

EDITORIAL

Virtualities as Creative Powers and Mimetic Devices

by Alexandru Bumbas and Anca Pop

In 1999, the writer and theatre professor Serge Ouaknine deplored the fact that virtuality was going to replace the “palpable presence of actors”¹. This formulation bears witness to a concern that was then widely shared: that of an art confronted with the rise of digital technologies and with the possibility that image, simulation and virtual devices would gradually replace the physical presence of the actor. As the new millennium approached, virtuality thus seemed to designate what most directly threatened the very essence of the performing arts: the co-presence of bodies, the here and now of representation, the materiality of the stage.

Cinema, for its part, has, since its invention, made this tension between presence and absence one of its constitutive conditions: the filmed object is physically absent at the moment when its image becomes present on the screen. As Christian Metz has shown, the cinematic apparatus thus rests on the simultaneous perception of the image as present and the represented object as absent². In this sense, it extends the logic proper to the photographic image analysed by André Bazin, in which representation preserves the material trace of a reality that is now absent³.

Within this horizon of thought, nourished by the conceptualizations that informed our call for contributions last year, we would first like to warmly thank the contributors who have deepened and displaced our initial intuitions. From Plato to Deleuze, from Baudrillard to Derrida, we understand that the digital does not invent virtuality but rather reconfigures operations of presence/absence, actualization and simulation that long predate it.

The #3 issue VIRTUALITIES that we have just launched — composed of a main issue and a *dossier* on puppetry coordinated by **Yanna Kor** — thus appears almost three decades after

¹ Serge OUAKNINE, “Si près de quelque chose de nouveau... Le théâtre. Du théâtre au virtuel,” in *L'Annuaire théâtral*, no. 26 (autumn), Québec, Ed. Société québécoise d'études théâtrales (SQET) / Université du Québec à Montréal, 1999, p. 18.

² Christian METZ, “Le signifiant imaginaire,” in *Communications*, no. 23, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1975, pp. 3–55.

³ André BAZIN, “Ontologie de l'image photographique,” in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, vol. I, Ontologie et langage, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1958, pp. 9–17.

Ouaknine’s “prophecy,” and shows that virtuality does not simply replace presence. On the contrary, it can produce it, extend it, displace it, duplicate it, make it perceptible, or even reveal the conditions of its emergence. Virtuality is therefore not necessarily the *other* of presence but constitutes one of its possible dimensions. In other words, virtuality does not designate only what belongs to the virtual in the technological sense; it also refers to what exists in potential, to what could come into being, to what remains latent within a form, an image, a body, a narrative, or an artistic device.

This conception allows us to shift the question: rather than asking what virtual technologies do to theatre, cinema or the performing arts — and, in this respect, we are pleased to note that all the contributions avoid the overly simplistic apprehension that would make virtuality, and digital technology in particular, a “danger” to the performing arts and cinema —, the question is what virtuality *does* to artistic forms and, conversely, what artistic forms *do* with their virtualities. For does not every work contain, in one form or another, possibilities that exceed its actualization? Does not every image carry other possible images within it? Does not every representation make something present and something absent appear in the same movement?

It is within this space of tension between the actual and the possible, between presence and absence, between reality and representation, that this new issue of *In Vivo Arts* is situated. It has not sought to stabilize a definition of virtuality, but rather to test its powers: the power to transform bodies and spaces, the power to displace regimes of presence, the power to fictionalize the real, but also critical and political power.

If the conceptual orientations of our journal have, since its foundation, revolved around the performing arts and cinema, one of the challenges of this issue has precisely been to integrate a space of passage between the stage and the screen: that of video games. Where cinema shows a world that remains external to the spectator and theatre organizes the co-presence of bodies within a shared space, the video game introduces another mode of relation to the virtual: that of immersion, interaction and actualization. The virtual world is not merely represented or projected; it becomes a space to traverse, inhabit and, to a certain extent, transform. A question nevertheless remains, which this issue does not claim to settle: does the video game constitute a (new) art form?

With this framework established, the composition of the issue shows that virtualities appear as creative powers as much as mimetic devices: they do not merely reproduce reality, but produce new forms of presence, experience and representation.

The issue opens with a section entitled *POSSIBILITIES*, in which **Yanna Kor** invites us into the artistic universe that is perhaps the most virtual of all: that of Alfred Jarry and his pataphysics, that vertiginous “science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes to the lineaments the properties of the objects described by their virtuality”⁴.

The *PRESENCES. Stages and Virtualities* section then plunges us into immediately contemporary stage experiments. On the one hand, **Moulay Youssef Maftah el Kheir** explores works such as *Le Test Sutherland* (Adelin Schweitzer), *Uncanny Valley* (Rimini Protokoll), *DADDY* (Marion Siéfert) and *The Encounter* (Complicité) through what he calls a “contract of opacity,” that is, “the regulation, by means of a device, of the circulation between what is shown and what remains unspoken, a regulation that institutes a potential presence and calibrates attention.” On the other hand, **Mona Dahdouh Recordier** brings us closer to her own research-creation, *J’attends le miracle toujours renouvelé de ta présence (I await the ever-renewed miracle of your presence)*, a performance that stages the virtual power of the love correspondence between Albert Camus and Maria Casarès under the sign of Derrida’s “hauntological” spectre.

IMAGES. Virtualities on Screen explores the relationship between virtuality and cinema. **Paolo Nazario Lasagni** examines strategies of detournement and aesthetic recomposition of the *spolia* type in the experimental cinema of Artur Jafa, which asserts itself as a deconstructivist critique of virtual representations of the Black figure in dominant media culture. **Joan Galleri** draws on Denis Villeneuve’s film *Blade Runner 2049* to illuminate the cinematic construction of the “impossible body of the virtual” and its transhumanist implications. **Nguyen H. Thi-tho** explores the Vietnamese women’s cinema of Việt Linh to examine the cinematic construction of virtual worlds and mythical imaginaries. Finally, **Dylan James Peterson** questions the concept

⁴ Alfred JARRY, “Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll pataphysicien,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, Gallimard, coll. “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,” 1972, p. 669.

of “formalism” through an analysis of the historical reenactment series *Unsolved Mysteries* on Netflix.

The analysis of video games — conceived as virtual spaces of passage between stage and screen — constitutes the *IMMERSIONS. Inhabiting the Virtual* section. **Lilou Cornec** admirably explores the link between video games and immersive theatre, showing how virtual reality orchestrates and reconfigures the performing arts. In turn, **Rosine Bénard O’Kelly** “suspends the logic of artistic performance” and analyses what contemplation in video games does to players’ sensory experience, drawing on a heterogeneous corpus composed of games such as *Dear Esther*, *Proteus* and *The Night Journey*.

BODIES. Virtualities and Bodily Becomings is a section bringing together two contributions that interrogate the body in its potentiality. **Marina Ledrein** offers us a (very) sensitive account of the experience of the MOUVEMENT(s) collective, whose artistic practice consists in introducing dance into the “crisis plan” in psychiatric settings. The artistic forms that emerge from it would in themselves be forms of virtuality. **Marianne Martin** explores the virtuality of the queer body in the work of Johanna Bruckner, described as “a laboratory of forms in which she explores the fissures of the digital in order to challenge a binary system.”

The horizon of the case studies is ended by a section entitled *PERCEPTIONS. Experiences in transit*, which examines, through the measure of semiotic proxemics⁵, the virtuality of space as well as the relationship that spectators maintain with the *site*. **Ohanna Pereira** takes us on a journey through the “hybrid territory” that is the performance *Spazio Latente*, conceived by Filippo Rosatti, to show how digital technologies “reshape the relationship between the audience and the performance.” **Wera Hipplesroither** takes us on a journey as well, this time between the “presence/absence” of site-specific works conceived through intermedial technologies by Janet Cardiff. Her analysis shows that “virtuality functions as a field of forces that is at once ontological and affective, transforming the participant’s body into a subjective palimpsest where physical space, recorded media and spectral histories meet and collide.”

In a deliberately experimental *ESSAY*, contemporary scrivener **West Ambrose** questions the “transcendental” — and virtual — disarticulations of the body in Grace McLean’s musical *In*

⁵ Edward T. HALL, *La Dimension cachée*, Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1971.

The Green (2019), which stages the figure of Hildegard of Bingen during the time she spent with the anchoress Jutta von Sponheim.

As usual, the *DIALOGUES* section brings researchers and artists into conversation to situate the issue within an “in vivo” dynamic, as close as possible to contemporary creation. **Chrystel Dupuch** engages in a “crossed” dialogue with set designer **Elissa Bier** and director, translator and dramaturg **Éric Devanthéry** to question the different registers of virtuality that shape Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* for the Pitoëff Theatre in Geneva.

Next, three Colombian female voices conclude the dialogues section. **Juan José Apolinar** speaks with visual artist and sacred-music singer **Carmen Elvira Brigard** about her “rituals of light” inspired by the rich work of Hildegard of Bingen and Gregorian chant. **Alexandru Bumbas** dialogues with actress, playwright and director **Ella Becerra** about her latest creation, *¿Quién prendió la plancha? Y, ¿por qué la dejó caliente sobre la cama? (Who turned on the iron? And why did they leave it hot on the bed?)*, in which the traumatic memory of sexual abuse and the myth of the Minotaur are explored and articulated as “units of virtuality” to produce stage meaning. This unpublished work is published in this issue, in the *DRAMATIC WORKS* section. Finally, **Alexandru Bumbas** also dialogues with playwright and director **María Adelaida Palacio Duque** about her creation *¿Quién es Margarita León? o el lugar al que pertenecemos (Who is Margarita León? or The Place to Which We Belong)*, in which the theatrical use of historical archives conceived as units of virtuality serves to expose and contest the massacre of members of the Patriotic Union, for which the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights would declare, in 2017, the responsibility of the Colombian state for the violence committed against its members. The unpublished work is also published in the *DRAMATIC WORKS* section.

Finally, a dossier entitled *Animating Matter, Suggesting Uncanny Presences. Light in Puppetry Theory and Practice*, coordinated by **Yanna Kor** — the result of a Study Day devoted to the relationship between non-human stage forms (puppets, masks, shadows, robots) and light through the lens of the uncanny — brings this issue devoted to virtualities to its completion. The dossier brings together reflections by Professor Emeritus **Claude Jamain** on puppetry; a study by **Yucheng Peng** devoted to the presence of humanoid robots in contemporary theatre; an

analysis by **Samuel Lhuillery** of the performance *Préhistoire* by the French company Scolopendre; a testimony on the creative processes of artist **Olivier Vallet**; and, finally, an article by **Marzenna Wiśniewska** on the virtuality of the “light masks” invented by Polish artist Tadeusz Wierzbicki.

From stage to screen, from body to image, from archive to video game, from puppetry to digital devices, the contributions to this issue draw less a cartography of virtual technologies than a cartography of the powers of virtualization at work in contemporary artistic practices. They show that virtuality is neither a territory separate from reality nor a mere effect of digital technologies: it is an operation through which something absent can become present, something latent can be actualized, something real can be reconfigured through fiction. In this sense, virtualities are perhaps less to be understood as an “elsewhere” than as that which works, from within, upon every experience of presence and every operation of representation.

It is at this point, between what is and what could be, between what appears and what remains in potential, that this issue of IN VIVO ARTS situates its exploration.