

Strada-Internet or Internet on the street¹

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I began to be interested in the relations between theater and technology, and the imaginary which is bound to it, at the beginning of the 80s.

I already had a long experience of street theater as a "street narrator", and I had deepened popular culture's variations. At a certain point, I realized that the popular imagination that I was engaged in, and the forms with which I expressed myself in the street, even though successful did not illustrate the times in which I lived. What was formerly expressed in fables, street tales, popular theater, now took the form of comic strips, television and science fiction.

I also chose to work in the street to find an audience untouched by the vices of the bourgeois theatre's public: it was a political and esth-ethical choice. It is with this same political intention that I then began to get involved in the use of technologies in the theater. Since the first experiments with video in clubs, and with "electronic" music in the street until the current phase of net theater research, my intention has always been to mix the good parts of popular culture with new communication technologies used in a creative and unconventional way. But it is also to react to its use by techno-artists, which is too often auto-referential, based on an ideology of miraculous technology. In this article, I illustrate in a broad outline, some stages of my research, by trying to give a description of it rather than a commentary, so that the reader can get a theoretical idea of it.

1982/85 Lo Zampognaro Galattico

Lo Zampognaro Galattico was a street performance (which was also given in bars, on the occasion of holidays, or in schools) of a variable duration. I used an electronic drum kit connected to loudspeakers fixed on a rucksack, which constituted the basis of

¹ In E. Quinz (ed.), *Digital performance*, Anomos, Parigi 2001.

the melodies played with the musette. The execution of the pieces served as an excuse to walk around town watching urban elements as if they were unknown things and to collect small objects like an astronaut on an alien planet. I announced i was a B17 replicant with mono-specific programming: to play in the streets of the galaxy. The direct relation with the spectators was deliberately reduced to the minimum, almost cold and distant. I had also mirrored glasses, with lateral protection, which prevented the spectators from seeing my eyes. My costume was inspired by Mœbius's comic strips and I had a real hat of the Foreign Legion. My voice was deformed with effects by a microphone. When it was possible, I also told a story by means of a videotape.

1986/87 Bandamagnaetica

Bandamagnaetica was composed of three elements endowed with multi-functional rucksacks, an electronic drum kit, a saxophone and a trumpet. Flavio Bertozzi, Frank Nemola and I, all proclaimed that we operated actions of acoustic decontamination. The musical repertoire extended from original fragments inspired by futurism to Techno-Beatles.

The effect was very ironic - technological. We had sculptured and colored hair and Ghostbusters type of overalls. Actions in the street were substantially aggressive. We never addressed the public (except in cases of communicating services and alarm calls) and all the actions were addressed to objects. For example we serenaded a bicycle. The language used was borrowed from the Futurists.

The amplifying technology that I had on the back was the best available at the time (a better relation between miniaturization and power). The musical basis on which Frank and Flavio played, if it was not generated by the electronic drum kit, was played with a Sony mini - player and it was all composed with a computer. From 1986 till 1987 we played on many occasions either in the street or in other places, we were invited to several television and radio shows. We produced a mini-album and a theatrical spectacle, Vita in tempo di sport, which transferred on stage this street experience.

1989/TvTale



The tele-racconto (TV tale) was born initially as a performance of video storytelling for children. Then the experimented "video mechanism" in these occasions showed itself capable of evolving in several directions for the theater and for performances. But how does the tele- racconto work? A camera films short stories of "objects", animated by a narrator, in real time and in a way visible to the spectators. A monitor, or screen (by way of video projection) broadcasts them live, as if it was a powerful magnifying glass, enlarging small actions until it gave them an aesthetic and narrative sense not perceptible before-

hand. Thus is born the "tele-racconto system": through "macro" recording, small objects become characters and the space of a sheet of paper becomes a television studio set with (almost) infinite potentialities.

First Tele-racconto told Hänsel and Gretel's tale, and among the "actors" there was a candy, a cockleshell, five spaghetti and a cracker having a dialogue with little fingers or on the bottom of the palm/cartography of a hand. A small box of tuna was the oven of the witch, and a subtle auto-irony moderated the tragic aspect of told events. Then I told the story of the Little Mermaid with some flowers and a glass of water, and then many other stories until the theatrical version of "Storia di una Gabbianella e del Gatto che the insegnò has volare ". One of the most interesting aspects of Tele -racconto is that it became an instrument used in their performances by a certain number of artists and narrators - such as Vania Pucci of the Giallo Mare Minimal Teatro, or Carlo Presotto of the Teatro della Piccioniaia (I quote here only those that deepened the technique with very personal results). At present there are five strings of development : the narration of sto-

ries for children by a single narrator through the use of objects; the narration of stories for adults through drawings and pictorial signs; the use of the macro take in collective theatrical spectacles, where narration mixes with representation; the creation of scenery for readings poems; the creation of scenery for concerts of classical or contemporary music.

A constant characteristic of any performance which uses this technique is the co-presence on stage of the creator of images and its images. Indeed, Tele- racconto was born to put forward the gap between image and reality as a useful space for creativity. It is moreover fundamental that the spectator sees what the "anima(c)tor" uses to produce these images. The glance of the spectator must be able to ceaselessly run from the object situated under the lens to its metamorphosis on video, and from the video image to the body - face of the performer which creates it.

The experience of these years showed the potentialities of this co-presence on the scene of the bodies of the actors and the electronic images in a live relation to each other. The gap between " three- dimensional - person" and "two- dimensional- object", between the consistency of the body and the immateriality of the image, this exchange on stage clarifies this technologically increased " reality " in which we live.

But so that all this works, it is necessary to produce images in real time and to have actors who are "narrators" capable of looking at the spectators in the eye and of modifying in a evident way the progress of their performance. It is necessary to establish a sort of " techno- commedia- dell arte" capable of showing that the spectator is a "necessary" part of the representation, and where technology is a means which amplifies the contact between stage and public, and not a cage of prerecorded rules and rhythms of little usefulness for the theater.

On 1998 / ... Storie Mandaliche - ZoneGemma

Storie Mandaliche is a still current techno-tale conceived at the same time as the theatrical laboratory of " bio-technological culture" ZoneGemma. It has arisen from my meeting with the multimedia artist Massimo Cittadini, the sound-designer Mauro Lupone, the dramatist Andrea Balzola and the critic - theorist Anna Maria Monteverdi.



Different approaches met with the idea to make theatrical research interact with techno-artistic research (that is the use and experimentation of digital and audiovisual technology), to create interactive events and zones of communication and spectacle. ZoneGemma at present is a nomad laboratory,

open to connections, creative and auto - formative interfaces with other artists, researchers and curious spectators. It considers the fruits of its research (spectacles, performances, installations, events) as the techno-natural sprouts from a collective project. Its motivation is not an ulterior putting forward of new "products" for the theater and art market which is already very saturated, but rather the creation of new modalities, instruments and contexts of communication and spectacle. Indeed, an integral part of the ZoneGemma laboratory is the management of the Techno-Theatre mailing list. A list that tries to put in contact all the Italian artists who are interested in alterations generated by the links between the stage and digital video technology.

The realization of the techno-tale *Storie Mandaliche* began in July, 1998 during the theatrical Festival "Scantafavole" in Ripatransone (AP), during a laboratory open to the public. At the moment we are developing this perspective, with workshops and open rehearsals.

Storie Mandaliche was revived successfully in the shape of a studio in other festivals among which: Invideo, the Triennale Palazzo of Milan; Alveare, Prato's Museo Pecci; and Regio Teatro of Turin. Its first version was based on the interactive "Mandala system" for Amiga computers. This system allowed to integrate objects filmed with a camera, with active backgrounds and objects generated with an Amiga 3000 computer. The Mandala System can be integrated and connected with the "MAX / MSP" software on Mac for an interactive development on sound.

Thus it was possible to show on a screen, two- dimensional environments which reacted, by transforming and by generating sounds, to the touch of the narrator which became thus a cyber- narrator: instead of the drawn canvas we had video (or monitor)-projected images which he transformed according to the real time rhythm, of his tale.

At present *Storie Mandaliche* is in a development and rewriting phase to be turned from the Mandala System to Flash 5.0. In sort, the interactive backgrounds used by the cyber-narrator, can be also visible on the Internet, so as to have an ulterior development of the theatrical story on stage. We thus planned to create an website dedicated to the spectacle.

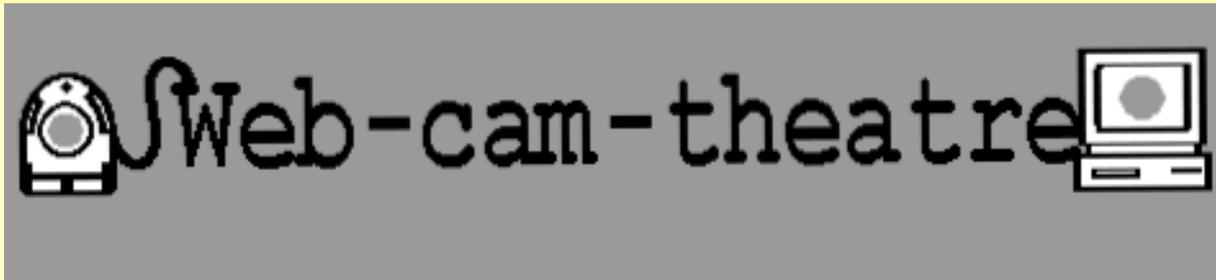
The narrative consists in 7 connected stories: the man-child; the almonds; the black princess; the raven; the white dog; the stone; the hermaphrodite.

Each story's protagonist also appears as a character in the other stories. The idea is that, exploiting the hypertextual potentialities of digital writing, every evening a spectator can decide by which story to begin the spectacle, while the progress of the narration will be determined by the audience's mood, which will should indicate (through a dialogue with the narrator) which direction to follow depending on a hypertextual cross-road.

The "Mandala" Term in sanscrit means " magic" or "mystic" search and it is, according to Jung, the symbol of half the Self as a psychic totality. "Mandalic" representations are universal archetypes and spring out during dream and imaginary activity, in situations characterized by dis orientation and perplexity, typical moods of this period marked by technological alterations which ceaselessly put in question the meanings of identity.

Storie Mandaliche, written for the occasion by Andrea Balzola, speaks exactly about this: of mutating beings and feelings in a world bursting with electronic - emotional connections.

2001/ ...Web - cam Theatre: Conessione Remota



With the use of Web - cams throughout the internet it is possible to see in real time very remote places and people. If we envisage the theater as the co-presence of actors and spectators in the same space-time, and if we consider the planet Earth as a single space-time, then we can use the frames of small images filmed by web - cams as if they were a set.

Doubtless the constraints of a small " global set" are not those of the traditional theater: the purpose of the Web-Cam-Theatre project is to discover them and update them through experimenting either in networks, or with a workshop.

Information about events and the state of development of the research are communicated shared through ZoneGemma's mailing List (TechnoTeatro) and whomsoever is interested can participate in the project with ideas, criticisms and propositions. The used technology is of an easy access, so that whoever, with a minimum computer literacy, can realize his Web - cam - theatre. Conessione Remota is the performance which inaugurated the project and site - www.webcamtheatre.org.

It forms a twofold reception - interaction situation: on stage at Prato's Pecci Museum(see May 25- 26, 2001: CONTEMPORANEA 01 "spectacle and arts for the new generation"), and through the network (another public place was active in Bologna during Digital_is_not_analog.01 the second international festival on net. art, hacktivism and net culture.)

There was also an interaction through a chat with the spectators that attended the performance on the net: they were "paradoxically" more active and "present" than those that attended the live event; besides, the people in chat rooms appeared to the audi-

ence as "characters" of the performance and whatever was said/ written by them took an always interesting dramatic value.

In the live version, we played with the delay echo effects (due to the video signal's slowness when it comes and goes through the network) with the gap between the performer's body and his "distant" image, between live manipulations of objects and the metamorphosis created by the network. There were thus two different points of view of the same performance: on-line and live.

The core of the performance consists of the execution of 10 + 1 small video - actions: Fantastic Worlds; digital Light; The sound of a single hand; Jibe; Advertisement; characters in search of...; Wherever I glance, I read; Cyb- visual- er reflection; My body dissolves; The fourth eye; Epilogue (now I become blind).

During the first 6 videos - actions, I do not go into frame, but I manipulate in front of the web-cam some objects or the " only hand ", and then in the second part, I show my face "masked" by a pair of " virtual- eyes" that hide my eyes and make me look like an underwater submarine, which allows a true "immersion" effect and allows me to always have the computer screen facing me.

I then started again at home. Indeed, since the 15th of June 2001, it is possible to ask for the on- line vision of the performance (on appointment).



There were spectators, having attended the performance on stage, that wanted to see it again on the net. And they announced, to my big satisfaction, that they preferred the Internet version because they felt more involved in the event.

In fact these first experiments confirmed my intuition that it is possible to envisage a " theater with/ for the network ", by taking into account the sensation of community which often bustles on the internet in a deeper way than in many other "material" places. Certainly, it is a different type of community but not for all that less important. Paradoxically I could say that the "magic", created formerly by the "nearness" in the theater, today can be compared to the one created by the "distance" in connection: it is a very similar kind of vertigo. I do not think that the one is better than the other, rather than both are justifiable and moving.

With that, I do not believe the net theater will ever replace the " theater house " (even though some think so) but I think that it will be able to reach the same aesthetic and cognitive quality. In the close future indeed, my intention is to deepen and develop all the possibilities offered by the net theater.

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