

## **MEDIATED MESSAGES :**

constructions of intimate communication through the use of digital technologies, and the extent to which such encounters can be conceptualised as one-to-one performance

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## ABSTRACT

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century a majority of the world's population carry in their pockets devices that promise connection to others over distance. The instant connectivity offered by technologies of communication is somewhat of mixed blessing combining the allure of interaction and the threat of availability. Much of the advertising gloss for the technologies of communication – smartphones, video conferencing and social networks – relies on selling the idea of real human connection at a distance.

This study sets out to explore the nature of mediated communications between individuals in the context of a perceived opposition that conceptualises technology as either distancing or enhancing what it is to be human. The research frames mediated interactions as one-to-one performance, an approach which encourages the unexpected and playful whilst embracing vulnerability. In exploring the nature of the one-to-one performance scholars and audiences stress their experiences as personal, at times intense and certainly intimate. Here intimacy is engaged with as both a subconscious technological fluency as well as intrapersonal closeness, placing such interaction in the socio-cultural context of late capitalism. It is concluded that rather than technology enframing a commodified experience of the world, intimate interrelations are possible and inevitable.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the research question and contextualises the inquiry in regard to my own personal and professional background.

Chapter 2 details relevant concepts, scholarship, performance practice and cultural context and serves to place the work in a lineage of other practice.

Chapter 3 describes, documents and interrogates the research practice, including inspirations and experiments alongside the final works. Chapter 4 conceptualises the practice within a phenomenological framework, analysing contemporary communications technologies as part of an expanding perceptual toolset with which we co-shape our reality and placing technical infrastructure within a framework of late capitalism. The final chapter concludes the complimentary writing and clearly enumerates the findings.

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## Introduction

Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists

(Kaprow, 1958:8-9)

There has been an acknowledged ‘recent upsurge in intimate encounters in the performance experience; ‘one-on-one’ or ‘one-to-one’ performance, which explores the direct connection between performer and audience member, space and individual interaction’ (Machon, 2013:22), and indeed some have argued that ‘The concurrent popularity of both the one-2-one form and of digital ‘first person’ platforms for seemingly intimate displays is surely not coincidental’ (Heddon et al., 2012:121). Here, one-to-one is defined as a performative turn that invites audience members to experience the event on their own, their spectatorship and participation are actively solicited as they are ‘engendered as a participant’ (Ibid: 120). The ‘one-to-one’ configuration can invite confessional reactions from its audience, it can proclaim individuality – attesting to the unique nature of the experience, and it provides a challenging platform for the enacting of sociability and performance of self.

It is also clear that ‘one-to-one’ interaction is a central part of much of our *mediated* activity in everyday life. Text messaging, video chats and direct messaging platforms are often and perhaps primarily used as a ‘one-to-one’ format. Much as the performance form emphasises and prioritises the interaction between its two individual participants and the engendering of a (generally temporary) relationship between them; so too digital platforms help foster a human connection by mediating a bridge of technological convenience

between distant locations. It is notable that much of the socio-cultural research into (for example) text messaging engages with its general usage pattern, as is to be expected, and in so doing the emphasis is frequently on such areas as the maintenance of social ties and conversational strategies of already extant groups of family, work colleagues and friends.

At the core of this project is the idea of intimacy through technology.

Investigating the question 'Can communications technologies be used to enable intimate one-to-one encounters?' Which is to say:

- Can participating in the now commonplace activity of exchanging text messages, or within a live audio/visual conference engender a similar experience as that discovered whilst sharing the same physical location?
- Are the experiences characteristic of the theatrical one-to-one (intimacy, agency, individual attention) replicable through these technologies?

In inviting a connection to an unknown other through technologies that are generally used for intimate personal communications we examine anew the different qualities and affordances these technologies offer. The term affordances as it used here is borrowed from perceptual psychology<sup>1</sup>, and refers to the potentiality offered by a particular object or environment to the human perceiver. Heft suggests:

The affordances of a given place in the environment establish for an individual what actions are possible there and what the consequences of those actions are. (Heft, 1989:1)

In his paper 'Technology Affordances', Gaver simplifies this to suggest 'affordances are the fundamental objects of perception' (Gaver, 1991:79).

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of affordances comes from J. J. Gibson's approach to an "ecological" alternative to theories of cognitive perception. In the case of a cognitive approach it is assumed that humans 'have direct access only to sensations, which are integrated with memories to build up symbolic representations of the environment and its potential for goal-oriented action' (Gaver, 1991:79) and as such information is processed entirely "in the head". Gibson's ecological approach leans instead on a phenomenological attitude to the understanding of perception, and invokes meaning making as a collusion of perception arising from the relations between the environment and the actor within that environment.



The technological affordances of the systems used in this research create a stage of possibility, within which an encounter operates as a crucible for relational becoming, offering new knowledge as to how intimacy might be transmitted or co-created between us.

Robin Nelson notes that

Research into performance may be insightful in unpacking the operation of cultural codes and conventions to reveal how social reality is constructed and knowledge is legitimated and circulated in the performance of everyday life (Nelson, 2011:111)

The work presented here might be categorised as what philosophers of technology have come to call an 'empirical turn' (Ihde, 2012:374; Brey, 2010:39). Technologies that mediate conversation and communication are chosen and examined through use. To achieve this end experimental usage is conceptualised, devised, described and documented. Following discussion with participants regarding their experience of these encounters, and a consideration of the author's own experience, critical reflection results in the devising of further encounters. The affect and affordance of the chosen technologies have upon the experimental participants perception of each other, and their behaviour towards each other is theorised and placed into the context of an intimate 'one-to-one' experience. The investigation is approached in a phenomenological manner, such that the research encompasses 'how technologies affect our experience in ways that are not bound to questions of function' (Aronowitz, 1996:15).

This 'empirical turn' activates a dynamic model of mixed mode research as outlined by Robin Nelson in his various writings on practice as research as a rich loam for the generation of new insights. Nelson follows Pears in categorising three varieties of knowledge 'knowledge of facts, acquaintance [things which are not facts], and knowledge of how to do things' (Pears quoted in Nelson, 2011:106). He posits a process model of action research; one which triangulates different forms of 'testimony, data and evidence' and allows shifts in focus

between different modes of knowledge-creation. Placing the product (the practice) at the centre of a triangle comprising:

- **Practitioner knowledge.** Constructed from training and experience, this 'know-how' establishes the researcher's framing of the way of doing things and will inform how research action might operate in contravention or agreement with established traditions. Extensive experience with both mediating technologies and text-based chat systems both influences and backgrounds the work undertaken here.
- **Practitioner's 'action research'.** A critically reflective process that locates the research within a lineage of similar activities and establishes documentary mechanisms that might capture the trace of an ephemeral event. Chapter 2 locates the practice made here into a lineage of similar works, whilst Chapter 3 documents the practice in concert with video and text evidence presented at the end of this document.
- Placing the work into a **broader context** by a conceptual framework. Bringing to light the insights of the research by the application of considered theoretical perspectives. Chapter 4 contextualises the learning of the practice through a phenomenological and political analysis.

The new knowledge created by this research therefore comprises the development of a design methodology which encompasses both theatrical and technological elements, an ethnographic approach to documentation of the experience of mediated encounter, and the application of a phenomenological and cultural framework to mediated one-to-one performance.

The practice developed over the course of this research problematizes the idea of interaction through a mediated one-to-one experience. In each piece two strangers connect for the first time through the exchange of text messages or within the environment of a modified video conferencing system. Through a loose structure of questions, challenges and actions they are encouraged to discover each other. In extending the structure of conceptual performance into

the arena of everyday social circumstance, artefacts of behaviour that might typically occupy the background are thrown into relief. This is theatre in the mode of laboratory or testing ground, its participants engaging in an erstwhile everyday activity within the non-everyday framework of an art project. An example: One participant, engaging in SMS conversation for a period of four weeks, comments

I particularly enjoyed spotting common social reflexes that I would normally think to employ... Namely that due to normally speaking to gay men, and being gay, there is often the consideration of whether I find them attractive, and a tendency to flirt.

On this occasion as I know not the sex, age, appearance or sexual orientation of the individual in question, the focus became instead the dialogue which was very enriching for me and a nice way for me to reflect on my tendencies and the possibilities if I avoid those automatic approaches (Participant Feedback, 2015)

The particular technologies investigated in this research are limited to SMS text messaging and video-conferencing techniques. This can be viewed as investigating telematic systems that operate at two ends of a spectrum of mediated sensory stimulation<sup>2</sup>, but it also represents technologies at different stages of mass adoption. At the one end a technology so commonplace that there are nearly as many active SMS-capable mobile phone contracts as there are people in the world, the other only touched upon within a few rarefied academic and performance-led ecologies – despite the core function of the technology being now replicated in every smartphone, tablet and laptop.

SMS or “texting” is a technology that has become reflexive: per Heidegger’s analysis of our use of the hammer<sup>3</sup>, messaging technologies can be said to extend the social reach of their users, and their mode of use has become second nature to all but a few. Video conferencing on the other hand is a

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity in this introduction I’m using this phrase to indicate the difference between the communication experience offered by text messaging systems and the more comprehensive simulation offered by video conference technologies. Ideas of presence and its performance companion “liveness” are taken up in more detail later in this introduction and in further chapters.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger uses the example of the hammer in the context of a phenomenological analysis of tool use. This is returned to and discussed in more detail later in this thesis.

technology that is enjoying a continued period of rapid development and the beginnings of mass consumer adoption (in one form or another), although incompatible technologies from competing manufacturers and a reliance on reliable internet connection have proven barriers to the uptake of a common platform.

The mobile phone and other technologies of communication enable an expansion of our intimate relations with our social groups. Being able to be so actively and immediately involved with the relations of these others at a distance and in a variety of locations is certainly a new phenomenon. 'This is the ability to, as it were, have a foot in both the here and now as well as the there and now' (Ling, 2004:190). This newly found superpower comes with the attendant concern of a reconfiguration of our sense of community. When an individual's concentration when in the public realm finds itself concerned primarily with the co-presence of those who aren't physically present, it can shift a balance and perhaps erect a barrier. Ling cites Gergen's fears that the use of mobile devices can create cliques, an 'us and them' mentality that fragments social interaction and collapses the possibility of emollient sociability – such as small talk on the bus or in the doctor's waiting room – and thus ejects us from our immersion in the broader social flow (ibid: 191-192). Here the tools of communication, it is argued, are complicit in removing or reprioritising certain modes of socialisation. By encouraging silo-ed conversation between the like-minded, already bonded strong ties are strengthened and weak ties left fallow. Ling draws on research by Rivere and Licoppe and notes:

Paradoxically, they point out that from the perspective of the individual, this is a civilizing effect in an "uncivil" world. That is, the specific and literally unceasing relationship to another intimate provides the individual with an oasis in an otherwise difficult world. From a social perspective, however, this represents a withdrawal from the public into the private. These researchers describe the balkanization of social interaction. There is the sense that "walled communities" are being formed because of the mobile telephone (ibid: 192)

In short the public sphere is threaded with opportunities for connection and the development of the weak social ties<sup>4</sup> that begin to generate and uphold vibrant community. Withdrawal into the private sphere collapses these possibilities, and removes potential for the *unexpected*. The practice developed for this project re-injects the unexpected into the digital domain by virtue of populating it with others about whom we know little, but with whom we can share the kind of surprise and discovery that might characterise a chance encounter or a first date. This is achieved in a context that participants have described as safe yet encouraging of play.

Participants who took part in the text message projects frequently stressed an apparent closeness they felt for each other, or recount strong positive emotional connections. The connections described appear unusually powerful when considered within the brevity of the exchange, or in the light of the conversation's transcript. When engaged in encounters mediated through video conferencing systems participants suggested that simple actions, such as focussing on each other's (mediated) breathing or collaborating on a task, generated a feeling of closeness between them, despite the physical distance and the limitations of the mediating systems. Participants described similar feelings of awkwardness as with the meeting of a stranger meeting in the flesh. In scenarios created for both mediating systems the participant experience was generally described as good-natured. Without foreknowledge most participants appeared to take an honest and genuine approach to their meeting with the other, which generally resulted in encounters described as positive and uplifting.

These encounters are intended to be illustrative rather than definitive. The developmental arc of the performance projects generated during this research is one which informs their theatrical and technological design, which leads to a

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<sup>4</sup> Social ties might be described as the interpersonal connective tissue through which human relationships express themselves. Baym describes *weak* ties as being 'limited in the range of activities, thoughts and feelings partners exchange' (Baym, 2012:125), these are gestures of acquaintance. She goes on to suggest that the 'Internet has expanded our access to weak ties and enabled us to have more specialized and intermittent contacts with more people' (ibid).

rich, intimate experience for the encounter participants. Explorations of the participants experiences are not intended to be drawn as comments on some kind of universal experience of mediated encounters, but instead to be highlighted as potential touchstones for understanding the affect of technological mediation in a one-to-one performance context.

In a recent blog post, poet and activist Harry Giles, comments that much of the history of art is described in terms of shocks and disruption<sup>5</sup> and outlines his concerns regarding how the everyday violence of neoliberal capitalism operates as a series of shocks to the system (Giles, 2016:online). He follows this précis with the beginnings of an analysis of the idea of care as a radical act. Name-checking the late lamented Adrian Howells (whose later work focused on intimate, one-to-one acts of care), and mentions Verity Standen's beautiful and epic choral piece Hug<sup>6</sup>. Giles observes that in neoliberal society '[t]here is no investment in care as something a person might want to do' (ibid). He points to the erosion of the welfare state, and to the politicisation of even the idea of state-sponsored social support as contrary to the ideological positions of independence and self-actualisation espoused by neoliberalism. One of the elements of Giles' view of what might constitute an act of care is to position *care* as a radical act operating in opposition to a prevailing orthodoxy of shock.

During the course of the research presented here it became more and more apparent that the value to the participants, of the experiments and encounters, was not in the technology used but the empathy, curiosity and humanity extended between the people engaged with each other through that

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<sup>5</sup> He names the first performance of the Rite of Spring as being so 'dissonant and suggestive' that it prompted a riot, then briefly runs through examples such as Duchamp's Fountain (1917), the publication of Ginsberg's Howl, and the activities of the Situationists to further his thesis.

<sup>6</sup> I was lucky enough to enjoy Hug not once but twice, in both Edinburgh and Manchester. In this performance the audience are each led to a chair and asked to put on a blindfold. Once all are blindfolded, the choir enters gently and soft of foot. They sing, in turn and together, surrounding us, the audience, with a delicate weft of sound. This is in of itself a beautiful experience, yet the game is raised when a hand falls gently on my arm and subtle touch guides me to my feet. My chorister embraces me whilst still taking their part in syncopated breathing and singing. This is embodied experience. I feel the vibrations of their song and the beating of my heart. I wept openly (and can only assume there was a lot of blindfold washing going on between performances).

technology. Further, that the arts context of these encounters meant that the participants engagement with their technological devices operated outside the envelope of their day-to-day mode of use, serving to expose both the affordances of their devices and their own performativity when expressed through them.

The co-creation of our relations with others through technology has often been characterised as distancing or de-humanising, instead, through this research, it becomes apparent that the connective powers of communications technology can and do extend intimate relations across distance. By using a theatrical scaffolding to frame such encounters the participants' agency is activated through novel configurations of technology use and circumstance.

## A Personal Context



Figure 1 Dogs of Heaven - The Bone Fire, Hulme. 1990

In 1988 I was living in Hulme, a council housing estate in Manchester, where I stumbled on the work of local artist, Michael Mayhew. Mayhew had taken inspiration from Welfare State International (and in particular from their handbook 'Engineers of the Imagination') and had set up the Dogs of Heaven theatre company. The work presented was self-styled as 'large scale, site-specific, environmental performance', and it fused the delicate community lantern parade aesthetic of Welfare State with a more aggressive and adrenalin fuelled fierceness of Spanish performance company La Fura dels Baus. Enthralled, I leapt at the chance to get involved in this other-worldly magic, and ended up working with Dogs of Heaven first as administrator then producer, maker and part-time performer until the company folded some five years later.

Aside from the chaos and spectacle, one of the most significant elements of the company's ethos was that it took its practitioners primarily from its local community, and emphasised skill sharing and a relatively non-hierarchical organisational structure. In this way welders learnt to dance, actors to build large set-piece structures, jugglers to be pyrotechnicians - many of whom would later become leaders in their field.

Within the event itself performers would frequently mix with spectators, who as often as not lived in the same housing block, and performers were defined as much by their intent to perform as by any training or idea of discipline. Most



would not at the time have described themselves as artists. These were a varied collective of individuals with theatrical skills not necessarily honed, but with their own focus turned to the making of the performance event. These performance events were, generally speaking, *necessarily* made as one-offs, as many of the large structures made (a 40-foot Viking long-ship, a wicker man as tall as a three story house) would be ritually burnt at the end of the show. This was event as cataclysmic and ephemeral.

On November the 5<sup>th</sup> 1990, I was running through an audience of thousands as they made their way through the council estate where I lived. I remember being breathless (I'd forgotten to bring my asthma inhaler), but pumped with adrenalin. As part of the show I had been letting off small, Chinese firecrackers in amongst the audience. A pregnant woman pushing a buggy laughed and shouted a hello of recognition as I bustled past wearing my rickety, home-made Samurai outfit, she far more assured of the situation than I was. This being my first experience of performance, and a bewildering one at that.

This mode of performance kicked into touch any previous notion I may have had that the proscenium arch was the be-all and end-all of the theatrical turn. What it emphasised was the idea of a visceral encounter between audience and performer; one where the audience's experience might be as much physical as observational. The mood was infectious and the experience did 'not depend on the "work of art" but on the interaction of the participants' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:36). An event such as this revels in its confusing spectacle, and participants can find their standard operational modes are suspended. The shared experience of familiar architecture and familiar faces is transformed; becoming an open-to-all and engaging 'ritual space without a rite' (Lehmann, 2006:122). Here, the topology of the individual's experience is characterised by spectatorship, emergence and transformation in that there is spectacle to observe, constantly shifting engagements with others (performers, audience, passers-by) yet without the comfort of pre-set rules, punctuated by shifting relationships between familiar architecture and people, framed by unfamiliar situations. Familiar and unfamiliar information and context becomes a

juxtaposition of potential meanings, perhaps a forerunner of the multiplicity of information and infrastructure with which the information age surrounds us.

At that time, whilst I was coming to terms with this new performance world, I was also completing my masters dissertation in analytical measuring techniques, a research project which raided scientific theory to describe why the measuring device I was testing was failing. This system, which was supposed to gauge the presence of the poisonous gas hydrogen cyanide, instead never managed to extricate its signal from the noise. Whilst there are clearly dangerous (and possibly fatal) consequences when the gas detector cannot make this distinction, the blurring of such rigid distinctions in performance-making can challenge default perspectives, reveal unexpected structures and discover beauty in the noise. Much as Cage's musical composition *4'33"*, which comprises four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence from all attending, shifts the perception of what becomes music and what is deserving of our attention, whilst simultaneously challenging who (or what) is a performer and embracing the randomness of noise (Sandford, 1995, reprinted 2005:32).

An unforeseen bonus: whilst studying at University I found myself able to use the academic network of computer terminals to talk to other students via text-based bulletin board systems and multi-user 'dungeons' hosted at UCL, Aberystwyth and the University of Essex. Structurally these environments are designed to be playable, and their dungeons followed predictable task driven rules for player advancement. However, much of the interaction between players was in fact social. Indeed, one of the perks of achieving the highest levels of wizard was the ability to cease the grind of object collection and battle, allowing the player to step outside the game (but not the world) and let their imagination run unrestricted; the users behaviour and character becoming 'typed into being' (Sundén, 2003:14).

When I was typing and reading text chatter into the bulletin board I found myself always aware of the playful character of language choices and an invocation of the frame of 'make believe' (Danet et al., 1997). Typed commands

allowed the users to perform actions. They could ‘appear in a puff of smoke’ or \*blink\* with bemusement. *MIST*, a multi-user dungeon which operated until around 1990, was described in terms of its unparalleled bloodthirstiness and ‘dog eat dog’ philosophy (Lawrie, 1991:online; Lawrie, 2003:online) – yet my memory of playing, sat alone at a terminal in the early hours (the game was only open during the mainframe’s down-time of between 2am and 8am GMT), is that the social interaction was the draw. This is by no means an unusual reaction, Sherry Turkle recalls a conversation with another text adventurer who says, ‘I began with an interest in ‘hack and slay,’ but then I stayed to chat’ (Turkle, 2011:158). This was a camaraderie of fellows, awake at odd hours whilst experiencing alternative worlds built with text, glowing green on a black screen. In my memory of those conversations and interactions I don’t imagine the others typing or in front of a similar screen to mine, but instead in conversation as though they *were* the text in front of me. From my perspective they were embodied in the words and glyphs on the screen. As their text appeared so did they, with the immediacy of spoken conversation, and with expressions and gestures imagined through playful engagement with text and the flourish of emoticons.

It is perhaps worthy of note that the level of intimacy that these conversations engendered was of sufficient quality to propel me as a young, nervous student to travel hundreds of miles to meet, sight unseen, these distant friends. This would be the same young, nervous student who might avoid conversation with barely acquainted but nonetheless fellow course mates in the same University department. This new-found interaction through text creating simultaneously a barrier of distance and a bridge of intimacy.

Communicating through dungeons and message boards in a text-based sociability pre-dates the now commonplace uptake of SMS, messaging systems and email. However, I still recognise many of the conversational quirks that were characteristic of how I’d express myself through older systems with my contemporary usage of the pervasive messaging systems of today: from Twitter to texting, and including other Social Networking Sites (SNS) that afford greater

word length such as Facebook and on-line blogs. If my text voice was trained in dungeons and chat-rooms, that doesn't challenge its legibility now. I have a peculiar desire to recapture these moments, to extend the hand of proto-friendship and discover new people through the pervasive medium of text.

In 2010 I found myself working at Contact Theatre, Manchester, which was hosting part of the FutureEverything<sup>7</sup> conference. Artist and academic Paul Sermon had been invited to present a new artwork, *Front Room* (Sermon, 2010b), based on his telepresence practice, which in this case used video conference technologies to enable a real-time link-up between individuals in Sao Paulo, Brazil and Manchester, UK. The key conceit of the installation was that it was presented to its participants as a simulation of the eponymous front room (or lounge) in a domestic setting, including a sofa and wide screen TV. Using video conferencing equipment and green-screen technologies the TV in each location showed an superimposed image of both sets of participants as if they were present in the same room. A core requirement for such a project was and is an unfettered internet connection, and given my technical remit at Contact, this meant troubleshooting the various bandwidth and firewall issues presented by the equipment. Through this process I was lucky enough to talk through the concept and technical logistics with the very practitioner who had set the bar in telepresence artworks. Prompted by this experience, and at quite the other end of the technologically mediated spectrum from the text interactions mentioned above, since 2010 I have been working with collaborators across the globe on projects that utilise technologies within performance practice that technicians, artists and practitioners have come to call *telepresence*. Indeed, in her phenomenological treatise on digital technologies and the live experience, *Closer*, Susan Kozel co-opts the term Telepresence<sup>8</sup> for use by artists rather than the clunky business-focussed

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<sup>7</sup> FutureEverything being the (then) new incarnation of the longstanding, Manchester based, festival of music and technology, FutureSonic. Recognising a shift from its original emphasis on music, the rebranding articulated the festival's new focus on technology, society and culture. Contact Theatre played host to key conference talks and artworks at that time.

<sup>8</sup> Naturally in the economic and cultural landscape of late capitalism, Telepresence is now also a protected brand for one particular company's version of the technology.

variations on the phrase *video-conferencing* (or perhaps brand names such as Skype, FaceTime or Google Hangouts) (Kozel, 2007:86).

Tele (*lit. remote*) presence has been variously defined as technology for 'apparent participation in distant events' and which gives its user 'a sensation of being elsewhere' (Google definitions). These meanings suggest that the user of such technologies would feel their own presence exerted over distance, that they would virtually travel to distant places. Whilst this may be true of performances that present both local and remote actors on a screen local to them<sup>9</sup>. Which is to say where the participants observe their own action within the shared space of a screen (such as in Sermon's *Front Room* project referred to above). However, in projects where the remote Other is visualised and conceptualised as a video presence apparently in the same physical space as the local participant I argue that the counter is true: that the user's experience of the technology is that it appears to bring the distant actors close, or that the space becomes a single gestalt location. The mediated representation becomes integrated into our perception of our local environment. My text message or my projected body may be conceptualised as being sent to another place, yet my perception of the remote actor is by way of a technological interaction with them in my own space. This mode of perception is largely confirmed by participants' reports of their experiences with the practice developed here.

In 2011 Contact Theatre embarked on the first of a number of co-productions with culturehub, an experimental technology, performance and culture studio affiliated to LaMaMa and like them also based in New York City. Presented in Contact's Space 1, a 300 seater end-on performance space, the setting consisted of a large fast-fold projection screen erected on stage right where images from the remote site were screened, a dance floor covering the stage,

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<sup>9</sup> I am using the terms local and remote to refer to the position of the actors in a notionally subjective frame of reference. Thus an audience watching a performance which consists of a performer (A) in the same space as they and one 'telepresented in' (B) from afar might be described as a local audience watching a local performer (A) and a remote simulacrum (B). In synchronous situations the remote audience would naturally be described in the same way (from their perspective).

and the DJs and musicians who provided the soundtrack located on stage left. A video camera high in the auditorium seating rake was used to frame the images streamed back to the remote site in NYC. At the Contact end of the connection we used a tiny PC laptop running bespoke conferencing software in order to connect to culturehub's expensive video conferencing equipment at the New York end. Our camera captured the image of the local dancer on our stage, the software processes and sends those images, and pixels dance on a screen somewhere in the Bowery. Elsewhere, culturehub return the favour and their image is projected onto Contact's screen. NYC stage right, Manchester stage left.



Figure 2 Dancers from Manchester and NYC share the stage at Contact (2011).  
Photo credit Al Baker and Contact, all rights reserved

The image would occasionally jerk and stutter, and at times I found myself believing that the system had stalled completely, when in actual fact those on the other side were simply standing very still. An anxious liveness was constructed from known failure modes, a subconscious shiver of excitement and worry that something might be going wrong. Later, during the performance the laptop software produced an error message on screen, a quite visible and certainly unexpected failure mode: the live stream continued to be projected but a computer dialog box dropped down from above and partially obscured the window into New York. Over there, a performer noticed the problem: he dropped to his knees and put his hands up to 'hold up' the error box. This

moment of improvisation felt electric, and in both spaces audience and performers laughed and applauded this virtualised piece of slapstick. Meanwhile, I remember frantically looking for the mouse to click on the box and make the error message disappear.

On stage, in a Q&A after the event, the dancers from both spaces were asked how it felt to work together using this technology and as a group they emphatically agreed that, for them, the experience was as if they had been in the same studio. For this to be said by practitioners of a form which relies on a distinct and visceral connection to each other's bodies and rhythms, this felt like a powerful statement of potential.

In the telepresence performances I have worked on with Contact and other venues and groups, the staging of an event is generally intended to both (a) bring together artists who would otherwise be precluded from performing, or otherwise working together, generally for logistical and financial reasons, and (b) investigate technologically mediated co-presence on stage for presentation to an audience. Whilst these performances are typically made in theatre spaces or rehearsal rooms it should be noted that the limitations of making performance with this technology is generally its availability and the reliable Internet bandwidth required rather than a theatrical infrastructure. A key prompt for the research project presented here was a desire to experiment with the kinds of telematic co-presence the dancers describe in the above example. Which is to say, rather than creating an experience in which the audience are spectators of performers both physically present and projected, to instead directly explore the relations at the heart of the mediated connection, to find a way to conjure moments of human contact between people in discontinuous places. There is certainly something interesting about using theatre as a mode to explore ideas of identity and place and how these ideas might affect each other. In interview, John McGrath<sup>10</sup> describes how this interrelation between identity and place was an important driver when setting up the National

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<sup>10</sup> Founding director of National Theatre Wales

Theatre of Wales, a national 'theatre without walls' based in no building but producing work throughout its country. For McGrath the core questions become 'what is it to be in this place and what do we want this place to be?' (McGrath, 2016:from 6'11"). If our social relations are more and more pursued in the mediated space of digital technologies, then we must seek to ask very the same kinds of question.

The telepresence events that were hosted at Contact characteristically involved some kind of improvised action between the performers near and far, who act and react with each other's projected image in real time. Techniques were developed to combine varying projection surfaces and placement of cameras in order to optimize the theatrical experience of the audience, and expand the performers sense of each other's presence. The most flexible and affordable option used a black gauze scrim running across the stage as a projection surface, and a remote controlled camera downstage to capture the local actors movements. Under these conditions a dance duet was found to work well. The connected, flowing movement of dancers, both physically present and projected, highlights their collaborative play to the audience, whilst minimising the visibility of technological issues such as signal lag and audio/visual sync (culturehub & Contact\_Theatre, 2011; culturehub & Contact\_Theatre, 2013). John Berger reminds us 'seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak' (Berger, 1972, reprinted 2008:7). It is perhaps no surprise that much of the experimental work with telepresent technologies use movement and dance (Kozel, 2007; PPS\_Danse, 1996; Biscoe, 2015) eschewing dialogue. Di Benedetto, in his neurological analysis of our perception of performance, argues that sense perception treats movement and the lighting contrast it creates preferentially, and precognitive processing takes precedence over considered reflection: 'the attendant's response is irrational and based solely on sense reception' (Di Benedetto, 2010:41,65).

Part of the audience attraction is certainly the spectacle of the mediated presence on the screen: I remember audible gasps in the auditorium when it became apparent that the ghostly image projected was reacting to the live



performer on stage and vice versa. In conversation with the audience on their experience of the staging of these events, the holographic spectre of long dead Tupac Shakur looms. At music and arts festival Coachella, using a modern take on the Pepper's ghost illusion, the animated CGI presence of this famous, and late lamented, rapper performed alongside his old collaborator Snoop Dogg (Coachella\_Festival, 2012). The online video of this event has over 42 million hits at the time of writing. It's no stretch to perceive similarities between the telepresence performance of the remote dancers at one of Contact's events and this streamed simulacra of Tupac. The CGI illusion at Coachella has been heavily praised for its authenticity and realism (Harris, 2013:238), the very characteristics that the technology of live-streamed video might virtuously claim: live action telematically shifted from one location to another.



Figure 3 CGI Tupac animated at Coachella (2012)  
Screen grab from YouTube



Figure 4 Telepresence 'dance-off' as part of *Digital Duets* (Queer\_Contact, 2013), dancers Javier Ninja and Darren Suarez conduct a vogue battle between NYC and Manchester  
Photo credit: Joel Chester Fildes and Contact, all rights reserved

In performances which combine a mediated liveness with actual performers on stage in the same room at the same time, there is the unmistakable feeling of what Steve Dixon describes as “now-ness”; of the audience present as spectator and all represented performers (both local and remote) “being there” and being there together (Dixon, 2009:127-129). The audience reacts to the gestalt of the staging, two dancers apparently on the same stage making a duet, performing live with each other. It is experienced as a ‘fusion not a con-fusion’ between realms (Auslander, 2008:42). Both the spectacle of the mediatisation and the perceived presence of the performers (both here and there) contribute to the enjoyment of the event. This presence or liveness is a combination of three interactions; the perhaps already well understood relationship between the performer physically in the room and their audience, between the projected performer and their remote audience and crucially between the performers at each site. It is the nature of this last interaction, between the mediated and non-mediated performer, that this research explores: an intimacy of shared telematic interaction.

The very debate on liveness is invoked by technology. The ability to record and replay, to shift performance through time and place gives need to the concept itself. In the revised 2008 edition of *'Liveness'*, Philip Auslander's much-quoted treatise on the topic, his earlier views on how technology activates the concept are revisited, and he argues that *immediacy* might be the core abiding principle, that real-time responsiveness is a prerequisite for the realisation of digital liveness. However, writing in 2012, in continued pursuit of his analysis, he once again revisits his ideas on how technology might invoke the authentic presence of another. Now framing his argument within a phenomenological matrix, he invokes an interpretation of *contemporaneous* engagement, one where full and believable presence is achieved not simply by things existing simultaneously (the spectator and the art work) but by the confrontation of two moments that are not concurrent<sup>11</sup> but are experienced as present through the belief of the spectator. Arguing that the work of art must be 'experienced and taken seriously as present' (Gadamer, 2003 via Auslander 2012). Auslander sums up his argument that

... digital liveness emerges as a specific *relation* between self and other, a particular way of "being involved with something." The experience of liveness results from our conscious act of grasping virtual entities as live in response to the claims they make on us (Auslander, 2012:10)

It is not simply the perception of the Other through technology that makes them present, rather it is our *belief* that they are there.

Over the course of just a couple of decades, consumer technologies have become commonplace mechanisms by which we pursue our social interaction with each other. A recent report from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth, regarding their Generation X cohort, discusses personal/social networking within that group and establishes that traditional vs electronic interactions have reached an approximate parity (Miller, 2013:7). So, whatever their nature, telematic interactions between us are already becoming normalised. In her 2009 TED talk, 'How The Internet Enables Intimacy', Stefana

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<sup>11</sup> Either geographically or in time.

Broadbent describes how technologies of Skype, social media, instant messaging and the mobile phone have enabled users of these technologies to break free of the social limitations they may find themselves bound by. Mobile technologies allow the sharing of intimate, personal moments during the working day, previously impossible due to the institutionalised segmentation of time into monolithic public/private divisions. Similarly, consumer video conferencing technology facilitates the sharing of a meal between a working migrant and their family at home. Broadbent also signals that attempts to limit these new possibilities for social connection, that make permeable formally impenetrable structures, should be viewed as forms of social control (Broadbent, 2009:online). Here Broadbent is casting intimacy as an opportunity afforded by communication technology; rather than seeking to quantify the degree or quality of the interaction she privileges its ability to overcome barriers.

Furthering this sense of connectedness between us through technology, Nick Couldry expands the envelope of Auslander's liveness to include the ideas of an online and group liveness – where there is a 'sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated co-presence with others known and unknown' (Couldry, 2004:357; Auslander, 2008:61).

It is clear, then, that communications networks connect us to each other. That we are no strangers to this presence from a distance, and in point of fact have swiftly adopted various technological modes of communication to complement or take the place of face-to-face or older epistolary methods.

Intimacy can be defined as a fluency of action, a connection between an object (a musical instrument, a smartphone, a computer) and its operator that has become so natural that the object becomes an extension of themselves.

Tomassi writes in his article 'The Role of Intimacy in the Evolution of Technology'

This intimacy implies a user ignorant of the inner components and manufacturing process, but entirely familiar with use. With total

familiarity, technological objects recede into the background of consciousness and become nothing, but extensions of our body (Tomasi, 2008)

It is commonplace to see this fluency in the world of musicians and instruments, but this same notion of intimacy is perhaps not as straightforward within the frame of technological communication. We might be adept at picking out a 140-character tweet on the virtual keyboard of our smartphone but do we lose nuance and depth of expression in the process? If so, would the quite different form of learned labour involved in writing a text message using an old fashion phone, one where the limited keyboard requires multiple key presses and offers counter intuitive control, alter the nature of the messages written?

Intimacy is also a measure of our closeness, our connection to each other, as colleagues, friends or lovers. Naturally, these are the very people we connect to most commonly using new technologies. Text messaging is routinely used for exchanges of a bewildering variety; planning dates, wishing each other happy birthday, breaking up, checking with housemates or spouses if there is enough milk in the fridge or cereal in the cupboard. A new technology start-up, Magic, rather than utilising a smartphone 'app', connects its users to an on-line human concierge using SMS and claims its service can source and action any task (call up a taxi, buy a Bugatti), suggesting that there is no limit to its service (Vanhemert, 2015). The "magic" in this service is nothing more than providing access to a human labour pool that can forage for anything on your behalf, for a price. Yet in this, the apparent simplicity of a text messaging interface belies its multi-faceted use.

Whilst full body telepresence with screens which take up entire walls is unlikely to be part of the consumer home experience outside of near-future science fiction, it is nonetheless commonplace to use the rather truncated forms of Skype or FaceTime via a phone or tablet. In any video conference experience sight and sound are privileged and well served (certainly they are simulated and stimulated) yet the other senses are truncated at the lens of the camera and at the pick-up of the microphone, left in the dominion of the real in the local

room. We might note that Cage described theatre as a thing to stimulate the eyes and ears, claiming the 'two public senses are seeing and hearing; the senses of taste, touch, and odour are more proper to intimate, non-public, situations' (interview with Cage in Sandford, 1995, reprinted 2005:43). From a technological perspective, too, a similar hierarchical division might be made. Kattenbelt who, in his dissection of intermediality<sup>12</sup> in performance, notes that the audio/visual senses are those stimulated by our 'multimedia' computers and other diverse telecommunications gadgets. He characterises the audio/visual as comprising our 'distance senses', that our eyes and ears operate as data collectors that enable us to develop an intelligent understanding of the structure of the world, but also keep things at a distance (Kattenbelt, 2009:22). Without the manifold haptic sensors and vibrators, described by Howard Rheingold and developed artistically by Ståhl Stensile, there is no distant touch (Rheingold quoted in Kozel, 2007:98; Stensile, 2010:online). Aside from the excellent phantasms, which conjure the smell of fresh produce in the supermarket, there are precious few mechanisms that create a functional ecology of smell and certainly no off-the-shelf electronic transport to do such a thing in a remote location – and without smell there is no taste. However, we are cautioned against 'adherence to the old 'five senses' doctrines' which has been described as a hangover of an earlier Cartesian epistemology – today it is more commonplace to invoke to bimodal sensory modalities (such as visuo-tactile neurons and the like) (Ihde, 2012:375). This *multi-modal* understanding of how the nervous system functions can't help but add clinical weight to the body experience privileged by the (post)phenomenologists. Yet even invoking the whole body experience the absolutes of a telepresence link are perhaps best defined as much by the lack of (certain kinds of) perceptual presence as they are by what the technology does stimulate and simulate.

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<sup>12</sup> Which he defines as a 'co-relation of media in the sense of mutual influences between media' (Kattenbelt, 2009:20-21)

The thing that interests me here, however, is not the suggestion that these audio/visual technologies might or might not invoke a decent simulacrum of reality. It is that they are, to paraphrase Sherry Turkle, 'good enough'. I can use technologies like Skype or FaceTime to spend time with my mother who lives some hours away, and whilst she seems simultaneously puzzled and delighted each time she answers the call on her iPad, I still know it is her, and she I, and we share moments together impossible without the technology. Such systems become part of an additional layer or strand of our reality, not an either/or dualism, nor a technology trying to ape what we understand as reality, but expressions of an on-going hybridity. In a concluding section on virtual bodies in his standard reference text, '*Digital Performance*', Steve Dixon brings together different strands of thinking to emphasis this false dichotomy citing 'I am part of the networks, and the networks are part of me' (William Mitchell quoted in Dixon, 2009:239). When we share intimate moments mediated through technology they are intrinsically no more or less valuable than those to be had in person, the value is instead created by context and opportunity, and cemented by belief.

As described earlier in this introduction, during 2010's FutureEverything conference Paul Sermon's telepresence installation *Front Room* was constructed in the foyer of Contact Theatre in Manchester and in the Museum of Contemporary Art (MASP) in Sao Paulo, Brazil (Sermon, 2010b). Connected using video-conference and chroma-key technology, the installation linked the two spaces presenting a visual combination of the two rooms on a large monitor screen in front of the participants at each location. On these screens participants in both locations see themselves side-by-side in a single combined video feed<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> More information can be found at Sermon's web archive (Sermon, 2010a:online)



Figure 5 Lowri Evans and Rodolfo Amorim share a moment in Paul Sermon's *Front Room* (Sermon, 2010a:online) Image Credit: Paul Sermon

Whilst the system was in place, I connected with my friend and colleague Lowri Evans, recalling that her Brazilian partner was in Sao Paulo at the time. She made contact with him and arranged to meet-up using the installation technology: he at MASP, her at Contact. As an observer, their meeting appeared exciting and electric, palpably different to the playful mugging of the other participants. When she talked to me about the experience years later, her words came out in a rush:

That was really magical (pause) that was really like ... It did that thing where we're so close, but so far. Almost painfully close, but [it] also just did feel a bit miraculous, and is something that I really cherished ... that ... and that I understand why this artist is doing this now.  
(Lowri Evans, Personal interview, 2015)

In this description of her experience Evans brings to mind Susan Sontag's '*Against Interpretation*', which urges us to learn to see, hear and feel more – to re-sharpen our sensory experience against a glut of stimulation. Sontag writes 'The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical; art was an instrument of ritual' (Sontag, 1961:1). Within this magic of technology<sup>14</sup> there is an opportunity to blur deterministic usage of these objects

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<sup>14</sup> Author Arthur C. Clarke famously suggested 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic' (Clarke, 1974:39).



of communication in order to consider afresh, much like those experiencing Cage's 4'33", what becomes signal and what noise?

*Front Room's* bringing together of geographically distant people into what becomes a common, virtual space is Sermon's signature telepresence move. The ease with which its participants become accustomed to its mode of operation, and their agency within it, is a testimony both to the simplicity of the user experience and the general acceptance of technologies of communication and presence. Designer and urbanist Dan Hill writes 'Technology is culture; it is not something separate; it is no longer "I.T."; we cannot choose to have it or not. It just is, like air' (Hill, 2013:online). That we use technologies to interact with each other is already established, yet the form of these interactions changes in step with technology: rapidly and continually. What is particularly interesting here is the adaption of rules and social behaviours that both accompany and inform these changes: that text messaging displaces a phone call as a less invasive communications strategy and one that brings a new granularity to gambits of communication (Turkle, 2011:187-189), that the 'ring-cut' or intentional missed-call might signal love in one culture and please-call-me-back in another (Sirisena, 2012:186), or that the very presence of a mobile phone in the room is found to shape the conversation of those present even if it is never referenced or used (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013).

Examples like these represent just a sample of the insinuation of technology into our everyday, an intertwining of opportunity and intentionality which affects the experience of our lifeworld in both conscious and unconscious ways: modulating human behaviour against a backdrop shifting at the speed of technological development and capitalist expansion. Moments of intimate connection, such as between the dancers of the telepresence duet or the lovers in Manchester and Brazil, punctuate the day-to-day through connective tissue provided by diverse technologies which bridge boundaries and facilitate the ties between us.

## 2. State of the Art

Now, one day, a man went to work, and on the way he met another man, who, having bought a loaf of Polish bread, was heading back home where he came from.

And that's it, more or less.

*The Meeting*, Danil Kharms (Kharms, 2009:69)

Perhaps this yarn's the only thing that holds this man together,  
Some say he was never here at all.

*Swordfishtrombones*, Tom Waits (Waits, 1983)

This chapter functions as a critical commentary on the various practical and written work that is relevant to the research area. Guiding the reader to relevant source texts and placing the research within a lineage of influential performance practice. Later sections provide a grounding in relevant cultural and economic context, setting up a macroscopic viewpoint of late capitalism and the ways in which this practice is situated within such a context.

### 2.1 Introduction

It is fair to say that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century communications technologies have revolutionised the way humans and systems connect with each other. Significant penetration of Internet connectivity into diverse communities combined with the proliferation of mobile, connected devices has led to a huge increase in the form and the content of interpersonal communications. As with all such connections, implicit in these new mechanics are different and varied affordances and contingencies.

There is an idea that technology promises to extend our (human) reach and our capabilities, through visions of smart cities and smart citizens (Hemment, 2013;

Townsend, 2013; Townsend, 2014) virtually augmented, networked crowds (Kindberg et al., 2011); devices to interface with our internal body (Light, 2010a) and, we are told, in the very near future (2030) fully immersive virtual reality (Kurzweil, 2013)<sup>15</sup>. Some of these declarations may be brushed off as promises of product marketing, the news media and the techno-gurus of a society distracted by spectacle. Yet opinion and speculation are intertwined with actual R&D possibilities (the trajectories of which are often simplified and hyped when they hit the popular press and social media outlets).

In deployment however, what are termed disruptive technologies have a tendency to expose social and cultural obstacles. Some have argued that often self-styled disruptive technologies are less disruptive and more ‘extensions of established business practice’ (Rushkoff, 2016:101)<sup>16</sup>. In ‘*Ones + Zeros*’, her reappraisal of the position of women in technology, Sadie Plant writes on what she styles “genderquake”<sup>17</sup>. She observes the powerful role that telecommunications technologies play in the realisation of this structural realignment of gender inequality, yet maintains that this is not a technological determinism, rather that

If anything, technologies are only ever intended to maintain or improve the status quo, and certainly not to revolutionize the cultures into which they are introduced (Plant, 1997:38)

Raymond Williams, writing on the politics of Modernism, also dismisses the notion that new technology emerges into society signalling inevitable social change of that society or sector, ridiculing the idea that “‘We” adapt to it because it is the new modern way’ (Williams, 1989:120) rather he suggests that

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<sup>15</sup> Kurzweil is probably most famous for his popularisation of the idea of an inevitable Singularity, wherein machine intelligence will match and then eclipse human intelligence. His prediction for this event horizon of computing power and intelligent software is that it will arrive around 2029, and he has maintained his belief in this timeline since before technologies such as even the Fax Machine had been invented (Cadwalladr, 2014:online).

<sup>16</sup> Here Rushkoff is railing at digital services such as Amazon, AirBnB and Uber all of which disrupt the established economics of capitalism by leveraging digital technologies to skim away business costs (insurances, pensions, retail outlets) in the name of efficiency savings and convenience to the consumer. Of course, the real losers are those who are laid off or discover themselves part of the precariat.

<sup>17</sup> A term she coins in the book, to describe what she considers as a fundamental power shift from men to women.

it is the capitalisation of these technologies that brings about social deployment and general use. However, his description of technological adoption might be considered regressive in that it proposes a 'cultural pessimism' that fears the new until it is no longer new, at which point it becomes accepted. The fast working consumerist machine has sped up the cycles of renewal to the point where all is new all the time. As Bauman has it:

If you don't want to drown, you must keep on surfing: that is to say, keep changing, as often as you can, your wardrobe, furniture, wallpaper, appearance and habits, in short – yourself (Bauman, 2011:24)

The relentless upgrade cycles of software and technological gadgetry pause for no one, and within this cycle of renewal the social spaces built from telematic systems are in a state of constant change<sup>18</sup>. Aside from significant ethical concerns, Facebook's behind-the-scenes alteration of its news feed algorithms for more than 600,000 of its users in an experiment to assess its emotional influence demonstrates the relative ease of engineering major changes to a user's digital environments (Booth, 2014:online). In this experiment the authors observed what they style *emotional contagion*, that is to say when the news feed of Facebook users is primed with a greater proportion of emotionally positively content users post more positive content of their own and vice versa. From this it is clear that changes in the algorithmic engineering of a social media users environment can result in changes in the users behaviour (Kramer et al., 2014:8788).

Yet it is not a clash of technology vs social or cultural determinism that steers the manner in which we engage with our digital world, it is a hybrid effort of discovery. David Buckingham, scholar of media interaction, defers to a dialectical argument suggested by Williams to see technology as

... both socially shaped and socially shaping. In other words, its role and impact is partly determined by the uses to which it is put, but it also

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<sup>18</sup> Social networks roll out blisteringly regular changes to the algorithms that determine presentation of social data. Website A/B testing is a commonplace strategy to investigate preferred rendering of digital information. This is where different users of the same website will see different layouts or hierarchies of information in order to (invisibly to the user themselves) feed-back information about mouse movements, menu choices and click-through.

contains inherent constraints and possibilities which limit the ways in which it can be used, and which are in turn largely shaped by the social interests of those who control its production, circulation, and distribution. (Buckingham, 2008:12)<sup>19</sup>

This *Networked Self* is 'expressed as a fluid abstraction, reified through the individual's association with a reality that may be equally flexible' (Papacharissi, 2011:304). New technologies provide flexible stages for varied presentations of self to varied audiences, blurring ideas of public and private space but enabling new and complex relations. Neither is there clarity in the look of the thing, as news stories positioned as fact mix with opinion, parody and farce on an individually tailored social media feed – rarely discernible from each other by category or intention. Users have difficulty discriminating truth, half-truth and fiction (Del Vicario et al., 2016)<sup>20</sup> whilst even legitimate news sources uncritically publish stories in the name of clickbait (Viner, 2016:online). Under debate is the notion that different forms of information presented through the network plays havoc with mental plasticity, subtly changing ways that the brain retains different types of information. How interaction with different types of data might be seen as providing mental exercise for cognitive processing or by contrast allowing cognition to atrophy<sup>21</sup> (Baym, 2012:24-25).

It is clear that complex social and technological variables shape these networked interactions and indeed ourselves as a result, but the development and maintenance of social relations through the various digital realms is now an incontestable truth of 21<sup>st</sup> century life.

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<sup>19</sup> Papacharissi cites Buckingham and Williams in her analysis of the convergent architectures of networked spaces. Highlighting tensions between individuals, networked publics and corporate interests – whilst observing opportunities for individual re-appropriation of the affordances on offer.

<sup>20</sup> This being acknowledged in research before the recent overwhelming glut of “fake news” and the corresponding political strategies built upon the ontological manipulation of what is truth.

<sup>21</sup> Here Baym is bringing together ideas of mental plasticity with memory research that has demonstrated how activities such as sudoku puzzles and keeping up with friends on social media exercises working memory, in contrast to the short bursts of information that are presented by Twitter updates which require less cognitive processing and may lead to short term attention issues.

## 2.2 Connected, relational selves.

Mobile phones, and the software that runs on them, have ushered in an age where the majority of individuals carry a communications device that is uniquely identified with them and them alone. Ann Light, drawing on the work of Maurizio Ferraris, dryly reminds us that a caller's frequent opening gambit has changed from "Who are you?" to "Where are you" (Light, 2010b:192). These machines act as a networked node and a gateway to numerous always-on networks, many of which are connected to each other and to the global Internet. This network is comprised of other individuals, corporate entities, machines and data. Computers at work and in the home make up additional strands of this net, filling in the connective gaps until few places are outside the reach of the networks. This is a map that entirely covers the territory. Within this reach, contact with others is always possible, always on the horizon. However, the ecstasy of this communication (*pace* Baudrillard) is not only in the smooth 'immanent surface of operations unfolding' (Baudrillard, 1983:20), in the giddiness of choral or spatial collapse, but also in a multiplicity of new and sometimes contradictory affordances.

Social psychologist Kenneth Gergen argues for a sense of self that is essentially constructed of relations, that the digitally liquid post-modern age offers an idealised, modernist vision of the romantic self that is supplanted by a hybrid and constantly changing set of interconnected relations. Further that these relations happen and are primary, not artifice - that the fragments of partial performance (both of ourselves and that we encounter from others) within relations create the memory and the actuality of the moment.

As we find, rational thought, intentions, experience, memory, and creativity are not prior to relational life, but are born within relationship. They are not "in the mind," – separated from the world and from others – but embodied actions that are fashioned and sustained within relationship. (Gergen, 2009:95)

Rapid adoption of new technologies gives rise to rapidly changing affordances; new means to instigate and maintain relations between each other. These systems themselves are in many cases updated on-the-fly, indeed, the need for

economic growth that underlies late capitalism ensures a speedy development of new or improved versions of these products. Such changes can alter the underlying contingencies and may result in fragmented connections that are built on a fragile social basis.

Sherry Turkle, MIT Professor and veteran of thirty years of studying the psychology of people's relationships with technology, posits that 'technology enchants. It makes us forget what we know about life' (Turkle, 2012:23) She argues that technologies promise connections that will make us less lonely, but that through their use we become unable to be alone – and hence more lonely. Turkle argues for the return to in-person conversation as an antidote to the fragmented connections always-on technology encourages. Suggesting that

[w]e slip into thinking that always being connected is going to make us less lonely. But we are at risk because it is actually the reverse: if we are unable to be alone, we will be more lonely. (Ibid)

Here, Turkle seems to suggest that the multiplicity of connections offered by an environment of continuous communication, afforded by technology, might remove a reflective space in-between each face-to-face encounter. That the gift of always-on technology might revoke a vital social downtime. She goes further arguing that technology allows us to retouch the presentation of ourselves in the world, that the messiness of human relationships can be cleaned up through technology. She contrasts online interaction as connection, something less than conversation (which for her is implicitly face-to-face) (ibid). Gergen's ideas of fragmentary relations can perhaps be read as upending this notion, by suggesting that in point of fact all relations are fragmentary and none are complete or whole. Positioning the face-to-face as ground zero for a value system of human intimacy may simply be privileging one fragmentary connection over another.

... the stable worlds in which we seem to live are quite fragile. In our daily relationships we encounter only partial persons, fragments that we mistakenly presume to be whole personalities. Stability and coherence are generated in our co-active agreements. But these agreements are not binding, and disruptions can occur at any moment (Gergen, 2009:138)

There is value in spending time face-to-face with one and other, but this value does not necessarily trump the quality of interaction we might discover mediated through technology, or what emotional depths might be travelled. This is no zero-sum competition between digital and face-to-face communication with digital coming off as an inevitable loser. As experiments with Facebook's news feed show: '[t]extual content alone appears to be a sufficient channel' (for emotional contagion) (Kramer et al., 2014:8790). That is to say, there is a rich potentiality for emotional engagement through even the leanest technological means. What is necessary is a renegotiation of the terms of engagement, bridging the increasingly arbitrary distinction between the real world and the digital one, and acknowledging the 21<sup>st</sup> century hybrid self.

Writing on the idea of 'authentic selfhood' Michael Zimmerman suggests that in the world where our individual modes of operation blur the lines between public and private, work and play, personal and professional – many relish the idea of technology-generated options and alternate identities (or, as we might say after Gergen, fragments or partially performed identities). He goes on to suggest 'despite all the excitement, some people report feeling disintegrated, superficial, even dehumanized' (Zimmerman, 2001:1). Zimmerman pits Gergen against Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinoza in order to articulate methods of retaining a sense of self within the complex and ever shifting perspectives made manifest by modern technologies. He suggests Gergen gives us a path to understanding that a relational, decentred selfhood has many positive traits, whilst Dreyfus/Spinoza sail close to Heidegger's position that technology collapses the human subject and object into the 'flexible raw material for the technological system' (ibid). Their solution to retaining humanness is to engage in the affordances offered by technology whilst being 'attuned to oneself as a flexible resource'; but with an understanding that this is not the case at all times and in all places

Zimmerman follows Wilber's argument that in order to avoid fragmentation through existential angst, brought about by a multiplicity of social roles, none of



which are ultimately taken seriously, the postmodern self must rely on a developmental narrative. Arguing that

... those who effectively and satisfyingly inhabit different worlds have developed a workable narrative of personal connectivity made possible by their having already developed a relatively stable and integrated egoic subjectivity concerned with sincerity, truthfulness, and integrity. (ibid:22)

In order to be open to, and thrive within, the multiple possibilities of being-in-the-world offered by modern technologies, he appears to argue that a sincere authenticity must *first* be developed. Yet this is not a call for a cleaving to an authentic self that remains static, rather that only by first inculcating elements of character such as truth, integrity and subjective depth is it possible to develop a multifaceted, shifting and effective transpersonal<sup>22</sup> being-in-the-world. In his optimism he argues that in expanding the number of characteristics one identifies with, surely brings increased compassion and desire to participate more in the various communities one might claim membership of. This notion of a germinating authenticity from which a multiplicity of ways of being-in-the-world might branch is but one strategy to thrive, what is certain is that the affordances of digital technology have proliferated mightily in recent times and what is perhaps inevitable is that this swift process of change calls for an appropriate process of social and ethical reaction.

What is plain is that digital technology is evermore intertwined with our lives. In just a few decades a personal computation device has evolved from the arcane and niche to the positively everyday<sup>23</sup>, the Internet has developed from a closed research and military project to a huge network of networks, connecting around

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<sup>22</sup> Zimmerman leans on this “transpersonal” concept of the extension of selfhood through higher development and transcendent consciousness through spirituality, although it appears to be a term with possibly as many definitions as it has adherents.

<sup>23</sup> In the thirty plus years of my own experience with digital technology the concept of the digital computer has lurched from the business and research mainframe, where one computer system facilitates multiple individuals use primarily through arcane and hard to master interfaces, through personal computers seen as niche or as educational projects (BBC Micro), platforms for games or programming (ZX Spectrum), to objects of the everyday (Tablets and Smartphones).

half the world's population in some form or another at the time of writing<sup>24</sup>. Hand in hand with the development of the Internet as a network goes the proliferation of ubiquitous computing<sup>25</sup> and mobile handsets taking part in an always-on data flux that surrounds the world and ourselves. Yet these few, busy decades mark the merest blip in our species historic timeline.

The various affordances offered by new communication technology go hand in hand with flows of change in the way social interaction is handled. Presentation and behaviour are in flux. danah boyd<sup>26</sup> writes about the action and attitude of teens when engaged in photograph sharing using Snapchat;

They shared inside jokes, silly pictures, and images that were funny only in the moment. Rather than viewing photographs as an archival production, they saw the creation and sharing of these digital images as akin to an ephemeral gesture. (boyd, 2014:65)

Within the context of privacy and security on social media she argues that teens rarely see the value in restricting the viewership of the shared content; that their strategies for their own privacy are in fact unrelated to blunt platform settings that might hide content entirely (perhaps because such security options can be found to be technically inadequate). The ephemeral gesture in the mediated space persists, requiring new strategies for performance and representation. boyd argues that a 'social steganography'<sup>27</sup> occurs, whereby coded information is perceivable by particular peer groups whilst remaining invisible to those not in the know. A re-writing of the mode of engagement of the written.

Ferraris has argued passionately that the explosion of writing through means of the computer, smartphone and tablet must not be seen as a 'creolisation, in

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<sup>24</sup> By 2022 Ericsson estimate 5.8 billion mobile broadband subscribers, with more than 70% of those as yet unsubscribed having mobile broadband coverage available to them.

<sup>25</sup> Ubiquitous Computing is a term widely thought to be coined by Mark Weiser during his tenure as chief scientist at Xerox Parc 'It is invisible, everywhere computing that does not live on a personal device of any sort, but is in the woodwork everywhere' (Kindberg et al., 2011:5).

<sup>26</sup> boyd rejects the capitalisation of her name, for reasons of identity and choice more comprehensively detailed in her blog (boyd, no date:online)

<sup>27</sup> Steganography is a cryptographic mechanism by which data is hidden in plain sight; information is encoded inside a container that is itself a form of information. E.g. a secret code concealed in the background noise of an image file, impossible to detect with the naked eye.

which the written becomes a variant of the spoken' (Ferraris, 2010:2.3). He dismisses the idea that characteristics of digital writing such as abbreviation and emoticons might mark an ontological blending of oral and written language, but more interesting perhaps is an assertion of the permanence of the written word seemingly regardless of its medium<sup>28</sup> - for example he writes 'the chatrooms are permanent, just like writing' (ibid). This coding of writing as permanence belies the time-sensitive gestures of the teenagers in boyd's interviews where context provides meaning as much as the digital trace of the message itself.

In a very real sense mark-making in the digital age is at once permanent and ephemeral. Ferraris trumpets the fax machine's transmission of the written word through a communications medium designed for voice as a triumph of the written over the oral (ibid). Yet the thermal paper of many fax machines degrades over time, and even those printed out through other means may become easily lost through misfiling or aged disposal. It is a truism of the age that once something is put on the Internet it's there forever, yet without useful or sufficiently narrow search terms the overabundance of so much other information may have the effect of hiding a needle in a haystack of other needles. Witness the struggle to find information lost to the Social Media time line, an ecology of systems that are geared towards action in the now rather than retrieval of data from the past (which is left to the Big Data back end). It has been argued that the mode of interaction with Facebook, for example,

leads people to feel as if they are always acting 'in the now' and that their history - as well as that of others they connect to - seems to disappear from view (Harper et al., 2012:1)

At first glance the rules seem up-ended and transformed, in actuality it may just be that different mechanics generate the same ends. In short, with the digital world in flux it is important to be open to discover new rules for old behaviour.

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<sup>28</sup> Curiously, later in the same ontological argument Ferraris puts forward that with the advent of digital devices 'writing on paper at last becomes as malleable as writing on the blank tablet of our memory' (Ferraris, 2010:3.3) arguing that it is now possible to write and edit without any trace of an edit being visible in the final work.

### 2.3 Art and Technology

Whilst the net art communities of the 1990s may have clustered around the online sharing spaces of Usenet newsgroups and mailing lists (*nettime*), IRC channels and discussion forums hosted on individual web sites (*Rhizome*, *The Well*) the first decade of the new century saw a proliferation and mass uptake of on-line social spaces and platforms.

Wikipedia (2001); Friendster (2002); Blogger (2003); Myspace (2003); Second Life (2003); Facebook (2004); Flickr (2004); Reddit (2005); YouTube (2005); iPhone (2007); Twitter (2007); Tumblr (2007); Grindr (2009); Instagram (2010). Blogs, wikis, social media applications, and other forms of networked social life have become commonplace sites of personal and professional expression. These inventions have radically changed popular culture and our personal lives, wrenching us out of the broadcast television era and into a more democratized media condition. Each, however, has risen so rapidly that it's unclear how these platforms have affected our interactions with one and other, what kinds of materials we choose to share, and how we imagine ourselves.

(Cornell & Halter, 2015:xx)

Galleries still struggle with Internet and digital artworks, displayed in their spaces as though they don't belong, and new Arts Centres list 'digital' as a category on a par with dance, theatre and art. This disjunction continues online, and while the sharing communities have proved vital areas for exchange and discussion 'some of the biggest platforms have been surprisingly resistant to use as spaces for art' (ibid:xxii). The rush towards a fully networked and self-sufficient individual has also ushered in what some artists have described as a "poststudio" situation (...) where the imperative is "to go mobile, as a body and a practice" (ibid:xx).

This urge for freedom and flexibility is imbricated with the community of the network. The Raqs Media Collective<sup>29</sup>, New Delhi based multi-disciplinary

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<sup>29</sup> Name-checked by Hal Foster in his *Bad New Days* book Raqs are part of an increasing ecology of artists whose primary mode of operation might be characterised as a recycling or recontextualising of archive material, often that which is lost or suppressed. In their artistic statement they claim to a multiplicity of territory: 'The *Raqs Media Collective* enjoys playing a plurality of roles, often appearing as artists, occasionally as curators, sometimes as philosophical agent provocateurs. They make contemporary art, have made films, curated exhibitions, edited

artists, argue that new technologies of communication facilitate discourse across cultural and political boundaries, constructing new connected systems of collaboration, which disrupt and challenge accepted practice. Pointing to the open-source movement as one that encourages information sharing as a vital step for innovation and quality control, and that functions in opposition to many of the existing frameworks of intellectual property protection. Interdisciplinary, cross-border collaboration using digital sharing mechanisms, they argue, inevitably foregrounds the value of the common, sustainably encourages such collaborations, can give new twists to the “publicness” (of public art) and raises questions as to the ownership and value of the ephemeral products of networked production.

The existence of contemporary art is ultimately predicated on the conditions of life of its practitioners. These conditions of life are constituted by the myriad daily acts of practice, of reading, inscribing, interpreting and repurposing the substance of culture, across cultures. These acts, in millions of incremental ways, transpose the ‘work’ of art to a register where boundedness, location and property rest uneasy. The work of art, the practitioner, the curator, the viewer and the acts of making, exhibiting and viewing: all stand to be transformed. All that is familiar becomes strange; all that is strange becomes familiar. (Raqs\_Media\_Collective, 2006:87)

With the rise in availability of consumer grade, affordable technologies such as the *arduino* microprocessor, mp3 players (both stand alone and embedded in mobile devices), activity sensors and GPS, comes an opportunity to experiment with new methods to tell stories and connect with each other. Combining these technological advances in miniaturisation with the significant uptake of mobile phones and smartphones, and the attendant mass adoption of social networks and connectivity has allowed performance-makers to extend their practice to include live or pre-recorded experiences triggered by interaction and played out through audio recordings, phone calls, smartphone prompts and text messages among other potential interventions. Peter Petralia, writing after the successful

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books, staged events, collaborated with architects, computer programmers, writers and theatre directors and have founded processes that have left deep impacts on contemporary culture in India.’ (Raqs\_Media\_Collective, 2016:online)

outing of Proto-type Theater's large-scale pervasive project *Fortnight* (Proto-type, 2011-14), suggests such experimentation might be the result of artists wanting to break free from the 'dominance of the screen as the main medium of innovation' (Petrulia, 2012b:online), and this is significant in a wider context of technology deployed in the making of performance, enabling further interaction and agency of the participant rather than its more common use in the mode of broadcast spectacle.

It may also be pertinent to reflect on the impact of new mechanics and opportunities afforded by technology in the same manner as any on-going reanalysis of performance making. As Michael Kirby writes on the New Theatre of the 1960s:

If painting and sculpture, for example, have not yet exhausted the possibilities of their nonobjective breakthrough (which occurred only three years after the start of this century), and if music has not yet begun to assimilate all the implications of its new-found electronic materials, there is every reason to feel that there will also be a fruitful aesthetic future for the new theatre. (Kirby writing in Sandford, 1995, reprinted 2005:38)

Performance maker Chris Thorpe styles theatre as 'a national laboratory for thinking about how we think and how we are and what we are' (Thorpe quoted in Gardner, 2015:online), and through this mode of operation a rich exploration of the relations conducted through new technologies might be pursued.

Technology and performance are hardly unlikely bedfellows, rather the practice of one and the enhancements of the other have always been intertwined. A technological function might be to improve the range or reach of a performer's action, such as the sound amplification provided by the acoustic designs of ancient auditoria (H. V. Fuchs, 2009); a practical intervention turned revolutionary, such as the development of theatrical lighting – first to illuminate, subsequently used for complex shifts in aesthetic (Johnson, 2012a:31-39); or as something utterly core to the performance itself, such as

the carefully crafted headphone audio of Duncan Speakman's *Subtle Mobs*<sup>30</sup> (Speakman, 2013). Here technology folds itself into both the structural staging and the sensorial reality of performance, so a set of headphones is both a practical delivery mechanisms for audio text and sounds, but also an everyday object which may find its use as a telephone hands-free or as a way to listen to music on a crowded commute.

In an artist-led and conceptual engagement with new technologies there is the opportunity to consider their use in unusual ways, or at least ways that are not necessarily part of the pre-supposed usage pattern of the technology provider or system designer. Tim Etchells, on recounting a story of his woodwork instructor teaching him the value of the right tool for the job, remarks that 'the most interesting results in the work are reached by using the wrong tool for the job' (Etchells quoted in Bailes, 2010:107). The art practice made for this research project uses (a) the sending and receiving of text messages and (b) high quality audio/visual conferencing systems intended to (and sold as devices to) simulate actuality as closely as current technological limitations allow. The practice developed here implements and adapts these technologies as the wrong tool for the job, in that their established use is in some way subverted – so, a video conferencing system that is more generally used to interrogate securely held prisoners, or conduct high level business meetings, is here used as a mechanism to make possible an introduction to and conversation with a stranger; similarly a text message exchange becomes a getting-to-know-you-chat stretched over time and held in the day-to-day space of other text messages, but without the implicit promise of a face-to-face encounter.

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<sup>30</sup> 'In *Subtle Mobs* the participants gather in a public place and listen through headphones to synchronized audio files that refer to the listener as a character in a narrative. No one knows for sure who is participating, out of all the people around wearing headphones or earphones. The organiser controls registration and sends out audio files with instructions on where to go and exactly when to begin the soundtrack. But the experience plays out according to the whims of individual participants, affected though that is by the narration they listen to and whatever happens to be going on around them at the time. Subtle mobs are a mixture of the designed (the audio tracks) and the contingent (confluence with random events in the setting)' (Kindberg et al., 2011:5).

So, the work of this project is perhaps not so much just to use the wrong tool, but instead to interrogate the scope of the job. In an everyday where communications technology mediates around half of our human-to-human interactions<sup>31</sup> now is a good time to investigate how these systems frame and shape our contact with each other.

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<sup>31</sup> As mentioned in the introduction: a recent report from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth on their Generation X cohort, discusses personal/social networking within that group and establishes that traditional vs electronic interactions have reached an approximate parity (Miller, 2013:7).



## 2.4 Encounters and Relations

In doing so, the work foregrounds the suggestion that ‘art is a state of encounter’ (Bourriaud, 2002:18) and engages with ideas that the ‘aesthetic experience of performance does not depend only on the work of art, but rather the interaction of these participants’ (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:36). Nicolas Bourriaud, in his turn of the millennium investigation into the aesthetic of artworks that attempt to renew and reinvigorate the state of inter-human interaction, claims

Artistic activity, for its part, strives to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one and other (Bourriaud, 2002:8)

This current development he claims is both a response and a challenge to the commodification and standardisation of social bonds, experiments in ‘*learning to inhabit the world in a better way*’ (Ibid:13, author’s emphasis).

In his activist call-to-arms ‘*Social Acupuncture*’, Darren O’Donnell, artistic director of Toronto based Mammalian Diving Reflex<sup>32</sup>, observes these effects of neo-liberalism on the commodification of artworks and artist, and appears to agree with Bourriaud’s ideas of relational art-making as a process which might confound the transactional processing that insouciantly infects the background of day-to-day communication (let’s meet over a duly priced beer, a coffee, go for dinner or a movie). He states: ‘One response to this incessant commodification is the explosion of artistic practices that induce encounters between people, replacing an object-based art practice with one dedicated to generating relationships’ (O’Donnell, 2008:29). There is an implied rejection of what he cites as Bourriaud’s ‘modernist impulse to refashion the world into a better place’ (Ibid), and a suggestion that today’s artists are rejecting the grand

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<sup>32</sup> From their website: ‘Based in Germany and Canada, Mammalian Diving Reflex views innovative artistic interventions as a way to trigger generosity and equity across the universe’. The company generate their artistic practice using a variety of performance, psychological and game techniques and are equally at home in galleries, theatre spaces or creating cultural events in the heart of a city. ‘We are a culture production workshop that creates site and social-specific performance events, theatre-based productions, gallery-based participatory installations, video products, art objects and theoretical texts.’ (Mammalian\_Diving\_Reflex, 2015b:online)

narratives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-guard ('idealism, revolution and teleological aspiration'), instead investigating 'the simple interactions between people' (ibid). Relational artworks, whilst sharing some of the aesthetics of the gallery installation, 'insist upon *use* rather than contemplation' (Bishop, 2004:55), setting the stage for an artwork that cannot exist without its participants direct involvement.

Of course, within the realm of performance making, there is a very real sense that the work could not exist without some form of involvement between its participants. The relationship between audience and performers has been – and continues to be - well documented and investigated<sup>33</sup>, and it is true to say these roles are hardly static; audience participation is no longer unusual, if it ever was. Examples proliferate from the cosy sing-along, through the individual exposure of an audience member being drawn onto stage, to the intimate relations that comprise the one-to-one encounter.

Fischer-Lichte inscribes the very nature of performance as a relationship of bodily co-presence, stating (after Herrmann):

Performance, then, requires two groups of people, one acting and the other observing, together at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime. Their encounter – interactive and confrontational – produces the event of the performance. (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:38)

The performance *communitas* can extend outside of any particular event. In his book '*Passionate Amateurs*', which analyses the nature of community and work of those who participate in theatre – and to be clear, by participants he includes venue workers, theatre makers as well as audiences – Nicholas Ridout outlines a

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<sup>33</sup> I am thinking here as much of the experimental intrusions into the performer/audience contract seen in Kaprow's *Happenings* (Sandford, 1995, reprinted 2005; Beaven, 2012) and Schechner's '*Environmental Theater*' (Schechner, 1973, reprinted 1994:40-85). Schechner writes in his 1968 paper '6 Axioms for Environmental Theater' that '(v)ery little hard work has been done researching the behaviour of audiences and the possible exchange of roles between audiences and performers' (Schechner, 1968:44). He cautions that the audience may have clear ideas of the particular 'decorum' they feel appropriate to their own behaviour at the theatre, and, unrehearsed and heterogeneous, may prove 'difficult to mobilize and once mobilized, even more difficult to control' (ibid). Well worth exploring for a wider understanding of the contemporary engagement and potential levelling of agency between performer and participant is Gareth White's extensive analysis: '*Audience Participation in the Theatre*' (G. White, 2013).

coming together of a peculiar social public within the community generated and sustained during the production and performance of theatre. Described as a communism un-allied to the name of a political process or party, it is more aligned to Jean-Luc Nancy's 'unworking of work' (Nancy, 1986, reprinted in 2006). Within specific examples he points to moments or encounters in the theatre that 'constitute(s) an instance of the production of social relations' although certainly not the bland claim of a generation of sociality or community through the mere 'gathering together of people in one place' (Ridout, 2013:54). Conversation is key here. Later in the book, Ridout considers the

... spectator who participates – the spect-actor of Boal's theatre or the convivial enthusiast of Bourriard's relational art practices – (who) might be said to join the conversation by becoming part of the event itself and may even be understood to experience some feeling of being part of the community constituted by the event. (ibid:140)

This is not to suggest any invocation of community within a participatory artwork will engender *only* constructive outcomes. Within the ecology of relational works, O'Donnell outlines a scholarly division between Bourriard's suggestions of the democratisation of artistic practice through a generally positive audience activation<sup>34</sup> and Bishop's suggestions that there is a confounding of any useful meaning making by the creation of works that 'reinforce already existing social circuits – complete with the same exclusivities, cliques and in-crowds' (O'Donnell, 2008:31).

That is to say artworks of encounter might implicitly offer their participants the promise of transformation through new social interaction. However, the extent to which such a process can be said to be meaningful becomes as much contingent on the nature of the participants involved as the conceptual architecture of the work itself.

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<sup>34</sup> Bourriard is relentlessly positive in his approach, considering relational artworks as strategic reactions to 'the social bond [...] turned into a standardised artefact' arguing that 'Social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies' (Bourriard, 2002:31). With these methods he believes the artwork – in particular those crucibles of conviviality wherein an atmosphere of 'heterogeneous forms of sociability are worked out' stand up against the Society of the Spectacle.

The divide between Bourriaud's social utopias and Bishop's antagonistic collisions<sup>35</sup> finds a mirror in a social analysis of mobile phone usage. On the one hand the mobile phone offers previously unviable opportunities for the building of social capital<sup>36</sup> with our loved ones due to its potential for intimate connection through the day, whilst on the other it can isolate its user from the broader social flow concentrating their activities instead with their own social cliques without enabling the possibility for other outside engagement.

Writing in 2004, Rich Ling offers:

We can speculate that the intense interaction of the in-group can have a chilling effect on the ability to engage in more superficial and peripheral social relationships. Thus, the teen girl described earlier was so busy sending text messages to organize her meeting with her friends at the local café that she was unavailable for small talk with others at the bus stop. (Ling, 2004:190)

Whilst Nancy Baym, writing later in 2012, muddies the waters of this easy distinction by pointing out that social networking sites – now available for interaction on the smartphone, and therefore in similar day-to-day circumstances as the 'teen girl' finds herself in above – can offer a multiplicity of different forms of social interaction. Both bonding and bridging capital can be exchanged within the community flow of social networking sites, which is to be expected as the online experience widens to supplant or compliment much of our social interaction. However, unlike the flow of people through the urban street with its attendant opportunities for unexpected interaction (Jacobs,

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<sup>35</sup> Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics - Bishop's careful deconstruction of Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics, including a comprehensive analysis of the work's artistic and cultural antecedents, makes for fascinating further reading (Bishop, 2004). Bishop argues for a more nuanced and comprehensive thinking around relational artworks, pushing against issues such as a cultural homogeneity of Bourriaud's gallery participants and a perceived lack of acknowledgement of political and cultural context. She considers that for relational artworks to embrace a true *democratic* flavour (a dialogue-driven micro-democracy created by the relational artwork in the moment of experience being a key trait lauded by Bourriaud) they must inculcate antagonistic, conflicting viewpoints and to be aware of how an artworks conceptual structure operates within its geopolitical reality.

<sup>36</sup> Social capital is a somewhat flexible term which refers to the 'resources people attain because of their network of relationships' (Baym, 2012:82). It can be divided into two sub categories that of bonding capital that exists between people in close relationships, and bridging capital that operates between those who do not share strong relationships, and those who are different from you.

1961:55-57), the silos of social networks are limited in the scope of publics they can offer. What's more, their delineation is considerably less visible than those of a city district. The fragility of the divide between the different publics of the digital realm is no more apparent than when a private message 'jumps ship' to a public status update by a user error or technological glitch.

In short, both participatory practice and social networking offer highly contingent possibilities of community and isolation, of new relational experiences and comfortable re-enforcements of tribal beliefs.

Returning to Bishop's dismissal of Bourriaud's relational optimism, she suggests even the process is far from novel:

This idea of considering the work of art as a potential trigger for participation is hardly new—think of Happenings, Fluxus instructions, 1970s performance art, and Joseph Beuys's declaration that "everyone is an artist." (Bishop, 2004:61)

Bishop goes on to argue that this historical agency of the audience does little to meet Bourriaud's notional criteria for success – that in fact he foregrounds the value of the structure over the user experience, the macroscopic idea of democracy and participation over questions of content and the spectator's reaction to the artwork.

When Bourriaud argues that "encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them," I sense that this question is (for him) unnecessary; all relations that permit "dialogue" are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good. But what does "democracy" really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why? (Bishop, 2004:65)

In the outdoor promenade piece *Nightwalks with Teenagers* (Mammalian\_Diving\_Reflex, 2015a), O'Donnell presses into service an irruption of unexpected behaviour from his teenage performers. They ask searching questions of a deliberately intimate and personal nature, the answers to which are then shouted loudly and in public. This forces a constant and difficult re-negotiation of status between the (mainly) adult audience and their minor protagonists. Here O'Donnell faces front-and-centre Bishop's assertion that,

should the artist take up Bourriaud's assertion that participatory works be judged on criteria which include political and ethical elements rather than simply aesthetics, then it is *antagonism* rather than *conviviality* that provides a true measure of the democracy and emancipation the work strives to attain. Bishop states: 'a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are sustained, not erased' (Ibid:66). Contemporary works that occupy multiple coordinates of this axis of conviviality and antagonism would include Ontroerend Goed's *Internal* and Kaleider's *You With Me*, both of which will be returned to later.

The relational artworks described by Bourriaud may begin in the gallery but also seem to fit into the broad meta-category of Live Art, which puts a name to the various diverse strategies of theatre makers (primarily in the UK) whose work doesn't necessarily fit comfortably into existing boxes. Lois Keidan, co-founder of the Live Art Development Agency, describes Live Art as

a research engine driven by artists who are working across forms, contexts and spaces to open up new artistic models, new languages for the representation of ideas, new ways of activating audiences and new strategies for intervening in public life. (Keidan, 2006:9)

Keidan populates a loose sketch by tracking the influences of Live Art from the strategies of late 20<sup>th</sup> century Performance Art<sup>37</sup>, through Forced Entertainment's experiments in twisting and breaking the boundaries of theatre, and taking in Blast Theory's use of technology and virtual spaces in their particular brand of playable theatre. She suggests Live Art operates primarily as a framing device for artists to approach the concept of 'liveness' no matter what form, process, practice, duration, location, grouping, discipline or even sense that it might take (this is of course a non-exhaustive list of categories that operate under its voluminous umbrella). Live Art, in its role as agent provocateur, frequently contests the use of the institutional locations in which art is generally produced and the methods by which it is presented.

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<sup>37</sup> described as a leap of visual artists from the walls of the gallery into their own bodies, which offers an interesting counterpoint to Bourriaud's relational artworks existing *in* their gallery spaces.

Keidan describes this as a displacement, that it's artworks 'could be understood as being *placeless* simply because they do not necessarily fit, or often belong, in the received contexts and frameworks art is understood to belong' (ibid:10). In this sense Live Art also opens up interesting questions of context: outside of the theatre or the gallery, all preconceived notions of significance can be lost, and the rules are yet to be learned. We have seen earlier that the rapid shift in the affordances of technology can up-end once-known rules of social engagement, here the framing of interaction as art creates a parallel shift in stability.

These participatory forms might once again press into service the role of theatre<sup>38</sup> as laboratory. Indeed, to be a participant in a relational artwork, or part of live art practice that brings the participant's agency and action centre stage, forces a reflective challenge of our instincts and behaviour. Scenarios which share many of the same signifiers as everyday life, yet are framed as art or entertainment, require adjustments in a presentation-of-self made suddenly unstable by unexpected vulnerabilities and potential outcomes. We might return to *Nightwalks with Teenagers*' stroll through the city. Here participants find themselves walking down familiar then unfamiliar streets guided by a group of young teens who, given license by carnivalesque instruction and a minimum of rehearsal, shout and gesticulate both to audience and other city dwellers alike. Each new passer-by glimmers with the potential of being an appalled friend or judgemental stranger.

The practice of this research is informed by the notion that performance is 'a genuine act of creation involving all participants' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:36). Noteworthy with remote performance is that all interactions between participants are perforce mediated, and as such the frame within which such an event takes place is no longer implicit by the nature of the location (a theatre studio, a gallery), but is instead signified by a complex space (or series of spaces) which straddles disparate geographical locations and includes the

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<sup>38</sup> I am referring here to Theatre as its broadest possible tent. Observing that, in his discussions on intermediality and the creation of hybrid works involving the performer, Kattenbelt asserts that 'theatre is able to incorporate all other art forms' (Kattenbelt, 2009:20).

liminal spaces of technological mediation – all of which combine to offer different cues and clues as to the nature of the interaction created, and the understanding of meaning generated.

Indeed, the nature of what is in of itself theatrical or performative has been argued to be affected by (if not a result of) the nature of the spectator's gaze (Féral & Bermingham, 2002:98), and by their own cognitive processing and thence personal associations made as a result of witnessing unfolding events (Di Benedetto, 2010:17,22,24). Féral describes theatricality as a 'result of a perceptual dynamics' linking an observer with that which is observed, which she asserts may be an actor declaring their intention to act, or a spectator - by their own intention - transforming what they observe into spectacle.

Integral to the ideas interrogated in this research project is the desire to blur the performer/spectator binary. So that within the context of the interaction between performer and spectator, in a largely improvised engagement, these descriptive states are flipped multiple times as performer becomes spectator and spectator performer. This approach serves to set the performance practice firmly in the world of everyday telematic communication, rather than a mediated broadcast event (the work occurs 'with' and not 'to' the participant). There is an implicit offer of mutual agency that is activated when the participants discover that they are both 'in it together' and that neither is an expert on the situation they find themselves in.

I have characterised the nature of those taking part in this work as *participants*, a word that suggests a balancing of status between each actor. Further, that the word is active in nature, and perhaps therefore offers a different mode of taking part than that of the assumed-to-be-passive spectator. Consolidating his decade long experience with interactive artworks, artist and theorist Johannes Birringer curates a series of writings from diverse practitioners (artists, technicians, computer scientists) into a written manifesto. Here an equality of agency between those taking part (be they human or machine) is given high regard. In a section titled 'Interactive Manifesto notes' Elliot O'Brart writes:



Interaction can have no passive watcher or superior performer. The spectator is dead; the performer is no more. Interactivity requires PARTICIPANTS (O'Brart writing in Birringer & Behringer, 2013:21)

Although, the word does not come without its own linguistic and political baggage: Quarantine's Richard Gregory, in a paper delivered to a conference on social engagement, mentions that during a group discussion on participatory theatre that it was a struggle to come up with a usable definition of "participatory". That whilst words such as "untrained" and "non-professional" were suggested, it was rarely clear as to what fields these words might refer. Gregory rejects these reflexive and vague definitions, which seek to categorise those who take part in the work through what they are not rather than what they might be. He instead gestures to the description Berlin-based company Rimini Protokoll have used; eschewing even the potentially egalitarian notion of "participant" they call the people they work with "experts in everyday life" (Gregory, 2007:online).

In his introduction to '*No More Drama*' Peter Crawley locates companies such as Rimini Protokoll and Quarantine as operators in the 'latest chapter in the avant-garde'. Which he describes as a location where actors don't act and are rarely actors, where the text is not dramatic but draws its drama from the authenticity and reality of its participants (Crawley & White, 2011:11).

I am minded to embrace an elegant definition of participation put forward by Gregory in his above cited paper: the wonderfully elliptical 'participatory theatre is created primarily for the benefit of those taking part' (Gregory, 2007).

... if we're talking here about art that tries to find ways to engage with the world around us, right now, to engage with society, to try to express something about how we feel about living right now, then – yes -that's what we're striving to do. And I think we get closest to it when we create a context for genuine – and often actual – dialogue between our audience and our performers. (ibid)

The vitality of art which is intended to engineer a vibrant and dialogic encounter between audience and performer, or between individual participants that defy such an easy categorisation of roles, relies on the affordances of the artworks'

structure whether they be technological or other elements of the range of possible human interaction. The affordances of the encounter, perhaps centrally how the world of the artwork mirrors or deviates from the everyday and what this means for a participant's choices and actions, activate the potential for self-reflexive criticality.

In the practice developed here the participant, or expert of the everyday, becomes both performer and spectator. It is therefore appropriate that some consideration should be given to concepts of performance and performativity as they are used here.

## 2.5 Performance and performativity

Peggy Phelan has argued that performance has become a lens through which many contemporary events may be understood, from the wars in Iraq to the pop culture of the music video:

We have entered a realm of all-performance-all-the-time. This is not to say that 'the real' has disappeared, but it is to acknowledge that it is impossible to recognize 'the real' without a concept of performance in view. (Phelan & Smith, 2003:292)

A recognition then, that reality is intertwined with performance as theorised within the extended theatrical metaphor of Goffman's *'Presentation of Self In Everyday Life'* (Goffman, 1956). Goffman's toolset of props, set and ruses also proves to be a valuable framework in the analysis of the ways we seek to maintain our façade through social and mobile technologies (Ling, 2004:29). This identity construction is also apparent in Papacharissi's deconstruction of the 21<sup>st</sup> century citizen as a *Networked Self*, where she cites Goffman's 'information game' narrative of a perpetually evolving cycle where 'identity is presented, compared, adjusted, or defended against a constellation of social, cultural, economic, or political realities' (Papacharissi, 2011:304).

Shifting the viewpoint from a day-to-day reality viewed as performance to the development of performance art as a process, which takes the real as its progenitor, canvas and impetus, brings us to the 'performative turn'. This notion was brought into a new academic focus in the 1960s by non-proscenium, what would now perhaps be termed "immersive", art creations such as those documented in Richard Schechner's<sup>39</sup> *Environmental Theater* (Schechner, 1973, reprinted 1994), Allan Kaprow's *Happenings* (Sandford, 1995, reprinted 2005), and the everyday environments constructed by the Situationists (Knabb, 1981). Erika Fischer-Lichte traces the 'performative turn' from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the work of German philologist Max Herrmann. Herrmann describes theatre as social play, for all and by all with spectators as co-players in

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<sup>39</sup> Schechner, in collaboration with anthropologist Victor Turner, would contribute significantly to the inception of the (at the time) all-new academic discipline of Performance Studies.

which 'the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:32).

The notion of performativity is itself a complex and at times contested term. Tracing its lineage would reasonably touch upon J. L. Austin's work on speech-acts in which he proposes a division between descriptive, or constative, utterances (statements of how things are) and performatives (phrases that enact or do things – a promise, a bet, a pronouncement of marriage)<sup>40</sup> (Austin, 1962:3-7). For Austin, performative speech-acts enact change in the moment and context of the utterance. Fischer-Lichte traces the use of the term in cultural theory beginning in the 1990s when culture as performance begins to supplant the notion of culture as text. She notes the significance of Judith Butler's ideas of performance of identity and in particular gender raised in her 1990 essay 'Performative Acts and Gender Theory'. Here Butler argues that rather than identity being predicated on existing categories (such as biology), it is brought into being by the repetition of performative bodily acts that continually create a constructed identity. Quoting de Beauvoir's claim that 'one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman' Butler suggests that rather than gender being a 'stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; ... it is an identity tenuously constructed in time' (Butler, 1988:519).

Austin's argument for the performative notes that it is transformative in the moment of the speech-act itself. For Butler, identity functions are instituted through performative acts that are internally discontinuous whilst maintaining the appearance of overall substance, each performative act contributing to a reflexive (re)creation of identity (ibid)<sup>41</sup>. These are acts of embodiment, creating self-identity out of the matrix of infinite cultural and historical possibilities.

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<sup>40</sup> Whilst this separation is a generally accepted truism, it has been pointed out that even Austin himself, in his later Harvard lectures, determines that after deconstructing utterances in order to propose these two types comes to the realisation that 'every genuine speech act is both' (Austin, 1962:147). That the performative and constative are merely poles of a continuum (Sedgwick, 2003:3-4).

<sup>41</sup> Butler's ideas on performativity of gender have been contested, memorably in Martha Nussbaum's withering take-down *The Professor of Parody* (Nussbaum, 1999), which characterises Butler's thinking as abstract and self-involved. However, her framework remains a powerful tool set in dissecting social and cultural interactions.

However, as Fischer-Lichte warns us, this is not to say the individual controls the conditions for the embodiment process nor has the freedom to choose which identity to adopt (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:27-28). Society exerts pressure to conform through the imposition of punishments when gender is performed wrong (Butler, 1988:528). Performance theorist Jon McKenzie writes:

This performance of gender is not expressive; it does not exteriorize an interior substance, identity, or essence; instead, gender emerges from performances that disguise their constitutive role. (McKenzie, 1998:221)

Observing that Butler asserts the 'acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts' (Butler quoted in *ibid*), McKenzie notes that where Turner and Schechner articulate performance as potentially transgressive, Butler's notion of gender performance is as a rearticulation of sedimented norms, and as such not individually expressive but rather constitutive of a repression of individual identity (*ibid*). Butler notes that re-appropriating the performative act as transgressive and as part of a rebalancing of social power is, however, possible. She argues in 'Gender Trouble' that dissonant and denaturalised performance of identity can bring forth the structure of the performative itself, that parody can expose the illegitimate underpinnings of identity by repetition (Butler, 1990:137-138).

Butler's notion of the performative is deeply contextual, so 'the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence' (Butler, 1988:527). Butler is suggesting that the transvestite performance in the cabaret show is accepted because it is enacted within a theatrical matrix, and because of this opens the opportunity for the act to be 'de-realized'. By contrast the same act on the bus can become dangerous (if indeed it does so) precisely *because* there is no theatrical frame and the transvestite's construction of gender must be accepted as fully real. Should a context itself be unclear (what is the gender of my interlocutor?) or a location be ambivalent or ambiguous to appropriate, natural performative acts (what are the rules for this space?), then what becomes the acceptable real?

That is to say, when the 'doing' of one's identity is placed outside of a regularised context, then does this let individual performative acts off the normalizing hook? Or does the absence or diminishment of social and cultural cues reinforce customary behaviour.

Working with technologies that might mask some of the cues through which the prevailing orthodox structures are reified makes way for an opportunity for critical analysis of the performative acts that constitute our mediated relations. Stretching Butler's metaphor somewhat: might we create a scenario where the transvestite performs on the bus, and in so doing can this de-realize the bus itself? In other words, rather than experiencing a contextual crisis, another strategy is to become immersed in the performance and accept the translation, albeit temporarily, of the bus compartment into a performance space<sup>42</sup>.

In the performance practice made for this research project, our context might include the anonymity of a text message exchange, or the displacement of cultural or societal norms that can be invoked by telepresence interactions across continents<sup>43</sup>. Under these circumstances there is an opportunity (or perhaps a demand) to consciously reflect on the manner in which we perform ourselves to an unknown Other.

Like Phelan, Fischer-Lichte argues that since the performative turn of the 1960s, and contingent on the spread of mass media, performance as a category spreads its wings to embrace arenas of politics, sport, spectacle and festival. She writes:

These performances do not claim to be art; yet they are staged and perceived as new possibilities for the theatricalization and aestheticization of our environment; they partake in the reenchantment of the world (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:181)

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<sup>42</sup> The degree to which the transvestite performer on a bus in the 1990s might create a violent crisis in their fellow passengers compared to a similar scenario now is also deeply contextual.

<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, this aspect was muted but noticeable in the NYC/MCR experiment, where the social and cultural influences exerted between the UK and the US were all too apparent.

Turkle has warned us of *technology's* power to enchant, suggesting that in its distraction we 'forget what we know about life' (Turkle, 2012:23), yet in the technological platforms used for social connectivity we find not only vehicles for connection but new stages for everyday performative acts. Thus enchantment is not only to be found in the newness of technology but by our own theatricalization and aestheticization of the technologies we use to connect with each other.

## 2.6 Reality bytes

The tension between simulation and actuality is a common debating ground in the scholarly analysis of performance. In her opening chapter of *Theatre & Violence* Lucy Nevitt asks what is or isn't real, contrasting the spectator's experience of the horror of violence in two examples: that seen portrayed on stage in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and that experienced by witnesses of the 9/11 terror attacks on the World Trade Centre. She describes the images in the first as having effects on the audience that were described by them as very real, persisting 'long after the play was over', whilst she asserts that a common reaction of witnesses to the annihilation of the twin towers was 'that it was like a movie' (Nevitt, 2013:2).

Reality, then, is not simply a perception of things as they are, reality can be a value system of perceived authenticity. This value system juggles material and simulation, and does not necessarily inscribe reality as a function of one or the other. If I take a photograph with my smartphone the device can be configured to playback the recorded sound of a shutter release when I take the shot. Not only does this signify to those nearby that a picture has been taken, it also associates the act of taking a picture with the sound of a much more expensive piece of dedicated camera equipment. The expensive DSLR makes the noise due to its mechanical workings and has no choice but to do so, whilst the smartphone can be configured to make any sound or none. A smartphone lacking in the requisite processing power may even find its ability to take a picture disrupted by the parallel task of simulating another object's reality.

Within the ecology of the performing arts itself, the nature of reality is confronted. In the opening chapter of her treatise on theatre as Event, Fischer-Lichte contrasts the spectators' perception of the action on a typical theatrical stage to that of the often disturbing and complex reaction of an audience to the work of performance artist Marina Abramović. Selecting the character of Othello for her thought experiment, Fisher-Lichte suggests that no audience member would feel compunction to involve themselves in the plot to kill Desdemona, yet in the closing section of Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* – where



the artist has cut her abdomen and lain upon a cross of ice positioned under a powerful radiator – after some moments of her sustained self-torture, the audience felt compelled to pull Abramović to safety and cover her naked body with their coats. Fischer-Lichte here argues that the *Lips of Thomas* challenges the audience by collapsing and suspending the rules of the everyday (where one would hope to intervene in circumstances that inflict pain) and of the performance (where it is known that whatever happens on stage, the actors will safely return for the curtain call) (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:11-12).

Cleaving to reality or the Real as some kind of metric of value has the airy danger of a high wire act, yet if the pursuit here is for a greater understanding of the intimacies and affect of mediated interactions between us humans, then the subjective experiences of different perceptions of reality must be part of the territory. This may be a good moment to introduce the kinds of theatrical or performance realities this study takes as its starting points.

Tim Etchells writes in *Programme Notes*, a collection of essays on the contested ground between traditional theatre stages and experimental performance locations, that

... reality moves on – more digital now and somehow even more fractured – and as the reality shifts so too theatre and performance duck, dive, shiver and mutate to keep up. (Etchells, 2007:96)

So, as reality as we experience it changes, performance must keep up. In so doing once again performance must relate to reality in a relentless cycle of feedback. Although there is the hint here that it is performance that must do the chasing, and that reality is the skittish changing thing that must be caught and represented.

## 2.7 Being there (or over here) – Liveness and Presence

In his essay 'Some people do something. The others watch, listen, try to be there' Tim Etchells works through, on paper, what this thing called theatre might be; he states 'Theatre then must always (?) be: the summoning of presence in the context of absence; a bringing in of the world' (Etchells, 2007:100). A working definition of theatre or performance might therefore include the representation of reality through the enacting or summoning of presence. In *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan says 'Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies' (Phelan, 1993:148) and in the rush of this auratic (after Benjamin) live performance 'without a copy [...] plunges into visibility – in a manically charged present' (ibid) before it vanishes into absence and memory. She clarifies that in this supercharged moment the spectator's gaze must take everything in – what is present must be consumed moment by moment – for once the moment has passed the opportunity to experience it has, too. Unlike a spectator's experience of literature, photography or fine art there are no take-backs or do-overs.

This ephemeral status of performance ontology can also be characterised as the possibility of transformation for both the actor and the spectator during an event's unfolding (Phelan & Smith, 2003:295). A theme that is extensively developed by Fisher-Lichte in respect of the performative turn, arguing that shifting the process of art making into an event co-created by artist and participants releases the material and semiotic status of the objects and actions of performance. This results in the potential for all participants to experience transformation (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:22-23). Phelan, responding to her critics who read her work as dismissive of technology<sup>44</sup>, suggests that it is not the use of technology that she finds problematic but the location of this power of

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<sup>44</sup> Phelan has pointed out that her argument comes from the idea that performance's ephemeral status can stand in opposition to the consumerist drive to 'preserve everything' and 'purchase everything' which she sees as characteristic of late capitalism. This viewpoint can also be seen as an impetus for the Performance Art movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, where commodification is rejected through the use of ephemeral performance rather than the creation of purchasable art objects. An interesting further development of which is the notion of instructional artworks wherein the tools for presentation are purchasable, whilst the labour inscribed within the artwork is then to be provided by its own consumers.

transformation. In interview she talks about live streaming and other media capture and circulation of performance

... these experiences are less interesting to me because the spectator's response cannot alter the pre-recorded or remotely transmitted performance, and in this fundamental sense, these representations are indifferent to the response of the other. In live performance, the potential for the event to be transformed by those participating in it makes it more exciting to me – this is precisely where the 'liveness' of live performance matters. (Phelan & Smith, 2003:295)

However, in co-opting technology as a two-way conduit for potentially transformative exchange, we conjure the possibility of transformation from within the shared space of communication. Although this only truly becomes a possibility if the presence of each of the communicative parties is experienced as real and responsive. Borrowing Auslander's most recent understanding of liveness enacted through technology, it is our belief in the moment to moment presence of the Other *as live* that makes it so. He writes,

... liveness does not inhere in a technological artifact or its operations—it results from our engagement with it and our willingness to bring it into full presence for ourselves (Auslander, 2012:8)

In writing on theatre that invokes connections outside the here and now, Wiens offers:

Medial space of interconnected, digital communication is a space of remote presence, the immediate presence of something located far away or that takes place over distance. The transactions that this space contains may not entirely be present, but nor are they absent. (Birgit Wiens writing in Bay-Cheng et al., 2010:108)

She argues that remote spatiality, and the interactions between us in the material and virtual spaces offered by the Internet is a vital and emergent area of study. Cautioning against a homogeneous approach which often characterises the Internet as simply the 'largest stage in the world' rather than taking into consideration its political, cultural, economic and structural complexity, she argues:

This could become a new, even explosive task for performance, exploring and staging the constellations, relations and dynamics of electronic

spaces and the gestures and modalities of their interconnected phenomena. (ibid)

Nick Kaye, writing in 'Screening Presence', an analysis of the live transmission and mediation aesthetics in the intermedial work of the Builder's Association, turns to the philosopher Samuel Weber. Weber argues that in the case of a television transmission there is a confusion in the relationship between the representation and the real, suggesting that the way the broadcast of live TV brings events closer to the viewer is not merely a 'representation', but rather a 'transposition of vision'. That the experience of the viewer with respect to the entity that is viewed is that it is 'neither fully there or entirely here' (Kaye, 2007:559). Weber points to the construction of language around the experience, that we do not talk of "seeing" television but of "watching". This mode of engagement he aligns with phrases such as "watch out for" and contends that here there is an active involvement of the viewer with the potentially unexpected, particularly, say, in watching a live sporting event where the outcome is of importance to the fan and at the time of broadcast unknown and played out in real time. Kaye inscribes this kind of experience, replete with anticipation, with the transformation and ephemeral characteristics of the live.

Another way of looking at the ephemeral nature of a mediated experience is through the concept of connectivity – originally made use of in digital media theory – this is a term that has been co-opted to refer to live theatre's engagement with telematic technologies and in particular the aesthetics of long distance transmission of information (Wolf Dieter Ernst writing in Bay-Cheng et al., 2010:185). Crucially, within the idea of connection is also the idea of failure of connection. Ernst argues that the clue is in the word construction, that "-ivity" implies the 'potential' of the connection and its implicit instability. There is of course the technical instability of signal break up or line drop, but also the up-ending of conventional hierarchies (shifts in time zone, cause and effect, and notions of distance). Ernst goes further by arguing that in, say, a long distance telephone call

intimacy is not taken for granted, as it is in a one-to-one<sup>45</sup> conversation, but rather is heightened because of the awareness of the absence of physical proximity. (ibid)

Along with this awareness he suggests there is also perhaps a longing for the possibility of a face-to-face meeting whilst being simultaneously conscious of its impossibility. Here we can see the bringing together notions of instability and ephemerality of a telematic connection, with the idea of an intimacy that is not generated by proximity but intensified because of the fragile nature of its connectivity. Ernst describes this as unstable emotional content reinforcing the dynamic relations between us the connectivity enables. In a telematic encounter the moment that the liveness or presence of the other party is most apparent is the one where the connectivity flickers or dies. Impending or actual absence caused by this loss represents a fundamental deactivation of the connectivity, both emotional and technical. There is a weight to the question "Are you still there?".

Writing on media in '*Postdramatic Theatre*', Lehmann argues that

What is a real cause of concern for the theatre, however, is the emerging transition to an *interaction* of distant partners by means of technology (at present still in the primitive stages of development). Will such an increasingly perfected interaction in the end compete with the domain of the theatrical live arts whose main principle is participation? (Lehmann, 2006:167)

He swiftly solves his own riddle, by choosing to separate out the communication structures of theatre from the domain of information itself, he makes the suggestion that information is beyond time. He appears to argue that the time taken to encode into the information flow (the "mathematization") sunders the technological representation from the regular flow of time, separating information from the possibility of death and annihilating 'proximity and distance'.

Here he privileges lived, face-to-face proximity, the 'aging together' of the 'sender and receiver' - the performers and audience who exist in the same

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<sup>45</sup> Here I think it is reasonable to assume one-to-one takes the meaning of face-to-face

physical space during the theatrical event. In so doing he posits performative liveness must in some way include the notion of death, absent in the world of information. However, in a telematic performance involving a connectivity between individuals the potential of death (the interruption of signal) is constantly apparent. This might manifest as a break or disruption in the media flow, or a 'ghosting' – where one of the SMS communicants simply stops responding. In video conference, whilst the characteristics of time are disrupted by time zones and lag, the flow is of 'real time'; legitimised by cause and effect, and played out not as mathematized information but as conversational continuity.

Interestingly, part of Lehmann's point appears to be an assertion that the technology of connection will eventually be made perfect, whilst at the same time declaring that such technology will not enable participation, which seems a remarkable oversight. Perhaps his point here is that it is *theatre* that cannot encompass such remote participation. In his analysis of intermediality, Kattenbelt, by contrast, has argued that

It is because of its capacity to incorporate all media that we can consider theatre as a hypermedium, that is to say, as a medium that can contain all media. (Kattenbelt, 2009:23).

It is not only conceptually possible for theatre to contain mediatized interaction, remote presence can be said to share key characteristics with theatre, such as a sense of liveness, an ephemeral nature and the possibility of transformation.

## 2.8 The one-to-one, intimacy in performance

In the introduction to this thesis it is observed that there is an apparent upsurge in intimate encounters in contemporary performance; named as ‘one-on-one’ or ‘one-to-one’. These seek to explore a ‘direct connection between performer and audience member, space and individual interaction’ (Machon, 2013:22). These encounters might exist as a ‘clandestine gesture’ (ibid) within the structure of a large-scale work (as with the potential and sought-after<sup>46</sup> opportunities for one-to-one experiences in the midst of one of Punchdrunk’s epic performance environments), the grand gesture of *You, Me, Bum, Bum Train* (2010-present) – where a huge number of volunteers create spectacle around and for the individual audience member, or as lightly connected as the telephone call between the single performer and the lone audience member that forms the core of Kaleider’s *You With Me* (2011 - current). This final example, which is discussed in more detail in Appendix A.3.1, is of particular interest as it is conducted entirely through bi-directional mediation (in this case invoked through sound).

It has also been suggested that the ‘concurrent popularity of the one-to-one form and of digital ‘first-person’ platforms for seemingly intimate displays is surely not coincidental’ (Heddon et al., 2012:121). Claiming both offer ‘the promise of sociality through performances of self’, Heddon and her colleagues do not decry the intimacies afforded by the one-to-one encounter in a digital space, but do seem to privilege full body co-presence. In an earlier paper

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<sup>46</sup> Punchdrunk’s ‘enriched’ environments are in the main populated by a performance ensemble who create visual, often physicality-led, non-linear vignettes as part of the immersive substance of the piece. Spectators are often given completely free reign to explore the playing space, and are encouraged to explore alone. As such each audience member’s experience is individual, contingent on where they find themselves, with whom, at which point in the orchestrated cycle of events. Key elements in this personalised notion of experience are the theatrical one-to-ones that only a small number of the thousands of participants might find themselves involved in. On the (unofficial) Facebook page for their 2014 show *The Drowned Man*, audience members who had participated in the show many times would discuss strategies to ensure they could experience all of the one-to-one encounters. Punchdrunk are widely considered to be the company that brought the idea of Immersive theatre to the mainstream. Indeed such a short time elapsed between their first appearance and the considerable commercial and popular success of their later work that it has been characterised by some as a fad. ‘So prevalent has the use of this term become in the UK that theatre journalists have begun to propose that this trend has had its day, accused it of being “tired and hackneyed already”’ (G. White, 2012:221).

Heddon goes so far as to suggest that one of the draws of confessional one-to-one performance is as a reaction to and an escape from the abundance of what she describes as 'confessional technologies': of blogs and other forms of social media. Co-author of the paper and an artist who devoted the latter part of his performance practice to the intimate, confessional one-to-one, the late Adrian Howells writes:

At the end of this first post-millennial decade, swamped by the mass-mediatization of confession and the proliferation of such manifestations of it as occurs in "Reality TV" shows, it occurs to me that what people perhaps really crave are opportunities to escape from this version of synthetic "real life." Rather than contributing to the deafening "white" noise, an alternative performance strategy might be to carve out other spaces, other modes of connection than the spoken exchange, other forms of the dialogic. (Adrian Howells in Heddon & Howells, 2011:12)

The confessional urge is not new, it is invoked by Foucault in '*Will to Knowledge*' where he states

... we have since become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide ... one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is the most difficult to tell. (Foucault, 1978:59).

He charges the confession as the West's most valued tool for the generation of truth, and describes the trajectory of this self-authenticating discourse from the Middle Ages, through the Inquisition until finally taking up a central role in the order of civil power. What is new, perhaps, is the extension of the arenas of confession into a different set of virtual publics. The scalability of technology allows for confessional tactics to play to a wide audience, and through the negligible cost (of time and money) of sharing to a one wider one still. What little control we might exert on the speed of gossip to spread by means of in-the-flesh conversation, phone calls and the mail, this is nothing compared to the reach of the infinitely replicable digital object. Such an overwhelming quantity of digital content may constitute the constituent parts of the "white noise" Howells describes above. In a pervasive sharing economy of confession there is explicit value in removing the broadcast settings and reclaiming ephemerality. In this way the intimate disclosures offered in the space of the



performance one-to-one may therefore operate with a discretion considered impossible in socially mediated life.

Confessional strategies are a powerful tool to engender trust in performance, a point demonstrated when they are earned and then destroyed. In their controversial 2007 piece *Internal*, theatre performance group Ontroerend Goed used their skill at winning the trust of strangers within one-to-one encounters to elicit personal, real-life information from their visitors. Later in the show, when all the participants come together into a group, the 'revelations and confessions would be processed – edited, twisted, taken out of context, paraphrased ... and made public' becoming intertwined with a heavily scripted performance (Ontroerend\_Goed, 2014:68-71). The function of the piece is predicated on the understanding that intimate confessions can be coaxed from an unsuspecting visitor who misjudges the performance contract they are involved with.

This desire to confess and to engage in intimate conversations with an unknown party in a performance context is hardly a new development. In what Zerihan describes as perhaps 'the first recorded piece of One to One performance' (Zerihan, 2012:4-5), American artist Chris Burden's *Five Day Locker Piece*<sup>47</sup> (1971) was intended as a work which tested the artists physical endurance. Yet, when performed, his audience unexpectedly took his action to legitimize their own desire to confess to an unknown party.

... he just expected to curl up and endure for five consecutive days. But to his surprise, people he didn't even know came unbidden to sit in front of the locker, to tell him their problems and the stories of their lives.  
(Carr, 1993:18)

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<sup>47</sup> Created at a time of experimental performance by contemporaries - such as Marina Abramović and Tehching Hsieh - each seeking to extend the perceived corporeal limitations of the artist's body, Burden confined himself in a 2' x 2' x 3' metal locker (number 5) for five days, without food or drink.

Burden embraced this transfer of agency, realizing that circumventing the traditional role of the performer seizing control of the situation activates the audience in interesting and unexpected ways.

Rachel Zerihan suggests the one-to-one form as being particularly adept at exposing its participants to an ‘especially intensive relationship in which an intimate exchange of dialogue between the performer and spectator can take place’ (Zerihan, 2006:1). A format that, in performance, ‘foregrounds subjective personal narratives that define – and seek to redefine – who we are, what we believe and how we act and re-act’ (Ibid). She highlights the intensity and intimacy of the one-to-one encounter and connects this to a personalisation of the connection between the performer and spectator. That in arranging a time to be alone with another heightens the ‘implication that the performance will be *your own*’ (Ibid). Zerihan discusses the various challenges of the form as including: intimacy - where it comes from and how it is sustained, negotiations of risk, creation (or the dispelling) of trust and exposure to demanding, potentially ideologically problematic content. Such an encounter can construct or suspend expected social rules, or by context confuse them (a collision between the imaginary and symbolic) and in so doing problematize the participants ‘cultural, psychological, social, sexual and ethical’ standpoints.

Zerihan further suggests the one-to-one form imbricates the politics of the consumption of art with the notion of a therapy session’s ‘talking cure’; specifically intertwining the ‘omnipresent states of artificiality and reality in performance’<sup>48</sup> (Ibid). Howells stresses that his priority was to create audience opportunities for face-to-face encounters ‘in real-time with real people’ (Heddon & Howells, 2011:2), yet in so doing from within performance there must be a tacit acknowledgement of this blurring of artifice and reality. Howells

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<sup>48</sup> Here she uses an example of a piece by artist Juliet Ellis, *Silent Sermon*, shown at Nottingham Trent University’s *Sensitive Skin* festival. The piece asks the spectator (described as ‘her Other’ by Zerihan) to “think of a moment when you wanted to cry and didn’t” and in a ‘potentially purifying meeting between us that invited [me] to consider this stifled trauma was dirtied with her instruction to join her in grating a raw onion’ (Zerihan, 2006). Constructed as an illustration both of affect and a question of the authenticity of its root.

expresses disdain for the 'synthetic reality' of conventional theatre, and turns to the construction of 'situations of 'authentic' engagement that might admit unfeigned happiness or pain' (Heddon & Johnson, 2016:30). One-to-one performance provides the space and opportunity for Howells and the audience-participant to create a heightened intimacy between them, generating what he styles as an 'accelerated friendship'(ibid:31,197).

One-to-one performances demonstrate an audience participant's willingness to engage in social and frequently physical intimacy with (anonymous) performers<sup>49</sup>. These relationships are also typically forged in environments in which the artist has 'alter[ed] considerably the conventional conditions of spectatorship' (Harari, 2011:141). These types of alteration of conventional space can also be applied to digital realms, indeed Harari goes on to discuss sociological implications of the 'new modes of intimacy' (ibid: 146) quoting Gerard Raiti's notion of *mobile intimacy* 'the ability to be intimate across distances of time and space' (Raiti, 2007).

A challenge for telematic encounters, in which the desire is to make intimate contact between strangers, is to do so without relying on the elements of activation that are characteristic of face-to-face encounters. Mediation forces us to abandon what become difficult or impossible strategies of proximal physicality. Characteristically transgressive acts of gesture or touch retreat into metaphor or imagination, in so much as intimate language can still be exchanged but not combined with the promise of a kiss or an embrace. Instead the challenge is to inculcate intimate relations within technological media that have been characterised as distancing and sensorially lightweight. Indeed, when writing on intimacy in performance, and privileging in-the-flesh encounter, Harari writes of the 'voyeuristic relationship' associated with what he styles our 'mediatized, two-dimensional and objectifying culture'.

If we are to say that intimacy occurs in the mediatized encounter, such an encounter must engage with key characteristics of intimacy. Karen Prager, a

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<sup>49</sup> c.f. work by Franko B, Michael Pinchbeck, Sam Rose etc.

leading researcher in intimacy with particular regard to mental health and couple relationships, suggests that intimate interaction is distinguished from other types of interaction by three conditions:

- **Self-revealing behaviour.** Which is to say, the disclosure of vulnerable or personal information, the dropping of defences and the offer for the other to bear witness.
- **Positive involvement with the Other.** An immediacy and intensity of reaction which conveys attention, empathy and interest, and
- **Mutual understandings.** To understand or come to an understanding of some aspect of the inner self of the other, and for those understandings to endure beyond the encounter. (Prager, 2009:919)

It is clear that none of these characteristics are precluded simply through interacting in the various digital domains, and instead that the differences in form might positively encourage the creation of actively intimate behaviour. For example, in an anonymous environment the disclosure of vulnerable stories may be perceived to be a safer option than in the company of those known to us, and might therefore be entered into with considerably less self-consciousness. The opening section of Ontroerend Goed's *Internal*, and the intimate discussions that form a key component of the emotional journey of Kaleider's *You With Me*, attest to this kind of self-revealing behaviour.

As the research presented here demonstrates, digital technologies are not inimical to intimate relations but are in fact rich ground for fruitful inquiry and further research.

## 2.9 Through a wide angle lens

Any relational involvement between us as individuals invokes a number of overlapping contexts and each contributes to the particular phenomenological experience that manifests, in each individual, as their understood reality of that encounter. Which is to say, our encounters with each other are inevitably moulded by and framed within the contemporary cultural, social and political reality of late capitalism. A system which demands constant change in order to develop and exploit markets, yet simultaneously occupies the collective consciousness to such a degree that it brooks no ideological challenge. In 'Capitalist Realism' Fisher reminds us that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'<sup>50</sup> (Fisher, 2009:2), positing that as a result of its system of equivalence, capitalism is able to 'subsume and consume all of previous history' (ibid: 4), reducing all manner of value systems into one. He writes,

Capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics. (ibid)

Fisher returns to this notion of collapse in his essay 'Lost Futures', where he presses into service Berardi's phrase 'the slow cancellation of the future' (Berardi quoted in Fisher, 2014:14); a phrase which Berardi coined in response to what he saw as an abandonment of progressive and modernist ideals, a negation or perhaps even evaporation, from around the 1970s onwards, of the notion of an improvement to the human condition as an inevitable hallmark of a developing civilisation. Fisher places this slow cancellation into the frame of popular culture, wondering if the landscape of late capitalism depletes the production of new cultural artefacts through a deprivation of a viable ecology for artists, whilst simultaneously the engineering of a nostalgia machine to

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<sup>50</sup> A statement widely attributed to Marxist philosophers Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek

supply consumers with the 'well-established and the familiar' (ibid:14-15). He writes:

The shift into so-called Post-Fordism - with globalisation, ubiquitous computerisation and the casualisation of labour - resulted in a complete transformation in the way that work and leisure were organised. In the last 10 to 15 years, meanwhile, the internet and mobile telecommunications technology have altered the texture of everyday experience beyond all recognition. Yet, perhaps because of all this, there's an increasing sense that culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present. Or it could be that, in one very important sense, there is no present to grasp and articulate any more (ibid:8-9)

This notion of sterility of cultural development operates in opposition to the constant transformation demanded by the ideology of capitalism. 'All that is solid melts to air' writes Marx in the *Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 1848, revised 2012:38), as he sets out his arguments for capitalism's need for constant change. He indicates the ruling elites' self-interest made manifest in the creation and continuation of situations of chaos and crisis, which are then recast as opportunities for redevelopment and renewal. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman writes on the perpetual motion of fashion, which we might argue acts as a driver for our constant desire for the new, suggesting that this disruptive force for change is predicated on a contradictory set of impulses: on the one hand a desire to belong to a group or tribe and on the other to be distinct and individual (Bauman, 2011:20). Status is reliant on keeping up with fashion, the doing of consumerist labour, acquiring the new and discarding the out-of-fashion. A destroyer of the inertia of consumption: 'Fashion casts every lifestyle into a state of permanent, interminable revolution' (ibid:22).

Capitalism is at root a form of economic (and hence socio-cultural) change, 'it cannot and never will be stationary' claims economist Schumpeter in his powerful argument of the constant and necessary industrial mutation that is at the heart of capitalist endeavour (Schumpeter, 1975:82). He cites this as the essential fact of capitalism and names it *Creative Destruction*. In the fantasy world of the progressive Democratic US government portrayed in the TV series the *West Wing* the character of the President is that of a Nobel laureate in

economics. After the successful negotiation of a new free trade deal, President Bartlett makes light of the resulting potential for jobs to be exported overseas claiming it will be economists who'll be filing for unemployment. Bartlett attempts to mollify his concerned staff:

Pres. Bartlett: Any economic advancement involves what Schumpeter called 'creative destruction'

C.J. Cregg (Press Secretary): ...Not a good answer, ...'Cause that word "destruction" will really mollify our critics....

Pres. Bartlett: Global economic forces are unstoppable just like technology itself

(West Wing, Season 5. Episode 'Talking Points'.  
First broadcast April, 2004)

Bartlett aligns the economic forces of globalisation with technological development, implying – via Schumpeter - that a level of destruction is an inevitable result of capitalist growth. As the episode progresses it becomes clear that in the politicking of the trade deal the economic opportunities offered include the option for US companies to out-source white-collar computer programming jobs to India. This episode of a TV show adept at mirroring the concerns of its time demonstrates the very reasonable fear of outsourcing labour to a cheaper pool in order to decrease the costs of production. In less than a decade commercial outsourcing is so commonplace that it is the nationalist cry for protectionist trade tariffs and the bringing home of labour that are seen as radical.

Aired in 2004, some three years before the launch of the first iPhone, 'Talking Points' pre-dates the onset of the sharing economy and the data-centric App infrastructure required to drive its technological revolution. The sharing economy, described as 'a socio-economic ecosystem built around the sharing of human, physical and intellectual resources' (Matofska, 2016:online), begins with the notion of repurposing excess personal resources for community and financial gain. Say I have a spare bedroom I'm happy to rent out to the occasional well behaved traveller, yet what I don't have is the time or infrastructure to figure out how to find or vet its potential occupant, figure out

a reasonable price, or easily process the payment. New companies start up, constructed around communications technologies and data processing, which fit this gap in the market: to facilitate connections between individuals in order to negotiate exchanges of economic value. Technologies of communication, with bolt-on layers of sociability, are the tools by which we objectify ourselves.

Sharing economy behemoths sidestep the language and actuality of local regulations through reclassification of their workers and services, through this they abdicate their responsibilities to labour through carefully constructed legal fictions. In order to uncover new forms of growth, global capital leverages these new communication technologies and by default directs creative destruction at established industry in its wake. AirBnB, whilst claiming that through their App they offer the widest selection of rentable property in the world, disclosed their employee headcount in 2015 as consisting of just 2,368 people (Gamba, 2015:online). It is clear that these few thousand employees are just enough to keep the data infrastructure, their business model's connective tissue, running efficiently. Some of the largest businesses in the world have become that way by effectively dealing only through digital connectivity. These businesses are not in essence taxi firms, rentiers or bookshops, but in point of fact communications companies. Bartlett's phrase above suggests that nothing can stop globalisation or technological advance, now we have come to see they are everywhere combined. The communications tools that we can hold in our hand represent not simply a possible utopia of digital community but also a complex construction of ideology and opportunity which is both industrial and social.

The marketing and hyperbole of the Silicon Valley innovators is indeed fond of describing their products as *disruptive*, and perhaps this is a mealy-mouthed attempt to soften the language of destruction. Sharing-economy products such as Uber and AirBnB are communication-technology levered, distributed businesses and this can be seen as part of the shift in technology-use that its advocates claim 'transform(s) life, business, and the global economy' (McKinsey\_Global\_Institute, 2013:online). A sinuous claim that offers little judgement as to the quality of the transformation, and who it may affect. This



emphasis on the disruption of established industries in order to open opportunities for new modes of profitability offers opportunity to investors and service users, but rarely compensates the labour force that is displaced.

Whilst negligible use-cost communications technologies are key to the services offered by these disruptive businesses, it is user convenience that drives their success (Marsden, 2016:online). Sold as part and parcel with this convenience is the removal (perhaps by a single step or even in its entirety<sup>51</sup>) of the necessity of dealing with another human being, instead the business services that run on smartphones and other devices encourage interaction between individuals and an abstraction of the Other. Of course, this is not unusual in the throes of late capitalism as the pattern of use of new technologies changes through time, not least in their gradual exposure to opportunities for commercial exploitation. In the early years of the telephone, Gergen argues, its use was primarily *endogenous* which is to say: 'It originated within and extended the potentials of face-to-face relationships' (Gergen, 2002:237). Soon thereafter, the world of commerce seized upon the cold call<sup>52</sup>, which signals a change of use pattern, and as a result the intimate nature of the telephone call begins to lose its lustre. Similarly, the call to a service provider, local authority or company is now likely to require engagement with an automated system of choices and recordings, either as a gatekeeper to or instead of an interaction with another human. Gergen has argued that, post the decline of the landline, the cellular phone re-opens possibilities for the phone call as a tool to strengthen relationships already made in the flesh. Not only because of the 'perpetual connection that a mobile phone allows' (ibid), but also because, as a result of this, that the user might then be careful in their selection of potential callers to whom they give out their number, thus limiting availability only to those important to them.

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<sup>51</sup> For example, eBay and Amazon offer the opportunity to buy from retail outlets or other individual service users. However, interaction between parties is contractually limited to what the platform can deliver and rarely if ever will occur face-to-face. Whilst the Uber cab driver will certainly appear in person (at least until the companies stated goal of driver-free cars is realised (Gibbs, 2016:online)) all negotiation of pick-up and payment are conducted through the App.

<sup>52</sup> Originally such calls would be from a human tele-marketer, as technology developed these are increasingly likely to be delivered by an automated, pre-recorded system.

Gergen stresses that: 'The dialogical nature of the communication serves as a further source of vitality' (ibid:238). His commentary here entirely illustrates how the use of communications technology develops as it jumps ship from one pattern to another, in the case of the tethered phone from primarily as a tool for community reinforcement and then to more commercial usage and perhaps commonly now as merely the placeholder for a broadband service delivered through its wires.

Writing in 2017, it seems no longer to be the case universally that cell phone numbers will be passed on only to nearest and dearest, and texting and data services have overtaken the mobile phone call as primary use for the mobile phone. Instead, there is a shift in the affordances on offer through connected devices, towards the promise of individually tailored access to the world of communication in which all choices are at your fingertips all the time and wherever you might find yourself. The offer of having the capability to call or be called by your loved ones at any time is eroded and replaced by access to services and the data corpus.

Hence the affordances of technology, and their positioning within the social landscape, are demonstrably always in flux, shifted as a product of technological innovation and the reflexive power of capitalism to colonise and exploit any opportunity for value creation. More fascinating still is the simultaneous visibility of these changes (technology's record breaking development cycle is clearly seen on advertising hoardings and in countless pop-up ads on the very devices we are urged to upgrade), and their erasure through a retroactive adoption cycle wherein each new way of doing things readily becomes always already common practice (think here of text messaging, email and social media – all ubiquitous now but unthinkable only 30 years ago). Swift acceptance of demonstrable yet seismic shifts in the way of doing things invokes a step change in rationalising a supposed stability in the fractured fabric of late capitalism.

Mark Fisher writes:

This strategy – of accepting the incommensurable and the senseless without question - has always been the exemplary technique of sanity as

such, but it has a special role to play in late capitalism, that 'motley painting of everything that ever was', whose dreaming up and junking of social fictions is nearly as rapid as its production and disposal of commodities. (Fisher, 2009)

Marshall Berman, in his Marxist critique of Modernism, argues that the enemy of capitalism is a prolonged stability, although he notes with some irony that stability is what both the elites and the masses have always yearned for (Berman, 2010:94-96). He suggests those who thrive will be those who embrace constant change and upheaval inevitable in the fluid form of society, that capitalism represents a sea change which gives evolutionary legs to those who 'delight in mobility, to thrive on renewal, to look forward to future developments in their conditions of life and their relations with their fellow men' (ibid). It is the ideology of the network caught up and surrounded by the ideology of capitalism that requires us all to embrace this change.

Zygmunt Bauman writes:

It is unimportant which place you are in, who the people are around you and what you are doing in that place filled with those people. The difference between one place and another, one set of people within your sight and corporeal reach and another, has been cancelled and made null and void. You are the sole stable point in the universe of moving objects – and so are (thanks to you, thanks to you!) your extensions: your connections. (Bauman, 2008:59)

Here the argument is that there is stability to be found within the network. Interactions with others are kept at a controlled distance because they are experienced through the network, to which you are the centre. Bauman describes interactions in the network as having an 'irreparable fragility' (ibid:60), arguing that it is their very fragility that means they can be counted less than interactions in the flesh. It is into these infinite light and fragile touches that retreat is possible, retreat into the network when the 'crowd that surrounds you becomes too maddening for your taste' (ibid).

The mass adoption of key technologies with the user at the centre creates an era of what has been referred to as 'networked individualism': these key technologies have been characterised as social media, a personalised Internet

and a constant connection to the network (Jordan, 2015:122). Over the past two decades, commensurate with the growth of these technologies, and those that preceded them and continue to run in parallel<sup>53</sup>, there has been a great increase in the number of people, services and data made available through the network. In return we find ourselves more contactable, traceable, surveilled and available than ever before. These tendrils of connection represent a constant wireless skin overlaying our practice of everyday life: 'We never quit the networks and the networks never quit us' (Castells quoted in Rainie & Wellman, 2012:95). Naturally this brings along its own cultural complexities: realizing through technology and market ideology a relentless focus on the individual (through social media profiling, mechanisms of on-line activity privileged by design and the resultant targeted advertising), and the super-saturation of content curated both by algorithm and by accident. Evident here (describing contemporary online dating):

... the internet put more potential relationships at their fingertips and made relationships easy to start, it also made relationships harder to maintain because it brought so many distractions and fleeting interactions into their lives. (Rainie & Wellman, 2012:9)

Perhaps the true challenge for the networked individual is one of *information triage*. This is nowhere more relevant than in the wash of information presented for interaction in social networks or messaging services. Such information rarely fits elegantly into a hierarchy or value system, often the prominence of an object privileges how recently the information was posted rather than its content. This can and does generate social timelines filled with unfiltered, juxtaposed information which requires engaged interpretation and decision making, in many cases even before deciding to act on or discard the content. Thus individual interactions are set against a constant wash of information, becoming but a component of a juxtaposition of wildly different data objects.

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<sup>53</sup> such as the standard mobile telephone capable of voice calls and SMS text.

Susan Sontag describes the Happenings of the 1960s as taking their look or style from the New York school of painting but their form from the radical juxtaposition characteristic of the Surrealist movement (Sontag, 1961:268-269). She describes an evolution in style as coming from the gigantic canvasses of the 1950s, through the creation of three dimensional “assemblages” of materials of a ‘sardonic variety’ (ibid). Happenings, she says, represent the next obvious step of filling the assemblage with people and ‘setting it going’ (ibid). In terms of form, she suggests Happenings owe much to the Surrealist tradition she describes as a sensibility that cuts across all art forms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writing:

The Surrealist tradition in all these arts is united by the idea of destroying conventional meanings, and creating new meanings or counter-meanings through radical juxtaposition. (ibid:269)

The Surrealist sensibility aims to shock, to generate meaning by aggressive disturbance of conventionality. Sontag also draws parallels with the Freudian analysis of free-association which takes all statements as relevant in an attempt to build coherence from contradiction. The violence of the shock of juxtaposition is endlessly repeated in the relentless triage of information that accompanies life as a networked individual, locating the user’s experience of always on networks in an envelope of constant and dislocating weirdness<sup>54</sup>.

So, it is with caution in mind that we progress not in the manner of a wide-eyed revolutionary but instead in open-eyed (and cautious) wonder at the shifts and changes in our individual relation to the other, to event and to space and time the present technological situation confers upon us. This is certainly not to say an uncritical viewpoint (or even a singular one), but one that necessitates a

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<sup>54</sup> In Mark Fishers book *The Weird and The Eerie* he considers the notion of weird as a an unexpected presence, a presence that our perception insists is somehow wrong, which in turn can disrupt the very frame of experienced reality. Doran places this in a cultural context in his discussion of the book, thus: ‘Modernist works of art/culture can often seem weird because we are in the presence of the new; so the shock of the new signals that concepts and frameworks that we’ve previously used are now obsolete’ (Doran, 2017)

critical net made from skein of a variety of material. Thus, joined to our web by invisible wires – we walk forward in the spirit of investigation.

## 2.10 Artworks in a lineage

As long as communications technologies have been around artists have been interested in finding ways to push them to their limits and to investigate their own particular ontology of telematics.

Technology here operates as a communication structure between the participants of the artwork: the cellular network carries the telephone audio in the conversation at the heart of Kaleider's *You With Me* or the video conferencing system that transmits and receives the bi-directional live video in Paul Sermon's various telematic artworks. It also function as staging, a window through which to experience the representational action.

The following artworks are key milestones or influences, descriptions of each are to be found in Appendix 1.

### A.1.1 Real-time video artworks

A.1.1.1 Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinovitz - *Hole in Space* (1980)

A.1.1.2 Allan Kaprow - *Hello* (1969)

A.1.1.3 Paul Sermon - *Telematic Dreaming* (1992)

A.1.1.4 Dries Verhoeven's *Life Streaming* (2010)

### A.1.2 Text Message artworks

A.1.2.1 Introduction

A.1.2.2 Tim Etchells – *Surrender Control* (2001)

A.1.2.3 Proto-type – *Fortnight* (2010, 2012)

A.1.2.4 Blast Theory – *Ivy4Evr* (2010)

### A.1.3 Telephone Artwork

A.1.3.1 Kaleider - *You With Me* (2010, 2012)

### 3. Practice

I once saw a film in which the main character didn't speak for the first half an hour.

Like us? Do all the minutes we've been together add up to half an hour?

I was completely absorbed as to what would happen because anything was possible.

And then?

He spoilt it - he spoke.

*The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*

(Greenaway, 1989)

Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.

*Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1981:10)

This chapter introduces the reasoning behind the choice of research methods, details the methodology, and describes a historical precedent of the style of encounter the practice develops. It continues describing initial experiments in creating one-to-one performance using the two chosen mediating technologies. The core section covers the making of the two research projects *Small Talk* and *Conversation Piece*, including some key observations, details of participant feedback and some analysis.

The practice is unpicked in more detail in Chapter 4.

This chapter ends with an account of a project that shares some characteristics with *Conversation Piece* albeit experienced face-to-face in a Manchester café. Further details of the logistical particulars of each experiment and performance are listed in Appendix 2.



### 3.1 Introduction to the practice #1 - theatre in technology

I am interested in the nature of relations between people as they are manifest now, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in an age where our relations to each other are dominated by mediated communications tools; where many of the affordances offered by co-presence are no-longer uniquely offered by sharing the same physical space.

As such, the practice developed here uses the mediating technologies of text messaging and video conferencing to explore, through those technologies, different ways we can be together without physically being in the same material space. In particular, the aim of the inquiry is to see what kind of connection develops between strangers when conducted in the format of a mediated one-to-one encounter.

The heritage of the practice is to be found in the work of artists who create environments for engagement that invoke a gentle, humanistic connection between performer and participant - in many cases entirely without the use of any technology. Artworks that take this form might include Quarantine's shared meal *No Such Thing* (Quarantine, 2016), Jo Bannon's beautifully conducted one-to-one performance *Exposure* (Bannon, 2013) which glimpses light in the dark, or Kaleider's intimate telephone call *You With Me* (Kaleider, 2013b). The practice described in this thesis aims to develop those accidental moments of hope, love and despair – which in the material world might be generated by a hug, the holding of a hand or a smile – and to see if those emotional elements can come out of and exist within a mediated interaction. In this way to better examine whether the promise of intimacy from our always-on connected lives might be kept.

Much of the SMS or smartphone based interactions found in pervasive gaming and play-lead theatre<sup>55</sup> concern themselves with the scalability of the

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<sup>55</sup> in describing theatre in which the agency of the audience is actively encouraged, rather than using the term “interactive” - which comes replete with the baggage of museum exhibits and childrens' educational toys – I choose to co-opt descriptions such as play-led or playable theatre. Terms like this, popularised by a new breed of interactive theatre makes like Coney, are

performance. Engaging head on with the infinite reproducibility of the digital object and exploring to what extent a digitised performance action might be enacted to many more audience members than a traditional theatre space might allow, or to create performance that can be experienced simultaneously by an audience spread over a town, a country or the world. To achieve this the technology of delivery might operate only in broadcast mode, which is to say that a single text is sent to multiple players or spectators, or might perhaps utilise some kind of automated system which can tailor its responses to be specific to you, the participant, where there may be thousands of participants, thousands of 'yous'<sup>56</sup>. By contrast, in the research conducted here, the concern not to conduct a Turing test - to be mechanical but only almost human - instead to find a way for the participants to perform themselves within the mediated spaces of digital communication. Of course, with the ever increasing popularity of messaging services, social media and Skype, conducting our conversations in a mediated environment is so commonly part of our everyday that we are in fact already doing so.

At their core the communications technologies used as part of this practice might be said to allow us to be *remotely* co-present with one another. A co-presence that exists as much in spite of technological means as through them. SMS, for example, is an asynchronous mode of text exchange and the delivery times of messages may vary substantially, however, despite this the messages are perceived as arriving in real time. SMS has been described as 'long distance emergent communication enacted virtually' (Foley quoted in Zurhellen, 2011:637), and Zurhellen notes that text messaging shares communication

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suggestive of a more egalitarian role for the audience participant, providing loose structures for complex improvisation between performers and participants rather than a prescriptive script.

<sup>56</sup> Automated or semi-automated systems have been developed by artists to take on various 'heavy lifting' roles in multiple-participant SMS-based artworks. Brighton-based collective Blast Theory can provide excellent examples of such work including the branching storyteller of *Ivy4Evr* (T. White, 2010) and the logistical infrastructure of *Day of the Figurines* (Adams et al., 2008). In the case of *Ivy4Evr*, commissioned by Channel 4, more than 4,000 young people participated in the SMS drama. A complex, multiply branching narrative was written by author Tony White, whilst the experience was orchestrated through a computerised system which kept track of the participants' individually tailored interactions enacted through their own mobile phones.

characteristics with oral culture 'or more precisely, communication techniques found in cultures in the incipient stages of literacy' (ibid). Rich Ling points out

... at the linguistic level SMS seems to be a trans-linguistic drag queen. It has features of both spoken and written culture but with enough flare of its own to catch your attention. (Ling, 2005:341)

Ling cites SMS text as having a linguistic immediacy, in that text messages are commonly written in the first person present tense. This effect combines with the notification alert of delivery to emphasise a feeling of presence, or what might be referred to in the field of contemporary arts as a *liveness*. Nick Couldry has remarked that mediating technologies introduce new categories of liveness, in particular he introduces the ideas of an *online liveness*, which describes the co-presence felt by the Internet-mediated audience of a live event or occasion, and a *group liveness* that describes the continual contact of a peer group updating each other via mobile calls and texts (Couldry, 2004:356-357). These notions are a nod to our sense of the presence of others inculcated by communications technologies. Philip Auslander writing in 2012, updates his previous treatise on the notions of performance liveness, and suggests that within the digital realm liveness might be characterised by both an offer from the digital system that an interaction be treated as live (through, for example, real-time responses to a user's actions), and a complementary belief on the part of the user that - in their engagement with the system - they experience it as *live for them* (Auslander, 2012:9).

Don Ihde remarks that our ideas of distance have been compressed by technology such that the linked space of communications might be described as uniformly nearly-here and nearly-now (Ihde, 2010:82). This blurry conception of technology being 'good enough' for a particular task or experience has been explored in brief by Peter Petralia in his paper 'Reach Out and Touch Someone' (Petralia, 2012a). He links Sherry Turkle's description of robotic toys as being 'alive enough' for the children to consider them companions, even projecting human needs and desires upon them (Turkle, 2011:88-90), to communications technologies such as Skype which might be 'intimate enough' or 'present

enough' to engage in the creative work of director and performer. He describes needing to Skype into performance rehearsals

... we had a sense of closeness built on being able to see and hear each other over SKYPE, but we were aware that it was not quite the same as being physically together in the same space at the same time.  
(Petrulia, 2012a:10-11)

There is an understanding then, that digital mediation does not represent a barrier in itself to feelings of presence and of liveness between communicants. Instead, that such interactions are infused with the inevitable additional contingencies which arise from areas such as digital representation and the users interface with technology. These contingencies combine and interact forming different conceptions of togetherness which may displace existing notions of continuous space and time.

In many cases where technology has been used to connect performers with an audience it has been only a component of the performance. Petrulia reports numerous intimacies exchanged between participants of Proto-Type's durational performance *Fortnight* (Proto-Type, 2012) and the company's nominated SMS operator (ibid:18-19). These exchanges were held in the wider context of that two-week long performance event. When I experienced *Fortnight* in 2012, in its Manchester incarnation, I was conscious that the relations generated between the operator(s) of *Fortnight's* SMS messaging and twitter feeds, and recognised that the participants were, almost without exception, positive and friendly. Because of this gentle "hug" of day-to-day kindness, the open invitation to connect by SMS or via the performance's Twitter account held an attraction of genuine attention and authenticity. This is not to say that messages exchanged within the framework of *Fortnight* do not demonstrate an intimate connection between interlocutors, but to place that strand of Proto-type's *distributed performance* as only one of its textures. The question then becomes could this one strand function as performance outside of the context of the event? Indeed, it was in such a conversation with Dr Peter Petrulia (Proto-type's director) where the concept of my *Small Talk* project, detailed below, first reared its head.

Innovative circus makers Circumference utilised SMS in a variety of ways in their 2015 performance *Shelter Me* (Circumference, 2015), a show which combined circus skills with a promenade environment that owed something to the immersive dressing of space popularised by companies such as *Punchdrunk*. Text messages sustained a component of an admittedly ambiguous narrative, and were also used as a kind of peer-to-peer orchestration technique with audience members being ‘paired up’ with unknown buddies and encouraged to text each other throughout the piece. The story-driven texts were certainly exciting in their novelty, and though the piece takes as one of its themes technological alienation, the drop-off in messaging content part way through the event seemed at the time as accident rather than design. In her ‘A Younger Theatre’ review Franciska Éry writes

The idea of getting the narrative through texts is very clever, yet after the first few sequences we don’t get many more texts, which makes the theme of technology inconsistent. (Éry, 2015:online)

However, innovative use of the ‘second screen’<sup>57</sup> of the mobile handset can be powerful. During one spellbinding section of the performance, an acrobatic couple perform elegant, intense movements outside the building whilst we the audience watch, entranced, through scuffed windows. Our phones buzz, buzz with notification pings. Their story - of love lost – is told in snippets of text by an unknown narrator, whilst they perform for us in silence, voiceless. In sharp contrast, when I text my ‘buddy’ a couple of times we exchange on the barest of pleasantries. She, it turns out, is French and from our texting seems good-natured. Later we meet in a room filled with permanent markers and write on the walls together, but we don’t think to text again. There are simply too many other things going on elsewhere. In the case of this performance event, the opportunities to spectate and interact with performers and other audience

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<sup>57</sup> ‘Second screen’ is a phrase used to describe the act of using an additional device, such as a mobile phone or tablet, at the same time as consuming content from elsewhere, such as engaging in social media commentary whilst watching television. A *Wired* article from 2013 quotes Nielsen research which suggests that more than 80% of U.S. Americans use their devices whilst watching TV, and that half of that number use their second screen to comment on what it is that they’re watching (Turner, 2013:online). In the example cited above, the second screen affords additional opportunities for content delivery and audience participation.

members through more traditional means, combined with an absence of any rules of engagement or other signifiers of meaning for the SMS interactions, results in the second screen taking second place.

Text messaging, and other digital interventions, might form the logistical backbone of a piece of contemporary performance, be used to add narrative texture or to function as a game mechanic. In the research presented here the investigation turns towards the construction of encounters which exist exclusively within the technological realm, or at the very least cannot exist without technology. This situates an interaction between participants in digital space not as an adjunct to an imagined interaction in what has been called by contrast 'meatspace'<sup>58</sup>, but, instead, as an opportunity for an entirely digitally encoded intimacy.

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<sup>58</sup> Meatspace is a compound noun that came in to current coinage in the mid 1990s and operates as a counter to the virtual world of cyberspace.

### 3.2 Introduction to the practice #2

#### Intimacy, from performance to the everyday

The experimental practice developed for this research engages with the form of one-to-one performance. This is by conscious choice, in part because the technologies lend themselves by culture and practice to be engaged with in that way – it is certainly commonplace to Skype or to SMS with just one person at a time – but also because one-to-one performance is associated with qualities of individual, authentic attention that lend themselves to the possibilities of an intimacy of connection developing through the encounter.

A psychological definition of intimacy would almost certainly reference the work of Karen Prager and Linda Roberts, who

... distinguished intimate interaction from other kinds of interactions by three necessary and sufficient conditions: self-revealing behavior, positive involvement with the other, and shared understandings.

(Prager, 2009:919)

Within one-to-one performance, confessional tactics may be used by the performer to reveal elements of themselves which in turn encourages the participant to both reveal their own truths and engage positively with the performer. With regard to Prager and Roberts' final criteria, that of shared understanding, there is, I think, a hope implicit in performance that the shared experience will lead to a shared understanding of that which has taken place. The precise meaning of *understanding* may here be up for debate, but if we might return to Fischer-Lichte's framing of the performance event as having the potential to be transformative for all participants (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:22-23) what is clear is that some conception of shared experience or meaning-making is to be expected.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, one-to-one performance courts intimacy. Dominic Johnson, in positioning a key perceptual arena of the experience of live art (in particular he references the body art of e.g. Ron Athey and Franko B), alights on ways in which our experience of intimacy and risk are

disrupted. Such practice might be said to force into the light mechanisms by which both art practice and the practice of everyday life exhibit a constant interplay of intimacy and risk.

He quotes psychoanalyst Adam Phillips: 'We have almost no language, other than banality, to describe the couple who have been happy together for a long time' (Phillips quoted in Johnson, 2012b:121-122), and sets this rueful statement about one form of intimacy against the notion that in 'common parlance ... to be 'overly intimate' with another's body implies abuse' (ibid). Positioning physical or emotional discomfort at the upper limit of intimacy – where 'abandonment' might constitute the lower. Considering this axis as a *continuum of intimacy*, Johnson suggests that intimacy 'unsettles and outstrips binary oppositions' (ibid) – believing that a common (banal) understanding of intimacy belies its complex and diverse operation.

In order to problematize the intimate encounter, Johnson maintains that live artists 'urge their own bodies into crisis' (ibid); and in so doing radicalise the situation created. Common performance practice might involve the close proximity of other bodies; a visceral engagement with wounding, bleeding or cutting, and the curation of risks and challenges that bring into question contemporary cultural behaviour and attitudes to the body itself.

Such practice often leans heavily on challenging socially adopted norms of behaviour: the 'close proximity of bodies' above might be said to enforce intimacy by simply placing the performer and audience within what has been considered the closest radius of personal space, tellingly labelled as intimate<sup>59</sup>. Visceral engagements tempt different types of risk, perhaps those of physical contact of blood and flesh, or the rapid and urgent fluctuations in status and mood that might accompany unexpected changes in bodily proximity, and

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<sup>59</sup> Anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher Edward Hall notably conjectured that personal space could be divided up into a number of concentric circles or zones based upon the type of social engagement that might occur within them. He labelled these as intimate (0"-18"), the casual-personal (18"-48"), the social-consultative (48"-144") and public domain (Hall via Meisels & Guardo, 1969:1167).



violence of action and voice. Without shock and awe strategies that can be deployed to disrupt and fragment an audiences' perception, to challenge and question normative socio-cultural behaviour, how can the mediated realms compete? If, as Johnson claims above, intimacy in the long established relationship is reduced to banality, whilst the radical crisis of an intimacy that breaks social and cultural boundaries is generated by visceral proximity – how might a mediated intimacy fit within these parameters, or create its own?

The intimacies described by Johnson are, of course, edge cases, extremities that suggest binary opposites where there are perhaps none. The complexity of communications strategies through mediated systems is matched by the complexity of the humans making those connections. Mediated interactions offer a variety of connective cues and social affordances, and although much scholarship and perhaps even common sense does suggest these mechanisms offer something less than their comparable face-to-face encounters, quite what this lessening *is* appears to be open for debate. In communicating through digital technologies there are considerations of what categories of information are most amenable to digitisation or fragmented computer processing, and indeed what these categories might be. At the very beginning of *'The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge'*, Lyotard makes the quiet assertion that knowledge which is to be passed-on to future generations undergoes a transformation in a computerised society. He implies both that there is a limit to what content might survive that transformation and additionally that future knowledge may be limited to that which it is possible to contain in a computerised language (Lyotard, 1984:4). That is to say, what aspects of real world objects or events might be lost as they are encoded and decoded by the computer, and what aspects might be lost before even such an encoding begins – as the very architecture of the system itself will perforce limit what can be stored.

Lyotard's caution is valid, but finds its level at the point of information categorisation. A kind of digital determinism, concerned with ideas of how real-world data might be enumerated, classified and entered into pre-determined

“digital” slots for posterity, does not help us here. Communications technologies are limited in form, but the communication undertaken with them is not necessarily limited in the same way. The plain text form of SMS quickly adopted smiley faces and other emoticons, modes of expression that were developed in Usenet newsgroups and BBSs to expand the scope of textual semiotics. Human action remodelling the limits of the form through playful experimentation, expanding the possibilities of meaning making beyond the creators designs<sup>60</sup>.

Or perhaps Lyotard is warning of a bias or *intentionality* that might accompany adoption of technology: a squeezing into database boxes information that challenges easy categorisation. Williams cautions against a technological determinism – dismissing the notion that technology emerges from study and experiment and immediately sets about changing the society in which it emerges, generating a causal adaption of the populous to a new ‘modern’ way of doing things. He argues it is the social and cultural environment which determines investment and wider adoption of technology, and that therefore it is only when a technical invention becomes an available *technology* that it becomes socially significant. His examples, satellite distribution and radio broadcast, are geared around investment and production as key drivers doubtless due to the costs of the (not insignificant) infrastructure necessary for their operation (Williams, 1989:120). What’s more, as technologies become more generally available for use, opportunities for creative implementations, often outside the intentional scope of the original use-case, become apparent and are harnessed. For example, Geocaching games, where objects are hidden in plain sight for other players to find through co-ordinated trails, become

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<sup>60</sup> Curiously the history of mark making is shaped by an increase in the delicacy of the tools for the making of marks. Cuneiform is a rough, simple script, delimited by its materials of clay and stick. In using quill and velum it became possible to make more delicate and complex marks. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is commonplace to read and write on computer, table or phone, devices that with their high resolution displays are capable of displaying a multiplicity of shapes in an infinity of colours, Yet here the tendency is to write using a limited pallet of characters, emoji and now pre-chosen animations. Perhaps it is no wonder that users seek to expand their vocabulary by innovative and playful use of that which is available.

viable only after the GPS network is opened up for public use (Farman, 2013:147).

Ling writes that many technologies have a fixed or 'crystallised solidity' that defies reinterpretation or repurposing (he cites the example of transport infrastructure, roads, cars, gas stations), however new technologies are far more open to reinterpretation than those more established (Ling, 2004:22). Communications technologies that are in use now can take advantage of already developed and deployed infrastructure. Technology as a service moves the goalposts, enabling rapid adoption of new software (new affordances, new interfaces) that runs on existing infrastructure (the occasional hardware upgrade notwithstanding). It is here that arguments of technological determinism are re-ignited for these changes operate in the dark, shifting strands of perception and meaning-making beyond conscious view.

Interestingly, where McLuhan appears to set forth a colonising argument for the relationship between old and new media

A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them. (McLuhan, 1964:174)

Linguist and scholar of computer mediated communications Ylva Hård af Segerstad, suggests a more adaptive approach

For SMS users, there certainly seems to be little sense in which their text messaging necessarily replaces face-to-face communication or whether it is like written or spoken language. New linguistic practices are always adaptive and additive rather than subtractive. (Hård af Segerstad, 2006:36)

Furthermore, Nancy Baym, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Kansas, reminds us of the deterministic trajectory described by Claude Fischer '[s]uch direct effects of technology may be strongest when a technology is new because people do not yet understand it' (Fisher quoted in Baym, 2012:26). Here, Baym appears to be suggesting that the nature of any form of technological determinism is affected not only by the affordances of the technology itself but also by the nature of the interaction between it and its

users. Specifically, that novelty affects the users engagement and fluency with new technologies. If this holds true, we might expect the ongoing deterministic impacts to be stronger if technologies are permanently fluid, always new.

Author of '*Radical Technologies*', Adam Greenfield, reminds us that for all their novelty, the rapidity with which technologies can be adopted quickly subsumes considerations by its users of determinism or affect. Speedy integration with the communications parameters of the networked individuals digital everyday; it is as though the smartphone has always already been present.

For all its ubiquity, though, the smartphone is not a simple thing. We use it so often that we don't see it clearly; it appeared in our lives so suddenly and totally that the scale and force of the changes it has occasioned have largely receded from conscious awareness. (Greenfield, 2017:online)

It is timely to note that intimacy can also be used as a descriptor of the fluency demonstrated in the use of an object. This is a perceptual quality that we might ascribe to an object that, when in-use, recedes from our consciousness. In order to achieve a mediated intimacy between people, there is the question of how our engagement with the technology can displace our engagement with the person, that perhaps only when the technology is *invisible* in practice can a personal intimacy be developed.

Baym argues for a complex and subtle understanding of the ways we interact and manage our interactions both on- and offline. When summarising much of the debate regarding mediation, she suggests that whilst lean forms of messaging might offer opportunities of asynchronous conversation and reflective composition, and achieve wider reach<sup>61</sup> they can often be characterised as offering a 'potentially lower sense of connection' (Baym, 2012:12). Equally, real-time and richly mediated experiences - such as those offered by video conferencing systems – may offer many social cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice, yet they are still considered impoverished

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<sup>61</sup> For example, in larger groups, in which the clamour of multiple voices in telephonic or video systems can become confusing

as they ‘lack critical intimacy cues including touch and smell’ (ibid). But, she argues,

... mediated interaction should be seen as a new and eclectic mixed modality that combines elements of face-to-face communication with elements of writing, rather than as a diminished form of embodied interaction. (ibid:51)

It may seem natural to rank interactions as more valuable or potent depending perhaps on the number of senses involved, but this is to assume that the impossibility of taste, touch or smell<sup>62</sup> suggests both irrevocable and dramatic reductions in the quality of our mediated interactions. Certainly this is true in some cases but this should not lead us to imperfect conclusions, as Baym notes:

I would be the first to insist that nothing can replace a warm hug. But even if we accept that face to face communication provides a kind of social connection that simply cannot be attained with mediation, it does not follow that mediated communication, even in lean media, is emotionally or socially impoverished, or that social context cannot be achieved (ibid:57)

With a strange synchronicity, in the same year Baym writes the above, MIT student Melissa Chow was experimenting with the extension of our tactile social functions into the space of digitally-actuated wearables. Her *Like-A-Hug* project enabled the translation of social media “likes” into a hugging action via an internet connected inflatable vest (Wainwright, 2012:online). This is an example of communication of emotion through, what David Rose, Chow’s mentor and instructor at MIT’s Media Lab, describes as ‘enchanted objects’. Describing social media as ‘a kind of telepathy’ (Rose, 2014:89), he simultaneously warns of its overwhelming torrent of data, suggesting that objects such as the *Like-A-Hug* vest may offer an alternative mechanism to engage with loved ones, to triage the information overload.

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<sup>62</sup> There has been much theoretical and prototyping work done with touch-based haptic networked affect, I’d draw the reader’s attention in particular to the work of Stahl Stensile (Stensile, no date), but such technology, along with networked implementations utilizing taste and smell are rarely made available to the general public.

Whilst the interaction consummated via the *Like-A-Hug* wearable jacket may share some physical characteristics with a regular hug its haptic function is clearly divorced from regular cultural or social aspects of physical proximity or personal intimacy. This conceptual experiment, concentrating as it does on a simple transactional premise of a positive social media gesture remotely actuating a simulacra of a very human gesture of closeness, serves to illuminate the mechanics of the internet facilitated action more clearly by operating in isolation. The wearer of this jacket understands that the remote hug operates as a special case, this jacket does not share the invisible quality afforded by technologies more integrated with our 21<sup>st</sup> century day-to-day.

In creating scenarios that highlight the underlying technology, perhaps simply through slight deviations from their normal use patterns, an instance of the 'wrong tool for the job' can shed light on the affordances and technological determinisms of these rapidly adopted systems. By invoking a different use case for everyday technologies, in this research, placing social and business tools in an arts context, users are forced to renegotiate their habitual patterns and to rediscover the novelty of use.

In much of the research conducted into social connectedness through mediated means, experiments are framed as comparative studies, mediated situations configured as a mirror to their face-to-face equivalents. These experiments might investigate communal task-based activities such as conducting a business meeting (Halbe, 2012:48) or working collaboratively (van der Kleij et al., 2009:355) in order to determine the participants effectiveness at carrying out the social or business functions of these interactions. As such, a focus on that which is being measured (for example, turn taking, interruption, effect of body language) may obscure the discovery of new knowledge which falls outside of the parameters of the interaction as conceived. Leaving the class or character of interaction open to the participant's interpretation can assist in discovering hidden intentionality of the technologies used.

### **3.3 Practice Methodology**

This section describes the methods and methodology used to pursue the research goals through the devising of mediated encounters, and informs the documentation and reflections on the practice which follow.

#### **3.3.1 Practice Methodology – Design and build**

The primary output of this research project was the making of a series of experimental theatrical experiences wherein the participant interaction takes place in a hybrid of physical and digital worlds. The research and learning detailed in this complementary writing comprises an analysis of the final projects and of the iterative process used to get there. That journey has necessitated thinking around two intersecting considerations of the design of the encounter.

Firstly, that there is an intention to fashion an experience which operates as theatre, which is to say, to create an encounter that might invoke Schechner's 'complex social interweave' of expectation and interaction between its participants (Schechner, 1968:42), or to offer the potential for transformation as argued by Phelan and Fischer-Lichte<sup>63</sup>, or perhaps simply an environment which provokes a liveness between its actors - as Etchells states an 'enacting or summoning of presence' (Etchells, 2007:100). Further, that at its core the practice invites the participant to reflect on how their engagement with another is affected by technological mediation, from the specific (within this interaction) to the general (in the context of the everyday). This might be said to be the theatrical design of the interaction.

Secondly, there is the technological design of the interaction. This part of the process might begin with the choice of a particular technology, this will come with its own baggage in terms of what aesthetics and practical issues such a choice might invoke in the design of the encounter. Following on from such a choice, there is a discovery process wherein the theatre of the encounter

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<sup>63</sup> Discussed in section 2.7 of this thesis

expands to fill and test the technical parameters of the chosen medium. The intention or style of the theatrical interaction may operate in opposition to what might be perceived as the general use pattern of the technology in question: for example, it is rare to engage in SMS conversation with strangers. What is intended here is that in creating an encounter within the frame of theatre, the participants are forced to re-examine their perception and understanding of the technology used in the transaction of the encounter. This returns us to Etchells' conception of learning more through using the 'wrong tool for the job'(Etchells quoted in Bailes, 2010:107).

These theatrical and technological design goals demand the employment of a series of iterative experiments during the development of the performance practice. This is a methodology built from testing the theatrical components and the technological parameters of the encounter in parallel, whilst continually reflecting how alterations in one design strand exert influence on the other. What's more, these two strands have no perfect resolution, the conceptual design of the works as they are presented here are themselves primarily tools of reflection and revelation. It is core to the work that the experience, both theatrical and technological, exposes these influences in the practice of everyday life.

These tests and experiments are perhaps best described by the mode of production known as devised performance. Within the ecology of contemporary performance making *devising* is a methodology for the generation of performance, which itself contains a variety of (often collaborative) methods. Such methods rarely take a pre-existing script or score as a starting point, may have the intention of developing a non-traditional theatrical product and frequently operate outside perceived constraints of form or discipline. Indeed, freedom may be the primary ideological flag that flutters above devising's broad tent (Heddon & Milling, 2005:2-5). It should be noted that where a devised performance methodology sanctions a wide variety of starting points and development processes for the making of artistic content, there is also tendency



for such processes to operate as a collaboration with other practitioners or associates<sup>64</sup>.

A methodological approach which overlaps with the process of devising, whilst expanding the arena of feedback and other iterative modes of influence, is Scratch. This is a process popularised by the Battersea Arts Centre and operates at the core of their approach not only to the making of art, but also to their business dealings and governance. On their website BAC describe Scratch as:

Scratch is about sharing an idea with the public at an early stage of its development. When you Scratch an idea, you can ask people questions and consider their feedback. This helps you work out how to take your idea on to the next stage. It's an iterative process that can be used again and again. Over time, ideas become stronger because they are informed by a wide-range of responses (Battersea\_Arts\_Centre, 2017:online)

Vital to the process of Scratch is a feedback loop wherein artists and audiences can quickly reflect on particular elements of a project or performance. When applied to a research project such feedback contributes both to the iterative development process but also generates layered insights into raw elements of the performance as they are experienced.

In order to juggle the various conceptual and practical elements demanded by this project, the practice was developed using what I have come to think of as a *rapid prototyping* of performance. The term rapid prototyping originated as a label given to a variety of processes which enable the manufacturing of 3d objects from digital files, typically generated using Computer Aided Design (CAD) software. Such prototypes allow designers to understand the physicality of designed objects and to see how individual components might operate within a wider project without necessitating the expense of mass production. The term has also been adopted in the field of software development, where it may be

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<sup>64</sup> To such a degree that in the introduction of their book *Devising Performance* Heddon and Milling limit the scope of their study to the collaborative creation by groups or companies, noting that devising by a single practitioner is more commonplace within the field of performance art (Heddon & Milling, 2005:3). Of course, the work of performance artists is frequently referred to in this thesis, and as such it is perhaps no surprise that a solo devising methodology embraced by practitioners in that field serves as a touchstone here.

used to describe the deployment of business models or software architecture as well as a methodology for the development of computer code. In each of these cases the broad conception is that it is more effective to place some element of a design into the field and to observe the results than it is to painstakingly theorise many variables and intuit their effects.

Rapid prototyping as a methodology for the development of practice here combines the devising of technical and performance concepts, the presentation of these concepts to participants or collaborators, feedback and reflection, and generally culminates in both a record of one experiment and a directional vector for the next. The choice of this terminology is also a nod to the dynamic changes that can be made to the performance environment through technological tweaks. For example, a shift of camera angle between, or even during, encounters in the video conferencing system might make significant changes to the experience.

Making small, concept-driven experiments in this manner becomes liberating. When notions of form, performance action, technology, audience and strategy are all to be conjured from scratch, the freedom to test fragments of a yet undiscovered whole reduces the anxiety of making, allowing focus to shift to a discovery process. Unlooked for results of new configurations arise and feed into the process, the final encounters are fashioned through a process of accrual and the discarding of elements that don't fit the emergent shape of the artwork or the parameters of the research.

Also, in the act of *doing*, more might be revealed than by study or observation alone. For example, in 2014 an experiment was fashioned as an SMS performance operating as an adjunct to a live performance by another artist. During the development period of Greg Wohead's solo show *The Ted Bundy Project*<sup>65</sup> (Wohead, 2014a) audience members from a one performance of the show were handed a card as they were leaving:

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<sup>65</sup> More information on the live performance can be found at Wohead's website (Wohead, no date).

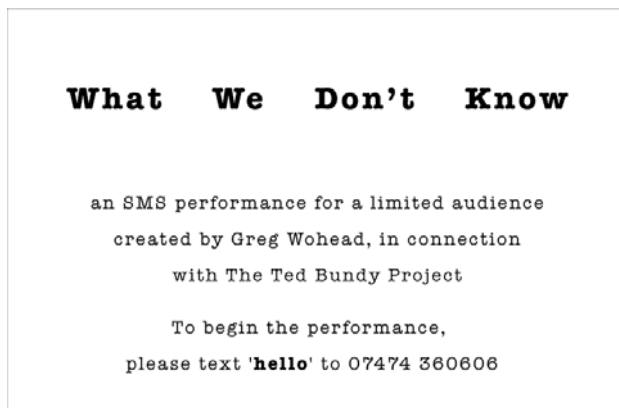


Figure 6 Card issued to audience members following a live performance of *The Ted Bundy Project*

Those who signed up for the SMS performance of *What We Don't Know* were each sent the same series of text messages. The content and delivery time of each message was chosen by Wohead to act as provocations around the themes developed in his show. Some messages were delivered in clusters, others singly at lunch time or in the small hours of the morning. They operate as echoes or murmurs, a kind of residue or ripple of the original performance. In form this piece shared similarities with Tim Etchells' *A Short Message Spectacle (An SMS)*. In that project, too, performance text was delivered to the audience as text messages sent over an extended period (16 days in the case of *An SMS*). Each message is a new component in a performance of the imagination, each new phrase arrives in the midst of the audience member's everyday, and, as such, each audience member experiences the text within their own, unique set of circumstances. In both pieces there is no declared mechanism for the audience to respond or interact, indeed in the first sequence of messages the system sends to the participants of *What We Don't Know* Wohead states that 'These messages will be from me, but they'll be sent out by a computer, so you won't be able to reply. They're just for you to read'<sup>66</sup>

Making and deploying this rapid prototype allowed a certain experimentation with form, and, in part, due to the collaborative nature of the project, a deep reflection on the expectations of both creator and audience. Design parameters, which took on particular importance in this case were:

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<sup>66</sup> Extract from the initial SMS sent during the performance of *What We Don't Know* (2014).

- the logistics of delivery - in this case the use of a computer programme paired with a smartphone, which meant messages could be sent according to a predetermined schedule, and in groups.
- a consideration of what controls can be exerted over the limited variables available: What are the effects of the length of message or time of delivery on the experience?

Informal conversations with audience both during and after the performance confirmed their appreciation of the performance text, and their excitement at receiving messages without foreknowledge of their quantity or schedule. Audience members also expressed a desire to “talk back” to the sender of the messages. In the *doing* of this prototype it became clear not only that the SMS form was ripe for further performance experimentation, but also that interaction between the sender and receiver was a valuable direction to pursue, that this interaction was desirable for some audiences. Rapid prototyping this small project acted to confirm the directionality of the research, whilst simultaneously gathering insights in areas of performance, technology and logistics and now these areas might overlap.

In devising a technique, many decisions are made as to which procedures accord success, which processes achieve a desired goal. However, the crafting of such techniques require walking out into the unknown, through shifting sands of form, action and technology - only an open, investigative and iterative process can hope to craft a rich final project. Which is to say an investigation which encourages and embraces the unexpected alongside a diligent study of those elements which are being intentionally tested. One which factors in such feedback and opportunity in order to refine forward direction.

Of course, embracing the happenstance of accidental discovery is suggestive of a broad palette and a wide canvas. Therefore, over the course of the experiments detailed in this chapter, a refining process operates in opposition to the openness of the starting points. The iterative development process allows elements extraneous to the performance and research concerns to be

carefully sliced away. This is reminiscent of the apocryphal story, attributed to many elusive sources, in which a famous sculptor is asked the question: 'How do you sculpt an elephant?' the reply to which is 'Simply cut away everything that isn't elephant'. Each test or experiment assisted in a myriad of ways to both define what the elephant might be, and to slice away all the elements that weren't elephant.

### 3.3.2 Practice Methodology – Records and reflections

As described in the previous section, the practice methodology followed an iterative process where the results of one experiment would influence and shape the next. So how were these results arrived at and documented?

Each of the experiments recorded here were conducted between pairs of participants, and in many instances I would take the role of participant myself. As far as it is possible to state, details of the participants are listed in the sections which describe the experiments themselves. As the inquiry is reactive to an understanding of the felt experience of the participants, data collection must seek to in some way transcribe their mental state. It is not possible to directly investigate a person's mental state, and so methods of inquiry must naturally rely on a recounting of experience. This might be a critical observation by myself as the architect of the practice, documenting my own experience and how my own felt experience may or may not align with the design imperatives tested. Or a participant's recounting of their emotional state immediately following the experience of such an encounter, or after some time has passed. Each fragment is a potential insight, a feeling to be distilled.

The participant's experience of any encounter is a complex Venn diagram of varying phenomena, which might include notions of performance, spectatorship and interaction, feelings of curiosity or embarrassment, a sense of self and of the Other<sup>67</sup>. A participant's response to an encounter resides in a combination of subjective emotional and logical perceptions of the situation, and what they might assert of their experience in interview is itself influenced by such factors as societal norms, confirmation bias and what it is they anticipate the research may be about.

Whilst there will be valuable insights to be gained through participant interviews or practices of auto-documentation, it is important that such

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<sup>67</sup> This is by no means a comprehensive list, and neither is the list intended to suggest these descriptions fall into the same categorical order. Instead, it is suggestive of the different kinds of processing that might come to the fore in the social setting of performance.

personal data is not viewed uncritically. Professor of design and creative technology Ann Light counsels caution both in respect of what might be reasonably observed by an interviewee and ‘how their observations can be meaningfully interpreted by the interviewer’ (Light, 2010b:201) referring us to Atkinson and Silverman who, perhaps rather tongue in cheek, suggest that to the qualitatively minded researcher the ‘open ended interview offers the opportunity for an authentic gaze in to the soul of another’ (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997:304). This they align with what they style an unwarranted and persistent impulse: ‘the elevation of the experiential as the authentic’ (ibid).

This research does not claim to inductively conclude any universality of behaviour or felt experience from its small sample of participants, nor does it propose a comparative study between different branches of technology or modes of performance. Instead personal testimony is used as a feedback method by which the recorded experience of participants is used to refine further iterations of performance practice. The performance practice is the final outcome of this research, and the communication of the results of the research is most clearly expressed through the experience of that practice.

Experiential data was collected for each experiment and is recorded in the appropriate section of this chapter. Technical information was recorded for each experiment, this data would generally include details of the equipment used and, if possible, of the participants taking part, the time of day and duration of a given encounter. Technical specifications for key experimental scenarios are listed in Appendix 2.

Where possible, participants were given a brief introduction to the encounter in advance, particularly ways they could end it and how they might summon help if anything went wrong. Afterwards they were asked if they would undertake a short recorded interview in order to reflect on their experience<sup>68</sup>. These

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<sup>68</sup> In the case of many of the SMS experiments there was no pre-briefing of participants. This is especially true of those produced later in the development process where it became increasingly apparent that any content outside of the initial offer, i.e. the invitation to text a particular telephone number, would front-load the experience and obscure the discovery

interviews, compounded with my own reflections, formed the basis of the interrogation of each encounter as research and performance.

In general, the SMS projects were documented through my personal reflection on the experiences, although, where possible, additional evidence was also gleaned from interviews or text messages with the participants. A face-to-face interview was conducted with one of the participants of the final *Small Talk* project, and where SMS experiments involved a group of performer/participants they too were interviewed. The Video Conferencing projects were documented through interviews with participants, combined with additional personal commentary.

Interviews were generally short, of the order of 20 – 30 minutes in total and were recorded using a Zoom H4n audio recorder or, if the interview was conducted via Skype, using Eecam's Call Recorder for Skype. Recorded interviews were transcribed, as necessary, using Express Scribe software and Microsoft Word.

In advance of the interviews a number of questions and provocations were prepared, although these were not used to impose a formal structure on the interview. Instead, interviews were conducted in a relatively unstructured manner with interviewees encouraged to discuss elements of their encounter which they thought of as significant or noteworthy. Indicators of significance might be moments where they felt a particular emotional connection with other participants, or perhaps insights into how they reacted to the technology involved. The loose structure allowed the recollection of the participant to guide the scope and direction of the interview, rather than enforcing a particular directionality on the discussion.

Where participants comments are mentioned in the text of this thesis their names have been changed. Where transcripts of text messages have been

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process. In the final version of the Small Talk project only one post-encounter interview was conducted.



reprinted here, numbers have been altered and identifying marks elided from the text.

### 3.4 Prelude and Études

During the research, I discovered a number of encounters or situations that inspired or influenced my way of thinking about how technology affords a measure of intimacy or presence over distance. Below I outline a particular historical example and place it in the context of the practice made during this research. It is presented here as a *Prelude*.

As part of the journey towards generating the two performance compositions that represent the final research practice, a number of experimental fragments were conducted. These represent opportunities to prototype different ideas and ways of doing things and to establish a greater clarity in the final pieces. These experiments are presented here as *Études*. Logistical and technical details of each of the *Études* are listed in Appendix A.2.1 through to Appendix A.2.7, and of the two final pieces in Appendix A.2.8 and Appendix A.2.9

This chapter documents the practice and offers a theoretical context in brief, whilst the following chapter critically evaluates the practice and comments on the conclusions drawn.

### 3.4.1 Prelude: Mojave Phone Booth

A long time ago,  
a lone phone booth  
was placed in the Mojave Desert  
for local miners.

In 1997 the phone began ringing,  
soon followed by more calls,  
and then people ...

Opening credits of short film *Mojave  
Mirage* (Roberto & Roberto, 2003)

Sometime in the late nineties Indie band fan and Internet user Godfrey "Doc" Daniels read in the zine of an obscure indie band the following text:

Recently, I spotted a small dot with the word "telephone" beside it on a map of the Mojave desert, 15 miles from the main interstate in the middle of nowhere.

Intrigued, I donned a cheap, brown serape and a pair of wing-tips and headed out to find it in my old jeep. After many hours I do find it (the glass is shot out and the phone book is missing) but it works!  
(Daniels, 2016:online)

The article listed the phone number, and an intrigued Daniels called it up. Not just once but again and again and again. Dialling into a desert, without any idea of who might be there, or even if it was ringing at all. He became obsessed, dialling more than once a day for over a month until he hit a busy signal, which only made him keener. Each time he'd record the call, which for the first days and weeks would only ever be a tape of the ring tone and his own cursing. Eventually, his brute force paid off and the phone was answered - yet after that (brief and energetic) conversation was concluded, his obsession didn't end. Motivated to make the trip in person, he researched a map, packed a car with plenty of water and navigated the dirt track roads into the middle of nowhere. Once there he made his physical mark on the booth and called up a friend. And this may well have been all there was to it, until he decided to document it on his personal web site as the project 'Hello? A Pointless Exercise in Telephony' (ibid). Here he transcribes his first conversation with local cinder-miner Lorene,

which oozes with his palpable joy (Lorene does not come off as quite so enthusiastic). He goes on to make a number of other web pages documenting his process and in so doing turns a personal quest into a template.

So, in 1997, the Mojave Desert Phone Booth was about to become Internet famous. To put this in context, this was at a time when there was no YouTube or social media networks<sup>69</sup> to speak of, the term Web 2.0 – widely considered to privilege user generated content, opening up ideas of user engagement and agency – wouldn't be coined until some two years later, nor be in popular use until late 2004. Co-incidentally, 1997 is the very year the term 'weblog' was coined by Internet community pioneer Jorn Barger to describe his *NewsPage* network, although the huge community of blog writers and the series of coherent technological platforms required to enable blogging by users without technical knowledge of web coding wouldn't come until much later (Ammann, 2009:279). It was in this rarefied atmosphere of the 90s Internet that the Mojave Phone Booth became an Information Age phenomenon; an idea hosted somewhere on the Internet going viral before even the term is in common use<sup>70</sup>. After the phone number was published online the booth attracted callers from around the world – despite the high costs of national and international calls - and perhaps even more significantly attracted pilgrims making the trip into the desert, sometimes camping out for extended periods, wanting to be there to answer them. These activities didn't go unnoticed, with JG Ballard in interview commenting that there was this:

... strangely poetic business about this telephone booth which was still functioning. I can't remember what the exact point of it was, but it became a kind of talismanic object. (Ballard, 2005:41)

What is particularly interesting here is perhaps the different routes the different types of interlocutor might take to arrive at the 'talismanic object', whether

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<sup>69</sup> YouTube wasn't founded until 2005, early SMN sites were all children of the noughties – Friendster (2002), MySpace (2003), FaceBook (2004).

<sup>70</sup> The OED has the first mention of viral as pertaining to an idea, and in particular the marketing of an idea, as early as 1989 – whilst more common coinage seems to be emergent in the early 2000s (Oxford\_English\_Dictionary, 2016)

they be pilgrim or caller, and also the status that the Mojave end of the phone call's infrastructure attains. The booth becomes the *reason* for the call, for the human connection between the two individuals taking part. The talismanic object is both cause and effect. Looking through various snippets of web and film archive little thought seems to be given to the phone at the *other* end of the call. Each caller touches base through a kind of pilgrimage to a hard to reach place – physically or through the still burgeoning Internet.

*Mojave Mirage* (Roberto & Roberto, 2003) is a short documentary film about the phone booth (now available on YouTube). Short sound bites of callers punctuate the film, intercut between video shots of callers at the phone booth itself. The conversational content varies considerably, from small talk such as 'where you from?', 'what's your name?'; through, perhaps expected, chat about the situation at the booth; that it's '40 miles from civilisation', or we're in the 'middle of nowhere', and descriptions of the object itself, that 'all the people that were here put their names on it'. Some snippets show how popular calling the booth had become 'you're my 21<sup>st</sup> call, I've been here about an hour and a half', 'some people camped here last night and said it rang all night long'. Then there are the questions that in other circumstances may not have been asked at all: 'you have a disability? what type of disability?' (16'45"), 'how long were you in a coma? couple weeks? yeah. me too. I was in a coma for two weeks' (18'24").

Callers question why is there even a phone booth in the middle of nowhere where there aren't even any people there, they call because of the thrill of it, and to see if there is actually someone else at the end of the line. It's named entertainment, both the conversations and the idea, 'it was kind of a challenge to see if I could catch someone there myself and talk to them' (21'40"); some didn't even believe it was there at all.

I do not answer my phone at home ever, I answer my phone at work but if anybody tries to get ahold of me it's either at work or they leave me a message. But yet I'll come down here and answer it from the moment I get here in the afternoon, throughout the night, into the next day. Until I

get ready to leave.

(Interviewee, Mojave Miracle Film, Roberto & Roberto, 2003:26'35")

This interviewee is describing his desire to connect with other humans via the phone booth perhaps in a way that a regular telephone call doesn't achieve. Whether this is down to the anonymity of the experience, or that it is something out of the ordinary, what is clear is that these conversations with strangers start to engage with Prager and Robert's intimacy criteria: there is something of a risk in answering a stranger, the conversations that are shared reveal information about the interlocutors (such as the shared disclosure of having been in a coma), and from listening to those speaking in the video it seems that a shared understanding is precisely what is being sought.

The National Park Service removed the phone booth in 2000, prompted by concerns around local environmental damage caused by so many, often ill-prepared, travellers to the desert location.

Curiously, via his Mojave Phone Booth web site 'Doc' was frequently asked what he'd do if he'd ever come across another phone booth in the desert, his reply: '... no. seeing what happened the first time, if i did, i would keep it VERY QUIET (sic)' (Kelly, 2009:online). Yet keeping quiet would erase the very possibility of the peculiar circumstances that facilitated all those calls, all those connections.

an instrumental musical composition, usually short, designed to provide practice material for perfecting a particular musical skill.

### 3.4.1 Étude: Burner

Sitting at a typewriter at his home in Bonn, Germany, Friedhelm Hillebrand types random sentences and questions, counting every letter, number, and space. Pretty much every time, the messages amount to fewer than 160 characters. This becomes the character limit proscribed by the emergent SMS standard first implemented in digital cellular networks in 1994. The first message ever sent said simply “Happy Christmas”. The message recipient<sup>71</sup> couldn't even reply as he had no way to enter text on his Orbitel 901 phone (summary of the development of SMS)

The Burner project was the first piece of experimental research constructed around the format of SMS communication between pairs of participants. The starting point of this experiment was to give the two participants the gift of a brand new still-boxed mobile phone. Upon opening the box and switching on the handset a text message would arrive signalling the start of the encounter. The address book of each phone would contain only the other's phone number: the object becomes a hotline or a 'Bat Phone'. A gateway. The conceit being

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Jarvis, from the UK's Vodafone network

that the gift is not simply the phone<sup>72</sup>, but is an opportunity to engage with another person.

In conversation with artist Tim Etchells, as I was developing the ideas behind *Burner*, we discussed ways in which a mobile handset could become a different type of object: that there was something in the idea of an object that *doesn't belong to you*. Or that it has a singular purpose in that it is used only for communication within this project. That there is something of its nature out of a thriller or a spy novel. Etchells recalled an artwork by Yoko Ono, *Telephone in Maze* (1971). Where a telephone is set in a physical maze, inside a room, within a gallery. Yoko Ono is the only person who knows the number, should the phone ring, it will be her calling.



Figure 7 TELEPHONE IN MAZE (detail) 1971/2013 Installation view, War is Over! (if you want it): Yoko Ono, MCA, 2013 Image © the artist Photograph: Alex Davies

In Ono's phone there is the implication of familiarity with fame, that the gift is a conversation with someone important, someone famous. During its display in Sydney:

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<sup>72</sup> Which, while being a very stylish flip-phone, is also somewhat cumbersome to use and offers no "smart" features whatsoever



An excited docent<sup>73</sup> tells me that the artist has rung nearly every day; in France she only rang twice (Mortlock, 2013)

The idea of a participant excitedly unboxing their *Burner* handset is, I think, probably influenced by a memory of a scene in the film *The Matrix* (1999) where protagonist *Neo* opens a padded envelope to find a Nokia handset. As soon as he takes the phone out of its container it rings, introducing him to a secret underworld of which he's previously unaware.

It is also true to say that at the turn of the Millennium I did own that very Nokia handset, although no secret underworlds were revealed through it.



Figure 8 Nokia handset as received by protagonist Neo in the film *The Matrix* (1999)  
Screen capture from YouTube

The goal here was to engineer a dramatic encounter between two individuals by way of a “disposable” mobile phone. The core aim of this experiment was to explore the degree to which a connection created and maintained through text messages might invoke an intimacy between its participants. The experiment was orchestrated through a series of text messages: which might be instructions of things to do, or questions to answer. These messages create some performance scaffolding, in order to jump start conversation or give the participants something to react to.

Some of the texts take a leaf out of Tim Etchells’ *Surrender Control* (Etchells, 2001), an SMS artwork in which Etchells issued 75 instructions to its recipients

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<sup>73</sup> museum guide or volunteer

over a five day period. Use of text such as these offered the opportunity for a certain degree of orchestration through injecting different types of performance language into the day to day texting. For example, in the first instance the participants were instructed to 'find out a little about each other', then later asked if they were 'tempted to lie or if they only told the truth?'. On the final day of the project they were prompted to interact with someone they didn't already know, which could be taken as a real-world mirror of the SMS experience:

This time I'd like you to ask someone, a stranger, an acquaintance, how they're feeling, be interested and attentive. What did you discover?

(instruction texted to participants, *Burner* project 2014)

The experiment might be likened to talking to strangers as though they are pen pals, but instead of waiting air-mail time, responses fly back and forth on their own schedule. As immediate as a conversation, a slow as a poem. Conceptually it reminded me of the typed messages I had exchanged with strangers back in the 80s and 90s on Bulletin Board systems on the University internet. Letters glowing green on a black background, or was it amber? 80 columns of characters, personality performed blind.

In feedback interviews with the participants some characteristics of the experiment start to become clear: Participants felt that there was an ambiguity of purpose to the project: that there are no rules, which makes following the rules difficult. Generally speaking there are tacit rules to a conversation based on context of situation and the people involved, here these are blurred, without convention as a frame it can be difficult to start. This ambiguity can also give credence to fears that they're "doing it wrong".

Both participants found texting with the handsets difficult, a muscle memory to be re-learnt having been made obsolete by use of their own touch-screen smartphones. The object of the handset is problematic, after the initial excitement of receiving a new gadget it becomes something extra to carry around. Both express the desire to carry the phone around in order to be

responsive to the other party, but this is foiled by convenience and habit. One even leaves the phone in their car over the weekend (whilst the other wonders if they've lost it).

It is exciting to receive instructions, although the participants complain that the *voice* of the "control" character<sup>74</sup> was inconsistent and ambiguous. One noted that it was comforting that there was another person involved, somewhere in the background. Instructions help to generate unexpected events: the instruction to converse with a stranger led one participant to developing an on-going acquaintance with someone they'd seen every day but never really engaged with before:

I had a very open chat with a stranger last night who revealed her mum had just died. We shared a lot and i think i helped her heal a little bit (sic). I just had a chat with the lady in my cafe. She reacted like no-one had asked her how she was, it was lovely (Participant Interview, Burner, 2014)

Neither felt any desire to use the phone to voice call the other.

Both participants felt encouraged to be brave both in the piece and in the everyday, and found engaging with the project enjoyable: 'it brightened my day' (Participant Interview, Burner, 2014), also mentioning that they wished it could have lasted longer.

I asked if they thought the text messages were being monitored in any way or if they felt theirs was an entirely private conversation. Neither thought the SMSs were being monitored<sup>75</sup>. Both considered such surveillance would have completely changed the nature of the piece, and described it as a very private experience. One described feeling emboldened by the anonymity, and that as a result they became much more revealing than they had expected. The other noted that they observed this, and responded to it. Whilst reflecting on this bold behaviour, they both cited a conversation on a particular day where one of

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<sup>74</sup> I was sending instructions or observations, acting in an orchestration or "control" capacity

<sup>75</sup> one wondered if it were possible before dismissing it out of hand, the other never even considered the possibility.

them went on a date and the other acted as their “virtual” wingman, offering advice and suggestions as the date unfolded.

Over seven days their conversation unfolded in a stutter: a shared, private and virtual experience, but one which also asked them to engage with the material world. Through slips of the virtual tongue they made wrong assumptions (going on a date with a man doesn't necessarily identify you as a woman) yet provided support and made a *kind* of friendship. Despite the leanness of the medium they felt connected to each other: small intimacies were shared, as they invited each other into their lives. They are now social media friends.

On the down side, the lack of intimacy with the chosen *object* - texting with the flip-phone was described as ‘clunky’ and ‘frustrating’ – meant that less time was spent in conversation. The aesthetic choice of committing to a ritualised exchange of objects, which is to say the conception of the mobile handset as a notional *gift* or a *gateway*, whilst providing an initial jolt of excitement for the participant, in the longer term resulted in a loss of engagement.

### 3.4.2 Étude: Small Talk (various)

... there comes a flow of language, purposeless expressions of preference or aversion, accounts of irrelevant happenings, comments on what is perfectly obvious ...

There can be no doubt that we have here a new type of linguistic use – *phatic communion* I am tempted to call it, actuated by the demon of terminological invention - a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words

(Malinowski, 1972:149-151)

Small talk has been described as conversation for its own sake. Malinowski describes phatic speech as the ‘prototypical formulation of smalltalk’ (quoted in Jaworski, 2000:109) – a speech formulation that serves to ‘to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship’ (Coupland et al., 1992:208). Whilst the phrase Small Talk has a number of different definitions in sociolinguistics and other academic disciplines, Jaworski tells us it can broadly be understood to be synonymous with casual conversation, gossip and chit-chat. Malinowski, he points out, quite vividly considers small talk as a defence against the fear of silence: ‘to a natural man, another man's silence is not a reassuring factor, but, on the contrary, something alarming and dangerous’ (Malinowski quoted in Jaworski, 2000:109). Small Talk has been widely considered since Malinowski’s studies of the early 20s as something to engage with to avoid silence in at a time when speech is expected by convention, or that it might be engaged with at the very start or end of a meaningful conversation (ibid:110). Jaworski suggests this negative or ambivalent conception of Small Talk comes in part from the Halliday’s beliefs that language is largely purposeful for *information exchange*. In the early 90s Coupland et al. recognized phatic exchange as ‘a multidimensional potential for talk in many social settings’ (Coupland et al., 1992:207), conceptually

repositioning small talk as a speech pattern that might surface at any time during transactional or information centred conversation in order to undertake relational goals.

*Small Talk* as a performance project began in 2014. The intention here was to continue developing an understanding of intimacy as it occurs between individuals in a text-based medium, and perhaps also to re-ignite the kinds of empathetic experiences I'd had in the 90s using the bulletin boards of the university network. I considered that an effective way to achieve this might be to initiate one-to-one conversation with strangers through SMS. Conceptually this was a deceptively simple idea: find a way to instigate a conversation with someone by text message then, through an improvised dialogue, discover what kind of conversation that might be.

I chose *Small Talk* as the title, and as part of the provocation, in the belief it would lower expectations of participants in terms of what was required of them, encourage a playful approach to conversation, and to provide a challenge as to what the concept of small talk might mean in this context. If small talk is the type of language we engage in to defeat silence, what might happen when we replace the silence of the texting mass that perpetually surrounds us with the *opportunity* of conversation?

Research has shown that SMS can be demanding (users feel it requires a rapid response) this has been noted to be especially true in the case of teens to the point where it can significantly disrupt their sleep patterns. Not so surprising when '[s]ustaining a relationship through texting is a common practice for many (students)' (Rice, 2011). It can also be used whilst it's interlocutors are both within the same physical space creating an 'intimacy at a distance' (Tjora, 2011:194). Tjora describes this as bringing a mediated liveness into material situations, describing activities characterised as flirting, 'hugging', discrete task coordination and live commenting (ibid).

Direct influences on the concept for this one-to-one experiment are performance art projects such as Chris Burden's *5 Day Locker Piece* (Zerihan,

2012:5), the mediated engagement in Kaleider's performance of *You With Me*<sup>76</sup> and the SMS performances of Coney, Blast Theory and Tim Etchells (Etchells, 2013).

Zerihan describes how in Burden's piece it was only once he'd begun his 5 day self-incarceration that he realised that he'd become a 'box with ears', and as such a perfect anonymous confessional. I'm immediately fascinated by the anonymity the *Small Talk* project can afford its participants, the lack of knowing anything about who the person is at the other end, and how that lack of cues influences how you perform to each other, with each other.

An individual's mobile phone is a personal and intimately operated object in the physical plane yet with capabilities outside of it. The phone is an object through which the participant and performer conduct a durational exchange or exploration. In this case there is no comforting (or otherwise) sound of the Other's breath, or the immediacy of response possible to a cry of "are you still there?"

Within the frame of *Small Talk* whatever turn the conversation takes, the act of conversation still remains in play. There are ethical constraints around what the improvised conversation might contain, and how the performer might react, but nothing is out of bounds because nothing can remove the central concept which is to conduct a new conversation with a new person. Sometimes the only response might be no response, which might signal the end of the performance – of the conversation – or a renegotiation of terms of engagement.

Tim Etchells' SMS performances each operate in a broadcast mode, relying on his trademark stylistic and heightened use of text for their impact. This use of text is mirrored in much of his work, in his own live performance and that of *Forced Entertainment*, in his *Neons*<sup>77</sup> and his SMS pieces.

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<sup>76</sup> See Appendix A.1.3.1 in this thesis.

<sup>77</sup> Sentences or single words rendered with neon lighting and displayed in various sites, which might be an art gallery, or at scale above buildings or other architectural fabric of the city.

I'm drawn both to the speed, clarity and vividness with which language communicates narrative, image and ideas, and at the same time to its amazing propensity to create a rich field of uncertainty and ambiguity (Etchells, 2013:online)

Where Etchells use of SMS differs from interactive modes such as those used by Blast Theory in *Ivy4Eva* (2010) or Proto-Type in *Fortnight* (2013) is that there is no return route. At the point at which the SMS performer (whether automated or human) responds, a new agency is activated in the participant. Uncertainty of language can be challenged and responded to, perhaps with even more uncertainty. This means of exchange does not devalue the power of the original language choices, nor indeed the structure of a careful SMS schedule which places texts in the hands of the participant at a particular time for a particular affect. What it offers to the participant is something different: an opportunity.

In choosing SMS as a platform there are a number of advantages. One is that there is a low buy-in cost, many mobile tariffs come with a substantial or potentially unlimited number of text messages built into a monthly allowance. This is in economic contrast to, say, Blast Theory's text performance *Ivy4Eva* (Blast\_Theory, 2010) which was conducted at a time and in such a way that each SMS incurred a unit cost. Whilst the platform which generated and responded to texts may have been scalable, the per-participant costs were not sustainable<sup>78</sup>. The cost advantage is also negated should the participants roam internationally, at which point small incremental costs may creep in<sup>79</sup>.

Another advantage of SMS is that its format is not dependant on any particular platform, as SMS interoperates with an overwhelmingly large number of mobile phones and carriers. Whilst a smartphone might enable the incorporation of emoji, graphics or even videos or animations, this is generally achieved by way of additional protocols wrapped into the smartphone's messaging interface and may use either proprietary technologies such as Apple's *iMessage* or tap into

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<sup>78</sup> From a conversation with Nick Tandavanitj of Blast Theory.

<sup>79</sup> EU citizens in EU countries are limited to a per text costs of *domestic price + up to €0.02* from 30 April 2016 until 15 June 2017. After this date EU citizens texting or using mobile calls or data within EU countries will incur no roaming charges at all (Europa.EU, 2016).



other standard protocols such as Multimedia Messaging Service or MMS. Using SMS opens up the project to be enjoyed by any participant with a mobile handset of whatever type, so there is a low technological barrier to entry.

Four *Small Talk* experiments were performed through 2014 and 2015, each contributing to the development of a final version of the piece, which was performed over several months towards the end of 2015. As previously noted, the concept at the heart of the experiment was to engage a stranger in an SMS conversation, to see how that conversation might develop, and to gain insights as to the degree of intimacy the interlocutors might develop.

Each of the four precursor experiments were performed over a pre-set period of time, and three out of the four were performed as part of an existing experimental performance festival.

	Date	Project	Team	Duration
1	30.06.14	<i>Small Talk</i> (Fluxus)	Solo	15.00 – 22.00 (7hrs)
2	04.10.14	<i>Small Talk</i> (Emergency)	Solo	10.00 – 17.00 (7hrs)
3	03.04.15 – 04.04.15	<i>Small Talk 24</i>	6 Operators	12.00 – 12.00 (24hrs)
4	18.04.15	<i>Small Talk</i> (Forensic)	6 Operators	15.00 – 21.00 (6hrs)

Figure 9 Key details of *Small Talk* experiments

Each experiment had three ingredients that make up the parameters of its execution.

Provocation	A way in for the participant. A mechanisms to present the SMS mobile phone number to a potential participant, and to encourage the initial text. This might be a printed business card, a listing in a festival programme or a poster on a wall
Platform	This was the performer’s point of view. It could be a mobile phone or a mobile phone / computer interface, which allows more effective management of multiple conversations and for the engagement of multiple performers.
Duration	The length of time the experiment runs. For each of the experiments recorded in this section, the duration was no longer than 24 hours. In three of the versions performed as part of an arts festival this was a result of abiding by the festival schedule.

## Small Talk at Fluxus and Emergency

The first two versions of the *Small Talk* project took place during two one-day performance festivals in Manchester: the first being *Fluxus*<sup>80</sup> at Contact, and subsequently *Emergency*<sup>81</sup> at Z-Arts. In both of these I operated or “performed” the show alone in an office room, away from the main operation of the festival. The provocation used to entice participants to take part in the experiment was broadly the same for both festivals: in each case a series of printed business cards were used. On the one side different designs were printed with the intention of provoking ideas around gossip or the exchange of secrets,

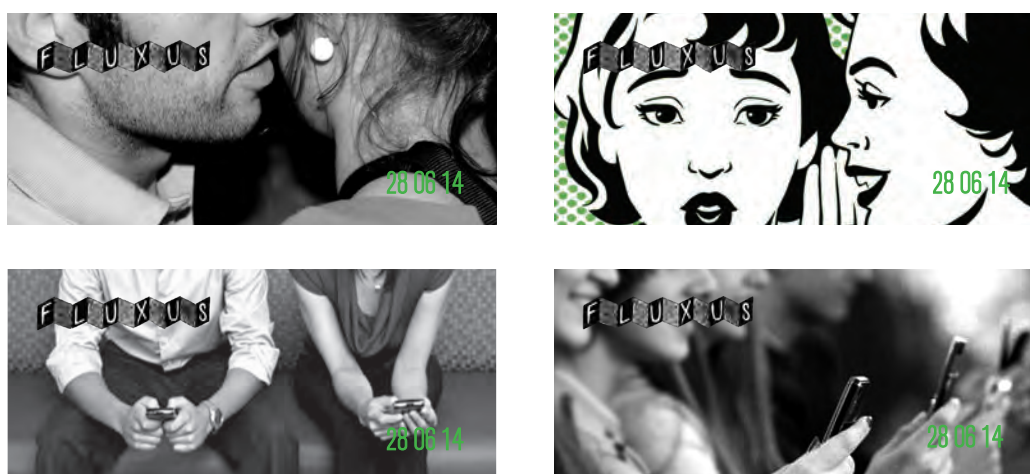


Figure 10 Business cards for *Small Talk* iterations #1 and #2

whilst on the flip side a simple instruction was printed.

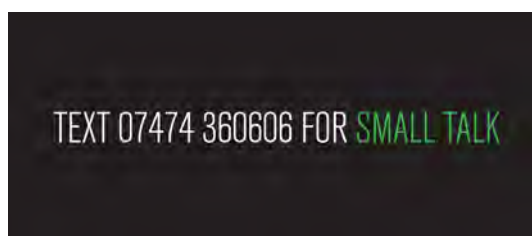


Figure 11 Business Card provocation - Text 07474 360606 for Small Talk

The platform made use of a basic Android smartphone connected to the cellular network of the mobile carrier “3”. The phone contract was equipped with a text

<sup>80</sup> Contact theatre in Manchester recruit a team of four young people to take part in a year-long producing internship known as Re-con. This culminates in a festival these young people design and programme themselves. *Fluxus* was Re-con’s 2014 festival.

<sup>81</sup> A regular experimental performance festival produced by Word of Warning.

message 'bundle' which included 5,000 texts within its monthly fee. The handset was paired with a laptop using the *Mighty Text* platform which allows its user to send and receive text messages from within a browser window, or by using a desktop application. The operational interface is shown below.

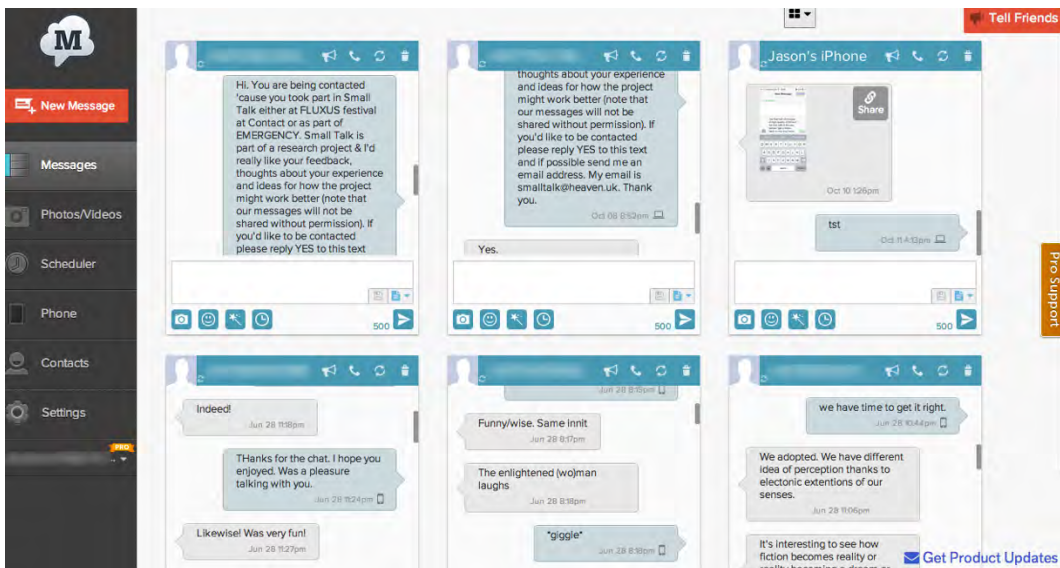


Figure 12 Mighty Text web interface

## Process and Analysis

Operating the piece required a good deal of concentration. Right from the start I experienced a feeling of anticipation, a kind of *unknowing*. Without any idea of how many people there are circulating, picking up cards, or even in the building at all, a nervousness brewed – a feeling similar to the anticipation that a performer might experience before going on stage; yet without any release of energy once that step is taken. Even towards the end of the event new people still might arrive, and I found it difficult to really gauge or put a value on attendance or attention.

Opening gambits from audience vary:

*“I’m supposed to text you”*

*“hello?”*

*“Small Talk”*

Some seemed to see the phrase as a key-word, a code-word. As the piece progressed I found myself wondering how people were framing their approach, if they considered the interaction to be a game or perhaps an automated system. Were their expectations stimulated by the picture on the particular card? (After all, that's all the data they have).

After a slow build-up, many conversations pulled my attention in different directions. I felt a need to be attentive, wanting to curate information like an encyclopaedia (during these first two versions of the piece I found myself using Wikipedia a lot to fact check or send out a random piece of information to the participants). I also felt an abiding need to be funny, witty, clever and interesting. To be something like a blind-fold stand-up, one who can't quite hear their audience. As I operated the system it began to feel like an intense, social call centre, yet because the messages were so utterly context-free everything was a gamble of meaning. I found myself behaving "nicely", presenting as honest and genuine. I suspect that's because I'm uncomfortable with the idea of coming across as unfriendly, and even as the experiment progressed my understanding of how easy it is to misinterpret the words grew. Participants came and went. Working in the context of an arts festival, it is likely that participants were going in and out of exhibits or shows. Or perhaps they'd lost interest, or have found other things or people pulling at their time. I experienced a heightened sense of nervousness when people didn't respond immediately, and a stretching out of time that changed the experience of immediacy itself. My response time appeared to have some effect on the participants' responses; if I found myself missing the start of a potential conversation and therefore responding some time after the initial text had been received, then the participant's response sometimes felt a more lack-lustre. Overall the experience was over in a rush, and hundreds of text messages were exchanged over the course of only a few hours.

Keeping track of and engaging in these multiple conversations required considerable concentration and effort. In this way I discovered that through scaling-up significantly an activity that I'd normally experience as fleeting, off-

the-cuff even, the experiment exposed a labour of messaging previously hidden to me. Continual attention to diverse streams of conversation, which would often switch tack midstream or suffer from long periods of inactivity, was found to be mentally exhausting.

	Fluxus	Emergency
Total number of texts	1271	1404
Total number of participants	54	30

Figure 13 Details of texts exchanged in *Small Talk* #1 and #2

The messages were predominantly light hearted in tone. Through the course of this experiment I didn't feel as though I was getting particularly close to the participants, perhaps in part because it didn't seem like there was enough time to fully engage. Texting operated at machine gun speed, in each performance an average of around three texts per minute were exchanged.

Second hand feedback is broadly positive. At Fluxus one of the event organisers tells me apocryphally "loads of people loved it", claiming she could see them sitting in corners texting and showing their own texts, and any replies, to their friends. At Emergency a volunteer notices a group of young students texting, saying "look what she's said now". Identity characteristics of gender, age and race are obscured by the medium of SMS, yet, in almost all conversations, participants do not inquire after this information, and I do not offer it. If there is a distinguishable *voice* to be recognised, through this mode of texting, it is difficult to discern. I later discover that I have conversed with friends I didn't recognise (and who didn't recognise me). As an example, a close friend talked to me about their experience of their conversation, exclaiming: "I don't know who's doing this one but they're not as good as the one that was at Contact".

In the second iteration of this practice, performed at *Emergency* (2014), I chose to purposely introduce pre-sourced or pre-written performance text in amongst conversational dialogical messages, with the intention of adding a different texture or layer to the performance. To achieve this in practice, on receipt of an

initial text from any new participant their number would be added to a list within the software. Grouping participant's numbers in this way enabled the sending of group messages which all would receive. Periodically I would send group messages consisting of fragments of performance text. The performance texts included fragments of oratory, copies of individual SMS messages exchanged by those affected during the Anders Breivik's terrorist attack in Norway (2011), and a message from rapper 50-cent to his son, threatening to disown him.

Some participants made contact with each other during the piece and discovered they'd all received these identical performance, and later described themselves as feeling cheated as a result. This may suggest that individually tailored text messages are considered more valuable, as they contribute to an on-going investment in the conversation.

In terms of technical infrastructure, using the *Mighty Text* interface meant that keeping track of the simultaneous conversations was much easier than through only the use of the phone. Conversations with different individual participants are grouped on the screen and this gave the impression of a wide angle view on the exercise as a whole. Something similar to a security guard observing the activity of many passers-by captured by CCTV cameras and displayed on multiple screens. Using the app made typing much easier, not least because the cheap handset that was actually sending and receiving the SMS used a resistive touchscreen which I found to be quite unresponsive. Under this working environment, and combined with the volume of text messages exchanged, the *labour* of the project was once again foregrounded. This activity engendered a feeling similar to that what I imagine a call centre operator using a customer services app might experience.

Reflecting on the printed cards which operated as the participant's provocation, I realise they group into the gossipy (secret spreading, slightly illicit), the technological (images of people on phones, phones themselves) and in one case slightly sleazy. These design-driven choices had created a particular series of

aesthetics which could front-load the participant’s response in ways that were both difficult to measure and potentially undesirable. In using meaning-laden provocations, especially those which are potentially untraceable in practice (who picked up which card?), it appeared to me that the provocation distracted from the work of the experiment. The images, which were intended only as ice breakers, started to frame the engagement.

### Small Talk 24

As described in the methodology, the next experimental iteration retained the concept but tweaked the method. Changes were made to the three structural elements of the piece: the provocation was simplified, the platform expanded to allow multiple performers, and the project extended to a 24 hour format.

	Method	Intent
Provocation	<p><i>Small Talk 24</i> also used business cards to present the offer of conversation to the participants, but the design is simplified considerably. Gone are the pictures and colours, replaced by the same message printed in black on a plain card. On the other side of the card the duration of the project was printed. (in this case midday 03.04.15 to midday 04.04.15).</p> <p>Cards were placed in numerous public and retail locations where people might gather throughout the 24 hour period of the experiment.</p>	<p>To provide limited visual stimulation to the participant, avoiding a front-loading effect by providing as little context as possible.</p> <p>To escape the festival context.</p>
Platform	The <i>MightyText</i> computer interface was used once again. In this case multiple performers operated the system simultaneously..	To Increase the capacity of the project: enabling the performers to engage with a larger number of participants, and to enable them to spend more time with each participant.
Duration	The total duration is one day, 24 hours.	To explore what happens when conversations are given more time to develop, and when they operate at different times of the day.

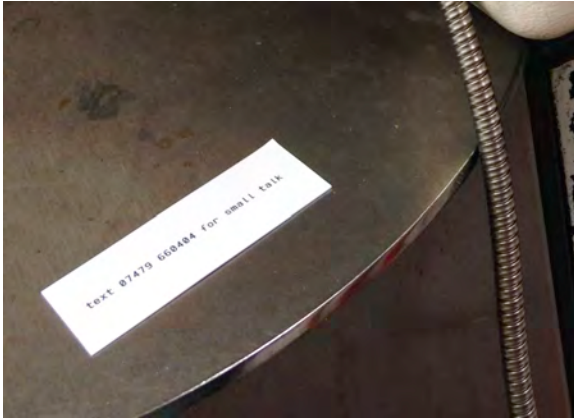


Figure 14 *Small Talk 24* Card left in phone box



Figure 15 *Small Talk 24* Performer using web interface

A team of volunteers was recruited through social and artistic networks. Once assembled, the team attended a face-to-face meeting in order to work through logistics, and to consider strategies and ethics. In discussion, the role of the performance research was explained, offering a description of the project as a mechanism by which its participants would explore making a connection with a stranger via text messaging, with a particular focus on the development of intimacy and empathy between participants within each conversation. At the same time, the event aimed to be playful and enjoyable to its participants. The projects starting point was to reach out to a stranger, and say "I'm here!".

The team operated the project from a studio in Islington Mill, Salford. Two laptops were set up on a table in the room, each was connected to the Internet via WiFi and, using the *Mighty Text* app, to the mobile phone which sent and received all SMS. This setup allowed two performers to operate the phone at



the same time. Each laptop was also connected to a projector which projected a clone of that laptops screen onto the wall. This meant that any member of the team could see the text of all of the conversations as they developed. The intention here was to encourage collaboration and support between operators. To help facilitate that intent, the team operated in shifts to ensure that at least two performers were available at any one time. Before the project went live to the public, the team had discussed ethical issues including support options should the messaging take a challenging turn. Contact information for support organisations such as the Samaritans and Youngminds was made available to the performers to refer to as necessary.

200 business cards were printed and distributed in Manchester city centre throughout the duration of the piece; these were left in cafes, shops and bars with the cooperation of the proprietor or senior staff. Cards were also left in phone boxes and other unattended public locations. The intention was to broaden the demographic of the participants. Instead of cultivating the attendees of an experimental arts festival, the cards were made available to a larger public.

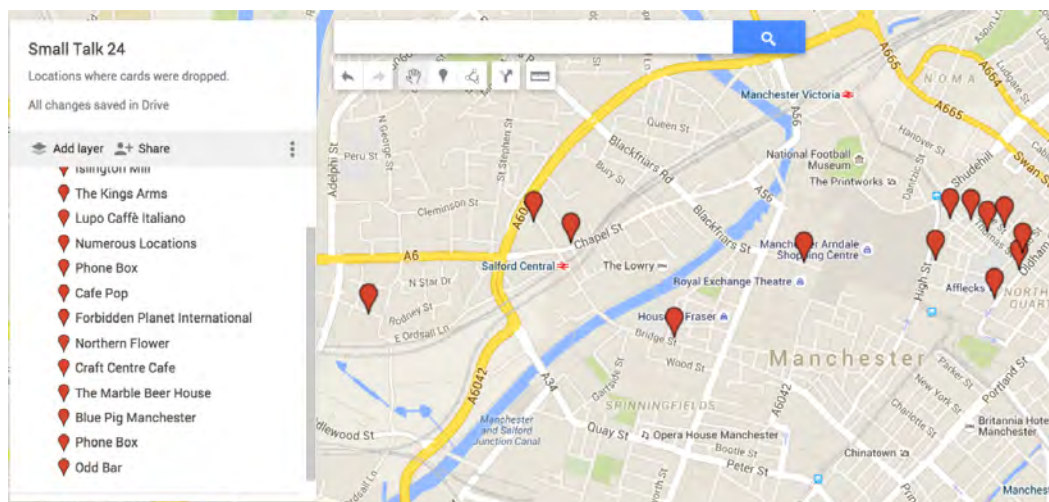


Figure 16 Map showing locations where cards were placed during Small Talk 24

### **Ethical considerations for the group**

With the wider potential demographic, a large number of performer participants, and the absence of an arts context as far as the participants are

concerned new challenges are exposed. The context of risk includes the following data points:

- The participants are unknown
- It is likely the participants are using their own phone, and as such are uniquely identifiable
- Should the conversation turn abusive, participants can be reminded of the above
- The participating performers can look to the support of the others in the room, and can disengage from the project at any time

The following risk assessments suggests a starting point for the ethical analysis of the project from the perspective of both audience and performer participants.

<b>RISK</b>	<b>ANALYSIS</b>	<b>CONTROLS</b>
Participant makes a statement of intent 'confession' that suggests criminal or abusive real world behaviour.	The participant may text that they plan to cause pain to themselves or another, or any similar language that implies potential real world consequences.	Performers will be briefed regarding this risk.  There will be peers on hand to discuss any text conversation such as this.  Templates are made available to suggest the participant might want to approach appropriate advice centres (Samaritans, Drug Addiction helpline).
Participant is of unknown age.	It is easily conceived that the person responding to the small talk text offer is under 18. Thus all conversations must be recognised as potentially being with a minor. Additionally, there are none of the normal grounding or controls within the conversation expected in a face-to-face encounter.	Performers will be briefed regarding this risk.  There will be peers on hand to discuss any text conversation that seems to overstep boundaries relevant to age.  Performers determine a protocol to use when engaging with participants whose conversation turns to subjects with which they are uncomfortable, with particular focus on issues such as child protection.
The mental health of participant is unknown.	The mental health of the participants is unknown, and they may be triggered by particular words or be particularly vulnerable at the moment of the interaction.	Performers will be briefed regarding this risk.  There will be peers on hand to discuss any text conversation that might indicate a trigger effect.  A protocol will be devised to engage if the participant begins to represent themselves as distressed. This will take into account the idea of the participant hazing or trolling the game.

<p>The Small Talk operators may be distressed by the texts they receive.</p>	<p>Similar to the way that Twitter users are sometimes attacked by on-line Trolls, it is certainly possible that participant operators may be offended by texts that are sent.</p>	<p>Performers will be briefed regarding this risk.</p> <p>There will be peers on hand to discuss any text conversation that might distress other operators.</p> <p>The operator will be able to issue an explanatory text message (template) asking the participant to change or halt their behaviour.</p> <p>There will be the opportunity to block such conversations on the computer interface used.</p>
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To reflect on ethical considerations of the use of a messaging platform such as SMS within a performance context I turned to Nick Tandavanitj one of the founders of Blast Theory and asked him about these kinds of concerns.

Regarding the performance piece *Ivy4Eva* he had the following to say:

One of the things that happened with Ivy is that we would, well there it was automated, we had a system whereby messages of a certain kind and I think we were looking for certain keywords, mainly because we were concerned about people sort of confessing things that were highly troubling ... things were flagged and forwarded to people, so we had a schedule of people who were responsible for checking in on messages that had come in. So we didn't read every message, but we did ... read all the flagged ones. I suppose it's a bit like moderating in a way. In that we had a procedure for responding to them if we thought things needed to be more serious. Because Ivy is ultimately still a box, and she couldn't really be a friend to anyone. (Skype interview with Tandavanitj, 2013)

As with all performance practice which engages with the public, a careful consideration of risk is vital to a full understanding of the ethics of such engagement. This analysis informs the structure of the project, an understanding of the responsibilities of performers and the point at which such responsibilities end.

### **Process and analysis**

It was found that the software and method used accentuated the sense of a call centre in operation to the performer participants. This attitude was emphasised by terminology (for example, the idea of being on- and off- shift), and also extended to the approaches performers took to their interaction both to the

process and with the participants. It quickly became commonplace for a performer to call out that they would take on the next conversation, and the sight of a *new* number on the projected board was cheered in of itself as a vindication of the project. Additionally, a complex hand-over (of tone, meaning and understanding) would occur as one performer needed to turn over their conversation to another at the turn of a shift.

As the project unfolded it became clear that two elements of the method put in place were particularly problematic. These were the visibility of performers activity projected on the walls, and the hand-over between performers as they ended a shift.

Visibility brought out a self-consciousness on the part of the performers, who described being concerned about their spelling or if they were “doing it right” and suggested that this was mainly because the others could see what they were doing. A process of composing and editing texts, which is generally performed in private, had become suddenly exposed and public.

One particular conversation came to highlight both the visibility and handover issues whilst also making the strongest case for the development of an intimate connection. In this case<sup>82</sup> the conversation began when the participant picked up a business card in a phone booth

Hey, I found this card in a phone box today, and was wondering who would choose to do that, and why? (participant text, Small Talk 24, 2015)

Rebecca<sup>83</sup>, in her late 20s, replied. Beginning a conversation that would run late into the night. Over the next few hours the story grew into one of a single parent with money worries, watching Disney films with his daughter, talking of his wishes to travel and his reading preferences (non-fiction with a survivalist theme). That he was a man who’d sung for a living, but right now wasn’t being as creative as he’d like.

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<sup>82</sup> Transcript #443 see *Small Talk* performance traces at the end of this thesis.

<sup>83</sup> Participant’s names have been altered.

In terms of the visibility of these texts projected onto the wall Rebecca tells me:

There were sort of feelings of guilt there, because ... He won't have known everyone else could read his texts. I feel like he definitely thought he was talking to one person, but actually he was talking to a lot of people, and I don't know how he would have felt about that<sup>84</sup>.  
(Participant Interview, Rebecca, 2015)

In discussion after the event, Rebecca concludes that whilst it was felt that the process wasn't *intended* as disrespectful or in any way an invasion of privacy, the *method* of staging impacted the performer's choices. She described that she

'felt I got to know him. I felt not ... attached ... I'm not sure if that's the right word. I felt a sense of responsibility, actually, to that guy' (ibid).

In the early hours Rebecca handed over the conversation to another performer, she recalls

'I handed this conversation over ... I just felt I needed to give her a bit of a debrief ... Because it felt like it should be the same person they were talking to'. (ibid)

Erin (27) picks up the story:

I think for me personally, 'cause I just had that one conversation. I felt quite affected by it, and it stayed on my mind for quite a while ... Going into it, and taking over from Rebecca, who had had this deep and personal talk with this person, even though she'd been completely honest that this was a performative thing, he didn't really know the details.

After taking over it felt quite wrong in some way. I went into it quite excited, like oh my god this person's being totally open and honest, and this is what it's about. But I felt like I couldn't let myself go a little bit. I felt quite eerie in a way (Participant Interview, Erin, 2015)

In another example Ethan describes having to hand over his conversation with a young student:

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<sup>84</sup> Michael Bachmann has undertaken an analysis of similar ethical dilemmas in the rendering of public/private spaces in the convergence of networked space with material space. With particular emphasis on Dries Verhoevan's *Wanna Play? (Love in the time of Grindr)* (Bachmann, 2015) – in which Verhoevan engages with individuals using the popular pick-up app Grindr, whilst unbeknown to his interlocutors he displays a (distorted) version of their interaction on a large screen in a public square.

I left that conversation at around 6-7 in the morning and (Robert) took over ... It felt a bit like that's my conversation, I felt possessive about it. I've worked with this person, and we've made a connection – now someone else is going to take it over, and then pretend to be me ... I had a look back at the conversations and when I looked at that one I thought "that's not what I would have said". It's obviously a totally different person (pause) Maybe she worked it out.  
(Participant Interview, Ethan, 2015)

What comes through very strongly during this version of the project are the investments performers make into the conversation, that they feel compelled to honesty and feel rewarded by what they perceive as the quality of the conversation. There's an implied contract of care. In the case of one particular conversation Erin describes herself as becoming invested, and that

... from what I got from him it was a bit Right Place / Right Time. I felt that he really needed that, that he needed to offload to someone. He was partly curious about what it was, but more he wasn't that bothered about the experiment side of it, the project or the performance. He sort of knew that was there. But he threw himself into it anyway. Felt like he wanted someone to talk to (Participant Interview, Erin, 2015)

Given the brevity of the interactions, which in transcript rarely amount to more than a few pages, the degree to which the performers invest into the conversation seems very high, and they report that they feel their participants are as engaged as they are. The longer duration of this project seems to help with conversations coming to a more gentle, natural end rather than being cut off abruptly. Performers reported they enjoyed taking part, that they often felt a connection with the other party, and that they valued that connection even given its temporary nature. They also made it clear they were performing as themselves, rather than taking on a character or role.

Participant take-up was in smaller numbers than earlier versions of the project, with 19 participants and 479 text messages exchanged. In terms of duration: four conversations took place over more than three hours, with one taking 7hrs (125 messages) and another 11hrs (86) from start to finish.

Whilst it is not possible to be specific as to why there was a smaller uptake in engagement, the following reflections are offered up for consideration within the context of the differences in performance design:

- The business card provocations were spread out over a far larger area than in previous iterations of the project, rather than in a single building
- The provocations were not contextualised as part of an on-going entertainment, which might operate as an additional hurdle given that festival goers are actively seeking things to do and see
- The provocations could easily be disposed of as litter or become hidden by other things (for example, some were placed in locations that were used to distribute marketing materials, which suggested a significant turnover of content)<sup>85</sup>.

### **Small Talk (Forensic)**

The fourth and final experimental performance of *Small Talk* was performed as part of *Derelict Sites*, a week-long festival of public performance based in Preston and organised under the auspices of UCLAN. *Small Talk* was to be performed alongside multiple other performance events in a number of publicly accessible locations. In this version of the project a key difference was the provocation, which in this case took the form of an installation in one of the *Forensic* houses<sup>86</sup>.

Applying learning from the previous 24 hour experiment, performers were encouraged to only access their own text conversations (this was based entirely on trust, the system had no technological barriers available to stop users

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<sup>85</sup> When leaving provocations unobserved unexpected interventions are always a possibility. At an experiment conducted at the Barbican, after a couple of hours without any responses to the provocation cards, we investigated to discover that the fastidious cleaning staff had cleared away all trace of our experiment only minutes after we had left the scene.

<sup>86</sup> Forensic was a micro-festival component of the established performance festival *Derelict Sites* (2015), which involved a series of short, durational or one-to-one performances contained within three *Forensic* Houses. The normal use function of these houses is as test environments used by the university's forensic medicine students.

reading all of the text messages exchanged). Similarly, there were no handovers of conversation from one performer to another.

### Process and Analysis

In the three forensic houses there were only a limited number of choices of room type, and each had their own very distinctive character (for example, one was set up as a small village post office, another as a front room, another as a pub). The room *Small Talk* was installed into was configured as a simulation of a burned out bedroom, and as a result was particularly distinctive. Additional dressing was applied to the room in order to blur any direct inference of meaning. In other words, scenic design was applied to off-set the burned-out nature of the room itself by juxtaposing items such as a undamaged bedside table, and a working lamp.

Different provocations, or opportunities to engage with the texting element of the project were presented to the installation attendee.



Figure 17 Set dressing in *Small Talk Forensic*

Under the lamp, atop a small table were 100 business similar to those used in *Small Talk 24*. Two light boards with different text provocations were erected in the room, the text on both boards contained the same 'offer' as on the business cards: TEXT 07474 360606 FOR SMALL TALK.

A 6'45" minute audio score was made for the room, and was played back on a loop using an MP3 player and a powered speaker. This audio component of the



installation consisted of an ambient soundtrack of soothing electronic sounds, and a voice-over track composed of recordings of text messages from previous shows. Participant, journalist, and critic Maddy Costa describes the room:

I think it was set up really beautifully - the texts in the room were really thought-provoking, so much so that I photographed one of them to keep ... because of the juxtaposition between them and the squalor of the work that shared that little room, it meant that I sent my first text in a mood of mild apprehension: would the person at the other end actually be friendly, or would they be a bit of a creep?  
(Participant Response, Maddy Costa, 2015)

The installation room was open to the public from midday, whilst performers operated their laptops from a room in a nearby University block.

### **Process and Analysis**

I think it's challenging, 'cause everyone's individual. you have to change how you're texting a little bit, to suit the conversation. Which you're learning as you go. Quite difficult at first ... you're gauging what kind of conversation someone wants. I got someone who wanted a proper conversation. I also think I influenced that too, I was asking a lot of questions then she was answering and asking me questions and it made the texts longer and longer ... a flippant silly question warrants a flippant response. (Participant Interview, Lucy, 2015)

Thirteen participants took part in the project, with a total of 446 texts exchanged. Lucy talks to me about her investment in the temporary relationship forged: 'Because there's no agenda other than the conversation, it makes me feel like it should be a worthwhile conversation' (Lucy, 2015). Like others she explained that she didn't want to be misunderstood, but was aware that the medium makes that all too easy. She's very conscious of the information and emotion that operates in the background when exchanging day-to-day messages with friends and family.

Costa writes about the freedom that she felt engaging with an anonymous stranger

... how much does this person think I'm revealing? how much are they revealing? I really enjoyed building up a mental picture of the person I was chatting to - gender, physique, ethnicity, all probably quite wrong -

and also not giving or receiving any of that kind of information: there's something really freeing about being able to talk to someone free from the baggage of appearance. (Participant response, Costa, 2015)

The conversational style of *Small Talk* generally appears to be reactive and reflective, and that there is a liveness and presence in the interaction.

Performers try to make the experience rich and full, both for themselves and for the participant, in short, to discover value in holding the conversation.

... it was really reliant on generosity, giving of yourself: at one point I bumped into [another participant] who said he wasn't enjoying it much, and I looked at his conversation stream and there was something weirdly confrontational about it, like [they were] holding back and/or expecting something to happen, expecting to be given something. I think it's a piece in which you got back whatever you gave. which really worked for me because I was happy to give (ibid)

There is the opportunity for disagreement, yet in practice this was rare. This may be in part due to the audience and how they are gathered, or a feeling that inevitably and fundamentally the participants, whether performer or festival goer, simply want to be liked. In discussion with the performers group, it feels that at its heart the piece might function as a kind of two-way mirror, with every exchange perhaps safer and more rewarding as a co-operative gesture rather than by instigating something divisive.

In her final comments on her experience Costa, writes in email:

... the abruptness suddenly revealed the art, or the artifice, or the fakeness of the conversation: like the happy time i'd been having was somehow delusionary. (Costa, 2015)

This serves to illustrate how the “ending” of a remote performance may require a different approach to that of a face-to-face engagement, as the medium can make it difficult to show appreciation or to say goodbye.

### 3.4.3 Étude: Cave Project

A new dichotomy has emerged between live performance constituted by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators and the autopoietic feedback loop and mediatized performance which sever the co-existence of production and reception. Mediatized performance invalidates the feedback loop

(Fischer-Lichte, 2008:68)

The CAVE project was directly inspired by the palpable human connections I had witness develop between dancers in different physical locations, collaborating creatively through the use of video conference technology. In particular, a description by one group that their experience was precisely as if they were sharing the same room.

During this research period I had the opportunity to collaborate with scholars, based in Falmouth University, who were working with a variety of telepresence technologies. Here, the CAVE project was developed in collaboration with dancer and choreographer, Tiia Venerata. Working initially for a week in Falmouth in December 2014, and then for two days in March of the following year we were able to create a telepresence link between Contact Theatre in Manchester and the performance studios on the Penryn campus of Falmouth University.

The experience of dancers recounting their strong feelings of completely sharing a space through telematic means, a dance aesthetic shaped the initial CAVE project. As a starting point, Venerata and I spent some time in a dance studio to try and develop a rapport with each other, Tiia, the dancer, demonstrating basic dance techniques to me, the untrained. She would explain concepts such as the *Kinesphere*, which she described as the space around our bodies that is within our reach. Experiments in contact improvisation followed, which turned my mind to ideas of touch and how telematics extinguishes the possibility of a physical touch. I discover in myself a kind of embarrassment of

touch, something that operates in between the assured touch of the performer engaging in their practice, and the interloper wondering what is proper in a new and tactile environment.

I am reminded that in the creation of video games there is often a need to compute cause and effect in the interrelation between computer generated objects. Characters and objects bump into each other, which generally has some kind of purpose within the environment of the game. The process of working out if objects touch each other is known as collision detection. When the collision detection fails, or is switched off, the player may be able to escape the rules of engagement completely, to dodge bullets or wander backstage. Using teleconference systems to link different rooms exposes how easy it is to recognise a simulation of reality in the reproduction on the screen and in the speakers, but also how easy this simulation is disrupted. Walking off camera or away from the microphone serves to remove the sense of sight or sound, which in turn removes some or all of our perception of the Other's presence. After Auslander, this may be considered to be a perceptual fragmentation which challenges our belief in the presence of the Other, and the nature of the co-existence becomes dislocated. Collision detection fails, and gravity is suspended.

### **Experiment #1: Penryn**

The process of making began with dance. On reflection, I believe this to be partly due to my own experience of the technology being used by dancers to share a hybrid performance space, but also because my collaborator had already been involved in some telepresence experiments carried out at Falmouth (structured around an inquiry into online pedagogy). In a sense, we both started from ideas we'd already had some experience exploring. In our first experiments with each other we tried to find specific ways to interact during the experience, to construct some performance scaffolding within the design of the encounter. It was argued that if there was going to be dancing, then there should be music, and this suggestion becomes one of the participant

being invited to pick their own music. As we begin to prototype the idea, issues arose quickly around its form. For one to dance for another invites a peculiar spectators gaze, magnified through the screen and problematized by near-to-hand cultural contexts such as performing webcam girls. Even when this loosely structured encounter was restaged in a single studio room, removing the technology entirely, it very quickly exposed an underlying instability: that an implicit power relationship between the participants becomes the dominant component of the experience. Thinking about the particular conflation of contexts in this prototype, led us to refine the theatrical design of the encounter: in particular, with an intention of developing a more collaborative offer to participants.

This starting point, that of an appreciation of the fluency demonstrated by the dancers collaborating using telematic technology, leans on the dancers embodied knowledge and training albeit translated into a novel environment. This result would be found to be reinforced in the second CAVE experiment, when participants acknowledge that their shared experience of dancer training influenced their interactions with each other through the technology.

In discussion between myself and Venerata, after the first two experiments had been conducted, thoughts around the demonstration of skills and shared experience begin to develop. She refers me to curator Simon Dove, who considers the ways in which categories such as community arts and social practice change as artists begin to engage with individuals and groups in what he characterises as a more organic, and less hierarchical manner. Dove describes the participatory performance in Rosemary Lee's *Square Dances* (2011)

This social practice is thus not a distracting “show” of skills, but rather a deeply engaging celebration of what it is to be human. The future of performance lies not in the “stars,” showing us their impressive skill sets, but rather in ordinary people beautifully sharing their lives. This challenges many of our extant notions of who the artist is, who the audience is, and who the producer is—as well as where art is made, where art is presented, what we mean by art, and ultimately, what art can mean to us all (Dove, 2014:online)

Reflecting on Dove's reframing of artistic roles and the idea of the 'sharing of life' as a core component to social practice, and also to wider configurations of cultural making, calls to mind Rimini Protokoll's casting of their participants as 'experts of the everyday'. In particular, a burgeoning notion of centring the participant's lived experience, and the sharing of that experience with another, within the telematic encounter. If the telematic encounter at the core of the CAVE project is to engender feelings of intimacy between its participants, then particular qualities of the staging and offer should reflect this. The experimental parameters become shifted towards an exploration of scenarios which anticipated or accentuated human connection. Implicit in the understanding gleaned from these initial prototypes was that cleaving to enacting dance over distance whilst in the company of dancers was low hanging fruit. The direction of the research inquiry demands an encounter in which its participants can simply *be*, rather than to enforce negotiation of a skills hierarchy already out of balance.

In a paper concerning virtual embodiment (and in particular Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming*)<sup>87</sup> Sita Popat opposes the idea that a *visual narrative* is of import when inhabiting a hybrid space – she quotes new media philosopher Mark Hansen's assertion that 'motor activity – not representationalist verisimilitude – holds the key to fluid and functional crossings between virtual and physical realms' (Hansen, 2006:2). She goes on to emphasise elements of agency and intention (largely within a cognitive frame) as vital to embodiment. In the example of Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming*, embodiment of the individual occurs as an instantaneously realised image of themselves on a screen, movement is purposeful and reactive; 'agency is established because it (also) echoes his motor activity' (Popat & Preece, 2012:164). This framing of cause and effect, in this case enacted through digital mirroring, as central to the individuals' perception of their own embodiment in the digital world chimes with Auslander's understanding of the role of belief.

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<sup>87</sup> From Susan Broadhurst and Jo Machon's collection *'Identity, Performance and Technology'* (Broadhurst & Machon, 2012)

However, rather than exploring the visual doubling of an on-screen avatar and the perceptual embodiment in a shared digital environment, the practice documented here concerns itself with a one-to-one interaction with a representational *Other*. In this case the hybrid space is constructed in part by the artefacts of the material room in which the participant stands, and in part by the digital representation of another material space, one which has been captured, processed, transmitted and is realised in real-time. Yet the technology is not science fiction, it is the familiar hybrid spaces created by Skype and its cousins, but this time its window is expanded to fit the size of a wall, and thus render the far end in an almost *expected* proportion. What is interesting here is how the virtual/physical hybrid space is parsed and if, as a result, we find ourselves operating differently. The *motor activity* that performs action in this hybrid space is that of speech and gesture, rather than a cognitive illusion of remote action.

The design of the encounter attempts to ground the situation in an already understood reality. It places the participants in a context which does not hide the enabling technology but nor does it take steps to emphasise its use. The prototypes are constructed to experiment in ways for the participants to get to know each other. Through prompts to employ small talk, exchange of stories, through questions and their answers.

During this part of the development process I reflected a great deal on the work of companies, such as Quarantine, whose practice exposes the trivial, the banal, the epic, and the deeply human behaviours that make us recognisably human. Quarantine describe their work as 'about the here and now. In its form, content and process of creation, it examines the world around us' (Quarantine, 2015:online). I find myself drawn to performance practice that either places the non-performer on stage, or that disrupts the performer's role by challenging the mask of performance skills – allowing a performer to be an individual in a space, exposed, but not necessarily comforted by their (known) skill-set. Applying this process to the practice, and through the desire to subdue the *spectacle* of

technology, it becomes important to seek an everyday quality of encounter through a technology that is rapidly becoming everyday.



Figure 18 One of the CAVE configurations in Penryn.  
Photo credit: Jason Crouch

Over the course of the week a number of different technological configurations were experimented with, such as different software combinations: including *Google Hangouts* and *SourceAudio*. The studios themselves are configured with multiple screens, projectors, cameras and cables. They give the impression of a busy and messy technological space, much like the stage of a rock'n'roll gig. The visibility of the cables, computers and other infrastructure also adds an earthy realism to the experience, in that the technology is exposed and functional. Once configured, the audio visual link is left active for extended periods of time and the simulation appears to slip into the perceptual background. This is especially noticeable once the projection surface is sufficiently large and the representation of the other proportionate. However, even as the video projection appeared to become a decent simulacra of the distant space, constraints in audio configuration required the use of cardioid microphones to enable collaborators to talk with each other. Which additionally necessitated the use of close microphone techniques to avoid feedback and echo.

During the CAVE development week in Penryn a number of themes emerged:



- Positioning of the camera with respect to the screen is key to creating the illusion necessary for interaction to feel natural. Placing the camera in front of the screen pointing away from it resulted in a pseudo eye contact that amplifies engagement<sup>88</sup>.
- When the base of the image is on the floor and the screen size sufficiently large, the hybrid environment created takes on an immersive quality. The room takes on a new perceptual architecture which includes the projected distant scene.
- Participants are completely aware that the image is representational, but experience interactions with each other as real. Describing their actions and reactions as no different to those they would have expected in an unmediated environment.
- Technical issues such as line drops, microphone echo or lag break the illusion almost immediately. Presence is replaced almost instantaneously with absence, with a heartbeat of anxiety in between.

One of the most genuine and heartfelt connections between us as participants in the space of telematic encounter, occurred towards the end of one of the experimental sessions. Both of us were tired, from exertion and the lateness of the hour. We'd been experimenting with different takes on how dance could be shared, in order to develop methods of making an offer of participation to each other, and had taken a moment to sit down and draw breath. In an almost off-hand way, with our attention away from the technology and any particular strategy, we found ourselves laughing and joking: and for a moment it was as though the technical gear wasn't even there.

## **Experiment #2: Manchester:Penryn**

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<sup>88</sup> This learning is more or less a confirmation of observations I've made over the course of many years of using telematic systems in performance. No matter where the camera is positioned, people always talk to the image. It's habitual and if the camera isn't placed in-line with the image of the remote actor it requires huge concentration to look at the camera and not the image.

The equipment and configuration that had worked most effectively during the experimental work in Penryn was carried forward to this next experiment, held between Contact Theatre's Space 2 in Manchester and the Performance Centre studio in Penryn. The two systems were connected to each other via the high speed academic network supplied by JANET/JISC.



Figure 19 Participants in Manchester and Penryn in the CAVE

In these encounters, the participants were given a number of different props and instructional activities with which they could choose to engage. These new elements were intended to provide the participants with a number of potential prompts, or conversation pieces, which might act as jumping off points from which the encounter could take an unexpected turn. Music might provide a soundtrack, or suggest a sharing of experience, the exchange of questions and answers might offer an opportunity for define to what degree participants wish to exchange personal information. In the Manchester CAVE experiments these included:

- A laptop set up to play music. This was located in Manchester, and configured such that any music played in Manchester would pass through the video conference system to also be heard in Penryn.
- A list of questions, largely sourced from playful performance games, which participants could use as stimulus for conversation.

- A variety of snacks and drinks. In order to set up the experience of sharing food in the telepresent environment.

Participants were encouraged to experiment, and whilst potential structures of encounter were sketched out to them in advance of each experiment, the participants tended to discover their own ways to interact with each other. In interviews conducted after each encounter participants described moments that stood out to them:

It's actually the music that in a way creates the common ground, not primarily the dancing.

She was breathing into the microphone, so that was all around me. It was really relaxing, I didn't want to open my eyes afterwards. It made us feel really close even though we were really far apart.

I like the approach of not really giving much. It felt like she didn't know as much as I didn't know, which was nice. I felt like that tone wanted to be kept. That, that failure be kept. With just a through-line of a few questions that come out and get you talking ... because it made *me* want to ask questions.

(Participant Interviews, CAVE Project, 2015)

Due in part to the experimental nature of the computer setup, the connection between Manchester and Penryn did suffer a number of interference problems and disconnections, and as a result participants were frequently interrupted in their encounters. These glitches in the technology were found to immediately collapse the participants' perception of the presence of each other, especially in case where the connection failed completely.

If the glitch was a *stutter*, that is to say a series of short-duration interruptions of the streaming video and/or audio, the hybrid nature of the space was foregrounded and perception of the remote participant became subject to an involuntary moment-to-moment recalibration, which was expressed as a kind of a digitised anxiety.

Participants of the CAVE projects described a strong feeling of the presence of their remote partner, albeit a fragile one which could be undermined by technological issues at any time. Participants' emphasised the feeling of

connection to each other that was engendered through collaborative activities, such as troubleshooting equipment or choosing music. One participant found a particular connection to her partner by focussing on a single strand of the mediated experience, that of the sound of her partner's breathing.

### 3.5 Final Compositions

The *Etudes* described in the earlier section were engineered as part of the prototyping process described in the methodology. The results of the experimental practice described so far is to be found in the design of two mediated spaces of encounter, and in the participant's experience through them. These final pieces of practice represent a distillation of the theatrical and technological design parameters into their simplest form, one where the concept may be quickly grasped and participation found to be second nature.

In '*Towards a Poor Theatre*' Grotowski ponders his own process. In particular, that the *doing* of theatre is his methodological breakthrough, writing that he '... realised that the production led to awareness rather than being the product of awareness' (Grotowski, 1968, reprinted 2002:18). To pursue his goals Grotowski stripped away what he discovered to be unnecessary, whilst at the same time experimenting with a reconfiguration of all manner of theatrical norms.

Rejecting stage lighting effects can reveal new possibilities for the actor's use of stationary light sources, whilst for each production a new performer-audience relationship might be considered, committing the audience to a renewed passivity or including them within the action either as active spect-actors (after Boal) or obstacles to be worked through (ibid:19-20).

What is key is the connection between actor and spectator, or performer and participant. Schechner, writing in his paper '6 Axioms for Environmental Theater', highlights this paragraph:

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion (Grotowski quoted in Schechner, 1968:63)

Schechner is here quoting Grotowski in order to compare his attitude to the technologies of theatre making with John Cage's 'high regard for technology' (ibid). The balance of the Grotowski quote above dismisses a theatre reliant on

a synthesis of disparate creative disciplines<sup>89</sup>, in contrast to Cage's eclectic vision which might employ 'colored television, or multiple movie projectors, photo-electric devices that will set off relays when an actor moves through a certain area'<sup>90</sup> (ibid:61-62). However, a theatre which requires technology, a mediated theatre, can still be pared down to utilise only the technology that it requires to function within the frame of such a 'direct, "live" communion' (ibid). Any conception of the technological spectacular is eschewed in favour of the construction of a technological bridge through which to channel this communion, it is this paring down to the essentials which might style this mode of theatre poor.

In his paper 'Towards a Poor Techno-Theatre', Aravind Adyanthaya considers technology's role in shifting the nature of the performer's embodiment whilst maintaining the principles of Grotowski's poor theatre. He suggests an embodiment which might include what he describes as a 'non-conceptual' body, insisting that the 'limits of the organic are each day closer to its couplings with the inorganic' (Adyanthaya, 2013:81). Drawing on Suzan Kozel's accounts of her telematic performance practice<sup>91</sup>, he describes her phenomenological framing as a way of engaging with a technological intertwining of human and machine. He suggests 'Grotowski's motto of theatre as an encounter is reformulated as a communion' (ibid), appearing to claim that the nature of the engagement between actor and witness in his *techno-theatre* is not limited to an in-the-flesh actor / audience encounter but may be reified through

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<sup>89</sup> The paragraph that follows derides what Grotowski refers to as the Rich Theatre, an 'artistic kleptomania' of an increasingly over-the-top series of proposed borrowings from other artistic genres. He concludes '(t)his is all nonsense' (Grotowski, 1968, reprinted 2002:19).

<sup>90</sup> Cage is very forward looking here, devices such as the movement sensing Xbox Kinect are increasingly being used to activate choreographic displays of moving graphics which react to a performer's movements. The entry cost for these kinds of sensors has dropped as they move into the consumer space (Kinect is first and foremost a component of a gaming platform, which suggests a particular consumer price point). Decreasing costs of components and a rising interest in microelectronics in general might suggest an increase in such work, yet this kind of animated digital liveness is even now off the beaten path and considered worthy of mention when it arises. Examples of such work would include *Glow* (Chunky\_Move, 2008), *Inked* (Aakash\_Odedra\_Company, 2015) and Darren Pritchard's *The Body of Light* (2016).

<sup>91</sup> Extensively documented in *Closer: Performance, technologies, phenomenology* (Kozel, 2007), and referred to in appendix A1.1.3 of this thesis.

technology. He argues that poor technology is increasingly within the grasp even of the poorest, and advocates a 'poor technology in performance' (ibid). Suggesting that a use of everyday technology within his practice lies close to the spirit of Grotowski and Boal:

use what is more readily available, what you have with you, so that its poverty and closeness serves to examine the struggles and complexity of your life. (ibid)

It is certainly the case that many of us have technology readily available. There are around 3.9 billion smartphone subscriptions currently active in the world (Ericsson, 2017:3-4), which means a significant proportion of the rich and poor have access to the affordances of a data connected Internet device. Activities from SMS messaging to video chat may well be described as part of the struggles and complexity of many of our lives. The creation of a *techno-theatre*, or a *mediated theatre*, using the technologies of the everyday, not only embraces these struggles and complexities it is experienced and made possible through their application.

In the final iterations of the practice, the SMS project *Small Talk* was re-worked into a solo piece with no pre-set duration and a minimal initial provocation, whilst the CAVE project was re-designed to incorporate some dramaturgical scaffolding, provided by an audio soundtrack. This new work, *Conversation Piece*, offers its participants a number of provocations or opportunities to take advantage of, ignore or reconfigure to their own ends.

These pieces are documented and briefly theorised here, and unpicked in more detail in the subsequent chapter.

### 3.5.1 Small Talk

Lead by the results of earlier iterations, the changes in design of this SMS performance were intended to carve away structures that arose not from the desire to fully explore the intimate nature of the dialogue exchanged, but instead from logistical or presentation limits that were imposed by external factors (such as the duration of a festival). This intention is motivated by an understanding, experienced through the lens of the previous experiments, that to create an environment which cultivates intimate exchanges then the constraints imposed should perhaps simply be the constraints of the medium itself.

The result was a conscious re-evaluation of how the SMS project was engaged with by both participants. Part of the context for this redesign was a reflection on the performance arts practice of artists such as Burden and Abramović. Particularly, in terms of how they exposed themselves, and the concepts they examined, to their audience and to the world. In each of his year-long performance works, Vietnamese American artist Tehching Hsieh took a relatively simple core concept. Yet through the extended application of that idea over time, the process challenge and changed the idea, the artist and the people around him. In the re-design of *Small Talk* artificial time limits were removed, with the intention that, through this liberation of duration, new characteristics would be exposed.



In the following table, key changes to the design of the project are listed.

Issue	Action
The <i>duration</i> of each of the previous experiments was generally arbitrary, set to conform to a festival schedule or for the convenience of the performers.	Any notion of a pre-conceived time frame was removed. The conversation was allowed to last as long as it might last.
The <i>provocation</i> was aligned to the schedule above, in the sense that it was only available during the time frame allotted.	In the provocation for the participant, indications of when the project might begin or end were removed.
The use of a laptop to compose texts invokes a different technological intentionality. In particular it was found to encourage a performer / participant dynamic (the call centre feeling), which might create a power differential.	Instead of using the laptop to write messages, the mobile phone was used.
Should a group of performer/participants operate the system a consistent, authentic voice might be lost or compromised	A single participant operates the phone for the entire period of the conversation.

This process of simplifying the design removes unwarranted influences exposed by the previous experiments, and liberates the person-to-person interaction from accidental artifice imposed by the design structures themselves.

The provocation for this iteration of *Small Talk* took the form of two back-lit posters similar to those used in the prototype *Small Talk: Forensic*. Individual participants discovered the SMS number through their engagement with what to all intents and purposes was a framed work of art. The two frames were displayed in the public space on two floors of Contact Theatre in Manchester, a theatre which boasts an unusually diverse demographic (but a theatre none the less).

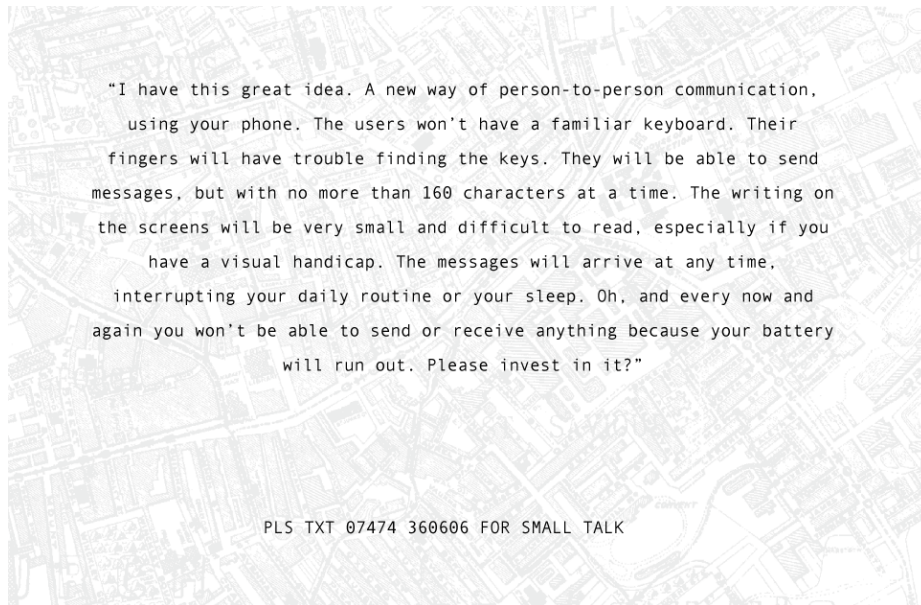


Figure 20 Extract from *Small Talk* poster

Once the invitation is accepted by the participant, conversation began and, through a kind of equality of the unknown, the space of conversation became an equal playing field.

### **Analysis**

*Small Talk* is an investigation of human connectivity through the means of SMS. A mode of messaging which can be categorised as a *lean communication medium*. Baym describes key characteristics:

In lean media, people have more ability to expand, manipulate, multiply, and distort the identities they present to others. The paucity of personal and social identity cues can also make people feel safer, and thus create an environment in which they are more honest. (Baym, 2012:9)

Brenda Danet, professor of sociolinguistics with particular interests in culture and technology, analyses digital writing as doubly-attenuated: firstly it has playful, oral characteristics yet lacking the physical and social cues associated with co-present speech; secondly that whilst it is certainly a form of writing, it lacks physical substance or permanence (Danet, 1997:5). Writing at a time before the development of widely distributed social media sites, she speculates that certain social rituals may inevitably transform into virtual versions of themselves, over time – either by way of a digital simulation of the aesthetic

experience or through real-world activity orchestrated and partially experienced through the network. Sarah Zurhellen begins her analysis of the oral texture of SMS with the following quote from John Miles Foley's Pathways Project<sup>92</sup>

Even so-called text-messaging, a misnomer of sizeable proportions given that the activity really amounts to a long-distance emergent communication enacted virtually, knits people together into interactive groups and keeps them connected and "present" to one another (Foley, 2015:online; Zurhellen, 2011:637)

Mobile technologies not only shift the mechanisms we have to interact with each other but also the wider results of those interactions. As sociologist Rich Ling remarks:

The mobile phone seemingly encourages people to have the most remarkable conversations in public places. It provides us with a way to forget the boredom of a bus ride or a wait in a doctor's waiting room and instead interact with our best friend who is miles away (Ling, 2008:93)

Ling further observes that due to the swift adoption of communications technologies we 'have been forced to adjust our ideas of propriety in what might be called a slapdash way' (ibid), observing that this disruptive change in established behaviours has only been in play since the mid 1990s. To illustrate, he cites an inquiry on an etiquette themed website forum "If someone is using a cell phone in the bathroom stall next to me, is it rude to flush?" Analysing the subsequent website discussion through the lens of ritual interaction, Ling identifies expressions of indignation from the discussion's participants. First and foremost that taking the call is in effect 'bringing the broader world into what is often seen as a sacrosanct place', and because of this breaches perceived codes of behaviour in a category of place where such codes or rules are most adhered<sup>93</sup>. Secondly, that in the situation described (that of the proposed flush) the audience for this sound, in this most private of public places, is not only the

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<sup>92</sup> The fundamental drive of the Pathways Project is to investigate and explain the correlations and correspondences between (as they style it) 'humankind's oldest and newest thought-technologies: oral tradition and the Internet' (Foley, 2015:online).

<sup>93</sup> He argues that in the public toilet we undergo 'fundamental adjustments in our façade' and in order to function without fault require clear and 'deeply entrenched set of conventions upon which we can rely' (ibid).

co-present occupant of the next stall, but by extension their telephonic confederate.

The world becomes a more permeable place. This is revealed in our everyday interactions when using our mobile devices, specifically that we often have, to varying degrees, *two publics*. Those who are local to, or co-present with us, and those who are at the other end of the call or text. Ling suggests that we may observe this in Goffmanian terms as requiring the complex management of a “double front stage”. In short, we need to figure out which of the competing calls to our attention are more or less important at any given moment. Which might be the dominant, and which the secondary of the activities that in the moment demand our involvement<sup>94</sup>.

Whilst the asynchronous and lightweight requirements of the text message might at first be considered only as a secondary involvement, Ling notes both (a) that skilful use of texting can be a kind of ‘parallel interaction that does not need to be attended to in the same way as a verbal interaction’ and also (b) that texting can be ‘as demanding of attention as a verbal co-present interaction’ (ibid:101). That, in terms of ritual interaction, the level of mutual engagement between texting interlocutors can clearly equal or exceed that of those who are co-present, i.e. it is quite possible for the mediated interaction to trump the face-to-face.

The management of the affordances and interactions made possible by the mobile device are one strand of the complex (but now commonplace) day-to-day management of the flickering flashlight of our attention. This is a curation of self as part of the everyday, and requires split-second shifts of awareness from one action (or potential action) to another, from one communication or information source to another. Indeed, texting is oftentimes characterised as a hybrid form in of itself. A linguistic chimera, the characteristics of which

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<sup>94</sup> Here Ling is using terminology and theory from Goffman’s *Behaviour in Public Places* (Goffman, 1963:43-45)

oscillate between spoken and written forms of language and have, as we have seen, been claimed to present as a new form altogether.

In *Small Talk* time is found to be shifted. One of the participants described this effect as 'slowing down time' (Participant Interview, Ethan, 2015). We write about experiences from the past, and thoughts of the future, whilst the conversation is often conducted in the present tense. Prose morphs into poetry, banality (and sometimes Emoji). Participant Helen, describes it as:

[m]aybe even a bit addictive. I talked about it a lot with a lot of friends, and I kept questioning the point of keeping texting you back, but then I was really interested to see where it was going to go. I didn't want it to stop. (Participant Interview, Helen, 2015)

The piece documents itself, in that it is the script of the participant's interaction with each other, their dialogue. The words are the artwork and the performance is instantaneously both score and trace. At the particular moment in time when the next line of dialogue arrives it becomes both a cue for action but is also placed into (becomes implicitly a part of) a queue of lifeworld considerations (many of which might exist on the same device). Each message constitutes a snippet of information, a call to response and a fleshing out of detail. Each message is present as an event in perceived real time. Fischer-Lichte writes that for a long time the work of art was expressed as a thing, as

... a sculpture, monument, or score, the artifact is accessible to different recipients at different times. In the case of texts and music scores, its availability extends to different spaces. (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:162)

For the play we have a script, a text which operates as both an evolutionary starting point and as a final trace. For *Small Talk* the text is both performance *and* trace. The mobile handset signals a new event through light, sound and vibration, a prelude, an inward breath. In the very moment I *read* the text message I perceive it as an utterance, with all the immediacy and presence of a phrase spoken out loud. From the moment of reading an incoming text to the end of my written reply it feels like I've just managed to pause the world.

In the quote above Fischer-Lichte is describing the idea of the art work as an artefact, the once pervasive notion of art as a *thing* which is created by an artist and shown to a public. Here, she is placing her conception of performance, as *event*, within the context of an aesthetics where the work of art operates as a object, as a container of (some) truth. She describes a collective reconfiguring of theatre and performance from the 1960s onwards as a rejection of commodification, writing that

[t]hey replaced the artifact with fleeting, unique, and unrepeatable processes and relativized, if not abolished entirely, the fundamental division of producers and recipients. (ibid)

In this context the artwork is no longer present as an artefact to be bought and sold, instead '[t]he ephemerality of the event, its uniqueness, and singularity became a focal point' (ibid). In the process of *Small Talk* this ephemeral state is experienced in the moment of reading and replying, during that first connection and in the other participant's subsequent reaction. Re-reading the traces, the conversational context, does not re-awaken the feeling experienced in conversation, but rather emphasizes the immobility of the once-written text: a butterfly skewered on a pin.

Each text, each tiny interaction, each message from a stranger felt a little like a gift: something sent out into the world with good will and optimism. One of the participants of *Small Talk* suggested a face-to-face meeting after we had been talking for several weeks by text. This was followed by a Skype interview, in which she described how she experienced an emotional connection through participating, describing her engagement with the project so:

That feeling is, for me, only similar to when you start dating someone. Not sure where it's going. Waiting for a text message from them, and excited. That's the only other time I've been as interested in text messages. (Participant Interview, Helen, 2015)

This description of the emotional backdrop to the conversation rang true with my own experience. These SMS conversations seem to exist in a swell of positivity, something akin to a feeling of brotherly or sisterly love. During the project I recall being particularly excited when a new *Small Talk* text arrived,

and, at the point I notice this new arrival, I would find myself already looking forward to reading it and to replying. There is certainly a feeling of escapism, and a kind of freedom because these text messages represent an engagement without real-world consequence.

Over the course of the conversation, whether it lasts a couple of weeks or in one case a little over three months, there is a peculiar sense of gradually getting to know one and other through tiny fragments, traces of things we are allowing each other to know. In a face to face meeting we could have perhaps exchanged just as much information over the time it takes to drink a coffee. In a face-to-face we might have exchanged more raw information before either of us had even opened their mouth to speak. Through SMS, there was something gentle and calming in this slow drift of knowing.

I thought that it was incredibly interesting that you thought I was a boy and that I thought you were a girl. Probably you're just projecting yourself. (ibid)

Understanding develops through the words we read and the replies we write, these influence and shape what we imagine.

Here, then, there is to be found an idea of an implicit value to a conversation experienced in human terms, as compared to the partially monetised value of the social network. It is an acknowledged truism of the communication age that if the users of a system aren't paying for it they are not the customer of that system but its product. Jodi Dean characterises the appropriation of our digital engagements in the world by the forces of capital as *communicative capitalism* which

... seizes, privatizes, and attempts to monetize the social substance. It doesn't depend on the commodity-thing. It directly exploits the social relation at the heart of value. Social relations don't have to take the fantastic form of the commodity to generate value for capitalism. Via networked, personalized communication and information technologies, capitalism has found a more straightforward way to appropriate value. (Dean, 2012: 129)

The *Small Talk* project embraces a method of engaging in text-based conversations that shares a lot of the linguistic and cultural trappings with interactions on social networks, but without its encompassing commoditisation process. Participants need not play to the gallery, nor be concerned by a public presentation of self. As the project has developed, the roles of participant and performer have become blurred and equalised, and the ebb and flow of conversation is generated between interlocutors on an equivalent footing.

During the two years of development, it has become increasingly apparent that the most interesting and important aspects of the *Small Talk* project are the opportunities it offers for the unscripted and the unexpected. Particularly something that approaches the ‘talking cure’ which Zerihan highlights as a factor in her analysis of performance one-to-one. In one conversation, apropos of nothing in particular, I recall we wrote about our experiences of that morning in a lyrical and spontaneous style, in what became an unexpected and emergent call and response. A little afterwards, and in reference to that exchange, my interlocutor writes:

So now i want to see and do all the things i imagine i'll want to have done when we're busy with our own baby goats. Writing that text made me feel really positive about my life. Thank you (Participant text message, *Small Talk*, 2015)

Later, in feedback after the project:

I remember replying and saying ‘thanks very much’ because you’d made me feel quite positive. I remember I was on a bus ... It did make me look at the world differently (Participant Feedback, Helen, 2015)

Within the dialogical engagement there is the offer of a transformative experience through its enactment. Although the relations that occur through this project are fragmentary by their very nature, this serves to highlight the lack of pressure by comparison to the mediated day-to-day.

After a hiatus, which I took to indicate the end of our conversation, I texted a thank-you to one of the participants. They responded with:



It was really interesting to have a conversation with a random person about such stimulating stuff with no idea where it was going.

I particularly enjoyed spotting common social reflexes that I would normally think to employ... Namely that due to normally speaking to gay men, and being gay, there is often the consideration of whether I find them attractive, and a tendency to flirt.

On this occasion as I know not the sex, age, appearance or sexual orientation of the individual in question, the focus became instead the dialogue which was very enriching for me and a nice way for me to reflect on my tendencies and the possibilities if I avoid those automatic approaches. (Participant feedback, *Small Talk*, 2015)

Through dialogue and gentle questioning, the encounter can expose the intentionality we adopt inadvertently through technological mediation, allowing us a better opportunity to understand the way our world is shaped.

Performance trace from *Small Talk* (2015) is included at the end of this thesis.

### 3.5.2 Conversation Piece

In accordance with what you are seeking, choose a country, a more or less populated city, a more or less busy street. Build a house. Furnish it. Use decorations and surroundings to the best advantage. Choose the season and the time of day. Bring together the most suitable people, with appropriate records and drinks. The lighting and the conversations should obviously be suited to the occasion, as should be the weather or your memories.

If there has been no error in your calculations, the result should satisfy you.

(Situationist\_International, 1954)



Figure 21 Conversation Piece, Manchester

*Conversation Piece* was devised during a short collaboration with a New York based colleague Lisa Parra, who herself has extensive experience in making networked performance, mainly using dance and movement<sup>95</sup>. Lisa was

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<sup>95</sup> Parra, as well as being connected to New York's culturehub, is a frequent collaborator with Porto based artist Daniel Pinero who has a particular interest in networked or distance performance. Following our collaboration for this piece, the three of us independently took part in a Facebook conversation with Annie Abrahams (who I had met in 2013 at the Remote Encounters conference in Cardiff) and other academics and practitioners of digital performance. This resulted in the creation of a Facebook group, *Networked Performance*, which invites a membership of practitioners, scholars and anyone with an interest in this kind of work to get involved in peer group discussion. In part, this group came about as a reaction to what we

introduced to me by Jesse Ricke of culturehub<sup>96</sup>. Through an informal partnership between culturehub and Contact, Ricke and I have been regular collaborators on telepresence-based practice since 2011.

*Conversation Piece* grew out of the learning from the *CAVE* project. In particular a desired shift in the emphasis of the event to the framing of a telematic meeting as an everyday activity, albeit one that is mediated between participants who are located in different rooms in different cities. This intention was in part to move away from what Elena Pérez has called the ‘Shock and Awe Aesthetic that seeks to impress audiences only with a technological display while dismissing the aesthetics of the works’ (referencing her own PhD thesis Pérez, 2014:4). In reframing the technology as a scaffolding for the facilitation of a genuine encounter, the intention is to dismiss the conception of technology as spectacle, which is to say to downplay its use as special effects. Instead, to centre it’s aesthetic, cultural or social affect.

*Conversation Piece* is dramaturgically framed as the preparing and sharing of food and conversation. The encounter is guided by a tape recording which offers suggestions to the participants: to share a secret, ask a question, make some tea. The staging is suggestive of a café or dining room, and to continue with this conceit a menu of questions is supplied which can be used by the participants to trigger conversation. The questions used were sourced from a twenty year old psychology research paper that purported to list the ‘36 questions that lead to love’ (Jones, 2015:online), and thus felt like they might provide a strong stimulus for intimate exchange.

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perceived as a lack of suitable spaces for such collaborative activity. Curiously, the many and varied practitioners of networked performance often seem to find themselves operating in silos, unaware of others working in very similar fields. Indeed, this is so characteristic of the work that it becomes something of a running joke – with newcomers posting details of new performances or festivals claiming they are the very first examples of a particular strand of digital or networked performance, much to the amusement of the more seasoned operators.

<sup>96</sup> culturehub is a New York based new-media studio associated with respected experimental theatre La MaMa and has been involved with many of the remote performance events hosted at Contact Theatre. Ricke and I have collaborated on a number of networked events including a performance of his *Graphic Ships* (Ricke, 2014) project at the *Fascinate* conference in Falmouth.

In practice sessions, it had become clear that it was necessary to provide some structure to gently nudge the participants into getting to know each other, and to avoid certain existential anxieties of the “what are we doing here?” kind. The piece was structured around a number of performance beats, conceived as sections of a menu and signified on a **Menu Card** as *Entre*, *Main Course* and *Dessert*. During the main course the participants were invited to ask each other questions from a separate **Questions Card**<sup>97</sup>.

An audio track was constructed, which consisted of a voice recording of a short introductory text, followed at discrete intervals by some short instruction texts. Periodically, during the 23m audio recording, a bell would sound and a computer generated voice would signal that the participants could advance to the next element of the menu. At the end of the piece a music track is played which and the participants are offered the ‘option of dancing’ (as listed on the menu).



Figure 22 The table in Manchester, showing Menu card and Instruction card

Each space was configured in a similar manner, with a table and various foodstuffs (bagels, peanut butter, jam) a kettle with tea and coffee. Food

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<sup>97</sup> Examples of the cards used are shown in Appendix A.3.1 and A.3.2

choices were made with the intension of generating a cultural connection – bagels and jelly for New York, a cup of tea for England<sup>98</sup>. In Manchester<sup>99</sup> a tape recorder was present which was pre-loaded with an audio cassette onto which was recorded the audio track which ‘scored’ the event. When this was played, participants in both rooms could hear the score. A sign on the table in the Manchester room indicated that the encounter would begin when PLAY was pressed on the tape recorder. The tape recorder was chosen to give a physical dimension to the audio track, and also to separate it from the telematic system.

The mise en scène of the encounter was the construction of an everyday activity. The technology used was clearly on display, and nothing is hidden or made opaque. No mystery is suggested by the presence of the technology, and in point of fact the technical function is made plain, much like a light switch or a television.

In technical terms: each room was equipped with a high definition (HD720p) hardware **Codec**<sup>100</sup>. The Codec is a device which is essentially a high speed processing system capable of rapidly compressing and decompressing audio/visual streams and sending them across an Internet Protocol (IP) network, such as the Internet. In operation this is similar to Skype, although generally in more higher definition video and with lower end-to-end latency. The picture-in-picture view which would generally show the local users camera image, and is perhaps characteristic of Skype or other consumer video conferencing systems, was not displayed.

In each room the **camera**, which serves as the sole viewpoint for the remote participant, was placed more or less central to the projection screen to encourage a sense of eye-contact. An ambient Polycom-branded **microphone** was used in both spaces, with an additional SM58 cardioid microphone placed

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<sup>98</sup> Although, the research I’d done to source appropriately American peanut butter and jelly turned out to be somewhat out of date. The brands used in Manchester were found to be reminiscent of foodstuff popular a decade ago! Which made for another time-slip in the experiment.

<sup>99</sup> Contact Theatre’s *Space 3* rehearsal room.

<sup>100</sup> In this case both rooms used a Polycom HDX 9000 series Codec.

next to the table in Manchester as a backup device, in case the primary microphone did not pick up ambient sounds and the sound of speech with enough clarity or detail. Noise cancelling options in the hardware were enabled to reduce echo effects, and to ensure the sound transmission was as clear as possible between the two spaces. The setup was guided by experience and best practice to reproduce the state of one room in the other.



Figure 23 *Conversation Piece* configuration in Manchester, showing New York participant on screen.

The audio output of the hardware codec was recorded using a Zoom H4n audio recorder, and a video camera was used to record a sidelong view of the two participants. The participants were informed of the presence of these recording devices after the event, and in particular that the recordings were intended for personal reference only. Some of the participants agreed that short excerpts could be made available as part of the documented practice for this thesis.

Each experience lasted around 25m, from the moment the door of the space was closed until the moment I re-entered the Manchester room to signal the end of the encounter. The connection was held open for the entire duration of the piece, and at no time did the signal drop. The participants were left on their own, and to their own devices, in their respective rooms in Manchester and New York.

The journey mapped out on the audiotape is detailed as follows:

00:00	Start. BELL SOUND Digitised voice "Entre"
00:05 - 03:15	Voice recording, performance text
03:16	BELL SOUND Digitised voice "Say Hello"
04:15	BELL SOUND Digitised voice "Main Course"
12:20	BELL SOUND Digitised voice "Desert"
17:20	BELL SOUND Digitised voice "Dancing"
17:21 – 22:00	Song (1) Bee Gees "You should be dancing" sampled from the film Saturday Night Fever OR Song (2) Cheek to Cheek from the film Top Hat

The piece was performed four times, with four pairs of participants, on the afternoon of Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> July 2015 following an afternoon of testing the previous Friday. The time slot was between 10am and 2pm EST in New York, which translates as 3pm to 7pm BST in Manchester.

### **Analysis: mixed reality environments and a sense of place**

In order to start thinking about how the phenomenological experience of a mixed reality environment might be conceptualised it is useful to consider current thinking. In her recent book chapter investigating the 'phenomenological qualia' of mixed reality environments Sita Popat examines the physical/virtual artwork *Vermillion Lake* (Gibson & Martelli, 2011). This artwork, presented in a white gallery space, consists of a physical replica of a Trapper's Shack inside of which is found the stern end of a rowing boat, replete with oars and a wooden panel to sit upon. The bow end of the boat is not physically present but is instead represented through a flat, 2D projection screen. Surrounding this image of the boat's prow is a virtual landscape reminiscent of the snow-driven mountains of the Canadian Rockies (Popat, 2015:163-165). The participant may take a seat and engage with the oar, and in so doing the relationship between the physical oars and virtual landscape is exposed. When the participant pulls on the oars – which require with some

considerable effort - the image of the boat on the screen is propelled forward. In this manner the user discovers a direct correlation between the action of moving the oars and the perceived reaction of the virtual landscape moving on the screen.

In her analysis, Popat considers a number of connected notions: Firstly that of the physical site of the installation. Here she considers the definition of site-specific performance as both a *physical* site within which the performance makes sense, and as a more *conceptual* idea of site, viz: a social issue, a political problem, a neighbourhood or a seasonal event. This idea of site morphs, through the potential multiplicity of the digital object, such that the installation (and the users interaction with it) could conceivably take place simultaneously in multiple locations, with multiple participants, each without knowledge of the other. Finally, she turns to the phenomenological experience of the user's engagement with a mixed reality environment, one where a participant interacts with both physical and virtual elements.

Of particular interest here is the concept of a *sense of place* within a mixed reality context. Popat draws from artist and academic Emily Puthoff's consideration that, with the proliferation of new technologies used in the practice of everyday life, 'the notion of "place" has become so multi-faceted it shimmers' (Puthoff, 2006:76). She argues that the excesses of such additional strands of meta-information can override the lived experience, driving a conception of the physical space into that of a *non-place*. She quotes Augé, 'a space that cannot be defined as relational, historical or concerned with identity will be a non-place' (Augé, 1995:77). Popat places this in contrast to Benford and Giannachi's notion that in the digital environment<sup>101</sup> it is the multiple and quite different points of view, simultaneously held, which converge and intertwine to co-create the affordances offered to individuals as they navigate the everyday (Benford & Giannachi, 2011:4). This territory is pursued by the

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<sup>101</sup> They refer to developments such as ubiquitous computing and a more generalised 'proliferation of new technologies' which might engender this notion of a multiplicity of viewpoint.



post-phenomenologists we will encounter in Chapter 4, who argue that the intertwining of human and technology co-shapes our perceptual reality.

In Papacharissi's conclusion to her book, *'A Networked Self'*, she, like Popat, reaches for de Certeau's *'The Practice of Everyday Life'* and, continuing his geographical / linguistic metaphor wherein 'walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc. the trajectories it "speaks"' (de Certeau, 1984:99), she outlines a model of networked sociality formed within online spaces that offer similarly conceptualized possibilities and interdictions which are then left to the individual to actualize or re-appropriate (Papacharissi, 2011:306).

A certain happenstance occurs here. The de Certeau essay to which she refers, 'Walking in the City', begins with a consideration of New York, which de Certeau describes as a city whose spectator 'can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding' (de Certeau, 1984:91). Of course, our telematic visit - and in part the very *nature* of visit is what is under discussion here - does not reveal this dynamic aspect of the perpetually changing Big Apple. Indeed, it does not bring us experientially any closer than an encounter with a New Yorker in a coffee shop in Manchester, or with a distant American cousin at a wedding. Rather than a view from the top of the (now non-existent, except in memory) twin towers, the outlook presented in *Conversation Piece* is that of a window on another placeless interior, one that we are promised is in the named city.

De Certeau asserts that a Place (*lieu*) is the order of things that are in a physical relationship with each other in a particular (unique) location where the elements that construct the place are beside each other. In the moment of an event, a place is an 'instantaneous configuration of possibilities' and implies a degree of stability (the bedrock). A Space (*espace*) exists when 'vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables' are taken into consideration; an active becoming; brought about by the 'ensemble of movements deployed within it' (de Certeau, 1984:117). For *Conversation Piece* the stability and ordering of place is disrupted by the coexistence of the two, mirrored and multi-stable places fused together by technological representation.

'The non-place of cyberspace offers itself up to the traveller with the promise of an endlessly expansive, yet accessible territory to traverse' (Puthoff, 2006:77) claims Puthoff, extending Augé – and by extension Foucault who casts the 'true scandal' of Galileo's work as the revelation of an infinitely open space (Foucault, 1986:23) which then dissolves any certain – or god given – centre. The centre now, ceded by God, becomes the individual. The virtual and physical environment generated by technological and ideological affordances 'places the individual as the centre and source of all interactions' (Papacharissi, 2011:306) activated by the location of an online connection, which for billions of people across the planet is wherever their smartphone can connect to the Internet.

Participant Suzie describes how they related to their distant partner as being in some sense brought to them:

They were brought to me, in that room ... in this massive room. If not that, then somewhere else – definitely not in the real world, we were somewhere we'd gone somewhere. (Participant Interview, Suzie, 2015)

Another participant considered the screen much as they would a glass window between adjacent spaces. Participants described the encounter as a coming together, a feeling that was emphasised once they were left alone in the room, just themselves and their telepresent Other. They described a strong feeling of being *alone together* in a single coherent location, one that is both physically consistent and real.

I didn't feel for a second that I was in New York, but it felt like we just had our two little blocks that are glued together. (Participant Interview, Ethan, 2015)

In navigating a hybrid space of real (material) and representational (virtual), and with a nod to Ihde's caution against following a Cartesian 'five senses' epistemology (Ihde, 2012:375), it is the experiential whole – centred on the individual - that provides illumination. Indeed, the moment-to-moment action of the individual participant is what activates the possibilities of place by imposing an order on the ordering system.

Popat refers to new media philosophers Mark Hensen and Jeff Malpas who have independently proposed that the most important factor in identifying the 'real' in any given situation is the lived experience of the individual, rather than the physical or virtual nature of the environment. This ties in with the Hegelian notion of traversing the illusion – exposing the phantasmic real of the event in question. Continuing in this vein, she refers to the work of Gernot Böhme on intuitive and virtual spaces – where he considers hybrid spaces built by perception of our environment overlaid by patterns of representation (perspective, juxtaposition, cultural gestalt) (Böhme, 2012:462). In this framing, he argues virtual spaces should not be called 'virtual' at all, as it is not the simulation of reality that is important (this is merely the mechanism by which the representative overlay exists), instead the space becomes truly virtual at the point at which the 'representational space becomes entwined with the space of a bodily presence' (Popat, 2015:17). Once again, this nods towards Auslander's notion that it is the observer's *belief* in the actuality of a digital presence which activates their perception of the digital simulacra as present.

Certainly, whilst the participants in *Conversation Piece* thought the technology advanced, they described the experience as sufficiently similar to Skype and Facetime for it to be instantly understood. Their conception of, and operation within, the space was for them an intertwining of the material and virtual into a single gestalt entity.

My personal investment in it meant that I was in this weird technical space that wasn't really the real world but that was a different world, whilst I also knew that there was some kind of time limit and that it was coming to the end, it felt infinite – there was nothing that could break it ... because there was nobody else there at all but me and this guy – it was very personal. (Participant Interview, Suzie, 2015)

Crucial to this co-created space experienced by the participants was an idea of a backstage, or off-camera area. This was where the rules up-ended, where the participants understanding of the shared and mutual space of co-presence switched off: 'The fact that I could have stood up, walked a few steps to the left and there would be nothing there' (Participant Interview, Erin, 2015). The

participants who stepped into the backstage world and out of view of the camera noted an abrupt change in the nature of their experience:

Getting off screen was interesting. It does change things. It broke you out of the moment. I left my knife for the mustard, or peanut butter, on another table. I had to step off camera to go get it. As soon as I stepped off camera I was out of session. My body takes a different posture. You get back on camera suddenly you're back in performance, you're back at the wedding. (Participant Interview, Aaron, 2015)

When Erin's partner left the screen she describes that she

... became really aware of my surroundings and it felt really vast – I could see his empty room there and there was no-one there. I felt my presence in that room as well. Am I projected in there? Is it just me in that room now? (Participant Interview, Erin, 2015)

For the purposes of this practical encounter the physical environment in each place is constructed around a screen surface projected with a real-time and continuous representation of another place. The technology used to create this link between places not only sites them together in juxtaposition, but also creates a kind of second-degree mirror: a mirror without a mirror. Each of the two spaces are duplicates of each other in function and in form, creating a temporary 'relation of proximity' (Foucault, 1986:23), as Foucault defines a site. In our case this is a shared site or a site of shared action fulfilling de Certeau's notion of place.

Much as a theatre stage juxtaposes a series of incompatible sites in a single real place, here the representational site of the screen and the constructed *mise en scène* in each room (each end of a virtual tunnel thousands of miles long but only as deep as the projection screen) creates a place for a mixed, joint experience – bringing a representation of the world and with it the totality of the world.

In order to stage *Conversation Piece*, over the course of the afternoon two geographically distant sites are constructed, connected, exist for a period simultaneously, and are then disconnected, broken down and removed; in some ways analogous to Foucault's notion of the transitory absolutely temporal

'mode of the festival' (ibid:26)<sup>102</sup>. The two sites share representation and time with each other over distance, each as a temporary construction. Shifting of heterochronic time occurs in a number of different ways. There is the displacement lag caused by compression technology and speed-of-light delay, which is of the order of milliseconds of clock time, causing conversational disruptions such as interrupting turn taking and cross talk. There is also a time zone difference, which exposes cultural and banal time-of-day concerns that in this project revealed themselves as a collision between the tiredness of after-work and the perkiness of just-got-up:

Being out of sync with another person and knowing you're engaging with something that's somehow foreign, something removed 'that way'. I could really feel that Matt had spent a whole day at his job and was like really 'I could go for a beer now'. I was not on that wavelength, because of the time zone difference. Being out of sync that way was pronounced.

More like time travel than distance travel.

He's in the future, right? (Participant Interview, Matt, 2015)

The construction of the encounter is also temporary, the bubble of the shared space exists only as long as the technology is switched on and there is the ever-present possibility that the call will drop. In *Conversation Piece* the exposure of the technology and the fact that the teleconference was always in session (we didn't make a call or hang up) contributed to a feeling that the shared space was always-already in play, without any beginning or end any more than in a material space. This is in contrast to earlier experiments in the CAVE where the technology occasionally failed, and participants note that they 'take it for granted until it cuts out, then it's gone' (Participant Interview, Amy, 2015). This may be an inversion of the allegory of Plato's cave: the participants of the conversation are in full awareness that the representations in front of them are shadows, but do not let the form anticipate or reduce their interaction with the humans contained within the shadows.

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<sup>102</sup> Foucault describes the temporary space of the festival as linked to the operation of time in its most 'fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect'. He suggests examples such as the fairground or circus.

One final design consideration that became clear after the 2015 performances of *Conversation Piece* was connected with the mode in which the encounter comes to an end. In feedback similar to that received after *Small Talk (Forensic)*, where a participant suggested that an abrupt ending somehow ‘suddenly revealed the art, or the artifice, or the fakeness of the conversation’ (Participant Feedback, *Small Talk (Forensic)*, 2015), the version of *Conversation Piece* documented here reportedly failed to guide its participants to a satisfactory end. The music track, which was the final element of the audio tape, simply faded out, leaving its audience a little bewildered as to what to do next. My own experience with other telepresence projects suggests that, as Ling has remarked, this rapid development of communications technology has forced us ‘to adjust our ideas of propriety in what might be called a slapdash way’ (Ling, 2008:93) and as a result the negotiation of the end of a mediated conversation, perhaps especially one used in a performance context, is both complex and personal.

In a later presentation of *Conversation Piece* the audio tape was altered to let the participants down a little more gently, with a shortened musical interlude and the addition of some closing remarks on the audio tape.

### 3.6 Coda

In July of 2016, in answer to an email invitation, I attended *No Such Thing* (Quarantine, 2016) a regular event hosted by performance company Quarantine. The description on their website reads:

Once a month, we occupy a couple of tables in Kabana curry cafe, in Manchester's Northern Quarter. The offer is simple: we buy you a curry, in exchange for half an hour of conversation.

For each event, we create a menu of conversation topics that you can choose from. We talk about stuff we're thinking about, things that are on our mind, what's happening in the world. We hope that you will too. There's always a 'Today's special' – something current and topical. Then we have a chat. That's it. So far, we've had over 100 curries with 100 strangers!' (Quarantine, 2015:online)

I arrived early, and make my way to the counter. Kabana was brightly lit and painted mainly in white, its kitchen exposed. I could see food preparation happening, although at that time of day, the very start of the lunchtime shift, what can actually be seen appears to be mainly prep work: containers being opened and workstations set out. I turned to ask Riz, Kabana's proprietor, where the Quarantine event might be, and just in that moment spotted Kate, my Quarantine contact, armed with a clipboard. Riz and I shared a nod and a smile, and I turned to greet Kate who, grinning, informed me that Maureen was ready to start. I remember the atmosphere felt informal and comfortable. The people involved with the arts project intermingled with the other customers of the café and there was really no readily apparent difference. Perhaps that's the point, that the conversation we were about to have was no different to the one happening at the same time at another table.

The name of the event is, of course, a play on 'no such thing as a free lunch', and in providing the not-quite-eponymous free lunch there is a nod to the question of what value might be exchanged here. In making the decision to attend you have already decided to consciously step out of the everyday, into the unexpected. Or perhaps not quite unexpected, the café is still just a café, and a conversation, well that can't be too hard. We do it all the time.

In earlier incarnations of this project, Maureen told me, I might have been sat with either Richard or Renny, Quarantine’s directors. Today, it’s us. We are not strangers, though, having met through previous Quarantine projects. I found myself wondering whether the fact that Maureen and I already know each other changes the offer, destabilising the value proposition?

Our conversation was curated through a menu of questions, although they serve as mere suggestion and scaffolding, and I suspect that if we really wanted to we could have skipped the topics entirely, eating and talking freely.



Figure 24 Menu at Quarantine's *No Such Thing* (2016)

We chose our food from the other menu, the one written on the wall of the café. Curry and rice was swiftly plated and handed over. Returning to our seats we mulled over the menu of conversation. Maureen is a little older than I am, she is gentle, kind, open and honest. As we looked over the menu the artificial nature of the situation felt a little like background noise, in that it was always present but rarely made itself fully known. Social choices shifted from phatic chat of the “how are you?”, “what have you been up to?” variety, to the curated and deliberately ambiguous questions of the Quarantine menu. For



each tricky subject there was always a “Something about ...” option, giving us license to wander around the topic and perhaps navigate into safer waters.

*Conversation Piece*, functions in similar ways, albeit with different social and physical constraints. As one participant of the telematic artwork observes it’s not possible to pass the butter or make someone else a cup of tea, yet as I was sat with Maureen, thinking about the networked conversation of last year, I notice that physically, much like in any similar situation, we pretty much keep ourselves to ourselves. The senses with which we engaged each other are those of sight and sound, described by Cage as our public senses. We hugged at the end, but I wondered if this is because we already knew each other, rather than being brought about through a burgeoning intimacy enacted through the encounter. Where these two pieces converge is, I suspect, in the unexpected. The curated questions in both instances sketch out the possibility of a social negotiation, but at the same time raise performance-of-self concerns, given the slip out of phatic communication and into perhaps more weighty territory.

## 4. Critical Engagement.

... the stable worlds in which we seem to live are quite fragile. In our daily relationships we encounter only partial persons, fragments that we mistakenly presume to be whole personalities (Gergen, 2009:138)

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together two broad themes which emerge from the practice based research. The first is a phenomenological interrogation of an individual's interaction with technology, which we might call a micro perspective, and secondly a wide angle view-point taking in the cultural and social environment in which this use of technology operates, the macro perspective.

## 4.2 A Philosophical Interrogation

The unprecedented rates of development and adoption of new technologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires from us a constant re-evaluation and reflection of their impact. In barely twenty years email, mobile Internet and social media have spread from niche activities to commonplace and everyday, and as a result are changing the way we interact with each other and the world. Such dramatic changes usher in a new connectivity for a vastly more connected world, yet formally strong advocates of the positive social potential of new technological spaces call for a re-evaluation of their purpose. Virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier writes:

One of our essential hopes in the early days of the digital revolution was that a connected world would create more opportunities for personal advancement for everyone. Maybe it will eventually, but there has been more of an inverted effect so far, at least in the United States. During the past decade and a half, since the debut of the web, even during the *best* years of the economic boom times, the middle class in the United States declined. Wealth was ever more concentrated. (Lanier, 2011:56)

Sherry Turkle now argues that we have lost the ability to engage each other face-to-face, describing the age of pervasive media as a fugue state of being 'alone together, mistaking connection for conversation' (Turkle, 2011:52). She suggests that we use our technology not to get closer to each other, but to touch lightly and reassure ourselves of our own existence as reflected in that of others (who are doing the same).

Yet such a 'light touch' use of technology may be symptomatic of inexperience with the toolset, its use and capabilities. Don Ihde notes of Heidegger that he described the hammer when in use as close-to-hand, and therefore experienced as a perceptual extension of the body, yet dismissed the typewritten word as "inauthentic", the action of writing no-longer flowing through the hand like the action of a pen (Ihde, 2012:374). Ihde suggests this a blind spot for Heidegger, who, he claims, discounts the perfection of necessary skills as *part of the process* of tool use: 'In short, he neither became a skilled typist nor did a phenomenology of typing, but instead leaped to a negative evaluation of typing'

(ibid). Through the use of a computer keyboard or the touch screen of a smartphone or tablet, different forms of what might be styled typing are today a commonplace component of everyday life. Although these modes of typing, or digital mark making, represent a dramatic extension of the typewriter's alphabet. Users of digital messaging systems might now add emoji, images, videos or animated graphics to the alphanumeric characters and emoticons previously available. This allows for a complex exchange of meaning making material, although some of which might be almost as constrained as the keys on a typewriter (there may be many animated graphics to share with each other through messaging apps, but there are far fewer tools available for the user to construct their own). The affordances on offer present opportunities for creative exchanges of ideas, and playful interaction.

Those who have grown up surrounded by new technologies show different fluencies in its use. In the introduction to her 2014 book 'It's Complicated – the Social Lives of Networked Teens', social theorist and cultural ethnographer danah boyd describes the situation at a high school football game, where both teens and adults overwhelmingly made use of their mobile phones but in dramatically different ways. The teens did use their devices to share media with each other, take photographs or text frantically - yet they often use their devices simply to locate each other in the crowd, and once the friends found each other the texting would stop. In contrast the adults would stare intensely at their screens, and unlike the teenagers they were not sharing their devices or snapping photographs. The adults might bemoan their children's 'obsession with their phones', yet the teenagers were simply using their phones as 'no more than a glorified camera and coordination device', whilst the adults were absenting themselves from the world entirely (boyd, 2014:3-4). Perhaps here it is the children who are mastering a fluid use of their technology, whilst their parents still struggle with Heidegger's typewriter.

Many advocates of new technology continue to take an optimistic stance placing their emphasis on the more positive sides to the societal changes that we experience as networked individuals. Their arguments may even use the

same examples of human interplay as the doomsayers in order to draw quite different conclusions. Today's communication technologies can lower the costs of solving social dilemmas through collective action, and lead to greater pooling of resources (and ideas). Media Scholar Howard Rheingold argues that the history of civilisation has in point of fact *always* been 'more people pooling resources in new ways' (Rheingold, 2002:31). Such arguments make much of the new possibilities of collaboration, knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer interaction which are now made possible by cheap and effective communications, combined with innovative and speedy data manipulation and distribution tools (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Shirky, 2010; Shirky, 2009).

However, given the complex interplay of technology and socio-cultural setting, judging technological influence as positive or negative may frequently be simply a matter of perspective: setting the convenience of an App-called cab over the disruption of local industry, or the apparent intimacy of renting a room from a local family against the rise of regulation avoidance by a new class of buy-to-let landlords<sup>103</sup>.

With so many visible changes in the technologies we use to interact with the life world, it would be an easy matter to suggest everything is changed. The wide availability of tools of mass-communication combined with the utilisation of this communications network by global capital, might be said to have caused a 'rupture in the normal run of things' (Žižek, 2014:38); a seismic Event which changes everything. Yet before bluntly declaring a disruptive change to *everything*, we are reminded and cautioned by Žižek (in the introduction to his collection '*Mapping Ideology*') that it is eminently possible that an event which announces a disruptive and new epoch may be (mis)perceived as a return to the past, or as a continuation of the past, and that *equally* the perception of an

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<sup>103</sup> An Australian housing activist, Murray Cox, has built up an interactive map which shows AirBnB listings marked as an entire property for rent all year round. His maps, which scrape data from the AirBnB system in real time, indicate how many of the properties seem to have been purchased entirely for renting through the service (Cox, 2016:online). In his podcast *Life after Rent*, Benjamin Walker describes this wasting away of community resources as 'all that was once solid has simply melted into Airbnb' (Walker, 2015:online).

event which is wholly inscribed by existing logic may be (mis)perceived as a radical change (Žižek, 2012:2). Žižek's go-to illustrative example is that of the thinking around virtual or cyber-sex. He observes that some have argued that cyber-sex is predicated on the radical rupture of the abandonment of physical interaction with the other, and instead suggests a significant new focus on masturbatory activity with a virtual other, one who is not present or (potentially) even human. Žižek roundly rejects this thesis on the grounds that far from demonstrating a rupture of established thought, virtual sex merely colludes with the Lacanian notion of the myth of 'real sex' with a (physical) other. The virtual interaction with a glove or a screen 'is not a monstrous distortion of real sex, it simply renders manifest its underlying phantasmic structure' (Žižek, 2012:7.2).

Heidegger, one of the originators of phenomenology and existentialism, responded to developing technological forces by arguing that through mechanisation humankind and the world are turned into commodities to be manipulated. Characterised by his notion of *Gestell*, a method of 'unconcealment', or 'gathering together' of reality, Heidegger supposed that this performative and active revealing through the frame of technology would encourage the perception of reality to be a raw material to be operated on. Žižek explains *Gestell* so,

*Gestell*, Heidegger's word for the essence of technology, is usually translated into English as 'enframing'. At its most radical, technology does not designate a complex network of machines and activities, but the *attitude towards reality* which we assume when we are engaged in such activities: technology is the way reality discloses itself to us in contemporary times. (Žižek, 2014:31)

Agamben describes *Gestell* as the functional framing of an apparatus, which 'exposes the real in its mode of ordering' (Agamben, 2009:11-12), which is both an orientation and part of an innate process of subjectification. He casts the net of apparatus wide, citing

... anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings. (ibid:14)

In the thrall of late capitalism, technology takes its part in the proliferation and development of an ever increasing number of apparatuses, it can be reasonably said that 'there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modelled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus' (ibid:11-12). Here technology is styled almost as a virus, insidiously involving itself in all aspects of human life.

Rutsky, in his reading of Heidegger, suggests technology at its very essence constitutes a dynamic and process oriented (and continuous) reframing of representations of the world. A 'setting forth' that places things in order only to continuously change the reference points and mechanisms of this representation. A conundrum whereby fragmentary and temporary order is brought into view through an inherently 'unsettling movement or change' (Rutsky, 1999:6).

Žižek argues that this mode of 'unconcealment' of reality is specific to the society it occurs within, and thus that for us in the here-and-now 'technology is the way reality discloses itself to us in contemporary times' (Žižek, 2014:31). He ponders the argument that engaging in a technological 'enframing' has the potential to dehumanise us by removing the deeply human capacity for ecstatic exposure to reality. He proposes a solution: that with mindful understanding and assessment of the extent to which technology performs this enframing function we may overcome it, and traverse the fantasy. He suggests that in this way we grasp the mode of representation for what it is, and are able to engage with the reality it exposes.

Perhaps what is eluding us here, is the extent to which frameworks of perception and categories of understanding bleed into each other.

Technology, science, culture – these categories have lost their disciplinary and ontological integrity since, in the realm of experience and ontology,

each of them is permeated and penetrated by the other two. (Aronowitz, 1996:10)

Aronowitz argues for a complex understanding of technology and its interrelationships with society, decrying neat categorisations, disciplinary boundaries and the simplicity of determinist cause and effect. He claims that 'many of our most fundamental categories have been challenged or changed by technology' (Ibid: 21-22). As technologies become increasingly core to so many of our day-to-day activities, whether on the surface or sight unseen operating in the background, it is accepted that monolithic attitudes to a technological leviathan are no longer tenable. Technologist and designer Dan Hill discusses this intertwining of technology and society: 'Technology is culture; it is not something separate; it is no longer "I.T."; we cannot choose to have it or not. It just is, like air' (Hill, 2013). John Durham Peters suggests that the time is right for a new philosophy of media, and that this must encompass a new philosophy of nature. That the effects of the activities of the technologies of humankind are felt so far and wide that the only places that could be described as "natural" – that is to say clean and untouched by humans – are those deliberately set aside for that express purpose. Like Aronowitz, Peters invites a category shift in our perception of the world.

Digital devices invite us to think of media as environmental, as part of the habitat, and not just as semiotic inputs into people's heads ... So-called new media do not take us into uncharted waters: they revive the most basic problems of conjoined living in complex societies and cast the oldest troubles into relief. (Peters, 2015:4)

Technologies do change our perception of the life world. My eyeglasses might bring distant things into focus, and the telescope extends that reach further still, yet the extent to which such an enframing marks a shift in my understanding or emotional connection to the world is not determined simply by the category of tool used.

Phenomenologist and philosopher of technology Peter-Paul Verbeek in his book '*What Things Do*' comments that what he calls classical philosophy has 'painted an exceedingly gloomy picture of the role of technology in contemporary



culture', suggesting that technology would 'discourage human beings from approaching reality as inherently valuable and would instead encourage them to approach it as raw material' (Verbeek, 2005:4). He goes on to say that as part of this process of re-evaluating reality through a technological frame, we as humans might alienate ourselves from the world. In their chapter 'Is there a Body in the Net?' Argyle and Shields note that frequently a motif of absence or disembodiment is suggested; that 'technology is often viewed as source of separation between people, a barrier' (Argyle & Shields, 1996:58).

Philip Brey, providing us with a potted history, describes philosophies of technology dominant through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a series of related approaches, which concentrated on the implications of technology on society at large. Brey characterises this as the *classical philosophy of technology* and suggests it

... took a critical approach to this topic, and advocated the idea that modern technology was harmful in many ways. It sought to identify these harms and reflect on them, and it sought to explore how humanity might develop a better relation to technology. (Brey, 2010:36)

He argues this position is best understood as a reaction to optimistic post-Enlightenment notions of technology and progress. He cites Descartes, in whose scientific method he inscribes the first suggestion of a modern idea of technological progress, writing:

Descartes enthusiastically declared that using the scientific principles that he had discovered, humanity could become master and possessor of nature, and develop an infinite number of devices with which it would be able to enjoy without effort the fruits of the earth. (ibid:37)

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the advanced technological society suggested here by Descartes starts to become a reality. Technology intertwines with all forms of human activity and provides opportunities for tremendous industrial growth, the rise of mass production, and the beginnings of the consumer society. Simultaneously, during the First and Second World Wars technology facilitates new types of mechanized destruction and persecution and, in the prosecution

of humankind's' (alleged) mastery over nature, generates new environmental and existential threats.

Peter Petralia, writing on technology's promise of intimacy (Petralia, 2012a), invites us to consider two opposing viewpoints of technology as it operates in the context of social connectivity. On the one side there is the increased exposure of our day to day existence that is afforded through social media which, it can be argued, leads to a blurring of the boundaries between public and private<sup>104</sup>. Invoking the terminology of Goffman, where there was once a clearly defined private 'backstage', social technologies enable the sharing of intimate details that would previously have remained hidden. Petralia cites Turkle's studies into the online behaviour of young teens, which suggest that the more these teens shared themselves the more anxiety they experienced. In her analysis of the alienating effects of social media, Turkle pronounces 'as we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves' (Turkle, 2011:12). However, in thinking of ways to better deal with our always-on and heavily mediated socialisation, Turkle has argued that a solution may be just around the corner and that it lies in new and improved technology that will 'organise, amuse and relax us' (ibid:11). Petralia wryly comments that this represents a 'solution being proposed by the very thing that caused the problem to begin with' (Petralia, 2012a:4).

On the other side of this debate, helpfully framed by Petralia, artist Natalie Jeremijenko suggests that we already have the possibility of agency of use.

We can use technology to connect with one another or to disconnect. The question becomes: To what extent do we exercise that agency? And why don't we feel more in control of it? (Conley & Jeremijenko, 2010)

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<sup>104</sup> Shifts between public and private resulting in changes in social behaviours are not limited to the digital realm. Much of the city space we might assume to be in public ownership has been bought up by private concerns who can police the access to their land and the behaviours they accommodate in different ways to public spaces. This is most clearly demonstrated in the eviction of the Occupy protesters in 2012 (Sackman, 2012:online). Why individual circumstances may raise considerable concern, shifts in the way we define space as public or private, are inevitable in both digital and material worlds.

Petralia reads this as Jeremijenko urging us to take control of when we switch off, and wonders if it is as simple as that. Yet Jeremijenko is alive to the different affordances offered by connective technology. Later in the same debate she talks about one of her children hijacking her Twitter feed, which she says could be argued as symptomatic of social media tearing families apart. However, 'Kids have always made mistakes' (ibid), she argues, and recalls that at ten years old she had already hijacked her parent's car and driven it down the freeway. Much better for her child, Yo, to 'hijack my Twitter account to explore social limits than hijack a deadly technology like a car' (ibid) claims Jeremijenko. She styles this as experimentation, that Yo is exploring his own agency within the social world that technology affords him. Engaging with others in the spaces of social encounter afforded by communications technologies often seems to require a negotiation or renegotiation of rules and parameters of engagement. This uncertainty may be due to user-interface decisions, or the user's perception of what kinds of activity are appropriate. The agency experienced by the participant in a mediated encounter can be encouraged by signalling that exploration and discovery are part and parcel of the encounter.

If Turkle and Jeremijenko's arguments are to be simplified to either switching off and disconnecting, or waiting for new and better technology, we might note that Agamben considers both of these approaches futile, pointedly saying 'What we are looking for is neither simply to destroy them nor, as some naively suggest, to use them in the correct way' (Agamben, 2009:15). Clearly neither approach, on its own, has the granularity or grace necessary to serve us well. We are striving to find a balance in our use of these new social and technological tools, but they do not fall into neatly categorised boxes (nor do they replace other boxes, such as one labelled face-to-face). The idea of apparatus or *Gestell* provide a method of examining at the interface between humans and the world, yet the apparatus does not exist outside of the relations between humans and the world.

Petralia reflects on his experience of the dispersed performance *Fortnight* during which he personally interacted thorough SMS and twitter with hundreds of participants and suggests that we have moved ...

... into an age where interactivity is deeply ingrained in our daily lives and that we have the power to make these interactions, these technologies, meaningful. We ignore technological advances at our own risk, I think, but we do not have to succumb to them blindly. We can set the rules. We can make them live up to their promises. (Petralia, 2012a:online)

Within the research presented here, the powerful and real interactions between participants when using communications technologies to engage with one and other correlates with this kind of complex understanding of how technology intertwines with our lives and relations with others. Rather than technology enframing a commodified experience of the world, intimate interrelations are possible and in fact inevitable. It is in fact our intentionality with respect to our technological affordances that frame our experiences with them, and with others through them.

Such an intentionality also combines with a process of de-coding, as interpretation of lean media appears to place different demands on the search for meaning than more representative media, such as video. In his performative analysis of surveillance space 'Loving Big Brother', McGrath considers the ways in which different media operate to fulfil the ideological configuration of surveillance as truthful evidence. Audio recordings, he suggests, 'can never achieve the representational self-evidence of video recordings' (McGrath, 2004:44), in part due to the implicit separation of an audio recording from its referent. However, within the performative space of speech and sound, there is an opportunity for the coded exchange of meaning which operates outside of (although in parallel to) representational speech:

... once the concept of code has been introduced, it may be used to develop a space of emotions and communications - a performative space - in which an endless expansion of possibilities beyond the evidence of representation can occur. (ibid)

Within the lean media of SMS, the ambiguity of language choices combined with expressive gestures, such as emoticons, allow for the construction of meaning-in-the-moment which melds intention and performativity with the context in which the message is received and acted upon. What's more there is the opportunity for the enactment of boyd's *social steganography*, the construction of digital gestures which might hide meaning in plain sight, affordances available only to those in the know.

Taking a phenomenological turn, human beings are constantly involved with the world and it is this engagement with the world that precedes and informs our understanding of it. Verbeek writes:

... it is impossible to speak about the world in the absence of human involvement with it. Reality-in-itself is unknowable, for as soon as we experience or encounter it, it becomes reality-for-us: a world. (Verbeek, 2005:110)

This intentional engagement of human beings and world constructs a mutual intertwining that obliterates the dichotomy of subject and object. Now, rather than perceiving the apparatus as a subjective framing between human beings and the world, it becomes a key mediation in their interrelation. Verbeek takes this argument further in his conception of a *post-phenomenology*, emphasising that not only are the subject and object interrelated but that they constitute each other. 'Not only are they intertwined, but they co-shape one and other'; and that 'Reality arises in relations, as do the human beings who encounter it' (ibid:112-113).

Like Ihde, Verbeek returns to Heidegger's early work to consider how the interaction of humans and their equipment and tools shape their encounters with the world. Examining the way in which things enable everyday practice whilst 'withdrawing from the explicit field of attention' (ibid:114). The object that is a hammer becomes a tool at the point at which the human engages with the task in hand, that of hitting in a nail. At this point where tools are present as *tools*, as an extension of the field of perception and embodied as part of a

humans' interactions with the world, Heidegger describes them as 'ready-to-hand' (Heidegger, 1962, reprinted in 2001:135).

Such an analysis of the use of technology is not uncommon. Philosopher of technology Alessandro Tomasi writes 'with total familiarity, technological objects recede into the background of consciousness and become nothing, but extensions of our body' (Tomasi, 2008:5). Where it gets interesting is when Tomasi extends the idea of the intimate nature of humans and their tools into a recursive and developmental relationship. That not only do (some) technological objects become intimate for us by virtue of our continued use of them, but that 'new technologies will initiate an evolutionary line only as long as they manage to intimately connect with the existing body/mind/machine' (ibid). That should the technology achieve sufficient social or cultural velocity it then claims influence by falling out of view, by becoming sufficiently intimate that it becomes a part of our own apparatus. The technologies of eyeglasses and hearing apparatus are those of mediation, and as such might they be said to share characteristics with the distance sight and distance hearing that video conferencing technologies afford. What might be approached more cautiously is the concept that the mediation of relations through texting shares something of the trait of being intimately connected with the body/mind/machine.

In experiments, conducted during this research, where participants were given older mobile phones which required a different mode of operation to their own smartphones, they described an irritation at having to re-learn how to text. The nature of the tool became once more apparent as it no longer exhibited the characteristic of being 'ready-to-hand'.

Verbeek suggests an object's state of being ready-to-hand gives us a way of looking at them, and how they are present in our encounters with the world.

A train coshapes the way in which a landscape is present to human beings, a telephone coshapes the way human beings relate to each other. Things, therefore, are not neutral "intermediaries" between humans and world, but mediators: they actively mediate this relation. (Verbeek, 2005:114)

Further, as we become more attuned to their use and the context of the reality they expose, they recede from our conscious awareness. Weiser, former head of Computer Science Labs at Xerox PARC, has it so: 'The most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it' (Weiser, 1991:94). However, this does not mean they have no effect on the co-creation of reality, rather that such effects become embedded.

Verbeek picks up on Ihde's characterising of this mediation role of artefacts as a *technological intentionality*; suggesting that technologies have a particular 'directionality, an inclination or trajectory that shapes the way they are used' (Verbeek, 2005:114). This is apparent when thinking about how the act of writing is differently experienced when using a pen, a typewriter or a word processor - the slow consideration of penmanship, the speedier compositional speed of a typewriter and the multiple modes of text organisation offered by the word processor. Each of these technological mechanisms offer a different 'inclination' not a deterministic way of operating, but perhaps a preferred vector. Once the technology becomes embedded, these inclinations also become embedded, and, as they fade into a background hum, these effects may become difficult to discern.

Such technological intentionality is apparent when it comes to interaction with various social networks and services via the Internet. Whilst it is possible to compose tweets on a simple feature-phone without Internet access, the reading of replies and interaction with the user's timeline is curtailed if not completely impossible. Facebook's extensive internet.org project has the lofty aim of bringing the Internet to the two-thirds of the world that does not currently have it; but it does this through the use of a bespoke Facebook app, Facebook messenger and a collection of other proprietary services rather than a full connection to the Internet. In many cases the users are not aware of any difference between them, and consider there to be an equivalence between Facebook and the Internet (Mirani, 2015:online). As we have seen earlier, in Gergen's analysis of the usage of first the tethered telephone and then the cell-

phone, changes in the patterns of use of technology changes the affordances they offer. As an example: rather than make use of a land-line telephone to converse with friends and family, the prevalence of robotic cold calls received on that device, coupled with a duplication of affordances available through the mobile phone, has largely caused me to abandon this usage entirely.

One key point made by Verbeek in his post-phenomenological analysis of the role technology takes in this co-shaping of human / world interactions is that 'this ability must not be conceived as an intrinsic property of the artefact itself' (Verbeek, 2005:117) claiming that technology-in-itself being just as non-existent as reality-in-itself. He again quotes Ihde:

Were technologies merely objects totally divorced from human praxis, they would be so much 'junk' lying about. Once taken into praxis one can speak not of technologies 'in themselves,' but as the active relational pair, human-technology. (Ihde quoted in Verbeek, 2005:117)

This might be read as claiming a technology has no intrinsic essence, it becomes itself only when ready-to-hand and in the action of doing. However, as a result of the demonstrable rise of the generalised computing power of many of our newer gadgets most smartphones, computers or tablets are not limited to one use, but operate in many different ways. In the design of encounters where humans will connect with others through an intermediate, mediating technology it is important to examine any expectations of intentionality the designer brings into the process. Which is to say, assumptions about the way in which technological objects might be used by a participant should be examined and if necessary dumped by the wayside. Additionally, social engagements can occur outside the framework of the intended experience. Nick Tandavanitj, founder member of Blast Theory, has observed<sup>105</sup> that in their technologically facilitated pervasive games *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003) and *Can You See Me Now* (2001) a significant proportion of the participants' interaction<sup>106</sup> was social in nature and operated outside the parameters of the game.

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<sup>105</sup> In a private Skype interview.

<sup>106</sup> He suggests of the order of 80%.



Returning briefly to the '90s: in the beginning was the word, and back then the word was written on wires, with LEDs and LCDs on a mesh filigree of structure holding their seven segment displays open to only limited iterations of possibility. When interacting with far away folk in the text-only worlds of MUDs and BBSs back in the early 1990s, the terminals on which I typed bathed my face in green light from ASCII characters set against a black background, quite unlike the LCD display in front of me now, with its millions of pixels and picture perfect rendering. Those terminals were designed for the reading and writing of text. No matter that this action was not that of a word processor entering in considered and edited text, that instead the experience was that of an explorer navigating a maze of text prompts and new languages (how to look up a server address, where to find the best points of contact, what time to login when the system was active, who to look out for); the focus was single tasked - my eyes took in the text, my fingers typed responses. No mouse or other windows competed for my attention, this tool use demonstrates the exposure of multiple possible interactions through a single context.

Returning to Heidegger's hammer, Ihde maintains that Heidegger's insight is to see the hammer *is what it does* (its thing-ness), how it is perceived and embodied when in action. What Ihde claims Heidegger does not do is to elaborate on what this means within the context of a technology that might be capable of many uses, to be what Ihde describes as *multistable*. In its most simple form Ihde argues that whilst the design of the hammer is to hit in nails, this doesn't mean it can't be used as a paperweight or (even) an objet d'Art<sup>107</sup>. This is key to how technological objects are considered, because the convergence of uses into single technological objects combined with the diversity of possible assignments of use is a significant characteristic of technological artefacts (Ihde, 2002:106). Ihde describes the contemporary computer (and by extension mobile devices, smart TVs, the interactive GPS in your car's dashboard) as inherently *multistable* in that the same gadget can be used in many different ways. This computer can be used to read and write text

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<sup>107</sup> Recalling Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917).

(as I am doing now), to check my day-to-day schedule, occupy social media, play a computer game, plan a travel itinerary, send and receive an array of different message forms (including real-time audio/visual data such as Skype or FaceTime). The screen creates a technological hybridization of possibilities; which erupts and breaks 'the boundaries of previous writing praxes' (Idhe, 2010:78). Text can be both brought into being and instantly dissolved, what is on screen can be permanently stored onto disk or into the cloud to be recovered once more in an instant, and, in the latter case, from anywhere access is possible; anywhere there is connectivity.

Implicit in the proliferation of general-purpose, convergent computing devices connected to a world-wide network is the notion that they can be used in many different ways. Compared to a single-use device, such as a word processor, for the computing device operating in a multi-stable mode the act of writing is no longer privileged, and whilst it may continue to be a dominant activity taking place on the device, its context is transformed. Once connected to the Internet, Idhe suggests, the screen speaks to us and us to the screen. The globally connected infrastructure of satellites, undersea cables and data-switching nodes are invisible to us as we experience the world through our device, which he styles as our *station* (ibid:81). Idhe notes that as such a device becomes a locus for human-technology-world interaction, and that such interaction is freed from geography. Experiences 'beyond our perceptions can be translated for our perception' (ibid). Within this locus of experience occurs what Idhe calls *cyberanomalies*, for it is here that *cyberspace-time* comes into being. 'In contrast to geographic space, cyberspace is always the *nearly same* near distance' (ibid:82), a telepresence encounter between individuals in Manchester and New York is perceptually experienced as being at the same near distance as one between Manchester and Falmouth, or between adjacent rooms. Similarly, time-lag is experienced in both encounters but does not bestow any clear understanding of geographical distance, rather it indicates that the displacement of time has become transparent and uniform everywhere (ibid).

In the one-to-one encounter *Conversation Piece*, carried out through telepresence as part of this research, my own perception of space and time fits into this notion of transparent and uniform cyberspace-time, that the experience occurs in what we might call the *nearly now*. When participants were asked to describe the experience of time and distance they might reply that they lost track of time, or that the screen was positioned just right. In short, their perception of cyberspace-time as the experiential time of the nearly now was such that it had become embedded into their perception of the mechanics of the encounter. This effect I think is in part due to the quality of the business system used (relatively high resolution, low lag, low noise), and in part due to the widespread use of video conference such that as a technology it becomes second nature and ready-to-hand.

Idhe described another time disruption as occurring when mediated interaction crosses time zones, this he describes as *layered time*. He suggests that in this experience 'the *materiality* of the temporality is felt' (ibid:83). Examples of this layering process were felt by the participants in *Conversation Piece* where the time zone difference was such that the US was five hours behind the UK. In one particular case the UK participant had been on shift work since the early hours and was ready to head home, whilst the US participant had just woken up. Later, in debrief interviews, these two participants independently commented that when this came up in conversation it gave them unexpected pause for thought. The notion that one had finished his day, whilst the other had their whole day before them brought this materiality suddenly to bear. Idhe writes:

Clearly such a space-time is neither *linear* nor *universally uniform* time. This is in contrast to earlier eras, time and distance are now more rapidly traversed as a near *hypertime*. (ibid)

In its attempts to produce a simulacrum of reality, it may be expected that video conference would provide a handy demonstration of the nearly-now. What is particularly curious is that the text message experiment *Small Talk* provided access to a similar mode of time and distance. With attention focused on the relational aspect of the mediated text conversations, the experience of

replying is always focussed in the nearly-now. It is as if the message to which the reply is composed is always already here, that the time taken in its composition is invisible and that its arrival (which may have been delayed by all manner of technical obstacles) brings the presence of its author precisely in the present moment.

The multiplicity of affordances offered by multistable devices can also be read as a blurring of purpose; the threat of interactivity that Baudrillard refers to in his polemical text *Screened Out*. In his argument, our engagement with digital media means everything that was once separated is now merged, that distance is abolished. That the real and the virtual are now experienced simultaneously and that it becomes impossible to distinguish between them with the result that there is no longer any possibility of moral judgement, that everything becomes *undecidable*. Where Ihde proposes a phenomenological extension of an *individual's* life-world perception, Baudrillard sees a disappearance of the human into the machine.

Virtuality comes close to happiness only because it surreptitiously removes all reference to things. It gives you everything, but at the same time it subtly deprives you of every thing. (Baudrillard, 2002:180)

The machine and the culture around the machine are both components of our technological experience of the life-world, and Baudrillard's fears expressed here are perhaps more concerned with the violence and alienation produced by late capitalism than by the object's technology. So, there is a need to tease out an analysis of how technology and culture are interrelated, and what bearing this has on any mediated encounter.

A telematic experience might be characterised as the intertwining that occurs in the moment-to-moment between human beings, a tool of mediation and the world. At its root it is the *relationality* between a human experiencer and the field of experience mediated through the technological tool. Verbeek describes how Ihde proposes two fields or dimensions of experience: *microperception* which engages with the 'bodily dimension of sensory perception' (Verbeek, 2005:122) and *macroperception*, which is concerned with interpretive

perception within the cultural context in which it occurs. Both perceptions belong equally to the lifeworld and, crucially, whilst they can be distinguished from one and other they cannot be separated.

There is no microperception (sensory-bodily) without its location within a field of macroperception and no macroperception without its microperceptual foci. (Ihde, 1990:29)

Ihde thus calls for a double sided analysis of the range of human-technology interaction. Proposing that the sensory perceptions offered by technological use are inextricably bound to the limits described by the cultural situation that such use is performed within. Which is to say, that in order to develop an understanding of how users perform themselves through their technological devices, it is vital to also consider the cultural and political context in which such devices are made and operated.

Breaking down modes of technologically mediated perception further, Ihde considers the various contexts technology operates at the moment of experience and concludes there are two mechanisms by which artifacts mediate the 'I' and the world. The first he calls *embodiment relations*, which are those concerned with an enhancement or change of the sensitivity of perception. An example might be a pair of eye-glasses, as these change perception but in such a way that they withdraw from the perception of the user. One does not look *at* eyeglasses but *through* them (ibid:125). This is by way of an extension of Merleau-Ponty's description, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, of the blind man's use of a stick:

The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:165)<sup>108</sup>

Key here is a notion of transparency, that once the technique implicit in the tool is learned the tool withdraws, as in the case of the hammer discussed earlier.

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<sup>108</sup> Brey notes that this is one of the few sections in *Phenomenology of Perception* where Merleau-Ponty deals with the idea of technology at all, and traces the development of post-phenomenological philosophy of technology from these small seeds (Brey, 2000:5)

The second mechanism Ihde refers to is titled *hermeneutic relations* (Verbeek, 2005:125), which are those that concern themselves with mediations wherein an interpretation is required. Setting forth his reading of Ihde's terminology Verbeek states that in the hermeneutic relation the 'world is not perceived *through* the artefact but *by means of it*' (Verbeek, 2005:126). Whatever the nature of their relational mode, technological mediations of perception have significant consequences in the manner humans experience their world – put simply because 'artifacts *transform* experience' (ibid). To sum up, Verbeek writes:

Formulations in terms of the "access to reality" offered by an artifact should be read as relating to the way in which an artifact makes possible the constitution of a world in the very process of perception. Humans and the world they experience are the products of technological mediation, and not just the poles between which the mediation plays itself out. (ibid:130)

For John Perry Barlow, co-founder of the Electronic Freedom Foundation<sup>109</sup>, speaking in 1995, the radical shift in the then new communications channel of email was nothing short of revolutionary. Arguing that between the words that are typed into an email at the one end and those that are received and read at the other there is 'nothing but a digital transformation taking place. It's not mediated. It's as intimate as it could be without me whispering in your ear' (Barlow, 1995:41). Barlow's intimate emails are no digital whisper, but a complex interrelation between mechanism, human and world. His casual dismissal of the nature of transformation taking place is perhaps part and parcel of the simplification this significant technological change brought to his own previous practice, wherein infrastructure was apparent and must be consciously traversed<sup>110</sup>. My own perception of the interaction between my words written in a message on a screen and those coming back to me in reply, or of the

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<sup>109</sup> Set up in 1990, the Electronic Freedom Foundation or EFF (found at <https://www.eff.org/>) is a not-for-profit institution championing civil liberties in a digital world: concerning itself with issues of online privacy, security, data protection and other ideas of governance.

<sup>110</sup> Earlier in the interview he sites email communication as operating in opposition to reading from a published book, pondering that in the world of publishing there is a complicated institutional infrastructure that sits between reader and author, from the manuscript to the printed and distributed final product.

moving image and spoken words of a friend transported through video conferencing techniques, do not in the moment-to-hand concern the methods or scope of the network – indeed, as far as my perception goes there may as well be nothing there at all. Writing on notions of virtual geography, Nick Bingham argues that

... 'the Net' is neither local nor global. It is local at all points since you always find terminals and modems. And yet it is global since it connects Sheffield and Sydney. (Bingham, 1999:255)<sup>111</sup>.

Simplifications of technological mechanics are a result, in part, of the transformation apparent in network geography. The communications network is both local and global, and yet neither at the same time. It is local at all points it is experienced but it extends our perception, affordance and reach globally. Ghislane Boddington, founder of *body>data>space*, suggests we are 'using the virtual to connect the local to the local' (Boddington, 2010:27). Perceiving each other in the nearly-now and the nearly-here.

In summary, a post Enlightenment philosophy of technology comes to view technology as an alienating mediation, distancing humans from the world and each other. What Verbeek styles as classical readings of phenomenology suggest technology reduces the authentic experience by disclosing an impoverished perception of reality<sup>112</sup>. Verbeek, after Idhe, argues that technological mediation provides forms of access to reality that will inevitably result in certain aspects being amplified and others reduced, yet will as a result provide access to things previously hidden or otherwise unavailable.

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<sup>111</sup> He also cautions against thinking of the network as universal, suggesting that at the time of writing he 'cannot email (his) next-door-neighbour and between a third and a half of the world's population still lives more than two hours away from the nearest telephone' (ibid). Much has changed since 1999!

<sup>112</sup> Verbeek dissects Van den Berg's analysis of the use of a microscope as an example: Van den Berg claims the access to reality given by the microscope does not allow us to see the tree, but instead the cells that compose the tree and as a result isolate the tree from its context, depriving it of its meaning. Verbeek challenges this notion by countering that such analysis attempts to bifurcate the perception of reality into that of everyday life and that of scientific or technologically mediated imaging; pushing forward the notion that 'science and technology deliver a reduced reality' (Verbeek, 2005:133) – which Verbeek refutes.

‘Technologies are therefore more ambivalent than alienating with respect to the interpretations of the world with which they are linked’ (ibid:135).

For mediation theorists’ social media are simply other ways friendships can develop and take shape. Whilst such relations may be radically different to those established by convention in the past, they are the ‘basis for new forms of friendship, not the end of it’ (Verbeek, 2013:78). Importantly, rather than supposing that new technologies of communication are alienating or revealing only a poor fragment of reality; it is supposed that these systems ‘are the very *media* of human existence’ (ibid).

The post-phenomenological philosophy of technology outlined by Verbeek and Ihde describes a complex view of mediated communications as a change in perception of the world and a change in the nature of the world. In recovering a positive spin on the role of technology in the co-creation of the lifeworld, it offers an environment in which friendship and intimacy might be reasonably pursued. Notions of the nearly-here and the nearly-now are constructed as an expansion of perceptual possibility and a reconstituting of the lifeworld through technology. In respect of the research inquiry to hand, it is not only possible to experience intimacy through technological mediation, it is both expected and assured.

As we have seen, generalising about technological tools can be an un-nuanced path to follow, indicative of a somewhat monolithic consideration of technology itself and a simpler construction than (for example) Aronowitz’s hybrid complexity. Formats and form are (of course) important and, to place the ideas of human engagement with technology into a context, we’ll take a short tangent into form obliterating meaning.

Early in this research period, at the Remote Encounters (2013) conference in Cardiff, I heard Marc Garrett of Furtherfield<sup>113</sup> deliver a paper concerning his

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<sup>113</sup> Garrett is one of the founder artists of Furtherfield (1997); which is a creative and socially minded gallery in central London. Operating in an inclusive and sustainable manner with its local community, it works with specialist and amateur artists, activists, thinkers, and technologists,



conception of “hack value”, in which he invokes the idea of *hacking* associated with the breaking down of barriers and the transgression of ‘walled up systems’ (Garrett, 2013:online). He suggests,

*Hack Value* can be a playful disruption. It is also maintenance for the imagination, a call for a sense of wonder beyond the tedium of living in a consumer, dominated culture. (ibid)

Hacking, then, might be a disruptive and creative mode of interacting with the world, one which absorbs art and activism in order to transcend societal boundaries. He cites the work of Sufi thinker Idries Shah and in particular his publication ‘*The Book of the Book*’ (1969). Published more than half a dozen times since its creation in 1969, at first glance this is a regular book: constructed with paper pages, a cover, a spine. Upon opening the work it becomes clear that only the first few pages contain the type of content expected from the form. A few passages of philosophical thought, around 1500 words on the theme of the folly of judging by appearance, make up the first nine or so pages. These are followed by three hundred blank pages which are intended to ‘bulk it out’ (Shah, 2000:99). The accompanying website offers this sage advice: ‘When you realize the difference between the container and the content, you will have knowledge’ (Shah, 2015:online). Garrett is particularly excited that the book can be framed as a ‘hack’, as an example of repurposing and challenging the original form of an object. He describes it as turning the very idea of a book on its head, negating the idea of what a book can be and simultaneously enabling the book’s owner to write their own into being.

Navigating to the website of the Idries Shah Foundation, the appropriate web page suggests that a “new” (8<sup>th</sup>) imprint of the book will be published “later this year” (2015), whilst at the same time linking to a version held on the online resource Google Books. Following the link to the online version brings the reader to the threshold of a curious conceptual exercise. The scanned pages can be viewed in the same way as any other electronic book on the site, and this

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who together cultivate open, critical contexts for making and thinking. The organisation has engaged with many thousands of people both locally and internationally.

includes those left blank. In this incarnation, however, the pages have surely changed their meaning. Once, perhaps, intended as an invitation to write your own narrative, now they are a static image of nothing, of white pixels representing white pages scanned and digitized (or perhaps obtained from a word processing file) – either way they remain unalterable. In a nod to the abiding capitalistic hegemony they are marked in the corner with the words ‘Copyrighted Material’ (which of course indicates further that in this rendering the pages are no longer an exact duplicate of their original).

There is little sense of the weight or tactile presence that might be apparent from these blank pages as part of the physical object, and also their value as potential containers is lost. Unlike the open screen of a blank document in a word processor application, which has the abiding characteristic of an eternal void of possibility being ‘empty and thus capable of being filled with anything’ (Baudrillard, 2002:194), these are incapable of change. Here the central conundrum posed by the work is irrevocably altered by its presentation. The medium has removed all trace of the message, or has at least created a new one.

Writing in late 2016, I return again to the website of the Idries Shah Foundation and the promised 8<sup>th</sup> edition now has a publication date of December 2016, whilst the link to Google Books remains the same. It seems the Foundation are in on the joke, the website is transformed into an purchasing opportunity ever out of reach<sup>114</sup>.

Any e-reader or tablet computer similarly disrupts the particular experience of interacting with a book. Bookmarks, notes in the margin, folded corners are all simulated by the same mechanisms that generate the appearance of the book itself. The physical and tactile cues are missing, and change the nature of the interaction with the content. Similarly, the scroll-like interaction with the material (imagine a page shaped window on a giant length of paper receding

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<sup>114</sup> By July 2017, the *Book of the Book* had finally returned to print and has been made available for purchase both in physical form and as an eBook.

away both upwards and down), gives precious little physical or cognitive scaffolding on which to construct ideas of (for example) the reader's place in the book, how many pages are left to go, the relationship between the density of the type and the number and size of the pages. The supposed simplification of these cues – brought together into a hybrid, multi-purpose surface - change the mode of interaction, fundamentally breaking the multi-sensory (tactile, aural) experience of the object it purports to replace. What is more, the act of swiping, intended to simulate the physical act of turning a page, has been shown to be distracting (more distracting than turning a page and without effective proprioceptive feedback) - another pinprick in an already stretched concentration (Keim, 2014:online). Research into reading from a computer display also suggests 'impaired performance and increased participants' experience of stress and tiredness' (Wästlund et al., 2004:391). The implication here is that distractions built into the form of the technology, in order to better duplicate the affordances on offer by the original, has the effect of reducing the concentration and immersion of the user when they are engaged with the content presented.

A digital simulation of the characteristics of a physical object is hardly uncommon, in point of fact it is prevalent in many examples of automation of function. What Baudrillard maintains is as important here is in the creation of black box systems that mirror an external physical process whilst taking an entirely different route to achieve the desired action. An example might be the starting lever of the car: replaced first by a key (that mirrors both the effect and the action – albeit in miniature), then by a card or chip. Automation is lauded as effortless, yet the implicit disconnection between action and reaction engenders stereotypical behaviours based not on a functional process, but on the imagined and reified idea of that process. Automated and hidden functionality closes off the underlying structures which 'exiles man to the irresponsibility of mere spectator' (Baudrillard, 2005:119).

Here at its heart is the conflict between our post-phenomenological analysis of technology use - where the intentionality of the mediation form is vital to our

perception of the co-creation of experience - and Baudrillard's concerns of a reality vanishing behind the digital images of the screen.

Roland Barthes reflects on the physical and chemical processes involved in the creation of a photograph, and uses these ideas to develop elements of his philosophy in *Camera Lucida* (though he takes pains to point out he is no photographer, and is happy to nod to the developing wordplay) (Barthes, 1981:9,49). These processes are destructive in nature (and photographically permanent, provided the photograph is correctly 'fixed' chemically), marking the physical materials from which the negative and subsequent positive are made. The digital camera captures its image non-destructively; the chemical process replaced with an instantaneous rendition of a scene through the movement of numerical values (light hitting a CCD array, pixels lit up on a screen, bits are written to storage media). Such an image may also be rendered as hard copy, but is more likely to remain a collection of ones and zeros, digital data. The inner workings of the black box are quite different, whilst the exterior form of the camera remains largely the same.

Baudrillard argues that whilst the photographic image is of the world, created by an interaction of representation, the digital image is created directly out of the screen. Declaring that

... the invention of the technical image in all its forms is our last great invention in the unrelenting quest for an 'objective' reality' and that the digital image replaces the real and is part and parcel of its own disappearance. (Baudrillard, 2009:33)

What is of interest is the point just beyond the creation of the image – it is here Baudrillard claims that the digital becomes 'submerged in the mass of all the other images' and part of the order of 'flow' (Baudrillard, 2009:37). This description conjures up an idea of our photographic image being surrendered to the all-encompassing cyberspace machine, the digital characteristic of infinite possible reproduction merging a single captured instant into a sea of other relentlessly captured instants. Baudrillard bemoans the loss of the significance and frailty of the moment when a photographic negative is exposed. That

moment in which the light from the photographic object meets the light of the gaze and an irreversible inscription is made which 'causes the object in its 'reality' to vanish for a moment' (ibid:38). This reads as an argument for the materiality of the medium - the photograph 'being produced in the world' - and against the perceived infinite flexibility of the digital. Without a photographic process, which includes the irreversible treatment of the material objects of negative and paper, does the photographic metaphor of appearance and disappearance, presence and absence, lose its lustre?

Rather than annihilate these concepts, the digital world shifts our engagement with them. Certainly the digital image might now reclaim impermanence: the images captured and viewed via the social network Snapchat are artefacts designed to self-destruct, the transient nature of the photographs combined with the platform enabling a strategy of resistance to digital permanence. danah boyd describes teens sharing digital images through such networks as making an 'ephemeral gesture' (boyd, 2014:64). In reporting the ways teens use Snapchat journalistic hubris often conflates the impermanence of the medium with an intent to share inappropriate images. Instead, boyd argues, by their use of the platform they signal that the image posted is of value only *in the moment*. The medium shapes the message. Growing up surrounded by the technological affordance of an infinitely replicable, permanent record of photographs and status updates, teens may see little value in expending the considerable effort required to hide and protect their content. Rather, their approach to privacy is characterised by a different set of tactics which may include the cryptography of a shared secret language, or a platform that self-destructs its content.

It's easy to think of privacy and publicity as opposing concepts, and a lot of technology is built on the assumption that you have to choose to be private or public. Yet in practice, both privacy and publicity are blurred. Rather than eschewing privacy when they encounter public spaces, many teens are looking for new ways to achieve privacy within networked publics. As such, when teens develop innovative strategies to achieve privacy, they often reclaim power by doing so. Privacy doesn't just

depend on agency; being able to achieve privacy is an expression of agency. (ibid:76)

In the making of both the texting project *Small Talk* and the telepresence project *Conversation Piece*, notions of the changing nature of public/private spaces were explored. Despite the ever present possibility of the reproduction of the digital object, a text message duplicated by an imagined orchestration system, or the recording or livestreaming of a telepresence encounter, participants suggested they dismissed these possibilities out of hand. In framing the experience as a one-to-one participants trusted that their private conversation would not be made public. In the experiments with group work (*Small Talk 24, Small Talk: Forensic*) it was noted by some participants that the visibility of the text conversations, even to the limited public of the other performer participants, became problematic. The opportunity for others to surveil their personal conversations activated, in them, a crisis of privacy which they found changed the nature of their own performance. When issues of privacy and surveillance came up in conversation with participants they noted that they expected their conversations to be private, even though no explicit claim had been made that they would be.

The text projects courted anonymity, and in almost all cases little or no time was spent by any party asking about the participants name, age or gender. A mobile telephone number may uniquely identify a person, but in order to discover their actual name or address a number of obstacles would need to be overcome. The conversation in *Small Talk* operates in a private space in part due to the one-to-one nature of the text messaging conversation<sup>115</sup> (here there is no playing to the social media gallery) but also due to the lack of external pressures brought about by shared social publics. This private conversation was not only conducted in private, away from everybody else, but also in private from the influences of shared social contacts or situations, and in private from gender or social norms. A participant in *Small Talk (Forensic)* described this as

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<sup>115</sup> Although more recent messaging apps enable the addition of new people into a conversation stream or “chat”.

‘there's something really freeing about being able to talk to someone free from the baggage of appearance’ (Participant Feedback, *Small Talk (Forensic)*, 2015). In the conversations I conducted as part of *Small Talk* I might liken the experience as somehow digging a private tunnel between two individuals outside the complexity of the day to day. Inside the tunnel conversation flows with a degree of freedom that operates in opposition to the more complex contingencies of messaging work colleagues, friends or family. I found myself excited by each notification which signalled that a new message had arrived<sup>116</sup>, an experience quite different to the admixture of curiosity and anxiety that accompanies the day-to-day notifications received on my mobile devices.

In the case of *Conversation Piece*, the participants experienced the technology as both private and ephemeral. One of them pondered that the video conference *could* be recorded but concluded that this would be too difficult in practice (in fact the high-end video conference equipment used offers this as an option by default). Another remarked ‘I didn’t even consider the possibility of it being recorded or watched. It felt very private’ (Participant Feedback, *Conversation Piece*, 2015). In fact, the decision to configure the teleconference equipment not to record the interaction was a conscious one.

In this instance the mechanical reproduction of the image creates a series of originals which flicker into life and disappear in an instant. These are passed from one element in the video conference chain to another in a global relay race until finally screened at the opposing end to the one where they were captured. From camera to codec, from codec to network, and once within the network they become digital tracery, handed off data packets flowing through switches and routers through undersea cables to a destination codec and finally from codec to screen. As each network packet is successfully received by the next router in the chain, signals are sent back indicating safe passage, ‘yes I’ve got this one, you can let go’. The images and sounds that form the data streams

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<sup>116</sup> Sometimes confounded by it, like when the flicker of light indicating a new message signalled a special offer from the telephone network rather than a new message from my private correspondent.

presented in the teleconference are ephemeral not by their nature but by the structure that is chosen for them to operate within.

Returning to the properties innate to the digital object: a digital photograph can be altered by accident (storage formats for digital photographs are often 'lossy' in nature and never twice produce precisely the same image) or by design (filters, photo-shopping or colour mismatching). Additionally, as we have seen in the company of the post-phenomenologists, the perception and experience of seeing an image or a piece of text is transformed by the environment in which it is viewed. The diversity of locations and situations in which an object might be perceived is expanded by multistable technologies of network and display. Images and text jostle for position on a viewing screen such as a laptop, mobile phone or tablet creating new possibilities for radical juxtaposition. Similarly, the atmosphere peculiar to the environment in which material is viewed – whether via social media on a mobile device whilst out in the public realm, on a TV or computer screen whilst at home, or on a public display whilst alone in a library – adjusts the experience of engagement. This democratisation of consumption might be seen as a completion of the shift from cultic value to display value outlined by Benjamin (Benjamin, 1936, reprinted 2008:12-13), but perhaps only within the scope of a reflective contemplation of the image.

If display value is indeed in primacy, and given also the saturation of image data that is the staple of the networked individuals day-to-day experience this might be a reasonable bet, it undoubtedly represents a change in the nature of our reflective meaning making. In the curated environment of *Conversation Piece* the affordances accorded to the networked individual may hold no sway, as the participants are bound by their perception of the environment they find themselves in, and of those within it. On the other hand, in mobile works such as *Small Talk* and Kaleider's *You With Me* (2013-14) little may be known about the environment (both physical and virtual) in which the participant engages, although orchestration may be devised in order to navigate them into receptive circumstances.



Benjamin determines two points of emphasis by which artworks are received: firstly the cultic value, a magic imbued on the artwork by the artist perhaps for no audience save the gods. Secondly, he describes the display value or *displayability* (ibid), this is the manner by which the artwork comes by its audience. In the development of photography Benjamin imagines the first shift change in industrial reproducibility of the artwork and sees the shift from cult value to display value as both inevitable and irretrievable. Yet he claims that 'in the cult of recalling absent or dead loved ones, the cultic value of the image finds its last refuge'. The aura is retained by the presence of the human face.

Barthes conceives that the photograph has a duality of form, first the general theme, scene or setting, which he calls the *stadium* and which he characterises as the property which attracts him to the image (Barthes, 1981:26). He couples this to a second element, that which disturbs the *stadium*, the piercing *punctum* - a 'sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice' (ibid:27). This second element he describes as a detail in the photograph which attracts him, something that for him marks the photograph with a higher value.

Here a mother and daughter sob over the father's arrest ..., and this happens out in the countryside (where could they have learned the news? for whom are these gestures?). Here, on a torn-up pavement, a child's corpse under a white sheet; parents and friends stand around it, desolate: a banal enough scene, unfortunately, but I noted certain interferences: the corpse's one bare foot, the sheet carried by the weeping mother (why this sheet?). (ibid:23)

The *punctum* has the power of expansion, whilst it remains a detail it 'fills the whole picture' (ibid:45). It is what remains when the image is out of view.

When I read these texts I imagine two men in quiet contemplation of the photographic image, perhaps stood before a framed picture on a wall, or leafing through a book. Even as Benjamin reflects on the mechanical reproduction of the artwork he is unaware that in half a century or less words and images might be perfectly reproduced, with negligible cost, in the blink of an eye.

In the contemporary flow of imagery, where we enter 'the fluid substance of the image' (Baudrillard, 2002:177), I cannot un-see the repeating image of the

body of Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach; replicating through television, newspaper photo stories and again and again on social network feeds. This image finds itself interspersed between pictures of friends celebrating and funny or cruel memes. It becomes impossible to put down or separate. As it reappears – posted on Facebook by algorithm, and as an accidental result of other concerned citizens signing an on-line petition in support of Syrian refugees - I find myself physically turning away from my devices as I scroll to escape. Each version of the photograph is surrounded by the other graphical elements of the news programme or the social feed. This returns us to the contemplation of radical juxtaposition we are alerted to by Sontag in her description of the Happenings, the shock of the unexpected from repeated exposure to a *meta-punctum*, the detail within the detail. Yet even this is another form of digital ephemera, one year on and that image is replaced with another, this time of another war child thankfully alive. Furthermore, the radical juxtaposition experienced through the viewing of a digital object might be that of a glitch, an uncreated image, perhaps instanced by a breakdown in the video stream or an emoji which fails to be rendered correctly on the recipient's device. Here the punctum is created entirely through the perception of the viewer, the author is not only dead but entirely absent.

Baudrillard suggests that in imagery the turn to the digital sacrifices the very idea of gaze in the Lacanian conception of the light from the object meeting the light from the gaze. Yet if we re-read Lacan's statement

The world is all-seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic – it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too (Lacan, 1998:75)

Thus, we might say that the co-shaping of our world through the mediation of our screens *is* exhibitionistic, and provokes our gaze sometimes through an abrupt *punctum* in its chimeric contexts.

In considering Benjamin's notion of the 'withering' aura of the mechanically reproduced work, and aligning this with Heidegger's ideas of the constantly

changing essence of technology, which serves to 'enframe' or set in place the fabric of the world, Rutsky writes:

The aesthetic can no longer be figured in the traditional terms of aura and wholeness, nor in the modernist terms of instrumentality and functionality. Like technology, it too comes to be seen as an unsettling, generative process, which continually breaks elements free of their previous context and recombines them in different ways.  
(Rutsky, 1999:7)

Technology cannot simply serve as a window into an already physically present world without changing our perception of it, whether because of our familiarity (or lack of familiarity) with the technology used, or through the peculiar representation of the world that technology offers. Digital technology presents a constantly changing, multi-stable spectacle which threatens to overwhelm, yet, with intentionality and an understanding of the affordances on offer there is the promise of human connection.

Barthes remarks of the punctum that it is 'what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*' (Barthes, 1981:55). That is to say that this piercing element which reveals itself to us also comes from us, and therefore that in our disclosing of it we reveal of ourselves.

### 4.3 Making Meaning

To set ourselves the task of investigating (at least in part) communication through our mediated, networked devices – we might begin to illustrate this exchange with the idea of text, defined here by what sociologist M A K Halliday refers to as ‘the instances of linguistic interaction in which people actually engage’ (Halliday, 1994:108). This is an operational rather than citational context (a conversation rather than a shopping list). It is here that the exchange occurs between words and ideas – the words activating ideas in a process of generation and regeneration: ‘At those moments, ideas intersect, intermingle at the level of the word’ (Baudrillard, 2003:x).

Halliday remarks that a text is at its root a ‘choice’ – a selection of ‘what is meant’ from the total range of possibilities presented of what *can* be meant, going on to describe text as ‘actualized meaning potential’ (Halliday, 1994:109). He points to Malinowski’s early work in meaning and indicates that the keys to rendering the meaning of text are the contexts of *culture* (the semantic system of language<sup>117</sup>) and *situation* (the environment in which the ‘text comes to life’). It is important to note that socio-linguistically the situational context is generally an abstract representation of the environment, rather than a literal encapsulation of the circumstances of utterance. The situation is generally regarded as a ‘social context’ (ibid) or particular situation *type*. In sociolinguistics this construction has three component parts that of field, tenor and mode.

Field refers to the ongoing activity and the particular purposes that the use of language is serving within the context of that activity; tenor refers to the interrelations among the participants (status and role relationships) (ibid:62)

Mode refers to the channel of communication adopted: not only the choice between spoken and written medium<sup>118</sup> but much more detailed choices [we might add: ‘and other choices relating to the role of Language in the situation’] (ibid:33)

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<sup>117</sup> Halliday suggests that interpreting meaning potential as a function of the entire semantic system of language is a fiction, and dismisses its value as a useful descriptor.

<sup>118</sup> And by extension, SMS and video conference

These components are used as a conceptual framework to represent the social context in which meaning is exchanged. Vitrally, these situational components surround and inform conversation and are considered key to decoding its meaning, moreover our interpretation of them is largely unconscious. In mediated engagement it may be that that situational context is disrupted due to a lack of clarity of field and tenor, and the mode – the way the text is delivered – is of course now, at least in part, technologically situated. In the mediated one-to-one encounters in this practice the conceptual containers of field and tenor are filled during the encounter itself. In particular, in the cases of *Small Talk*'s SMS conversations much of the meaning making structure outlined here is functionally absent. Additionally, with the framing of the conversation in the context of an arts project, the participants' notions of mode and tenor are in constant flux as they negotiate the terms of engagement through the conversation itself.

In meaning making we will fill the gaps ourselves. Baym draws our attention to this by way of the phenomenon of *hyperpersonal communication* which she encapsulates so:

When people meet one another online, especially in media with few identifying cues, they often seem to like one another more than they would if they had met in person. (Baym, 2012:126)

Tracing Walther's original research on the subject (Walther, 1996), she outlines three ways in which this phenomenon might be explained, certainly in the early stages of building relations. Firstly that sparse cues leave a great deal of room for imagining the Other, second, that we might appear more attractive to others online precisely because sparse cues give us selective control over what we disclose and finally that reduced cue environments encourage us to concentrate more on message production, that we create better messages (ibid:126-127).

What is interesting here in terms of performance making, is the notion that we might be more imaginative in our conjuring of the Other's attributes in an environment constructed from these sparse cues. This represents an opportunity for imaginative play:

When you're texting a stranger you immediately get in your head a picture of them. Then the picture changes constantly as they're revealing more of themselves. And I quite enjoyed that, there's something really nice about that. (Participant Feedback, *Small Talk 24*, 2015)

*Small Talk* participants rarely gave out personal information that might identify their gender or age, which appeared to be a conversational tactic to increase their enjoyment of the piece.

[We were] ... swapping quite personal bits of information, which is the point at which conversations with strangers become really exciting to me: how much will i reveal - and how much does this person think i'm revealing? how much are they revealing? i (sic) really enjoyed building up a mental picture of the person i was chatting to - gender, physique, ethnicity, all probably quite wrong - and also not giving or receiving any of that kind of information.  
(Participant Feedback, *Small Talk Forensic*, 2015)

Here, *Small Talk* offers an opportunity for its participants to play a game with performative identity. To make *choices* in the things they wish to expose about themselves in order to curate how they might appear, yet at the same time under no illusions as to how little control they have in that identity's interpretation, particularly via this lean media. The fragmentary nature of the personalities on show in these exchanges is revealed but at the same time revelled in.

I thought that it was incredibly interesting that you thought I was a boy and that I thought you were a girl. Probably you're just projecting yourself. Sometimes I think you thought I was being quite rude, but you just got the emphasis wrong ... I think the way we read texts tells us more about ourselves than each other. (Participant Feedback, *Small Talk*, 2015)

In this particular conversation our guesses of each other's gender were quite different to those we present in the real world - a common thread in the project - suggesting that our understanding of each other in these conversations is *perceptibly* coloured by our own projection and imagination. Yet within these conversations where the stakes are low because there are few - if any - real world consequences, a fluidity in the understanding of each other can be appreciated. Indeed, after revealing our gender to each other (that I was male, and the participant female) a peculiar tension was felt by both, until passing

comments either accidentally or tactically revealed that we were both already in stable relationships<sup>119</sup>.

... you sent me a text saying something about your fiancée, which made me more relaxed on that point ... I mentioned I had a boyfriend, maybe slightly on purpose when you were a boy. Then I was quite relaxed about it again, when I knew we both knew we were in relationships. (Participant Feedback, *Small Talk*, 2015)

Playfulness is embraced until it hits a socio-cultural boundary wall, in this case a potential for sexual tension between individuals who were becoming intimates through mediated conversation. Once clarified, the stakes were changed and play returned.

In *Conversation Piece* some participants imagined the other as an orchestrator or performer as they began to frame the piece within a performance context. Once it became clear that this was not the case, that both participants were experiencing something novel, a different social construction emerged, which shifted the nature of their engagement into an essentially collaborative mode, which was frequently described as bringing them closer to each other<sup>120</sup>.

I didn't know that the person on the other end also didn't know [what was going on] either ... So, in a sense it felt like we were in it together. We were trying to work out what was going on. (Participant Feedback, *Conversation Piece*, 2015)

Being 'in it together' is the field and tenor of participant engagement in both *Conversation Piece* and *Small Talk*, and participants discovery of their agency in shaping the conversation appears to encourage an openness to personal disclosure and a largely positive involvement with the Other.

As we have seen technology has been characterised as potentially a barrier in human interaction, yet it can also enable social action. One participant

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<sup>119</sup> Here the implication of a stable ongoing relationships with our (unseen) partners seemed to be as much a key to this relaxation of tension as any presupposition of gender binary or heteronormativity. It was in the taking off the virtual table the possibility for a particular quality of flirting or other sexually motivated activity that reclaimed the safe, playful space.

<sup>120</sup> Similarly, in the early *CAVE* pieces, participants noted that when they experienced technical issues or when they were unsure of what to do next they engaged with each other to find a response, which brought them closer together.

described herself as generally shy and awkward around new people but found the technological mediation of her encounter helped her feel relaxed and the social situation unforced. Reflecting on the experience, she suggested this might be because she could escape easily (should the need arise), and that compared to similar, unmediated, circumstances she felt less embarrassed and experienced less pressure to make conversation. Baym cites an example of one couple's experience, where their online likability exceeded their compatibility in the flesh.

She and he exchanged emails filled with literary passages and dreams. But when they finally met, they realized they could only "speak in emails" (Baym, 2012:127).

This highlights the potential for intimate encounters that can *only* play out well in a mediated space, rather than seeing mediation as a prelude to a perceived reality of face-to-face.

The multistability of our communications devices renders complex the environment we enter into when engaging with each other through them. Such devices (computers, smartphones, tablets) make it possible to switch between many communicative applications quickly. Nancy Baym suggests that when we shift attention like this we might describe our activity as performing oneself differently in each open window. Via this metaphoric framing device made literal, Baym reiterates what other scholars have noted, that with digital mediation the idea that 'each body gets one self' is disrupted (ibid:105). Not only that it is possible to perform oneself differently via different media (in and through different windows) it is inevitable. Redefining identity as representing 'the aspect of the self that is accessible and salient in a particular context and that interacts with th[at] environment' (Turkle quoted in Baym, 2012:107). The individual, empowered by computerised and networked technology, becomes a decentred self - performing 'different roles at the same time' (ibid). This is made clear during the group operation of *Small Talk*<sup>121</sup>, as performers become conscious of themselves switching personality *potentials* between different

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<sup>121</sup> In the experiments *Small Talk 24* and *Small Talk Forensic*.



conversations in the web app. Further, for those who ‘swapped shifts’, who came away from a conversation before it ended or joined one in progress, they felt a responsibility in that particular performance of themselves. In one hand over between Rebecca and Erin, Rebecca felt the need for a de-brief before she passed the conversation on, feeling ‘like it should be the same person they were talking to’. Erin, taking over the conversation, found herself feeling ‘[g]uilty and scared of slipping up’. Here a perceived rift in the rules of social engagement begin to significantly influence the participant’s experience of the encounter, as the perception of their own authenticity becomes problematized.

Baym signals that ‘the most important identity signal may be ones name’ (ibid:109) and that ‘an authentic name may be required for trust’ (ibid). However, taking this statement as an absolute comes with its own problems. Facebook, the dominant social network, has recently been quite insistent that users comply with this notion; a heavy handed edict which conflicts with a developing, and perhaps more nuanced, view of multiple ‘windows’ on a complex performance of self. Facebook has rigidly adopted the concept that a user’s real name is synonymous with authenticity – operating in accord with its CEO’s view that ‘Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity’ (Zuckerberg quoted in Zimmer, 2010:online). In particular the site has come under fire for forcing drag queens and other performers to change their profile names to their ‘authentic’ real names, names which many of their fans and social groups don’t even recognise. Whilst this conflict has some of its roots in purely commercial territories,<sup>122</sup> there are valid concerns for users of this extensive social media system who wish to be circumspect about who has access to their given name<sup>123</sup>. Furthermore, the limitation of presenting ‘real names’ as a key measure of authenticity in virtual environments - where we write ourselves into being - marks a significant restriction on the potentiality of

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<sup>122</sup> Facebook offers different practical entities for users (people) and performers (pages) with different parameters and costs for engagement with other members of the site.

<sup>123</sup> Many examples spring to mind, but as a start: LGBTQ users of the service who may have revealed their sexual orientation only to a subset of their friends and family, or users who may be survivors of domestic abuse and seeking support through social networks.

mediated performativity. The very nature of the digital universe itself throws into confusion the notion of a known true name being the hallmark of a singular individual. Gabriella Coleman writes of the online activist group Anonymous that

... it is believed that many different individuals and groups have taken up the moniker [of Anonymous], making it an apt example of what media scholar Marco Deseriis describes as a “multiple use name” (Coleman, 2015:39)

Deseriis’ research traces the multiple use name as one of the components of a number of developing and disruptive strategies of modern avant-garde artist/activists<sup>124</sup>. He dwells upon the activities of the Luther Blissett Project, active in Italy between 1994 and 2000, in which hundreds of individuals and groups identified themselves as Luther Blissett in a variety of public interventions. He notes the use of a single identity to mask a hidden multitude is not entirely novel, citing the Mail Art movement of the 1960s as one precursor, but emphasises the impact new technologies have on both the logistics of collaboration and the mass reach of this type of composite identity. He argues that such tactics are

... not primarily aimed at undermining power or demystifying the Spectacle, but at affirming the constitution of new forms of subjectivity springing from within the social bios (Deseriis, 2011:82)

In other words, that this approach constitutes a new mechanism of challenge to existing power structures, a re-writing of notions of narrative causality by the creation of a composite yet singular identity which can operate outside existing cultural and social norms.

Within *Small Talk* participants’ names came up rarely in conversation, signalling that engagement was between the participants’ personalities as co-created through their interaction with each other, rather than with a potentially

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<sup>124</sup> Deseriis writes extensively of the guerilla-communications techniques of the Luther Blissett Project and many others that followed such as Liabach/NSK, The Yes Men, 0100101110101101.ORG. He includes a broad analysis of the various cultural and political stances such groups occupy, in particular regarding how they position themselves within the struggle of renegotiation of power, labour and value in the modern world (Deseriis, 2011).

arbitrary interpretation of a given name. Participants of the multi-actor *Small Talk* projects were painfully aware of what they perceived as their own collusion in an untrue identity when this implicit one-to-one contract was transgressed by a “handing over” from one participant to another.

Noteworthy here, is that in the lean mediation of *Small Talk* true names were rarely exchanged, whilst in the audio/visual experience of *Conversation Piece* most participants offered their name as part of their initial encounter. When we know nothing about each other the process of discovery can be extended and enjoyed, whilst in mediated encounters with more sense data social norms re-assert themselves and we adjust our behaviour accordingly.

Mediated encounters have been described as experienced via transforms of the senses yet this coding may not have a one-to-one equivalence. Susan Kozel raises issues of renegotiating embodiment through a mediated interface that channels only one sense. She describes how, in her performances in Sermon’s *Telematic Dreaming*,<sup>125</sup> the movement of her body was entirely mediated through sight. So, should she lose track of the monitors that showed the location of her virtual self (and that of her virtual companion) all sense of interactivity disappeared. She suggests that ‘[w]hen interaction is dependent upon one sense, it becomes inherently fragile’ (Kozel, 2007:100). In *Conversation Piece* we discovered a similar but distinct property of the hybrid media space: where Kozel lost all sense of the embodied connection when she no longer had the monitor in view, turning away from our screen did not break the connection. Rather, the act of stepping out of the camera’s eye view severs the sense of a shared presence. When I saw my digital companion walk off screen they vanished more completely than had they walked out of a room. When a body leaves a shared location in material space, I recognise that there is a sense of their receding presence, perhaps an unconscious notion that should you run out of the door you would still encounter them walking away. In the telematically mediated space of a video conference stepping out of view

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<sup>125</sup> See appendix A.1.1.3 of this thesis

collapses the ‘nearly here’ and ‘nearly now’ and reifies the physical distance between the parties. It becomes clear that in these mediated video encounters the split-second cutting off of the connection triggered by equipment failure or a mistimed flick of the off-switch can disturb face-to-face notions of endings. Notions of civility, or at least good practice, in the enacting of goodbyes are interrupted, jarring participants out of the intimacy of conversation and into a different mode altogether<sup>126</sup>.

At the same time, this type of engagement with the hybrid space opens opportunities for exploration and an understanding of the way mediation co-shapes our perception. In one *Conversation Piece* encounter, participants became curious as to what differences and symmetries might be contained in the two rooms – in particular what was there that couldn’t be seen by the other. Like searching for your image in the edge of a mirror, what is off-screen represents something unsee-able, yet for them was made available through another’s description. Through the digital coding of senses, new opportunities for making choices as to how we engage with the space are exposed. In the *CAVE* experiment Tiia and Amy chose to close their eyes and listen for each other’s breath, Amy experienced the sound as coming from all around her, in her words: ‘it made us feel really close, even though we were really far apart’. It is in these unexpected engagements that new affordances of technological mediation are revealed.

One of our participants, in his thirties and with extensive experience of interactions using digital mediation, describes how he and his wife might use Skype to simply *be with* each other when they’re half a world apart:

If I’m on a Skype call or doing a telepresence thing with somebody I know pretty well, like yourself or for example my wife, when she’s [away] we

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<sup>126</sup> The process of ending the SMS conversations was also loaded with confusing signals. Some participants ended their conversation with polite expressions of thanks, others disappeared “ghosting” their partner. As previously mentioned Maddy Costa, participating in *Small Talk (Forensic)*, found the sudden end of the project a dramatic shift in the nature of her conversation, forcing her to reevaluate what had gone before. This serves as a reminder that the negotiation of endings, and perhaps all nexus points, in virtual relations are complicated by the medium and may not follow what might be regarded as typical patterns.

might hang out for an hour without saying much, just hanging out together. (Participant Feedback, *Conversation Piece*, 2015)

This signals again that the individual's experience of mediated relations is perhaps not best understood as the transformation and transmission of a coherent coding of sense data. Instead, mediated perception might be characterised as fragmentary and partial, with a peculiar intentionality that is influenced by circumstance, usage and representation. Technologies of connectivity reveal the situated and partial perspective of *all* perception, as Donna Haraway argues

The 'eyes' made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific *ways* of seeing, that is, ways of life. (Haraway, 1991:190)

In this sense, telematic systems do not operate as mediating devices for the senses, but instead offer a different quality of perception through them, that technologies of communication should perhaps be seen as co-creating new relations between humans, rather than as partial copies of existing modalities. Kozel, in her phenomenological analysis of artworks such as Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming* (1992), refers to an interpretation of the experience as

... revealing how the human senses of intimacy and physical connection are dependent on playing across what is revealed and what is concealed, rather than simply on what is visually displayed. (Kozel, 2007:86)

When participants of *Conversation Piece* described feelings of connectedness or intimacy they rarely dwelt on the technology used, which they generally observed as being somewhat like Skype or Facetime. The visual acuity of the telepresence representation appears to make less of a contribution to qualities of presence or absence than the relations between participants. When Aaron describes leaving the Skype connection to his wife open, even though it may be unwatched by either of them, the fact that the connection is there at all contributes to his ongoing belief in her presence. However, when he reflects on moving out of the camera view during *Conversation Piece* he describes feeling as though this action "broke you out of the moment"; bringing relations

between the participants into crisis. Each technology of mediation creates different modes of presence and absence, different mechanisms to reveal and conceal<sup>127</sup>.

Ihde has highlighted the appearance and growth in dissemination, over the past century or so, of technologically mediated visual and audio stimulation - a pervasive combination of diverse audio/visual stimuli: such as broadcast TV, film, adverts, our own recordings and self-mediation. He observes that this mono- and bi-sensory primacy has normalised our mediated experience: that 'the audio/visual has become deeply sedimented in our seeing/hearing and is taken for granted in our experience' (Ihde, 2002:8). But Ihde is not calling for a re-privileging of Cartesian senses considered ill-served by technological mediation, rather this argument is de facto illustrative of just how far the technological-possible is from what Ihde describes (with a certain amount of distaste) as the 'ultimate goal' of virtual embodiment 'to become the perfect simulacrum of full, multisensory bodily action'<sup>128</sup> (ibid:7). He argues instead:

... nor do we show ourselves directly as representations or images or pure objects. Rather, it is in the interactions, in the mutual questioning and interacting of the world and ourselves, in the changing patterns of the lifeworld that things become clear. (ibid:86)

The participants of the telematic encounter *Conversation Piece* did not report longing for a better simulated sensorial experience – 'the fact they were in front of me was enough that they were in the room with me' (Participant Feedback, *Conversation Piece*, 2015). Instead their curiosity was in their engagement with

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<sup>127</sup> These various experiences of revealing and concealing and how they relate to presence might also be valuably considered in terms of what Fisher refers to as the weird and the eerie. Tackling Freud's notion of the *unheimlich* (often translated into English as uncanny, a translation which Fisher deprecates, preferring the word unhomely), he divides the concept into two quite different experiences. Weird, he claims, is the perception of something 'which does not belong' (Fisher, 2016:10) citing the tendency of surrealism to use montage in order to invoke such a feeling (in much the same mode as Sontag refers to the radical shock of juxtaposition). The eerie, on the other hand, is found 'more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human' (ibid:11), and this he claims is more fundamentally tied up with notions of agency 'What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all?' In the examples of telematic artworks above, there may be a weirdness experienced in the juxtaposed image of a remote reality, or an eeriness which becomes manifest when one party steps away from the camera and out of the perceptual reach of the other.

<sup>128</sup> Referring perhaps to Kurzweil's notions of fully immersive virtual reality, mentioned earlier.

each other. Similarly, in the SMS encounter, participants described their enjoyment in their negotiation of a new and temporary relationship with one and other through a sparsely cued mode. Participants make meaning through playful interaction and through both creative and banal manipulations of the technological affordances on offer. Theatrical context operates as a component of the scaffolding that facilitates the participants playful interaction. In the context of the video conference piece scenic design and a cueing mechanic dramaturgically curate the playing space, in the more challenging environment of the SMS piece it seems enough that the context is an arts project.

Paul Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming* (1992) deliberately utilised a bedroom as its material set, which inevitably coded the space with a series of socialised behaviours to be acknowledged, abided by or transgressed. In her phenomenological account of performing in that work Susan Kozel writes

Banal sexual responses, such as grabbing and poking, were not open to a new vocabulary of movement since they fell into a sort of automatic code of behavior. And they were basically very boring. Sometimes I wanted to get rid of the bed, to see how the technology would work in a physical context that was not immediately recognizable so that a new social and movement vocabulary could be created. (Kozel, 2007:102)

In coding the space in this particular way Sermon's intention is to overwhelm intellectual reflection on the technical systems in play, allowing its participants to instead immerse themselves in the sensorial experience. Kozel calls for new spaces to work in, outside of existent psychological coding, whilst also reflecting that before reengineering our movement and cultural vocabulary an understanding of that which is already in place must first be attempted.

She quotes Walser:

... the spacemaker can never hope to communicate a particular reality, but only to set up opportunities for certain kinds of realities to emerge. The filmmaker says, "look I'll show you." The spacemaker says, "Here I'll help you discover". (Walser quoted in Kozel, 2007:103)

Walser is here talking of the infinite possibility of digital manipulation within the frame of a virtual reality, setting this conception against the fixed viewpoint and

timeline created by the filmmakers camera-eye view. In *Telematic Dreaming*, Kozel - herself operating through the fixed viewpoint of another camera – makes space through her own agency and through the embodiment of her projected image which she perceives interacting with the Other via monitors which transmit real-time images of the other room. In this case the intentionality of the camera is no impediment to discovery, because here the construction of the space is communicative – by its interactive affordances it becomes not a space for showing but for finding.

Yet still, this system is characterised by an asymmetry. Kozel operates as performer in a brightly lit room (so the camera can adequately capture her image) and observes her interactivity with the participant on a series of monitors where her image and that of the participant are doubled. In the other room, the participant enjoys the illusion of being in the same bed with the performer. The theatre of this particular encounter hides the technological mechanics for the participant, but makes them very apparent to the performer.

In contrast, for the participants in *Conversation Piece* the spaces in which the experience takes place are broadly symmetrical. Each room is similarly configured with the “set” of the performance. There is a table, a chair, and the materials for making sandwiches and tea in both spaces. Where technology is used it is neither hidden nor is attention drawn to it. In both rooms there is a physically large screen upon which the representation of the other space is projected. Rather than embody themselves as an avatar on screen, participants instead inhabit the hybrid space conscious of both their partial perception of the Other and also that their own representation is experienced by their partner as also partial: ‘the virtual subject is multiple, not identical’ (Ihde, 2002:85). As participants interact with each other, and grasp the technological formation on offer, they take their own presence in the Other’s room for granted through an assumption of symmetry. The user of the system subconsciously accepts remediation of their own presence in the remote room through their belief in the liveness of the representation of the Other in their own. No matter how they perceived the space of the encounter their description emphasised a



coming together of individuals: 'like being in this bubble' (Suzie), 'like [we] were in the same room' (Matt), 'like we just had our two little blocks that are glued together' (Ethan).

In deploying the technology symmetrically a key intention was to create a simulation of eye contact. Positioning the camera and screen such that when looking at each other's image, we are also looking at their camera. This technological "fix" had the desired result, that of the participants feeling a closeness with their partner, but for surprising reasons. One reported that 'there was more room for your eyes to wander, because you haven't got that eye contact' (Jessica), another thought that the positioning maintained eye contact and that 'it really did make the experience more intimate. Definitely.' (Aaron).

The digital spaces of encounter constructed for both *Conversation Piece* and *Small Talk* are social spaces in which the technology emphasises the affordances on offer. Those taking part understand implicitly their fragile and partial nature, that technology is mediating their experience of their partner, and by being immersed in the conversation an awareness of their own mediation becomes exposed. Theatrical staging can activate different modes of operation compared with those used in the everyday, particularly in regard to generating understanding and complicity between participants.

We must make our freedom by cutting holes in the fabric of this reality, by forging new realities which will, in turn, fashion us. Putting yourself in new situations constantly is the only way to ensure that you make your decisions unencumbered by the inertia of habit, custom, law, or prejudice—and it is up to you to create these situations. Freedom only exists in the moment of revolution.  
(CrimethInc, 2015:online)

#### 4.4 Revisiting the wide angle lens

It is perhaps one of the ironies of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that, in a time when relentless individualism is lauded by the politicking of the prevailing late-capitalism orthodoxy, the digital presentation of the self into the world finds its template in rigid structures created by corporations to objectify and commoditise that very individual. In this the networked individual presents a curious conundrum. Paradoxically the very mechanisms of connection often serve to separate and segregate us from each other, rather than to bring us together. Much of our social and commercial interaction is built around a conflation and commodification of services and personal data, driven on rails designed under the systemic interference of a capitalist, ideological value system. We become individuals operating within the network:

In incorporating gadgets into their lives, people have changed the ways they interact with each other. They have become increasingly networked as individuals, rather than embedded in groups. In the world of networked individuals, it is the person who is the focus: not the family, not the work unit, not the neighborhood, and not the social group.  
(Rainie & Wellman, 2012:6)

This mechanistic atomisation of the individual is thus set against a desire for community and connection. In what she describes as a technological ideology, sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman indicates her interpretation of the traversal of liberal philosophy from a Renaissance understanding of organic

interconnectedness to a modern mechanical metaphor. Through a process of separation and compartmentalisation society becomes ideologically framed as just so many interchangeable parts. This, she argues, is a setting into place of a multiply layered series of social roles and obligations between which we relentlessly oscillate. 'We carry these separate selves around, experiencing not only the compartmentalization between people, but *within* ourselves as well' (Rothman, 1990:35). But the 'culture of separation' (ibid) cannot extinguish all signs of the physical connectedness of the embodied human,

... we have in every pregnant woman the living proof that individuals do not enter the world as autonomous, atomistic, isolated beings, but begin socially, begin connected. (ibid)

Through the network, and via its underpinnings of capital, a wealth of information is at our fingertips. Although in order to access that very information, through both the discovery process of the algorithmic search and within the very content itself, data is spun and framed by multiple opaque criteria. What is presented to us through search or social platforms is determined by unknown algorithms, which not only take as their input potentially unreliable meta-data attached to the information itself, but is also shaped by the commercially driven engine that has processed it. This has raised criticism that such blunt data filtering and shaping might isolate or silo people into 'information bubbles only partly of their own choosing' (Resnick et al., 2013:95), contributing to already widely known effects such as confirmation bias. There are arguments for developing proactive mechanisms that might be employed to 'provide subtle nudges that encourage individuals to choose diverse exposure' (ibid:97).

The practice developed here represents an opportunity to surprise ourselves, to step out of the constricted marketplace of the silos of the social networks and into a different type of conversation with the Other. This opportunity uses the tools of the network to regain the small talk of Ling's bus queue or waiting room (Ling, 2004:190)<sup>129</sup>, whilst still exerting a degree of agency and privacy offered

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<sup>129</sup> Referred to on pages 5 and 157 in this thesis.

by the technology over the face-to-face. The possibility of a turn to the unexpected offered in an intimate encounter with a stranger is a draw of the one-to-one performance, and here it acts as a different texture to the mediated world of the day-to-day. It is here that theatrical design combines with technological design to create an opportunity in which sedimented rules of engagement might be revisited and reflected upon.

Information is presented as a new currency (see Mason, 2015; Jordan, 2015), and central to the monetisation of individual data is an exchange mechanism predicated in part on the generation of social capital, the value of which can fluctuate rapidly within the exchange system. Value and identity intertwine (another hybrid in an age characterised by interconnectedness) and are in turn affected by the environment they co-create reciprocally. In the context of broadcast transmission/reception Baudrillard describes the following as a truism: 'Monopoly capitalism develops the consciousness-shaping industry more quickly and more extensively than other sectors of production' (Enzensberger quoted in Baudrillard, 1981:278). However, the reach of the statement is extended rather than reduced once transmission is re-sited within the boundaries of multi-directional social distribution via SNS and other online messaging. It is only by stepping outside of the dominant systems, however temporarily, that their intentionality as well as their affordances are exposed. In this way it is possible to allow ourselves to engage in a constant exploration of the various mechanisms technology shapes our interaction with each other. McLuhan describes the way media determinism can creep up on us through

... the imposition willy-nilly of new cultural ground by the action of new technologies is only possible while the users are 'well-adjusted' – sound asleep ... there is no inevitability where there is a willingness to pay attention. (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1992:127-128)

In our day-to-day interactions with SNS and the wider web it is almost as though there is a return to a broadcast mode. Items of media may be crowd-sourced or re-appropriated from the more traditional broadcast paradigms (such as a clip from a TV show), but in the act of sharing this media becomes a distributed broadcast. That is to say, the memetic power of the payload can overload any

effects of conscious tinkering by the individual sender in all but a few cases. The over-stimulation promised by Baudrillard, Virilio and others is here generally realised. Leftist political theorist Jodi Dean describes activity within the network, and hence in the contemporary lifeworld, in terms of ‘super saturation of attention’ (Dean, 2012:143), quoting Beradi:

The acceleration produced by network technologies and the condition of precariousness and dependence of cognitive labor, forced as it is to be subject to the pace of the productive network, has produced a saturation of human attention which has reached pathological levels.  
(Beradi cited in *ibid*)

In the first two *Small Talk* experiments, exchanging hundreds of text messages with participants exposed the labour component of messaging, and the experience of conducting multiple conversations was both overwhelming and fragmentary. Similarly, during the writing of this thesis, I realised that in order to maintain sufficient and continuous levels of concentration necessary to do the work, I needed to significantly reduce my engagement with the distractions of SNSs and the Internet. The cognitive drain exposed by both these activities was surprising, in particular the use of SNSs which I would previously have characterised as being relatively, if not completely, benign<sup>130</sup>.

Such exhaustion might profitably be viewed in the light of ego depletion, a hypothesis that suggests ‘that some internal resource is used by the self to make decisions, respond actively, and exert self-control’ (Baumeister et al., 1998:1263). Experimental research on both humans and animals suggests that the quality of decision-making in a given instant is at least partially dependant on how many choices had previously been made by the subject, and further that

... a broad assortment of actions make use of the same resource. Acts of self-control, responsible decision making, and active choice seem to interfere with other such acts that follow soon after. (*ibid*)

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<sup>130</sup> There may be a similarity in the development of this “labour of likes” to the progression of the twentieth century workers’ leisure time from time absent from the pressures of work, into a working time in which the labour of consumerism is pursued.

Also described as decision fatigue, it is marked by a longer duration of effect than that of attention fatigue. Whilst studies of depletion in both attention and decision-making have illustrated a limited supply of an inner resource in both, depletion of attention occurs only during the time of preoccupation, demonstrates a swift recovery pattern and rapidly returns to a baseline level after concentration is lifted. In contrast ego-depletion involves lasting resource-depletion effects (Vohs et al., 2014:896).

Allying this concept with the multiplicity of choices implicit in the activities of social media seems a short step. Christine Rosen writes

... most of us have also suffered decision fatigue when faced with this proliferation of choices. Why this particular person, why now? We have always had to answer these questions, but never this often or on this scale. (Rosen, 2012:49)

When engaged in the projects *Conversation Piece* and the later, unbound instance of *Small Talk*, the experience felt like a gentle and focussed engagement operating outside of the task-switching stream of the everyday. This was a theatrical approach based on the consideration of the connective sharing of time and place with the participants, discovering who we are in this place together (after McGrath)<sup>131</sup>. Discovering that taking time or energy to engage with the person behind the representation, regardless of the form, is in itself a form of resistance. In a discussion on the power imbalances at the core of the technological meeting places of social networks, Verbeek writes:

Rather than developing tactics to counter the strategies of dominating powers, citizens in a technological world should develop techniques to give a desirable shape to their technologically mediated existence. (Verbeek, 2013:78)

Contingent on the growth of telecommunications technology, implicit changes in information topology generate a new ideological formation where elements of both capitalism and democracy intensify. Informational access and public participation in particular are reified in networks. This convergence is described

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<sup>131</sup> See page 17 of this thesis

by Dean as *communicative capitalism* and it is within this formation that she claims 'we build the trap that captures us' (Dean, 2012:124). This is systemic structural oppression created for us by us, hung on a scaffolding built by capital out of control of its own algorithmic creations. Here, there is a shift away from capitalism's dependence on the exchange value of the commodity-thing, rather 'It directly exploits the social relation at the heart of value' (ibid:129). As we have noted before, capital has the ability to colonise technology-use like a cuckoo, displacing connections to people with connections to commerce. In remembering again to frame the purpose of technology as human connectivity, we allow our own intentionality to re-colonise it.

Fischer considers a collapse in categories of information and value:

Work and life become inseparable. Capital follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions. As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems (Fisher, 2009:34)

Setting up a direct interplay of perceived and frequently wildly fluctuating<sup>132</sup> information value based on networked connections, between individuals as organisational units in an information marketplace, it is the ideology which sets in place a mechanisation of social spaces rather than the technology. Paul Mason explains as part of his conception of *postcapitalism*, information value is largely guesswork, not calculated from known exchange-value but extrapolated from untested potential and arm-waving estimations of risk (Mason, 2015). This represents an intentionality of technology wrested out of balance by a dominant ideology. Yet a recalibration of value is both possible and necessary.

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<sup>132</sup> It appears commonplace that such fluctuations in the value of networked assets and capital are seemingly based on hunch in immature markets untethered to any clearly monetisable processes. The dot-com crash and market valuations of social networks pay clear testament to this. Indeed, rather than problematize the consequences of the major social media platforms being built upon an infrastructure dependent entirely on advertising revenue, Fuchs suggests that 'Social media was founded as an ideology aimed at convincing finance capitalists to invest in Internet companies once again, and in so doing to attract advertising clients' (C. Fuchs, 2015:144), that this social communications revolution was predicated on a need to figure out mechanisms to attract skittish capital after the 2000 dot com crash.

It is claimed that technology demystifies the world by way of its power of organisation – the very technology of technologies – which removes any *magical* value from the commodity, whilst simultaneously commoditising the social and obliterating the human (Vaneigen, 2006:83-87). It is in the final step of this process that it is realised that the automated systems operate most efficiently without any human involvement at all. ‘That all consumption takes time is in fact the bane of a consumer society’ (Bauman, 2004:25), for the efficient transaction of value exchange (whatever that value may be) in its perfect execution allows for no moment of reflection. However, inside the alienation arguments proposed by Vaneigen and Dean (and others), there is also the kernel of an exit strategy – one which seeks to liberate the technology apparatus by ‘snatching it from the hands of rulers and specialists’ (Vaneigen, 2006:87). This charges us with the task of re-socialising and re-humanising these means of connection outside their role as a means of production. Or perhaps to use the means of production to construct a new system of value. To emancipate the networked individual by activating a different quality and by re-energising the human potential for action, for mobilization, for community. Debord, in his ‘Theses on Cultural Revolution’ (Debord writing in Knabb, 2006:53) describes the Situationist approach to viewing cultural activity as an experimental method for the construction of everyday life, and demands that

Art can cease to be a report on sensations and become a direct organization of higher sensations. It is a matter of producing ourselves, and not things that enslave us. (ibid)

In order to navigate away from the prevailing ideology of value equivalency, which itself struggles to cope with categories which operate counter to the mechanics of the market, it is perhaps necessary to recalibrate our mode of engagement with each other through digital systems. Rather than building Dean’s trap of *communicative capitalism* to instead find ways to build agency in the technological affordances through which we increasingly produce ourselves.

In his book *‘The Forest and the Field’*, theatre maker Chris Goode suggests ‘that acts of theatre, by necessity, create their own sense of place’ (Goode, 2015:45)



quoting Lyn Gardner's contention that 'theatre is an experience you have not a place you go' (Gardner quoted in *ibid*:44). He urges us to imagine theatre as both a colonising and transformative process by using the linguistic multiplicity implicit in the idea that theatre 'takes place':

... in other words, the transition by which something imagined or speculative comes through the acts of its realisation to be placed, and by which the site of that placing makes a similar transition. (*ibid*:106)

Transposing this notion to the network allows us to radically recolonize conceptions of what virtual places are and can be. As we observed in the previous chapter 'the notion of "place" has become so multi-faceted it shimmers' (Puthoff, 2006:75-76), and also that McGrath configures theatre as a place to ask the question of "what is it to be in this place, together?" In the telematic performance it is easy to construct the idea of the *place* of being together as a geographically distributed technological apparatus, but by using Goode's conception of theatre 'taking place' it is possible to re-imagine place as a social construction in which the relations of its inhabitants challenge and change its very nature. The telematic participants of *Conversation Piece* report that they take ownership of their social space, one suggesting that it is the moment they are left alone with each other that it becomes theirs. As Papacharissi reminds us in chapter 2 (2.1), socialisation through the affordances of networked spaces can invoke new possibilities and limits for the individual to appropriate. By taking on the space we make for ourselves in the mediated encounter between us we actualise its possibilities and claim it our own.

The rough construction of the networked individual as passively overwhelmed by stimulation and in need of activation might place us in the company of Jacques Rancière. He proposes the paradox of the spectator: that there is no theatre without the spectator, but that the spectator is 'separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act' (Rancière, 2009:2). In order to liberate the spectator he suggests the formation of a new theatre wherein the movements and actions of those on stage serve to mobilise the living bodies of the spectators allowing them to become 'active participants as opposed to

passive voyeurs' (ibid:4). He imagines this by way of an empathetic engagement of those that comprise the temporary community that takes hold in the act of theatre, and places this in opposition to passive observation of the illusion of spectacle. Rancière's emancipated spectator is therefore freed from the notion of the audience as a homogeneous bloc, instead participating in the performance by refashioning it in their own individual way (ibid:13).

Rancière's suggestion of an active co-creation of the performance reality by both performer and spectator, we might liken to the notion of the co-creation of our mediated relations. What's particularly interesting here is that in the everyday multiple on- (and off-) line performances-of-self, such categories shift dynamically moment-to-moment, as we find ourselves oscillating between actor and (active) spectator, between narrator and translator (of ourselves and others). In parallel to this the technology of the network implicitly (and simultaneously) brings together the two poles of spectatorship Rancière sets out: that of distanced investigation and vital participation. The networked individual is at once aware of the physical separation of distance<sup>133</sup> and of the intimacy of presence.

The combination of our own contributions to the network and the constant swell of information vying for our attention exists against (and is in part predicated on) a backdrop of a pervasive, default position of constant availability. The connective backbone operates on an endless loop of (often conflicting) drives; which propels the individual in different directions and issues multiple prompts for comment or reply, which then generate similar nodes for other networked individuals to engage with. Occasions for decision-making are frequent, which, as we have seen suggested, might take a biological and cognitive toll (Dean, 2012:144; Vohs et al., 2014:896). Žižek examines the fairy tale of the Red Shoes: In this Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale the poor, young woman at the centre of the story puts on magical shoes, which force her to

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<sup>133</sup> Although an awareness of the particular geographical distance is rarely remarked upon, the network having shrunk such separations to a much more 'uniform near-distance' (Ihde, 2010:82)

dance - nearly to her death. Žižek muses on this in the context of *drive* in the manner of Lacan (following Freud), and from here it serves as a nod in the direction of the contemporary mode of existence; replete with the pressures and stresses of continual availability and engagement, endorsed by the attention grabbing networks which operate 'without care for the (users) well-being' (Žižek, 2014:131). Yet this notion operates at the point of collision between an overwhelming configuration of automated stimulus and the fluent operation of available affordance. It is here that the intersection between humanity and network needs to discover its 'desirable shape' (Verbeek, 2013:78).

Marc Augé, in his construction of *supermodernity*, characterizes the technological age as one of excess; suggesting the acceleration of history generates the perception to the individual (and the historian) of an overabundance of events. Rather than the explicit historical dates of the Revolution or the fall of the Berlin Wall, information saturation and the commensurate intertwining of the individuals everyday life with that of the 'world system' creates, he claims, the experience of an overwhelming density of events which serves to rob individual events of all meaning (Augé, 1995:28). The seismic Event that constitutes the communication revolution generates a rise in microscopic events experienced in the sphere of the individual. Augé was writing nearly two decades ago, when his argument takes its lead from increased life expectancy expanding the collective, historical and genealogical memory: 'multiplying the occasions on which the individual can feel his own history intersecting with History' (ibid:29-30) and imagine that they are in some way connected. Through the information space of the network this effect is magnified, and we might characterise this as an acceleration of history. Connected to this acceleration of history is the appearance of a contraction of space - offered up by improved and faster travel links, live network coverage of distant events and instantaneous communication technologies. Both combine to collapse time. Rushkoff writes:

Our society has reoriented itself to the present moment. Everything is live, real time, and always-on. It's not a mere speeding up, however much our lifestyles and technologies have accelerated the rate at which we attempt to do things. It's more of a diminishment of anything which isn't happening right now – and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is. (Rushkoff, 2013:2)

In the info-glut of overabundance and excess, scarcity value is now accorded to an individuals' time, rather than products that might fill that time. It is also clear that scarcity value may be accorded to things that cannot be easily digitised (and hence reproduced and redistributed). In response to Paul Mason's dissection of the failures of capitalism to successfully operate in the current information age of the networked individual (such as the collapse of the link between wages and work, dissolution of distribution costs disrupting pricing mechanics, automation collapsing job markets or breakdowns in hierarchical structures of production) Marek Horn muses on the potential *theatre* of the postcapitalism world. He argues that within the socio-cultural matrix of a capitalism that no longer values things for their financial worth, but instead values the cultural originator: what could be

'... more valuable than an art form that has, built into its very mode of being, the idea that it should be created anew every time it is experienced and consumed?' (Horn, 2015:online).

This is to say that in a time of information abundance where many art forms - TV, film, literature, music - can be effortlessly duplicated and distributed for little or no cost, it is a reasonable suggestion that live performance retains (or increases) its value precisely because it cannot be. Which might remind us of Sontag's point regarding the implicitly anti-consumerist nature of the Happenings:

A painter or sculptor who makes Happenings does not make anything that can be purchased. One cannot buy a Happening; one can only support it. It is consumed on the premises. (Sontag, 1961:266)

Horn also rehearses classic arguments that theatre 'resists the tyranny of the simulacrum' (Horn, 2015:online), and notes that the 'Internet can reproduce sound, and light, and words and pictures. It cannot however reproduce space

and it cannot reproduce time' (ibid). Of course, as we have already seen, such macro arguments have a tendency to take the digital as a homogeneous lump: making grand claims about perfect reproduction of the digital object (the image, the film, the e-book) without considering the way such digital artefacts are experienced in the moment. As mass adoption of portable music players became a reality, so it became easier for theatre makers to adopt the technology and present audio walking tours and headphone theatre (Nedelkopoulou, 2011; Haydon, 2013:48-53). Far from being an idealised digital reproduction of an imagined, originating art form, headphone theatre activates a new configuration in spectatorship as '[t]he active audience find themselves in a dynamic exchange with absent performers' (Nedelkopoulou, 2011:122). In her paper, Nedelkopoulou describes examples of artist Janet Cardiff's trademark audio walks, which make use of binaural sound recordings to create a 3d experience of sound for the listener. She writes that the use of binaural technology activates a hybrid space of performance which is at once connected to the reality of the audience member's every-day, and the narrative reality of the headphone audio.

The audience's participation ... is not simply an instance of seeing, listening and strolling around the space, but an embodied experience that enwraps both the perceiving and the perceived; a holistic process of embodied absence. (ibid)

The use, or misuse, of a technology developed for the reproduction of music is here (mis)appropriated in the creation of new forms of theatre, another example of the wrong tool for the job creatively re-imagining a technology's affordances.

Rather than consider the network in regard to what it cannot do, we therefore explore what it can. Rowan Wilken has researched the use of mobile technologies to connect strangers in the context of art projects and argues for radical and inventive strategies in the use of mobile media tools. He suggests they might be reconceptualised as facilitating forms of 'haptic perception' (Wilken, 2010:464) which is to say we might reconfigure our engagement with communicative technology as exploratory as well as connective and community

building. In a fascinating footnote, Wilken points us in the direction of research conducted by Raul Pertierra regarding Filipinos' use of SMS. Pertierra discovered that 'most Filipinos readily agree to exchange text with strangers' (Pertierra quoted in *ibid*), and has argued that the national character of Filipinos encourages an individualism which can be expressed through mobile phone use:

[t]his individualism is expressed in the establishment of novel relations with strangers. Whereas the stranger is assiduously avoided in traditional societies, the cellphone opens the possibility of cultivating virtual relationships

These virtual relationships can be transformed into more conventional ones should the circumstance arise or they may remain virtual as a choice. (Pertierra, 2006:14)

Wilken summarises Pertierra, suggesting that for Filipinos engaging with strangers through SMS is a strategy with 'limited initial risk' which may result in new friendships and resources. He aligns this to Mauss' ideas around the gift economy, suggesting that different value criteria are being applied. During the course of making the practice presented in this research, that of the generation of temporary relations mediated through technologies for reasons of aesthetic or entertainment, it became apparent that a non-zero-sum approach might be enacted by default. Here, value exchange might be measured in curiosity, surprise or other social currency. Horn asserts that the key value of performance with respect to technology and capital is its liveness, its presence in the here and now. Perhaps this extends to all social engagement, and the problem is not the mechanisation of interaction, but a shift in value away from what it means to be human. Rushkoff suggests that the neoliberal project's shift in economic focus towards the growth of intangible and imaginary financial instruments itself devalues and absents the human. He argues for a rebalancing, writing 'in a human-focused economy, there will never be a lack of need for humans' (Rushkoff, 2016:66). Rushkoff highlights the political devaluation of human-centred professions – such as those in health care or education – noting they are 'some of the least appreciated, must underpaid professionals in our society' (*ibid*). He argues that for their 'high-touch activities' (*ibid*) which 'create value in real time, often one-on-one' (*ibid*) it is their very un-scalability that

makes them incompatible with industrial-age values. He signals that the overarching economic drive for growth is toxic to the kinds of human engagement that are in our own interests. Harry Giles, has written that acts of shock have long been part of the artist's lexicon and argues for a consideration of acts of care in the making of art. In this context, he argues that care can operate in radical opposition to the violence of late capitalism. Both Giles and Rushkoff in some way seek to reposition the needs and desires of humans at the heart of the cultural and political lifeworld.

Phelan and Fischer-Lichte have referred to an abiding characteristic of performance ontology as the possibility of transformation in its participants. However, should the borders of this consideration be expended, Goode argues, the very question itself is often considered 'inherently risible' (Goode, 2015:291) citing critic Michael Billington's offhand declaration that 'theatre can't change the world' (Billington cited in *ibid*). Goode approaches the question of theatre's ability to change the world from a deeply personal position, which operates outside of metrics of theatre's potential role in the doing of social good, or even of its mode in the declaration of a grand revolutionary gesture, writing:

I think that theatre has made me a better person. I think that because I 'do' theatre, I see more thoughtfully, I think more feelingly, I listen more carefully than I otherwise would; I think I am politically and socially and sexually more radically curious because theatre has needed me to be so. (Goode, 2015:293)

Further that

... how else will we change the world if not first by changing ourselves and our capacity to reach others inspiringly and seductively and encouragingly? (*ibid*)

Thorpe has argued that theatre can operate in the mode of a 'laboratory for thinking about how we think and how we are and what we are' (Thorpe quoted in Gardner, 2015:online), McGrath indicates that theatre might be where we can discover what it is to be together, in this place, and here Goode suggests that theatre might change the world through changing ourselves. Theatre may

provide access to the turn towards the human that Rushkoff demands, and an opportunity to reframe certain modes of digital interaction such that they operate in opposition to the saturation of human attention Beradi bemoans.

Certainly the framing of this research as an *artistic* project, with the proviso that the demographic data is indicative rather than universal, appears to activate both a curiosity and desire for intimacy between the participants. The practice developed also appears to nurture a value of humanness as extended between participants. Rather than placing emphasis on the architecture and economics of technologies that enable the light engagements between us, it suggests that we might instead focus on the qualities to be found in our co-created, mediated entanglements with each other.



## 5. Conclusions

This project begins with the question ‘Can communications technologies be used to enable intimate one-to-one encounters?’ The iterative, practice-based approach presented here has generated a series of practical and theoretical responses which expose both the complexity of the question and shape the understanding of its answer. In Chapter 2 we noted that Prager defines intimacy as being conditional on ‘self-revealing behaviour, positive involvement with the other, and shared understandings’ (Prager, 2009:919). During the course of the research practice, described in Chapter 3, participants engaged in mediated one-to-one encounters where they shared information about themselves, collaborated in their understanding of the performance situation and found themselves invested in the temporary relationship created. Referring to Gergen’s notion that all relations between people are necessarily fragmentary, and allying this with a post-phenomenological approach, as championed by Ihde and Verbeek, which suggests that our perception of world is inevitably co-created by the technologies used to access it, in Chapter 4 we conclude that the affordances on offer through the use of communications technology are indeed rich ground for intimate one-on-one encounters between people.

As has been argued in Chapter 3, the methodology developed to facilitate this research has lent on characteristics of the development style known as rapid prototyping in order to effectively explore, test and gain feedback regarding different approaches to the performance language, staging and technology used for the encounters. Working in this way was found to operate as a counterbalance to the particular challenges of remote interaction, where the experience of a participant in the moment may be more difficult to gauge than in a face-to-face scenario precisely because the experience of the mediation process is that which is under scrutiny.

In crafting performance-led encounters using mediating technology the importance of two independent but interrelated design threads become apparent: that of the theatrical design and technological design. The technical affordances offered by the technology used in an encounter can be undermined

or reinforced by the dramaturgy of the theatrical scaffolding used: which might take the form of an indicative scenic design, or the setting up of a particular narrative through the asking of questions or issuing of instructions. Placing mediated interactions in the context of an arts project serves to activate new contingencies and affordances, and this mirrors the experience of other practitioners in projects such as Kaleider's *You With Me*. When taking part in mediated encounters participants found themselves reflecting on their mode of interaction with one and other: considering their own language or gesture choices, how they come to an understanding of the other, and through comparisons with their typical usage pattern with comparable technology.

In the practice generated by this research, the use of communications technology and the artistic framing of the project functioned as liberating factors within the encounters, with some participants acknowledging they were braver than they would be in a face-to-face scenario and, particularly in the SMS project, noting their ability to choose what aspects of themselves they might share and enjoying the fragments the other party would share with them. Participants of the video-conference encounter stressed the opportunities offered for expression through gesture and the ability to 'use their body as a medium', whilst others noted that the camera positioning offered a shifted form of eye-contact that offered them a greater freedom to observe the whole situation whilst still being attentive to the other person in the room. In each case, through exploring the emergent relations between each other in context of a one-to-one interaction, participants exposed different affordances of the technologies used, and as what might have been initially characterised as the wrong tool for the job became, through use, the right tool for the experience at hand.

Participants of the projects documented here at times engaged with the technologies they utilised in a playful manner, such as expressing themselves through poetic or whimsical language choices when messaging, yet maintained an honesty in their interactions with each other. Participants emphasised a desire that their interaction should be a genuine and worthwhile connection

with the other party. In some cases this manifested itself through a kind of implied performer/participant contract, as experienced by some of the participants in the group work. In others this desire might be driven by the participant's own investment in the conversation. Despite understanding that once these mediated conversations were over they were unlikely to meet each other again, each participant reportedly found themselves invested in the engagement. Not only does this make plain the potential for intimate encounters which can *only* play out well in the space of mediation, rather than considering mediation as simply a prelude to or a poor simulation of a perceived reality of *face-to-face*, but is also suggestive that theatrical encounters may provide a different template for mediated interaction.

Intimacy has also been described as a fluency of use, and the mediating technologies used here to extend each participant's perceptual reach were sufficiently conceptually familiar to those participants that the technology appeared to recede into the background, revealing itself only in the glitch of system failure. Suggesting that for the participants of this project, all citizens of the developed world, such technologies are no longer novel in deployment, and operate as ready-to-hand. The implications for encounter design using more emergent technology might be that human interfaces which are conceptually similar to existing technology may be more readily understood by participants, especially if given appropriate cues, whilst novel implementations are likely to require a greater direction in use, and also that the user experience will be influenced by a different quality of labour. This may be of particular importance when considering interactions in the light of decision and attention depletion, as briefly discussed in Chapter 4 (4.4).

Don Idhe has theorised the ability of communications technologies to bring our perception of each other into the nearly-here and nearly-now, and this research appears to corroborate that analysis. Participants of *Conversation Piece*, the video conference project, noted that their perception of each other within the telematic space was that of being in the same space as each other (although descriptions of that place differed). Similarly, during the long text conversations

of *Small Talk*, a profound feeling of co-presence with my interlocutor was evident in-the-moment as I read their message and composed my reply.

In the design of mediated encounters, care should be taken to become aware of the complex nature of the spaces co-created through human interrelation through technology, as few elements of such an engagement may be under the designer's control. Issues such as the mode of a participant's attention, or the specific quality the labour of a particular interaction imposes may be hugely contingent on factors outside the influence of the project. Extensive testing of various configurations and with a variety of participants is recommended, in particular, to discover the differences between the affordances which are intended by the design and those which are discovered by the participants. As these affordances are modes of perception which are peculiar to the people and environment involved at the time, it is of particular interest to note those which may be unexpected and appear only through use. A recognition of these possibilities is key to a better understanding of what the mediated encounter offers to the participant.

Close attention should be given to moments when interactions shift focus, such as the end of an encounter, where the negotiation of acceptable behaviour can be rendered additionally complex due to a clouding of appropriate social conventions. The affordances offered by communications technologies are often perceptually similar to face-to-face encounters until an aspect or property that highlights that mediation is brought into focus. Examples from this research might be found in the perceptual shifts that *Conversation Piece* participants experienced when moving 'off camera', in the sudden evaporation of the Other's presence through connection failures found during the *CAVE* project, or the exposure of an SMS conversation's 'artifice' by its sudden, jarring end.

Certainly, as technology co-shapes our engagements with the world, it alters both our understanding of the world and our behaviour in it. The speed of development of these new communications tools demands a fluid and

constantly changing interrelation between us and the technologies we use to engage with each other. As Rich Ling observes: 'we have been forced to adjust our ideas of propriety in what might be called a slapdash way' (Ling, 2008:93), suggesting that social conventions may lag behind rapid changes in the affordances of communications technologies. In the research presented here it is established that with only the slightest push even the most familiar technologies of engagement can afford us new possibilities for interaction with the unexpected Other. A theatrical framing serves to defamiliarize sedimented usage patterns of technology and activate novel possibilities, giving participants the opportunity to become brave and playful in a rediscovered space of encounter.

The lens of late capitalism encourages the conception of technology as a tool for the commodification of information value and as an efficiency-driven mechanic to facilitate growth. Shifts in usage patterns of widely adopted communication technologies demonstrate that their potential for extending the reach of social relations is also subject to their colonisation by capital, and in this way the human resonance of communication becomes deprecated. The re-centring of the digital world through individualisation promises personal control yet can offer instead its erosion, as the multiplicity of choice presented by a constant connection becomes a challenge of triage seeped in the shock of information juxtaposition. Social ties and human engagement become capital in an industrial-age value system which is ill equipped for its management or exchange. Notably that the complex digital information which represents us in the world acquires unexpected intentionality and its distribution may rupture previously acceptable boundaries of privacy.

Reframing mediated interaction through a theatrical lens can facilitate rich and complex investigation of affordances and offer new knowledge for emergent and embedded technologies. Whilst the experience of individuals with communications technology is deeply intersectional and contingent, operating outside the guidelines of the intent of technology manufacturers or designers can reveal new usage patterns and encourage emergent behaviours.

It is our task to develop effective tactics to shape our technological immersion in this networked world into something distinctly human. To engage with the expanding affordances of communications technologies in concert with an understanding of the way our use of them co-shapes our experience of the world, and through acts of playful resistance rediscover the human in the machine.

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## Appendix 1: Artworks in a Lineage

### A.1.2 Real-time video artworks

#### A.1.2.1 Hole in Space – Galloway & Rabinowitz (1980)



Figure 25 Galloway & Rabinowitz, *Hole in Space*, 1980 (photo © Galloway & Rabinowitz)

It would be remiss to start any conversation involving the creation of telematic art works without first indicating what Steve Dixon claims to be the ‘most celebrated example of pre-Internet telematic performance’ (Dixon, 2009:420): the *Hole in Space* (1980) created by artists Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz. Using satellite broadcast technologies they opened up a “virtual tunnel” between The Broadway department store in Los Angeles and the Lincoln Centre in New York City. With cameras and screens in both locations, live feed from one location was back projected in black and white and at life size into the other. Audio was also transmitted, allowing passers-by an unprecedented and unfamiliar ability to communicate between remote sites (Galloway & Rabinowitz, 1980a). During its short three-day existence<sup>134</sup> relationships were

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<sup>134</sup> satellite connections being expensive, and in this case donated.

struck up, some remote participants returned each day to see and converse with each other, and relatives and friends in the two cities made arrangements to meet up through the artwork<sup>135</sup>.

Steve Harrison (then part of the Media Space project at the Xerox PARC) cites this artwork as changing the very way he thought about video-mediated communication, and emphasizes the extent to which it fundamentally influenced both his own work in Computer Supported Co-operative Work (CSCW), and the researches of others (Erickson & McDonald, 2008:155). In their paper discussing their own *Telemurals* project – which aims to create usable, sociable, network connected spaces – MIT associate professors Karrie Karahalios and Judith Donath describe *Hole in Space* as one of the ‘seminal works in telecommunication art’ (Karahalios & Donath, 2004). They suggest that despite technical flaws, such as satellite delay, gaze discrepancy<sup>136</sup>, camera location and a difficulty in communicating,

... attempts to create similar audio-video connections today have proved less effective. More work needs to be done to understand the attraction of *Hole-In-Space*’ (ibid).

They acknowledge that part of its charm may be its setting and time in history, what was new and out of the ordinary then may not be today. Indeed, I would argue that in an time when Skype is commonplace, we are less forgiving of the kinds of technological flaws that characterized this otherwise revolutionary project.

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<sup>135</sup> Whilst there are precious little documentary materials available, a short video of the project in full flow can be found on YouTube (Galloway & Rabinowitz, 1980b).

<sup>136</sup> The phrase Gaze Discrepancy doesn’t appear to occur in the literature very much - it is referred to in Karahalios’s paper I quote from above, and from context its use is intended to highlight the challenges that occur between the placement of the camera and the projected remote image. It is a valuable phrase to address the very real issues around what we might call (for want of a better phrase) eye contact. In a telepresent environment people will talk to the moving image of other people, irrespective of the location of the camera. Camera location and a sense of staging are thus key to the function(s) of the setting.



#### A.1.2.2 Hello - Allan Kaprow (1969)



Figure 26 Screen capture from TV presentation *The Medium is the Medium*. These images are of the segment that features Allan Kaprow's *Hello*.

Made as an “interactive video happening” as part of the TV programme *The Medium is the Medium* for Boston’s WGBH station in 1969, Kaprow’s *Hello* used the TV station’s closed-circuit, outside-broadcast system to connect four remote locations using five cameras and 27 video monitors. Groups of participants were dispatched to the various locations with instructions to perform actions based on what they saw through the monitors: such as to say “Hello I see you” when they saw an image of themselves or of other people they recognised. In the studio Kaprow functioned as director, switching the images the monitors displayed from one camera feed to another. In this way a technologically mediated, wide-area game of tag was orchestrated.

Kaprow explains that he was interested in the idea of ‘communications media as non-communications’ and most importantly the idea of ‘oneself in connection with someone else’ (Kaprow, 1969). Intending the artwork to operate as a palpable critique of the disruptive nature of mediated interaction, Kaprow’s *Hello* uses the close-circuit of the TV infrastructure to short-circuit the TV network, and in so doing highlights the potential for human to human connectivity. Furmanski, writing in an article documenting Kaprow’s personal papers, notes that an archive tape exists which is longer than the six minute segment aired as part of the TV programme. Recorded during the making of *Hello* he describes it as illustrative of the “strange, straining yet often hilarious scramble of efforts to reach out” that transpired on that day’ (Furmanski, 2009:205). The sound of a voice, the reach of a hand to the camera’s power switch, this videotape is a time capsule of a long past, live event.

### A.1.2.3 Telematic Dreaming – Paul Sermon (1992)



Figure 27 *Telematic Dreaming*. (Photo © Paul Sermon 1992)

Paul Sermon's 'seminal installation' (Dixon, 2009:216) *Telematic Dreaming* (1992) consisted of video cameras, monitors and projectors link together two beds in two separate rooms using videoconference technology. One bed is covered in blue cloth and the system uses Chroma-key techniques to separate the performer's image from the physical bed they lie upon. This separated image is projected onto the others bed, whilst the composite image of the two is presented to the performer on monitors. Sermon made the artistic choice to use pre-recorded audio in order to simulate a dream like quality, rather than using the live audio feed from each room.

Performing within Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming* installation for a four week period in 1994, Susan Kozel created extended interactive improvisations with gallery visitors' telepresent representations for up to two hours at a time. She describes the experience as being a reduction of human interaction 'to its simplest states: touch, trust, vulnerability' (Kozel, 2007:93). Whilst the telematic link between performer and participant was a live video feed from one room to another, and thus could not be made physical, when one participant drew a knife – she describes feeling 'the predictable shiver' as the 'loaded item' entered the virtual space of the installation (ibid:96). Palpable emotional

characteristics of physical intimacy here transcend the intellectual understanding that actual contact is impossible.

This meeting in combined material and virtual space has been described by its participants as occurring in the moment, in the 'now'. Virilio argues that telepresence occurs in the 'now' yet denies the 'here'; that telepresence tries to 'permanently loose the body proper in favour of excessive love for the virtual body' (Virilio, 1999:44). Whilst Kozel argues that the 'here' is simply a new and unfamiliar 'here' (Kozel, 2007:106).

#### A.1.2.4 Life Streaming - Dries Verhoeven (2010)



Figure 28 Life Streaming, Sri Lanka

In 2010 theatre maker Dries Verhoeven directed the telematic artwork *Life Streaming*, which uses video conference technology to connect individuals at two physically distant locations to each other. To take part, twenty individuals are asked to remove their shoes and enter a specially constructed trailer which functions as a mobile Internet café. Sitting at twenty computers, and using a bespoke software package, they are connected to twenty others. Who, far from the Western situation of the trailer, are situated some 8,000 kilometres away on the coast of Sri Lanka, where a devastating 30,000 people lost their lives during the 2004 tsunami. The encounter operates as ‘part travelogue, part Chatroulette, part carefully crafted cultural and moral object lesson’ (De Spain, 2012:34).

Curtains are lowered over the windows of the trailer, and the participants are sat at booths with wooden walls, in this way the method of staging blots out any extraneous or peripheral engagement with the local environment. Rather, the participant’s focus is concentrated on the interaction between themselves and the lives on their screen. During the course of the performance various scenes unfolded, information regarding Sri Lanka that Western participants may

have been unaware of was shared, and their thoughts solicited. Improvisational techniques were employed to create a video chat that felt unscripted and somehow “real”.

The performance only worked when the spectator felt that this part was “live,” that his answers were meaningful and were taken seriously and that the performer was honest to him, both about his personal life and about the structure of the piece’ (Verhoeven interviewed by De Spain, 2012:35).

Indeed, the intimacy and connection afforded by the piece that ‘the audience was so attached to the performers and their stories that in the end most of the participants continued to send them messages’ (Papagiannouli, 2012:278). Papagiannouli likens this effect to Dixon’s term ‘virtual touch’, to indicate an intimate connection through the network.

De Spain articulates key elements of the potential for an enhanced intimacy through telematic interaction:

Combined with the safety net of being able to disengage with a simple push of a button, communication technologies can often facilitate a greater sense of risk, and therefore a greater potential for intimacy, than a face-to-face encounter with a stranger (De Spain, 2012:34).

## A.1.2 Text Message Artworks

### A.1.2.1 Introduction

Text in the short form has notable historic antecedents, from Japanese Haiku through the doctrine of Oulipo (House, 2007) via the (probably apocryphal) Hemmingway's six word story "Baby shoes, for sale, never worn". Short text services can provide a new outlet for artworks, such as noted playwright David Grieg's *The Yes / No Plays*<sup>137</sup> created on Twitter during the tempestuous times of the Scottish Referendum (Grieg, 2013:online).

Bereft of context and without much of the communicative grounding of gesture and eye contact that surrounds and informs face-to-face and telepresent interaction (Clark & Brennan, 1991), SMS has been characterised as 'the most hostile environment you can go to. No picture, no sound, no font even' (Benford & Giannachi, 2011:116). This is undoubtedly changing as SMS blends with other messaging systems, which might include emoji<sup>138</sup>, images, animation and even video content. However the presentation of these media depends on the capabilities of the device receiving them, with basic feature phones, common amongst an older demographic in the Western world and significant in the developing world, cannot display this kind of media at all.

Functionally, text messages are a fundamentally lightweight format. Formed only of language elements and imaginative gestures such as emoticons, SMS is incapable of carrying the additional side-band information that is taken for granted in face-to-face or audio/video communication technologies. However, far from being a lo-fi carrier merely of simple information and through the

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<sup>137</sup> Within the 140 character limit of Twitter two dramatic characters Yes and No debate each other, make gestures and statements, sometimes they interact with others. Each character displays a kind of blurry allegiance both to the two sides of the Scottish referendum debate and to the declarative words themselves. Each tweet serves as a stand-alone scene although many are narratively linked. The shortness of the form frequently leaves interpretation ambiguous, yet over time the personalities of Yes and No deepen as they develop into a kind of surreal Odd Couple.

<sup>138</sup> a small digital image or icon used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication.

active engagement of its interlocutors, text messaging simultaneously carries and subverts complex layers of meaning.

#### **A.1.2.2 Surrender Control - Tim Etchells (2001)**

Tim Etchells' artworks frequently depend on the packing and unpacking of meaning within text, in a recent artist's statement he says

I'm drawn both to the speed, clarity and vividness with which language communicates narrative, image and ideas, and at the same time to its amazing propensity to create a rich field of uncertainty and ambiguity

(Etchells, 2013:online).

*Surrender Control* (2001) was an 'interactive work comprising an escalating sequence of text message instructions' (Etchells, 2001), and first presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. After subscribing to the project by text the participants receive a number of text messages over a pre-set time period. These messages operate as observations, suggestions, challenges or dares for the participant, and might ask them to think about things in a different way or to perform provocative actions. These messages may have been perceived as disturbing or disruptive by the audience, particularly as SMS, at the time, was a channel of communication more generally associated with conversations with close friends, family members or lovers. In the intervening years integrated messaging apps have appeared on smartphones, and the use of SMS as a marketing device has doubtless eroded the notion of text messaging as a walled garden of intimate interlocutors.

Whilst being described as an interactive artwork by Etchells, the lack of response to audience agency (reply texts are simply ignored) means this SMS project can be seen to operate as a durational broadcast rather than a conversation.

A later SMS Artwork from Etchells, *An (SMS) - Short Message Spectacle* (2010), took the form of a textual performance event, a description of something that never happened. Delivered through SMS it was 'composed of a series of absurd movements in which half-familiar scenes flickered into life and then spiralled out of control' according to Andy Field of Forest Fringe, and writing then for the Guardian (Field, 2010:online). Unlike *Surrender Control* which urged a certain degree of complicity from its participants in that real-world or imaginary action was required from them, *Short Message Spectacle* describes something imaginary as though real and leaves interpretation up to the recipient. Etchells has described it as deeply personal, like having someone whisper in your ear. The eloquent and expressive language prompted evocative reflection in some of its participants (Pawson, 2010:online). However, others found the lack of participant agency a problem with engagement.

As a coda to this mode of broadcast messaging, I worked with artist Greg Wohead on an experimental SMS artwork called *What We Don't Know* (Wohead, 2014b), which operated as a digital adjunct to his performance *The Ted Bundy Project* (Wohead, 2014a). Participants signed up to receive SMS texts by following the instructions given out at the end of the performance, initially by texting "hello" to a specific number. What followed was a series of provocations around some of the main themes of *The Ted Bundy Project*. Feedback indicated that whilst the language was of some interest and occasionally provocative, participants were hungry to interact, to respond or engage with the sender in some way.



### A.1.2.3 Fortnight – Proto-type (2010, 2012)

*Fortnight* was an immersive experience woven into the everyday lives of its participants over the course of its two week duration. Communications from *Fortnight* took a variety of forms (perhaps a hand written letter, a text message, an email or a tweet), and connected the dots between activities and events at curated locations in the real world. Some events were enjoyed as a group, others at physical locations that were only open for audience interactivity for a specific duration on a specific day. In this performance SMS played dual roles, not only to deliver instructions to participants, but also to engage in conversation. Many and varied conversations were held simultaneously between the hundreds of participants and the human beings who became very personal representations of the *Fortnight* experience.

Peter Petralia, director of Fortnight, describes it so:

... in Fortnight the text messages that people received were all personalized to some degree, so that whenever any of the two-hundred people received a message it felt like it was just for them. And if they replied, every message was responded to by Fortnight (me) with a unique response (Petralia, 2012a:online)

#### **A.1.2.4 Blast Theory - Ivy4Evr (2010)**

'Ivy4Evr uses SMS to go places that other dramas can't go – onto your phone and into your pocket. Ivy wriggles into your life, sending you messages on the way to school, college or last thing at night.'  
(Blast\_Theory, 2010)

In this piece – targeted at a teenage demographic with significant SMS usage patterns - Blast Theory developed an automated, scripted, branching intelligent system that could engage with its audience and remember conversational themes of its individual participants. This is another example of a two-way SMS performance, only this time the performed responses are generated by a non-human source. The original script for Ivy was written by author Tony White, and the piece commissioned by UK TV station Channel 4.

In their research, Blast Theory discovered that the teenage demographic of the intended participants often subscribed to pay-as-you-go or prepay tariffs from their mobile provider, which, at the time, often included a significant number of SMS in a "bundle". Whilst the cost of the users' participation may have been insignificant, the SMS bill for Ivy, conversing with more than 5,000 participants, may not be.

The experience was certainly novel and certainly had the power to expand its participants' notions of what theatre can be, and where it can go. Jake Orr, at the time editor of A Younger Theatre, wrote:

As a piece of interactive drama it was outstanding, revealing a compelling story of teenage life. Yes it was aimed at teenagers with an educational slant, but it has revolutionised my thinking about mobile personal theatre (Orr, 2011:online)

Configuring Ivy as an interactive storytelling experience, facilitated by technology but activated by its theatrical architecture, helped bring theatre to new audience demographics and once again expanded its reach.

### A.1.3 A Telephone Artwork

I include here a description of Kaleider's *You With Me*, as an extant project which helped me process some of the key concepts in my own practice.

#### A.1.3.1 You With Me – Kaleider (2013,2014)



Figure 29 Still from promotional video for Kaleider's *You With Me* (Kaleider, 2013a:online)

In 2014, I assisted with the Manchester showing of *You With Me* made by UK-based Kaleider, a company that in their words 'brings people together to design, promote and produce extraordinary live experiences' (Kaleider, 2016:online).

*You With Me* (Kaleider, 2013b) operates in its simplest form as a telephone conversation between a performer and an audience member. The conversation lasts around forty-five minutes and takes place in the middle of a bustling city, and is played in one of a variety of time slots which might be early afternoon or late in to the night. The performer and participant never meet face to face, their interaction takes place entirely through their shared telephone call. Seth Honnor, Kaleider's artistic director, describes his ideal setup for the show is to give the participant 'a place to be in the city centre, a telephone number to call, a time to call that number' (Honor, 2015:2'36"). From the participant's perspective the phone call covers a number of different types of conversational engagement. It is at times playful and might be considered a game of sorts,

whilst at other times it becomes contemplative and reflective, almost therapeutic in nature. Whilst, to the participant, the piece might appear relaxed and open ended this belies its tightly scripted structure, and is a testament to the improvisational skills of the performer and the orchestration skills of the company.

In practice, the piece uses some basic technology both to facilitate the shared experience of the performer and participant, and to allow the management, or orchestration, of that experience by the company. In essence, the show functions as two simultaneous telephone calls: the first, which might be characterised as a front or audience-facing stage, is between the performer and participant, the second contributes a back stage or orchestration function, and is conducted as a conference call between the performer and up to five volunteers and a company stage manager. The calls are executed using simple “feature phone” handsets and make use of hands-free kits for security and convenience. The audience member is encouraged to use their own phone. However, should this prove impossible, perhaps because the battery on their mobile is low in charge, or they have no wish to give out their number, a company mobile – replete with hands free kit – can be made available for their use.

As far as the participant is concerned, the performer appears to be engaged only with them, as the performer never directly address the others on the backstage conference call. The orchestration team, for their part, never hear the participant’s side of the phone call, and supply information to the performer as necessary. What this information may be, typically the participant’s whereabouts, is guided by the performer’s conversation and assisted by the stage manager who directs the chatter as necessary (and during some of the high-octane moment it does get quite chatty).

Thus, the tools required for the show’s execution are a number of mobile telephones, and the ability for a number of those phones to take part in a conference call. Despite research, Kaleider have not discovered any other

technology which gives easy access to both an intimate audio platform for the participant's experience and an off-the-shelf and simple mechanism for logistical orchestration.

In *You With Me* the one-to-one interaction is enacted entirely through voice, not only this but voice *at a distance*. The performer and participant never meet in person (whilst there are a number of plot events during the phone call that hint at such an outcome, none of these are completed).

After a brief introduction to the idea of the show and a certain laying down of rules (what happens should the call be cut off, the fact that the call is not being recorded), the participant is invited to walk through the city, first heading off in a particular named direction. This forms part of an initial invitation; one which asks the participant to look at the city in a different way, to look anew at the people that surround them, going about their daily lives. The performer acts firstly as a guide, ushering the participant through the city, inviting them to ask where 'the centre' is, in fact to ask a passer-by that question, to initiate an interaction with a stranger. Twice during this opening sequence the participant is encouraged to 'recognise' the performer in amongst the crowd. In both of these examples a plant, another member of the company speaking on the phone masquerading as the unseen caller, is used to misdirect.

It becomes clear that she can see you, but you can't see her.

The piece shifts ground: "Try and lose me" she says, "you can run if you like, go into shops and down streets. Let's see if you can lose me". It's exciting, fast, and good fun for audience, orchestrators and performer. Feedback from past participants suggest that the very action of running with a phone makes them feel like a criminal, to feel suspect and makes them feel they are operating out of normal parameters, becoming aware of the busy city, the busy citizens as an audience for their own transgressive behaviour.

In the context of the show, this game cannot really be 'won' or 'lost'. One of the core aspirations of the piece is that it's unbreakable; if a participant jumps on a

bus or books a table at a restaurant the conversation continues. If they are successful in their attempt to lose the surveillance team (despite, perhaps, being unaware there is one), they may feel an achievement, that they've won. However, this doesn't stop the performance in its tracks, instead it simply continues down it's scripted path (it also turns out to be quite tricky to lose several committed observers)<sup>139</sup>.

Once the game section is completed, the participant is invited to "share a drink" with their performer. Not physically in the same space, but each in their own, geographically separate, locations. It is here that the conversation tends to turn to the introspective and intimate. In describing this part of the show Honor, its director, calls up an analogy of the activities of the Blue Whale: for the most part existing on the surface of the ocean, basking, breathing, drifting, then, taking the deepest of breaths, it dives right down to the depths (ibid: 6'23"). In his experience of orchestrating the piece, Honor suggests the participant almost always quite readily makes the deep dive. Maybe in part due to an adrenalin rush or endorphin release as a result of the recent physical activity, perhaps the simple joy of the chase, but with relentless inevitability the participant will 'go to the conversation in their lives that they are not quite having' (ibid: 7'01"). These conversations are characteristically intimate, often stories of family or revealing of themselves. This brings into play ethical issues for the company both around privacy and confidentiality for the participant, but also highlighting vulnerabilities of the performer. It's important, says Honor,

... that we don't share those stories unless there's a vulnerability, but we make sure we look after our performers and that actually they have a space to talk to each other about that (ibid: 7'10").

Led by their performer, the participant ends up adrift in time and space. Being gifted a peculiar moment to make conversation with a stranger. The performer's improvisation throughout the piece is charged with authenticity,

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<sup>139</sup> Of course, the participant is free to hang up the phone at any time, too, which might operate as a kind of "walking out" of the show and off the (temporary) grid.

Alice Tatton-Brown, who has performed *You With Me* in both Exeter and Manchester, says

.. you had to work from a place of integrity which was anchored in your own life - even though there are elements of it you would mythologize – [this was] in order for the exchange to be real (Tatton-Brown in private conversation, 2014)

The conversation is tinged with an authentic real-ness, the performer and participant are present, and the real magic of the show occurs in this twenty minutes. Perhaps this section acts as a reclamation of time we give back to ourselves, a reflection, sometimes a catharsis, but most importantly time where the focus can be utterly on the now (and inevitably the self).

Audience members found themselves frequently delighted by the run-around game, and intensely curious as to how objects were placed in their path without knowing, yet the strongest feedback came from the conversation they had during this moment of stillness. Participants' feedback suggests a number of self-described life-changing decisions were made as a result of their taking part in the show. We are again touching on this idea of intimacy in mediation, an exposure of self and the sharing of private information. Alice again:

... there are times within the show you need to expose yourself and your own history in order to invite the trust of the other. So I think there was a vulnerability in this show which wasn't like a vulnerability I've come across in other shows (Tatton-Brown in private conversation, 2014)

The anonymity of the encounter also adds to the frisson and alters the risk

we so often have to judge ourselves via the consequences of our actions, but we hold this moment in time where there is no consequence to anything we say and that's really very important (Tatton-Brown in private conversation, 2014)

In the performance of *You With Me* it is made quite clear that the dynamic is between a participating audience member and a performer. The degree with which the participant is aware of the orchestration – whether that be the scripted improvisation of the experience, or the back-stage action required for audience surveillance – is doubtless variable, yet it is clear that the piece

generates a safe environment, in which open-ended and authentic mediated conversation flourishes. Somewhere that intimacy is shared between two people who never actually meet.



## Appendix 2: Experimental Notes and Technical Details

### EXPERIMENTS

A.2.1 SMALL TALK (FLUXUS) (28.06.14)

A.2.2 SMALL TALK (EMERGENCY) (04.10.14)

A.2.3 BURNER (NOV/DEC 14)

A.2.4 CAVE (PENRYN) (8 - 12.12.14)

A.2.5 CAVE (MANCHESTER: PENRYN) (11.03.15)

A.2.6 SMALL TALK 24 (03 - 04.04.15)

A.2.7 SMALL TALK (FORENSIC) (18.04.15)

### FINAL PROJECTS

A.2.8 CONVERSATION PIECE

A.2.9 SMALL TALK

### A.2.1: Small Talk (Fluxus)

Project	<b>Small Talk (Fluxus)</b>
Period	28 Jun 2014, 6h duration
Participants	54 (1271 texts)
Equipment	1 x android handset 1 x SIM card pre-loaded with 5000 bundled texts 1 x laptop, with web app for reading and writing of texts, and allowing the performer to see an overview of all conversations
Method	<p>Goal: exploration of interactions afforded by one-to-one text conversations between strangers.</p> <p>Provocation: Branded business cards with call to text printed on one side. Performed in a festival environment, alongside multiple other performance events in the same building over the course of a 6h period. The SMS number participants need to message in order to take part was distributed using printed business cards. On one side these were printed with images intended to be suggestive of gossip or the sharing of secrets, on the other is printed, in all capitals: TEXT 07474 360606 FOR SMALL TALK</p> <p>The performer used a laptop to send and receive text messages.</p>
Notes	<p>1271 texts are exchanged between the 54 participants and myself. Over a 6 hour period this represents an average of 3½ texts per minute.</p> <p>The duration and the quantity of messaging evokes the quality of a call centre operative offering some kind of conversational service to the participants. I feel pressured to respond quickly, to be witty or informative. I find myself responding playfully, not thinking too much about the tone of the text replies, but also not drawn to being controversial or negative. In short, I think I'm trying to be the best version of me.</p> <p>Conversation feels a little like getting to know one and other and is generally Informal and light hearted. There are jokes, Wikipedia lookups, and exchanges that feel like a friendly conversation in a pub.</p> <p>Performer was asked if they were a robot, or if the project was an automated system.</p>

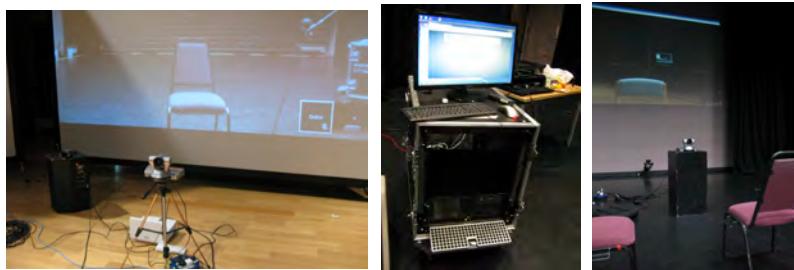
### A.2.2: Small Talk (Emergency)

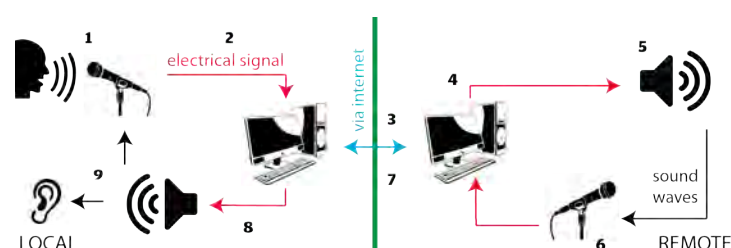
Project	<b>Small Talk (Emergency)</b>
Period	4 Oct 2014, 6h duration
Participants	30 (1404 texts)
Equipment	1 x android handset 1 x SIM card loaded with 5000 texts 1 x laptop, with web app for reading and writing of texts, and overview of conversations
Method	<p>Goal: Investigation of one-to-one text message conversations between strangers, including narrative and declarative ‘fact’ statements alongside conversation.</p> <p>Provocation: Branded business cards with call-to-text printed on one side, additionally a mention of the number to text in order to take part was mentioned in the festival programme or “one-sheet”.</p> <p>Performed in a festival environment, alongside multiple other performance events in the same building, over the course of a 6h period.</p> <p>The number for participants to text was distributed using printed business cards. On one side these are printed with images intended to be suggestive of gossip or the sharing of secrets, on the other is printed “TEXT 07474 360606 FOR SMALL TALK” The performer used a laptop to send and receive text messages.</p> <p>Cut and pasted texts were used to introduce the participant to the project, and to add an additional linguistic “texture”</p> <p>As they join the performance each participant is added to a distribution group. Texts are periodically sent to this group. These texts are either</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional (to do something in the performance)</li> <li>• Informative (facts about text messaging or other communications media), or</li> <li>• Quotes from text messages that have had some considerable media exposure (e.g. Malaysian Airlines group text to the families of the victims of the MH370 disaster)</li> </ul>
Notes	<p>Feedback from participants suggests that if they receive the same messages as other participants they feel cheated, in that they aren’t receiving text messages tailored to themselves. This effectively decreases participants involvement, shifts the engagement away from a conversation, lessening the connection.</p> <p>A participant who had taken part in both the FLUXUS and EMERGENCY versions of this project remarked that whoever was doing the last one was “better at it”. Aside from fluctuations in my improvised conversational tactics, I wonder if this is due to the time-consuming and distracting logistics of the group messages taking my attention away from the conversations.</p> <p>Participants are overheard referring to the ‘performer’ as ‘she’</p>

### A.2.3: Burner

Project	<b>Burner</b>
Period	Nov – Dec 2014 (duration 1 month)
Participants	Two 1 x white male, 1 x white female
Equipment	2 x Samsung flip-style mobile phones / handsets for participants 2 x PAYG SIM cards with unlimited texts for 1 month 1 x Operator mobile phone
Method	<p>Goal: Dramatic introduction of two individuals to each other by way of a ‘disposable’ mobile phone. Investigation of intimacy of connection created and maintained through text messaging.</p> <p>One handset was posted to London-based participant (F) and one handset was given by hand to Manchester-based participant (M)</p> <p>Each handset listed only two contacts in its address book.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A number listed as ‘operator’ (orchestration by JC)</li> <li>2. The number for the other handset in the pair, which is listed as a name constructed from a random set of letters rather than the other participant’s actual name. (There is an instruction later to rename the contact or not as the participant deems appropriate).</li> </ol> <p>The operator number is that of a third mobile phone. This phone is used to deliver instructions, ask questions and suggest provocations.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Is there someone you see every day who you don’t talk to? Try talking to them’</li> <li>• ‘If something is forbidden, do you want it less or more?’</li> </ul> <p>User experience:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Participant receives phone. When they turn it on a brief introductory text is received. This informs them of the operator and their role, and invites them to chat by SMS to the other person in their address book</li> <li>2. Participants receive up to four (4) instruction or provocation texts</li> <li>3. Towards the end of the month, the participants are informed that the experience will come to a close on a particular date</li> <li>4. The handsets are collected</li> </ol>
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total of 50 texts sent and received between participants</li> <li>• Participants engaged in conversation with each other and also responded to questions and challenges from the ‘operator’</li> <li>• Participants shared conversation went through a number of phases: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Exchanging of pleasantries</li> <li>○ Talk about how hard it is to use old-style handsets to text rather than a smartphone, learned together how to type smiley faces “:-)”</li> <li>○ One volunteers the information that he is going on a date, the other offers to act as “wingman”, they follow-up this with text exchange during the date</li> <li>○ Activity winds down, as the duration of the experience comes to its end</li> </ul> </li> <li>• ‘Shame today is the last day of this project really - feels like we are only just getting started’ ‘I know x’</li> <li>• Participants reported felling engaged with the project and with each other even through few texts were exchanged</li> <li>• Neither participant made a decision to call the other using the phone.</li> </ul>

#### A.2.4: CAVE (Penryn)

Project	<b>CAVE (Penryn)</b>
Period	8 – 12 Dec 2014
Participants	Jason Crouch & Tiia Veneranta
Equipment	<p>Microsoft Windows PC based video conferencing (VC) equipment.</p> <p>High specification Windows PCs running Windows 7 and tested with various software:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vsee (Video Conferencing)</li> <li>• Appear.in (Web browser based VC)</li> <li>• Google Hangouts (Web browser based VC)</li> <li>• Source Connect (HD audio over network)</li> </ul> <p>The PCs used external USB sound cards for input and output – and were connected to professional sound equipment (wired microphones, PA system).</p> <p>For video output the PCs contained high specification video cards and were connected to multiple projectors and / or full HD wide screen TVs (where wide screen &gt; 48” diagonal).</p> <p>For video input: HD Cameras were used with SDI outputs and ingested into the PC VC systems using Black Magic Decklink Pro video capture cards.</p> 
Method	<p>Goal: To experiment with the idea of two individuals sharing space with each other through the use of telepresence equipment rendering the remote image as apparently “life sized”.</p> <p>Over the course of five evening sessions, we explored different movement, dance and spoken exercises in (1) a single dance studio without technical equipment and (2) a pair of dance studios linked together using the video conferencing equipment.</p> <p>The video conference equipment in each room was configured as a mirror of the other room, insofar as this was possible. Each setup featured</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a single large screen showing the image being sent from the camera in the other room</li> <li>• a wired microphone on a stand near the centre of the performance area (the participants were encouraged to use the microphone and to remove it from the stand as necessary)</li> <li>• twin speakers on either side of the projection screen</li> <li>• a single camera placed in the middle of the projection screen area in order to maximise the potential for eye-to-eye contact (so as the user in the local studio looks towards the camera as they look at the image of the user in the remote studio – this is much like how skype or facetime tricks the gaze when used with a phone/tablet or laptop where the camera is built next to the screen)</li> </ul>

	<p>A rough performance structure was created which consisted of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Introductions</li> <li>2. Participant choses a music track (from streaming service)</li> <li>3. Dancer performs improvised solo dance to music</li> <li>4. Dancer choses a music track</li> <li>5. Participant invited to dance together</li> <li>6. Reflections and exit</li> </ol>
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positioning of camera and screen appears to contribute significantly to the quality of the experience (here I'm using 'quality' to describe participants self-declared 'degree of connection with the other party'), e.g.:       <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) In one studio the projection screen was more than one meter up the wall, this vertical distance decreased the feeling of connectedness for the participant in that studio</li> <li>(2) In an early practice session the cameras and screens were not used in the preferred configuration, instead the camera was positioned to one side of the screen – here 'the more pronounced the distance between the camera capturing my image and the screen showing my partners, the less it appears as though we are looking at each other' (quote from the project diary)</li> </ol> </li> <li>• If the microphones are turned up too high then they pick up not only the ambient sounds of the local room, and the participant speaking, but <u>also</u> the output of the speakers. This causes a kind of echo effect, where the participant in one room hears their own words repeated, this proves to be distracting and lowers the quality of the experience. Technically this is due to the sounds from the local room being captured by the local microphone, sent to the other room via the VC software, being amplified and coming out of the speakers in the remote room, then picked up by the remote microphone being sent back to the speakers in the local room (and vice versa).</li> </ul>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dancing motif owes its origin (1) from previous work and experience, and (2) from working on this experiment <i>with a dancer</i>. I found that this theme presented a number of problems which may obscure or disturb the research inquiry:       <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ emphasises a of hierarchy of skills</li> <li>○ being 'performed to' in this structure objectifies the performer – potentially enhanced by the gender of the participant (M) and the performer (F). This was especially evident in the pre-technical rehearsal stage, although the video conferencing setup reminded us of webcam girls</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The most human connection we experienced was at the end of a session when we were laughing and joking whilst still in the separate room, after the 'performance' structure been completed. Might suggest that (a) performance anxieties extend into networked performance, and (b) that a natural 'everyday' setting might be a productive area of inquiry</li> </ul>

### A.2.5: CAVE (Penryn:Manchester)

Project	<b>CAVE (Penryn:Manchester)</b>
Period	11 Mar 2015
Participants	Falmouth: 1 / Manchester: 3
Equipment	<p>Microsoft Windows PC based video conferencing (VC) equipment.</p> <p>High specification Windows PCs running Windows 7, software used was</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appear.in (Web browser based VC)</li> <li>• Source Connect (HD audio over network)</li> </ul> <p>As before, the VC PCs used external USB sound cards for input and output – and were connected to professional sound equipment (wired microphones, PA system). Audio input in Manchester was via 2 x super-cardiod directional rifle microphones, and in Falmouth via a cardiod SM58 wired microphone.</p> <p>For video output the PCs contained high specification video cards and were connected to one projector each. Projection was 1024 x 768 pixels over a 10' x 8' screen (which at full person height meant very few pixels for e.g. facial detail).</p> <p>For video input each PC used a single HD Camera connected to the PC using SDI outputs, ingested with Black Magic Decklink Pro video capture cards.</p>
Method	<p>Goal: To investigate the degree and nature of intimate connection that is achieved through shared activities performed using telepresence equipment which projects the remote image at “life-size”.</p> <p>Over the course of two daytime sessions, we explored different movement, dance and spoken exercises using the VC system. System comprised hardware and software elements and connected two studios, one in Manchester (Space 2, Contact Theatre) and one in Falmouth (Studio G, Performance Centre, Penryn Campus)</p> <p>The video conference equipment in each room was configured to mirror the other room, insofar as this was possible. Each setup featured</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a single large screen showing the image being sent from the camera in the other room</li> <li>• either (a) 2 x rifle microphones pointing at the playing area (Manchester) or (b) a wired microphone on a stand near the centre of the playing area (Penryn)</li> <li>• twin speakers on either side of the projection screen</li> <li>• a single camera placed in the middle of the projection screen area in order to maximise the potential for eye-to-eye contact (so as the user in the local studio looks towards the camera as they look at the image of the user in the remote studio – this is much like how skype or facetime tricks the gaze when used on a phone, tablet or laptop due to the position of the camera relative to the screen)</li> </ul>

	<p>There were a number of objects in the Manchester studio that the participant could choose to interact with.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A list of questions</li> <li>• Cans and bottles of soft drinks, and water</li> <li>• Snacks: chocolate bars, fruit and crisps</li> <li>• Music laptop and PA system</li> </ul> <p>Participants were left to their own devices for approximately 20 minutes</p>
Notes	<p>Low resolution of the projector meant that the participant could see little facial detail. Some participants described this as having a ‘distancing’ effect.</p> <p>Seeing the whole of the other participant’s body meant movement exercises which involved sharing or co-ordinating moves were made much easier.</p> <p>‘What I noticed was that having something to share (food in this case) was beneficial to shorten the distance between the two people... it’s also true what one of the Manchester guys said that it’s actually the music that in a way creates the common ground, not primarily the dancing.’ (Tiia, Penryn)</p> <p>[During a breathing exercise] ‘She was breathing into the microphone, so that was all around me. It was really relaxing, I didn’t want to open my eyes afterwards. It made us feel really close, even though we were really far apart.’</p> <p>The technology was unreliable which broke the illusion for some participants.</p> <p>For one pair of participants, when a problem with the technology occurred they were still able to communicate through gesture, and they found that trying to work together to fix the tech had a bonding effect between them.</p> <p>When the equipment lost connection or “glitched” during the connection this highlighted feelings of absence and presence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feelings of heightened awareness of the remote participant’s presence in the moment of a technological glitch. When a glitch is manifest (such as a stuttering of video image, or audio breakup) there appears to be a momentary (and moment-to-moment) recalibration by the user of their perception of the other’s continued presence. This is generally accompanied by a shift in the user’s activity into a mode where they’re trying to work out if the technological connection has failed or is failing. This can be gamed. For example should one participant stay still and silent it is typical that the other participant will anticipate the system is broken in some way and will start to ask if the other is there, or move to try and ‘fix’ the technology.</li> <li>• If the technology breaks to the point where no audio or video communication is active between the two participants it is felt as a decisive break, a sudden and decisive absence of presence. ‘You take it for granted until it cuts out, then it’s gone’</li> </ul>



### A.2.6: Small Talk (24)

Project	<b>Small Talk (24)</b>																
Period	03 Apr 2014 – 04 Apr 2014, 24h (midday-midday)																
Participants	5 operators, 19 participants (479 texts)																
Equipment	<p>1 x android handset  1 x SIM card loaded with 5000 texts  2 x laptops, with web app for reading and writing of texts (and overview of conversations).  List of questions</p>																
Method	<p>Goal: One-to-one text conversations between strangers.  Subsidiary goals: a scaling up of the project to provide  (a) more capacity: number of operators increases the greater number of total conversations possible, and  (b) operators to be able to flexibly allocate more time and attention to each conversation, and not be overwhelmed.  Subsidiary 2: making the project <i>without</i> ‘arts festival’ or ‘arts venue’ context  The number for participants to text is distributed using printed business cards.  Unlike previous versions of the project, the cards are plain white with ‘TEXT 07474 360606 FOR SMALL TALK’ printed on one side, and a date and time range on the other.  The cards are distributed in public spaces, including café bars, a nightclub, telephone booths and retail outlets. The project is stand-alone and not part of any wider festival or other public event.  The operators use a laptop to send and receive text messages. Each laptop screen is also projected onto a wall, which enables all operators to read each-others conversations and offer help or suggest responses.  The operators have available to them a list of questions and tactics they can use within their conversations.</p>																
Notes	<p>479 texts are exchanged between the participants and the group.  Over a 24-hour period, representing an average of 1 text every 3 minutes. This suggests a much smaller uptake from the previous projects, each of which were part of a wider performance festival and contained within a much smaller location (a single building).  Of the 19 conversations: 15 contain less than 30 total messages, of which 8 consist of less than 10 messages.  Details of the top four conversations in terms of total numbers of texts exchanged and duration taken from first to last texts are:</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>TEXT IDENTIFIER</th> <th>NUMBER OF SMS</th> <th>DURATION (FIRST – LAST)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>#227</td> <td>38</td> <td>4hrs</td> </tr> <tr> <td>#394</td> <td>48</td> <td>3 1/2 hrs</td> </tr> <tr> <td>#970</td> <td>86</td> <td>11hrs</td> </tr> <tr> <td>#443</td> <td>125</td> <td>7hrs</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		TEXT IDENTIFIER	NUMBER OF SMS	DURATION (FIRST – LAST)	#227	38	4hrs	#394	48	3 1/2 hrs	#970	86	11hrs	#443	125	7hrs
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	<p>Due to the 24-hour duration, operators do find themselves needing to tag-team mid-conversation, because one has to leave. This requires a <b>handover</b> to another operator. They note that they find this distressing, as they feel they've built up a connection with the participant and don't wish to pass it on. Reasons for distress are described as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's 'my' conversation</li> <li>• I feel like the participant is being cheated</li> <li>• On observing the new operator's conversation thinking 'that's not what I would have said'</li> <li>• [after taking over] Afraid of getting it wrong, needing to 'get into character' and 'research' [read the text trail] before responding</li> </ul> <p>Some operators report their response is significantly altered because of the <b>visibility</b> of their actions in the room (the projection of the screen). Whilst any operator can dip into any conversation through the web interface at any time, this requires action on their part. The digital projection of an individual operator's workspace therefore provides a passive mode of surveillance for other operators in the room. This has effects such as (a) magnifies operator anxieties and causes them to alter their choice of reply (b) causes operator inaction as the operator feels pressure from the (assumed) observation of their task.</p> <p>With multiple operators observing the conversations, it is clear that there are frequently many interpretations of the meaning of the texts by different operators.</p> <p>The more an operator is involved in a conversation themselves, the more weight they attribute to the texts.</p> <p>Changes the experience of time: energetic thinking and discussions between operators in short bursts following messages that don't have clear meanings, that the operator(s) can interpret.</p> <p>Concern from operators that the participants won't know that more than one operator can see their texts. Highlights considerations of ethical position, of intent of the operators and the research.</p> <p>Operators observed that some participants anticipated what the project was 'for'. Characterised it as an arts project. Perhaps gamed it?</p> <p>The picture of the stranger that's built up over the course of the conversation is constantly changing. You have to keep up, because there is no background information (in contrast to texting with someone known).</p> <p>Operators largely felt they performed 'as themselves' rather than being in character, except in specific examples of handover.</p>
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### A.2.7: Small Talk (Forensic)

Project	<b>Small Talk (Forensic)</b>
Period	18 Apr 2015, 6h (12.00 – 18.00)
Participants	5 operators 13 participants (446 texts)
Equipment	Operators station 1 x android handset 1 x SIM card allocated 5000 texts 3 x laptops, with web app for reading and writing of texts, and allowing the performers to see an overview of all conversations Installation in the Forensic House; 1 x table top with lamp and 50+ business cards 1 x MP3 audio player & speakers 2 x large back-lit signs, inscribed with provocation text and an instruction to send SMS to the Small Talk phone number.
Method	<p>Goal: One-to-one text conversations between strangers.</p> <p>Subsidiary goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scaling to allow multiple users, but without <b>visibility</b> issues highlighted by <i>Small Talk 24</i>.</li> <li>• Use of different prompts (a dressed room, audio material etc) as initial provocation.</li> </ul> <p>Performed as part of <i>Derelict Sites</i>, a week-long festival of public performance, alongside multiple other performance events in multiple, publicly accessible locations in Preston. It was included in a particular tranche of the festival (Forensic); which was to involve a series of short, durational or one-to-one performances contained within three locations styled the “Forensic Houses”. In normal use these houses are test environments used by the forensic medicine degree course students.</p> <p>In order to distribute the Small Talk text number two strategies were employed:</p> <p>(1) Distribution of Business Cards to other festival performance spaces, e.g. the Hunt &amp; Darton Live Art Café, and</p> <p>(2) Using different prompts in the designated Small Talk room in the Forensic Houses (business cards, audio soundscape, backlit posters).</p> <p>The printed business cards are plain with the following text printed in block capitals on one side: TEXT 07474 360606 FOR SMALL TALK</p> <p>The Forensic Houses contain many rooms designed to be facsimiles of everyday environments, e.g. a kitchen, a front room, a pub bar. The room allocated to Small Talk simulates a severely fire damaged bedroom. The room was dressed with additional props and technology.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Table and table lamp; on the lit table top were placed a number of the Small Talk business cards</li> <li>• Audio soundtrack comprising ambient soundscape and recordings of six different voices reading text messages from previous editions of the Small Talk project</li> <li>• Two back-lit poster boards. Each poster contained a provocative text and the familiar request to ‘TEXT XXX FOR SMALL TALK’</li> </ul>



The performers used a number of laptops, each logged into the web app, to send and receive text messages. It is possible to see all of the conversations that are taking place, although performers rarely 'double team' and tend to stick with their own conversations. The only exception to this is if one performer has to leave mid-conversation.

The project lasted from midday to 18.00; participants were informed at around 18.30 that the project is coming to a close.

Notes

446 texts were exchanged between the 13 participants and the team of operators. Of the 13 conversations with participants, four conversations contain more than 50 text messages, the two longest conversations contain more than 90 messages each. One participant sends a single image of a cat.

There is a qualitative difference between two particular conversations: One is between two women, the other between two men. The women's conversation appears generous and detailed, the men's more confrontational. Wary of extrapolating anything from this, but interesting data point.

Comparing feedback notes on one of the above conversations: the two women both confirm their approach to the conversation was based on a generosity of spirit, a giving tactic that 'gets out what you put in' (participant), that

I want them to have had a good conversation. A worthwhile one. Not feel like they've wasted their time' (Performer Feedback, Small Talk (Forensic)).

One participant expressed sadness about the abruptness of its end, which also changed the nature of her experience:

the abruptness suddenly revealed the art, or the artifice, or the fakeness of the conversation: like the happy time i'd been having was somehow delusionary. and that was the one difficulty i had with it (Participant Feedback, Maddy Costa, Small Talk (Forensic))

Appendix 2.8: Conversation Piece



### A.2.8: Conversation Piece

Project	<b>Conversation Piece</b>
Period	25m sessions between pairs of participants, conducted over two days
Participants	8 (4 in NY, 4 in Manchester)
Equipment	<p>In both spaces:</p> <p>1 x Polycom Telepresence Codec with Eagle Eye HD camera</p> <p>1 x Sound system</p> <p>Kettle, crockery and cutlery</p> <p>Tea, granulated coffee, sugar, milk</p> <p>Choice of bagels</p> <p>Peanut butter, jelly, cheese, pickles (NY), pickle (UK)</p> <p><b>Menu</b> and list of questions</p> <p>At Contact Theatre, Manchester (Space 3)</p> <p>1 x Polycom Microphone</p> <p>1 x SM58 wired microphone</p> <p>1 x Projector and Screen</p> <p>1 x Cassette Tape player</p> <p>In culturehub, NY</p> <p>1 x Polycom Telepresence Codec with HD camera</p> <p>1 x 50" LCD Screen</p> <p>1 x fixed microphone</p>
Method	<p>Goal: One-to-one encounter between strangers using a video-conference system.</p> <p>Enacting learning from previous experiments, Conversation Piece uses shared actions to initiate interaction between participants. The encounter is also structured into sections, which consist of short duration shared activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening to an audio introduction</li> <li>• Instructed to ask each other questions from a supplied list</li> <li>• Making a sandwich and a hot drink</li> <li>• Dancing</li> </ul> <p>As far as possible each room mirrors the other, sharing the following characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central to the space is a table and chair.</li> <li>• An HD camera is set facing the chair, and in front of the screen. The camera is set to capture a full height of the participant when standing behind the table.</li> <li>• The screen projects a life-size image of the other room (in Manchester the projection is of the camera image feed from NY, and vice versa).</li> <li>• To one side of the table is set the food and drink making materials.</li> </ul> <p>The participants are both introduced to the respective spaces at a co-ordinated time and left to their own devices.</p> <p>In Manchester, on the table there is a small (10cm x 21cm) sign that invites the participant to PRESS PLAY on the CASSETTE PLAYER positioned to the right of the participant's table.</p>

	<p>The audio on the cassette tape enforces the encounter’s structure by virtue of a series of sound cues which serve as prompts for participant action. The formulation of the audio is as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ENTRE. Short introductory performance text which references ideas of time, presence and distance, notes that buzzers will be sounded to indicate time to move onto a new section or ‘course’ from the menu and informs the participants of the MENU. The recorded text ends with the phrase ‘say hello’. There is 1 minute of silence before the audio tape plays the phrase:</li> <li>2. MAIN COURSE. The main course item on the menu directs the participants to the second menu, the menu of questions. These have been culled from various sources, although most are from the ‘36 questions to force intimacy’ research paper. Participants choose questions to ask each other. During this section they are also invited to share food and drink. The materials to make bagels with a choice of toppings are to hand. Following this is the final section, entitled:</li> <li>3. BEVERAGES &amp; DESSERT. During this section the participants can make a hot drink of their choice. Some five minutes into the section there is an announcement that there will be DANCING and a piece of music follows.</li> </ol> <p>The piece ends as the song ends, and the participants are collected from their respective rooms.</p>
Notes	<p>Some participants were not aware of the status of the other, considering them to be ‘performers’ or in some way in-on-the-act.</p> <p>Time differences were experienced by participants through topics of conversation:</p> <p>‘So, talking to somebody who’s just getting off work as you’re getting to work. Being out of sync with another person and knowing you’re engaging with something that’s somehow foreign, something removed ‘that way’.’</p> <p>I remember thinking ‘he had so much of the day left, and I don’t have much of the day left’</p> <p>Some participants experienced awkwardness (when dancing, when asking or answering what they considered difficult questions).</p> <p>No participant felt they had ‘visited’ the other location. More common was a feeling of being in a ‘bubble’ or feeling separated from each other by an ‘infinite window’.</p> <p>Most felt that the two of them were alone in the same space.</p> <p>Participants described the environment as very safe.</p> <p>‘The most standout feature to me was the stranger, that the person was an unknown person to me. It’s very much like going to a wedding and you get sat down at the table with a bunch of people you don’t know, because that’s where your name is. And you have a conversation with those people over dinner.’</p> <p>Participants felt that the other was very present and in the moment ‘The fact that there was this distance did not intrude on our normal social process’</p> <p>If participants strayed from the camera-eye-view this dramatically altered their perception. For example (1) describing the feeling of being off-camera as being ‘off stage’, which caused them to change the way they ‘performed’ themselves; or (2) feeling very much alone if the remote participant moved off-camera, in contrast to the presence they felt when the participant was on screen.</p>

	<p>'I became really aware of my surroundings and it felt really vast – I could see his empty room there and there was no-one there. I felt my presence in that room as well. Am I projected in there? Is it just me in that room now?'</p> <p>'As soon as I stepped off camera I was out of session. My body takes a different posture.'</p> <p>One participant thought the camera might be recording for later broadcast or perusal and this made them reflect more on their behaviour than they would normally.</p> <p>Participants described the conversation as polite and honest. Thought this was encouraged by (1) the structure of the interaction, and (2) the necessity for turn taking in order to adequately hear and be heard using the technology.</p> <p>When the camera and screen are oriented such that in order to look at the remote image the participant must look towards the camera, participants reported good eye contact was made and that this enhanced the connection they felt between each other. This was also tempered by the lack of a 'mirror' or local camera feed Picture In Picture as is usual in Skype or similar.</p>
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## Appendix 2.9: Small Talk

"Putting yourself in new situations constantly is the only way to ensure that you make your decisions unencumbered by the nature of habit, law, custom or prejudice – and it's up to you to create the situations."

PLS TXT 07474 360606 FOR SMALL TALK

### A.2.9: Small Talk

Project	<b>Small Talk</b>															
Period	8 May – 1 Oct 2015															
Participants	4 (5 including myself)															
Equipment	1 x Android Handset 2 x Back-lit Posters hung on the walls of Contact Theatre, Manchester															
Method	<p>Goal: Investigate nature of connection/intimacy during open-ended text-message conversations between strangers.</p> <p>Experiential framing included the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial provocation to exert minimal influences on participant expectation</li> <li>• Location of provocation is an arts centre, frames the work as “art”</li> <li>• Conversation to have no fixed duration</li> <li>• Operator to maintain honesty of intent</li> </ul> <p>Provocation: Two signs were posted inside the Contact Theatre building in Manchester, one on the ground floor and one on the first floor. Brief text based provocations were written on the signs, along with the text instruction: TEXT 07474 360606 FOR SMALL TALK</p> <p>In contrast to the group based tactics and logistics utilised by the previous two experiments, for this project one operator responded to the texts and engaged in conversations as they might in general SMS interactions, viz:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the phone was generally carried on the operators person</li> <li>• texts were responded to as seen, and not with any more or less immediacy than in everyday life</li> <li>• texts were largely composed and read on the mobile handset</li> </ul> <p>Four conversations took place:</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>CONVERSATION</th> <th>NUMBER OF TEXTS</th> <th>DURATION OF CONVERSAION</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1</td> <td>62</td> <td>8 May – 12 May</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2</td> <td>104</td> <td>8 May – 12 May</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3*</td> <td>267</td> <td>20 May – 15 June</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4</td> <td>275</td> <td>27 June – 1 Oct</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>One participant was interviewed after the end of their conversation (marked with an asterisk).</p>	CONVERSATION	NUMBER OF TEXTS	DURATION OF CONVERSAION	1	62	8 May – 12 May	2	104	8 May – 12 May	3*	267	20 May – 15 June	4	275	27 June – 1 Oct
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3*	267	20 May – 15 June														
4	275	27 June – 1 Oct														
Notes	<p>One participant reported taking part made them question how they normally interact with new people:</p> <p>‘I particularly enjoyed spotting common social reflexes that I would normally think to employ ... Namely that due to normally speaking to gay men, and being gay, there is often the consideration of whether I find them attractive, and a tendency to flirt.’ [absent that knowledge]</p> <p>‘... the focus became instead the dialogue which was very enriching’</p> <p>One participant wasn’t sure why they were taking part, but felt compelled to do so, describing the process as ‘addictive’.</p>															

	<p>There was a fairly constant miss-reading of gender and other social identity attributes. The lightweight nature of the SMS form means this information is obviously not present at the start of the interaction.</p> <p>In interview a participant ‘thought that it was incredibly interesting that you thought I was a boy and that I thought you were a girl’. Another believed I was a &lt;40yo female. The participants rarely volunteered their age or gender or asked directly for details of mine. In one conversation details were revealed that both myself and the participant were in stable relationships, but the gender of the interlocutors was not explicitly mentioned. In another the gender of the participant was revealed as part of a guessing game.</p> <p>One participant described the experience as being in the same vein as the ‘getting to know you’ text conversations that they might have when first dating a new boyfriend. In particular the uncertainty ‘They might not text back, and you’ll never hear from them again. Maybe it’ll go on.’ This participant also noted that the conversation changed nature when it was revealed that we were both in stable relationships.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">‘I think when I mentioned I had a boyfriend, maybe slightly on purpose when you were a boy. Then I was quite relaxed about it again, when I knew we both knew we were in relationships’</p> <p>One participant felt the number of things they wanted to talk about in the conversation was ever growing. That things were starting to get ‘email length’.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">‘It’s interesting to me how easy it is to talk to you because in the real world I’m very awkward socially and not good at meeting new people - and definitely not at keeping in touch!’</p> <p>Conversation slipped easily into areas that feel intimate and semi-private in nature. E.g. family disputes, locations and work. The way the conversation develops feels very getting-to-know-you, albeit over a different time frame and with different social cues.</p> <p>Conversations have felt consistently honest:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">‘It struck me the other day that talking to you was a chance to be someone else - to pretend to be who I want to be or to try out a different persona - but I blew it by thinking of it too late and just being me!’</p>
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Appendix 3:

Menu Cards

(and other traces)



CONVERSATION  
PIECE

# *Menu*



## *Entre*

A PRE-RECORDED INTRODUCTION  
FOLLOWED BY  
A FEW KIND WORDS

## *Main Course*

SOME LIGHT SECRETS TO SHARE,  
ALONG WITH BAGELS  
AND A CHOICE OF TOPPINGS  
(PLEASE HELP YOURSELVES)

PLEASE SEE THE QUESTIONS MENU FOR DETAILS

## *Beverages & Dessert*

TEA  
(AND THE POSSIBILITY OF DANCING)





# Questions

## *Selection one*

- Are you a morning person or a night person?
- What is the one movie you don't mind watching over and over?
- What tune can't you get out of your head once it's in there?
- What's the worst thing someone could call you?
- How honest would you say you are?
- Who was the last person to make you truly angry?
- If something is forbidden, do you want it less or more?
- Do you find it easier to do things for other people than to do things for yourself?
- Do you embrace rules or flout rules?
- What would constitute a "perfect" day for you?
- Do you feel your childhood was happier than most other people's?

## *Selection two*

- Who would you say you can trust the most?
- Would you like to be famous?
- Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say?  
If so, why?
- Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?
- What's the most embarrassing thing that's happened to you that you're prepared to share with me?
- What would you tell your teenage self?
- If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are now living?

**Tell your partner something that you like about them already.**



## *Selection three*

- Do you think things are getting better, or are they getting worse?
- When did you last cry in front of another person?
- What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?
- How can we change the world?

## CONVERSATION PIECE

A Short Performance Text

[ entre ]

I'll start

Thanks for coming

Thank you both for coming, being here,  
right now, together.

(Wherever here is)

Shortly, I'll stop talking and you'll be left to say "hello",  
perhaps to introduce yourselves and make small talk across the table.

Like you've just met.

Which, I guess, you just have.

You'll see a menu on the table.

It's a guide, a sketch of how this might go.

To help you navigate I've recorded a signal.

A sound to indicate when it's time to move on to the next thing.

Like those storybooks you might have read as a child.

When you hear this sound

[ ding ding ]

it's a signal to move on to the next course.

These words are recorded onto tape, they are magnets pointing due north.

An old-school GPS.

These words are coming out of a speaker, they are vibrating the air.

In this room is a microphone, which is capturing that movement and turning them back into electricity.

Sending them, through technology, somewhere.

To someone else.

That somewhere could be the room next door, or just down the hall.

Somewhere in the next county or the next country.

Maybe riding on wings of copper or fibre to the other side of the world.

You are connected to each other through electricity.

When you face each other and look, do you really see each other?

Can you feel your eyes meet?

If they do, where?

Are you conscious of looking for a camera, or at a camera?

Does this make you feel more, or less, watched?

Does it make you feel watched at all?

I'll not wait for an answer.



I'm going to ask you to close your eyes. Just for a moment.  
Please close your eyes now.  
With your eyes closed I wonder what you see?  
The electricity still flows, your picture is still on the screen.  
You are floating, unseen, somewhere far away but somehow nearly here.

Tendrils of perception  
    reaching out through space  
        travelling down wires  
    shifting and shimmering in time.

And so here we are, wherever here is.  
You could open your eyes again now.

While you're hear. I can't feel your breath.  
I can't touch your hand.  
I can't taste your air.  
I could murder a sandwich.

[ ding ding ]



## SMALL TALK TRACE

The following pages contain transcripts  
of SMS conversations selected from the  
*Small Talk* project

SMALL TALK 24

TRANSCRIPT #443

Hey, i found this card in a phone box today, and was wondering who would choose to do that, and why?

Apr 03 9:17pm

Hey, nice to hear from you. Why not?

Apr 03 9:18pm

Haha fair enough, just wondering what your aim is thats all. Or is it just for the lonely? lol.

Apr 03 9:20pm

I can't say I feel too lonely right now. What do you do when you feel lonely?

Apr 03 9:21pm

Cry Haha, no just try to keep my mind occupied with reading ect.

Apr 03 9:23pm

That sounds like a good way to keep occupied, what kind of thing do you like reading? I've just finished East of Eden.

Apr 03 9:24pm

Well i only read non fiction, so anything on the wilderness/survival. Iv just finished the origin of species. Charles darwin.

Apr 03 9:27pm

I've also just finished a curry. How come you don't read fiction?

Apr 03 9:28pm

Haha, i love to make curry, and i dont know, iv just never read a made up story i like or can relate to, i suppose i just like TRUTH! Haha, my name is XXXX, what's your's.

Apr 03 9:32pm

Thats interesting, I don't think you should write off fiction just yet, sometimes you can find a lot of truth there. Hi XXXX!

Apr 03 9:37pm

What would you like to call me?

Apr 03 9:38pm

Haha id like your real name. So i can try picture who im talking to. Lol.

Apr 03 9:39pm

I'm afraid I can't give you my name. You can picture whoever you like!

Apr 03 9:41pm

Aw go on, Haha this is the first time iv done anything like this, its a bit confusing:)

Apr 03 9:45pm

This is an experiment created for strangers. Don't be confused, we could start with a question.

Apr 03 9:50pm

Do you embrace rules or flout rules?

Apr 03 9:51pm

Embrace them, 100 percent.

Apr 03 9:55pm

Shall we set some rules? What rules do you like to live by?

Apr 03 9:56pm

Depends.

Apr 03 9:57pm

Depends on what?

Apr 03 9:58pm

What rule's i need to apply to.

Apr 03 10:02pm

How did you end up in a phone box today?

Apr 03 10:04pm

I have only text message's on my phone, so i had to use the phone box to contact a friend.

Apr 03 10:06pm

Resourceful. Did you need to talk about something important or just for a chat?

Apr 03 10:07pm

Just to say id be late home from work.

Apr 03 10:09pm

Ah I see! Did you have a good day at work?

Apr 03 10:09pm

What do you do for a living?

Apr 03 10:11pm

Not really i only started last week, i had a good day up until the point i didnt get paid. And i have to wait till tuesday for it, and i have no money and a daughter. So you can imagine her reaction as well Haha.

Apr 03 10:12pm

Im giving a whole lot of info out to you without knowing who you are, and to be honest! It feels a bit weird. :->

Apr 03 10:13pm

That sounds like a nightmare! Sorry you've had a rubbish day.

Apr 03 10:13pm

Unless thats what your experiment is? To see how much info people will actually give out?

Apr 03 10:14pm

Kind of, but its more to do w

Apr 03 10:16pm

Sorry! typo!

Apr 03 10:16pm

Kind of, it's more to do with what kind of human connection two strangers can make only through text.

Apr 03 10:17pm

Don't worry, I've never done this before either.

Apr 03 10:17pm

So are you female or male? And im quite spiritual as a person, id find it hard to make a connection only via text, without seeing or at least knowing the name of the person.

Apr 03 10:23pm

Well do you think you can tell from my messages if I'm male or female?

Apr 03 10:25pm

Hmmm. . . . Id say the way you told me you've just finished a curry would suggest your male?

Apr 03 10:27pm

Good deduction skills!

Apr 03 10:31pm

If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?

Apr 03 10:36pm

The amazon. To experience the jungle.

Apr 03 10:42pm

That sounds brilliant. I would too. I'd also really like to go to Brazil.

Apr 03 10:46pm

Cool, i suppose thats a start. Having something in common. Haha yeah im quite the bear grylls kind of guy, without the money :-x

Apr 03 10:51pm

Do you live in the WOODS?

Apr 03 10:53pm

Haha no, but i wish i did at time's. Im a lot happier there. Its peaceful.

Apr 03 10:55pm

Did you climb a lot of trees as a kid? I did. I liked walking our dog in the woods.

Apr 03 10:58pm

Yes hundred's. And between me and you i still do, there's nothing better to me than climbing the highest tree i can find, with my pocket book and a cig, and read away Haha. It help's as behind my property is what remains of a forest. That use to cover this whole estate. I wake up to dear some morning's too. Its great.

Apr 03 11:03pm

<REPEATS>

Apr 03 11:04pm

Hah! That sounds great. If you had a free day, is that what you'd do? There are a few trees near me, never thought about climbing them though, I might now though. The biggest animals I get are squirrels though. You sound sane, don't worry. Haha.

Apr 03 11:08pm

You should its great, the world's your oyster, what ever that mean's lol.

Apr 03 11:12pm

That's my task for next week, climb a tree!

Apr 03 11:15pm

Are you a morning person or a night person?

Apr 03 11:15pm

Both really, im up at seven everyday, to get my daughter to school then I start work, but i love the night to, iv built a kind of hut in my back garden, with a brick fire oven in front of it i also built, so every saturday ill light the fire with my daughter and we cook salmon, and jacket spud's. Then wait for the stars. Its a lot better than saturday's tv. Haha

Apr 03 11:20pm

That sounds good. Saturday TV is crap isn't it? You built a brick fire oven too? Thats pretty bloody brilliant, not many people build things these days. Sounds like a great Saturday, and it sounds like you're setting a great example for your daughter too.

Apr 03 11:27pm

Thank's:) she love's it. She's still a girly girl though lol. Got her growing plants too.

Apr 03 11:36pm

She sounds brilliant, how old is she?

Apr 03 11:37pm

5. Going on 10 Haha

Apr 03 11:39pm

I can't believe she's only five! She sounded older by what you were saying.

Apr 03 11:43pm

Nope she was walking at 10 month, it was very strange to watch, out of nappies at 1 and a half. She use to watch her mum go then walked the toilet ever since, knowing her mum doesn't wear one. Crazy baby lol

Apr 03 11:47pm

Hah! I don't have kids, but I always find it mental when I see how fast my friends' kids grow!

Apr 03 11:54pm

They do grow fast, make's me realize how old im gettin. Still don't understand why you cant tell me your name?

Apr 03 11:57pm

It's one of the rules of the project. We agreed we wouldn't give out our names or location.

Apr 04 12:02am

Sorry!

Apr 04 12:02am

Location is understandable. But first name's ok surly. So what do you's get from doing this?

Apr 04 12:08am

It's hard to say. It's an experiment! Into how we can connect with one another without any human interaction.

Apr 04 12:18am

And there's some curry!

Apr 04 12:18am

How's your evening going?

Apr 04 12:19am

Yes but we couldn't naturally, only through technoligy. So not very human lol.

Apr 04 12:20am

Not good Haha, she's ignoring me till i get paid. Typical woman Haha. And my daughters sat watching a film with me, she wont sleep Haha.

Apr 04 12:22am

Ah well it's the holidays!

Apr 04 12:25am

What film are you watching?

Apr 04 12:25am

Well i didnt get much choice. The wizard of oz. Disney version.

Apr 04 12:27am

Not sure I've seen that...

Apr 04 12:29am

Is it an animated version?

Apr 04 12:29am

Have you ever seen 'Return To Oz'??

Apr 04 12:29am

It is bonkers!

Apr 04 12:29am

Thats the one its disney Haha and yes it is bonker's. Especially the chicken.

Apr 04 12:31am

Belinda!  
Apr 04 12:31am  
And the dreaded wheelers...  
Apr 04 12:31am  
Haunted me for years!  
Apr 04 12:32am  
Haha i didnt get to see this one when i was young, just the other, but yes  
for a child its quite scary.  
Apr 04 12:34am  
Is she enjoying it?  
Apr 04 12:37am  
Yeah she's been watching it for about a year now. 5 time's a day lol. So  
give me a good book title thats fiction then.  
Apr 04 12:45am  
I think you might enjoy Touching The Void  
Apr 04 12:55am  
Have you read it?  
Apr 04 12:55am  
It's not technically fiction!  
Apr 04 12:55am  
No but ill look out for it, whats it about?  
Apr 04 12:57am  
Erm...  
Apr 04 1:00am  
It's about a guy who has an accident and gets stuck up a mountain  
Apr 04 1:02am  
I'm not selling it very well  
Apr 04 1:02am  
It's been a while since I read it but it's interesting and of the 'outdoorsy'  
category!  
Apr 04 1:04am  
hence the recommendation!  
Apr 04 1:05am  
One to read on one of your tree climbs...  
Apr 04 1:07am  
Sound's interesting. Ill defo look out for that one.  
Apr 04 1:19am  
Do you have any other Easter plans then?  
Apr 04 1:41am  
No but my daughters going to guliver's world with her grandad and  
cousins.  
You?  
Apr 04 1:48am  
That sounds FUN!  
Apr 04 1:49am  
Well, I'm here making small talk in this room until 6am!  
Apr 04 1:50am  
So I guess catching up on sleep tomorrow.  
Apr 04 1:50am  
Really six am wow! Haha. Any job's lol  
Apr 04 1:50am  
Not suprised.  
Apr 04 1:52am  
What would be your dream job?  
Apr 04 2:03am  
Well i sing for a hobby, but id much rather do what grylls and irwan do.  
Thats much cooler.  
Apr 04 2:07am  
Or irwin did should i say!  
Apr 04 2:08am  
Oh cool... Do you sing in public?  
Apr 04 2:31am  
Be careful what you wish for. Doesn't Bear Grylls do a lot of drinking his  
own wee?  
Apr 04 2:32am  
That can't be pleasant!  
Apr 04 2:33am

Haha yeah but he's demonstrated that for every one already so ill leave that part to their imagination. And yes but not at the minute. I use to gig all over but iv lost touch with the landlord. Who was getting me the gig's. But im sorting something out soon.

Apr 04 2:35am

What sort of things do you sing?

Apr 04 2:47am

Anything from snow patrol, kings of lion, i even throw a bit of Elvis in from time to time Haha

Apr 04 2:58am

An eclectic mix! I am a sucker for a bit of Elvis.

Apr 04 3:08am

I'm ashamed to tell you that steps has just come on shuffle

Apr 04 3:09am

5,6,7,8

Apr 04 3:09am

Haha step's.

Apr 04 3:10am

So only 3 hours to go.

Apr 04 3:11am

I thought I remembered all of the moves but I'm sad to say that I'm a bit rusty!

Apr 04 3:11am

Not long now.

Apr 04 3:12am

Got any ideas how I can pass the time?

Apr 04 3:12am

Take it you dont have a book? Have you ever sang? Or played an instrument?

Try writing a song.

Apr 04 3:16am

I have a ukulele and a keyboard! And my friend recently bought me a 'thumb piano' which is a weird instrument. Okay, I'll get to work on a song!

Apr 04 3:57am

I do like to sing but not really publicly, unless I've had a few!

Apr 04 3:59am

Have you written any songs?

SMALL TALK FORENSIC

TRANSCRIPT #908

Hello. How are you?  
Apr 18 1:45pm

Hello! I'm pretty well thank you. How are you?  
Apr 18 1:46pm

I'm having a really great day thank you. The sun is shining and I'm with an old friend and I'm having time off from my kids and doing ART instead. What are you doing?  
Apr 18 1:48pm

Always nice to be doing art in the sun. How long have you known your friend?

I'm currently doing ART in a room looking at the sun, while also trying to combat a light hangover with posh(ish) apple juice.  
Apr 18 1:52pm

22 years!! We made friends through music and I now take him to lots of odd performance things. What are you DOING? And what gave you the hangover? I haven't had a hangover for years, which is nice but also a sad sign of being boring.  
Apr 18 1:55pm

I'm doing Small Talk at people :)

It was my boss' birthday party last night. We went to a Power Ballad night at the Ritz. It was... an experience. Things were drunk.  
Apr 18 2:02pm

Oh DUH of course! Am silly. And a bit overexcited. My friend says the ritz is TERRIBLE. Hope the drink disguised that. What's the best conversation you've had so far? Often I find small talk v difficult bec it's so mundane.  
Apr 18 2:05pm

The best conversation is ours of course. I think it's okay to be mundane.

What's the most mundane thing you can think of?  
Apr 18 2:17pm

Hmmm well talking about the weather is obvs super boring but actually I really enjoy it. Mostly I find mum conversations about children stuff super boring - unless I initiate them, which is usually bec there's something I'm finding difficult/stressful. What do you find mundane/boring to talk about? Are they actually the same thing?  
Apr 18 2:20pm

I must agree about the weather thing, but I am enjoying giving my feet an airing wearing sandals today. I don't have children, so I am yet to be involved in high amount of conversations about them. I always find the 'I was so drunk last night' conversations pretty boring. I reckon mundane and boring are quite different. I would find a conversation about celery boring, but you can't really say that would be a mundane conversation...  
Apr 18 2:30pm

Yep can't remember the last time I had a conversation about being drunk, that's an advantage I suppose. I actually used to have a lot of conversations about celery, for the odd reason that there was a porny postcard artist in the 50s who did images of pin-ups revealing their stocking tops in accidental ways, and ALL of them for inexplicable reasons were carrying celery. For another friend, celery became a feminism battleground bec it's a zero-calorie food. Oh no! I'm making you have a conversation about celery! Hope it's not boring...  
Apr 18 2:51pm

Well I can't say this celery conversation is boring or mudane. They are facts/information that I will carry with me to inform my next celery conversation. I Although to give celery it's due, it makes soup taste GREAT! I remember my Grandad growing celery and eating it straight from the ground (after a swill under the tap) Do you have a celery related memory?  
Apr 18 2:59pm



Oh I absolutely hated celery until a couple of years ago and still struggle with it cooked. There's a traditional cypriot dish - parents from Cyprus - made with a root veg similar to a yam plus celery and tomato, proper peasant food, and I would HATE it when we went to my granny's and that was what she'd cooked. What are your best and worst family dishes? I love talking about food.  
Apr 18 3:14pm

Oooh that sounds lovely to me. Very fresh. My mum makes a great pizza, although it is not in any way a traditional method. She lets the dough rise for ages so it is really thick, and makes her own tomato sauce. I try to re-create but have been unsuccessful so far... My Granny also made the best yorkshire puddings, with crispy bottoms. The worst thing was curried eggs if we were having people over and mum made a buffet. BLUGH! I love talking about food too. I am currently trying to grow radishes and carrots in my back yard. What was your favourite meal growing up? Do you grow any veg?  
Apr 18 3:24pm

Oh god I love Yorkshire puds. I find questions about what's your favourite x really difficult, my kids ask them all the time, they're really concerned with things being ranked, I think it's to do with a desire to make sense of the world through categorisation (which I guess carries on and on, even when we know it's quite detrimental). Also, I'm rubbish at remembering stuff from childhood. As a young teen I loved meatballs (not filth!!) and was "vegetarian" for a year before I managed to give them up. What's something you've given up that has been hard? Re veg growing, I'm v v bad at it but like growing tomatoes to eat fried green ones and courgettes to get the flowers. Always wish I were better at gardening. What's something you do but wish you were better at?  
Apr 18 3:35pm

I remember me and my sister asking my Grandma and Grandad who they liked best. It is strange the things that you get hung up on as a kid. I think the plethora of exams we have to do from a young age don't help the situation either. I am a veggie! And I love veggie meatballs! (Usually supermarket own brands are the most tasty.) Giving up bacon was pretty hard actually. It's the smell. Lovely! I grew some tomatos last year, I had too many plants though and couldn't eat the quick enough so some went to waste...I wish I was better at singing. My partner is really great, and I wish we could do a cheesey duet together but I just haven't got the skills. What would you say you were good at? What do you enjoy doing?  
Apr 18 3:52pm

A friend asked her daughter to order who she loved most and was mortified when she ranked lower than dad AND teddy!! I love singing and dancing but am not half as good as I'd like at either of them, also love making clothes but haven't the patience to do it well, always wanted to be in a band but similar problem of not giving time necessary to getting good at it. Feel like a failure all the time!! Which is quite odd to talk about with a stranger. But I think that's what I like about this project and the (possible) thinking behind it: what does our strangeness open up?  
Apr 18 4:11pm

Oh dear, I'm not suprised she was mortified! Note: Never ask my future child where I rank on the love stakes. Did you ever have singing or dancing lessons? I used to have dancing lessons, but hated doing ballet because it meant that I missed saturday lunch at my grannies which was egg and chips! Food again! What clothes have you made? I have just learnt to crochet, and am in the process of making a cardigan, but I have missed and gained some stitches so it is a bit wonky! I would love to be in a band too. I was thinking about it on the train this morning. I am sure there are things that you are very good at that maybe you don't even realise! I am glad you like this project. I am very much enjoying talking to you. What do you spend most of your time doing?  
Apr 18 4:53pm

Also do you have any clothes making tips?  
Apr 18 4:53pm

Ah I remember being really angry about going to Greek school on Saturday morning, whined about it so much stopped going and now can't have a conversation with m granny. I really should learn. Am gearing up to learn crochet - can knit though, all my jumpers are a bit wonky too! I spend almost all my time writing, except when I'm being mum/working. I'm trying to balance things better though: I've gotten back into sewing lately - need new clothes and refuse to buy! Making tips: do a course! I love adult ed courses. What do you spend most of your time on? How typical is it of your art making?  
Apr 18 5:22pm

I would love to learn another language. I always feel really ignorant when I go abroad and everyone can speak English. I highly recommend crochet, it's very soothing. I find knitting a bit clunky as my hands are pretty small for the big needles. What homemade item do you wear the most? What sort of writing do you do? Why would you rather make your clothes than buy them? I am looking forward to the sense of achievement I will (hopefully) feel when I wear my cardigan for the first time. Oh really, I might check out the courses around my local area then! I am spending too much time at home in the minute, pottering around, thinking too much. Which is great, but I am looking forward to a busier work schedule over the summer season! Sorry, do you mean how often do I make art?  
Apr 18 5:43pm

It has been lovely chatting with you. Thank you for taking part in our Small Talk experiment. If you have any thoughts or feedback please email [isthissmalltalk@gmail.com](mailto:isthissmalltalk@gmail.com). Have a lovely evening.  
Apr 18 6:15pm

Final instalment! I have some homemade skirts I wear all the time. I write about theatre. I'm really fussy about clothes, always want natural fibres, struggle to find stuff that fits, and hate the prices! I write about theatre! I'll let you know when I write about this. It's been a joy: thank you x  
Apr 18 6:49pm

SMALL TALK FINAL

TRANSCRIPT #054

Hey

May 08 9:53pm

How you doing?

May 08 9:54pm

Has it been a bright day or dark?

May 08 9:55pm

Murky Id say.... Likeeee.... October...

May 08 10:05pm

Are you wishing Summer away?

May 08 10:06pm

Or do you think we did that yesterday?

May 08 10:09pm

I think wish isn't the word... I think we miss summer.... And most of life hoping to reach some sort of euphoric future plateau... I wish summer would stick around...

I would spend less on energy... :)

May 08 10:12pm

I drop down in the winter. Fall a little, and in the dark struggle some to power through. I think I'd like more Summer. But you're right - we can aim too high and too hard for something we probably don't need.

What should I wish for?

May 08 10:14pm

What do you wish for?

May 08 10:24pm

We can aim too high and too hard for perhaps what we already have. The smallest seemingly insignificant thing can hold a world of beauty and peace... To slow down and "live" is what I wish for...

But again is wish the word... Wish sound like a word of U likely aspiration...

As if only magic could provide the outcome we seek

May 08 10:51pm

Yup. I wish for magic. Or at least awe?

Maybe we've traded that for an iPhone

The world in a drop of rain, eh? Feel tendrils fly from this machine to all of everyone I know, touch base and connect. But to live slower don't seem to be a decent aspiration no more. Should be tho. (lets take a break from the rest).

To grasp stillness, what'd you do?

May 08 10:55pm

I get out of town... I purposefully walk slow... I look at something small... I hear what's around me...

I always think... There are so many people, in so many job, with bosses pushing for more and more outputs, to make stuff, mainly cheaper, "sometimes" better.... Always faster...

But why?

I deleted facebook from my phone last week... I don't need to know about everyone's day all the time. I don't want to feel compelled to check everyone and everything all the time in case I miss something. I want to live, and see, and hear... And not synthetically... Unless I'm escaping into space to fire lasers at pirates in order to escape reality for a brief stint

May 09 9:13am

Hello again! I hope you had a good sleep (or if you didn't that you had a brilliant and epic time out).

I like your stillness plans. I have so many opportunities to get out of my various ruts but its scary how infrequently I take them. Out of town simply isn't that far away but I can't remember the last time I was there. I think I'm going to change.

Yes! The hectic buzz of increasing productivity; it takes it out on the meat that's being grinded. Doesn't it feel like we're back in the industrial revolution? But with flat screen TVs and better plumbing.

I'm conflicted with social media. I take the high horse and claim not to be addicted, in fact even 'knowing' about the stresses and strains of constant updating. Yet it is a constant interruption. It's not a binary, it's not all cat pictures, strident outbursts and 'look at me's; sometimes we all need a cat pic. (I know I did yesterday morning).

Which space pirate laser game do you like the best?  
May 09 10:07am

Our access to information and tools to measure has made it easier to seemingly objectify everything... Which is good... But not so when the process robs us of what (in my opinion) makes us human... The ability to do more than just provide informative responses, carry out physical functions... Which is just instruction and implementation... Computers can do that... And while I am a biological computer, I have the capacity for creativity... And I like to use it...

In terms of blowing spaceships up in space... There is a game called "EVE" which I quite like...

Facebook... To maintain a relationship with something, there must be a need of:

Positive gain

Avoiding positive loss

Avoiding negative gain

If u were to leave facebook today, what do u think might happen? It's only been here a few years anyway...? What happened in the world before it... Before the Big Bang was there more time? Lol...

May 09 10:26am

Yes. I think the objectification thing is a big element in all this. We're dehumanising each other as everything becomes a commodity (especially as the most obviously measurable judgement of value comes from financial value). Nuance is difficult with databases and algorithm.

As you say, tho' - we are at the very beginning. Toddler steps.

I wonder if those who've played massive online games (EVE, WoW etc); might be slightly ahead of the curve? Although theres always the horror stories in those environments too!

Leaving FB today would mean that some folks would slip out of my grasp. Is this important or necessary? I don't know. There's a desire to hold everything; perhaps this is unnatural - or a step on the path as we grow up?

As a player, do you see any parallels with gaming community and the enveloping social medias?

May 09 11:17am

Efficiency... We can of course be much more efficient but do we "need" to be?

The quickest thing we can judge about a person is their appearance. We think it tells us so much... So our appearance has become an ever more "important" uniform. But that's like trying to make a PC case look as wonderful as possible... Perhaps in the hope that no one will turn it on... To discover it's actually windows 3.11

We don't have time to build internal substance when we are trying to maintain a flawless exterior... But then if everyone else is doing the same does it really matter... Will anyone ever have the time to scratch below the surface, turn on the machine, find out what's within?

Holding all the information? I would like an implant... That would background stream all the data I want into me head... But then do I need it all?

Sometimes I think about simple strategy games... And the basics... Food, shelter... And we have now invented all these other things which we are told we need, which we don't need... Unless we need to keep up... But what are we keeping up with? Who is the identical haircut uniform for? Who is the "phrase" of the moment for...

Regarding online games, WoW... It may as well be facebook... It doesn't function the same way... You display of superiority is in what your gear looks like, or in EVE the size of your ship.

I think facebook has more ability to be a threaten for ourselves. We get to decide on the set, props, we edit...

We choose what others see and try to paint our lives in the most idyllic light... And of course all we see of other people is their idyllic lives... And we feel

pressured to make our lives more idyllic... We are on the constant obsession of marketing ourselves.... But why? And for who? And for what?  
May 09 3:06pm

Yes. We certainly perform ourselves in particular ways within particular media. There is a fragmentation of ourselves, I think. We also build our own selves and the various images of ourselves broadly without community guidance (as we grow); and with precious little support as we live. The questions you ask above are spot on. How did we get our social/cultural values so skewed?  
May 09 3:43pm

2.make biased or distorted in a way that is regarded as inaccurate, unfair, or misleading.

"the curriculum is skewed towards the practical subjects"  
May 09 4:14pm

Is that 2 of 2?  
May 09 4:18pm

In my little opinion  
May 09 4:18pm

Ha! Do we gauge our opinions on size?  
May 09 4:20pm

Well that's subjective... I don't believe in right and wrong... Just subjective opinion...

However I do agree that I don't think the current aims of especially western society are ideal...

Image costs. And the image is made up of more than physical objects, accessories and clothes... It is also the lifestyle that goes with the image. All these things cost... They are products of the economy, and thus provide momentum and sustainability of the consumerist cycle...

And so all the images are reinforced in TV, film, music... And then there becomes a hierarchy of those who try to adopt that which has been temptingly constructed for them... And of course we all want our bite of the cherry. Competition spawns and of we merrily go in a constant drive to best imagine the image handed to us by all the external sources to ourselves that there are...  
May 09 4:24pm

Cmd///delete 'little'/end of line  
May 09 4:24pm

Although I suppose different peoples opinions carry different degrees of gravity, dependant on power and influence... And of course the audience  
May 09 4:25pm

Yes that push towards STEM is a powerful incentive to know your place No creativity it fun for you, there won't be a job in that  
May 09 4:38pm

I think I may have misunderstood that message?  
May 09 5:23pm

Oh sorry. It was referring to your earlier missive about the curriculum  
May 09 8:46pm

I really lobed your rant after that  
May 09 8:47pm

LOVED!  
May 09 8:47pm

Are u secretly a Ferengi? Despondent with the rules of acquisition? (Lobe reference) lol  
May 09 8:48pm

Ha! I mean I think I've seen stuff (I've seen things you wouldn't believe) but I'd not have got the Ferengi  
May 09 8:49pm

Reference  
May 09 8:50pm

What would I not believe... I may? Try me...

Did I make a missive about the curriculum?  
May 09 8:52pm

You know... I had rather a lame experience today... I went shopping for a new bag... And despite having loads of disposable income this month... And I do have a fair bit in savings... I was like... What am I going

To do with it all? I can't buy time, friends, love, happiness  
May 09 8:55pm

And those are the things I want  
May 09 8:55pm

Will they fit in the bag  
May 09 8:56pm

They may... As I suspect the number of suitable candidates will be small lol  
May 09 8:59pm

I feel a little trapped, by the ideal image of a species working to achieve a happy equilibrium with each other... Thinking in heuristic way, but quickly... And to have people that can see conventions, analyse them... And then make choices  
May 09 9:01pm

I intend to do most of the music for it too...  
May 09 9:07pm

Ha! I'd like to listen to that music. Would it be like Godspeed? Like Mahler? Like DJ Shadow? Like the music at the end of time?  
May 09 9:16pm

Mainly piano... That's my main instrument  
May 09 9:18pm

Do you play a real piano? I have a 25 key Akai thing.  
May 09 9:19pm

:)  
May 09 9:21pm

I have a piano, a clarinet, accordion, violin, guitar and I soon plan to add to the collection a guzheng  
May 09 9:21pm

Bloody hell! That's pretty amazing. How are you on each?  
May 09 9:21pm

I want to create a dance piece... Two actually... I saw a piece last night which led me to your piece...

The first piece is called 10 beautiful things

The second is to do with social conditioning...

There will be the sound of rain, wind, nature, people just being people... And then the lights may dim with a closing speech...  
May 09 9:22pm

Violin, lame...  
May 09 9:22pm

Guitar, better than lame  
May 09 9:22pm

I could be better technically  
May 09 9:23pm

And piano... I think I'm ok... :)  
May 09 9:23pm

Accordion and clarinet... Goo dish  
May 09 9:24pm

Wow. That's quite a vision. I would counsel you to go in with the feels and the emotions - and a sketch of what you've just described. The work with the people you want to make it with to synergetically build the piece. Forge a company of folk with a common visio!  
May 09 9:25pm

Sadly I'm a full time employment <elided> who does not possess a studio... I expect it will be a solo piece at least to start  
May 09 9:33pm

Ish  
May 09 9:34pm

Ha! We perhaps you should think about scheduling  
May 09 9:35pm

Start using my studio at the gym... Record music at home... Take it with me...  
Start choreographing...

May 09 9:36pm

perhaps :)

May 09 9:36pm

Goodish\*

May 09 9:38pm

Think and write every day.

May 09 9:43pm

Work with some dance folk. Meet some dance folk. Figure out a way to work.  
Make work.

May 09 9:44pm

This is true...

May 09 9:51pm

It's just doing it though

May 09 9:53pm

Ha! Don't imagine the hurdle before it's in front of you

May 09 10:16pm

I suppose this is about investment and risk... Putting in time to anything where the outcome is based on a long term investment introduces risk, as you then have to factor in that the outcome is likely to balance out or exceed the initial investment.

That doesn't have to be financial, but as you mentioned much earlier, it often is the focal point...

May 10 1:33pm

(hi again)

Yes. There is an element of risk. However, it's also framed as the risk of the venture's success. In art (as in so many things) failure can be unexpected, rewarding and send you on a new path of discovery. It's the process, the doing of a thing, not the particular performance which is the most fulfilling outcome.

Do you find that with music?

May 10 6:33pm

With art and dance, I do enjoy doing it at the time... If it isn't "work"... But when it comes to performance... If I'm not happy with the performance... I get a bit upset. I do want the outcome to be good.

I suppose though each piece of work, each performance... Does provide its own feedback ...

But I would like a piece that I am happy with... Like food. I love to cook. And when the food is good, I almost disassociate myself from it and then sit back and appreciate my own work. The same with art...

May 10 8:03pm

Yup. I totally get that about wanting your stuff to be good. Its hard won, the peak of a mountain, eh? I think I'm so stupidly precious about what I make that it can stop me from working at all. So not allow ing myself to fail stalls the making process. I guess that's what I mean about having a precise vision of something before the work has begun.

May 10 8:14pm

Or at least part of the problem for me!

May 10 8:15pm

How do you start a making process?

May 10 8:19pm

I just have an idea, a value... Something I want to say...

May 10 8:48pm

And then the ideas just come to me

May 10 8:48pm

Like... If I want to do a talk about something... I just go...

May 10 8:49pm

Where to go on holiday... Whether to go on holiday... I will be going alone wherever o go

May 10 9:14pm

Sounds like you're very at ease with your creative process! That's certainly something to be proud of.

What kinds of things do you talk about when you do a talk?  
May 10 9:40pm

The last one I did was about relationships. A break down of the word... And then the addition of labels to relationships to explore what that means  
May 10 9:43pm

Were there lots of post-its?  
May 10 9:50pm

(didn't mean to make that sound tooooo flippant!)  
May 10 10:13pm

Erm... Sort of... They were actually pieces of card hung on string  
May 10 10:51pm

I didn't quite make the point I wanted to make  
May 10 10:51pm

I think I spend a lot of time thinking about what I want something to be like, and not enough time discovering what it should be like. I'm trying to figure out ways to fast prototype performance work (or any type of work really). Continuous creation, embracing failure as a discovery process and as part of whatever it is I'm making (or is being made whilst I bumble around  
May 10 10:57pm

Thanks for taking part in my Small Talk experiment. It's been great to chat, really enjoyed our conversation. If you have any thoughts or feedback you could text  
May 12 11:32am

Oh well that's sad :(

Feedback:

It was really interesting to have a conversation with a random person about such stimulating stuff with no idea where it was going.

I particularly enjoyed spotting common social reflexes that I would normally think to employ... Namely that due to normally speaking to gay men, and being gay, there is often the consideration of whether I find them attractive, and a tendency to flirt.

On this occasion as I know not the sex, age, appearance or sexual orientation of the individual in question, the focus became instead the dialogue which was very enriching for me and a nice way for me to reflect on my tendencies and the possibilities if I avoid those automatic approaches.

I am intrigued of course to know who you are! But I suppose that will remain a mystery?!

Kind regards and thank you for having me take part,

P  
May 12 12:59pm

That is brilliant. Thank you so much for both being involved but also for giving such speedy and eloquent feedback.  
May 12 2:49pm



SMALL TALK FINAL

TRANSCRIPT #992

20 May 07:34 pm  
SMALL TALK

20 May 08:51 pm  
Hello. This is Small Talk. Have you been enjoying the weather today?

21 May 12:38 am  
Hello. Not specifically enjoying the weather. But it made for pleasant views on my journey. Have you?

21 May 07:15 am  
I like rainfall. Mainly on the outside though - perhaps through a window! Like on a train, or from a balcony. Yesterday I found myself caught up in it, a slow drenching making its way through all the chinks in the wet weather ware! Ick. Where were you travelling from?

21 May 09:45 am  
I like rain in glass houses too. I travelled by train from london where we sat in the shed enjoying the rain until it got too cold. Sounds like you need to re waterproof your wet weather gear. X

21 May 10:58 am  
Yup. There's something splendid about rain and storm through glass. Did you come up for anything in particular? Or was it just for the shed sitting :-)  
I'd have recommended something to warm yourself, like a nice rum or one of those hand warming things that you take camping. Oh, I'd chosen the wrong bloody gear - thinking it would be all bright and dandy. Still, it's all fine now. Skin is good at drying out. Are you back in London now?

21 May 02:33 pm  
London was the trip. Manchester's home i'm back now. I went to get my fingerprints taken for my russian visa but it was really disappointing and electronic no ink. I hope you're wearing suitable sunny clothes today.

21 May 02:36 pm  
Russia? That sounds exciting, and - well - possibly tempestuous? I suspect I'm falling for all kinds of media hype saying that. NO ink, eh? Does it feel weird that your fingertips have been digitised and are now out in the world? I'm out in a bit, and am contemplating SHORTS. This may be a step too far, but I can feel the heat on my face through the window - so may take the gamble. What are you planning to do in Russia?

21 May 08:47 pm  
Let's talk about small talk. So far it's been a some text messages with a stranger mostly about the weather. Why?

21 May 09:53 pm  
Good question. I suppose small talk usually starts with the weather, or things that are easy and common - which might be sports, simple likes and dislikes. I'm curious about the medium. I use text messages all the time, and I'm sure you do too. What is and isn't said with the text alone? What do we add in to the mix? I don't know you at all (nor you me), so where might this go?

21 May 10:02 pm  
That's what i'm starting to wonder. Where's it going? I do use texts all the time, but rarely as a first contact. I don't type words to strangers usually. I'll speak to them and by the time we're texting we're not strangers. First small talk via text is strange

21 May 10:21 pm  
Very true! But texting is only around 20 years old. And pretty much everyone in the (western ) world having a mobile probably much less. We don't talk to strangers much by text (perhaps mostly when dating?). Its a relative new way of communicating, one that I use to talk to acquaintances, friends, work colleagues, lovers, automated services and my parents. Such a range!

21 May 10:59 pm  
Have you seen the film Her? I don't like how similar this feels to that. You could be a computer programmed to generate responses that i would like.

Kind of like artificial anti loneliness software. There's no human connection with texts. They are surface messages not human contact.

21 May 11:46 pm

Ah. I haven't seen Her yet, but I'd like to. I also missed Ex Machina (?) at the cinema. Of course this could be some kind of Turing machine experiment, and I suppose simply telling you it isn't won't prove it :-). I agree that text messages have very little context, and certainly not much in the way of inflection or context. But I'd argue they don't have to be surface. Certainly they aren't between me and my fiancée - but this is most likely due to the immense amount of emotion and data that already links us. My inquiry here is what happens if that kind of envelope isn't there at all? (also, why would they be responses you would like :-)

22 May 01:03 am

Boy or girl?

22 May 09:12 am

I'm going to guess you're a boy.

22 May 10:25 am

And you?

22 May 10:56 am

Of course I'll tell you, but I'd ask what is the main reason you would like that question answered? (and you never said if my guess was right :-)

22 May 08:15 pm

I guess it doesn't matter. I was telling my friend about small talk last night. We spoke about it for ages. We wondered if we could tell gender simply through text messages. You can't ;)

22 May 09:50 pm

I was just wondering if our chat had come to an end, I looked down at the phone (which I hadn't picked up all day) and there was a winking white light! Hello again. I love that you talked about it for ages. Won't you let me know what you said? You appear to have come to the conclusion that you can't tell much through text. Is it because it's so low bandwidth? Is it because it's so easy to lie? If you can't tell gender, can you tell orientation, race, age? (If I drop in a reference to watching Star Wars in the cinema, or still thinking the West Wing is the best TV ever made - can you tell my age now?). What other conclusions did you come to?

22 May 10:38 pm

Martin Sheen for president!! CJ is my idol.

22 May 10:52 pm

Ha! Well it is the very best. Don't you wish that Bartlet was president! I wonder if the days when the advisors to the great and good actually knew stuff and that politicians actually listened to them!

23 May 06:20 pm

Did we decide what genders we are yet?

23 May 06:25 pm

What gender are you?

23 May 06:32 pm

I'm male. Any further ambiguity would probably have gotten irritating. Am I right?

23 May 06:33 pm

Earlier I thought you were, too. Was I right?

23 May 06:34 pm

No. You were wrong. I'm not good at texting. It's my birthday party today. We're having a BBQ in Rusholme. Come?

23 May 06:35 pm

Ha! Ok, I concede your earlier point - clearly we can't tell gender at all through text.

23 May 06:36 pm

I'd adore to come to a BBQ in Rusholme but I'm surrounded by books and

papers and am constantly failing to write. Distractions are not my friends.  
(Neither are deadlines)

23 May 06:37 pm  
Haha. Your fiance,'s welcome. Xx

23 May 06:37 pm  
Happy Birthdy, tho! I hope your BBQ is splendid.(as the anonymity fades)

23 May 06:38 pm  
So I know you (or at least you know me), and I've read back the last few texts,  
and I know you're female ...

23 May 06:39 pm  
\*thinks\*

23 May 06:39 pm  
Can I have another clue?

23 May 06:40 pm  
It's blue up there in the sky. Looks perfect for a BBQ. I can smell the sizzle.  
Are you going to operate the BBQ? Will you use highly flamible liquids to  
make it burn?

23 May 06:43 pm  
I'm not operating it it's flowing. Food is being eaten it is good.

23 May 06:45 pm  
What's it like? Describe it.

23 May 06:46 pm  
No i'm here present. Not going to text about it. Wanna know. Be there.

23 May 06:49 pm  
Oh well. I'm going to have to not know then :-). Hope you're having a brilliant  
time.

24 May 09:36 am  
Its an odd one and a half way street. You know me (or enough if me to know  
I'm engaged) I suppose in this convo its like being at a party. Chatting to  
someone whilst all the while trying desperately to remember their name.  
Although without booze, distractions and those cheese and pineapple sticks.

25 May 06:18 pm  
So how did the writing go?

26 May 10:59 am  
Very slowly. I'm having to really immerse myself and think a lot. MY brain  
hurts. How did the BBQ go?

26 May 12:41 pm  
The bbq was beautiful but i've just said goodbye to my boyfriend and my  
friend and am feeling grey like the sky. What are you writing?

26 May 12:43 pm  
I'm writing about this. Well, about the making of connections and meaning at  
a distance. Through SMS (like this). Are you grey because the other people  
have left?

26 May 12:44 pm  
What for? Where else did you advertise small talk? Will you reference our  
conversation? Yes. And the sun isn't shining. And its time to think about  
work. And clean myself and the house and my mind.

26 May 12:46 pm  
For my thesis. I've advertised Small Talk in a number of locations (Salford,  
Manchester, Preston) and in a variety of ways (poster, audio, business card).  
I may reference this conversation, but without its phone number or any  
distinguishing marks. I might ask you to feedback or comment, too! I wish I  
could clean my mind. A nice refreshing shower just underneath the brain  
pan would be great right now.

26 May 01:04 pm  
I feel like i've been giving you my feedback throughout. But i'll answer more.

Sometimes magic mushrooms make you feel like your brain has been bathed and you feel clean afterwards. Well, someone described that to me. I can relate.

26 May 01:12 pm

Yes, you certainly have. Sometimes abruptly :-). It's really important (for me) to constantly question what this is about. What's happening in my (unwashed) head, and how that reacts to yours. Of course, we're now quite imbalanced, 'cause I think you know me and I still haven't quite figured out who you are. I've had mushrooms before, not in any great quantities tho'. I don't think they ever made me feel like my brain was cleaned!

26 May 02:47 pm

I don't feel like I know you any more than you know me now. What more would you like to know? Did you notice that you read my texts differently when you knew my gender? I apply a different reading to yours now I know your male which is odd. I don't think gender matters particularly...

26 May 02:59 pm

Oh. From things I inferred from the texts you sent earlier I had come to the conclusion that you were someone I know in the face-to-face. Is that not the case? I suppose what I mean there, is that if you do indeed know physically who I am

then that's the imbalance I am imagining. However, if I've misjudged that and in fact you don't know who I am then I guess that colours me confused :-). I believe that we surround the text messages with meaning culled from other sources (every text from a lover, co-worker, family member or friend is surrounded by this knowledge).

26 May 02:59 pm

I think gender is very important, but also that it is performed. So that within the constraints of this low bandwidth apparatus we are performing tiny versions of ourselves.

26 May 03:14 pm

So assuming we don't know much about each other. Why not share some information. Name some music you couldn't be without: I'll start: Eric Satie's Gnossiens (but not much else), The Smiths Hand in Glove, some 65daysofstatic, erm. Jimi Hendrix

26 May 03:15 pm

I don't know who you are. Now I wonder if I do!!! Maybe we infer meaning, but we edit, rewrite and reread texts before we send them, we are more selective than I think we are in person.

26 May 03:20 pm

Definitely. We curate ourselves.

26 May 03:22 pm

Mantra music. The Beatles. Joni Mitchell. I would like to by Rusted Root.

26 May 03:23 pm

Helter Skelter? or Love me Do

26 May 03:26 pm

I find texting on this particular phone frustrating. It's a Nokia 30something with push buttons. Texting takes time and I can't scroll through past messages easily. I presume you have a touch screen as you reply fast. Norwegian wood

26 May 03:27 pm

Well I salute your texting with such a lowly phone! (I'm listening to Send Me On My Way by Rusted Root now. I don't think it's anything like I expected!). Oh I do like Norwegian Wood, and Strawberry Fields. A bit of Eleanor Rigby (but not too often) I'd forgotten about the frustrations of using a simple phone. Like not being able to see the conversation as a conversation.

26 May 03:29 pm

You have to dance around the room waving your hands over your head

26 May 03:29 pm

Ha! YES you do! I am doing that now! Genuine LOL.

26 May 03:30 pm

Its different. I was without a phone for 2 weeks before i got this. It was super liberating.

26 May 03:30 pm

I'm almost crying.

26 May 03:30 pm

With joy?

26 May 03:31 pm

Yeah. I'm realising that I loose focus when I've got all these distractions. I mean I already knew that I suppose, but I'm damned good at tricking myself. (distractions of twitter, fb, all those things that come with a smart phone) Oh yeah! With loads of joy. (I've just started laughing again remembering it) I'm adding this to my mental joyful playlist

26 May 04:52 pm

You're welcome. You're in control of those distractions but its a pretty crippling addiction we all have to constant communication at the minute. So tell me stranger whose writing a phd, what are you hoping to get out of your time on this earth?

26 May 05:36 pm

That's a huge question, innit. One I probably should have some stock answer to. Make things good for my family and friends. Improve the lot of the world in numerous small ways (probably quite localised ones). Funny. As I write these into this phone they seem to be all about other people! I wish to have joy, love and respect. I wish to enjoy the love and respect of others. Oh, and a decent gaming pc :-). What about you?

26 May 08:03 pm

To live with love. To embrace the weeds. To step foot on every continent maybe even country. To be honest. To love. Love. And love.

26 May 08:11 pm

That's quite beautiful. I love (!) that we both converge on LOVE. Big, complex, surging, sometimes debilitating, heart exploding and naturally utterly undefinable thing that it is. That's twice today I've felt a surge of joy from a text :-). Every country's a hard task! I met a guy once who'd been to every country (203?) he was from Liverpool and I think a talk about it is on the TED talks website! I think he did it almost entirely without using aeroplanes, too. Weeds are just flowers given a bad name.

27 May 11:15 am

Morning.

27 May 01:27 pm

Afternoon

27 May 01:45 pm

Time slip. Thank you for talking with me. I hope you enjoyed our exchange. I'll be thinking of dances to unknown music and embracing the weeds :-)

30 May 04:43 pm

You can call me al is also a cracker. You should listen to it a few times learn it a bit then sing it loud during your morning shower.

30 May 04:45 pm

Ha! I'll practice. May I ask what your memory of this conversation is likely to be?

30 May 05:22 pm

I'm still a bit confused by it. I make small talk all day long and barely get to text or connect with the people i love.... I question the point of this remote interaction with a stranger. Why? I still can't figure it out. Or why i continue to engage with it... But i am engaged. And was wondering if you were going to text again.

30 May 05:26 pm

It also makes me think about our inability to be alone. I think we have an addiction to communication in this society. Millions of people alone with a

smart phone asking cyber space to love them. Xxx What will your memory of this conversation be? Xx

30 May 07:53 pm

I do welcome confusion and engagement. I know I feel both of them when I'm involved with this project. The way our last conversation felt like it tailed off (which I began to take as the end of it), was certainly punctuated by my looking at the phone to see if the I've got a new text message light was flashing. (earlier in the week it was, but it was 3 telling me my bill was ready). We do seem to cultivate busy-ness and also be very curious in socially chatting with others (these two together are bound to cause trouble, right). When I started this process I was wondering how it would work, thinking that in social media situations there is a far larger audience to the chat (facebook, twitter etc); so I imagined people would be less likely to want to chat to an individual; especially in a way that offers no secondary audience. Although it could be a kind of reclaiming of private chat in what is I suppose a fairly secure place. We are unlikely to be overheard? Is that something? I agree about our inability to be alone. Especially with all the networks at our fingertips it's pretty hard to duck out and even be alone. DO you miss being alone? You said you have a basic phone at the moment. Is that an active choice? Even without a smartphone, do you have a computer or tablet to be connected?

31 May 01:56 pm

Hmmm. I do yoga and meditate alone to reclaim my space. I like taking train and busy journeys without a smart phone I can see the world. I'm busy and can't always be bothered to text. Doesn't mean I don't want to. It's just not my most natural communication medium. Especially with this phone. I have a laptop and am on facebook. I rarely chat on it though. I've never used a dating site. This is the longest most detailed text I've ever had with a stranger. I'm a theatre director studying an ma at the moment. I'm interested in ideas about performance...I'm curious about this.

31 May 05:04 pm

I very much like your phrase 'without a smart phone I can see the world' - I suspect the main lure of connected devices is their shallow assertion that they bring the world to you. It's only when the world comes clamouring in that it becomes white noise! Going without reclaims the universe of our eyes and ears (and lets us set the pace again?). Thanks for talking, I hope I didn't give any kind of impression that you weren't being punctual enough in your replies! I'm finding it really interesting how the gaps in conversation work. How easy it is to slip back into the conversation (like a good book!). Before this project I'm not sure I ever had a conversation with a stranger by text! Do you ever pick up a conversation on FB with strangers or friends once removed? I don't think I can remember doing that. Pretty much everyone I know on FB are people I've met. I would love to know your ideas on how this relates to performance (both of self and within performance/theatre studies)

31 May 10:14 pm

How many people have responded to small talk?

31 May 10:17 pm

In terms of performativity I think written message is really interesting. I always rephrase or at least we get a lot longer to consider our words than when we are speaking... Messages are completely constructed... When a friend is starting to date someone and we all talk about what to write back... How many kisses etc. It's fun and completely performed. The least spontaneous impulsive or genuine form of communication.

31 May 10:38 pm

I think there is something about it being constructed that's interesting and unique to all users (and I think this also has something to do with age, or perhaps age of adoption of the technology). It's fun, too! Odd that we construct these messages in much the way you describe (how many kisses, how long to leave between texts), but to what audience. Which is especially interesting in this project :-)

31 May 10:40 pm

In total over the past 9 months I've done this project in different forms probably about 100 people? Some only for one text, others tens or hundreds. In one version (run over 6 hours I exchanged 1200 texts with 54 individuals.

31 May 10:44 pm  
What a fast thumb you have.

31 May 10:45 pm  
This conversation is, I think, the longest in number of words - and the only time I've had a conversation that lasted for more than a day.

01 Jun 08:40 am  
Haha yeah, as my boyfriend said, this is no longer small talk. Its pretty big talk.

01 Jun 08:45 am  
Big talk in a small window :-)

01 Jun 08:45 am  
I taught at a school in india for a while. The students have phones and facebook. They all speak tamil, which has its own script, but as these devices mainly use english alphabets the kids write tamil using english, spelling things phonetically and creating a new text only language that the adults can't decipher.

01 Jun 08:48 am  
That is brilliant. Did you hear about the Mosquito? This was the high pitched sound that only young folks could hear - used to make an irritating sound in the shopping mall to deter young teens from hanging around. Some of them made it into a ringtone so they could text in class without the teacher knowing! There's disruption for you.

01 Jun 08:56 am  
Young people are arguably better at having fun with these things. Have you only done small talk with adults?

01 Jun 09:04 am  
In terms of it being a theatrical performance... Perhaps it isn't. I believe we need a performer and a spectator. I'm not spectating i'm participating, but in such a way that i have equal control to you. For a while you thought i knew more of you than you did of me. I haven't got the sense that you are leading this, or that there's a narrative or journey you've constructed, it seems open, you'll follow my lead in the conversation. So its two equal individuals engaged in dialogue with no public audience. It certainly engages with ideas about performativity and constructed selves. But i'm not convinced its theatre.

01 Jun 09:20 am  
I've never really known what age groups have taken part. The locations the number has been in would suggest a majority are adults, but I never really know I take your point about a theatrical 'leading on' which hasn't really been part of this process. There's little frame for it at the moment, and to be honest I struggle to set out the parameters to even start that journey. (Which is not to say it hasn't been tried). I am interested to see if the spectator / performer axis flips during this two and fro' - our day-to-day engagement with performing through social media gives a wider audience than ever before. The equality of purpose gives risk and reward, and also can uncover ways I think about interactions (how my own bias might work). I'm also somewhat fighting with the presenting of theatrical language and 'style' (broad I know!) within the confines of messaging. I.e. Descriptive texts, branching narrative that is in of itself on rails.

01 Jun 09:57 am  
This morning i woke up in a small shepherds shack on a farm. I could hear the geese clucking to be fed. Me and my man were all tangled up with a double sleeping bag that was partly zipped apart. I had time to feed the baby goats bottle milk before running for the bus. Manchester is busy noisy traffic queues people heads bowed eyes down rushing. I've got to go home quick give a presentation at uni cycle to work then go to my friends tonight. I can't wait for us to start our own farm....but probably then i'll really miss being busy in the city.

01 Jun 01:24 pm  
I started the day with the sun streaming through the blinds, there's never enough black out - so I rise with the sun (or sleep over in the grey). I hear the sounds of traffic, and wonder how we ever sleep. Up and showered, needle points of hot wet piercing the fog of nearly sleep. Slip into lycra-tight

cyclewear and ZOOOOOOO. Through the streets of the city, angled round corners that hold within them the opportunity for speed and impact. Out of breath split time reads 7 minutes. Not the best. Time to fold into work. (I go inside, out of the light, and wonder how much time I'll spend there today).

02 Jun 10:51 The entire time the sun shone I was in a room without windows. On the journey back home the rain licked my face and ever so slightly blurred my vision. Cycling through a city it's clear that everything is constructed (by design or accident), placed here or there - even trees and other greenery - except the weeds which grow hunch-back until they become too high to ignore. I'm starting to realise I stay in the city all the time (I love the city), I don't know why I never really think to escape. It's easy to get in a rut, eh? What rut would you want to get out of?

02 Jun 01:19 pm  
I don't feel i'm in a rut. I'm always on the go. I work freelance and part time. I'm going to russia to direct two shows soon. I plan to leave manc when my degree finishes. I suppose what i want a 'rut', or stability or a home really. moving onto the farm is a step towards us achieving our dream. But realistically that won't happen for five years or more. So now i want to see and do all the things i imagine i'll want to have done when we're busy with our own baby goats. Writing that text made me feel really positive about my life. Thank you.

02 Jun 03:32 pm  
Thank you for writing it to me (and by implication to you). Like you, I don't feel I am ever in a rut; I keep busy with many projects and they are sufficiently varied and stimulating to make me really love what I do (and that those around me do, too).(Although I'm not so sure I would extend that joy to my academic writing which still has to be wrung from me like a screaming parasite) What I certainly don't do, though, is to step outside of my self-made-rut. The rut of comfort and already understood challenges. I think I've busied myself so much that I don't have to take a step outside and look hard at what I'm doing. (I would claim not to have time!). It's a little scary to dream then. Or at least to dream about attainable things. I am very impressed that you have plans and ideas of what and how you want to navigate life and the next few years. It makes me think I should be talking with my fiance about such things as baby goats, and not brush those things aside. Thank you.

03 Jun 08:41 pm  
Right now I can hear the peel of church bells, I am assuming they come from the Cathedral (as I think that's the closest place of worship that I associate with bell ringing). The sound is coloured with shouts from the road, birdsong and a Peter Broderick song that has started to play. It's still bright out, the window is open and I can feel the breeze on my feet. I \*think\* that's the sound of a plane overhead.

04 Jun 10:17 am  
I can hear birdsong the coo coo that you only hear in england. I'm holding tea too hot to drink. Steam in my face. I suspect i've made a mistake and used earl grey. Morning Yoga made me aware of tension behind my right shoulder. Soft ache. Mindful moans. It is earl grey. But its ok. Embrace the weeds. Excited by the sunshine. Ready to go out and grab the day with two fist fulls of life.

04 Jun 12:02 pm  
So I've been out around town, looked in on a business I sometimes work for and fixed a thing but mainly chatted. Trying to justify being away from the hot workbench of creativity that is supposedly fueling my writing. (or at least facilitating it). I'm going to cycle over to the library to get out another book I'll probably put in the bookshelf next to my desk. I get a small rush of accomplishment at stocking the shelves with words (although I am getting better at lifting out at least a small amount of meaning). Cloud-whisps lay light in the sky and I can see a helicopter circling far enough away I can't hear it. A dog is barking. It doesn't interrupt the birds. The sssshhhhh of the cars sounds a little like wind.

04 Jun 02:05 pm  
Reading on journeys is a great way to do it. A small pocket of time to digest ideas. I can't work at home. I also can't really work from time to time. I need to eat sleep and breathe something in a horrible 2 week hermacy to



deliver any thing i'm happy with. I'm impressed with anyone who's taken the phd plunge. I don't think it'll be for me.

04 Jun 04:40 pm

I've been listening to podcasts and recordings whilst cycling about. It feels really edifying, but there's no opportunity take a note on the bike :-). I've managed to convert one room into an office that is sufficiently immersive (surrounded by books, papers and stationery) that it actually encourages work rather than finger twiddling. I'm actually right now in the eat, sleep and breath stage - and feeling halfway between becoming and falling. Small breaks are welcome, and in fact the library visit was not completely a distraction - I have actually done some valid reading (Peggy Phelan's Unmarked). I can't help but wonder what I'm doing with the PhD almost all the time. But in fact, some of the reading today helped! (In that it codified doubt as an inevitable :-). I suspect that my biggest problem with the academic writing is that it is academic :-). I've just thought this convo has all pointed back at me again, and it's all a bit angsty and self-involved. How has your week been? Was the tea the right choice in the end? How is the city and the country? Are the weeds tended, just so?

04 Jun 08:35 pm

All of these texts have been about your phd.

I've concluded that people care more about texts when they are starting to date someone. Tonight i am exhausted. Already horizontal. No time to go to the farm this week. He's there and i wish i was too. Perhaps my last message was a little harsh? I didn't mean it to be. I meant i don't mind that these texts have been about a phd or a performance or whatever. Its cool. I won't text if i don't want to.

05 Jun 11:20 am

Hey there. I hope you're less exhausted now, and that missing the farm wasn't to sad-making. I didn't think your response was that harsh. In fact it's clearer and clearer to me that we project stuff onto these small exchanges of words. Even our own texts once written and sent are re-imagined by us (the author!). Its challenging and interesting to take part in a conversation where so little (well nothing really) is known in advance, how much is guessed at, what we give away and how comfortable we end up chattering. I'm certainly enjoying talking with you. It's interesting when you say folks care more about text when they are starting to date - this might be a particularly charged example (dating) of an otherwise social desire: one which doesn't get picked up on much as people rarely do so much \*discovery\* by text in friendships?

05 Jun 06:01 pm

In my experience, no one ever talks about their text messages apart from my girl friends when dating. My housemate is being particularly obsessive right now about texts, which i don't fully understand. But in our other relationships text is usually a form of short communication and for me tends to be facilitating an actual meeting. We don't consider them too carefully, or i don't usually, unless we fancy someone. And yes i see what you're saying. All of the interactions with someone we are attracted to are charged so it figures texts would be more difficult to construct. As can spoken sentences if you are shy!!

05 Jun 07:42 pm

I think I reference texts when talking to others, but in amongst conversation that references 'oh someone tweeted this' or 'did you see that FaceBook comment'. In fact when I come to think about it, its more common to talk about SMS when its been deemed a slight or out of character, and the conversation is about interpretation! Perhaps that's where the whole dating thing is relevant, you might pour over a text to try and discover meaning (meaning that was quite possibly not intended at all).

I think a lot of folks use text for triangulating and logistics. Short messages like you say. However, I know increasingly large numbers of people (mainly friends who are younger than me) who would rather have an extensive conversation by text than answer the phone. That could just be my annoying phone manner tho :-)

I'm wondering about shyness and construction of text messages? Is it easier to make yourself 'heard' by text, if you can construct and reconstruct the sentence? Or is it just as hard? The 'volume' of a text is prtty much the same for everyone (BAR SHOUTING) so maybe it's easier to make a point. Depends

how much self-censorship goes on, I guess. When we generated more complex prose to describe what we were doing and how we felt about it, that felt a little more transformative (away from the short form hello). I think I actually wrote more fluidly than when I'm trying to construct a comment on what you just said!

05 Jun 08:49 pm

I think social media has given shy people a platform they never had before. Not just shy but also those society ignores. Perhaps text gives the same voice. You'll have to ask a shy person. I don't suppose many shy people will have text small talk.

05 Jun 09:01 pm

I would agree that there is the possibility of platform for the shy (or at least less overly dramatic) within the promise of Social Media - but then there seems to be a combination of an immense pressure of (e.g. gender normative) conformity, and easy (and at times violent) untamed mechanisms for bully-boy retaliation. I'm wondering if this kind of text messaging contains less intrinsic risk? So might be an easier platform. Although I'm not so sure a shy person would automatically see it that way (and I'm wary of characterising 'shy people' as a heterogeneous group, too :-). Certainly mass communication has given opportunities to organise and find ways to develop social/group cohesion over distance. It promises Arab Spring and Occupy, but delivers Facebook and Google+. Your dissertation sounds very interesting (and unbelievably relevant). Did you see the Contact produced performance Crystal Kisses? Of course there's also been Rites and Nirbhya recently in Manchester - I'm not sure if they played outside a theatre or in anything other than a theatrical context.

08 Jun 09:14 am

Long walk home from my best friend's house this morning. Right side of my nose and head throbbing slightly. Bright sunshine bouncing off cars making me squint. I move at a different pace to these busy Manchester morning bees. Got a full fat day of working life ahead of me. Tonight I make theatre. I've performed at Contact before. I saw Rites and Nirbhya at Edinburgh. It's disgusting gender based violence continues to be relevant. Makes the sunshine less sweet.

08 Jun 03:32 pm

Was that an indulgent throbbing from the night's play? Or morning 'orriblebness? I was up early (6.am) as I'd been for the past few days - working at a conference so nasty early hours (and late nights). I \*did\* love the morning sunshine. Glorious through the blinds that don't quite black out the room :-). I used to have some ace clip-on sunglasses, but no more. Now I'm routinely blinded by the sun! Need to source some cool prescription sunnies. I was walking back from the conference centre a couple of days ago and Could Not Believe how busy the town was, how much bustle, make-up and glamour. Then it came to me: I'd done another working day on a Saturday. Doh! A nod and a holler of theatre blessing (of the Break a Leg sort) for tonight. I've not been to the Edge before! \*heads off to google\*

08 Jun 03:37 pm

It's a constant amazement to me how far we seem to have come as a species, yet we are so utterly shit to each other based on seemingly arbitrary attributes. So good at breaking each other.

09 Jun 01:29 pm

I run a weekly drama club for young people with Down's syndrome. It's always loads of fun. One of my favourite jobs. We're doing pirates and sea caves and mermaids and monsters. Something I've noticed during our conversation is the space text give you to construct responses. When talking, conversations can go off on tangents, some threads are unfinished. Although having conversations whilst taking acid was completely different. Ideas became much more tangible. There is distance between messages and I can complete and rephrase responses without being interrupted. I don't feel like I have to answer every question, I don't have to respond. The final point probably has more to do with the fact that I don't know you. If my mum text with a question I'd feel a greater pressure to reply.

09 Jun 04:52 pm

Pirates and sea caves, mermaids and monsters sounds brilliant. Living in the city I meet folks who are going to or doing these kinds of things a lot, especially in the last decade or so. I grew up in small town England and don't

remember there being much creative activity going on. I've always been shy, and it's taken me years to get to a place where I'm not crippled by self-doubt and unbelievable over-thinking. I suppose I'm thinking about what if's; I'm not sure where I got it from, but I'm frequently afraid of doing things wrong. In one version, I attribute this to the type of education I went through (right and wrong answers, very little grey area, creativity not associated with success). I'm always excited by ways people can come together and build things (without being knocked down). Don't know where that micro rant came from! I noticed the finishing of unfinished threads the last time I made this project; when you're reading the reply it sometimes feels like you build a bullet list in your head and simply go through one by one. Other times, things get missed. I know a few times before I've systematically answered everything because I thought it would be impolite not to :-)

11 Jun 01:09 pm

(I would note that if you met me I don't really fulfill the archetype of 'shyness'. If there's folks around me I know already I'm a mighty overdramatist and (seeming) extrovert. It's with people I don't know I collapse - I think that was the subconscious reasoning around this project!)

12 Jun 12:00 am

I'm leaving for Russia next week. Would you like to meet before I go?

12 Jun 10:06 am

Yes I think I would like that.