

Showing Without Going: Interview with Ant Hampton

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Maria Ristani

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by **Maria Ristani***

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Ant Hampton

In November 2021, the futureStage Research Group at [metaLAB \(at\) Harvard](#) published the [futureStage Manifesto](#), insightfully highlighting prospects and opportunities for the next normal of post-Covid theatre and performing arts. In what reads as an urgent call for change in multiple fields, the manifesto trumpets “agile, low cost, telematic, multi-sited modes of performance . . . devised and bundled up so that they can travel from site to site and company to company with sharply reduced human travel.” If environmentally sustainable mobility is to be secured for performance, the “norm on the future stage,” writes the Manifesto, shall be with “liveness plus,” defined as expanded liveness for performance that carefully balances “between presence and tele-presence, between the embodied and the mediated.”

Ant Hampton's *Showing Without Going* rests on a similar field, fleshed by what the project terms “liveness at a distance” and seeking to thus re-imagine theatre artists' “going” and “showing” in ways that fit a world of “abrupt climate breakdown.” Ant Hampton (he/him) is a British-German theatre artist, whose work spans and spreads across multiple fields (be it theatre shows, performance acts, installations or interventions), ones that yet loosely unite in a shared interrogation of liveness per se. Since his first experiments with unrehearsed performers in the late 1990s and then with *Autoteatro* in 2007, Hampton remains preoccupied with liveness as coupled with and challenged by the automated and the pre-recorded, the unrehearsed and the unexpected, or the distant, the absent and the telematic as is the case in *Showing Without Going*.

The SWG project was initiated in 2021 by Ant Hampton and Caroline Barneaud of Théâtre de Vidy-Lausanne as an attempt to gather documentation on how “live performance work can travel and be experienced / performed without the artists being physically present.” What began as an open worldwide call for examples or imaginings of such ways soon became a detailed inventory of suggested approaches and actual performance practices, eventually fleshing a rich, open-contribution *Atlas* of ways to do live performance without travel. This was collectively created by an interdisciplinary research group coming from different parts of the globe – Munotida Chinyanga (UK), Ant Hampton (UK / DE / BE), Rita Hoofwijk (NL/BE), Ophelia Huang (CN), Gundega Laiviņa (LV / USA), Kate McIntosh (NZ / BE), Ogutu Mūrāya (KE) and Shiva Pathak (IN). As we read in the SWG website, the *Atlas* was designed with a view to an era of multiple crises

(health, nature, environment, finance, war and conflict), calling for a re-invention of going without compromising the need for sharing and showing: “if things are likely to get worse, we need to get good at ‘doing liveness at a distance’.”

Except for being a practical online tool for performers, the *Atlas* mapped together by the SWG research collective sets numerous theoretical questions (considerations / approaches / connections) on liveness and the future stage, on audience participation and sharing, on absence and presence. Picking up from there, I spoke to Ant Hampton and asked him to address the “new going” for performance that he envisions and its links with green mobility and environmental sustainability. The focus on reduced artistic mobility as imperative in a world of climate crisis is not new; what I wished us to discover in shared discussion was the “deep adaptation” and “unlearning” for theatre praxis that this involves; the ways in which not going / going slowly / going differently may redefine, challenge, benefit or limit “showing” and sharing in performance.

My special thanks to Ant Hampton for providing valuable insight in this direction.



Ant Hampton. Photo: Courtesy of Ant Hampton

Maria Ristani How did the idea of Showing Without Going (SWG) begin? Given that the project was launched in 2021 – a year notably “without going” – was this a pandemic-birthed initiative or can its roots be traced earlier and elsewhere?

Ant Hampton: A bit of both. Making or presenting live work without being present, despite sounding unusual or oxymoronic, is not new of course. It’s something both Caroline [Barneaud, director and producer at Théâtre de Vidy Lausanne] and myself have been interested in and busy with for many years. For my part, that challenge has always

held a certain fascination. In my teens I remember dreaming about the future of theatre and live presence as somehow recordable, scaleable, reproducible. In my 20s I lived with electronic musicians and would joke about being jealous of their processes, both of production – at home, often in pyjamas – and distribution with cassette or CD. Theatre, in contrast, demands both weighty processes (bodies, props, sets, rehearsal spaces) and ephemeral outcomes (all gone as soon as you stop doing it). Soon enough (1999), I was experimenting with recorded voices guiding live, unrehearsed performers, and it seems like one way or another that has remained a kind of constant through much of my work up to now.

In my 30s I started experimenting with smaller formats that I and my collaborators called *Autoteatro*. The first example was *Etiquette*: in a working café, two participating audience members sit opposite each other at a table wearing headphones. Voices tell you what to say to each other – you repeat the text, and fall into a scripted conversation. There are instructions for small actions too (“Hold out your hand” / “Look away and take a breath” / “Look back” / “Raise your eyebrows”). In *Autoteatro*, there’s no one else watching; your participation is reciprocal, producing and maintaining a performance that is for each other only. Since 2007, I’ve made about ten different works like this, many of which have ended up sometimes travelling without me due to being very light. It’s an amazing thing as a theatre maker to be able to do this, and to have at times different works showing in different places at the same time.

This sketches my personal history so far of *Showing Without Going*, but there are many other approaches and, when the pandemic hit, Caroline and I had the idea to try and gather them in one place. We felt an overview was particularly necessary just then since it was soon clear that for many artists and presenters the options for continuing to create and show work were felt as absent or, at best, very reduced. They were more on the level of a quick-fix and not particularly exciting or motivating. There was a sense of misunderstanding or even panic. Shows that really needed everything we call ‘liveness’ were being simply streamed as a video recording as though that could be satisfactory.

Retracing your personal history of work with liveness and automation, what would you say explains this ongoing fascination with the field?

What has kept me interested for so long, working with fixed or recorded formats, is not so much the practical benefit as what happens to the live experience. An example could be watching a piece where the lighting, soundtrack and voices giving instructions are all recorded and “set.” If we know that nothing on stage is variable except the human response of the performer(s) who are discovering everything at the same time as us the audience, then that is where our attention is: very much heightened and focused on that human element and its quality.

SHOWING WITHOUT GOING

An Atlas

*liveness - at a distance
ways of approaching + things to consider*

[MORE INFO](#)

browse!

Approaches

Considerations

Examples

Connections

Start anywhere! Filter using the #tags if you like.



Add your thoughts to the existing Connections.



Create your own workspace as you browse the different sections by 'pinning' entries that interest you. Then use your pinned entries to create thinking and new Connections.



If you like, contribute your new Connections to the Atlas.

SWG yielded an impressively polyvalent Atlas of ways to perform live without travelling. We can see this atlas as an “emergency map,” showing ways for theatre and performance artists to grow agile when/even if in variously-imposed lockdown. But could it also be a map for/of the “new normal” – an artistic manifesto, as it were, of how the future stage can/should/might look like at a time of urgent environmental collapse?

There are many different reasons why we may choose not to travel, or not be able to, but I'd say the two you mention are central to how and why the *Atlas* came about. However, even regarding its environmental concern, I much prefer the idea of it as a map than a manifesto. More useful perhaps. It's a confusing terrain, and we want to help people come together from their different places. The *Atlas* first seeks to identify and expand upon different options – practical approaches – that are open to us now, in a spirit of optimism and curiosity. Rather than take a position of being able to impose these approaches, we instead sought to challenge them with the different “considerations,” and ended up braiding that theoretical element into the itself. This was an important turning point in how it developed – all thanks to the great team that came together for the making, from Kenya, Belgium, China, India, Latvia/USA, UK, Switzerland.



Left to right from top: Kate McIntosh (NZ / BE), Tristan Pannatier (CH), Shiva Pathak (IN), Gundega Laiviņa (LV / USA), Munotida Chinyanga (UK), Ophelia Huang (CN), Ant Hampton (UK / DE / BE) & Rita Hoofwijk (NL/BE), Ogutu Mūrāya (KE), Tammara Leites (UY / CH).

SWG invites practitioners to show, yet not go, calling thus for a more eco-conscious design for theatre and performance on the principle of reduced artistic mobility. Would you elaborate on the ecological agenda of SWG? How does it branch out and intersect with other concerns of the project, political or otherwise?

The *Atlas* was created collaboratively, and each of us had different standpoints about what needs to be done regarding the catastrophe of climate breakdown.

Speaking for myself, I try to take the position of at least trying to aim for basic truths and common sense. But it's not easy is it? Easier would be denial, which at once enforces the status-quo and *is* the status-quo. Insisting on "common sense" means agreeing not to look away when it comes to listening and learning, not just about climate science but everything to do with how we got to where we are: colonialism, greed, patriarchal / nature-dominating mindsets – it's a lot to take on board. The *Atlas* aims to open up some of these avenues in its "Considerations" part, and I think part of the success of how it's designed is that it's almost impossible to ignore how one element is already connected to others. What's more, if as a reader you want to connect anything, you can. The *Atlas* is continually being updated with contributions.



Showing Without Going // TEASER

SWG starts on a pronounced absence: “without going.” Would you feel that “not going” is a rather extreme response to an extreme (nonetheless) situation? What are the challenges of staying (staying put, staying still, staying away, staying clear, staying clean, staying safe)? Would “going differently” be an equally viable solution in light of the current eco-crisis?

The name tries to be clear, to crystalize a certain idea and approach, and perhaps like most titles is slightly attention-seeking! Another title that was on the table for a while was *The Show Must Go On (Its Own)*. But we dropped that – after all, Jérôme Bel already has his own way of campaigning, a different approach.

Your last suggestion about “going differently” makes me want to quote working-group member Gundega Laiviņa who writes well about this:

Actually, I am for going. Yet I have to question again and again – who goes, how and why. I am for a different kind of going than the conventional touring routine: taxi, plane, hotel, venue, hotel, plane, taxi... I am for going slowly, going with care, going to stay, explore, connect, going to create conditions for the artwork to live longer, not going, going with dignity, letting someone else go. What are alternatives to travel fatigue – a condition discussed frequently within the “bubble” of Western theatre makers? To stop and find well-articulated reasons for not travelling anymore as we are privileged to do so? But we could as well give chance to new approaches to emerge, we could keep exploring and connecting things, places, people and ideas without necessarily going or – if going – then differently.

I think as people navigate the *Atlas*, they will see that it’s not a decree or manifesto, but even so, I hope people won’t read a proposal of ‘not going’ as an action reciprocal to the climate catastrophe in extremity, but rather as an attempt to normalize moderation,

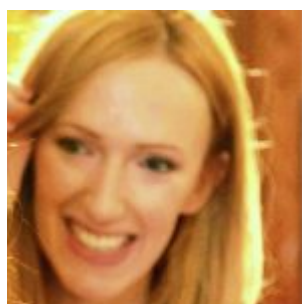
reduction, degrowth. We are so far from anything like that. It can barely be uttered in the political realm. I had to take a look at how much I was travelling, how many planes I had taken, admit that it was not reasonable and that I was in a position to scale back and make a sacrifice, even if others couldn't.

“Doing more with less” is a basic motif underlying SWG. Browsing through the performance practice examples of the Atlas, what I notice increasingly lessened is the human presence as the all-powerful wheeler of theatre praxis. Would you regard such a lessening of the human protagonist as key to a theatre away from the Anthropocene?

“Doing more with less” is for me more a motif of performance culture than anything else, and one I hold onto dearly whenever faced with the kind of event that “shows the money,” which is usually a depressing experience. And I love reading Gordon Craig's notes from 100+ years ago and many others' since then who have all imagined in different ways and for different reasons a theatre without human presence. A receding of the human protagonist would of course make sense for a “theatre of the Anthropocene,” it's a nice idea. But perhaps that speaks of a certain kind of art or theatre, one rather focused on representation and image, a theatre that speaks “about” politics rather than actually doing politics. I'm interested in performance acts that embrace the here and now, in “liveness,” I guess, more than conventional theatre, which probably explains my readiness to embrace forms that sometimes don't even need theatre buildings or obvious stages. If there's any kind of performative act that is suited to the abomination that is “the Anthropocene,” to me it would probably look less like spectacle and more like activism, protest, community engagement, interventions and direct action, Arte Útil etc.

I see what you mean. In this grappling with the Anthropocene, we are also in high need of a relational grammar of attunement, mutuality, exchange and interdependence, aren't we? In this light, can we afford the absence of the performer's body on stage – exposed and affective in his/her shared vulnerability? What new opportunities for relational worlding can such absence afford?

I do think that the *Atlas* opens up a lot more than a theatre stripped of human presence. After all, there's always the audience. You can remove the actors, but you can't really do without bodies live and present in the room somewhere, bearing witness and being drawn into involvement, physically, spiritually or mentally. [#Participation](#) is the commonest unifying tag in the “approaches” section, and there's quite some focus on the possibilities for re-creating performances via rehearsal with local performers._



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