

## Introduction

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*The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., all are in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged around, hallowed, within which special rules obtain.* (Johan Huizinga)

The essays in this volume re-invigorate notions of 'staging' and theatricality through consideration of contemporary art practices that work across moving image and live performance. Here these terms pertain not to a stylistic tendency but rather to the creation of a space in which the relationship between the immediacy of performance and the reproducibility of the image is re-addressed, and, indeed, recombined so that new combinations and interrelationships emerge. Therefore, unfolding around this concept of 'staging', *The Sensible Stage: Staging and the Moving Image* focuses upon contemporary art practices that explore the terrain in which the relationships between bodies and images, between immediacy and reproduction, and between action and passivity are made malleable. Theatre is not evoked here as an aesthetic of high drama, excess or repetition but through the figure of the stage as a space and time in which the mutable relations between bodies and image, and related questions of 'liveness' can be explored, tested out and remade. It is, therefore, a place in which 'special rules' apply as Johan Huizinga suggests, where the 'special rules' refer to the manner in which the artists discussed *break* the rules to combine (live) performance and filmic-images in ways that question the perceived definitions of these categories. 'Staging' is then a way of both complicating and re-combining the division between body and image; between what is experienced and what is imagined, what is immediate and what is mediated, and what is live and what is not-live. Set in motion through practice – and through their occupation of a space between performance and moving image practices – these artworks invoke important questions of time, materiality and affect.

*The Sensible Stage: Staging and the Moving Image*, therefore, unfolds around two terms – the 'sensible' and the 'stage', and two different forms of practice – artists' moving image practice (also referred to artists' film and video in this book), and the theatrical. There is of course a third term (and practice) that is present here and that is performance art, which compels our attention to the immediacy demanded by the 'live' body. If performance practices can be said to have worked to extend the limits of the body and in doing so expand the relationship between bodies – the bodies of the artist / performer and the audience / viewer – then much of the work addressed in this book is concerned with the opposite: delimiting or contracting these spaces in order to understand the interrelated textures between what is live and what is mediated, as well as questions of participation and spectatorship. These are questions that, as Jacques Rancière has noted, go to the heart of the debates and politics of twentieth century theatre (and I would suggest have great implications on assumptions and values concerning exhibition making in general). The diversity of artists' practice explored in this book – and that of the curators and writers also – does not arrange itself neatly across this set of oppositions nor through these forms of practice but ducks and dives and weaves across and through them. But what is common across this work is an interest in this question of 'liveness' in relation to both performance and the moving image, and the way in which this is mediated, indulged in, achieved. Questions of what constitutes 'theatre', what is the relation of the script and the score to the moving image, the relation to text to live performance and questions concerning the 'material equation' of film and performance prevail. (Schneeman 2000: 97, quoted in Reynolds 2016: this book)

Rancière begins his discussion of theatre in his essay, 'The Emancipated Spectator' with the simple observation that theatre is constituted by 'bodies in action before an audience'. (Rancière 2009: 2) And it is from this point that questions ensue – questions concerning the constitution of an audience and its relationship to action and so on. Defining 'theatre'

around the central tenant of 'action', as Rancière does, immediately opens up the dichotomy between activity and passivity that gives rise to what he terms 'the paradox of the spectator', which is also, of course, the paradox of the theatre itself. This 'paradox' is based upon this simply binary of activity / passivity and theatre's assumed dependence upon it – firstly, that is, that there is no theatre without an audience, but that, secondly, being an audience is bad because to be a spectator is to be passive and to be subject to illusion, and, finally, viewing is the opposite of taking action. In other words, spectatorship – that is watching, being an audience, sitting in an auditorium – subjects the viewer to an illusion and thus they are 'separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.' (Rancière 2009: 2) Audiences sit and watch, and in doing so they are passive and subject to the illusion that takes place – is *activated* – on the stage, or so that scenario goes. This is entirely familiar as the basis of Guy Debord's similar claims in his film and book later, 'The Society of the Spectacle' – that is that the media industry subjects us to 'delusion and false consciousness' (Debord 2003: 44) and in doing so separates us from our true selves and true capacity to act instead keeping us passive, subjugated to the power of the spectacle. While this valorisation of 'action' and damnation of 'inaction' remain at the core of so many judgements made in relation to contemporary art practices (I am thinking here principally of the popularity of the terms 'participation', 'interaction' and 'taking part' to so many practitioners), Rancière begins to unpick these binaries through the history of theatre largely focussing on the work of Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud.

The respective approaches taken by Brecht and Artaud in seeking to overcome the separation between stage and auditorium are still relevant today, and go some way towards representing the differing approaches taken by contributors to this publication. A shorthand generalisation of these two quite distinct approaches would suggest on the one hand, an emphasis on the separation between the audience and the stage, and their complete elision or unification, on the other. That is, between the 'exemplary dilemma' of Brecht where the audience learn through the stage and are then able to engage in future action concerning their plight, and the catharsis of Artaud in which the separation between the stage and the auditorium is eradicated by the joyful insurgence of a community 'in possession of its own energies'. (Rancière 2009:4) On the one, there is an emphasis on separation, splitting, distancing and, on the other hand, a productive coalescence. Yet at the same time the way in which these differing tendencies are realized becomes more and more complex once the basis of theatre itself becomes questioned, and even further complicated once we become to question the nature of liveness, immediacy and reproduction. For example, where and when is the stage? In other words, where does theatre take place?

## **QUESTIONS OF LIVENESS**

As we know, much performance and moving image practice in the last 50 years has radically disrupted neat separations between the live-ness of the body and the not-live state of the image. In the film-performances of Carolee Schneemann, for example, the body and the film-image combine through the performance to produce a 'tactile and reciprocal event'. (Reynolds 2016: THIS VOLUME) As Lucy Reynolds points out in her essay, 'The Subject in Process: Material Equations in the Work of Carolee Schneemann and Annabel Nicolson', expanded cinema practices of the 1960s and 1970s established a relationship between the body and the image as live process that unfolds through the performance. One of the most well known examples of this is, of course, the work of Malcolm Le Grice whose films *Castle I* (1968) and *Horror Film 1* (1971) require the direct intervention of the artist's body into the space of the projected image. Le Grice's *Horror Film* in particular depends upon the artist creating a form of shadow play in order to project an image upon the screen. Here the hidden mechanics or apparatus of film's projection are made visible, and its subsequent 'live' manipulation or play, creates an immersive situation in which artist, audience and image are joined in the unfolding experience. (i) This mutual unfolding of the film-performance occurs through what Reynolds, following Schneemann herself, terms a 'material equation'. (Schneemann 2000: 97) Schneemann uses the term to refer to the shared formal properties between film and performance and

the means through which they might interact or conjoin. These, she suggests, are the projection of 'color, texture and literal imagery from film into the environment of the performance', achieved through her playing with the 'focal plane of film' relative to 'actual space'. (Schneemann 2000: 97) The 'material equation' therefore refers to the apparatus that lies behind the event of the performance, teasing apart the textures through which each element – body and image, material and spectral – merges in and through the immediacy of the performance.

For Reynolds, Schneemann's 'material equation' becomes the means for the understanding of the complex and inter-subjective inter-relationship between image and body in the film-performances. As Reynolds observes in her essay, this was a 'temporally inflected art practice that sought to break down the distinctions between art forms, where the live event and the artist's body became a convergence point at which different media, including film, could coalesce.' (Reynolds 2016: THIS VOLUME) What is notable about these works – such as *Ghost Rev* (1965) or *Snows* (1969) – is the openness of the relationship between body and image. In these works, the body is radically open to the affective potential of the image and vice versa such that there is a sense of the body and image both being produced through the space and time of the performance. Here the material order of the body and the immateriality of the projected, filmic-image is recast and re-ordered into a more complex weave that in so many ways foreshadows the reciprocal (and not so reciprocal) relationship we have with images and image-making technologies today. For Reynolds, this is a state of '*body-becoming-film-becoming-body*' – an affective and mutual becoming in which body and image are intertwined in a completely visceral manner. In her important reading of Schneemann and Nicholson's work, Reynolds further extends this state of radical openness between body and image to include the machinery of the image's projection – in Schneemann's case the often multiple projectors used in the performances, and in Nicholson's the sewing machines that acted to materially inflect the images produced. The sewing machine, like the projector and projected image, becomes a part of the work's 'material equation' producing 'an intermingling of these bodies: corporeal, mechanical, material and immaterial' as Reynolds observes. (Reynolds 2016: THIS VOLUME)

Reynolds' articulation of points of convergence or coalescence, as places in which image and body meld together in Schneemann's film-performances, resonate with what Dominic Paterson explores as the element of 'touch' in the work of Jimmy Robert. Paterson's careful and beautifully composed examination of Jimmy Robert's work unfolds through the notion of touch as the point at which body and image meet – inter-mingle, inter-relate, conjoin. In Robert's work, *L'Education Sentimentale* (2005), it is the touch between a spectral body (the film-image of the artist Bas Jan Ader) and a living body (Robert's own) that confuses boundaries and definitions of time outside of this moment of *touching*. As Paterson writes, touch is both physically and temporally elusive in Robert's work suggesting at once an insistence on a 'now' (he observes the complicity between the French word for 'hand' and for 'now' – *maintenant*), and the impossibility of that 'now' – 'as something that slips out of the present tense...' (Paterson 2016: THIS VOLUME) In his essay, Paterson invokes a scene in *L'Education Sentimentale* in which Roberts restages a fragments from Ader's 'falling films' such that it is as if he reaches into a Ader's film to gently hold the artist's body (and thus arrest his fall). Here Roberts plays between the spectral and material image, as Paterson observes and in which 'the generalities of the "the body" in performance are recast in terms of the specificity of a loved body...' (Paterson 2016: THIS VOLUME) As Roberts himself has noted in another context:

*The absence or presence of the body is equally relevant to me. I think it is important to say here that images/objects are also performative, and their representational instability – in other words, their performativity – tips them over into the physical realm, consequently the body figures as much as the images do.*  
(Palumbo, Stefania)

Here the insistence of the gesture of the hand and the immediacy of 'now' reorder a dichotomy between presence and absence, material and spectral, live and recorded

images; suggesting instead, a certainty of touch, of touching. Here, I would suggest that these points of convergence or touch might equate to the idea of a stage as a conceptual device or operation that articulates the point in which body and image inter-relate, conjoin, overlap.

## **DIALECTICS OF THE STAGE**

The question of the 'live' / not-live-ness of the cinematic image and performance is discussed by Ian White in his essay, 'Performer, Audience, Mirror: Cinema, Theatre and the Idea of the Live', which was based on seminar series that he gave in London: *6 or more kinds of theatre*, held at no.w.here (2010), and *Performer, Audience, Mirror: Cinema, Theatre and the Idea of the Live*, LUX (2011). In the essay, White seeks to radically negate the notions of live-ness attached to both performance and cinema in order to be able to re-consider them both as equally live and *not-live*. In undertaking this exercise, White turns his focus to the architecture of the theatre in order to examine the way in which ideas of participation (and non-participation) have evolved through the notion of the agora as the site of democratic participation. Citing, Dorothy Richardson's article from 1928, '[T]he new film can assist radio in turning the world into a vast council chamber', White asks us to consider both cinema and performance as unstable entities that act to enclose the viewer and to separate them from participating. (Richardson 1932, quoted in White 2016:) This instability of the feedback loop – of performance into image, image into performance and so on – also acts to undermine fixities of time, reminding us of the relation nature of time itself.

We see White testing out these ideas concerning the quality and situation of 'liveness' in relation to the artists' film and video practices in an earlier essay (and film programme), 'Kinomuseum'. In the essay, he calls for a museum in which questions 'originality, authenticity and presence'. (Crimp 1980: 56 quoted in White 2008: 13 are reworked through (and thanks to) artists' film and video practice, producing what White calls, 'a differentiated cinema'. (White 2008: 14)) This 'differentiated cinema' relates specifically to the expanded cinema practices of the 1960s and 70s where the projection of film becomes a unique event in which the presence of the spectator as well as that of the film itself is emphasised. Thus questions of time and immediacy are key as those of presence or being-present within a particular time and space. We might say, then, that White's notion of a 'differentiated cinema', when thought in relation to the museum or gallery, enables us to re-examine what it means to experience the space and time of the artwork and the museum itself. As White observes:

*It leads to a differentiated cinema, a museum based on the principles of impermanence, immediacy and the temporal and the temporary, manifested in the minds of an audience who experience it in the space and time of the auditorium's that is the museum's permutating exhibition hall, and who are its active, defining agent. (White 2008: 14)*

Here the suggestion is that the 'differentiated cinema' of artists' film and video practice intervenes into the museum to produce an always already live event or encounter that results from the sensible effects of moving images, and the reciprocity of our relation to them. In this more recent essay, 'Performer, Audience, Mirror: Cinema, Theatre and the Idea of the Live', White addresses the question of 'liveness' from the opposite angle asking that if cinema (and also, he suggests, repertory theatre) cannot traditionally be considered 'live' because of its repetition of movement, gestures and images then what is? 'Liveness is not lifelikeness', he suggests, instead defining this 'liveness' through a 'shared act' that is differentiated. As Alain Badiou suggests, it is the coming together of 'a temporal form

(the present) and spatial form (the presence of a crowd in a place)'. (Badiou and During 2016: this volume).

Badiou whose discussion with Elie During opens this book suggests that the advent of new technologies of the image, new sites or new forms of practice do not disrupt the dialectic arrangement of theatre, which is situated between an impetus to 'collective fusion' and 'the distance and contemplative passivity of a silent and captivated public...' (Badiou 2016: THIS VOLUME) For Badiou, theatre is always inherently dialectical – composed of the body on the one hand (and dimensions of the body), and, text on the other hand (or other structuring, ordering dimensions). He states: '[t]heater is a complex ordering system whose material series is not set in stone: texts of course, but also bodies, costumes, the set, the site, music, light...' (Badiou and During 2016: this volume) There's several points in Badiou and During's conversation that are important for us to take up in our discussion of staging and the moving image: these are primarily concerned with the manner in which the space of the stage is organised in relation to what Badiou terms, 'theatre', and the relation of time and the moving image to this space of the theatre. Badiou differentiates theatre from the 'plastic arts' through the manner in which it organises time: theatre is the product of the organising and display of bodies in such a way as to demonstrate the 'evident primacy of time over space' whereas plasticity is produced through the display of the primacy of space over time. There is a distinction therefore between different organisations of *time* so that video for example displayed in a temporal manner might be considered as theatre whereas video displayed on a monitor exhibits a plasticity that results from the abandonment of the movement of time in favour of an emphasis on the spatial dimensions of exhibition. This, of course, equates with our understanding of cinema *as performance*, an understanding developed through expanded cinema practices in which the performed-cinematic image becomes visible to us through the assemblage of bodies and structures in the singular event of the performance. This brings us to the second important point that arises in Badiou and During's conversation, and this is that for Badiou theatre is the product of the body-language dialectic: it is produced through the coming together of 'the body and a text' in the present moment in the space of the stage. The image, therefore, is considered only a dimension of the body or language, and cinema itself is always, cut from the present, signaling a withdrawal from the visible into the past.

In their essay, 'The Divided Stage: Splitting the Dialectics of Performance', Pil and Galia Kollektiv evoke Badiou's concept of 'splitting', in order to question the ethical formulations of allegiance and agency in relation to the performance, 'Be Black, Baby!', which takes place within Brian De Palma's film *Hi, Mom!* (1973). Splitting is the term given to the act of re-making (or as Badiou says, 'forcing') a separation between things that are assumed to be one, so that, in terms of the operations of theatre, this provides us with new ways of re-configuring the division between image and body, stage and screen: that is, between what is considered live and what is mediated. Here, the discussion of *a performance of a performance* (the enactment of cultural and racial stereotypes) within a film further complicates conceptions of time within our discussion of the live / not-live nature of performance, theatre and the image. William Rubin, the main protagonist in De Palma's film, is engaged in the act of surreptitiously photographing and filming his neighbours. This act of image-*ing* those around him is a process that becomes enveloped in his daily life and results in his involvement with the black activist theatre group that stages, 'Be Black, Baby!', and therefore, Rubin's immersion and emergence into the image at once evokes the complexities of image culture today. Unlike, the act of voyeurism in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), in which the protagonist is separated from and looks through the window to the image outside (and outside of himself), Rubin's voyeurism is without this frame: instead, Rubin enters into the image both producing, experiencing and acting within the images he produces. However, while Rubin enters into the image by participating in his

neighbours' theatre performance, for example, the staging of the performance within the film provides a direct contrast to the boundless nature of the imagining technology of Rubin's voyeurism: it produces a live moment within a mediated image.

The 'live' performance of 'Be Black, Baby' is both a mediated image (transmitted, as it is, through the medium of film) and experienced by us as 'live'. As Pil and Galia Kollektiv point out this results in a confusion of reaction: our judgement and disgust at the reactions of the (not-live) audience in the film and at the same time, the immediacy of our own reactions as an audience means that our allegiances are challenged. In this case, the 'remove' of the cinematic image is denied twice: once by the boundless and time-less nature of the technology of Rubin's imaging (or imagination), and secondly by the performance of *the performance* of the image, that is the performance of stereotypes captured and re-performed, experienced and re-experienced as mediated *and* live. The London-based artist, Gail Pickering's work, *Brutalist Premolition* (2008) exercised something similar in its realisation as a live performance and film projection within a sculptural set. Here too, the boundary between live action and projected images is a complexity of unexpected splits and layers. Taking place in an abstract-replica of an existing architectural form (one of the flats in the infamous Robin Hood Gardens Estate in Poplar, East London), the 'live' performance of actors on stage directly replicated their performance in the film also projected onto the stage. The mirroring of mediated and live-action in the mirrored spaces of the stage-set and the apartment acted to emphasise the reception and transmission of images within the performance itself. In this case, the use of actors recognisable from TV soap operas set them at a remove and flattened their live presence into images mediated by the screen. Pickering's work typically confronts conventions of live-ness and transmission so that in her desire to approach the singular intensity of the body in performance, she unravels the constitution of the live presence of the body through a complex array of transmitted images: images transmitted technologically or through cultural stereotype, she layers the two together.

*The Sensible Stage: Staging and the Moving Image*, proposes staging as a method for the (re) articulation of the myriad ways in which the relationship between body and image is realised through moving image and performance practice today. As a result of its intimate relationship with theatre, staging is an inherently divisive device pitting audience against actor, action against spectatorship, live experience against mediated image. Yet, at the same time, staging is a methodology that allows us to re-examine these divisions and to remake the ways in which the image and body are mutually bound together. This is signaled in general terms through a movement away from methodologies that act to dissolve the temporal and spatial boundaries between performer, audience and what is performed in favour of a reinstatement of the spaces of the stage and the screen. To put it in another way, this is a movement away from performance art ('Live Art') to theatre. Furthermore, the attention paid to structuring devices, in many of the practices discussed in this book, acts as a means to address and understand the expanded economies through which both images and bodies move. This is the awareness that we participate in an economy that operates through the boundlessness of the sensory effects of images. Therefore, while 'staging' offers a method for practice in terms of enabling new combinations and configurations of the tension between image and body (the act of 'splitting' that Pil and Galia Kollektiv discuss in their essay), it also provides a bounded space – a space in which 'special rules' govern the appearance of things (perhaps bodies, perhaps images) within its bounds. In contrast to the unbridled nature of sensory effects, we have a stage; it's a space defined for action, discourse and discussion: '[T]he arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen... forbidden spots, isolated, hedged around, hallowed, within which special rules obtain.' (Huizinga, Johan 1971: 10 quoted in Thacker, Eugene (2011): 56)

Staging is a methodology for thinking about a certain type of practice, and it is a device of enclosure that acts to attune our attention to a specific moment in space and time – moments of encounter, dwelling, convergence, coalescence. In this way, the use of the term ‘staging’ provides us with a means to articulate the way in which images and bodies meet in a particular space and time. And most importantly, ‘staging’ is a way of both complicating and re-imagining the relationship between body and image; between what is experienced and what is imagined, what is immediate and what is mediated, and what is live and what is not-live. The stage, therefore, might be understood as a sorting device and as a methodology that allows for a testing of the relationships between body and image, projection and presence, materiality and reproducibility in the contemporary performance and moving image practices that are explored in this book. The simultaneous immersion and separation that is inherent in the theatrical nature of the stage enables the kind of dual process that is at the heart of this book, and engages with the need for re-thinking these relationships in regards to the increasingly influence of new technologies and their affective, sensory impacts upon the body. Unfolding around the concept of ‘staging’, *The Sensible Stage: Staging and the Moving Image* invokes the boundaries of presence and participation inherent in performance practices by addressing the work of artists whose practice involves both moving image and performance in a way that questions the definition of these terms. These are continuing debates and speculations on topics that range from the prevalence of artwork exploring a textual dimension, to the intense questioning of the status and presence of the image, and to the use of theatricality and theatrical procedures.

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<sup>i</sup> It should be noted however that in discussing Castle 1, Le Grice asserts that performance of the live element – the swinging light bulb – is intended to act as a *distancing* device acting to separate the viewer from a state of immersion or passivity. He writes: *'The light bulb was a Brechtian device to make the spectator aware of himself. I don't like to think of an audience in the mass, but of the individual observer and his behaviour. What he goes through while he watches is what the film is about. I'm interested in the way the individual constructs variety from his perceptual intake.'* Malcolm Le Grice, *Films and Filming*, February 1971, via [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/histories/1960-1969/castle\\_1.html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/histories/1960-1969/castle_1.html) Accessed 3 May 2016.