

## **Performing the Accident: Through Richard Maxwell's *Ode to the Man who Kneels***

Ioana Jucan

### **Prelude**

In this project, I consider the accident as a way to open reflection on endurance, particularly its role in digital contexts. The project consists of this essay and an accompanying audio piece\* – an artistic expression of the conceptual framework put forth in the essay. The audio piece brings together an excerpt from an audio performance of my play *Y*, performed by Arianna Geneson and Daniel Ruppel; *um breathing* – an audio piece by Kathryn Robbins; as well as various sounds I encountered while walking through the city or while typing on my computer keyboard. The sounds reached me by accident. My feet continued walking, yet my ears were engaged. My fingers continued typing, yet my ears were engaged. I was not sure what was happening, but these sounds – which at first seemed to be coming out of nowhere – interrupted whatever it was I was doing then. These sounds were instants tearing time apart.

To think the accident I seek to perform it. Or, rather, I seek to think what performing the accident without annulling it might mean today. In the essay, I do so through a series of speculations, punctuated by a few blinks (*Augenblicke* – moments, literally “blinks of the eye”) overflowing from the deadpan theatre of Richard Maxwell – in particular, from his play, *Ode to the Man who Kneels*. In the audio piece, I perform the accident through a collection of aural gestures that instantiate a state of mind and being associated with the occurrence of an accident. This state is characterized by the indeterminacy of not knowing. The vocal gestures are punctuated by moments of

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\* <http://liminalities.net/8-3/performing-the-accident.mp3>

change – of nuance and/or content – that have the potential to open spaces for reflection for an engaged listener.

## Speculations I

The accident happens before (any)one knows it and without (any)one knowing it. “I don’t know what has just happened.” “I don’t understand.” And: “Why has this happened?” This is what I have found myself thinking every time I’ve suffered through and survived what could be called an accident.

An accident happens “when the *paradoxical* instant tears time apart.”<sup>1</sup> This moment is an *Augenblick* – a blink of an eye. What can be seen in the blink of an eye? What can be experienced there? Not much, at least in the moment. Not enough to make sense of what has just happened in the passing moment of its occurrence.

“When you see the eye you see something going out from it. You see the look [blink] in the eye (*den Blick des Auges*).”<sup>2</sup> Reading this remark by Wittgenstein, Jean-Luc Nancy notes:

The look, Wittgenstein’s *Blick*, is the thing that leaves or takes its leave, the thing of leaving. More precisely, the look is nothing phenomenal; on the contrary, it is the *thing in itself* of a departure from the self through which alone the subject becomes a subject. Far from being a look directed toward an object, the thing in itself of the departure or opening is an opening toward a world. In truth, it is no longer even a look *upon* but a look as a whole, open not *on* but *through* the evidence of the world.<sup>3</sup>

What could be seen in the blink of an eye is an opening toward a world through the evidence of that world. In the opening, the world is being re-gathered in an attempt to make the things of the world hang together once more, so that one can find a place for one’s self in it. Seen in the opening, as evidence, the world comes to be a whole with holes, the presence of an absence. Wittgenstein termed it “a limited whole” and referred to “the feeling of the world as a limited whole” as “the mystical feeling.”<sup>4</sup> The limit of the world, or one of its limits, at least, is the subject – the “I.”<sup>5</sup>

In this way, what could be seen in the blink of an eye is “the *thing in itself* of a departure from the self through which alone the subject becomes a subject.” The

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<sup>1</sup> I here extrapolate Jacques Derrida’s expression concerning the event of the gift from *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1967), §222.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, trans. Simon Sparks (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 245.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1922), § 6.45.

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, § 5.461.

moment when the paradoxical instant tears time apart can be said to be the moment of being out of time with one's self – possibly, the moment of becoming subject. For, an occurrence is called an accident if it happens unintentionally. The occurrence involves oneself (the one who suffers the accident) but the self cannot – or, rather, need not – lay claim to it. As I live through an accident, immediately after the fact (of its happening), the world is potentially neither my world, nor a world that is never – and that shall never be – mine. “Contingency is possibility put to the test of the subject.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, perhaps, the accident can be said to be “an event (*contingit*) of a potentiality as the giving of a caesura between a capacity to be and a capacity not to be.”<sup>7</sup> In the caesura, the body of the subject is potentially broken, or broken down.

The blink of an eye: the instant that tears time apart: the giving of a caesura between a capacity to be and a capacity not to be. The thing of the departure from the self that gives evidence of a world that is neither mine nor never not mine is an interruption, an arresting of movement. This can be a break, a shift, or a turning point, depending on circumstances. The accident slows one down or stops one in one's tracks. It gets in the way of one's achieving an end – a pre-determined end, that is. It suspends the possibility and frustrates the desire to figure out the “why?” of what has just happened (out of nowhere, it seems) – at least temporarily.

Now, the interruption potentially opens the way for the performance of an act of reflection – in an elongated present moment in-between the past and the future. As Charles Larmore notes, reflection, always situated, is “addressed to an interruption that has occurred in the continuity of our existence.”<sup>8</sup> Reflection is the time of reason – of finding and giving reasons to oneself. At a point of not knowing and not understanding, reflection emerges as an attempt at and possibility of “getting a grip on ourselves so as to be able to reappropriate ourselves.”<sup>9</sup> In reflection, the “I” is reappropriated. I give an account, for myself, of what has just happened and make a decision about it. The decision is a gesture that allows me to move on, to endure. It takes the form of either “I can't possibly make any sense of what has just happened,” or of “This was meant to happen.” If it was meant to happen, it could not not have happened. If this is the case, then the accident – an event (*contingit*) – can be said to have happened out of necessity. In both cases, I remain at a point of not knowing, of indeterminacy. The decision I make remains a gesture – a gesture that allows me to move on.

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<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 146.

<sup>7</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 146.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Larmore, *The Practices of the Self* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 84.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 86.

## Blink 1

“Two cowboys step up on stage.”<sup>10</sup>

Richard Maxwell’s plays often begin with a performance of appearing in the form of stepping onto stage. Stepping from where? From the outside in? This is certainly a possibility, though, for the moment at least, this is a possibility that remains open.

As the stage direction makes manifest, this possibility is actualized in *Ode to the Man who Kneels*, where two men step on the stage from outside of it – which is nevertheless still inside the theatre. They step inside a grid – or, rather, Grid, as the town in *Ode* is called. “In the town called Grid, eyes see. Feet fall. Nostrils breathe. Skin feels and dusk by breezes cools thicker air.”<sup>11</sup> Grid is a town that gets reached by the stagecoach – its only connection with the world – once a year. This time, the coming of the stagecoach is indefinitely delayed because of an accident that happens off-stage. “The wagon blew up on a stump. [...] It happens...”<sup>12</sup>

As the performance opens, the two cowboys take their places on the seemingly empty stage, inside Grid. They look at the audience while waiting to begin. They appear to be rooted to the spot.

The two men seem to be (at least) twice rooted to the spot: both physically and by means of language. The physical act of the actors taking their places on stage and, thus, of becoming rooted to the spot, is followed – after a long silent pause – by a description made by one of them in the present tense: “Two men are 15 feet apart. The man on the left is standing. The man on the right is kneeling.”<sup>13</sup> With this description, the play begins again. Following it, the man on the (audience’s) left becomes The Standing Man and the man on the (audience’s) right becomes The Kneeling Man.

The Standing Man points his finger at The Kneeling Man. Short silent pause. The pointing continues for over eleven minutes – an elongation of the initial moment of directing the finger towards The Kneeling Man.

A pointing finger, like the one of the Standing Man in Maxwell’s *Ode*, is what Charles Sanders Peirce termed “the type of the class” of the index.<sup>14</sup> The index is “anything that focuses the attention.”<sup>15</sup> The index – in its double dimensionality, as

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<sup>10</sup> Richard, Maxwell. *Ode to the Man Who Kneels* (unpublished; manuscript available from New York City Players, 2007), 2.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Vol. 1*, eds.

Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 226.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume 2, Elements of Logic*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1932), 161.

trace and as shifter (deixis) – is a paradoxical sign characterized by “a dialectic of the empty and the full” that “lends the index an eeriness and uncanniness” not associated with any other kind of sign.<sup>16</sup> The paradoxical indexical sign is characterized by a paradoxical temporality. More precisely, it is characterized by a sort of “temporal tension” in the sense that “the indexical trace – the footprint, the fossil, the photograph – carries a historicity, makes the past present,” while “the deictic index – the signifiers ‘here,’ ‘now,’ ‘this,’ ‘that’ – are inextricable from the idea of presence.”<sup>17</sup> The index functions as an interruption (and sometimes as disruption) that is always in the present.

For a moment, the pointing finger in *Ode* is an index that focuses attention both on the man at whom the other man points and on the connection between the two men, who become The Standing Man and the Kneeling Man precisely by virtue of this connection. After this moment, however, the pointing finger becomes more than an index. It becomes a stand-in for a revolver once The Standing Man utters the following description: “The Standing Man is pointing a revolver at The Kneeling Man.”<sup>18</sup> This act of description is a type of performative utterance.

Description implies “a separation between the describer and the described.”<sup>19</sup> It is traditionally grounded in the dichotomous subject-object relation that Martin Heidegger denounces to be at the heart of representation (as calculation). Yet, in the act of description pointed out in Maxwell’s play, it is precisely this separation and the subject/object binary opposition that come undone in the uttering of the description – in the present tense – at the moment at which the performance of what is described itself occurs.

The use of description in performance is a Brechtian technique. Brecht explicitly called for the “transposition into the third person” and for “speaking the stage directions out loud” as means that allow “the actor to adopt the right attitude of detachment” while “alienating the text proper.”<sup>20</sup> In Brecht’s words, “this style of acting is further alienated by taking place on the stage after having already been outlined and announced in words.”<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the act of description in *Ode* has an effect of estrangement (*Verfremdungseffekt*), though, here, it is not a proper instance of “speaking the stage directions aloud.” It confers upon the language an appearance of factuality, seemingly withdrawing the words from the realm of emotion. As such, this act of description is seemingly in line with the Maxwellian style of delivery, which has been often characterized as “deadpan.”

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18.1 (2007), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Doane, “Indexicality: Trace and Sign,” 219.

<sup>18</sup> Maxwell, *Ode*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Garry L. Hagberg, *Describing Ourselves: Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 92.

<sup>20</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1964), 138.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

In addition to the *Verfremdungseffekt* it produces, the act of description accompanies – and, in a sense, makes possible – the doing; in this way, the speaking “I” can be seen as both subject and object, if this terminology is still to be employed. In a sense, the descriptive act pointed out in *Ode* acquires a performative dimension – not necessarily in a physical way, but in a virtual one, i.e. “acting without the agency of matter.”<sup>22</sup> The act of description effectively becomes a performative act as the audience listening to it – in the absence of a physical revolver on stage – fills in the (visual) blank. Ultimately, this is what putting a play on the stage is about for Richard Maxwell: “Just put the actors on the stage, he suggests, have them say the lines and then let the audience fill in the blanks.”<sup>23</sup>

In the act of description under scrutiny, the traditional subject-object relation comes undone in yet another, related, way. In light of the lines that The Kneeling Man utters following The Standing Man’s act of description, pointing a revolver at The Kneeling Man appears to be a reenactment – an instance of making the past present, as the switch between verb tenses also suggests:

I was thinking what a perfect time and place for me to go. So I took the rifle, pull the trigger but with the gun away from my face. My arms start to shake. I cock the gun again and this time I put the barrel in my mouth. I pull the trigger. Click. Nothing changed. [...] But pain and death are not the same! The caliber of this shotgun is small. You go into shock. A black hum and blood and shredded tissue in the mouth and hot buckshot heat up the back of the head and shortly, you lose consciousness [...] Silence. [...] After a couple hours, the life has all but drained out and the body gets colder and hardens by the hour till it locks into this position like wood.<sup>24</sup>

In the act of description and in the reenactment, the self pulling the trigger – performed by The Standing Man – is rendered as other. Yet, The Kneeling Man’s “prayer” – effectively another act of description uttered in response to The Standing Man’s line, “Say your prayers” – reveals that, in the elongated moment of the pulling of the trigger, the subject and the object are not one, but they are not in binary opposition either.

This is the sense of The Kneeling Man’s saying his prayers on the stage, as an instance of talking silently to oneself (while facing the audience). For, speaking (silently) to oneself involves the opening of “a hiatus [*un écart*] that differentiates me from myself, a hiatus or gap without which I would not be a hearer as well as a speaker” – a hiatus that defines what Derrida termed “the trace, a minimal repeatability” found “in the very

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<sup>22</sup> Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Maxwell cited in Ben Brantley, “Theatre Review: Articulating the Inarticulate With Deep Pauses,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 1998, accessed August 2, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/08/movies/theater-review-articulating-the-inarticulate-with-deep-pauses.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Maxwell, *Ode*, 2-3.

moment of hearing-myself-speak.”<sup>25</sup>

This is also the case when I see myself seeing in the mirror: “it is necessary that (*il faut que*,’ Derrida would say) I am ‘distanced’ or ‘spaced’ from the mirror. I must be distanced from myself so that I am able to be both seer and seen;” I must be out of time with myself. “The space between, however, remains (as Foucault would say) ‘obstinately invisible.’”<sup>26</sup> The Kneeling Man in *Ode* does not see himself seeing in a mirror, but he sees his (future) dead self “serene and nap-like” that he in fact becomes as he is speaking.<sup>27</sup> He is thus both seer and seen – seer and seen removed from one another by an “obstinately invisible” space that remains indeterminate and indeterminable in the moment of the performance.

The act of the Kneeling Man seeing his (future) dead self at the re-enacted moment of his (or its) becoming occurs under the threat of a pointing finger/revolver – a possible index of a death to come. In the elongated moment of the pulling of the trigger, thus, The Kneeling Man can be said to be standing before death. As Derrida would have it, standing before death implies “standing before myself,” where “before” has both the temporal connotations of “*avant*” and the spatial connotations of “*devant*.” “Standing before myself” in turn implies “some distance from myself, myself *as* another, as in ‘standing before a mirror’ [...]; the other then is over there, death is over there. There is, as Derrida would say, ‘*espacement*’.”<sup>28</sup> Death becomes “the name of the impossible simultaneity and of an impossibility that we know simultaneously.”<sup>29</sup> In a Maxwell play death cannot be real except as impossible. This is not to say that *Ode* is a play about the impossibility of the real. Rather, it is a play about the impossibility of real death and the simultaneous possibility of real stage death (within the world of the theatre).

In *Ode*, this impossible death constitutes the real towards which The Kneeling Man seemingly aspires. This is, in effect, the death of the actor, for, as Wittgenstein remarks, “an actor may play lots of different roles, but at the end of it all *he himself*, the human being, is the one who has to die”, to “look death *itself* in the eye [*dem Tod selbst in’s Auge schauen können*].”<sup>30</sup> Thus, The Kneeling Man declares in a self-reflexive moment with a poetic touch, which usually makes the audience burst into nervous laughter:

(*The Kneeling Man prays:*)

I’m an actor. Everything I experience in my life, everything I feel, is saying this. You know? It adds a layer to my life that I wish weren’t never there. A voice in my head

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<sup>25</sup> Leonard Lawlor, “‘Animals Have No Hand’. An Essay on Animality in Derrida,” CR: *The New Centennial Review*, 7.2 (2007), 59.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Maxwell, *Ode*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Lawlor, 54 (brackets added).

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 65.

<sup>30</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 50e.

that says you don't count for shit, because you, what you're experiencing, you're thinking, you're counting, you're not in the real world. You're recording. You're storing up for a moment where you can use this for later. I've been plagued most of my life by this. It's not a real way to live. And you get used to it. But I feel. That's plain. In any case. I FEEL.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, that this death is the end(point) towards which The Kneeling Man aspires remains an open possibility, for "I wish weren't never there" contains an error – an accident? – that makes the expression almost nonsensical and, thus, forever ambiguous.

## Speculations II

The accident, by definition, is relative and contingent. In *The Original Accident*, Paul Virilio suggests that the accident is "*an invention* in the sense of uncovering what was hidden, just waiting to happen."<sup>32</sup> This invention is inextricably connected with the development of technology.

Indeed, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in the second part of the nineteenth century the term "accident" began increasingly to be used to describe negative effects of technology, technological failures, especially in conjunction with trains and automobiles.<sup>33</sup> One of the first times "accident" was used in the context of automobiles was on August 17, 1896, when a Mrs. Bridget Driscoll was hit by a car powered by a Roger-Benz engine while crossing the grounds of the Crystal Palace in London.<sup>34</sup> Her body injured, Mrs. Driscoll died shortly after the accident. She is, purportedly, one of the first pedestrians whose death was to be caused by an automobile.

Virilio's take on the relation between the accident and technology complicates an understanding of the accident in terms of contingency: "To invent the sailing ship or steamer is *to invent the shipwreck*. To invent the train is *to invent the rail accident* of derailment."<sup>35</sup> The accident is "itself programmed, in a way, when the product was first put to use" – it is programmed as a possibility.<sup>36</sup> If it is programmed, how could it be contingent? Is this simply nonsense or does it, in effect, open the way for an alternate view of contingency and, correlatively, of the relation between contingency and necessity?

Virilio's claim is particularly intriguing in light of discourses on technology emerging during the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Putting into place the

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<sup>31</sup> Maxwell, *Ode*, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Sawdy, "Fantasies of the End of Technology," in *The Humanities in Architectural Design: A Contemporary and Historical Perspective*, eds. Soumyen Bandyopadhyay *et al* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 68, fn.2.

<sup>34</sup> Sawdy, "Fantasies of the End of Technology," 57.

<sup>35</sup> Virilio, *The Original Accident*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 70.



modern conception of technology, such discourses conceptualize technology in terms of its power to overcome contingency.<sup>37</sup> Critics of technology, taking seriously this conception, have argued that technology disenchant the world.<sup>38</sup> In a disenchanted world, “there are in principle no mysterious, incalculable powers at work.”<sup>39</sup> Technology renders the world fully explainable – predictable, calculable. At stake here is the issue of rationality/reason, for calculation is in fact the essence of reason in its classical, Kantian conception.

Classical reason is fundamentally teleological. It is a matter of calculation meant to determine the best means leading – necessarily – to (pre-determined) ends. It operates, by necessity, within a space of knowledge. As such, in the Kantian conception, the “*determinative* knowledge of the rule” is a necessary condition for keeping within the bounds of reason.<sup>40</sup> Guided by teleological reason (“*logos*”), technology is (pre)supposed to eliminate contingency irrevocably.

To make sense of Virilio’s claim mentioned above, it is perhaps necessary to move beyond the conception of technology outlined above – and of reason, for that matter. In his reflections on reason and of its place in “The ‘World’ of the Enlightenment to Come,” Derrida opens the way for such a reconceptualization. He calls for the undoing of the link between reason and calculation, seeking to rethink what reason could become if teleology is given up. Beyond teleology, Derrida writes, “[a] reason must let itself be reasoned with.”<sup>41</sup> To reason with a reason means to acknowledge that what is to come may end up not being at all. It means to allow that an “event or an invention is possible only as im-possible.”<sup>42</sup> To think otherwise would be to think from a place of “the knowing of an *eidōs*” and, thus, to neutralize the event in its eventfulness.<sup>43</sup> Neutralized, the event no longer offers an occasion for the intense living of the surprise – of an experience of thought emerging at the interface between the sensual and the reasonable/rational.

What other thought of technology could become possible given this other conception of reason (beyond calculation)? Perhaps a thought that is not far removed from that of the classical thinkers (Plato and Aristotle, among others). According to this thought, “*technai*” – “intrinsically uncertain and unpredictable in their outcomes” – “were activities involving the making of things in a way which was guided by *logos*, by

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<sup>37</sup> Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Nature, Technology, and the Sacred* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 173.

<sup>38</sup> Max Weber introduced the notion of “the disenchantment of the world”/ “*die Entzauberung der Welt*.”

<sup>39</sup> Max Weber, “Science as Vocation,” in *Max Weber’s Science as Vocation*, eds. Peter Lassman and Irving Velody, trans. Michael John (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 13.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The ‘World’ of the Enlightenment to Come (Exception, Calculation, and Sovereignty),” in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, ed. Werner Hamacher (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 158.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 159.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 144.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 143.

reason.”<sup>44</sup> Here, contingency appears to be at the very heart of technology, opening one to the ways in which not knowing (and not being able to fully determine the functioning of a particular technology) could be an enabling condition. Or not.

## Blink 2

As an index of impossible death, the finger/revolver pointing at The Kneeling Man in Maxwell’s *Ode to the Man who Kneels* constitutes a gesture. For Giorgio Agamben, a gesture consists of “the presentation of a mediation.” It is a “communication of communicability, [...] the being-in-language of man as pure mediation;” it is that which “in each expression remains without expression.”<sup>45</sup> As such, the ontological status of gesture can be defined in terms of an in-betweenness: the gesture can be said to be “between possibility and reality.”<sup>46</sup>

Gesture is a key performance element for Maxwell. In his development of the gesture, Maxwell inherits the legacy of Brecht’s *Gestus* (gest, gist, and gesture). In Brecht’s account, the actor must “show gestures that are so to speak the habits [*Sitten*] and uses [*Gebräuche*] of the body.”<sup>47</sup> In Maxwell’s theatre, gesture has to do with the externalization of emotion – an emotion that is lived in, through, and with the body. Unlike in Brecht, for whom “whatever the actor offers in the way of gesture [...] must be finished and bear the hallmarks of something rehearsed and rounded-off,” for Maxwell, the gesture – although it must bear the hallmarks of something rehearsed, given that it is purposefully theatrical – is precisely not finished.<sup>48</sup> Like the index in Doane’s account, the gesture in Maxwell’s theatre is uncannily characterized by both fullness and emptiness: it is both whole and unfinalized (as well as seemingly unfinalizable). As such, it has both an effect of estrangement (akin to Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*) and a comic effect.

As Samuel Weber points out, Brecht’s theatre is gestural in the sense that “it is a theatre in which gestures have been made *citable*,” the stage of this theatre can be seen “as the site (*situs*) and as sight but also and above as a space of citable gestures.”<sup>49</sup> The choice of the term set in italics is not irrelevant, for “to cite” (close to the German “*zitimieren*”) has etymological affinities with “*citare*,” “to set in movement.” Yet “cite” does

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<sup>44</sup> Szerszynski, *Nature, Technology, and the Sacred*, 52.

<sup>45</sup> Agamben cited in Niels Albertsen, “The Artwork in the Semiosphere of Gestures. Wittgenstein, Gesture and Secondary Meaning,” in *Architecture, Language, Critique: Around Paul Engelmann*, eds. Judith Bakacsy *et al.* (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), 75 (brackets added).

<sup>46</sup> Albertsen, “The Artwork in the Semiosphere of Gestures. Wittgenstein, Gesture and Secondary Meaning,” 95.

<sup>47</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 45.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 139.

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Weber, “Replacing the Body: An Approach to the Question of Digital Democracy,” in *Public Space and Democracy*, eds. Marcel Henaff and Tracy B. Strong (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 182.

not only mean to set in movement, but also “to arrest movement.” Thus, “the basis of citation” is interruption and disruption.<sup>50</sup>

As citable gesture, the pointing finger in the beginning of *Ode* arrests movement; it is an indication of the actor’s body in danger of breaking and breaking down. As Weber remarks, “the essence of gesture” is “the joints that make all bodily movement possible while at the same time also making possible their interruption [...]. To experience the body, not simply as a continuous medium or entity, but as the possibility of an imperfect machine, as the potential disjunction of its constitutive members,” is what is at stake in the notion of “citable gesture,” of arrested movement.<sup>51</sup>

To emphasize the citability of gesture understood in these terms as a “determining mechanism of theatricality” means “to call attention to the body as something other than an organic whole, as something other than a container of the soul” and, thus, to call into question “the immanence of subject, object, and the world they are held to constitute.”<sup>52</sup> To reinforce this point, Weber turns precisely to the pointing finger. Specifically, he turns to one of the earliest discussions of “digitality” in the history of Western thought: Aristotle’s reflection on place and its relation to the body in Book IV of his *Physics*.

Aristotle understood the relation between hand and finger in terms of a relation between whole and part. For him, the finger was *in* the hand. In the digital age, by contrast, the hand and the finger no longer can be said to stand in a whole-part relation to one another. Weber elaborates this point:

What happens, however, when the function of the finger is no longer determined primarily through the fact that it is located “in a hand” as “generally a part” is located “in a whole”? [...] It is in this context that the notion of “digitalization” reveals its curiously ambivalent character. For the “digit” is, on the one hand, a model of discreteness: the clearly defined unit of the finger [...]. And yet, the numerical unit does not necessarily relate to the combinations it constitutes as does a part to a whole. A “digit” does not relate to a numerical operation as does a part to a whole. It is a relational element in a combinatorial process. In the case of computers, that relation is one of binary opposition: 0s and 1s, shorted and opened circuits, positive and negative, each only “meaningful” as the other of the other.<sup>53</sup>

It is precisely in the context of the phenomenon of digitalization that the pointing finger becomes a citable gesture and a suggestion of the body in danger of breaking and breaking down. In this context, Maxwell’s use of gesture acquires particular relevance.

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 182.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 183-4.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 184.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 184-5.

### Speculations III

Moving on, I would now like to situate my discussion in the present, in what has often been called the contemporary digital age, and to focus on digital technology and its “invisibly visible essence” – software.<sup>54</sup> Admittedly, I am writing about software from a place of not knowing, of not fully understanding it, although I make use of it daily. Yet, as Wendy Chun shows in *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (2011), unknowability is a key characteristic of software.

Digital technology is driven by a logic of programmability. This logic is intimately associated with what Chun terms “software as thing” or “software as logos, as always already there, as something that persists and enables persistence.”<sup>55</sup> To understand software as logos is to understand code written in higher-level programming languages – which instructs a machine on how to act – as “the perfect performative utterance:” as “automatically and unfailingly ‘doing what it says;’” thus conflating legislation with execution.<sup>56</sup>

Such a logic gives rise to “a dream of programmability” that has the principle of calculation (teleological reason) at its heart. As Chun argues, this “dream of programmability” can be seen as “a return to a world of Laplaceian determinism in which an all-knowing intelligence can comprehend the future by apprehending the past and present.”<sup>57</sup> It renders the future calculable (thus, predictable based on the past), neutralizing the event, annulling the accident.

Yet, this “dream of programmability” remains a dream. In fact, machines running on software take people by surprise over and over again. They often function in unexpected ways or malfunction (in most unexpected ways), leaving one unable to figure out what has just happened. In this way, they open the future towards the unpredictable. By linking “rationality with mysticism, knowability with what is unknown,” digital technology emerges as a powerful fetish that “offers its programmers and users alike a sense of empowerment, of sovereign subjectivity, that covers over – barely – a sense of profound ignorance.”<sup>58</sup> In this way, to understand software as logos is to take logos (reason) in a non-tautological sense.

When “our computers execute in unforeseen ways, the future opens to the unexpected.”<sup>59</sup> To develop this point, Chun proposes a reading of software in terms of metaphor – of a logic of substitutability:

Based on metaphor, software has become a metaphor for the mind, for culture, for ideology, for biology, and for the economy. [...] More broadly, culture itself has been

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<sup>54</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 128.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 175.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 12.

posited as “software,” in opposition to nature, which is “hardware.” Although technologies, such as clocks and steam engines, have historically been used metaphorically to conceptualize our bodies and culture, software is unique in its status as metaphor for metaphor itself. As a universal imitator/machine, it encapsulates a logic of general substitutability: a logic of ordering and creative, animating disordering.<sup>60</sup>

Chun’s reading of software in terms of metaphor operates on two levels. At one level, metaphors can be found in the “user-friendly” interface (e.g., “files,” “folders,” “windows,” “pages”); in computer architecture (e.g., “buses,” “memory,” “gates”); and in the structure of software (e.g., “virus,” “UNIX daemons,” “back orifice attacks”).<sup>61</sup> At another level, the very logic of digital technology can be seen in terms of metaphor – computers can be said to be universal machines of substitution (and substitutability).

“Metaphor,” returned to its etymological root (the Greek “*metapherein*”, from *meta-* “over, across” + *pherein* “to carry, bear”), means to carry or bear across. It designates – in Chun’s well-crafted turn of phrase – “a transfer that transforms.”<sup>62</sup> Paradoxically, it is precisely this transfer that transforms that makes possible the endurance of digital technology. For digital technology to endure, it necessarily needs to change (through endless upgrades). Thus, through the conflation of memory with storage, software can be said to create “an enduring ephemeral that disappears if it is not repeated (and also disappears through its repetition).”<sup>63</sup>

This “transfer that transforms” potentially calls the subject into question, along with its embodiment. It is, potentially, the giving of a caesura between a capacity to be and a capacity not to be. Thinking in metaphors can open us to what is to come – to contingency, to the event in its eventfulness. As Chun notes, “[e]mbracing software as thing, in theory and practice, opens us to the ways in which the fact that we cannot know software can be an enabling condition: a way for us to engage the surprises generated by a programmability that, try as it might, cannot entirely make the future and the past coincide.”<sup>64</sup> Yet, I suggest, it does so as long as metaphors are acknowledged as such (as metaphors), as long as this unknowability is acknowledged – in an act of reflection.

### Blink 3

To repeat, the pointing finger as citable gesture and the body in danger of breaking and breaking down in Richard Maxwell’s *Ode* acquire particular relevance in the context of digitalization. In the words of performance and digital artist Stelarc, for whom the declared “important thing is to plug in, extend the body with cyber-systems” in order

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, 55.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 56.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, 177.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 54.

“to see what it can actually do,” the body is “obsolete;” it is “biologically inadequate.”<sup>65</sup> The body is obsolete – so the logic goes – not only because technological advancements have superseded its capabilities and brought to the fore its vulnerability and need of enhancement (through technology), but also because, following Claude Shannon’s and Norbert Wiener’s conceptualization of information as “a kind of bodiless fluid that could flow between different substrates without loss of meaning or form,” human identity, too, came to be conceptualized (by Hans Moravec) as “essentially an informational pattern rather than an embodied enaction.”<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, statements, as bodiless information, have in recent decades been theorized in terms of their “materiality-effect.”<sup>67</sup> Concomitantly with this theoretical move, the body has paradoxically come to be increasingly conceptualized in terms of spectrality, a “spirituality”-effect. These theoretical moves undo the incompatibility between the material human body and the virtual cyberspace; the body, conceptualized in terms of spectrality, can inhabit cyberspace.

As information in the digital age – which has also been described as the age of speed – is characterized by flow and instantaneity of transmission, the body understood in terms of information and spectrality is always in motion, constantly running and running out of time while lacking a place. “The digital age” is purportedly the age of the instant – of the instant response enabled through a finger’s click or a hand’s touch of the screen. This instantaneity and immediacy is what “real time” is about.<sup>68</sup> In Paul Virilio’s view, the invention of this perspective of “real time” – which is, in effect, cyberspace – along with this absolute speed constitutes the big event of the twenty-first century. More specifically, this event has to do with the emergence of cyberspace as “a new form of perspective” that “does not coincide with the audio-visual perspective which we already know:”

[I]t [cyberspace] is a *tactile perspective*. To see at a distance, to hear at a distance: that was the essence of the audio-visual perspective of old. But to reach at a distance, to feel at a distance, that amounts to shifting the perspective towards a domain it did not yet encompass: that of contact, of contact-at-a-distance: tele-contact.<sup>69</sup>

Tangible from a distance, the body understood in terms of information is

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<sup>65</sup> Stelarc in Paolo Atzori and Kirk Woolford, “Extended-Body: Interview with Stelarc,” *C-theory*, September 6, 1995, accessed December 25, 2010, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=71>.

<sup>66</sup> Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), xi-xii.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The theoretical move towards an understanding of statements in terms of materiality is arguably linked to the emergence of the instructions grounding programming languages at the heart of intangible (that is, impossible to touch) software. Such instructions have clear “material” effects on the computer screen.

<sup>68</sup> Paul Virilio, “Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!” (1995), trans. Patrice Riemens, in *Reading Digital Culture*, ed. David Trend, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001), 23.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, 24.

essentially mappable and, as such, disjoint-able – breakable into parts that no longer form a whole, if reassembled again. More precisely, the body has become mappable with the emergence of software applications such as, for instance, the recently launched *Google Body Browser*, revitalized as *Zygote Body* at the beginning of 2012 after the closing of Google Labs. Seemingly a counterpart of *Google Earth*, which lets you “fly to any place around the world” and “explore the world in 3D from anywhere” through a click,<sup>70</sup> *Google/Zygote Body* offers “a 3D model of the human body.”<sup>71</sup> With a touch of the mouse, with/in *Google/Zygote Body*, “you can peel back anatomical layers, zoom in, click to identify anatomy, or search for muscles, organs, bones and more.”<sup>72</sup> Fascinating as it may be, the view of the body thus mapped out (and torn apart) is undoubtedly uncanny.

The question that the view of this body – with its uncanny effect – opens is: is the body thus reconceptualized and mapped/mappable still real? It is real, indeed, for the notion of “the real,” too, has been reconceptualized in such a way as to make it compatible with the virtual. In Gilles Deleuze’s conception, for instance, the virtual, the encounter with the virtual, “is real without being actual.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, “the virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual.”<sup>74</sup>

Notwithstanding such reconceptualizations, the problematic of the body and the real in the digital age remains open, both in the case of Maxwell’s *Ode*, which subtly engages with it, and in that of the broader contemporary socio-cultural context. Also open remains the problem of what is called thinking and feeling/emoting. In other words, what remains open is what has traditionally been termed – unmistakably linking it to the body – the problem of the head (mind) and the heart (soul).

Although the real body in the digital age might be disembodied, however nonsensical the notion of the disembodied body might sound, embodiment still matters. As Katherine N. Hayles remarks, “embodiment makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it.”<sup>75</sup> Embodiment also makes clear that feeling/emotion depends for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it. As such, even in the digital age, embodiment still matters, although, potentially, as reconceptualized.

Heidegger’s gesture towards this reconceptualization – purportedly pre-dating the digital age or possibly concomitant with its emergence – is particularly thought-provoking. In Heidegger’s thinking about thinking, there is a co-implication of the body designated by means of the hand, thought, and language. In Heidegger’s words,

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<sup>70</sup> *Google Earth*, main page, accessed January 20, 2011, <http://www.google.com/earth/index.html>.

<sup>71</sup> *Google Body*, main page, accessed January 20, 2011, <http://bodybrowser.googlelabs.com/>.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Gilles Deleuze invoking Proust; cited in Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>74</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, NY: Continuum Books, 2004), 260.

<sup>75</sup> Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, xiv.

thinking is “a craft, a ‘handicraft,’ and therefore has a special relationship to the hand;” in turn, “all the work of the hand is rooted in thinking.”<sup>76</sup> The craft of the hand is rich:

The hand does not only grasp and catch, or push and pull. The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes – and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hand of others. The hand holds. The hand carries. The hand designs and signs, presumably because man is a sign. [...] But the hand’s gestures run everywhere through language, in their most perfect purity precisely when man speaks of being silent. And only when man speaks, does he think.<sup>77</sup>

To extend Heidegger’s thought: the hand does not only indicate/point, but it also opens the body towards others in a gesture of offering that calls for others – in the gesture of the gift. This is certainly the case in Maxwell’s *Ode*, where the gesture of the pointing finger/revolver in the beginning recurs in the end, after “the Younger Woman known as Juny” is taken away during “the Great Hunt,” taken “into the sky to ride wild and forever.”<sup>78</sup> Made by the same Standing Man, the gesture this time takes the form of the open hand – the hand that lets go while silently calling for a return or a remaining. This gesture indeed marks “the present thickened with future, thickened forwards.”<sup>79</sup> In the elongated moment of its occurring, “the inside of a hand is *becoming* outside [...], where the hand turns the palm outwards, turns around and uncovers the inner.”<sup>80</sup>

This gesture of the hand’s turning of the palm outwards to reveal the inner – extended in time, as it is in the performance of *Ode* directed by Richard Maxwell – is touching: it has the potential to touch, to move. The responses of the audience in the living moment of the performance – sometimes in the form of a half-burst into laughter – testify to this. In effect, more generally speaking, performances written and directed by Richard Maxwell are rich in moments that have the potential to touch or move. One such moment in *Ode* precedes the moment of the open-hand gesture: it is the sharp (precise) gesture of The Waiting Woman’s closing of the eyes – a potential indication of her death on stage – a stage death strangely succeeded by yet another act of speaking produced by the Waiting Woman. What follows after this death is what Maxwell describes in italics as “*the briefest moment*” – “*a universe for the most forgotten page in an eon.*”<sup>81</sup> An accident, potentially.

Moments like this, when the performance becomes touching, are thought-provoking in Heidegger’s sense: they offer one (the one experiencing them) the gift of

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<sup>76</sup> Martin Heidegger, “What Calls for Thinking?,” in *Basic Writings: from Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*, by Martin Heidegger, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1977), 357.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, 357.

<sup>78</sup> Maxwell, *Ode*, 23.

<sup>79</sup> I here return to Albertsen’s formulation cited earlier; Albertsen, “The Artwork in the Semiosphere of Gestures. Wittgenstein, Gesture and Secondary Meaning,” 95.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, 95.

<sup>81</sup> Maxwell, *Ode*, 22.



the handiwork of thinking, for the handiwork of thinking is itself a gift.<sup>82</sup> Being a gift, it commits both the giver and the receiver of the gift. It gives “the chance for reflection, that is, also for *disassociation*.”<sup>83</sup> The extended moment of the gesture thus becomes the time for reflection.

Following Derrida, the time for reflection could be understood as follows:

The time for reflection is also the chance for turning back on the very conditions of reflection, in all senses of that word, as if with the help of a new optical device one could finally see sight, one could not only view the natural landscape, the city, the bridge and the abyss, but could view viewing. As if through an acoustical device one could hear hearing, in other words, seize the inaudible in a sort of poetic telephony. Then the time of reflection is also an other time, it is heterogeneous with what it reflects and perhaps gives time for what calls for and is called thought. [...] The chance for this event is the chance of an instant, an *Augenblick*, a “wink” or a “blink”, it takes place “in the twinkling of an eye,” I would rather say, “in the twilight of an eye” [...].<sup>84</sup>

To see sight, to view viewing, to hear hearing, is to see, view, and hear non-teleologically: that is, beyond any determinate (pre-determined) end. This seeing, viewing, hearing, are only possible in an indeterminate and indeterminable blink of the eye (*Augenblick*), “irruptive and unmotivated.”<sup>85</sup>

In the blink of the eye, the gesture of the open hand in Maxwell’s *Ode* can be said to mark an interruption in the performance, a pause, which will have overflowed in a prolonged moment of reflection. The gift of this moment of reflection, necessarily impossible possible, made possible by an economy of means without (determinate, pre-determined) ends, shows how Maxwell’s “deadpan” theatre with its “robotic, flat, deadpan, expressionless” acting style<sup>86</sup> “devoid of emotional affectation”<sup>87</sup> can succeed in touching and moving its audiences. It offers time for thought and emotion to temper one another in a moment of reflection, which is also a moment of not knowing, of indeterminacy.

This moment of reflection is lost time. It is time lived out of time with one’s self. But it is by no means wasted time, for it does make a difference, although – or precisely because – it is lived outside of, or beyond, the economy of means determined by determinate ends. This difference lies in that “anyone who reflects,” taking seriously

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<sup>82</sup> Heidegger, “What Calls for Thinking?,” 357.

<sup>83</sup> I here extrapolate Derrida’s formulation in “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils,” trans. Catherine Porter and Edward Morris, *Diacritics*, 13.3 (1983), 19.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, 123.

<sup>86</sup> Steve Moore, “Flicking the Switch: Toggling between the real and artificial with Richard Maxwell,” *The Austin Chronicle*, September 19, 2003, accessed January 5, 2011, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A178178>.

<sup>87</sup> Theron Schmidt, “Richard Maxwell and the Paradox of Theatre,” *Platform*, 3.1 (2008), 8, <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/dramaandtheatre/documents/pdf/platform/31/maxwell.pdf>.

indeterminacy in so doing, “is not continuing on as before.”<sup>88</sup> Yet, although one does not continue on as before, one continues on, nonetheless. And, perhaps, to continue on in spite of change (transformation, the event) is to endure. As the poem in Maxwell’s *Ode* goes:

*All sing:*  
Endure, dear, endure, endure, endure ...  
(Endure, dear, endure, dear,  
Darling, don’t be sure about it  
Endure, dear, endure dear, etc.)<sup>89</sup>

### **Postlude**

An accident happens in the blink of an eye, before (any)one knows it and without (any)one knowing it. Its temporality is that of the blink of an eye – of the paradoxical instant that tears time apart. This instant puts the one suffering through the accident out of time with one’s self. It calls into question the embodied subject’s capacity to be and not to be.

An accident functions as an interruption. It is an arresting of movement; it slows one down or stops one in one’s tracks. “I don’t know what has just happened;” “Why has this happened?;” “I don’t understand.” That’s what the one suffering through and surviving the accident thinks. An accident may offer the chance of reflection. To be able to move on, one must live the surprise of the accident in its full intensity and allow it to give rise to an experience of thought between the sensual and the reasonable/rational. One must re-gather one’s self and one’s world in a moment of decision. The ability to move on in spite of the interruption and rupture (a break, a shift, or a turning point, depending on circumstances) occurred is endurance.

Thinking the accident requires taking seriously its relation to technology and to the reason (“logos”) that grounds technology. It requires a reconceptualization of how the accident stands in relation to contingency and necessity. For, if Virilio is right, an accident is bound to happen, but it is bound to happen as possibility, at some point in the future that differs radically from the past and that remains forever indeterminable.

As it is commonly used, the term “accident” refers to a machine that malfunctions – that functions otherwise than expected but not necessarily otherwise than programmed – thus putting the bodies surrounding it at risk (of being broken). Yet, what happens when machines running on software malfunction? How are we to think about the accident in contexts of digitalization? How are we to think about the accident in the context of the recent reconceptualizations of the body and of the relation between the real and the virtual in the digital age?

In this essay, I have sought to gesture towards an answer to these questions by performing the accident. The relationship between the accident and performance is

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<sup>88</sup> Charles Larmore, *The Practices of the Self*, 84.

<sup>89</sup> Maxwell, *Ode*, 12.

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thought-provoking in the Heideggerian sense: it calls for thinking, it gives us to think.<sup>90</sup> It is thought-provoking in that the accident, just like death, is possible in the theatre only as impossible. A real accident, just like a real death, interrupts and disrupts the theatre and its world in its becoming. Then, how can an accident be performed without annulling it in its eventfulness? In this essay, I have sought to do so by displacement: through Richard Maxwell's *Ode to the Man who Kneels*. More specifically, I took the chance of reflecting on gesture as performance element in Maxwell's piece – particularly on the gesture of the pointing finger and of the open hand in *Ode*, perceived and experienced in the broader context of digitalization. These gestures – presentations of a mediation, that which in each expression remains without expression, undoing teleology – touched me, moved me. They put me in a state of mind and of being (out of time with myself) akin to that associated with the occurrence of an accident. By yet another displacement, the sound piece accompanying this essay gives aural expression to this experience.



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<sup>90</sup> Heidegger elaborates the notion of “the thought-provoking” in the section “What Calls for Thinking?” from the essay “What is Called Thinking,” in *Basic Writings: from Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*, by Martin Heidegger, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1977), 345.