Interface Theatre: Watching Ourselves Disappear

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ABSTRACT: *We propose, in this essay, a new theatrical genre we term interface theatre and examine three theatrical works from the past ten years that exemplify the form: Big Art Group's* Opacity (2017), *31Down's* DataPurge *(2015/2016), and Marike Splint's* You Are Here *(2020). These pieces, and others like them, depict, and critically reflect upon, a world pervasively mediated by interfaces: the apps, social media platforms, and device operating systems that screen so much of our everyday experience and personal communication and distil them to data, both for our own self-tracking and for the scrutiny of corporations and state surveillance. All three works act as transducers: they create theatrical microcosms of the processes by which human life gets transformed into data, allowing spectators to momentarily assume the perspectives of a surveilling algorithm. We offer the term interface theatre as a means of adding nuance and texture to current discourses about theatre in the digital world, which can encompass so many different forms, practices, and politics that greater specificity is required. Equally importantly, we argue, works of interface theatre make a strong case for the necessity for the theatrical form itself as a medium through which to grapple with the role of interfaces in social and political life writ large.*

KEYWORDS: *interface theatre, data performance, algorithmic performance, surveillance capitalism, platforms, computing, digitization, context collapse, deskilling, automation*

In this article, we examine three recent works by contemporary performance practitioners who are creating new theatrical languages to embody the new lived realities of surveillance capitalism.[1] These performance pieces and others like them depict, and critically reflect upon, a world pervasively mediated by interfaces: the apps, social media platforms, and device operating systems that screen so much of our everyday experience and personal communication and distil them to data, both for our own self-tracking and for the scrutiny of corporations and state surveillance. Big Art Group's *Opacity* (2017) – the title

itself rebuts the "transparency" promised by so many user experience designers – and 31Down's *DataPurge* (2015/2016) stage theatrical microcosms of the processes by which human life gets transformed into data, allowing spectators to momentarily assume the perspectives of a surveilling algorithm. Marike Splint's *You Are Here* (2020), which presses Google Earth's surveillance tracking to its limits, reinfuses context into spaces where it so often tends to collapse.

We are calling this genre *interface theatre*.[2] These works attempt to show spectators how machine intelligence sees them and, even more perniciously, how it is casting them in new algorithmically-determined roles, identities that may be more "real" – economically, juridically, even politically – than the selves they think they inhabit. But these pieces also provide an occasion for the re-humanization of data, examined in negative, for the display of what we'll term *infradata*. It's the opposite of metadata: the unquantifiable aspects of subjective experience pithed away by digitization's avid aggregations. Interface theatre is a more specific genre than live performance with digital elements or live-streamed performance in a digital era; it is theatre that interrogates particularly the functions of interfaces to obscure, distract, and shape our moment-to-moment consciousness. The examples we examine here are far from the only live theatre doing this work: pieces such as Turbo Pascal's *Algorithmen* (2014), which offered live audiences the opportunity to sort themselves as algorithms would sort them, or Chris Kondek and Christiane Kühl's *Anonymous P* (2014/2015) are also significant instances of this genre. We are also inspired by visual artists whose work critically examines the interface, most notably American Artist, whose recent works examine and destabilize the white supremacy that has been embedded in the visual interface models of mainstream consumer technologies since at least the early 1970s (establishing, for instance, an "office" interface that is visually white and implicitly Western, white, and male).[3] We distinguish interface theatre from its visual art analogues because of the role live performance plays in unfolding the interface's point of view. The performances explored in this essay represent significant modes of theatricalizing the interface, separated by two to three years each: an epoch in the era of digital innovation. *DataPurge* asks spectator-participants to engage in the amelioration of their own surveillance footprint, while *Opacity* invites spectators to view human interaction the way interfaces do. *You Are Here*, created during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, offers its spectators a means of contemplating the role of Google Earth, of mass data more generally, and of performance in making and unmaking our relationships to place.

In an age of ubiquitous data tracking, graphic interfaces are windows onto the world and our inner lives: we look out, and look inward, through

the medium of accumulating data. But they are also mirrors: literally, in that glass smartphone and computer screens often return a spectral outline of the user's body; figuratively, because they are a locus for the reflection and refinement of identity as expressed in the creation of new virtual selves.[4] Such interfaces encompass the web browsers by which a small portion of the internet is translated into visual form for commercial traffic; the social media platforms that proffer shifting forms of self-performance and community, even as they commoditize the data that users knowingly and unknowingly transmit; the apps and operating systems that mask their data-aggregating activity with seductive design. Interfaces frequently obscure the full range of their activity behind complex user agreements and delusive hallmarks of user competency. The computer scientist Harry Brignull has coined the term "dark patterns" – and a watchdog website of the same name – to describe deceptive interfaces that record or transmit data without users' consent, or that otherwise mislead them about terms of use, placing them in data jeopardy.[5]

Theorists of the interface like Branden Hookway and Alexander Galloway connect digital interfaces to a longer history of translating complex mechanical processes into simplified form for the purposes of operation and use: an entire technical operation cued with a lever or switch. In this view, social media portals participate in a history that includes car interiors, appliance controls, or elevator buttons. We know how to call the elevator, but we don't know how the pulleys work. The interface becomes a point of both connection and transformation, the place where the subjective experience of the user or consumer meets the capabilities of the machine. It's at once a site of possibility – an extension of human capacity – and of new constraints, delimiting new potentialities even as it creates them. Think of repeatedly tapping the button for an elevator that won't come.[6]

In the digital era, interfaces are the conduit between physical life and unseen worlds of data, only apprehensible with computational tools. We use the term *interface* here – instead of a more familiar usage like *application* – both to invoke these longer histories of engineered experience and to get at a larger, but frequently obfuscated, truth about our interactions with the digital sphere, one that the concept of an application, with its implied meaning of a software tool employed by a knowing user to perform a deliberate task or address a contained problem, does not. In the case of the digital interface, the user's encounter is not only simplified (like the old-fashioned elevator button) but also altered and obscured in translation, like the computerized elevator of today, whose "door close" button is less of a tool and more of a theatrical prop standing in for one. As scholars of the algorithmic landscape have observed repeatedly, the interface's role in obfuscating processes and erasing its own role in perpetuating implicit bias is neither incidental nor easily

addressed through widely accessible education and racial and gender diversification in the tech industry, though both are necessary elements of any effort to redress endemic racism and sexism in the digital world.[7]

These functions can make interfaces not just theatrical but perniciously theatrical, in ways that correspond to the duplicity anti-theatricalists have always assigned to the art form. As Sarah Bay-Cheng has eloquently observed:

> Although it has become common to discuss contemporary digital media in relation to the image or technological and data manipulations, these media and their platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on – also function as stages; places for people to construct and cultivate identities to presented audiences, both real and imagined. (273)

But in the age of dark patterns, our use of interfaces has come to resemble theatres within theatres. In the frame we see, one that bears a more than passing resemblance to a classical proscenium, we act deliberately: searching for information or a date; purchasing goods; staging our experience in pithy tweets or artfully arranged photographs. But this visible theatre, proffered to the gaze in the seductively knowable enclosure of the browser window or app frame, conceals the larger theatre in which such activities make us unknowing actors: surveillance capitalism's theatre of data. (In this way, the theatre of big data represents a fundamental shift from the more "classical" paradigm of human-computer relations, as exemplified by Brenda Laurel's foundational study *Computers as Theatre*.) This theatre of the virtualized and reconstituted world also scripts our lives in the physical world. We cannot know when we're on stage or off.[8] In Wendy Chun's incisive formulation, "YOU are a character in a drama called Big Data" (23). This inclusion of the theatrical metaphor reflects a new strand of the long history in which both theatre itself and theatrical vocabulary are interpolated by other fields as shorthand for dangerous forms of deceit. In the case of big data, the relationship is undeniably theatrical; but this circumstance is also an invitation to reconsider the role of theatre itself in such a dialogue. Theatre, Annie Dorsen writes in an essay published in 2022, "has an inextricable relationship to metaphor. This-here is always (potentially) that-there" (54–55); and for Dorsen, this foundational aspect of theatre is what allows audiences to see layered meanings in the words, images, and actions before them – in other words, what allows for infradata to exist.

Eating Reality

In today's digital economies, interfaces are the primary means by which data are harvested by corporations and other actors who see human beings' everyday experience as a renewable natural resource. As the technology

critic Ben Tarnoff argues in a recent issue of the critical technology studies journal *Logic*, capitalism is in the throes of renewing itself, using our bodies, feelings, and mundane experiences as the raw material: "With digitization, however, capitalism starts to eat reality itself. It becomes an imperialism of everyday life – it begins to consume *moments*" ("Data" 96, emphasis in orginal). These realities give eerie new currency to some foundational ideas in the discipline of theatre and performance studies. Building on a tradition of theorizing everyday life as outside, or at least potentially resistant to, the apparatus of state power – a tradition exemplified by thinkers like Henri Lefebvre and Michel De Certeau – Diana Taylor first articulated her germinal concepts of archive and repertoire in the context of parsing the dynamics of colonial encounter. In the hands of the imperial aggressor, she notes, the archive, the stuff of recorded history – an earlier century's big data, in its more materially confined forms – becomes an instrument of power. What enters the official record contributes to hegemonic narratives, including those that administer captive populations and undergird cultural history; what is excluded can be suppressed, stamped out, or simply destroyed. Moreover, what Taylor (*Archive*) calls the "scenarios" of early colonial encounters – the dramatic structures produced by prior histories of contact and conquest – quickly began to govern future encounters.[9]

The repertoire, in these terms, represents history's subaltern: that which cannot speak, at least within the records of a history written by the victors. It consists of ephemeral forms of knowledge and experience that lack legibility to the gaze of the archive. But this opacity is also a source of its subversive potential: that which goes unrecorded, unnoticed by power, contains the potential to resist the workings of the archive. Taylor's theories revisit a moment when the extractive practices of Western imperialism were being articulated in the same moment as its administrative techniques. To know a population better – and to force it to know itself in ways that conformed to the archival knowledge of imperial administration – was to better subjugate it; labour, and with it, resources, could thus be more smoothly extracted. The colonial background of Taylor's theories, together with their paradigmatic importance for theatre and performance studies, make them an illuminating reference point for our discussion here. Even as new technologies of data capture and data use further confound distinctions between the respective terrains belonging to the archive and the repertoire, they are reviving the archive's power as a potential instrument of economic and state control.[10]

One way to characterize the business models behind the new extractive economies of surveillance capitalism is to say that they rely, essentially, on transforming the repertoire into the archive, and on mobilizing that enlarged

archive to administer both our real-world and data-world selves. (China's social credit system is already uniting these functions to produce digital authoritarianism.[11]) New digital forms of contact tracing arising to combat the spread of COVID-19 are also giving rise to the spectre of new regimes of bio-surveillance. As numerous recent examples attest, technology companies are inextricably connected to state power, providing both tools and data to governments, police forces, and the military. Lately, many workers in Silicon Valley have begun to speak against these connections – refusing to work on projects that would give police access to facial recognition data, for example, or simply refusing to work with police at all.[12] But the more pervasive and frightening effects of these new technologies may lie outside the purview of the state as traditionally conceived: a worldwide homogenization of desires; a transnational system of administration by tightly choreographed patterns of induced consumption and gratification.[13]

What does all this mean for theatre and for theatre and performance studies? One answer, suggested by the works of contemporary performance examined here, demands a renewed attention to processes of translation. These artists devise new stage languages to embody the experience of pervasive, unboundaried surveillance – the kind that transforms bodies into data, via interfaces, in real time, all the time. In the mixed reality of contemporary life, watching and being watched, performance and spectatorship are modalities we pass through constantly. The theatre may be one of the last places in contemporary society where those boundaries remain at all clear or meaningful, if only because turning mobile devices off while we watch and perform remains a convention (even if it's a rule as often broken as observed). These pieces ask what it *feels* like to be aware of yourself as alternately (or at once) both a data double and a living body.

Catharsis

For Ryan Holsopple, the creator of *DataPurge*, the crisis of the interface demands therapeutic attention. *DataPurge*, as its title suggests, proffered a digital-age cleansing ritual: an airing of secrets and anxieties, an amelioration of unknowing behaviours. In its first version, staged as part of the COIL Festival in New York City in 2015, an impromptu clinic was set up in an art gallery, complete with a reclining dental chair and stark antiseptic white decor. Clad in lab coats, holding clipboards, Holsopple and his collaborators conducted a kind of cyber-autopsy, rooting through the phones of "patients/clients" for hidden evidence about their digital lives. Meanwhile, their findings were streamed in real time to virtual spectators tuning in over the internet. It was a cyber-confession: the making-public of all the secrets usually concealed in the recesses of apps and folders, but also a performance, by different means, of the

kind of transmission of personal data that goes on all the time with our passive assent but without our full understanding. Showing personal photographs to an anonymous audience of digital eavesdroppers is a cringe-inducing violation of personal privacy – but our phones make even more personal disclosures constantly, if we let them. The piece's nested audiences suggested the complex forms of surveillance capitalism's hypervigilance – at once personalized and impersonal, intrusive and automatic (see Holsopple).

A second version of *DataPurge*, performed a few months later at Hall-walls Contemporary Arts Center in Buffalo, as part of the Structures of Digital Feeling colloquium at the University at Buffalo, took the form of a sort of encounter group. The "clients," resting serenely on cushions amid candles, plush carpets, and the attentive members of 31Down, looked on as the contents of their smartphones were projected onto a nearby screen and rummaged through by Holsopple and his team of auditors. Audience members stood around and watched with a mix of prurient curiosity and vicarious embarrassment. But the clients mostly just seemed relieved to be unburdening themselves of their digital peccadillos. It's a productive irony that this therapeutic effect was achieved by turning passive surveillance into fodder for direct theatrical spectatorship – a more "classical" mode of surveillance.

Some of the volunteer performers emitted audible gasps of relief as a previously unknown transgression came to light: a bad poem from the notes app, say, or evidence of sloppy attention to privacy settings revealed by the phone's shockingly comprehensive knowledge of their recent whereabouts. (One participant's location data, undeleted over a period of months or perhaps even years, preserved a vivid crisscrossing map of everywhere she'd been during that time, in Buffalo and beyond.) Mere data were being leavened with infra-data: the intangible affective and experiential textures that data points can't capture. Arid archives were being reinfused with the thoughts, feelings, and memories of the people behind the data. The problem of an individual's interaction with the digital sphere – usually a private concern, even though of pressing public interest to us all – became a matter for public discussion, and even consolation.

Given all this, it's worth thinking about theatre itself as an interface in these terms, as a technology whose meaning and cultural capital has long depended on its function as a juncture between worlds, manifested in the relationship between bodies and representation, between actor and role; between divine and profane; between historical sweep and individual striving; between the political and private spheres; between constructions of race and the bodies disciplined by them; between normative ideas of gender and expressions of individual identity. Interface theatre picks up many of these themes at the juncture between embodied and digital life: staging the aperture by which

each communicates with the other. In *We Are Data*, his study of new forms of identity and power produced by the algorithmic sorting of big data, John Cheney-Lippold argues that "[w]ho we are is much more than a straightforward declaration of self-identification or intended performance. Who we are [. . .] is also a declaration by our data, as interpreted by algorithms" (5). Interface theatre keeps both of those terms constantly in view.

DataPurge, like Big Art Group's *Opacity*, eschews conventional theatrical narrative, including anything as stable as a script or even a performance text, in favour of something that looks more like a digital-age version of Taylor's idea of the scenario: a dramaturgy that encodes and displays power relations, cueing improvisations tightly delimited by ideology's themes. These performance pieces dramatize the modes of relation prescribed by technology while also attempting to give spectators of view of that which they can never ordinarily see – the inhuman gaze of the data-mining tool. Their open structure models a more transparent form of interface with technology, one that is not occluded by the delusive proficiency encouraged by the graphic interface.

DataPurge and *Opacity* both create reactive spaces in which the contemporary blurring and interaction of archive and repertoire can be made manifest. As they do so, these performances map what we have called elsewhere a "structure of digital feeling" (Felton-Dansky and Gallagher-Ross 1): in this case, the discomfiting awareness of being at once an individual subjectivity and a data-producing commoditizable entity, a performer in the larger choreography of surveillance capitalism's circuit of automized desire and atomized group-life. As the media theorist Scott Richmond argues in his forthcoming book,

> The changes new computational and digital technologies bring are difficult to grasp because any scene of ordinary life is difficult to grasp, and also because these changes have scrambled what is personal and impersonal in ordinary life, and thus frustrated our ready-to-hand procedures for sorting out which is which. More often than not, such life is marked by an uneasy, rapid, and surprising toggling between affective states and scales and stakes. It's hard to know how to feel and to know what those feelings might mean. It's hard to know what's mine and what's general, or generic – what's personal and impersonal.

This is where *DataPurge* began: with the uncomfortable realization that we often don't know what our devices – and the data pools they feed – know about us: about the particular dark patterns in which we're swept up. And with the knowledge that we should. The piece's premise is simple, but its ramifications are profound. For Ryan Holsopple, who devised the project, the fact that many of us carry tiny portable computers in our pockets means that

we're in need of a consciousness-raising session about just how much our devices know about us and where that information is going. Because so much of our daily lives is concentrated on our devices, they're little clearing houses for secrets: racy photographs, perhaps, or inadvised text messages, but also financial details, personal biographical information, and legal liabilities.

In *DataPurge*, patients reclined into a blissful quasi-confessional state, momentarily unburdened of the complex admixture of ignorance, shame, and confusion that characterizes our compromised interrelation with interfaces. This made *DataPurge* purgative in an almost Aristotelian sense: a digital-turned-physical catharsis. (And it provided a coinciding scene of recognition: it was showing patients, and by extension spectators, how the digital world sees them – showing them the overlapping data sets that make a digital self, at one of the main points of collection.) The bodily expression of this relief wasn't accidental: phones know all kinds of things about our physical lives, and our physical lives are being reshaped – indeed, Shoshana Zuboff would say automated – in response to their promptings. *DataPurge* reverses the interfaces' usual transubstantiation of lived reality into archivable data. Data are instead being re-personalized, restored to memory and affect. The data double was being returned to its source, the archive returned to the repertoire, across the threshold of the interfaces. But that "almost" is important: no one scene of recognition could be sufficient.

DataPurge parses the many ways individuals are interpellated by their devices, unpicking the complex dynamics of privacy and publicity braided by digital personalizations. The new statistical economics tells us that such data are only meaningful in aggregates – massive agglomerations of the residue of banal activities. And that we can safely assent to being tapped for such hoarding in the knowledge that we're anonymized. *DataPurge* attempts to restore individual quiddity to such tallies, reminding us, amid the new rush for data extraction, that data are made of experience – made of people.

But this surplus of interpellation also indicates that *DataPurge's* recognition scenes can't lead to a final catharsis in the Aristotelian style. Instead, the piece seems to propose a perennial cycle of glut and purge – of unknowing assent to new dark patterns and deliberate interrogation of them – as surveillance capitalism continues to encroach on new zones of experience, and we by necessity re-examine the terms of our digital citizenship. The notion that one such "therapy" session could be remotely sufficient might seem quaint from the remove of 2024.

Suffering and Recognition

All conventional theatrical spectatorship is more or less extractive; audiences sit in the dark, taking impressions from the proceedings, making interpretations,

deriving pleasure and insight (hopefully), and are rarely called upon to give much back. But Big Art Group's *Opacity* recasts spectatorship's extractions in less comfortable terms: as we read the data presented on stage, extrapolating conclusions from the aggregation of narrative and image, our activity is being measured against the other forms of resource exploitation going on: the piece is both about data extractivism and an agent of extraction itself, participating in the digitization economy as it creates its text and scenarios anew each time by gathering data from social media. Theatre, like digitization, to use Tarnoff's phrase, "consume[s] moments" – *Opacity* does it both ways. The ontology of algorithmic sorting points backward: to new predictive patterns made of old data; interface theatre points forward: to new uses made of dark patterns.

Opacity – first presented as a work in progress at the Fisher Center at Bard's 2017 performance biennial, *We're Watching*, and now in further development as the first instalment in a projected trilogy of algorithmic pieces called *Trouble* – tells a seemingly banal story of digital-age encounter, refracted across mobile platforms: It's the story of a hookup. It's also a journey into the heart of a particular kind of darkness – the opacity of the interface. Two young protagonists, P and K – genders, ages, ethnicities unknown, though queerness is implied – arrange a rendezvous, sliding from DMs to a meet-up. On screens up stage, we see a route mapped by GPS; transitive feelings are tracked with series of emojis; status updates document progress; an Instagram comment explodes into a feverish torrent of text. There is no first-hand experience in this narrative: *Opacity* renders daily life as filtered by interlocking interfaces, a collection of overlapping data sets. Tangible realities are secondary, valuable only for the data they generate, and this humdrum encounter is producing a vast trove of extractable (and commoditizable) data.

Embodied as theatre, the piece illustrates, in a way that few other art forms could, just how much character-defining information is left behind by making a few plans and hanging out at the mall. But an eerier question is also implied here: who's really scripting this encounter? Is it the "characters" – whoever they are – slipping between apps in seamless digital-native style? Or are they simply following the prompts of behaviour-predicting technology: the choices generated by a dating app, the routes suggested by GPS, the emotions guided by emojis? In other words, has their encounter been automated, scripted before it even begins?

The movement of the physical bodies on stage suggests the latter proposition. As the data scroll across the screens, in the foreground, two shrouded figures perform a shuddering dance of self-scrutiny. They're holding smartphones, the devices twitching across the surface of their bodies in time to a score (or instructions) we can't see or hear: caught in the maelstrom of dark patterns. In their fanatical desire to document every inch of their bodies, they seem to be

taking enough selfies to create a composite rendering of themselves – and indeed, we know that such composite images are an increasingly common feature of smartphone cameras, the images subtly reshaped by the editorial intervention of artificial intelligence. In fact, the eerie choreography – it looks like the characters are buffering – is being generated in real time by a computer program akin to the algorithm that raids Twitter for the piece's text, displaying scraped images – chosen for their gestural properties and proximity to the search terms that provide the words – on downstage monitors for the actors to copy (the programming is by Big Art co-founder Jemma Nelson). But they're scanning blankness: their limbs, faces, even fingers are shrouded in light-swallowing black.

The text and scenarios that accompany this hermetic choreography are correspondingly elusive: a litany of commonplace phrases and actions algorithmically harvested from thousands of tweets according to sets of search terms, and projected in various forms – instant messages, GPS route modifications, Instagram comments – on screens up stage. Initially, the scraped text appears as a chipper series of updates, the juddering counterpart to the convulsive movement: vivid but gnomic sentences that imply action and novelty while not really adding up to plot development. They churn in place while teasing the viewer with implied narrative. The published text of *Opacity*, one possible iteration among multitudes, begins with:

> P fears tedium.
> K likes a picture from a hopeless car.
> P needs sex.
> P and K update avoidance to a hook up. (Big Art Group 37)

The scene continues in a relentless stream of subject-object-verb phrasings. The insistent verbs at once suggest movement, incident, and emotional life, but as you watch the update feed spool out, you're made uncomfortably aware that the verbs are the statistical record of virtualized actions: thoughts and feelings translated into an intricate ballet of thumbs and fingers on the interface's stage. The verbs point to the work that we do on behalf of surveillance capitalism, the individual gestures in the attention economy's assembly line: liking, swiping, commenting, sharing, updating, scrolling, clicking. But there's a poignancy here, too: the eddying bot-like text is made from the ever-metastasizing archive of human thoughts and feelings on Twitter, that most voluble of platforms: this nonsense is made of sense; the absurdity is being created from former meaning. The authors of the thousands of tweets that make up this corpus have no idea that their words – disentangled, aggregated, recombined – are driving a piece of experimental theatre in a black box auditorium.

Throughout the piece, the physical life of the performers is separated from dialogue and narrative in this way, and you have to look back and forth from projections to bodies and back again to figure out what's going on. It's the spectatorial equivalent of what the characters are likely doing (and what we've probably been doing on the way to the theatre): looking back and forth from our phones to the world, and back again, from filtered reality to the rawer version, face to interface. But on stage, only the screened realities register. And so, as we watch, we're experiencing something like the inhuman vantage point of a data-mining tool. From the safe remove of our seats, we're watching data accumulate across multiple platforms and imagining the affective realities that could produce these digital traces. But, if, as is more than likely, we've merely silenced our phones, we're also likely being surveilled, even as we watch, generating data about our whereabouts, and bodily disposition, that can be used to personalize our search results and social media encounters – to "cast" us in datasphere roles. (And if spectators have tweeted recently, there's an iota's chance, however statistically unlikely, that they've contributed to the text of the piece they're watching.)

Despite the agglomerating data, the human lives producing these effigies remain inaccessible to us, at least in the ways we're accustomed to experiencing at the theatre: they're hidden, faces obscured, usually poorly lit, no match for the play of images across the screens. *Opacity* gives us a taste of how algorithms see (and don't see) us: to the gaze of the machine, the data are real, the bodies are vexingly illegible (except inasmuch as they generate stats), the interior lives are entirely absent. But it's the data that tells them what to do, even as they generate more of it, in a non-stop feedback loop. The actors have been automated, and while the jerky choreography might seem grotesque and nonsensical, you get a discomfiting sense of a hidden inhuman sensibility dictating the movements. It's no more unnatural, the piece seems to be implying, than the new bodily rigours imposed on us by the habitual use of mobile devices: hunching forward and squinting at tiny type, swiping and clicking with our thumbs, walking while shifting attention back and forth from the screen – an entire choreography we've learned in only a few years and that we now perform for an ever-larger share of our waking hours. This tension between the opaque labouring bodies and the emergent patterns of identity appearing on screen might bring to mind Zuboff's and Cheney-Lippold's distinctions – and pointed reversal of priority – between our lives in the material world and the declarations of our data. The obscurity of the physical bodies on stage reflects the discomfiting reality that they matter less than the data points they generate. This isn't merely a Brechtian separation between performer and character, it's a more radical statement about the new volatility of selfhood. It's as though the characters are stepping into – and recoiling away from – new virtual selves

with every stammering movement. And, meanwhile, a mirrored floor creates delusive depth for the frenzied blankness: nothingness reflected, an anxious void.

During a sequence in which the "characters" take a ride-share – the projections on screen shift to the simplified progress report of a GPS route map – we're eerily reminded that *Opacity* itself treats actors like Lyft drivers and spectators like Lyft passengers: riding in a vehicle driven by data along an uncertain route, even if we know we'll ultimately disembark. The piece emulates the eerie placelessness of a ride-share ride – the app knows the route better than the driver, whose behaviour is being automated by its promptings. Director Caden Manson has noted that the ensemble deliberately selected untrained, non-professional performers for the piece. The actors are operating in a continuous present guided by algorithmic instructions. The program "knows" where they're going even when they don't; we see them moving without knowledge of their next coordinates. But that means no one knows, really. It's "deskilled" theatre for the gig economy: like Lyft or Uber, it's an app that automates its users and, in theory at least, is scalable – this piece could go anywhere and be performed by anyone (Gallagher-Ross).

Uncannily, what we're doing is what internet tracking does to us: we're "personalizing" the figures on stage, ascribing ages (young), genders (unclear), sexualities (queer? straight? does it matter?), social classes, regional identities, urban disposition (suburban?), based on interlocking data sets; nothing we see pass between the two physical bodies on stage confirms the meet-up/ hookup narrative we're assembling, and yet, it coheres. By reaching out empathically to close the gap between stage and auditorium, we're imprisoning these figures in identities, desires, and narrative – even as they seek to find each other and establish a fragile connection online. Poignantly, the performers, driven by algorithmic instructions, circle each other twitchily but never touch. They want, need to make contact – but can't, no matter how close they get.

In other words, to return to Cheney-Lippold's terms, who they are is a declaration of their data. Everything fits, but we're left with troubling uncertainties – have we imposed this story on them? The real bodies remain ultimately out of reach – to us, and to each other – but the data provide character, story, movement. We're complicit in a process of surrogation: the data double for the "real" people. And the shrouded figures provide an opportunity to consider our own built-in biases: how are we assigning race, gender, and desire to these bodies? Are we defaulting to a universalizing white maleness? Are we willfully suspending the assigning of identity? (And is that, in itself, a leap to unmarked whiteness?) What clues are allowing us to "target" our assumptions?[14]

The piece is using hallowed habits of theatrical spectatorship against us: we're accustomed to seeing character as "transparent" in the sense that we see past a symptomatic presentation of dialogue and action to the character's hidden desires, the subtext. We see past the actor's body to the character. Here, the "character" is a shifting overlay on an unknowable body – one that bears no affective or intellectual relationship to that body's subjectivity, not even the closeness produced by an actor's interpretation and embodiment. The opacity of identity and the opacity of technology are united in the same image. The appeals made by interfaces to our imaginations, the intangible sum of look, "behaviour," and implied narrative, perhaps rely on our desire to deduce "character" from such combinations of data (and are an equally delusive imposition on opaque functioning).

Throughout, the text, prompted by constellations of search terms, circles around themes of isolation, yearning, and retreat: grasping at connection that seems perpetually withheld, forever just out of reach. But this isn't merely the emo isolation of adolescence – the piece is actually attempting to show us the anomie of surveillance capitalism. At two points, the performers sing to us: first a lonely solo, then a plaintive duet. Or at least they seem to sing: fleeting breaks in the harmony reveal that the actors aren't actually making the melodies. In these brief intervals, we can hear them droning song lyrics into their microphones in an affectless monotone closer to talking than singing. Pitch-correcting – or, in this case, pitch-creating – software is transmuting the mumbling to the bright melodies of yearning ballads: hauntingly slowed-down versions of anthemic songs by Tegan and Sara and by Porches that offer ironic echoes of the piece's melancholy themes: ("I'm only real in my longing"; "Hang on to yourself . . . hang on to your mind").

In these sequences, the opaque code governing this transformation is invisibly present as a veil between stage and auditorium: we can barely hear the voices as embodied sound, although you might catch the smallest echo, in the interstices of the synthetic melody. We're mostly privy to the data-processed result. But that's true of so many experiences now, glimpsed (or represented) through the seemingly transparent aperture of an interface like Instagram or Snapchat – but invisibly transformed by layers of code and transmission. And the most affecting part – the yearning melody you can't help but surrender to – is the most artificial. The code is bringing us closer to the characters, as song-abetted sympathy closes the gap between spectator and performer, but it's also shunting us further apart. In these moments, the "interface effect" is almost tangibly present: both creating the conditions of our connection and ensuring that the actual expression of the performers remains out of reach. The interface is as much a membrane as it is a window.

Later in the piece, an Instagram comment, projected on screen, explodes into a torrent of text: beginning in the banal observational mode of everyday online discourse, the text begins to metastasize, becoming not one comment but a comment on comments: a roiling stew of phrases sutured together from who knows how many scraped interjections – each traceable back to the work of an individual mind but now so much fodder for scanning and sorting, predictive perhaps of future behaviour and commentary. The snaking text and superabundance of expression defy comprehensibility by human eyes. Scanning this streaming pastiche, we're seeing from the data-mining perspective again: we're looking at an analogue for the mess of undifferentiated scraps of consciousness sent through machine intelligence all the time. What is this serpentine text teaching us? What is it teaching itself about us? The torrents of text eddy around paranoid themes: conspiracies, threat, the sense of being watched.

As before, the sentences deliberately defy conventional sense; to pull impressions from it, we have to read like an alogorithm:

> On the void of surveillance state so we can make every one Freedom of The USFA needs to quit screaming into fraud at Angola. "Thank God we as free of insulin Metrazol electricity subsidies of surveillance material. The last tweet has just paranoid! Another one! That's crazy thing is, so void and barmy, we don't know if that void. "You're seeing it should see what you in the tools and CNN not subject to a US citizen, 18 pounds of me wth why is he... #TrumpRussia must tell you there.... FRAGILE LITTLE WITNESS PROTECTION SERIAL EGGS (paranoid tweet is no point the positive element) lmao, now but it means freedom. i dont speak against. in our emonumental President. Can a racist. This is the search. Shared surveillance up with paranoid in general election, is inside your heart there is no enemies, you're paranoid. Senior citizens share an absolute right••• Only a US since she was 7. She's not and CNN not patriotic voice of The #USFA at the end. Good point, spend trillions on earth would void of Transparency (90%). am i think we've lost an SUV bumper and Pharma's profit outweighs ethics: the Week Long Action Challenge to accuse you agree abt freedom is void" "You're seeing an isolated thing: Freedom Fighters & enter the Worst Joke in a Pride and Democratic officials say. Since he still got paranoid. (Big Art Group 51)

This stream of words, brands, symbols, and emblems is a parody – but just barely – of the phenomenon known as context collapse, a concept articulated by, among others, Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd more than a decade ago.[15] Context collapse, as Marwick and boyd explained in 2010, consists in the flattening of multiple audiences into one seemingly singular or undefined mass on social media platforms, such that public speech might lose the thread connecting it to the public it aims to hail, create, and address.[16] Uses of this

phrase have proliferated over time – the context of its own creation collapsing and ballooning – and these words have come to refer also to the effect of high volume, fast-paced information on social media, unsourced or opaquely cited, that promotes disinformation, distances readers and users from sources, and erases epistemological categories online. In a 2021 article, George Pearson writes of "the breaking down of distinctions between content types: information context collapse" (1182). Information context collapse describes the experience of looking at Google search results and not being certain which ones are ads (or being inured to the abundance of ads within them), and it describes the misinformation that alters election results.

This image of superabundant emptiness prepares the way for the piece's apocalyptic ending: a vast nothingness when all behaviour is predicted and staged by machine intelligence, everything becoming nothing. The Lyft ride ends abruptly, at a crater that's inexplicably voiding the surface of the map where K's house should be. It's a sexual image: orificial. But it's also an image of nothingness that picks up where the plenitude of roiling speech left off just moments before. The void also recalls the recursive logic of the piece. Think of the piece's mirrored floor again: multiplying reflections of imitated movements with no true referent into depthless virtual space. Each performance is at once entirely new and unrepeatable – the text is generated anew each time, the choreography unrecordable in its combination of interpreted images – making it even more ephemeral than a more conventional performance. But that also means each performance is weirdly self-cancelling, disappearing into a cannibalized void: difficult to preserve in spectatorial memory, deliberately defying narrative recall – the outlines are clear, but the details are elusive – even as it teaches performers to follow its dictates more precisely. We're watching *Opacity*, but the piece's algorithm is surveilling the internet. It's watching us.

Toward the end of the piece, as the characters reach their final destination, the bedroom, an eerie animated sequence appears on the projection screens: grossly distorted organic figures – they look like marionettes constructed out of meat, Frankensteinian effigies, data doubles. Tied to the gestures of the onstage performers by sensors, the meat puppets match their movements in choppy parody – staging an impossible duet of data double and organic source code. Soon, the figures merge into a flailing chimeric beast with two backs, and many limbs. In one way, the image is parodic. It's sex, perhaps, as seen by an algorithm. The discomfiting fleshiness of the images is also a reminder that each tiny data molecule that makes up an online self is traceable back to a moment of embodied life. Sex, here, seems the outmoded precursor to another kind of ecstatic self-dissolution, the merging and remerging of our data with that of others into giant composite

bodies – a kind of transhuman congress that's going on all the time now, without our knowledge.

That means the fleshy effigies on stage are as much the images of the spectators as the performers, and here, the piece is reminding us of the doubled theatricality of surveillance capitalism itself – its theatres within theatres, stages behind stages, hidden audiences. Although we might seem to be safe in the dark – enjoying the hallowed public privacy of theatrical audiences – we're also being watched, and something will be done with the results of that watching. We're all sitting together, but to the devices surveilling us, even as we, in turn, watch the performance unfolding before us, we're alone: independently generating data, personalized, and atomized. Even now, the temporary community of the theatre auditorium is being sundered apart, in real time, and recombined by data aggregators that can't account for its existence. The gathering of spectators in an auditorium – a temporary community united by public privacy – is form of corporate body that algorithms can't see, at least meaningfully. A volitional gathering of bodies united by common attention and common concern: combining privacy and togetherness, community and solitude, common experience and subjective interpretation.

Reversal

As many scholars of the digital landscape have pointed out, individual abstention from apps, social media, and the information-gathering interfaces that sustain them is neither a privilege many can afford nor a viable means of keeping big data in check (see, e.g., Benjamin 15–16; Portwood-Stacer, qtd. in Odell 91). Multilayered context – carefully unpeeling the frames of the interface – offers a space of possibility, and this negotiated engagement with the interface is at the core of director Marike Splint's 2020 solo piece *You Are Here: A Homebound Travelogue*, which traversed the globe digitally during the first months of the COVID crisis in 2020. Produced by La Jolla Playhouse for its 2020 Digital WOW (World Without Walls) Festival, *You Are Here* examines the nearly all-seeing interface of Google Earth, meditating on the individual's relationship to place over time and probing the gaps in what the interface can see.

You Are Here begins but does not end in autobiography. Seated before a camera in her apartment, Splint greets a mosaic of tiny audience members on Zoom before describing how life in COVID lockdown prompted her to virtual travel on Google Earth. The screen shifts us into Google Earth as we follow Splint to the outside of her house, down her residential Los Angeles street, and into spaces of her childhood and her family's past: a suburban home in the Netherlands, a farming village in Tunisia. Sometimes Google Earth offers emotional immediacy, as when Splint locates a concrete underpass in the Netherlands that she traversed time and again as a child. Other

times, the gaps in what its all-seeing eye can encompass emerge. These are temporal gaps, like when Splint shows us a photo of her previous home, her husband's barely visible head peeking above a backyard fence and into the frame. They're also gaps in control, as when Splint whirls the viewer around a residential street to show us the one house whose owners or residents have the technical knowledge and the time to request that Google permanently blur the images of their houses, cars, or of themselves in or near their homes (see, e.g., Morse).

Panning out from her own story, Splint asks the viewer to consider the landscapes of our own childhoods and pasts, the everyday engagement we make with mapping interfaces, the context that these interfaces routinely include and exclude. Google Earth is a study in surveillance technologies and their limits, of course, but it is also a tool for historical seeing, Splint demonstrates, one that theatre can be as well. In his classic study *To Brecht and Beyond*, Darko Suvin writes of three points of view feeding Brecht's aesthetic – the first two being the rough, comic, human-scale "view from below" and the second the uncompromisingly rational "view from above," both merging in the "look backward," a historically situated dialectical form. "[T]he most significant of [Brecht's aesthetic categories] is a *look backward* from an imagined golden future of justice and friendliness to his (and our) cold world and dark times," Suvin wrote. "Brecht's central aesthetic device, the technique of estrangement [*Verfremdungseffekt*], and the whole estranging arsenal of Brechtian poetics flow logically out of such an angle of vision" (113, emphasis in original).

This is not precisely Splint's vantage point, but the resonance is deep. Street View provides the illusion that one is situated inside the virtual world on screen, with the white navigational carrots and the street labels reminding us that we are inside a map. Splint dips and swerves into Street View, each photograph mapping a moment in time that is not our own but that is filled with the emotion and materiality of human life: her husband, captured by a Street View driver at their old apartment, during a time of culture shock and grief after moving to the United States; an unnamed person pushing a shopping cart that might or might not hold all of their worldly possessions.

Satellite view is a look from above, and while one can zoom in and alight on the street in some places, others are visible only via the far-away snapshots taken by unseen satellites, becoming grainy and abstracted when the user attempts to situate themselves inside the world at street level and human scale. Sometimes this is because a location has been left out for reasons more and less self-conscious on the corporation's part. Splint attempts to zoom into the small Tunisian village where her mother grew up, but Street View drivers have not covered it yet, and she can only enlarge, to the point of abstraction,

squares of farmland and soil. Other parts of the world (like most of Afghanistan) are wholly unavailable for view, while even places that are, for the most part, photographed and mapped in great detail – like Silicon Valley – have notable omissions, like the Google campus itself.

Scrolling from one continent to the next and shifting between views of her own home and satellite imagery of far-away places, Splint describes Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven's concept of "guilty landscapes": places that have seen war, genocide, violence, and that still exist without testifying to the suffering that has occurred there, sometimes even covering the traces with grass or trees. As she talks about guilty landscapes, she flicks through a few spaces – some look like dilapidated apartment buildings – that have suffered war, famine, power loss, while others appear unmarked, just trees and woods. She doesn't identify them to us: they're not ours to gaze at maybe, and maybe not hers to cite. Her respectful observation of distance, her choice not to name and label, speaks of the selective inclusion of context that pushes against the tide of context collapse, though Splint's looks backward in time, unlike Brecht's, do not presume the vantage point of a better era to come.

A more localized guilty landscape sits at the centre of *You Are Here*, bespeaking a much more endemic and mundane form of guilt. Splint's emphasis throughout is on the places that we can't see, in tandem with the places Google Earth doesn't allow us to see, because of the ideologies built into the map. One of these is the alley behind her house, which, though it is a thoroughfare for trucks and a space where people live, is not one of the many streets threaded with a thin blue line denoting that Google Earth mapping cars have been there. Splint doesn't insist on a causal relationship but suggests that this may be because the alley is a space where the city does "eviction dumps" when tenants are forced out of their apartments. Hazily, the viewer can see from above that there are blankets, mattresses, and piles of other detritus from someone's life in the alleyway. Likewise mundane but guilty is the campus of Google's headquarters, which is the only blank spot in miles of intricately criss-crossed roads, all meticulously mapped and photographed. Google would like to leave itself out of the picture, part of its bent toward objectivity, along with the self-driving cars that would presumably be free of the human inclination to infuse the map with our own subjectivity. Splint describes, as an instance of this, a Google Street driver who covered every block of his hometown with affectionate diligence, but then, when asked to photograph a neighbouring town that held memories of a past bad relationship, had quickly photographed only the "important" landmarks, neglecting to update the remainder of the geography so as to spend as little time as possible there.

Splint's personalization and contextualization of the landscapes she describes do of course provide a method of including the repertoire in the archive, lived experience in the digitally opaque space of information. As Taylor noted nearly two decades ago, the archive and the repertoire were never entirely distinct, and any simplistic critique of the privileging of writing above embodied culture misses the larger analysis of how writing and embodiment relate to power (*Archive*). Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* offers a similarly wide-ranging approach and is useful here because of Azoulay's revelations about the means through which photography and imperialism are complicit. To understand the full history of this complicity, Azoulay proposes, one must venture further back in time than conventional narratives of photographic technology would allow: "Imagine that the origins of photography are not to be found somewhere around the beginning of the nineteenth century [. . .] Imagine instead that those origins go back to 1492," she writes (2–3). Photography, as Azoulay writes about it, has always functioned as an interface, capturing images that reinforce imperial ideology and and imagine imperial structures into being. Google Maps is a laughably exact instance of this, but Splint makes it less exact, and deeper, by bringing it into the space of the theatre. Theatre, perhaps, too, can extend our understand of the interface and its entanglement with power, can unstick archive and repertoire in order to offer a slow and incomplete glimpse at the interface itself.

Splint draws on the famous Borges story "On Exactitude in Science" as an analogy for the map that eventually becomes so large that it is rendered useless, while we draw on Brecht, whose scientific vision was – Suvin points out – less Newtonian objectivity and more Einsteinian relativity, in ways that are echoed in *You Are Here*. At the end of the piece, Splint pulls back the theatrical curtains, walking through the door out of her future child's bedroom and waving hello to her collaborators, who are seated at a table in the next room and out on the porch. (From the previous glimpses we've gotten of them, they could have been thousands of miles away or next to her in the same room.) We see with her eyes as she moves through the house, out the front door, and out into the street – or, actually, the camera allows us to think we are seeing with her eyes, that we are moving at human scale onto street level, inhabiting but perhaps not mapping anew a Street View. But then slowly Splint's profile emerges on the side of the screen, moving alongside the camera, then in front of it, and then the camera stops and she keeps walking, not invisible but smaller and smaller in the frame.

It's a cinematic cliché, of course, one that Splint's piece deliberately draws upon; she's leaving the camera's field of vision, exiting the viewpoint offered to her spectators on Zoom. Our TV and film-viewing minds want to believe her story is done, that she's escaped from the grid of problems posed

by her hour-long dialogue with Google Earth. But a theatre spectator knows that's too easy. Her body is still walking down a street, still simultaneously part of Brecht's view from above and his view from below, not yet part of his glance backward – because in the street, any street, a Google Street View car might be emerging, even now, around the bend.

NOTES

1. Our use of this term derives from Zuboff's authoritative study, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.
2. In a 2021 article for *Theatre Journal* contextualizing his recent research-creation projects, Robert Ellis Walton notes that interfaces teach users new habits by encouraging them to rehearse and perform new skills. He calls this phenomenon "interface performance" (283), which is distinct from our concept because it refers to the performances of computer users rather than to a form of theater.
3. For more information on American Artist, see https://americanartist.us/.
4. We are inspired here by the thinking of director Caden Manson of Big Art Group, whose recent work theorizes the interface as a warped (and warping) mirror – the image appeared in the first version of *Opacity* (see below) and will be a feature of the upcoming sequel, *Trouble* (Gallagher-Ross).
5. See Brignull, "Dark Patterns," as well as his lexicon of deception strategies and his inventory of offenders at https://www.deceptive.design/.
6. See Hookway, especially his analysis of the interface as "a form of relation" (1–7); and Galloway (1–25).
7. See, for instance, Noble's critique of the Silicon Valley discourse surrounding a project like Black Girls Code (65); or Benjamin's observation that "by focusing mainly on individuals' identities and overlooking the norms and structures of the tech industry, many diversity initiatives offer little more than cosmetic change" (62).
8. Here, and throughout this essay, our analysis is informed by Zuboff's vivid use of theatrical metaphors to describe the functioning of surveillance capitalism: see, for example, her description of the on and "offstage" behavior of big tech and their "competitive dramas" (10).
9. See also Taylor's discussion of scenarios as "meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes" (*Archive* 28–32).
10. See also Taylor's reconsideration of her terms in light of emergent digital practices and new social realities in her essay "Save As."

11. See Benjamin's discussion of social credit (esp. 45–47).
12. For a recent overview of such efforts, see Tarnoff's "The Making of Tech Worker Activism."
13. See Zuboff, especially chapters 9 and 10, "Rendition From The Depths" and "Make Them Dance."
14. The sequence calls to mind Benjamin's discussion of racial "coding" (5–6).
15. Further discussion of how this term evolved can be found on boyd's blog entry titled "how 'context collapse' was coined."
16. We're thinking here, of course, of Michael Warner's indispensable observation that works of art and literature instantiate audiences with their form of address.

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