

Mobile Media Performances as Asynchronous Embodiment

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While traveling through Tokyo in the early–2000s, media theorist Howard Rheingold began to notice a change taking place around him: the people walking the streets were “staring at their mobile phones instead of talking to them.”¹ Toward the end of the decade, in 2009, there was an important shift that took place—mobile phones were used more for data transfers (such as text messages and Internet use) than voice communication. This shift in the way mobile devices are being used has a profound effect not only on performers who utilize these media, but also for the cultural imaginaries around the significance of documents and live interactions. As this transition began to make itself apparent, especially in the college students around me who preferred to send a text message in lieu of making a phone call, I noticed the historical tensions surrounding the status of asynchronous engagement playing themselves out in the everyday actions of mobile phone users. Taking up this tension, UK artists Blast Theory created a performance that confronted the problems of documentation discussed in Amelia Jones’ thought-provoking exploration of presence, performance, and supplementation. By looking at the mobile media performance of *Rider Spoke*, I align with the modes of embodiment Jones gestures toward and how such embodiment can be attained through asynchronous engagement. This mode of asynchronicity, in which users engage each other without regard to the demands of real-time performance, demonstrates how ideas of community are fostered through varying experiences of time and documentation. In performances like *Rider Spoke*, “the live is an artifact of recording media. Liveness exists not as a prior condition, but as a result of mediation,”² as Matthew Causey notes.

In 2007 at the Barbican Museum in London, visitors to the *Rider Spoke* performance were given a bicycle, a helmet, and a mobile device. The device, a Nokia N800J, was equipped with an earpiece and a microphone. *Rider Spoke* asked participants to ride around the streets of London, guided along their journey by the voice of Blast Theory co-founder, Ju Row Farr. The first objective for participants, as directed by Farr, was to “relax and find somewhere that you like. It might be a particular building or a road junction. When you have found somewhere you like, give yourself a name and describe yourself.”³ Blending the modes of audio exploration as seen in the works of Janet Cardiff and the attachment of narrative to place in the projects like *[murmur]* and Yellow Arrow, participants would press record on the device’s interface and speak into the microphone to record their own story related to the location. Through a triangulation by mobile phone towers or WiFi access points, their narratives were geotagged. The recordings were then archived and made accessible to any other participant who happened upon that same location. Participants in *Rider Spoke* were prompted to either “Hide,” which allowed them to find a location related to one of Farr’s prompts such as “Find a place that your father would like and record a message

about it,”⁴ or “Find Others,” which allowed users to “seek” other people’s narratives located throughout the city. These two options were the mobile device’s main interface and highlighted the piece’s relationship to social gaming and a common history of childhood play.

Because participants record themselves or listen to others’ recordings, *Rider Spoke* is a performance of the process of documentation. While engaging in this act of documentation, which transforms the urban landscape into much more than a physical environment by turning street corners into sites annotated by digital information, the interactors of the piece produce a distinct sense of embodied space. Embodiment here is intersubjective: I eavesdrop on your stories and you eavesdrop on mine. As Blast Theory co-founder Matt Adams describes, “It sits on this boundary where you’re on your own, you’re alone, at night, on a bike, which already separates you from the pedestrians and from the road traffic and you’re making these very personal recordings. But, of course, they are broadcasting. It’s recorded. It’s stored there, and anyone who comes after you can listen to it.”⁵ Thus, this mode of embodied engagement, though asynchronous, is intimate: I hear your voice in my ear. This intimate voice however no longer signals immediacy and presence. Instead, the person I am connecting with has simply left me a voice message, not dissimilar from one I might get from a friend who missed me when they called.

Drawing from Jones’ implementation of poststructuralist understandings of the body, which point toward “the insufficiency and incoherence of the body-as-subject and its inability to deliver itself fully,”⁶ and the phenomenological modes of embodiment that inform her readings of body art, I posit a “sensory-inscribed” body that ultimately understands mediation as a primary mode of being-in-the-world. In my forthcoming book, *Mobile Interface Theory*, I elaborate on the sensory-inscribed as a body that is not only conceived out of a sensory engagement across material and digital landscapes, but a body that simultaneously incorporates socio-cultural inscriptions of the body in these emerging spaces. This type of phenomenological hermeneutics aligns with Jones’ notion that “there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art.”⁷ Though my individual understanding of my body involves the senses, it also involves the ways my body is written by the cultural codes of others (and my attempts to write myself into being by taking ownership over some of those codes). The ways we engage intersubjective embodiment is simultaneously a sensory experience through the body and also a process of decoding and encoding the various cultural inscriptions that inform every interaction.

To elaborate, the asynchronous engagement of sending a text message to someone on a mobile device offers a strong example of the sensory-inscribed body. The senses are involved on many levels: the person writing the text incorporates the screen into his or her material world and also projects the self into an imaginary realm where the receiver is located. The person is also keenly aware of the temporal aspect of text messaging, where time between responses is a sensory experience. These examples, which can be developed and augmented in many ways, are an incomplete picture of this embodied experience. The use of a mobile phone for texting also has cultural inscriptions that the user must contend with, including notions of when it is or is not appropriate to text. This aspect is even being legislated, as many states across the United States are passing laws prohibiting the use of mobile devices while driving. The sensory and the inscribed combine to inform a reading of the body while texting. Additionally, the sense of the temporal is also a site of inscription.

As Nicola Döring and Sandra Pöschl argue, "Extended response times can be perceived as creating an uneasy silence, while short response times might nonverbally communicate thoughtfulness, eagerness, or closeness."⁸ Thus while the experience of time is a sensory one, it is also a mode of reading as we imbue the time with meaning and significance. These two modes of embodiment converge to demonstrate that with an asynchronous connection to our body and the bodies of others across media, the sensory-inscribed offers a useful way to understand performance in mediated spaces.

Encountering the documents left by others around the streets of London in *Rider Spoke* is an embodied, intersubjective experience that asks us to reimagine the ways we experience intimacy in the mobile media age. As I come across someone's recording, which was left in this exact spot, I understand it as a supplement of their bodily "presence," but the recording also clearly demonstrates that all embodied engagements enact this process of supplementation. As Jones notes, "Body art flaunts the body itself as a loss or lack: that is, as fundamentally lacking in the self-sufficiency . . . that would guarantee its plenitude as an unmediated repository of selfhood."⁹ The intimacy gained in *Rider Spoke* recognizes the continued deferral of intersubjective connection. Thus, the production of embodied space is ongoing, never settled, always being created across various modes of time since synchronicity does not deliver full-presence any more than the documented narratives left by the interactors of *Rider Spoke*.

Being together in synchronicity or encountering each other through asynchronous means, a sensory-inscribed mode of embodiment keenly understands that our experiences of intersubjectivity are often produced across vast geographic distances (i.e., without any physical tangibility of one another) and through highly mediated forms. As we abandon the "presence" of the voice on mobile phone calls for the asynchronous documentation of text messages, we are in the process of producing bodies through asynchronous documents. Even when engaging each other face-to-face, we are continually developing context through our bodies and our relationships to the spaces we produce. This context, however, is never fully saturated and, as Jones notes, we may actually come to understand our interactions more fully in hindsight, when the synchronicity that is typically privileged is later reexamined and incorporated into our sense of being-in-the-world.

References

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Notes

1. Rheingold, *Smart Mobs*, xi.
2. Causey, "The Screen Test of the Double," 384.
3. Blast Theory, "Rider Spoke."
4. Benedictus, "Grab Your Helmet," 29.
5. Blast Theory, "Rider Spoke by Blast Theory"
6. Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia," 13.
7. *Ibid.*, 12.
8. Döring and Pöschl, "Nonverbal Cues," 111.
9. Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia," 14.