

## EXERCISES IN REMOTE COLLABORATION - HUIS CLOS / NO EXIT - (OR, "HOW CYBERPERFORMANCE REVEALS INTIMACY")

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In 2009 I started the artistic research project *Huis Clos / No Exit*. In this project I use a specially developed interface to unite several people remotely in a shared performance space that becomes subsequently both a laboratory and a playground. The performance experiences using this interface, suggest that today's intimacy is no longer revealed through private images but through behavior captured in real time interactions.



*Angry Women, Annie Abrahams, screencapture of a performance test. [bram.org/angry/women](http://bram.org/angry/women)*

Nowadays, people use webcams to film themselves and to express their ideas and feelings to the unknown other that will look at their videoblog. People rarely use their web- or phonecam to talk to someone else. The use of Skype is either very business like or restricted to family members. In Internet applications as Chatroulette people rarely exchange more than a glance. What they look for is their alter ego or an opportunity.

In her book *Alone Together* Sherry Turkle [1] describes how we hide more and more behind technology, how intimate communications start being something to avoid rather than to look for, how smartphones help us to flee our fear of the other, how we learn to control our relations via interfaces and how we are adapting our behavior to this new situation. Facebook teaches us how to simulate intimacy, how to make relations easy, clean, and without danger. At the same time, these relations also become superficial and makes us ask: Who are we when we don't perform? Why can't we show our vulnerable, messy sides? Why can't I be boring and cherish solitude anymore? In a society where authenticity and privacy become endangered it is important to find ways to access our vulnerabilities and doubts, to make them public, to cherish our messy side, to make place for the beast in the beauty, to go back to reality, to claim the human.

In 1998 I worked with at least eight other French artists, who I never met, on a collaborative website called *lieudit.org*. The site and the collective died in 2000, but I still have very nice memories of, for instance, our IRC rendez-vous during the launches of the virtual exhibitions we organized. Collaborating on a shared website was very stimulating, but in the end we couldn't find a common goal to make us better negotiate our differences and so we split up. It was very frustrating to learn that behind our machines we couldn't overcome these political, philosophical and emotional differences, that problems were exaggerated and stayed insurmountable.

This was the first time I noticed that collaboration using machines wasn't easier, maybe not more difficult either, but different from ordinary face to face communication. Later experiences with online collaborative creation interfaces, for instance Furtherfield's Visitors Studio, confirmed this. So, in the early 2000s when people started talking, dreaming and glorifying the advantages of Internet collaborations, I was very doubtful and somewhat vexed; and so decided to start thinking about how to use the recently developed streaming interface of *panoplie.org* for working on these problems. (1)

In telematic performances intimacy is not where you think it is. *The Big Kiss* performed with Mark River (of MTAA) in New York in 2007 [2] might have looked as an intimate performance, but in fact it was closer to a 'drawing à deux' session than to a real kiss, even if it did awake intimate feelings, as drawing a kiss on paper might also have done.

In the telematic performance *One the puppet of the other*, with Nicolas Frespech (Paris 2007), [3] we felt most intimate, most close together when we didn't exchange, when we were waiting, when nothing happened.

In 2009 I started *Huis Clos / No Exit*: a networked performance series investigating collaboration at a distance and relational dynamics in a dispersed group. [4] With an interface developed by Clément Charmet (*panoplie.org*) and Estelle Senay (Théâtre Paris-Villette / x-réseaux) I could unite the images and sounds of the webcams of up to six participating performers in a mosaic. The physically separated performers could share borders and interaction surfaces in a common virtual space and become co-responsible for the mosaic image projected in front of the public during performances. At all times they had this same mosaic image on their screen.

A first experiment took place in November 2008 in the International Laboratory of Interactive Digital Media on Stage, organized by NU2's in L'Animal a l'Esquena, in Celrà, Spain. In one of the tests, I asked three performers to execute a protocol that stated that, before leaving the performance interface they were to compliment the others after having insulted them. It was strange and beautiful to see how they couldn't stop complimenting and saying nice things to another. Later I became more and more aware of how the performance interface, besides allowing observation of behaviour in collaboration and auto-organization, can also reveal private, intimate behavior to the public. The cyberperformers are so occupied by their interactions, that they don't have time to negotiate their image as they mostly do on the Internet.

I talked about machine-mediated revelation of intimacy in an interview with Maria Chatzichristodoulou published in *Digimag* in Oct 2010. [5]

I always look for situations that make any attempt at escaping from exposure impossible. In general I do not rehearse my pieces. If this is necessary – for instance, due to technical reasons – I write new protocols for the final performance. I try to find ways to penetrate the other performer – just for a second I want them to expose themselves to me (and to our observers) in an action, or a response, that

is out of their control. I want them to unveil something they usually hide or only disclose in situations of complete trust, of complete intimacy. I want to know how they function, not by them telling me, but by me almost forcing them to reveal an instance of their 'hidden code' in public. I want us to go beyond self-representation and the control that this requires. Am I really forcing them to do this?... No I am not. What happens is that the situation in itself – that is, the telematic performance interface, the protocols, the flaws in the streaming connections – rewrites the conditions of communication in a way that makes this revelation possible, if not inevitable.

Because I think we need to counterbalance the tendencies to make our Internet-mediated relations cleaner, faster and more and more secure I started paraphrasing Rancière, “The real needs to be trapped in order to be available for thought.” [6] (2)

### **Notes:**

(1) From 2006 - 2009 I organized the *Breaking Solitude* and later the *Double Bind* web performance series with [panoplie.org](http://panoplie.org). While they started out as performances around the idea of the Internet as a public space of solitude they became more and more involved with experimenting "different ways of being together." What can we share, what do we share, how are we interacting and what is this technology doing to us? <http://2008.panoplie.org/2008.panoplie.org/#//DoubleBind>

(2) Because the *Huis Clos / No Exit* interface makes people film their own image, a collaborative cyberperformance using it can also be staged as a live production of an autonomous video, available for reflection. <http://bram.org/huisclos/toutvabien/indexang.html>

### **References:**

1. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
2. Annie Abrahams, "The Big Kiss," 2007, <http://www.bram.org/toucher/TBK.html> (accessed September 7, 2011).
3. Annie Abrahams and Nicolas Frespech, "One the puppet of the Other," 2007, <http://www.bram.org/confront/sphere/indexeng.html> (accessed September 7, 2011).
4. Annie Abrahams, "Huis Clos / No Exit," 2009, <http://bram.org/huisclos/indexang.html> (accessed September 7, 2011).
5. Maria Chatzichristodoulou, "Annie Abrahams: Allergic to Utopias," *Digimag58*, October 2010, <http://www.digicult.it/digimag/article.asp?id=1902> (accessed September 7, 2011).
6. Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du Sensible: Esthétique et Politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000).