PERFORMANCE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
THEATRES OF ENGAGEMENT

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Theatres of Engagement: performance after postmodernism

As so often, ours is a story of changing realities. Consider this, the publicity blurb for a new theatre festival, inaugurated in May 2014, for the economy-raddled city of Athens:

Digital cameras, iPods, mobile telephones, the Internet, and live-cinema, documentary and editing techniques are all mobilized in the interactive, multimedia and site-specific spectacles the OCC [Onassis Cultural Centre] will be hosting as part of the 1st Fast Forward Festival (FFF). Because the theatre of now is restless and hybrid, a collage of arts, techniques and media and an exciting, groundbreaking, holistic experience closely bound up with the technological advances and quickening socio-economic pulse of our times.¹
Several themes are harnessed: the rapidity of cultural change; the defining role of digital technologies in contemporary culture; the increasingly hybrid nature of theatre form; and experience as a main attraction. It is perhaps not surprising to see this initiative emerge from amid Greece’s economic chaos. Artistic production here is a marker of resilience and connectedness. The Fast Forward Festival (supported by the financially independent Onassis Foundation) looks out to an international circuit of festival theatre production. It looks back to a scenario – we might even call it Athenian – where festivals mark the cultural currency of a place. And it looks forward, embracing work that is new and emergent.

[INSERT FIGURE 1.1]

The Festival included productions by the Berlin-based company Rimini Protokoll, the Dutch scenographer and performance-maker Dries Verhoeven, and the Lebanese writer and director Rabih Mroué. This small selection represents much of what Performance in the Twenty-First Century addresses, for these pieces variously deal with perspectives on fact and reality, adopt hybrid performance modes, and are intrinsically shaped by digital culture. Rimini Protokoll’s Situation Rooms is a piece for 20 spectators. Each has a set of headphones connected to an iPad. The event is split into eleven segments. In each, the spectator hears the story of an individual in some way connected with contemporary warfare – a surgeon, a child soldier, a hacker. The iPad shows a video that mixes documentary footage with a recorded version of the performance setting in which you find yourself. This enables you to navigate the
space, in which you encounter different rooms (scenically arranged within a
realist aesthetic), and other spectator-participants who stand in for the
additional characters that are described in the scenes that you inhabit.

Dries Verhoeven’s *No Man’s Land* is also for 20 spectators (indeed, auditors),
whom it also asks to don headphones. These are connected to MP3 players. As
distinct from *Situation Rooms*, the voiceover that you hear is the same for all
spectators simultaneously, and is a merged account of the experiences and
musings of a group of immigrants who contributed to the process of creating the
piece. Each spectator is taken on an individual journey through the surrounding
streets by an immigrant or refugee, the latter acting as a guide and, in effect,
standing in as a witness for her or his community. (I discuss the piece more fully
in the next chapter.)

[INSERT FIGURE 1.2]

The Lebanese theatre-maker Rabih Mroué presented two pieces. *The Pixelated
Revolution* was a lecture-performance in which Mroué considered the prevalence
of mobile phone recordings of demonstrations and activities in the Syrian
conflict, still ongoing when I saw the piece in 2014, looking particularly at
moments in which the phone’s camera recorded the moment of death of its
owner. In *Riding on a Cloud*, Mroué’s brother Yasser presents a possibly partly
fictionalized account of his biography. This much is true: he was shot in the head
by a sniper in Beirut but survived, paralysed down his right hand side. He sits at
a table and plays a series of cassette tapes containing his own voice track; and
DVDs whose images appear on the large screen at the rear. He indicates early in the show (by way of his voiceover, accompanying an image of him with a guitar) that at one point he wanted to be a musician. The piece provides a moving finale by way of the brothers playing the guitar together, Yasser shaping chords and trills with his left hand, Rabih strumming and picking with his right.

Theatre has been exploded, and it has regathered. It is no longer what we knew, and it sustains its root in communal live encounter. Theatre has become more than itself, a compound of media. No Man’s Land and Situation Rooms cannot properly be described as ‘mixed media’ pieces. They stage a more complex interrelation of media and modes (video, scenography, utterance), forms (drama, documentary, testimony) and structures (dramaturgical, architectural, spatial and temporal). Theatre has become something other than an encounter between actors, or between actor and audience. There is no longer a separation between the space of performance and that of spectatorship. Scenic space is inhabited. Riding on a Cloud, whilst presented in a conventional end-on studio setting, walks a similar line between personal and public, the actual and the aesthetic. Each piece participates in the broad ‘reality trend’ described in the German term Theater der Zeit, adopted by Rimini Protokoll and applicable to a much wider range of work. Theatre enters the world, and the world is presented back to us as theatre. Meanwhile all these pieces engage with both personal and political concerns.

What kind of theatre do we see here? Three particular phenomena help answer this question: the rise of forms of ‘truth-turning’ after the erosion of settlements
of the post-Second World War era and the cultural relativism of postmodernity; the incursion of digital technologies and their relation to performance; and the ingrained nature of performance in contemporary culture. These contribute to a hybrid cultural scene that looks very different from that of the mediatized but pre-digital 1980s. We find ourselves in a cultural space that has the look and feel of one that is now definitely beyond the postmodern, even whilst it continues to trade in certain postmodern strategies. This scene finds pleasure, meaning and pertinence in scenarios of actuality, authenticity, encounter and experience (terms that reverberate in discussions of contemporary theatre and performance); the involvement of bodies (including ours as spectators) in events; and mixed modes of production that are, not infrequently, enabled by specific developments to or adaptations of digital communications technologies. There has been a shift in our perceptions of the real and how we might deal with it, which relates to different engagements with fiction and fabrication. Indeed, the term ‘engagement’ provides a useful stamp for the cultural processes and aesthetic formations that arise during the period, that typically negotiate actuality and fabrication. 1989 provides us with somewhere to start, for it presents a particularly vivid historical moment and an epicentre of new engagements (authenticities, experiences). It lies a quarter-century behind us as I write this, and somewhere within a fuzzy boundary between the postmodern and whatever cultural formation takes shape beyond it.

In *Riding on a Cloud*, Yasser Mroué meditates on those defining moments where we can say there is a before and an after. He mentions the fall of the Berlin Wall; the attacks of 9/11; the Arab Spring; and (reminding us that perspective depends on where you stand, for the Mroués are Lebanese) the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon. I reflect, below, on the defining moments provided by the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and 9/11 (2001), with respect to their place within a trajectory of cultural production that bears upon the performance events discussed in this book. More immediately, they also help us to think about a period beyond that of ‘classic’ postmodernism. I will address the latter in due course – but let us go beyond, in order then to look back.

The notion that 1989 provides a watershed is not uncommon. As Jeffrey A. Engel observes:

> The world changed in 1989. At the start of the year, the globe’s strategic map looked much like it had since the end of World War II. ... A year later, communism would be dead in Eastern Europe ... The future – our twenty-first-century present – would be at hand. And no one had seen it coming.

(Engel 2009: 1)

The fall of the Berlin Wall was the most visceral and immediate symbol of wider developments (particularly in Eastern Europe) that appeared to herald the arrival of a progressive populism, through which major structural political reconfigurations were performed. Partly enabled in Eastern Europe by the policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika* overseen by the Soviet Union’s President Gorbachev,
the drastic national reorganisations of 1989 were bookended by the elections of Lech Walesa (a shipyard trade union leader) as the Polish prime minister and Vaclav Havel (a novelist) as the President of Czechoslovakia, the first non-communist incumbent for 41 years. In October, East German troops refused to fire on crowds in open demonstration. On November 9, crowds from both East and West Berlin congregated in the area between the Brandenburg Gate and Checkpoint Charlie, following an announcement earlier that day that the East German authorities were permitting permanent emigration across all border-crossing points between East and West Germany. One of the border guards, interviewed amid the unprecedented flow of people, observed with sanguine understatement, ‘The last twelve hours, travel possibilities have improved enormously’ (quoted in Buckley 2004: 164). Over the next few days, people from both sides of the wall dismantled the edifice that had divided them for over 28 years. A domino effect ensued across other parts of Eastern Europe. New governments took office in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and (after initially violent repression) Romania before the end of the year.5

This was different from the ideological fixity manifested in the stark Cold-War distinctions between East and West. In his account of the ‘short twentieth century’ (which he dates from 1914 to 1991) Eric Hobsbawm proposes the end of the Soviet era as the effectual truncation of the century. As he suggests, ‘there can be no serious doubt that in the late 1980s and early 1990s an era in world history ended and a new one began.’6 (Hobsbawm 1994: 5) The new disruption arose from popular uprising that was nationalist or anti-governmental in its fervor, separatist in its political preference, and economically integrative by
desire. This shape – individualized (even atomized), yet plurally convergent – comes to define a good deal of personal, cultural, civic and political transaction over the subsequent two decades.

Other sorts of walls were tumbling. A potent symbol of hope was celebrated globally on 11 February 1990, when Nelson Mandela, former President of the African National Congress, was released from Victor Verster Prison in Cape Town after being incarcerated for over 27 years. Mandela had been exploring the prospect of a negotiated settlement with the government since 1985. His release came without him compromising on key positions of principle, including the release of other political prisoners and the recognition of the ANC as a legitimate political organisation. President F. W. de Klerk announced the unbanning of the ANC on the opening of parliament on 2 February 1990 (see Limb 2008: 95, 100). Mandela’s release just over a week later was momentous. When he walked through the prison gates arm in arm with his then-wife, Winnie, and raised his fist, the triumph wasn’t only that of an individual. It stood as an emblem of the rights of black people and a form of triumph over adversity and injustice. Mandela’s release heralded the end of apartheid as South Africa’s state system, and pre-empted the election on 9 May 1994 of Mandela as the country’s first black president. This turn of events seemed all the more remarkable given the previous intransigence of the apartheid regime, not unlike that of East Germany under Erich Honecker or Romania under Nicolae Ceauşescu. Ozymandias-like, old orders, certainties and, it seemed, injustices were not just crumbling, but doing so with extraordinary rapidity.
If the world looked different in 1989 and 1990, it appeared even more altered in 2001. On 11 September, four hijacked passenger planes flew respectively into the North and South Towers (each 110 stories) of the World Trade Center in the financial district of south Manhattan in New York City; the Pentagon in Arlington County, Virginia; and farmland in Pennsylvania following the intervention of passengers. Arguably, 9/11 provides the most categorical threshold between postmodernism and that which lies beyond, at least from a western perspective.

For Jeffrey Melnick

“Post-9/11” indexes a profound rupture in time and space. It is clear that the events of 9/11 shape not only our understanding of nearly everything in the political and cultural lives of Americans since that date, but that those events also shape our understanding of much of what came before. ... Once we loved irony and took refuge in that distancing strategy: now we are earnest and authentic. Once we fragmented into our various political and social identities; now we stand united.

(Melnick 2009: 18)

If Melnick overstates, he nonetheless describes a comprehensive shift from ironic disengagement to refigured engagement. Other commentators are more cautious, but it is broadly accepted that 9/11 propelled a reconsideration of previously uninspected assumptions, and a restatement (and in some respects retrenchment) of core positions. 8
Historical phases and, in particular, moments of identifiable change are figurations of what Jacques Rancière calls a ‘new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable’ (2010: 149). The three iconic instances, above, provided sudden definition to shifting formations in culture and geopolitics. More than this, they helped us think differently. This series of falls (Berlin Wall, apartheid regime, twin towers) was relayed in still and moving images that imprint the retina because of their clarity and the astonishment that they evoke – people dancing on the Wall, Mandela’s walk to freedom, the planes flying into the twin towers, the towers’ collapse. Each instance provided a massive cultural and political verfremdungseffekt, where we saw as changeable that which we had previously taken to be fixed. Historical process also implied, at least, a shift from understanding the state (polis) as the organizing power, to seeing a different distribution of agency – expressed by historically impactful forms of individual intervention. Such shifts in the visible, sayable and doable feed into changing cultural formations, and these in turn shape the nexus of assumptions, desires, behaviours and practices that contribute to cultural production.

The revolutionary surges of 1989 were reported by television and radio networks – news-oriented media in a media-saturated age, enabled by satellite broadcasting technology following the consolidation of the satellite TV industry in the 1970s and 1980s. 9/11 was also experienced and discoursed in and through social media. As Melnick observes, ‘Blogs became, in the aftermath of 9/11, a kind of wireless wire service, and undefined, anarchic first-responder news and opinion service’ (Melnick 2009: 13). Other events, from terrorist attacks (such as those in Madrid on 11 March 2004 and London on 7 July 2005)
to popular demonstrations (such as those of the Arab Spring between 2010-12), were facilitated by mobile telecommunications. Their hour-by-hour and day-to-day developments played out on social media. Helena Grehan argues that ‘The condition of witnessing what one did not (and perhaps cannot) see is the condition of whatever age we are now entering’ (2009: 172). Witness is adjacent to testimony, which also runs through contemporary cultural production (as I discuss in Chapter 2, below). The condition of witnessing, here, arises from communication systems that can capture and disseminate plurality in close to real-time; along with platforms and spaces for regular reiteration. This very intersection between the event and its simultaneous mediation points towards another defining feature of the quarter of a century that straddles the millennium: the rapid, pervasive and culture-changing growth of digital communications.

**Digital paradigms**

Following their initial development in military and governmental settings, computers for personal use started to enter homes and offices in the late 1970s, gathering pace as desirable labour-saving devices throughout the 1980s. By 1991 http (hypertext transfer protocol) procedures were sufficiently developed to enable the transmission of information from a server to a browser, thus providing the operational backbone of the World Wide Web. In its initial phase, html (hypertext mark-up protocol) was information-based rather than interactive, depending on the transfer of pages like a form of rapid special
delivery. Between 2000 and 2002 the development of Web 2.0 technology and RSS (Really Simple Syndication) provided the underpinning informational schemata for weblogs (blogs), enabling users to add content to pages and recirculate the results in an endless chain of iterations – sending as well as receiving. In 2004 RSS protocols made podcasting possible: the syndication of audio and video files as well as images and text. This enabled the ready exchange of user-generated content across platforms including MySpace (established in 2003), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006), along with an array of wikis and blogs, and ushered the Internet into an era of fluid information-exchange and demotic publishing.\(^9\)

The statistics that evidence the uptake of digital culture are often virtually incomprehensible in their magnitude, although they also depict a significant divide between developed and developing countries. According to the International Telecommunication Union, the United Nations agency for information and communication technologies, ‘The number of mobile-cellular subscriptions worldwide is approaching the number of people on earth. Mobile-cellular subscriptions will reach almost 7 billion by end 2014, corresponding to a penetration rate of 96%.’ Mobile broadband continues to grow, with ‘an estimated global penetration of 32 per cent [in 2014] – four times the penetration rate recorded just five years earlier.’ The number of Internet users globally, meanwhile, is around 3 billion, representing a penetration rate of 40% (78% in the developed countries, 32% in developing countries). Around 44% of the world’s households have Internet access at home, up from 30% in 2010 (ITU 2014: 2, 3; and ITU website\(^{10}\)). Newton Lee observes that ‘Facebook as a nation
in 2012 would be the third largest country in the world with over 955 million citizens, after China and India.’ (Lee 2103: xiii) Lee reports that in 2011 more than 100 million Americans watched online video on an average day. This doesn’t denote an entirely passive audience. (Lee 2013: 23, 24) David Gauntlett conservatively estimates that ‘at least 100 million new blog posts were produced each month in 2012’ (2013: 81). The period we are addressing – the quarter-century or so since 1989 – is swept up in the march of digital culture, where the information-communications economy replaces the commodities economy of the 1980s.

This has had unpredictable and sometimes counter-intuitive effects. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins discusses the case of Osama Bin Laden and Bert, a puppet from the US children’s TV series *Sesame Street* (2006: 1-2). Dino Ignacio, a high school student, photoshopped the pair into the same image in a series entitled ‘Bert is Evil’. The casually satirical image was recirculated in the Middle East, in different earnest, as part of a collage that appeared in signs wielded by anti-American protestors. As Jenkins notes:

> From his bedroom, Ignacio sparked an international controversy. ... Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.

(Jenkins 2006: 2)
Digital dissemination is varied and volatile. It has facilitated global corporatism across national and geographical boundaries; and community-based expressions of identity, protest and action. It has enabled mega-monoliths of the digital era (Facebook, Google, YouTube, Twitter) to provide platforms for individual agency and interaction. It has liberated a swathe of one-to-one, one-to-many, and group-oriented communications beyond the closely-controlled flow of information through large-scale print and broadcasting organisations. It also facilitates surveillance and ‘dataveillance’ (the tracking of individual activities by way of the digital footprint left by phone transactions, online bookings, credit card purchases and so on). It supports faceless bureaucracies that transact behind online paywalls, or through geographically fractured call-centres, or by way of complex corporate mechanisms across the diverse reporting and taxation regimes that facilitate global commerce. In another characteristic convergence of opposites, virtuality has gone hand-in-hand (so to say) with a sharpened enjoyment of co-presence, corporeality and embodied sensation.

Cultural production in the twenty-first century reverberates with this paradoxical mingling of capabilities and effects. Havens and Lotz characterize this within a longer trajectory of post-Fordism – whereby service-oriented transactions replace a factory-based model of production – as ‘a complex web of centralizing and decentralizing tendencies’ (2012: 187). Mass customization (a form of centralization) clearly applies to the glide of the computer across the globe, and the convergence of user systems, platforms and creative processes that go with it. On the other hand, there is room here for bespoke and unique creative outputs, reflecting the particular circumstances of the individual
creator, or emerging through group processes that can only result from that specific combination of people. This kind of cultural production typically operates through what Thrift calls ‘hybrid assemblages: concretions, settings and flows’ (2008: 9).

If historical events such as 9/11 and the fall of the Wall required new ways of thinking, the technologies and devices with which we performed our thinking also changed. In so doing they remade the procedures (both cognitive and technical) by which we expressed our cultural engagement. They *restructured* our experience of and transaction with the real. By way of an instance, consider the mobile phone, a device that started rather obviously as a portable telephone, but has since become a multifunctional computer used for anything from watching videos to posting pictures to navigating from one place to another. As DeLuca, Lawson and Sun suggest:

In its introductory stage, a medium is just a tool for specific tasks within an environment created by other media and cultural practices. So, for example, that was the case for mobile phones in the early 1990s and smartphones around 2005. If diffusion accelerates enough, however, the medium reaches saturation and a tipping point and moves from being a tool within an environment to helping create the environments within which we operate. ... With the spread of smartphones, space and time cease to be barriers to living in a mediated world all the time.

(DeLuca, Lawson and Sun 2012: 486)
The same goes for a wider array of digital devices and interactions, allowing real-time information-sharing concerning activities that are variously public and personal, momentous and banal. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, first published in 1984, Michel de Certeau suggests that ‘The floodlights have moved away from the actors who possess proper names and social blazons, turning first toward the chorus of secondary characters, then settling on the mass of the audience’ (1984, v). Little could de Certeau have known the extent to which the mass of the audience would come under a spotlight of its own everyday positioning in the age of social media. ‘We witness the advent of the number,’ de Certeau writes. ‘It comes along with democracy, the large city, administrations, cybernetics’ (v). The Internet and social media return the name to the number.

The ongoing mediatisation of culture (at least in postindustrial parts of the world) facilitated this extension of individual engagements with the social sphere. In 2008, reviewing the position he took in his influential monograph *Liveness* (first published in 1999), Philip Auslander notes that when writing the book it still seemed possible to insist that television was the dominant medium. By now, there is a strong case to be made that the honor belongs to the computer, although it seems more accurate to say that there is an ongoing, unresolved struggle for dominance among television, telecommunications and the Internet.

(Auslander 2008: xii.)
The virtual domain of Web 2.0 has refigured this scene into a mutually intersecting mediascape, not so much a struggle between monolithic media forms as a merging of platforms and protocols. Corporations and companies (indeed individuals) will of course remain in competition, but a different metaphor from that of struggle also applies to contemporary communications.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman proposes the notion of *liquid modernity*, in his book of the same name published in 2000 (just before the embedding of Web 2.0 technology). Bauman infers that ‘fluidity’ is ‘the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era’ (2). He describes processes of flow, lightness and speed, and new ways of conceiving and managing time (in part through the near-instantaneity of communication). He observes older structures being dissolved in cultural processes that privilege decentring, disaggregation and dispersal (unfixity). He notes that ‘The disintegration of the social network, the falling apart of effective agencies of collective action is often ... bewailed as the unanticipated “side effect” of the new lightness and fluidity of the increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty, evasive and fugitive power.’ (14) Bauman uses the term ‘social network’ in the sense of stable practices and spaces that circumscribe a community, and is uncomfortable at its seeming erosion. Now, however, we understand it differently. The cultural liquidity that has dissolved fixed practices and solid spaces also provides the tools for a new form of social interrelation, the ‘social network’ as we have come to express it as a multifarious set of interpersonal connections. Liquid modernity has enabled the reestablishment of a social scene – through some of the forms of fluid dispersion that characterise late-capitalism.
We observe a characteristic doubleness of digital culture. We lament its splintering and atomizing effects, the erosion of personal liberty in an age of electronic surveillance, and the separation between digital haves and have-nots. On the other hand, social media have facilitated popular protest as diverse as the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring; and digital culture has allowed us to present ourselves diversely – playfully, seriously, actively – in public, and share knowledge faster than ever before. It enables bespoke personal expression. It is disposed to participatory citizenship and collective action. It has extended the relativizing work of postmodernism, but also helped us to rediscover our voices and values, and our singular selves. Which suggests that postmodernism as a cultural force has shifted to become something other than itself.

**After the postmodern**

A gathered view of postmodernism is that in the period after the Second World War – particularly through the 1960s and 1970s, after the austerity of the post-war years – culture in late-capitalist societies underwent a series of shifts that changed patterns of work, social habits, attitudes and modes of artistic expression. (For summative accounts of postmodernism, see Bertens 1995; Billig and Simons 1994; Docherty 1993.) As ever, there was a political context. The Cold War fed off the ideological separation behind the post-war settlements that divided Europe following the demise of Nazism, with Russia emerging as a superpower alongside the USA. Each treated the other with an untrusting scrutiny that came to a head in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. The sense of
geopolitical fragility was exacerbated by the increased sophistication of nuclear technologies. Not only were nuclear power stations now part of the reckoning for electricity generation (for a self-selecting few countries), but the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 had indicated that the superpowers could effect military will with drastic immediacy. The superpower states were meanwhile affirming their own territories and hegemony; the USSR, for example, through the invasion of Czechoslovakia on 20 August 1968, the USA through the Vietnam War (1955-75) and in its support for the Contras and other anti-leftist movements in Latin America. In this political scenario the popular voice surfaced – as in the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, or les événements in France in 1968 – as counter-cultural protest, where the prospect of real and lasting change seemed distant.

Whilst the superpowers dominated geo-politics, commercial corporations became powerful multinationals, operating across borders with increasing scope and flexibility. In manufacturing, the lithe and flexible systems of post-Fordism came to predominate over the Fordist structures of factory-based production-line economics. Postmodernism was associated with technological advance and complexity, intertwined with economic development towards post-industrial models of social and commercial transaction, segmentation and the differentiation of markets. Through all the above, it was a key feature of globalisation (Henke and Middeke 2007: 2).

A similar dispersal was happening culturally. Postmodernism drew on and contributed to the growth and ubiquity of plural media. Against the grain of the
dominance of major media networks, it also enabled new forms of counter-cultural expression. The era was marked by the Happenings, the growth of hippy culture, the incursion of pop, rock and then punk. In parallel, postmodern criticism offered a challenge to stable and even knowable senses of self and personal identity. This marked a set of disengagements – from politics, precedence, the very idea of coherent personhood. The postmodern age displayed ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ (Lyotard 1984: xxiv) – those defining stories of progress, dominating systems, or monolithic political positions. It embraced instead the rhetoric and practices of fracture, detachment and irony. Intellectually and critically this cultural tendency was powered by the rubrics of poststructuralism in Europe and its American counterpart deconstruction, as exemplified in the writings of Derrida, Lacan, Jameson and de Man.

Bertens reasonably depicts two major trains of thought: a Foucauldian examination of social and civic structures along with histories to reveal ‘the workings of power, and the constitution of the subject’ (Bertens 1995: 7); and a Derridean analysis of language and texts that depicts representation as untrustworthy and tenuous. Foucault’s writing disputed the notion of a linear development of history in favour of seeing histories as plural, whilst any historical analysis was a record of discourse, power and the discriminations of cultural practices. Derrida performed in his own writing the elusive nature of poststructuralist thought, which holds that language is (de)structured by gaps and slippages, and full of fissures through which constructs of truth and stability
evaporate. It traps its users in delay, deferral, *différance*. Knowledge itself became an unstable commodity. As Bertens suggests,

If there is a common denominator to all these postmodernisms, it is that of a crisis of representation: a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense. No matter whether they are aesthetic, epistemological, moral, or political in nature, the representations that we used to rely on can no longer be taken for granted.

(Bertens 1995: 11)

Postmodernism’s playful and resistant critiques circle around an epistemological black hole. When language is untrustworthy, it becomes difficult to say something that commonly appears to matter. Bauman characterizes this as ‘the celebration of the “demise of the ethical”, of the substitution of aesthetics for ethics, and of the “ultimate emancipation” that follows.’ (Bauman 1993: 2) Bauman doesn’t approve of this kind of freewheeling, seemingly amoral postmodernism. He proposes instead that the postmodern allows a ‘tearing off of the mask of illusions’ to reveal ‘sources of moral power’ (1993: 3). Two years later he argued that ‘some sort of coordinated and concerted action is imperative. And the name of such action is politics; the promotion of a new and badly needed ethics for the new age can only be approached as a *political* issue and task.’ (Bauman 1995: 281, original emphasis. See Bauman 1997 for further development of this argument.)
By the mid-1990s, then, the tide has turned. Postmodernism had performed the healthy function of destabilizing assumed norms and notions of the real. Yet the tools that it introduced proved limited in dealing with new scenarios that changed our relationship (historically, politically, technologically) to realities and their expression. Matters of truth, transparency and commitment took on a different face with the incursion of the network (al-Qaeda) and network culture (the Internet and the spread of social media). Bauman's call to action was realized in ways that he could not have anticipated, nor, in all probability, quite meant. The real had returned, and so had the evident presence of politics and imperative questions concerning ethics. Culturally, the real could not be avoided, even where it was contested. And we developed a new taste for it.

Any significant shift in representation is usually a return to the real, as the expressive conventions of older forms are seen to be, precisely, conventions. Newer modes, technologically enabled, allow us to see and present things differently. Moreover we experience culture differently because we do so with our minds and expectations adjusted to the speeds and shapes, flows and frames of the expressive apparatus with which we live. How different is this from what came before? A consistent question, even during its heyday, concerns the extent to which postmodernism marked a development of, or departure from, defining features of modernism. Taking a long view, Henke and Middeke, for example, treat modernism, and postmodernism in its wake, as a break from Enlightenment rationality (see also Brown 1994: 16; and Foster 1985: ix, xi-xii.) Bertens sees it as a complexifying and continuance of Enlightenment-shaped concerns with the place of reason, logic and social process. In the shorter run,
postmodernism can be depicted as an extension of practices that modernism had set in play; or as a break from modernist aesthetics and social processes. A similar tension runs through the book you are reading, between a sense that the theatres of engagement that I discuss mark a break from the ironies and decentrings of postmodernism, or alternatively a continuance through different artistic strategies of its larger project of dispersal and its insistence on context. Hal Foster suggested in 1983 that ‘modernism is now largely absorbed. Originally oppositional, ... today, however, it is the official culture’ (Foster 1985: ix). Likewise the precepts, techniques and assumptions of postmodernism are now largely absorbed, albeit refigured and extended in post-millennial culture.

Feminist scholarship helps exemplify the conceptual shifts over the period. Writing at the turn of the millennium, the editors of Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism observe that ‘the late twentieth century has been a difficult time to think about transformation. ... Somewhat ironically, recent social, political and intellectual transformations seem to have left many of us without a vocabulary or framework for discussing transformation’ – this in the wake of postmodern epistemologies and evident limitations to a variety of ‘new’ mainstream agendas (Ahmed et al., 2000: 4-5). In order to engage afresh, the authors observe in feminist projects ‘the process of re-membering themselves in order to understand how aspects of the past may enter into the future’ (6; original emphasis) – a process that implicates the body, retains advances already made, but requires the work of continual transformation of histories and practices. Writing in the same year, bell hooks (2000) likewise presents a case that is celebratory and recuperative, advocating continued change through wide
cultural engagement. In the preface to the second edition of their *Manifesta*, reflecting on differences between the book’s first publication in 2000 and its new edition a decade later, Baumgardner and Richards note a sustaining theme: a call to women ‘to do the big thing that feminism invites us to do – to recognize our power to create social justice in our own unique ways’ (xiii) – in other words, a compound of individual agency and communal engagement that is characteristic of the period. This sense of reappraisal and re-engagement provides a bridge to ‘fourth wave’ feminism, a decade into the twenty-first century, that diversely negotiates the media systems and identity repertoires of contemporary culture (see, for instance, Nally and Smith 2015).

Postmodernism marked a scepticism about universalizing truths, grand narratives, and dogmatic statements of intent or belief. Historical process either side of the new millennium demonstrated that individual agency could be effective, overt and drastic, and that established systems were vulnerable and couldn’t be taken for granted. This made for a return to some forms of universalizing (in the categorical expressions of particular faith positions or political ideologies, for example), but also entailed more individualized forms of felt experience and personal commitment. Digital culture and social media helped individuals to reinscribe their opinions and their bodies in social and cultural discourse. In so doing they were often armed with the tools, techniques and many of the assumptions of postmodernism: no truth is without its context; no exchange is innocent of its mode of mediation. Yet these tools were taken up in a new engagement with the world, and with the individual selves and bodies within it. After decentring, we found ourselves diversely centred. To address a
tense present: we are amid interdisciplinary cultural formations, interested in
meaning, representation, utterance and content, but also mindful of display,
surfaces, presentation. We depend upon flattened hierarchies of creation,
multiple modes of dissemination, and geographically wide distributions of
labour, production and consumption. We remain at the behest of mega-
corporations and suave political systems, but in some instances we adopt diverse
means of instantaneous communication to convey our own modes of certainty
and identity. After the clarion calls of modernism, and the absences and ironies
of postmodernism, come the nuanced and differential negotiations,
participations and interventions of an age of engagement.

The world has become theatre (or, Re-Enter Truth and the Real)

Running alongside the development of postmodernism is a common conceit: the
world has become theatre (or performance); performance (or theatre) provides
not just a metaphor but also a modus operandi for our relationship to the world.
Jon McKenzie provides a celebrated orientation in his book Perform or Else
(2001). McKenzie sees the emergence of ‘performance’ over the last half-decade
of the twentieth century as ‘an onto-historical formation of power and
knowledge’ (2001: 18), akin to that of ‘discipline’ in the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries. He identifies three fields in which this is manifest. The first
is ‘organizational performance’, to do with the business of business, the stuff of
profits, prices and efficiencies, and the protocols of ‘performance management’
whereby objectives are achieved by calibrating the work of individuals. The
second is ‘cultural performance’, including the major media of television, cinema and theatre, as well as communications within specific social, cultural and behavioral settings – what McKenzie describes as ‘the living, embodied expression of cultural traditions and transformations’ (8). The third field is ‘technological performance’, which concerns specifications for manufacture and end-use, ‘a sense of performance used by engineers, technicians and computer scientists’ (10).

‘Performance’ as a term is thereby particularly resonant, since it acts as a compound for an interrelated set of practices to do with presentation, efficiency, and advantage. As part of this analysis, McKenzie provides a history of the academic discipline of Performance Studies from its inception in the 1950s, moving through Erving Goffman’s ‘social psychology of everyday life’ (33), to Victor Turner’s ‘social drama’, to Richard Schechner’s discipline-shaping account of performance in an array of social and cultural settings, to Marvin Carlson’s discipline-defining Performance: A Critical Introduction (1996). McKenzie notes that performance in each of these approaches is often conceived as liminal, marginal, disruptive or subversive. This points to one way in which the field has developed further in the couple of decades since Carlson articulated its parameters. We tend now to see performance all around us, as a norm rather than an expression mainly of corporate drive or subversive resistance. McKenzie reflects upon Carlson’s comments, as the latter concludes his study, and the citation bears repetition here:
[Performance] is a specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, almost invariably clearly separated from the rest of life, presented by performers and attended by audiences both of whom regard the experience as made up material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in – emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically. (McKenzie 2001: 49-50 [Carlson, 1996, 198-99])

For McKenzie, this is part of a continuum: liminality as a feature of both performance and Performance Studies. But if Carlson's statement accurately described the landscape when McKenzie turned to it in 2001, it looks a little different from the perspective of a further decade or so. As I review this in 2015, we would not necessarily say that the liminoid aspect of performance is always foregrounded – rather, that performance finds ways to imbricate the actual and virtual, presence and absence, the real and fabrication. It is not ‘clearly separated from life’ but of and within it. Nor is it necessarily presented by performers and attended by audiences, but comprised of performers and spectators who shift roles or may not appear at all (as performers, or spectators) in the constitutive roll-call of the performance event. Nor do we observe ‘made-up material to be interpreted’ – rather, presentation to be experienced, consumed, lived within. As John Corner observes, ‘there is hectic innovation around combinations of the “real” with the self-declared and openly performative “artificial”’ (2004: 292).

This is meant not to dispute Carlson's analysis, but as an observation about shifts in the trajectory of performance insofar as it is thinkable and observable from particular vantage points. Here we move from liminality to embeddedness,
whilst performance nonetheless retains its ability to operate across boundaries. It’s just that we now expect this to be the case, and – since it is the case – we observe performance operating at our centre rather than at various margins. If anything, certain margin-behaviours have moved into our common ground. This bears out McKenzie’s coinage of the notion of the ‘liminal-norm’ (2001: 49-53, 166), although in slightly different terms. McKenzie describes a scenario ‘where the valorization of liminal transgression or resistance itself becomes normative’ (50). The continuing valency of performance as a mode appropriate to – vital within – twenty-first-century culture has proved yet more extensive. Performance has mainstreamed. Its liminal-norm now concerns its intermediality, its operation across ‘high’ and ‘low’ registers, its consistent merging of actual and presentational, as opposed to something more structurally subversive (although it can still operate in these terms).

Shortly before the turn of the century, Hans-Thies Lehmann expanded a critical apparatus designed for this development.\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Postdramatic Theatre} (published in German in 1999 and English in 2006) established fresh coordinates for performance analysis, with its focus on physical, material and sensual aspects of theatre production, and practices that depended less on the dramatic text and more on regimes of scenic, spatial and somatic organisation. For all that Lehmann’s work has been contested, the rubric of the postdramatic remains luminous in theatre and performance studies. As the editors of a retrospective volume suggest:
Lehmann had deployed the term [postdramatic theatre] as an alternative to the then ubiquitous term “postmodern theatre” in order to describe how a vast variety of contemporary forms of theatre and performance had departed not so much from the “modern” as from drama”.

(Jürs-Munby et al. 2013: 1)

Lehmann indeed traced continuities reaching back to archaic and classical forms of theatre, across into Aristotelian and Hegelian philosophy and beyond theatre to Scheckner’s performance studies and interdisciplinary and multimedia work. The theatres of engagement that I discuss below share many of the attributes that Lehmann assigns to postdramatic theatre, but they mark a further extension of theatrical paradigms beyond theatre, into a wider performance scene that is defined not so much by its departure from drama, as its re-engagement with the real.

This returns us to the question as to whether performance in this scenario has moved beyond postmodernism. I tend to agree with Henke and Middeke’s assessment:

Virtually all aesthetic characteristics of postmodern art ... can be found in contemporary drama: a fascination for self-reflexive, metadramatic modes which reflect upon epistemological uncertainty, ambiguity, and blanks; a mistrust of totality which results in fragmented formal structures: collages, cut-up forms, paradox, pastiche, parody – signifiers that disperse unidirectional attributions of fixed meanings, intentions, or propositions.13
Within this continuity, however, we must entwine a new fascination with authenticity, and the fixing of performance at the heart of contemporary experience. A way of considering this is to return to 9/11. What could be more actual than the attacks of 9/11, in their categorical violence on bodies, their political consequences and their effects on attitudes and perceptions? And what could be more theatrical, in their spectacular imagery, the shock they provided and their extraordinary staging of protest? In an essay written not long after the event, Slavoj Žižek argues that following the twentieth century’s fascination with getting closer to the Real, 9/11 brought a ‘Third World’ style of authentic horror to the USA. He articulates an interlocking compound, actual|theatrical:

The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition. This is what the compelling image of the collapse of the WTC [World Trade Centre] was: an image, a semblance, an ‘effect’, which, at the same time, delivered ‘the thing itself’.

(Žižek 2002: 19, original emphasis)

The real is unassimilable except as a sort of grisly fiction – it is nevertheless real. This is one aspect of the irruption of the real as theatre onto the world stage. Another, however, is provided by the polar opposite of the evental, spectacular
9/11, and it is found in the tissue of quotiden, banal, everyday figurations that suffuse the contemporary media landscape by way of their appearance on social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, and in curated media outlets such as reality TV programmes, radio phone-ins, stand-up comedy acts and art installations that stage our ordinariness. We can invert Žižek’s statement to outline an also-applicable feature of contemporary actuality: the Real has the status of a semblance precisely because it is mediated as quotidian, expressed in and through performance as the theatricalized image of our everyday selves.15

Reality incurs not as reality but as it is performed (presented) and perceived. Performance expresses insofar as it can be matrixed against a reality. This figuring of the real as both assimilable through its appearance and available because presented provides a perspective on theatre and performance of the period. In her introduction to Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage, addressing theatre in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Carol Martin observes ‘an emerging theatre of the real that directly addresses the global condition of troubled epistemologies about truth, authenticity and reality’ (2010: 1; see also Forsyth and Megson 2009: 2, 3). She relates this more broadly to ‘a great expansion of ideas about “reality.” Restored villages, Civil War enactments, network television, blogs, YouTube and other internet innovations, cellphones, photography, plasma boards, surveillance cameras, and mainstream film in all its modes’ (2010: 2). Taken together, this swathe of mediation-machines leads her to a question that also weaves through Performance in the Twenty-First Century: ‘are reality and representation so inextricable that they have become indiscernible?’ (2010: 2; see also Reinelt 2010: 28)
Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage addresses documentary, testimony and verbatim theatre, but its scope is much wider, as its globally embracing title suggests. It focuses on discourse and practices that circulate around notions of truth and actuality. Let’s call this ‘truth-turning’, in order to avoid simply ascribing Truth in any one place. For (after postmodernism) ‘truth’ is always contextual and often subject to shift, whilst the ‘real’, as Rancière has it, ‘is always a matter of construction, a matter of “fiction”’ (2010: 148) – aesthetically, at least. The circumstances in play do not necessarily have to be factually correct for truth-turning to be with us. They will appear to be truthful to some people; or their apparent truthfulness matters in context; or they can be seen to involve people in action or agreement concerning matters of fact. This is not to deny that the nature and accuracy of the facts frequently matter a good deal. Rather, it is to point up the nature of a regime of (re)presentation in which facticity, actuality and truth-turning have such potency, indeed necessity, for artists and audiences. This obtains, as Reinelt suggests, in relation to the ‘hypertheatricalization of contemporary culture’ (2010: 39), where facticity provides a form of ballast:

audiences know that documents, facts, and evidence are always mediated when they are received; they know there is no raw truth apart from interpretation, but still, they want to experience the assertion of the materiality of events, of the indisputable character of the facts ... I see the potential for this gesture as an ethico-political revolt, as a demonstration of caring, engagement, and commitment’

(Reinelt 2010: 39-40, my emphasis)
Not the least pertinent part of this account is its notion that truth-turning is
*experienced* as a feature of engagement. Theatrical tropes can help to clarify and
present new perspectives on realities, whilst anchoring audiences experientially
in a specific material context (Reinelt 2010: 41). This reminds us of Bauman’s
call for an ethics for the new age, and Lehmann’s for an *aesthetic of responsibility*
(or *response-ability*) ... [that can] make visible the broken thread between
personal experience and perception’ (2006: 185-6, original emphasis). It
provides an opening for certain sorts of political agency, where it is possible to
reclaim a sense of theatre and performance doing a particular kind of work in the
world – and doing it in resistance to norms or uninspected assumptions, with the
ability to make us see things differently and perhaps take action as a
consequence.16

The sorts of ‘caring, engagement and commitment’ that Reinelt observes moves
us into a notably different lexicon from that employed during the height of
postmodernism. The terms that resonate now in performance studies are
‘actuality’, ‘authenticity’, ‘encounter’, ‘engagement’ – a set that would have
seemed naïve or faintly ridiculous if wheeled out a generation or so ago. The
difference is that theatricality itself has been riveted at the heart of these terms,
as part of a combined effect of cultural production that finds urgency and
excitement in the joint operation of ostensible realities and overt presentation.
Musing upon a world of simulacra in which grand narratives have been
discredited, Tomlin observes ‘an ultimate collapse of the boundaries between the
fictional and the real’ (2013: 35). Another way of putting this might be to suggest
that the boundaries have *become inhabited* (we are back to McKenzie’s liminal-norm), where actuality and fabrication remain mutually in play, with all their respective phenomenal and ontological distinctness.

As the real returns – through transformative events like the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11, communications technologies that enmesh us in a sustained present, and aesthetic procedures that offer experience and encounter to their audiences – theatricality takes on a different relationship to the spaces, objects and concepts that it references. It re-presents them in their immediate presence and function. It offers a presentation structure that permits (indeed sometimes requires) representation, in an era when mediation (also) empties representation. This takes us towards Thrift’s sense of performance as a cultural knowledge, whereby ‘performance has become a general art which concentrates especially on the conduct of the now and which can be appropriated.’ (2008: 71) The appropriation is not only to do with the *presentation* of performance in the now-moment, but the *intertwining* of performance and experience, performance and witness, performance and encounter, performance and actuality. Herein lie our contemporary theatres of engagement. They arise when we observe a sharpened focus upon actualities (of situation, the body, the moment) framed within spaces and scenes of mediation that are also sites of encounter and experience. Theatres of engagement are neither, necessarily, virtuous nor vicious, popular nor coercive. But they are all around us, for they provide a shape and a means by which things are presently sayable and doable. If the world has become theatre, what of the theatre that finds itself within this particular world?
Being engaged

The term ‘engagement’ describes the mode of this theatre. It conveys a sense of component parts coming together in order to work – as when gears engage and an engine or a machine performs its function. A theatre of engagement, in this sense, comprises diverse technical aspects that are brought together in order for the whole to perform appropriately (in McKenzie’s formulation of technical performance). The term can also be taken to mean being of the world and in the world. In this sense it suggests a set of performances that are turned towards their society, deliberately invested in social process, political perspective, matters of import to gathered groups of people. This is a theatre that is socially committed, not necessarily in order to espouse a particular perspective (although it might), but to perform an age-old function: provide a seeing place (theatron) where matters of significance are shared communally, and a gathering ground where events are inhabited in common. ‘Engagement’ also suggests a mode of involvement on the part of individual spectators (who become participants in some performances in this field). Relevant markers on this particular spectrum include participation, corporeal interaction and experiential encounter. ‘Engagement’ in these latter instances is not just an attitude but also an act. You are engaged because this is required of you, body and mind. The term thereby also conveys a sense of commitment. It can mean both an assignation – an agreement to meet at a particular time – and, more momentously, a decision to join in marriage. In all these latter scenarios, it indicates a process of offer, decision and mutual accord, a cleaving to the mast. It is about arrival and
concreteness rather than deferral and slippage. In this sense the term catches the wider disposition to affect of much contemporary theatre and performance, and the associated arsenal of feelings – allure, threat, trepidation, thrill, delight – that spectators report amid various encounters with performance.

*Theatres of engagement*, then, mix it with the world. They get in amid social process. They face outwards rather than inwards, albeit that they might also involve the most intimate personal sharing or exposure. They ask commitment and sometimes sacrifice of their participants and spectators. They depend on and produce feelings and experience. They involve sometimes high-tech calibration of diverse component parts and media. In this field of intersecting attributes, ‘engagement’ appropriately describes performance after postmodernism.

compelling expressive potential of performance that draws on a broad range of people involved in the social situation in question’, doing so through lived experience and professional expertise (2010: 1). In a UK context we would think of this kind of ‘engaging performance’ as ‘applied theatre’, a field that has grown considerably over the past decade or so. Whilst it doesn’t always respond to social controversies, applied theatre engages with various communities small and large, including the young, the elderly, the imprisoned, the displaced, the traumatised and the abused, and often with people who find themselves outside social norms or tolerances. As reality-trend performance has spread, works that might previously have been encountered only in applied theatre contexts have appeared on different stages, as in Ontroerend Goed’s *Once And For All We’re Gonna Tell You Who We Are So Shut Up And Listen* (2008, featuring teenagers), She She Pop’s *Testament* (2010, featuring three elderly fathers of members of the company) and Rimini Protokoll’s *Radio Muezzin* (2008, featuring four men who give the call to prayer in Egyptian mosques). Engagement here is with particular communities of interest or expertise, but also with specific social and cultural issues that arise from their situation and experience. Engagement likewise indicates the involvement of individuals as performers who might otherwise not have so public a voice. Noting that Jean-Paul Sartre ‘advocated for all art to be “engagé,”’ (committed), Cohen Cruz suggests that contemporary engaged art goes further than the existentialists’ call for artists to act as witnesses, for it provides ‘opportunities for people to speak for themselves in some phase of the process’ (2010: 3, 4).
This re-expression of a political sensibility, along with a desire for more direct political engagement with and through performance, is shared by a number of authors (see, for instance, Harvie 2013, Jackson 2011, Spencer 2012, Thrift 2008, Tomlin 2013). All, nonetheless, remain mindful of the changing context in which political theatre must now be thought. Carol Martin promotes the notion of ‘constructivist postmodernism’, for example, as a way of recognizing the continuity of postmodern techniques and perspectives within scenarios of commitment and meaning-making. (Martin 2010: 3) Tomlin proposes ‘an alternative mode of poststructuralist resistance which seeks to reconfigure contemporary notions of reality, rather than merely highlighting the simulated nature of all representations of the real.’ (2013: 143-44) This leads her towards ‘alternative models of performance which ... seek to engage the participant (now neither performer nor spectator in any conventional sense) in a more direct and experiential relationship with their own subjectively constructed reality.’ (2013: 144) The models are not solely appropriate for resistance. They express, more broadly, contemporary cultural transactions with and through performance, where a consistent theme is the meeting of performance and the real.

As we have already seen, *engagement* trails a set of related terms that have been useful in discussions of this meeting-point, such as actuality, agency, authenticity, encounter and experience. Indeed this lexicon reverberates more widely across disciplines including sociology, computing, art and aesthetics, human geography and economics. Pine and Gilmore describe a society in which experiences have become a core commodity alongside goods and services (1999; see also Schulze 1992; and Boswijk *et al.* 2007). Groot Nibbelink notes the rise of
the term ‘theatre of experience’ to describe early-millennial Dutch and Flemish theatre that focuses on the single or isolated spectator (2012: 416). In their discussion of the experiential arrangement of cultural attractions in Denmark, Baerenholdt et al. see experience as the outcome of a matrix of activities, that together make for ‘a form of connective authenticity’ (2008: 199, original emphasis).

The recourse to ‘authenticity’ has something almost plangent about it, for this was a term not much in currency in postmodernist discourse. For the philosopher-psychologist Eugene Gendlin: ‘Authenticity can become the new “centre” after the decentring by postmodernism’ (1999: 206). Boswijk et al. suggest that it marks a fundamental development in contemporary society: ‘Authenticity is about rediscovering values and traditions and interpreting them in a new way within a progressive context. The individual is looking for genuineness and originality: for the core and essence of things’ (2007: 46).

Paradoxically, perhaps, this essence is often found through the virtualities of digital culture. The authors argue for a set of ‘important watersheds in history’ (39). These include (in recent times) Network, Experience, and Engagement, and whilst this problematically splits out the paradigm-shift of the digital era across three whole ‘revolutions’, the trajectory plausibly suggests that a networked cultural scene moves into more routinized provision of experience, which in turn extends into a wider facilitation of engagement.

The incursion of games and gaming, enabled by computers, provides an instance in microcosm of this kind of trajectory, by way of the sorts of intensely affective
play that will be familiar to many (and the parents of many). In their most pervasive form, games offer a ‘blur of the real and the fictive’ (Stenros et al. 2009: 258), and provide encounters that may be social as well as virtual (see also Calleja 2011: 10; Douglas and Hargadon 2001: 152; and Dovey and Kennedy 2006: 8). Many games offer an extension of play-frames through online discussion fora, ‘how-to’ videos and conventions such as Comic-Con, further blurring the lines between performative play and quotidian activity in the world.

We can extend Bourriaud’s influential notion of a changing relation between the artwork and its spectator. If ‘Art is a state of encounter’, it is so, Bourriaud suggests, in order to facilitate ‘the transposition into experience of spaces constructed and represented by the artist, the projection of the symbolic into the real’ (2002: 18, 82). An important correlate in subsequent developments of spectator engagement is the extent to which the event is realised or changed by the spectator-participant through what we can describe as an agency function (which is a form of both reality matrix and reality effect). In many events, one can choose how one watches, where one goes within the event, and the pace at which one does things (as in a number of immersive theatre shows or gallery-based works, for example). More directly, one can determine flows of action through decisions as a participant or gamer. Such involvement is also experiential. That’s to say, when we are immersants within a Punchdrunk show, gamers in a Blast Theory piece, or interactants at a residency by Marina Abramovic, we experience the event differently from, say, an evening spent sitting in the auditorium at the theatre, because we make a greater range of choices, find ourselves performing a larger array of actions, and have our senses
pressed in a wider variety of ways. Our bodies are in play and we recognise that our own actions contribute to the figuring of the event. This self-reflexivity is part of the echo-chamber of contemporary performance encounters. We have moved from a society of the spectacle to a society of involved spectaction; in turn, we experience ourselves having experience.\textsuperscript{17} Authenticity is, so to say, bodied forth and understood in the body, which is one means by which it performs an act of centring amid the separations of digital culture and in the wake of postmodernism.

It’s not startling to suggest that experience is all around us; but the way in which experience is accorded significance marks a shift in focus in theatre and performance studies, where theatre itself expands as a domain in and through experiential performance in (for example) museums, galleries and games (Bennett 2013; Bishop 2006; Calleja 2011). Claire Bishop, for instance, observes that installation art presents (for us to experience) rather than represents. ‘This introduces an emphasis on sensory immediacy, on physical participation (the viewer must walk into and around the work), and on a heightened awareness of other visitors’ – making for what Bishop celebrates as an ‘activated spectatorship’ (2005: 11; see also Bishop 2006: 10-17, and Bishop 2004). Such work is not solely concerned with its own meanings or representational schema. It ‘presupposes an embodied viewer’ (Bishop 2005: 6, original emphasis). The very circumstance that the art critic Michael Fried notoriously lamented in 1967 – the blurring of an artwork and its context, the joining of spaces of presentation and spectatorship, the irreducible importance of the self-aware, necessary
spectator – has become the condition of much twenty-first century art and, by extension, performance.

A good example is provided in the opening chapter to *The Audience Experience*. Radbourne *et al.* discuss *Haircuts by Children*, a piece developed by Toronto-based company Mammalian Diving Reflex, in which children between the ages of 10 and 12 cut the hair of adults. According to the authors, ‘So thorough is audience engagement in *Haircuts by Children* that the audience and the art offering have become one.’ (2013: 3) The piece embodies more widespread developments, including shifts in the nature of spaces for performance (here the space is also an extra-theatrical workplace); the performance of concept in and through the realization of the piece; and what Alston (discussing Punchdrunk’s work) sees as a characteristic conjunction, where ‘acts of participation … become sites of reception’ (2013: 130). That’s to say, the older model of reception as something conveyed from elsewhere is confounded when reception is *produced by* your own active engagement.¹⁸

Such involvement isn’t the case with all theatres of engagement, but it does characterise a larger scene. The performance that surrounds us now is often affective. It is also of the world – not solely because it is among our entertainments, but because it is suffused in our lives within culture. Performance engages with and puts us in the face of actuality. It is a means by which we can express positions and negotiate perspectives. Social space is differently inhabited. Stages extend into the world. Performance is re-
theatricalised as the presentation of shifting realities, mediated in and through our own necessary presence and participation.

NOTES

All links live at 2 January 2015 unless otherwise indicated by a different date of access.

1 Theatres of Engagement: performance after postmodernism


2 I discuss Situation Rooms by Rimini Protokoll and The Pixellated Revolution by Rabih Mroué in greater detail in Lavender 2014.

3 The term literally means ‘theatre of the time’, but has been rendered in English as ‘reality trend theatre’.

4 Lehmann remarks that the ‘motives for a certain re-entry of the political and social dimension … are rather obvious’, including 9/11, the fall of the Wall, ‘new wars, the rise of rightist populist leaders in Europe … [and] new social problems of different kinds’ (cited in Jürs-Munby et al. 2013: 2). I state the obvious here to open into a wider discussion of relations between historical process, a reality aesthetic, and developments in techniques and technologies of (re)presentation.
For an analysis of the political context for developments in the Soviet Union, see Engel 2009: 20-26. See Engel 2009: n.1, 30-31, for a bibliography on the Cold War; and n. 2, 32 for a bibliography on 1989 in East Europe. For a narrative account of the political and social events leading up to the fall of the wall, see Buckley 2004: 137-167.

Hobsbawm sees the last part of the century, from the 1970s, as ‘a new era of decomposition, uncertainty and crisis’ after a ‘Golden Age’ of social and economic growth over the preceding three decades (1994: 6).

See Limb 2008: 99-100 for the wider political context that contributed to Mandela’s release.

It is easy to agree with Sherman and Nardin’s observation that the ‘dark times’ referred to by Hannah Arendt in her discussion of the Holocaust provide a ‘far more appalling period of war and depression, terror and oppression’ (Nardin and Sherman 2006: 4). Their caution partly concerns the sense that 9/11 was used to legitimise geo-political interventions in service of the ‘war on terror’ (so-called by US President George W. Bush) and broader neo-liberal agendas (see also Spencer 2012: 2; n.9, 14). For a consideration of 9/11 in light of faith-based perspectives, see Morgan 2009b (one of a series of six examining 9/11). For a consideration of responses in the arts and wider cultural outputs to 9/11, see Melnick 2009: 3, 4; and Morgan 2009a.

For discussion of the growth and affordances of social media and digital culture, see Benkler, 2006; Bunz 2014; Castells, 2012; Jenkins, 2006; Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; and Trend 2001 (including sections on communication and the performance of identity). For brief overviews of competing positions concerning
digital culture, see Bohman 2004: 131-133; and Castells 2001: 116-133. For discussion of social media and protest, see De Luca et al 2012: 501. See Teigland and Power (2013) for a collection of essays on a next-phase to Internet use that entails seeming blurrings between the virtual and the physical. See Trottier 2012 for an account of social media and surveillance. For discussion of digital culture in relation to theatre and performance; see Bay-Cheng 2014; Causey 2006; Dixon 2007; and Lavender 2010.


11 For further discussion see Auslander 2011.

12 Lehmann's work is discussed, disputed and developed in Pavis 2014 and Jürs-Munby et al. 2013. Watt (1998) tackles similar ground – theatre in light of postmodernism – from a very different perspective granted his American location and interest in playtexts. For celebratory responses to Postdramatic Theatre see Balme 2004 (introducing a special issue of TRI on postdramatic theatre) and Carlson 2006; and for a notoriously scathing review, see Fuchs 2008.

13 See also Heddon and Milling's list of adjectives that apply to postmodern performance, which continue to have resonance (2006: 203).

14 Engle (2009) discusses a range of images from and about 9/11, within the rubrics of cultural production and signification. See also Spencer 2012: n. 1, 13, for references to interventions by Carlson, Sell and Stockhausen concerning the relation between 9/11 and aesthetic organisation; and Kubiak 2012: 2.
It is worth pointing out that Žižek is caustic about the liberal interpretation of the end of postmodernism and ‘The End of the Age of Irony’ (2002: 34).

See Lehmann 2013 for discussion of the prospect of a political postdramatic theatre, in relation to the mode of tragedy.

We can trace a line of thought from Debord to Baudrillard to de Certeau, concerning the cultural ecology of representation within society within and beyond postmodernism; initially a separation of images from their referents (Debord’s ‘society of the spectacle’), to an endless circulation of simulations (Baudrillard’s simulacra), to a multiform presentational system that underpins felt encounters and material practices (De Certeau’s ‘thrice-narratable culture’, comprising the ‘stories’ expressed in advertising and informational media, along with their citation and re-citation [1984: 186]). Tomlin (2013) provides a helpful guide.

The Audience Experience predominantly addresses audience engagement in a different sense: that of audience ‘development’, by which artists and companies aim to increase their reach. See also Freshwater 2009: 29-33, and NEF 2010. See White 2013, Bala 2012 and the essays in Kattwinkel 2003 for a discussion of various dimensions of and theoretical perspectives on audience participation. For wider discussion of spectatorship see Freshwater 2009; Balme 2008: 34-46; and the essays in Pavis 2012.