ASSEMBLY IN ONLINE THEATRE

Replacement and Renovation of Theatre as a Space of the Social for the Digital Assembly in Pandemic Times

Antonia Rehfueß

Student Nr.: 4503237

a.m.s.rehfuess@students.uu.nl

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Abstract

Online theatre has received great attention in European theatre discourse in the wake of the worldwide Corona pandemic, which severely restricted physical assembly in terms of sharing the same time and place. Particularly considering this societal context, online theatre challenges our understanding of theatre and the social since both are still largely associated with encounters of bodily co-presence in daily language use but also partially theoretical discourse. Based on the virtual theatre lab of the Dutch collective Nineties Productions taking place in March and April 2021, this master thesis explores assembly in online theatre as a staged social practice through digital ethnographic fieldwork. The research basically asks how to assemble in online theatre and explores this alongside participatory observation with theories from sociology, theatre, and media studies. Through applying above all Judith Butler´s research regarding the performativity of the assembly, as well as Erika Fischer-Lichte´s phenomenology of theatre and Steve Dixon´s exploration concerning digital performance, my findings allow for new perspectives on concepts of publicness, interfacing, liveness, and presence regarding theatrical assembly in online theatre. At the same time, they reveal new staging strategies for facilitating up to evoking assembly in digital realms in terms of translating phenomena of corporeal co-presence. In this way, this exploration characterizes online theatre as an exciting field for reflecting on and experimenting with forms and phenomena of public assembly and socialising in distance.

CONTENT

1.   Introduction: Remembering Assembly in Online Theatre

In March 2021 during the third Corona pandemic wave in Europe, I attended the digital lecture "Re-membering assembly" at the University of Warwick in the course of preparing and researching this master's thesis. The two speakers and friends, Louise Owen and Marilena Zaroulia, referred in their exploration primarily to their own experience of going to the pre-pandemic theatre, as well as to the video "In A Nutshell" by the group *Lost Dog*. The second was produced in autumn 2020 and released on *you tube*. In the video, actor and director Ben Duke is seen sitting in an empty theatre auditorium as he describes to a fictional future generation, who have never witnessed a theatre of bodily co-presence, how this can be pictured. It creates a melancholy mood when Duke, somehow lost in this empty auditorium, remembers the rustling seat neighbour sitting far too close, the red seats, or the spitting of the actors. He describes a missing whose cause he cannot really put into words. This melancholy is also created in Owen and Zaroulia's talk, as it is in many digital theatre panels I attended during the last year of the pandemic. A frequent notion that I encountered in these lectures and discussions is that of the assembly. Already in the title of Owens and Zaroulia's lecture it becomes clear what I often took away as an impression from this current discourse: Remembering an assembly in the theatre because it cannot take place apart from bodily co-presence and thus especially in times of the pandemic. A reception that currently does not only count for the theatrical assembly, but for the assembly in general. This master's thesis begins with this impression and its significance for the phenomenology of theatre. Because even though I feel the same way about the loss of going to pre-pandemic theatre, I also encountered a new and promising theatre as a space for assembly. I am talking about online theatre where audience and performer share the same time but not the same place. With this thesis I like to remember assembly in the <u>online</u> theatre. Now, as the hope for no further lockdown slowly rises and free time as well as cultural institutions reopen, I am concerned that these digital spaces and knowledge that were created in the last months will become lonely and forgotten in artistic practice and in theoretical discourse again. Because, although online theatre has been around since the beginning of the internet[1], it has received very little theoretical attention so far. Although receiving a boost in the wake of the pandemic, many also became quickly tired of dealing with it in more detail and, above all, in its full significance.

I am concerned because I have experienced it as a promising space for socialising in distance. Here and simultaneously there, I probably have met the most unfamiliar people during the last year. There were chance meetings, which sometimes delighted me, sometimes irritated me,

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[1] See Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), p. 461.

sometimes unsettled me. However, they always brought me out of the familiar, sometimes even out of my comfort zone. Thereby, these gatherings in the online sphere had very different forms and qualities, which have aroused my curiosity exploring them in more depth.

Therefore, I will explore in this research paper, how to assemble in online theatre.

This question is interpreted in two ways in this study. On the one hand I ask, how is the assembly in online theatre constituted? These are always observations regarding my own experience and experiences of others. So how can it be described in terms of its organisation, social construction, and boundaries? What does its phenomenology tell us about the underlying understanding of assembly in theatre? On the other hand, it is about the question, what staging strategies were found or emerged in my case studies to produce an assembly of audience and actor despite physical absence?

Under the hypothesis that the assembly in online theatre is dependent on the creation and perception of certain conditions instead of ontological definitions, I will investigate it by means of *Nineties Productions* virtual Performance Lab and in the context of the Corona pandemic. During the lockdown, the Dutch collective *Nineties Production* - consisting of Anne Maike Mertens and Yannick Noomen - in cooperation with many different artists, staged online performances every Saturday for eight weeks in March and April 2021. Giving eight different artists and art collectives the opportunity to develop online productions for a week at a time, the diversity of artistic approaches and the aim of the projects to explore forms of online theatre artistically make Nineties Lab an excellent case study for my research. As a participatory observer, who joined the rehearsals taking place in the NDSM terrain in Amsterdam as well as the online performances from home, I took digital ethnography as my methodological approach. Beginning with examining the influence of this perspective on my research, I will further expound my theoretical framework including mainly texts from the fields of sociology, theatre, and media studies. Studying them, I will explore existing understandings of assembly in the theatrical and public sphere within a digitalised society, as well as the relationship between audience and performer in the theatre of physical co-presence, including the role of digital media. I negotiate the theories concerning notions of publicity, interfacing, presence, and liveness in the context of my ethnographic observations during the Nineties Lab. Based on two selected performances of the Lab, I will analyse specific staging strategies facilitating experiences of being assembled in online theatre in more detail. Finally, I will summarise my findings on the phenomenology of assembly in online theatre and its impact on both the notion of public assembly and theatre.

2.   Methodology: Applying Digital Ethnography for Online Theatre

Speaking about online theatre, I often observe in everyday language use as well as theatre studies that theatre of bodily co-presence is often spoken of as "live" or "real" theatre. This immediately implies a hierarchisation and prevents a direct application of its methodologies to the field as a lot of terminologies for describing online experiences are still missing.

Online ethnography as my chosen methodology offers me to explore online theatre as a field whose relevance and necessity is not questioned or must be rated. Rather, it is a cultural practice that has received new impetus from a contemporary context. Following Christine Hine in her research "From Virtual Ethnography to the Embedded, Embodied, Everyday Internet", the methodology of ethnography describes the "task […] to understand ways of life as they are lived, and not to worry too much about whether any specific kind of interaction is ››good enough‹‹ for ethnographic immersion. If people do it, then it is good enough to make a legitimate focus for ethnography. The task, as I understand it, is to explore the way that life is lived and relationships enacted, through whatever medium is used by the people concerned."[2] Therefore, the very presence of online theatre proves its practice and forms of social interaction to be relevant and valuable for enquiry, which in turn have the potential "to broaden this conversation of virtual world ethnography by showing how forms of technologically mediated sociality shape and are shaped by the contemporary context."[3] Therefore, studying assembly in online theatre through ethnography promises to be a phenomenological investigation. Their results will shed light on social practices and our understanding of how they are constructed, thereby reaching beyond the theatre context and are transferable to other social phenomena.

In terms of applying my methodology to the field, I begin with determining and scoping the field site, which is "understood as an assemblage of actors, places, practices, and artifacts that can be physical, virtual, or a combination of both."[4]

2.1.   Online Theatre as a Virtual World

Starting with asking how the place of my field site can be determined, I state it is a hybrid space, which thus also defines the theatrical, online assembly as an intermediate state. Using Homi Bhabha's definition of hybridity creating a so-called third space, it is described as "a difference

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[2] Christine Hine, "From Virtual Ethnography to the Embedded, Embodied, Everyday Internet," in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, ed. Anne Galloway, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 22.

[3] Tom Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds. A Handbook of Method* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 12.

[4] Ibid., p. 60.

'within', a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality"[5], which is in Nineties Lab evoked by its virtuality.

Nineties theatre is built in cyberspace on the platform *Ohyay*, which is a video call platform published in 2020 by PineLabs LLC. In comparison to platforms like *Zoom* or *Skype*, it offers the possibility creating virtual worlds. According to the authors of "Ethnography and Virtual Worlds" virtuality is characterised by four criteria, all of which apply to Nineties theatre:

Reminiscent of a city centre[6], the Nineties Lab firstly inhabits different rooms including various bars, a disco, the theatre (called Nineties Lab) and even an escape room thereby creating a "sense of worldness"[7]. A side alley leads out of the small town to a flickering campfire.[8] As a visitor, you can move through the spaces independently by means of your cursor and even move objects in certain rooms, such as virtual wine and beer glasses in the bar. This means that it is not only a matter of "spatial representations but offer an object-interact."[9] Secondly, the Nineties Lab is characterised by key events. These consisted of the Saturday performances. Apart from that, the theatre seemed like a ghost town, in the sense that the past liveliness of these spaces was palpable. This liveliness was brought about by "solitary activities within them"[10] like the cheesy campfire song evening, for example. Here, Yannick from Nineties and programmer Marcel sat together in front of the same computer camera playing various pop songs on their guitars. Everyone else who had gathered around the campfire with their participant videos sang along, some even unpacking their own instruments.[11] It becomes clear that Nineties Lab as a virtual world is defined by being "thrive[n] through co-inhabitation with others."[12] Building on this evening, I remember that I had to leave the campfire earlier, which reminded me of leaving a party sooner than everybody else. It triggered the feeling of missing something out. I was aware that things could happen, people would stay there and keep singing and I might end up missing some funny and beautiful moments, that the others would tell me about on Monday. This perception determines the Nineties Lab as a virtual world proving the third point that virtual worlds "are persistent: they continue to exist in some form even as participants log off. They can thus change while any one participant is absent, based on the platform itself or the

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[5] K. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 13.
[6] See Appendix 6.1. Figure 1, p. 46.
[7] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds. A Handbook of Method*, p. 7.
[8] See Appendix 6.1. Figure 2, p. 46.
[9] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds. A Handbook of Method*, p. 7.
[10] Ibid.
[11] See Appendix 6.1. Figure 3, p. 50
[12] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds. A Handbook of Method*, p. 7.

activities of other participants."[13] Last, I experienced several ways of embodiment evidencing its definition as a virtual world[14], which were determined to certain rooms. First, there was the already mentioned form of embodiment by being visible through a participant video, which I could hide by switching off my webcam. Then, all the others including me saw a small emoji that could be adjusted in the individual settings. One other virtual body was my mouse cursor and those of the others. Next to the cursor standing the name of the person. Third, I was embodied as a textual avatar by means of writing in a chatbox. And last, I could send emojis like clapping hands, smileys, or others. Some emojis additionally had a sound, as, for example, the clapping hands.

Having established Nineties theatre as a virtual world, it is hybrid operating as a third space in terms of being liminal and in-between different physical and metaphorical locations. First, the virtual theatre can be seen as the bridge between the green-screen studio at the NDSM terrain in Amsterdam of the artists and the many other physical places, where the audience members sat. Through this possibility of the digital, the theatre exists across geographical and national boundaries and thus also questions the geographical location of cultures. In the sense of a hybrid notion of cultures, the Nineties Lab as well as Nineties Production is located in The Netherlands, but as the Lab's invited international artists it also broadened the geographical range of specific performances. For example, a large part of the audience at Ariah Leester's performance was tuned in from Venezuela, or many Brazilians watched the performance by Thais diMarco. This suggests that online theatre has great potential to reach across geographical borders. In this sense, my field site can also be described as a hybrid, because geographically speaking, different inner-European as well as international audiences and artists meet here.

Concentrating on the artistic perspective, I remember Ibelisse Guardia Ferragutti, performer and singer of the band Silverbones, presenting her dramaturgical concept as an interplay of three layers: the artists acted at the interface between the analogue green-screen studio, the projection plane (i.e., the digital cropping of the green-screen and overlaying of it with selected image and video material) and the online streaming on *Ohyay*, which was additionally 16 seconds delayed. Therefore, there was also the experience of "existing and functioning outside of time"[15] also creating a state of being in-between. Last, "the virtual is not what is deprived of existence, but that which possess the potential, or force of developing into actual existence."[16]

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[13] Boellstorff et al., Ethnography and Virtual Worlds. A Handbook of Method, p. 8
[14] See ibid.
[15] Dixon, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*, p. 19.
[16] Marie-Laure Ryan, ""Cyberspace, Virtuality, and the Text.," in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 88.

Through this, the virtual is characterised as an in-between space, just as the theatre itself represents this in-between reality already, "where actors imaginative conspire with audiences to conjure a belief."[17] Concluding from these multiple, overlapping hybrid spaces of Nineties theatre, and thus my field site, it also provides initial information about the assembly that takes place there as an intermediate state.

2.2. Actors[18] and Practice in Online Theatre

Ohyay, as described in the chapter above, has been a very new platform at the time of the lab. This is significant because, as a digital ethnographer, I am not coming into a community that already existed before I arrived, but rather witnessing the artists and audience members also visiting this place created by the Nineties collective for the first times and appropriating it more and more over time. By experiencing this place for the first time, too, all actors have a certain outside perspective regarding the practice that leads to reflexive thoughts about coming together. For example, I had conversations with invited friends and, afterwards, they quickly made comparisons on their own. Additionally, it is important to mention that this place is designed for third parties. Theatre in general is addressed to an audience. It does not aim to be a closed community, but exactly the opposite in its thought. In the sense of Fischer-Lichte, a community between spectator and performer should be created, as well as between the spectators themselves.[19] I therefore define my field site not primarily in terms of actors, but in terms of the practices that take place and that aim to produce these temporary communities. The assembly - as the practice to be researched in this thesis - plays a central role, although in cyberspace this in turn depends on specific factors. By exploring these factors within my theoretical framework, I finally will examine the preconditions for producing temporary communities of artistic practice.

2.3. Digital Technologies as Cultural Artifacts

Through the lens of digital ethnography, I explore all various digital platforms and applications of the Nineties Lab, "as a culture in its own right, and as a cultural artifact"[20]. This means that I recognise that technologies and the ways of participation and interaction they enable are "products of social construction."[21] An important characteristic of social constructions is that,

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[17] Dixon, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*, p. 363.
[18] At this point, actors are not meant as performers but as participants.
[19] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 52.
[20] Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publication 2000), p. 14.
[21] "From Virtual Ethnography to the Embedded, Embodied, Everyday Internet," p. 23.

due to their repetition and routine in social practices, they are often no longer recognised as a construction in the sense of a decision, but as a given. Therefore, my focus of investigation is also largely directed at phenomena that are not extraordinary but rather common or familiar and thus no longer questioned by the participants. These mentioned phenomena are produced in Nineties online theatre through technological possibilities. However, the technologies can also be understood as social constructions in this sense since they enable social interaction and have been constructed including their functioning and use. And here, too, the phenomenon occurs that those certain technologies, as well as their application, are no longer questioned. This became clear to me, for example, when I switched from a Windows computer to a Mac computer during my work at Nineties Lab, which differ in their applications starting with the use of the mouse and can therefore lead to irritation for switching users. At the same time, they are united by the decision that computers always look similar in their materiality. Michel Serre elaborates in his book "Thumbelina. The Culture and Technology of Millenials" that one main social construction of our world has been the indiscernible pre-eminence of the page since the invention of printing:

"This page-format so dominates us - though we are hardly aware of it - that even our new technologies have not been able to break away from it. The screen of a laptop computer - which itself opens like a book - mimics the page […]. Innovators in every domain are heralding the new electronic book, but the electronic has not yet been liberated from the book, even though it implies something completely different from the book and the trans-historical format of the page. What that thing is has yet to be discovered."[22]

The dominance of the page in the technologic and digital realm also influences our social interaction in cyberspace. Communication via social media, which as so-called "posts" on *Facebook* or *Instagram* even have a linguistic reference to the printed page, as well as video call platforms that function two-dimensionally like *Zoom* or *Skype* and on which I see a section of the person sitting opposite me like a living portrait, which does not allow spatial perspectives and has an influence on social interaction. Thereby, digital ethnography and its focus on the ordinary enable me to recognise these technologies as developed cultural artifacts, which could also be different in their shape and use. This is relevant for my research in this regard that they refer to "the agency of users and their significance of practices in constituting – in a through-going way

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[22] Michel Serres, *Thumbelina. The Culture and Technology of Milennials* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), p. 23.

– what a technology is […] to find out exactly what that technology becomes in each specific context of use."[23]

At the same time, my field of research is characterised by the fact that it is not only new for me, but also for the other participants. This applies to the invited artists, *Nineties Productions,* and the audience. It is therefore interesting to investigate what is perceived as self-evident, but also what is irritating, because it deviates from the known or where new routines have developed within the two months.

2.4.   Applied Methods of Digital Ethnography

Choosing Nineties Lab as my field site, participatory observation became my main ethnographical method. Being part of the rehearsals as a technical assistant during my internship at the rehearsal space in Amsterdam and participating in the online performances as a spectator from home, I was able "to grasp everyday perspectives" on online theatre from both sides. Observing the production process and reflecting together with the artist, I had an insider perspective in terms of 'being part of the band', as one of the technicians once stated it. Every Saturday for the performance, I took a rather outside encounter for also empathizing the perspective of the audience. Attending the after talks and talking to spectators individually helped me to gain more insight into their experiences.

Moreover, I also reflected on my perspective as a researcher coming from the arts and among others having for example a German or technically skilled perspective. Taking this into account it was for example much easier for me to find my way around the virtual theatre and therefore participate than it was for my mother, who already had technical problems at the entrance. Therefore, my field site revealed technical barriers and also stated that as an ethnographer, I must bring prior knowledge regarding "keyboard and mouse control, navigating menus and commands, customizing the look of our avatar, learning technical and linguistic conventions for the test chat and voice communication, and learning how to engage in typical activities."[24] Taking this into account, my participatory observations including conversations with other actors of the Lab are the basis for the scientific investigation. Based on them, existing concepts regarding the assembly in the online theatre are going to be proven, questioned, and rethought within the theoretical framework.

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[23] Hine, "From Virtual Ethnography to the Embedded, Embodied, Everyday Internet," p. 23.
[24] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds. A Handbook of Method*, p. 73.

3.   Theoretical Framework: Theatrical Assembly in Online Theatre.

In my theoretical argument, I make a general distinction between the public assembly and the theatrical assembly. The public assembly, the demonstration, is defined by Judith Butler in "Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly" as "overcoming the distinction between public and private for the time of revolution."[25] The revolution arises from a precariat, which defines "those populations whose basic rights of self-determination, movement, and assembly are denied."[26] Overcoming the precariat, in other words its opposite, does not consist in "security, but rather, the struggle for an egalitarian social and political order in which a liveable interdependency becomes possible."[27] This definition by Butler already shows an essential difference to the theatrical assembly. After all, the European theatre as an institution cannot undifferentiated be recognized as a place of the precariat, but rather as a "pillar of the nation state"[28], a place of so-called high culture and privatisation beginning with the eclipse of the auditorium.[29]

At the same time, it is interesting to note that under the Corona measures, both the political assembly in the public space and the theatrical assembly in the theatre building have experienced great restrictions in their freedom of movement and gathering, which represent grassroots democratic rights. This in turn highlights the commonality of both phenomena as practices of physical co-presence. The concern of online theatre to overcome these restrictions in a safe, non-threatening way makes it relevant in an overall societal context, as strategies could be transferred to other areas.

Inferring from this, I explore the assembly in the online theatre through two different lenses. First, I will analyse it primarily through concepts regarding political assembly in public space. Then, I will examine it through the lens of theatre theory, more specifically through a performance analytic that deals with physical co-presence as a basic condition.

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[25] Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 98.

[26] Ibid., p. 69.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Robert B. Shimko and Sara Freeman, *Public Theatre and Theatre Publics* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

[29] See Christopher Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

3.1. Performing Digital Public Sphere in the Theatrical Assembly

A central feature of the public assembly is the public sphere. Butler defines the public sphere as performative. This means that the public sphere is both the environment of the assembly and is produced by it. It "describes both the process of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting, and that we cannot understand its operation without both these dimensions."[30] For the assembly as a revolution, publicity is important, because it "contests the distinction between public and private, we see some ways that bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public"[31] for their reason of equity.

Theatre is also often object for studying notions of public sphere. Especially by the theatre scholar Christoph Balme, who notes that theatre is increasingly becoming a private space, both from an institutional and performative/aesthetic level.[32] However, I would like to tie in with his thesis that "through reconnection with new media on the one hand and an increasing move outside theatre buildings on the other, has this political and social efficacy begun to be reactivated."[33] A movement that fulfils the online theatre in both aspects.

In this chapter, therefore, I like to explore the relationship of assembly in online theatre to the concept of the public sphere. In doing so, I will highlight performative strategies of the Nineties Lab that bring forward its institutional (Chapter 3.1.1) and aesthetic levels (Chapter 3.1.2).

3.1.1. Demarcation of the Theatrical Public Sphere in Online Theatre

Beginning with describing my own experience, every visit at the Nineties Lab starts with something that is anything but spectacular in the theatre of bodily co-presence: the entrance. The procedure is very similar. The theatregoers line up to show their tickets at the entrance, where the individual QR-code of the playbill is scanned and checked by a Nineties member through the webcam. However, the fact that the process is familiar, but the practical procedure is not, puts a special focus on this situation. Instead of walking, I press different buttons with my cursor that make my participant video join the queue or move forward step by step. Webcam and microphone must be turned on so that I can communicate with the cashier.

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[30] Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 63.
[31] Ibid., p. 71.
[32] See Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere*. And "Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere," in *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography*, ed. Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2010).
[33] *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, p. 14.

Once I was successfully checked in, I am allowed to enter a new virtual room by pressing an in this very moment appearing button named "Enter". Then I enter the foyer of the Nineties Lab, where it is possible to chat with other members of the audience. Additionally, I can follow the counting of two large numbers on the right and left edges of the screen. The right number shows how many people are already in the foyer and thus inside the theatre, while the left number refers to the people still waiting at the entrance. Through this distinction, the admission situation marks its transitional situation, at the end of which stands a process of demarcation between audience and not-yet-audience.

In terms of other online performances, I attended during the pandemic, this staging of an entrance stood out. I deliberately refer to this situation as a staging strategy, as it is primarily an aesthetic decision, not a functional one. Given the technical possibilities, it would certainly be possible to replace this sometimes-protracted process of checking individual tickets with another autonomous system.

Compared to an autonomous check-in via password or link, the staged entry situation draws attention to the fact that participation in this theatrical assembly is linked to certain conditions. Through ticket control as well as the display of the number of audience and not-yet-audience, it makes access and barriers more transparent. It becomes clear that this place is not public to all, as in being completely inclusive.

Based on this observation, I will explore how the relationship between the assembly in online theatre and the notion of public sphere is formed on an institutional level.

Looking at theatre theory and theatre histography, the public sphere is often equated with the theatrical assembly. This can already be seen in the fact that terms like 'audience' and 'public' are used almost synonymously. This perspective on the theatrical assembly in European theatre still goes back to ancient Greece, where "the agora and the theatre festivals attained the ultimate degree of publicness possible at that time, so that the theatre public and the public sphere were in a sense almost identical."[34] Coming from the theatre aesthetics, the ancient tragedy arose from the emergence of the individual from the overall social collective, whereby the assembly from which was detached, becomes the audience. The chorus, as a mirror of the ancient audience, precisely represents this social collective. However, this theatre-historical view omits the fact that ancient Greece had a very limited definition of the overall social collective in terms of belonging since only men with the status of a citizen received the full rights. This designation

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[34] Balme, The Theatrical Public Sphere, p. 24.

had an impact on the theatrical assembly. Certain social groups, starting with slaves and women, were not included in the public sphere at all. Based on this historical perspective, the equation of theatrical assembly and public sphere is based on a very exclusionary understanding of the public sphere. This precise consideration in linguistic usage is important, since the public sphere is still considered as the basic condition of democratic societies, as it is "first of all realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed."[35] This theoretical and political concept goes back to the philosopher Jürgen Habermas and his 1991 publication "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere". Since then, it has shaped the European and Anglo-American discourse and is not spared much criticism: Above all, Habermas's idealized image of an unrestricted, liberal public sphere - comparable to the above explored designation of the ancient theatre as a public assembly - has been discussed. For example, by Nancy Fraser, who emphasizes that Habermas proposition of a liberal public sphere is "constituted by, a number of significant exclusions."[36] While Fraser focuses primarily on the role of women and forms of sexism, this structural inequality, that Habermas' theory ignores, can of course be extended to include many other forms of discrimination such as racism, classism, ableism, nationalism, etc. In addition to the omission of structural discrimination, it is also becoming increasingly clear regarding advancing digitalization, mass communication and globalization that the singular liberal public sphere does not exist, but rather "a network or rhizome with a plurality of entry points and, indeed of publics. There is no monolithic space."[37] The assertion of an unrestricted public sphere and the designation of one's own grouping as a public sphere in the sense of calling yourself "the people" is therefore largely exclusionary and instrumentalizing, as can be seen in Butler's examination of the public assembly. Butler notes that "when a group or assembly or orchestrated collectively calls itself ››the people‹‹, they wield discourse in certain way, making presumptions about who is included and who is not."[38] She euphemises that "››[t]he people‹‹ are not a given population, but are rather constituted by the lines of demarcation that we implicitly or explicitly establish. As result, as much as we need to test whether any given way of positing ››the people‹‹ is inclusive, we can only indicate excluded populations through a further demarcation."[39]

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[35] Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article," *New German Critique* 3 (1974): p. 49; *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991).

[36] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* No. 25/26, no. Duke University Press (1990): p. 59.

[37] Janelle Reinelt, "Rethinking the Public Sphere for a Global Age," *Performance Research. A Journal of the Performing Arts* 16, no. 2 (23 May 2011): p. 18.

[38] Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 4.

[39] Ibid., p. 19.

Designating the public sphere as public spheres, taking its plurality and exclusive barriers seriously, the point is not to disguise them, but to make them visible and thus vulnerable for attack and negotiation. Staging strategies of online theatre have a great potential to make this phenomenology of the multiplicity of public spheres tangible.

"While 'spectator' and 'audience' refer to individual or collective bodies inside the building or actively attending the performance – participants in the *hic et hunc* of theatrical encounter and exchange – the term 'public' and even more broadly 'the public sphere' refer to a potential audience or perhaps not even that."[40]

Balmer states the theatrical assembly as a temporary gathering of audience and actors, which is opposed to the public sphere, as it is only a fraction, a small temporary community while the majority is outside the theatre event as counter publics[41] to be considered. Thus, the moment of demarcation is already given at the institutional level. However, if it becomes invisible in the theatre of bodily co-presence through its habit, the change of media makes this visible and tangible again. Through change of media, meaning the process of transforming a media-specifically fixed pre-text or substrate into another medium, i.e. from one semiotic system to another[42], the media-specific transformation process from the original to the target medium reveals specific characteristics of the original medium. As the target medium will never be able to evoke the same reception experience as the original medium, the comparison of the two experiences evokes a moment of reflection, which I will illustrate using the example of the admission situation at Nineties Lab. There, this becomes particularly clear in the virtual foyer. While the number changing on the right refers precisely to who, metaphorically speaking, are inside the theatre building and will thus be able to participate in the performance, the number on the left refers to the audience potentially joining in, thereby making clear a difference. Since online theatre is not tied to a physical location and thus to physical barriers such as a long journey or a room capacity, the entrance could potentially be attended by all people, provided certain technologies. The number of potential audiences could therefore be immensely high. If the left figure in the digital foyer were to refer to the number of the entire world population as an example,

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[40] Balme, "Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere," p. 40f.

[41] Fraser states counter publics as a notion for "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs", Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," p. 81.

[42] See Irina O. Rajewski, *Intermedialität* (Stuttgart: UTB, 2002), p. 16.

the micro assembly of people, engaged in this theatrical event, would be shown even more clearly.

At the same time, access to the theatrical event is not only dependent on physical barriers, as the staging of the ticket control makes clear. Balme dedicates an entire essay to the playbill and its role in relation to the theatrical public sphere, using it to illustrate the process of demarcation between the open sphere and the theatrical assembly:

"A simple distinction between the collectivized group of individuals inside the building and the larger sociological entity of those outside - or from the point of view of the marketing department (to use a deliberate anachronism) those who have bought a ticket and those who have not—is somewhat facile when it comes to theorizing the social and political place of theatre in a public sphere."[43]

It can thus be stated that the theatrical assembly in online theatre, like the theatrical assembly of bodily co-presence, is characterized by processes of demarcation from a public sphere. The potential of online theatre lies in experiencing these processes of demarcation, beginning with the necessary processes of registration on digital platforms and ending with the staging of demarcation, which is necessary as a transformation process due to the change of media. This visualization of demarcation processes makes it possible to experience the plurality of public spheres and thus, in the best case, counteracts an instrumentalization of these through performative speech acts of a monolithic public sphere, as described by Butler.

By making visible a theatrical public sphere[44] that lies outside the event, i.e., the distinction between an inside and an outside, the gaze moves on to another important phenomenon of assembly in online theatre, which is also directly related to the public sphere and has not yet received attention: The distinction between private and public spheres, which will be explored in the following chapter.

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[43] Balme, "Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere," p. 45.

[44] Balme extends the distinction between audience and theatrical public sphere, as the latter is far greater than audience by negotiating theatre in media other than theatre itself. A level whose investigation the scope of this thesis cannot afford. *The Theatrical Public Sphere*.

3.1.2. Destabilising Public and Private Sphere in the Digital, Theatrical Assembly

My friend Lilly told me at our weekly Zoom meeting, which usually followed the Nineties Lab performance, how uncomfortable it was for her that everyone could see into her living room. After the performance, we both moved through the Nineties universe and ended up at the virtual campfire. Lilly sat in her armchair in her flat in Lübeck with a water bottle in her hand, I sat at my desk in Utrecht. We both primarily listened to the conversations around the campfire and chatted via WhatsApp about how long we wanted to stay.

When Lilly spoke about this uncomfortable feeling, I could relate to it and remembered one of the first Nineties performances, a concert by Silverbones. The band played in the green-screen setup and therefore in different abstract places. At one point they showed an abstract mountain landscape in which suddenly different participant videos of audience members appeared, among others mine. Even though I knew from the rehearsals that this would happen, I remember a brief feeling of being caught off guard. I felt very watched, looked at and observed. Basically, I was suddenly standing on the stage with the spotlight directly on my face. I remember trying to move as little as possible and smiling, but not too much. In the reflection meeting on Monday, the lead singer herself said that this should have been announced beforehand, because it is like dragging someone onto the stage without asking and leaving him/her/them alone, at the mercy of the rest of the audience. Three months after that, during the European Football Championship I had to think back to this moment. During the games, you always see people from the audience. Most people notice at some point that they are being broadcasted live on the screen and are usually euphoric jumping up and waving. Conclusively, I wonder where this strange discomfort in online theatre comes from.

I explain this discomfort to myself by the fact that something unfamiliar is happening here. And not only for me, but from various conversations, also with others. Hence, what exactly is new and unfamiliar here in the theatrical assembly? Based on my two anecdotes, it seems that it is linked to the relationship between private and public spheres. In this chapter, I therefore explore the question of how the relationship between private and public spheres change in the theatrical assembly of online theatre. To this end, I put forward the thesis that a destabilisation of the two categories of private and public spheres occurs.

Based on Lilly's statement feeling uncomfortable, if all the other theatregoers can see into her living room, it seems reasonable to explain the destabilisation of the two categories coming from the fact that the public theatre meets one's own home. Both places are present at the same time. The audience experiences the performance from their bed, sofa, or kitchen table, which is

particularly visible through the/their webcam. However, this explanation would be too simple and short-sighted, especially in view of our highly digitalised Western world. John Thompson already evidences in his article "Shifting Boundaries of Public and Private Life" from 2011 that "we must get away from the temptation to think of 'the private sphere' in terms of physical spaces like the home."[45] He justifies this by stressing the normality in this digital era of being at home and simultaneously in public spheres by means of social networks:

"Today when an individual sits in the space of his or her home or bedroom and goes online, disclosing information about himself or herself to thousands or millions of others, in what sense is this individual situated in a private sphere? She may be in a private space in her home, but at the same time she is participating in a public arena of information dissemination."[46]

What does the situation of the theatrical assembly in digital space change then about experiencing the blurring of public and private spheres that has been common for years? From my point of view, the destabilisation of the two categories is related to the destruction of the conventional division between spectator and actor in the theatrical assembly. This is due to the change in social interaction and participation, which I would now like to explain concretely using the example of my two anecdotes, therefore especially in relation to the use of webcams.

When Lilly talks about her discomfort that everyone can see into her living room, what exactly can the other strangers see there that makes her uncomfortable? Because, especially in view of the pandemic, we have learned to stage ourselves in our homes. We can always choose which angle of our room the camera catches. Hence, it really cannot be the place itself. I explain Lilly's discomfort with Thompson's description that the private sphere is not about physical space, but about "spheres of information and symbolic content"[47]. Thompson describes the individual desire to control this rather abstract information about oneself that one may not be able to put into words or name precisely. This control seems to be endangered in the assembly in online theatre, which I first like to justify with the special mediality of the webcam and later link to their impact on the relationship between spectator and actor.

"Webcam is even more in one´s face than co-presence, a de-contextualized mutual strain between correspondents"[48]: A conclusion reached by Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan in their ethnographic research on webcams, since the encounter via webcam already focuses visually

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[45] John Thompson, "Shifting Boundaries of Public and Private Life," *Theory, Culture and Society* 28, no. 4 (2011): p. 62.
[46] Ibid., p. 63.
[47] Ibid., p. 49.
[48] Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan, *Webcam* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2014), p. 55.

very much, if not exclusively, on the face and its expression. In the view of the two researchers, the special intensity and intimacy is also created due to the shift of everyday and not only private meetings into the "more domestic space"[49] of one's home. In their opinion, this leads to an encounter with the "more natural and less prepared self"[50]. This would partly contradict Thompson's theory. However, I would also critically question this observation by Miller and Sinanan, since I have already observed several forms of preparation for encounters via webcam, starting with myself. Before a Nineties performance, I never went to the computer unprepared. Instead, I added to my usual preparations before a visit to the analogue theatre. Others fell away or were less important. For example, while I often watched the performances with sweatpants in front of the computer, since it would not be visible on the webcam anyway, my preparation was mainly finding the most suitable position and the best lighting conditions for the webcam image. In my case, this included a background that was as clean as possible. I usually chose a white wall. In my individual case, this choice was mainly since the furniture in my room was not my own and, in Thompson's sense, did not count as part of my symbolic content, although it would of course still be read as information about my persona as soon as it would have been visible. With my choice of framing and good lighting of my face, I wanted to control information about myself. Based on this observation, I would clearly not speak of a "more natural and less prepared self", but rather of a curation and staging of the seemingly more private self, which preparation requires different skills than a visit to the theatre of physical co-presence. Because after all, Nineties theatre is not simply a connection between two physical spaces - one's own home and the theatre - but again a so-called third space created through forms of interfacing. Miller and Sinanan also come to this conclusion in their study of the webcams:

"Instead of thinking about them as instruments which connect separate locations, we may have reached the point in which people in some sense live; a third place, distinct from the two offline locations."[51]

In this third space, it is necessary to find out who you are and how you represent yourself, which can lead to "anxiety and embarrassment about how one appears to others […]. And as people become familiar with this persona they are encountering online, they may also become equally

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[49] Miller and Sinanan, *Webcam,* p. 36.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., p. 28.

concerned as to how far people see that image as a true representation of themselves, particularly when they are surprised by their online appearance."[52]

While we probably have already gained experience with our online appearance, especially during the pandemic, the online theatre as a third space represents a newer context changing the relationship between spectator and actor through its forms of interfacing and leads to a destabilisation of the private and public spheres.

"The relationship between actors and spectators changes depending on the audience´s position: encircling the stage; standing; moving around three sides of a rectangular or square stage; sitting full frontal to the stage, separated from it by footlights."[53]

Although Fischer-Lichte describes several spatial arrangements of audience and actor, the latter remains the most common in European theatre. It goes hand in hand with the "artistic achievements of the past century that have successfully transformed the theatre from a rowdy, potentially explosive gathering into a place of concentrated aesthetic absorption have been obtained at the cost of theatre's very publicness. The darkened auditorium has become to all intents and purposes a private space."[54] From this, it should be noted above all that the audience's task is to watch, which becomes already clear from the often synonymously used designation of the spectator. Regarding the assembly in online theatre and especially in view of the digital communication technologies that are added to it, the arrangement between audience and actor changes including their relationship. Following on from my second anecdote, in which I suddenly watched my own video image on the screen during Silverbones' performance, it becomes clear how quickly the arrangement between audience and actor, audience and stage can change. In online theatre, this happens mainly on a visual level. Fischer-Lichte already describes the special relationship between seeing and touching, which "is connected to a number of other interrelated oppositional pairs: public vs. private, distance vs. proximity, fiction vs. reality. They are all based on the seemingly insurmountable, fixed opposition between seeing and touching."[55] A special phenomenology of theatre lies in dissolving these apparent oppositions. Thus, I can be touched by something that I see on the stage and a "glance exchanged between two people can constitute closeness and intimacy similar to physical contact. Seeing stimulates the desire to touch."[56] An acknowledgement very similar to the one Miller and Sinanan quoted at the

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[52] Miller and Sinanan, *Webcam*, p. 37.
[53] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 107.
[54] Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, p. 3.
[55] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 62.
[56] Ibid.

beginning, that webcam can create a more intimate encounter than physical co-presence.[57] The insecure feeling that both Lilly and I experienced is thus related to the fact that the image of the webcam creates a special intimacy through its visibility within the theatrical public space. In this, I run the risk of having less control over the symbolic content of myself. Because in the online theatre, the darkened audience space can be dissolved at any time and I can be separated individually from the collective, I am visually much closer to the other theatregoers and actors who are potential strangers to me. In addition, by translating my own appearance and actions into digital interfaces as the webcam image, once writing in chats or sent emojis, I always perceive them from an outside perspective as well. I not only see how others react to me, but I also perceive my action for myself. Therefore, my own effect and thus my own staging come more to the fore. Like the actor, I reflect on my appearance. In a certain way, I go from being a spectator to an actor within the theatrical assembly and think about how I convey my own persona. I discover and form myself:

"There are several elements to this discovering of the self. The first is visual. What does it mean to see ourselves? The second is relational. What does it mean to see ourselves as others see us? Then we also need to consider the implications for our concept of the self. Which ides or whose idea of the self are we talking about?"[58]

This confrontation with my roles, my relationship between intimacy and publicity, makes me an active participant who confuses the relationship between spectator and actor in the assembly of online theatre and destabilizes the dichotomy of private and public spheres.

As the goal of both the public and theatrical assembly is to temporary shake up, overcome and/or contest this dichotomy,[59] online theatre opens entirely new possibilities and fields of experimentation for this, which are worth for further artistically and theoretically exploration.

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[57] Miller and Sinanan, *Webcam*, p. 55.
[58] Ibid., p. 43.
[59] Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 72 and p. 98.

3.2. Translating Bodily Co-Presence in Online Theatre

"This time of the interval is one in which the assembled bodies articulate a new time and space for the popular will, not a single identical will, not a unitary will, but one that is characterized as an alliance of distinct and adjacent bodies whose action and whose inaction demand a different future."[60]

"Aesthetic, social, and political aspects are inextricably interlinked in performance. Such a connection is not established by political issues or agendas alone; the fundamental bodily co-presence of actors and spectators engenders and guarantees it."[61]

As can be seen from the quotations, the special mediality of the public assembly as well as the theatrical assembly is based on bodily co-presence. Butler links the performativity of the assembly greatly to the gathering of bodies in physical public places, stressing the point that already their appearance, the visibility of their vulnerability shows its politic of alliance and the interdependence between the body and its infrastructure without the need of vocalizing it by a speech act.[62] Therefore, Butler leaves me with the question, how to translate the appearance of the body in the online performance. Hence, what is exactly evoked through bodily co-presence, which apparently cannot be generated in the physically distanced encounter? This chapter will explore and examine its possible translation into the digital. Since theatre has been determined by bodily co-presence, its theories provide a valuable foundation for this investigation. Distinguishing it from other media, such as television, radio, streaming-, or in general internet portals, the constitution of the special phenomenology evoked by bodily co-presence differs in theory. Or rather, different emphases are set, which I will address individually in this and the following chapters.

3.2.1. Interfacing Proximity in Distance

Beginning with bodily co-presence as a proximity-generating phenomenon, I state the hypothesis that it leads to a sense of responsibility and thus activation. "The desire to create an active subject"[63] is one aim of art stressed by Claire Bishop in "Artificial Hells". According to Fischer-Lichte, the activation of the spectator already lies in the performance itself, since its generation depends equally on the actor and the spectator:

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[60] Butler, Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly, p. 75.
[61] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 44.
[62] See Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 19.
[63] Claire Bishop, *Participation* (London, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel, The MIT Press, 2006), p. 12.

"Instead, their bodily co-presence creates a relationship between co-subjects. Through their physical presence, perception, and response, the spectators become co-actors that generate the performance by participating in the ››play‹‹."[64]

Based on this reasoning, it becomes clear that bodily co-presence is determined as a form of relation that activates the individual to do something in interdependence on the other. The goal of activation in the sense of taking responsibility is also found in Butler's reflections on public assemblies. Butler ties the specificity of bodily co-presence to the fact that the precariat is reflected in the body. This "means that demands made in the name of the body (its protection, shelter, nourishment, mobility, expression) sometimes must take place with and through the body and its technical and infrastructural dimensions."[65] Therefore, the corporal has a very great effective power, since its bodily appearing (and thus appearing of the precariat) already means independently of a discourse or pre-discourse.[66] At the same time, we live in a world of global interdependencies, which are not caused by ongoing globalization and digitalisation, but rather therefore become more visible. That is why it is even more important to be aware of one's own global responsibility. Because "[w]e might think that interdependency is a happy or promising notion, but it is often the condition for territorial wars and forms of state and violence."[67] Digital media enable capturing this, as they allow us to receive information from places that are physically far away, but whose events also have an impact on our own lives. At the same time, the question arises, how to generate a sense of responsibility and activation for liveable interdependencies towards these physically distanced precariat, since political activation is strongly linked to the effect of physical proximity, of appearing. Therefore, in the face of advancing global injustices and economic power monopolies, it is even more important to find ways that can create a proximity in distance apart from bodily co-presence. Therefore, it must be critically questioned whether a reduction of the theatre – which in Europe still designates itself as a place for social negotiation – to bodily co-presence is still contemporary at all or whether it even actively evades a current political responsibility. Should it not rather try to seize the opportunity, based on its artistic freedom, which is largely free of economic pressure, and its variety of aesthetic means to find ways creating an experience of proximity in distance? This leads to the question how bodily co-presence as a form of relation can be translated, whereby the online theatre offers a great field for experimentation. Based on my participatory observations during

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[64] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 32.
[65] Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 129.
[66] See ibid., p. 8.
[67] Ibid., p. 120.

the Nineties Lab, I would like to hypothesize that this becomes possible through forms of interfacing.[68]

Interfacing describes first and foremost the interaction and design of human-machine relationships. In everyday life, it is mainly practised as a human-computer relationship. This always starts from both actors. Interfacing describes not only the interaction between human and computer, but also between computer and human. The interface is not only the path of interaction, but always also the surface. The special design of the surface also changes the "way of humans and computers […] construct actions together."[69] Indeed, the computer enables us not only to communicate with it, but also through it with other people. This is also possible through various forms of interfacing, a few of which have already been mentioned here. The chat or the webcam, for example, would be forms of interfacing that create different forms of relationship between people communicating via the computer.

Interfacing between people is possible in both physical absence and temporal displacement. I can respond to a chat communication at any time. In online theatre, however, it is primarily the case that people interact with each other at a physical distance but at (almost)[70] the same time. Especially in this case, it is interesting to investigate the translation of physical co-presence into forms of interfacing. Brendan Hookway states in his study of interfaces, that "[t]he equilibrium of the interface is a balancing of forces that press against it from all sides, drawn from the entities that it divides. To produce equilibrium, the interface seeks out differential conditions where bodies come into contact. It defines and channels those differences as at once opposing and reconciled within a moment of equilibration."[71] The design of the interface is thus shaped by the bodies that communicate with each other through it. However, this is reciprocal, as it also has a great influence on the physical experience of the relationship. In her volume on "Live Television", Stephanie Marriot notes that when watching television, for example, everyone has the basic bodily experience that "the television itself will be broadly 'in front' of all of us."[72]

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[68] The translation of bodily co-presence as a form of relation through interfacing in online theater is something I have already explored in my Internship Report using the Nineties Intro that preceded each performance. However, for the sake of completeness, I will retrace it here and, if necessary, quote from it. The internship report about my time at and reflection son the Nineties Lab is also attached to this master's thesis.

[69] Brenda Laurel, *Computer Theatre* (Boston, Indianapolis, San Francisco, New York, Toronto, Montreal, London, Munich, Paris, Madrid, Capetown, Syndne, Tokyo, Singapore, Mexico City: Addison-Wesley, 2014, second edition), p. 2.

[70] Since there was a streaming delay of 16 seconds during Nineties performances, it is not the same time. Therefore, direct communication with the audience during the performance was often avoided. I will discuss this particularity mainly in the chapter on Liveness (3.2.2.).

[71] Branden Hookway, *Interface*, 1 online resource vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014), p. 64.

[72] Stephanie Marriott, *Live Television. Time, Space and the Broadcast Event* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage, 2007), p. 11.

Similar collective, physical experience is also found in Nineties' online theatre. Here we just all sit in front of our computers instead of our TV.

Hookway, who describes interfacing as a form of relationship also euphemises that each form of interfacing establishes an experience of being in-between as its phenomenological property, since it is a "coupling of the processes of holding apart and drawing together, of confining and opening up, of disciplining and enabling, of excluding and including."[73]

In the Nineties online theatre, this proximity in distance as a relationship – brought about by various forms of interfacing – is experienced in many moments. An experience that we are already familiar with through television becomes clear, for example, in the performative concert of Silverbones. Here, many cameras are used, which are cut back and forth during the performance. The cameras are mobile and can produce both close-up and long-distance shots. Despite the physical distance, they allow me as a spectator to participate much closer than if I was sitting in the front row of a bodily co-present performance. I see close-ups of the musicians, move metaphorically between the instruments, and can record every detail of the stage set: From the sweat on one's forehead, to the many buttons and colourful cables of the synthesiser, to the fabric texture of the little puppet horse standing on the sound monitor. This closeness, which is created here primarily through visual proximity, is also described by Philip Auslander as a special form of intimacy on television, which is created by the special arrangement of viewer and image, or rather their interfacings.

"The position of the television viewer relative to the image on the screen was often compared with that of a boxing fan sitting ringside or a theatregoer with the best seat in the house."[74]

Online theatre opens entirely new possibilities to reshape the relationship between audience and performer by means of interfacing. The very act of the performer looking into the camera enables the experience being directly addressed as an audience member. And this at the same time as all the other spectators do. For the theatrical assembly of online theatre, this enhances new staging possibilities that can be experimented with to dissolve dichotomies of proximity and distance, collectivity and interconnectedness, privacy, and the public sphere. And this not only in terms of the relationship between audience and actor, but also between spectators. This is especially visible in the intro of Nineties Production, which I examined in detail in my internship report, and can be fully read in the appendix.

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[73] Hookway, *Interface*, p. 4.
[74] Philip Auslander, *Liveness : Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London ;: Routledge, 1999), p. 16.

The intro ran every Saturday directly before the performance. It consisted of a shared Power Point presentation. As a spectator, I looked at a white screen on which the Nineties performer Yannick wrote to me. With black letters, typed like in a Word document, he welcomed me to the performance and asked rhetorical questions. A special moment of interfacing was the appearance of all the spectators through the visualisation of all the mouse cursors. Suddenly, many cursors with the participants´ names scurried across my screen. I could also discover my own in the hustle and bustle. Nineties then asked us to perform various actions. We were supposed to follow each other, form pairs, come together in the middle or form a circle.[75] In my internship report I investigated the visualisation of the cursor as a dramaturgical strategy that evokes moments of distant socialising and unfolds an interactive potential between the audience members. For the investigation of my master's thesis, I would like to name differences in the staging of interfacing using the two staged examples from Nineties online theatre. To do this, I like to draw on the theoretical categories of "immediacy" and "hypermediacy" that Steve Dixon outlines in his book "Digital Performances". The theatre scholar and performer take Bolter´s and Grusin's theory of remediation further by distinguishing the categories as follows:

"The hypermediacy of webpages and other computer displays foreground and celebrate the medium and the mediation, while the aim of immediacy is to play down or eliminate the mechanics of the interface, the medium, and the act of mediation itself. But both, they say, are opposite manifestations of the same desire to pass through the limits of representation to evoke authentic and emotional user experience."[76]

The different camera perspectives in the Silverbones performance want to draw me as a spectator into the action, generate an intimacy through the close-ups and thus make the process of mediation as invisible as possible. I became particularly aware of this claim during a test run. While the three camerawomen and -men were moving around downstairs, I was standing upstairs at the technical desk together with the video technician. He had an overview of all four camera perspectives on an external screen (in addition to the camera staff, there was also a PTZ camera) and selected live which image the audience should see. During the test run, the technician cursed more than once because, from his point of view, no suitable footage was filmed. Above all, he grumbled at times when something new was happening on stage that no camera caught. For example, when the singer started singing again after a long break or got to the more rhythmic chorus. I, who could also see the whole stage just by looking down the ceiling, asked

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[75] See Appendix 6.1. Figure 4, p. 47.
[76] Dixon, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*, p. 136.

myself why this was so important. When I sat in front of my computer at home during the performance, I understood. As an audience member in the bodily co-present theatre, I am used being able to decide for myself where to look. In online theatre, this possibility is more limited because the camera takes over this decision to a large extent. At the same time, as explained above, the camera has more freedom because it can take perspectives that are not possible for me as a person sitting frontally in the audience. Nevertheless, an important task of the camera staff becomes apparent here, namely to film so intuitively that the spectators notice as little as possible that their own gaze is being guided and lent to a great extent. In this case, for example, this also includes keeping the camera on the singer when she starts singing again after a long pause. Because I as an online spectator notice this acoustic change but cannot see it as the camera is showing another part of the stage. Therefore, I notice and am made aware that something is being conveyed to me. The camera or the camera image becomes obvious to me as a medium as I am shown the limits of its mediation. Since this is not desired in the case of Silverbones and the point is to immerse into the music and situation, this is a staging of interfacing that is intended to produce immediacy. The intro of Nineties, on the other hand, is what I would call hypermediated. Instead of wanting the mode of interfaces being invisible, it uses one of the most familiar forms of interfacing (the mouse cursor) to "expose and foreground the medium and interface"[77]. Although I am used seeing my own cursor on my screen, it is outstanding to be shown all the cursors surfing on this platform at the same time. This is information that is usually not shown on other internet portals. Through this deviation, this disturbance of the usual, the cursor receives a special attention as a form of interfacing. Dixon compares this exposure to Bertolt Brecht's V-effect. The Brechtian V-effect is a dramaturgical device of epic theatre for creating a fundamental distance between poetic and illusionary stage reality as a metaphor for everyday reality. It was used by Brecht primarily as a dialectical instrument to reveal social conditions.

As a distancing dramaturgical device, which in the Nineties intro is still supported by questions or comments such as "That feels kinda good in a weird way, right?"[78] or "This page... space... stage..."[79], the hyperreality of interfaces has a reflexive effect on the audience. It leads to the spectators being made aware of their environment and to an activation through the distanced evaluation. It is a reflexive observation of this coming together and thus of the form of assembly taking place in the online theatre.

[77] Dixon, Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation, p. 136.
[78] NinetiesProduction, *Performances Nineties Production Lab* (2021).
[79] Ibid.

A friend with whom I was still talking about the evening after a visit to Nineties Lab asked me provocatively where the difference between online theatre and television would still be. Since television, too, is precisely this closeness in the distance: "[I]ts immediacy – the close proximity of viewer to event that it enables – and the fact that events from outside are transmitted into the viewers home."[80] Today I would answer that it is precisely the alternation between the staging of interfaces as immediacy and as hypermediacy. Because while television primarily tries to make the medium invisible, i.e., creating immediacy, online theatre experiments with an interplay of both and thus becomes a reflexive medium.[81] By creating proximity at a distance, it not only tries to lull the viewer, but also raises questions about the forms of relationships, the assembly, that are currently taking place. At best, and in Claire Bishop's sense, this activates the viewer to take these questions into everyday life. Therefore, theatre acts as a kind of prologue, as it is described by Anna Burzyńska: "Art can only be a prologue to the action, an analogue of reality."[82] This can be observed not only in our understanding of proximity and distance, but also in other phenomena that are held to be constitutive of assembly in theatre. For example, regarding the concept of liveness, which will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

3.2.2. Experiencing Relevance through Evidencing Liveness

Some people from the Nineties audience kept asking if the performances were live, especially after performances that were technically flawless. It arose independently of whether the performance is ontologically live, in the sense of "co-temporality – the sharing of the same present moment – […] in the full sense that the time of the event, the time of […] creation and the time of transmission and reception are one and the same."[83] Since an ontological live performance is not automatically experienced as such, one of the video technicians often posed the question how the performances could artistically prove their liveness. At this point, I would like to supplement why this certainty is at all relevant for the theatregoer. What does it change, if the spectator is certain or uncertain about the liveness of the performance? And finally, what effect

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[80] Auslander, *Liveness : Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, p. 16.

[81] Because at the time of writing this paper during the pandemic, online theatre is not in its infancy, but in a first big and broad upswing, it can be perceived as a remediation. Remediation means "creating new media forms from older ones" (Dixon, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*. p. 136), which leads to the fact that in the first encounters with this new form of media (in this case the online theater) there are always moments of hypermediacy of the old media (for example the computer and the analogue theatre) through processes of transfer, combination, or demarcation. The more ordinary online theater becomes, the more it becomes necessary to search for other and new staging strategies of hypermediacy to evoke this effect of distancing and activating the spectator. Because online theater is a comparatively new remediation that is only now really achieving a wider reach, it works well to reflect on our analogue theatre reality and digital everyday life and to look at it from a new perspective.

[82] Anna R. Burzyńska, "Between Art, Society, Representation, and Subjectivity: Wojtek Ziemilski´S Prolog," in *Intermedial Performance and Politics in the Public Sphere*, ed. Katia Arfara, Aneta Mancewicz, and Ralf Remshardt (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 138.

[83] Marriott, *Live Television. Time, Space and the Broadcast Event*, p. 5.

does the experience of liveness in online theater have on the assembly? Before examining these questions, I will argue that the experience of liveness is linked to the experience of relevance, and thus to the experience of seeing one's participation as relevant. To substantiate this thesis, I draw on Peggie Phelan's often-cited ontology of performance to examine its motivation. Afterwards I will come to liveness as a quality factor via Philip Auslander's abolishing of hierarchies between digital media and theatre.

In "Unmarked: The Politics of Performance" Phelan states that performance is based on bodily co-presence and therefore interaction between spectator and actor, which only takes place during the shared time and space of the performance. Phelan's theory can be described as an ontology of theatre that defines the being of an object in advance instead of it being described from a practice. Why the theory is valuable and interesting to me is the motivation from which Phelan's definition emerges regarding the refusal of reproducibility and thus capitalist structures. Performance, according to Phelan's definition, is a singular and non-reproducible event, without remains, and thus a weapon against the economy and mass media.[84] Looking at online theatre, this attempt of performance becomes particularly important as theatre institutions dealt with it in different ways, especially in times of the pandemic. Many theatres, which had to close their houses temporarily due to the measures, streamed old recordings of productions. Thereby, I witnessed different degrees of non-reproducibility of these events. In some cases, the audience had the option of watching the recording at any time or during specific times slots for streaming a recorded performance together with others. While the first example does not fulfil Phelan's claim at all, for the second one could argue still is a non-reproducible event, since one is uniquely bound to certain parameters, such as the temporal start, which do not make the event equally reproducible. Compared to many other collectives as well as institutionalized theatres, Nineties Lab took a truly digital path and tried not to lose performance´s liveness, the event, but rather to find a translation for it. Already starting with the ephemerality of the productions, which were only played once and could only be experienced at a specified time, too. In addition, there was always a switching after each program consisting of post-show discussions, campfire evenings, or various DJs. This made every Saturday evening an event that could be told about afterwards to others who could not recreate the experience.[85] Next to this performative framework of the Nineties lab, the question arises how to enhance the individual online performances

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[84] At this point it should be noted that non-reproducibility is also successfully exploited by capitalism. There are entire economic sectors that have specialized in marketing the uniqueness of events at a particularly high level. However, this opens a field whose dedication overrides this research.

[85] This is also a point which establishes online theatre as a genre of its own and not as an assimilation to formats of public television or streaming services.

as a unique, unreproductive event. Based on my observations in the Lab, I can identify three strategies that have produced liveness and thus the relevance of spectatorship. The first one cannot be understood as a real strategy, because it happens unintentionally, namely the disruption. This mainly concerned technical malfunctions leading to temporary interruption of a few performances. The characteristic of the disruption is that in its moment of accident the specific mediality of the medium, for example its liveness, becomes visible.[86] Even though these are exciting moments of the online performance, which would also be interesting to investigate regarding their effect on the assembly as a moment of crisis, I must mark this as a further research question, since its investigation would go beyond the scope of this work. Hence, I focus on the artists' intended strategies for generating liveness. One strategy is interactive staging, exemplified by the performance of Ariah Leester, who at times during the performance communicated visibly with the audience via a superimposed chat. Here it comes to an open "reciprocity of contact between audience and performers"[87], which always carries "a different tension and vulnerability […], a sense of danger and unpredictability that affects the adrenalin and nerves of both the performer and the spectators."[88] This was noticeable, for example, when during the middle of the performance an audience member commented on when the tour would finally start. The person inevitably expressed his displeasure in a disrespectful way, whereupon Ariah asked the person to leave the performance. It was clear from Ariah's voice and reaction that the comment had hit him. At this point, the relevance of one's own participation was clearly felt, as many other audience members took the initiative and joined Ariah in the chat, contradicted the person, praised the performance, and thus made their solidarity with the performer clear. This example evidences that liveness in the sense of Dixon always holds vulnerability, but at the same time also the potential to react, to participate, and thus to become aware of the relevance of one's own action. While this performance is characterized by a high degree of audience-performer interaction, I will now discuss performances whose concepts are not based on this. Here, other ways must be found to make liveness perceptible. In general, my observation was that many performers had little or no engagement with this central mediality of theatre and were not searching for possible translations. However, one moment of the performance "Lucid Express" is worth exploring. As noted elsewhere, performance and streaming in the Nineties Lab were not contemporaneous apart from the interactive performances. For technical reasons, a 16-second-difference existed, which questions liveness already in its ontology. The

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[86] See Albert Kümmel and Erhard Schüttelpelz, *Signale Der Störung* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003), p. 10.
[87] Dixon, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*, p. 131.
[88] Ibid.

beginning of "Lucid Express", however, used these 16 seconds to prove liveness in the sense of not not-living/dead according to its opposite, but in its "ways of being and becoming"[89]. In the green-screen studio in Amsterdam, there was always a large flat screen that displayed to the artists what the audience was seeing. During the performance it was usually switched off, as it was too distracting to see one's own actions with a 16-second delay.

"Lucid Express" begins with the audience standing at a virtual train station as participant videos in the design of the Nineties universe. At the same time, the dancer Lucinda Wessel begins her performance in the NDSM terrain. She is filmed standing in the studio and looking at the screen on which the audiences´ participant videos can be seen. 16 seconds later, the audience no longer see themselves at the station, but Lucinda Wessel in the green-screen studio, looking at the screen which shows themselves standing at the station 16 seconds ago.[90] For the spectators, it has the impression from a first impulse that they are further along than the performance, because they finally see their past image.

This experience of temporality shows that, in the sense of Herbert Zettel, who wrote about liveness on television, that each "frame is always in a state of becoming. While the film frame is a concrete record of the past, the television frame (when live) is a reflection on the living, constantly changing present."[91] For the theatrical assembly in online theatre, this means that the experience of liveness is directly related to interdependencies, which in this case become evident not on a spatial but on a temporal level, creating a sense of relevance to one's participation in the moment.

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[89] Eirini Nedelkopoulou, "Reconsidering Liveness in the Age of Digital Implication," in *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performances. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Matthew Reason and Anja MØlle Lindelof (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 217.

[90] See Appendix 6.1. Figure 5 , p. 51 and Figure 6, p. 51.

[91] Herbert Zettl, "The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics," *Journal of the University Film Association* 30, no. 2 (1978): p. 3-8.

3.2.3. Being Present as a Mode of Attention

"It is content not container than asserts presence."[92]

After my time at Nineties Lab, I worked in Oldenburg for the online *flausen+Banden* festival as a technical support. This festival also took place on Ohyay. For me as co-programmer of the festival seeing the admin view of ohyay, I was able to monitor who of the audience was currently in which room. During one day of the festival, we noticed a visitor not moving from the welcome page for a long time. Both, my colleague, and I tried to contact the person and took him/her/them to our support room. Nothing was successful. We finally concluded that he/she/they had probably come to our virtual festival, but then hadn't logged out and was probably sitting at his/her computer with other windows open, browsing with the sound turned down. Hence, we finally pulled him/her/them into the disco so that upon turning the computer sound up again, he/she/they would notice the music. He/she/they was there and not there at the same time. For me, this incident opened a new perspective on presence in the digital, which I like to explore in more detail. I put forward the thesis that presence in the digital is not linked to the physical body but can be understood as a mode of attention.

I compare this being in a place where my presence is perceived and counted by others (after all, said visitor was also included in the audience statistics of the festival) with experiences in bodily co-present theatre. There it happens to me not infrequently that I am physically present, but at times I digress in my thoughts or, in the most extreme case, even nod off briefly because I am so little captivated by what is happening on stage. Therefore, it is questionable whether presence in the theatre should really be defined exclusively by corporal presence. After all, it should not only be about the presence of the physical shell, the "container", but about awareness of the situation, as Dixon describes it. The theatre scholar and performer define presence as a mode of attention, "about interest and command of attention, not space or liveness."[93] This is not dependent on physical liveness, as it is primarily a mental activity of paying attention and/or attracting attention. Of interest for the assembly in online theatre is Dixon's investigation of how the determination of presence as bodily co-presence has influenced our behaviour. Thus, in his view, a conditioning of the spectator goes hand in hand with this definition "that expect an audience to afford live performers attention and a ››certain respect‹‹."[94] This conditioning,

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[92] Dixon, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*, p. 134.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid., p. 193.

caused by the privileging of physical co-presence, points to a hierarchization between performer and spectator within the theatrical assembly. However, this must be seen as a construction.[95]

The physical absence of the audience in the online theatre changes the definition of presence and thereby also the behaviour and relationship between audience and performers. The experience of a physically absent audience moves the goal of their mental presence in the sense of their undivided attention to the centre. After all, at the moment of the performance, the performers are not only in competition with the individual world of thoughts of each spectator (as the conditioning of the western theater audience includes also not talking in the auditorium or switching off one's cell phone), but also with an infinite number of other internet portals and distractions in one's own home. Leaving the performance with a click when bored is also associated with fewer hurdles than leaving a performance in analogue theatre. There, you must stand up, make noises, attract attention. The online performer cannot rely on the conditioning of the audience to be silent, clapping or laughing and enduring only at appropriate moments. The performer must create the presence of the audience in another way, namely by arousing their attention and giving them attention.

In the Nineties Lab performances, I observed that this was attempted especially in the beginning. There, an active welcoming of the audience by the performers took place. This often happened by addressing the audience directly via the camera and introducing oneself. Two online performances of Nineties Production, before and after the Lab celebrated this greeting very extensively. *Memento Mori*, the predecessor to the Nineties Lab still performed via Zoom, as well as *Untitled*, the production created also on Ohyay after the Lab, are both strongly characterized by a foregrounded audience. Here, the individual viewers sitting in front of their webcams are addressed directly but noncommittally by the performers, even directly with names as being visible at the bottom of the webcam image. Sometimes performers and individual audience members started a short conversation, exchanged information about the choice of drink or about one's current wellbeing. It was commented, if one found one or the other person's look particularly comfortable or if someone even made the effort to put the beamer into operation. The audience in its entirety as well as the individual spectators are given attention right at the beginning. The performers show that their presence is appreciated and not taken for granted. This time, which is actively spent here to generate a relationship between audience and the performance, I have perceived in the online theatre of Nineties in a special way. Resulting from

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[95] After all, it could just as well be assumed that it should be the task of the performer to pay the greatest possible attention to the audience. Because the audience pays with time and money for it.

the physical remoteness of the audience, presence in the online assembly is constituted by modes of attention enhancing the potential for shaking ritualised and hierarchical relationships of spectator and performer in its attention economy.

3.2.4. Experiencing Interdependencies through Autopoietic Feedback Loops

"It ties the living process of the theatrical event back to the fundamental process of life itself [...]. As a self-organizing system, as opposed to an autonomously created work of art, it continually receives and integrates into that system newly emerging, unplanned, and unpredictable elements from both sides of the loop."[96]

What Marvin Carlson describes as the importance of the autopoietic feedback loop in the theatrical assembly can be summarized in Butler's terms in a few words: The recognition of interdependencies. Meaning that "we are also bound to one another, in passionate and fearful alliance, often in spite of ourselves, but ultimately for ourselves, for a ››we‹‹ who is constantly in the making."[97] Theatrical assembly is considered having a special mediality by means of the autopoietic feedback loop, a concept invented by Erika Fischer-Lichte. It determines moments when interactive micro-processes between actors and spectators co-creating the performance become apparent and are perceived by both parties.[98] Thereby, Fischer-Lichte states bodily co-presence as the precondition evoking autopoietic feedback loops.

"The actors act, that is, they move through space, gesture, change their expression, manipulate objects, speak, or sing. The spectator perceives their actions and respond to them."

Coming from this theory it is proposed that the creation of tangible interdependencies resulting from bodily co-presence, cannot be produced in online performance. She justifies by stressing that "the audience´s physical participation is set in motion through synaesthetic perception, shaped not only by sight or sound but by physical sensation of their body."[99]

During an online performance, the immediate possibilities of resonance are technically limited as audience´s microphones and webcams are primarily switched off. Thus, the audience is reduced to the role of witnessers and a participation in the sense of a co-creation and joint authorship of the event is missing.

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[96] Marvin Carlson, "Introduction. Perspectives on Performance: Germany and America," in *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetic*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 8.

[97] Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 121.

[98] See Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 59.

[99] Ibid., p. 36.

At the same time, I have already concluded before that the shared virtual space is characterized by a state of being in-between.[100] However, these chapters were primarily concerning the environment of the theatrical assembly. In this chapter, I look at performance, which is characterized by its staging. While Fischer-Lichte claims that it is not exclusively staging strategies evoking experiences of autopoietic feedback loops[101], she nonetheless names them as means for making them possible and, in whose accomplishment, "clearly highlights the fusion of the aesthetic and the social."[102] Especially in online theatre, where a large part of the physical micro-processes between the audience and the player are not possible as not being transmitted for technical reasons, staging strategies can facilitate experiencing autopoietic feedback loops. In the investigation of my following case studies, the aim is to identify staging strategies that have created an autopoietic feedback loop which are related to the previously used concepts of presence, liveness and proximity creating hybrid moments of interdependency. I propose beforehand that both staging strategies are characterised by role reversals.

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[100] See the chapters "Online Theatre as a Virtual World", "Destabilising Public and Private Sphere" and "Interfacing Proximity in Distance"

[101] See Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 55.

[102] Ibid.

4. Case Studies: Staging Autopoietic Assemblies in Online Performance

As my case studies, I picked out two performances of the Nineties Lab. While the first one at least starts as a classical division into audience and actors, the second one is the pre- and post-performance of the Nineties Lab, meaning the program that has already been mentioned here in narratives of, for example, the admission situation or the campfire. With this division of performance and pre-/postperformance I refer to Erving Goffmann´s theory distinguishing for the theatre event between the *inner event* and the *external event*, which is oriented to Kenneth Pike's definition of *game* and *spectacle*.[103] The external event or spectacle refers to "a certain amount of standardized preperformance and postperformance activity results"[104] in which the audience appears in the role of a theatregoer:

"He is the one who makes the reservations and pays for the tickets, comes late or on time, and is responsive to the curtain call after the performance. He, too, is the person who takes the intermission break. He has untheatrical activity to sustain; it is real money he must spend and realtime he must use up - just as the performer earns real money and adds or detracts from his reputation through each performance."[105]

During the game or the inner event, the audience inhabits the role of the onlooker, whose main task is to watch and listen. The change from theatregoer to onlooker, "from spectacle to game – from encasing events to encased events – typically involves a change in frame, the encased or inner events hopefully generating a realm that is more narrowly organized than that represented by everyday life."[106]

In Nineties' theatre, the change in frame as a staging strategy corresponds to the change of spaces, interfaces and therefore, which I am starting to explore in my first case study which is determined as the inner event.

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[103] See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), p. 261.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid., p. 129f.
[106] Ibid., p. 162.

4.1. Darkroom: Performing Autopoietic Feedback Loops through Voice and Noise

During the pandemic, I experienced digital performances in online environments as highly concentrated on visuals and therefore, the visual perception. Sitting in front of my computer, I was first and foremost spectator, watching performers speaking into the camera and sometimes sadly assuming that the live songs would have sounded much better in a corporal shared room without transferring it through microphones and poor computer headphones. Also, Nineties Production Lab indeed relied on the visual aesthetics by offering the green screen as the main aesthetic set-up for participating groups. Therefore, the performance "Darkroom" by the artistic duo *Tom&Jo* was outstanding, as during the rehearsal week they were sitting mostly in one corner of the room or lying on the red couch without paying attention to the big green walls and curtains surrounding them. Finally, these just served as a provisionally recording studio that made the performers themselves completely disappear as well as being invisible for the audience during their show.

However, it may already be recognized in the linguistic meaning of the terms "disappear" or "invisible" that appearing somewhere, and perceiving others' appearance is strongly connected to its visuality and therefore, our bodies. Additionally referring to the origin of the theatre-term, it derived from the ancient Greek word "theatron", meaning a place of viewing.[107] Clearly, the visibility of the audience is normally not given during the online performance, the inner event. Only the performers are visible, and thus the role of the spectators is solidified as that of the onlookers. In *Tom&Jo´s* performance "Darkroom", however, the role is changed, in the form of making the audience visible not through image, but voice, which in combination with the participatory performance leads to an experience of autopoietic feedback loops.

Starting by describing my participatory observations of the performance´s introduction I am sitting on my bed looking at a computer screen. There, I see a blurry person standing in darkness. The person is wearing a purple wig, holding a feather fan in the left hand. The performer is gently and a little mischievous welcoming me and us. The person addresses us as "you", which simultaneously refers to a "we" and a "me". This is significant because at the beginning I have no proof of the presence of other spectators, and therefore initially feel addressed individually. This feeling changes as the performer asks whether somebody is there. Suddenly several different noises of people breathing and rustling, as well as spoken answers like "hello", "yes" or "we see you" come 'crashing down' on me, – the term deliberately chosen as it was

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[107] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, ed. Ramona Mosse and Minou Arjomand (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 7.

not pleasant. All voices and every noise were on the same frequency, equally loud and drowned out what the performer was saying. Having the rustle through the headphones directly at my ears and at the same time trying to filter out the performer´s and spectator´s individual words from the background noise creates a stressful feeling. At the same time, it proved presence of the others and the places, where they were. Additionally, we were all in sync at that moment, all heard equally, at the same volume, so that we could and did drown out even the person occupying the virtual stage.

Based on this experience, I would like to focus Fischer-Lichte drawing her argumentation around the importance of bodily co-presence for autopoietic feedback loops to voices and sounds. As an example, she states that it is "the spectators' laugh, cheer, sigh, sob, cry, […]"[108], which creates bodily co-presence of audience and performers. Reinforcing this realisation, the theorist Eric Vautrin euphemizes in his article "Hear and Now: How Technologies have changed sound practices" that "sound is a presence, and a presence reveals its complex nature by sound, within the sounds, in its matter (in light, in a body, in a space). Sound – a voice or otherwise – is no longer the sign of that which is absent, but rather reveals the metaphysical strength of that which is present."[109] This proves that by determining the special mediality of performance and theatre to bodily co-presence, we are reducing the complex interaction between perceived and perceiver to its visuality.[110] For my analysis, this realisation stresses that also online theatre – where performers and the individual members of the audience do not share the same place – can create micro-processes of co-presence by enhancing space for intrusive noise. With bringing into play the notion of "intrusive noise" I am relying on the theorist Katharina Rost, who used this term describing moments where sounds are creating and are perceived as unpleasant and metaphorically speaking an "uninvited entrance or appearance"[111]. This description is comparable with my before used term of voices 'crashing down'. However, why did I perceive this sounds as intrusive sounds and what does this tell me about being assembled in theatre? Rost links the perception of intrusive sounds to context:

"Furthermore, the quality and intensity of intrusive noises depend on the specific spatial, temporal and cultural configuration of the context. In certain conditions, a sound can be much more

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[108] *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 39.

[109] Eric Vautrin, "Hear and Now. How Technologies Have Changed Sound Practices," in *Theatre Noise: The Sound of Performance*, ed. Lynne Kendrick and David Riesner (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2011), p. 141.

[110] It reveals a hegemony of the visual in western theatre which are also worth exploring further in another context as the importance of aural space is often neglected and only gained attention with the emergence of certain sound technologies, which were in turn overshadowed by the visual technologies developed in the same period. See among other ibid.

[111] Katharina Rost, "Intrusive Noise: The Performative Power of Theatre Sounds," ibid., ed. Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner, p. 46.

intrusive than in others. For example, a noise in a quiet library will seem much louder than that same noise in a busy airport."[112]

Therefore, perceiving audience speaking, listening to their breathing amplified by digital technology reveals cultural codes within the theatrical assembly. It shows that my job as an audience member is to listen and to be quite rather than starting to talk or proving myself being here and alive. This can also be seen by the technical disjunction of audience and performer in bodily co-present theatre, which is created in terms for better understanding sounds coming from stage as well as performer being amplified by microphones. Opposed to this, in online theatre we are technically all in sync regarding the frequency. While my microphone is on, a cough or rustle can disturb the auditory dominance and attention economy of the performers. At the same time, the theatre makers have the power to mute the audience´s microphones in terms of silencing them. Within "Darkroom", the moments of accessing the microphones by the audience were determined in advance, too. Nevertheless, by producing this disturbance, *Tom&Jo* challenge the hierarchization and silencing of the audience. This becomes even clearer through the participatory game following their introduction. After a dream journey, the performers explain a game to me, to which I am invited playing:

"[…] Let´s call this game *What world would we see, when we open our eyes?* For every sentence you say, a part of this world will build. It will expand and grow. And together you can build this other world. Nothing can be taken away. Just added. It is very simple. And for now, you can just be in the body and maybe feel the presence of the other people. [...] The rules are very very simple. For every sentence you say you start with 'what if…' or 'yes and what if…'."[113]

After a bell, I did not hear anything for a few seconds. Only silence. I felt a tension, knowing about the possibility saying something and sharing my thoughts. Then I remember hearing an unfamiliar saying: "What if everybody listens to each other." And another voice responding: "What if everybody gets free money all the time."

Prompted by this, we started talking. We played this game, laughed sometimes and I remember the warm feeling that arose in me. Although I did not see the other three people I was talking to, a connection was formed co-creating the imaginary world. The autopoietic feedback loop became tangible for me here in the sense that I felt how much the game depended on my and the others participation. If I remained silent, not reacting to my opposite, the game would have

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[112] Rost, Intrusive Noise: The Performative Power of Theatre Sounds, p. 46
[113] Tom Oliver Jacobson and Jo Kroese, *Darkroom* (Nineties Production Lab, 2021).

stopped. Beginning in the role of spectator and listener, I became a participant through the activation of my microphone and in the next step perceptibly experiencing the responsibility for this game, as well as my dependence on the other co-players. This change of roles "considerably increase[d] the uncertainty about the performance's outcome and allow[ed] us to observe the feedback loop as if under a magnifying."[114] This gives rise to the temporary theatrical assembly which according to Fischer-Lichte "establishes a community of co-subjects or merely recreates the old relationship in a new guise."[115]

4.2. Nineties Virtual World: Framing in Pre- and Post-Performance

Analysing Nineties virtual theatre as pre- and post-performances, I focus on the role of the audience as theatregoers in the external event. The role of pre- and post-performance as a field of research has remained largely open in theatre discourse, even in Goffman's and Fischer-Lichte´s explorations. This analysis of external events in online theatre, based on my participatory observations, can give a glimpse of the potential of these research perspectives. Regarding the research question how autopoietic feedback loops can be created for enhancing the assembly in online theatre, I propose the staging of changing frames in terms of interfacing giving rise to different tasks and therefore roles the individual audience members.

I will examine two changes in frame during my Nineties Lab visit. The first is the change from the entrance situation to the foyer.[116] While I appeared in the entrance line with participant video and microphone, this function was deactivated in the foyer. Here, my appearance as a participant requires next to the appearance as part of the number showing the people in the room, an action: Either it is possible for me to write in the chat or to send emoticons. This room is characterised by the fact that all my actions can be perceived by everybody in the room. Compared to all the other spaces of the pre- and post-performances[117], here all people come together in one place to interact with each other on the same level. The number on the right shows me the size of the audience and gives me a sense of the level of publicity I would achieve, for example, by sending a message in the chat. While I appear in the chat with a name or pseudonym, by sending emoticons, it is possible to send a reaction to everyone in an anonymous way. The emoticons, especially in connection with the sounds created by some of them – for example, a sound of

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[114] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 42.
[115] Ibid., p. 40.
[116] The situation and further description have already been done in chapter *3.1.1. Demarcation of the Theatrical Public Sphere*
[117] Thus, apart from the Nineties introduction described in chapter *3.2.1 Interfacing Proximity in Distance* and chapter *6. Appendix: Internship Reflection on Research Component* plus the individual artistic performances as for example *Darkroom*

applause plus cheering by sending clapping hands – also evokes the presence of others. Although this can be deceptive since a single person alone could tend to cause a lot of noise in the sense of mass emoticons, this can of course be checked against the participant number. In my own behaviour as well as that of others, I often noticed ripples in the use of emoticons. After a moment of silence, sending a "green rose" emoticon, for example, would trigger the sending of many green roses, which were then mixed with clapping hands, black kittens and furthermore. Making noise and covering the chat or the whole virtual space with emoticons enjoyed great popularity. Sometimes the sending became so out of hand that the reaction bar had to be deactivated by the programmer for preventing overload.

Through the chat, it became clear which language group was most represented that evening. Even though almost all the performances as well as the announcements by the Nineties team were in English, most of the chat was in Dutch, which is why longer conversations were sometimes inaccessible to me as a German and English speaker. However, I was aware and understood enough that the chat was mainly about drawing attention to one's own presence. Many of the messages included a form of greeting to the group, in the sense of a "hello", "hoe gaat het?" or "when do we start?". In some cases, it was evident that people seemed to meet in a more personal way, as if they knew each other, for example by addressing each other by name and asking how they were feeling. But this, of course, was always done under everyone's eyes, so no deeper, more intimate conversations were to be expected.

Based on these observations about the forms of interaction, as well as the way in which these possibilities of interaction were used, I would like to conclude that the role of theatregoers in this space was to create publicity by acting in the chat and sending emoticons, as well as by representing themselves as part of a participation number. The foyer as a space was staged to give the individual visitor a sense of how many people they assembled with. The feeling one receives is at the same time one oneself creates. Starting with one's own representation in numbers, the performativity of the public sphere can be traced. In Butler's sense, the participation number is at the same time "the process of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting"[118].

The second frame I would like to examine in more detail takes place in the post-performance of the Nineties Lab. After the artistic performance, one could move freely through the entire Nineties universe. Except for two rooms, one entered each room with both participant video and microphone. Some, however, were restricted in the sense that only a certain number of

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[118] Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 63.

people could be seen through webcam. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, on Ohyay it is possible to show only twenty people with webcam and microphone at the same time without burdening the individual server. Secondly, some of the designs of the virtual rooms did not allow for an infinite number of participants, as otherwise spatial and perspective arrangements would not have been visually possible.

So, the most used interface in the post-performance was the participant video including microphone. Despite this same form of interfacing, there were big differences in how much the different spaces were encountered and used. Yannick said to me about halfway through Nineties Lab that it was noticeable that the three bars were always very empty. Instead, it was outstanding that especially the disco and the campfire were always highly frequented, and people stayed there for several hours. From my observation, this can be explained by two reasons. First, I hypothesise its relation to the clarity around the role´s task in a certain frame. In the disco, the task and reason for coming together is clear: dancing. In the virtual world, this is possible in different ways. On the one hand, I can dance in my private, analogue room. I can do this in front of the camera, but I can also dance out of the webcam perspective or turn it off completely. Another option, which the analogue room does not offer, is to let my participant video dance. You can think of it as moving my participant video with my mouse cursor to the rhythm of the music. In the disco there is the possibility to move it horizontally, also vertically, so that the video becomes smaller in perspective, or you can also rotate it. In the Disco I am also able to send emoticons and select them according to the performance or DJ set.[119] The campfire, on the other hand, established itself as a popular spot for post-performance programme: At the cheesy campfire song evening, Yannick and the programmer Marcel sang various pop songs on their guitars. The theatregoers who could be seen joined in, some sitting in front of their computers with their own instruments, bobbing along or listening. Between the individual songs, short conversations developed between everyone, for example when it came to deciding on the next song. These conversations took place by everyone who was present with webcam and microphone simply talking to each other. Some of them, but also those who were not present with video due to the full number of participant spots, wrote messages that they sent via the page in a similar way to the emoticons. On another evening, Ibelisse Guardia Ferragutti, artist of the band Silverbones who also calls herself a shamanic practitioner and spiritual activist coming from Bolivia and Brazil, read her tarot cards to the audience around the virtual campfire. She also initiated conversations between the people sitting there. She asked people about their

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[119] See Appendix 6.1 Figure 7, p. 50.

experiences in the performance today or reacted to things she detected in the background of one´s video. In both spaces just described – the campfire and the disco – the possibilities for interaction were not only predetermined or moderated on a technical level, but also in terms of content. It gave a reason to gather in these spaces and led to people staying there longer and perhaps even participating in activities and conversations. This was different in the bar,[120] where people looked in briefly but then also disappeared again quickly, although one would think that the purpose of a bar is rather clear in terms of drinking and talking. However, something seemed to have been lost in translation from the analogue to the online space. Explaining this loss in comparison to the other two spaces the disco as well as the campfire aimed at a gathering of different people, while the bar appeared as a space for more private conversations at tables of two or three. However, this possibility of more private conversation was prevented by the public setting. Although there was even the possibility of whispering with one person, so that one could only hear each other, one felt constantly exposed on a visual level. Hence, after a Nineties visit, my friends and I would usually switch to another video call platform like *Zoom* after sitting around the campfire, dancing in the disco, or listening to the follow-up conversation. This seemed to us being a more private setting, like in offline theatre changing to our favourite bar, or one´s kitchen, where we talked about the play in more detail and eventually drifted into more private conversations. This observation leads to my second point to answer the question, why some spaces and frames were more adopted for interactions of theatregoers than others. Nineties virtual theatre is a space for assembly within a certain framework. A more private frame must be staged for it to be accepted and played in by theatregoer as such. And in general, it should be noted that the staging of pre- and post-performance in the sense of a spectacle also needs an occasion that emerges in the form of a framing of the interaction possibilities in terms of content and technology. Regarding the bar, for example, Anne Maike and Yannick later considered having a bartender. This would have had the possibility to initiate conversations and take on a similar moderating function as Ibelisse.

For the audience member in the role of the theatregoer this means that their tasks can vary but are always linked to the staging of the setting on both the content and formal level. Regarding my question of how autopoietic feedback loops are generated through role changes, it should be noted that the pre- and post-performance in its entirety becomes a role reversal. The external event is the stage for the audience: They become the performers and play the places. At the same time, however, this is dependent on the theatrical framework provided by the theatre

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[120] See Appendix 6.1. Figure 8, p. 50.

makers of Nineties in terms of technical forms of interfacing as well as content. The clearer the individual framing of the spaces, the easier it is for the theatregoers performing in them, appropriating their rules and, in a next step, even changing them. Whether we can speak of an autopoietic feedback loop within pre- and post-performance in Fischer-Lichte's sense is questionable since it mainly concerns the relationship between spectator and actor. Nineties virtual world as an external event thus focuses on an aspect that has received little attention so far: the relationship between the individual audience members. How relationships and dynamics can be theoretically grasped here is an interesting research question worth pursuing further in the context of another research project.

5. Conclusion: Online Theatre as a Field of Experimentation for the Assembly

Since its emergence in ancient Greece, the European theatre has been understood and designated as a place of assembly which special mediality lies in the bodily co-presence of actor and spectator.

"Theatre is the site not only of 'heavy' *bodies* but also of a *real gathering*, a place where a unique intersection of aesthetically organized and everyday real life takes place. In contrast to other arts, which produce an object and/or are communicating through media, here the aesthetic act itself (the performing) as well as the reception (the theatre going) take place as a real doing in the here and now. Theatre means collectively spend and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing and the spectating takes place."[121]

The worldwide Corona Pandemic has had the consequence that this very collectively inhaled air becomes a danger, made us in this regard highly privileged Europeans experiencing interdependency on another level and thus not only plunges the theatrical assembly into a crisis. For the art form of performance though, this crisis can also be seen as a moment of decision[122] since it brings to the fore long-standing questions about the socio-political relevance of theatre. After all, in this study and with the involvement of Christoph Balme and Judith Butler, European theatre has been identified beginning on its institutional level as anything but an inclusive and public sphere. In addition, and on a performative level, there is a great power imbalance and difference in attention economies between spectator and actor. This already begins with the darkening and silencing of the auditorium, which raises the question of how a real co-creation of the event in the form of tangible interdependencies can be brought about. Yet the theatrical assembly as an intermediate state, which makes the relationship between actor and spectator transparent, has precisely this as its goal.

Hence, online theatre offers the chance focusing on this again, facilitating and evoking up to rehearsing to assemble despite physical distance. Answering the research question how to assembly in online theatre, it foremost enables us to look at the phenomena of physical proximity, presence, liveness and autopoietic feedback loop, which are associated with the theatrical assembly in relation to its constitution from a different perspective.

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[121] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 2015, 6. Auflage), p. 17.

[122] See Robert E. Mitchell, *Bioart and the Vitality of Media* (Seattle, UNITED STATES: University of Washington Press, 2010), p. 17f.

Thereby, digital ethnography as a methodology makes it possible focusing on practices instead of preconceived definitions used in theory and common parlance. Rather, it became clear that the assembly in online theatre produces new phenomenologies through its translation into the digital enhancing those conventional categories of describing social interaction in cyberspace that are no longer sufficient. Hence, we are facing the task to describe the relationship of people in the digital as well as their connection with technology. Here, too, digital ethnography opens promising possibilities and powerful methods for "showing how forms of technologically mediated sociality shape and are shaped by the contemporary context."[123]

While the assembly in the online theatre leads us to question normative practices and ontological definitions, it simultaneously confronts the artists with the task of developing new staging strategies producing its unique mediality in terms of autopoietic feedback loops making interdependency tangible. On an artistic level this task creates promising approaches in translating and facilitating these phenomena in the digital, which were found in my case study, the Performance Lab of the collective Nineties Productions and their collaborators.

In the sense of the theatrical assembly, staging strategies were elaborated creating the relevance of the event, different forms of interfacing and the feeling of proximity in distance. A suitable staging strategy for the Nineties Lab turned out to be the process of roles reversals, which goes hand in hand with the change of frames. Online theatre enables different forms of appearance through the many possibilities of interaction through interfacing, which are interdependent with different possibilities of action in the sense of tasks and roles. In addition to the inherent experience of changing roles in the medium of online theatre, it is also possible within the performances to shake up the relationship between audience and actor through participatory staging, which directs the focus at this moment to the constitution of the assembly itself.

Lastly, the study revealed that theatrical assembly cannot be reduced solely to performance, which became visible especially through analysing the theatrical public sphere and through exploring the virtual world of Nineties in my second case study. Therefore, the external event, in the form of pre- and post-performances, receives a new focus and significance through online theatre. Especially the role of the audience is in the foreground requiring a design of the theatre as a place of assembly and worth further scientific and artistic attention.

Conclusively, the digital offers a variety of technical possibilities creating the environment for the assembly and experimenting with it. Additionally, the institutional sphere is also brought to

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[123] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds. A Handbook of Method*, p. 12.

bear by the wide reach of online theatre in the field of tension between the public sphere, the theatrical public sphere, and temporary theatrical assembly.

Beyond the focus of the present research, it is promising to apply my results in exploring the question, how communities can emerge from these temporary intermediate states of assembly in online theatre through the experience of interdependencies. In combination with the question of exclusion mechanisms and ritualized practices, the theatre therefore could be additionally negotiated in its social site.

Thinking this further, it would also be interesting applying the observations regarding the question of the "fusion of the aesthetics and the social"[124] in theatre to other areas of political and social life. Especially in the context of the ongoing digitalization, it appears valuable to apply the strategies found in theatre to social and political assemblies in the digital. Or the other way around: to examine social and political assemblies in the digital in terms of theatrical staging strategies. Viewed through this lens, I remember the assembly in online theatre above all as an experimental field and laboratory for overall social processes in the digital realm that should remain and be harnessed beyond pandemic times.

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[124] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 55.
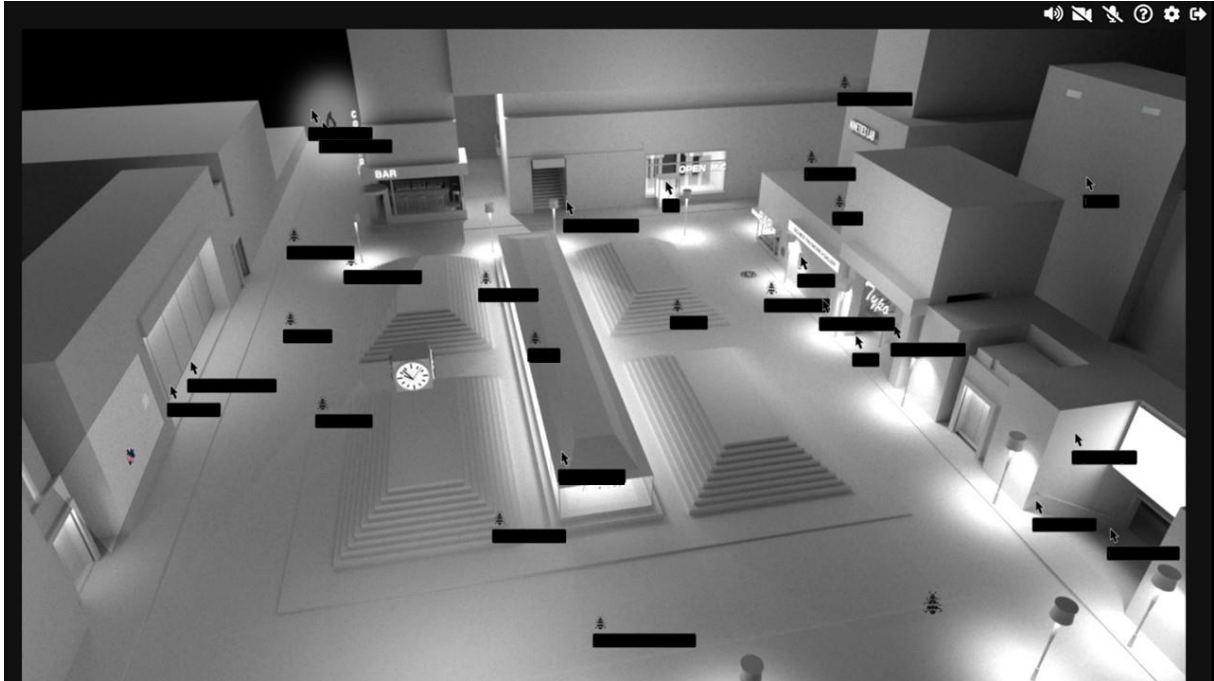
6. Appendix

6.1. Figures

Figure 1: NinetiesProduction. Performances Nineties Production Lab. 03/27/2021
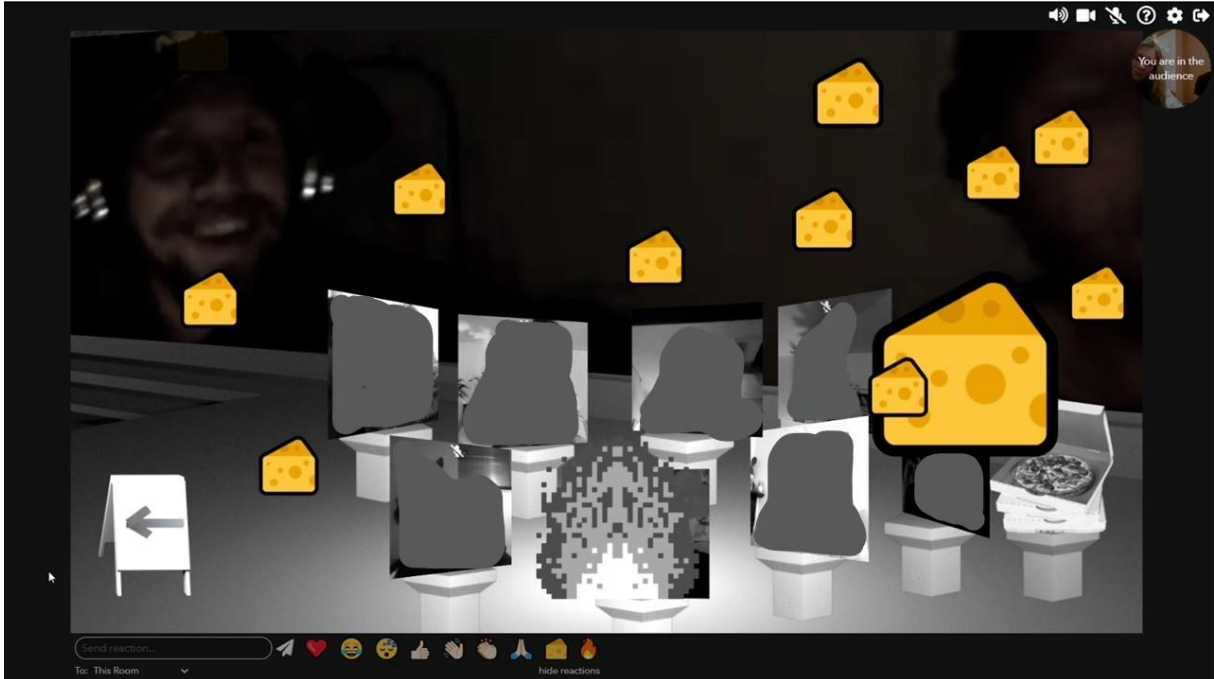*Comment: The names of the cursors have been censored in this screenshot for anonymity reasons*

Figure 2: NinetiesProduction. Performances Nineties Production Lab. 03/27/2021
Comment: The names of the cursors have been censored in this screenshot for anonymity reasons

Figure 3: NinetiesProduction. Performances Nineties Production Lab. 03/27/2021
Comment: The picture of the theatregoers have been censored in this screenshot for anonymity reasons
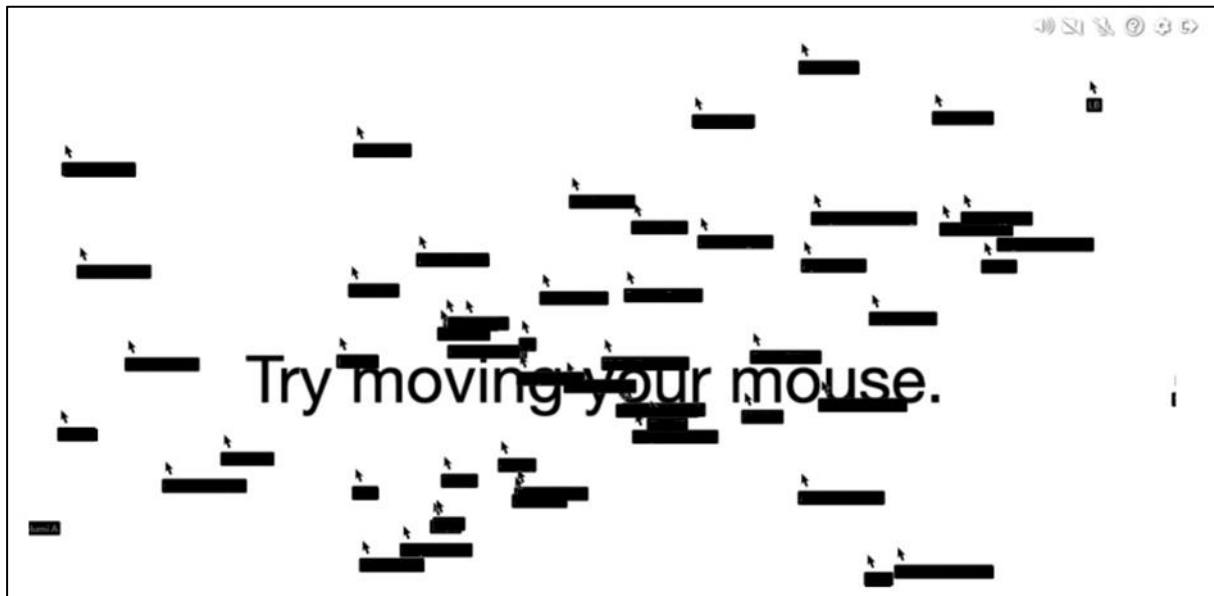

Figure 4: NinetiesProduction. Performances Nineties Production Lab. 03/27/2021.
Comment: The names of the cursors have been censored in this screenshot for anonymity reasons
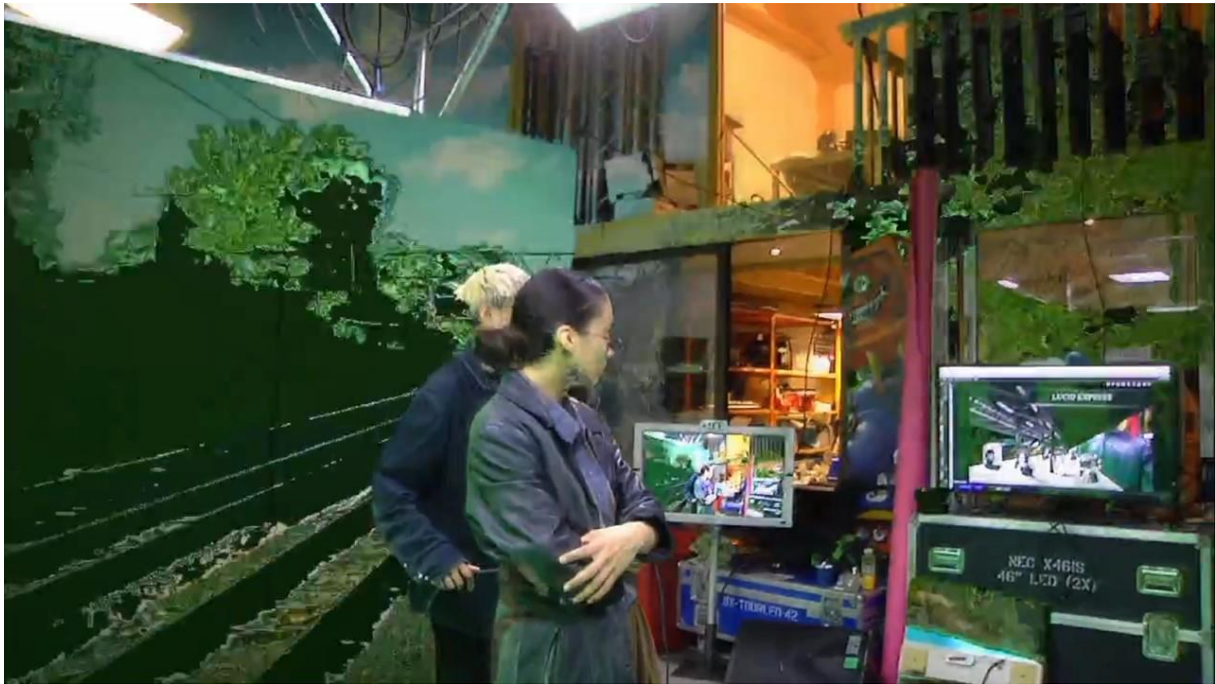
Figure 5: NinetiesProduction. Performances Nineties Production Lab. Lucinda Wessel and Hows of Norms, "Lucid Express", 04/01/2021.

 Figure 6: NinetiesProduction. Performances Nineties Production Lab. Lucinda Wessel and Hows of Norms, "Lucid Express", 04/01/2021.
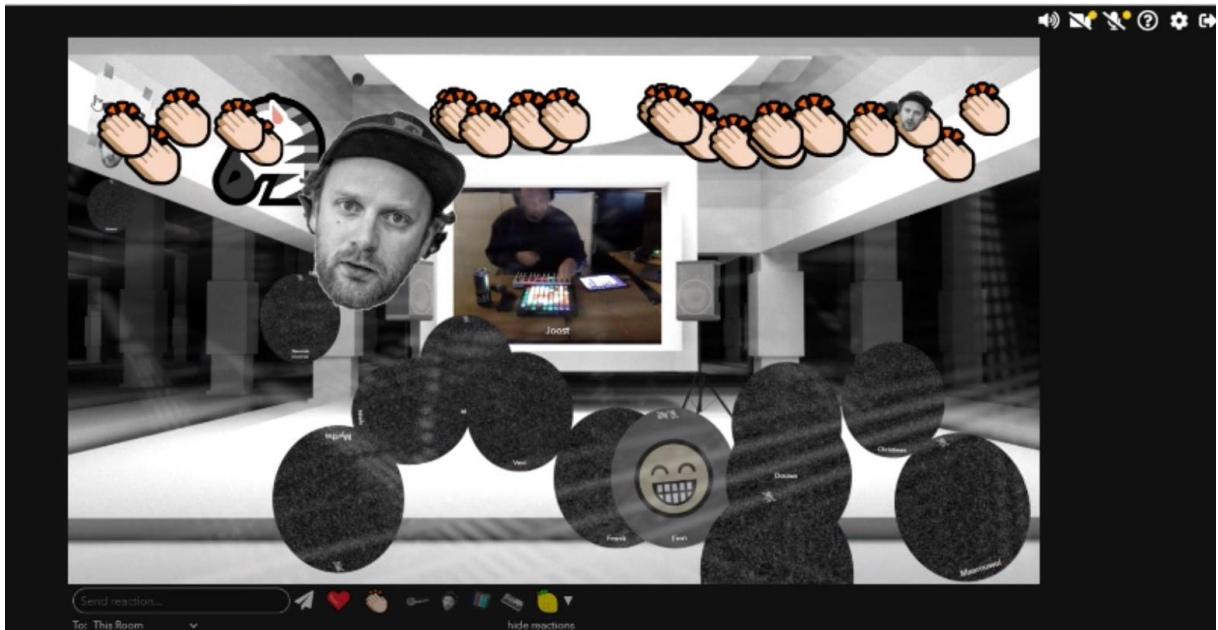
Figure 7: NinetiesProduction. Performances Nineties Production Lab. 03/27/2021.

Figure 8: NinetiesProduction. Performances Nineties Production Lab. 03/27/2021.

6.2. Internship Reflection on Research Component

The analysis of the Nineties Intro, which took place weekly before the artistic performances, is an excerpt from the internship report I wrote at the end of my work at the Nineties Lab as part of the "Arts and Society" master course at Utrecht University.

1. Introduction: socialising in the distance through digital theatre

The Corona pandemic has acted as a catalyst in many societal areas. It has, for example, made injustices even more obvious or disclosed our habits and seemingly self-evident ways of life, as these could not be practised anymore or had to be plied in a restricted, different, or due to the circumstances more worried ways. This also affected our habits and thus our understanding and definition of social interaction. Since the virus is transmitted through physical contact and corporal proximity, people all over the world were encouraged or even obligated by the government to engage in "social distancing". Thereby, it should be mentioned that "social distancing" as an option is first and foremost a privilege. It presupposes, for example, a profession that can be conducted from home and is still well paid. In general, it requires a home in the first place offering space to distance oneself and to live there comfortably and safely for a longer period. In addition, access to social and digital media has been a privilege as well since the beginning of the pandemic, as it made communication with the outside world and other people possible as a safe means of encounter. This last observation also reveals the limited understanding of social interaction that emerges from the term "social distancing" since it links the social with physical co-presence, meaning sharing a common physical place at the same time. An understanding that sociologist Steffen Mau criticises in his guest article at the German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel*. He distinguishes between physical and social presence and suggests "distant socialising"[125] as a more appropriate name for the current situation and task. According to him, we practise social presence since decades by living in far-distance relationships, communicating via letters, chats, or mobile phones. All remains possible despite physical absence.[126]

Conclusively, it becomes clear that we currently use physical co-presence as a synonym for interpersonal relations. Following Mau, however, it is only one of many forms of relations. At the same time, it must be emphasised and acknowledged as a special one since we have probably been practising physical co-presence as a form of interpersonal relation by far the longest

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[125] Steffen Mau, "Social Distancing Ist Irreführend, Es Gibt Einen Passenderen Begriff," Der Tagesspiegel, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/unterschied-zwischen-physischer-und-sozialer-naehe-social-distancing-ist-irrefuehrend-es-gibt-einen-passenderen-begriff/25699794.html.
[126] Ibid., las accessed on 06/15/2020.

and it has been therefore the most habitual. Concurrently, many other forms of relations are emerging or reinforcing during the pandemic, mainly in the digital space. The digital realm is an interesting field to explore social interaction, as Tom Boellstorff already stated in his book *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*. Here "we find novel possibilities for human culture, even as we discover continuities with long-standing physical world conventions and practices."[127] In combination with theatre, which is theoretically often defined as a place of corporal co-presence as well, the digital theatre offers an endless space for experimenting with forms of distant socialising.

In my internship report, I will explore digital theatre as a place of distant relations through my experiences and observations at the Nineties Production Lab. As the subject of my research, I will focus on the performative introduction of Nineties Production that ran before each weekly performance. Based on my observation regarding the understanding of social togetherness and theatre being based on bodily co-presence, I would like to examine a dramaturgical strategy which was found in the introduction to make the gathering of bodies present in the digital performance and therefore, created a form of relation between the individual spectators and performers. In doing so, I would like to hypothesise that bodily co-presence as a form of relation can be translated into digital theatre through the staging of interfacing.

First, I will discuss the definition of physical co-presence as well as interfacing as forms of relation. Subsequent I am going to relate this to my case study by exploring the question of how the presence of the audience becomes apparent to all spectators.

Afterwards I examine the special quality of interfacing as a form of relation based on my case study and bring it together regarding the tension between proximity and distance.

Third, I am going to distinguish the interactive potential in the moment of staged interfacing from that of physical co-presence.

Finally, I will summarise my results in a short conclusion and apply them to my initial research question. In addition, I will give an outlook on further research questions regarding my master's thesis, which deals with assembly in digital theatre.

As my methodology I primarily apply situational analysis exploring the performative introduction of Nineties Production Lab. Situational analysis is a methodology invented by Adele Clark which provides the opportunity to view the selected scenes against their contextual backgrounds and my theoretical framework to find out which dramaturgical decisions create the situation

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[127] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds. A Handbook of Method*, p. 1.

and vice versa.[128] For this, I rely on my memo protocols, which I respectively conducted after witnessing the different performances.

2. Forms of relation: physical co-presence and interfacing

I will start with a little anecdote from the rehearsal process of my internship. During lunch, I was discussing with Yannick from Nineties Production and the video technician the development of digital interfaces. Specifically, we talked about the computer mouse, which is connected to the little arrow we use to move around the computer screen. The technician invited us to play a mind game: We should imagine that after all life on earth is destroyed, aliens only find a functioning computer and a mouse. What would they conclude about humans, their bodies, and their behaviour from these findings? They might think that humans only had two fingers for example.

The computer mouse was invented 1968 by Engelbart Douglas and "could be stated as the start of true ´human computer interaction´"[129] and therefore the start of interfacing, which can be broadly defined as this very moment. Through the mouse, the computer and humans come together. Thereby, the interface is basically the interface between these two bodies:

"The equilibrium of the interface is a balancing of forces that press against it from all sides, drawn from the entities that it divides. To produce equilibrium, the interface seeks out differential condition where bodies come into contact. It defines and channels those differences as at once opposing and reconciled within a moment of equilibration."[130]

Therefore, the interface tells us and is linked to our human bodies as well as to the computer machine. Additionally, the computer machines serve in respect of my case study to connect us with other humans and therefore, human bodies. Conclusively it seems worthy to juxtapose the experience of physical co-presence with being together through the interface of a digital space. Thereby and first of all, the question appears how the human´s presence becomes apparent in the digital?

In this chapter, I want to explore this comparison as a staging strategy for translating bodily co-presence by means of the intro of Nineties Production. Thereby, I would like to propose the

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[128] Göde Both, "Praktiken Kartografieren. Was Bringt Clarkes Situational Analysis Für Praxeografien?," in *Methoden Einer Soziologie Der Praxis*, ed. Franka Schäfer, Anna Daniel, and Frank Hillebrandt (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), p. 121.

[129] Prashan Premaratne, *Human Computer Interaction Using Hand Gestures* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2014), p. 1.

[130] Hookway, *Interface*, p. 64.

hypothesis that the staging strategy works as a deconstruction in terms of visualizing the interface of computer human interaction.

Starting with the question, why physical co-presence can be stated as a form of relation I want to look at theatre science, especially Erika Fischer-Lichte´s theory regarding the aesthetic of performances. She states that bodily co-presence is the reason for the specific mediality of performance.[131] The importance of bodily co-presence producing this specific mediality is linked to the hence emerging so-called *autopoietic feedback loop* which describes the relationship between spectators and actors. This is a reciprocal one as "[b]oth the other spectators a well as the actors perceive and, in turn, respond to these reactions. The action on stage thus gains or loses intensity; the actors´ voices get louder and unpleasant or, alternatively, more seductive; they feel animated."[132] Resulting from this, Erika Fischer-Lichte even states the autopoietic feedback loop as the key role in enhancing a temporary community.[133] From these analyses I conclude that Fischer-Lichte covers bodily co-presence within theatre as a form of relation between the audience among themselves and the actors.

In digital theatre on online platforms this relationship is not a foregone conclusion as audience and spectators do not share the same physical space. Sometimes they do not even share the same time. So, for example during several performance of the Nineties Lab there was a 16 second delay to increase the streaming quality. However, in the intro this was not necessary. Conclusively, time plays a minor role in this analysis.

As the term already anticipates, it had the goal of introducing the audience. It was an introduction to this digital space, to the other, physical distant spectators and to the performance. The question arises how the audience could become aware of the presence of other audience members. Due to this, finding a translation for physical co-presence in the digital played a major role during the Nineties' preparation. At this point I would like to describe my own personal experience regarding a moment of the audience´s emergence within the Nineties´ intro in order to analyse it thereupon:

I sit on my bed during the intro or at my desk on another night. Before that, I have already been able to click through the entrance area of the virtual world of Nineties Production. This has been built on the ohyay platform, which was recently founded and released. Having already turned on my camera and microphone to show my tickets, I now find myself in a new digital

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[131] See Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 39.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid., p. 51.

room which is apparently a streaming-only space. I can not turn on my camera and microphone in this one.

Sentences and questions in black letters start appearing on the white page addressing me directly. They welcome me to this page… this space… this place.[134] They address me as "you", which simultaneously refers to a "we" and a "me". This is significant since at the beginning of this intro the other spectators seem very far away. I witnessed their presence before, for example via participant videos[135] while standing in the virtual entrance line showing my ticket or in the open chat in the so-called foyer. However, since at the beginning of the intro there are no signs that interaction or participation via the usual digital channels - via video and microphone - is possible, I feel isolated from the other viewers in front of my computer and thus individually addressed. It creates a feeling of being thrown back on oneself. These feeling changes when the black letters – behind which is the Nineties performer Yannick - ask me to move my cursor and only a moment later it scurries on my screen. Many small black cursors
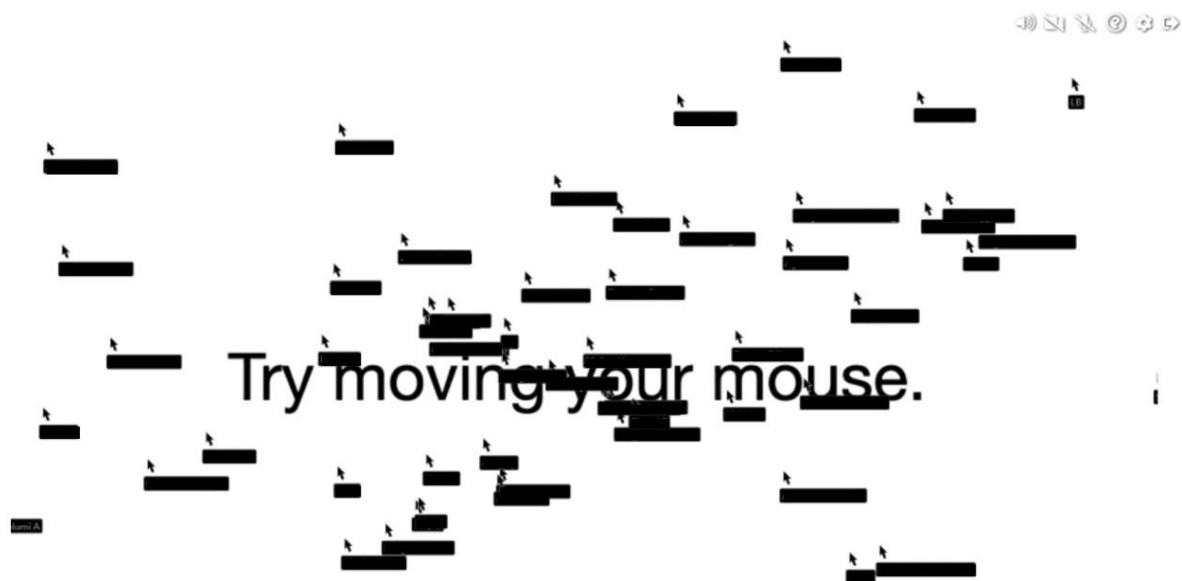
@Nineties Production[136]

start moving over the white page. Next to each cursor is the corresponding name. At first it is not so easy detecting my own cursor in the crowd and I find myself pulling it to the outer edge of the page, away from it. However, soon I take pleasure in rushing back in, moving around,

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[134] A free quote from my memory protocol about the intro from the collective Nineties Production on 04/24/21

[135] I call participant videos the live videos recorded by the individual computer cameras that are already known through video call platforms such as Zoom or Skype. The ohyay platform offers a lot of scope to arrange these videos. It is possible to arrange them in perspective horizontally, vertically or on a 3D plane, so that the impression of a virtual space is enhanced.

[136] NinetiesProduction, *Performances Nineties Production Lab*. The names of the cursors have been blacked out by me for reasons of anonymity.

looking for cursors whose names seem familiar and follow the further tasks that continue to be conveyed to me via the written sentences.

Translating physical co-presence into digital space within this intro, the most familiar form of computer human interaction is made visible: interfacing through mouse, recognizable by the movement of cursors. The peculiarity of this dramaturgical strategy is that not only my own cursor is visible, but of all the people who are also on this page at that very moment. Because even though it is probably common in World Wide Web to incidentally visit the same website at the same time with others, these pages usually suggest me to be there alone as they do not make this kind of information transparent. By making all cursors visible that are on the same page at the same time, the page becomes a space in which proximity and distance can be translated, movement and mass can be perceived. Through the internalized use of the mouse, as the most common interface for computer and human, I as a viewer automatically conclude from the cursor in combination with the name to an associated human body and person, who sits just like me in front of their computer and with whom I perceive to share the same digital space despite great physical distance at this moment. Thus, it can be summarized that a form of relation is created through the enactment of interfacing, in this case by making collective interfacing visible during the same time on the same page. Therefore, it is a translation of physical co-presence as a form of relation into the digital. Which properties interfacing as a form of relation contains will be further explored in the next chapter.

3. Interfacing: a paradoxical relationship between proximity and distance

After our cursors started moving, Nineties again asks us via the path of written instructions to gather in the centre, then pair up and eventually form a circle. From the outside, small choreographies emerge based on the movements, the playfulness with proximity and distance of our cursors. The written letters comment on our doing with "This feels kinda good. In a weird way." I am asking myself why it feels good as I perceive a similar feeling, although I practically do nothing more than pointing my cursors at other cursers.

Within this chapter, I would like to get to the bottom of this triggered feeling by examining the question of how the form of relation that is created through staged interfacing can be described.

Thereby I want to state the hypothesis that it emerges out of a paradoxical tension between proximity and distance.

That feels kinda good,
in a weird way.
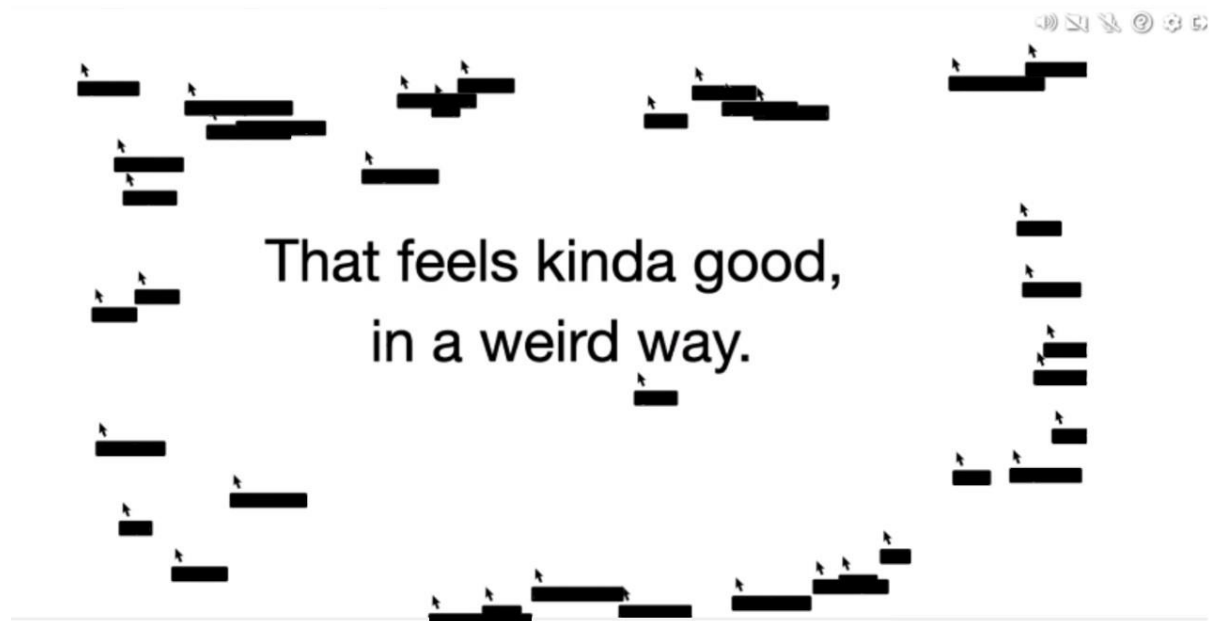
@Nineties Production[137]

Here I would like to draw on Branden Hookway´s theory about interfaces relating it to this experience. If we consider the staging of interfaces in digital theatre as a translation of bodily co-presence, it is interesting to note that the paradox of meeting in the digital room /space as being simultaneously near and far from each other is already inherent in the interface as its specific quality. Following Hookway´s definition of interfacing, it is a "coupling of the processes of holding apart and drawing together, of confining and opening up, of disciplining and enabling, of excluding and including."[138] As this moment of sharing the same digital space is enabled by an interface which facilitates "interaction between two entities that would otherwise be unable to communicate with each other"[139], it has an impact on its quality of relation.

I, as a participating person in this intro, feel close and distant to the other people at the same time. Placing oneself close to another person's cursor creates an effect of closeness that I can relate to from memories of moments of physical co-presence. At the same time, our cursors are not our bodies, and we are physically miles apart, otherwise it would be probably kind of uncomfortable and inappropriate to place oneself so close to another person or associated with much more shame and insecurity. Therefore, the paradox inherent in interfacing as a form of

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[137] Ibid.
[138] Hookway, *Interface*, p. 4.
[139] Maria Chatzichristodoulou et al., *Interfaces of Performance* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), p. 1.

relationship explains the good and at the same time strange feeling that Nineties describes and that I, as a viewer, also experienced.

Additionally, this moment of togetherness also transports the fluidity of relations, which can also be viewed through the lens of interfaces. Hookway emphasizes, that "[t]he concept of the interface was developed for use in the field of fluid dynamics."[140] Conclusively, it is traceable that the quality of fluidity, of transience, is also reflected in the effect or perception of the relationship between the two entities as "to engage an interface is also to become a constituent element within a kind of fluidity."[141] Becoming aware of temporality of relationships through staging interfaces as fluid dynamics can also be compared once again to the specific relationship that develops in the theater, which Erika Fischer-Lichte describes as "short-lived, transient, theatrical communities"[142], which are "particularly relevant for an aesthetic of the performative."[143] So again, the translation of physical co-presence into digital theater through the staging of interfacing offers valuable opportunities and chances to translate characteristic phenomena of theatre into the digital realm. At the same time, it is not just a translation in terms of a copy, but rather more an extension of theatrical experiences through new modes of perceiving proximity and distance between each other.

4. Possibilities of interaction in staged Interfacing

The fluidity also plays a role for exploring interactive potentials of interfacing as a staging strategy. The fluidity of the encounter becomes clear to me once again when I realize that the duration of the relationship and the joint interaction are only in my power to a very limited extent.

During the intro of Nineties, this becomes especially clear as all the spectators are asked to paint on the white page. This works similarly to the image editing software *Paint*. Collective paintings emerge on the white page, created from brush strokes of all colours executed by different cursors. Several paintings are made, which are erased again and again in between by Nineties. The artist collective describes this again by communicating with the audience via writing as possibilities of humans to begin again and again from the scratch. I, as a spectator and participator, became especially aware in these moments of sudden deletion of the painted pictures that

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[140] Hookway, *Interface*, p. 5.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 55.
[143] Ibid.

I have little influence within this framework. That my connection with the others and the platform is clearly predetermined and can be stopped at any time. This is reflected in the fact that the painting is very hectic because it is not clear how much time remains until the image is deleted again.

This limitation of interfacing enabling the interaction of two entities, is also described by Hookaway:

"If used as a form of communication between these entities, the role of the interface would be limited to the translation or transmission of that which its bounding entities project into it. While the specific means of this communication belong to the interface, the interface would otherwise always refer back to its bounding entities."[144]

The interface and especially the entity that built the interface determines the possibilities of interaction. Here, the physical co-presence allows for more room to manoeuvre, which, due to social codes and norms, also prescribes ways of acting that are rarely broken. Nevertheless, there is always the knowledge of the potential to expand the possibilities of interaction and thereby destabilizing the hierarchy between actors and spectators. Erika Fischer-Lichte attributes this to the possibility of physical touch within theatre, which has the power "to destabilize the binary relationship between reality and fiction, public and intimate"[145] and thereby "offer[ing] a chance to move beyond established spheres of communication and into new experimental realms."[146] This possibility of being physical co-present eludes the actors' power in analogue theatre. It can be attempted to be reduced using technology or codes of conduct, but it always remains. In digital theatre, it is a choice to leave room for it through the way the interface is programmed. Finally, however, it should be noted that more interaction does not necessarily mean a higher quality of relationship since Steve Dixon foremost describes that every art is interaction between spectator and artwork. He distinguishes between different categories of interaction, emphasising that the hierarchisation of these categories does not equate to quality, but simply refers to more interaction.[147] The choice of a medium level of interaction during the intro allows the artists to better orchestrate the direction of the wished perception and the audience to get to know this new space in an introductory way. Building on this, it would be possible in perspective to give the audience more freedom in interaction without overburdening them.

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[144] Hookway, *Interface*, p. 8.
[145] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, p. 63.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Dixon, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*, p. 561.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the staging of interfacing evokes, reflects, and effects moments of social distancing, especially in the context of the pandemic, in which, due to the avoidance of physical contact, the communication of people must be impeded or redirected. As a dramaturgical strategy for translating physical co-presence into the digital realm, it mostly works by making modes and qualities of interfacing visible and therefore new experienceable for the audience. It reveals the paradox perception of being near and far at the same time, as well as the quality of fluidity of this relationship. Furthermore, and by analysing the programming of the interface, it is possible to find out which idea of participation and interaction between spectators and actors is desired by the producers during a performance. The more self-determined interaction the interface allows the more possibilities there are for destabilisation. Unlike in the theatre of physical co-presence, this relationship can be determined more precisely and specifically in advance.

In a further step, it would be interesting to examine a more differentiated social phenomenon of interaction, which is based on physical co-presence, for its nature in digital theatre. In my master's thesis, I will therefore investigate the possibilities and opportunities of assembly in digital theatre.

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