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.

disDance 11054.80
at the Remote Encounters Conference, Cardiff April 2013

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Dr. Ian Willcock, Principal Lecturer in Interactive Media at the University of Hertfordshire.

Background and planning of the Project

The disDance project was the beginning of an enquiry-process in which some of the possibilities of working on networked, physically separated, interdisciplinary performance, incorporating interactive media, architecture and dance/performance/audio were investigated. disDance 11054.80 was prepared for the Remote Encounters International Conference and acts as the template for future collaborations using similar methodologies.

The piece was sited in two geographically separated locations; Cardiff, UK and Lasalle College of Arts, Singapore. At each site, dancers/performers were interacting with their colleagues at the other site through a novel networked messaging system designed specifically for live performance. Heidi Saarinen, who was the overall creative director, was based in Cardiff (where she was the performer) while Ian Willcock (the developer of the LIMPT system) coordinated from Singapore.

The title disDance 11054.80 relates to the collaborative aspect between disparate disciplines and refers to the multi-location aspect as well as holding a factual reference to the distance in kilometers between the two locations involved in the project; Cardiff and Singapore (11054.80 km).

Instructions / how does it work?

Equipment:

Two performers in Singapore, one in Cardiff.

LIMPT software and system (a central server based at the University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, messaging/cuing software installed on laptops, iPac interfaces, floor sensors, pre-prepared audio and video materials)

2 screens at each location (1 showing projected/instructions from the LIMPT system, the other showing a live Skype link feed)

A live internet connection for the LIMPT and Skype connections.

There was also another screen in Cardiff showing faint shadows of excerpts from *urban journeys,* a film by Heidi Saarinen.

Laptop computers (one for each performer).

Coloured tape on floor marking performance area boundaries at both locations.

Set of events

The performances in the two locations, Cardiff and Singapore, were functionally connected using the Live Interactive Multimedia Performance Toolkit (LIMPT) system (see below).

For *disDance 11054.80,* the performance spaces were also linked via a Skype link, allowing the audiences in both locations to witness the remote performance simultaneously with the live performance at their location (although the Skype view was deliberately a partial view – a window onto the other performance rather than an attempt to directly place them together).

Visual instructions and commands generated by the LIMPT were seen on a screen on the stage in each location. The visual cues included texts such as "*Slow Down Tempo*", "*Repeat, Repeat*" etc. and each was also presented as spoken audio. The conditions for the generation of cues were specified in a number of *rules*, which had been programmed into the LIMPT system during the development period by Heidi and Ian.

The instructions, or cues, were triggered by the system for time-based cues (e.g. "*Start section 4")* or by the performers via the keyboards or sensors on the floor – and acted as a semi-random choreographic tool throughout the performances. The same instructions were shown on the screen to the audience in both locations as graphic visuals and voice instructions. These instructions or cues, inevitably decided

the choreography for the duration of the performance ("*Move to the Centre of the Stage*", "*Start, Stop..*", "*Dance the Day Away..*").

Some commands caused the LIMPT system to play short pieces of audio; composed using found recorded sound and produced specifically for *disDance 11054.80*. The audio had hidden layers of sound relating to the idea behind the two locations, the spatial boundary restrictions on the Cardiff stage (coloured tape) and consisted of sound derived from shorelines, birds and storms (adding randomness and unpredictability to the composed work).

The performers knew the cues that the various keyboard keys set off, but although the performers had planned to 'plan' some of the cue instructions, in reality this was not possible, simply due to the performers' necessary engagement in the performances. This is an interesting aspect, and will be carefully considered for future performance projects, as there may be a place for a cue assistant, adding further randomness (as well as new focus for the performers, as the cue instigation is removed) and intrigue to the '*place*' of the *disDance* project.

The movement pieces at each end of the collaboration were rehearsed and devised separately, for each site. In Singapore, the development of material was devised and led by Melissa Quek, Programme Leader of the School of Dance at LASALLE School of the Arts. For the Cardiff performance, development took place by Heidi Saarinen at the Karamel Club in North London and at the University of Hertfordshire, prior to the performance. The Cardiff performance had a planned focus on improvised repetition with influences of fragmented choreography, spatial boundaries (hence the floor tape) and deliberate slow pace with repeated everyday movement, linking directly to previous rehearsal developments. The Singapore movement was faster and included interaction between the two dancers on site in Singapore, with some choreographed parts to the devised score, using props (shredded paper on stage). Although both parties, Cardiff and Singapore, rehearsed before the event, it was clear that the improvisation was key at the actual performances, as had been expected. The choreographed aspects were a very important back up to the random nature of the performances due to the way the cue signals had to be instigated.

To further develop this aspect, for future projects, the improvised work could be challenged and made into identical short choreographed set pieces, triggered by the cues, allowing prolonged interaction between the two sites, bouncing off each other, effectively 'dancing together' with elements of choreographic improvisation, continuing the connection through the geographic distance and remoteness via the Skype imagery and 'mirroring'.

Both locations had coloured tape marking the boundaries within which the performers had to remain throughout the duration of the performance. This acted as a

reference to the spatial boundaries of *place*, constructed from the space where the performance intervention occurred.

The performance lasted 20 minutes, with voice/audio alerts at intervals towards the end to count down and highlight remaining time. This way the performers could keep track of time and prepare the final parts of the performance.

The content of the performance was choreographed and devised by Heidi Saarinen (dance, spatial articulations, graphics, video edit) and Ian Willcock (digital materials; design of LIPMT system, co-ordination in Singapore) with additional choreographic material by Melissa Quek. Development was through a collaborative, exploratory process working with small groups of performers. Sound artist Gerard Boeck and sister suitcase (Heidi Saarinen) composed the audio.

The performers in Singapore were Wah Yi Xin and Atiah Tka, both of whom were final year dance students at LASALLE College of the Arts. We are very grateful for the generosity and support from all at LASALLE, their contributions greatly enriched the process and helped us in our explorations.

The LIMPT System

The Live Interactive Multimedia Performance toolkit (http://www.willcock.org/works/projects/limpt.html) is a novel messaging and cuing system which is designed especially to support the integration of interactive Multimedia in live performance in as flexible way as possible. Information about the performance and about individual performers' activity is sent to a central server and, if a pre-prepared condition is met (e.g. a dancer steps on a given floor pad), an action is generated which may be a cue to performers or the presentation of an image or sound.

The system is designed to use no specialist equipment and to be highly customizable for different artists' ways of working. It was developed as a part of Ian Willcock's PhD research at De Montfort University's Institute of Creative Technologies and presented at the DRHA10 conference. The system allows the elements of a performance to connect to each other in dynamically configurable ways to initiate activity or influence behavior. For this performance, the system was hosted on a University of Hertfordshire servers; each site connected to the server over standard network connections. Data was collected from each performance using floor-mounted pressure switches and, based on a set of contextual rules which were prepared in advance, cues and directions were sent to specific performers in the other site via a number of laptops.

About the Authors

Heidi Saarinen is Senior Lecturer in BA and MA Interior Architecture & Design at the University of Hertfordshire and a dance artist with current research focus on *The Construction of Place; Spatial Choreographies.*

Heidi is interested in 'the peripheral place/in-between' and the interaction/collision and layers between buildings, spaces and the body. Unusual, derelict and unorthodox spaces are used for performances and solo dance and movement works, such as: derelict dance (2011), http://www.sistersuitcase.com/derelicay.html and high levels (of dust) (2011) http://www.sistersuitcase.com/loft.mov. Collaborative works include CELLS – confinement/configuration/coding (organiser/curator) University of Hertfordshire (2010) http://cells-uh-25-11-2010.blogspot.co.uk/. Related projects with Interior Architecture and Spatial Design students include http://performance-east.blogspot.co.uk/. Links to Heidi's projects can be found on http://studiocontainer.wordpress.com/archive/.

URL(s): http://studiocontainer.wordpress.com/, http://www.sistersuitcase.com/

Dr. Ian Willcock is Principal Lecturer in Interactive Media at the University of Hertfordshire. With a background in music and performance, he is particularly interested in live performance practice, which is integrated with interactive media. His recent collaborative work includes both interactive installations (The Street, an interactive gallery-based Installation with Martin Rieser, presented from 8th-29th August 2009 at the Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast in the ISEA 09 conference) and performance projects (eMerge, with Jane Turner and Daniel Biro, presented at the ICA, London in May 2004) together with a long series of collaborations with animator Andrew Greaves (e.g. Peyps' Pipe, premiered December 2008 at The Horse Hospital, London).

His interactive installation, *You. Here. Now.* was presented at the Science Gallery, Dublin in the *Illusion* exhibition in July 2013.

URL(s): http://www.willcock.org/