

# Presence as Performance: Exploring Witnessed Presence

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## Abstract

*The performing arts have been concerned with mediating presence through orchestration, dramatization and choreograph for many centuries. Insights, knowledge and skills have been passed over through 'direct transmission, from person to person, from generation to generation. Current technology mediated presence design faces similar challenges as the performing arts: how to set a context, how to induce attribution and imagination, how to show the unsaid and more. Some issues have changed radically though with the introduction of digital technology: we can have sensual synchronous experiences while we are not at the same place, we can connect and possibly act in places where we are not present, all mediated presences can be copied endlessly and will last forever. These old and new questions are not only relevant for the performing arts, but for many professional realms that have to deal with on- and offline collaboration as well. Most contributors to this panel work in and from out the arts and/or use artistic practice as inspiration for their academic and scientific work.*

**Keywords:** Natural presence, Mediated presence, Witnessed presence, Absence, Design, Diagram, Performance, Performativity, Body Moves

## 1. Introduction

To act out one's presence in such a way that it has the potential to influence others people's presence is a significant phenomenon in social interaction as well as that it is a profound ambition in performance settings. In theatre words like 'magic' are used for moments when presence is impressive and people are touched in their hearts. In social interaction one speaks for example about 'charisma' when a person's presence is impressive. Apparently presence, when staged in a certain way, can affect others.

Fundamentally the sense of presence in natural presence is understood as the sense for survival and well being in any given situation. The sense of presence is maximized when all layers of consciousness (proto, core and extended) function clearly and consistently together [1]. The sense of presence translates, understands and informs us, with input from all senses in all layers of consciousness, to where survival and well-being are to be found. Sensations, emotions and feelings are important indicators for the acts we are about to do [2]. We steer away from pain, from unpleasantness, from social exclusion. We do not want to harm others because they may

harm us. It can even be argued that ethical behavior is fundamentally rooted in the sense of presence as well [3].

In the performing arts there is a lot of knowledge and experience about telling stories, shaping emotions, manipulating sensorial input and inducing processes of attribution and imagination. This knowledge and expertise has found new territories of application in research area's that are concerned with shaping computer human interaction and the design of mediated presence [4]. Presence research is one of the area's where insights from the arts can make a difference. However, the discourses between academia and science on the one hand and the arts on the other do not easily communicate. In this panel each contributor will speak from her or his own discourse and together we will try to translate these to a mutual understanding including the audience as well.

## 2. The performative in presence design

"To act out one's presence" refers to the performative quality of presence [5]. In the work of Haraway, and others like Judith Butler, it is argued that people perform masculinity, femininity and ethnicity [6-7]. We act out our gender and race and this performance is determined by the biological writing about the body and this biological writing reflects ideological, cultural and power positions. One can possibly argue that the same writing and power positions influence the way we act out our physical presence. We act out our 'being alive' and this acting out of being alive also reflects biological writing and ideological positions about what it means to be alive in a certain culture within certain power relations.

The performative quality of people's presence influences how social interaction unfolds. The reference point for the performative quality of presence lies in "the eye of the beholder" as well as in the original 'producer' of presence. In the interaction between the producer and the beholder of presence, performance is one of the perspectives from which to understand as well as orchestrate this interaction.

In creating performances authors are well aware they are deliberately inducing emotions and feelings in their audience, which they use to convey the stories and concepts they want to share. Because the arts address these specific qualities of the human soul already for many centuries, a firm body of knowledge has been gathered. However, the way this knowledge is shared is mostly by 'direct transmission', from person to person. Skills, attitude, knowledge and insights about 'what works' in performance settings has been described in many scholarly texts [8]. Nevertheless for creating a great performance one needs the passed-on experience and exercises, even when one is highly talented, to be able to perform brilliantly. In this experiential and often tacit knowledge valuable insights are to be found for Presence Design.

### 2.1. YUTPA: with You in Unity of Time, Place and Action

In the performing arts the "Unity of Time, Place and Action", which is attributed to Aristotle even though he did not actually formulate it, is a well-known theatre law of the 19th and 20th centuries [9].<sup>1</sup> One of the understandings that evolved from the use of digital technologies in the performing arts was their capacity to function as a catalyst in this discourse about the unity of time, place and action. The changing shape of presence was understood in these basic terms, which functioned as an ingredient for composition and orchestration.

After several decades of mediated presences we have come to realize though that social interaction as well as social relations deeply affect the understanding of mediated presences. Through social interaction media schemata develop and a shared understanding and use of certain technologies evolves [10]. When involved in social interaction though, the way people relate defines how the communication is understood. The social relation actually changes the perception of Unity of Time, Place and Action. The most significant distinction can be made between people we know, with whom we have a relation and through whom we experience our own unique human being, and people we do not know, who we merely treat as information [11-12].

Next to time, place and action there appears to be a fourth dimension which is crucial for presence design. This is the dimension of You/not-YOU, which defines in natural as well as in mediated presence the way the other dimensions are experienced significantly. How we relate and how we witness each other reflects social, cultural, economical and political realities as well. Also media schemata influence how we witness and understand what we witness as well.

### 2.2 Witnessed presence

The witness changes the nature of presence of the one who is witnessed and vice versa. The concept of witnessed presence builds upon the concepts of social presence and co-presence. Witnessed presence however, emphasizes how people's presence is changing because it is witnessed. The witness has the potential to come into the action and change the course of events. The witness can influence our survival and well being, therefore the witness is a factor of significance for performing presence. The fact that people witness each other (by whom, how, when, where and to what extent with what consequences) is one of the building blocks of organizations and societies. It is an institutionalized concept in law and jurisdiction. It is an important factor in journalism, education, management and organization and in how people find truth [13]. Witnessed presence, in which the

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle elaborated on staging 'the complete action', which includes all elements that have contributed to a certain situation.

performative qualities of presence are significant, functions as a catalyst in natural presence as well as mediated presence in many structures of social interaction [11]. In the evolving catharsis the witness is crucial.

### 3. The Panel

Chair: Caroline Nevejan

#### 3.1. Sher Doruff: The Diagram in Live Mediated Performance

Sher will elaborate on the notion of the performative creative process as diagrammatic pre-sense. As an artist and theorist Sher has focused on the collaboration between different art forms in live mediated performances. She co-authored KeyWorx, a multimedia platform in which images, sound and text are generated and mixed in a live performance from a variety of locations.

In her theoretical work Sher has been exploring the notion of the diagrammatic advanced by Deleuze in various works [14-15-16-17]. He proposes a relational mapping strategy, an interface or cartography of the event dynamics between creative expression and content. The affective tonalities generated by online performative presence can be especially sensitive to the tendencies of the diagram. Brian Massumi's concept of the biogram is especially useful for thinking through the diagram performatively [18]. The speculative relations between pre-sense, the biogram and contemporary performance practice have been taken up in the dissertation *The Translocal Event and the Polyrhythmic Diagram* [19].

#### 3.2. Satinder Gill: Establishing common ground

Satinder will elaborate on her research on communication as performance, with a focus on how tacit knowledge flows and transforms. She has formulated the notion of Body Moves which appears to be crucial for establishing common ground between people of different skills. Her work on the emergence of, and relation between, parallel and sequential Body Moves offers new insights for the design of mediated presence. Her early work was inspired by the rhythmic choreography of body and voice of architects sketching together, and is being developed further with musicians [20].

Although there is a distinction between the parallel and sequential Body Moves, there is a commonality between them (they are related), of rhythmic quality that affords them a collective action, which is differentiated from the model of the speaker-listener turn [21].

#### 3.3. Bryoni Lavery: Dramatizing presence

As a writer of dramatic pieces in which other people perform. Bryoni Lavery is very aware of the laws of orchestrating presences. Personal presence, witnessed presence, social presence and performing presence are concepts a writer and theatre maker work with every day. Bryoni will share the essence of presence as she uses it in her dramatic work as a playwright and as an actor.

How to make a dramatic experience for someone else? What sentences to write in a play and which lines does an audience not need to hear on stage? How to create eye for detail when inhabiting a persona and how to induce an audience to follow you? And what changes in dramatic work when mediating presence?

### 4. Christer Lundahl & Martina Seidl: Choreographing Absences – The Viewer as a Medium

As artists and choreographers, Lundahl and Seidl work as introducers to inner worlds and guides to alternative perception. Bodies and minds are equal part of this deconstruction of perceived reality.

In this panel Christer and Martina will elaborate on the process of staging transitory group situations in total darkness, where the participant/visitor is given the possibility to deconstruct and rediscover the experience of being in the world and to explore the confines of self. By the use of directed instructions and the simple audio technique, Lundahl & Seidl achieve a state of acute sensorial connection to space, where sensations may be similar or differ between visitors, but where basic perception is challenged to a point where it becomes a physical experience: body parts "disappear", the point of view alters magically, disorientation and groundedness alter and all is framed by a great concept of artistic comfort in the medium of dance and performance and its full possibilities

A major goal in the EU funded Presencia project is to create a virtual body that feels and acts just as a real body with 'complete presense'[22]. The work of Lundahl & Seidl manipulates very similar mechanisms of body presence by touch and auditory stimulation. Furthermore, the work explores the sense of space surrounding the body, which is central to the 'place illusion' in presence [23].

#### 3.5. France Brazier: Social performance and never fading data

As head of the Intelligent Interactive Distributed Systems Group within the Department of Computer Science, professor Frances Brazier has worked on agent technologies for over a decade [24]. Having realized the social, political and economic implications of these technologies, professor Frances Brazier is now working on technology to make data vanish and disappear.

Data plays a very dominant role in today's society - it's a very significant part of human presence. Much of human presence in society is mediated and often difficult to orchestrate. First impressions are often based on data - not on human interaction. Data is persistent and in a variety of situations data define people's presence more than their actual physical being. In the 'real world' things disappear, die, transform and are forgotten as part of our social interactions, while in the artificial world new data is created that may be stored endlessly, without losing their executing power. Consequently people's mediated presences are often beyond their own control and may contain incorrect, inconsistent and out-dated information [26].

In absence of data issues of trust and suspicion easily arise and people's natural presence can be seriously be challenged as a result. The issue of data-performance is not only bound by their potential truth or falsehood. Much of data's executing power is based on the 'mis-en scene' around data and the way they are 'staged' to protect some people and organizational structures and affect others-implicitly or explicitly. As such data have obtained a witnessed presence - a presence previously associated solely to human presence.

Frances will present current research in which scientists, academics and legal experts all collaborate to better understand the implications of data performance and executing power in relation to an individual's capacity, human rights and presence [27].

#### 4. Speakers biographies:

**Sher Doruff**, formerly Head of the Sensing Presence department and Research Programme at Waag Society in Amsterdam, is currently a Research Fellow with the Art, Research and Theory Lectoraat (ARTI) and a Lecturer/Mentor in the Master of Choreography programme at the Amsterdam School of the Arts. She received her PhD from University of the Arts London/Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in 2006. Her research investigates the role of collaborative interplay and creative processes as diagrammatic praxis, evolving the concepts in her dissertation: "The Translocal Event and the Polyrhythmic Diagram." She has published numerous papers, edited a book on Live Art, and regularly lectures, presents in academic and artistic contexts and nurtures a modest artistic practice.

**Satinder Gill**'s work is about knowledge as embodied performance. She has 20 years of experience in the field of human-centred systems, participatory design, ethics and aesthetics. She received her PhD in Experimental Psychology from the University of Cambridge in 1995, after which she joined NTT's Communication Science Laboratories as a Research Scientist, followed by a joint position at Stanford University, USA, and Centre for Knowledge and Innovation Research, Finland as Team Leader on Dialogue and Human-

Computer Interaction. The focus of her work is the human-system interface and the processes of knowledge in purposive communication. This involves the investigation of collaborative practices, culture, gesture, and social intelligence. As a member of the Centre for Music and Science at the University of Cambridge she investigates the relation of body and sound in collaborative performance. This is extended to consider the ethical dimension in her work within the EU Co-ordination Action on ethics, 'Emerging Technoethics of Human Interaction with Communication, Bionic, and Robotic Systems' [ETHICBOTS]. Satinder Gill is Associate Editor on the international AI & Society: Journal of Culture, Cognition, and Interaction, published by Springer. She runs the 'Body Interface Seminar: Performance and Transition', at Middlesex University, and has organised international workshops on issues of ethics, aesthetics and technology, including a recent workshop on 'Ethico-Aesthetics' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. She is editor of the book, "Cognition, Communication, and Interaction: Transdisciplinary Perspectives of Interactive Technology", published by Springer, 2007.

**Bryoni Lavery** is a multi-award-winning playwright. Her original plays include *Frozen*, *Last Easter*, *A Wedding Story*, *More Light*, and are performed all over the world. She also adapts classic and modern novels for theatre and radio, including *Wuthering Heights*, *Precious Bane*, *Behind The Scenes at The Museum* and *The Magic Toyshop*. Her most recent work is *Stockholm*, a text and movement piece created with the physical theatre company *Frantic Assembly*. She teaches playwriting. She used to both perform and direct, but happily left these disciplines behind when she discovered her many more gifted collaborators! She explores the relationship between text, objects, movement, light, soundscape and media skills in all her work. Her current projects are a dance/film/theatre version of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, a text and light piece *The Thing With Feathers* and, for the theatre company *Sound and Fury*, *Kursk* - a sound piece in which the audience become submariners and, by obeying pre-existing codes, write and run their own theatre experience. She loves theatre because it is a place where audience and actors breathe the same air. And that the role of theatre is to disturb that same air.

**Lundahl & Seidl** have a background in contemporary visual art and choreography. The artist's work includes; exhibitions, large-scale participator projects, performances, workshops as well as curated talks and seminar presentations. Presentations have taken place at: Tate Britain, Battersea Arts Centre, Whitechapel Art Gallery (London), Weld (Stockholm) and Espace Kiasma (Paris). Being on the border of both art and science they actively create and nurture social networks to implement a sense of community around their practice. Being equally organized researchers as they are accomplished artists, Lundahl&Seidl are breaking

new ground between visual art, architecture, dance and neuroscience.

Christer Lundahl and Martina Seidl are both born in Jonköping, Sweden. They live and work in London.

Professor **Frances Brazier** is head of the Intelligent Interactive Distributed Systems group (IIDS) at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Management of virtual organisations of distributed interactive autonomous systems in dynamic Internet-based environments is the core theme of IIDS' research. IIDS' agenda is to further fundamental understanding of the technology, interaction with human users, and the legal/societal consequences of the use of distributed autonomous systems in Internet-based environments.

**Caroline Nevejan** is an independent researcher and designer with a focus on the implications of technology on society. She received her PhD from the University of Amsterdam in 2007. In her dissertation "Presence and the Design of Trust" she explores the orchestration of communication processes in on-and offline environments and introduces the notion of witnessed presence as a dimension next to time, place and action. Since 2007 Caroline Nevejan is member of the Dutch National Council for Culture and the Arts, research fellow with the PrimaVera research program of the Amsterdam Business School of the University of Amsterdam and research associate of Performing Arts Labs (UK).

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