



At Home on Zoom, Theatre Shows During the Quarantine Time

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyse the totality of connections between space, performers and audiences created during artistic performances taking place on the Zoom platform during the lockdown. After Facebook & YouTube *live* events, these types of show, most often theatre performances but also contemporary dances, poetry shows, concerts, or performance art, became one of the most popular artistic manifestations of March-May 2020. In conjunction with cultural institutions being closed and artists and spectators confined to their homes, the two-month lockdown led to the emergence of a *quarantine culture* marked by online artistic manifestations. What I call *quarantine culture* is a kind of *homemade culture* that involves art performances at home, a theme I have been studying for the past eight years. Here I take up the example of the HomeFest events, which, due to the pandemic, took place on the Zoom platform in 2020. Focusing on the online HomeFest, I examine the differences, as well as commonalities, between the work for a show created for the traditional stage or the black box and the work for the in-house productions broadcast online, where artists have adapted themselves to the domestic, as well as to the virtual space. I explore the interconnections between the elements of the zoom theatre performance (also read as *e-homemade culture*) while also questioning the relationship between the final work and the cultural market that led to the emergence of *e-homemade culture*.

Keywords: Homemade culture, E-homemade culture, Domestic box, Zoom, Online performance, Media clash, Zoom Persona



Introduction

This article deals with a peculiar moment not only in the history of performance arts but in the history of humankind. There has never been such a moment before the pandemic when so many people are confined to their homes. What we have experienced (or still experience) is quite a bizarre situation whose effects we have witnessed in almost every aspect of daily life, including artistic production. The article explores the spatial reconfiguration of the performative acts realized during this period. More specifically, it analyses the totality of connections between space, performers, and audiences generated during artistic performances realized on the Zoom platform during the lockdown.

HomeFest is a performing arts festival that has been held in the domestic spaces of Bucharest since 2014. Every year, the organisers make a public call for hosts (and artists)¹, some of whom are the audience of previous performances or people with no experience with HomeFest. While the main criterion for selecting the host is the location of the house in the city, in other words the accessibility to the organised event, the only condition for the artists (local or international) to participate in HomeFest is the ability to adapt their works to (or creating works directly for) the the *domestic box*. The *domestic box* denotes the domestic space transformed into a performative space by means of the interaction with the artistic act. Unlike the black box, which is a neutral performance space, the domestic box is a space endowed with the personality of the host.

The sixth edition of HomeFest, originally scheduled between 27 March and 11 April 2020, was postponed for an indefinite time. Since all cultural events and public meetings were forbidden by the Romanian government, online performances became the only option for artists. Facebook turned almost instantaneously into a global stage. Manifestations of all artistic kinds started flowing from houses, villas and apartments. Suddenly, what I had been studying for over eight years, *homemade culture*, a social-cultural phenomenon that can be briefly defined as the intersection between the artistic act and the domestic space, became the only form of artistic manifestation. Famous or unknown musicians, independent actors or actors hired by state theatres, visual artists, dancers, all became performers in a ‘global HomeFest’, adapting their works and adjusting themselves to the constraints of the domestic and virtual space. Thus, the emergence of the *quarantine culture* was recorded, the first stage of what we would call *e-homemade culture*, the digital version of homemade culture.

1 This is the call for artists of HomeFest Zoom quarantine edition “As we all were in a countdown until May 15th, we decided to smooth down the last days’ waiting, and to lend some colour to the days of the so-called new world. HomeFest 2020 will take place between May 11th and 21st on... ZOOM – surprise! –, but we keep the intimate format we have been used to, i.e. 20 participants per event. Moreover, we curate only half of the programme, with fresh artistic acts produced in isolation, and, for the other half, we are going to launch a call for artists whose spring has not been exactly easy. We are, therefore, looking for 5 artists to join us, with the following requirements: 1. the artistic act should happen – surprise, again! – at home. 2. the performance should last for 30 minutes at most and it must be designed during this period, *HomeFest call*, 2020, <https://homefest.art.blog/2020/02/08/call-for-hosts-2020/>.

During the quarantine, artists expressed themselves on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok in competition with recordings of masterpieces broadcasted online by established theatres, with cinema platforms which aired many good quality films for free as well as with Netflix or HBO TV shows. Since theatre seasons, concerts, exhibitions, fairs, festivals, conventions were cancelled or postponed, the archives of theatres, operas, museums and other institutions started to reveal their treasures and they became available for free to people in isolation. In this fierce competition for the screens of the quarantined people, most solo acts of musicians, actors, performers and poets were lost in the ocean of live streams. Also, that is why Facebook pages that put together artists from various fields have become more successful than individual online manifestations.

In order to examine the issues of spatial reconfiguration of the performative acts of this period, I use the relational model that Richard Schechner developed in his early work, *6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre* -- a significant study on performance theory originally published in 1968, and still influential when it was last reprinted in 2013. Schechner approaches the theatre event as a “set of transactions among audiences, performers, text (in most cases), sensory stimuli, architectural enclosure (or lack of it), production equipment, technicians and house personnel...” (Schechner, 1968)– a grid that can be used for any site-specific artistic production.

Before Alfred Gell’s seminal book *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory from 1998*, art anthropologists had been dealing with the question of what a work of art means. After Gell, the question has turned into *how a work of art or a performance manifests itself*. I am likewise interested in the form of an artistic performance rather than its aesthetic content. It is from such a perspective I explore visual, performative, and dramatic arts manifested in the domestic space, a field I have called *homemade culture*, and which I consider to be one of the expressions of the *social turn* in contemporary arts. Due to the place of performance, the unpretentious *homebased art* fits Bishop’s statement; “Art that operates under the umbrella of social change tends to happen outside museums or galleries, although this is not always the case. Since much of art is collaborative and focused on constructive social change, it is rarely commercial or object-based – two things considered to be elitist and consumerist” (Bishop, 2006).

This article is meant for readers interested in theatrical anthropology, artistic anthropology, performance and theatre studies, and also for artists seeking to conceptualise digital and virtual performance art. The study is also relevant to domestic anthropology, for it provides a new layer for understanding and decoding the functions of the *house/home* in human existence. My research is based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with artists including actors, directors, performers, spectators, organisers, all in HomeFest gear. Although the study is particularly focused on the lockdown period, some of the reflections and conclusions presented below can be applicable to art performances realised after the lockdown on Zoom or on other online platforms.

Homemade culture vs. e-homemade culture

Homemade culture includes a wide range of elements: art galleries located in the house of a curator or an artist, apartment theatres, artist run home spaces, cultural associations that carry out activities in the homes of their members, art festivals that take place exclusively in houses and apartments, readings organised in living rooms, site-specific projects of artistic groups, artists or theatre companies, performances, actions and happenings in inhabited spaces or dealing with habitation via various artistic environments. A broader definition of homemade culture would be the meeting between domestic space and artistic acts. Homemade culture and quarantine culture share one crucial element --the house as a performance space.

Let me outline the specific traits of the shows performed during the quarantine. They were mainly one-man shows (or shows with only one person in the frame), they used domestic sets only, they had minimal budgets, their themes were connected to the general social framework (pandemic, isolation), they were broadcast through various media platforms. As the quarantine ended, themes and casting were diversified along with the means of rehearsal, representation and reception. Quarantine culture could be seen as the artistic effects of the state of the general isolation since the beginning of the pandemic. It could be considered a particular and sharply dated form of *homemade culture* that created the frame for inception of e-homemade culture. It seems unlikely to go out of date, not only because technology keeps developing but also because artists have discovered that valuable art can be made anywhere, even in someone's living room. One such example is the online offer from Naryshnikov Art Center where audiences can watch (and pay for) choreographic productions of its artists recorded at home. Although remaining niche productions, they are unlikely to disappear, since the technology that makes them possible is already in place with low costs and the artists have become aware of the existence of a new performance space leading them to new directions for expression.

The essential difference between homemade culture and e-homemade culture lies in the fact that the artists and the audiences share the same media platform *but not the same physical space*. The *homemade culture* events yield sociability which makes them come under relational art. As I noticed in my position the audience of HomeFest shows the social aspect prevailed the aesthetic one as the post-show discussions became more significant for the participants than the shows themselves. Regardless, live streams (that define e-homemade culture) usually allow for little interaction, mostly in the comments of the audience. In homemade culture, the differences between hosts, artists and audience are diminished – there are no stages, nor backstages, nor seats. Therefore artists and audience are on the same level, indicating a level of art democratization (Bennett, 2005, p.10). In e-homemade culture, the mainstream live streams of shows (concerts, theatre and performance plays) on Facebook and other platforms are predominantly one-directional, from the artist to the audience, like in the physical theater or concert stage, which makes the spectator's experience similar to a film or multi-media performance experience.

HomeFest 2021

The HomeFest line-up covered thirteen theatre and performance plays and concerts. *Work. No Travel* by Bobi Pricop deals with the experiences of Romanian migrants for whom working abroad has become the only possibility of survival in the economic context after 1989. The play questions precariousness, massive privatization and social uncertainty. It was originally performed in a black-box theatre hall, and adapted for Zoom. *I Don't Even Think You Exist* by Robert Bălan – in which I also played along Robert Bălan, Mihaela Dancs, Cinty Ionescu, Carmen Florescu – is based on the personal experiences of performers during the quarantine, and it was created exclusively for the Zoom platform. *A Morning Show from 2033*, by Theo Herghelegiu, pictures a dystopic Romania that is stuck in quarantine. This study is based on the interviews I conducted with the participants in these shows and as well as with Maria Müeler, a Romanian actress based in New York who, during the quarantine, played in various zoom shows².

In addition to four concerts, the line-up included a show by Nicoleta Lefter about violence against women, with a focus on the quarantine period when the number of cases increased; the show *Don't touch, Stay in Touch* where two writers (Rucsandra Pop and Anca Ștefan), two directors (Luana Hagi and Laura Săvuțiu) and one actress (Graziela Bădescu) set out to artistically explore the new reality imposed by the Coronavirus – where people are forced to stay indoors, where state borders are closed, borders are redrawn between the personal and the professional domains, between the inside and the outside, where time dilates or contracts, where relationships are transformed and all of these changes force us to reinvent our daily existence. In Andreea Șovan's *Full House*, each room of an apartment finds its own character. Ruxandra Coman's play *Mama, Ruxi și Uriașa CevaRău*, tackles the relationship between daughter and mother. The poetry show, *Umbra / Stihomanție* has the artist read the spectators' future in books of poems.

After-show discussions would often last three to four times longer than the performance, touching subjects such as loneliness, isolation, online life, parenting, future in a pandemic, resilience in the current situation, fear, depression, anxiety, domestic violence, the artistic exploration of the new reality imposed by the Coronavirus and of the feeling of *home*. Thanks to Zoom, the festival benefited from the presence of spectators from other cities and other countries who could, for the first time, watch the HomeFest performances that were until then meant only for the audience in Bucharest. In a discussion aftershow, one of the members of the audience referred to Zoom as “Our daily Zoom”, a biblical reference that showed the significance of the online meetings of the period. According to Wikipedia, Zoom Video Communications³ is an American company headquartered in San Jose, California, providing video and chat online communication that is used in teleconferences, remote work,

2 The shows are: “Where Are you?”, “24th Fest”, “The Wolf”, “Lasagna with Everything”.

3 I use the word *zoom* written with no capital letter when it designates the medium, and in capital letters when it refers to the company, Zoom Video Communications.

remote education and social relations, also remote of course. Zoom became relevant during quarantine, outclassing its main competitor, Skype, which has been on the market since 2003. Gleaning information from forums and articles, I found out that the main reasons why Zoom was preferred to Skype were the ease of use, even for people without any technical skills, the audio-video quality of communication, the lack of spam, as well as the possibilities to include in the free version a large number of interlocutors (65) which, in turn, can be split into several groups/rooms. Other players on the market are Facebook Rooms (since May 2020), Google Meets, Join.me, Cisco Webex, and their numbers are increasing. In April 2020, during the quarantine, the estimated number of Zoom users was around 200 million.

The Relationships between Performers, Audience, Virtual and Domestic Space

Homemade culture is an urban cultural practice that consists of artistic manifestations different in both form and content (Sterian, 2020). Artists adapt their works or produce works directly for the domestic space. The usual host-guest-house triad becomes host/artist (hostartist) – guest/spectator (guester) – house/stage (domestic box), which leads to the creation of new and complex relationships among its duplicated elements. In the case of productions broadcast by zoom from the domestic space, these relations are transformed through the interaction with the virtual environment. The term *virtual* has its roots in medieval scholasticism where it is practically associated with the notion of possibility (Alloa, 2014, pp. 147-170).

Schechner's model of relationships looks like this:

1. among performers
2. among spectators
3. between performers and spectators
4. among the production elements
5. between the production elements and the performer
6. between the production elements and the spectator
7. between the production as a whole and the space where it takes place.

Adapted to Zoom performances, Schechner's relations fabric becomes:

1. among performers
2. between performers and Zoom
3. between performers and the domestic space
4. between the performer and his zoom persona
5. among the production elements
6. between performers and spectators

7. among spectators
8. between spectators and the domestic space
9. between spectators and Zoom
10. between the production as a whole and the supporting media (virtual and domestic space)
11. between the final production and the cultural market.

Relationships among Performers

Even if they share videos, documents or music, even if participants reveal to one another areas of their private space, even if they teach, perform, work remotely or simply chat, the main activity that happens on Zoom is verbal communication. People use sound to exchange information by sitting in front of a screen in a position called ‘close-up’ in cinema, a framing that includes the head and part of the chest. While close-ups are a clear directorial choice in cinema (to provide details about the character’s condition, at the expense of wide shots), zoom has generalized this type of frame through which people, once they choose to keep their camera open, allow themselves to be seen by the others to a greater extent than, for instance, an actor on stage. Often, in order to show others the space in which they are, people step away from the frame. Zoom was a video communication platform before they came up with a contemporary professional working tool. The isolation during the quarantine has led to a boom of online interaction, where communication prevails over all the other functions of Zoom. For those who live alone, rehearsals were among the few opportunities to socialize. As chats were longer, they were taking time and energy meant for rehearsals. Robert Bălan, the director the show *I Don’t Even Think That You Exist*, says: “For about a month, rehearsals were just some long conversations. By the time we decided to start rehearsing and do something, just staying before a screen would have already consumed our energy...” (Sterian, personal communication, 22nd June, 2020).

Lower emotional communication should affect the construction of the connections that had to be created among characters. However, after long rehearsals they were finally created, as the director Theo Herghelegiu points out:

In the theatre, on a real stage, relationships among characters are born and they gain substance, shape, meaning, as the rehearsals progress. The same goes for Zoom - I could feel them! I don’t know how that happened, everyone was the same, everyone had a laptop, a video camera on their device, sitting in their house, looking at their partner in some small squares there... You could feel the rehearsals where they entered a relationship, and those where they played alone, as we say in our theatre jargon” (Sterian, personal communication, 26th June, 2020).

My research among the artists who performed in HomeFest shows how the daily presence on Zoom has become exhausting, producing more anxiety than the very pandemic that has generated these conditions: “After about 2 months spent on the platform almost daily, I have

come to hate the print-screens from Zoom that I still find on FB”, says Robert Bălan. Alexandra Dancs has similar thoughts: “I had reached some kind of saturation, but I got used to it anyway”. The same happened to Carmen Florescu: “For me, communicating on Zoom has become more and more tiring and cumbersome” (Sterian, personal communication, 22nd June, 2020).

As Adina Manta states “Just as in everyday life, the individual interacts with others in a social framework regulated by certain formal or informal norms, so the actor interacts with their stage partners in a framework defined and regulated according to a certain scenario” (Manta, 2015). Work on a show involves inevitable misunderstandings as well, compatibility and incompatibility. Whether rehearsals take place in the physical or in the virtual space, frictions are inherent to any process of collective creation, but Zoom negatively enhances any potential misunderstanding: “There are all sorts of technical problems, delays, you speak over your partners, and all of that has given us huge headaches. You don’t ‘feel’ your work partners, you don’t perceive nuances, or you perceive them differently – which can generate tensions. If you have never worked with the artists involved in the project, it is quite difficult to come to know them on Zoom” (Alexandra Dancs). “I found out or rediscovered how important rehearsals are, how vulnerable the people are when they rehearse, even on Zoom, or especially on Zoom” (Carmen Florescu) (Sterian, personal communication, 22nd June, 2020). The importance of the rehearsal lays not only for their irreplaceable role in the working process but also for their “team building” meaning, as Theo Herghelegiu underlines:

During Zoom rehearsals, the time for discussions seemingly not connected to the topic is restricted (sometimes to extinction); I mean, those discussions in live rehearsals, that are actually meant to generate a pleasant and relaxed working environment, or to deliver more information about characters and situations, or to simply reinforce the relationships among project partners, and to create complicity – those are a magical and absolutely necessary ingredient on stage. Well, that time is lost on Zoom (Sterian, personal communication, 26th June, 2020).

Although it is a frustrating and emotional environment, Zoom makes performers more professionally pragmatic, precisely out of the desire to spend as little time as possible in front of the screen, which is not necessarily beneficial to the process of working on a show.

Relationships between Performers and Zoom

Being a performer on Zoom involves, first of all, a close relationship with a phone, a desktop and, most often, with a laptop. Being a zoom performer means spending as much time with your eyes on the screen as a gamer. The performer must also be equipped with a good internet connection. The possibility of a network crash has haunted and will haunt all Zoom artists. To be sure, some broadcast both on their phone and on their laptop at the same time.

Zoom shows have also generated a technological upgrade for all those involved. Artists have learned to edit, to make better use of the sound system, and to direct their own video

appearance. “Our relationship has evolved in the sense that I now have a much better understanding of this platform - I can use it to my advantage, I know its settings, I know ‘tricks’ that can help me offer spectators an interesting experience” says Maria Müeler (Sterian, personal communication, June, 2020), while Andreea Şovan emphasizes the resemblance to cinema: “What we do now on Zoom is a different form, which is cool, but it’s not theatre. It’s a kind of movie, you need lights, camera, technology... while on stage you don’t... as an actor you rely on yourself only” (Sterian, personal communication, July, 2020). I consider the last part of Andreea Şovan’s statement debatable, because the purpose of the stage is to highlight and to protect the actor, while the domestic box, even in its digital version, makes him/her vulnerable. The screen of a laptop can function as a prompter as well, so performers no longer need to memorize the text.

Relationships between performers and the domestic space

The backstage is essential to the performers’ preparation for the stage, disconnecting them from the “mundane” world. “From a temporal perspective, we can say that, before a show, the backstage is the place where strategies are devised, for distancing oneself from the real self; but, at the end of the show, the backstage is where the distance from your virtual self manifests itself” (Manta, 2015, p. 26). The virtual self that Adina Manta talks about is not the one from the online performances, but the virtual self of the characters that must be played, or *the performed self* (Kornhaber, 2011), as it is called by the theatre theorist Konstantin Stanislavski who developed a system of actor training, preparation and rehearsal techniques.

A rehearsal room is a space for a single activity. Performers go there with a clear purpose, to perform an activity for which they are paid or that they are highly motivated to carry out. A domestic space involves activities radically different from those in a rehearsal room. For performers and dancers whose work was site-specific, the transition to zoom performances (from home) was faster and easier. The overlap between a home space and a stage space is difficult for those accustomed only to the theatre. In cinema, the *mise-en-scène* is what appears in front of a camera, which is also true in a Zoom performance. In the case of Robert Bălan who, during the quarantine performed in and broadcast from the apartment where he lived with his wife and two daughters (and two cats), the fact that he was at home had direct consequences: “The worst thing for me was just that, in 5 seconds I was already “on stage” (Sterian, personal communication, 22nd June, 2020). The journey from home to the place where the show takes place has always been very important. It’s a time when I can put aside current issues. This time I couldn’t. As I sat in the kitchen during the show, I had the ‘pleasure’ for someone in the house to come in to get water or something to eat, to have the oven open (that is, in the full process of cooking). But, for the most part, they complied and it was pretty quiet”. Maria Müeler felt the same loss: “Many times I missed going there and the music I used to listen to (special playlists for each character) would give me a certain feeling” (Sterian, personal communication, June, 2020). For Carmen Florescu, the lack of a need to go back home and the violation of the intimacy of the family “nest” were very important:

I was just as nervous as before a show on stage, only that it happened in the house, in the living room, in the kitchen, and that was very strange... with the children next to me watching me bustle before the show or even during the show; and a strange and slightly uncomfortable feeling that unknown people were in my house, in my private space... In fact, it kind of felt like a violation of my privacy. I was just as tired after the show, feeling a sort of emptiness, like an empty silence, because I wouldn't always stay after the show to chat with colleagues or we didn't take the same route from the theatre to home" (Sterian, personal communication, 22nd June, 2020).

For most professional actors, playing in a living room (as it already happens in *homemade culture*) was a difficult and often unsatisfactory experience. The reason lies in the perception of theatre as a place of the sacred, a mentality imbued by theorists and practitioners like Artaud, Grotowsky, Brook who made statements about theatre like these: "Theatre must make itself the equal of life – not an individual life, that individual aspect of life in which characters triumph, but the sort of liberated life which sweeps away human individuality and in which man is only a reflection" (Artaud as cited in Ward, 2017) , "Performing is a total act of laying oneself bare, tearing off the mask of daily life, of exteriorizing oneself... [in] a serious and solemn act of revelation" (Grotowsky as cited in Ward, 2017), "*Holy theatre* an event through which the 'invisible is made visible'; the invisible being a realm of life/experience that is beyond the normal and outside the everyday and sacred" (Brook as cited in Ward, 2017). For them, the theatrical experience is strictly delimited from everyday life, and this must be transmitted to the public. Actors in the independent field (pub theatres, black box performers) and choreographers who are more accustomed with site-specific work, had fewer issues with the adaptation to the domestic space.

Usually, people who are not related to the show are not allowed in the rehearsal room. In the *domestic box*, apart from those who live alone, other family members, human or non-human, interfere with the play space. The disruptions by cohabitants, people and/or animals, and the possibility to do something else during the idle time in rehearsals, break the performer's focus. Other disturbing factors are the sounds outside the house - the noisy hyperactive neighbours, nearby construction sites, car sirens, and so on. All of these make it difficult for the *homemade culture* and *e-homemade culture* artist to completely detach himself/herself from everyday life.

Performing at home means transforming the interior environment of the performer-inhabitant into scenography. For Maria Müeler, who was involved in four theatrical projects during the quarantine, the situation was more complicated: "The small space in my apartment limited my options for a very limited 'setting'. In three out of four cases, I felt that my walls or my furniture did not match the character I was playing. But the directors were all very understanding and they worked with what each actor had at hand" (Sterian, personal communication, June, 2020). When the house is, from the very beginning, exactly the home

space imagined by directors, playwrights and/or performers, then the performance becomes site-specific and authentic. *Work. No Travel* was about assuming extremely personal stories, the experiences of people who went to seasonal work between the '90s and 2000, in very difficult conditions, therefore the domestic space contributed a lot to the atmosphere of the show, in that all the participants – actors, guests and spectators – were at home, no matter where they were. When the artist does not have to pretend that he/she is elsewhere, nor that he/she is someone else, the performative presence can even become relaxed and authentic. It can even be comfortable to perform from your own home, without a curtain, lights in your eyes, the stress of an audience that can sometimes prove unfriendly.

The Zoom Persona: The Relationship between the Performer and their Digital Avatar⁴

The zoom performance leads to the emergence of a virtual performer who reproduces the features and intentions of the real performer, but which is and, at the same time, is not. The zoom persona is an avatar whose actions are watched by spectators, by other performers as well as – and here lies the big difference from the stage – by the source performer.

The zoom persona is a proxy of the performer, meant to represent and to represent him/her. What prevails in a body displayed on Zoom is the performer's face. Zoom often provides a closeness unusual for the theatre actor, whom the stage keeps at a distance from the audience, but who plays near to, or in the middle of the audience (which is quite common in *homemade culture* performances). The body of the Zoom performer is an intermediate body, a virtual puppet that replicates exactly the actions of the puppeteer as far as the technical conditions allow it. The continuous viewing of one's own body involves a process of acceptance of one's own dematerialization, "the virtual experience of the subject can create the feeling of disembodiment, but the physical materiality of the body that moves, thinks and perceives is undeniable" (Dinescu, 2007, p. 14).

For actors and, especially, for performers with a background in contemporary dance, the body is not just a tool, but the performer himself/herself, as Richard Schechner points out: "Your body is not your instrument" (Schechner, 1973), a statement that is no longer valid on Zoom, where the performative body is different from the physical one. In reality, the body goes through sensory and cognitive experiences (Dinescu, 2007, p. 7) required by the part. Whether it is in gallery view – the participants' windows have the same size – or in speaker view, the image of the speaker or of the person who produces sounds prevails on the screen; the other, smaller, windows are on the top bar or on the sidebar, so the window size varies, and it is impossible for the performer to ignore the presence of his/her own face on the screen⁵: "I would rather look at my image than at the image of those in the audience" (Carmen Florescu); "In a way, it was like watching a movie. I was connected on my phone and on the computer

4 A version of this chapter was published at https://www.academia.edu/50913630/Zoom_Persona.

5 This doesn't happen in two situations: when spectators are asked to turn off their screens (as with *A Morning Show from 2033* and other Homefest shows) and, if a large number of participants attend, one can choose an image so that the face is not visible anymore.

too, so I checked on the computer the video image that was sent by my phone” (Robert Bălan); “You are in the same position, usually sitting, with your eyes glued to the screen. You see yourself non-stop and you are very aware of your image” (Alexandra Dancs) (Sterian, personal communication, 22nd June, 2020). “Every time I did it, I scolded myself a bit and I tried to turn my attention back to my partners, but the temptation to focus on yourself is much stronger than when you’re on stage and you don’t have a mirror in front of you” (Maria Müeler) (Sterian, personal communication, June, 2020). I have found it compelling that none of the performers involved in the HomeFest line up chose to remove their own icon while performing although it is a viable option.

The equivalent of this situation on stage would be the performative act where the artist constantly looks in a mirror, at the same time relating to the other actors and to the audience. This split is a new condition for the performer, and it implies an awareness of the self-image that is not necessarily favourable to catharsis. The zoom persona is a continuous signal that the performer is in the digital environment, it is perceived as hostile, at least at the beginning of the use, as the actress Adriana Dragut reveals: “For me it was painful at first, but then I started enjoying it, however this happened after many conversations with Teuca (director Theo Herghelegiu). I am against everything that is online at the moment. But the zoom experience was, apart from that, fabulous” (Sterian, personal communication, July 2020). Just as reading the subtitles of a movie lowers the attention paid to the action, contemplating one’s own image lowers the attention paid to fellow performers, spectators and the show itself as it leads to the performing act becoming superficial as it is an activity that feeds the narcissism inherent to every human being and the more so in an artist who is addicted to being viewed by others. A cynical-aphoristic definition of Zoom could be that ‘the online environment where you meet others to look at yourself’. This permanent visual contact with someone who looks like you, behaves like you but is not you, being in the same digital format as the rest of the participants in the Zoom meeting, is an essential change of the performative act. Once assumed, reflexivity can disconnect from the passivity of one’s own contemplation in order to move on to the next level, the activation of self-awareness, which leads to knowledge, and to a new perspective of the artistic practice, and a new perspective of the world.

The body on stage belongs to a single place. The body of the Zoom performer is a multimedia body and it exists in several locations simultaneously: on his/her own screen, on the director’s screen, on the screens of the spectators who may be in the same city or in different geographical areas as well as in their own homes, of course. This state of facts lends a political feature to the Zoom performance, according to Götz Dapp who drew attention to the phenomenon of *mediaclash* (Dapp, 2007) – the conflict between medias, but not through message, but through form.

Because the internet speed differs from one user to another, latency occurs, which means that not everyone who looks at the same screen at the same time sees exactly the same thing. For Merleau-Ponty to have a body is to be crossed by virtualities, (Merleau-Ponty, cited in

Alloa 2014) referring to the possibility of moving, of going to places where the mind wants to get to, or referring to the ability to take all kinds of action. In the case of virtual movement, a simple touch of the mouse, a physical movement projects the material body into a world that has its own rules and attributes. Unlike the body-in-the-world of the human being (*in-der-welt*), the zoom persona is *in-zwei-welten*.⁶ For the zoom persona to acquire *corporeality*, the material-physical presence in the virtual reality (Dinescu, 2007, p. 13) both worlds need to come into existence, as it does not belong entirely to reality, nor to the digital. In order to activate the zoom persona one needs an original body, a device with a video camera, a link that opens the Zoom platform and, essentially, the eyes of other people. Assuming that he/she steps away from the self, the performer on stage interacts with his/her fellow performers, with the energy of the audience, with the role, with the elements of the show, with his/her own body. Mentally, the performer's zoom persona is a meeting between the authentic self, the character self and the technologically mediated self (see the figure 1).

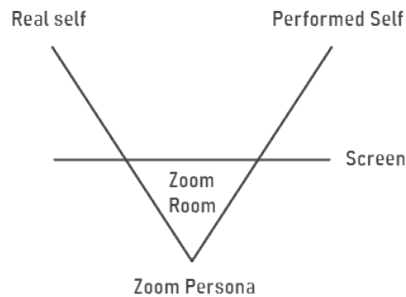


Figure 1.

Relationships are created among the three hypostases, which lead to the emergence of a complex identity that falls under the umbrella of digital ontology, “existential framework that is connected to a virtual ideology, and it includes the theories and the practices of the post-human, in the context of the proliferation of information-computational technology” (Dinescu, 2007, p. 8).

The *zoom* persona can be seen as a kind of *daemon* (in the sense used by Hannah Arendt), that accompanies the performer in his/her digital life. Unlike the daemon that is the distinct identity of each person but which appears and is visible only to the eyes of others, (Arendt, 2007, p. 234) the *zoom* persona is an altered identity (altered by role, technology, will) that accompanies the performer in his/her life on Zoom and which, although controlled and seen both by them and by the spectators, tells others something that the performer does not know about himself/herself, something that would explain the artists' interest in his/her own image on screen. If the *zoom persona* could be reified, then the person who would result from that process would not be the same person who was the source of the *zoom persona* – just as our

6 In Two Worlds (German).

Facebook personality, under the constant supervision of our peers, is not the same as the one manifested with people close to us, or not the same personality as the one visible in moments of solitude.

If, “existence is merely the complement of essence” (Baumgarten cited by Alloa, 2014) then the body manifestations of *The Others* become a representation of the essence of humanity which has dematerialized during the global isolation. During the quarantine, to be in the world meant being in the virtual world mostly. As long as the real human interaction (i.e., not technologically mediated) is abolished, the statement *I am online (on zoom) therefore I exist* holds the highest degree of truth. The communication on Zoom and on other platforms has kept man in the world (Heidegger, 2007, p. 31) that is alive.

Relationships among the Elements of Production

A performance on Zoom involves overlapping three different spheres – physical (domestic), digital (virtual) and esthetical (artistic) –, with all of their elements. The domestic sphere is the space of comfort, of everyday life, of relaxation. There is also a place in *homemade culture*, dedicated to socializing – for the host, for artists and for the audience. Such a place is no longer preserved in *e-homemade culture*, where the host is the artist as well, and the audience sits in another physical space. Socialization is mediated by screens, through software applications – Zoom, in our case study. The communication software (Zoom, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok) requires constructed elements that can be considered psychopomps – the phone, the tablet, the laptop – agents that ensure the transition from one environment to another. Their underlying function is video transmission. It is not a coincidence that the same agents are used equally inside and outside, in both the private and public spheres. The last space is the aesthetic one, a space of transformation, a transmedial space, activated (only) by the presence of an audience. It uses the elements of the other two environments, plus the human factor (the inhabitant of the house and the user of the telephone), and it takes a performed dramaturgical route (script, directorial indications).

All elements of each medium are redefined by the interaction with one another. Even though they are not used for their basic purpose, the initial function(s) of each one influences the manner in which they are used, and parts of them acquire roles in the others. Thus, a lamp becomes the lights in the show, the laptop used for writing or for bingeing is transformed into a video camera whose frames produce different effects, the objects in an apartment are rearranged according to the requirements of the performance. As the performance is influenced by the atmosphere and the things inside the house, undergoing a digitizing process, the zoom functions become performative. The entrance to the virtual world is prepared by the interaction between body and computer, through the keyboard, the mouse, the screen, by clicking on icons, establishing a system in which actions, commands and responses intertwine, so as to attain cooperation between the object and the subject (Dinescu, 2007, p. 43).

Relationships between Performers and Spectators

There is a transfer of energies between artists and audience, which can influence the intensity and the quality of the show (Ward, 2017). “The energy of the audience always charges me up when I’m on stage, and it was a rather strange experience for me not to feel it”, says Maria Müeler (Sterian, personal communication, June, 2020). An apathetic audience can drain the emotion off an artist no matter how well prepared he/she may be. On Zoom, the audience is no longer a solid mass with a common energy, each spectator is in his/her own domestic space, sometimes on another continent – as happened in the 2020 HomeFest edition. If the audience is not involved in the show, the connection between artists and audience is weak, with repercussions on the emotional journey of the performer. However, there remains a memory of the stage space and of the audience, a memory of the people who participated in previous shows, a memory reactivated by their Zoom faces, as Alexandra Dancs says:

Whenever I had acquaintances in the audience, who I knew had seen my shows, or if I had acquaintances among fellow performers, people with whom I had previously performed, then a kind of emotional memory was activated, a kind of familiarity. Kind of... we did things together and in the same physical space. But now the situation is different; we adapt and, even if I don’t see you much, I do not feel you, or I do not hear you, something in me knows you are there (Sterian, personal communication, 22nd June, 2020).

The audience disembodies, the artists no longer feel the energy in the audience; hence, the consequence is a more exaggerated acting, similar to acting outdoors – where actors speak their lines louder and use more emphatic gestures in order to be heard and seen by the spectators.

Zoom interaction between the performer and the audience can take three forms. With the first form, the spectators have their video camera and the microphone off; artists perform in front of a screen, they have no information and do not receive any energy from the audience, which is similar to the live shows on Facebook.⁷ That was the case of all shows in which Maria Müeler played: “As for the audience, the interaction was close to zero during the shows. Everything was done in such a way that the actors were the only ones on the screen and the spectators had their camera turned off” (Sterian, personal communication, June, 2020).

The artists have the possibility to turn off their camera – to which they resorted in *I Don’t Even Think You Exist*, for performative purposes. In the third or the fourth show, we decided to turn off our video camera for a few minutes, once the discussions had started. We would come back later, after the audience had the opportunity to talk casually to one another, ignoring the presence of artists who had inevitable expectations of feedback. With the second

7 In this case, the feedback from the audience comes on the chat room, which is most often read by the end of the performance.

form, spectators have the video camera on, and they participate not in the show but in the discussions after the show (if applicable). This situation is most similar to the theatre stage. Although the audience is mediated by the screen, they are visible and, to a certain degree, they can be felt, so that the performers receive energy – unsatisfactory though, as Carmen Florescu states:

And, again, what happens with the audience is weird. You can see some of them on screens – people at home, each one in their house, some are cooking, others are talking to those next to them, others are not in front of the camera at times. So, the audience is much more visible than in the theatre hall, literally. But you feel them much, much less, because you cannot hear them... you do not breathe the same air as them, the exchange of energy is close to zero actually, you cannot feel them (Sterian, personal communication, 22nd June, 2020).

In the third form of interaction, the audience is performatively integrated in the show. In the play *Work. No Travel* the audience read texts that they had received via private chat messages. In *Work. No Travel* the audience were asked, from the very beginning, to keep their screens on and to pay attention to chat messages, while in *A Morning Show from 2033*, the audience were asked to turn off their screens (and mics). In *I don't even think you exist*, we allowed the audience to choose what they wanted – to be seen, or not to be seen. In *Umbra/Stihomanjie* (The Shade/Versemanjy), the audience was an active part of the show, as they chose numbers that turned into book pages. In *I Don't Even Think You Exist*, the spectators were asked to dance and to do an exercise of self-hugging, together with the performers. Of course, this type of interaction can take many creative forms.

Despite the fact that the director has prepared the production with the highest precision, both the audience and the actor find themselves in a basically anarchic situation. "Anything might happen" (Mackintosh, 1993, p. 2). The source of this anarchy trait of the theatre and of the performance is the non-mediated interaction between the audience and the performers. In Zoom performances, both categories are safe, and the "anything might happen" is only related to the failure of the internet connection.

Relationships among Spectators

The use of Zoom has changed the traits of *homemade culture*. One such change is the possibility to reveal the intimacy of the spectator's private space – which applied only to the host, before. This can happen in three ways: 1. directly, in interactive shows, where the audience is required to do so, 2. implicitly, in shows where the audience have their video cameras open, and 3. naturally, in post-show discussions where spectators each get to show their interiors to the others, as happened during Homefest 2020. Spectators no longer wear festive clothes, often watch the shows dressed in their comfortable loungewear. In a 'classic' homemade culture event, the public are invited to someone's house to participate in an artistic event, where the host (who is the same as the artist, sometimes) is the one who opens his/her

intimate space to others. In an *e-homemade culture* (from quarantine time) event, the artists are the *host* of the Zoom meeting and, like the other participants, they show as much of their house as they want or as much as the director requires. When they are on the same visual level, the difference between the audience and the performers is blurred.

As stated in the Introduction, for many of the HomeFest 2020 spectators, post-show discussions were the only form of socialization. The pandemic situation has imposed some recurring mandatory topics.

With the exception of one-to-one meetings, there is no direct eye contact on Zoom, which favours a form of voyeurism through which participants become spectators of spectators.

Relationships between Spectators and the Domestic Space

For the audience of Homefest 2020, the comfort (of their own home space) related to convenience (not going to the venue, with all that it entails – dressing up, preparing, time spent in traffic) was considered the greatest advantage of watching from home: “You are pampered in your safe space at home. That is why I like it the most, you don’t waste time going to the show and back home. You can change your mind at the last minute, to go or not to go. You smoke. You drink. You change your place. You watch from bed” (Maria Mora); “The advantage was the convenience, of course, your loungewear, in the comfort of your living room/kitchen” (Ilinca Urmuzache); “I stayed comfortably at home, we had the whole family together, so everyone was watching” (Raluca Moşescu); “The advantage of watching a show on Zoom is that you’re at home, it’s comfortable and you save time like that, I think. Then, if there is music, you can dance with the cat, which is not to be ignored. Of course, the disadvantage is synonymous to the advantage, but for the cat part” (Raluca Bujor) (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020). “*Saving time*”, means the time spent traveling to the location and back, but a crucial time for the performer, as seen above, is also mentioned by Laura Ilie. However, the convenience has also disadvantages: “It breaks your focus, it distracts you. But, most of the time, my thoughts were wandering, no matter how much I wanted to stay focused, the comfortable environment at home didn’t seem to allow me to fully enter the atmosphere of the show” (Ilinca Urmuzache) (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020). Forced comfort during a pandemic is not an ingredient of happiness (Brook, 2020). External factors (noise from a construction site, neighbours) can disturb the pleasure of watching: “During some of the shows I could hear a drill that killed my concentration” (Ilinca Urmuzache); “Being at home, on my laptop, my attention could be drawn by an email, a phone, a courier, etc. Also, it was weird when I watched the shows in ‘gallery view’ because I could see the faces of the other people in the audience, which made me feel a little uncomfortable and distracted me from the show. However, this lasted for a short time, in the beginning, until I got used to it” (Miruna Molodet) (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020).

During the shows, people would drink alcohol and they would smoke, activities that improved the viewing experience. “I had a beer now and then, but otherwise I was quite

connected. On music shows, I danced, I talked a little with my family, I invited them to watch” (Raluca Bujor); “Sometimes I ate, I smoked, I drank coffee. I never stopped watching the show in order to talk on the phone or leave or do anything else” (Raluca Moşescu); “I ate seeds and nuts, I made a polenta (and I ate it), I smoked, I went to Facebook / Instagram / WhatsApp, I worked” (Miruna Molodeţ); “I was a spectator in one Zoom show, but I had many Zoom classes. I cooked. I used to listen to the radio in the kitchen while I washed the dishes or cooked, and I can pay attention to what I hear, but this didn’t work with the zoom classes. I couldn’t remember anything. During the show, I moved around the house about 3-4 times” (Maria Mora); “I also checked emails / social media, I smoked” (Ilinca Urmuzache); “I ate, I checked the phone, I put on moisturizer” (Andreea Drogeanu). “Small things (I checked my phone, made my coffee), but I tried to stay as focused as possible” (Olivia Grecea) (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020).

The distance among the spectators was perceived both as an advantage and as a disadvantage. “You are at home, you do not touch anyone, no one sees you. Everyone looks at themselves on Zoom”, says Laura Ilie. “Oh, yes, what’s cool is that there’s no more chatter, it’s like you’re going straight into the ambience and, in the end, you shut the window and you’re back with your cat in your arms. No complacency, no eternal debate about *where shall we go now*” (Raluca Bujor) (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020).

Accessing the show by simply clicking on a link, sitting comfortably at home, possibly nibbling a snack, with a glass of wine in hand, doing other things at the same time, seems ideal for the online viewer. Unlike Facebook live shows, on Zoom one can peek into someone else’s house, favouring voyeurism, even exhibitionism. You can meet known and unknown people without direct contact, safely, a desirable situation given the pandemics. The shows can also be accessed from another city/country. Mediated by a screen, accessing a Zoom show would compare with the experience of watching a movie at home. In short, this would be the spectatorship on Zoom.

The Relationship between the Spectators and Zoom

Just like the performers, most of the spectators discovered Zoom at the beginning of the quarantine and they used it mainly to satisfy their need to socialize during the quarantine. “The biggest advantage for me here, in New York, was that I had access to shows, events in Bucharest. This normally involves a leave of absence, a plane ticket to Bucharest and money saved. I really miss the shows, the concerts, the live screenings but, on the other hand, I would like the Zoom option for Homefest 2021, for instance” (Andreea Drogeanu) (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020). Andreea was not the only spectator from another country to watch the HomeFest shows. For the first time, the Bucharest based festival had an international audience as the shows were watched by people from the USA, the UK, France, and Austria.

Participation in the after-show discussions was extremely important during the quarantine. If the shows lasted about half an hour, the discussions, that sometimes became a kind of

pandemic talk show, lasted at least twice as long. “After the first show that I watched, I stayed because the transition seemed natural. The atmosphere was already somehow intimate and warm because I had managed to empathize with the performers, and the spectators were on the same page. I stayed because they were the first strangers I was seeing in a long time, even though virtually, and it mattered a great deal to me to have a talk - about anything” (Ilinca Urmuzache); “I feel more free to express myself, with less emotional pressure somehow. Which is actually classic for online communication, but still before everything moved online, I wasn’t aware of that” (Maria Mora); “Zoom facilitated the interaction among spectators, normally you don’t talk to the rest of the audience in the theatre/performance hall; and we interacted directly with the artists, with no mediation, we felt closer to them” (Raluca Moşescu) (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020).

Only two of the spectators expressed their curiosity about “the ways in which live shows were adapted for online performance” (Laura Ilie). “Although Zoom shows have limits, it was interesting to see how people adapted to the platform” (Miruna Molodeţ) (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020). The comparison with live shows was obviously in favour of the latter: “But I always prefer to leave the house, to go to a show in the theatre, I prefer direct social interaction, even if minimal” (Raluca Moşescu). “I would like to be able to return to the venues / houses / outdoors. The Zoom experience was both intimate and cold – intimate due to the personal space whose spectator you are; cold because the physical presence cannot be replaced by an online show/conversation/interaction, no matter how hard you try. I would watch more shows if it was the only option. It seems that we are going to stay online until 2021; so, yes, I’ll be watching zoom shows” (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020). (Ilinca Urmuzache). The experience of a theatre hall is also essential for Andreea Drogeanu: “The disadvantage is that nothing compares to the unique experience you have when you are inside a theatre (or an apartment in your case), or a cinema, for example. Moreover, for a few hours, you look at your laptop screen, at your image, and you end up obsessively arranging your hair” (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020). Watching one’s own image was ubiquitous, especially at the beginning of the shows: “Sometimes” (Andreea Drogeanu, Ilinca Urmuzache); “Sometimes, but not much. Although there’s much mirroring, it still does not trigger me that much. In fact, when I become aware of myself, I step out of that safe space where I thought I was at home. So, I prefer not to become aware” (Maria Mora); “At first, very little, I frowned, I still arranged my hair” (Raluca Moşescu); “I looked at my own image, of course. At some point, everything was very lonely, I really wanted to look at someone else, but there is no possibility of eye contact on Zoom” (Raluca Bujor); “Yes, although I looked at it more during the discussions after the show than during the show. It also depended on the show, I didn’t see my image during all the shows (neither the image of the other spectators)” (Miruna Molodeţ) (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020). For Raluca Moşescu, watching others was part of the extended pleasure of watching a show: “I peeked into people’s houses and watched their facial expressions, reactions; during the show, I would change the viewing mode in Zoom

and closely watched each one of them”. “I’ve always been curious about other people’s houses. Houses often reflect fragments of people’s personality or bits of what happens in their lives. I’ve been working as a set designer for the last 10 years, so I have an excuse” (Andreea Drogeanu); “I really wanted to see normality in the houses of the other spectators” (Ilinca Urmuzache); “It was especially interesting to see them walking around the house, for example from the balcony to the room, from the room to the kitchen” (Miruna Molodet); “Zoom life or offline life, I like to enter the private space of others” (Olivia Grecea); “I peeked into other people’s homes, but nothing out of the ordinary” (Raluca Bujor) (Sterian, personal communication, June-July, 2020).

As can be seen, spectators and performers had different experiences on Zoom. For the spectators, Homefest and other similar initiatives were much closer to the performative equivalent of food-delivery. In the case of spectatorship, Grapp’s *mediaclash* concept becomes more of a *mediamatch* – the combination of domestic, artistic and virtual environments offers more advantages than disadvantages. The lack of artistic performative aspect makes the zoom persona of the spectator manifest in an insignificant form.

Although Zoom offers the option of “visual” applause, this option was not used by the spectators. The usual applause was also quite rare. Most often, the appreciation was shown during the after-show discussions or through messages on the chat box. The domestic space offered the audience more comfort through side activities that enriched the viewing experience (smoking, drinking, eating), compensating for the lack of emotion that would be given by the show on stage. If camera-shy people permanently turned their cameras off (even during the discussion), most had no problems with showing parts of their domestic space, as some shows were even watched in bed. The ease of connecting to Zoom has made the shows accessible to older people, a fairly rare audience, for example, at HomeFest.

From a technical point of view, no matter how good the source of image and the sound of the artists was, the technical conditions of each receiver were the most important. A concert that sounds impeccable on the musicians’ end can be heard terribly on the spectators’ end. In a performance hall, the spectators benefit more or less from the same sound quality, but this is no longer possible on Zoom. Unlike the friendly Zoom meetings where the phone was used, desktops and especially laptops were used for shows. In June 2020, Zoom Video Communication Inc. produced their own tablet, equipped with functions that facilitate remote communication, which will certainly influence future performative experiences.

Production as a Whole and the Space Where It Takes Place

The (aesthetic) performative space of Zoom shows is the result of something that could be called *spaceclash* (originating in Grapp’s concept of *mediaclash*), an intersection of two spaces with different features, with a strong cultural load: the domestic space and the virtual space. Both involve different kinds of habitation and of usage, distinct practices, communication and connection codes to employ with other users, as well as other value systems. The creator

of such shows is like an explorer charting three territories at the same time, amongst which the most familiar is the performative one. But the charting depends on knowing the other two. According to Richard Schechner, the first site-specific (environmental) theatre theorist, a new acting environment can be approached in two ways: “First, there is what one can do *with* a space and *in* a space. Secondly, there is the acceptance of a given space. In the first case, one *creates* an environment by transforming a space; in the second case, one *negotiates* with an environment, engaging in a scenic dialogue with a space” (Schechner, 1973). The Zoom performance requires the transformation of the domestic space (we perform where we eat and sleep, a typical *homemade culture* situation), as well as the acceptance of the virtual space (ok, we don’t have a choice and, for a while, we shall perform on Zoom). In the second stage, there is the negotiation on the intersection of the two. In the third stage, as soon as the *e-domestic box* came into being, its performative use begins. Instead, in a stage performance, the text and the director’s view impose the setting, the technology type and the acting style.

The virtual and the domestic spaces involve certain restrictions that limit, on the one hand, the concept of artistic manifestations, challenge the creativity and the adaptation skills of the artists. By performing in an *e-domestic box*, the artists are transformed into site-specific artists. Ideas that can be put into practice in the studio or on stage cannot be done on Zoom but, instead, one can reproduce on stage almost anything to a high technical quality. Building the relationship between characters is more difficult. It is done only through lengthy rehearsals, involving a considerable (and tiring) amount of time spent on Zoom. As the theatre director Bobi Pricop states:

It is pretty difficult to convey very precise indications on Zoom, nuances, subtle emotions, so that in the end it was still by meeting face to face that we managed to build the performance experience in a meaningful way, both for us and for the audience. Zoom was the best option in a less favourable context. It helped us to be somehow together and to see everything as an adventure in which we all had the courage to throw ourselves, to take risks, to question everything we had known about our work by then (Sterian, personal communication, July, 2020).

In the case of theatre plays, stage crafting needed to take into account the fact that every character was in their private space and plots needed to be based on that. The play *A Morning Show from 2033* has the format of a TV show where anchors are in different cities. In another play by Theo Herghelegiu, *Lasagna. Cu de toate* (Lasagne with Everything), the members of a family have a Skype conversation; in *Work. No Travel* by Bobi Pricop, a play about emigration, Zoom worked very well because the platform (Skype) is similar to the one immigrants use to communicate with their families back home, and the audience had a participative presence in the original version, too. *I Don’t Even Think You Exist* turned from a show about crises, into a show about the general crisis where the team members performed how they lived through the quarantine, when the Zoom platform started to be used on a massive scale.

In Zoom shows (during the quarantine) there is no professional team to transform an ordinary space into a magic one – costume designer, set designer, make-up artist, light designer, sound designer. All of their jobs are taken up by the artist, which makes performing on Zoom a Do It Yourself activity. The inside of the performer’s house (furniture, light, sound, clothes) take over all of these functions, just as the phone, the tablet or the laptop will impose some technical features on the show. “Everybody made a great effort, it was a long period of experiments, research of all possibilities to work together remotely, to create something relevant with whatever each of us had around the house, laptops, phones, lamps, boxes, mirrors etc” (Sterian, personal communication, July, 2020), says Bobi Pricop, a director who rehearsed three performances on Zoom, out of which only *Work. No Travel* was also played in this medium. In that case, a technical person was in charge, who became our Zoom ‘specialist’. So, the show included sharing the screen, we used the chat, used drawing, spectators were involved, virtually all Zoom features became performative.

The Art Product and the Cultural Market

The last element of Schechner’s model, the one reconfigured by the domestic-virtual performance, is the relationship between the final product and the cultural market. Homemade culture events are most often non-profit, the interests of their initiators are primarily personal, artistic and social, which makes it difficult to place them on the capitalist market, thus inducing a continuous, implicit critique of the system. The events are not promoted and their monetization is not wanted either.

During the quarantine, the e-homemade culture phenomenon was a form of artistic resilience but, afterwards, it started to gain professional traits – by means of increasingly advanced technologies, and through marketing. The fact that companies and brands approach cultural events located in domestic spaces indicates that such events have turned into a commodity, which marks the start of a phenomenon that has eluded the tight net of capitalism by now. Such a homemade culture project that defied this direction was carried out during the 2020 pandemics, by the Bulgarian artist Ivo Dimcev, an artist known in the world of contemporary dance, who has started an international music career in recent years. At the beginning of the quarantine, he posted the following message on Facebook: “I don’t want to play music online, I want to play in people’s homes, in their living rooms. They will sit on the couch and I shall sit 3 meters away, on a chair, with the synthesizer on my knees. Of course, everyone will wear masks. I enter the house, I do not touch anything, I sit down, I play for 30-40 minutes, then I leave” (Kenarov, 2021). In three months, the artist gave over 100 concerts in apartments and houses in Sofia, with the declared aim of helping people get over loneliness and depression in such difficult times. The concerts were given in living rooms, kitchens, toilets, attics and basements, in disadvantaged areas of the city, in neighbourhoods inhabited by Roma communities. The artist performed for free, inviting the hosts to a symbolical purchase of a T-shirt. “I have not felt so well since the beginning of the pandemic” (Kenarov, 2021), says Dimiter Kenarov, for whose birthday Dimcev came to play

in his apartment. Dimcev considered his project a kind of public service, meant to mitigate the effects of a general situation.

The intimate feeling of homemade culture is lost through technology and multiplication, which drains its social function (Borriaud, 2004). A type of event that was meant for a small audience before the pandemics, has now become accessible to anyone, coming out of a social bubble, to enter the market, in Adorno's terms, in the culture industry. The aims of the culture industry are economic in nature – as with any industry (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). Albeit a product of the domestic box, the domestic space activated by a performative act, by the intensive technology, by the multiplication and the broad access, turn it into a sort of artistic Airbnb⁸, where hosts become providers of cultural services in exchange for money, or in exchange for a reputation that is monetised.

Conclusions

Starting from the Schechner's diagram of the transactions of the theatrical act, I have developed an updated one while researching a performative arts festival held exclusively in the domestic space and broadcast on zoom. These relationships have been highlighted by comparing work processes in the creation of a show in different spaces: the classical theatre stage, the domestic space in homemade culture, and a new space that is a hybrid between the physical, the domestic and the virtual, which could be called *e-domestic box*. According to Octavian Saiu, "The space is the main ordering component, everything that involves relationship or presence in the performance space is resized, processed, reorganised from a perspective that ensures coherence" (Saiu, 1998). In *homemade culture* the domestic space is reconfigured by the intersection with the artworks, a valid situation also in *e-homemade culture*. The e-homemade culture performers face challenges generated by the attempt to adapt the artistic content to two spaces: the domestic space and the virtual space. The boundaries between the performative act and the daily activities are blurred, and the status of the artist is "laicized" (as it often happens in homemade culture). The status of artists and the status of the audience tend to become equal in homemade culture, whereas a *live* show mediated by the screen is most likely perceived as a movie at the cinema, on television or on a laptop. The "sacredness" of the performative act is diminished by the triviality of the domestic space, by the lack of rituals to transit from one space to the other, as well as by the feeble connection with the audience. The presence of one's own image on the screen induces an exacerbated self-awareness which may lower the concentration and lessen the artistic experience. The artist faces the *zoom persona* phenomenon, a digital construct made up of one's own identity, the performed part and the self-reflection on the screen. Regardless of the production level and the technical broadcasting of the performance, the reception depends on the technical conditions available to the spectator. During the quarantine, the artists' disembodiment has become the

8 Airbnb is an American company that operates an online marketplace for lodging, primarily homestays for vacation rentals, and tourism activities, using at the beginning, the homes for rent that belonged to regular people.

strongest message conveyed to viewers, more significant than the aesthetic or the political messages intended by the author and by the director. While the quarantine culture was a form of resilience in the current constraining context, the e-homemade culture tends to become professional due to technology and the design of cultural events in public spaces. If homemade culture could be considered a subculture, a theory that I wish to research further, then the emergency of e-homemade culture signals the beginning of homologation by mainstream culture through commodification, weakening its potency of resilience (Hebdige, 1979).

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