

## **Me and My Shadow (2012)**

*Me and My Shadow* is an installation by sound and media artist Joseph Hyde combining motion capture and telepresence technologies. It was co-produced in the UK by body>data>space and the National Theatre as part of the EU project MADE. Originally presented from 10th-26th June 2012 with its London based in the foyer of the National Theatre, *Me and My Shadow* was recently shown as part of the Networked Bodies Digital Performance Weekender at Watermans Art Centre, Middlesex from 7th-9th November 2014.

This review takes the form of an experiential narrative, documenting my encounter with the work in 2012. The narrative aims to capture the feeling of being 'in' the work as an audience member, with a particular emphasis on my embodied and somatic experience as I navigate the virtual world, and my virtual body. It is an extract from my full auto-ethnographic account of the work, and is part of my wider research practice exploring technological embodiment, somatic sensation and the digital double.

*Me and My Shadow is an installation in four cities; London, Paris, Istanbul and Brussels. Each installation acts as an online portal, connected in real time to a 3D virtual environment where participants can meet their own representations and participants in other cities. Multiple Microsoft Kinects are used in each site to capture the movement of participants, which is projected on to an avatar or 'shadow' in the virtual world. By the time I arrive at the London portal I am flustered and running late. I search the (rather large) foyer of the National Theatre for signs to direct me to the Me and My Shadow portal, and am ushered around a corner by a member of the box office staff. I can't help but wonder how my flustered state, with its increased heart rate and slightly nervous energy, will affect my experience of the work. I make apologies for my lateness only to find someone else has just gone in to the portal. I pleased to have some time to collect my thoughts, to try and let go of my flustered state and to focus on the present moment and my bodily experience.*

*As my turn arrives I enter the black box portal and find the brightness of the screen in an otherwise dark environment quite jolting. I begin to adjust to the light and take in the virtual environment on the large screen in front of me. It is barren. Nothing but a grey expanse of land, a blank expanse of sky and the moon. My avatar or 'shadow' is similarly featureless; it is merely the outline of my body shape projected in to the virtual world. The only way to distinguish avatars is by colour; each of the portals is represented by a different colour avatar, so that you know where your dance partner is coming to you from. London based participants have purple avatars, Paris red, Istanbul blue and Brussels green. I am pleased not to be distracted by my appearance.*

*Tentatively I begin to move, starting the process of 'learning' my virtual body. I find moving isn't quite as straight forward as I expect it to be. The comment book I am directed to as I leave the installation calls it 'getting lost standing still'. Every time I move my shoulders my avatar races off in to the virtual space, and I feel like I am running after them, asking them to come back. Once when I get lost I cannot find my way back. The moon has quickly become my point of orientation, and when it eludes me I begin to panic. I can feel my heart racing and my breath constricting; it feels like getting lost in the woods as a child and thinking I'm never going to get back home. But, gradually, as I learn to keep*

*my shoulders still I find my way back, and when I see the moon again I reach up to it, relieved.*

*As I move the space fills up with figures. They are not pulsing like I am, because they are the shadows of those who have danced here before me. When we dance in the virtual space, our shadows are left behind. I try to reach out to them, to touch them, to hug them, but they disappear as soon as I move towards them. When I move away from them, they reappear. Like ghosts, they are intangible echoes of the past. After a while I find myself actively searching for someone from Paris, Istanbul or Brussels. I keep thinking I can see the pulse of another person, and embark on excitedly trying to find them. The shadows of previous participants over time make me feel less alone - but I want someone to dance with. Then I'm told by the steward that there is someone from Istanbul under the moon - and they've been waving at me. My heart leaps at the thought of not being alone in the virtual world. I wave at them. They wave back at me. I smile. But they are so far back in the space and I have to figure out how to get there. This requires keeping my shoulders perfectly still whilst trying to walk forwards. So often I mess it up, move my shoulders slightly and they disappear as my avatar races off in the opposite direction. As soon as we get close together, I reach out to them and our images overlap and dissolve – my dance partner has disappeared. It is bittersweet. I found them, but as soon as I found them they were gone.*

*My avatar doesn't move in disjointed steps as I do, but glides through the virtual world, aided by the fact that the bottom half of my legs aren't picked up by the Kinect. It's a bit like skiing; I feel like I'm gliding due to the smoothness of the movement. I soon become engrossed in the correspondence between how my movement feels, and how it looks. As a dancer I frequently use a mirror as a means to correlate kinaesthetic and visual information about my movement. The use of the mirror in this context is as a corrective tool, to confirm that my kinaesthetic and proprioceptive perceptions of my bodily position and movement are accurate. Working as a dancer for film and projection, I am also used to seeing myself dancing on film, a process that facilitates the judging of technical flaws in my movement. The relationship I have to seeing the movement of my avatar is somewhat different, because it doesn't have my face, or distinct bodily features. Without being able to focus on my bodily features and the technical accuracy of movement, I begin to see the quality of my movement more clearly than I ever do in a mirror. I am struck by its fluidity. For the first time the visual image of my movement seems to correlate to the feeling of moving when I am improvising. I begin to play with maintaining a visual and kinaesthetic sense of fluidity in my movement whilst increasing its swiftness. I am no longer lamenting the absence of a remote partner to dance with, because I am engrossed in a dialogue with my own movement.*

## **Abstract**

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## **Biography**

Kelly Louise Preece is a dance lecturer based in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Northampton. Her teaching practice encompasses choreographic processes, improvisation, dance history, screendance and practice-as-research. Her current research focuses on embodiment and somatic sensation in digital dance performance and emerging dance pedagogies. She is also a choreographer solo authoring and working in collaboration with other dancers, performers and artists on a variety of dance theatre, screen based and multimedia works. She is currently Associate Choreographer with Playgrounds Dance Company.