

Abstract

*In the participatory performance experiment **Surrender Control** (Tim Etchells, 2001), the audience is asked to submit to a distant authority that will dictate our thoughts and behaviour from afar through the medium of SMS. Subscribing to the event one agrees to 'surrender' to the instructions one receives for a period of five days. In this article, **Surrender Control** is analyzed in terms of presence and performativity, discussing the notion of a performative presence in relation to phenomena such as mediation, physical presence and absence. In this aesthetic analysis based on the author's own experience of having participated in the event, the following questions are asked: How is authority established in the performance, and how is the effect of a present other, monitoring our actions, accomplished in the medium of words? J. L. Austin's influential theory of performative speech acts, as well as Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht's thoughts on presence production and presence effects serve as the main frames of theoretical reference on which the analysis is funded.*

Keywords: authority, mediation, participatory performance, performativity, presence/absence, presence effects, SMS, surveillance

Presence and mediation: On the participatory SMS performance *Surrender Control* (Tim Etchells, 2001)¹

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Treasured, yet virtually ungraspable, the significance of presence is a contested case in studies of performance. As a condition, presence is radically determined to evade conceptualization: The more concrete and tangible its manifestations, the less it lends itself to representation, in particular, to verbal representation. The concept of presence is perhaps at its most problematic when tied to the physical presence of the performer, vaguely indicating some sort of ultimate performative condition brought about by physical proximity alone. At this point, presence and performance often become interchangeable terms, equally loaded with essence and purity. Taking on a performative function, the terms now no longer describe but *are* the situation to which they refer.

Dealing with words so suggestive that they become what other words merely signify is a privilege only poets are usually granted. However, while naturally resident in poetry, this

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poetic (Jakobson, 1987) or performative (Sidnell, 1996) function of language is less at home in academic discourse. Employed as an analytical tool such language would appear to be rather inflexible, resisting further mediation (as there would simply be no other words that could describe the condition more precisely). Consequently, this is a version of presence that is particularly difficult to deal with in academic discourse. Ironically, it might also be a conceptual construct without reference in reality: a version more solid, more imaginatively tangible than any instance of actual physical presence ever was.

In scholarly frustration over this uncompromisingly evanescent quality of presence, theorists have wanted to replace it with a concept that is more compatible with verbal representation, arguing, for instance, that ‘there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product’ (Jones 1997: 12). Others have attacked the problem from the contrary angle, arguing that it is precisely our cultural obsession with verbal representation that prevents us from grasping the proper significance of the presence experience in the first place. This is the view pursued by literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in his work *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2004). Here, he also proposes a solution to the dilemma, suggesting that if presence itself is out of reach for us, presence effects may be a more attainable treasure (Gumbrecht 2004: 105-106). While not as rare and precious as the real thing, the effects of presence lend themselves more easily to verbal representation, thus making themselves available for analysis.

As demonstrated in recent research publications on the concept and phenomenon of presence in performance studies (e.g. Féral 2012, Giannachi and Kaye 2011, Giannachi, Kaye and Shanks 2012), presence may be conceptualised in a number of ways, taking on a variety of forms. Often seen as a singular occurrence, it may also be approached as environment (Giannachi 2012), in and through networks (Giannachi and Kaye 2011), and by way of presence effects (Féral 2012). Focusing on the effects of presence instead of ever-evasive presence itself may direct our attention to – and allow us to articulate – less obvious versions of presence than the ones contained in bodily proximity, such as, for instance, presences that appear to have no solid origin. In the performance analyzed in this article, *Surrender Control*, it is just such a presence that confronts us, in the shape of a distant authority attempting to control us from afar. Hence the question of mediation becomes pertinent: Instead of an

immediate, tangible presence this is a presence obtained through medial means, more precisely, through the medium of words. How do we account for the performative force of these words to establish presence?

Related works

During the last decades, the employment of new media technology within the performative arts has proliferated, its potential uses and functions appearing to be endlessly varied (Tronstad, forthcoming). Yet, in restricting its representational apparatus to the medium of written words, *Surrender Control* is an unusual instance of technologically mediated performance. While the technological possibilities were admittedly more restricted in 2001 than they are today, the web-based *Online Caroline* (2000-2001) is an example from the same period of a more media-rich (photo, e-mail, webcam) interactive drama (Walker 2004). Sharing the surveillance theme, *Online Caroline* relies on some of the same principles as *Surrender Control* in creating a sense of mutuality between participant and protagonist. A more recent work in which new technology is used to explore issues of surveillance is *50 Aktenkilometer (50 kilometres of files)* (2011) by the German reality-oriented theatre company Rimini Protokol. Employing smart-phones with a GPS function this audio-walk provides its participants with access to site-specific documentation of surveillance performed by the Stasi in the area around Alexanderplatz (Berlin) during the cold war. The Canadian artist Janet Cardiff's slightly different type of audio-walks, as well as other works in which she uses highly realistic audio material as an overlay to create tension between what we see and what we hear, have been analysed in terms of their presence effects in ways that resonate much with my experience of presence in *Surrender Control* (Féral 2012). Blurring the line between the physical and the virtual, also the British artists' group Blast Theory have a long history in establishing new constellations of presence with the help of technology, in works such as *Day of the Figurines* (2006), *Rider Spoke* (2007), and *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant* (2009) (Benford and Giannachi 2011, Giannachi and Kaye 2011).

The case

Surrender Control was an experimental SMS performance created by Tim Etchells, director of the influential UK based theatre group Forced Entertainment. Commissioned by Kirklees Media Centre, the event took place in November, 2001, and lasted for five days, during

which the audience-participants were sent 75 SMS messages from ‘a distant other’ with instructions on what to think, how to behave or on actions to perform. The performance was open for everyone to join – one registered as a participant by sending the message ‘surrender’ to a given phone number prior to the event.

Subsequent to *Surrender Control*, Etchells have made two other SMS-based performances, *39 Or So To Do* (2008) and *A Short Message Spectacle (An SMS)* (2010). While his artistic practice spans a vast number of media, including text, photo, video, interactive CD-ROM and installation, he is internationally renowned first and foremost for his live theatre and performance work with Forced Entertainment. In a recent interview with performance scholars Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye on the phenomenon of presence, Etchells identifies presence as one of the things that may occur in the cracks or gaps that a performance leaves open, and that the audience is forced to invest in and imaginatively fill (Etchells, Giannachi and Kaye 2012). In this light, as we shall see, *Surrender Control* could well be regarded an exercise in presence production.

The instructions given during the performance experiment were varied, appearing on the participants’ phones in intervals of a couple of hours, sometimes more frequent, sometimes less. This is how it started:

1. *Put your fingers in your mouth.*
 2. *Touch your ankles, feel the skin.*
 3. *Close your eyes and count to twenty.*
 4. *Remember last night.*
 5. *Move something small from one place to another.*
 6. *Open your mouth as wide as you can.*
 7. *Look up. Count the people who can see you. If there is no one: who would you like to be watching you now?*
- (...)

Some instructions demanded both action and inventiveness from the participants, such as message 36: *Call a number which is one number different from that of a friend. If someone*

answers try to keep them talking. Some of them involved a certain social risk, like message 50: *Call someone with whom you went to junior school. Tell them the truth about why you call,* or message 60: *Steal something.* Other messages were less demanding of action, thus easier to follow (or perhaps more difficult to resist), like the abovementioned 4: *Remember last night.*

With participants spread around the globe, there was no way the instruction-giving authority could determine whether or not the participants actually performed the actions demanded of them. Thus, it was up to the participants to decide in each case to what extent they would obey the commands. Doing as the messages instructed would turn the participants into performers, extending the materiality of the artwork to include the participants' bodies and their environment. Not obeying the commands, but simply reflecting on them – perhaps imagining possible consequences of performing the actions – would reduce the participant's role to that of a more or less traditional audience member facing a conceptual artwork. In either case, no feedback was granted the participants: They could realize the performance one way or the other, but they could not have their performance confirmed by an approving authority. The 'distant other' who assigned the tasks was not available for inquiry, despite the use of a conventional two-way communication technology such as SMS. Most probably there was no immediate person behind these messages at all, but a computer programmed to deliver the messages to the subscribers at carefully timed intervals. As a participant, I was aware of this probability, and yet I could still perceive a clear voice – a real other – behind the messages received. The question guiding the forthcoming analysis is how this effect of a present other was accomplished in the performance, despite the obvious lack of an actual, physical presence.

A note on method

In the article 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', performance theorist Philip Auslander raises a number of methodological differences between studying performance within the tradition of art history versus studying it from the perspectives of sociology and anthropology. Where the ethnographically trained social scientist may focus his or her study on the participating audience, conceiving of the performance as an interactive event, the art historian will be more concerned with the documentation that is available,

trying to reconstruct the performance as a work of art (Auslander 2006: 6). From the perspective of the art historian, Auslander argues, the presence of an initial audience hardly matters at all:

The purpose of most performance art documentation is to make the artist's work available to a larger audience, not to capture the performance as an 'interactional accomplishment' to which a specific audience and a specific set of performers coming together in specific circumstances make equally significant contributions. For the most part, scholars and critics use eyewitness accounts to ascertain the characteristics of the performance, not the audience contribution to the event, and discussions of how a particular audience perceived a particular performance at a particular time and place and what that performance meant to that audience are rare. [...] I submit that the presence of that initial audience has no real importance to the performance as an entity whose continued life is through its documentation because our usual concern as consumers of such documentation is with recreating the artist's work, not the total interaction. (Auslander 2006: 6-7)

It should be noted that most of the examples in Auslander's article are historical performances that were performed first and foremost in order to be documented, and that were never intended to be witnessed as performance by a live audience, such as Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void* (1960) and Vito Acconci's *Photo-Piece* (1969). His – therefore quite reasonable – conclusion is that it is the documentation, and not the live event, that best reflects the aesthetic projects of the artists involved. It is also in the documentation that the performative force of the performances are to be found. However, despite his conclusion's dependence on a rather specific type of performance, his argument appears to be addressing performance documentation in general. For this reason, I find it striking that a third methodological possibility is not even mentioned in the article – that of the researcher using her or his own first-hand experience of having witnessed the actual performance when it was performed. Assuming that performances in general are meant to be experienced live, and not as a documented past event, I would expect this methodological position to be at least as relevant as studying documentation and audiences. In certain cases, such as my case here, I consider it more relevant. Emphasizing that the analysis performed in this article is an aesthetic analysis, I want to stress that its subject is a matter of sensuous perception – the perception of presence effects. Analyzing (and not merely reporting) perceived presence

effects of a performance cannot be done on the basis of witness accounts and/or documentation – it must be based on a first-hand experience.

My analysis in this article thus reflects my own experience of participating in the performance. Although I assume several people participated, I personally know of only one other participant – a colleague. This prevents me from making general claims as to how other people may have experienced the piece. Generalizing the experience is also far from my intention, as what intrigued me with this performance, and made me want to examine it further, was the surprisingly strong effect it had on me despite the fact that I did not perform it the way (I supposed) it was meant to be performed. Suspecting my performance to be odd compared to others', I have no reason to believe that other participants will have shared the exact same experience.

Not only variations in how the commands are executed by the participants influence the experience, it is also critically influenced by differences in location and environment (cf. Giannachi 2012: 52). The following comment by Steve Benford on Blast Theory's pervasive game *Day of the Figurines* may be applied to *Surrender Control* as well:

[...] it is interesting to consider the potential impact of a player's physical location on their experience of the game and on their interactions with it. Players may receive messages from the game and frame their responses within different physical locations, which may influence their actions, in terms of their mood, connections they may make between their current physical and virtual space, not least the input of others who are present and who may share and comment on the messages. (Benford in Giannachi and Kaye 2011: 221)

As I was temporarily residing in eastern Europe at the time, on a writing retreat away from my familiar milieu, I (perhaps mistakenly) did not expect people in my immediate environment to be participating in the event, nor even to be aware of it. If I would have been located elsewhere, perceptually closer to the origin of the event, the idea of being surrounded and possibly observed by other potential participants would more likely have been part of, and coloured, my experience. Also, the way in which the performance is conceptualized will necessarily influence a participant's experience of it. My participating colleague, trained in narrative theory, reported in her blog an initial sense of disappointment and lack, as the event

failed to meet her expectations of how a narrative is successfully constructed (Walker, 2001). As a games and performance scholar, I conceived of it differently, as partly a performance, partly a game, and I started out with the best intentions of doing what was requested of me. Soon, however, I found myself contemplating possible outcomes and consequences of acting according to the instructions, rather than actually acting. So as a performer in the event, I failed miserably, but in this process of failing, the paradoxical nature of presence revealed itself in ways that urged me to examine the performance more closely in light of theories on presence and performativity.

Theoretical perspectives

In his book *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2004), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht makes an argument for revitalizing presence as a theoretical concept and research perspective within the arts and humanities. Here, he argues, meaning has ruled the ground for far too long, representing the only quality in a work of art that is considered worth examining. Hence theories of interpretation (hermeneutics) have become the main research perspective within the humanities. Furthermore, the influence of postmodern theory has rendered the concept of presence taboo in most academic circles, where it is now associated with intellectual naïveté and ‘substantialism’ (Gumbrecht 2004: 53). As a result, the concept and phenomenon of presence is still largely an unexplored field within the humanities. Outside of academia, on the other hand, the interest in presence phenomena is increasing, he notes. For example, an increasing number of artists are now exploring strategies to escape the production of meaning in their works, focusing instead on the production of presence. How can we do justice to such works if we insist on examining aesthetic objects as products that generate meaning, first and foremost?

In Gumbrecht’s view, meaning and presence are both parts of the aesthetic experience, but always in tension, as incompatible concepts that can never be reconciled (Gumbrecht 2004: 105). Where presence is an ephemeral experience, the dimension of meaning is what we are left with when the moment of presence has vanished. Thus, the act of interpreting a work in order to reveal its meaning inexorably removes us from its presence – from the immediate experience of it as pure, unmediated presence. As argued in the introduction to this article, trying to conceptualize the experience of presence often turns out to be an impossible

enterprise: It is always already permeated with absence the moment meaning interferes with it. Firmly settled in a meaning-based culture, we are however equally unable to grasp the experience of an un-conceptualized presence outside of the realm of meaning. Stressing the ephemeral nature of presence, and how we are unable to grasp it either with or without interpretation, Gumbrecht describes the aesthetic experience as an oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects (Gumbrecht 2004: 107).

Being a text-based performance, all action in *Surrender Control* is defined by textual instructions. While text is usually a meaning-oriented medium, the textual instructions of *Surrender Control* fill an additional function to merely transmitting meaningful messages. Constituting acts in themselves, these instructions are representative of what J. L. Austin, in his seminal work *How to Do Things with Words* (1997 [orig. 1955]), termed performative utterances. Austin coins the term performatives to distinguish utterances that merely describe (which he calls constatives) from utterances that are executions of actions, such as promises, bets or orders. The illocutionary force of such utterances – that is, whether or not they fulfil their function as promise, bet or order – depends on the particular situation in which they are uttered, and on the speaking subject's authority. A performative is a type of utterance that can never be true or false, since it does not describe anything, but, rather, does something. Instead of being judged as true or false, then, a performative utterance may be successfully or unsuccessfully performed, depending on the factors described above. For instance, certain words uttered by a priest in the situation of a wedding will result in a marriage, whereas the same words uttered by me would not have this effect: my performance would in this case be 'unhappy' or 'infelicitous' in the formal language of speech act theory.

Presence in words – performance analysis

So how is the effect of a present sender subject accomplished in *Surrender Control*, through the medium of textual commands? In the following analysis, I will identify three answers to this question. First, from the perspective of media aesthetics – an analytical perspective departing from our time's all-encompassing mediascape, aiming to account for how differences in mediating apparatus, our media experience and media literacy influence aesthetic experience – an obvious answer would be that, to a large extent, the choice of technology in itself may account for the effect. Typically, we bring the mobile phone with us

everywhere, allowing it to interrupt our daily routines whenever someone wants to reach us. Accustomed to how the phone usually functions as a medium for communication between people, we naturally expect there to be someone at the other end. Dramaturgically, *Surrender Control* cleverly exploits such expectations that we have to the medium. The messages are carefully timed to (appear to) address us personally by explicitly relating to the specific situation we are in when we receive the message. This way, an illusion of real-time communication and surveillance is achieved. For instance, one morning around 11, the following message ticked in: *Don't eat at lunchtime*. Trivial if you are not hungry; of existential importance if you are. And who is not, at 11 A.M.?

The messages of *Surrender Control* are performative speech acts, functioning as suggestions, commands or challenges. In contrast to descriptive speech acts referring to objects and relations outside of themselves, performatives are self-referential. If they do direct attention to anything at all outside of themselves, it is to the person performing the speech act. Partly, thus, the staging of the other in *Surrender Control* may be explained by the use of performatives throughout the performance, pointing at and thereby constructing a sender subject.

Performance and performativity are concepts closely connected to that of presence. Arguably, the artistic genre that has been the most preoccupied with presence understood as a direct and unmediated experience is the performance art of the 1960s and '70s. The practices among performance artists of the period in which they subjected themselves to physical risk in front of an audience is commonly interpreted as exercises in presence and experiments with the production of presence itself. Considering the conceptual closeness of performativity and presence, one could easily come to assume that the presence effect of *Surrender Control* would be proportional to the individual participant's physical commitment to the performance: that the presence effect of the other would be more remarkable in situations where the participant obeyed the instructions and performed the actions demanded of her. In my experience with the work, this turned out not to be the case, however. On the contrary, merely reflecting upon the messages often produced a stronger sense of being observed than performing did.

Austin's theory of the performatives may give us a clue as to why this is so, directing our attention to the actual authority of the 'distant other' to perform the instructions as speech acts. If this person were really watching us, if he (or she) had genuine power to control our actions, the situation would be different. Then perceiving our master's presence could be exactly what made us obey his commands. But our situation is different: as it is, the other has no real power to control us. It is entirely up to ourselves to decide to what extent we are willing to commit to the performance, and whether or not we will obey the more demanding orders; for instance those that put our social reputation at risk, such as the following examples:

15. Drop something. Make it look like an accident.

16. Break something. Make it look like an accident.

31. Call someone. Tell a lie.

32. Call them back. Admit that you lied but do not tell the truth about why.

Or this, witty, one:

69. When another person stands you sit. When they sit you stand.

The performative force of these instructions is weakened by the fact that their utterer does not possess the authority required to make us obey them. If we decide not to obey, our decision contribute to weaken his authority in the performance even further. If we do obey, on the other hand, is not this out of commitment to ourselves and what we want to experience in the performance, rather than an expression of our commitment to the other? By executing the orders and performing the actions demanded of us, we furthermore replace the other as performative subject in the performance, shifting the focus from the other to ourselves: Now we are the centre of attention, not him.

To me as a participant, the other's presence was remarkably more perceptible in messages that did not demand more of me than the sender had the authority to enforce, such as these two:

23. *Think about your weaknesses.*

13. *Imagine tomorrow*

In contrast to the previous five, these two are almost self-fulfilling. Similarly, in the following series of messages received during a late evening/night, the presence of the other becomes increasingly provocative until it reaches a performative crescendo in message 42:

39. *Pinch your arm. Hard. Are you dreaming?*

40. *Are you dreaming?*

41. *Are you in love?*

42. *Do you love me?*

43. *Are you scared?*

44. *Are you awake?*

Both presence and performativity are of a paradoxical nature, which can partly explain why they appear so evasive as concepts and phenomena. The physical presence of the performance artist hurting herself on stage may easily function as an obstacle rather than a catalyst for the audience's experience of presence. Experiencing her presence as forced or importunate, the audience may withdraw emotionally from the performance situation. In fact, it is not necessarily presence itself that evokes in us a sensation of presence – it can just as well be absence. As Gumbrecht has explained it, absence may evoke a desire for presence in which the presence effect comes to manifest itself. In my experience, this was also the case in *Surrender Control*. During the time the performance lasted, I could clearly perceive a sender subject, while at the same time, I more realistically assumed that there was no sender subject but a computer behind the messages, programmed to deliver the messages to the participants according to a carefully planned, predefined time schedule. There was no way I could find out during the event whether the messages were sent manually or automatically, so this double consciousness remained part of the entire experience.

This double consciousness, in which the participant partly suspects that there is no one but a machine at the other end, is the third factor I would like to point to as being crucial to the

creative construction of an other's presence in this performance. For the performance to have any effect at all, the sender needs to be personalized. It would simply not make sense to have this kind of relationship to a machine. So, suspecting there is no one there, the audience-participant has no choice but to construct an other in order to make the performance successful and a meaningful experience for herself.

Thus we may identify three main factors behind the successful staging of presence in this performance. First, it is the use of a conventional communication technology, making us expect a traditional sender subject at the other end. Secondly, it is the extensive use of performatives throughout the performance, which by directly addressing the audience-participant consolidates the other's position as an autonomous sender subject. Finally, it is the desire for presence evoked by a notion of absence, when we as audience-participants realize that we are in it all by ourselves, that there is no one there after all who will approve of our actions and confirm our experience.

Conclusion

The final, 75th message of *Surrender Control* read:

Forget the instructions you've received and the things you've done because of them. Forget everything, forget it completely and never speak of it to a soul.

A question from the audience at a conference where I presented this analysis reminded me of this last instruction – it had completely left my mind. The reason I had chosen to forget all about it is probably that it was the instruction that bothered me the most, because: What is the point in doing performance research if I am prevented from communicating my findings to others? The instruction is interesting for a number of reasons. The sense of despair that it initially caused in me (before I conveniently forgot it) is but a final index of the authoritative presence established throughout the performance. Over time, however, its effect has faded, so even if I am now (again) fully aware of its message, I am no longer influenced by it. Neither am I able to reproduce its original effect in my analysis – I can only report how I experienced it then.

Here we return to the dilemma outlined in the introduction to this article. In analysing the aesthetic, that is, sensuous, experience provided in the performance, the effects of presence characteristic of my first encounter with the work are just as significant – actually more significant – than (the subsequent) interpretation and intellectual reflection over the piece. It was, after all, these effects that triggered my analytical curiosity in the first place. The last instruction of forgetting it all cunningly reflects the insight that the most fundamental qualities of the performance – its presence effects – will necessarily be lost in the transition from event to report, from live experience to analysis in hindsight. Interpreted in this sense, the last instruction can be understood as promoting the often-contested view that a performance is a singular event that cannot be reproduced or repeated.

The practice of reconstructing historical performance art events through their documentation, common in the field of art history, admittedly appears rather meaningless from such a perspective. This could explain the resistance put up by art historians against this view, where representatives have been arguing quite strongly against the significance of presence in the performance situation (see e.g. Jones, 1997; Jalving, 2005 and 2009). As theatre scholar Rebecca Schneider suggests: ‘Arguably even more than in the theatre, it is in the context of the museum, gallery, and art market that performance appears to primarily offer disappearance’ (Schneider 2012: 66). Refusing to submit to the archival logic of these institutions, performance challenges the ocular hegemony of the west in a way that Schneider, on the one hand, finds politically promising. On the other, she asks, importantly:

And yet, in privileging an understanding of performance as a refusal to remain, do we ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently?
(Schneider 2012: 66)

It is entirely possible that the dimension of presence is unnecessary to reconstruct performances as objects of art to be included in the art historical canon. However, in order to address the aesthetic experience they provide in terms of events, the dimension of presence is key. As I have attempted to demonstrate here, such analyses can neither rely on witness accounts nor on other material documenting the performance, but must be based on a first

hand experience: both despite and because of the fact that they can never reproduce or realistically represent the effect that they aim to account for.

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Bio

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