

Review for *Theatre Research International*

Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation. By **Steve Dixon** with contributions by **Barry Smith**. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2007. Pp. xv + 809 + illus.

Multi-Media: Video – Installation – Performance. By **Nick Kaye**. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. Pp. xxii + 249 + 20 illus.

Reviewed by Andy Lavender, The Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London

In case there was any doubt that postmodernism is now done, these books hammer another couple of nails into the coffin. Both look back at digital performance and multimedia art in the latter part of the twentieth century, tracing histories, critical and theoretical frames and key works. Both suggest the emergence of a cultural shape that can now be seen as that of the new millennium.

Steve Dixon's name appears alone on the cover of *Digital Performance*. The book also features unattributed contributions by Barry Smith (much of its research and materials were developed out of Dixon and Smith's AHRC-funded Digital Performance Archive),

so a sometimes royal-sounding ‘we’ resonates throughout, which accords with the sweep of this monumental volume.

Digital Performance takes a long view, consistently reaching back to classical Greek aesthetics and philosophy and mapping contemporary digital artworks alongside antique forbears (Stelarc’s *Exoskeleton*, for instance, ‘recalls the *theranthropes*’ [p. 320]). It finds resonance between the non-linear paradigms of computing and a ‘premedieval “mythic atemporality”’ (p. 516), and traces a differently long historical curve from Wagner’s 1849 notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In counterbalance, it argues robustly for the ontological newness of cyberculture and for digital performance as ‘an emergent avant garde’ (p. 7).

The book is compendious – a history, a survey, a set of micro case studies and a series of brisk analytic interventions. Sometimes it’s like looking at a map whose scale seems around 1:2. At other points the mapping is startlingly brisk. That’s not to gainsay the impressive immensity, in all senses, of this volume. Invaluably, it hoovers up a host of artists and practices and pulls together a range of critical writings. It contains some distinctive critical propositions. The authors argue that digital performance shares ‘uncanny artistic parallels and synchronicities’ (p. 49) with the work of the Italian Futurists between 1909 and 1920. There is a cogent exposition of posthumanism, to address machine-informed subjectivity that deals with pattern and information. And the authors provide their own calibration of different levels of interactivity (from ‘Navigation’ to ‘Collaboration’) (p. 563). There are useful introductions to emblematic

works such as Michael Joyce's hypertext narrative *Afternoon* (1987), Company in Space's telematic work and the continuous netcasting project effected by Jennicam.

The writing is salty, Anglo-Saxon in its directness, with bracing scope and attack. Baudrillard and Derrida, 'these self-confessed haters of media and performance' (146), are knocked into a cocked hat, there is some tart comment on terms often taken for granted ('cyberspace', 'disembodiment', 'interactivity'), and insightful writing on, for instance, video games as popular theatre and the dichotomies of CCTV and webcam technologies.

In an accumulating thesis the authors observe the return of a host of luminous spectres that postmodernism was supposed to have exorcised – narrative, grand narratives, history, meaning, the real. The digital paradigm is newly structuralist rather than poststructuralist, constructive rather than deconstructive – all the while trading in separations, multiples and pluralities. In a final renunciation of postmodernism, the book concludes with an appropriately phenomenological first-person account of experiencing Blast Theory's *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2004), ending with a knowingly retro paean that observes 'how timeless and humbling is the experience of great art' (p. 669).

Nick Kaye's *Multi-Media* is slimmer, cooler, more neutral in its re-presentation of ideas and analyses. Kaye begins with a proposition: 'In performance, video amplifies division, difference and multiplication' (p. 9). If this establishes a key throughline, the ensuing analysis suggests that simultaneously video amplifies synthesis, overlap and

convergence. These features settle in the book's conclusion as part of a (Dixon-like) turn to a sort of unfused synthesis of elements.

Multi-Media addresses a history of predominantly video-based multimedia art. Kaye provides a good account of the experimental television and video art of Nam June Paik, identifying a practice that is processual and that cannily refunctions its materials. He addresses the 'performance of times' (p. 53) in the work of Cage, Paik and Fluxus, relativist practices in that of Nauman, Graham and Jonas. A section on space posits both divisions and expansions of places of being and viewing. Elsewhere, various simultaneities are observed, and binaries or opposites seen to collapse – for instance (in Kaye's conclusion on John Jesurun's work) the conflation of inside/outside, live/mediated, technology/the performer. Kaye is alert to the shifting ontological contours of mediation, although means that less attention is paid to the effects and affects of the work, and a tendency to take the artists' accounts at face value also leaves one wondering what the audience/spectator makes of it.

The book includes some deft contributions from artists themselves: Fiona Templeton, The Builders Association, Pipilotti Rist, Paolo Rosa of Studio Azzurro, John Jesurun and Vito Acconci (all subject to analysis elsewhere in the volume). These sometimes have the effect of advertising the insufficiency of the document. I was left wishing that I'd seen Rist's video interventions on the huge screen in Times Square, New York, or been in the audience for Acconci and the Mekons' *Theater Project for a Rock Band*. Nonetheless, by way of both its documents and Kaye's spare analyses, *Multi-Media* suggests an arc to its

subject matter that results for the historical distance that now applies. In Kaye's analysis, the earlier (1960s and '70s) video art evokes disjunctions of time, place and persona that are also, peculiarly, conjunctions that provide foundations for future work; whilst in more recent pieces Kaye observes 'the reassertion of 'presence' ... the convergence of media ... [and] the return of narrative and role' (pp. 163-4). It is this ontologically fresh return, this interdependent mix of (in)separables, that leaves both books facing digital performance's future as much as its past.