Annie Abrahams's Experiments in Intimacy

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Abstract:
This article explores the work of French-based pioneer of networked performance art, Annie Abrahams, in relation to notions of intimacy in mediated performance practice. Specifically, it explores two of Abrahams's pieces *Shared Still Life / Nature Morte Partagée* (2010) and *L'Un La Poupée de L'Autre (One the Puppet of the Other)* (2007). The article suggests that, unlike a plethora of other technologised practices, Abrahams's works resist the celebration of utopic notions of technologies of connectivity and interactivity. Instead their focus is on the broken links, the miscommunications, in short, the failures of both technological and human connectivity. The article argues that the acceptance of failure as an element that is embedded in the make-up of the networks is what renders Abrahams's Internet embodied and visceral, "an Internet of emotions." (Catlow *Intimate Collaborations* n/p). It further argues in favour of a "banality" that characterises Abrahams's work –this banality is not the safe zone of intimacy that Johnson has identified, but a far more troubling manifestation of it (n/p). Finally, the article proposes that Abrahams belongs to a generation of female artists who, as Morse has suggested, seek to challenge their very artistic medium (16-33).

> What makes for a livable world is no idle question. It is not merely a question for philosophers. (…) Somewhere in the answer we find ourselves not only committed to a certain view of what life is, and what it should be, but also of what constitutes the human (...).
> (Butler 17)

> Annie Abrahams: In fact, all my work emanates from one big question: how can we live in a world that we don't understand? (Chatzichristodoulou, Annie Abrahams n/p)

Annie Abrahams

1   Annie Abrahams was born to a farming family in the Netherlands as the eldest of five daughters. As it was not socially acceptable for her to study arts at the time, she chose to become a scientist: Abrahams holds a PhD in biology, a science that sought to understand the world, and which her father could accept as a profession. Her love of Dostoyevsky, and her colleagues' contempt of his literature in the aftermath of May '68, directed her towards retraining in fine arts (Chatzichristodoulou, *Annie Abrahams* n/p). Abrahams has been based in France since 1985. Her artistic practice most often employs networking technologies: she produces networked performances, net.art pieces, collective writing projects, videos, as well as installations and performances in physical space. She started using technology in her work around 1991; her first telepresence piece took place in 1996 in a gallery in Holland. Her works have been exhibited and performed internationally at institutions such as the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, New Langton Arts in San Francisco, Centre Pompidou in France, Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki and many other venues (Abrahams, "Please Smile

On Your Neighbour In The Morning" n/p). This article discusses Abrahams's networked performances following her first solo show in the UK, *If Not You Not Me*, which took place at the HTTP Gallery in North London in February and March 2010 (HTTP n/p).

Shared Still Life/ Nature Morte Partagée

2   In visiting Abrahams's show at the HTTP Gallery last winter, I found it inspiring in its subtle, low-tech sensitivity of inter-connectedness. Amongst the new works created for this exhibition, *Shared Still Life/ Nature Morte Partagée*, appeared to be the central piece. This was a telematic installation that connected the HTTP Gallery in London with Kawenga - territoires numériques in Montpellier, France. The piece was extreme in its simplicity, almost stark nakedness: a table, a cloth, a plant, some fruit, a clock, a dictionary, and an LED display were more or less the objects that formed the still life composition. There was also paper, marker pens, crayons, and blu-tack, inviting visitors to contribute paintings, messages, marks, and written traces. Visitors could compose their own messages for the LED display, as well as interfere with the installation in any way imaginable since there were no instructions telling us what we could and could not do with the still life or, indeed, our own presence in front of the camera. Visitors unavoidably became actors in this piece: to reorder the objects on the table one had to stand in front of the camera contributing fragments of one's body (a turned head, a hand, one's back). As the still life was shared (people in London could see the still life in Montpellier and the other way round), new LED messages or re-orderings of the still life arrangements at one site provoked responses at the other.

3   Abrahams's piece cannot be described as innovative: Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz created the first telematic "public communication sculpture", Hole-In-Space, in 1980, using satellite technologies (Electronic Cafe n/p). *Hole-In-Space* linked the two coasts of the United States for the first time, bringing together people from New York City and Los Angeles in life-sized, televised images. Since the emergence of the Internet, telematic art and performance has become widely accessible and rehearsed, with iconic works such as Paul Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming* (1992) and *Telematic Vision* (1993), and performances by the Chameleons (UK) and AlienNation Co. (USA), amongst many others (Sermon n/p, Dixon n/p, AlienNation Co. n/p). With skype and other internet telephony protocols linking us to dispersed family and friends, teleconferencing has become a commonplace feature of our everyday lives.

4   What is it then, I asked myself, that makes Abrahams's piece –so simple, almost "basic"– poignantly relevant today? To me, it is the very stark simplicity and understated

nakedness of Abrahams's work that makes it moving in its subtle, and often futile, attempt at interconnectivity. Abrahams's *Still Life* is commonplace, messy and malleable; it is about the inconspicuous trivia of everyday life, time passing by, and people crossing paths in fractured, desperate or indifferent attempts to communicate. *Shared Still Life* is about the few achieved moments of intimacy –banal and humble though they might be– as much as it is about the many connections that fail. This everyday quality opens up Abrahams's piece to movement, dust, miscommunication, shared absence –and network failure.

5   I spent more than an hour playing with *Shared Still Life* at the HTTP Gallery. It was no more or less interesting than real life. I observed. I interfered, changing things to my liking. I hoped for a message, a sign of life on the other side, some response. It didn't come. I sent more messages. I ate some of the composition's fruit. I made balls of paper and threw them at the beautifully arranged tablecloth. I added the peeled skin of my fruit in the mess. I smiled at the camera while consuming the last slice of the *Shared Still Life*'s mandarin. Nothing happened. Nobody told me not to touch (or, indeed, consume) the artwork. Nobody prompted me to interact with it either. Finally something happened. "Tu es là?" ("Are you there?"), I had written on the LED display. "Oui, oui, je suis içi" ("Yes, I am here"), came a message from the other side. Someone was there. Someone rearranged their own still life composition. Someone was trying to talk to me. Too late –I didn't really want to respond any more; I didn't want to have a dialogue with this someone.

6   I experienced *Shared Still Life* as a piece that is as much about intimate (one-on-one, though publicly exposed) communication and exchange, as it is about the lack thereof: physical absence, shared loneliness, the hope for a presence that never fully materialises (not the way you had hoped to, at least, not the way you expected). Someone's fragmented presence, delayed, compromised, fleeting, crosses your path for a moment, in an attempt to link, to communicate, to exchange. Will it happen? The answer is subject to network functions and failures, randomness, and lu/ack. I appreciated the freedom that Abrahams gave me, the viewer/participant/actor, in her *Shared Still Life* composition: she allowed me to be there with others, but also on my own; she invited me to communicate, and to hide; she did not stop me from consuming the artwork, or messing it up to leave my own traces, banal and everyday –as banal as the piece itself; as banal as life, and relationships. This is a piece about connectivity that is as fully functional when connections fail, as it is when they succeed. There are no superimposed expectations, no stress to perform, no euphoric projections into a shared future. Just the simple, fragmented, unsatisfactory, fleeting exchange of everyday life.

Intimacy

7   I have exposed the intimate nature of my encounters with Abrahams's works; but what does this entail? Generally understood as intertwined with feelings of closeness, trust, familiarity and affection, intimacy occurs through effective communication between people in some kind of relationship. Intimacy enables two sentient beings who feel comfortable enough with each other on an emotional and/or physical level, to reveal something about themselves and connect in some form of affective exchange. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the "intimate" as "Inmost, most inward, deep-seated; hence pertaining to or connected with the inmost nature or fundamental character of a thing; essential; intrinsic." and "Pertaining to the inmost thoughts or feelings; proceeding from, concerning, or affecting one's inmost self; closely personal." The term "intimate", the same dictionary instructs, is a euphemism of "sexual intercourse"; or it can be said "of a theatrical performance […] that aims at establishing familiar and friendly relations with the audience." Although, as those definitions suggest, broad notions of intimacy are generally located "in the familiar spaces of friendship, love, sex, family, and feeling 'at home'," Lauren Berlant has introduced into the equation a set of intimate circumstances and encounters that can be connected to "estrangement, betrayal, loneliness, and even violence that may accompany the demise of relationships, both personal and political" (*Intimacy* n/p). I suggest that sensing intimacy –as either a positive (here, meaning 'pleasant') or painful experience– in performance relocates registers of affect from the public sphere to the private experience, and the reverse: the private is repositioned as public, thus being invested with political potentiality. This relocation triggers a number of questions around the nature and e/affect of contemporary performance practices.

8   I ask Abrahams how consciously she pursues the overarching idea of intimacy in her practice. At first, she declares that she has no interest in intimacy. In fact, she strongly expresses her discomfort about the very use of this term. This is because "intimacy indicates a situation where one deliberately relinquishes control –to some extent– in order to approach another person." (Chatzichristodoulou, *Annie Abrahams* n/p). She considers this to be a dangerous situation during which anything can happen. This is why, she says, she avoids the use of the term intimacy in talking about her work. Her thinking revolves more around ideas of communication: about, on the one hand, the desire of being close with someone and, on the other, the necessity of restricting one's openness, of retreating from intimacy (Chatzichristodoulou, *Annie Abrahams* n/p). As we continue to discuss, she starts to reconsider. "The more I think about it", she says,

the more it seems that, indeed, I have been creating instances of intimacy in my work for a very long time […]. Maybe now I am beginning to consciously try to create the circumstances for intimate exchanges in my performances; maybe now I should say "yes, I am concerned with the idea of machine-mediated intimacy" […]. In doing so I sometimes violate conventional communication rules. I always look for situations that make any attempt at escaping from exposure impossible. (Chatzichristodoulou, *Annie Abrahams* n/p).

9   I first met Annie Abrahams in December 2007, in the context of a three-day festival and symposium that I initiated and co-created together with Rachel Zerihan, *Intimacy: Across Digital and Visceral Performance* (Goldsmiths, Laban, The Albany, Home London, online). The *Intimacy* event responded to an observation that Zerihan and I made at the time: we suggested that the last few years (2005 onwards) were seeing a proliferation of both visceral and digital performance practices –live and recorded, mediated and immediate– which sought to establish some form of intimacy between one and other (be it between two co-performers, a performer and an audience member, or between two audience members). Zerihan has since further discussed the dramatic increase in the numbers of One to One performances programmed in festivals such as the *National Review of Live Arts* (4), leading to the One-on-One Performance Festival at the Battersea Art Centre in South London in July 2010: the first international performance festival of its kind (BAC n/p). Back in 2007, Zerihan and I had suggested that "those proliferating practices of intimacy respond to the cultural climate of acute (in)security in contemporary environments of extreme closeness and heightened connectivity, where technologies of inter-subjectivity function as the settings for both beautiful and threatening encounters." (Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan, "Report on *Intimacy* Event"). I see Abrahams's work as directly addressing those same issues that we identified as concerns shared by makers and audiences invested in exploring notions, experiences and practices of intimacy in performance –that is: issues around bodies of data and flesh; presence as aura and representation; desire as embodied condition and disembodied fantasy; the human and posthuman self; furthermore, intimacy as an experience that can be both public and political.

10   On first impression, the notion of intimacy and figurings of socio-political processes might not appear a close pairing. Julia Kristeva approaches "the intimate" etymologically in her book *Intimate Revolt*, by referring to the Latin root of the word: "intimus" from the superlative of interior, meaning "the most interior" (45). Kristeva articulates "the intimate" as an interiority that includes the unconscious, but warns that it should not be reduced to it, arguing that "the intimate […] is that which is most profound and most singular in the human

experience" (45). She goes on to claim that intimacy is "similar to the life of the mind, that is, the activity of the thinking ego [...] in opposition to social or political action" (45). Kristeva's definition of "the intimate" as an interiority that is opposed to social or political action is one I grapple with. This is because my own interest in intimate performance encounters derives from an understanding of those practices that directly opposes Kristeva's approach to intimacy as a state that *cannot* claim any degree of socio-political agency. In fact, I argue that "the intimate", "that which is most profound and most singular in the human experience" becomes *once performed* –that is, once it is given a public status which launches it back into the "public orbit"– endowed with both political agency and social potency. *Shared Still Life* for example, is a piece that consists of unfulfilled desires for connectivity, fleeting exchanges and broken links –that is, a series of minute, private instances of mediated intimacy between one and other. Were those instances uniquely private, un-witnessed, and contained within one's personal "bubble", they might well have been the internalised state that Kristeva suggests (although one could refer to some of Allan Kaprow's Happenings as uniquely private and un-witnessed instances that are, nonetheless, intensely and actively political). In *Shared Still Life* those instances are exactly that –shared. Moreover, they are not only shared between one and other, but they are constantly exposed to the public eye as they occur in public space. Furthermore, they don't just "occur" in public space; they are, in fact, publicly *staged*. This is, I think, Abrahams's main artistic pursuit: the public staging of mundane, private and intensely intimate encounters. But once those intimate details are "blown up" for all to witness and observe they become political acts, as they register questions of social and gender dynamics. As Berlant has argued: "The personal is the general. Publics presume intimacy." (*The Female Complaint* vii).

The Poetics of Failure

11   Margaret Morse has discussed the poetics of interactivity, specifically within media or technologised work authored or created by women artists. She explains:

> The theorist Jeanne Randolph has proposed that the primary ideological assumption about technology is that it should work. No wonder the term *interactivity* presupposes a fait accompli – that links in networks of connections have been successfully made. However, unintentional failures of interactive hardware and software and of the humans that design and employ them occur at every level of cybersociety […]. The term interactivity thus refers to a state that occurs after or is incognizant of painful effort and myriad unsuccessful, broken, and invalid connections and attempts to interact that simply don't work. (22).

I find Morse's discussion of the poetics of interactivity as a poetics of failure, or a poetics of the unsuccessful, enticing. This is because failure is, indeed, so rarely acknowledged as an inherent element of networking technologies; an element native in the technologies' make-up much in the same way that certain illnesses, or ageing (and following that death) are inscribed within the human DNA. Back in 1998 Jensen suggested that "expectations of 'interactivity' and new 'interactive media' have been pushed to the breaking point in terms of what will become technologically possible […]. The concept seems loaded with positive connotations […]." (185). I suggest that, though expectations of cyber-utopias have clearly subsided in current times, digital technologies, interactive media and social networks are still loaded with romantic ideals of personal emancipation, empowerment, freedom and, success. Abrahams's work, on the other hand, talks about failure: the failure of technological connectivity vis-à-vis the failure of human connectivity, fragmented intimacies, unfulfilled desires, glitches and mistunings. As Ruth Catlow points out: "Where social networking sites make us think of communication as clean and transparent, Abrahams creates an Internet of feelings –of agitation, collusion, ardour and apprehension." (Catlow, *If Not You Not Me* n/p).

12   I want to argue that once failure (and all that comes with it, such as obsolescence and death) becomes accepted as embedded in networked processes and functions, networks are more likely to emerge as embodied and visceral phenomena. Failure as inscribed in the networks can ensure that utopic (or dystopic, depending on one's viewpoint) cybernetic visions of downloadable consciousness and immortality are put to bed. In her essay "Embodied Utopias" Elizabeth Grosz questions the validity of the very term she uses as her title, that is: "embodied utopia" (131-150). She wonders whether this might be an oxymoron and argues that embodiment is "that which never had its place within utopias" (Grosz 131). It is not so much that utopian discourses have not dealt with the question of bodies, says Grosz, as the fact that utopias, due to their direction towards a goal and their neglect of process (and thus time) seek "a future that itself has no future, a future in which time will cease to be a relevant factor, and movement, change, and becoming remain impossible." (143) For Grosz, a utopia is a place fixed in some never-existent moment, a place that is still, and frozen, like a still image. That place necessarily excludes embodiment: our bodies can only be *in* time as *we live time* (Lefebvre 95). I suggest that Abrahams's work strongly foregrounds the body – and thus the time to be, the time to move, the time to cease– by its insistence on the minute detail of the everyday (including everyday bodily functions), and the lack of prescribed narratives about technological successes. Considering the visceral qualities of her practice it is no surprise that Abrahams declares herself as "allergic to utopias" (Chatzichristodoulou,

Annie Abrahams n/p). Her work is far from technophilic, idealised notions of technology, far from the impressive and spectacular; far from being lured by utopic visions of technology, Abrahams exposes us to the vulnerable beauty of the glitch, and she reminds us that yes, networks fail, as do bodies –human and/or posthuman.

13   Berlant has proposed that "intimacy involves an aspiration about something shared, a story about oneself and others" (*Intimacy*1). All Abrahams's performances aspire to something shared, a story that is not of one (the teller) but of many (the participants, the performers, the observers, and the voyeurs). Her shared intimacies are particular and, I suggest, gendered, because thy are (allowed to be) marked by frustration: the frustrations of mediated communication, broken relationships, disparate attempts to achieve a meaningful connection with the present-absent other, the body lost in digital space, physical and emotional distance, and unfulfilled desire –life, as it is, today, in the networks. This is why I see Abrahams's work as poignantly relevant today, within the intensely technologised, media-saturated, hypernetworked environment that has become, for many of us Western subjects, a "natural" daily habitat. The opposite of spectacular, Abrahams's performances promise no networked utopias, no euphoric futures, no smooth connections; muddled and uneventful, mundane and flexible, they are of and about the "banality" of intimacy, and of our everyday life. It is not, I think, accidental, that this type of work is produced by a female artist: Morse, while careful to avoid claims about generic unities or common aims in the work of women media artists, points us to "the uneasy situatedness of women in the worlds of art and technology that promotes a reflexive and ambivalent relation to media and incites production that self-consciously sets its own premises in question." (23). She offers several examples of such works by artists Christine Tamblyn, Marjorie Franklin, Paul Tomkins, Lynn Hershman, Sarah Roberts, Sonya Rapoport, and Coco Fusco among others. I think that Annie Abrahams fits the bill as another female artist who sets out to question and challenge her own artistic medium. Abrahams's relationship to the technology that she employs for her performances is, indeed, ambivalent –and she is not here to pretend otherwise.

L'Un La Poupée de L'Autre (One the Puppet of the Other)

14   Abrahams's piece *L'Un la Poupée de L'Autre (One the Puppet of the Other)* (2007) consists of two igloo tents in public space (originally the piece took place in Centre Pompidou, Paris, France). The piece is a One-on-One performance, though the exchange does not take place between a performer and an audience member, but between Abrahams and her co-performer Nicolas Frespech. The audience take on the role of voyeurs of a very intimate,

occasionally painful exchange between a man and a woman that are together, and apart: the two tents function as two domes that shelter the artists and separate them from each other. Abrahams and Frespech are in close physical proximity, but each resides in his/her own universe (bubble). The pair can only attempt mediated forms of communication through the use of webcams, headphones, microphones, and computer screens. Abrahams and Frespech go on to plunge themselves into a game by which they become each other's living puppet. As Cyril Thomas has suggested, in this performance the tents and the technological interfaces act as the skin that makes touch possible: "The dialogue as well as the images lead the spectator to the ontology of the gesture that exists before contact." (n/p). Linked by the technology's "third skin", the artists are face to face via their webcams (Prince 13). Two solitary human beings, they appear to be floating each in his/her own world, so close but miles apart, preoccupied with opportunities for intimacy but never quite achieving the touch. The public follows the performance in physical proximity (rather than online); nevertheless, the performers are concealed from public view. All the public can see is the performers' shadows from inside the lit tents in some kind of high-tech puppet show; and the projection of the two webcam images, side by side, on the wall behind the tents. "All that remains for the audience is a contingent and vulnerable human interaction expressed through request, action, request, action." (Catlow, "Intimate Collaboration" n/p). A discomforting one-on-one networked encounter that is launched back into the public orbit by inviting audiences to witness the touch that occurs before or despite the lack of touch. The performance starts and the artists launch into a gentle interrogation of each other, which gradually becomes a gendered power-game between human and avatar, or master and slave:

00:26
Annie Abrahams: Nicolas? Nicolas
Frespech: Yes?
AA: Would you like to say hello?
NF: Hello.
NF: Annie?
AA: Yes?
NF: Describe yourself please.
AA: I am in my bubble […].
15:46
AA: Close your eyes the way you want to.
AA: And tell us what you see.
NF: (silence)
AA: Do you want to tell us what you see?
NF: No.
AA: Would you open your eyes?
NF: Annie? Can you dance for me?

AA: Yes.
23:21
AA: Nicolas?
NF: Yes?
AA: Do you want to say "I love you" together with me?
NF: No.
(*L'Un La Poupée de L'Autre*)

15 In *L'Un la Poupee de L'Autre* Abrahams and Frespech become each other's living avatar. Like in a virtual world such as Second Life or in a video game, each person can manipulate their avatar into speaking certain lines and undertaking certain actions. The difference here is that each artist is both the puppet and the puppeteer –both the person manipulating the avatar, and someone else's puppet. Furthermore, in this performance the avatars are made of flesh and blood. Try as one might to make his/her avatar perform specific actions, the avatar is independent from the puppeteer's control. As the performance develops, the master's control slips. Though the piece –like *Shared Still Life*, and like all of Abrahams's work– remains unspectacular (no big dramas, no revolutions, no insurrectory action on the part of the avatar), there is a gradual and subtle challenging of the puppeteer's power. The avatar claims instances of independence, where his/her own will becomes the dominant one. Abrahams is yet again questioning her medium. Through this performance she puts mediated communication under the microscope –like the scientist that she is, she dissects it to examine its every aspect, its minute detail, the instances where the technological skin succeeds to connect, and the ones where it doesn't. Both the protocols and the failures of mediated intimacy come to the forefront. Abrahams sees this performance as a gesture that aims to reveal the playfulness and perversity that can result from the sense of proximal distance in mediated intimacies ("*L'Un La Poupée de L'Autre (One the Puppet of the Other)*" n/p).

The Banality of Intimacy

16 Dominic Johnson argues that "we have almost no language, other than banality, to describe intimacy." (n/p) This is because:

> Intimacy seems to be uncomfortably tied to risk. Generally, our assumptions about the anomalous condition of being intimate with another person are restricted to the safest mid-point of what might be called a continuum of intimacy. This continuum reaches from meagre moments of contact, to the most challenging situations in which a subject demands something from someone else. In common parlance to be "overly intimate" with another's body implies abuse, and clearly positions the experience of intimacy in proximity to physical or emotional discomfort. (n/p)

Johnson further suggests that Live Art practices often confirm one thing: "The conventional understanding of intimacy has drawn its scope of representation too closely, naturalizing a banal, feel-good figuration that represses the discomforting diversity of intimate human relations." (n/p). I do not disagree with Johnson's suggestion that intimacy (both physical and emotional) is often considered, within the context of Western culture, as an "anomalous condition". Nor do I wish to contest his argument that it is often, in everyday life and in art, restricted to a safe middle ground, which ensures that there is not too much giving, not too much touching, not too much exposure, not too much penetration of the boundaries between self and other –but also, not too little: just enough to allow for the intimate encounter to occur without challenging one's boundaries, without disturbing too much one's comfort zones. Nevertheless, what I propose here is that the banality of Abrahams's intimate work is, in fact, the very element that makes it troubling and discomforting. Abrahams's mundane, often domestic and always uneventful performances do constitute a safe zone where nothing spectacular or overtly troubling ever happens. Rather than becoming the safe middle-ground for feel-good figurations of intimacy though, they become evocative of our daily, commonplace frustrations. Abrahams stages our (fragmented) intimacies, complete with all their baggage: emotional unavailability, broken links, hitches, glitches, misunderstandings, failed attempts at communication, dysfunctional connectivity, aching bodies that are not yet obsolete, and the thorny question of sex post-menopause. (Chatzichristodoulou, *Annie Abrahams* n/p).

17   In a way, the comforting banality of Abrahams's work functions as a springboard for emotional elasticity, where intimacies gradually transform from familiar and everyday to uncomfortable, troubling and discomforting. This setting of domestic "softness" is what allows Abrahams to really probe into the other; to demand, and proceed at staging an "unveiling" of one's secrets in public. This becomes explicit in works such as *A Meeting Is A Meeting Is A Meeting* (2010): a telematic performance between Annie Abrahams and Antye Greie, which consisted of nine "domestic streaming sessions" of five minutes each (Abrahams "A Meeting Is A Meeting Is A Meeting" n/p). Each meeting focused on a different thematic strand, such as "preferences", "patriotism" and "love", while the overall theme of the piece was "misunderstandings". The majority of the performances were being streamed from the performers' domestic environments, and the performers appeared to be having an intimate discussion. Watching this piece, I felt like a voyeur of a mundane private exchange, such as a skype conference between friends or family members. This position, in itself, could be discomforting at times. Furthermore, it gradually became clear that the

performers were gently pushing each other towards a zone of emotional or intellectual discomfort. According to Abrahams:

> In my last series with Antye Greie, *A Meeting Is A Meeting Is A Meeting*, we explicitly challenge one another. We push each other towards new terrains, and into unknown, unrehearsed actions. We did not aim to produce an intimate encounter for this work, but the fact that we enter unknown realms makes it intimate because we cannot control the image of ourselves that we broadcast to the public. For this performance we both accept a discomforting prerequisite: something that we don't want others to know about us, something secret, will, no doubt, escape. The moment this condition of discomfort suddenly and unexpectedly occurs is maybe one of the most intimate moments one can share: when a secret escapes during a performance, the minute it reveals itself to us and to our observers, this secret cannot but be unstaged. It is a moment of nakedness within the performance. […] In a certain way, the format of the performance itself stages our intimacy, before this becomes unpurposefully unstaged. (Chatzichristodoulou, *Annie Abrahams* n/p).

Desire

18   On occasions Abrahams's work inhabits the edge between registers of intimacy and the realm of desire. Steven Shaviro has discussed desire, following Kant's analysis in the *Critique of Judgment*, as that which "determines the will" (6). He explains that whereas Hegelian and Lacanian definitions of desire approach it as "lack", in Kant desire "cannot be understood in terms of negativity and absence, for it is an active, autonomous power of the mind. […] *Desire produces the real*." (Shaviro 6, original emphasis). Furthermore, Grosz has discussed erotic desire as "an otherness in the subject, triggered by an other, something that overtakes one, induces one to abandon what one has planned, and even what one understands […]. The other erupts into the subject and interrupts all the subject's aims and goals." ("Animal Sex" 286-287). This is why, Grosz argues, desire is not simply about receiving recognition, communication or exchange; it is not simply about the "transmission of intimacy" ("Animal Sex" 294). More than that, desire "is a mode of surface contact with things and substances, with a world, that engenders and induces transformations, intensifications, a becoming something other." (Grosz, "Animal Sex" 294). I think those understandings of desire are relevant to the way Abrahams describes the nature, purpose and intensity of her exchange with the other performer –her co-player:

> I try to find ways to penetrate the other performer –just for a second I want them to expose themselves to me (and to our observers) in an action, or a response, that is out of their control. I want them to unveil something they usually hide or only disclose in situations of complete trust, of complete intimacy. I want to know how they function, not by them telling me, but by me almost forcing them to reveal an instance of their "hidden code" in public. I want us to go beyond self-representation and the control that this requires. Am I really forcing them to do this?... No I am not. What happens is that the situation in itself –that is, the telematic performance interface, the protocols,

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the flaws in the streaming connections– rewrites the conditions of communication in a way that makes this revelation possible, if not inevitable. (Chatzichristodoulou, *Annie Abrahams* n/p).

19   "Emotional open-source" –this is what constitutes both the appeal and the discomforting element in Abrahams's work: the fact that every single one of her performances seeks to penetrate the other, just for a second, in order to unveil a tiny bit of one's secret code in public. This exposure is not something that Abrahams orchestrates as a vice. She does not harbour a wish to purposefully provoke a painful unveiling, a "skinning" of one's protection that exists below the "third skin" of technology. Instead, the affective power in Abrahams's work is, I think, compounded by desire's capacity to "shake up, rearrange, reorganize the body's forms and sensations, to make the subject and body as such dissolve into something else." (Grosz, "Animal Sex" 296). Here, desire demonstrates its active, transformative force in both the creation of one's reality and the destruction of one's reality as it was, before the performers erupted and dissolved into one another. I think that the most substantial skill that Abrahams demonstrates in the creation of her work is the fine balance that she achieves between the banality of the mundane intimacy, and the tension that keeps this uneventfulness constantly alert to the transformative intensities of desire. In Abrahams's work desire is not fulfilled as an event, but present as a potentiality that is – oh so close to one's fingertips.

21   Homosexuality and anal penetration, we can argue in conclusion, destabilises the sacrosanct position that has been occupied by macho masculinity. As such, homosexuality undoes "the symbolic machinery of repression, making the rectum a grave […] in which the masculine ideal of proud subjectivity is buried" (Bersani 29). Homosexuality, and the inherent emergent masculinity, challenges not only the salience of gender in social stratification but more importantly the policing of desire and sexuality.[1]

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[1] *A short part of this article has appeared in a different version as*: Chatzichristodoulou, Maria. "*If Not You Not Me*: Annie Abrahams and Life in the Networks". May 2010. *Digimag*. 54. 29 September 2010.

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