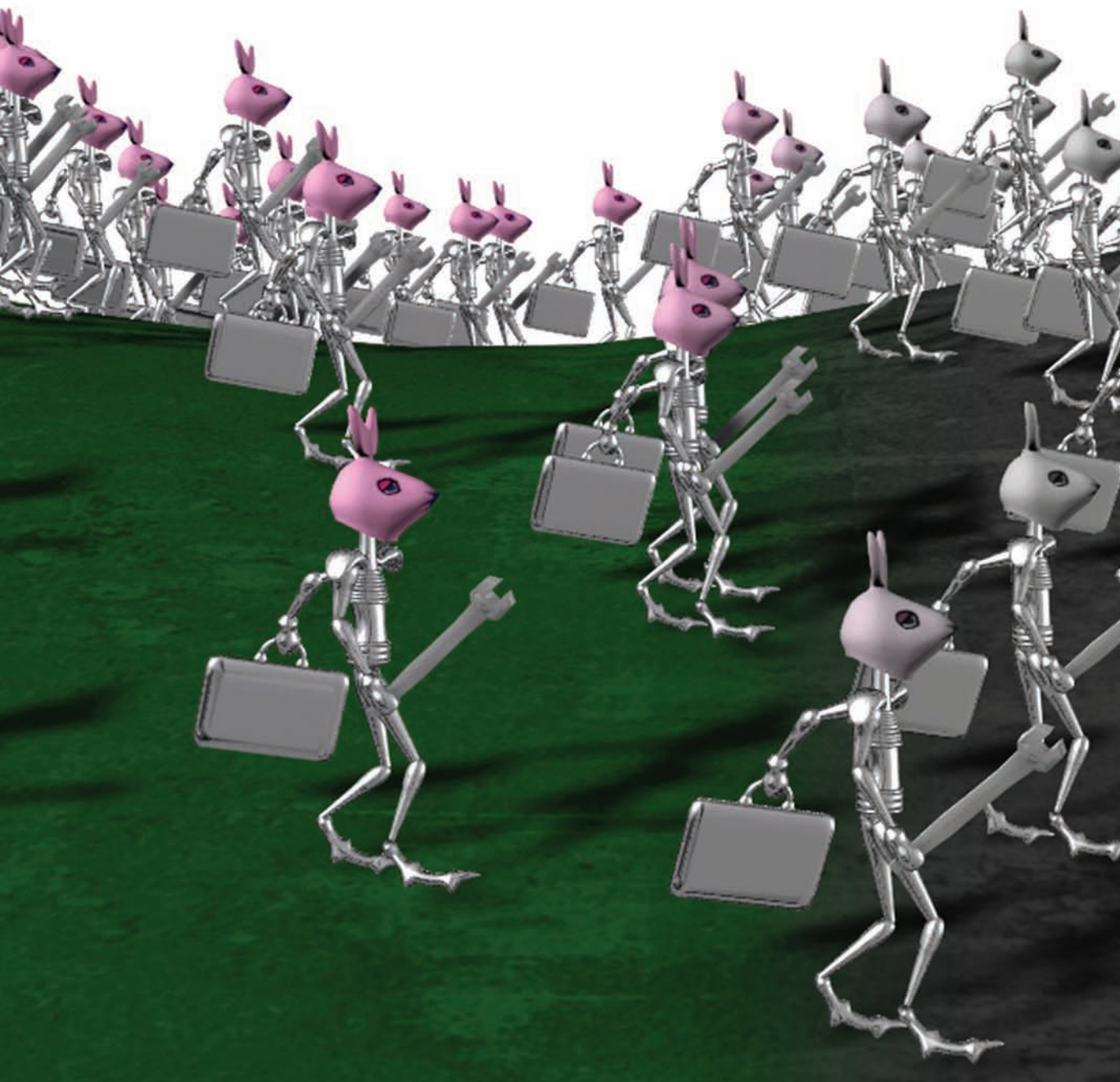
LIVE MOVIES

A Field Guide to New Media For the Performing Arts

edited by

Kirby Malone and Gail Scott White

Documenting Multimedia Performance Studio's New Stage Technology Project



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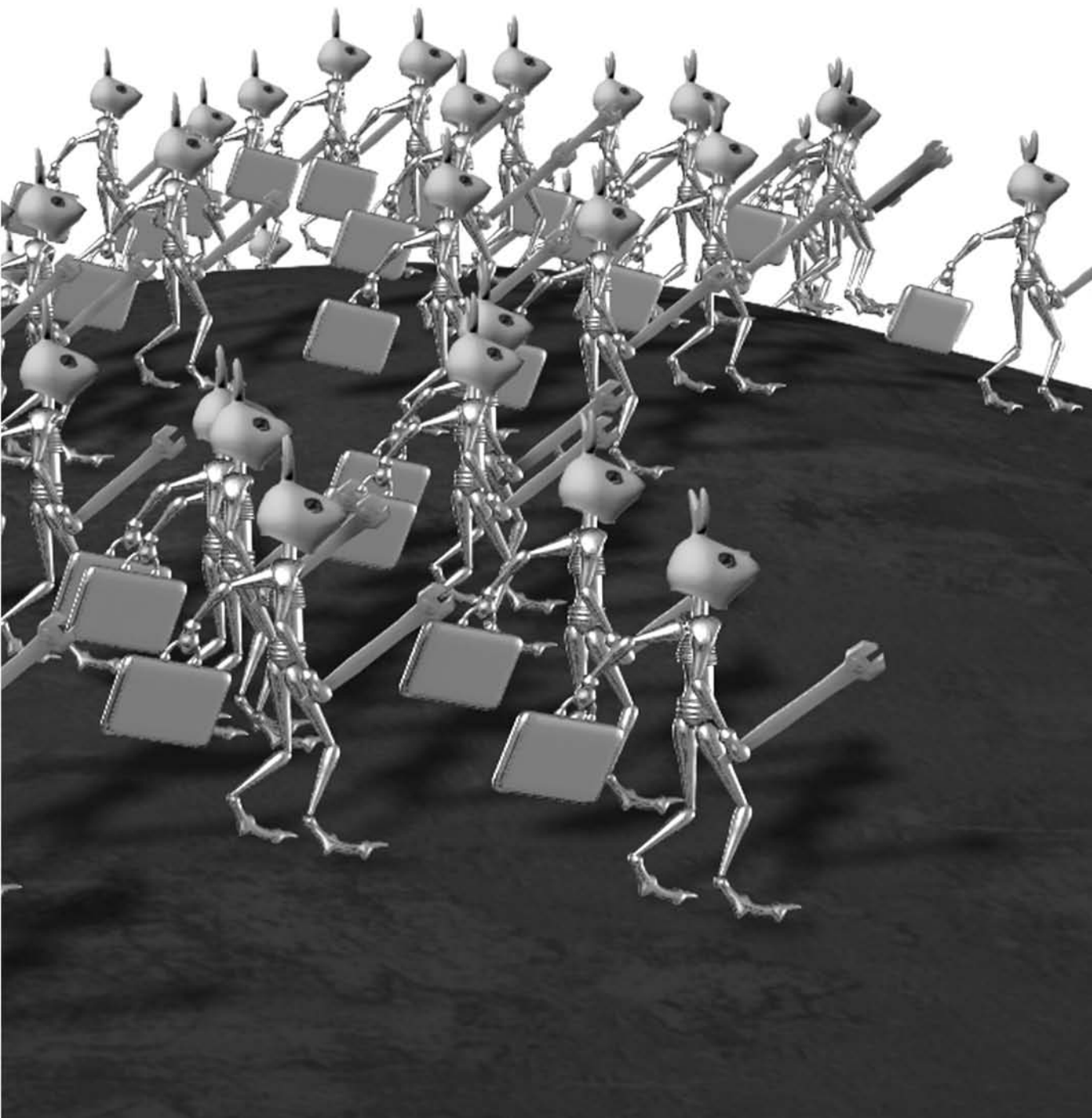

REVOLUTION

LIVE MOVIES

A Field Guide to New Media for the Performing Arts

edited by Kirby Malone and Gail Scott White

Documenting Multimedia Performance Studio's New Stage Technology Project

Multimedia Performance Studio

Department of Art and Visual Technology
College of Visual and Performing Arts

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

Nick Spanos (Lenin) in Komar & Melamid's *Naked Revolution*, MPS, 2001.

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40th Anniversary
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS
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To Lorraine Brown

with gratitude for her passionate preservation
of the heritage of the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspaper

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Photo: Ioulia Kouskova.

Joshua McCarthy (animatronic Thomas Alva Edison) with Alexander Graham Bell ventriloquist's dummy, MPS/Cyburbia's *Silence & Darkness*, 2004.

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Amelia Winger-Bearskin (Noxi), MPS/ Cyburbia's *Time Traveler Zero Zero*, 2004.

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LIVE MOVIES

A Field Guide to New Media for the Performing Arts

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling….

— Walter Benjamin (1936)

Photo: Ioulia Kouskova.

Mike Solo (John Titor), MPS/Cyburbia's *Time Traveler Zero Zero*, 2004.

INTRODUCTION

This book came into being to serve a range of purposes.

To chronicle four years of Multimedia Performance Studio's research into new media, the New Stage Technology Project (2001-2005).

To provide a service to the field of the performing arts, focusing particularly on how new media may be made available not only to large organizations but also to grassroots presenters, producers and performing arts ensembles.

To depict a historical and theoretical spectrum of the practices of projection design and multimedia performance.

To present an overview and documentation of MPS's productions, as records of one group of artists' research and exploration of the field.

•••

MPS creates original productions, often drawing on historical or science fiction sources; innovative stagings of opera and new music theater; multimedia scenography for theater, dance and performance art; and indoor and outdoor projection installations. Under the sponsorship of the Department of Art and Visual Technology, MPS artists work in the Mason Media Lab and the Harris Theatre at George Mason University, where they experiment with new and traditional stage technologies, and develop imaginative approaches to the integration of these technologies with the live action and music of theater. Making these works, threaded and laced with new media, is the equivalent of creating a play (or opera), a movie, and a CD album, all at the same time.

Photo: Ioulia Kouskova.

Kelly Wilson (Elektra) and Amelia Winger-Bearskin (Noxi), MPS/ Cyburbia's *Time Traveler Zero Zero*, 2004.

Live Movies is constructed as *a* field guide to new media for the performing arts, not *the* guide. It is *for* the performing arts, both the artists and producers, and the disciplines, theater, opera, music theater, performance art, dance, dance theater, music concerts and puppetry (all divided from each other by the Industrial Revolution, according to Jacques Attali). It is also intended to prove useful to artists and organizations who create architectural installations, exhibitions, films, pageants, spectacles and any number of other projects which rely on, and are exploring, new media. This book is also addressed to the general reader who is curious about the interplay among humans, machines, information systems and culture(s).

•••

Cinematic and visual "literacy" have prepared today's audience for new forms of narrative and stage design. This field guide is intended as a resource to the field(s) of the performing arts, new and traditional, for both experienced experimenters and for those just beginning to work with multimedia technologies, and most particularly those who work with a modest, limited budget.

•••

By "new media," in MPS, we mean primarily digital projection and sound design; the term also can refer to breakthroughs in, and explorations of, new technologies in lighting, visual displays, automated kinetic scenery, animatronics and more being dreamed up even as you read this. Many of which we have explored, or are exploring, to a range of degrees. And of course it all revolves about the computer…

•••

This book is conceived as a record of (a) work in progress, and is presented as a series of voices and opinions as starting points for, or picking up in mid-sentence with, discussions and speculations in the broad field of performing artists oriented toward new media, and an interdisciplinary, multimedia sensibility. It is also a work in progress in that the material presented here (along with film and sound clips, additional still images, and an expanded bibliography) will be available online at a Live Movies web site <www.avt.gmu.edu/mps>.

(Also see <www.cyburbiaproductions.com/books> for a cyber-culture bibliography/filmography.)

Multimedia Multimedia: A Note on Terminology

In the 1970s and '80s (and even in the '60s), "multimedia" designated performance works that featured some combination of slides, film, video, music, sound, puppetry, light shows, overhead projectors, filmstrips, etc., in conjunction with live performers.

In the '90s the term "multimedia" was co-opted, one might say, by the corporate world, used by Microsoft, Adobe and others to describe "suites" of digital "applications," thus thereby hijacking the term from the purer meaning it once had. (Still, we've chosen at MPS to use the term.)

Perhaps a more useful "contemporary" term is "new media," useful in some ways, but best summed up simply in the title of the collection Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree edited, *New Media 1740-1915*, which just about says it all: it is important in making cinematic theater, live movies, that artists transcend technological fetishism, realize that "new media" are always arriving, and focus on the content, the meaning(s), of the work they do. This may be a way to build a theater of the future, synthesizing theater, cinema and music for a profoundly different kind of audience.

A similar terminological quandary exists for designers: are we projection designers, or multimedia designers? The former can prove unproductively ephemeral (you're providing pictures that move in the air, and then are gone), and the latter is fraught with the corporate-ness cited above. The former focuses on the act, not the process; the latter connotes a fuller picture of the complexity required to pull a live movie off.

Given the considerations above, what we artists, who are embracing technology (more or less) ambivalently in the performing arts, are creating is *multimedia multimedia*. We intertwine the curious interdisciplinarity of the earlier sense of the word, with employing and exploring the new tools cooked up for us by audio-visually inclined engineers and corporations.

For the purposes of this book, we have chosen not to select which terms to use, or exclude, but have left them as each of the writers conceive of, and use, them. This polyvocal process of mutating and transforming language is good for us, and encourages us to try to understand and envision, as exactly as possible, what we might mean, as both artists/writers, and as citizens.

Finally, you say *theatre*, I say *theater*…rather than engage in the debate over which means what, we have retained the spellings as we received them, in both new essays and historical sources, and have not subjected these writers to an editorial uniformity.