"Too Artful to be a Virtual Soul."
Performance, Psychology and Social Media in Gretta Louw's project
Controlling_Connectivity

From 2-12 November, 2011 the Australian artist Gretta Louw staged *Controlling_Connectivity,* a 10 day online performance. Locked into the shuttered rooms of the arts centre Art Laboratory Berlin she spent 240 hours online, offering her availability around the clock for chats, video conferences and Twitter dialogues. She chose a popular set of social networking sites – Skype, Facebook, Twitter and Google+ as well as documenting the performance on a Tumblr blog (http://controllingconnectivity.tumblr.com/). The main purpose of the performance was to research the psychological effects of total internet immersion, but almost immediately a sociological component competed for her attention and that of many of the performance's viewer/participants. In fact, the project attracted a number of participants from various online sub-cultures: users of Second Life; enthusiasts of Google+'s multi-user video conferencing platform 'Hangout'; a long time internet artist, whose own oeuvre has included online performance; a psychoanalyst who studies the therapeutic effects of virtual realities.

Louw, having studied Psychology before becoming an artist, saw the project as a combination between arts practice in the fields of performance and digital arts as well as psychological research. The immediate results of the performance – including a number of screen shots and video pieces constructed from screen recordings taken during the performance – can be seen in the exhibition that opened about two weeks later. Further results are expected in an upcoming artist book. The interdisciplinary structure of the project combines traditions as diverse as Performance Art, New Media, Psychology and Sociology to investigate a set of current cultural structures that are changing with such speed that society at large seems only half aware of them. Yet it is the current speed of technological change, as well as new media's seduction and its unknown side effects on our psyche that the artist is investigating.

From Performance Art to the Digital World

By choosing the gallery (and later location of the exhibition) as the actual site of her performance Gretta Louw is referencing the tradition of durational performance and the history of Performance Art. In the run up to the performance Orit Gat wrote an article on rhizome.org comparing the piece's use of location to Joseph Beuys' iconic *I Like America and America Likes Me* from 1974.[1] Other examples of durational performance inside the white cube include Marina Abramovic's *Lips of Thomas* and Vito Acconci's *Seedbed.* A duration of ten days may seem rather short when compared to the performances of Tehching Hsieh, whose works often lasted for a year, but Louw's constant promise of online availability meant that she had as little as one hour of sleep per day.

Her choice of the gallery space, shuttered like Plato's Cave, also provided a spartan location – she brought a mattress and ten days provisions – which aided in keeping her focus solely upon her virtual endeavours. On the one hand she was available to anyone in the world with an internet connection, interacting with people on six continents, on the other hand her sole contact with the human race during the ten days was via technology. This contrasts to a further tradition within the history of Performance Art: the studio performance, like that of Bruce Nauman, which the viewers only experienced after the fact.[2] An intermediate variant, also used by Nauman, as well as Ulrike Rosenbach and Heinz Cibulka in their *Video Live Performances,*[3] used the video

[1] http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/oct/18/performance-public-and-online-presence-gretta-louw/ accessed 24/11/2011.
[2] Michael Rush, *New Media in Late 20th Century Art,* London: Thames & Hudson, 1999, p. 48-50.
[3] Ibid, p. 59.

camera as a virtual intercessor. Yet all these examples from the 1970s are generally one way performances, in which the audience is usually passive, or at best an object of provocation.

During the 1990s and the emergence of various artistic strands that have fallen under the category of 'New Media' the importance of interaction grew from the passive participant as victim (as in Nauman's room installations from the 1970s) to a position of collaborator. The emergence of the internet, an open technological structure that has come to duplicate and represent the actual world, offered a number of artists an additional platform, not only for showing their work (whether it be representations of analog art or the software manipulations of early net.art) but also as a performative arena. Artists such as Igor Štromajer (who would become involved as a participant in *Controlling_Connectivity*) and Annie Abrahams have pioneered the web as a platform for performance. Eva and Franco Mattes (0100101110101101.org) have recently used virtual platforms such as Chat Roulette and Second Life as both a stage (*No Fun,* 2010) [4] and a virtual gallery for an art history of Performance Art (*Synthetic Performances*, 2007-2010). [5] The logic seems to be that as the general populace (especially those under 40) spend ever more time online, it makes more and more sense to investigate and utilise this 'new world'.

The Psycho-social Rupture

Gretta Louw's studies in Psychology have also played a vital part in the way she has structured and carried out both the performance and the exhibition. In preparation for the performance she took a battery of tests in cooperation with her alma mater, the University of Western Australia. She also consulted a number of studies on internet addiction and internet therapy. In particular she was interested in recent studies that suggest that large amounts of time spent online actually change the structure of the human brain.[6] She prepared herself for the inevitable effects of lack of sleep and the change of her internal clock due to being sealed off from daylight. On a deeper level she was interested in the effect of 'disinhibition' that is often part of intense involvement with online platforms, and the danger of manipulation by participants.

'Online disinhibition' refers to the phenomena where people do or say things online that they wouldn't do in the 'real' world. This is often the result of perceived anonymity, the feeling that others online cannot "see me" or "know me" or that online activities are "only a game", enabling people to enact their "true desires".[7] There is a budding field of psychology and psychoanalysis which investigates the therapeutic value of virtual reality, especially in the treatment of phobias. Dr. Leon Tan (who also participated in the performance) has written on the therapeutic use of Second Life, enabling, in one case, a woman with extreme agoraphobia to overcome her condition.[8] Ironically it was in Second Life that Louw had her riskiest experience during the performance. After a conversation with a participant who invited her to join him in Second Life, Louw was offered an avatar whose form was created by the participant, who most likely saw the events as a sort of date. Of particular note was the participant's constant reference to the avatar he had created as 'you' (meaning Louw). Before entering the Second Life platform Louw was asked by the participant to wait while he 'got her (sic) dressed' and one of his first comments

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[4]   http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/nofun/index.html accessed 24/11/2011
[5]   http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/reenactments/index.html accessed 24/11/2011
[6]   http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=does-addictive-internet-use-restructure-brain and http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0020708 accessed 10/11/2011.
[7]   For an overview of this phenomena from a psyhological standpoint see J. Suler, „The Online Dishibition Effect" , http://users.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/disinhibit.html accessed 24/11/2011 and Suler, J. (2004), in: CyberPsychology and Behavior, vol 7 Nr 4, p. 321-326.
[8]   Tan, Leon, "The Use of Virtual Realty for Peer Suppor*t"*, in: *The Use of Technology in Mental Health,* ed. by Kate Anthony, DeeAnna Merz Nagel, Stephen Goss, Charles C. Thomas Pub Ltd: October 2010, pp. 170-77.

(they were also talking live through skype during the interaction) upon entering the virtual world was to ask Louw "do you like the way you look".[9]

Of course, it was exactly the built-in constant of outside participation that made the performance not only a psychological experiment on deprivation and immersion, but also a sociological investigation. Each platform contains its own sub-cultures, who thrive on the particular characteristics of that platform. Google+, not yet five months old at the time of the performance, has attracted diverse groups of individuals from different locations, who meet for long multi-user video conferences using Google+'s hangout feature. Twitter, which the artist began using only a year before the performance, has proved prone to vibrant text dialogues, often surprisingly complex and intellectual given the medium's 140 character limit.

The combinations of social milieux and the effects and risks of 'disinhibition' point to a blurring between the fields of Psychology and Sociology. As Bruno Latour remarked in his essay "Beware, your imagination leaves digital traces": "The ancient divide between the social on the one hand and the psychological on the other was largely an artefact of asymmetry between the traceability of various type of carriers."[10] This divide is being relentlessly erased in a virtual world in which we partake in social communication from the isolation of our individual computer screens and keyboards (or more recently smart phones). The supreme seduction of online social networks is one's ability to present oneself without leaving the chair. In the process one can also indulge in a number of desires, games and experiments that would be discouraged in 'real' social space.

The performance *Controlling_Connectivity* was in part an experiment and investigation into what various regions of cyberspace and their denizens chose to offer the artist in a ten day window from 2-12 November, 2011. She in turn, became a symbolic other for whom they performed, introducing her to their not so private online worlds, acting out their desires, curiosities and intrigues. As one participant wrote: "You're an artwork, not us. We can go to sleep, you can't. You have to be strong, not us.", "During #conconn, you 'have' to communicate w/ us whether you like it or not, right? It's not you talking to us, it's your project" and "Sure, but I'm actually not talking with u now. I'm talking to a project, a concept, an idea, an artwork. Not to a person, right?"[11] and two days later "You're just an illusion, @GrettaLouw. A computer algorithm. A flow of data. You're too artful to be a virtual soul. #conconn"[12].

In fact one could argue both for and against the veracity of this statement: Gretta Louw was most definitely present as a human being. Her consciousness, by turns frailer and more adrenaline filled, sat in the gallery space, monitoring and recording her online experiences, and the psychological effects of the performance, which by its end included loss of sense of time, memory lapse and a sense that her mind was "5-6 cm above her head".[13] On the other hand for many of the participants she was, due to her special role as 'performer', less a real person than a form of 'meta-avatar', a cybernaut exploring new virtual territories.

Beyond Performance

In the end, on Saturday 12 November 2011 at 1PM Central European Time, Louw logged off her computer and opened the gallery shutters. After a few days she began to examine and edit many hours and pages of material. The exhibition *Controlling_Connectivity* not only documents the

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[9]   Conversation between Louw and the participant, source: Gretta Louw

[10]   Bruno Latour, *Beware, your imagination leaves digital traces,* in: The Times Literary supplement, 6 April, 2007.

[11]   Tweets from @intima from 7 November 2011. @intima is the Twitter moniker of internet artist Igor Štromajer.

[12]   Ibid, from 9 November 2011.

[13]   From a series of interviews with the artist from 15-24 November, 2011.

performance, but analyses the diverse activities of the artist and the participants who interacted with her. Away from the blurring speed and giddiness of virtual worlds, the exhibition offers a rational insight into these events.

Divided into two rooms the exhibition offers us unsequential points of entry. In one room we find three works, a projection, mostly of text, quotes from conversations, various tweets and reflections by the artist. The accompanying soundtrack is a conversation between Gretta Louw and Dr. Leon Tan. Opposite is a digital print which at first resembles a Tachist painting, but is actually a map of cursor movements from the artist's computer using IOGraphica software. Nearby on a monitor screen recordings play excerpts from the artist's 30th birthday (3 November 2011) and an online performance in collaboration with artist Douglas Paulson that was screened at Flux Factory, New York on 10 November 2011, in which the artists layer various screen recordings and live Skype transmissions. In the second darker room we encounter an installation which combines various screen recording footage along with a mattress and various detritus from the performance. Here as well, a layering effect, through quantity of footage, takes place – a projection and TV Monitor compete with three miniature digital frames showing the artist's adventures in second life, time lapse footage of the artist from the ten days, and images of participants.

The pure commonplace existence of virtual communication, from ubiquitous email to seemingly convenient Facebook pages which 'allow' us to share images and information with friends and family to subtly addictive Twitter, has captured more and more time from our lives. How many of us could 'exist' without email? What would be the cost, professionally and personally, if we ignored various social networks? We almost seem to have forgotten that hardly any of this existed 20 years ago. In all the speed of acclimatising to new technologies, we have had little, if any time to reflect on how it has changed us; changed our minds, souls and our society. Gretta Louw's project *Controlling_Connectivity* provides a unique and long overdue starting point.

-Christian de Lutz (Berlin, November 2011)