**Editorial: On Proximity**

**Performance Research 22:3**

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Towards the beginning of his book 39 Microlectures in Proximity of Performance,
performance-maker Matthew Goulish offers a short text entitled 'On proximity'—a
reflection on Goat Island's tour of It's Shifting, Hank (1993–4) to a festival in Fribourg
(Freiburg), Switzerland in July 1994. The text describes the group's arrival to the festival
venue Belluard Bollwerk, a 'three-story circular fifteenth century fortress converted to a
theatre' (Goulish 2000: 21). A dance performance was already in progress in the
theatre, and it was too late for the group to join the audience. As they drifted around the
building, the sun gradually setting, a festival volunteer discovered them, and beckoned
them to an adjacent courtyard. There, one at a time, it was possible for them to view the
performance through a window-like opening in the fortress wall. The opening was 'a
nine-inch diameter circular hole at the interior edge, tapering open to a horizontal oval,
three feet wide and eighteen inches high at the exterior edge' (ibid.). Cut into a wall of
stone three feet thick, the design of the window constructed 'a wide field of vision for
somebody looking out, but a narrow field of vision for somebody looking in, like us'
(ibid.). With the view upon the side of the stage thus telescoped by the window, the
dancers within 'resembled a miniature moving diorama' (ibid.). Goulish compares the
fortress windows to the medieval device of the hagioscope—a 'notch' incorporated into
the pillars of churches and cathedrals enabling congregations without a direct view to
see the altar—and to his experience, as a child, of witnessing the glow of the distant

Lansing drive-in movie theatre screen from inside his parents' car while speeding down the Michigan highway. The text concludes with a somewhat sentimental account of the help he offered to the festival director's young son and his friend to watch the festival's final performance, a dance duet, through the fortress window—a moment shared in spite of his incomprehension of the French-speaking children's native language.

As a discourse on proximity, Goulish's text may at first seem counterintuitive. Its account of partially occluded, distanced and disrupted experience appears to contradict the dominant connotation of proximity as 'nearness': 'the fact, condition, or position of being near or close by in space' (OED 2017). Indeed, much contemporary writing on artistic practice considers the most worthwhile proximities between art and audience to be close ones. For example, in Performing Proximity: Curious intimacies, a detailed meditation on their body of performance work, Leslie Hill and Helen Paris keenly assert 'the value of close physical proximity' (2014: 3) despite framing 'proximity' in terms of a differential quality of 'expanding and contracting distances between audience and performer' (2). A social imperative underpins their interest in nearness: 'close audiencing generally begets greater inter-subjectivity and communitas than "not close" audiencing' (15). The supposition is that close audiencing involves a more active engagement of the body, offering, they suggest, 'a much richer sensory palate to work with, and a much richer field of sensory feedback for us to work from in terms of being able to "read" the experiences of our audiences' (17). This view resonates with Josephine Machon's take on the sensorial effects of immersive theatre, a practice that, she argues, 'accentuates the "presentness" of the performing moment as a lasting-

ephemerality through the "praesentness" of human sensory perception' (2013: 107).
Compared to these accounts in theatre and performance and, in the field of visual art,
what Kathryn Brown sees as now standard 'invitations to contribute actively to the
production and display of artworks' (2016: 1), Goulish's oblique and poetic
contemplation of proximity in terms of frustration, obstruction and limit seems to jar.

However, Goulish's text shares many concerns with the writings in this issue of
Performance Research—in particular, an attention to the persistence of literal and
metaphorical architectures of the past in the present, the construction of vision and
experience in terms of spatiality and the conditions of social relations that surround and
determine artistic practice. The profoundly material, situated, non-ideal nature of
Goulish's recounted experience is also reflected across the pages of this issue, where
proximity in art, theatre and performance appears as something desired, feared, denied
and refused as much as it is solicited or welcomed. Countering the discourse of
unproblematically desirable closeness and performative presence suggested by the
frequently used descriptors 'immersion', 'participation', 'network', 'connection' and
'interaction', the essays here engage with proximity as terminology and concept without
prior qualitative investment. We take proximity to be a mode of variance and
ambivalence, echoing Lauren Berlant's critical reading of intimacy as a condition to
which 'no inevitable forms or feelings are attached' (2000: 5). The essays and artist
pages gathered here levy proximity to draw attention to the absolute contingency of
bodies and things engaged in the constant struggle of interdependent sociality, and the
function of representation within it.[{note}]1 Reflected in the multiple relational positions

described by Goulish's text, the paradox of proximity is that while it suggests closeness, connection and relation, it does so with the assertion of distance and difference. Rather than seeing this paradox as an existential condition of intractable separateness to be bemoaned or overcome, particular moments of identification, distinction, potentiality and agency can be seen to arise because of, rather than despite, the paradox of proximity.

**Observing proximity**

This issue of <u>Performance Research</u> started life as 'Conventions of Proximity in Art, Theatre and Performance', a two-day symposium held at Birkbeck, University of London in May 2016. Our desire to put out a call for papers and artist contributions on this theme initially stemmed simply from observing the prevalence across artistic practice of the terms 'immersion', 'participation', 'network', 'connection' and 'interaction'. The most extreme of these, immersion, implies a total dissolution of separation, and favours a radical closeness enfolding the audience inside the cultural object—though, as Machon shows, the impossibility of such a move results in gradations of forms of immersive experience in practice, from an exciting sense of imaginative absorption to a more overwhelming quality of 'total immersion' (2013: 62–3). While Machon celebrates the potential of immersive theatre and other like practices interested in 'locating the individual organically within <u>and</u> as a continuum of the wider environment, physically and politically' (92), we share Jon Foley Sherman's concern that the construction of an 'enveloping present' in performance threatens to obscure 'the cultural, political and economic formation of the perceiver and the perceived, and serves, at the limit, as a

means of suppressing the labour of those that made possible the place, subjects and objects involved in perception' (Sherman 2016: 70). Adam Alston's critique of immersive theatre practices in Beyond Immersive Theatre (2016) does historical and deconstructive work to elaborate on the contextual relationship between an ethic of individualism in neoliberal political culture and the construction of active audience involvement in such performances, identifying a dynamic pattern of 'narcissistic and entrepreneurial forms of productive participation' (11) in works desiring and claiming the eradication of distance and the activation of the audience member.

In foregrounding 'proximity', our symposium sought to contribute to this ongoing conversation. Rather than interrogating participation and immersion per se, we wished to ask after material complexities and political possibilities in art, theatre and performance through analysis of their arrangements of human and non-human entities and their particular relations of proximity. We were interested in

> the 'conventions' of positioning and the particular types of closeness and distance that these create—whether in terms of historically, economically and spatially situated gatherings of bodies, the interrelationship of objects in a canon, or the dramaturgies of different modes of address. (Conventions of Proximity 2016)

Moving from a more direct critique of immersive practices towards a wider concern with how proximity may operate as a critical lens, Jacques Rancière's The Emancipated Spectator (2009) suggested to us a way out of the passive/active, close/distant and

audience/participant binaries that have preoccupied much evaluative writing on contemporary cultural production—and, as a short text on forms of theatre originally published in Artforum in 2007, a way of bringing into closer critical proximity discourses on nearness and distance from both visual art and theatre. In A Strange Proximity: Stage presence, failure and the ethics of attention (2016), Sherman draws on a selection of Rancière's writings to problematize the implicit proposition made by performance interested in closing the gap between performer and audience that 'proximity equals access, and access both disorders and remedies the distances of exclusion' (82). Thinking after Walter Benjamin's 'Work of art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility' (1936), Sherman argues that, in the digital age, 'artists and attendants seek authenticity not in distance but in proximity' (2016: 68). Concerned primarily with visual arts and curatorial practice, Claire Bishop has similarly engaged with Rancière's work to cast doubt on some of the more exuberant endorsements of what she calls 'the social turn' in art, arguing for a critical evaluative mode that is not just concerned with the 'exemplary ethical gesture', but also seeks 'rupture and ambiguity' (2012: 28–9). However, while persuaded of the validity of these observations on the contemporary preoccupation with collapsing distance, we were also keen to question Rancière's seeming assumption that all contemporary art, and all contemporary artists, are devoted to removing the actor–audience divide by activating the spectator, or, as Rancière put it in the Artforum essay: 'Even when the dramaturge or the performer doesn't know what he wants the spectator to do, he knows at least that the spectator has to do something: switch from passivity to activity' (2007: 277).[{note}]2 We wondered if the keyword 'proximity' may allow some space for alternative

formulations. What if we were less concerned with the collapse or maintenance of distance, and the sought-after activation or otherwise of the spectator in art, theatre and performance and paid attention to particular moments of access and obstruction produced by an always-complex array of relations of proximity?[{note}]3

**Critical proximity**

The articles in 'On Proximity' form a continuum with and a departure from the binary collapse that Rancière instigates. Some draw upon Rancière specifically, but all the articles here take up the question of what possibilities emerge from particular configurations of relations of proximity, and what sorts of knowledge and experience may be produced from them. To borrow from another philosopher cited more than once in this issue, Jean Luc Nancy, the concern here is not with the collapse of the distance between oneself and others, but how cultural and spatial formations may allow for different ways of 'being singular plural' (2000). And the juxtaposition of these articles, documenting a plurality of practices, places and times, is itself an exercise in critical proximity. Without wishing to deny or refuse the possibility of more developmental historical narratives, assembling a selection of essays in this manner is generative, and suggestive of unexpected affinities. While relations of proximity shift and change, patterns co-exist, overlay and contradict one another from one time to the next. For example, the distance of physical separation across geographical space is not simply overcome by new communication technologies, but nuanced, changed and overlaid by the new proximities afforded by the digital. As Jane Frances Dunlop shows, the space

of the digital opens a new sort of intimacy with concomitant frictions and tensions, while

Liam Jarvis explores how the intervention of virtual reality technologies in performance

can productively open a discourse on the ethics of empathy and identification within

situations of radical displacement instigated and exacerbated by the refugee crisis.


Opening up the complexity of proximity can disrupt, or even throw into reverse, received

theoretical understandings of the way in which relations of distance and closeness

develop across historical time. Ella Finer examines just such a shift through her

reconsideration of the Benjaminian concept of auratic distance in relation to sound art.

For Finer, auratic distance may take on a new meaning when the interference of the

materials of technological recording begins to override the message that those

putatively neutral interfaces were designed to transmit. Indeed, many of the texts reveal

not the affirmation of closeness as a strategy of liberation, but the use of various

constructs of proximity to control, constrain and invoke specific responses. Patrick van

Rossem explores just such a possibility by uncovering the often-neglected anxiety of

1960s 'participatory' art practice and the desires of key practitioners to restrict the

responsive possibilities of their audiences. In a decidedly different context, Erik

Mattsson examines how the spatial arrangements of the criminal courtroom in Sweden

delimit and manage antagonism. Sue Wiseman's analysis of the interplay between

speech, song and movement in the everyday social life of the early modern English

village reveals the way in which performance in close quarters elicited calculated

reactions that, in turn, structured wider social and political hierarchies—an analysis that,

juxtaposed here with discussions of modern and contemporary cultural practices, has

much to tell us about the transformation of these modes over time. For Deborah

Schultz, the particular space of viewing within contemporary artistic and curatorial

projects that create biographically inflected environments—life film sets with the actors

yet to arrive—overcomes the binary of participation versus non-participation that has

dominated discussions of contemporary art practice. The controlled space of audience

interaction and response takes on a more disturbing character in Tony Perucci's

examination of the Trump presidential campaign and, through its deployment of

representations of performative presence and authenticity, its strange similarities with

constructs of performance art.

The theme of mediation likewise recurs across numerous other contributions. Alison

Matthews discusses the triangulation of desire and envy, and the mediation of intimacy

as a complex phenomenon in the context of performance installation The Ballad of

Isosceles (2015). Emma Bennett explores the mediation of 'intimate talk' in stand-up

comedy, and the ways in which the 'grammars of address' employed in comedian

Stewart Lee's performances interpellate the public and define the social status of paying

audience and paid-for artist. Caroline Astell-Burt explores how a one-to-one puppetry

performance allowed audiences an unusual form of access to the peculiarities of the

'undeadness' of the puppet in performance, and Peader Kirk, Teoma J. Naccarato and

John MacCallum explore the stethoscope as a device facilitating acts of 'intimate

listening' and its potential for the creation of artistic work. Meanwhile, from a different

perspective, Leah Sidi explores medicalized constructs through a discussion of the

theatrical representation of the boundary between reality and unreality in Sarah Kane's

playwriting and its directorial mediations, asking how different approaches have enabled audiences a form of access to 'non-normative mental states'. The ethical issues at stake here are picked up by several contributions that examine the politics of proximity in spatial terms and the consequences of instituting categorizations. Ben Cranfield considers the 'conventions of proximity' in play in museological practice, and theorizes the curatorial not in terms of connection but through its gaps. Nicola Conibere contemplates how the use of distance and separation in her choreography Assembly (2013) provoked questions for its audience on themes of responsibility, feeling and performative response. Bruno Roubicek considers the proximities between land, artist and spectators in his performances of digging, and the ecological politics and ethical questions that arise from them. Poppy Corbett discusses Kim Noble's You Are Not Alone (2014–16) as a response to the alienated but proximate socialities of urban life in Britain. And in her manifesto for decolonizing walking, Sharanya Murali discusses the politics of proximity between the body and its location, considering the possibilities and problems that certain modes of performative walking, developed in Western cities, may present in the post-colonial streets of Delhi.

Taken as a whole, 'On Proximity' offers a fragmentary portrait of various moments of movement, negotiation, mediation and confrontation, substantiating claims made in the field of sociology regarding the dialectical relation between proximity and mobility (Pellegrino 2011a: 2–3). Time and again, across these articles, it is not just closeness and distance that is analysed, but the interplay between proximity and mobility—the latter a term that does not readily stand 'as a synonym for "movement" or, even less, for

"freedom of movement"' (Buscema 2011: 43). As John Urry observes, what has been called the 'mobility turn' addresses 'the multiple ways in which economic and social life is performed and organized through time and across various spaces of movement and proximity' (2011: xv), an observation that highlights the implication of this dialectic in the long history of capitalism.

Just such a moment of cultural production that draws attention to the crucial dialectic of proximity and mobility in the context of this history was the 2012 La Triennale (The Triennial) in Paris, entitled Intense Proximity, and curated by Okwui Enwezor at the Palais de Tokyo (Tokyo Palace) and seven other venues across the city. In difference to the frequently benign invocation of closeness outlined at the beginning of this introduction, Enwezor's relational intensities were ones fraught with questions of violence and power that come with the relations of proximity and variant mobilities of a world scarred by colonialism and shrunk through globalization: forces that have created, in Enwezor's view, '"a collapse of distance"' (Khazam 2012). Through the conceptual mobilization of the 'contact zone' and the legacy of that term from ethnology, 'whose institutionalization coincided with the apogee of colonialism' (Bouteloup 2012: 35), Intense Proximity aimed to 'externalise the conflicts that arise from the ways people settle into and move through the world' (ibid.). Examining the long history of ethnographic exploration as a French tradition, starting with a re-reading of Claude Levi-Strauss' Tristes Tropiques (1955), the 'intense proximity' that the exhibition accounted for and produced was one of othering distance as much as commonality or identification (Enwezor 2012: 18). However, in the curatorial act of 'bringing together heterogenous

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elements and suspending them in a state of tension' (Bouteloup 2012: 35), it was not just artworks and audiences that Enwezor mobilized and brought into proximity with each other, but the exhibition form itself with the Palais de Tokyo, a refurbished relic of the colonial exhibitionary tradition of World's and International Fairs, residing at the heart of a 'global' art world that, as much as it expands to incorporate more practices from more places thanks to the work of curators such as Enwezor, also manages to re-centralize its spoils in the hands of a tiny metropolitan elite. Intense Proximity imagined a state where the former ethnographic contact zone of the near and the far is dispersed and collapsed in 'multicultural society' (Enwezor 2012: 32), creating tension that is exacerbated and exploited by nationalistic and far-right forces. But it perhaps overlooked the importance of the specifics of global capitalism that keeps so much at an unreachable distance from so many, and that allows for the machinery of colonial structuring to be repurposed for mega-exhibitions such as La Triennale. When considering the intentional and unintentional proximities of such complex cultural productions, what emerges is the necessity of examining the material realities that determine social and cultural positions and their representation.[{note}]4 As the essays in this issue reveal, our realities may be constituted as much by things that may not appear to be physically near to us as by those that seem close by. And equally, what seems close by may in actuality, and for any number of reasons, be a world away.

**Notes**

1 Our notion of interdependence here follows Judith Butler, in particular her work on the non-independent body, its precariousness and its requirement for human and non-human support (2004, 2015), and the work of Donna Haraway, who calls attention to processes of sympoesis: becoming-with (2016: loc 505).

2 This claim is not registered as strongly in Rancière's book-length study, where it is articulated differently: 'Even if the playwright or director does not know what she wants the spectator to do, she at least knows one thing: she knows that she must do one thing—overcome the gulf separating activity from passivity' (2009: 13).

3 Sherman's close reading of Punchdrunk's Sleep No More brilliantly conducts this kind of analysis, demonstrating the manner in which the production sets in place 'proximity as the lingua franca of the production' (2016: 74), and stages a 'confused invitation and denial', which 'speaks to a potentially productive distance kept by the production, while the invitation aligns with the presumptions of immersive theatre' (81). His account foregrounds a dynamic internal complexity present in productions that may seem unproblematically 'total' in their immersive strategies.

4 For example, legal scholar Sarah Keenan examines the interarticulation of law, space and representation, noting that 'British immigration law has a long history of operating as a "brick wall" for particular subjects, and producing categories of race in the process'; she argues that 'we take a particular space with us when we move' (2017).

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