

Creating a Digital Stage – The HAU: Hebbel am Ufer Berlin An OSUN Digital Case Study

Executive Summary

Can in-person mediums of art such as theater transition well online? Can technology help reimagine the function and potential of theater? Is the future of theater multimodal and interdisciplinary? This Open Society University Network (OSUN) audiovisual case study explores these issues as part of a series of cases on Digital Theaters.

This case explores these questions by examining the HAU4 stage in Berlin – a fully digital theater space that was created as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The project has broken all conventional notions of how theater is experienced and who gets to access it– for audiences and artists alike. This case includes interviews with Annemie Vanackere, managing and artistic director of the HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin, Anna Krauss, creative producer of the HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin, dramaturg Sarah Reimann, Ulla Heinrich, founder of the performance collective “dgtl fmnm” as well as independent artists Anna Fries and Malu Peeters.

The case includes the following elements:

§ [Video Interviews](#)

§ Written Case Study: This Document

From Crisis to Opportunity

The Covid-19 pandemic completely upended the normal way of life with all aspects of life – from school to work and even social interactions going digital. At this time, how people consumed and experienced art also changed dramatically. Theatrical production globally had to drastically shift gear during the pandemic: extensive lockdown closures pushed theater to go digital in an unprecedented manner.

This case was written by Nishtha Gupta, with inputs from Professor Ramona Mosse for the Open Society University Network, and based on the video case by Aidan Maloof, and Adam Stepan. The faculty advisor is Professor Ramona Mosse.

Copyright © 2022 The Open Society University Network (OSUN). No part of this publication may be reproduced, revised, translated, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the written permission of the OSUN

In Germany, theaters were closed down first from March 2020 – July 2020, re-opened briefly at reduced capacity for the new season starting in September and were forced to close again between November 2020 and May 2021. Forced to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, theater groups in Germany undertook a number of measures to continue their operations. While some only reopened rehearsal spaces with stringent testing rules for performers, others coped by streaming from their archives while holding back new productions for a later date. But some others dared to opt for live streaming premieres of their newest works.

However, most of these innovations continued to largely operate within pre-defined confines of how the theater functions. The rules were the same – the performance was just being streamed online. But one theater in Germany completely reimagined how theater can be experienced in a digital world. The Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) Theatre in Berlin was willing to adopt a much more expansive reconceptualization of the idea of theater itself. It expanded the definition of theater to include a site at which performance, discourse, music, and visual arts meet.

A Legacy of Innovation

The Hebbel am Ufer Theatre in Berlin is one of the most prestigious production houses for independent theater in Germany. It is located in Berlin-Kreuzberg, one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in Berlin and formerly in close proximity to the Berlin wall. Unlike many state and municipal theaters around the country, the HAU is among a handful of theaters that do not have its own repertory ensemble. Instead, it curates an extensive season schedule, hosting an eclectic mix of local and international independent theater companies across three distinct theater spaces. It provides production and touring management for a variety of artists. Some of the artists and performance collectives that perform at the HAU Hebbel-am-Ufer regularly include The Wooster Group, Constanze Macras, Rimini Protokoll or Gob Squad.

In its current structure, the HAU Hebbel am Ufer was founded as a fusion of three separate playing spaces: the Hebbel Theater (now HAU1), the Theater am Halleschen Ufer (now HAU 2 and formerly the performance space of the renowned Schaubühne under the artistic direction of Peter Stein), and the HAU 3, a small black box stage across the canal from the HAU 2. The fusion took place in 2003 under the artistic direction of Mathias Lilienthal. In 2012, the Belgian theater director and theater festival curator Annemie Vanackere took over the HAU Hebbel-am-Ufer where she currently serves as artistic director.

Engaging with the ways in which digital media is shaping our lives had already been an important concern at the HAU prior to the pandemic. In 2018, the artistic direction of the HAU Hebbel-am-Ufer organized the Spy-on-Me Festival, a nine-day series of events that gave artists the chance to investigate the idea of big data and to highlight the influence that global digital technology corporations have on the fundamental structures of contemporary life. The aim was to create an awareness of what happens to data and how it is used.

The second installment of the Spy-on-Me Festival “Artistic Manoeuvres in a Digital Present” was scheduled to be held from March 19–29, 2020 but just before the event began, the world went into a lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The HAU team and artists had to move at least part of the festival online in a period of less than two weeks. Artists who developed work for this fully online version included dgtl fmns, NewfrontEars, onlinetheater.live, and doublelucky productions.

The experience with Spy-on-Me 2 and the growing network of relationships with a wide range of digital artists provided the starting point for restructuring the HAU to provide a more permanent place for digital artists and their performance formats. The idea for HAU 4, an additional digital stage was born.

The Stage Goes Digital

In 2021, the Hebbel-am-Ufer founded another fully digital stage, the HAU 4, in order to provide a permanent space for interdisciplinary artists working in the online space. It thus committed to digital theater formats not only as an intermittent stop gap in the pandemic crisis but rather as an aesthetic in need of a more prolific platform. Anna Krauss, the new digital producer of the HAU explains, “We devise pieces for the digital space because we think the format is great not because we are forced to.”¹

In order to successfully work with digital artists and create a lasting space, the HAU had to reorganize its infrastructure, make budget available for digital productions, provide additional training for staff and create new positions; they had to fundamentally expand their methods of working. As Annemie Vanackere, the Artistic Director at the HAU explains: “We had to find a new orientation in how we produce theater[...]The artists need other things, some of which we ourselves are not yet familiar with.”²

One such position the HAU newly implemented was that of a Digital Producer, which one of the existing production assistants, Anna Krauss, took on. In addition, the dramaturg Sarah Reimann became responsible for curating the program for HAU 4, focusing on the exploration of digital dramaturgies. Together, Vanackere, Krauss and Reimann saw this as an immense opportunity: the HAU 4 would provide space for showcasing experimental work that crossed disciplinary boundaries and give digital

¹ Interview with Anna Krause.

² Interview with Annemie Vanackere.

artists a platform for work that had previously only existed on the fringes of established theater institutions. Speaking of her work, Reimann says: “On the one hand it meant transforming analog formats for the digital space, on the other hand, and more importantly, we now curate and produce programming that is conceived for the digital space from the get go.”³

In 2021 and 2022, the HAU 4 showcased performances in a variety of formats from online hackerspaces, shared gaming sessions, and performances via smartphone apps to video and audio-only theaters.

Construct Space, Deconstruct Power

As it navigates the digital world, HAU 4 is committed to being critical of technology and social media platforms, seeking to create new virtual spaces that do not reproduce forms of oppression such as racism, sexism and ableism seen in the analog and digital world alike. As Sarah Reimann explains: “There are many activists and young people who are still trying to find ways of making their voices heard and for whom the digital space is an amazing opportunity. It is important for us to present artists who we would not immediately manage to get.”⁴

The scope of the transformative and disruptive work that is now part of the digital theater at HAU can be seen through the productions put on by its independent collaborators. One such collaborator is the performance collective *dgtl fmns*, which aims to create interdisciplinary spaces of performance and discourse that privilege the connection between feminism and technology. Ulla Heinrich, the founder of *dgtl fmns* states:

We are not interested in the conventional borders between theater, visual art, discourse and science. We have been exploring these questions at the surface of theater since 2015. For us, theater is interesting as a social space and also as a resource – connecting theater, feminism and technology, and obviously the audience. How can one bring all these aspects together? That interests us.⁵

By combining feminism and technology, *dgtl fmns* seeks to create an emancipatory space in which to engage with the manifold ways that digital technology shapes our lives. In collaboration with the HAU 4, they have created digital workshops and residencies that push the definition of what theater might be. Heinrich adds:

³ Interview with Sarah Reimann.

⁴ Interview with Sarah Reimann.

⁵ Interview with Ulla Heinrich.

My theater of the future has a fundamentally different structure to what exists at present. Theater now is extremely hierarchical: that means theater is white, and still dominated by men. In many parts of theater, people with disability play no role whatsoever. Theater is full of an intellectualized part of society that purely performs for each other. My wish is simply that theater is used as a really open space and not as a place that purely reproduces partly super toxic working environments.⁶

In Summer 2020, dgtl fmnsn ran an only residency for a variety of artists to give them the necessary space for exchange and experimentation to develop their digital performance works. One of the pieces developed during the digital fmnsn residency was Anna Fries' and Malu Peeters' *The Host* (premiered in June 2020) – a digital essay created with the virtual reality platform Unity that tracked Fries' pregnancy.

Fries connected the transformation of her body to ideas of monstrosity in order to create an alternative, non-normative digital world beyond gender stereotypes in order to de-romanticize pregnancy and motherhood. Structured like a series of diary entries, *The Host* takes place in an alternative heterotopian space in which Fries is also able to reshape her body and its markers. Yet, the collaboration of Anna Fries and Malu Peeters extended further to show how digital work can translate back into physical spaces. Fries explains the idea behind the project: "For me it is about showing pregnant bodies that we don't get to see in mainstream representation. This is what I always wanted to do, theater doesn't provide these options, but now I can do it in Unity and it is going to stay and not go away."⁷

After the completion of *The Host*, Fries and Peeters set out to create another performance format based on non-normative bodies and speculative fictions. This time, Fries moved beyond her own pregnancy and developed non-standard avatars that eradicated the notion of gender stereotyping even more fully. The audience was led on a journey through a world that allows them glimpses into hybrid bodies and stories.

At the same time, *Virtual Wombs* is a VR performance set on stage in a physical theater space that creates a dialogue between digital and physical theater experiences as the avatars are mirrored by a real performer onstage. *Virtual Wombs* perpetually oscillates between actual and virtual spaces, disorienting and challenging the audience to navigate the intense transitions between the two.

Fries and Peeters' project is thus an example of how the different stages at the HAU cross-fertilize in terms of their season schedule: their project began in an entirely digital mode and then opted to transition into the physical space, opening with *Virtual Wombs* in HAU 3 rather than HAU 4. Fries and Peeters also adapted most of their work processes so that joint rehearsals in a shared physical space were replaced by remote work processes across different geographies and in an exchange between tech and theater experts.

⁶ Interview with Ulla Heinrich.

⁷ Interview with Anna Fries.

There is a story of how a new idea of multi- or transmedial theater can lead to innovative aesthetics. It is this kind of work and exchange that the HAU 4 at the HAU Hebbel am Ufer Theater makes possible.

Digital Future

One thing is clear. The team at HAU are sure that their experiments with digital theaters need to continue even as the world goes back to its old analog ways. The HAU considers itself a learning institution.

The new innovation allows them to explore opportunities that were not possible before – both in terms of expanding their reach and creating new experimental spaces that lead to art that deconstructs power hierarchies. Anna Krauss explains the new direction the team will take:

We want to explore the digital space and everything that is possible there. There is one strand where we say, it would be great to offer more live streams here and there, just to reach a wider audience. Maybe we can bring in an artist from the US online so they can avoid long travel. This is the strand focused on audiences and new accessibility that is gained. The other strand is the experimental, the exploratory one. Here we test new spaces and find out what kinds of encounters are possible.⁸

⁸ Interview with Anna Kraus.