

# Stories of Solitude: Performane, Technology and Digital Overload

## Abstracts and Biographies

### Panel 1:

#### From Implication to Solitude: The Role of Art and Performance Today

**Matthew Causey**

**'Now I Am Alone': Dwelling in the Technological**

Dwelling within the technological, the data-subject of digital culture is both consumer and product. A zone of indistinction between the individual alone and an engaged collective exists resulting in a digital swarm mapped and tracked as 'big data'. Solitude functions as auto-exploitation resulting in chronic stages of information fatigue syndrome. Nevertheless, the suppositions above are by way of a conclusion. Firstly, I want to ask what it is we think solitude is. Why should we seek it out, promote its value, dread its appearance as loneliness, mourn its loss as a descent into the noise of 'the they'. Is solitude a fundamental necessary condition for thinking? Using examples from western theatre history such as the actor first standing outside the chorus in ancient Greek theatre (Thespis), to the soliloquies of early modernism (Hamlet), to the manifesto of the 'Theatre of Death' (Kantor), I will suggest that these models of performing identity were constructed, in part, to foreground the power of the solitary (patriarchal?) subject and a theatricalization of the tragic principle of individuation.

If, the theatre was once a place where the subject could speak, 'Now, I am alone' (Hamlet, 2.2), and mean it 'as if' it were true, where have we arrived, when being alone results not in the construction of a subject, or a clearing for thought, but of a project, an auto-exploitation of solitude?

**Dr. Matthew Causey** is Professor in Drama and Fellow of Trinity College Dublin where he is Head of School of Creative Arts and Director of the Arts Technology Research Laboratory. He is author of *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture* (Routledge, 2009), and co-editor of *Performing Subject in the Space of Technology: through the virtual towards the real* (Palgrave 2015) and *Performance, Identity and the Neo-political Subject* (Routledge, 2015). His theoretical writings on digital culture and theory are published in many journals including his essay 'Postdigital Performance' (Theatre Journal 68, 2016).

**Maaïke Bleeker**

**A Dramaturgy of Devices**

In my presentation I will speak about my recent collaborations with designers of social robots and smart objects and our explorations of theatre, dance and performance as a perspective on design. In his groundbreaking study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Ervin Goffman observes that people live their lives like actors performing on a stage and that they design their behavior in order to produce a self-image. If all the world is a stage, robots and smart objects are the new kids on the block. And they are actors of a radically different kind. Their behavior cannot be understood as staged self-expression, as Goffman's approach to human actors suggests. What is required instead is a dramaturgy of human perception and experience as staged by our devices; a dramaturgy that can account for the objecthood of these devices as including the networks of relationships in which they operate and in which human users, their behavior, perceptions and ways of understanding, are implicated.

**Maaïke Bleeker** is a professor in the department of Media & Culture Studies at Utrecht University. Her work engages with questions of perception, cognition and agency from an interdisciplinary perspective, with a special interest in embodiment, movement, and technology. Her monograph *Visuality in the Theatre* was published by Palgrave (2008). Recent publications include the co-edited volume *Performance and Phenomenology: traditions and Transformations* (Routledge 2015) and the edited volume *Transmission in Motion. The Technologizing of Dance* (Routledge, 2016).

**Estela Oliva**

## **Reality, Fiction and Subversion in Immersive Art Experiences**

Traditional forms of making and experiencing art and culture are being challenged by the integration of new technologies in the arts. Immersive art installations created using software, digital design tools and high-end hardware have the power to transport the audience outside our known reality to parallel and hybrid worlds, in which the virtual and physical converge in new ways. This presentation explores and questions how these emerging art practices are becoming a testing lab for new forms of creation, exhibition and distribution. Creating art in virtual worlds is a rapidly developing art practice. Borrowing tools from gaming and 3D animation, virtual reality art imagines new realms in which the creator becomes the architect and the director. How do the artists of today approach this new craft? What skills and collaborations are required from the worlds of design and technology?

Virtual reality is characterised by the way users experience it - as a first-person experience, strongly connecting with the user as well as disconnecting with the physical world around, and those who exist there. What is the potential of virtual reality art in transmitting concepts and telling stories? How can virtual art installations inspire new ways to connect users with the physical environment? How can they engage in creating a collective experience? In the case of immersive art spaces, where multiple art forms converge such as projections, real-time graphics, digital aesthetics, music and interactivity; the collective experience is maximised with large groups of viewers who are submerged into the space. As wider audiences interact with this type of art, they become a "pop culture" phenomenon in which strong concepts behind the work might be put aside, in benefit for aesthetically pleasing experiences. In exploring hybrid experiences, our relationship with reality is shifting. As the world becomes more hostile through the current political and economical tensions, immersive art experiences might provide an escape mechanism from the present. Just as cinema once opened a door to imagine other worlds, these new experiences may be the next step ahead for the art world.

**Estela Oliva's** work is inspired by the impact of technology and the internet in human behaviour, society and our surroundings. She creates hybrid environments in which the physical and the virtual blend, unfolding narratives and cerebral experiences. These projects come to life in experimental formats as exhibitions, programmes, experiential events, installations, web experiments, apps or films. She has produced festivals, curated exhibitions and events around the world including Into the Wild, exhibition for Makerversity at Somerset House and New Realities, a touring exhibition which has travelled to Mobile World Centre Barcelona and Espacio Fundacion Telefonica Lima. She has also produced events and projects for brands including Instagram, Sediton and Google. Estela brings along extensive experience working in the digital sector. She launched her career working for Google UK for six years, later on she founded and co-directed Alpha-ville, a cultural agency and festival of digital culture which operated between 2009 and 2016. Estela has recently launched her new project Clon, a hybrid studio for art and new media.

## **Panel 2: Artists in Discussion: Immersive and Interactive Experiences for Individuals and Collectives**

**Shannon Yee**

### **Sonic Arts & Solitude as an entryway into Acquired Brain Injury**

Reassembled, Slightly Askew is an autobiographical, audio-based artwork about Shannon's experience of falling critically ill with a rare brain infection and her journey of rehabilitation with an acquired brain injury. Audience members experience Reassembled... individually, listening to the audio via headphones, while lying on a hospital bed. The audio technology makes the sound three-dimensional, causing listeners to feel they are inside Shannon's head, viscerally experiencing her descent into coma, brain surgeries, early days in the hospital, rehabilitation, and re-integration into the world with a hidden disability.

Created with a team of interdisciplinary artists alongside Shannon's neurosurgical team,

Reassembled... immerses audiences into her journey of terror, discovery, and humor, but above all, hope. [reassembled.co.uk](http://reassembled.co.uk)

**Shannon Yee** is an award-winning playwright and producer. Her perspectives as an immigrant, biracial, queer artist with a disability living in Northern Ireland are deeply embedded in her work. Her *Reassembled, Slightly Askew* merges sonic arts, dramatic narrative and movement to aurally immerse audiences in her first-hand experience of nearly dying and her subsequent acquired brain injury. During its five-year development, Shannon secured a range of public and private funding, and engaged her neurosurgical team with the interdisciplinary arts team. *Reassembled...* has received numerous accolades and has been touring the UK, Ireland, USA and Canada since 2015, in arts festivals and medical training settings ([reassembled.co.uk](http://reassembled.co.uk)). It is scheduled for Hong Kong in 2019. Shannon is a current Arts Council NI Major Individual Artist Awardee for her project, *Starf\*cker*, which grapples with astronomy, popular culture, social media and video projection mapping to tell the story of what makes our stars fall. [s-yee.co.uk](http://s-yee.co.uk)

## **Invisible Flock**

### **Digital Membranes: Interaction, Silence and Abstraction in Invisible Flock's Practice**

A reflection on how layers of digital interaction and abstraction can help place or displace us in our daily interactions and lives; how the relative 'thickness' of these membranes can act as enablers or barriers to deeper interaction with the world around us. Looking through the lens of Invisible Flock's practice covering AR games, design for people suffering from dementia and the attempt to synthesise the vastness of remote natural landscapes Ben Eaton will draw on various technologies and design principles as well as accidental findings to illustrate where silence, minimalism and the self meet.

**Invisible Flock** is an interactive arts studio based in Leeds, making groundbreaking innovative work to be experienced and participated in by thousands all over the world. Described in the Guardian as "real innovators" their multidisciplinary, technologically driven practice seeks to redefine and disrupt traditional perceptions and models of global art practice. Drawing directly from the world around us they aim to create art and foster relevant and contemporary practices that have a long lasting transformative effect, having built GPS powered AR art games, transformed discarded beach plastic into 3D printed artworks, and created large public sound installations as well as pioneering digital pieces that exist out at sea. Invisible Flock have an irrefutable reputation for artistic excellence and innovation, both nationally and internationally. 2017 saw the organisation developing and showcasing work in Kazakhstan, Kenya, Indonesia, India and all over the UK, including a brand new commission for the Hull City of Culture opening ceremony, experienced by 342,000 people and reviewed as "overwhelming and extraordinary" by The Times. Invisible Flock collaborate and present work for organisations such as FACT, the V&A, MIMA and Watermans, festivals such as UK-Indonesia Festival, The Tbilisi International Festival, Brighton Festival, L'Entorse Lille, Lagos Theatre Festival and Unbox India as well as collaborating with British Council, Jerwood Charitable Foundation and Welcome.

## **fanSHEN**

### **Solitude and AI in fanSHEN's Looking for Love**

We will reflect on the relationship between AI and solitude in fanSHEN's practice, focusing on a case study of *Looking for Love*, a new piece that is currently in development. In *Looking for Love* you communicate with an AI bot over the course of three weeks via an interface modelled on dating apps. The AI bot attempts to seduce the player through personalisation, attempting to adapt itself to be your ideal partner. The piece explores whether an AI could provide meaningful company for a human or whether interacting with something that is your mirror image only serves to heighten your solitude. Through its dramaturgy *Looking for Love* reveals the price we pay for personalisation and connection through the data we leak.

Dan Barnard is Artistic Director of fanSHEN and Senior Lecturer in Drama and Performance at London South Bank University, where he is a member of the Centre for Digital Story Making and the Performance and New Technologies Research Group. fanSHEN have been making theatre, interactive and immersive experiences and participatory activities for over ten years. For fanSHEN, Dan has co-directed more than twelve professional productions with long-term collaborator Rachel Briscoe. For more information about fanSHEN's work see [fanshen.org.uk](http://fanshen.org.uk). fanSHEN's digital practice includes Invisible Treasure (which took place in a of sensor and projector-filled digital playspace), The Justice Syndicate (in which audience members are jurors examining and debating a case using iPads), Disaster Party and Out of Sight (both of which are experienced through headphones).

**Rachel Briscoe** is an artist/ director/ dramaturg/ producer and is Creative Director of fanSHEN. She started off as a theatre director but quickly wanted more dramaturgical possibilities, more exciting tools and participants more representative of the UK's population. As a director, she studied on the National Theatre's Directors' Course. As a writer, she is a graduate of the Royal Court programme and Soho Theatre Young Writers. In 2014, Rachel completed the Clore Short Course for Cultural Leaders and in 2015, graduated as a Feldenkrais practitioner. She participated in the inaugural Producer Farm in 2016. Rachel was a member of SIPA's core group which set the industry sustainability goals launched at PLASA in October 2015. She was part of the British Council's SPACE programme in 2013/14 and for 5 years to 2015 worked at Ovalhouse as Director of Theatre (jobshare) where the Guardian credited her with 'restoring order to Ovalhouse with bold, experimental programming.' She is a Near Now Fellow 17/18 and was selected for Collusion's AI Lab in 2017. Rachel has freelanced for King's Cultural Institute, Einstein's Garden and the Old Vic, and works as exec producer for the Empathy Museum. She has sporadically written for publications including the Guardian, Exeunt and Run Riot. Sometimes she works in universities.

**Jude Brereton and Helena Daffern**

### **Shared Immersion vs Solitary Experience in Acoustic VR/AR Environments**

With recent advances in digital audio technology it is now possible to accurately capture, model and recreate the acoustic characteristics of a performance venue. However, very often the acoustics of a venue are not taken into account during the composition of a musical piece. The Architecture series by composer Ambrose Field challenges that practice, incorporating specially developed spatial harmonic-mapping techniques to inform the traditional compositional process of writing music for voices.

Being able to place both audience and singers in a specific "virtual acoustic space" presents many practical and artistic challenges, but also gives rise to a number of exciting opportunities. Shared immersion in a virtual acoustic, performing music written quite specifically for that acoustic space, potentially heightens the sense of togetherness already recognized in group performance scenarios, in contrast to the more common solitary virtual reality experiences.

We will consider how audiences engage with a virtual acoustic space, and discuss the possible impact of working with virtual environments in this unique way, as a collective rather than solitary endeavour. We will also reflect on the commonalities between the experience from the perspective of performer and audience member and gather ideas for potential future exploration.

**Jude Brereton** is a Senior Lecturer (T&S) in Audio and Music Technology, Department of Electronic Engineering, teaching on a number modules in the areas of acoustics, psychoacoustics, virtual acoustics and auralization, music performance analysis, voice analysis and synthesis on postgraduate and undergraduate programmes. She designed the department's popular MSc in Audio and Music Technology and was programme leader until 2017. Jude is heavily involved in a outreach and public engagement activities including a community-based project 'Tang Hall Dynamo' to raise the profile of creative engineering amongst young people through music and art workshops. Until 2017 she was chair of the Electronic Engineering Equality and Diversity Committee and lead the department to gain an Athena SWAN bronze award for its commitment to gender equality.

She is still committed to improving gender equality in HE and often gives keynote presentations on the subject, as well as serving as a Chair for UK Athena SWAN assessment panels. Her research interests include: the design and perception of spatial sound in virtual auditory environments; the use of spatial sound to enhance performer and listener experience and interaction; the analysis, perception and evaluation of musical performance; the analysis and synthesis of the human voice. In 2008 Jude was winner of the British Voice Association Van Lawrence Prize for Voice Research.

**Helena Daffern** is currently a Lecturer in Music Technology in the Department of Electronic Engineering at the University of York. She received a BA (Hons.) degree in music, an M.A. degree in music, and the D.Phil. degree in music technology, all from the University of York, UK, in 2004, 2005, and 2009, respectively, before completing training as a classical singer at Trinity College of Music. Her research utilises interdisciplinary approaches to investigate voice science and acoustics, particularly singing performance, vocal pedagogy, choral singing and singing for health and wellbeing. Recent projects explore the potential of virtual reality to improve access to group singing activities and as a tool for singing performance research.

### **Panel 3: Loneliness, Social Media, and the Fear of Missing Out**

**Lisa Bortolotti and Valeria Motta**

**Exchanging ideas online and offline: Costs and benefits of the digital overload**

What is the impact of the 'digital overload' on the way we exchange ideas and share perspectives with others? Does it make us more isolated or better connected? Does it open our minds to new ways of thinking or does it encourage the creation of 'epistemic bubbles'? Does it spare us the emotional charge of a heated discussion or does it lead to inevitable trolling? With reduced opportunities to meet and talk face-to-face and increased opportunities to meet and talk online, have our interactions improved or deteriorated? In our presentation we compare how debates and exchanges of ideas are conducted on social media and in more traditional settings, and consider the advantages and disadvantages of the digital revolution for the philosopher within us.

**Valeria Motta** is a Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham. After teaching philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires, she moved to the UK and did her MA at Bristol University. She is now part of a major research project (PERFECT 2014-2019), funded by the European Research Council and led by Lisa Bortolotti. She is interested in understanding the nature of intersubjectivity, pleasant and painful experiences in the encounter with others, and emotions. She is currently studying the experience of loneliness and solitude.

**Lisa Bortolotti** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham. She works in the philosophy of psychology and psychiatry and has a special interest in the relationship between mental health and rationality. She is currently leading a major project (PERFECT 2014-2019), funded by the European Research Council. The leading research question is whether false and irrational beliefs or inaccurate emotions can have any positive contributions to make to wellbeing or agency. Lisa's latest book, *Irrationality*, was published by Polity in 2014.

**Shaun Lawson**

**Loneliness Liking: isolation and social media**

The jury is out on whether social media is a social connector with positive usage outcomes, or whether it reinforces, exacerbates or even causes loneliness and isolation. In this talk I will discuss the current thinking around both sides of this argument and provide pointers to research that supports one, or indeed, the other. Depending on the specific context it can be shown that social media usage can correlate with either positive or indeed negative outcomes. I will then present work done as part of the recent ESRC funded "Loneliness in the Digital Age" project that deployed and utilised participatory and interaction design approaches to produce, deploy and evaluate a range of novel digital interventions that address issues of loneliness in specific contexts with groups including carers and students.

**Shaun Lawson** is Professor of Social Computing and Head of the Department of Computer and Information Sciences at Northumbria University. His research lies at the boundary between computing and the social sciences and explores the use and significance of social media, and other participatory digital services, in people's lives. This includes a focus on the design of new social platforms, applications and services as well as the multi-disciplinary analysis of text, speech and image data. He has conducted applied and cross-disciplinary work in areas including mental health and wellbeing, politics, activism, animal behaviour and sustainability. He is author of over 150 peer-reviewed publications.

**Zeena Feldman**

#### **Beyond Time: On Quitting Social Media**

For many people, social media participation is embedded in the performance of everyday life. The Quitting Social Media (QSM) project seeks to understand the motivation behind this participation, and users' decisions to disengage. This talk explores the experiences of current and former social media users, based on surveys and interviews with 477 participants from 35 countries, and reflects on the ways that time connects with users' experience of loneliness and togetherness. My findings suggest deeply engrained tensions at the core of social media use. Many participants linked social media to the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and expectations around producing 'fun' and 'perfect' visual narratives for (semi)public consumption. Young women in particular reported devoting substantial temporal and affective resources to crafting the online self, and critiquing peers' self-representations. Meanwhile, parents spoke of familial expectations that they act as 'engaged documentarians' and record their children's lives for broader consumption. Most participants did not consider quitting social media a viable option. Yet respondents' social media practices were consistently framed by ambivalence - for instance, by narratives of temporal waste, inefficiency, anxiety and unwanted obligation. This talk seeks to unpack and theorise that ambivalence in order to think through how the digital adds urgency to the neoliberal imperative of crafting the self (nb. Elias, Gill and Scharff 2017; Bauman 2001).

**Zeena Feldman** is Lecturer in Digital Culture at King's College London. Her research is motivated by questions around how digital communication technologies interface with understandings of traditionally analogue concepts - for instance, belonging, cooking and eating, and self-care. Her work has appeared in *Information, Communication & Society*; *TripleC*; *Cultural Policy, Criticism & Management Research*; *OpenDemocracy*, and on BBC Radio 3 and 4. Zeena's edited collection, *Art & The Politics of Visibility* (IB Tauris) was published in late 2017. She is currently working on a monograph, *Belonging in a Social Networking Age*.

## **Panel 4: Online Loneliness or Solitary Play**

**Natalie Kane**

#### **Intimate Objects: In search of loneliness online**

In this talk, I will explore what we understand loneliness and intimacy on the internet to be today, using personal examples from my own early interactions with chatrooms, live journal and early social media platforms (as well as the artists), to the ways in which loneliness is mitigated, and intimacy found, in spaces that are often hostile and compromised. I'll touch slightly upon how capitalistic structures have sought to exploit the fragile territories of the self through algorithmic personalisation and recommendation, and where we can seek to gain intimacy again. I'll draw on the work of digital artists that have sought to confront loneliness (from Jennicam to Miranda July to Nina Freeman) and see where there are opportunities for new intimacy and connection. Essentially, I don't think it's technology that makes us distant from each other, but the structures that exist around technology that weaponise loneliness as a means of control.

Natalie D Kane is Curator of Digital Design at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (UK). She is one-half of curatorial research project *Haunted Machines*, alongside Tobias Revell, and a Visiting Lecturer at the Institute of European Design in Barcelona, and the London College of Communication, UAL.

**Sebastian Deterding**  
**The Joys of Absence**

The more, the merrier: when it comes to games and play, this is common wisdom among designers and researchers. Be it Fortnite, 'couch co-op', or the renaissance of board games, the fun in games is other people. Solitary play in digital games has been a brief aberration in the history of always social human play. Or is that so? In this talk, I will explore what we lose and gain in solitary play.

**Sebastian Deterding** is a designer and researcher working on human flourishing. As a senior research fellow at the Digital Creativity Labs (University of York) and co-editor of "The Gameful World" (MIT Press, 2015), he is a leading expert in using games and play for good. Founder and principal designer of the design agency coding conduct, he has created engaging experiences touching millions of users for clients including the BBC, BMW, Deutsche Telekom, KLM, Novartis, and numerous startups. He is a frequently invited speaker at venues including CHI, Design and Emotion, GDC, Google, IDEO, Lift, MIT Media Lab, or UX London. He lives online at [codingconduct.cc](http://codingconduct.cc).

**Florian Block**

**Solitude or Hyper-Sociality? Rethinking New Forms of Creative Expression through Video Gaming**

Over a billion people worldwide play video games and stereotypes of nerds in basements are crumbling. This talk will give an up to date overview of online gaming culture, including ways that facilitate communities, foster collaborative learning of transferable skills and new forms of social creativity. It will also cover the use of cutting-edge technology such as AI and data visualisation in facilitating new forms of social, creative and immersive experiences in the context of games and a connected society more broadly.

Florian Block's background is in Computer Science (Diplom from LMU Munich) and Human Computer Interaction (PhD Lancaster University). After his PhD he worked on the Life on Earth project, where he has designed, implemented, and studied the use of a series of interactive museum exhibits that aimed to help the general public learn about evolutionary biology. He was appointed as a Research Fellow/Lecturer in Interactive Media and Digital Creativity at the Department of Theatre Film and Television at the University of York in January 2016. As part of this appointment, he is currently a full-time Research Fellow at the Digital Creativity Hub.