this is now, this is live…

Virtual infants in Zoo Indigo's *Under the Covers*

Rosie Garton & Ildiko Rippel

We are really excited to perform for you tonight – we just had one little problem: we couldn't get any babysitters. But don't panic, we found a solution! Anybody ever heard of SKYPE? Great. So this is what we've done, the clever bit: we've attached infra-red cameras above our babies' beds, and we are filming them, now, live, so you can babysit, while we perform. Now, we are going to be quite involved in the acting side of things. Focused. In the moment. So we can't really react, should there be any problems, any waking up or crying – so this is where you guys come in really handy. See this microphone downstage, it is attached to the laptop running the SKYPE connection, and our technician will switch this on, should the babies wake up. So, if one of them stirs, it would be great if you could calm them back to sleep, just trust your instincts, say what comes naturally, to calm them down. "I know, I know, there, there, now, now", or a nice calming shhhhhhhh.

Remember - This is now. This is live. This is Charlie. This is Dylan. This is Ilona. They are asleep. Please look after our babies.

Now let's begin with the show….

We are Zoo Indigo, a Nottingham based performance company, experimenting with innovative new technology and the virtual performer to create authentic presence on the arena of illusion, the stage.

As part of our research we recently took the exploration of the virtual performer further, and explored the virtual "non-performer", the infants in *Under the Covers*. The audience's – and the performers' – response to the digital infants is always intense. The babies are there with us, live in the theatre space, their presence is felt constantly as we observe the blurry CCTV style live video footage, and the audience is drawn into their spaces further through the interactivity created with live sound connections.

In this paper we are going to introduce the different elements that contribute to create this authentic, "real-life" presence, flooding into the performance situation of pretence. The paper furthermore investigates if new technology and virtual presence in performance comments, confirms or contradicts current theories of posthumanism, and whether, as part of the posthuman condition, a virtual version of a performer – or the digitalised presence of any person - can have an authentic presence at the remote location, can be as real, or even more real, than a live body of flesh and blood.

The first element we identify as responsible to create a sense of authenticity of presence is interactivity, both in the sense of interactive technology and audience interaction. The multiple connections to a remote location via the SKYPE link enabled us to view live video footage from the children's bedrooms. The sense of interactivity was enhanced through the possibility to interact via sound, when the volume was activated in certain circumstances.

The authenticity of this presence is not only established through multiple live connections of the sites, but also the responsibility the audience is given, the fact that the spectator discontinues to be a passive onlooker but is now actively in control of the performance as well as of the actual situation of looking after a baby. The mere fact that we established a

video connection to a faraway site does not necessarily create this intense presence of the digital babies, but through the act of making the audience a virtual babysitter, with the responsibility to react to the babies, should they be upset, the presence of the infants in the theatre situation was intensified, and a "real-life" and somewhat unpredictable presence was created.

In discussion with audience members it was frequently mentioned that the SKYPE interface and the situation it creates is reminiscent of playing with a Tamagotchi, a handheld digital pet created in Japan, that demands the owner to regularly feed, pet and clean the virtual animal. The scenario of virtual babysitting in Under the Covers is experienced as playful, a humorous comment on recent online gaming trends to tend virtual environments and creatures, so in order to awaken the audience from passivity and to realise the urgency and actuality of the situation, the performance needs to prove the liveness of the SKYPE link to the baby.

At a point in the show we stop to perform and address the audience:
"You don't think this is live, do you?"

To prove to the audience that this is now, this is live, the volume of the SKYPE connection is activated to one of the babies, to see if he would react to the noises emerging from the auditorium. We hand out musical toys to the audience, testing if the baby responds to the soundscape, and in most cases, he would wake up, clearly reacting to the cacophony, looking into the infra-red camera, and he is seen tossing and turning on the projection, clutching his teddy.

The audience reacts intensely to this situation, we can feel a sense of breathlessness, spectators sitting at the edge of their seat, witnessing an unperformed everydayness. This is increased through the fact that the spectators are in charge to babysit, to calm the baby down, if the sounds of the musical toys should upset him, so the audience is elevated from witness to taking on responsibility within the performance, forcing some spectators into intervening with the situation. At one occasion a woman in the auditorium tried to stop the scene and cried out wildly: switch it off we're upsetting him!

When the liveness of the connection is recognised, the audience's perception of the situation changes, some begin to feel uncomfortable, realising a sense of voyeurism, as a very private situation, a baby asleep in a cot, is exposed, witnessed - and maybe, as some might feel, exploited - in such a public arena. There is maybe a conclusion made by some spectators, that this shouldn't happen, that live video conferencing to an unaware sleeping baby is not morally acceptable. However, mostly we find excitement, a sense of thrill experienced by the audience, to witness this intimacy in theatre, and we are also met with trust that we would not take the interruption of the children's privacy too far.

Furthermore the audience realises the autobiographical relevance of this specific virtual presence to the performer. Due to the fact that we, the actors, are the actual mothers of the infants in *Under the Covers*, we would reveal an instinctive and "real", unperformed response to the children's activity and level of distress. As a result, the performer's behaviour on stage, the "acting" is heavily influenced when watching the scene of the baby being exposed to the soundscape, as the outcome is unpredictable. When witnessing that our children are becoming distressed, we often slip out of performance mode, discontinue the act, and are exposed in our unperformed, natural response. So, the live presence of the baby creates a real response of the performer, the mother. The performer stops to perform and becomes their everyday self, and the audience hence observes and experiences momentary "real-life", not only through watching the live link to the baby, but through watching the parent react instinctively as a private person in a very public situation, exposing an unperformed moment in the arena of pretence, the theatre.

The main factor that created a sense of everyday life presence in Under the Covers has been touched upon in previous points – the infant. Of course, as their mothers, the presence of the children on stage affects us, the performers, intensely, but due to instincts to secure the survival of the species all adult humans are affected by a crying baby, especially if they seem solitary, abandoned even, to the effect to want to care for, look after, protect the infant. This instinctive behaviour is an evolutionary adaptation and hereditary, therefore an authentic human reaction. This reaction is produced by the "Kindchenschema" translating to "infantile schema", named and identified by Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz, who discovered that the facial characteristics of an infant, including large eyes, small noses and high cheekbones as well as infantile personality traits, such as fragility, helplessness, and innocence provoke loving feelings of protectiveness in adults. But not only creates seeing the baby these very real responses, the audience is also conscious about the fact that the baby is completely unaware and unaffected by the situation of performance and pretence, as this is beyond his understanding and cognitive development. For him all is real, now, live, and his behaviour will be unaffected from the technology and the theatre momentum. We furthermore see and interact with the baby not in the artificial situation of theatre, but in an actual real-life situation – his nursery at nightime.

Director Castellucci from Societas Raffaello Sanzio titles children in his performance works as "dis-human", together with objects, animals, and bodies who had surgery. Theorist Mathew Causey states "Castellucci stages the bare life of the sacred human through the non-matrixed performance of children" (CAUSEY, 132):

> The supplements of the performing (…) child establish an aesthetic that resists acting, metaphor and narrative in favour of performance/enactment, metonymy and image. (…) (The child) supplies a unique presence which circumvents an imitative illusion. A strangeness pervades the performance of authenticity in Castellucci's mis-en-scene. (CAUSEY, 133)

This quote refers to Sociatas Raffaello Sanzio's *Tragedia Endogonidia*. This performance presented a baby of approximately 12 months abandoned on stage, crawling, looking at the audience. The effect of this of course was overwhelming, to see the baby live in the theatre situation, not knowing what the situation of theatre implies. During the premiere the baby fell and started crying, leaving the audience, and the director Castellucci breathless, in awe of this very real moment in the arena of pretence. Similar to Under the Covers, some spectators responded with protest when the baby cried, seeing the act of placing the baby on stage as unethical.

Castellucci reflects on the presence of the baby negating the situation of theatre, as the baby realises to be in the same space as the audience:

> [T]his actor …seems to disrupt a sense of spatial propriety. … In being here, or rather there, on the stage, she seems not to wrap around herself the fact of not being here, in the same space as us, that other, older actors use as their most basic costume. (CASTELLUCCI, 108).

This resulted in audience members starting to wave at the child in certain performances, realising the fact that the baby was unfamiliar with the stage-auditorium divide and the resulting performance situation of pretence.

Causey asks: "Does this lack of consciousness of performance (…) on the part of the performer, voids its process as theatre? Or does the spectator's reading of the activity as performance suffice?" (CAUSEY, 169), meaning, are we watching, or even more –

participating in a real-life situation when we see the infant? In Castellucci's work the situation was still the one of theatre, and adults were at hand to nurture the baby when he started crying. Even if the infant in Castellucci's work, when being placed on stage in real time and place, is not aware of the situation of pretence, he is aware of the situation being out of the ordinary compared to his "real" life and his behaviour therefore must be extremely affected.

With *Under the covers*, the audience participates in the babies' real life, the audience is in control and has an effect on the infants through sound connections when trying to calm them back to sleep. The video links in Under the Covers also create the true authentic and unaffected presence of the children as they are observed in their "natural habitat", not on stage, and their presence furthermore produces authentic emotions in the audience.

In *Under the Covers* we use part of the set, cots or cribs, to project the live video of the sleeping babies upon – hypersurfaces.

The term hypersurface stems from architecture and describes spaces and buildings that are an object with a function in itself but also serve as a surface for information or imagery, especially new technology, moving images or text, a virtual environment that is projected onto and embedded into the real environment, onto subjects with functionality.

This idea of the hypersurface is incorporated in performance to heighten the sense of tactility of the virtual presence, for example through innovative choices of projection surfaces, such as projecting a virtual performer onto the body of a live performer. This could be observed for example in the cutting edge new media dance works by Chris Haring and video artist Klaus Obermaier, a piece called *Vivisector*, using the bodies of men to project their own bodies onto, with the faces projected onto the back of their shaved heads. Real and virtual versions of these performers fused, melted into one another, and in this case the real performer of flesh and blood was made invisible, as the act of projecting onto the body created the sense of solely digitalised beings moving on the stage.

The hypersurface of the bed was very famously used in Paul Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming*, where the live video of a performer is projected onto a bed in a separate location where an audience member lies upon, and through multiple video connections interaction between digital performer and live spectator is made possible. In this case the video of the performer had a strong sense of presence, as both the projection of the performer and the audience member shared the same environment, the bed. The artist observes the audience member's actions on monitors and can therefore react to the movement of the spectator to create a real time contact improvisation.

Susan Kozel, who performed in *Telematic Dreaming*, remarks:

> [The] body became virtual (i.e. a projected image), yet the rapport between image and person was very real and evoked a social and sexual dynamic familiar to us all. (KOZEL, 1994, 36).

The theatrical illusion of presence through the use of hypersurface can be articulated to overcome the absence of real bodies, with the digital performer achieving a sense of true liveness, as the body is projected onto a real environment.

> This piece is significant for revealing, in an accessible way, that basic human qualities such as touch, trust, vulnerability, pain, and embodiment are not lost when people engage with each other through technologies. (KOZEL, 2007, 88)

The bed itself is an object full of symbolism and social, and especially sexual connotations. In *Under the Covers* we use the babies' cots, with a screen attached at the top, to project the life size video of the babies. The crib, similar to Sermon's bed, holds symbolism, more innocent of course, but already evoking the image of a sleeping baby, for example through the way the performers protectively look over the cot, rather than staring ahead at a flat screen. To intensify the sense of plasticity and to enhance the tactile quality of the hypersurface, we furthermore use knitted blankets to warmly and lovingly cover the projection, our digital babies. We also establish a sense of touch, as we stroke their projected heads, and the audience, through embodiment, can equally experience this physical contact as they witness the touch.

Under the Covers, 2009

Through projecting onto hypersurface and the followed viewing of a subject of the performance (the crib in this case) the audience has "direct rapport with their own environment." (Giannachi, 95) whilst watching a remote environment. Watching the subject (The crib) brings the remote situation closer than watching an object (a screen) would do. Hence the experience of watching the sleeping baby via the hypersurface of the cot enhances the realness and authenticity of the virtual presence of the infants.

So, to conclude, we are observing a matrix of different elements to create a sense of authentic presence in *Under the Covers*, hypersurface, the authentic response of the spectators, reacting to the Infantile Schema, an authentic behaviour of the child, being unaware and unaffected by the technology and theatre situation, and the authentic reaction that the audience observes in the performers, as they stop to perform, and are seen as the parents, reacting to their crying babies.

In conclusion we would like to raise a question with regards to posthumanist theories on presence and the question of authenticity.

Some theories of the posthuman state that through technologies a person can be as authentic, or even more authentic than a real life body, as the essence of the human is the thought, the process of thinking, as stated by one founder of humanism, Rene Descartes (Cogito ergo sum meaning "I think, therefore I am"). Technology communicates "the thought" without any distraction of the physicality, pheromones, touch and smell.

But is this true for an infant? Or is the pure digital presence or thought not completely meaningless to the baby? In the case of Under the Covers the posthuman baby can achieve authenticity in presence. However, this feeling of presence is one-way, we, the audience and performers, watch the babies, experience real and unaffected presence, we interact via sound and we have that sense of being able to be at two places at once. On the babies' end of the video connection though they cannot sense any presence, only absence, the technology is unable to produce the presence a baby or child needs, that of touch and smell and physical closeness that no SKYPE connection could – currently- achieve.

P.S.:
Of course the babies are not alone. They're with their fathers – we just want to keep an eye on things, just to double check…

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Zoo Indigo work

Under the Covers, 2009/2010

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Ildiko Rippel is performer and co-director of Zoo Indigo, Nottingham, and lecturer of Performing Arts at De Montfort University. She is studying part time towards a practice based PhD in theatre at Lancaster University. Ildiko's research explores the virtual doppelganger and the erasure of the live performer, and with reference to posthuman theories she is researching effects of the digital 'non-performer', through involving live video connections to the performers' children. Ildiko also works as a performer for SHRUG ladies.