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## **Remote Encounters:**

**Connecting bodies, collapsing  
spaces and temporal ubiquity in  
networked performance**

<http://remote-encounters.tumblr.com/>

The following paper has been published as part of *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 10 (2); a special issue based on a selection of papers and performances at *Remote Encounters: Connecting bodies, collapsing spaces and temporal ubiquity in networked performance*, a two-day international conference (11th - 12th of April 2013) exploring the use of networks as a means to enhance or create a wide variety of performance arts.

## **make-shift**

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**make-shift** (<http://www.make-shift.net>) is a long-running networked performance series (2010-2012) that dramatises and problematises the private actions of our domestic lives in relation to ecological themes of plastic marine pollution. Each event is telematically located between two ordinary houses (usually in different countries) and an online performance space<sup>1</sup> accessible to anyone with a broadband connection. We (Helen and Paula, one in each house) work with proximal<sup>2</sup> and online participants to collaboratively 'stage' the work. Moments of scripted and visually poetic performance are interspersed with webcam videography, digital imagery, avatar puppetry and online chat. Intermedial performance modes integrate with open systems of interaction to engage proximal and online participants in a discursive co-authorship that both frames and questions issues surrounding consumption and disposal in late-capitalism. Small groups (usually 8-12 people at each house, plus online participants) are essential to the conversational unfolding of the work across the three spaces. This intimacy enables a sense of temporary community which is also an active negotiation of difference; alongside the socio-political content a space opens up in which audiences can think deeply, discuss, and shift their perceptions about local-global relationships, experiencing a sense of connection which leaves physical and virtual traces.

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<sup>1</sup> The online performance space consists of UpStage, a browser-based platform for live performance (<http://www.upstage.org.nz/>) and audio-visual streams.

<sup>2</sup> 'Proximal' refers to those in the same physical space as one of the artists, as opposed to those who are online/remote. Defined by Helen Varley Jamieson 2008, 72



**Figure 1:** Helen Varley Jamieson in Istanbul: make-shift Istanbul/Exeter/online 19.9.11.

### Framing statement – by Paula Crutchlow

This is a place of fragile connectivities. Every thing you're about to experience is operated live in real time by Helen, Paula or the people in the houses that you can see to the left of your screen. Images, sounds and their meanings may arrive to each of you at different speeds and times, after traveling through varied routes and translations. Things may drop out, reconnect, lag and stutter if things stop altogether - try reloading. We invite you to assist us in making this event - in fact your contribution will make a real difference to how it goes. To do this you can type in the text box to the right of the screen and please join in any of the activities. (Introductory performance text, *make-shift*, 2012)

*make-shift* is a messy, complex and fragile performance system that was devised to be reliant on both online and on-site 'audience' participation to function successfully. Throughout the making and performance process our aim was to find ways of devolving responsibility for event actions, inviting participants to become an increasingly integral part of the performance 'dispositif' (Deleuze 2007)<sup>3</sup>. For Remote

<sup>3</sup> Dispositif is Foucault's term for an apparatus, which we both belong to, and act in and is described by Deleuze (2007) as "machines that make one see and talk" (339). Each dispositi-

Encounters (figure 2) we wanted to share a sense of how being a part of this discursive performance system collectively manifests an affecting and effective metalogue<sup>4</sup>. To this end we staged a 30 minute work demonstration drawing on descriptions, commentary and embodied actions from the event score, to offer an immersive and performative critical reflection. We invited conference attendees to actively contribute to the presentation and advertised it as open for online participation.



**Figure 2:** Screenshot of online interface during the introductory sequence for the Remote Encounters presentation 12.4.13. Live streams from APO33, Nantes and University of South Wales, Cardiff on the left. Text chat box for participant input on the right.

As a site responsive work, *make-shift* is reliant on its domestic settings to produce and anchor its meaning, relevance and resonance. Proximal participants in the houses take part in a two to three hour experience in someone's home, sharing food and discussion as well as contributing to the performance action itself. Online participants often tell us they are also in their own home<sup>5</sup>. Some log on early and

tif is “a multiplicity, where certain processes in becoming are operative and are distinct from those operating in another apparatus” i.e. the prison apparatus is an optical machine for seeing without being seen (Deleuze 2007, 342).

<sup>4</sup> Described as an instance of content and structure in continual, resonating conversation with each other (Garrett & Catlow 2013, np).

<sup>5</sup> UpStage currently requires the Flash Player plugin and is therefore not accessible through tablets and mobile devices. It also requires specific network ports to be open, making it sometimes inaccessible through institutional firewalls. These circumstances encourage online

are witness to preparations and technical checks through the AV streams whilst simultaneously doing domestic things with their browser open. Throughout the event they comment in the text chat, contextualising their input with comments about their daily lives and immediate surroundings. Whilst the conference participants at Remote Encounters were differently situated in a black box theatre space (figure 3), we attempted to both describe and re-site some of the essential processes of the work to give a taste of what it might be like to be immersed. We chose specific performance fragments that could migrate to this setting, and by taking the same “implicit body” (Stern 2013, 89)<sup>6</sup> approach as the original event, we attempted to open up windows and paths of flight that connected experience with imaginative understandings.

During each *make-shift* event we actively try to soften and blur the edges of the roles and performance forms we inhabit through use of particular vocabulary, as well as through the types of actions we make and who does them. We are 'brokers' rather than performers or artists - we present, negotiate, facilitate, translate. The audiences are 'intermedial participants'<sup>7</sup> - co-authors, dramaturgs, directors, performers, technicians, videographers and commentators. These roles arose partly through our inability as two people to manage all of the different aspects of delivering a performative discussion in and across multiple embodied and remote environments. We needed help, and we didn't want an invisible 'other' to try and make things seamless from outside the performance environment. It was also a conscious dramaturgical decision from the outset to expose the machinery; the fractures, the lags and the stutters of technology, and us as we try to communicate with each other across distance about something important and meaningful.

The use of avatars is both a visual binding of the three spaces, and an important part of attempting to converse across distance in a way that our telematic 'broadcasting' presence cannot achieve alone. Our personal avatars create a particular co-presence with online participants that speak directly to their input, in a way that echoes how we the corporeal 'brokers' in the houses address on-site participants. The 'Dave' avatar (figure 5 & 8) also contributes greatly to the bridging of on-site and online performance space as a provocateur; a character that speaks to all participants and is not perceived as us. In this way he can ask direct questions and voice

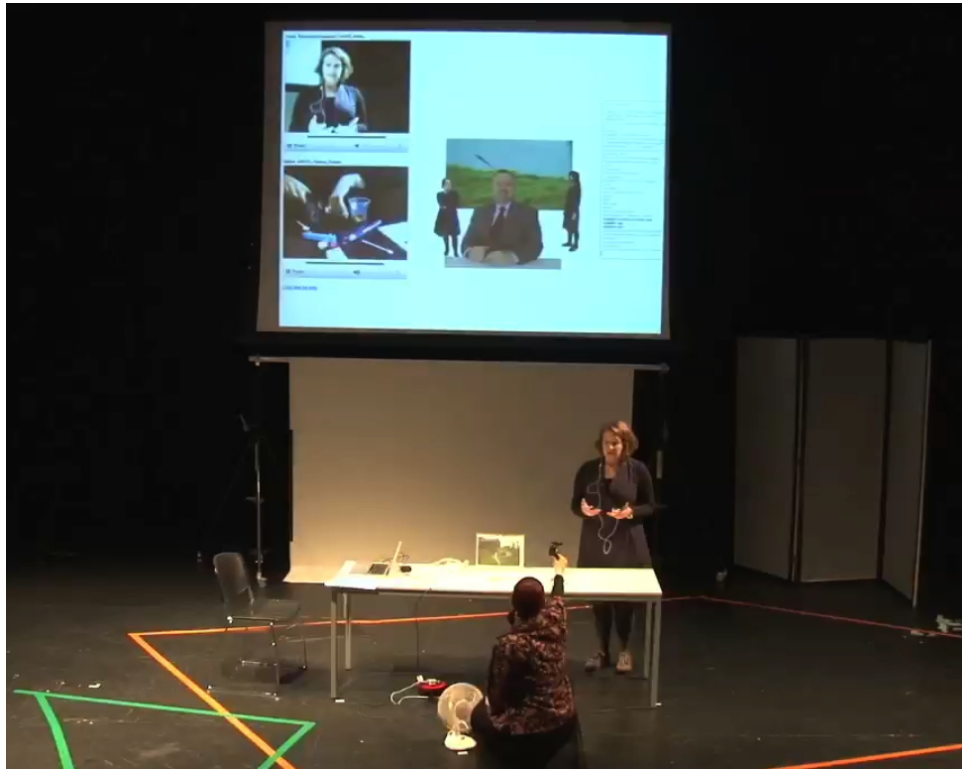
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participants to be in domestic or leisure settings.

<sup>6</sup> “Directly address(ing) our interactions, and the relational performance of body, matter and matters.” (Stern 2013, 89).

<sup>7</sup> See Helen Varley Jamieson's chapter "UpStage, cyberformance et assistance intermédiaire" in *Théâtre et intermédialité* (sous la direction de Jean-Marc Larrue, Lille (France), Presses universitaires du septentrion, 2014) for an in-depth discussion of the emerging 'intermedial audience' and processes of engagement with particular reference to *Avatar Body Collision's* "Familiar Features" (2006) and *make-shift* (2010-12).

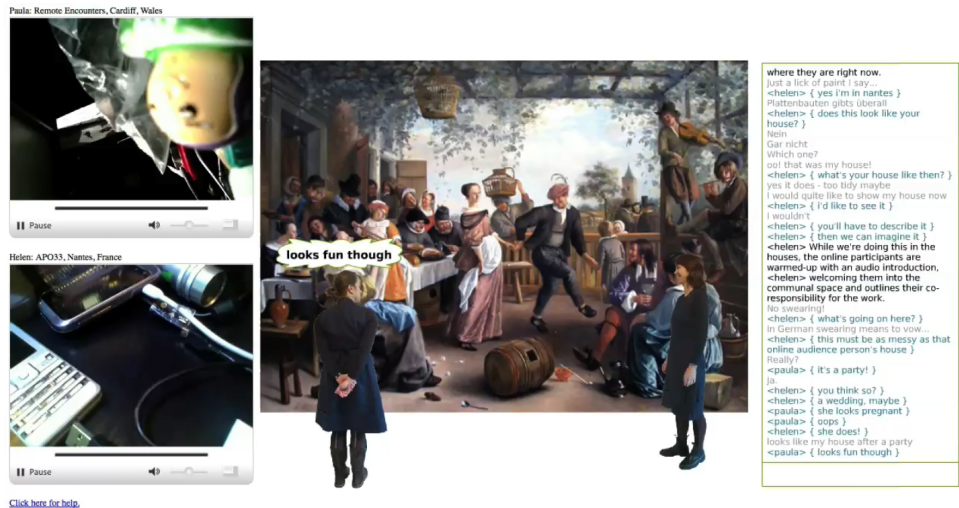
difficult and challenging things that we the 'brokers' as objective facilitators could not.



**Figure 3:** video grab of the Remote Encounters presentation space, University of South Wales, Cardiff 12.4.13. Paula delivering text to webcam, conference participant operating webcam, and online interface showing live stream, video clip and text chat in background.

Dave is an extension of the 'personality' of the online participants, appearing as if out of the online community and repeating and responding to things that they say. But whilst we the 'brokers' operate this avatar, he also seems to have a life of his own. He responds in flippant and contradictory ways to online chat and often says the things that no one wants to own up to thinking: ugly wants, confusing dreams, challenges, contradictions and recognisable anxieties we face on a daily basis living in late capitalist society. This shifting of the 'brokers' voice between corporeal and remote presence, role of benign facilitator and provocative interloper, generates a real sense of temporary community at each event that crosses interpersonal and international boundaries between online and on-site space. Proximal and remote participants interact and engage with each other in lively, entertaining and

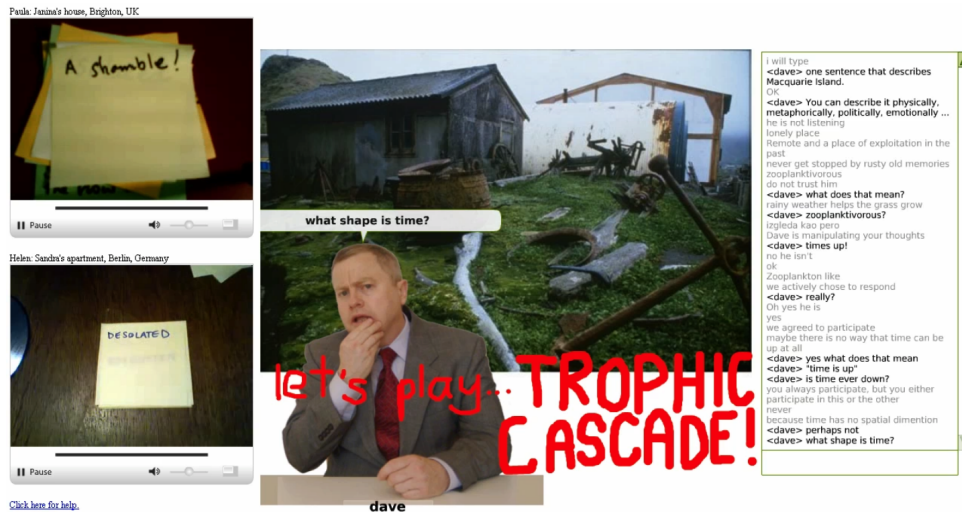
far reaching discussion around the themes raised in the work. There are periods of concentrated discussion in one or other space, and between them. There is also time for more convivial and sometimes irrelevant chat when each group of participants moves out of being the main focus of attention for the moment.



**Figure 4:** Screenshot of online interface during the make-shift presentation at Remote Encounters 12.4.13. Central image "The Dancing Couple" by Jan Steen.

This is a new type of interaction for most people. For online participants it is an intimate view into people's homes and lives, and these places and their inhabitants not only respond to chat commentary, but invite direct input into the creative writing and digital scenography that is a key part of what makes meaning in the event. For house participants it is multi-tasking between a set of actions they need to make happen to keep things rolling, and a simultaneous multiple reading of what is being embodied in the house with them and the digital presences and textures of remote screen space. This intricate set of interactions takes time to warm up to. Each set of participants (in each of the two houses and online) needs a differently facilitated way into contributing in turn, with a gradual increase in the complexity of the tasks being asked of them. The thirty minutes of a conference sharing is always challenging, but for *make-shift* the time frame only manages to show a glimpse of the types of conversation possible. Online participants in particular are somewhat sidelined, with the physically co-present conference audience often taking precedence in any explanations or discussion due to time limitation. In a full three hour *make-shift* event the screen space becomes really 'hot': "I've never experienced such a degree of liveness on the internet" was one particular chat com-

ment, with an online participant in Italy emailing after the Turin/Exeter event to say *"it conveys an intimate connection between performers, audience and arts that is rare to find. Yesterday I really thought I was forming a part of the art experience."*

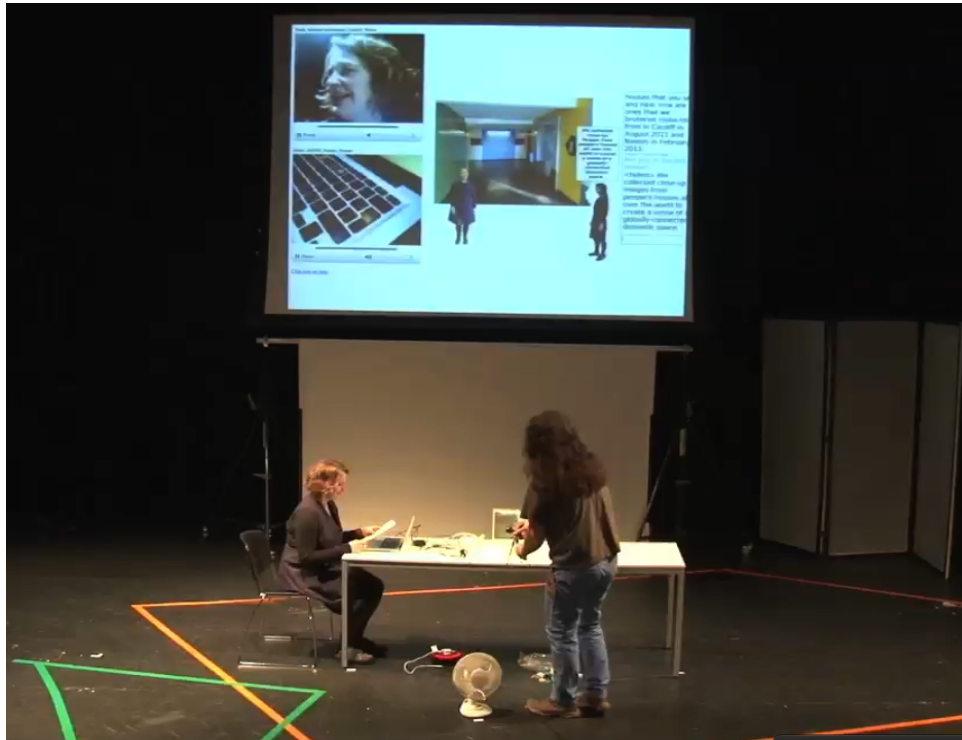


**Figure 5:** Screenshot online interface make-shift Brighton/Berlin 12.5.12 with proximal participant post-it notes (left), 'Dave' avatar and Macquarie Island image (centre), online participant chat interacting with 'Dave' (right).

Whilst we (Helen and Paula) are only a part of the event staging, the task of two people being the sole 'brokers' of such a complex set of interactions across such varied spaces is bound to failure. We cannot listen to, address and interact with all the participants and each other all the time. There is a delay in our responses as we process different forms of information, make a decision and then act on it. The participants are also constantly editing their own experience of the materials through decisions around attention to what is happening in front of them and remotely, and what they have responsibility for delivering or are attracted to responding to. They miss what other people are saying, or visual cues from the screen, they misunderstand some of the information being exchanged as they wait for their cue, or continue to 'chat' about things that the 'brokers' have already moved on from. The technology is not fluid or high speed. It often fails and we have to re-start the interface or computer. The sound stops, the camera image stutters, the only possibility is to acknowledge and play with its domestic, disjointed and suspended nature. This means the event score moves clunkily between fragments of text, action, video-



graphy, process, structure and interactive prompts – we are all trying really hard to make it work and something, somewhere, is always failing.

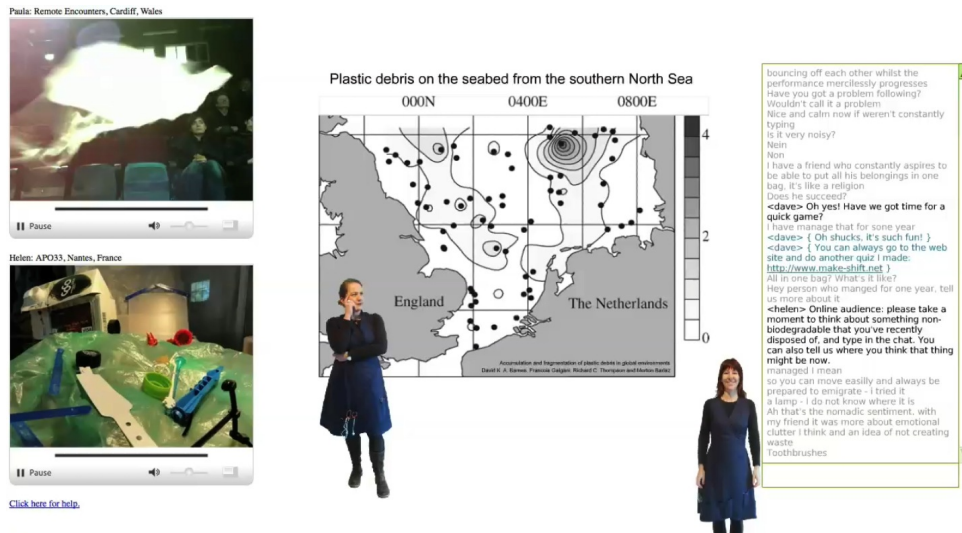


**Figure 6:** video grab of presentation space at Remote Encounters, University of South Wales, Cardiff 12.4.13 with Paula at desk, conference participant webcam videographer centre, online interface in background showing 'Helen' avatar interacting with online participants.

The challenge and the opportunity offered by *make-shift*, is that no one person can ever see or experience it as a whole. We (broker and participant) each act from the space we inhabit, imagining what is happening elsewhere through the limited views offered by the different 'windows' of the online performance space. The 'brokers' are observers and the participants are spectactors<sup>8</sup>; everyone both watching and doing and no one has an overview, they can only play their part in the 'dispositif'. This group action/discussion, co-responsibility and transparent relationality that are an essential part of *make-shift*, act to remove hierarchies of knowledge and power in relationship to the issues we are addressing; shifting away from a didactic,

<sup>8</sup> The term used by Augusto Boal to describe audience participants in Forum Theatre (2000).

information giving approach to awareness raising into a model that is 'sticky' offering deep changes in perception and action. We can clearly see that each of our individual actions has a consequence in other spaces, both embodied and remote; and that once we have made our action we cannot control its journey through the event ecology. It is subject to constant relationality to the actions of others – beings and things, and is transformed by the processes and materiality it is moving through with regards to both its timing and its impact.



**Figure 7:** Screengrab of online interface from make-shift presentation at Remote Encounters 12.4.13 showing kite flying on live stream from Cardiff, reconstruction of Macquarie Island scene from plastic waste in Nantes.

In some senses a *make-shift* event is very ordinary; small groups of people gather as guests in different houses, and use domestic IT and everyday objects to collectively imagine and discuss issues surrounding plastic waste and its affect on the world. But these gatherings have at times created an extraordinary level of intense and intimate exchange between proximal and remote participants, where processes of what Gaston Bachelard (1994, 43) calls "dynamic dialectic" happen between the specific nature of the houses involved in any one performance of make-shift, the imaginations of the dreamers within them, and the conditions of the wider universe we all inhabit<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> See also Paula Crutchlow (2013) *Connecting Conversations: the eye of the storm*, framing statement for the video documentation of *make-shift* Dartington/Providence/online 20th June 2012 (accessed 12th December 2013) [http://www.artsandecology.info/?page\\_id=70](http://www.artsandecology.info/?page_id=70). A

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full video edit of the three spaces of the *make-shift* event Dartington/Providence/online staged on 20.6.12 can be found at [http://www.artsandecology.info/?page\\_id=521](http://www.artsandecology.info/?page_id=521).

### About the Authors

Paula Crutchlow is a performance maker and director who co-authors live events across a variety of forms. As a co-founder and director of Blind Ditch (<http://www.blindditch.org>) she combines digital media, with live performance and participant interaction to engage audiences in distinct and active ways. Their most recent project This City's Centre (<http://www.thiscitycentre.net>) is a digital triptych for Exeter that gently probes the boundaries between public, private, and privatised public space. Paula is currently the Artistic Adviser for Adverse Camber directing work with some of the UK's leading storytellers, and was an Associate Lecturer in Theatre at Dartington College of Arts, Devon 2001-10 and in Digital Performance Practice at the University of Plymouth 2010-13. She is currently studying for an MRes/PhD in Critical Human Geographies at the University of Exeter.

Helen Varley Jamieson (<http://www.creative-catalyst.com>) is a writer, theatre practitioner and digital artist from New Zealand, currently based in Germany. She has a Master of Arts (QUT, Australia, 2008) investigating her practice of cyberformance – live performance on the internet – which she has been developing for over a decade. She is a founding member of the globally-dispersed cyberformance troupe Avatar Body *Collision*, and an instigator and co-coordinator of UpStage, an open source web-based platform for cyberformance. With UpStage, she has co-organised and co-curated five annual online performance festivals involving artists and audiences around the world. Helen is also the “web queen” of the Magdalena Project, an international network of women in contemporary theatre.



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