

Andrea Bozic

It's Me But I'm No Longer There

A performance with an absent performer for two active audience members.

'All great, simple images reveal a psychic state. The house, even more than the landscape, is a "psychic state", and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy.'(Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 1958)

The Installation

I originally developed the installation as a research project within my postgraduate studies at the Dance Unlimited, Theaterschool Amsterdam in February 2004. Its central question was related to presence: what constitutes the presence of a person? How far does that presence extend before it becomes a trace of a presence? What is communicated with that presence?



In order to deal with this question, I set up a practical situation in which the relationship between distance and intimacy was inverted. I made a spacious room which I filled with my own personal belongings and arranged it into an intimate and private space. Inside this room, I placed another small room which was almost unnoticeable. The two rooms were therefore in the same space but the two visitors were unaware of it, as they were led into them through separate entrances. I connected the two rooms with a camera, so that the visitor to the small room could watch what the visitor to the big room was filming there. They both listened to the same sound of the room which was controlled by the visitor to the small room. This way, they were physically close to each other although they thought they were in separate rooms. At the same time, with the image of the camera projected onto the inside wall of the small room and both listening to the same sound, the two visitors shared a space of intimacy through the image one of them was making especially for the other. As my collaborator Robert Pravda noticed, one visitor was the eyes and the other the ears of the space.

This way, I inverted a basic theatre situation: the protagonist was gone. Her room was abandoned with only her traces left in it. There was no more performer. Instead, two audience members were invited to enter the space and re-create its inhabitant through her traces. Ultimately, the intimate space of the absent person was used as a playfield: a space for the visitors to actively stage their own performance of the space to each other.

In order to look into the question about what constitutes the presence of a person and how far that presence constitutes before it becomes a trace, I created a person's interior. I arranged the details of the room, the warmth of the colours, the casual mess left behind. The room was divided into several areas which included a bedroom corner, a living room corner, a working space, a changing room, a bathroom, etc. Then, inside each of the furniture items, there were books, clothes, hidden diaries, memorabilia,

photographs, internet links, documents, bank statements and other personal belongings. And even further, inside smaller boxes and hiding places, there were particularly personal items. The more the visitor looked, the more they would find out about the missing person and the more they would get into trying to piece up their own story about it.



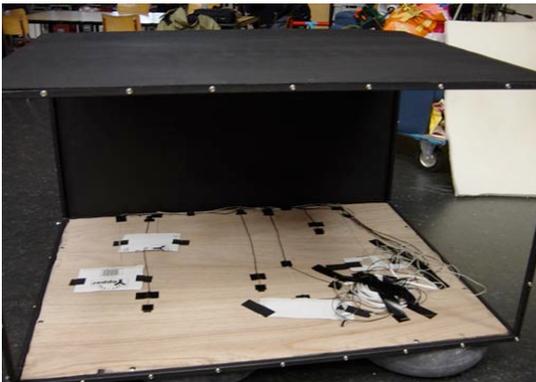
I invited 56 people, aged 1 to 75, of very different background, to enter the room and play. I wondered if I could come very close to them, even if I was no longer there. Could my room and the traces in it make them play, make them make theatre?

I made it into a game for two players.

The Setup

In order to see what is communicated in the absence of a physical person I made the following setup. One of the players was brought into a large, partially lit room, filled with my personal belongings, arranged into islands of light in a dark space. They were given a camera and invited to feel free to explore, to play and nose around the room. They were told their partner was watching what they were filming. They could use the camera to tell something about that space to their partner. What they were filming was projected live so their partner followed it.

Inside this larger space, there was a box hidden on the edge of the space with a separate entrance, so it was not obvious at all that it was there. The box was built on unstable footing so it had a wobbly effect when one moved in it, producing a feeling of floating and ease for the one lying in it. Inside, it was black and filled with unevenly distributed soft pieces of sponge covered with a black cloth, so the surface was uneven. Underneath the sponge, there were pressure sensors and switches, so when the person inside it moved, they triggered pre-recorded sound files and panned them across the larger space outside the box. This way, the little movement they produced would trigger larger motion in the soundscape of the larger room.



The sound files consisted of the fragments of voice of the absent person – the thinking processes going on inside her head; the sounds of her body moving, breathing, inhabiting the space; the sound of music and movie quotes this person listened to, echoing in the room. These were heard and panned on four mono speakers distributed throughout the larger space, at varying distances from the box. On one side of the box, there was a projection screen. The camera of the person outside was connected directly to the projector and the person inside the box could follow the view of the camera of their partner outside. Both players heard the same sound at the same time.

The other player was taken into this box through a separate entrance and told that if they wanted to hear anything, they had to move. The production and panning of pre-recorded sound files was entirely dependent on the movement of the person in the box. In order to be able to trigger and pan sound, they needed to rock their bodies gently inside the box. This was expected to put them into a heightened state of relaxation where they became more perceptive of the intimate video input they were offered by their partner.

The spatial and technological setup were made so that the two participants were placed together inside the ‘head’ of the absent person. They could re-create the person, via the visual and audio/textual input, only by working together. No one had control over everything alone. At the same time, using the ‘absent’ person as a target of their investigation and play, the setup allowed them to start playing with their own personal memories, fantasies and desires.

The technology was used to fuse the role of the viewer and performer on both the dramaturgical and conceptual level. Each session lasted for 15-20 minutes after which the players were asked to swap roles.

After the swapping, the players would realise what the connection was between the two rooms and the second session would turn into a response to the first one.

The Game

The focus was on the process of constructing a ‘story’ out of non-linear visual, audio and textual input across spaces that were divided but re-connected by technology. Linear type of story-telling was replaced by the viewer looking for a story, therefore directing it, and at the same time communicating it to another person. This way, the story was immediately multiple. It only came to life in the theatre of its telling. The focus was not on ‘finding’ a fixed story or getting a reward, but rather on stimulating the interaction between the individuals and the creation of a shared imaginative space. Therefore, the interaction was twofold:

1. between the players and the absent person whose space this was and
2. between the two players as the space becomes their own.

All of the participants, in varying degrees, went through a similar process. Curiosity and insecurity, figuring out what the rules were, what the space was like, what to do with the partner, embarrassment, curiosity and playfulness. The players would perform small roles for their partner, change into my clothes, leave notes in the space, re-arrange the room, create a mess or clean up the whole space. After only a few minutes, the room was no longer mine: I was surprised how easily it became theirs. All of the players told a story not so much about the room but about themselves in that room, to their partner. The missing person, as expected, was not the focus: the focus was the ‘play’ with the partner and the intimate space of the missing person’s room served as a field of projection for their own imagination. In the meantime, I secretly witnessed about 200 different performances the visitors created for me. The room transformed with each new couple of players into a different space: ultimately, into a projection of themselves and their relationship with their partner into the space which was inviting it. This projection was never fixed and never arbitrary but depended largely on the communication established inside the playfield offered. The conclusion to my initial question was that the physical absence of the ‘owner of the room’ created conditions of voyeurism which brought the two players closer together. The absence of the performer was replaced by the two performers communicating with each other.

I presented the format of the installation differently on various occasions: as a dance performance with an absent performer (Something Raw Festival, Amsterdam), an interactive installation (Digital Cities, The Hague), an installation performance (Dansnacht, Rotterdam) are some of the examples. The issue of presence/absence of the performer stirred up a lot of discussion around how to define it and within which framework to present it.

I developed the installation in collaboration with Sher Doruff as my advisor, Pierre Perrin, who did the initial programming of the sensors, and later with sound designer Robert Pravda, who developed the soundscape of the installation.