

## “I know you’re there, even when I can’t see you”\*

### Performing for a Virtual Audience

Since the first UK lockdown, I have had more conversations than I can count with friends and collaborators about liveness, how it functions, what it does, what exactly we missed. Several of these discussions included Camilla Nelson, Xavier Velastin, Serena Braida, Luna Montenegro, and Adrian Fisher with whom I curated SLANT’s four online events; Writing Bodies, Forms In Flux, Voiceworks, and Spontaneous Combustion. The pandemic context has led us to consider notions of performativity through a new lens, beyond contexts of shared time and space. SLANT, a platform initially devised to explore poetic liveness, became a digital space for poets and performers to experiment with the constraints and possibilities of online performance. Delivering this program has allowed me to witness the development of a diverse range of exciting approaches. Beyond experimenting with new formal possibilities, playing with simultaneity and experimenting with framing and editing, some of SLANT’s contributors have explored ways of directly engaging with their virtual audience. They have done so in adapting pieces devised before the pandemic as well as creating entirely new material rooted in its online context.

In their Writing Bodies piece ‘High Noon’, Two For A Fiver (Luis Amalia & Alice Esme) turn their kitchen into a performance space. Their movements respond to looped audio fragments from Keith Jarrett and Marta Delas’ poetry and music. We witness the dancers’ intense performative interaction with their private environment through two simultaneous shots stacked on top of each other. The resulting scene is comical and moving. While looking into people’s private spaces through our screens has become a common experience, Luis and Alice’s close performative engagement with their space is more unusual. Instead of attempting to draw attention away from their home context, finding a neutral corridor or a white wall, they open and close their fridge, press their heads against the counter, and roll across their tiles. The inherent sense of displacement produced by lockdown performances becomes the focus of their piece, drawing attention to the artificiality of our own positions as home-bound audience members, sitting quietly in the kitchens and living rooms we attempt to relate to as venues. Keith Jarrett’s words echo: ‘squares upon squares, upon squares’; ‘like sudoku, with bodies’. These bodies are Luis and Alice’s, investigating the strange confines of their kitchen through movement, and these bodies are ours, watching theirs, stuck in our separate squares, rooms, screens.



Ekaterina Luzgina and Mike McShane's piece 'The Riot Of Springs', also showcased as part of Writing Bodies, is an elaborate choreography of performative textual machines. The artist duo's audience remotely inhabits a vibrant automated set through the gaze of their robotic camera operator DOP Kazimir, thereby collectively adopting the point of view of yet another machine of their conception. DOP Kazimir's movements through the scenes are, at times, fractured and erratic, suggesting moments of contemplation and hesitation that give a sense of personality and agency. Together, we travel through rooms full of robotic characters with a mix of human and linguistic features, each caught in their own relentless sequence of gestures. This anthropomorphic spectacle, at once fascinating and disturbing, speaks to our complex relationship with the new technological reality of performance. Adopting a robot's point of view reinforces the experience's immersive quality and playfully responds to our position in relation to the piece. Through DOP Kazimir, Luzgina & McShane respond to our disembodied presence by allowing each one of us to step into a collective body produced specifically for the occasion.

Niya B's piece 'I Was Once The Snake Woman' merges movement, sound, video and snakeskin fabrics with lines of Margaret Atwood's poem 'Snake Woman'. I had seen a previous version of this piece in person, at one of the events of her 'Translucent' series, in London, 2018. It was a highly immersive experience, which ended with the performer approaching audience members, thus adding a tactile

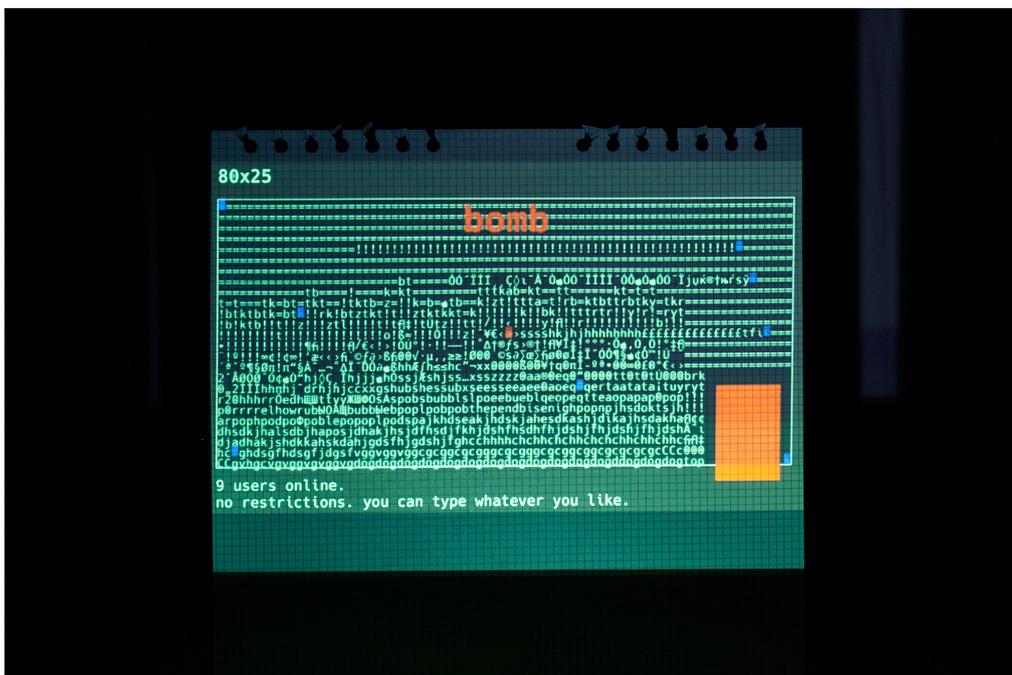
dimension to her multisensory piece. At the end of the version produced for Writing Bodies, she slowly walks towards the camera, and Margaret Atwood's words, projected onto her body, call out to us: "I know you're there / even when I can't see you / I see the trail you make". These lines break what I am tempted to call the fifth wall, the additional layer of distance, or multiple distances that separate her from her scattered audience members. As Niya B gradually reaches the camera, the lens that connects us, her slow movements allow us to progressively focus on her intention: to come closer, to reach us. As our sense of this intention grows, parts of her body slip out of the digital frame she is trapped in. Finally, as her face fills the screen, she carefully covers it with a mask that fits the snakeskin motif of her piece. As she stares unblinkingly through the camera's lens and into our screens, Margaret Atwood's words echo in our minds: "I know you're there / even when I can't see you".



Our physical absence is central to Ana Coltatu's performance 'Dear Applicant'. This piece, presented as part of SLANT's Forms In Flux, involves a poetic quest for new physical audience members in a lockdown environment. In a sequence of static shots, Coltatu faces away from us, reading rejection letters to a river, a lamp-post, a squirrel, a grave. Her virtual audience members become indirect witnesses of a private performance addressed to physical elements of public space. While the letters' repetitive structures, their formal tone, and the artist's impassive delivery build an atmosphere of insistent detachment, the piece's framing creates an additional layer of distance. Looking over Coltatu's shoulder onto the parks and streets she faces, we find ourselves facing our own absence through the elements with which she has replaced us.



Jörg Piringer's piece '80x25', also showcased in Forms In Flux, is a participatory performance built for a virtual audience in which we are invited to take part by typing in real-time in response to his prompts. The program pronounces each character as we type it, giving us a collective voice. The screen itself becomes a platform, a virtual space in which we are together, immersed in collaborative audiovisual improvisation. Once in a while, Piringer intervenes with effects such as 'bomb' or 'rain', which disrupt our textual landscape. As these performative features are announced, our characters erupt, scatter, or trickle down the screen. Piringer becomes the virtual conductor of an anonymous ensemble. His participatory system brings all of the intensity and immediacy of physical liveness to a virtual



space. In '80x25', nothing is lost through remoteness; the gap between audience and performance disappears.

Emma Bennett took part in SLANT's Voiceworks with a new solo performance of her collaborative speech score, 'The Superficial Front-Facing Way Of Putting It Out There'. The score, which she developed with Antonia Barnett-McIntosh in 2019, includes two overlapping voices, the deconstructed utterances of which evoke an overheard conversation between two people attempting to understand an unidentified machine. In her Voiceworks performance, Bennett combined layers of her own voice with minimal stills involving colour blocks and flat textured surfaces. The audience's experience begins with a black screen. Several friends watching the event attempt to alert me: it looks like something isn't working. As Bennett's voices weave into each other in what seems like an attempt to define the mechanics of the piece itself, our screen's colours and textures gradually shift in response to her vocal performance. The pace of these transitions is slow enough for us to get used to each still and their regularity allows them to feel temporary. While this sequence of surfaces constantly reminds us that we are looking at a screen, the invisible performer's overlapping voices highlight the duality of the online context, in which we are both isolated and ubiquitous. Emma Bennett connects with us by exposing the strange mechanics of the new context we now share.

SLANT's fourth and last online event, Spontaneous Combustion, ended with a set of short improvisations from the event's co-curators Montenegrofisher, called 'Spacing the Poem'. Their last piece unfolds as a sequence of statements guiding their audience towards 'the poem': 'the poem is there'; 'the poem is just inside your screen, just down there'; 'the poem is inside your keyboard'; 'the poem is just above the plug'. Luna Montenegro and Adrian Fisher take turns in voicing these improvised lines, responding to each other. As the poem's locations multiply, they gradually become more specific; it is 'just below the alt' and 'in your space bar'. Eventually, it springs from our keys, moves through our fingers and into our tongues. Through performative utterance, Montenegrofisher release their poem from its virtual environment and into the audience's physical bodies.

At the end of their piece, Montenegrofisher progressively step back while repeating 'spacebar, return' in unison. This echoing phrase grows into a form of incantation. I imagine the keys being pressed repeatedly, carving new gaps, shaping new pockets of space for 'the poem'. I think back to two for a fiver, Luzgina & McShane, Niya B, Ana Coltatu, Jörg Piringer and Emma Bennett and the poetic

ways in which they have worked with distance, isolation, and absence, building new forms of connection, engagement, and intimacy through, despite, and beyond those gaps.

Written by Iris Colomb, June 2021.

\* Quote in title From Margaret Atwood's 'Psalm to Snake', *Interlunar* (Oxford University Press, 1984), as projected in Niya B's performance *I Was Once the Snake Woman*.

Photos by Suzi Corker, featuring and responding to the performances of Two For A Fiver, Luzgina & McShane, Niya B, Ana Coltatu and Jörg Piringer.

More information about SLANT at [www.slant-events.com](http://www.slant-events.com)