

Reports and Commentaries

DIGITAL STAGES: EXPLORING TECHNOLOGY IN PERFORMING ARTS FESTIVAL,
APRIL 2011, LONDON
by Vlad Strukov

In the past decade new genres have emerged at the crossing of digital technologies and performing arts. It is rare these days for a mainstream theatre production not to include a screen projection, and even dance and circus performances are frequently accompanied by a moving image on screen. Some of these engagements are based on remote connections; others aim to achieve an effect of interactivity and simultaneity of perception. On another level, digital technologies enable choreographers and stage producers to look anew at the human body and explore movement in a completely different way: the digital revolution on stage is similar to how Edward Muybridge's photographs allowed the viewer for the first time to appreciate the gait of a horse and the body movements of an athlete. The use of digital technologies on stage is varied and intentionally complicates our understanding of performing genres and different media. By their nature, theatre and dance are mixed-media forms, as are indeed film and television. Digital performances disturb any system of media and genres, putting forward principles of interactivity, mediation and telematic interventions. If Vsevolod Meyerhold utilised external action as part of his biomechanical theatre in the 1920s, it appears in the 2000s and 2010s that the very boundary between internal and external apparatus of performance is blurred and the concept of biomechanics has returned in the shape of the virtual body and networked body.

In what follows below I attempt to problematise some of our assumptions of the role of digital technologies on stage and to put forward a notion of **transmedial performance** by providing a review of a festival of digital performance that took place in London in April 2011 and included performances by such distinguished artists and groups as Mark Coniglio / Troika Ranch, The Chameloen group and others.

Digital Stages: Exploring Technology in Performing Arts festival was organised by Glaz, a London-based art and film company that promotes innovative ways of exhibiting film and organizes experimental art festivals (http://glaz.co.uk/Glaz_Menu.html). Glaz brings together Alissa Timoshkina and Margarita Osepyan who work as independent film and media curators in the British capital; their previous projects include Sergei Paradjanov festival (2010) and various film screenings and theatrical performances. *Digital Stages* is their new project that

was conceived and developed as an international creative platform in London for sharing and developing new work in technology and performing arts. The April 2011 festival was organised in collaboration with Kate Sicchio, a choreographer, media artist, performer and lecturer in Dance at the University of Lincoln, and Sarah Rubidge, a practising artist and professor of Choreography and New Media at the University of Chichester.

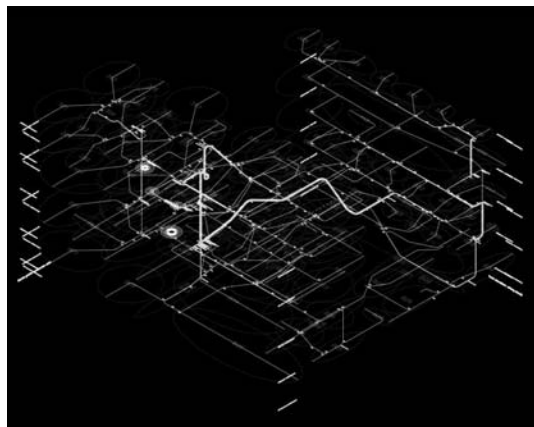
Digital Stages had two central aims: to increase general awareness about the integration of digital technology into creative processes and to create a platform for artistic and intellectual exchange. The festival took place at various venues in London over a week at the end of April 2011. The festival included three types of activities: performances, workshops and talks. The workshops and master-classes were attended by performers, dancers and choreographers, as well as a general public interested in the convergence of digital technologies and performing arts. For example, the Mobile Video workshop with Camille Baker, a Canadian media artist and curator, involved a participatory performance art project using mobile video. She guided participants, armed with their own handsets, through a series of activities using and creating personal abstract videos to explore ways to communicate visually, gesturally and non-verbally, by repurposing the mobile device's means of communication and expression. The Creative Software workshop was taught by Mark Coniglio, artistic co-director of Troika Ranch and creator of the real-time media manipulation software Isadora®; the workshop introduced participants to basic strategies and techniques for integrating interactive media with live performance, by guiding participants through the practical, scenographic and dramaturgical implications of adding live media to performances intended for the stage.

Digital Stages talks and panel discussions series held at Queen Mary University of London included presentations by practitioners as well as leading scholars in the field of performance and digital technologies. Dr Maria Chatzichristodoulou [aka Maria X], University of Hull, delivered a paper entitled 'Digital Stages: Is There a There, There?', in which she put forward an investigation into the spatial contexts of digital and networked performance practices. She focused on practices that emerge from, reside, develop or unfold in a) virtual worlds or, b) hybrid locations that merge physical and digital spacetimes (such as augmented reality environments). Her main concern was with notions of space, especially the manner in which these virtual or hybrid environments (re)configure, shape or affect the practices they host. Katie Day, a commissioner for Theatre Sandbox for iShed (an experimental theatre-new media practice in Bristol, <http://www.ished.net/>) and a theatre maker in her own right, who runs 'The Other Way Works' company making interactive and site-specific performance, talked about six commissioned projects and the learning that the scheme and its evaluation generated. She focused on the role of digital technologies at all stages of creative work from commissioning to dissemination, and she examined how partnerships between industry, artists and creative companies emerge in the digital era. By looking at a few case studies she explored how events, networking, consultancy and creative work merge due to media and industry convergence, and what function an artist may have in this new hybrid artistic environment.

In his presentation entitled 'Topical Opticality', Alex Haw, an architect and artist operating at the intersection of design, research, art and the urban environment, show-cased (un)realized projects conceived by a company he runs, *atmos* (<http://www.atmosstudio.com/>). *atmos* is a collaborative, explorative, design-led practice creating architecture and events

with an emphasis on content and connectivity, real-time responsiveness and technological innovation, spatial sensuality and articulation. One of the projects that Alex Haw elaborated on is entitled *LightHive*; it was an installation at the Architectural Association, School of Architecture, London (the AA). It consisted of a constellation of over 1,000 suspended LED lights, each of which was arranged to recreate the position of every light source in the AA building. Alex Haw would use complex software to translate the intensity, colour and direction of the real light source into its symbolic representation in the exhibition space. The lights were controlled by infra-red cameras that would switch on and off and change their intensity in response to changes in real light use in the AA building. *LightHive* was a realised sophisticated transmedial practice that combined software and architectural practices, as well as mediated human interaction with technologies producing light, and presented them as a spectacular immersive installation. Set within the AA building and reacting to the ‘life’ of the AA building, the project commented on the nature of light and space and human perception of inner spaces, whether they are architectural or psychological. Produced in 2007, *LightHive* sparkled from the screen in the Arts auditorium of Queen Mary University of London at the audience of *Digital Stages* in 2011, transcending the historical distance as light does. In its luminous way, *LightHive* transformed not only the Georgian splendour of the AA building but also our perception of new media objects and installations as they appear four years later, raising important questions of how to document digital performances in the age that seems to privilege being in the now.

Images 1 and 2. Alex Haw’s *LightHive*.

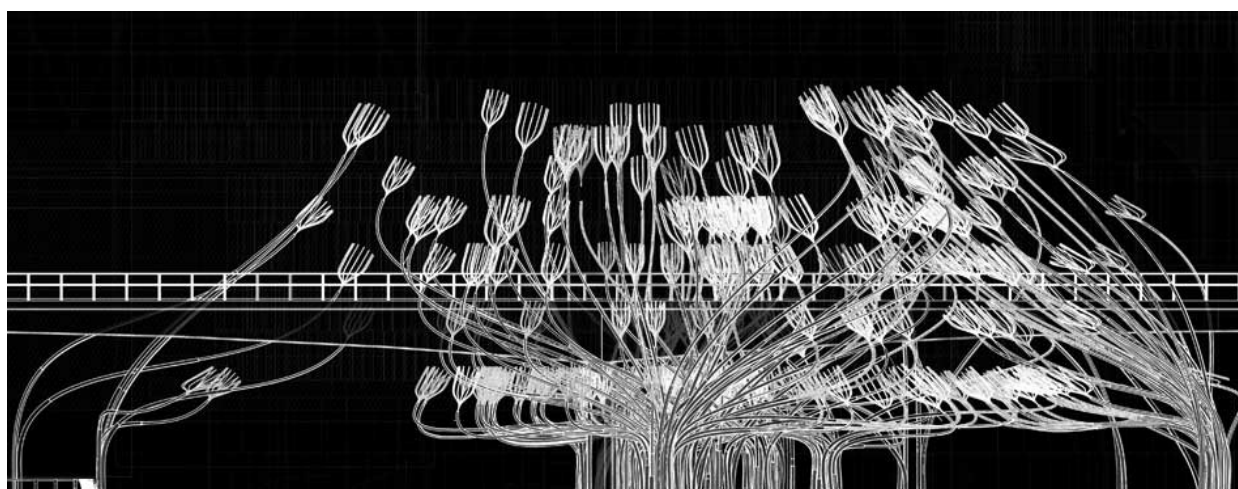
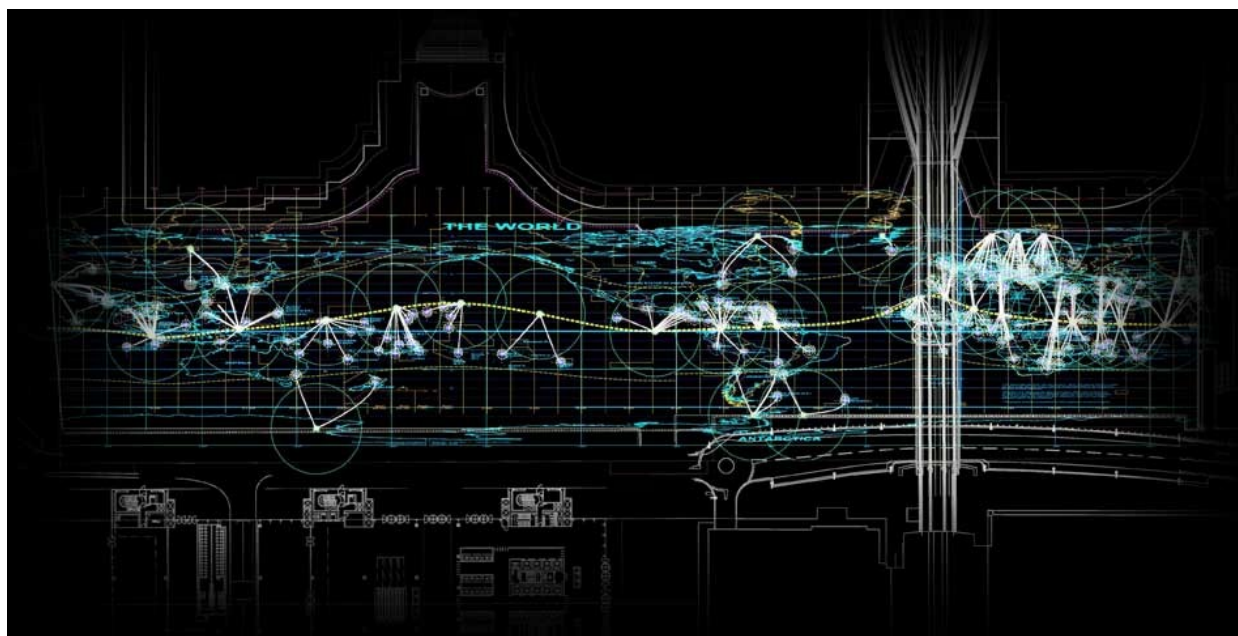


Source: <http://www.atmosstudio.com/#794210/040-LightHive> (accessed 1 May 2011).

Ironically, Katie Day and Alex Haw subconsciously put forward a peculiar paradox of contemporary digital practices, i.e. crusading presentism and equally crusading zeal to construct digital monuments and therefore memorialise perceptions and experience. This became particularly evident in the stream of un-realised projects in Alex Haw’s presentation, for example, in his *Sunlands*, a finalist public art proposal, commissioned by Modus Operandi for the occupation of the 300-meter-long Middle Dock at Canary Wharf in London. *Sunlands* was meant to evoke the centrality of London and the river Thames in world commerce and communications. Now occupied by the world’s leading banks, Canary Wharf is an example of the

transformation of the industrial hub of capitalism into the post-industrial financial barracks. *Sunlands* aimed to recreate this position of London in the world of international commerce, with the Greenwich observatory only a mile away from the intended location of *Sunlands* defining the distribution of space and time on the global scale. *Sunlands* would include LED lights that would respond to data collected from weather stations around the world and would recreate light intensity in all corners of the world. Therefore, *Sunlands* would encode light as experienced in various countries of the world and it would present London's Canary Wharf not only as the accumulator of time and capital but also of light, where light traditionally stands for knowledge and time. The project would, ultimately, become a complex apparatus for observing changes in natural light across the globe and for inscribing these experiences on the gloomy skies of the London docks.

Images 3 and 4. Alex Haw's *Sunlands*.



Source: <http://www.atmosstudio.com/#803535/103-Sunlands> (accessed 1 May 2011).

In his *LightHive* and *Sunlands* Alex Haw inadvertently conceives the viewer as part of an elaborate surveillance system. It is the making of light and illumination that entices the viewer to observe the work of time, capital and intellect—represented by the AA and Canary Wharf—as converted into a spectacle by algorithms and digital implementations. Conceived as machines for vision and visual participation, Alex Haw's projects play with viewers' perception of time and light as well as their own senses, to the extent that the sensory system appears on display in the museum space. In many ways, such was the intention of Florencia and Maria Guerberof's performance *Foucault's Sons: The Origins of Technology* at the opening night of *Digital Stages*.

Image 5. *Foucault's Sons: The Origins of Technology* performance by Florencia and Maria Guerberof.



Source: Piotr Erdman

Foucault's Sons: The Origins of Technology was a digital performance that involved a human subject enacting an identity in the space of an art gallery, accompanied by three simultaneous screen projections and live music consisting of various sounds. The projections were enlarged moving images streamed from the cameras attached to the performer's body. The performance focused on female desire and on the relationship between technology and senses. Attached to the body, the cameras provided an ultimate surveillance technique, look-

ing at, along, and inside the body of the performer. They engaged the viewer in the complex surveillance act by manipulating the gaze of the viewer in its relationship to the body and the screen. The performer's movements accentuated the visual perception of touch, smell and taste: by rubbing her crotch, nose and mouth the performer seemed to have turned these organs inside out, making senses palpable to the viewer in their extreme proximity. The music followed the performer and her convulsive body movement, making the viewer aware of their own hearing, and the cameras / projections invariably interrupted the viewer's gaze. The performance emphasized the fragmentation of the body, particularly the senses, and depicted a corporeal transformation and (dis-)belief in digital embodiment. The telematic body of the performer, i.e. its connectedness to the projected image, went along with her intimate improvisation on the gallery's floor, with the viewer engrossed in the flesh and engaged in the experience of pain. The body and its screen representations helped the viewer reflect on the dynamic divide of the corporeal experience and the omnipresence of the gaze.

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