

ISOLATION: DISCONNECTION, SOLITUDE AND SECLUSION IN A CONNECTED WORLD. School of Art, Hobart, Tasmania. 14th – 16th December 2006.

Conference report by Sarah-Mace Dennis

There is no doubt that 'isolation' is a slippery signifier – a concept radically affected by new formations in physical and virtual networks, many of which are suggestive of different possibilities for bridging geographic, cultural and social divides. Hosted by the Housing and Community Research Unit in the School of Sociology at the University of Tasmania, *Isolation: Disconnection, Solitude and Seclusion in a Connected World*, invited researchers and practitioners from diverse fields to come together and discuss the way that critical concerns in social, political, creative and spatial disciplines have contributed to the reinterpretation of notions of connection and disconnection, redefining our understanding of what it means to be isolated. With the support of ANAT's Professional Development Travel fund I attended the conference as one half of the collaborative team Dennis Kratz (Sarah-Mace Dennis and Svenja Kratz). Throughout the three day experience there was much discussion as to how, in an era of increased connectivity – where new technological possibilities have enabled information to be transported across once distant boundaries – the cultural, emotional and experiential meaning of isolation has changed.

Professor Adrian Franklin's keynote paper *On Loneliness* contemplated what it means to be lonely in a contemporary culture where social and structural changes have re-contextualized the way we organize our identity. Continuing in the vein of much work currently being produced in the humanities and social sciences, Franklin argued that consumerism has permeated cultural and political formations, unfixing subjectivity and creating relationships between bodies and spaces that exist in a permanent state of desire, exploration and becoming. Within this framework, people and things are often disposable and exchangeable, resulting in the substitution of love and *meaningful* bonds with surface affect relationships. Relating these issues to new technologies, Franklin argued that as a medium, the internet allows connections between people to be activated and deactivated on a regular basis. The flexibility of online connectivity allows users to develop a string of virtual acquaintances whose emotional intentions are virtual and often abstract, resulting in relationships that according to Franklin are potentially built on unstable bonds and thus run the danger of bringing about an enhanced feeling of loneliness.

Although Franklin's argument was both thorough and engaging, at times it seemed to rely too heavily on a quantitative methodology, drawing on surveys that reduced emotions to 'data' used to analyze the relationship between online interaction and contemporary loneliness. For me, this was an approach that seemed to raise more questions than answers. Can the complex experience of feeling lonely be expressed through this form of data collecting, or does it instead, leave the depths and complexity of loneliness unheard and unsaid? Perhaps in this instance further investigation needs to take place regarding a useful methodology for collecting data about online relationships, particularly those that start within the virtual space of the screen, then change as they extend into physical geographies.

Evolving from an interest in the tangible and intangible networks that take place in the public space of the city, Sydney based artist Astra Howard's paper *Feeling Cities: Activating individuals in public spaces to enhance the experience of the city*, provided insight into her art and design based research methodology. Drawing on concepts employed by urban studies, performance art and design, Howard's exploratory character 'the Action Researcher/ Performer' acts as a 'transducer' that mediates between theoretical texts, public spaces and the people who inhabit them. Howard's Melbourne project *CITYtalking* saw her build a large, portable, box-like structure that had been internally divided into two separate sections by a wall so that both occupants were unable to see one another. Described as a 'catalyst for interaction between strangers' the work enabled the artist to anonymously engage with the public and draw out personal stories about

their experience of the city. Astra argues that 'by disabling the normal means of communication in some way members of the public are more willing to interact with one another'. A scrolling LED text panel wrapping around the top of the conversation booth displayed excerpts from narratives told inside, providing passers by with an insight into the sometimes intimate and sometimes playful conversations.

Howard recounted the powerful narrative of one woman called Leonie who claimed that entering the booth and telling her story had been an emotional and meaningful experience. Betrayed and ignored by a political and social system that she said had failed her and her family, it seemed that Howard's thoughtful intervention had provided this woman with an alternate space of expression within the public domain that was free of some of the intimidations and complications imposed on the individual who has no power or voice to exercise their position..= Howard's work instigated excitement and creative discussion amongst an audience of sociologists, youth workers, geographers, artists and theorists who all agreed that her interdisciplinary, creative approach to 'connecting' often isolated and disparate groups offered a range of possibilities and positive outcomes for rethinking and redeveloping social interaction in urban spaces.

Lee Stickells' *Architecture and Motion: shifting spaces of encounter* was a paper that gave me new insight into the potential contribution that architectural theory could make to new media arts practice. Providing insight into the way that the concerns of architects have changed from the modernist to the post-modernist period, Stickells' interests departed from the former's concern with the production of 'isolated, privileged view points' that influenced the way that individuals visually experienced spaces to focus on more emerging architectural interests related to the 'production of physical connections and social links between bodies and space.' Using the activated surface of the ramp as a focal point for his research, Stickells provided examples of designs that he argued created new dialogues and relationships between bodies *in* spaces, as well as generated new movements and connections between bodies *and* spaces. Within this context, he drew on the work of cultural theorist Brian Massumi, noting his view that architecture is one practice that can embody and generate movement, affect and sensation and in turn, the creation of new ways for experiencing environments. In the current collaborative research of Dennis Kratz the issue of how to accurately represent a given event or experience is an inevitable concern. Stickells' work has opened up new interests in the potential for collaboration between architecture and new media art (particularly interactive and immersive environments) to create work where sensation and affect are experienced as much as they are represented.

With a title borrowed from a Virginia Woolf novel, David Toop's striking presentation *Chair Creaks, though no one sits there: decomposition, liquidity, isolation* invited listeners to drift between the spaces of practice and research, becoming immersed in his discursive piece that described the intersections between these two things as if any boundaries that once existed between them had become so blurred that they were no longer identifiable. In this work, Toop reflected on his practice of recording musicians and other sonic technicians in separate rooms and then composing (or perhaps decomposing) these recordings in the space of the computer. Toop's ficto-critical approach not only reflected the experience of creating electronic music but also on the experience and memory of the playing and recording of music inside both physical and virtual rooms. For Toop the act of creating and listening to music is an interaction with noise that exists at deep levels of the spectrum, it is not so much an 'envelope that we pass through' but an 'overpowering, colonizing force.' In relation to developing his own recorded performances he notes that the 'feeling is of building a silent room devoid of physical presence, then filling the room with the sound of an ensemble of willing ghosts, the sound of many rooms within rooms, the sound of isolation.'

Perhaps it is the sound of these virtual rooms, inside which can be heard the ghosts of now unseen musicians whose compositions were once recorded in quiet rooms, that participants of

the conference listened to on Thursday night at the *Isolation Sessions*, a music evening at the Peacock Theatre, Salamanca Arts Centre. Lawrence English and David Toop were invited to perform here as a result of the relationship their work holds to notions of isolation – a theoretical concern developed through both artists' interests in ambient sound and found instrumentation, investigations which have led them both at one time or another, to experience and record the sounds of remote places. English engaged his listeners through sounds of isolation: dark and calm compositions of 'elsewhere' offset by drifting images of alien landscapes, pre-recorded video that had a pace and sensibility which seemed slower and more detached than the 'real' time being experienced by the audience as they listened to the performance. And then David Toop brought us his musical rooms, spaces told by flute and computer, each layer of sound seeming to come from some other sort of geography, very far away.

To compliment this music evening, a call went out through Lawrence English's record label *Room 40* asking for musicians to develop acoustic works that responded to the notion of isolation and to the 'orbiting social, geographical and philosophical issues' surrounding it. The result is *On Isolation*, a 15 track CD provided to all conference delegates. The soundscapes recorded on the compilation are ambient works that explore isolation in a literal sense, while also creating acoustic spaces that delve into the concept on a deeper and more conceptual level.

At the conference I represented one half of the collaborative team Dennis Kratz (Sarah-Mace Dennis and Svenja Kratz) to present *Into the Interfold: Isolation, historical memory and the reconstruction of time*. This paper extended on concerns developed during a seven week residency in the remote gold rush town Hill End in 2004. Drawing on this experience, we discussed the way that new technologies can be used to convey isolation, allowing absence to re-establish itself as presence in the recording and re-interpretation of a site heavy with nostalgia and historic value. Intersecting creative writing, cultural theory, historical information and images taken around Hill End, our presentation provided insight into our two recent bodies of work *To Rose (My Love)* an interactive installation exploring the death of a woman and her three children on her property at Triamble and *Diorama: Constructing a Virtual Memory*, an online hypermedia work funded by a Write in Your Face grant through the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts. A good turn out at the presentation resulted in an interesting post-paper discussion generated by audience members who worked in diverse artistic and theoretical fields. The different discipline-based responses to our work resulted in interesting questions and feedback that will be considered in the future development of our work. Providing information about the techniques and technologies used by our practice also meant that we were able to shed light on some of the processes of new media art – which meant new information for many audience members. Conversations were also continued informally at social events, allowing us to continue to talk about Australian artists, groups and organizations working with new and emerging technologies.

Attending *Isolation: Disconnection, solitude and seclusion in a connected world*, gave me a unique opportunity to share information about the work of Dennis Kratz, debate cultural and theoretical concerns relevant to notions of isolation, and to exchange information with people working in different disciplines, many of which were distanced from those usually engaged in my day to day practice. I was also able to make contacts from diverse geographic and theoretical/creative areas, including artists, sociologists, cultural theorists, geographers, designers and social workers – many of which I will keep contact with into the future. Isolation has certainly become an underlying aesthetic and mood in the collaborative work produced by Dennis Kratz as well as in the concerns explored through my individual practice, and the creative, conceptual and atmospheric stimulus absorbed at *Isolation* will no doubt be folding and refolding into my writing and art practice for years to come. ANAT is greatly acknowledged for supporting my attendance at this conference, without which my trip to Tasmania would not have been viable.

