

CONTINGENCY OF THE NOW #2

October 2014

In addition to the performances presented for *Contingency of the Now* each artist is asked to participate in an interview that aims to share some of the thoughts and ideas behind their performances and practice.

Rie Hovmann Rasmussen: To begin with, could you tell me a bit about your performances for *Contingency of the Now #2*?

Melanie Jame Wolf: There are two performances, *Far Away...So Close* and *Touch//Screen*, one informs the other. The first, *Far Away...So Close* is an established work that I have shown before at festivals in both Australia and Germany that I will be doing a new iteration of for Contingency of the Now #2. The second, *Touch//Screen*, is an experimental piece that I will try with audiences for the first time at NLHspace. Both works are one-to-one, meaning one audience member at a time with me as the performer. They are very fluid and conversational in structure.

The first performance is called *Far Away...So Close*. Essentially, it is a work about the modern condition of love and distance. It happens over Skype. The audience member comes to the gallery space, climbs into bed and makes a call to 'A Distant Friend' - that would be me in another location, potentially anywhere in the world. What happens next is really contingent on the play and interaction between us, but I've found the best way to succinctly describe what we do is to state that we have a 20 minute micro-love affair on Skype, but a love affair can be a lot of things, they can happen between friends, lovers, new acquaintances. I first made the work after I had moved to Berlin from Australia and I found myself on Skype all the time, both for work and more importantly for maintaining connections and the love with my friends across the incredible geographical distance that exists between Australia and Europe - it is such a long, long way away. The main aim of the work is to explore the question of how intimacy between two people can be created and maintained using the screen as, to borrow from Mischa Kavka, their zone or point of affective conjunction.

The second performance is called *Touch//Screen*. This is a brand new experimental one-to-one work that I'm really excited about bringing to NLHspace, particularly because of Rie's openness to me doing something more process-based as a part of my time there. *Touch//Screen* is the first work that I've made specifically as a performative installation for a gallery space. I've been wanting to cross over, or expand into, this context for a while, so this is great. The starting point of *Touch//Screen* for me is to investigate questions that have come up through performing *Far Away...So Close*. The first of these questions is about continuous space. In *Far Away...So Close* there is a moment available where myself and the audience member play with bed sheets and the screen to try and achieve a sense of being in the one world or space. It's probably my favourite moment of the piece. So with *Touch//Screen* I will be constructing the installation as another representation or experience of this same space. We will move together through this space exploring it as a liminal place of potential screens. The work will involve us playing together with these potential screen spaces and a series of projections as a way of exploring how we inhabit screen spaces - like Skype or selfies or videos. Rather than a kind of anthropology of this, I'm interested in the poetics of this contemporary possibility - particularly how our memory or our kind of enculturated or subliminal knowledge or memory of cinema informs how we inhabit screen spaces. Then there is a whole new line of questioning around ghosts - as a way of thinking about digital subjectivity and liminal continuous screen spaces and even collaboration in the one-to-one context - but that's another story. Basically, what people can expect from *Touch//Screen* is a one-to-one performative conversation where we play with continuous space and ideas around the screen and light and the self.

RHR: I would actually like to pick up on what you shortly mentioned about ghosts. Ghosts "[...] as a way of thinking about digital subjectivity and liminal continuous screen spaces [...]". I think it's an interesting link and perhaps you could say a bit more about this and why this interest in the ghost?

MJW: Yeah, I have begun to work with this neologism of 'the apparative' as a way of articulating an aesthetics of the digital as it relates to my practice around remote collaboration and performance. The idea is a marriage of the German 'Apparat' - meaning machine or apparatus, and the English 'apparition' - meaning spectral or ghostly vision or visitation. This idea of the apparative or of the ghost is a way for me to think more deeply about the 'poor' image quality of the Skype and smart phone based digital technologies that I am using: the pixelation and the glitching and all of that shittiness which I really love and love with video - the fact that on a Skype call we can appear to materialise and dematerialise in front of one another, that our voices become out of sync or distorted or disembodied. It also relates to the relationship that I am exploring between the lineage or memory of cinema and how that might or might not inform our current ways of inhabiting screen spaces - traces and ghosts of an 'old' or 'dead' medium. There is so much discourse around the dance that occurs between cinema and the idea of ghosts. Steven Choe has a lovely phrase, 'evanescent ontologies' which refers to the relationship between ghosts and

Weimar Cinema and that idea of evanescent ontologies is exactly what I am trying to get at in terms of my work. And then there is the strange afterlife of images – in obsolete storage formats or online in bizarre places which in turn speaks of the particular quality of the digital capture of 'live' moments. Finally, the apparatus also refers to the mode of production of the remote collaborations that I am involved in – working apart, but constantly haunting each other with ideas and partially lost translations of agreements and visitations; strangely affective relationships of absence.

It is really something that I am just starting to sink my teeth into – both *Far Away...So Close* and *Touch//Screen* work with and flesh out these ideas. I consider one-to-one performances a form of collaboration and the distance of our being strangers and the distance that I am trying to bridge in terms of the traditional audience/performer power relation make them remote. They are visitations, we haunt each other (in the best way) and this apparatus condition becomes heightened, supported and expanded via the digital platforms – Skype and projections; energy and light. The continuous spaces that are in dialogue between the works were made of white bed sheets in their first iteration. This feedbacks so wonderfully to the old school bed sheet ghost costume, which in turn can be of the screen and be a screen. So that's where the ghost sits right now within my thinking and my work.

RHR: Both *Far Away...So Close* and *Touch//Screen* are one-to-one performances, why use this specific type of performance situation? And what does it have to offer when you work with reflections on digital media and the screen?

MJW: I've been working with the one-to-one format for a long time now. I think that, formally, the two things that it offers are, firstly, a framework in which, with a rigorous enough kind of porous, flexible dramaturgy, a co-authorship of the performance event can occur between the two people involved, wherein infinite possibilities are available within the structure; secondly, it creates a space for intimacy between strangers, for playful, affective exchange between strangers. This doesn't always happen, and definitely happens by degrees, but that possibility for the 'failure' of intimacy is just as interesting. I think the one-to-one frame offers a lot of productive risks for an artist, and for audience members. It can be a space to really lean into boundaries – but this has to be done so carefully and with a lot of grace. I like what it presents in terms of the affects or, dare I say it, energetics of the way in which we encounter each other as beings. It also means that there is this lovely afterlife of the work in which only you and the other will ever really know what happened within the performance, I love that secretive, bespoke quality.

As far as what it offers when I'm working with reflections on the digital, one of the principal reasons that I made *Far Away...So Close* was to see if I could create the same levels of intimacy or affective exchange through the Skype platform that I can in a 'live' one-to-one in which our two bodies inhabit the same physical space. In some cases so far, that has happened in really impressive and moving, beautiful ways.

I think also, given that the way in which we now inhabit screen spaces on a daily basis and kind of have a digital subjectivity, or a digital body or bodies, those inhabitations and new subjectivities are quite personal and I feel as though the privacy and intimacy of the one-to-one frame allows for a particular kind of open play with these ideas. The way in which we inhabit screen spaces nudges and leans into all kinds of tricky stuff and questions around the narcissism of the contemporary condition and also some tricky metaphysical ground in terms of the ways in which can now materialise and dematerialise in front of one another through digital representation – like for example when a Skype call drops out or freezes. When we inhabit these screens in transmission technologies, we are inhabiting a third, liminal space and state of being which McKenzie Wark calls Telesthesia. I think that this telesthesiac space and mode of being ties in completely with the ideas of the apparative, with the ghostly and with the concept of haunting or of visitation and I think a one to one frame is a great space to climb inside those ideas and test their parameters and meanings together. That's what *Touch//Screen* is intended to explore – it proposes a kind of conceptual submersion in the elements of digital subjectivity and the screen as well as investigating what the lineage of cinema might have to do with these phenomena.

RHR: Your performances seem to challenge the connection between liveness and performance practices as well as what may constitute this liveness. What are your thoughts on liveness? And how do you reflect on it in your own practice?

MJW: I don't know that I have a resolved position on liveness, but I certainly have a lot of questions and interest in the concept. I know that I personally feel challenged by approaches to ideas around liveness which kind of carry this almost belligerent insistence that, you know, 'you can't beat the real thing'. Sure the 'real thing' - the unique moment in physical live space, is great, but I don't think it is necessarily any more an 'authentic' or 'magic'. Phillip Auslander talked about this over a decade ago, he asked why we aren't already thoroughly fatigued by privileging the live over the mediated? There was a great recent panel discussion at Tate Modern on Liveness, which is still available to listen to online, it was chaired by Chantal Pontbriand and Phillip Auslander spoke along with Cally Spooner and Fiona Templeton. I like it for many reasons, but particularly because in her introduction, Chantal Pontbriand says that 'investigating liveness is somewhat of an urgency' for contemporary practice and contemporary life. Of course, this is because of the digital and also because of the increasing interdisciplinarity of work being made and because of globalisation and new modes of production and all kinds of factors. I think, with the digital - with video and streaming and all of their delicious potential for glitchy aesthetics - what appears as a question is whether liveness requires a shared spatial dimension, or only a temporal one - doing something at the same time, you know, online, live - like Skype, or chat, or streaming.

But do we need to be connected via the digital in order to believe that we are sharing the temporality of an action? Can't we just trust each other? I'm interested in this because I'm interested in the possibilities of

remote collaboration, but also because I am resistant to this ominous magnetism of always being online and of always needed to post and prove that things are happening - this emerging paradox that the live only took place if it has been mediated and I guess a personal grief at the loss of the romance of distance and of not knowing. It feels as though discussions around liveness inevitably lead into questions around verifiability, or as Auslander points out, insuring somehow against some kind of fraudulence - that things are really real and really happening, that they are genuine. But then, can they be scripted or scored? Or does that begin us down the slippery slope to mediation? Does liveness demand spontaneity to be 'legitimately live'. I think it's all of this kind of authoritative, legitimation kind of language around liveness that I am so resistant to - I like my world to be a little more uncanny and uncertain than that. That said, this idea of liveness is really central to the 'success' or the efficacy of the one-to-ones that I make; that two people are sharing a unique moment of exchange that only they are privy to. Perhaps that secrecy of the events of the live one to one moment are where I locate my resistance the need for hyper-mediation to prove that something has happened. I find the feedback loops of thinking about liveness that I inevitably get caught in only make me want to pursue these questions more in my work.

Liveness is always placed in a binary with mediation, but really, a strong argument can be made for everything existing only via its mediation. I was thinking about this and it made me laugh, that the true opposite of liveness is actually deadness. And certainly, I have seen many live performances, which are scripted and completely inflexible in terms of 'what happens' and yes, dead, affectively dead. It's like with politician's speeches - which is something that Cally Spooner talks about in the Tate talk - in the speeches of someone like Obama, the scripting is so careful, the dramaturgy of the speech itself so careful, the rhetorical gestures and so on, so careful and plotted out in advance, that really, there is nothing live about them and their cynicism only worsens that condition. Yet the way that such speeches lean into genealogies and narratives of great oratory tradition - bending a mythology of liveness for persuasive purpose - renders them dead, no? Or at least, renders them as a particular kind of theatre pretending to be live. Again, why do we privilege liveness? What I will say is that, in terms of performance, I value the palpable actively engaged presence of a performer far more than I do the legitimacy of the 'liveness' of the act, I think those terms are distinct.

Thank you.