Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*

Installation by Jeff Burke
Dialogue recording by Adam Shive & Meg Ferrell

An audio performance of Heiner Müller’s *Hamletmachine* is ripped apart and stored in fifteen pieces by simple digital editing.

In an installation space, every shard is played back simultaneously, its continual loop in time unaffected by the movements of its visitors or the state of any other sound fragment. Several bright lamps at one end of the space cast their light on a long strip of sensors at waist height on the opposing wall. A visitor, who is by action or inaction part of the performance, reveals any or all of these dialogue fragments by casting a shadow on the sensors along the wall. A simple relationship is constructed by a computer hidden from view: the less light on a sensor, the louder its dialogue fragment is played through the speakers in the space. (It doesn't get much simpler than this in “interactive art.”) The darkness of the shadow on a particular sensor controls the volume of its line at that moment without affecting the delivery itself: each sensor contains and reveals its segment of dialogue without quite allowing complete control. The different lengths of each loop ensure that the piece will almost never be the same twice. Standing close to the strip of sensors and far from the lights, one observer-performer can only reveal a few shards of dialogue at a time, but the shadows are deep and therefore the volume of each segment is quite loud. If the person stands closer to the light, they cast a wide shadow across many sensors, revealing all fifteen fragments at once—a cacophony as if the entire play is being performed simultaneously. In between the extremes, ducking below the sensors and extending their hands into the space, or working with another person, the observer-participant can explore many other variations of the same text.

Our tendency to define digital technology’s impact on live performance in terms of particular outputs—as a new source of projection, for example—ignores the underlying nature of the digital. It is an abstract arena for connection-making and memory that can be exploited to create new types of theatrical experience. Unlike other technologies, it easily bridges modalities, allowing direct connections between performer action and sound, stage lighting and audience movement, or a website and video playback on stage, to name a few examples. This capability of dynamically adjusting media based on some measurable phenomenon is applied in this installation performance of *Hamletmachine.* However, much more is possible than what was explored there. Digital technology’s ability to cost-effectively gather information and media from remote locations in “real-time” invites experimentation with the unfiltered context of the world that exists outside of the performance space. And what can be recorded digitally can be remembered and used theatrically: imagine a stage that could watch and learn a performance, like a stage manager, like another actor, like a new type of performer that we can only imagine. The digital is a not simply a new excuse for “multi-media” on stage, though it enables new forms of that technique as well.¹

This production of *Hamletmachine* was shown at the University of California, Los Angeles, at Fusion 2000, an event held simultaneously at UCLA, the Bauhaus University in Weimar, and the University of South Wales, Australia and broadcast over the internet between the three schools. The piece was an installation, not a performance in the traditional sense. Yet, because the technology implicated the visitors’ movement in the control of dialogue, they were drawn into their own performance of the piece as soon they stepped into the space. Indeed, though the dialogue would repeat indefinitely at some infinitesimal volume in a space without observers, only with their shadows would the work be complete.

¹ For more discussion of new uses of digital technology in theater performance, see David Saltz’s article in *Theatre Topics* (Saltz 2001), my own in *Theatre Design & Technology* (Burke 2002), and several recent articles by the MIT Media Lab in the *IBM Systems Journal* (Sparacino 2000).
David Saltz has argued extensively that all participatory computer interactive art is performative but not a performing art. (Saltz 1997) Here, in some cases, I think it has managed to be both. One of the most intriguing experiences to watch was that of the young actor, Adam Shive, who had recorded the dialogue for this piece and had also performed in a previous stage production of *Hamletmachine*. After he discovered the fragment of dialogue associated with each sensor, he moved his body below the line of sensors and used his hands to create a juxtaposition of dialogue based on his own understanding and experience of the piece. His movement was a performance in concert with a dialogue he could not stop or start, but could reveal, hide, or overlap as he moved. It was different for those with less experience with the piece, but their movement, either more timid or more blasé, developed into a dance of discovery that was no less of a performance than Adam’s. This interface of light and shadow to the text of Müller’s well-known work seemed somehow appropriate. It could be played like an instrument by someone having experience with the text, become auditory chaos as many people moved through the space, or reveal itself slowly, haltingly, and always “out of sequence,” to the new visitor. If anything, I wish there had been more time to develop a strong relationship between the shape, size, and number of shadows cast with the rest of the piece.

I am not a scholar of Müller’s work (nor of Shakespeare’s, for that matter); I know what I can gather from the text, that it is *Hamlet*—the play, character, and the actor—ripped apart with German history and performed in pieces. So, this installation tore it up a bit more and presented the fragments as I expected to experience them, simultaneously, with no one line or time privileged over another except by choice of the observer-participant. In some ways, it reached for how Jonathan Kalb describes Robert Wilson’s production of the same piece: “The text, in other words, was simultaneously obliterated and preserved as a monument—like the images in it of Stalin, Mao, Lenin, Marx, and like Hamlet, the Hamlet Actor and his drama.” (Kalb 1998) The text is both sheltered and shattered by the perfect preservation and repetition possible with digital technology, while its complementary capability for dynamic manipulation of media allowed each experience to be a different collage of sound and meaning.

References


