More opening entrances, more initial encounters and more first impressions are now made by email, and impression management has always mattered, to both presenter and receptive audience. The importance and the frequency of email presentation has now created a particular kind of performance anxiety, an anxiety comprising possible mis-communication, mis-representation, missed or mixed messages, or the perhaps accidental but inexcusably irreversible premature ‘send’. Variations of punctuation, inappropriate conversational style, spelling errors, misplaced humour, dubious tone, and temporary emotion made electronically permanent, may significantly influence the reader’s perceptions of the writer, let alone the intended meaning. In their book Send: The How, Why, When, and When Not, of Email (2007), David Shipley and Will Schwalbe narrate a horror story of emails miswritten, mis-sent, mis-understood, and made public when they were intended for private consumption. They describe email as the most difficult written medium to manage, and warn that ‘a message written without regard to tone becomes a blank screen onto which the reader projects his [or her] own fears, prejudices, and anxieties’ (Shipley and Schwalbe 2007: 7). An awareness of this potential for misunderstanding creates unease: ‘We are in the position of having to get our messages right dozens or even hundreds of times a day, often under intense pressure, and for recipients whose needs, attitudes and moods are constantly changing’ (8).

‘Urban dictionaries’ and online social forums now recognize ‘send anxiety’ as involving panic or fear caused by the need to send an email to a large audience that may include senior work colleagues or over the possibility of forgetting to attach a document or over the possibility of there being grammatical errors in the email: ‘Even after the email content has been triple-checked for accuracy, the attachment has been verified (attached), and the recipient list is correct, one may feel panic or fear (anxiety) before sending, causing delays to click “send”’ (Phoenix, www.urbandictionary.com, 2006). This kind of anxiety may be considered a form of stage fright; Esther Milne describes how the theatricality of email creates apprehension:

In their one-to-one communications, the subjects of epistolary discourse engage in what we might call a dialogic performance, whereas for their email counterparts the one-to-many performance is more properly described as theatrical. The latter is, arguably, more difficult to regulate, since communication involves the participation of multiple subjects. Although, of course, misunderstanding and misrepresentation are possible in epistolary communication, in email discussion groups this possibility is amplified. Subjects must negotiate not only the portrayal of self but also the audience response to this portrayal and, subsequently, their own response to the audience’s reaction. (Milne 2010: 197)

The act of sending an email stages both the text and the sender, exposing them to potentially limitless audience numbers. Whether deliberately sending an email to a large group or sending a message to an individual with the intention and expectation of it being kept private by him or her, emails are written with an awareness of the writing as performance. (Without this awareness the potential for embarrassment increases, and it is this awareness that produces performance anxiety.) Milne describes how when writing to
an Internet mailing list, ‘one is keenly aware of the writing as performance or writing "for publication”’ (2010: 198).

The performative qualities of email are particularly revealed in the uncanny moment when one receives an email from oneself – that is, when you send an email to a discussion group or a mailing list and it arrives in your own inbox. Milne explains that, in this instance, ‘it is possible to occupy the role of both audience and actor because one encounters one’s own email as if it were sent from another participant’ (2010: 198). This is an uncanny encounter in which one recognizes a reflection of oneself that is the same but different, familiar yet foreign; Milne reminds us that we ‘do not, however, “own” this version of self; other members of the group can intervene to “read” me differently, to rupture and challenge the stability of my image’ (198). This version of self is vulnerable and easily misunderstood, and in encountering this other in the inbox, an author is spectator to his or her own performance.

While tweeting or posting text on a platform such as Facebook, a blog or Twitter is an inherently public act, email communication is seemingly more private. However, the illusion of privacy is of course spurious, as there is always the potential that an email may be recirculated, retrieved or monitored. In her book Portable Communities: The social dynamics of online and mobile connectedness, Mary Chayko describes the particular ways in which email can be anxiety-producing ‘as we attempt to master the “rules” and norms of modern technological use’ (2008: 126–7) and she explains how surveillance of employees by employers has become increasingly commonplace in technological societies: ‘Most companies have the ability to monitor employees’ web connections, and as many as half may retain and review email messages’ (152). Part of the anxiety of performing email stems from a slippage between public and private modes of mediated communication and the potential for email to be forwarded, shared, posted and even altered and resent. The content of the emailed message may even be dictated by the author’s awareness of a potential witness; the author writes to a specific addressee but the writing is shaped by the potential presence of other readers. Once the author has pressed ‘send’, they have allowed that message to be reproduced by anyone; it has become a published document without privacy protection and, as with all hard-copy communication, it may be scrutinized and the writer may be held accountable in a court of law.

Email is the literal manifestation of Derrida’s writing that ‘constitutes a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle hinder its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten’ (Derrida 1988: 8). It is this independence that Derrida argues defines writing: ‘For a writing to be a writing it must continue to “act” and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he [or she] has written’ (8). In an email, writing becomes itself in the sending; it is in this act that the author abandons his or her mark, which ‘cuts itself off from him [or her] and continues to produce effects independently of his [or her] presence and of the preset actuality of his [or her] intentions’ (5). Sending severs the written text from the domain of the writer while still representing the writer through the concept of authorship. Emails may both act as an extension of the original author and perform independently of the original author.

Mark Amerika explains in his article ‘Expanding the concept of writing: Notes on net art, digital narrative and viral ethics’ that, ‘[w]riting is becoming ever more performative in a network-distributed environment’ and that ‘such writing is fueled by what Gregory Ulmer calls “the logic of invention”’ (2004: 9). In his 1989 book Teletheory: Grammatology in the age of video, and in his 2002 book Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy, Ulmer explained the move from ‘literacy’ to ‘electracy’, which extends and redefines the literary paradigm. In a lecture in 2000, Ulmer explained, ‘Electracy is to the digital apparatus
what literacy is to the alphabetic apparatus' (Ulmer 2000). Email seems to lie at a point of transition between these two paradigms, not quite embracing the 'logic of invention' of digital writing, yet enjoying the speed and scope of digital dissemination. Email is an odd format for communicating, confusing the long-form style of written letters with the instant feedback potential of online communication. The medium of the communication, the instant online 'post', can jar with the importance and formality of the message.

Whether posting a written letter or sending an email online there is a moment of 'letting go', of disconnection between author and writing, and, simultaneously, a moment of 'bringing forth' an entity into the world. When one writes within the digital domain, the text is inherently 'unfinished'; Peter Lunenfeld describes 'unfinish' as defining the aesthetics of digital media (2000: 7) and digital text is in constant flux, always potentially alterable and unfixed. When writing an email, the text exists this way until the moment in which the message is sent. The act of sending produces something that was not previously available, making public and accessible that that had been private, and the following will examine the explicit performativity of this act. Sending an email both realizes and disseminates the writing in such a way that it may be considered within a performative frame.

Writing digital text (typing, deleting, cutting and pasting) rehearses the performative act, where that that has been internal or 'behind the scenes' is brought forth onto the stage, communicated from one party to another via mediated representation. There has been much discussion of the various ways in which computers perform, and digital text has been widely articulated as inherently 'performative'. Alice Rayner, in her chapter in Of Borders and Thresholds, entitled 'Everywhere and Nowhere: Theatre in Cyberspace', explains how the digital code itself performs:

The code is necessary but unavailable except as a symptom; alien to life in three dimensions, but present; the media of community that has no place and exists only each time it is iterated; it has no potential. The iterations of code are performances without theatre. (Rayner 1999: 299)

Digital code is iterated when informational patterns are recognized; digital writing essentially involves re-patterning and re-coding digital language.

Katherine Hayles explores the difference between print and electronic text and the performativity of digital code. She explains that while readers of print perform complex cognitive operations when they read a book, the text itself exists as such prior to the reading of the book. However, an electronic text does not exist anywhere in the form in which it is realized on screen:

After it is displayed, of course, readerly processing may occur, as with print. But we should not indulge in the logical confusion that results when it is assumed that the creation of the display – a process that happens only when the programs that create the text are activated – entails the same operations as a reader's cognitive processing. In this sense, electronic text is more processual than print; it is performative by its very nature – independent of whatever imaginations and processes the user brings to it. (Hayles 2005: 101)

The email text is never realized on the receiver's computer in the same way as it was on the sender's. It is accessed via programs that enable display (meaning, of course, possible confusions of code or formatting in the translation of 'writing' by different programs, but even when there are no such errors, the writing is inherently remediated), and following Hayles' logic, email is performative by its very nature.

The term 'performativity' has a complex linguistic and philosophical background of usage continually bound to J. L. Austin's lectures on 'speech acts', presented in 1955 at Harvard University as part of the William James Lectures. The 'performative' utterance does not describe an action or an event; it is the performing of an action or event through the words. In examples listed by Austin, such
as, ‘I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth’, ‘I bet you . . .’ and ‘I bequeath . . .’, ‘it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it’ (Austin 1962: 6). Speech acts are ‘performative’ specifically because they produce change; they bring into effect the consequences of an action. Derrida explains that the performative produces or transforms a situation, it effects; and even it if can be said that a constative utterance also effectuates something and always transforms a situation, it cannot be maintained that that constitutes its internal structure, its manifest function or destination, as in the case of the performative. (Derrida 1988: 13)

The act of sending an email changes the status of the writing, produces the effect that it describes and brings the writing into existence. It is not proposed here that the act of sending or posting constitutes a ‘speech act’, but rather that the act is inherently performative, producing something that was not previously in existence. It is debatable whether the performative transformation can be considered permanent: unlike some performatives that can be undone or revoked (for example, taking back a promise or having a marriage annulled) the act of sending text into the cybersphere is one that is nigh impossible to completely erase. Dennis Kurzon in his book It is Hereby Performed ... Explorations in legal speech acts, explores the phenomena of ‘reversible performatives’ from a legal perspective, examining three verbs – ‘to bequeath’, ‘to take’ and ‘to enact’ – that are often cited as examples of ceremonial performatives. These three performatives have a property that differentiates them from other performatives; ‘After being performed in the full sense, they may be reversed, i.e. their original performance is annulled’ (Kurzon 1986: 41). Kurzon explains, using the example of the American Supreme Court overturning an unconstitutional statute, how an original performance can be reversed despite the previous felicitous performance of the speech act: “The speech act "goes sour" (or "misfires" in Austin’s terminology, 1961: 16) after performance, although apparently fulfilling all prior conditions’ (46). This is different to Austin’s notion of infelicitous performances where the act never achieves felicitous performance; one or more conditions for performance have not been met and the act either ‘misfires’ (‘act is purported but void’) or is an ‘abuse’ (‘act professed but hollow’) (Austin 1962: 18).

Some email platforms do offer a limited ‘recall’ option and/or an ‘unsend’ option, where emails may be recalled within a particular time frame if they have not been opened or where the sending of a message can be prevented for a few seconds. Microsoft Office advises that the recall feature is only available for Exchange accounts (and they clarify that ‘most home and personal accounts do not use Microsoft Exchange’), and that the success or failure of a recall is dependent on the recipient’s account settings (Microsoft Office Support, 2013). There are questions concerning whether emails can be recalled if sent as ‘bcc’ (blind courtesy copy) or if sent to an email account that is accessed on a smartphone. Recipients may or may not be notified of the retraction of the sent message, that is, that they were sent a message that was then recalled, and if, as sender, you request an email ‘to tell you if the recall succeeds or fails, there is no way to know how long it might take for this e-mail message to arrive as there are many variables in this process’ (Microsoft Office Support, 2013). In the retrieval or retraction of an email, it may be considered that the felicitous conditions of the performative act have not been met; perhaps there is no intention or sincerity on behalf of the sender or the act is purported but rendered void. However, one could also argue that the act of retracting may itself constitute a further performative or periperformative act (that is, to retract, to ‘take back’), or that, in some cases, sending an email may be a ‘reversible performative’. The practicalities of recalling an email are, however, limited, and traces of the original email are difficult to completely delete; even if recalled an email will inevitably endure as a ‘sent item’.
It could further be argued, albeit speculatively, that the act of emailing meets the basic requirements not only of a performative but also of performance. As earlier mentioned, the discourse exploring the performance of digital technologies has been well-rehearsed. In *Perform or Else: From discipline to performance* (2001), Jon McKenzie explains the different uses of theatre and performance as conceptual models within the sciences and examines Robert Crease’s application of performance as a paradigm for theorizing scientific experimentation in his book *The Play of Nature: Experimentation as Performance* (1993). Crease offers the following definition:

Performance is first of all an execution of an action in the world which is a *presentation* of a phenomenon; that action is related to a *representation* (for example, a text, a script, a scenario, or book), using a semiotic system (such as language, a scheme of notation, a mathematical system); finally, a performance springs from and is presented to a suitably prepared local (historically and culturally bound) community which recognizes new phenomena in it.

(Crease 1995: 100)

In emailing a message, the act of sending is an action in the world that presents a phenomenon; in sending the email the sender/computer remediates (represents) the unfinished digital writing, making it available to a prepared local audience.

However, emails can be duplicated and this would appear to conflict with an understanding of the ontology of performance as being non-reproducible. In *Unmasked: The politics of performance*, Peggy Phelan explores the characteristics of ‘performance’ as a species of contemporary art and outlines that both the performative speech act and the ontology of performance are incapable of being reproduced. She offers Emile Benveniste’s explanation of the speech act: ‘Being an individual and historical act, a performative utterance cannot be repeated. Each reproduction is a new act performed by someone who is qualified. Otherwise, the reproduction by someone else necessarily transforms it into a constative utterance’ (Benveniste in Phelan 1993: 149). The nature of performance as being definitively ‘live’ means that it cannot be reproduced or re-experienced in exact form and context. Indeed, Phelan asserts that performance’s being is dependent on its ‘disappearance’; ‘it becomes itself through disappearance’ (Phelan 1993: 146).

Email becomes itself through appearance and arrival; it is dependent on its appearance and, as discussed, its potential re-appearance. Emails can be re-sent but, once sent, the status of the writing itself has been altered. The act of sending produces the writing; if altered in a revised draft, or through the process of re-sending or forwarding, a new text is performed. An email can of course be sent more than once, and it can be sent in exactly the same form repeatedly, to many recipients. While sending an email separates writer from text, disseminating it in such a way that it exists independent of context and author, an email is never fixed but always alterable. Without material instantiation, digital text exists only as informational pattern that can be endlessly accessed, remediated, represented and performed in each encounter and interface.

In exploring the performativity or the potential performance of email, it is necessary to pose the question as to who, or what, is performing? One could query whether the performative act is accomplished at the moment of sending or on the receipt of the email, but as the argument here pertains to the process of digital writing and its performance, the act of performance as transformation occurs at the time of sending (the performance of the reader or of the transformation of the writing in the process of encounter/consumption has been well-established, for example, in Barthes’ discussion of the ‘writerly text’ (1974) and in Eco’s ‘open work’ (1989)). The act of sending connects the performativity of the human command with the ‘technological performance’ of the machine, as described by McKenzie:

> When we talk about how a car performs, or when we ask about the performance specifications of a computer, we are citing a sense of performance used by engineers, technicians, and computer
scientists. Concepts of technological performance help guide the design, testing and manufacture of thousands upon thousands of industrial and consumer-grade commodities. (McKenzie 2001: 10)

This kind of 'technical performance', which involves reaching a particular standard of efficiency or achieving a high measure of efficacy, may be compared with Marvin Carlson's framing of performance as involving the display of 'skill' (with 'skill' understood as evidencing technical proficiency). Carlson describes 'two rather different concepts of performance', one 'involving the display of skills, the other involving display but less of particular skills than of a recognized and culturally coded pattern of behaviour' (Carlson 2004: 4-5). In the sending of electronic mail, we see both manifestations of performance: the technical performance of digital computation and the culturally coded behaviour of the communicator.

Sending an email illustrates the performativity of the human action in connection with the technical performance of the computer. While in this example the interplay between user and machine typically involves command and response, the example of 'pressing send' appears to complicate this simplicity; 'sending' is produced collaboratively. It manifests both the performative action of the author and the performative sequencing of the computer. In unpacking this relationship, it would be simplistic to understand the computer as 'extending' the capabilities of the human body, or to suggest a kind of cybernetic corporeality. This performative act is produced in unison, as a partnership, performing the symbiosis of human and technology. Anna Munster calls the site of connection between human and machine 'a kind of graft' and suggests that it is through this interface that we experience 'digital embodiment', a recombinant notion in which the digital is neither pure code nor the pure physical extension of the body (Munster 2006: 4–10). The act of emailing performs this connection and manifests the intermediation of materiality and information.

Intermediation is a term utilized by Hayles in her book My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts (2005) and in her article 'Intermediation: The pursuit of a vision' (2007) to denote dynamic interactions between language, code, text, subject and media. As a term, intermediation brings together ideas of intervention and mediation and suggests the act of coming between. Hayles asserts: 'Perhaps most importantly, intermediation also denotes mediating interfaces connecting humans with the intelligent machines that are our collaborators in making, storing, and transmitting informational processes and objects' (Hayles 2005: 33). This kind of collaborative connection is very overtly realized in the simple act of sending an email. In this act we see a transaction between body, text and media, revealing the 'entanglement of the bodies of texts and digital subjects' (Hayles 2005: 7). On a most basic level, email performs the interface connecting humans with digital communication systems.

The collaborative process of composing and editing emails, sms (short message service) texts, tweets, blogs and Facebook messages, rehearses the digital text in an often non-linear dance of 'cut', 'paste' and 'delete'. The process of digital writing is inherently unfinished; it exists only as pattern that can be reshaped and rewritten, right up until the moment that we press 'send'. Sending both completes the writing process and disseminates the writing product. Pressing 'send' realizes the digital text, bringing it to a form of completion and into the world. 'Sending' or 'posting' suggests the dispatch of a message from one destination to another, yet in sending an email, there is a sense not of transferring a fixed entity from one place to another, but of bringing the previously abstract into being. The act of pressing send, or posting, makes available that that had previously been inaccessible; it stages that that had until that point been in the process of rehearsal or preparation, unfinished and in flux. In this act, an immediate transformation takes place as, for all intents and purposes, the writing is instantaneously published. An understanding of
the performativity of mailing electronically may offer constructive insight into the performance anxiety associated with this prominent and pervasive means of communication.

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