

## AHRC ICT Methods Network Event

# INTIMACY: ACROSS DIGITAL AND VISCERAL PERFORMANCE

GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE, LABAN, THE ALBANY, HOME LONDON AND ONLINE, 7, 8, 9 DECEMBER 2007

### Seminar *At Risk* led by Dr Tracey Warr

Rapporteur's report by J Spiegel

What constitutes 'risk' in performance art today? For the *At Risk* seminar, over 30 artists, researchers, curators and communications specialists gathered in the Goldsmiths College Graduate School Seminar Room for a lively investigation of the topic in Tracy Warr's seminar. The seminar began with a round of introductions. Warr then presented participants with a list of thirteen questions that would shape the trajectory of the inquiry, as well as two pages of short quotes and a bibliography of sources inspiring her thoughts. The questions explored the body of the performer as a medium of communication and the ways in which digital technologies alter this communication.

Through an examination of artists' work ranging from Jerzy Beres, to Gina Pane, to Franco B., Warr put forward the suggestion that such work be understood as poignant explorations of the human condition. Its force, she argued, emanates from the visceral response provoked in the audience, making the performance an event in which the audience is necessarily complicit. Is this an empathy response on the part of the audience? It is solipsism? Warr left these questions for participants to chew on. The questions she focused on were those of *what* artists bodies communicate and *how* – questions, inextricably linked to the changing histories of performance art, to changing techniques of performance and to the different questions and experiences that these techniques implicitly open.

Within this context, where in lies the *risk*? While *who* is at risk and *how* continues to change, Warr's suggested that the history of performance and the force of the response evoked very much hinge on the sense of risk experienced by the audience. Warr pointed to a trend that has emerged in many artists work of undergoing (or appearing to undergo) extreme pain or danger. The closing distance between the illusory and the actual in performance implicates the audience in the event itself, calling for audience members to rouse themselves from their role as spectator and bringing the question of *responsibility* to the foreground.

In some of Warr's examples, artists work called for the deliberate need for audience intervention, for instance, to prevent serious harm to the performer. Warr described how artists have further experimented with risk and responsibility in performance by inviting audience members to do as they wish to the performer, furnishing the audience with a range of dangerous objects including knives and guns.

Warr then explored how the use of technology changes the dynamics of risk. Photographers, for instance, often bring a sense of risk into their work by capturing live acts that exhibit vulnerability. The use of digital cameras has allowed artists such as Mark Ridsperer to accentuate this vulnerability by allowing subjects to believe they were being recorded in still photographs when in fact they were being recorded in video. Moreover, technological innovations are allowing the altering viewpoint, speed and digital manipulation generally, not possible in the live theatre. For Warr, these technologies raise anew questions of embodied consciousness and the metaphysics of the bodies.

Warr closed the first half of the seminar with a discussion of avatars, now prevalent on the internet, whereby a graphic or even an image of someone else can be appropriated and presented as the user's identity. Ponderously she asked if this suggests a tendency in the digital toward the specular,

commodification, and a solitary mode of engagement and whether it was possible for us to play responsibly in the digital realm.

After a short break, the seminar resumed and participants divided themselves into small groups to discuss the questions and issues raised. Warr invited groups to explore these issues using examples of both visceral and digital performances with which members of the group were themselves acquainted. When the group reconvened as a whole the fruits of the discussions were shared. Issues raised included increases in health and safety regulations currently limiting performance possibilities enacting what some felt to be a contemporary trend toward 'lobotomizing in the name of protecting.'

The group noted the profound difference between public spaces and designated 'art spaces.' Many felt that risk was eliminated through the framing of projects as 'art' within gallery spaces and that the street was now the only venue where risk in performance remained possible. Within the sanctioned space of the gallery, audiences now tend to 'trust' that performer, relinquishing their sense of both risk and responsibility. The subjectivity of audience member's experience and the factors that might alter this, including the duration and context of the performance were discussed. Several participants marveled at the desire for authenticity that has taken hold of audiences, whereby if a performance artist is performing pain, audiences seem to want that pain to be real. This raised the age old philosophical question: *what is authentic?*

The ephemeral foundation upon which such a days inquiry must rest thus surfaced in discussion as the irremediable gap between a singular live performance and the subsequent 'dissemination of the legend': even in reproducing the various elements of the performance as it 'originally' occurred, the experience of the event can never be reproduced, and can never be 'faithfully' reported.