

# FIND

Alex Davies





# The Black Box Sessions

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## **The Black Box Sessions**

The Black Box Sessions takes place in a pitch-black room approximately 6m x 5m in size. Single audience members are invited to enter the room under the premise that they will be presented with an individual performance from one of several entertainers present at the venue. To view the performance (in the pitch-black surrounds) the audience member finds a single peephole located in the wall of the space.

When looking in the peephole, the audience member sees a screen with a live video feed of themselves, captured from an infra-red capable camera at the rear corner of the room. They hear a door open off to the left in the darkness and then see the performer enter the room via the mediated video image.

The performance commences...

Thirteen performers from Austria and Australia collaborated on the project. Each performer was shot in a chroma-key studio configured to simulate the physical installation space. The performers were instructed to engage with the (future) audience members and to imitate performing in a pitch-black space so that their actions would be plausible within the context of the actual installation environment. The studio video content was subsequently processed so that it could be composited with the live video feed in the installation space.

Several scenarios were recorded for each performer. These variations are randomly selected when audience members enter the installation space. In addition to the performances, an actor undertook the role of an usher. The usher directs audience members to both real and fake exit points, and provides short interactions between the more lengthy performance pieces (each performance ranges from 1.5 to 10 minutes in duration). An additional purpose of the usher persona was to determine if direct natural contact with the audience members could elicit a response i.e would real people follow directions from an avatar? The combination of the usher and performers creates a virtual representation of a plausible live performance scenario. 'Live' performances were chosen as the foundation of the work due to their potential to innately provide engaging and compelling content for the audience.

Event programmes and publicity further propagate the illusion by stating that selected performers will present improvised performances to individual audience members. Even prior to entering the installation, audiences are more receptive to the illusion, as seeds are planted in their mind that they are, in fact, going to be witnessing live performances by artists who are physically present.

The Black Box Sessions employs offscreen sound as a sonic cue to artificially shape the virtual environment and expand the narrative of the work. The small physical installation space limited the scope of activities that the avatars could undertake. Sound was utilised to physically define the architecture of the environment beyond the visual frame defined by the camera within screen space. By enlarging the space sonically to encompass a greater area, a broader variety of scenarios could be devised.

On the wall behind the audience, a non existent door was created from which the avatars entered. Behind this virtual door, cast and crew can be heard chatting, arguing and moving props around before the performances begin. As an example, the character played by Patrick Huber engages in

an increasingly heated argument in the 'back stage area'. The muffled confrontation continues behind the door until, frustrated, Huber enters the performance space (screen space) still launching a torrent of abuse before slamming the virtual door. This situation is an example of a pre-determined offscreen activity simulating spontaneity, assisting in defining the personality of the performer and the dynamics of the performance prior to their presence in screen space.

Due to the small size of the installation space, direct point sources were appropriate for most sound with very little panning required. Speakers were placed at the actual origin of the virtual sound source. For instance, one speaker was situated at the location of the virtual door. Another speaker was placed where the performers' amplifiers could be seen, and so on. This method produced very realistic sound placement as the sound was emanating from the location of the virtual objects themselves.

The primary design of the visual systems employed in The Black Box Sessions is centred around the use of infra-red camera technologies that can present the pitch-black room to the viewer as if it was brightly lit. A side-effect of the use of such technologies is that the live video image is black and white. This not only informed the aesthetics of the image displayed, but also assisted in several technical aspects of the project. By reducing the colour-space of the image to greyscale, the avatars that had been recorded in a chroma-key studio setting could be more readily composited with the live video. Common artefacts of the keying process such as green fringing around edges would not be evident. The use of black and white imagery, in addition to the development of a visual aesthetic based upon low fidelity images, facilitated the creation of the illusion. To further enhance the seamlessness of the visual composite, an additional layer of noise was added to the two layers of video. The image unstably fuzzed and glitched giving the impression of an erratic technology fault and serving the function of perceptively linking the layers of video into a single visual entity. Rather



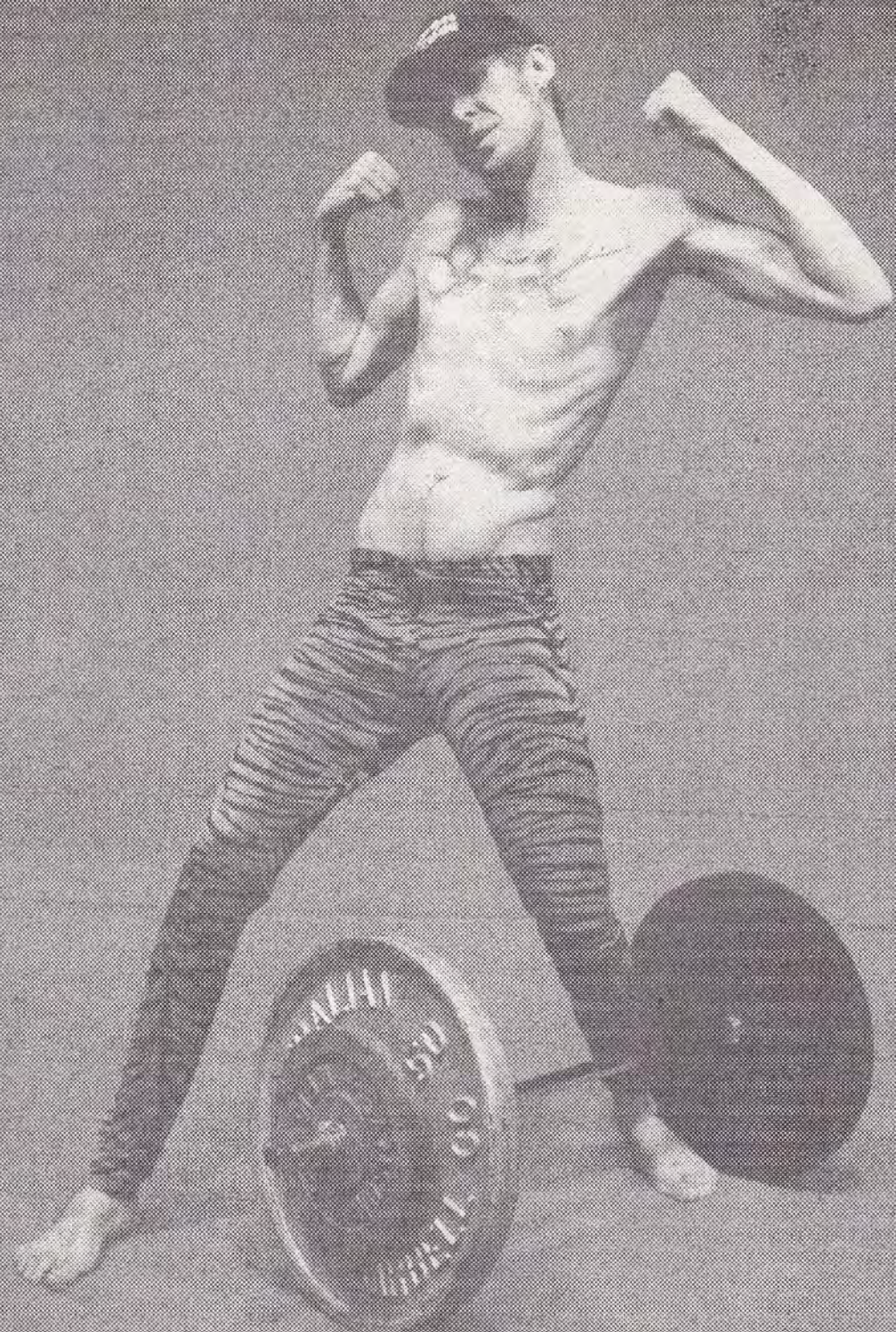


than opting for a high fidelity display to encourage illusion, the inverse approach was undertaken to achieve the same end. This approach would not be appropriate for a Hollywood blockbuster, but for the purpose of The Black Box Sessions, fits very well with the aesthetic of the work.

Due to the size constraints of the work, the avatars co-inhabit a small confined space with the audience member. To avoid some of the complications inherent in this setup, such as the potential intersection of audience and avatars within the space, the work was conceived around the premise of one audience member in the installation at any given time. More complex collision detection systems and image manipulation are not necessary as a single audience member, positioned away from the screen, is not able to see themselves walking into an avatar. When the audience member is located at the screen, enough buffer space is carefully left between their body and the avatars so they cannot stretch out far enough to touch or kick the character and therefore rupture the illusion.

All the content, visual and sound considerations of The Black Box Sessions places audience members in the unusual position where their primary references to reality are mediated.









## Selected Exhibitions

- 2009 Häusliches Glück - Linz09 Haus der Geschichten, Linz, Austria
- 2009 Dislocation -Trace Elements, Performance Space, Sydney, Australia
- 2008 The Black Box Sessions - HAIP Festival, Ljubljana, Slovenia
- 2008 Dislocation -Trace Elements, Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
- 2008 Dislocation - Mirror States, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, Australia
- 2007 Documentary Photography - Chalkhorse Gallery, Sydney, Australia
- 2006 Conversation/ Swarm - Re:search, Art collaboration of Australia and Japan, Sendai Mediatheque, Japan
- 2006 Pugilist 449 - Platform, The Art Center, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand
- 2006 Dislocation - FACT Liverpool, UK
- 2006 Flutter - Artspace, Sydney Australia
- 2006 Pugilist 449 - Space Invaders, Gallery 4A, Sydney Australia
- 2006 Sonic Displacement - What Survives - Performance Space, Sydney, Australia
- 2006 Pugilist 449 - Grudge Match - Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne, Australia
- 2005 Recombinant Void - Liquid Architecture Festival, Sydney Australia
- 2005 Recombinant Void - Simultan Festival, Romania

- 2005 Recombinant Void - Helen Lempiere Arts Scholarship Artspace, Sydney Australia
- 2005 Dislocation - Vanishing Point, Melbourne, Australia
- 2004 Sensory Circus - Times Up, Ars Electronica, Linz Austria
- 2004 drift - ISEA (International Symposium on Electronic Arts), Helsinki, Tallinn, Stockholm
- 2004 Swarm - 2004, Australian Centre for Moving Image, NGV, Melbourne Australia
- 2003 Filter Feeder - Primavera, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia
- 2003 Anchortronic Performance - Garage Festival, Stralsund, Germany
- 2003 Heterodyne - Garage Festival, Stralsund, Germany
- 2003 Swarm - Artspace, Sydney, Australia
- 2003 Filter Feeder - FILE Hypersonica, Paço das Artes, Sao Paulo, Brazil
- 2003 CELL Performance - Big Day Out Festival, Sydney Australia
- 2002 Data Terra Performance - dLux Future Screen Festival, Sydney Australia
- 2002 Birdcage Performance - Electrofringe Festival, Newcastle Australia
- 2002 Slacking Off - Imperial Slacks Gallery, Sydney Australia
- 2002 Filter Feeder- Helen Lempiere Arts Scholarship Artspace, Sydney Australia
- 2002 Reflux - First Draft Gallery, Sydney Australia
- 2002 TCE - O.K Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Linz Austria

- 2002 Filter Feeder - Kunstraum, Linz, Austria
- 2002 Sonic Displacements' - Kunstraum, Linz, Austria
- 2002 Big Day Out Festival - Triclops International, Sydney Australia
- 2001 Body Spin - Times Up, Linz Austria
- 2001 Stop Spot - O.K Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Linz Austria
- 2001 Acoustic Trauma- Helen Lempiere Arts Scholarship Artspace, Sydney Australia
- 2001 Heterodyne - Space 3 Gallery, Sydney Australia
- 2001 Fusion Network Event Sydney, Weimar, Los Angeles,
- 2001 Transient Network Event - CEAT Festival California, USA,
- 2000 Closing The Loop Network Event - Times Up, Linz Austria
- 2000 Triclops International - What Is Music Festival, Sydney Australia
- 1999 18 is Enough - Herringbone Gallery, Sydney Australia
- 1999 Trancefix - Sydney Fringe Festival, Sydney Australia
- 1998 Citric Acid - E.M.U Gallery, Sydney Australia
- 1997 Depraved Melodies - Silent Cells Film Festival, Sydney Australia





Although the “guild for Reality integrators and generators” may have been active for centuries, since November 2006 six cultural organisations have begun to open the doors of the guild. The current gRig members share a mutual purpose; to mix separate realities, as well as bring whole new realities into existence. They are committed to research and create situations in hybrid (or mixed) reality, where digital media and physical materials, objects and spaces are increasingly intertwined. It is on these fuzzy edges that experimental technology and contemporary culture amplify each other’s potentials. We have found these edges to be the most fertile ground for innovative social and cultural advances, in which the Guild for Reality Integrators and Generators can be best called into service.

gRig sites 2006-2009

FoAM (Belgium) is a transdisciplinary laboratory committed openness, resilience and a holistic approach to life. FoAM seeks out and connects people in the interstitial spaces between professional and cultural boundaries, encouraging them to mix realities of art and science, digital and physical, nature and technology, adopting the motto - “grow your own worlds”. <http://fo.am.be>

*nadine* (Belgium) is an arts laboratory aimed at developing research focusing on transdisciplinary experiments in the fields of new media and live arts. *nadine* is a flexible and evolving project that doesn’t shy away from questioning itself to be able to stay on top of the constantly changing needs of artists. <http://www.nadine.be>

Time’s Up (Austria) is a research institute using experimental situations as a means of investigating the behavior of the public individual in everyday and nearly everyday situations. <http://www.timesup.org>

Performing Pictures (Sweden) works in the area of moving images and new technologies for media delivery as part of the Interactive Institute – a Swedish experimental IT-research institute that combines expertise in art, design and information technology. In their artistic practice Performing Pictures explore and develop responsive film art. <http://performingpictures.se>

KIBLA (Slovenia), a multimedia artcentre, is focused on the new (contemporary) educational, cultural and artistic praxis, connecting education and research, culture and technology, arts and sciences, emancipating and demystifying media as a creative tool in education and new forms of art. <http://kibla.si>

InterMedia (Norway) investigates the intersections between design, communication and learning in digital environments. Their approach is multidisciplinary and involves critical research, development and experiments. <http://intermedia.uio.no>



Education and Culture

## Culture 2000

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