

The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader
Edited by Stella Brennan and Su Ballard
Designed by Jonty Valentine
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as are other New Zealand artists including Rebekah Wild, Liz Bryce, Gabi Schmidberger, and Vicki Smith and myself from Avatar Body Collision.²¹ Marcus Williams has examined the presence of the virtualised body by exploring ‘limbic resonance’ in highly mediated environment. His *Smoke-In* works give a sense of presence as smoke seems to flow from a body in one distant location to another. Events such as Interdigitate and the ADA symposiums provide opportunities for the presentation of live digital performance, although networked performance or cyberperformance have yet to feature greatly in their programmes.

Steve Dixon has suggested that digital performance peaked during a ‘golden age’ in the late 1990s and this seems to be true at least quantitatively, but it begs the question, why?²² It could be partly that the speed of technological development has failed to keep pace with the imaginations of theatre makers; certainly the actuality of immersive 3D technologies has yet to live up to the hype. But forget for a moment the popular obsession with the latest high-tech cutting-edge rich-media prophesies, and look at what many of us have in our offices and homes—we have such a lot of technology to play with. Today’s online social networking spaces and tools are as “ripe for dramatic play” as the IRC channels and Multi-User Dungeons of the early 1990s.²³ Cyberperformance is lo-tech wizardry that uses accessible tools to playfully interrogate complex notions of time, space and presence— notions that have undergone a massive change since the very first telephone call was made.²⁴ Having accepted that we can speak in real time with someone on the other side of the world, it seems a small step to accept that our presence in the liminal territory of cyberspace can be ‘real’ or solid. There is always a curiosity to know where people physically are, what time it is there and what the weather is like. Asking these questions of those connected to us gives us a shared sense of being simultaneously present, in some way, in multiple other places. For example, I can give a workshop in Romania, attend a meeting in Amsterdam and watch a performance in Brisbane all in the same day and without leaving my house in New Zealand.

The blurring of disparate time zones by events such as attending the premier of a performance the day before it happens disrupts the certainty of measured time. It may be almost tomorrow, but my audience are still staggering through today and yesterday. Somebody’s got to get up in the middle of their night. Cyberperformance exists outside the clock, in a chunk of time shared by all the participants. The shared moment is real time, the venue is a virtual space, and the result is live theatre.

21. Rebekah Wild presented *Baba Yaga* at the 070707 UpStage Festival; Liz Bryce performed in *Indigenous Maniacs* (2006) and *the old hotel* (070707 UpStage Festival and other performances); Gabi Schmidberger performed in *Indigenous Maniacs* (2006) and *Ophelia_machina* (070707 UpStage Festival).

22. Dixon defines digital performance as “all performance works where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics or delivery forms.” Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art and Installation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

23. Adrienne Jenik, “The Early Years of Desktop Theater,” *Riding the Meridian* 2, no.1: Women and Technology, 1999. <http://www.heelstone.com/meridian/>

24. The phrase “lo-tech wizardry” to describe cyberperformance was coined by Vicki Smith in 2001.

Centres and Peripheries

Vicki Smith and Adam Hyde

Living mostly on the West Coast of the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, Vicki Smith works with two clusters of schools where technology assists in teaching, as well as in social and cultural collaboration. Vicki is a member of Avatar Body Collision, an online performance troupe who devise, rehearse and perform using a variety of Internet technologies.¹ Adam Hyde is based in Europe. An artist, educator, tactical media practitioner, streaming media consultant, and sometime curator, Hyde’s projects have placed him on most continents, including the Antarctic and pervade the online world. For both Vicki and Adam, their most constant address is an email one.

In March 2005 Adam Hyde (along with Honor Harger, Zita Joyce and Adam Willetts) hosted re:remote Auckland, a symposium featuring on-site, online and pre-recorded presentations analysing how digital technologies augment collaborations across geographical and cultural distance. Artists and commentators presented from London, Newcastle, Helsinki, Rotterdam and Sydney. Participants from around New Zealand attended both virtually and in person to share their work.

re:remote Auckland was the first in a series of conferences designed to explore what it means to be remote in an electronic art world. Are there ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ within a world increasingly bridged and mapped by digital technologies? Can technologically mediated communication ever substitute for face-to-face dialogue? Is geographical isolation a factor in contemporary art production? Is remoteness a relative concept? The conversation documented below reflects on these questions, negotiating issues of presence, liveness, communication and connectivity.



fig. 1



fig. 2

1. <http://www.avatarbodycollision.org>. The *Colliders* are four women who met online in 2001, forming Avatar Body Collision in 2002. They are a collaborative, globally distributed performance troupe who live (mostly) in London, Helsinki, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia and cyberspace. They devise and rehearse online, using chat software that is cross-platform and free to download. For a discussion of Avatar Body Collision and its projects, see the preceding essay by Helen Varley Jameson.

1: Adam Hyde, DIY radio workshop, WAVES Festival, Riga, Latvia, August 2006.
2: Students at South Westland Area School Harihari attend a *kapa haka* lesson delivered by Maori performing arts students at Northland College, Kaikohe. The SWAS students learned *mihī, waiata* and *karakia* while the Northland group achieved tutoring credits, video conferencing via the Ministry of Education NZEduNet Bridge, 1 October, 2007.

Skype [Edited chat history]

2007-08-23 22:54:14

Vicki:

Hmm... says user not online.

Adam:

I am.

Adam:

I am!

Vicki:

Ahh, there you go.

Vicki:

But hey, are you ready?

Adam:

Not yet—in another meeting.

22:55:48

Adam:

Ok, so Vicki, I understand in Harihari you would be considered by most to be 'reasonably isolated'... Would that be accurate?

Vicki:

Yes, geographically we are a long way from what people expect to have handy (public transport, shops, banks, health services). An essential item unfortunately is a good vehicle and a given is a lot of driving. In servicing the Primary and Secondary Schools' Information Communication Technologies contract from 2003 – 2005, I clocked up 155,000 kilometers. Now I am trying to do much of what I used to do offline by using online environments and video conferencing—although I still seem to do a lot of travelling.

Adam:

What sort of connectivity can you get there?

Vicki:

I'm on an ADSL connection, so now get a relatively serviceable 92KBPS (according to a test I did just now). Until the Government's Project Probe initiative forced Telecom to provide broadband in rural areas, some schools, especially further south of here, had horrendous connection issues.² For example, it would take Haast school minutes to access the front page of the Te Kete Ipurangi

website, a resource repository for education.³

Adam:

These issues are now resolved?

Vicki:

Well they are *kinda* resolved—the next stage of Project Probe is currently underway. I am close to the exchange—but further out in this valley they are not so lucky—I think there is also an issue regionally of how many people can actually access 'broadband' from any one exchange.

Adam:

So Te Kete Ipurangi is set up to enable remote learning?

Vicki:

No, actually it is resource for New Zealand teachers, including exemplars and assessment work project sites. There is actually a fantastic resource called the Virtual Learning Network that brokers courses in distance education.⁴ It was started to assist development of Video Conferencing clusters—distributed both regionally and demographically. There are now around thirteen clusters promoting 'multi modal' ways of accessing education.

Adam:

Do you know what tools they use?

Is this a Moodle network?

Vicki:

They currently use the learning management system Interact, an open source software project developed by Glen Davies of the Christchurch College of Education. The network supports (or brokers) virtual conferencing from a variety of sources and each cluster uses a variety of tools—it is through this network that I am using Breeze. Moodle is used by some clusters. There is also Schooodle... and many others.

Adam:

Can you tell me a little about these tools? What are their strengths and functionality in comparison to each other? Moodle versus Schooodle versus Breeze?

2. Project Probe was a collaboration between the Ministries of Education and of Economic Development to provide broadband to Rural schools. <http://tinyurl.com/2meqjw> and <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm?layout=document&documentid=7328&indexid=7877&indexparentid=6919>

3. <http://www.tki.org.nz>

4. <http://www.virtuallearning.school.nz>

Vicki:

Interact I know best. It was incredibly useable, allowing a huge range of interaction and sharing between password protected and open access areas. I ran several projects between schools on the Coast and between NZ and UK using that and other tools. Moodle works in the same way. You can create groups, classes and courses and add the functions you require: file sharing, drop boxes, forums, chat, polls etc. etc.

Adam:

I can understand that these tools might be good for organising information, but how do you interact with the students?

Vicki:

Synchronously through a chat function, asynchronously through forum features, polls and journals—guess they'd be called blogs :)

Adam:

Is this interaction 'rich' enough?

Vicki:

The asynchronous functions are great—for example a drama teacher kept in touch with her senior students while away on sabbatical through journals. They had to contribute at specific times. She would read and comment on their work, and they would often go back and review what they had written and comment on their entries. It was a fantastic way to show their reflective processes, which is especially important in assessing in the arts. It was also good for them because their teacher was in the UK and they would often get comments overnight :) You could see from the number of times they were going online that they were engaged with this medium.

Adam:

And the synchronous communication?

Vicki:

Ahh well... we sometimes used UpStage for that.⁵ Now I use the graphical chat in UpStage or I use Breeze, which has all the chat features (including whiteboard notes) but users can also share desktops and files.

Adam:

Do you use these tools because they are suited to the theatrical subject matter of the course, or because of its communication component?

Vicki:

UpStage is especially good for drama, but we also used it for a health project—exploring issues of dyslexia (I can hardly spell it), bullying and relationships. Breeze is good for creating a meeting space.

Adam:

So it's the spatial component that was important for using UpStage?

Vicki:

It is very good for 'presence' somehow and fascinating how engaging it is. Even groups who are in the same room will engage with each other on stage while being almost completely oblivious to their peers sitting right next to them. But the sense of 'inhabiting' space with others is definitely a major factor (it allows the use of webcams) so there is a very real sense of the other there with you.

Adam:

Do you augment these communications with Skype, IRC or other more commonly used tools?

Vicki:

Yes, some of the schools use Skype. Interestingly, some of the schools I have worked with block chat programmes like MSN Messenger.

Adam:

Really? Why is that?

Vicki:

I guess for the same reason some schools ban cell phones—they haven't figured how to add it to their educational *kete* (kit bag).

Adam:

Is there more concern in rural schools about this kind of distraction? Or is this a general issue?

Vicki:

I think it's common to schools in both rural and more urban environments. Some allow cell phones in school but not in class, some ban them totally,

5. <http://upstage.org.nz/blog>. UpStage was designed by Avatar Body *Collision* and artist programmer Douglas Bagnall. It was launched in 2003 thanks to funding from Smash Palace, the Arts Science collaboration fund from Creative New Zealand and the Ministry of Research Science and Technology. Version two of the software was released in July 2007 thanks to the work of AUT Computing Science Students Endre Bernhardt, Lauren Kilduff and Phillip Quinlan, and Douglas Bagnall, assisted by further funding from the Community Partnership Fund from the Digital Strategy (Ministry of Internal Affairs). It is available to download from Sourceforge <http://sourceforge.net/projects/upstage/>

which is incredible when you try and think of a teenager having a social network without one.

Vicki:

What tools do you use? How do you 'engage' with people you work with who are not proximal to you?

Adam:

Well, I use a wider variety of tools as there is no specific group I communicate with. So, for example with the remote events I use whatever tools are easy for the presenter.

Vicki:

What about the issues of ports, is that an accessibility problem?

Adam:

Ports are always a problem. But there is always a way round, for example, talking to someone on the phone, or pre-recording things to video. There is no need to rely on the Internet for networked events, in fact doing so is a bit regressive. The point is not using the Internet, the point is to dissolve distance as best as possible.

Vicki:

Aah, but when you pre-record things does that take away the sense of everyone being at the 'event'?

Adam:

I think there is too much importance put on the idea of 'liveness'. I think liveness is not or not as important as is made out—'presence' is more important. So yes, pre-recorded video is excellent, and much under-used.

Vicki:

Really? But in a conversation tangential elements sometime reveal interesting things that might not appear in a monologue.

Adam:

If there needs to be interaction this can always be augmented by other technologies. For example, at remote Auckland we had a pre-recorded video presentation with Zina Kaye from Australia. Actually it was recorded in NZ a week before because she wasn't in NZ to do it live during the event. Then we did a Skype text chat afterwards

to ask questions. It worked very well. The video itself had a presence—possibly more than some of the live presentations!

Vicki:

Ah yes, I have done support to an UpStage presentation where I could hear the audience. Hearing them really enhanced my sense of presence and sped up my response to their comments. Actually, I presented remotely at remote Auckland. I found it very frustrating.

Adam:

In what way?

Vicki:

I think PowerPoint got in the way of the UpStage window.

Adam:

Hehe...

Vicki:

:)

Adam:

Well, that's the other part of it—in these things technology is another player. Technology is not an enabler, it is a mischievous interloper.

Vicki:

Yes! I also use video conferencing. I do agree with the importance of 'presence'. I think the haptic sense of connecting through technology can be incredibly rich.

Adam:

Video conferencing is a good way to communicate in these environments, providing you have the bandwidth.

Vicki:

I have looked at, but never seen Access Grid in action, except in a video :)

Adam:

Access Grid... ugh. I heard a very good story about it. There was a remote presentation between two big universities. They got the link started... nice video... but no sound. So they did the whole exchange using white cards and writing on them with a marker. Excellent!

Vicki:

lol

Adam:

But I really don't see the need for these big high res. technologies.

Vicki:

I guess that story harks back to presentations using overhead projectors.

Adam:

Yeah, networked overhead projectors, that's what we need!

Vicki:

In the end it's what is being scribbled onto them that counts.

Adam:

More than high res. video conferencing.

Vicki:

Actually the white board function in Breeze allows for scribbling.

Adam:

Nice.

Vicki:

And drawing is also possible in UpStage.

Adam:

Remote desktop sharing is like that. It's an excellent remote teaching tool when connected to a data projector. 'Desktop presence'—that's an interesting one.

Vicki:

Yes it is, because in the end it is the sense that through your fingers you are contacting other people. There is always that slight screen, but it becomes more permeable with the addition of visuals.

Adam:

And sound.

Vicki:

Absolutely! And sound.

Adam:

Synchronous Skype and desktop sharing is pretty powerful. Matthew Beiderman and I did a workshop on Pure Data like that. It worked beautifully.

Vicki:

Great! We are constantly asked why we don't have actual voices in UpStage.

Adam:

Why don't you?

Vicki:

Bandwidth. We tried to keep it accessible to dial-up. In fact I only just got broadband. In the end it was because of the download time for UpStage. I could do other work in schools and dial-up was to me a much easier connection because of its portability.

Adam:

Can UpStage work smoothly at the moment over dialup?

Vicki:

It can—it takes an age to load the stage, depending on the images, but then it seems to be pretty quick.

Adam:

Well, a friend once said 'face to face is the broadest bandwidth'. It's corny but true.

Vicki:

Very definitely. In working remotely with the schools we try to have as many opportunities for face-to-face interaction as possible. In fact, where we can't have 'the broadest bandwidth' I kind of form the network. It's funny though, with Avatar Body *Collision* we have not all met (or ever all been in the same room together). My mental picture of the others is always them kind of leaning into their screens.

Adam:

Hey... I actually have to run.

Vicki:

Ok, I have to go soon too.

Adam:

I will be back later but I think you will be asleep.

Vicki:

I have a massive drive tomorrow...