

Review of CREW U_Raging Standstill Tramway 2007

by

Laura Bissell

Abstract

As a participant in the Tramway's Winter School, I was involved in Belgian company CREW's Glasgow production of *U_Raging Standstill*, an immersive performance for an individual spectator to move around virtual environments with the aid of multimedia as prosthesis. The performance allows one spectator (or 'immersant' as CREW refer to them) to 'physically walk around in a live virtual surrounding' while a viewing gallery allows others to watch the immersant's experience. The environments are made up of either live feed or pre-recorded filmed space, as opposed to computer generated or simulated spaces and it is this synthesis of the live and the pre-recorded, the real and the virtual, human and machine, that will be the focus of this review.



All pictures courtesy of CREW, taken at Tramway February 2007

Virtual Reality and Real Virtuality in CREW's *U_Raging Standstill* (2007)

In their most recent production *U-Raging Standstill* (Tramway 2007), Belgian company CREW play upon their audiences' familiarity with virtual reality game playing. This is not done to fool them or trick them into believing that they are in a computer game or a virtual space - the aesthetics and use of pre-recorded film rather than animation or computer graphics make this notion obsolete - but rather to confirm that they are *within* this virtual environment and that they are experiencing the things that they seem to be

experiencing. Reality and virtuality dance a fine line as the company's explorations of memory and the relation between mind and body become clear when immersants 'physically walk around in a live virtual surrounding'.

The concept behind *U-Raging Standstill* started off as an investigation of the human mind suffering from dementia, looking specifically at the mental processes of Alzheimer's patients. Artistic Director Eric Joris, says that he views the workings of the human mind experiencing dementia much as he views the way a computer works. He uses the analogy between the mind and a computer to explore themes of memory and recognition. As he explains: 'Most people see technology as a way to progress. We wanted to explore it as a way for people to regress.' CREW wish to return to an experiential, physically moving kind of theatre, a theatre that is affecting and physically and mentally challenges the body and our perceptions of the body. They wish for us to return to the responses of the body and mind in the circumstances they create for immersants to experience, rather than being visually dazzled by technological slickness and wizardry.

At the beginning of 'U' the immersant is shown the equipment that shall be used throughout the performance - firstly a headset with a camera on the top of the device - which shows the immersant what is around them via a live feed camera. It must be noted that this is *not* the device that is worn throughout the performance, and in this there *is* an element of deceit - the goggles that are actually worn throughout are linked to pre-recorded images rather than live feed, and then for the final part of the performance they have a feed that

is situated elsewhere in the space. They are not given the goggles at this point, but are informed by the Crew member that they will be fitted with the equipment at some point throughout the performance. They are instead given headphones (the first prosthesis) and the voice of a performer instructs them to keep moving. The voice frequently calls the immersant by their first name and directs them on where to move. The route that the immersant is guided through is constantly being filmed and viewed by the members of CREW from their station in the final performance space. In this space, there is also the live performer who is able to comment to the immersant on their particular movements, telling them, for example 'I see you are smiling' or 'ignore the person walking past you.' This initially is disorienting for the immersant. They often think that they are being followed and look behind them, while the members of CREW in the separate performance space watch their movements via computer monitors. Spectators in the spectating gallery see the same images projected onto large screens in the final large space where the immersant will end up. Text by Saskia de Coster is also broadcast to the immersant. This involves a repetition of the phrase 'this is a pre-recorded voice' which is undercut by the live performer's constant use of the immersant's first name and the comments made about the immersant's surroundings and what they can see. What is live and what is not is hazy, and as the immersant moves into the next section of the performance, what is real and what is virtual also begins to blur.

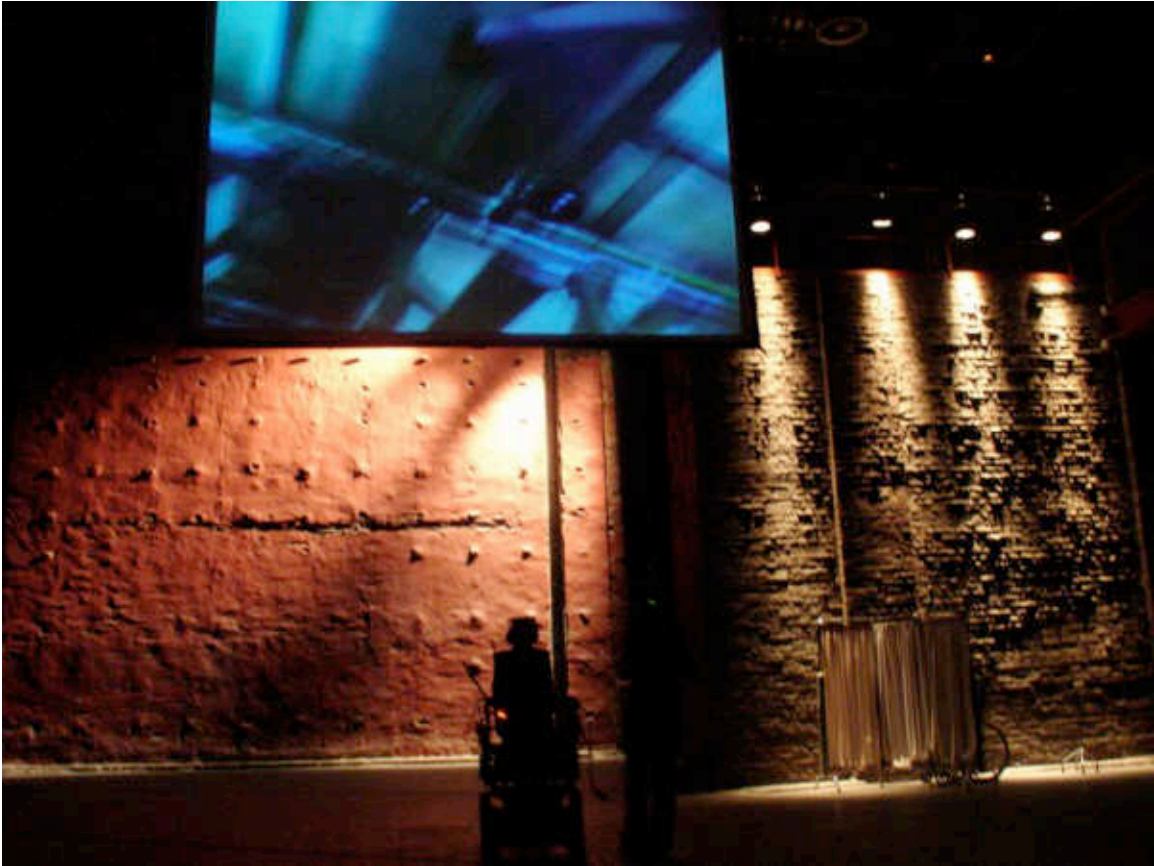


All pictures courtesy of CREW, taken at Tramway February 2007

Once the immersant reaches the main performing space and is fitted with the prostheses, the voice states, 'you will be replaced,' 'new cycles for new pieces,' 'everything is replaceable.' As this is happening, one of the members of the company, using an ink stamp, stamp the immersant's flesh with the phrase 'I was in U'. The double meaning of this is apparent: the immersant was involved in the performance 'U' and also, to an extent, their psyche was infiltrated with the company, the performance, and the experience. The stamping on a part of the immersant's flesh could also be perceived as linking with the text that is being spoken at this point. The immersant is a mere replaceable part, one product on the assembly

line of this performance. The stamping conjures up notions of the mechanistic nature of the performance: the immersants *are* on an assembly line (with fifteen half hour slots per day this is feeling is inescapable.) They have just been fitted with apparatus that makes them cyborgian. They are part human, part machine, a product of the performance, a product of our time.

Once in the main performing space of Tramway One the original idea of dementia is explored to its fullest. Here the immersant moves through the filmed real spaces virtually via the headgear. Some of the spaces are those that the immersant has physically just travelled through on the initial part of the route, guided by the voice - and the sterile white corridors and large white empty spaces of the Tramway are ideal for giving an institutional or functional atmosphere. However, some of the spaces are spaces filmed at other venues, which are very similar to those of the Tramway. They all have the same aesthetic quality to them which gives the impression of a half remembered or altered version of what has been actually experienced moments before - a half remembered dreamlike journey.



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In CREW's work the adage 'seeing is believing' is challenged. The immersant views a range of spaces through the virtual goggles while actually moving around the 'empty space' of Tramway One. The feeling is of being in one space, but in fact existing in another. To further the illusion of this, other senses are also affected. For example, when being urged by the performer's voice to move towards what seems to be a gaping hole in the floor and to look down, a fan is placed alongside the immersant, blowing air up into their face. At this point many immersants are fully 'inside' the experience. They struggle to see what is at the bottom as the voice tells them 'Look down, further, look down, it is you on the bottom.' By

making this virtual environment sensory to both the eyes and the skin, the environment is more complete, more 'real,' and perhaps therefore less virtual. What CREW are reaching for is this altered state of immersion, to confuse the state of presence by combining theatre and technology until it is no longer possible to distinguish the medium from reality. What is interesting, here, is that despite the prominence of technology, the company has used an illusionist trick, a simple electric fan to provide this effect. The amount of bodies required to stage 'U' is also notable. For each performance there are eight people involved for every one immersant's experience. Despite the technology, *bodies are needed* - here bodies are not erased by machines but instead are crucial to the production itself.

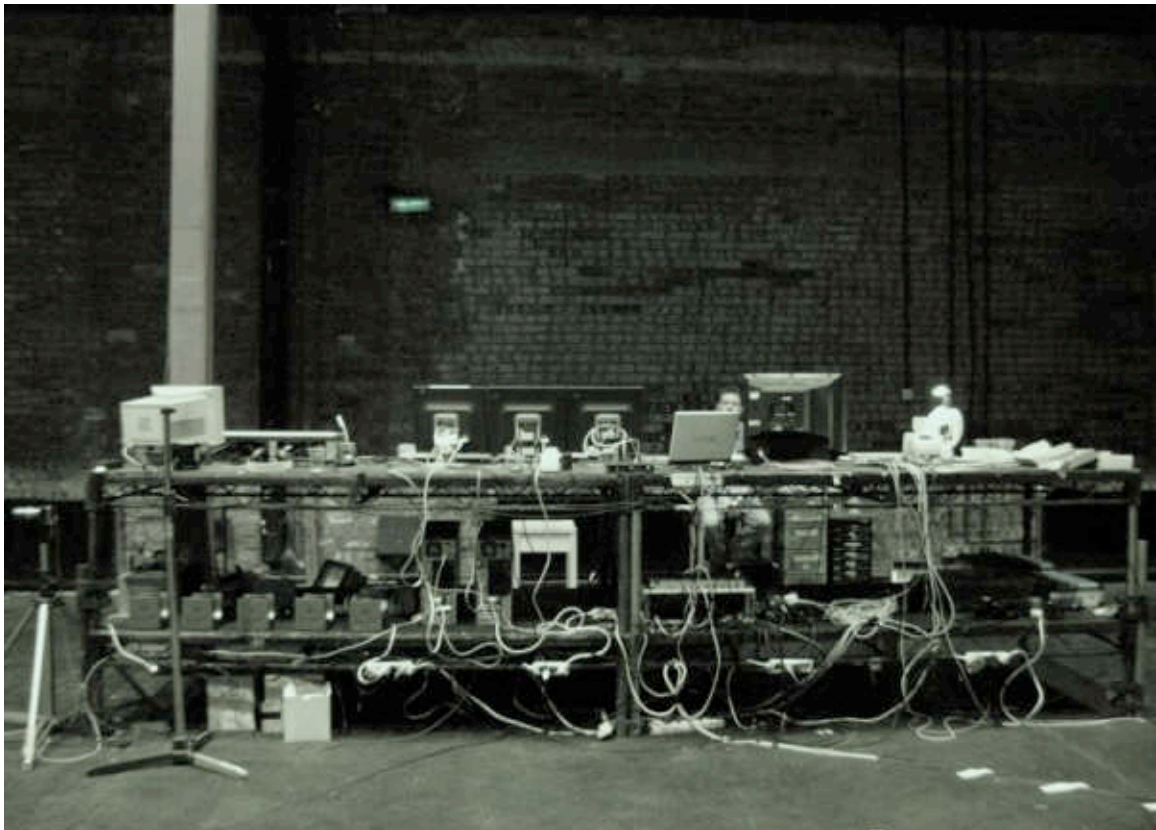
Eric Joris shared with me a story about one of the company who first experienced 'going inside.' He went through the performance as an immersant and at the end seemed highly unimpressed. When questioned about this he replied that he didn't see the point of being led about various places in the building via a trolley - what was the value of it? It was only after Joris and CREW explained what had actually happened to him - that he had remained in the one large space while experiencing a range of virtual environments - that he 'got it.' From this we can deduce that 100% immersion is unsuccessful - that is, if the immersant accepts the virtual environment as completely 'real' then the whole performance implodes and becomes nothing.

Towards the end of the piece, the images switch from the pre-recorded images to a live feed being filmed by a CREW member driving an Omni-directional camera. This is the live image that the

immersant is seeing. So while the immersant thinks that what they are seeing is being filmed by a camera on top of their head (as they were led to believe by the original demonstration apparatus - yet another simple deception, another illusionist technique) they are actually being followed by an Omni directional camera that is acting as their eyes. Because of this, when they turn a corner onto a light corridor constructed in the space, the CREW member controlling the camera behind them speeds up so that the immersant sees a figure in front of them. It takes a while for the immersant to realise that this figure that they are approaching and eventually pass, is in fact themselves. They are prompted in this recognition by the performer's voice telling them to 'raise your right hand'. This, I would argue, is the point where CREW come closest to achieving the separation of body and mind that that they strive to produce. The confusion that being able to move and also simultaneously see yourself moving from a distance, while also seeing yourself as a figure that inhabits and moves around in this virtual environment is a strange one. Some describe it as an out of body experience. Here, the immersant's vision of their spectral self moves us into the realm of Freud's uncanny; in seeing themselves virtually inside a virtual environment, the immersant faces their own death, their own transference from 'real' being to 'virtual' being. Their body, the thing most grounded in the 'real', passes over to the realm of the virtual. Joris offers a description of this section of the performance: 'You pass your own body - the part which is life can be changed.' As this section draws to a close, the camera overtakes the immersant and moves into blackness, with the voice whispering in your ear: 'you

leave yourself behind...'

Eric Joris speaks of 'Reality engineering' and states that 'reality is but one of the levels of the narrative.' I think that this viewpoint is evident through CREW's work, and particularly in their experiments with the real and the virtual to create virtual environments in 'U.' By using multiple prosthesis and other devices to make the experience for the immersant as total and as phenomenological as possible, CREW are in fact exploring and celebrating the potential of the live body itself by toying with our notions of what is real and what is virtual.



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Laura Bissell

Laura Bissell is currently completing her Mphil by research entitled *The Posthuman Body in Performance* at Glasgow University's Department of Theatre Studies where she also is employed as a tutor. She graduated in 2005 with a degree in Theatre Studies and English Literature and during her undergraduate degree studied abroad at UNSW in Sydney, where she became involved in performance art and the integration of new media and technology in performance. Laura writes and devises performance and poetry and hopes to continue her academic career in the field of technologised performance.