

Anti-gravity Donuts

Performance and Mixed Realities: the “place” of digital proximity, mime & mimesis, and the undetermined vector of emerging virtual technologies...in a pandemic

By James Dennen, Assistant Professor, Theatre, Denison University

(slow music playing)

♪ Just a perfect day.
Drink sangria in the park.
And later when it gets dark, we go home.
Just a perfect day.
Feed animals in the zoo.
Then later a movie too, and then home.

Oh it’s such a perfect day.
I’m glad I spent it with you. ♪

(music stops)

(sound of record player)

(sound of footsteps)

(clinking sounds)

(water pouring)

James Dennen [as a cartoon wolf avatar, walking on its hind legs]: Jacques Derrida once said “I believe in improvisation, and I fight for improvisation, but with the belief that it is impossible.” But what could he mean? Don’t we improvise nearly every moment of every day? Isn’t improvisation as simple as making up the words... or the notes... or the movements... as one says, plays, or performs them? But 20th-century thinkers have taught us that nothing – no action, event, or behavior – is ever free and clear of pre-determined elements. There is *always* a script of some sort, if not planned or on paper then built into the way that we respond. But nonetheless, within nearly every performance tradition, there are longstanding improvisation practices, each of which promise to provide its spectators with special access to its performers ... to see them as they really are – spontaneous and authentic, or somehow more real.

(footsteps)

(snap) [James transforms into a realistic human male avatar]

(*footsteps*)

James: I'm going to talk today about what happens when improvisation intersects with technology, in particular virtual reality and telecommunications – internet, wifi, phones, etc.. While this intersection may seem like a very narrow and specialized niche, and it is for sure, I believe that some of what we've been doing... what I've been doing with my collaborators in virtual reality recently... points to broader social possibilities in relation to performance and technology generally. That is, how can we expand the languages and techniques of performance in the light of new modes of sharing space... new modes of being together... aside from the all-together-in-one-room idea, which we theatre artists hold so sacred? Can we meet in other ways? Does it even work? And can performance speak to this question?

James: Of course, it can. And I've recently begun to explore some of these possibilities with my collaborators. And today, what I'd like to do is share some of our results and some of the questions that have come into view as a result of trying to bring our work into virtual reality, or V.R.. I've been working with improvisation for close to 30 years but it was only very recently, during the pandemic, that I made a foray into VR with my collaborators, which culminated in a performance in front of a live audience in this space on April 10th, 2021. And I'm going to talk a little about that production and how we got there, but before I do that, there are a few aspects of the work that I do with my ensemble that I want to make clear because I think each of these things were crucial to our journey into Virtual Reality.

(*footsteps*)

James: First, we're scattered geographically. We live all over the country. So, that means that when we get together to work, generally, it involves air travel and hotel stays, etc., which became all but impossible at the beginning of the pandemic. Second, in my work, we're aiming for a kind of discovery, of social and creative possibilities that, at least to us, do not exist yet. This means that we're trying not to draw from conscious memory, or recollections of events, or imitations of the world as we know it, but rather to produce and explore and start from as Brecht put it, not "the good old things," but "the bad new ones." And to produce these "new" things in our work with improvisation, we rely on accidents and unpredictable or totally uncertain spatial dynamics, which hinge on physical movement in a shared space. We've always needed to be in a room together to do what we do. And third, my company's work in improvisation is very low tech... intentionally. This is because our aim has always been, at its base, about finding out what humans can do – in theatrical spaces, but also in any space. So, creativity in the way that it's integral to our work, is not about virtuosity, but sociality. We're trying to ask – or at least I'm trying to ask – not "what a *few* people are capable of?" but "what are *people* capable of?"

James: So, 1. my company is scattered geographically, 2. our work is aimed at a certain kind of

discovery through improvisation, which hinges on physical movement in a shared space, and 3. it is intentionally low tech for both aesthetic and ideological reasons. These are key conditions for the exploration I'd like to recount.

[Time code marker 6:47]

James: When the pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, we had a show scheduled for the following spring. And there was still a ton of work to do on it in terms of conceptualizing, devising, revising, rehearsing... And with air travel and sharing space so difficult, we turned to technology to see whether we could continue with our work in some other way. First, we tried Zoom, which we were excited about, because you'd think it could work. It's conversational, you can see and hear each other and you know it's "improv" – you take turns talking – what's the problem doing that over Zoom? But it didn't work because my performers couldn't find a way to share space... to feel like they were *co-navigating* space. No matter what we did, there was no kinesthetic response, no sense of proximity to each other... no playful threat of intimacy, or distance... and thus there was no spatial risk or danger. In fact, if you imagine what a Zoom meeting looks like on the screen, our interface with each other is visually rendered for us as separate... just our upper halves in these separate boxes on the screen. So it wound up being really cerebral or jokey in Zoom – talking heads taking turns being clever – which is the kind of improvisation that I've really spent much of my life trying to distance myself from ... and to try to NOT do.

[8:10]

(*footsteps*)

James: We couldn't make it work over video. But our technology coordinator, Christian Faur, a fantastic artist in his own right, suggested that we try V.R. to which I responded with lots of resistance: It's too high tech, which works against our whole ethos. We won't be able to do the sort of body based, human centered work that we do. And it still just won't be the same as actually sharing physical space, which is certainly true. And that's always going to be true. But nonetheless, technology as a means of being together, is part of how we live and that may not be going away. Anyway, in spite of all of these reservations, Chris convinced me that it was worth a try. And we did give it a try. And once we fought our way through the headaches, and the dizziness, and the disorientation, and the connection troubles, what we found, to our surprise, was that it was kind of remarkable. It truly felt to me like we were in the same room together. In fact, I remember the first time we got connected in V.R. for any significant length of time... when we finally took our goggles off... and there was our Zoom meeting still running, the sensation was like, "Oh yeah, we're across the country from each other. We're not in the same room together. Darn."

James: Scientifically speaking, the hard difference is three dimensionality. But it does make

such a difference in terms of relating to each other in space. Compared to Zoom at least, rather than encountering each other visually as our top halves in separate boxes, in two dimensions, in VR goggles what you see - what's rendered for you - is an animated three-dimensional shared environment. Thus, much of the physicality and the spatiality that we couldn't activate in Zoom, became active in V.R.. I think what this really came down to for us was movement. There was so much movement... and a co-navigation of space... and consequently, a sense of proximity or distance... and thus, intimacy and risk. All of this was mobilized for us. And it was fun: donning these new, absurd avatars, putting on what amounts to a whole new body... and getting to work together anytime we could schedule without having to travel across the country. And as I said, just the uncanny delight of feeling like we were actually spending time together, even though we were thousands of miles apart, never seemed to wear thin. And best of all, we were productive in ways that we hadn't been able to be during the pandemic, over Zoom.

(*footsteps*)

James: There were deficiencies and challenges too of course: first of all, the hands of these avatars... or paws or mitts... were inarticulate compared to our own. And in improvisation... (*upbeat music plays*) ... this is a big deal because we're miming any object that we need to hold. And the performers need their mime objects to be legible to each other. So what this challenge meant to my performers working in virtual reality was a necessity to expand the size of their physical vocabulary. Suddenly, it was crucial that these avatars expand the size and scope of their physicality so that mime and gesture were legible between a frog and a possum. (*upbeat music plays*)

[11:25]

James: And then of course, just the fact that my performers were wearing avatars and not using their own bodies meant that they didn't have the same simple ease and fluency of ordinary articulation through gesture. In effect, they didn't really know what they were communicating. But this too wound up giving way to a really surprising and compelling opportunity. In the donning of a new body by way of an avatar, the performers wound up using a mirror that allowed them to learn what their bodies were doing. So while we were rehearsing, the mirror was placed downstage in exactly the place where an audience would be during a performance. And there's this easy poetry in the idea that a performer sees themselves through the audience as though the audience is their mirror. But there is also a less poetic interrogation of performance and spectatorship in the fact that performing in front of a one-way mirror, in which players can see themselves but through which they can't and don't have to see the audience, is easily possible in V.R.. And in fact, it's what we did. We kept the rehearsal mirror in place during performance. And to think of this kind of separation as desirable - that performers might appreciate it and choose, as mine did, to *not* see their onlookers by using a mirror that blocks them from view... this seems to unsettle this poetic audience-as-mirror metaphor. Anyway, we wound up finding so many surprising benefits to working in virtual reality together,

not to mention the fact that COVID had long since shut down the production we were originally working on, so we decided to try to actually try to perform in virtual reality. And that's what brings us to this particular space that Chris Faur built for us.

[13:09]

James: And right off the bat, you might be surprised to find that this theater looks a lot like a theater... and thus isn't taking advantage of the fact that it could literally be constructed to seem like anything... which we explored. But ultimately, we found that we actually needed the venue to look and seem like a theater as we already know it... because that familiarity provided so much orientation. "Oh a theater... I know what to do here," as opposed to entering some wild new construction that would have left the burden of explanation on us as the hosts of people coming into the space. Plus, simple practical things like avatars needing to be able to see over the heads of the other avatars in front of them meant we needed to rake the audience. And also, wanting to give people a shared sense of spectatorship... of watching something together. We wanted these things. So, we found that longstanding traditions of Western theater construction were most helpful to us. So, we chose this form as our venue. And people located all over the continent sat right next to each other in these seats to watch a performance together. And it was remarkable... not the performance itself though that was amazing in its own way in my opinion. But it was the larger event I think - *that* we were gathered to watch something – that was even more groundbreaking.

(*music stops*)

(*clinking sound*)

(*footsteps*)

[14:38]

Audience member 1: I felt that we were in a space being treated well by performers... that sense of "I got you" that a performer can offer. Um, I felt that, which I think is a huge thing to be able to say: that I actually walked away saying "Yeah I just went to a piece of theatre in virtual reality. What?! That happened!?"

Audience member 2: I felt that the fundamental process of gathering together in small dark spaces has been... had been... fundamentally altered.

Audience member 3: I was immediately swept away by the variety of people's avatars. Um, it was so nice to see a stick of butter, uh you know, an alien, a crab... uh you know, there's something about that feels very true to me?

Audience member 4: What I thought was so cool about the performance is that it really showed

and demonstrated the liveness of it. Right? You're not coming to a theater to watch a pre-screened... you know... pre-recorded movie. Like you're coming here to watch people improvising... beautifully. And I think that's... it's almost... in a way... just opens up more access. And there's actually the potential of... you know... you know... seeing it with many different types of audience too... because, you know, you can perfectly invite somebody from Zimbabwe here or China here, and they can be sitting right next to you where that experience would never happen in a real live show or at least, you know, it would make it much more difficult.

Audience member 5: I mean, obviously it was during COVID and we weren't seeing each other. And suddenly we were all in the same space. I mean you really believe that you were in the same space. And I was seeing friends that I hadn't seen in probably a year and even Joey and Lauren who I don't know... to see them do their piece... we could experience that... something close to that liveness.

Audience member 6: The options for bringing the observers into the creative moment... into the creative process... will expand dramatically. One of my awarenesses even leaving these... this theater... was that I'm becoming a director in this experience because I am choosing which part of the experience I focus on and from what angle I watch it. There's a beauty to that. There's... there's a... And if it is approached in the... in the nature of a game of real, you know, loving playfulness then, oh my gosh, the amount we could be contributing to each other, and the better outcomes we could be coming up with are limitless. Um... but like I say, there's... there's nothing about... about the human nature that tells you that will always be... you know... loving or playful. (*laughs*)

(*footsteps*)

James: Okay. (*snap*) [James transforms into a cartoon human male avatar]

[17:47]

(*string quartet plays pensively*)

James: Before we go on, let me just show you around the space a little bit and... and... tell you about... what we have in here. Some of it we used all the time. These are... are chairs, they can go away... we can... they can sit on these chairs... you know. (*string quartet plays*) Um... and we use these chairs all the time. Here's a block that I can also sit on. Um...I don't know why this... ball is here. Um... Well anyway. So a lot of this stuff we put in this space, um, because of... the work that I... that I do with my collaborators relies on, on mime... and I'll our thought was to... to render some of these objects to see whether we might... um... you know, use a real object, rendered like this for us, in lieu of the mime object, you know.

James: And that's sort of a major difference here in this virtual rendered reality... this idea that

we could render the objects, and what we often found was that we didn't really want to render the objects. First of all, it takes too much time and effort... to render an object. It doesn't have the spontaneity. We can't just type in book and suddenly there's a book made for us. We have to program it and... Whereas in mime space anything that you make can suddenly be real for yourself and the audience member. We thought... we thought of comparing some of these things... the real object...

James: Forgot about the record player. You know, of course my... my players can make a record player here and they can pick up a record and they can put it on, put the needle on, you know, let it play it, they can take it off, change the record, put another record on, all that can be spontaneously created, but of course, in this virtual reality you can also have that thing drawn for us, right? So... we have a record player. (*string quartet plays*) I can play a record on it. I like this one. All right. So... a lot of these things are just things that you would find around a theater, you know. Props. You have these books. I think some of them can just float in the air. Again, the reason why we had... oop... some of these be, you know, ordinary in the sense that they have... gravity to them... and then some of them, just like a mime book... Oh, here, I'll show you what I mean.

James: So if I pick up a book... let's say I'm... here, I'll go over here... there, there's a bookshelf right here and I'm kind of looking through the books... Oh! I found just the book I need. I take it out. I look at it, turn the page. I turn the page. You guys as audience are... are with me as I... I make that book real for me and it becomes real for you. You make it look the way you want it to look. And I might put it back on the shelf. There's ... As soon as you create this real book... you know... I have to have a real shelf, so then ... I drop it and it falls. Put it on the desk here because the desk isn't... the desk has to be over here for real. But I thought that you might start playing with some of the foundational forces like gravity, you know, where you have a book that you can, sort of, just put there and leave on that shelf, the book exists but the shelf doesn't. To be honest... you know, we found it was so much more helpful... to not have the rendered object for us in the kind of work that we do... that these sorts of objects, whether they're, they were foundational and had the gravity or not were less... were less interesting for the kind of work that we wanted to bring into the space than if we did have... than if we didn't have the actual object.

[23:24]

James: Anyway, this is our venue. And it was designed for the needs of this one particular performance that we did in here. And as I said, it looks a lot like other theaters for reasons that we discovered were necessary for us for this particular performance. But I think it's important to point out that it could really look like anything. And it would be fantastic, I think, to have a virtual venue that works for *any* performance... which could change completely for each one. This ambition exists already in the idea of modular theaters that many theatre companies have – to be able to rearrange the space, put the

stage or seats or walls here or there, to re-scale the space in some way... This is the whole idea of the Black Box theater.

James: But I'm imagining a changeability that is far more substantive, and perhaps more *cinematic* in its conception, where a 'set' becomes 'setting'... or a 'space' becomes a 'place'. For example, if I were to make a piece – as I actually hope to soon – with a football player (football gear wearing) male avatar performing his masculinity *on* a football field... where to I would like to invite or include an audience somehow as well... perhaps *on* or *surrounding* the field... not sure yet... this is going to be a very different arrangement than the one we're in now. I'm not talking about figuring out a way to suggest a football field here in a theater space like this one, by fitting a representative piece of the field onto this stage or one like it, nor other theatrical methods of evoking a football field.

James: I believe in such a practice... because I've always thought that cinema and television has a lock on making things look just like real life... and that theatre needs to do something else altogether, including, in my opinion, always interrogating itself. Why bother meeting in a theater in the first place? It's hard to get to. It's scary and potentially confrontational. I can't pause it whenever I like. Personally, I value that shared person-to-person encounter – in a theater and in life. But I wonder if V.R. gives us both cause to doubt the limits of the person-to-person encounter – or rather, the limits of its uniqueness – like, can other kinds of encounters offer the same connection? I confess, I have now experienced cause to wonder if the conditions of virtual reality – or shared virtual reality – have just now begun to provide that felt sense of being together, and if this is true then there are all sorts of large scale economic, social, and ecological implications.

[26:04]

James: But let's look further into the aesthetic implications. Ok, so, yes there may be cause to doubt the uniqueness and sacrosanctity of the stage – of live performances... live performance – wherein performers and spectators share one space at one time. But, even more interesting (to me) is the fact that V.R. offers a medium by which to investigate these questions thoughtfully and rigorously, beyond chat and conjecture... like my own: that it really *feels* this way or that... that I *prefer* one or the other.

James: Outside of V.R., we have this seemingly simple choice between the stage and the screen... between the promise of proximity and intimacy of a co-spatial, co-temporal encounter and the apparent distance of a screenal encounter. But here in V.R., in a shared virtual space like this one, we confront a different set of choices. As I said, I chose to construct this animated space to resemble a conventional theater because I decided that our show would gain by scaffolding upon that existing vocabulary. But this 'theater,' as it appears to be, is no more real than if we had constructed it to look like we were all floating on lily pads in a pond watching our frog friend in his natural habitat,

or whatever. This space is rendered as a place – a particular concrete, brutalist theater with no ceiling – to surround all of us. It's only by way of a mental habit – or a trick, really, that we play on ourselves – that we regard ourselves as though we are in a theater. And this includes the constructed sensation that there is a traditional sort of separation between performers and spectators... when really... we are all – you guys and the performance that took place or you guys and myself – we are all in the same boat, surrounded by a rendered-for-us, imaginary, animated environment. Each of us are fully immersed in just the same way. While I chose to provoke this traditional sense of close-but-separate situation, there's no reason why all or any performance originating in a virtual reality needs to recreate such a traditional dynamic.

[28:21]

James: The whole concept of 'immersion,' which is a common ambition for certain makers - to construct a performance event that immerses its spectators in a world that has been engineered for them – no longer requires any such effort in virtual reality. Rather, it is the effortless baseline of experience in V.R.. Immersion now requires effort to *undo*. Unrendered, we would not be separated... in the way that the stage and the seats seem to place us. We are equivalently immersed unless the environment that has been constructed for us convinces us otherwise.

James: And so, once again, if such a thing is explicitly *reconstructable*, then it follows that it is always a construction. That is, if the basic spectator-performer dynamic must be constructed in virtual reality for it to even appear to us, then virtual reality seems to present the requirement that we re-think or un-think this dynamic for every performance occasion. The performance Event is revealed, through virtual reality, as more exquisitely plastic and genuinely determinable by the artist and the artwork in V.R.. And naturally, artists and makers are going to want to make that determination even if, as we have here, they choose to try encourage everyone to pretend that some things haven't changed. "See... you're all just sitting in a theater... just in virtual reality now... watching me, the performer. Nothing unusual here."

James: And, this radical plasticity ... of performance ... which tries to be invisible... but which virtual reality seems to out ... is also infinitely more doable in ways that even the most high tech up-to-date brick-and-mortar space can't possibly accommodate. This is exciting. And it's exciting in ways beyond moving the seats, and even beyond the limitless possibilities of "setting". Any foundational force or quality of space that you can think of – gravity, friction, distance and proximity, visibility and invisibility, inside and outside, size and scale, density, repeatability, and, without a doubt, things I can't think of or spin off here – any quality of space or time that can be concocted mentally can probably be digitally rendered in V.R.. If you can think of it, it can *become* the new ground for performance... whether we're talking about the setting or, perhaps more interestingly, about the nature of the performance event itself. Any new space or place that we can render can thus give way to a performer-spectator dynamic that is specific

to itself. What if we were in a line of people 400 miles long, being whispered to rapidly and provocatively in our ears... words that seem to come from the front of the line somewhere miles and miles off. Or, what about an ordinary gesture, like this? [James raises his right arm to a 45-degree angle at his side and lowers his left arm to a 45-degree angle at his side] What if it were being performed by ten, or a hundred, or a thousand of me?

[31:19]

James: As it becomes necessary to rethink the basic relationship (or distinction) between performers and spectators, it becomes necessary as well to re-think and re-author the whole reason-for-being of performance. To say again, by the way you construct the event “we want people to watch us, and here’s why, and thus here’s how.” ... which really brings me to the most exciting possible mental rearrangement that’s been mobilized by bringing performance into a virtual- or a digital-making paradigm... and that is ‘access’. Not just making it easier for people to attend, though that too. But also, to ask the question: access to what? access to the performance (the work)... or to the performing – or performing in general? Am I attempting to move people to awe or to perform themselves? Or, is the performance and the performing only a mode of access to the performer? Are these all the same? Perhaps they are. But perhaps only until you ask yourself the troubling question – what is the fundamental structural dynamic (the relationship) between people that I am trying to instigate? Am I merely a self-promoter... or am I doing some other labor on behalf of a system of passive spectatorship that serves some other master? Isn’t there a stark difference between moving people by way of performance and moving them to perform themselves? Or, if I’m interested in granting access to the performers themselves, what are the opportunities for proximity and intimacy made possible by performance engendered in a strictly digital context? What if there’s only me, one witness, and the performer? What if it feels in every perceivable way like there is only the performer and me but there are actually hundreds or thousands of others experiencing the same thing? ... at the same time? It’s possible.

James: And venturing further still, why perform at all? Why not play mutually, like a game... but not shoot-em-up, or high velocity, or risk free ‘danger’ that technology has long-provided to game-players but instead, what happens when inquiries into *social* possibilities utilize the merger of performance and technology? In other words, what does it mean to ‘play’ with someone in a structured way that provides *access* both to that playing partner and to one’s own creativity or sociability by virtue of the performance game algorithm? Can I play at situations to which I don’t have access outside of digitalia? Perhaps... emancipated by the cover (the cloak, the skin, the reveal) that my avatar offers... and by being intentional about (*snap*) [James transforms back into the cartoon wolf avatar] what it is to which, or to whom, I am offering access or closeness... or by intentionally dissolving entirely that longstanding distinction between performers and spectators... through these sorts of choices that virtual performance

provokes, we might discover more of what's actually possible by way of *all* performance *through* performance that originates in a virtual environment. It seems to me that it's this kind of investigation that can take place. Or, we can pursue more dazzling spectacle in an ever-expanding blob of shapelessly impressive technology.

James: And further still, in the specter of our ubiquitous screenal civilization, does a virtual reality, which mimics, falls short of, and exceeds actual reality, allow us (force us even) to trouble assumptions about the unassailable value of live encounters? Are we, now here, co-spatial? Are we co-temporal? Are we live?

James: Tricks aside, screenal performance, including movies and television most of all, is not only seen by many more people than what we traditionally call live performance, but also is arguably many times more influential, for better or worse. How do we measure the impact of a brilliant live performance seen by tens or hundreds against the impact of any reproducible performance seen by hundreds of thousands or millions? What part of the drive to what we traditionally call live is reducible to a thrall to its rarity... to its value in symbolic or social currency that it garners? And what is legitimately unique about the live person-to-person encounter? Performance work that begins virtually can show us, by de-naturalizing... by de-normalizing... some of our assumptions about what is actually useful exclusively about live performance.

James: Here, in virtual reality, (*snap*) [James transforms back into the cartoon male avatar] how and why we gather seems to be at stake at least as much as the performance content by which we gather, as new and different things become legible, seeable, estranged, as Brecht would say, by virtue of the new reality that we're inhabiting.

[36:18]

James: In relation to my own work, I've probably pointed out a hundred ... maybe five hundred ... times in my career, that the work that I do with improvisation relies on full embodiment, and shared physicality and spatiality... seemingly irreplaceable features of the live in-person encounter. But then here they are, playing in a physically collaborative way in a seemingly shared space... and enjoying it... I think... and doing great work.

James: And remember, the letdown, after we played together - my collaborators and I - was when we left the virtual theater and got back onto the Zoom call... and remembered that we *weren't* actually together... or at least not anymore. It wasn't (at least for me) when we hung up from the Zoom call, which felt like that always feels (to me) like a relief. The embodied sadness of goodbye felt very 'real' to me, as opposed to the perpetually broken promise of closeness that I invariably feel via Zoom or over the phone. So does this mean that V.R. refutes the seemingly irrefutable uniqueness of the person-to-person encounter? I'd like to think not. But then, maybe there's some kinds of intimate connection that can take place in other (digital) realities. And further, some things that we can see here that we can't see in the 'real' world.

James: Mime, which tends to *dis*appear in reality, seems to become more legible because of the contextual contrast between the fully articulate human bodies and the coarser, clunkier, relatively inarticulate movement vocabulary of our avatars. Do the skilled and expressive human bodies of my collaborators not stand out against their own animated avatars in their virtual environment?

[38:06]

James: So we worked in this room... in a way that directly mimics the way we've worked for years. But we were only able to spend several short sessions in here rehearsing, which calls into question the kinds of constraints that could wind up determining work that begins in a digital environment. Just thinking about timing for instance, it becomes clear very quickly that you can't log the same kind of hours in V.R. that you can in R. (Reality). And so pieces might need to be shorter. But then, that doesn't necessarily seem like a bad thing. Why would we want or need pieces to be 'full length', whatever that is, anyway? In some ways, duration standards – 'evening length' performances – are entangled in commercial imperatives like parking and ticket prices but couldn't all of that be completely altered or wiped away? Couldn't pieces be just as short as the artists need or want them to be, given the artist's sense of the piece's needs and the specific event that they're constructing?

James: And then we might also begin to unthink or rethink the ordinary flow of live performance from the stage first to a recorded or digital context second... that is, *if* it gets to be one of those very few performances recognized by media and commerce in such a manner. What if works are *first* imagined, and produced, and experienced by spectators in a digital context ... and *then* there are co-spatial, live, or local shared person-to-person experiences in which smaller events could take place, which draw upon, or re-create, or depart from, an ordinary digital or virtual experience? Or is there a conjunction of both of these contexts possible? (*string quartet stops playing*) The recurring question is this: can digital performance point back to real life?

James: But aesthetically, there is another surprising reversal of our naturalized, (*string quartet resumes playing*) natural seeming, standard creative work flow in performance. We might think about the repetition of rehearsals – the working and working on something uncertain until it is 'done' and predictable – as resembling a sort of fixing in place such that the danger of live performance is all but worked out of existence. But if we imagine working first in a way that gets fixed immediately into a recorded form – think of improvisation that is captured, like the clips I've shown you... here. Or any kind of performance recorded and 'set' early in its evolution... and then seen by people (and maybe known popularly) in advance of live outings, or a live tour. The live performance begins to take on that uncertainty (or danger) in relation to the original fixed (recorded) work, by spinning off of it or even trying, and inevitably failing, to replicate it.

James: There's a well-established tradition of a musical album being made (and sold and heard by many people) prior to a live tour, the excitement of which hinges on both the live performance's faithfulness to the original, and its exciting, surprising, transgressive departures from the original. This flow – from a recorded original to a live, uncertain, risky 'riff' on that original – becomes a probable option in the performance-making scenario that I'm talking about, whereby digital production precedes live engagement. And by reversing this flow, I'm imagining that we could begin to see new kinds of live performance, unusually instigated by digital production seen on the screen, which recovers some of the 'danger' that the temporal live does uniquely offer.

[41:46]

James: As for the capture itself, there's yet another unexpected, and remarkable, opportunity instigated in virtual reality in the form of recordings of playful encounters between performers *as* real time animation. Here's what I mean: An interaction like this one took place and became animated video at the same time. The venue was set up for the encounter to take place – in our case, a planned performance (rehearsed over months) with completely unplanned content – and we constructed it to include multiple avatars that record what they see and hear.

James: This could be any encounter in any setting of course. But interestingly, this has become something that anyone can do now. Not only do we potentially short cut ooggles of labor in rendering animation frame by frame and second by second, but also there is no longer any studio or graphics training required. What we're looking at – what you're seeing – is very developmental because these advances are all happening right now. And this is just an old game platform that was cheap and easy for us to access, but which can now be easily shared by more than one person... by all of us. That's what's key. It'll look impressive later or tomorrow. The important thing I think is that social encounters can now, instantly, BE animation, including all of the control and reality alternatives that animation offers, from avatars to anti-gravity.

James: It was Brecht who saw, looking back at the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democracy that was quickly and catastrophically overtaken by the Nazi Party, that the space and relationship of performance is charged and powerful and doesn't just homologize or parallel the social relationships of real life but potentially teaches and incites its spectators to action. To Brecht, there was no separating the way that people sit and watch and not act in the darkened theater – in their comfy chairs, eating bon-bons – and the way that people could sit still and remain silent and not take action themselves in real life. He saw that this space between us must, even as entertainment, remain critical and examine itself repeatedly as a space of social consequence... because unexamined, it reifies – it makes into a real, living, social state of being – the passive, slack-jawed stare of the theater (and of screen life).

[44:19]

James: So much of what Brecht saw, and shouted, has become technique. It has become 'everyday' in the theatre. It's "receded," as Herbert Blau would say it, "receded into illusion." But what we, and I think (I hope) others are discovering is that at this moment – as alternate realities become accessible – that we cannot waste this space... that it has possibilities that are life altering, for the good, and not necessarily or only as greater and greater technological spectacle, but rather as new ways of seeing ourselves and of being together. Imagining, as Brecht did, an early motor car overtaking a horse-driven carriage on the road... for a moment, the driver (of either vehicle) could truly understand the concept of 'horsepower', and the society-altering mechanics of the combustion engine, before that new technology was fully naturalized into the fabric of everyday life, as though it could never have been any other way.

(string quartet plays)

(music fades out)

Written, Directed, and Performed by James Dennen

Cocreated and Produced by Lane Czaplinski

Featured Performers: Lauren Katz and Joey Slotnick

Technology Designer, Unity Programmer, and Editor: Christian Faur

Original Music: ETHEL

Audio Mix and Sound Design: Florence Barrau-Adams

Audio Recording Engineer: Jordan Fehr

Production Assistants: Namu Kim and Armaan Tucker

Audience Member Interviews: Ralph Farris, Kip Jones, Dorothy Lawson, Cory Lee, Cheryl McFarren, and Brant Russell

Special Thanks to: Anastasia Congdon, Arloni Melini, Molly Shanahan, and Cindi Turnbull

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Support provided by:

Wexner Center for the Arts

Denison University Theatre Department

Denison University Research Foundation

Cynthia Ann Turnbull Charitable Foundation

National Endowment for the Humanities

Parnassus Performance Laboratory

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