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JAM 2013: The Body and the Digital

The Dramatic "Hyper(play)text": Collabo-writing in the Digital

"We have, as Baudrillard suggests, moved decisively from a cultural order characterized by 'relations' among things to the digital order characterized by 'connections' between things"(Auslander 197).

"In digital practices, due to the hybridization of the performances… various intensities are at play. It is these imperceptible intensities, together with their ontological status, that give rise to new modes of perception and consciousness" (Broadhurst 5).

Roland Barthes discusses writing and textuality in terms of networks, links, nodes, webs and paths. Such terminology precedes the use of hyperlinks and hypermedia in electronic texts, which enable a *writerly* and 'synaesthetic' reading experience. Theatre in the 21st century has been marked by trends, which are described in performance terms as "immersive," "interactive" and "site-specific," where the audience is situated in a web of choices linked to multiple paths. Josephine Machon defines these contemporary trends that highlight the visceral, as "(syn)aesthetic":

> **(syn)aesthetics provides a discourse that defines simultaneously the impulse and processes of production *and* the subsequent appreciation strategies which incorporate reception and interpretation. (Syn)aesthetics is an aesthetic potential within performance which embraces a fused sensory experience, in both the process and the means of production, as it consists of a blending of disciplines and techniques to create an interdisciplinary, intertextual and 'intersensual' work (Machon 14).**

She further explains that, "(syn)aesthetic *play*texts are commensurable with Barthes' 'pleasurable text' which is a writerly 'text that discomforts' (Barthes 1975: 14)… Barthes asserts that such text, as well as unsettling and disturbing an audience due to its form, provides *jouissance* (… 'unspeakable bliss') where linguistic play 'granulates'. 'crackles', 'caresses', 'grates', 'cuts' and 'comes' (67)" (Machon 39). Many of the performance groups that create this '(syn)aesthetic' work fall in line with a historical avant-garde that rejected the 'authorial' role that text has played in conventional drama. Though these groups are not proclaiming their work to be anti-textual, they inherit this tradition, as their work seems to have left the literary world and its conventional dramatic elements behind. For example, groups such as Punchdrunk and Shunt do not produce their 'works' as literary texts. As a result, the public can only access their 'work' as a live performance text.

My practice-based research involves the writing and development of a site-specific and interactive play, *Rumi High*, with a network of 'collabo-writers' which includes performers, designers and audience. The play addresses the topic of education and critiques predominant systems of schooling. The play is imagined to take place throughout a school building where a multi-linear narrative is activated when the audience member, situated as a 'student,' makes choice in what paths to follow throughout the 'school day.' The aim of the practice is to explore how such a play, where 'choice' and 'site' are major factors in how the 'work' is experienced, can be presented as a literary text. My aim is to re-position dramatic plays that blend "disciplines and techniques to create an interdisciplinary, intertextual and 'intersensual' work," as literary. My practice will propose that digital technology, specifically forms of hypertext and hypermedia, enable writing for a "(syn)aesthetic theatre."

I will first discuss my writing process, which includes work-shopping, rehearsing and presenting texts-in-progress with designers, performers and audience members. In an orthodox play development process the playwright is often writing towards a performance text. My process involves writing a series of performance texts towards a literary text. As you will see, this writing process has been aided substantially by digital means. Second, I will discuss how hypertext technology used in 'hyperfiction' will allow the playwright to re-imagine how a reader engages with a play. Finally, I will conclude with some of the practical dilemmas that my practice currently faces.

[Collabo-writing via Digital Means]

My personal writing practice is marked by a 'stream-of-conscious' approach, which manifests into a variety of forms of writing from poetry to memoir, reportage to list-making, songs, to letters. As a discipline, I aim to write a minimum of thirty minutes daily—which to date, spans 59 books reaching back to 1997. **[IMAGE]**

My *play*writing practice involves an ongoing excavation of these books, aware that my subconscious has inevitably riffed on a theme, idea or concept for a play. Oftentimes this excavation will reveal dramatic textual matter in the form of dialogues, monologues, plot structures and character descriptions. This dramatic textual matter, the 'traces' of the play, function as the seeds of collaboration, and the foundations for my critical practice. In preparing to move from NYC to London, to pursue a practice-based PhD, I knew that having access to this body of work would be instrumental in interrogating my writing practice. Transporting fifty notebooks was neither practical, nor affordable. The solution was rather obvious—**a digital camera**. I photographed every page opening of every book, in chronological order, creating a digital archive stored on an external hard drive. **["B"]**

The play, *Rumi High* critiques and satirizes the New York City public school system, which I am a product of, and have spent five years working within, as a Teaching Artist. Having lived with the idea of this play for several years, the digital archive enables me to locate and return to the initial stimuli for creating a play about education. Here, I share with you three extracts located in Book 34, the first 'traces' of *Rumi High.* In the first of these samples, we see my initial impulse to write a play about education comes directly from my experience working in public schools: **"Perhaps I need to create a play out of this… an experience, a message, an attack on the illness that is the school system…"** Two weeks later, I return to this idea: **"… a satire of the school system of education in America the ghetto of America, public education, real rich colors vibrant color… Debbie Almontaser Rumi"** In the third finding: **"Someone needs to re-write *The Crucible* but get it to reach the masses… School Play *Crucible* happens at a high school A teacher working on *The Crucible*."** Locating these 'traces' allowed me to bring the play back to its roots—to strengthen and realign the playwriting practice by recalling and sharing these intentions with collabo-writers.

Social networking also became a significant writing tool in this writing process. By establishing a Facebook group page, *The S'kool of Edumacation,* I formed an ever-expanding network of educators, former students and artists, totaling 136 members, who collabo-write by sharing video, articles, images, personal comments and "likes," writing an ongoing and schizophrenic dialogue around education that creates a content board, that inevitably leaves its 'traces' in the play.

In addition to my journals, I left behind another integral part of my playwriting practice, newFangled theatReR, an ensemble of theatre-makers who I have been developing new works with, since 2004. The digital expanded the possibilities of how I could work on this material with these artists. Enabled by *Skype* videoconferencing, I began conducting rehearsals with company members abroad. This process forced me to shift my approach, which typically involved physically driven group rehearsals in one location, to write and works-shop material. The *Skype* rehearsals reversed all of these norms—one-on-one, conversation-driven rehearsals took place across various time zones in a variety of locations. Embracing the obvious challenges of rehearsing material through a computer screen, such as disconnections and digital delays, the digital means seemed to manifest into digital solutions for realizing the work. For example, in this clip, I work with actress Sevrin Anne Mason on the character of Lillian-Berg. Lillian's scenes were imagined off-site, outside of the school. In our early conversations, we grappled with how this character would function in the framework of a site-specific play. It then became obvious as we rehearsed via *Skype*, that these scenes, could occur on-site, in the school via *Skype*. **[23:00 & 24:30]** This brief moment of digital delay exemplifies how the performance text informs and inspires the literary text. This particular rehearsal later opened the possibility of writing this scene in the format of a chat-screen, as a Dadaist poem, or using a video recording itself in the body of

the text. How can a play be written in a way that embodies these 'processual traces?' Elam

states:

> **Each text bears the other's traces, the performance assimilating those aspects of the written play which the performers choose to transcodify, and the dramatic text being 'spoken' at every point by the model performance—or the… possible performances—that motivate it. This intertextual relationship is problematic rather than automatic and asymmetrical. Any given performance is only to a limited degree constrained by the indications of the written text, just as the latter does not usually bear the traces of any *actual* performance (Elam 209).**

Imagining the possibility of a literary text where the reader can parallel that of an

audience member in a participatory theatre event, I recalled a children's 'gamebook' series,

***Choose Your Own Adventure*,** made popular in the 1980's. Produced by Bantam Books, each

story situated the reader as the protagonist who would make choices, which would allow

him/her to jump to different sections of the book. Today, these books are being published as

'e-books,' and are part of a larger genre of writing known as 'hyperfiction.' Increasingly,

society is engaging with reading material electronically—magazines, newspapers and books

have gone the way of the digital. But, these manifestations of written text have been beholden

to the reader's familiarity with how they engage with print. Jay David Bolter considers

writing as a process dictated by its medium of dissemination:

> **How the writer and the reader understand writing is conditioned by the physical and visual character of the books they use. Each physical writing space fosters a particular understanding both of the act of writing and of the product, the written text. In this late age of print, writers and readers still conceive of all texts… as located in the space of a printed book. The conceptual space of a printed book is one in which writing is stable, monumental and controlled exclusively by the author. It is the space defined by perfect printed volumes that exist in thousands of identical copies. The conceptual space of electronic writing, on the other hand, is characterized by fluidity and an interactive relationship between writer and reader. These different conceptual spaces foster different styles and genres of writing and different theories of literature (Bolter 11).**

The transformation to a more 'open' reading process, with many pathways, has been

slow, especially for the craft of playwriting. My practice aims to experiment with hypermedia

formats to develop a literary playtext that will bare the 'traces' of the performances of the

writing process. I call it the '**hyper(play)text.**'

> **A hypermedia display is still a text, a weaving together of elements treated symbolically. Hypermedia simply extends the principles of electronic writing in the domain of sound and image. The computer's control of structure promises to create a synaesthesia in which anything that can be seen or heard may contribute to the texture of the text. These synaesthetic texts… will be flexible, dynamic and interactive; they too will blur the distinction between writer and reader (Bolter 27).**

This idea of a "synaesthetic text" written through the use of hypermedia, makes it possible

for Machon's "(syn)aesthetic" theatre to situate itself more deeply in a literary context, *and*

makes the 'work' available to a wider audience. "When one moves from verbal hypertext to

hypermedia's activation of multiple senses, the variety of linearities increases… Different

senses favor different media and different types of communication. Orality favors hearing,

whereas literacy favors the visual faculties. Hypermedia integrates the two" (Liestol 109).

Yet, the classic debate of authorial control remains: "In one sense, the computer opens a

particularly wide gap because of the abstract nature of electronic technology. On the other

hand, the author has a unique opportunity to control the procedure of reading, because he or

she can program restrictions into the text itself" (Bolter 30).

As *Rumi High,* is written through rehearsals, workshops and performances, enabled

by digital means, the playtext has taken on a digital life. I now imagine a play that is

encountered by a reader at a web-'site' where s/he logs in, registers as a 'student' at Rumi

High and begins his/her journey by encountering various media in the format of a playscript

composed of re-imagined dramatic elements. The reader will be required to make choices

that will activate hyperlinks that direct him/her across a (web)site, representing a school

setting.

In my practice, I have faced some challenges that I believe reignite the debate of

authorial control, (or lack thereof) within the text. The authoritarian figure in this network is

the publishing industry, which produces and prints plays according to "industry standards" that enslave the writer (and reader) to the limitations of print culture, dictating what a play should look like. While some plays are available as 'e-books' that can be read on tablets, smartphones and computer screens, these digital texts are merely re-presenting the format of a printed book. Further, **software programs,** such as Final Draft and Celtx, perpetuate these "industry standards" and make it difficult for playwrights to deviate from the assumed structures of what a play looks like and how it is read. I have yet to find a program that allows the writer to use hyperlinks or hypermedia; even adding an image into the body of the text is not possible.

One of the exciting aspects of the **'hyper(play)text'** is that like performance, "electronic literature is not static, nor is it "timeless": it exists in "real time"... The fiction realizes itself on the computer screen and then rolls or blinks out of sight and is gone. The reader might produce the same sequence of screens on the next day, but for any large structure of episodes, exact repetition is unlikely. As readers develop an aesthetic sense for this new medium, they may no longer care about perfect repetition or long preservation" (Bolter 130). I believe that contemporary theatre-goers are just beginning to develop an "aesthetic sense" for attending a theatrical event that is "(syn)aesthetic." The dramatic hyper(play)text will resituate the playform as literature, in a way that parallels (syn)aesthetic trends in 21st century performance.

** Sections in **Bold** denote the use of a slide image.*

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