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Aesthetic Negotiations of Identity – Between Embodied and Disembodied Performance

Abstract:

The study focuses on the aesthetic and ethical relevance of the hybrid nature of a few multimedia artworks, taking Klaus Obermaier's performances as significant self-reflexive and also trans-artistic processes. The visual, musical, choreographic, and simultaneously digital and corporeal "stories" displayed by these artworks contain an ongoing deconstruction and reconstruction of performer's own artistic identity in-between fictional worlds, media, bodies. At the same time, by equally exposing a radical – sometimes trans-human – alterity, the performances call for a critical rethinking of a few aesthetic categories and of rigid theoretical dichotomies. Plus, the embodied and alternatively dis-embodied performances could be analyzed as an enactment of a "chaosmic" production of subjectivity (to use a formula of Guattari's) and thus they reveal a live matrix of artistic creativity. Finally, such hybrid artworks are revealing for the ontological condition of non-captive spectators, namely those challenged to have an agency when confronted with the artistic process. The ethical value of the intermedia performance sometimes resides in the spectator's possibility to opt, to express choices regarding the different layers of meaning, as these are embodied on stage. This is not a matter of effectively performing an option through some actual physical intervention in the stage area. It is instead an aesthetic and critical option and one pertaining to the ontology of art and to the spectator's own paradoxical, "hypermediated" status.

Keywords: creative (dis)embodiment, hybrid multimedia performance, aesthetico-ethical option, a new ekphrasis, Klaus Obermaier.

If we were to credit certain theorists in the fields of the aesthetics and technoculture of virtual reality, it would appear that today we belong to a postsubjective, posthuman era. The idea that we share a posthuman condition is adopted by some with enthusiasm and by others with skepticism. Apocalyptic theories also reverberate in art.

The condition of the author-demiurge, endowed with uniqueness and artistic exceptionality, has passed, in recent decades, through

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successive "deaths" and revivals – from the "death of the author", proclaimed during the period of structuralism, to the author's resurrection, seen from the vantage of the cultural ideology of identity, according to the principle that "the personal is the political", and then, to his effacement, once again, in the posthuman era of technocultural creation and bio-digital identity. The age of interactivity within the artistic sphere, when the spectator is considered to have gained an "emancipated" condition (Jacques Rancière), is regarded by many theorists in the domains of aesthetics and cultural anthropology as "trans-artistic", as an escape from the apparently elitist ontology of art. According to a paradoxical statement of the philosopher Arthur C. Danto, we are living in an age of art "after the end of art". Therefore, the process of reassessing the conventions of art reception theories, of rethinking the concepts in such a way that they may serve as valid tools of interpretation, is becoming more stringent nowadays: *authorship*, "*spectatorship*" (the aesthetics and anthropology of the spectator), *aesthetic distance* (as well as the distinction, sometimes rather equivocally stated, between distance and absorption, detachment and identification, or downright immersion) and, not least, *aesthetic value*. What is the meaning of ... aesthetic value? Could such a concept still be considered relevant in the realm of ethical, anthropological, ideological (those belonging to cultural ideology) and even political judgments (especially those pertaining to the so-called *micropolitics* of identity)?

The answers several contemporary art theorists have provided to such questions have revolved, over the past decade, around the idea of a *return to beauty*. The aesthetic category of the beautiful was banished a few decades ago, on a vehemently polemical tone, by the followers of the postmodern "anti-aesthetics" of the 1970s and the early 1990s. And why should the beautiful not return in aesthetic debates? After all, the category has been resumed, albeit in transformed manner, in artistic practice: for example, in inter-media performances, installations and video performance type compositions signed by contemporary artists such as, to mention just a few, Bill Viola, Mona Hatoum or Klaus Obermaier? The revived interest in this new "return to beauty" is made visible by some exciting interrogations about the ontology or even the "bio-ontology" of works of art.

In a book with a highly relevant title, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005), W.J.T. Mitchell argues for the strange vitality of images: through their spectral character, images "haunt" us, they tend to gaze back at the viewer, they seem to "want something" from him, to respond to the presence of the spectator. Apparently passive art objects, such as paintings, or more active art creations, such as live performances and multimedia installations – they all seem to "expect" us to heed them as beings, to give them ontological status, to recognize their *otherness* and their entitlement to exist on their own. They are seemingly gazing back at us, and want "equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be leveled into a "history of images", not to be elevated into a "history of art", but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities" (Mitchell 2005, 47).

Mitchell assumes that magic attitudes toward images are perhaps as powerful in the modern world as they were in eras dominated by mystical thinking. Therefore, he argues for a "critical idolatry" (Mitchell 2005, 26) seen as an antidote to that iconoclastic critical thinking that dominates intellectual discourse today. This critical idolatry implies a different approach to images; it does not intend to destroy, but rather to understand each act of disfigurement or "defacement" as a paradoxical act of destructive creativity, for which one must assume responsibility. Mitchell is one of those who reinforce symptomatically the discussion on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. In turn, authors like Thierry de Duve, Stanley Cavell, and Martha Nussbaum, or, in recent years, Claire Bishop argue for the interdependence between the aesthetic and the ethical, from the conjugated perspective of the philosophy of art and cultural analysis.

The case studies included in this paper, relevant for a (bio) ethical and anthropological approach to the life of art works, will be focused on several performances directed by the Austrian media artist and composer Klaus Obermaier: these are live, multimedia productions, in which the identity of the performer is both biological and virtual.

What is necessary is a debate on the ethical and aesthetic value of this type of cultural and aesthetic objects belonging to the sphere of emerging arts. An analysis of the complex cultural-technological and anthropological implications of hybrid performances, in which virtual reality and the sphere of "live art" seem to mutually encroach upon their borders, is likely to test the limits of interpretation. And, furthermore, to question the classification of these performances as mere aesthetic creations.

Levels of fictionality, aesthetic boundaries. Artistic value between vision and bio-technology

Digital and interactive artworks represent a turning point not only in the sphere of artistic practices and reception, but also in that of aesthetic and cultural discourses. It is imperative, therefore, to rethink and reconceptualize formulas such as "antimimetic art" and the distinctions between mimetic and antimimetic, between what is fictional, virtual, and real, and even the boundary between fiction and nonfiction.

Referring to the various ways in which fictional worlds or realms are distanced from the real world in which the reader is assumed to be located, Thomas Pavel considers that the effort to disguise the real self of the reader as a fictional self increases qualitatively with historical and cultural distance, so much so that in order to send a well-prepared fictional self to *À la recherche du temps perdu* or *Gulliver's Travels,* "we must change several essential parameters of our frames of reference" (Pavel 1992, 148). The benchmark worth preserving when the ontological boundaries of fiction are crossed and its diverse – progressively deeper – layers are accessed seems, nonetheless, to be the awareness that there is a *distance* and a fundamental *difference* between the fictional world and the conventional real world. These criteria disappear, however, for the most part, in the case of a virtual, avatar-like self. After all, in light of Thomas Pavel's argument that there are different degrees of fictionality in various novelistic

universes, analysis may target a wide range of diverse levels of virtuality, hyperreality and/or fictionality attached to them.

Within the realm of postmodern narratology, Brian Richardson, for example, establishes several criteria for distinguishing between the sphere of fiction and that of nonfiction (Richardson 2012, 23). Starting from antimimetic and "unnatural" narratives (with their avant-garde, absurd, hyperrealistic aesthetic), the theorist identifies elements that are entitled to exist only in a world of fiction: sequences of temporal events that are impossible in the real world, visibly contradictory spatial configurations, and the inversion of causal sequences, whereby the effect precedes its cause. In addition, fictional characters can personify ideas as parts of an ampler allegory; they can even allow themselves to be known in more depth than the beings actually surrounding us. These characters may even realize that they are, in fact, fictional creations. The narratologist introduces here a strong ontological argument, testing the specific grounds of the fictional world by a confrontation with death: he sees the ontological difference between dead and alive as a touchstone in defining the difference betweem real and fictional on the level of aesthetic ontology. The fundamental difference between fiction and nonfiction is all the more obvious when death is brought into discussion. In the world of fiction, the characters can negotiate with their authors to have their lives spared, temporality can flow backwards so that the dead can be resurrected, or a particular protagonist may "die" several times in a row in fiction, only to later miraculously be brought back to life in the next chapter. "In life, there is only one death, and it is irreversible."[1]

In SF speculative fiction, relating to survival in perpetuity, thanks to the immortality of the consciousness stored in the virtual world, there can appear an astonishing rapport of reversibility between the ontological boundaries separating the dead from the living. Relevant, in this regard, for example, is the film *Transcendence* (2014, directed by Wally Pfister). To what extent is it interpretable as a utopian fiction (dystopian, in fact) or as a self-reflexive cinematic creation, which appears to speak prophetically about the destiny of hyperreality? Or does it point to a new metaphysics and a new ethics of transhuman survival, beyond the mortal condition – considered, this time, not an ontological given, but a temporary condition, which may be overcome?

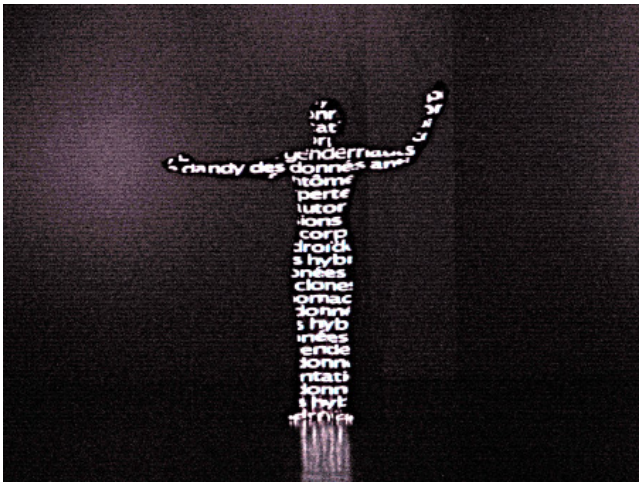
In any case, the new boundary identitarian condition might be defined, according to N. Katherine Hayles, through the juxtaposition of an experience of "ourselves as embodied creatures", with the increasingly overwhelming phenomenon of bodily boundary transgression and of the access to "a disembodied, freefloating existence made posible in part by the near-instantaneous transfer of information from one point on the globe to any other".[2] It would appear that any homogeneous or complete representation of the body, understood as a metonymy of the self, and the unifying discourse about this self are brought under interrogation. And this new *self* seems to agglutinate through a sharp, discontinuous juxtaposition, described by the well-known theorist of the posthuman era through the comprehensive formula of *parataxis*. Or, more specifically, in Hayles statement, as a "parataxic mode of experience".

Fictional gaps – performativity, theatricality, virtuality

The hybrid nature of Obermaier's multimedia performances is given by visual, musical, choreographic, and simultaneously digital and corporeal "stories" about a continuous construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of identity. Plus, the visual and musical narratives developed on stage are a continuous exposure of artistic and anthropological alterity, sometimes a trans-human one. Finally, such hybrid artworks are revealing for the ontological condition of non-captive spectators, namely those challenged to have an agency when confronted with the artistic process. More, the embodied and alternatively disembodied performances could be analyzed as an enactment of a symptomatic "temporary-contemporary" matrix of artistic creativity.

Such a virtually and physically exposed and enstaged creativity is coextensive with a "chaosmic" production of subjectivity, and with a "plunge into the materials of sensation", in the sense explained in his *Chaosmosis*. *An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm* by Félix Guattari: "Every aesthetic decentring of points of view, every polyphonic reduction of the components of expression passes through a preliminary deconstruction of the structures and codes in use and a chaosmic plunge into the materials of sensation. Out of them a recomposition becomes possible, an enrichment of the world (something like enriched uranium), a proliferation not just of the forms but of the modalities of being" (Guattari 1995, 90).

Relevant, in this regard, are the simultaneous processes of staging of the play and processing the digital images: digital creations and projections are made in real time, during the performance of the actors-dancers, and the two creative processes also mutually reflect one another, as in *Apparition* in 2004, created by Klaus Obermaier & Ars Electronica Futurelab. The processual work, which is always in the making, derives from the convergence of several artistic discourses and acquires a self-referential character.



Excerpt from *Apparition*

Performativity (a key concept, perhaps even a conceptual tool for interpreting the theatricality of the stage and of quotidian existence alike for a theoretician like Josette Feral)[3] creates a symptomatic gap in the fiction enacted on the stage, but also in mimetic types of fiction in general. The *duality* inherent in the actor-performer's status of embodied fiction and also in his condition of a being on the verge of breaking the boundaries of his own and the character's skinbag alike is integral to *theatricality*. An actor performs, enacts this consciousness of duality and of the theatricality that is specific to him *in front of* and, to some extent, *on behalf of* the viewer. As Féral suggests, "Thus the spectator's gaze is double: he sees in the actor both the subject that he is and the fiction that he incarnates (or the action he performs); he sees him as both master of himself and subject to the other within him. (…) The spectacle is the vehicle for all of this, and it is from this ultimate cleavage that one of the spectator's most profound pleasures arises" (Féral 2002, 13).

However, the boundaries of fiction/nonfiction are also disturbed by a certain hyperreal reconstruction of space, based on the movements or the multimedia "drawings" the body produces as a virtual *imago*, and even on the activation of a chimeric, virtual sensoriness. The ethical relevance of the intermedia performance sometimes resides in the spectator's possibility to opt, to have an agency. This is not a matter of effectively expressing an option through some physical intervention in the stage area. It is equally an aesthetic and critical option and one pertaining to the ontology of art and to the spectator's own status as a receiver, situated, in fact, between one layer or another, between one world and another of the performance and of the interactive system created thereby. The duality of a theatrical type (in the sense that Féral gives to the concept of "theatricality") would consist, though, in the case of intermediality, in the spectator's double condition. The viewer is immersed and absorbed in the immediacy of the performance and also adopts an extrinsic gaze at himself/herself, aware of this immersion, "hypermediated".

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For the philosopher and cultural analyst Paul Virilio, *D.A.V.E. Digital amplified video engine*, the performance Obermaier achieved in collaboration with Chris Haring in 1998, is tantamount to a quasi-apocalyptic phenomenon and a posthuman fatality: technologies "initiate an invasion of man", and he is no longer protected by ethics or biopolitical principles.[4]

On the contrary, what may be accredited is the idea that Obermaier's show is meant not so much to "represent" an apocalyptical drama of the human as to perform, to enact a continuous metamorphosis of the human self-image. On the hybrid, real-virtual stage, the increasingly disembodied moving image appears to have, at first, anthropomorphic characteristics, but this presence gradually loses its human attributes, become hyperreal and opens up more and more towards something else, towards the stranger or the "monster" that may arise along the fault lines of the human. In other words, there is an always-already presentified negotiation of identity, an explosion

and, in parallel, a recomposition or reconstruction of this identity, which oscillates between the actual and the virtual experience. A concept that corresponds to such a process of identitarian alchemy, as it is transposed into the multimedia show *D.A.V.E.*, is "monstrification". In the interpretation Carmen Veronica Borbély gives this concept in her *Genealogies of Monstrosity*, "post-Frankensteinian" monstrification has rather a positive, "promising" connotation as regards the posthuman future of humanity: "Previous taxonomic attempts at subduing monstrosity's contaminating, contagious threat have given way to an accommodation of teratical abnormality alongside humanity, and this provides ample scope for contemporary post-Frankensteinian figurations of otherness to project monsters as portentous, yet promising tropes for humanity's posthuman future".[5]

The instantiations of the human and of the monstrous posthuman, the latter no longer being subject to normative "domestication", are part of Obermaier's staged "dramas". His performances comprise aesthetic and moral allegories, even when (or especially when) they trigger anxieties at an ethical level, as is the case of the apprehensions expressed by the philosopher Paul Virilio.

These performances contain their own ethical interrogations, by successive "negotiations" and dislocations of their protagonists' real-virtual identities. Images that are embodied and disembodied one by one unfold in a story-fable that has its own "moral". This is all the more so since, in an interview Klaus Obermeier gave in 2007, the multimedia artist symptomatically insisted on the dialogue between the performer and the interactive system created thus, the latter becoming the intercreative partner of the former[6]. In fact, I would say that in this case the "system" shifts from the stage of an object or frame of the performance given by the man-actor to the status of *subject*, of the self's *other*, who is also an actor of his own staged story.

Characterized by sharp critical reflexivity, Obermaier's systems, along with the actor-protagonist entering into dialogue with them, impose themselves as metonymic figurations of an aesthetic discourse with considerable metatheatrical features and with elements of "metapictures". In addition to this, Obermaier's metapictures are traversed by spiral-like movements, as if they were on a search for meaning – an "embodied" meaning, defined by a paradoxical narrativity of visuality (even though such movements are ostensibly non-narrative).

Partial immersion in the virtual, detachment from the virtual. Towards a new ekphrasis

The images that are resurrected by and through the performer's body, on one hand, and on the other hand the body itself – which appears to be decorporealized, disembodied, disintegrated by the images' vertigo – construct an enacted, staged story about the quest for selfhood. It is a quest of the identity (aesthetic and anthropological) of the actor, but also of his double, the character – created both by the stage director's vision and by the confrontation with the public gaze, a symptomatically fictionalizing

gaze. In fact, what is enacted here is the quest for selfhood of the en-staged artwork itself, through the dialogue of performative and multimedia languages and their interaction with the spectators.

Moving image-paintings contain a story that is in the making, but also a metapictural meaning. Then, the physical performance, accomplished by and through the performer's body *in praesentia* during the "physical" time of the dance-theater is reduplicated, projected into a hyperreality and a dream-like temporality. Both the layer of visual projections, with their specific narrativity, and the scenario of the actor-dancer's movements enter into dialogue with the new technologies and are metamorphosed, manifesting their difference, their otherness or, by contrast, their tendency to become convergent.

Triggered by the performer's improvisational imagination, *in actu*, and in parallel with it, the imagination of the spectator becomes absorbed into the virtual plane and appears to be emptied of content. Why? Facing apparently nonnarative "stories", hence, against the background of scenarios underlying both virtual and live performances, the movements of the body on stage, hence, the gestures of the live actor start the engine of imagination in real time, through creative improvisation. In order for this real time to become something else, to be altered by its continuous melting into virtual time (in relation to the processed script) and the other way around: the virtual is re-enacted as real, illusion and reality mutually encroaching their borders, in a paradoxical circular motion.

The cognitive satisfaction derived from such a performance can quite seriously vie against the pleasure obtained from perceiving this creation as artistic. On the other hand, Obermaier's creations reveal a generally harmonious aesthetic vision, in which the characters encapsulate the reconciliation between the living and the virtual: their performative and visual characteristics are homogenized rather than merely hybridized. In the performance, the character seems to be a visual-performative metonymy of some universal, autotelic essence; the disturbing shadows and the phantasmatic, multiplied visions of the en-staged self, although present, do not truly undermine the metaphysics of a unifying point of view.

In Klaus Obermaier's "remake" after Stravinsky (also done in collaboration with the Ars Electronica Futurelab, in 2006), more precisely, after the musical composition and ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps*, the dancer-performer Julia Mach interacts with the visual content generated by the interactive, "real-time" mode, projected onto a large screen. Stereoscopic projections, combined harmoniously with the choreography, comprise *metapictures* whose movement is self-reflexive. Their *self-referential* character is also transgressive, as these images that include and augment the actor-dancer's body contain not only an interpretation of the self, as viewed in a mirror, but also an interpretation of other, neighbouring artistic formulas, which transgress their boundaries, and not least, a reflection of the receiver's status. Scenic and digital creations, at the same time, they are artistic, vocational samples of research, an epiphanic "practice as

research". The process of an artwork's self-generation and, in parallel, that of self-interpretation (*poiesis* and *semiosis*) can be traced, beyond the phenomenon of interactivity (which is relative, partial), through the manifestation, at the virtual level, of the effect produced by the movements of the actor-dancer's real body.

It is difficult to decide which elements of the performative, processual creation, have the primordial role: the performer, or the "interactive system" consisting of images and sounds. This is especially so since the system becomes, as Obermaier memorably puts it, the performer's "partner". What is relevant, however, both aesthetically and ethically is their *dialogue*, their positioning in a process of mutual reflection and reciprocal creative stimulation, of the *poiesis* of one artistic formula in the proximity of the other. Hence, performative movement has both a critical-reflexive[7] specular dimension and a creative one, given its continuous generation of artistic content (visual, choreographic, theatrical, musical, etc.), as well as the continuous mutual filtering of these contents. There goes on a process of translating one artistic language into another (a complex *ekphrasis*, in several directions at once), of distillating one mode of artistic creation into another, into a formula that is derived from abstract art and from "live art" at the same time.

One issue that has been intensely discussed by the theorists of the phenomenon of performance and by those of the visual arts alike is related both the cultural, aesthetic, anthropological significance of the distinction between living art (and the functional concept of liveness) and mediated art. Philip Auslander adopts, for instance, a balanced position in relation to the debate between those who uphold the authenticity and preeminence of live art, on the one hand, and those who support the primacy of – disembodied – digital art and multimedia, on the other hand. The concept of "liveness", which contains an intrinsic aesthetic value, pertaining to the authenticity of the living and of *presence* in art, describes, in fact, as Auslander argues, a historical, contextual and not an ontological condition of art and of specifically human creativity. Thus, "to declare retroactively that all performance before the mid-nineteenth century was "live" would be to interpret the phenomenon from the perspective of our present horizon rather than those of earlier periods" (Auslander 2012, 3). The paradoxical concept of "digital liveness" would therefore respond, in Auslander's view, more adequately to the effect that today's hybrid multimedia performances have on us, since even the digital artworks are often perceived by the consciousness as "live".

All these different layers or levels of performance that exist in the creations of the digital artist Klaus Obermaier can be interpreted as *borderline* artistic discourses, which are, in a way, transartistic; they can also be seen as discourses of applied philosophical anthropology. They rather summon us to encapsulate them into another level of meaning, but also into a new level of aesthetic ontology, linked to the more recent discourse of virtual ontology. This is all the more so since it incorporates the co-presence of: body and virtuality, fiction and nonfiction, physicality and metaphysics, detachment and absorption of the viewer. They are now proving to have been former dichotomies, which

can be abandoned and, possibly, overcome, against a horizon of reception that is heading towards other interpretative, aesthetic and ethical categories. The latter could be inferred from the the dynamic logic of an aesthetics of the virtual. It is as if self-mirroring performances such as *D.A.V.E.* and *Le Sacre du Printemps* would imply an ethical view upon the decorporealization[8] and in favour of "the richness of the possible".

The quasi-fiction of embodied virtuality, combined with the continuous, eternal presentification of the performer's body, becomes a trans-fiction, the included third of a creation situated outside the aesthetic categories that, until recently, parted the waters between mimetic and nonmimetic art.

Notes:

1 This verdict stands for an argument insofar as the ontology of fiction is concerned. See, in this respect, Brian Richardson, in *Narrative Theory. Core concepts and critical debates.* Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012, 23.

2 See N. Katherine Hayles's article "Postmodern Parataxis: Embodied Texts, Weightless Information", *American Literary Histor*y 2.3, 1990, 394-421.

3 "Performativity is indeed inscribed within theatricality, and is an important component of it. In fact, any performance, whether theater, dance, circus, ritual, opera or any other living art form calls upon these two elements. Performativity is at the heart of what makes any performance unique each time it is performed; theatricality is what makes it recognizable and meaningful within a certain set of references and codes. Each art form, each artist, even each aesthetics proceeds from a combination of both performativity and theatricality that is different in every instance but necessarily calls upon both elements." (Féral 2007, 5).

4 For Paul Virilio, "technologies are not sent to other planets anymore, but initiate the invasion of the man himself, who is no longer protected by anything, neither by ethics nor by biopolitical principles". See http://www.exile.at/dave/project.html, consulted on 28 March 2015.

5 See Carmen-Veronica Borbély, *Genealogies of Monstrosity. Constructions of Monstrous Corporeal Otherness in Contemporary British Fiction*, Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2014, 262.

6 "In *Apparition* technology is completely *interactive*, images and sounds are generated real time. Motion detection perceives movements of dancers that, not connected to the projector position, are free to improvise. The objective was to create an interactive system that was something more than an extension of the performer, rather *its partner.* There are three fundamental parameters in the interaction with dancers: the proximity, the velocity and the size of the movement." (my emphasis). See Annamaria Monteverdi. 2007. "Klaus Obermaier: the strange dance of New Media", *Digimag*, Issue 23, at http://www.digicult.it/digimag/issue-023/klaus-obermaier-the-strange-dance-of-new-media/.

7 The analytic potential of such intermedial performances is clearly stated by Klich and Scheer, in their book *Multimedia Performance*. In the chapter entitled *Liveness and Re-Mediation*, the authors argue that: "Intermediality can be both a creative and an analytic approach based on the perception that media boundaries are fluid and recognising the potential for interaction and exchange between the live and the mediated, without presupposing the authenticity or authority of either mode" (See *Multimedia Performance*, 71).

8 See, in this respect, the ethical and "ecological" view of Félix Guattari on aesthetic ways of producing subjectivity, in his *Chaosmosis. An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*: "There is an ethical

choice in favour of the richness of the possible, an ethics and politics of the virtual that decorporealizes and deterritorializes contingency, linear causality, and the pressure of circumstances and significations which besiege us. It is a choice for processuality, irreversibility and resingularization" (29).

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