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## Viral Theatres' Pandemic Playbook - Documenting German theatre during COVID-19

Ramona Mosse<sup>a</sup>, Janina Janke<sup>b</sup>, Judith König<sup>c</sup>, Christian Stein<sup>d</sup> and Nina Tecklenburg<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Viral Theatres Project, EXC2020 Temporal Communities, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany;

<sup>b</sup>Independent, Berlin, Germany; <sup>c</sup>Freie Universität Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany;

<sup>d</sup>Humboldt University of Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany; <sup>e</sup>Bard College Berlin, Berlin, Germany

### ABSTRACT

This document offers an overview of the artistic research project Viral Theatres, which documents the radical changes in theatre aesthetics and infrastructure during the Covid-19 pandemic by building an online multimedia living archive that tracks these developments in interviews, video documentaries, rehearsal residencies, and case studies. Through a survey of five exemplary case studies we show how significantly the tools and practices of theatre have shifted during the pandemic and suggest that these examples belong to a reconceptualization of the idea of theatre *per se*. In creating an online Living Archive platform that makes these and other case studies and pandemic material accessible, Viral Theatres contributes to creative documentation of pandemic culture.

### KEYWORDS

Pandemic archiving; digital liveness; VR theatres; digital collaboration; participation

## Introduction

With the COVID-19 pandemic, theatres globally have gone viral in more than one sense. They have been affected like no other by an airborne virus that has made the gathering of bodies in a shared space impossible. Yet from behind their closed doors, theatres have found a wide variety of alternative ways to connect with their audiences during lockdown: whether through social media apps, Zoom, or VR, theatres have used digital virality to substitute for the shared encounter in the auditorium. For viral theatres are both: theatres very literally affected by the COVID-19 virus and engaged in reframing the metaphor of contagion that is inscribed into reception theories of theatre from Aristoteles' notion of catharsis to Artaud's theatre as the plague (see also Felton-Dansky 2018). The COVID-crisis has shown more generally that our established theoretical vocabulary for understanding theatrical performance has become insufficient for addressing the current situation of remote performance, social distancing and digital forms of engagement. This is

**CONTACT** Ramona Mosse  [r.mosse@fu-berlin.de](mailto:r.mosse@fu-berlin.de)  Freie Universität Berlin, Grunewaldstr. 35, 12165, Berlin, Germany

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not to deny a complex pre-pandemic history of digital performance, as Steven Dixon has developed it (2007, 37–45). And yet, the established privileging of embodiment and co-presence (Phelan 1993; Fischer-Lichte 2008) as the core of theatre cannot hold up in the face of the proliferating digital theatres during the pandemic. In turn, even Philip Auslander's own expansion of his media-historical approach to liveness (1999) with an essay on digital liveness that he defines as based in a temporal and decentred experience of liveness might need further revision (2012, 6). Heidi Liedke and Monika Pietrzak-Franger conclude that viral theatre is disruptive and 'makes it possible to inspect and rethink the 'essence' of theatre – its liveness – and the way it engages with the spectator' (2021, 130). The multiple versions of digital theatres currently being produced raise the question of digital liveness, participation and, indeed, archiving. Preliminarily, we would like to suggest that participation – or what Auslander explores as 'being connected to other people' (2012, 6) – appears to trump liveness and may replace the term more lastingly.

In the following, we provide a survey of our own process of documenting the conceptual, aesthetic and infrastructural shifts specific to the German theatre scene during the pandemic lockdowns in 2020/2021. In doing so, creative forms of documentation lie at the heart of our research project *Viral Theatres*,<sup>1</sup> a collaboration between five scholars, artists and scholar/artists in Berlin since March 2021. *Viral Theatres* uses a practice-based approach to create a digital living archive of the pandemic, made up of three streams of documents:

1. Research residencies at select Berlin theatres during lockdown, shadowing rehearsals for digital/hybrid productions and conducting extensive artist interviews in Germany and internationally, producing audio and video case studies of exemplary productions/initiatives.
2. A digital multi-media survey of the German audience's shifting theatre experiences during the pandemic to expand the underrepresented dimension of audience documentation.
3. Student contributions to the Living Archive as part of an undergraduate collaborative network course on Digital Theatres with cohorts in six campuses of the Open Society University Network. Participating institutions: Bard College Annandale, Bard College Berlin, Birkbeck University of London, Central European University Vienna, Universidad de Los Andes Bogotá and Witswatersrand University Johannesburg.

The various documents are being stored in a digital living archive that we are currently building and that also will be showcased in the form of a creative and participatory performance installation in April 2022 at the Tieranatomisches Theater Exhibition Space in Berlin. Here, the display of what we have collected and the generation of further material for the archive with the help of the attending installation audiences go hand in hand. We thus define the 'living' nature of the archive through its interactive, open-ended and looped construction, in which collection and contribution coalesce in the act of performance, drawing on Matthew Reason's 'audiencing' as a way of privileging audience experience as an exchange with and extension of the performance (2019, 100). These looped versions of archiving as a more random and participatory exercise also evoke what John Hartley has termed 'the probability archive', enabled by the automatic self-

documenting function of digital media (2013; 74) and what, Diana Taylor has conversely considered to be the appropriation of the concept of archive by the digital (in Bay Cheng 2016, 510).

With the pandemic, the interest in and need for archives has surged even further. Viral Theatres' Living Archive thus picks up on this increase in creative documentation projects that have emerged globally in response to the pandemic, particularly during the first lockdown, beginning in March 2020. Examples range from individual artists self-documenting their pandemic experience (e.g. Joshua Gelb's Theater in Quarantine, performing in his Lower East Side closet), to theatres/collectives tracking creative responses (e.g. the international Decameron Row- project, the Brick Theatre's *Out of Abundance of Caution-Series*). Sometimes formulated as chain letters of artistic creation or collaborative prompts to connect cultural makers across the globe, these projects of collecting across geographies also resonate with the model of contagion and virality in performance. Performative interventions proliferate to reflect the shared experience of living in the altered social reality of the pandemic. In *Viral Performance*, Miriam Felton-Dansky has traced the growing engagement with forms of social transmission a set of viral dramaturgies based in forms of participation: 'Viral performance thus represents, at once, a kind of limit case for audience participation, and a broader, conceptual dramaturgy' (2018, 33) that interlink art, the public sphere, and digital media. Felton-Dansky's pre-pandemic study of social virality gains further relevance in the pandemic and is useful to read alongside the surge in archiving activities.

In the following, our collaborative paper takes the form of a survey of examples to document how the different elements that constitute theatre – rehearsal work, performance event, and audience experience – have become reframed digitally during the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. We alternately draw on examples from our own practice and research across the German state and independent theatre scene. In offering these different perspectives, we want to underline the diverse developments across the theatrical landscape from state theatres and the independent scene to university-based projects. At the same time, we acknowledge the unique situation of the heavily subsidised German theatre system, which during the Corona crisis was further supported by the large-scale *Neustart Kultur* (A New Start for Culture) rescue programme with 2 billion Euros.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the German government in the summer of 2021 added a further 2.5 billion financial package to reboot the running of cultural events. On the one hand, this has made possible the ongoing work in state theatres behind closed doors with staff continuing to be on payroll, able to produce new productions via livestream (and mostly available for free or a voluntary fee) and thus moving beyond only streaming archival material. In fact, the annual *Theatertreffen* – the renowned festival of the ten most exciting German language theatre productions of a given year – ran itself online in 2020 and 2021 and included diverse livestream-only productions such as Sebastian Hartmann's adaptation of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (Deutsches Theater Berlin) and Gob Squad's *Show Me a Good Time* (co-produced by HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin/LA Jolla Playhouse, San Diego). The extensive funds for individual independent theatre makers experimenting with digital theatre formats also supported a boost of 'transformation projects', i.e. existing analog performances that were translated into the digital sphere, such as Turbo Pascal's *Unterscheidet Euch* that we are exploring in more detail below. Such transformation processes also worked in the opposite direction: while 2020 and early 2021

transferred analog into digital formats, there is an increasing push for digital work to be transformed into further hybrid formats that can be performed on the German stages that have largely reopened for the 2021/22 season (e.g. Anna Fries and Malu Peeters digital essay *The Host* in its transfer to the VR performance *Virtual Wombs* at the HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin). These further ventures into hybrid performance are sure to be an expanding field in the development of future performance practices.

But for now, let's open with what we would like to call a Pandemic Playbook in five Scenes.

### **Pandemic Playbook 1: the role of the camera in livestreams**

The most common form of digital theatre is that of the livestream; it is one that predates the COVID-19 pandemic and can be roughly divided into two different branches. On the one hand, live-streaming has provided audience development and additional revenue streams for large renowned performing arts institutions with offerings such as the Live-in-HD-series of the National Theatre in London or the Metropolitan Opera in New York City as some of the earliest adaptors. These livestreamed performance largely use conventional camera aesthetics to provide a largely cohesive experience of the performance event. On the other hand, camera work has played an important role on stage in the work of experimental theatre directors (particularly in the German context) who use it to reflect on the intermedial conditions of contemporary theatre, most prominently in the work of Katie Mitchell, Frank Castorf, or René Pollesch. Here, the camera as a dominant form of cultural mediation is exposed in its workings, potential and shortfalls. In short, the theatrical stage provides a platform for investigating other media. Yet, the COVID-19 crisis has shifted the experimentation with live-streaming and camera work further in yet another move beyond filming a stage action.

Some prolific and original work of live-streaming in the German context has come from the Deutsches Theater Berlin, which has taken the idea of the digital livestreams to a more complex aesthetic level. An exemplary production of the DT's youth theatre (Junges DT) may serve to illustrate this innovative approach. As part of a research residency with the Junges DT, I was invited in April 2021 to join the rehearsals for *Selbstvergessen* (*Self-forgotten*), directed by Gernot Grunewald. The production explores the question of memory, using the personal research of six children and teenagers about their grandparents who all were suffering from dementia. The fragmented memories of the grandparents contrast the emerging life plans of the children in a production that traces the interminability of personal identity. *Selbstvergessen* captures how to become or cease to be oneself; likewise the focus on the very young and the elderly as particularly vulnerable resonated poignantly during the pandemic.

Originally planned as a analog performance in the small black box theatre of the Deutsches Theater, the ongoing pandemic and second round of theatre closures in Germany (November 2020 and until Summer 2021) created the need for adaptation: after in-person selection workshops, the production began rehearsing on Zoom in February and March before returning to in person-rehearsals. Ultimately, the creative team opted for a livestream-only performance with no access to a subsequently available on-demand version. The entire artistic process of this production thus turned into an

ongoing renegotiation of spaces: from Zoom to the black box and back into the livestream.

The core question that Grünewald and his artistic team had to tackle was the role of the camera itself. As Grünewald explained to me in an interview:

And that was a peculiar difficulty: what is this camera? Does it observe? This is what we know from the context of film: the camera as a neutral observer. Or do I address the camera? That would be rather unusual in film. [...] All in all, it was an interesting process of adaptation, since it implied a different set of rules. There are rules for the stage, there are rules for Zoom, and there are also rules for a live film or livestream - and they all differ (Grünewald 2021).<sup>3</sup>

In practice, the set of rules that Grünewald and the team at the Deutsches Theater developed for the performance centred around the necessity of giving up a cohesive experience of a theatrical stage. In order to create a sense of theatrical liveness and immediacy with the children performing, the theatre space itself had to be given up first. The camera was no longer a framing device that offered an audience perspective onto a black box stage but instead became another player in the space, always in intense proximity to the performing children. The young performers addressed the camera at various points throughout the performance, at times so close that their noses almost touched the lens (Figure 1).

The stage space itself was visually rendered through two mobile and one static camera (the latter run and manipulated by the children themselves for monologues and close-ups), edited live during the performance by the video artist Thomas Taube in dialogue with the director Grünewald. That is to say, the stage itself broke apart into little islands on which the children performed – there was no apparent relationship between



**Figure 1.** The performer Lasse Kühlcke addressing the camera in *Selbstvergessen* (April 2021); image: Adeeb Hadi.



**Figure 2.** The playing space with cameras and glass panes at the DT Box. Image: Adeeb Hadi.

these spaces. Instead they seemed to layer on top of each other much like an internal stream of memories would, picking up on the theme of *Selbstvergessen*. In addition, the production used a highly versatile set of six large movable smudged glass panes, able to create ever different spaces for the young players to set themselves up in, while also doubling as projection devices for showing personal photographs of the grandparents, for example (Figure 2).

The live-stream thus played with a collage of dispersed spaces that rendered a unique visual experience but which at the same time never came together into a single space that we could reconstruct as a specific theatre. This is particularly striking since the staging of theatrical space and in particular of the auditorium has featured so prominently in pandemic livestreams. The Old Vic 'In Camera'-Series consistently used the view into the auditorium from upstage as the 'set' for each of their livestreamed productions. Similarly, the Vienna Burgtheater's streamed version of *To Be a Machine* (Dead Centre) or Gob Squad's *Show Me a Good Time* all explicitly mark empty auditoriums and specific theatre locations in their filmic dramaturgies.

Overall, Grünewald's set of camera rules managed to create a liveness effect. It did so: 1. by placing the audience virtually in the midst of the players in uniquely intimate scenes; 2. by repeatedly offering glimpses of the off-stage areas, including discarded props from earlier scenes that are apparently not intentionally placed or part of the narrative world. In doing so, the audience gains the immediacy of a shared now beyond filmic realism. Instead, the livestream visually remains a palimpsest of frames that resist any established aesthetics of either theatre or film (Figure 3).

Ultimately, *Selbstvergessen* reiterates a technique that the Deutsches Theater had already developed with the earlier livestream production of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (November 2020), directed by Sebastian Hartmann and invited to the Theatertreffen in 2021. In the online post-show talk (May 22, 2021) Hartmann had explained that the camera gained a new status in his theatre production: it was no longer, as in other



**Figure 3.** The director Gernot Grünewald in front of the auditorium of the DT Box, transformed into a tech and video editing space for *Selbstvergessen*. Image: Adeeb Hadi.

intermedial theatre productions on stage, an alienation effect allowing us to reflect on the status of live theatrical performance. Much rather: the camera was the medium through which liveness now had to be rendered. Both Hartmann and Grünewald employed a method of inversion: where Grünewald showed left-over balloons from a previous scene or clothes piles of the actors on the sidelines, Hartmann would suddenly shift the camera, so that the DT's main-stage auditorium became visible as a backdrop, making us aware as audiences of where we are not: in the theatre. The conventions and traces of theatrical space and production, rather than the camera, now provide the authenticating liveness effect. The digital livestream work at the Deutsches Theater thus offers a glimpse at a new genre still in the making.

### **Pandemic Playbook 2: adapting collaborative practices during the Pandemic – Janina Janke**

Liveness is not exclusively an aspect of the performance event alone. The entire process of collective practice and devising work is fuelled by the live encounter and has hence become difficult in times of the pandemic with its accompanying lockdowns. I have experienced this firsthand as a member of the performance collective Turbo Pascal.<sup>4</sup> Turbo Pascal is an independent theatre collective known for its participatory performance formats that allow the performers to interact with the audience and the audience to interact among themselves. This process of facilitation and communication is extremely

sensitive and forms the core of the performance. Through the forced shift into the distance and/or digital sphere, the collective was not able to continue with its well attuned collaborative working methods, which have been perfected over the years. Meeting in a rehearsal room, thinking, creating, and improvising together for several hours a day has rarely been possible during lockdown. Both the risk of contagion and closed childcare facilities and schools made our usual encounters impossible. The lockdown pushed half of our team into home-schooling and care-work. We lacked time for artistic creation and rehearsals. With the pandemic our group shifted from 8 h physical rehearsals to 4 h digital meetings.

At first, the transition into the digital space appeared easy, maybe due to the team's long and proven experience in cooperation and communication. I even appreciated the concentrated atmosphere of the online-meetings. We logged in every morning and started right away with rehearsal, listening to research-inputs, reading articles and watching videos together. On Zoom, we started to devise the performance concept, discussing and improvising. After several months of work, I can say that talking and thinking together in the digital space is simple. Yet, the step into practice – into the creation and approval of a scenic concept – turns out to be more difficult. Strikingly, this has nothing to do with whether the format of the final performance is digital or physical. Over the course of the pandemic, Turbo Pascal has developed performances in both. Still, for our group, physical co-presence seems to be critical to entering into collective practice and creating a workflow.

In practice, this need for co-presence led to a grotesque scenario. We met in a draughty rehearsal space, sat at a distance in front of our computers, wore headsets, face-masks, and winter coats to run hybrid rehearsals on site for a digital performance. Meeting live and physically even when rehearsing for a digital performance made it easier to react, to read the moods of the other team members and thereby to find compromises and come to decisions. I am unable to rationally explain this need for liveness and co-presence during rehearsals, perhaps it has biological reasons or it simply has to do with habituation. But I can confirm that these impediments to our collective work process – limited rehearsal time and the lack of physical collective practice – resulted in extended rehearsal periods and the accompanying postponements of premiere dates.

In early 2021, our Turbo Pascal collective developed an interactive zoom-performance, the premiere of which had to be postponed from May to August 2021. This production was hosted by the Sophiensaele, a renowned off-theatre space in Berlin. It addresses the power of class and classism in German society, which is a pressing topic particularly in the pandemic that has highlighted forms of social precarity in a glaring light. This sense of precarity goes beyond people working in the cultural sector, who have been hit hard by the pandemic-related bans on events and performances. It applies above all to low income contexts, in which people are forced to live and work together in confined spaces and for whom basic digital equipment for home-schooling and home-office is not a matter of course. They are not only exposed to higher risks of contagion but also lack private retreats. Their children miss the support and equipment for distance learning and thus often cannot keep up with the school material. Meanwhile, large corporations such as online retailers, streaming services, etc. are profiting from the digital shifts during the pandemic. The pandemic thus further deepens the gap between rich and poor. Strikingly, however, our preliminary research showed that most people you ask

count themselves into the middle class (see Dröscher 2018; Friedrichs 2021) while what constitutes the concept of middle class remains undefined and blurry (economics, education, up-bringing, social norms and values). This is the starting point for Turbo Pascal's performance 'Irgendwie Mitte' (*Sort of the middle*; a play on words with Mitte denoting both middle class and the central neighbourhood in Berlin popular with creative professionals). Starting from our own biographies, the collective examines what this middle actually consists of and who belongs to it. How do we show our social affiliation and where are the dividing lines between the people we know? For the realisation of the performance, Turbo Pascal chose the format of a digital series, a 'Zoom-Com' (Figure 4).

In four episodes, the audience both watch the collective's personal explorations of the topic and participate themselves in interactive segments that allow audience members to reflect on their own social background and economic situation. Over the course of the four-part series, guests (family members, work colleagues, friends) join the Zoom.com to tell their stories, thus adding further perspectives on what it means to be middle class today.

In its exploration of social and economic class, the performance *Irgendwie Mitte* is a continuation of themes raised in our previous production 'Unterscheidet Euch!' (Distinguish Yourself) that Turbo Pascal performed in an original analog version in 2019 at the children's and youth theatre Theater an der Parkaue, Berlin. For various festival invitations in 2021, *Unterscheidet Euch* had to be reconceived in a digital format. The crucial and important challenge for our collective lay in translating the participatory nature of the performance onto a digital platform. In practice, this meant transforming the active mingling of the audience in the theatre space into a lively and active digital exchange. With the constraints of the pandemic, Turbo Pascal had to choose between digital platforms in order to adapt their interactive processes and ways of communicating with the audience effectively. Ultimately, the team opted for a performance on Zoom, since it offers the widest range of accessibility and interaction for many users based on our research.



Figure 4. Turbo Pascal's *Irgendwie Mitte* Zoom-Com (August 2021). Image: Daniela Del Polmar.



**Figure 5.** The performers Margret Schütz and Angela Löer during *Irgendwie Mitte*, talking to one of their guests. Image: Daniela del Polmar.

Despite the general familiarity of Zoom, its interactive tools and user features require explanation to the audience before the show. Thus, the online-shows always start with a technical tutorial as a first communication. One performer is spotlighted and explains the settings and features.

In preparation of the performance, the collective developed a strict dramaturgy to steer audience interaction. The whole performance is organised into alternating sites of communication: opening up such possibilities and limiting them again. The script clearly marks the moments in which the audience is allowed to use the chat, when mics are muted or when the audience is asked to turn them on again, when cameras need to be turned off and when the audience is asked to become visible again or change into gallery view and so forth. Sometimes the performers give direct instructions, sometimes our dedicated Zoom host orchestrates the Zoom stage from behind the scene. By orchestrating the responses of the audience, the participants of the performance become aware of each other in various constellations, either as individuals or as a group. Breakout-rooms are opened for one-on-one encounters and group conversations; the audience is also invited to use the chat for responding to questions when prompted or to comment more generally throughout the performance. Intermittently, they are asked to turn the camera on/off or provide hand gestures in voting situations, and sometimes polling apps like mentimeter are integrated. One of the simplest and most productive Zoom features we have been using is to actively use the 'renaming'-function of the individual zoom boxes as a playful tool to reframe one's identity during the performance. For *Irgendwie Mitte*, audience members were asked, for example, to re-name themselves according to their parents' profession, turning the audience into an array of groups, including 'lawyer's daughter,' 'Teacher's child,' or 'Baker's son.' By coordinating the use of

these features, Turbo Pascal invites the audience to associate, differentiate, and observe one another. At the same time, the anonymity that comes with such acts of renaming actually enables a more open discussion with strangers about the loaded topic of social class. Overall, Turbo Pascal's performance of *Irgendwie Mitte* and *Unterscheidet Euch!* allow the audience to experience how groups become constituted, to divide into differing camps, and to opt in or out of certain group constellations. The use of the discussed Zoom features successfully shaped this experience and was able to transfer collaborative engagements with the audience into the digital space (Figure 5). Through these playful acts of participation and communication, a temporary community becomes constituted. However, at the end of our digital performance, you leave the Zoom meeting by pressing a single button and are thrown back onto yourself: at home and usually alone. The abruptness of this final gesture continues to leave me with a sense of implosion.

### **Pandemic Playbook 3: staging audience participation – Nina Tecklenburg**

Creating theatre and performance art digitally has become an enriching playground especially for those theatre artists who have long been experimenting with participatory formats, immersive set-ups or interactive game elements such as my own performance company Interrobang,<sup>5</sup> which I have been running together with Till Müller-Klug and Lajos Talamonti for a decade. Rather than using the computer, tablet, or smartphone primarily as a screen for 'watching a play', performance practitioners that draw on gaming and participation invite their audiences to use their digital devices as interactive and communicative tools for social encounters. In other words: they turn large parts of our digital everyday social lives into theatre art, thereby testing and challenging general dynamics and mechanisms of what it means to be social digitally. With this playbook entry I aim to provide insight into the work of Interrobang and other theatre makers in order to give some examples of how we stage the audience and digital social interaction. I want to show how contemporary theatre makers literally play with different modes of digital interaction whilst raising questions about new forms of digital participation in general. But let me start with some pre-pandemic remarks on the audience's part in our performance projects.

The audience has always been at the centre of Interrobang's work. For our projects we create what we call 'systems' that enable the audience to interact with each other, with performers or with machines such as telephone operators, AIs, chat bots, and so forth. This increased level of participation allows the audience to 'live through' the respective thematic foci of our projects. However, rather than a self-contained immersive experience, we aim to enable self-reflexive moments, in which the audience can distance themselves from the participatory set-up they are part of. Our pieces confront the audience with the consequences of their own actions – always in a playful way and within the frameworks of our 'systems'. We call this kind of participation *critical immersion*.

In terms of theatre history, this approach is rooted in Bertolt Brecht's learning play and practices of Augusto Boal's Forum theatre. However, our focus on this particular kind of participation happens against the backdrop of an increasingly digitised life that is marked by interaction, participation, simultaneity and immersion. These concepts add another crucial layer to our theatre experiments: In a significant number of our works we have made use and/or explicitly dealt with participatory tools from our digital

everyday life, such as commenting, voting, posting, polling, liking/disliking, chatting, assessing, multiple-choice, etc. We have always been extremely interested in the question to what extent these specific tools of interactions and communication, used in digital environments and social media, both restrict and enable new forms of the social and how they alter known concepts of encounter, participation and community. In pre-pandemic times *the analog theatre space* in audiences meet in person had served us as a critical set-up for questioning the structures of digital communication and interaction. The analogue space of physical encounter was our 'V-Effekt' (alienation effect) that enabled us to reflect on communicative and social mechanisms of the digital.

When theatres had to shut down and our usual ways of theatre making were inevitably brought to a standstill we felt – surprisingly and somewhat ironically – inspired to further explore questions around digitality, participation, (theatrical) community and new formats of theatre and performance-making. Something had been amplified and pushed to our consciousness which had for long been on our agenda. Being forced to produce theatre works in which audiences, still in the centre of our works, join and interact remotely, seemed both challenging and promising. By going digital we basically turned our approach upside down. *Instead of questioning digital formats and practices through their translation back into the analog forum of the theatre, we started to implement 'theater-like' tools and approaches into the digital realm*, thereby asking questions such as: what is the theatrical potential of certain social media such as *zoom* or *twitch*? How far can we consider these platforms (digital) stages? What kinds of interaction do they allow us to perform? And to go further: What are the politics behind specific platforms and how can we make those visible?

For our piece *Familiodrome* we used Zoom as the basic platform and, in addition to zoom's interactive possibilities, we extended the programme by integrated polling tools that the online audience would be able to navigate via a website on their smartphones (Figure 6). *Familiodrome* deals with the audience's ideals of education. Inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's humanistic classic 'Emile, or On Education' from 1762 – a mix of novel, philosophical treatment and counselling literature of the Enlightenment, which draws up a fictional upbringing of a likewise fictional male child named Emil – we asked the audience to become a collective of online parents that raise their ideal child, revealing and negotiating their fundamental moral principles and hopes for a future in the process. At crucial points in the story, which is delivered by two performers, the online-audience can vote on a range of sometimes precarious topics (choice of school; daily chores; potential influencer career of their teenager etc.), intervene by giving personal statements into their cameras, or discuss crucial issues in the chat, thereby feeding back into the partially improvised story and thus influencing the development of their common child. In *Familiodrome* we extended the communicative space of zoom into a collective storytelling space in which a highly fictional story is shaped by factual material. In consequence, the plot becomes less about a common child than about the audience. We originally planned this performance to happen in a face-to-face theatre space. Designing and realising this piece in a digital environment raised the new medial conditions and their technical possibilities automatically as an additional topic: in almost every performance audiences brought up the issue of data collection, data analysis, or data protection. Interrobang touched on this topic only at the very end, thereby re-framing the performance retrospectively: the performance ends with

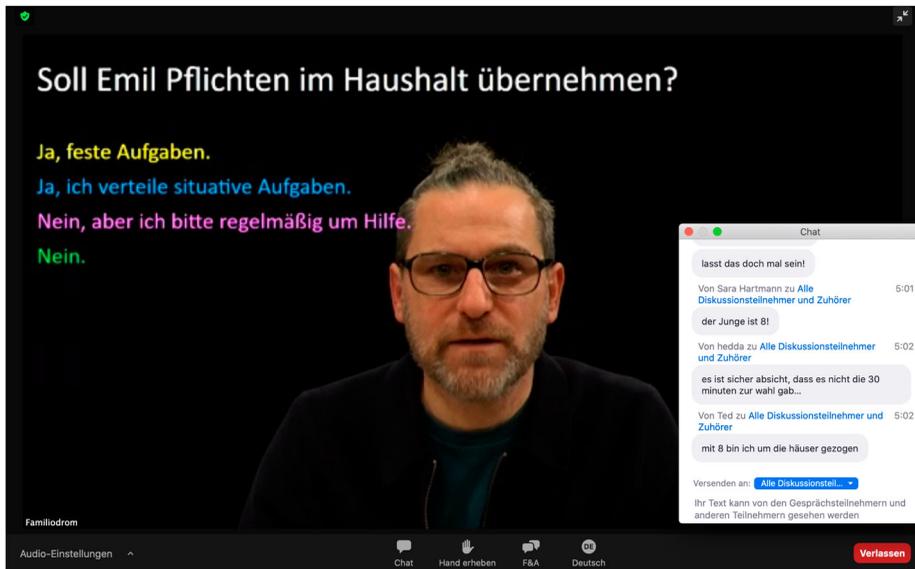


**Figure 6.** Interrobang: *Familiodrome*, photo: Interrobang. Image shows how decision-making processes were integrated into the performance: while the actor narrates the fictive life story of Emil, various questions/decisions pop up for the virtual parent collective. The overlaid polling options and a diagram of polling results show how the audience of virtual parents divides in their decision-making processes. Translation from screen: *Question: What speaks for choosing the state school for Emil? Option 1: Emil experiences a socially heterogeneous reality. Option 2: Short way to school, no costs, friends close-by. Option 3: What speaks against this choice: I want to intervene by raising my hand in Zoom.*

the (still fictitious) claim that *Familiodrome* serves as a series of test runs for the development of future AI-controlled education (Figures 6 and 7).

As experts in creating social encounters Interrobang and many other performance makers from the field of participatory performance, game theatre, and immersive theatre practice have started to ‘theatricalize’ online platforms whilst foregrounding their community-building (or community-excluding) effects *beyond* geographical and physical limitations. The latter is fairly new for most theatre makers whose fields of action have mostly been limited to analog spaces. In consequence, these new combinations of theatre and digital media, which have emerged since spring 2020, allow us to critically engage with social media and their inherent politics of digital participation. They also force us to reconsider our general understanding of what theatre is or can be. These latest theatre experiments expand and challenge our common idea of theatrical co-presence and the parameters of the live encounter: instead of a physical co-presence they stress a virtual co-presence. They do so by staging familiar ‘claims’ of liveness (Auslander 2012, 10) whilst encouraging the audience to become visible to each other (switching cameras on in zoom), to become readable (encouraging them to chat, embedding the chat into the action, turning the chat into the main act), or to become audible (e.g. by making a comment, singing a song etc.). These staged moments of the audience’s presence authenticate the sometimes magic-like virtual encounters across the globe *as live moments*, and they emphasise the direct impact people have on the digital stage’s action.

The ability of digital social media in particular, to create a sense of closeness and community across spatial distances, became highly significant in several one-to-one



**Figure 7.** Interrobang: *Familiodrome*, photo: Interrobang. Image shows an additional third layer to actor narrative and polling processes with the simultaneously running chat function, in which audience members provide a running commentary on the decisions and polling processes itself. Translation from the screen: *Question: Should Emil take on duties in the household? Option 1: Yes, clearly defined chores. Option 2: Yes, I decide upon chores based on the individual situation. Option 3: No, but I regularly ask for help. Option 4: No. From the chat: 'Leave it!'; 'The boy is 8!'; 'It's probably intentional that a 30 min chore limit is not part of the options ...'; 'at 8, I was running loose through the neighborhood'.*

performances that were produced during the past couple of months: in Tania El Khoury and Basel Zaara's piece *As Far As Isolation Goes* (2021) a one-to-one zoom performance deals with the experience of migration and physical as well as cultural isolation; in She She Pop's *Telephone Canon* (2020), a single audience member meets a performer during a telephone conversation and is asked to describe their most impactful theatre experience in order to add to a fleeting archive of performances; or in 600 Highwaymen's *A Thousand Ways (Part One)* (2020), in which a chat bot-like voice enables, through a set of instructions, an exceptional one-hour-long encounter between two strangers who neither will know their names nor meet afterwards; or Interrobang's *Müller-Phone* (2021), in which individual audience members can interact via smartphone app and keypad with the dead poet Heiner Müller, who died in 1995. We manipulated and edited his original sound material – interviews and readings from the 1970s-90s – in a way that allows for a ghost-like live effect of a conversation with Heiner Müller on current pressing political issues in the here and now. In the latter project the quasi-live encounter happens – at least as an effect – across temporal rather than spatial distance, thereby turning the smartphone into both a machine for time travelling and for a new kind of theatrical aesthetic illusion.

For our future projects we plan to further explore hybrid formats that bring together digitally and physically live present audiences. In *Chat Inferno* we intend to stage a meeting of these two different groups of audiences via chat, which/who will eventually play the lead role in this project. For *Commune Twitch* we plan to found a two-week-

long online commune using the social platform twitch in order to explore new forms of living in solidarity and community beyond physical-spatial boundaries, asking the question: how can we misappropriate the profit-oriented self-promotion structure of social networks and actually make them social?

Pandemic digital theatre has foregrounded qualities that are usually assigned to performances under the medial conditions of physical co-presence: closeness, encounter, exchange, participation, feedback-loop. Digital participatory theatre practices which highlight the action and impact of the live audience show that these qualities are by no means limited to a physical live encounter. They force us to reconsider performance as such. These artistic practices productively and critically face new social forms shaped by digitality and set out to test and question their potentials and limits. Seen from this perspective, we have not 'lost the theater' during the pandemic. On the contrary, we have just begun to discover the theatre of the twenty-first century, its new forms and functions.

### **Pandemic Playbook 4: engaging digital audiences – Judith König**

What does it take to produce an audience digitally? This question has informed both my own research work as part of my M.A. thesis and has informed my extensive experience of digital theatres as an audience member over the past year of pandemic theatre experiences. With the wide range of technical possibilities, theatre faces a new playing field it had hardly dealt with before, as it shifts its focus from a local to a temporal community. How such alternate temporal communities are made visible ranges from a head count on the screen, revealing how many people are currently watching a livestream together, to theatre formats that are designed as an interactive video call. Yet, the ways in which digital media can relay liveness moves even further.

A tool that is being used frequently but that remains insufficiently theorised is the chat function within digital theatre formats. Almost every video conference tool and every social media platform contains a chat function. The chat is used by the theatre makers both to brief the audience or to give them the opportunity to participate in the performance. Thanks to the chat, audience awareness of themselves and each other can be translated into the digital sphere. The chat connects the viewers in a communal space and develops complex social dynamics and rules within minutes. In the chat, laughter, applause and displeasure turn into emoticons or GIFs. Murmurs and glances become sentences. The spectator's body turns into a typing speech bubble.

When a chat window turns into a theatre auditorium, two rooms merge. Conventions determining behaviour in the auditorium are transferred to the chat and vice versa. Via the chat, the audience is enabled to engage in new practices deemed impossible in conventional theatre. The chat tool offers the possibility to constantly comment and to share your thoughts alongside the performance. Looking at the chatting process within a video conference, it sometimes looks like a parallel world. With the possibility of a private chat with a chosen person, there is even the option to separate off into a hidden nook of private exchange. One convention the theatre has brought into the chat is the courtesy demonstrated in this written communication. It is a common phenomenon that a harsh tone prevails within a chat or comment column. Due to the anonymity of the internet, chats often have turned into spaces of abuse and offense. Yet, when taking part in around 20 theatre performances in the digital space over the course of the last year, I

have not once experienced offensive behaviour. It seems as if the awareness of the theatrical frame is omnipresent and thus affects the attitude in the chat. We are no longer anonymous but instead part of a theatre performance – we are an audience and therefore an at least temporary community.

In much of digital theatre, the chat functions as one communication among many. The chat nevertheless reveals a different set of dynamics and conventions to face-to-face theatre. Crucially, the chat offers a low threshold for active participation. Moreover, the progress of the performance often depends on active participation in the chat. At the same time, administrators have control over the chat and can mute participants with one click or simply ban them from the chat. This interplay of openness and control becomes particularly evident in the works of theatre groups which use messenger apps such as Telegram to realise entire performances: in this case, the stage is created through texting. The experience of liveness is rendered through the conventions of immediacy in the messaging apps.

By way of example: the performance group MachinaEx has been experimenting with digital spaces and the interface between theatre and computer games since before the pandemic. In 2020, MachinaEx created two living room adventures that are reminiscent of point & click text adventures or pen&paper – *Homecoming* (2021) and *Lockdown* (2020). Both adventures are only experienced and played within the messenger app Telegram in small groups of players with a delegating performer who introduces everyone to the plot they are to participate in: going in search of a missing person. As the situation gains in complexity, the story unveils itself bit by bit through photos, text or voice messages and short video clips. Simultaneously, the active participation of each player becomes more crucial in calling up telephone numbers, chatting with new figures that enter the plot or evaluating strange websites with dubious people, deciding who to trust. The complexity and speed of the story requires the individual to quickly get involved in the situation and its specific tasks. There is no time for everyone involved to get to know each other. The encounters are reduced to sharing information and decoding secrets via chat messages. The rhythm of the piece consists of writing yourself into the performance and waiting for the performance to be written while we have to constantly follow the instructions of the game administrator. Within a short time, a productive and collegial dynamic develops between people who do not know each other and who will likely never get to know each other in real life.

This form of dynamic togetherness, as a community of fate, is also known from previous site-specific immersive performances that take place in analog space. Interestingly, the togetherness in the chat is seemingly more focused and goal-oriented than in other embodied immersive theatres. However, the experience is reduced due to the absence of what cannot be grasped, such as facial expressions, moods or tone of the others. Nonetheless, *MachinaEx's* living room adventure is amazingly immersive and interactive. Much like in real life works within the chat. You have to get involved in the experience and everyone is responsible for the shared experience and the success of the game. The experience is constituted by language and the ways in which it stirs one's own imagination. However, the chat also offers options that are rarely found in face-to-face theatre. For example, one can continuously exchange ideas with other members of the audience. The conventions of the messenger app itself and its constant demand on each participant to respond create a different sense of textual liveness and temporal co-presence. The text as another marker of digital liveness: this is what theatre can look like in a chat window.

## **Pandemic Playbook 5: experimenting with VR theatres across geographies – Christian Stein**

When thinking about the consequences of the pandemic for theatre culture, the lack of presence and communal encounter is often cited as a major limiting factor. The digital space, it is often argued, offers no sense of community, no sense of body, no live co-presence – which is essential for theatre, performance, and many other forms of cultural offering. Still, there is another way of looking at it. In the pandemic, experiments with digital forms of live encounter increased at an unprecedented rate, creating new formats and genres that cannot be just seen as inferior surrogates. My thesis: no recent event has pushed theatre as much forward in its expressions as the pandemic – amid lamentations, of course, but forward nonetheless. The pandemic has confronted theatres and ensembles worldwide with the question of how to reach audiences differently without the traditional base of a shared physical space.

The digital worlds of computer games and especially virtual reality provide templates, examples, and role models for such alternate forms of live encounter. To draw a comparison with sports: the rearguard action that representatives of traditional sports, for example, had been waging against eSports has long since been lost. Digital spaces have ceased to be places of idiosyncratic loneliness but are just as much shared spaces of experience and places of cultural debate. The impressiveness of these worlds is undeniable – and it can be used to build the future of theatre.

Virtual reality as a new medium goes even further: immersion in virtual worlds can create moments of human closeness impossible to match in physical space. In virtual space, boundaries are renegotiated, transgressions are possible, and one's own participatory role is enabling and free. No medium focuses more strongly on the body than VR: the display is no longer in front of you like a stage, but literally around you. You become part of the scenery and no longer act in it via classic controllers, keyboard or mouse – but by moving your head, hands and body. The passively sitting and observing audience member is transformed into the active player co-creating the scene.

VR re-establishes embodiment digitally as its sensors and technologies aim to lead us and our bodies immersively and intuitively into virtual worlds. For example, virtual reality headsets are advancing beyond controllers, tracking the movement of the hands themselves. Eye-tracking allows for a response to exactly where users are looking beyond head movement and can show those areas in even greater detail. Virtual Treadmills allow natural movement in virtual worlds by walking, jumping, and running, even when limited physical space is available. Motion Capture Suits capture the exact movement of the whole body and can map it in real time to avatars in virtual space. 360° cameras capture images in 3D and enable virtual immersion in photographed or filmed physical spaces. Soon, face-tracking sensors will record our facial expressions and transfer them to avatars. Increasingly, high-resolution displays with ever larger fields of view make virtual worlds appear increasingly realistic. Wireless headsets enable unimpeded movement. And the capture and mapping of physical objects into the virtual worlds allows virtual objects to be touched and moved with the user's own hands. All these developments indicate that we will be able to experience virtual worlds more and more intensively in the near future – with open undiscovered spaces that exist nowhere else (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Golem Project. Video can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/330256113>

The research of gamelab.berlin at Humboldt University already realised numerous projects on VR and dance / performance before the pandemic. In the pandemic, this work suddenly became much more important and acted like a resource toolbox for theatre in the pandemic. One such example is the project 'Golem Labor', which gamelab.berlin realised together with the Goethe Institute (Figure 8). Here, performers and 3D developers in Prague, Riga, Tel Aviv and Bogotá developed VR dance pieces in close collaboration with each other with each performative iteration serving as a non-verbal communication offer to the other locations and an example of how to communicate performatively across geographies.<sup>6</sup> For this purpose, we used workshops to record choreographed dance sequences with motion-capture suits and then translated them into avatars and virtual landscapes in VR. The dialogue between the geographic locations produced a shared, co-created and global VR dance performance that visitors from all over the world were able to experience and enter virtually. The project drew technically as well as conceptually on the VR motion tracking performance 'Golem' (Figure 9)<sup>7</sup>, the dance experiment 'Playing with Virtual Realities'<sup>8</sup> and the experimental live 360° VR performance experiment 'Entering Virtual Realities' that we had previously developed with dance performers.

Then the pandemic hit and required us to shift much of our planning yet the overall digital frame of the project made it possible to switch to virtual pandemic-compliant formats relatively quickly. No longer did the entire project team travel to workshop locations; instead, motion-tracking suits were shipped, developers collaborated with performers via video link, and development and recording were digitally fused. The interim results of *Golem Labor* were presented to the public in virtual Mozilla Hubs rooms, reaching a much larger and more diverse audience than originally expected. For the project partners involved, the transition was unfortunate, but manageable. Through various



**Figure 9.** Carly Lave and John Snyder rehearsing. Image: Manuel Sierra Alonso.<sup>9</sup>

digital communication media, we tried to keep the connection diverse, lively and as direct as possible. The project is still ongoing, but it can already be said that the pandemic hit digital concepts less hard than purely analog one and that adaptation was more manageable.

People experiencing virtual reality for the first time typically do not compare the experience to computer games or other media, but to intense experiences in physical space. Meeting other people in virtual reality, talking to them, and exploring virtual worlds together is one of the most intense virtual experiences. The virtual overcomes boundaries that still apply in physical space and that otherwise determine our encounters. The gaming context of VR – i.e. the possibility to act without consequence – allows for the expression of suppressed emotions and experimental try-outs of actions. Creating the spaces for these encounters must not be left to the entertainment industry alone. It is a matter of exploiting the creative possibilities in an interdisciplinary way, combining artists, researchers, and digital makers across universities, cultural institutions and the performance scene as has been the case with *Golem.Labor* in order to question and reflect on what the digital is. Staging VR as a space of discovering the still liminal potential of the digital as a space that can be shaped, made, and understood by people will be an important task for the digital theatre of the future. Doing so means neither to replace nor to restore physical presence but rather to extend it by taking the digital possibilities seriously. Furthermore, VR theatre offers a possibility to overcome the divide between analog and digital spaces, as it is a digital device that renders an ultimately physical experience and a return of embodiment by virtual means.

## Conclusion

The five scenes from our pandemic playbook provide spotlights onto specific conditions and practices that suggest a fundamental process of transformation in the definition and social function of theatrical performance. It is a process that, at this early stage, may best be captured in the situatedness of individual examples, hence the predominant need of extensive ethnographic documentation. What emerges from these examples and our work up to now are the following preliminary provocations:

1. Pandemic theatre is no longer *for* but *with* an audience – reconnecting, reconstituting and directly engaging with an audience that may not always share a common auditorium or be after an embodied experience. The audience instead reinvents a sense of co-presence through participation via an emerging chat culture as Judith König explored, via participatory polling apps, as Interrobang's *Familiodrom* staged it, or just in the very fact that on Zoom, performers and audiences are all alike – each of us stuck in their Zoom tile. This focus on a newly dispersed but participating audience has a different quality to audience participation in the elaborate landscapes of immersive theatres of the pre-pandemic. The basic intimacy of the Zoom tile and the shared situation of the COVID-19 crisis allow for a more direct and often individual exchange. The communality of being an audience breathing the same air is replaced by an audience actively communicating with each other.
2. Pandemic theatre is about discovery and experimentation in a digital playing field. Digitalisation will not mean that the Zoom theatres of the initial lockdown phase are an endpoint. Instead Christian Stein's contribution about *gamelab.berlin's* work with the alternate worlds of VR argues for a breakdown of professional and geographical borders that opens up collaborations between gamers, digital artists and theatre makers globally and at an unprecedented level.
3. Pandemic theatre manifests itself in acts of translation. As Janina Janke's report on the independent theatre collective *Turbo Pascal* makes clear, their work consisted of various acts of translation: re-creating previously developed analogue work for the digital space and adapting digital platforms to participatory theatre games. These translation processes do not stop at the performance level but include devising and rehearsal work, which in the case of *Turbo Pascal* has already led to a hybrid performance format with the performers interacting digitally for their Zoom.com while simulating their separate 'home spaces' in a communal physical performance space. The intensification of such hybrid exchanges that actively put digital and analog experiences side by side, may prove long-lasting and most productive for theatre in the post/pandemic.
4. Pandemic theatre has the capacity to reconfigure liveness and live-streaming because of its immense pervasiveness during lockdowns, making it into a practice that extends beyond a few eponymous and globally recognised performing arts institutions. In doing so, livestreams raise the question of access to the theatre and what might constitute new and radical content. The experimental livestreams of the youth theatre at the Deutsches Theater Berlin model how much possibility for further bold experimentation there is.
5. The pandemic did not only shut down theatres but has also enabled new players to enter the scene. The work of the youth theatre at the Deutsches Theater is representative here for a more general development in the German theatre landscape: a potential shift in resources and public attention. These shifts in infrastructure in a single institution mirror how infrastructural transformations on the national level. The German cultural ministry provided the NEUSTART KULTUR emergency support for state theatres and the independent scene alike by creating generous governmental infrastructural support with added resources and rewritten funding parameters for artists during the pandemic. In effect, a more diverse range of artists was able to garner funding in this new pandemic territory. It remains to be seen how much of this shift in funding parameters is here to stay. At the very least, the Fonds Darstellende

Künste (one of the main funding bodies of the independent theatre scene) commissioned a team of theatre scholars and professionals to examine how funding structures should change permanently in response to the precarities and structural inefficiencies that the pandemic has made more starkly visible. The initial findings were presented at a conference in the Academy of the Arts in Berlin in November 2021 with a publication scheduled for Spring 2022.

Ultimately, our playbook sketches scenes of how the pandemic has worked as a catalyst for aesthetic and structural change in German theatre. Other examples that speak to comprehensive nature of this shift include the new permanent digital stage HAU 4 at the HAU Hebbel am Ufer Theater Berlin; the Berliner Ensemble and the Komische Oper Berlin collaborating on new digital infrastructures across their institutions in their federally funded Spielräume-Project; and the expanding work of the Academy of Theater & Digitality at the Theater Dortmund. Moreover, the audience and its experience move into the centre of pandemic theatres. In response, our next step for The Viral Theatres Research Project is to engage in a digital multimedia survey of theatre audiences across Germany to capture their experiences, habits, and reflections of the past 22 months.<sup>10</sup> As we enter into the third year of the pandemic, there also is a shift away from an exploration of digital forms to a deeper engagement with the new subject matters that COVID-19 itself has brought to the fore. It will be up to theatre makers to continue experimenting and to apply their newly expanded range of performance tools to raise how social precarity has fundamentally altered living conditions due to the pandemic; to give space to the voices of those that have been most vulnerable, whether children and teenagers or the aged; to address the full scope of grief and loss of life; and finally, to make present the relationalities between the pandemic and the climate crisis that dominates our time. The pandemic continues writing our playbook.

## Notes

1. <https://viraltheatres.org>
2. Neustart Kultur - Bundesregierung.de: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/bundesregierung/staatsministerin-fuer-kultur-und-medien/neustart-kultur-startet-1767056>
3. Personal Interview with Gernot Grünewald, Deutsches Theater Berlin, April 17, 2021. Transcript available upon request. Our thanks go to Gernot Grünewald, the young performer of Selbstvergessen, the head of the Junges DT Birgit Lengers and the entire team at the Deutsches Theater for allowing us so generously to document the rehearsals and conduct interviews .
4. In the last year, many of my collaborative artistic research projects have succumbed to the pandemic. In these projects I explore the social structures and transformative processes of specific locations like e.g. the UN headquarters, a psychiatric hospital, or Le Corbusier's Unités d'habitation. This on-site working and researching has not been possible in recent months. Therefore, I will focus on my perspective as a member of the performance collective Turbo Pascal (<https://www.turbopascal.info>) to describe the shift into the digital sphere.
5. <https://www.interobang-performance.com/en/news-worthy/>
6. <https://www.goethe.de/ins/il/de/kul/sup/gol.html>
7. <https://www.gamelab.berlin/portfolio/golem/>
8. <https://www.gamelab.berlin/portfolio/playing-with-virtual-realities>
9. <https://www.goethe.de/de/uun/prs/med/m20/21985737.html>

10. You can find updates on the theatre audience survey and options to participate at <https://viraltheatres.org>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Volkswagen Foundation: [Grant Number 0416 86 5201].

## Notes on contributors

**Ramona Mosse** (Freie Universität Berlin) is a Lecturer in Theatre Studies and Principal Investigator of the 'Viral Theatres'- Research Project, funded by the VolkswagenStiftung. She is based at the Excellence Cluster EXC2020 Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective at Freie Universität Berlin. She is a former fellow of the International Center for Interweaving Theatre and Performance Cultures, Freie Universität Berlin, and has taught in the US and Germany. Her research is focused on the crossings between digital and environmental humanities in a theatrical and performance context. She holds a PhD in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University.

**Janina Janke** (Independent Artist) is a free-lance artist who has been developing collaborative artistic research projects, site-specific performances and spatial installations that explore the social structures and transformative processes of specific locations, including *Unknown Spaces* at the UN Headquarters in Vienna, Nairobi, New York City and Geneva (2011-2016) and *Flache Performance/Flat Performance* (2020) with the Computing Club for Seniors in Berlin Mitte. She is a part of the performance collective Turbo Pascal, based in Berlin.

**Judith König** (Freie Universität Berlin) is a theatre maker from Berlin and currently completing her M.A. in Culture and Media Management at the Free University of Berlin. As a freelance theatre maker, she has realised numerous theatre projects in the areas of directing and production. She is a student assistant in the Excellence Cluster EXC2020 Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective.

**Christian Stein** (Humboldt Universität Berlin) is based at the Excellence Cluster Matters of Activity: Image - Space - Material (<https://www.matters-of-activity.de/en/>), whose interdisciplinary work draws on his combined studies German literature and Computer Science. At the Cluster, he is currently working on the interactivity of objects and humans in the digital sphere. He is also the co-founder of gamelab.berlin, which focuses on the development of game prototypes and VR applications for exhibition contexts. In his current book project, he is working on the interaction between natural and artificial languages.

**Nina Tecklenburg** (Bard College Berlin) is a theatre maker, scholar and Professor for Theatre and Performance at Bard College Berlin (<https://berlin.bard.edu>). She is a co-artistic director of the performance collective Interrobang and has collaborated with Gob Squad, She She Pop, and Lone Twin Theatre. With Interrobang, she devises participatory immersive game-settings and theatrical installation spaces that explore the ethics and aesthetics of digitality and liveness. She holds a PhD in Theatre Studies from Freie Universität Berlin. Her monograph on narrative practices in contemporary theatre *Performing Stories. Erzählen in Theater und Performance* (Transcript 2014) is forthcoming in an English translation with Seagull Books as part of the Enactment Series, edited by Richard Schechner.

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