Learn together what it means to be connected ...

Author: Annie Abrahams

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Summary: In October 2012, a one-day online symposium created a platform for discussing the practice of cyberformance. In 2014 with Helen Varley Jamieson, Annie Abrahams edited *CyPosium - The Book*: a selection of presentation texts, chat log excerpts, discussion transcripts, edited email conversations and illustrations - along with invited articles that responded to the event. In this article Annie Abrahams reflects, referring to Kit Galloway, Gregory Bateson and Susan Kozel on her participation in, the interest and importance of the cyposium. She cites reactions and concludes: “... we will have to become more radical in our experimentations and start to be more critical towards our own work. We shouldn't be afraid to operate a 'niche', where we are 'just' our own audience. It might be a prerequisite for new discoveries, for the creation of a situation where we learn together what it means to be connected.

This summer while working on this book I saw for the first time in my life a video of *Hole in Space* by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz. [1] This media art work from 1980, this pre-internet telematic installation/performance work as Maria Chatzichristodoulou named it in her CyPosium introduction talk, or “public communication sculpture” as the authors called it, was presented in the opening exhibition *Conversations Electriques* of a new art space dedicated to contemporary culture in Montpellier called *La Panacée*. [2] I already went back several times because I couldn't get enough of looking at the people reacting to the possibility of realtime speak, see and hear communication for the first time. What I like in online performance was already present there in this pre-internet piece: - the audience who becomes the performer (who gets agency) and - who's behaviour becomes the core of the aesthetic experience.

It was also in *La Panacée* (June 23 2013) that I heard Kit Galloway talk about this piece, stressing how difficult it was at the time to implement the technology (via satellites) and asking for more bandwidth, inciting us not to be satisfied with less - “WE MUST CREATE AT THE SAME SCALE AS WE CAN DESTROY”, ecafe manifesto, 1983. [3]

At the same time he told us how strange he found it that a museum wanted to show the whole length of the videos and not go for a mounting of the ‘good’ moments. So some of what I don't like about new media art and what makes it often boring was already there too. Too much attention for the technology and hardly any thoughts on what this technology provoked and instigated in humans, how it changed their behaviour, their perceptions and ways of interacting.

How interesting it would have been to have had Kit Galloway in our CyPosium I thought. I would have loved to hear him talk about the *Electronic Café International* [4] another piece he did with Sherry Rabinowitz. This is what the website says about its goals:

“For the last decade, ECI has been using technology to explore co-creation and collaboration in real-time networked environments. The prerequisites for this are: 1) employing a multitude of disciplines, 2) using the performing arts as modes of investigating these new ways of being in the world and 3) creating a new context so that new forms and content can emerge.”

It would have been very interesting to hear his ideas about the results of this endeavour and his ideas about how it relates to the network possibilities of today.
So we didn't have Kit Galloway, nor Susan Kozel, who I will mention later, but we did have very interesting other artists in this CyPosium. I am very happy we made this event possible, that we started collecting historical information, that we asked people to talk about their past work(s) - sometimes hardly anything has been written or archived about these projects. I am also very happy with the experience itself. The conditions for the performances we were talking about resembled the conditions in which we met to talk about them. The whole event felt like one big metalogue. In 1970, on page 1 of his book *Steps to an ecology of mind*, Gregory Bateson defined a metalogue as “a conversation about some problematic subject. This conversation should be such that not only do the participants discuss the problem but the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the same subject.” [5]

For me this reference is interesting. I do think the subject of the CyPosium was problematic. Not only because of the difficulty of defining its borders, but more especially because it is very difficult to describe what is exactly happening in online performance. You had to be there!

One of my reasons to participate in the organisation of the CyPosium was that I thought and still think it important to try to find words, ways of thinking about it, analysing it. What is so specific? What can we communicate and how? How do we perceive our bodies when performing? Why has it such a special energy? Why is it so demanding? How come we feel so close to others, so included and often so extremely exhilarated? Is it because it makes the borders between the performers and the audience fluid? Is it because it lacks hierarchy? Because it goes against total control?

Why is this so important? Because technology changes us and if we want to get an idea of where is the limit between manipulating and being manipulated we should make an effort to think about our own practice, we should try to practice some close reading on it. (or get other people to do this)

In 2012 I wrote an article with the intention to try to determine the special aspects of machine mediated communication and collaboration in my own performances. I wanted to catch the essence of these in a few short lines. This, as I should have known, was impossible. But I formulated motives, described means and I managed to give my work a succinct philosophical and political background. At the time I concluded:

“*In my web performances the performers have so much to do and so little control that their communication both suffers (becomes more difficult) and prospers (becomes more honest) due to these conditions. The performers are so occupied by their interactions, that they don’t have time to negotiate their image as they normally would on the Internet and so, almost without being aware of it, they show their vulnerabilities and doubts, their messy and sloppy sides, their "hidden code". They go beyond self-representation and the control that this requires.*” [6]

In the CyPosium discussion after block 3 Luka Prinčič reacted saying that maybe it is a question of organisation, that I might change my opinion if tasks get more delegated and technology becomes better. I am not sure and Roger Mills somehow affirmed this when he said: “*I think because there's this dispersed dislocation within networked performance and particularly talking about music here, that you have to think and feel and listen so much more carefully, and that induces a heightened sense of intimacy and awareness between you. So I think you have to work harder to get many of those things that you might get from a co-located audience.*”

A lot more interesting discussion took place on the 'side-lines' of the CyPosium - in the chat-window among the audience members and during the mediated discussions after the talks. I especially value these informal 'side-line' activity. [7]

Here I want to go back to a few remarks that stayed with me. In one of the discussions Adriene Jenik said “*I am still shocked about how now we can connect with people, and we are still trying to figure out what to say one to another besides what time it is, and what's the weather like, and how to really have a deeper conversation.*” I agree completely. Somehow, as I pointed out in an interview in *Neural*, internet communication is still in its 'teens'. [8] But I am not shocked, it is
normal and we can only go beyond if we first analyse and accept this, as we should, in another context, try to answer questions like “Why do we use so massively the social web?” We have to shift our attention and think less in results (compared to what we already know) as in processes, what is happening, how it feels and why we enjoy it. We are in unknown territory, you know. (smile) Joseph DeLappe saying “I’d be walking down the streets of New York City and seeing people and thinking I could click on them and get information.” when he talked about his Gandi performances also points to a mindshift coming along with being online. His remark shows how ‘real’ and ‘online’ mix - and, how difficult, impossible? and probably useless it is to try to think the distinction. Roger Mills said more or less the same: “But what I was thinking, and the musicians said something similar as well, that their musical space is the music. It's not some sort of cyberspace or networked space other to where they are, but actually it's the music that they are in and that provides the space, they don't see any other networked space or cyberspace.”

When writing this text I found my self wondering: “What would Suzan Kozel have to say about all this?” So I went back to her book Closer from 2007, where she is asking what can be discovered as we come closer to our computers – as they become extensions of our ways of thinking, moving and touching. And I noted some phrases which I underlined three years ago when I read the book for the first time. Here they are, still ‘talking’ to me:

Page 70: “by means of intentional performance with technologies we can regard technologies not as tools, but as filters or membranes for our encounters with others”, page 99: “Our virtual rapport had a greater physicality and intimacy than our real engagement”, page 107: “When I perform via videoconference link I do not think of the other performers and myself as occupying endpoints: instead I have a strong sense that we can slide into the grainy, two dimensional image, down an imaginary tunnel that links the remote locations.”, page 108: “There is a constant process of deciphering involved, a constant need to interpret the code of the movement received and to respond to the disintegrating and recombining physicality that is generated.”, page 111: “When the intensity of this not-quite-touching-touch is maintained, it can span long distances as well as tiny gaps.”, page141: “…, digitally mediated communications can be construed as processes of connecting, intents to achieve proximity, and attempts at touching, rather than the accomplished states of communication, proximity and touch.”, page 145: “…it is about modes of perception within a carefully constructed attentive field.” [9]

And I would like to ammend: “It’s about behaviour as an aesthetic material within a carefully constructed performance field.” And in order to be able to experience it you have to have agency. Would this mean that we should abandon the concept of audience altogether? I am not sure, but I am sure we will have to become more radical in our experimentations and start to be more critical towards our own work. (Too often, for instance, while assisting in an online performance I felt manipulated, guided in my actions under the pretext of giving me agency.)

We shouldn't be afraid to operate a 'niche', where we are 'just' our own audience. It might be a prerequisite for new discoveries, for the creation of a situation where we learn together what it means to be connected.

Annie Abrahams august 2013

notes

[3] For the whole manifesto see the original website: http://www.ecafe.com/84manifesto.html
(accessed August 30, 2013).
[7] In 2006 - 2008, during the online performance series Breaking Solitude and Double Bind, organised with panoplie.org, we decided that the only thing that would remain from the performance would be its immediate feedback, the text written in the chat window by the audience. At the time this was a way to confront the performing artists to online situation, where the brute and often emotional reactions of the public would not always be as respectful as in the protected environment of art centres, museums and galleries. At the same time the audience had the privilege to assist in a performance, to see and hear a person during an act of creation without having to subject to the social rites of the art world. For more information on these performance series see: http://2008.panoplie.org/2008.panoplie.org/#//DoubleBind (accessed August 30, 2013).


https://link editions.tumblr.com/cyposium
Что означает "быть собой"? 

Часто говорят, что "быть собой" означает быть тем, кто ты есть. Это значит быть искренним, не скрывать то, что ты чувствуешь, и быть автономным.

В некоторых случаях "быть собой" означает быть индивидуальным. Это значит, что ты можешь быть тем, кем хочешь, и не нужно следовать определенным правилам или стандартам.

"Быть собой" также может означать быть настоящим. Это значит, что ты можешь быть тем, кем ты есть, вместо того, чтобы стараться быть тем, кем ты думаете, что нужно быть.

Важно помнить, что "быть собой" не означает быть только тем, кем ты есть. Это значит быть тем, кем ты хочешь быть, и не бояться быть таким. Это значит быть тем, кем ты учились быть, и не бояться быть таким.