art. Though this is a task far exceeding the scope of this article, as I draw it to a close, I will venture to return to David Savat's *Uncoding the Digital*, from which I quoted in the beginning. The author convincingly demonstrates that the political strategies known from democracy, and based on the premise of unrestrained action of a free individual, are the result of the emergence of the industrial-mechanical ensemble, and may prove inefficient at a time when the digital ensemble becomes increasingly dominant. Therefore, Savat calls for the creation of fluid politics, whose essence is 'generating specific

<sup>26</sup> Ross, 'Spatial Poetics', p. 23 [author's emphasis].

<sup>27</sup> From a recorded interview with Michał Krawczak in the author's archive.

flows of code' within the cybernetic network and 'affecting other flows'.<sup>28</sup> However, these flows don't come about as a result of the human individual's subjective activity: a human-machine interaction is requisite for them to be established. Although human agency is severely restricted in this networked political system, flows of information created in human-machine assemblages in the digital ensemble can quickly bring about change to the entire system.

In this perspective, cyberparticipation and malicious interactivity not only enable art made today to actualize the dystopian vision of a non-democratic society where it's impossible for an individual to act and choose freely. Instead, the art of today becomes a training ground of experience where audience members get to know the mechanisms of the digital ensemble and learn that only through interaction with machines can the potential of change brought about by those who devised the structure of the performance be revealed. This revelation occurs beyond the audience members' will, but gives a glimmer of hope for broader social change.

*Translated by Joanna Błachnio*

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28 Savat, *Uncoding the Digital*, p. 181.



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## ABSTRACT

**Mateusz Chaberski**

## Cyberparticipation and Malicious Interactivity, or: Who or What Participates in Post-Theatre

In recent years, performative arts in Poland have seen a proliferation of hybrid art installations combining not just different media, but also procedures from the field of academic research, designing new technologies, as well as political action and philosophical inquiries. In this context, post-theatre doesn't have to (and shouldn't) become yet another artistic genre that comes 'after theatre'. Instead, it could define different kinds of spaces for dynamically creating new ways of being in the world and thinking about it. Still, with their attachment to traditional genre-related classifications, critics and art scholars have yet to find a language to precisely describe this kind of post-theatre experiences, taking as their starting point the audience member experience they regard as constitutive. This lack of language is evidenced by few reviews for, and critical assessments of the work of Dead Baitz, a group comprising scholars Agnieszka Jelewska and Michał Krawczak, composer Rafał Zapała, multimedia artist Paweł Janicki and software developer Michał Cichy. It's extremely difficult to write about Dead Baitz's work without taking into account the situated experience of a critic or scholar. The present article aims to fill this gap, while offering a broader reflection on the issue of participation in the latest art installations. However, the starting point for these reflections will be not so much a survey of Dead Baitz's artistic methods as the analysis of the author's own experience of participation in the installations *Post-apocalypse* (2015) and *Anaesthesia* (2016). By employing the autoethnographic method (Ticineto-Clough) and the findings of contemporary ensemble theory (DeLanda), I'll try to demonstrate taking part in these art installations falls outside the participation theories developed to date (Rancière, Bourriaud, Bishop). This is because underlying these theories is the tacit assumption that participation in art events is limited to humans. But Dead Baitz installations feature different types of ensembles of human and non-human participants – ensembles which are either absent from, or assigned a marginal role in, the established participation theories. In this context, it seems fitting to speak of cyberparticipation rather than simply participation. Etymologically, the proposed term stems from the prefix 'cyber-', commonly used today. It derives from the Greek adjective *kybernētēs* – the source of the word 'cybernetics', denoting both the helmsman – the one who steers the ship – and the helm. In this understanding of the term, cyberparticipation is relevant not just to digital culture phenomena, but also to the experience of at once controlling and being controlled, which is peculiar to culture in its most recent form.