Highlighting the process: documents and presence in audiovisual performance
Enfatizando o processo: documentação e presença na performance audiovisual

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Abstract: in response to the concept of an artistic project, technology has a double role: it hides the performer behind the computer and extends the possibilities by representing him/her. This article analyzes the presence and process in live audiovisual performances, from the perspective of an artist-researcher. Based on my experience, I play with possibilities related to presence, process and documentation. The understanding of audiovisual performance as a processual practice expands documentation beyond the promotional videos and their dissemination via social networks to comprehend other documents, other forms of reaching interested audiences. Different forms of experiencing a performance coexist: the fruition of an event or document includes the study of a performance focused on how it is created and how it is presented. Furthermore, digital platforms play an important role on these practices, gathering and archiving documents related to performing-artists, making them accessible to a multitude of points of view.

Keywords: live; presence; document; technology; process.

Resumo: em resposta ao conceito de um projeto artístico, a tecnologia tem um duplo papel: esconde o artista atrás do computador e amplia as possibilidades ao representá-lo. Este artigo examina os temas da presença e do processo na performance audiovisual ao vivo do ponto de vista do artista-investigador. Ao desenvolver investigação sustentada na minha prática, vou experimentando possibilidades relacionadas com a presença, processo e documentação. Ao compreender a performance audiovisual como uma prática processual, as possibilidades para a sua documentação estendem-se além dos vídeos promocionais e a sua disseminação através das redes sociais para incluir outros documentos, outras formas de

chegar a audiências interessadas. Compreendem-se diferentes formas de experiencia a performance; a fruição de um evento ou documento pode incluir o estudo da performance centrado na forma como esta é construida e como se apresenta. Para além disso, as plataformas digitais têm um papel fundamental nestas práticas, o de coletar e arquivar os documentos associados com os artistas-performers e torná-los acessíveis de forma a responder a uma multitude de pontos de vista.

Palavras-chave: ao vivo; presença; documentação; tecnologia; processo.

Combination of media

The stability of objects on the one hand and the ephemeral nature of performative practices on the other seem to imply two distinct, opposite approaches to the artistic production. However, both objects and performances may employ the same media (such as video and audio) and technology (such as recording devices, or hardware and software for editing and live mixing) in their production. Objects and performance are often separated as entities pertaining to different categories: objects being regarded as enduring, and performance as ephemeral. The media and the means of its production are perceived as tools and used according to the conceptual requirements of a specific artistic project.

From the 1950s and 1960s onwards, the use of different technologies to combine sound, image and body movement became prominent in performance. The performances included in the event 9 *Evenings* (1966), by the group E.A.T., are an early example of such combination. To produce performances with sound, image and movement the project, 9 *Evenings* used computational and communication technologies. The same articulation of technologies were also used to produce objects during the same period. Fluxus provides a few historical examples, such as the *FluxusYearBoxes* (1965-1968). Both examples suggest combination and reinvention as part of the fluid definition of media arts.

Performance has been evolving thanks to fruitful combinations of movement, speech, sound and the moving image. Roselee Goldberg acknowledges performance as a live art with infinite variables and says that its definition should be left as loose as possible. Since the performing artists use all disciplines, media and materials freely, a closed definition of performance would be to deny it (GOLDENBERG, 2007, p. 10).

Audiovisual performance as a group of practices (CARVALHO, 2015, p. 131) has always been influenced by technological developments. According to Chris Salter,

> Screen-based performances were the result of two particular strains of technocultural development: (1) breakthroughs in digital computation, particularly the development of hardware and software components for the capture, processing, and manipulation of image and sound, and (2) the international rise of techno/club culture, which rapidly exploited such technologies. (SALTER, 2010, p. 172)

From the appearance of synthesizers and modulators in the 1970s to the 2000s portable computers, software and midi keyboards, all the available technology at any given time begin to be used as instruments in performance. The equipment used in performance, particularly in audiovisual performance, is very important, because the event is constituted from the relation between the performer and instruments.

In addition to the definition by Goldberg, David Davies, in his book *Philosophy of the Performing Arts* (2011), suggests a definition of performance built around the presence of the artist and the audience (individual and collective). For Davies, performance is what an artist or a group of artists presents within an artistic context that requires witnesses (the audience) because it is directly open to public scrutiny or assessment (DAVIES, 2011, p. 16). These and other elements that constitute a performance are not what define each performance, "but how the assemblage of elements that make up the artistic vehicle is intended to function in the articulation of content" (DAVIES, 2011, p. 16). Performance is, therefore, more than construction of meaning through the visibility of presence, since the body as a medium is combined with other media, being one among the many elements that constitute performance. Neither the settings nor the length of time define performance; and it is not the assessment made by the public that witnesses a performance (sometimes reduced to the artist). Performance is a combination of all these factors in a unique and unrepeatable way.

Presence in performance

Even though the artist is often hidden behind the equipment in many ways: behind the projection screen or next to the sound technician, the body as a medium is central to the practices of live audiovisual performance. The hidden presence of the performer questions his/her role, as Salter puts it:

> Lost amid the tangle of machines, the human performer's role was usurped and transformed by the artist-technician for whom performance was a process of trackpad or mouse manipulation – the tweaking of infinite banks of parameters designed to filter, sample, blur, cloud, vibrate, shatter, saturate, and granulate image and sound. (SALTER, 2010, p. 166)

An observation similar to Chris Salter's, regarding actions and visibility of the artist, is also addressed by Amy Alexander: "because the visual and sonic output of laptop performance often does not correlate with the visible physical gestures of the performer, what is the visual role of the performer?" (ALEXANDER, 2010, p. 203) For the audience, seeing the static presence, or the absence of the performer – and accordingly, the absence of his/her expression – may be similar to watching a film at the cinema. In live audiovisual performance, absence or immobility does not exclude the significance of presence, it is a part of it.

The artist's presence and its meaning have been discussed by different artists and authors. While, with the Light Shows, the location of the artists behind the screen and the sight blockage of the manipulation of elements and equipment is part of the setting, and in VJing the position facing of the stage and the screen from a distance, sharing the space with light and sound technicians, is usual, in other contexts this absence of sight is problematic. Following Salter's concerns,

> Does the performer gradually become dematerialized by the electronic fog of the increasingly realistic digital image, having become a corpus delicti for photons and pixels, or have the architectonics of the projected image sufficiently overwhelmed the human body so that the screen itself now becomes the new site and body of the performance? (SALTER, 2010, p.164)

Salter suggests a different presence, in agreement with the notion of body as an element that constitutes the performance as Davies (2011) proposes. The represented body, when a result of a performative act recorded before the event, constitutes improvisation material for the performance through the live mixing of the footage. In this process, another performance is included: the performance for the camera (AUSLANDER, 2008). The projected body, although in a different fashion, is present, and it is a producer of meaning with its presence. Consequently, the represented body becomes an extension of the performer's body, an integrating part of the performance. Since another performance (a performance for the camera) occurs before the event, how does it affect the understanding of the concept of performance?

Performance as process

In a group of performances presented between 2006 and 2009, in which I participated, the visuals were produced with a series of objects, a turntable, a video camera to capture the objects, and a video mixer to manipulate the captured images. The setup enabled me to show my actions through the manipulation of objects onstage and as a response to the sound. Both the action of manipulating the objects and the projected images were perceived by the audience as intertwined. The visual performance was composed of both my actions with the objects and the images on the screen. With this setup my aim was to bring visibility to the performer and to connect the actions onstage with the images on the screen.

Around 2009, I changed the setup, performing with a laptop, live editing software and a database of pre-recorded clips, to bring the projected image to the center of attention. These clips showed me (my hands) manipulating the same objects of the previous performances, the actions of arranging the objects exclusively on the screen. The light previously located over the turntable, making the objects and their manipulation visible, disappeared, leaving me dimly illuminated by the laptop screen. I was still on stage, but my actions were invisible. The projection, resultant from mixing the clips with appropriate software, was clearly the main visual focus of the event. This change included a new performance, the one for the camera, which occurred before the performance at the event. Following Salter's proposal, the images projected showed the body and expressed its meaningful presence in the performance.

The changes in the setup made me reflect on the performance as a processual practice. Audiovisual performance is often seen as a processual practice for its improvisational features. The reference to improvised jazz is recurrent: the skills to play are developed during the act of playing (AMERIKA, 2009, p. 79). This learning process includes errors and accidents, as well as malfunctions of the machine as features rather than mistakes. Reflecting on the changes in the setup, I understood the performance for the camera, before the event, as part of the performance. Each performance – both the recorded and the live ones – is part of the same process.

The focus on these interconnections made me extend the scope of my research and consider how the process translates into evidence, that is, into document.

Bearing this in mind, I made a series of collaborations with sound artists, which I presented internationally at several events in New York (2012), São Paulo (2014) and Porto (2015-16). Keeping features of previous performances, such as a laptop and live mixing short clips, the new project aimed at finding ways to document

both the preparation and the "presentation" of the performance. To this end, each one of the performances of this series is part of the continuum of performances that, besides sharing a database of clips, follows a score concluded in 2011 as part of a commission. The score became an object of the same process as the performance.

Presence, process and documents

The documents related to contemporary audiovisual performance are mostly videos based on recordings of the performance, clearly registering the aesthetic results. The videos – which are available on *Youtube* and *Vimeo* and distributed through social networks such as *Facebook* – give visibility to the work by promoting and disseminating it to a wider audience. As much as the sound and image presented in the videos allow for the understanding of the performance, they are mainly a substitute for being at the event. The preparation of the performance is usually not documented, excluding that moment from the performance and limiting this to the live event. The intricate connections such as those created between the on-screen and onstage presence, the structures of the dialogues between image and sound, but also the technological developments achieved through the construction of unique instruments for live manipulation, such as sensors attached to the body, guitars that trigger and distort sound and image signals, to name a few, can be relevant information to a variety of perspectives upon a performance. How could the documentary material of the process of making a performance allow other perspectives on the same performance while making gradually apparent the need for a dialogue between the performance and its documentation?

During the period of making the video clips for the series of performances that occurred between 2012 and 2016, I was also collecting texts, writing and drawing. In addition to the material for the series of performances, I created a booklet containing the score, texts and drawings. The elements of the booklet articulate with the performance, intertwining with it and forming one single artwork.

The use of scores reflect an ongoing interest in musical composition, particularly in graphic scores, as means to extend the dialogue between sound and image to other media. Scores such as manifestos are documents that inform the artwork and sometimes they are an artwork in their own right. The performance itself, "the present charged with significance," as Phelan (1996, p. 148) describes it, continues to vanish into invisibility, escaping evidence, proof and registration. There is very little evidence in each performance, which maintains the idea that we cannot retain it in its natural evanescence. A more complex understanding of performance

emerges, when we consider the interconnection of actions, recordings, and the series of performances on stage. The documentation of the process includes multiple perspectives on the performance and therefore address other points of view.

From the artists' point of view, the creation of scores extends the process of the performance to the possibility of 'versioning,' allowing for possibilities to remake or reenact sound and image of their own work as well as others. That was my intention with the score, as well as with others that have been created since. This score includes indications for both sound and image. Another point of view regarding the performance is that of the researcher interested in knowing how and why a given performance is presented as it is at the event. These documents witness the understanding of developments in technology, the knowledge of the particularities of unique instruments, the resultant hybridity of presence (on screen) and the invisibility of the artists. Documents, such as the video files that constitute a database, can result in a performance and in a video that does not document the performance but that exists as a separate work from the same process.

Audiovisual projects that deal with documentation

I also have been looking at the connection between documents and associated performances, actively developing research and presenting its results through essays and online projects. Over the past six years, several projects with related concerns have emerged.

One of them is *See this Sound*, edited by Daniels Dieter and Sandra Naumann, which consists of a symposium, a web archive (since 2009) and two published volumes (2010 and 2011), the first containing a historical overview of the artistic field and the second focused on the interdisciplinary of contemporary "audiovisuology." This project has been instrumental in the dissemination of historical and theoretical knowledge to a wider public. Another example, *Audio. Visual: on visual music and related media*, a book containing a DVD edited by Cornelia Lund and Holger Lund, looks at visual music as a common element to different audiovisual practices. Both projects resulted in a book, but *See this Sound* is more complex, including an exhibition, a symposium and an online archive. Contributions to both projects are mostly made by artists for the theoretical debate that begins with their own experience. A wider approach to audiovisual (or audiovisuology) that includes performance but is not restricted to it was also common. Other projects are more similar to an ongoing process; they exist online as blogs – such as that by Maura McDonnel (http://visualmusic.blogspot.pt), and that by Dr

Heike Sperling (http://visualmusicarchive.org) –,websites – such as the *Center for Visual Music* (https://www.centerforvisualmusic.org) –, to name a few. Audiovisual performance has been widely documented through these and other projects, both historically and contemporarily.

From 2005 to 2009, *VJTheory* developed methodologies for the production of documents. The aim of this project was to motivate the theoretical debate among practitioners about the ongoing publishing of new work. The focus on artists as constructors of their own theoretical context is at the core of *VJTheory*, and the methodologies to create documents resulted from this mindset. Specific subjects were included in the debate after a reflection upon the practice, such as: the role of technology and its developments, the identity of the artist, the collective and the community, participation, audiences and narrative, among others. The debates took the form of blogs, conversations in virtual and physical spaces, such as *skype* and festivals, respectively. Performance as a process was central to *VJTheory*, not only because most activities were developed throughout a defined period (rather than through the submission of a final document/text), but also because some of the debates were open to anyone who wished to participate. As a result of this methodology, the book *VJam Theory: collective writings on real-time visual performance* (2008) was published, written collectively with the editors, invited writers and anonymous participants, in a structure constituted by three blogs, each one addressing a specific theme: performance, performer and "interactors," audiences and participators. The use of technology for performance and communication, familiar to artists, was fundamental to gather the community through common interests, even though they were geographically distant. The *VJTheory* raised the community's interest in developing, individually and collectively, reflective and theoretical thinking about the audiovisual, *VJam Theory: collective writings on real-time visual performance* became part of the collection of books about audiovisual performance practices.

The use of common digital tools gathers professionals of graphic design, audiovisual production, sound, programming, and visual arts, in experimenting in the performance context. As result, audiovisual performance is an artistic amalgam of expertise. Furthermore, the broad use of the personal computer, tablets and smartphones for performing and the technology becoming gradually lighter and smaller "depended on the aesthetics of fluidity and nomadism generated by portable technology – the ability of individuals to move globally, carrying laptops and portable mixers from one venue to the other, only to move rapidly to the next presentation in a country thousands of miles away" (SALTER, 2010, p. 174).

The possibility of communicating, working and performing allows constant exchanges of knowledge at festivals and other gatherings and through online platforms. While developing performances informed by research and experimenting with the possibilities of documentation, I also research similar parameters in the work of other artists: which documents are being constructed from the process that leads to a performance.

As a result, the project *Ephemeral Expanded* (2014 onwards) was created to research and collect works where documents are combined with performance. The project aims to explore the relationship between the evanescence of the performance and the remaining documentation, highlighting the process of developing a performance. The ongoing documentary development invites artists and researchers who may be searching for information besides the one provided by the event. The project follows similar directions of *VJTheory*. Although with a different methodology, *Ephemeral Expanded* is also grounded on artists' practices, inviting artists to actively participate. On the one hand, it provides access to a series of scores for audiovisual performances and, on the other hand, it develops a growing collection of interviews.

Online platforms, such as *See this Sound*, *VJTheory*, and *Ephemeral Expanded*, are less ephemeral than the performances and not as stable as physical documents, they also express an in-between state, an ongoing state that serves the interest of developing research at the intersection of the ephemeral with the documentary, that is, the processual. *Ephemeral Expanded*, besides its section of interviews and scores, hosts other projects, such as the documentation of the annual event *abertura*, the archive of *VJTheory*, and the presentation and digital versions of the book *The Audiovisual Breakthrough*.

Conclusion

This article began by establishing technology as a common ground for the dialogue between the ephemeral and the object in audiovisual performance. The same technological tools contribute and shape the way performance is produced as well as its documentation. While considering performing with media, the presence of the artist at the performance changes. Presence in the sound and image is also a way of being visibly present since the acting for the camera is one among the many possibilities of presence. The notion of the event as an end in itself is replaced by another, where the artist is a performer in a multitude of ways on and off stage. Performance works, understood as a processual practice, include the construction of a database of video loops, texts and drawings. Therefore, a wide range of documents,

including scores and booklets are simultaneously part of the process and its results. Some of these documents, the scores, for example, are part of the performance and allow other performances to exist. Digital platforms, understood as documents that contain documents, feed this continuum as well. Remaking, representing, researching, and general curiosity are enabled through this approach to the documentation of performance.

Regarding live audiovisual performance, Salter (2010, p. 175) suggests that "one future direction of projection [will be] something that one inhabits rather than observes from without." If the projected images are shaping the performance and the desire of inhabiting a space is at reach, how could this be extended to the related documents? Perhaps documents can constitute a way of accessing and exploring the audiovisual process from perspectives that are specific to the present. Media allow to transcend the observation, to include other points of view, such as that of the researcher interested in knowing how and why a given performance is presented as it is at the event. By combining performance and databases of documents, a performance can comprise several points of view, intertwining databases with audiovisual performances.

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