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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.

Presents//Presence

Rea Dennis and Magda Miranda, Lembrança

rea.dennis@deakin.edu.au, magdamiranda.art@gmail.com

Rea Dennis, artist and scholar in Drama and Performance at Deakin University.
Magda Miranda, performer and visual artist with background in dance, drama and improvisation.

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Abstract

Of giving and receiving // Of giving and taking // Of exchanges
Reciprocity // Mutuality // Expectations

A performance of liveness in which the presence of the performer is interrogated.

Drawing on Dan Graham's (1974) *Two Consciousness Project*, Presents//Presence plays on Object = Space relationships. Engaging with contemporary notions of thinking and consciousness, the performance plays with time - the here and now, the passage of time, time zones, and timing.

Lovers. An anniversary. Fine Dining. Distance. Skype.

Presents disrupt subject positions of audience, of performer; something happens while we are waiting for something else to happen. Through the use portable computers and hand-held (smart) devices for the capture and 'projection' of action in real time, the exploration sets out to engage with notions live and remote, absence and presence, the play of embodied transmission and live performance and the perception of absence.

Presents//Presence is a performative event that (re) activates live/d moments in the lives of the artists. The piece draws on the languages of live theatre, elements of autobiographical performance, inter- and intra-subjective perception, and an understanding of time as a spatial metaphor. In this statement, we outline the narrative and structural anchors that frame the piece and discuss some of the theoretical threads informing the research. The paper is accompanied by a recording of the live performance that was delivered to an audience at the University of South Wales, Cardiff during the Remote Encounters conference in April 2013.

The implosion of space into time, the transmutation of distance into speed, the instantaneousness of communication, the collapsing of the workspace into the home computer system, will clearly have major effects on the bodies of the city's inhabitants. The subject's body will no longer be connected to random others and objects through the city's spatiotemporal layout; it will interface with the computer... (Grosz, 110).

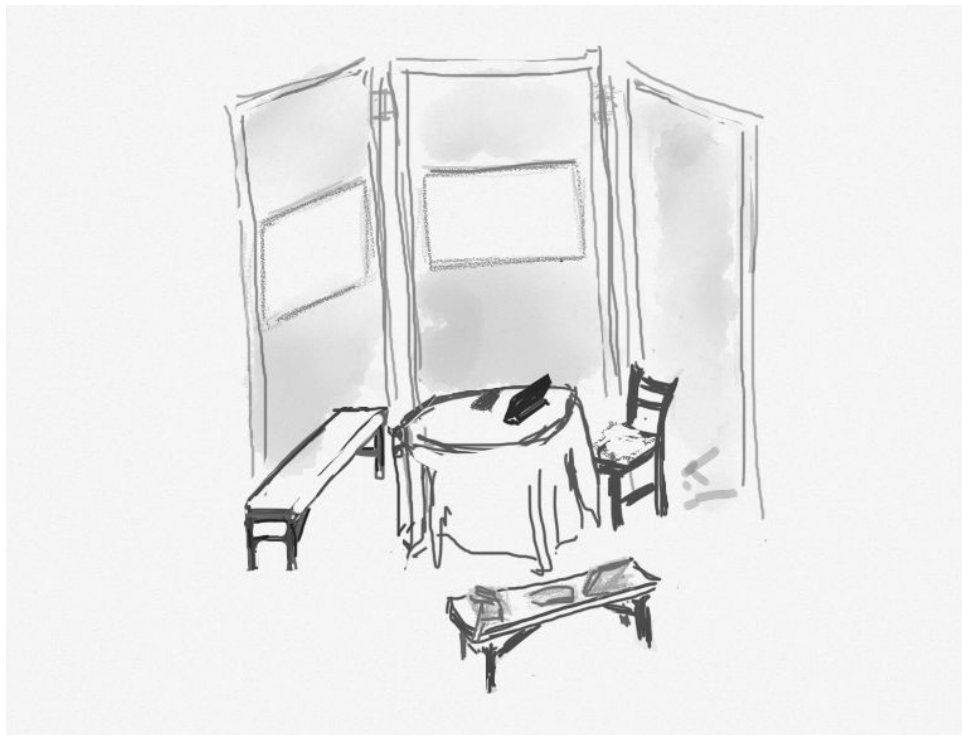


Fig. 1: Setting of Presents//Presence.

The structure of Presents//Presence is at the convergence of telematics and live performance. It is influenced on the one hand by the mechanics of Dan Graham's

groundbreaking project *Presents Continuous Pasts* (1974) and on the other by the accessibility and affordability of low-tech domestic technologies. It sets about exploiting the innovative temporal space of the network in performance and plays with the ambiguities of inter-subjective perception at the intersection of material and virtual bodies. In *Presents//Presence*, Rea Dennis and Magda Miranda disrupt the use of the mirrors that characterize Graham's piece with the inference of live feeds alongside recorded footage. This enables them to open spaces for the ambiguous reading of the live and virtual events. At the same time, the duo go about performing self; and are present (and absent) as themselves.

The setting (see Figure 1) is designed to signify a telematics performance event. There is an iPad visible on the table, screens set up and projectors installed alongside the live body. The scenario is composed of items that signify a quotidian scene - a small table and chair, and some photographs. The setting is located in a traditional theatre stage in a medium sized auditorium with raked seats (160 capacity) and occupies a small downstage left area.

An Autobiographical Performance

Presents//Presence has its roots in a 2008 trip to Paris where two women met in real time; at that time, this was a rare real time rendezvous.

There is a woman stood at an airport turnstile, all of her aliveness concentrated in her eyeballs, her eyes follow the moving conveyor, recognizing then dismissing object after object - other people's suitcases - searching for her own. A second woman is stooped over, peering through a thick glass barrier - a physical signifier of the border between the two. The first woman catches sight of the second woman. Suitcases continue to circulate. Both women stand upright. Unmoving. Eyes locked.

Once gazes interlock, there are no longer quite two persons and it's hard for either to remain alone. This exchange ... effects ... a chiasm of two 'destinies', two points of view. (Valery 1970, 26)

Peering at one another through a glass barrier became synonymous within the relationship; a tangible element of their shared destiny! Not the glass barrier at a national border, rather the glass screens of computers. After their first brief meeting in São Paulo in 2007, Magda and Rea began a long distance relationship. Today, they know that their relationship would not have had form had it not been facilitated by a network. *Presents//Presence* is an autobiographical performance that pays homage to the way in which technology created a place for their relationship. Technology cut through the tangibility of national borders and vast distances acting as an alternative location; a new kind of tangible (other) place or, as Marc Auge (1995) posits, a non-place space. In addition, beyond object, the networked computer exists

ted as subject in the relationship and being ascribed identity through naming and juxtapositions.

On entering their hotel that day in 2008, the women paused in front of the exhibition in the foyer: dozens of framed photographs of computer screens were hanging from the walls. The framed images were like mirrors to the two who had spent many hours peering into the glazed impression of each other's faces pixel-rich on a laptop screen.

We slept with the computers in our beds
 Saying good night through the screen
 First waking gesture; a computer touched
 Reaching for the other
 10,000 kilometers away

The networked computer *was* our partner.

The setting thus, pretends to be that of an intimate time and space. As each experience builds on past encounters *in this space* a perceptual blue print for the relationship emerges. This has momentum for grander more sustainable stories that are the living of this relationship in real time – transatlantic flights, filling in visa applications, periods of time living in each others' countries, cities, homes, kitchens and living rooms, beds. All these moments are present within the Presents//Presence performance – continuums of presence and absence, live and mediated, virtual and real, made tangible by the constancy of the network presence. Skype became a place where we lived our intimacy; computer keyboards, our expressive voices. When computers crashed, it was as if our relationship had ended, and in some extreme cases, it was if one of us had died.

Screen as Mirror: Intimacy, Mirror Neurons and Playing with Looking

Presents//Presence simulates the simultaneous presences (performances) of performers Magda Miranda and Rea Dennis. Paul Virilio states that such *presence* characterizes computer time – “a permanent present, an unbounded, timeless intensity” (cited in Dixon 2007, 90). Such presence could also be said to characterize the intra-subjective experience of intimacy. Across the screen, however, rather than the inter-subjective – self/other – relationship of Merleau Ponty's writings, Presents//Presence explores the way in which the screen morphs into a mirror. As minutes, hours, and days pass; as the two engage in the continuously networked courtship, they begin to look at the screen rather than into the screen; and they look beyond the virtual body to the room behind. In an interplay between the screen as mirror and the self as other, the experience of the corporeal body has become a kind of video-self, where aspects of presence, immediacy and reality merge and instead of *looking at* each other (looking through the screen), they begin to

watch themselves. That is, Rea has shifted to a position of watching Rea, and Magda meanwhile, has begun watching Magda. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say Rea has begun *looking at* the mediated image of Rea, while Magda has begun *looking at* the mediated image of Magda. They are no longer performing for the other they are performing for themselves.

This ambiguous sensation of the screen as window, mirror, and surface is explored by Bolter and Gromala (2005) within a transparency - reflectivity continuum. The perceptual experience of the looker is distorted by the uncertainty of what appears tangible, of what is virtual and of what is, in fact, imagined. This can also be thought about from the perspective of Lacan's mirror stage of identity development in which the subject is permanently caught and captivated by her own image at the interface. Thus for Magda and Rea the screen morphs from transparent to reflective due to the way in which they perceive the mediated image. The interface begins to facilitate the way in which the shifts and changes in the identity of Magda and of Rea occur.

Network as abode: Living in the pastpresentfuture as *now*

They write the same shopping list.
Go out at the same time.
Buy the same groceries.
Return at the same time.

During these outings, a Skype connection is sustained!

Rea enters her apartment. Hi!! She speaks to the computer who is Magda...

No answer

A delay, white noise - echoing the emptiness of the apartment in São Paulo as she listens from her apartment in Cardiff

She then hears the key turn in the door 10,000 km away
The sound of plastic shopping bags
Rea glimpses the top of the door in Magda's apartment as it swings open - the angle of Magda's laptop camera pre-determining the view Rea gets of the world.
The entire image is more about what Rea cannot see rather than what she can see.

Magda calls: Hi!

They are both back *home*.

While they were out they exchanged text messages. Photos of things they passed or purchased (like that of the salmon that Rea bought in Cardiff while Magda was buying salmon in the supermarket in Moema, São Paulo, see Figure 2). These everyday actions characterize the way in which Magda and Rea *perform* their intimate relationship and disregard the way in which physical distance impedes their proximal intimacy. These simulated shared experiences equate to their shared domestic space.



Fig. 2: Salmon for dinner.

What becomes essential is not the **tangible** yet vast distance between them, rather it is the experience of things occurring simultaneously; and that they are present to these events at the same time. Michel Foucault aligns such experiences to living in what he calls “the epoch of simultaneity” where “juxtaposition”, “near and far”, and “side by side” characterize our everyday lives (cited in Manovich 2002, 72). In Emmanuel Levinas’ terms, these simultaneous experience envelopes all tenses, resulting in a *present* that is “so saturated by different temporalities that it becomes a ‘perfect present’, where time does not move, but merely dilates” (cited in Dixon

2011, 90). Thus, on re-entering their respective flats, both Magda and Rea place the same ingredients on the bench top, both begin peeling potatoes, both season salmon and place it in the oven to bake. Rea starts a timer. When it rings, Magda hears it and checks her salmon. They serve. They eat. Rea is seated opposite her computer. Magda is seated opposite her computer. They talk. They eat. This is typical of a network exchange between the two performers.

Presents//Presence takes a similar kind of moment, a meal; an anniversary meal. In the performance, today is their anniversary and they are apart, in different cities, in different countries, in different time zones; nothing particularly extraordinary these days. The narrative and structural frame of the performance is that of a Skype call – the two performers are engaged in the kind of conversations that have characterized their relationship. These are at times mundane, at times simultaneous monologues, always intimate episodes in which the two bodies are engaged in making meaning; in an inter-subjective negotiation, across the network.

Virtually in touch

The tangible place of the networked computer has a potent presence in their relationship. Just as the screen orients their two sets of eyes; the keypad occupies their hands as they touch, touch, and touch to speak. It is a place where they meet; where they experience the sensation of touching. Often, the importance of touching the keypad, outweighs the experience of speaking. It is as if emotion is expressed through typing. Typing becomes the sole important gesture of love. It is as if typing ensures that I exist! Hegedus (2003, 265) writes that:

The hand has always been an elementary mediator between thought and action. And this is increasingly so in our technological era, where merely fingers on a keyboard can release enormous forces ... hands become especially significant in our handling of the immaterial situations released by the new technologies of simulation. Here they are both the pragmatic and symbolic point of contact between our bodies and what is incorporeal. In the tactility of their actions, no matter how slight, our body maintains a physical context of experience and understanding.

Touching the screen, tapping on the keypad, are actions that contain sentiment; actions in which the language of love is embedded. This carries over into moments when the two are together in real time and shared space. The audible sound of each other's breath. Collapsing into a corporeal (non-verbal) conversation. Cherishing silence. Celebrating the absence of the soft light from an 11-inch screen! Yet they are not two, they are three, or four, or five: Rea => her computer => the network => Magda's computer => Magda. The nature of natural and spontaneous communication between the two had been mediated so often, that to share at the most intim-

ate level, they reached to touch the keys. Seated side by side, the sound of tapping, fingers rushing forward with words, then impatiently back-spacing repeatedly, searching for that inner feeling that confirmed that the typed words would communicate what it was each was feeling, expressing what it is they wanted to say. While it is now common for people in the same house to relate through a network; in 2008 it was far less common.

It is during the live performance of *Presents//Presence*, when Rea reaches out and touches the screen, as if to touch Magda, that the quality of the intercorporeal experience is most intimate. All the millions of times she has reached out before are active in that live moment. Within the live performance, the networked computer shifts the couple's experience beyond that of being objectified to one another; this time objectifying the couple. A new audience watches. Where over previous months and years Rea and Magda have been audience to each other, in *Presents//Presence*, there is another audience. This audience is invited to watch them in their networked abode, during a Skype call. The narrative frame is 'the anniversary'. The performers' experience sets out to replicate their own remembered real experiences. There are two screens set at the rear of the setting – on one, Rea is streamed live; on the other – Magda is projected. In front of these screens, Rea sits at a table facing the smaller screen of the tablet. She has a pair of pliers and a roll of wire. She is constructing small wire sculptures. These will be presented to Magda; her anniversary gift. Magda is at her kitchen bench, she is cooking the anniversary dinner that she will serve to Rea; her anniversary gift. There is no beginning as such, when Magda's image comes up she is in the middle of saying something in what appears to be a language other than English. It is Portuguese. Rea speaks directly to the audience: "She is on the phone..." Throughout the performance Magda cooks. Rea sits. They talk. At times they are silent.

Interactive media are time-based. This means that the action occurs in real time and that the performers bring their own rhythms and their own subjective concepts of time into the action. They can stop or alter the course of events at any time and therefore structure perception themselves. In interactive systems, the body reforms itself... Networking means communicating in the present. (Fleischmann and Strauss, 320)

Digital technology is one of the mediums exploited by *Presents//Presence* yet the work does not set out to exhibit and explore the extensive inherent possibilities within the digital platform that Bolter and Gromala (2005) say populate design-driven art projects. It does aim however, to give technology an artistic purpose. More than a vehicle to support the performance itself, the presence of technology is part of the dramaturgical framework. As the performance commences, the audience members are witness to an intimate interfaced dinner date. As the live performance progresses, audience members begin to question the time dimension. Is this a live

Skype call they are witnessing? The rising ambiguity within Presents//Presence engages audiences with the layers and potential for deception embedded within remote mediated encounters. The precept that this is a simultaneous encounter occurring in real time is called into question. Eventually it becomes clearer to audience members that they are being deceived; Presents/Presence is part representation, part re-enactment, part re-production. Magda performs to camera. Her performance has been pre-recorded and then (re) played during Rea's live performance. They are playing with form - Rea speaks directly to the computer screen, as if to Magda. Magda's image is projected onto the screen behind Rea. We see Magda responding, as if to what Rea is saying. While Rea knows that she is talking to a recording, we see her impulses rise as she reciprocates. They are playing with time perception - juxtaposing the recorded past with the simultaneous live present. They are simultaneously revealing the complexity of intimacy and of trust in intimate relationships and in performer-audience relationships.

This framing statement seeks to position Presents//Presence as autobiographical performance and consider the complexity of the performers' embodied experiences through the glass of pixilated dots. It considers the conceptual placement of the screen, the network and the interface as dramaturgical devices in a discursive system in which questions of perception, reception, and trust (deception) are active. The accompanying video features edited excerpts from the performance event.

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About the Authors

Rea Dennis is an Australian artist and scholar with a particular interest in relational dramaturgy, performed memory; and the body in performance. She lectures in Drama and Performance at Deakin University. Previous publications include essays on refugee performance, autobiography and performance writing and playback theatre.

Magda Miranda is a Brazilian performer and visual artist with background in dance, drama and improvisation. An actress with over 20 years experience, she has a BA in cinema. Her current practice is exploring her bi-cultural identities through performance; she is working on a series multimedia self-portraits.

Lembrança - Rea and Magda formed Lembrança in 2008 to investigate interdisciplinary ways of making live performance inspired by shards of memory and autobiographical fragments. Their work is preoccupied with form as content and seeks to engage audiences beyond linguistic meaning. Previous works have included the epic Train Tracks and Rooftops series that played in USA, UK and Australia [2010] to dynamic installations like 'Guantanamo Presence' [Manchester Hazard 2012].



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