

Preface

This book developed out of a major research project undertaken by Steve Dixon and Barry Smith from 1999 to 2001, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK).¹ *The Digital Performance Archive (DPA)* was established to record and analyze an extraordinary and unprecedented period of activity and experimentation within performance practice where computer technologies and techniques were increasingly integrated into live productions, and new forms of interactive performance emerged in participatory installations, on CD-ROM, and on the Web. An initial announcement sent to relevant arts and new media culture lists in 1999 summarized the project's scope:

The Digital Performance Archive (DPA)—<http://ntu.ac.uk/dpa/>—is a research project documenting developments in the creative use of computer technologies in performance, from live theater and dance productions that incorporate digital media to cyberspace interactive dramas and webcasts. DPA also collates examples of the use of computer technologies to document, discuss, or analyze performance, including specialist websites, e-zines and academic CD-ROMs.

While the level of such activity was high at that time, its recording and documentation was uncoordinated and sporadic, and the *DPA* sought to retain for posterity some traces of this work. During the years 1999 and 2000, the Archive recorded all activity it could find within the field, and provided an extensive online database of individual works, with data fields including date, venue, credits, types of technologies employed, summaries of the works, photographs, artists' statements, biographies, and website links (many artists' websites were also cloned by the Archive to ensure their longevity). In parallel, Dixon video recorded twenty-five live performances in the United States and Europe (some with a single camera, others with a four camera crew), including works by Blast Theory, Amorphic Robot Works, Random Dance Company, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and ieVR.

Artists and companies were also contacted and asked to preserve some of their own documentation with the Archive, and textual materials (production flyers, programs, reviews, articles), photographs, CD-ROMs, DVDs, and videotapes were received. These can still be viewed by appointment at the reference libraries of the DPA's two UK host institutions, Nottingham Trent University and Salford University.

The Archive's two years of intensive research into the field, 1999 and 2000, constituted a historic period for digital performance where its zenith was unarguably reached—in terms of both the amount of activity and the originality, quality, and significance of many seminal productions—prior to a general downturn of activity and interest. Inevitably, this book pays particular attention to those years, but as a “history” it has also involved extensive research into the pioneering work of the 1980s and 1990s, and of subsequent work in the early 2000s. We also trace digital performance's historical lineage back to earlier conjunctions of performance and technology, particularly since the early twentieth century.

The scope of the book is therefore wide, as its subtitle suggests—“a history of new media in theater, dance, performance art, and installation”—but is also quite specific. Digital Performance, in the terms that we define it, concerns the conjunction of computer technologies with the live performance arts, as well as gallery installations and computer platform-based net.art, CD-ROMs, and digital games where performance constitutes a central aspect of either its content (for example, through a focus on a moving, speaking or otherwise “performing” human figure) or form (for example, interactive installations that prompt visitors to “perform” actions rather than simply watch a screen and “point and click”). Apart from occasional references, our study excludes the use of digital technologies in “non-live” and “non-interactive” performance forms such as film, television, and video art.

The one major area of the live performance arts the book omits is music, for two primary reasons: we do not have sufficient specialist knowledge and expertise to approach a worthy analysis; and our focus is in any case already wide enough. We would nonetheless note that music was one of the first artistic fields to experiment significantly with and embrace computer technologies, and in terms of both creative production and commercial (as well as illegal) distribution, music has arguably been more radically revolutionized by the “digital revolution” than the other performance arts we explore.

We readily acknowledge that our term *digital performance* is somewhat problematic. “Digital” has become a loose and generic term applied to any and all applications that incorporate a silicon chip; and the term “performance” has acquired wide-ranging applications and different nuances both within and outside the performance arts. Indeed, over the past forty years understandings of the word “performance” have been so stretched and reconfigured that it has become a paleonymic term: one that has retained its name but has transformed its fundamental signification and terms of reference. In academia, the

emergence of the interdisciplinary field of “performance studies” in the 1990s stretched the term widely to embrace varied facets of philosophy, linguistics, history, cultural and social sciences, and the general field of human activity in “everyday life,” just as Joseph Beuys had urged the visual arts to do many years earlier: “enlarge the old concept of Art, making it as broad and large as possible . . . to include every human activity.”² The related term “performative” has similarly been adopted, used, and often abused across many academic disciplines to denote and encompass seemingly anything and everything. As J. L. Austin put it in 1961, “You are more than entitled not to know what the word ‘performative’ means. It is a new word and an ugly word, and perhaps it does not mean anything very much . . . it is not a profound word.”³

Elsewhere, “performance” is related to the qualitative measurement of the capabilities of cars, aircraft, and other machinery under test conditions. The word retains a specific meaning within the computing industry itself, being applied to the speed and accuracy of processing, and the “architecture” of particular models of computer. A Web search for “digital performance” therefore prompts not only examples of the types of performance arts we discuss, but also sites related to, for example, testing and improving the processing speeds and operations of home PCs. But at the time of writing we are heartened that such a Web search still places our Digital Performance Archive at the top of most search engines’ lists.

Since 2000, the use of the term “digital performance” (in the sense that we intend it) has become more frequent within performance studies as well as in university education where, for example, a master’s degree in Digital Performance was launched in 2004 at Doncaster College, UK, led by Robert Wechsler (artistic director of the German dance and technology company Palindrome) and David Collins (editor of the *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*). In 2002, a new e-journal titled *Digital Performance: The Online Magazine for Artists Embracing Technology* was created by The Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre (New York), which began by noting the “tricky task” of defining digital performance and invited dialogue from readers as well as “individual artists and observers of the field . . . as a way of clarifying the terms and finding out how much we all have in common.”⁴ Although this approach to definitions indicated the danger that the term could be all-inclusive, the journal was more precise in locating a working definition for the term “digital” within this broad context, seeing it primarily as a “tool” to be exploited, but one with far-reaching performative consequences:

“Digital” is a more purely technical concept, narrow in origin but extremely broad in its applications. It is a particular way of describing the real world, a specific technique of encoding sensory data (sound, music, movement, sets, costumes, etc.) that allows that information to be communicated, altered, manipulated, and ultimately interpreted in a complex and potentially intelligent manner. It is an enabling concept. It includes multimedia and interactivity as you have a huge and

constantly expanding toolbox of theatrical effects that each has their own intelligence, sensitivity and subjectivity, that in a sense become characters on stage.

And we would argue that it is potentially a new paradigm in theater and performance.⁵

We share many of the ideas expressed here, and throughout this volume have sought not only to provide a history of the fascinating development of digital performance, but also to identify and evaluate the degree to which the use of new media in the performance arts has brought about new paradigms, genres, aesthetics, and interactive experiences.