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Viewing and doing: from lived acts to seen scenes (and back)

The beginnings of performing arts can be located at the crossroads of drama (dran: to do or act) and theatre (theasthai: to see or view). The separation of actors from a communion of spectators is widely considered to be both constitutive of theatre and indicative of its divergence with ritual, executed by a welded collective of participants. Much performance has nevertheless continued to privilege its ritual origins, while artistic interest in shareable live action has flourished with the recent proliferation of interactive digital media creations. Computer-anchored, networked practices, drawing on the limitless transmission and remodeling possibilities of digital data, effectively challenge traditional distinctions between viewers and doers. Moreover, the keen sense of vitality and presence which pervades certain collaborative online creations is perhaps symptomatic of emerging types of communion or ritual.

I propose to show how the “viewer-doer” dichotomy underpinning performance might elucidate today’s participatory art works and tune us to their nascent theatrical qualities. Historical cases used to scaffold my study include examples from mediaeval mysteries, court ballet, and twentieth century mass spectacles. Online creations offering a contemporary sounding board include works employing site-sensitive or “locative” media and multi-participant improvisation platforms. This comparative study focussed on the tension between visibility (viewing) and engagement (doing), and on their characteristic moments of continuity and rupture, intends to provide an original framework and provoke fresh debate on issues of gaze and participation in performance.