

## Theatre/Video and the Crossing of Boundaries: Big Art Group's *Flicker* (2002-2005): Stitching the Eye/I

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Fig. 1: *Flicker* (2002-2005)

In 2014, one of New York's most eccentric theatre companies, Big Art Group, celebrated their fifteen year anniversary. Founded in 1999 in New York City by Caden Manson and Jemma Nelson, Big Art Group often crosses boundaries

between media. In this essay, we examine this aesthetic hallmark—which has become something of a “trademark”—of the company.

In creating their experimental company, the founders' objective was, in Manson's words, to “aggressively attack the boundaries of performance through experimentation with structure, medium, and process” (Big Art Group). Aesthetically, the Brooklyn-based group, which is part of the off-off Broadway cultural landscape, deals with some very cliché-*esque* components of pop culture from z horror movies to the most crude reality TV shows. Their world is a tacky blend of commercial music, Barbie-like puppets, night club culture, queer imagery, and ultimately whatever piece of junk they can dig out of the dumpster. What is worth interest here is not the dumpster though, nor the pieces of junk, but the way the members of Big Art Group dismantle the *clichés* to reassemble and reactivate them on stage through their technique of Real Time Film, which the group developed and perfected in three successive productions: *Shelf Life* (2000), *Flicker* (2002), and *House of No More* (2004).

With Real Time Film, defined as a technique “of live projection and split second-choreography,” Manson and Nelson bring together the world of theatre and the universe of video, as hinted at in the title of *Flicker*, in which the actors perform actions that are simultaneously projected onto screens.<sup>1</sup> The audience simultaneously watches the live performance and the live feed of the performance (Fig. 1). This “technological *mise-en-scène* of digital cameras and screens ... sets up the relationship between fragmented bodies staged through digital reproduction on [stage-front] screens” (Farman, 2009). In *Flicker*, the second opus of a trilogy, the company uses the “Real Time Film technique to examine the image of violence” (Big Art Group). In this show, which premiered in January 2002 at Performance Space 122 in New York City before touring the world the next three years, Big Art Group uses the theatrical and video media to comment on yet another artistic medium: cinema. A blend of video and theatre in form, *Flicker* deals with the Hollywood horror movie industry. Cinematographic make-believe horror becomes the playground of the troupe's deconstructivist fantasy, the pretext to unveil the making of illusion, to expose the stitches that hold images together, as we will first see. A “place for viewing,” theatre, *theatron*, is transformed by Big Art Group into a showcase displaying freaks: technologi-

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<sup>1</sup> The term “flicker” is used in video when referring to the “unwanted regular variation in the brightness of a reproduced picture” (Jack, Tsatsulin, eds., 2002: 120).

cal “curiosities,” technical “wonders” and fictional “eccentrics” or “strange people” in the terminology of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Freak Shows (Bogdan, 1988: 6). As the deconstructive process unfolds, a heterogeneous stitched Frankenstein-like body comes to life. *Flicker* is a monster. Not only witnessing the construction of this crossed media creature, the viewers have to make their own ways through the profusion of images and decide for themselves which image to watch and how to assemble and stitch the pieces together. In this sense, the audience is implicated as active participants in the process of artistic creation.

### **Deconstruction is Funny/Reconstruction is Scary: On the Making of Images**

In *Flicker*, “two ‘movies’ collide into each other and bleed onto a single screen” (Big Art Group). Any American mass audience would identify the first storyline with a typical slasher movie story involving a bunch of teenagers being chased by an evil mysterious *Blair Witch Project*-like killer who, unsurprisingly, will stab his victims one after another in a furious splash of blood. The second story is akin to a reality show turning into a psychological thriller featuring Jeff, “the man with the camera,” constantly intruding into people’s lives by filming them. Like most horror films, there is copious fake blood and gore along with hysterical screams in the stalker’s tale. There is also blood in the other story, but instead in the form of a bloody sex game between two of the players. Both stories are tragedies, both feature young people, and both concern violence and voyeurism, but neither is to be taken too seriously as the outrageous play on the *topoi* of classic horror movies or thrillers explicitly sets the show as a parody of these cinematographic genres. The performers wear ostentatious cheap wigs and masks distorting their facial features; their speech delivery is unnatural, either outrageously hysterical or comically deadpan. The actors embody one-dimensional characters who look more like cartoon figures or puppets than actual human beings. The caricatured performances are meant to debase the glamorous kitsch aura of Hollywood stars. Parody is a deconstructive strategy meant to shed light not only on the fabric of violent screen images but also on the artificiality of representation. “The point of parody,” as Susanne Hamscha writes, “is not to destroy the system on which it relies, but to create a space of critical distance, that is to produce a moment of difference and of deferral of meaning” (Hamscha, 2013: 263). Critical distance is literalized by the set itself, which materializes through physical distance, physical gaps, and physical “spaces” through which a deferral of meaning between the screen image and the live action results.



Fig. 2: *Flicker* (2002-2005)

As mentioned above, the spectators not only watch the two movies but they also witness how the screen images come to “life” on stage. The set is divided into two different spaces, what Big Art Group refers to as a “positive space” and a “negative space.” Manson defines the positive space—which we could also call the “screens” or “video space”—as “the actor onstage being caught by the video”; the negative space, the theatrical space serving as both shooting set or acting area and as the backstage or the dressing room, is “the actor on stage not being caught by the video, still onstage, but off scene” (qtd. in Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 59). The processes of both acting and filming are made visible to the spectators who see the actors moving about in the negative space. At the very beginning of the show, before the blackout, this negative space is visually acknowledged as the actors are seen entering the stage to get ready. The stage displays three mounted stationary cameras and three screens running the width of the stage. The actors take their places behind the screens; their legs and feet, shoulders and head remaining visible to the audience. Their images are captured by the cameras and projected onto the screens. Therefore the positive space is supposed to be the *result* of what happens behind the screen, which is the *process*. By juxtaposing the positive and negative spaces, Manson and Nelson stage the making of images (Fig. 2). Jemma Nelson declares:

When you come to see Big Art Group you're not coming to see a play or a story, you're coming to witness an action, the building of a space, and the act of doing it. It's less about the play and more about the making of the play. It's less about the image and more about the making of the image. It's less about the text and more about the making of the text (qtd. in Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 60).

By laying bare the process of the making of images, Big Art Group deconstructs the fabric of illusion. The technique may be called "Real" Time Film, but there is nothing *real* in this world in which characters drive their cars with fake rubber steering wheels and in which locations are indicated by signs which light up when the action moves from one place to the other. Reality is constantly deformed and distorted. From form to contents everything works to expose humorously, as parodies do, the fakery, the artifice, the illusion of reality. If "parody is a favourite device of the grotesque writer," as Philip J. Thomson asserts, the grotesque nature of *Flicker* also stems from its hybrid quality, its monstrosity in Bakhtinian terms (Thomson, 1972: 40).

### ***Monstrare*/Monstrosity: Performing Hybridity**

*Flicker* is a "monster," in the words of Jemma Nelson (qtd. in Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 63). Like two Doctor Frankensteins and in the image of Jean Pierre Sarrazac's "creator[s]-rhapsode[s] of the future," Nelson and Manson are masters of "vivisection." They "cut and cauterize, stitch pieces together and then take the stitches out of the very fabric of theatre," to give life to new kinds of hybrid "creatures" (Sarrazac, 1999: 40-41; *Jouve's translation*).<sup>2</sup> "Hybrid" by nature, the Real Time Film technique, as the members of the company explain, "mix[es] filming and televisual ideas with theatrical form" to generate a monstrous, grotesque body (Big Art Group, "The Balladeer": 2013). For Mikhail Bakhtin, "the grotesque body is never finished never completed, it is continually built, created and builds and creates another body" (Bakhtin, 1984: 517). Generic instability and formal incompleteness regenerating into new identities, characterize Nelson and Manson's flickering work, a show oscillating between theatre, the art of here and now, of flesh and blood, and cinema, the art of broadcasted actions, of mediated bodies.

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Sarrazac reflects upon *La Remise*, a play by Roger Planchon and he describes the playwright's work as the first evidence of experimentation by a "creator[s]-rhapsode[s] of the future." With *Flicker*, Nelson and Manson go further than Planchon in their experiment with vivisection and as such, it can be argued, embody the "creator[s]-rhapsode[s] of the future." The original French version reads: "On voit ... s'esquisser, dans [*la Remise*] le geste de l'auteur-rhapsode de l'avenir. Pratiquer la vivisection. Couper et cautériser, coudre et découdre à même le corps du drame" (Sarrazac, 1999: 40-41)

In the image of the show, the characters appear as hybrid bodies rather than, as Jason Farman argues, as “cohesive digital bodies” (Farman, 2009).<sup>3</sup> Caden Manson explains:

When a character in Real Time Film crosses the screen, it's flickering between male, female, trans, black, white, and Asian, and oftentimes it's vivisected, and put together, and you have this monstrous identity up there where you have a black arm on an Asian woman (qtd. in Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 63).

The screened images appear as unfaithful representations of what is actually performed: a character is made up of several actors and becomes the embodiment, the allegory of the show itself, of the “monster” *Flicker* represents (Fig. 3). By stitching or “suturing” parts of different bodies all together the “creator[s]-rhapsode[s]” who, in both Sarrazac and Manson's words, “vivisect” the artistic material, make the fabric of images all the more apparent as the continuity cuts are ostentatiously visible (Farman, 2009). The collage effect is sometimes rendered more subtly when the company plays with matching actions when, for example, the matching actions of the movement of the camera do not actually match from the left to the central screens. Because the positive and negative images contradict each other and because the positive images on the screen appear as fragmented due to the effect of discontinuous continuity cuts, formal fragmentation and incompleteness prevail (Fig. 4). This play on formal discontinuity, incongruity, puts into question the magic of moving images, of videos and cinema, and casts light on the construction of images displayed as artificial artifacts.

If *Flicker* displays, shows monstrosity, monstrosity also performs in the play. The traditional performers, the actors, collaborate or even fuse with the technological devices which become performers themselves. Gallagher-Ross writes:

Technology performs in Big Art Group pieces—camera reveals the limits of their sight, electronic soundscapes shake the room. Unhooked from recording devices, live-feed video images become as ephemeral as the performances they simultaneously copy—churning across the screen, and disappearing into oblivion. But the company also performs technology: in Big Art Group's Real Time Film pieces .... actors dash across the stage to imitate the blur of a camera-pan; turn into profile lens angles; lean into the camera to zoom (Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 59).

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<sup>3</sup> In “Surveillance Spectacles: The Big Art Group's Flickers and the Screened Body in Performance,” Jason Farman argues that the bodies on screen appear as “cohesive” or “singular.” He writes: “In the performance of *Flicker*, a cohesive body (singular) does not exist on the actual but only on the virtual stage space of the screen.” However, as the rest of our demonstration shows, we argue that the digital bodies are staged as fragmented to lay bare the artificial nature of the projected images.

Although Gallagher-Ross initially affirms that “technology performs in Big Art Group pieces,” he however rightly nuances his statement to re-qualify technology as a *passive* performer:

In the Real Time Film Trilogy—*Shelf Life*, *Flicker*, *House of No More*—video cameras become passive participants, and the performers do the moving around ... Editing becomes corporeal choreography (Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 59).

Mechanics, which is theatrical at the core, substitutes for technology, that is central to the arts of video and cinema. As Caden Manson explained to Jason Farman: “the real technology of the piece are the live performers” (Farman, 2009):

[The live performers] are the ones in control. The camera are stationary and are turned on before the show and turned off after the show. The performers are the ones making the digital illusion. They make it look like the piece is edited with zoom, dolly, shots, and quick cuts—not the camera. (qtd. in Farman, 2009)

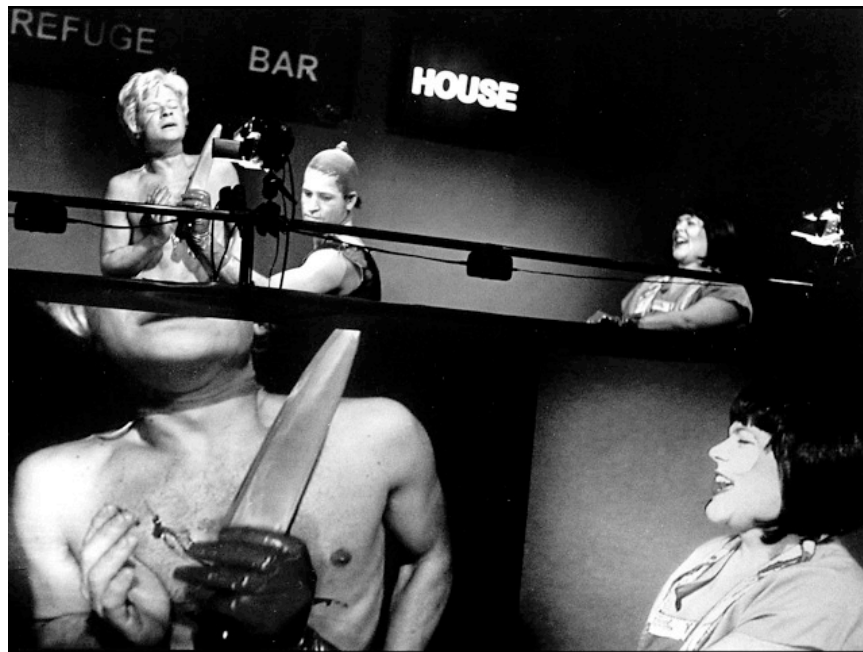


Fig. 3: *Flicker* (2002-2005)

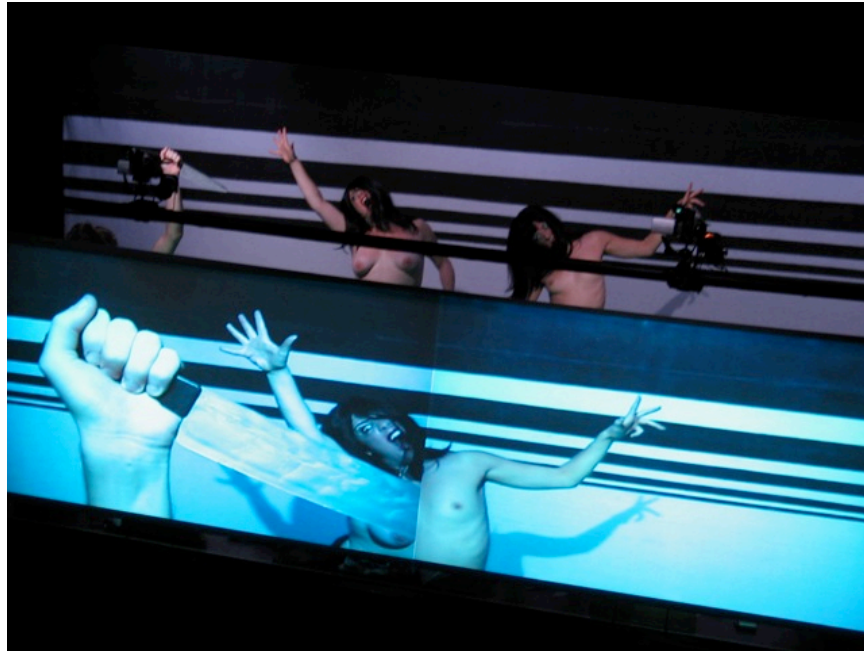


Fig. 4: *Flicker* (2002-2005)

Endorsing a hybrid identity, the monstrously talented actors perform the characters but also the movements of the camera as, for example, they physically enact the focus by adjusting their positions before the lenses. They finally act as machinists shifting flashboard sceneries setting the action in a forest in the first story, or flashboards reminiscent of the title credits in movies (Figure 2). Monsters, grotesque bodies always muting into “another body” to go back to Bakhtin’s words, the actors are multi-performers (Bakhtin, 1984: 517). Yet, their performances are conditioned by the cameras themselves—the “passive” but constraining performers—which appear to call the shots, thus limiting their agency. In his definition of the Real Film Technique, Manson interestingly refers to the “idea of live feed,” or to the “actors being caught by the video:” the camera appears as cannibalistic, feeding on the actors whom are “caught” (qtd. in Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 59). *Flicker* questions the power of images, of the visual industry. To what extent do we, as *social actors*, influence the making of images, or does the making of images influence us in these *Post Modern Times*?

#### **The Politics of Viewing/Choosing: The Audience’s Way(s) of Seeing**

“Seeing comes before words,” John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing*; “[t]he child looks and recognizes before it can speak.” “But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words [:] it is seeing which establishes our place in



the surrounding world" (Berger, 2008: 7). For Caden Manson and Jemma Nelson seeing not only comes before words but images are substitutes for words: "the contemporary language is the image," Manson asserts.

We speak the image, everyone speaks the image—it's a global language, but a language that is mutating constantly and really fast. We're voracious image eaters—we're eating images all day long, we can't get enough. At the same time, people say these images are garbage and worthless, but actually they're really powerful—they move everyone. So when you have culture creators and advertisers feeding you these images, and at the same time saying, don't pay attention, it's garbage, throw it away, it's a very problematic scenario because then you're just willfully getting washed over and influenced. So a lot of our work is about this idea of how you're reflected back to yourself with these images (*sic*) (qtd. in Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 62).

Reflection is at the core of *Flicker*: the two Frankenstein-like creators of the monstrous piece immerse their audience into a self-reflective world, a metafictional "Society of the Spectacle," to reflect on the Media Revolution. Contrary to Mary Shelley, whose 1818 novel read as a warning against the dangers of the modern Man's attempt to control nature at the time of the Industrial Revolution, Manson and Nelson do not denounce our contemporary society of visual consumption but hope to raise the post-modern Man's awareness about the way He relates to images.

The two-layer spatial structure of *Flicker* with the positive space, or on-screen space, and the negative space, or the off-screen space, is indeed metafictional: the play "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh, 2001: 2). The omnipresence of cameras which are not only part of the scenic apparatus but are also used as props within the narrative structure is another instance of the metafictional strategies used in the play to invite the spectator to reflect about the "mediated eye/I." Along with Linda Hutcheon, metafiction can be defined as an alienation strategy that, in the manner of the Brechtian alienation technique, encourages the spectator not to blindly immerse himself or herself into the narrative (Hutcheon, 1980: xiii). The play on formal discontinuity discussed earlier, or what Jemma Nelson refers to as "fissure," is also part of Big Art Group's "theatrical methods":

As we've developed the work, we've gotten into the idea of the fissure, of the gap between what's being produced, and what the end result is, and the different layers of transmission that happen in between. We're not interested in communicating an illusion, we're always breaking it and bringing you out of

it, and ourselves out of it, so there's this constant back and forth—disruptive technique (qtd. in Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 62).<sup>4</sup>

Both Jacob Gallagher-Ross and Jason Farman view this aesthetic of “the fissure, of the gap” as “descend[ing] from Brecht” (Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 62): In “Surveillance Spectacles: The Big Art Group's *Flicker* and the Screened Body in Performance,” Farman writes:

The semiotic link between what takes place on the material stage and what takes place on the virtual stage of the screens requires not simply a phenomenological experience of the body but a simultaneous semiotic reading of various signs and multiple referents. Though the audience is initially confronted with three huge contiguous screens that present one performance, they are simultaneously invited to look *past* the screens at another performance. The tension comes when an audience member is faced with the decision to engage in a type of figure/ground perception and make one of the performances (either the digital or the analogue) the dominant “figure” in relationship to the distant and unfocused “ground.” The performance solicits this tension and even makes it the fulcrum of the entire piece constantly displaying its technique ... Nothing is hidden. Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* plays a key role in the direction of *Flicker* and the Big Art Group's work as a whole (Farman, 2009).

The company's disruptive technique is typical of the post-Brechtian aesthetics of mistrust which has come to the fore in recent “high tech” multimedia performance and from which emerges a “suspended condition” of doubt. The breaking of illusion, necessary for the members of the audience to remain aware of the manipulation of images, places the viewer in the role of what Georges Banu names the “supervisor” that is the critical member of the audience who watches the play to decipher the “tricks and subterfuges” that trap the viewers into the world of fiction (Banu, 2006: 13—*Jouve's translation*).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gallagher-Ross writes, “Their theatrical methods are descended from Brecht: opening the apparatus of modern image-manufacturing to dissecting scrutiny, they take the discrepancies between live bodies onstage and their onscreen doppelgangers as a figure for media culture's many forms of transubstantiation. Not content with staging simple binaries—live or recorded, images or material presence—BAG graphs a spectrum: bodies that crave the hi-def perfection of the video image” (55).

<sup>5</sup> In the original French version, Georges Banu writes, « *Veiller*, c'est humain, *sur-veiller*, en revanche, déborde ce cadre et bascule du côté de la faute, de la déviance qui doivent être dénoncées, et implicitement sanctionnées .... Le “veilleur” est à l'écoute du théâtre, de son passé qui remue encore, de sa mémoire qui s'active et des jeux qui se déploient ; “le surveillant”, toujours dans la nuit, épie les êtres, les jauge, mais surtout redouble, par son regard de la surveillance qui s'exerce sur le plateau. Il est invité et entraîné à “redoubler” la veille qui est son statut normal pour passer du côté de la “surveillance” en observant les pièges et les subterfuges que l'on bâtit sur scène » (13).

Basing his demonstration on Michel Foucault's analysis of surveillance, Farman concludes that "*Flicker* functions as a performance of the spectacle of surveillance in its performance of excessive visibility" (Farman, 2009): with *Flicker* the members of the audience are made aware that they are *spectators* that are viewers and voyeurs. Throughout the show, the spectator-supervisor is challenged as he or she has to confront his *Doppelgänger*, the spectator-voyeur, who is embodied in the narrative of the play by the character of Jeff. Jeff functions as a go-between protagonist, a character ensuring the junction between the two intertwined stories. In the psychological drama plot, he is explicitly cast as the voyeur always watching the other characters through the lens of his camera. At the end of the opening scene, Jeff, holding his camera, is seen on the video facing the spectators who appear as mirror-images of Jeff. In the sequence that follows, Jeff shifts into the position of the spectators who watch Jeff's sadomasochistic victim on the screen through Jeff's camera. An embedding-effect is created: the embedding camera corresponds to the video apparatus and the embedded camera is Jeff's own, which captures the image of the victim. This embedded structure sets Jeff's camera as the subjective camera: the members of the audience see the scene through the voyeur's eyes. Because subjective camera is also adopted in the first story, the *Blair Witch Project* spoof, Jeff may be seen as the mysterious killer-voyeur through whose eyes the spectators see the scenes and whose point of view they are led to adopt. This subjective camera process encourages the identification of the spectators with the voyeurs. The phenomenon of identification is often opposed to the concept of alienation as it favours the immersion into the illusion. The immersion into the "House of Fiction" is also triggered by the use of suspense, which maintains the viewer's attention at the level of the narrative, by the music which stimulates emotions rather than the intellect, but also by the style of performance of the actors. As Ophélie Landrin notes, the actors never address the audience but only the camera which enhances the effect of a closed-in universe on which the spectators spy (Landrin, 2008: 54). As soon as the viewers identify with Jeff and get caught up in the spiral of the narratives, they become the voyeur's accomplices indulging in scopic pleasure.<sup>6</sup> The spectator-supervisor who, as Banu stresses, is Brechtian by nature becomes "an Aristotelian spectator caught unaware by unexpected turns of events and unforeseen situations" (Banu, 2006: 27 — *Jouve's translation*).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The focus on naked bodies and on sexuality justifies all the more the use of the term "scopic pleasure."

<sup>7</sup> The original text in French reads, « La surveillance lui accorde le statut de spectateur brechtien aussi bien qu'aristotélien » (13). A few pages later, we read, « [Le spectateur] s'implique alors dans la destinée des êtres que la stratégie adoptée a démasqués ou sauvés. De spectateur brechtien qu'il fut, il devient spectateur aristotélien saisi par l'inattendu des évènements et la surprise de la situation. Informé sur le processus, il succombe sous le poids de ses effets. Lors de la surveillance, il entretient une double rela-

Hybridity appears again as a key notion when it comes to qualifying the mode of spectatorship that *Flicker* engenders. The monstrous show calls for a monstrous spectator, half supervisor/half voyeur. The spectator's monstrosity is no fatality, no schizophrenic syndrome but articulates the dialectics of choice: to choose or not to choose to believe in the visual illusion, as the flashboards "Fiction"/"Non-Fiction" at the beginning of the show hint at. The aesthetic of profusion, which characterizes Big Art Group's work, "force[s] the audience to make choices" as Jemma Nelson says:

Traditionally, in our performances there's always the question of the audience: how are you assembling these things, deciding what is important, and what is not important? For some people, our plays are sometimes confusing or frustrating because there's a lot of things happening at the same time. They force the audience to make choices: what do you grip and what do you not? What do you pay attention to? How do you assemble a narrative? There's always an active dimension for the audience (qtd. in Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 62).

Besides choosing what they want to see and what they want to believe in, the active members of the audience are also invited to decide for themselves whether they "will be willing consumers or wary skeptics." For Jacob Gallagher-Ross, "Big Art Group's experiments with attention and perception ... creat[e] a new model for political theatre grounded in the contested dynamics of spectatorships" (Gallagher-Ross, 2010: 55).

### Conclusion

*Flicker* is not a show designed for a passive audience, but is instead a call for action and as such this "new model for political theatre grounded in the contested dynamics of spectatorships" brings us to Jacques Rancière's "Emancipated Spectator" and to the scholar's concept of "passive versus active spectatorship":

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting: when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection (Rancière, 2009: 13).

Big Art Group "challenge[s] the opposition between viewing and acting," an opposition which, to us, constitutes the very starting point towards an understanding of *Flicker*. Forthcoming elaborations on the status of the spectators of Big Art Group's shows could now take the shape of a critical exchange between Rancière's theory and, for example, John Armitage's vision:

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tion, convertible, avec les actes et les êtres. D'abord de la distance, ensuite de la participation » (31).

For any critical assessment of Ranciere's theoretical work on the spectacle must allow for bodies and actions, gatherings and audiences that are no longer what they were in Debord's time, with the important theoretical and practical difference being that almost no one today believes that the society of the spectacle can be reversed or used against consumer capitalism.

It is thus not the chasm between the active and the passive that matters in the present period, but the demise of the difference between reality and its simulation, that gives rise to the inactivity, aesthetic unresponsiveness and political insensitivity of the masses (Armitage, 2010).

By activating diverse levels of reality—meaning multiple states of disbelief—by stitching the different layers and expectations, by atomizing the audience's gaze, forcing each viewer to choose what to look at, what to ignore, by engaging him/her to cut and edit images on his/her own terms, and ultimately by redefining a genuinely new “private,” “personal” Eye/I, *Flicker* triggers an appealing aesthetical and political bomb and invites—or forces—us to take an active responsibility in bringing into life *our own* monsters.

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