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DEMATERIALIZATION OF THE STAGE
(Epistemology of New Media in Performance Arts and Music)

Abstract: One of the fundamental, philosophical ontological questions discussed in this text is whether the *technological system and practice* or the *system and practice of digital technology* can be considered a medium (media system and material provider of practice) of theatre art, music and performance art as "live arts". Bearing this question in mind, the concept of media is redefined in several ways: as an instrumental and/or communicative extension of the human body, i.e. object, mechanical, electromechanical, electronic, digital or network *prosthesis*; as an agent or communicator, first of all, between human and other *bodies*, i.e. between machines and biological organisms; as a *medium* through which communication goes on between a source and a receiver; and as an instrument or technology of mass and individual one-way and interactive communication, that is, an affectation interaction that turns into a situation of "apparatus".

Key words: Affectation, Music, New Media, Performance Arts, Metamedium, Postmedium, Sound Art

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New media in music art refer to artistic performance practices based on the introduction of "new" or "previously unused" media in the traditionally defined

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media identity of musical disciplines. For example, new media designate the introduction of film or video media in the contexts of music performance, that is, the introduction of "new" mechanical, electronic or digital *apparatuses* in the performance, production and postproduction of music.[1]

In late modernism, *new media* refer to "experimental research" establishing relations between traditional and new media within the previously defined monomedia practices. Therefore, new media denote all hybrid musical practices derived from linking and confronting several media (*mixed media*, multimedia, polymedia, extended media, art and technology, ambient art, computer art, sound installations, cybernetic art, etc.).[2] Media hybridization was essential for the neoavant-garde, primarily fluxus[3] practices in the late fifties and throughout the sixties of the twentieth century. Hybridization may imply – at the level of examples – a situation in which an artist disrupts the "consistency" and "conventional disciplinary determination" of the media. Historical examples may be quite different – from Cage's *immanently musical* "prepared piano", to Georg Brecht's *antimusical* "drip music" to the *transmusical practice* of "the theatre of eternal music" by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela.

Today, *new media* denote, first of all, musical artistic practices based on "programming". Such *programmable* practices lead to a musical (audio or audiovisual) piece: computer, digital, cyber and biotechnological art, that is, *sound art* examples. The relationship between image and sound at some point becomes a new problem for theory and philosophy,[4] leading from a debate on "reproduction" to a debate on the "audiovisual" situation within culture to a debate on "interaction" between a body and a machine in the field of social powers. The definition "new media" designating programmable artistic, i.e., performance and musical practices, is characteristic of art in the age of globalism and transition, since programmability appears as a globally totalizing practice of structuring and performing artistic musical works existing somewhere between high and popular culture. Programmability has pointed to a step forward from "creative work" in modernism to "consumer work" in postmodernism and "post-production cognitivisation" in transition or globalism. In other words, the modernist attitude of the artist, i.e. the composer or the performer, is determined by the notions of creat-

1   Rudolf E. Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1996; Michael Rush, *Video Art*, Thames and Hadson, London, 2007; Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat – A History of Sound in the Arts*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1999; Thom Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music*, Routledge, New York, 2002; Paul D. Miller (ed.), *Sound Unbound – Sampling Digital Music and Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, 2008.

2   Alan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings,* Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1961; Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *The Theatre of Mixed Means – An Introduction to Happenings, Kinetic Environments, and Other Mixed-Means Performances*, The Dial Press Inc, New York, 1968.

3   Réne Block, "Fluxus Music: an Everyday Event – A Lecture", from *A Ling Tale with Many Knots – Fluxus in Germany 1962–1994*, Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart, 1995.

4   Jacques Rancière, "Metamorphosis of the Muses", from *Sonic Process. A New Geography of Sound*, Museum d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2002, p. 17–29.

ing a "work of art" as an autonomous, exceptional and authentic sample of culture in a medium environment. One of the radically modernist challenges, and also responses, to the new mass media of music reproduction was the work by a Canadian pianist, Glenn Gould. At one point in his career he replaced the "live performance" of classical piano music (Bach, Schoenberg) with the "media performance" (radio, television) of recorded and reproducible music.[5] In modernism, the "programmability" concept is metaphorically applicable to "numerical" operations included in the poetical protocols of composers, such as dodecaphony, serialism and integral/total serialism: Arnold Schoenberg's *Op. 3 No. 23* (l920–23) or Pierre Boulez's *Structures* (1951-52). In avant-garde modernist practices, the relation between "the non-musical technique and the art of music" is defined as a utopian synthesis aimed at anticipating the art/music of the future. We can mention the conceptions of "noise music" by Luigi Russolo or Edgar Varèse's piece *Amériques* (1918–1921). In postmodernism, removing the hard and fast boundaries between high and popular culture indicates the transformation of artistic work from "creative" to "consumer"[6] work. An artist works with "user programmes" characteristic of running within the consumer oriented and motivated software of the commercial digital culture. An important problem here is the relation between the creative act and "sampling" in the spaces between popular and high culture. Some typical examples include the works *You Can Be Anyone This Time Around* (1970) by Timothy Leary, *Spillane* (1987) by John Zorn or *Ice Ice Baby* (1990) by David Bowie. Composer sampling protocols have raised two major aesthetic problems: the theoretical problem of "appropriation" in postmodernism and transitional global culture, as well as the economic problem of "copyright" on the use of *existing*, i.e., *sampled cultural traces*. As far as transitional and globalizing cultures are concerned, it is becoming important to conduct "programmable practices" as complex projects of production, postproduction and global distribution within the indefinite and changeable boundaries of the market acceleration of "cultural products" within *cognitive capitalism*. In this context, artistic musical practice becomes a sort of cultural work or artistic activism (*artivism*)[7] linked with the complex economic, cultural and social structuring of the "immaterial market".[8] In such a context, as a composer or performer, an artist becomes the "author-producer" and "author-designer"[9] of a piece that exists in the manner

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5   Glenn Gould, "The Prospects of Recording" (1966), from Christoph Cox, Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture – Reading in Modern Music*, Continuum, London, 2007, p. 115-126.

6   Bors Groys, "The Artist as an Exemplary Art Consumer", from Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Aesthetics as Philosophy –Proceedings Part I*, in *Filozofski vestnik* št. 2, ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana, 1999, p. 87–100.

7   Aldo Milohnić, "Artivism", from "Performing Action, Performing Thinking" (theme), *Maska* št. 1–2 (90–91), Ljubljana, 2005, p. 15–25

8   Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial labor", from Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy – A Potential Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 133–146.

9   Elie During, "Appropriations: Deaths of the Author in Electronic Music", from *Sonic Process. A New Geography of Sound*, Museum d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2002, p. 39–55.

and regimes in which there are numerous cultural artefacts of consumption, appropriation, identification, mobilization and transfer (travelling, movement, visiting, documenting or exchange). The issue here is about different culturally motivated productions of music or audiovisual products presented on a wide scale, from "the entertainment industry" to the politics of *world music*, to completely different identificatory multicultural practices related to racial, ethnic, national, generational, geographical or native identification groups. As an example, hear/see Tan Dun's *The Map* (2003) designated as a *historic multimedia concert performed in the outdoors of rural China*.

Along with the term "new medium",[10] the term "metamedium"[11] is used, as Lev Manovich defined it in the context of digital film. *Metamedium* or *postmedium* is identified with computer multimedia and digital communication networks, such as the Internet. If we bring this discussion into the field of a debate on music and the performing arts, we can say that "samples", created with "old" media and archived in digital surroundings, are recycled, appropriated, i.e. sampled or programme-simulated through computer multimedia. The key interest in modernism, as the old media avant-garde, is to discover new forms of expression, i.e. different ways to humanize and objectify a completely alienated image of the world created by mechanical and electronic media technologies. The new media avant-garde is no longer concerned with the observation and presentation of the external world in a new way, but is rather focused on new ways of approach and the use of data previously accumulated and archived through media. According to Manovich, the "new media avant-garde" is established in a dominant appropriative manner.[12] Metamedia art and culture rely on digital computer technology considered essential for data processing, representation or simulation, meaning the imitation and display of the sensuous effects of all the other media. *Digital art*[13] therefore deals with new ways of approaching and manipulating sound, audiovisual and visual information, and the recombinations thereof. Its techniques are hypermedia, databases, browsers, instruments for data comparison, image/sound editing, that is, for establishing a vital relationship between a computer and interface with regard to the human body or life forms in a culture and society. A digital artist, or an artist assuming the functional and instrumental "competencies of an IT worker", does not approach material reality directly, but rather uses media recordings and is occupied with previously accumulated recordings and representations, or possibilities of their transformation and transfer. This leads to total inconsistency and transfiguration wherein the instrumentaria of social struggle are deployed as part of politics, science or the organization of everyday life in the manner of a simulated and designed

10   Johanne Drucker, "Interactive, Algorithmic, Networked: Aesthetics of New Media Art", from Annmarie Chandler, Norie Neumark (eds.), *At a Distance – Precursor to Art and Activism on the Internet*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2006, p. 34–59.

11   Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, p. 33.

12   David Evans (ed.), *Appropriation*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2009.

13   Christiane Paul, *Digital Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2003.

aesthetic experience. The field of "new-media musical/sound work" with computer multimedia, or with complex "presentation apparatuses" connected through interfaces with computer multimedia, is the place where quite competitive professions meet: composers, sound designers, stage designers or digital artists, as the authors, performers, authors-performers or post-production interventionists.

Most often, contemporary aesthetic experience is not autonomously formulated through music art, but through public and mass media (computer-net-computer, video, cable TV, satellite TV, or the massive stage spectacle) engaged in the cultural production, exchange and consumption of information and sensuous/ body events of *affectation*[14] as well. Media and their effects create an open cultural environment – culture as affectation ecology – that can become anything through software manoeuvres: an ecosystem, a scientific paradigm, a political atmosphere, a pornographic object, an artistic distinction – but also a factory, a shopping mall or a private space for production, the exchange and consumption of the material effects of symbolic (software) or affectation (interface) manipulations. The confrontation of sensuous and body affectations, and the recoding/coding of socially contextualized message flows are an essential poetic problem of such artistic practices. An author/performer or a recipient of digital art is initiated into "platforms and procedures" as the points of intersection between tendencies toward the creation of "body affect", and toward the interventionist identification of the media environment as a cultural ambience full of "mobile" meanings. The possibilities of creating a stable "new language of design" and "new language of art" are subverted by the incessant introduction of new techniques and technologies for representing communicative situations and the performability thereof. Therefore, we are dealing here with quite specific "digital situationism". New media not only offer more opportunities than the old ones, but continue to grow and expand in time/space, wherein technical and aesthetic knowledge aligns itself with political[15] action: by establishing or subverting the structures of power.

The key consequence of the mass production and use of digital technologies is confrontation with the technologies of social practices of communication, control, surveillance, regulation, as well as enjoyment, shifting from the "specialized sense" to the "body" moved by affectation. *Production work* employing digital technologies is not primarily the productive transformation of a natural condition – from raw matter (natural objects) into artificial products (commodities, surplus value) – but the performance of digital system events in relation to human bodies and their affectation. In other words, a digital work of art is neither a *finished piece* nor a live performance, but a possibility and consequence of a *flux*

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14 Brian Massumi (ed.), *A Shock to Thought - Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, Routledge, London, 2002.

15 Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance*, Autonomedia, New York, 1994; Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Civil Disobedience*, Autonomedia, New York, 1996; Critical Art Ensemble, *Digital Resistance*, Autonomedia, New York, 2000.

of events, i.e. achieved affectation. Performing in the world of digital technologies implies a break with social and individual organic balance and a shift to executing commands between machines or, rather, *networked machines* wherein the subject evolves from a body-*centre* to a *flux of affectations around and, more importantly, through and by means of the body*. Due to these processes there are no longer any differences between a *musical work of art* and any other cultural or social artefact, performance, or practice. For that matter, theories about new media practices shift from exploration/research in the aesthetics and poetics of *digital technologies* to the *politics of affect*,[16] meaning, to a public confrontation with the potentials of regulation and deregulation of *life itself*.

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- as an instrumental and/or communicative extension of the human body, i.e. object, mechanical, electromechanical, electronic, digital or network *prosthesis*;
- as an agent or communicator, first of all, between human and other *bodies*, i.e. between machines and biological organisms;
- as a *medium* through which communication goes on between a source and a receiver; and
- as an instrument or technology of mass and individual one-way and interactive communication, that is, an affectation interaction that turns into a situation of "apparatus",[17] the "apparatus" implying a heterogeneous set of relationships including linguistic and non-linguistic agents: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, political measures, philosophic propositions, cultural representations, etc.

Digital technology is a medium in all four senses. It helps create various extensions of the human body – e.g. a literal extension with a cybernetic arm as the third arm,[18] or an extension of a body at the terminal, connected through

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16 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual – Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Duke University Poress, Durham, 2002.

17 Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2009, str. 1–3.

18 Use of the third cybernetic arm in Stelarc's performances; see Marina Gržinić (ed.), *Stelarc*, Maska, Ljubljana, 2002.

software and hardware to the Internet[19] by means of which it achieves almost instant visual, audio, audio-visual, audio-verbal, or haptic presence in any spot on the planet connected to the Internet. Digital technologies – in the first place, network technologies – build a *new type* of communication and presence – *telepresence*,[20] at the same time building new behavioural environments phenomenally different from the experiential physical environment or natural ecology. The issue of "virtual space" or "virtual reality"[21] is a completely new interactive world of human bodily experience. Digital technology is not only a media instrument of communication, but a totalizing system and practice of regulating and deregulating a "possible world" by machines.

When talking, for example, about a "digital theatre" or "digital musical theatre", we would not be referring to it as a *hybrid medium*, but as *hybrid technologies* which in discourses/institutions of theatre and music provide real or virtual or real-virtual apparatuses with which relations are created between a body and terminal, interface agents of the machine or network of machines in creating a complex affect/message. Exploring the theatre, music and media or digital technologies, several typical cases can be singled out:

  a) a digital system screen, as a source of visual and audio or audiovisual *images*, is a part of or entire stage design for a musical theatre play; or, a digital system helps create the stage design (screen, laser, electromechanical stage settings) for a music theatre play; this is a standard stage design nowadays applied in a large number of plays;

  b) a terminal with a digital system screen is a passive or interactive "participant" in a music theatre play, or a kind of "hero" or "character" included in a musical theatre narrative – one of the early examples of a "screen opera" is Philip Glass's *La Belle et la Bête* (1994) for which a screen with a projection of Jean Cocteau's movie was put up as the "hero" or "character", i.e. the "body" of the opera which was vocally and instrumentally performed in front of the screen; another example is *Cremaster 3* by a film and performance artist Matthew Barney, consisting of a digital version of the film as the main part and the performance titled "The Order", staged in the Guggenheim Museum in New York, featuring relations of "appropriated" artistic practices – from Richard Serra's interventions with melted petroleum jelly to presentations of the New York underground and punk music stage productions, etc.;

  c) a theatre play is performed: (d1) only with terminal-type participants: avatars; (d2) as a relation between terminal avatars and live participants,

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19   Internet Art or Net-Art is based on connecting a body to a network or body networking by means of *terminal*. See Christiane Paul, "Internet Art and Nomadic Networks", from *Digital Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2003, p. 111–124.

20   Paul Virilio, "The Third Interval: A Critical Transition" from Andermatt Conley, V. (ed.), *Rethinking Technologies*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1993, p. 3–12.

21   Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2003.

without networking; (d3) by networking terminal avatars and live partici-
pants into a digital control system (a kind of a proto*cyborg* performance);
(d4) with *cyborg* systems relativizing actions of the participant, as an ex-
periential body, and surroundings (stage, stage settings) into a complex
digital real-virtual audiovisual event – one of the early examples is Ste-
ve Reich and Beryl Korot's opera *Three Tales: Hindenburg + Bikini + Dolly*
(1998–2002), staged exclusively for non-interactive performance by means
of a DVD projection;

d) any stage or non-stage music theatre work which can be audiovisually
documented, edited, performed and presented as a digital recording on
a computer, video equipment, television or digital projectors, such as op-
eras or dance plays directed for stage and media performance – for exam-
ple, the television version of John Adams's opera *The Death of Klinghof-
fer* (1995), directed for stage by Peter Sellers and for television by Penny
Woolcock;

e) music theatre work presented as an Internet theatre event, implying a
software-based system of interactive images (photographs, animations,
film) requiring a reaction from performers; most often, this is a digital
animated film with "avatars" offering the possibility of choice or influ-
ence, or interaction between the avatar in VR space and the user's body in
real space – see, for example, radical political experiments and actions in
Electronic Disturbance Theatre presented on the Internet from 1994 to 2002,
or actions in the field of "interactive theatre", such as TkH *Psihoza i Smrt
Autora: algoritam – YU03/04..13* (2004) [*Psychosis and Death of the Author:
Algorithm – YU03/04..13*], etc.

Digital music and theatre have been moved from the domain of the "ontol-
ogy" of *here-and-now* live performance to domains of the "ontology" of interaction
between *that* here-and-now and the virtual potentials of events in the time and
space of simulation. Roughly speaking, digital music and theatre can be a thea-
tre designed as an interactive digital animated film and also as a traditional live
performance with digital infrastructure. To that effect, digital theatre and digital
music can equally be used to present both the traditional Western "ontology" of
theatre (unity of space, time and plot)[22] and the potential simulative "ontologies"
of virtual unity, difference, delay, removal and so on, of the relations of space, time
and plot. In other words, the "traditional ontology" of the unity of space, time and
plot is based on the criterion of understanding the similarity between a theatre and
an ordinary, real life, behavioural event. "Simulative ontology", on the other hand,
proceeds from the concept of the hybrid possibility of establishing various criteria
for creating the relations of space, time and plot. For that matter, digital technology
does not imply disturbing the unity of space, time and plot through dramaturgy,

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22   Pierre Corneille, "Debate on Three Unities: Plot, Time and Place", from Jovan Hristić (ed.), *Teorija
drame – Renesansa i klasicizam* [*Theory of Drama – Renaissance and Classicism*], Belgrade University of Arts,
Belgrade, 1976, p. 438–450.

production and stage as in modernist and avant-garde theatre, but a *regulation* of *relations* among real, fictional and virtual time, space and plot achieved by means of technology since the traditional unity of time, space and plot is derived from a mimetic pattern defining a musical and theatrical work as an *image* of reality based on criteria for the canonization of experience. In digital theatre and music, the relations of space, time and plot are a consequence of the arbitrary (non-experiential, conventional, accidental, intentional, etc.) regulation of relations among real (physical, experiential, stage), fictional (representative) and virtual (generated, simulated by technology) space, time and plot.

<div align="right">Translated by Goran Kapetanović</div>

Мишко Шуваковић

ДЕМАТЕРИЈАЛИЗАЦИЈА СЦЕНЕ
(Епистемологија нових медија у извођачким уметностима и музици)

РЕЗИМЕ

Једно од битних филозофско-онтолошких питања разматраних у овом тексту јесте да ли се *технолошки систем и пракса* или *систем и пракса дигиталне технологије* може сматрати медијем (медијским системом и материјалним носиоцем праксе) уметности театра, музике и перформанс арта као „живих уметности"? Концепт медија се, пред таквим питањем, редефинише на неколико начина: као инструментални и/или комуникацијски продужетак људског тела, тј. предметна, механичка, електромеханичка, електронска, дигитална или мрежна *протеза*; затим, као заступник или комуникатор између, пре свега, људског и других *тела*, односно, између машина и биолошких организама; и као *средина* кроз коју се одиграва комуникација између извора и пријемника; и као инструмент или технологија масовне и индивидуалне једносмерне и интерактивне комуникације, односно, афектацијске интеракције која прераста у ситуацију „апаратуса".

Кључне речи: афектација, извођачке уметности, метамедиј, музика, нови медији, постмедији, Sound art