

archived presence¹

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The 'digital apparition' is the light that illuminates for us the night of the yawning emptiness around and in us.²

Even though information provides the basis for much of contemporary society, it is never present in itself.³

The modem beats its familiar rhythm/fluctuating hiss like the end of the radio dial/alternating high and low synthetic pings/the empty noise of the telephone line. I am riding the ghost train late into the night; looking for something, I am not sure what, perhaps I'll know when I find it.

The internet would seem an unlikely place to look for the live. An electronic landscape composed of ever-receding frames, its pre-programmed and inhuman screens don't appear to promise many of the qualities we associate with liveness. Less still, would it seem a good place to encounter live art, whose history has been marked by immediacy, eventhood and the presence of the flesh. But what strikes you in even the shortest of surfs, is that the 'digital apparition' is itself haunted by all the things it appears to have left behind.

¹ Originally commissioned by the Arts Council of England for I ♥ LA.
² Vilem Flusser, 'Digital Apparition' In *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, Ed. Timothy Druckrey, (Aperture, 1996) p. 245.
³ M. Katherine Hayes, 'Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers' In *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, Ed. Timothy Druckrey, (Aperture, 1996) p. 259.

...history drove out of photographs the shy relation to the speechless object that still reigned in daguerreotypes, replacing it with a photographic sovereignty borrowed from lifeless psychological painting to which, furthermore, it remains inferior.

theodor adorno

Its screens are enraptured by flesh, which it tirelessly images closer and closer still. Its technologies drive towards simultaneity with the real world they reflect, promising (but never quite delivering) the abolition of belatedness, in a smooth flow of instantaneous action at actual speed. The whole ghostly machine seems caught in a longing for embodiment and eventhood, a longing evidenced in the large number of sites dealing with performance and live art.

The other day I sat pretending to read, all the time watching him working, tapping away, his eyes fixed in the screen's glare. What is it about seeing someone (him) working? The erotics of power in a voyeuristic look, yes that, but something else that feels like witnessing an absorption. The little habitual ticks, the way his hands fall on the keys, these things given over, his concentration channeled out to another face: the interface with the screen. I see him, his eyes, in the tractor beam of the screen, momentarily lost to another force. The animate version of watching him sleep. And in this moment I lose myself too.

A broken surface flickering too fast for eyes to see/cold landscape of pixels and blips/emanating a tiny fog of light around me. Windows switching and opening/await and find/labyrinths of frames and passageways/stalls and blocks and non-functioning signs. Invisible workings/an image coming/juddering downloads/interminable waits/slow and clunky revelations. Countless dead ends/anaesthetized/bored/and then suddenly a small gem of info/turning into a productive spiral. Moving towards what, exactly?

Information has a strange quality on the net: it appears less concrete and consequently less trustworthy, moreover the specter of the lie pervades all net reception. The hoaxes and viruses have worked their way into the conscious and unconscious processes of the interface. The terminal has taken on the character of a bodily orifice, a site of informational consumption, expulsion and exchange, and hence a site of anxiety and doubt. Lies and 'viruses' stalk the outside, which your screen opens onto, they threaten to meet you at any point along your electronic journey. The status of information on live art is of course always in doubt; the transience of these acts and their often limited audience makes them hard to capture, condense and represent. Hence the persistence of contradictions and rumors in the performance scene (Schwarzogler's severance, Finley's jam, Abramovic's halted acts). Like

all forms of re-presentation, the net has problems in documenting and archiving the live, since the object is necessarily absent. Many of the sites cast by artists and institutions that relate to performance are then simply informational, guiding you to texts and images that stay resolutely at the level of the trace. These sites are at their best when they acknowledge and play with the impossibility of ever returning to their originary acts, the impossibility of delivering the presence of performance.

He has left now. Though I sometimes wonder if he ever leaves. It's not just his careful careless residues, the objects scattered here and there, insinuated into the scenery of my place. It's something more elemental, more human; his trace in and on and through my body. As if all that tumbling into each other, that pressing and caressing had led to some form of particle melding or chemical transfer. He seeps into my pores and stays in flesh memory. When I touch the memory of his touch he is here again: space collapses and time stalls.

Ideas have a viral energy on the net, accessibility encourages copies and mutations, making it hard to identify the origins of genres and forms. I check out the Surveillance Camera Players, a group of artists whose mission is to stage and propagate performances to be caught on CCTV. Both formal and ad hoc, these are fleeting events that insert the extraordinary inside the inconsequential, everyday and sometimes illicit social actions that take place in the camera's gaze. The work is principally directed towards the urban surveillance system and it operates as both entertainment and subversion. There is something deeply appealing about the deliberation and futility in this gesture. As an irregular creative revenge, the performance opens a discourse on the 'sight machine',⁴ its power and economy, and the human cost it extorts. The work is part-frat joke, part-street theatre, part-social action, part-silent testimony to the lives and times lived out under blinkered electronic eyes. Impossible to say where this contagious idea began, as works for CCTV now proliferate in funnier, more aesthetic, or socially interventionist forms. The net helps to open the social body to infections like these. Here and elsewhere, this is evidence of performance as radical social action, mimicking and altering the orders of life. Of course, the work itself is unviewable on the net, though it exists somewhere, perhaps just (once the tapes are ritualistically wiped) in the minds of those who saw it or participated in it, perhaps even stored and hidden in some accidental archive.

⁴ Critical Art Ensemble's phrase, a social and cultural system, complemented by the war machine and the flesh machine.

Error 404. Again and again. This place is full of dead links. I'd like to think that this is a by-product of velocity and evanescence, that the scene is shifting so fast its net locales are quickly redundant, but then I'd be buying into the ideology of net rhetoric: fast = better. In fact these are moments of human and technical failure. I'm with signal2noise, artists who make uncanny and clunky animated image-works for the net, whose interest lies in what cartoonists term "the gutter", the gap between images, where there's no narration and so you have to make it up. signal2noise's work is full of antiquated forms, ungainly joints and stutters; they say "the web is still focused on technical solutions rather than artistic solutions [...] I'm not sure that speed is going to help all that much". And actually the gaps, delays and failures, are an integral part of the net's pleasures. Signs everywhere in these patterned surfaces of light, of the real breaking through, of irregularity and incoherence tripping up the system.

It's often said that the net is a kind of non-place, a shifting space without stable borders or identity; but this doesn't mean that people cannot find a sense of belonging there, or that the net itself does not exhibit belongings. In fact, it's striking how those whose own sense of identity is marginal and fluid are attracted to the open space the net provides. Like live art practice whose immediacy, fluidity of form and antipathy to tradition has made a welcome ground for disenfranchised and marginalized voices, the net offers a productive space in which to test the limits of identity itself, and to exhibit the evidence of this testing. Sex, gender and sexuality warps here. This is where I go to greet mutants like me: an archive of edges, where normative, stable and coherent selves are lost.

It's late now and I've just stumbled into Eye Opener's extraordinary series of images Censored Porn (No Flesh Guaranteed). This is the net at its most self-reflexive, its most ghostly and uncanny: it's a place where the technologies of photography meet performance and flesh, opening a powerful discourse on their relation. The images are samples of net porn photoshopped into oblivion. The flesh has evidently vanished, being replaced by the cheap 70s and 80s decor of the surroundings, but the shape of the figures remains, the

bodies now appearing as a kind of shift in the pattern of the context. From a distance these look like pictures of empty anonymous rooms, close-up they look like stills of invisible people fucking. The images work on you, through recognition, disjunction, and projection so that the emotions they raise seem both elemental and wholly out of place. It's a visual synthesis of the mundane and the sublime that performs an emotive critique of the ideological and imaging apparatus of porn. It makes apparent the way porn disappears its human subjects, comments on our sexual and bodily fixations by showing all the particularities as exchangeable, whilst also speaking to the transience of physical pleasure. Whatever residual thrill you might muster is shown as dependent upon projection and memory, and upon the shape of the form, more than the given body. As image-works they gesture towards a concern that performance artists have held and explored in a variety of ways over the last thirty years, that even in these pancapitalist technipotent times, there is some value in human pleasure (and presence) that remains radically out of reach of commodification and imaging.

In your absence all the hours are swallowed by the thought of you. Work gets suspended and flips into a net search for your name; at first an idle game, then a serious quest for traces of you. Any of the words / all of the words / the exact phrase. I am surprised by the large number of hits. Fragments of your past and previous lives: old email correspondences on lists, bits of writing for a student journal, institutional details and policy documents. I have become an amateur sleuth and a virtual stalker. But I learn nothing new about you, nothing that might explain who you really are and why you came into my life. I find your address and zoom into a street map. The streets where we walked together, the diner where we ate and talked. Crude pixels mark the place of that moment, and that moment and the time before. And I realize again that what you are has no place: we were lost before we began.

And if the image technologies of the net seem to press ever closer to the flesh, out there, in 'the real world', the flesh itself gripped by new technologies, seems to press ever closer to the limits of its own materiality. Performance has come to be the primary form through which this testing takes place. I am thinking less of the technical mutations and modifications of Stelarc and Orlan who are handsomely net-imaged, and more of choreographer Kitsou Dubois. Dubois has been experimenting with dances for space, taking rides at high speed

Television...means...something like 'seeing at a distance'... To be farsighted is to be ready for any eventuality.

herbert marier

Technology discloses man's mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them.

karl marx

and altitude on a plane that flies in repeated parabolas to give its occupants multiple 25 second bursts of micro gravity. This work reminds me of Stelarc's early work, particularly the Copenhagen Suspension, where his body was pierced with cabled hooks and swung on a crane high above the streets and buildings. Stelarc conjured an exceptional live image of human flight in an urban context, and marked this transcendence as dependent on a mixture of shamanistic magic, industrial haulage and human pain. But the body itself was frozen and inexpressive, the poetry of transcendence always halted by the inarticulacy of the body-like-meat. Dubois however, repeatedly leaving the gravitational pull of the world, is making gestures in and across the void, taking her body to a material limit, where it loses its habitual knowledge and begins to move otherwise.

Night yawns. Eyes fading. Thinking of you. It is safe to turn off your computer.

Adrian Heathfield writes on contemporary performance. He is the editor of Small Acts: Performance, The Millennium and the Marking of Time (Black Dog Publications, 2000), and with Andrew Quick of On Memory, Performance Research (Vol. 5, No. 3, Routledge, 2000), and with Andrew Quick and Fiona Templeton, of the box publication Shattered Anatomies: Traces of the Body in Performance (Arnolfini Live, 1997). He is currently working on a new book, Opening Night: Essays on Performance, Memory and Death. He is a lecturer in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Warwick in the UK and has been a Visiting Scholar in Performance Studies at New York University and at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.