



*Reflections on Reinterpretations of  
Audience/Performer/Mirror*  
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*The UNFOLD: Audience/Performer/Mirror event, organised by LIMA in Amsterdam, saw reinterpretations of artist Dan Graham's famous performance Audience/Performer/Mirror (1977) made accessible for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience.*

“You are the audience and I am the performer.” This sentence was often repeated in the art performances that took place on the evening of 15 January 2020 during the UNFOLD event organised by LIMA in Amsterdam. LIMA, an organisation that has (amongst other mandates) the preservation of media art, invited artists Keren Cytter, Emile Zile, Jan Robert Leegte and students of the Gerrit Rietveld Academy (under the leadership of Willem van Weelden) to create a reinterpretation of the iconic performance *Audience/Performer/Mirror* which artist Dan Graham gave at De Appel arts centre in 1977. This phrase sets up a demarcation between the performer and the audience and is epitomised in the performance by Graham. He stands in front of the mirror with the audience seated behind him, describing every little movement he makes in detail, implying a sense of objectivity. But, when he turns his attention to the audience and starts describing every uncomfortable movement they make, he turns the tables, making them part of the performance.

Forty years later this tension is lost when viewing other versions of Graham's performance on YouTube. His meticulous descriptions of every single movement lasts for more than five minutes and is, at times, boring to watch for a contemporary online audience. Annet Dekker, curator, researcher and assistant Professor of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam, emphasised this point during the panel discussion that concluded the reinterpretations of Graham's performance at LIMA. She questioned the relevance of Graham's performance, seen in isolation. Dekker offered that it is

through reinterpretations, like those shown at LIMA, that Graham's performance becomes significant and enlivened for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience who are unfamiliar with the artist's work.



Photo by Edita Lasauskaite.

## The Eye of the Camera as Mirror

Dekker's point was underscored by the first performance by students of the Rietveld Academy. The audience was directed into a space and seated on the floor facing a screen waiting for the performance to begin. After a few minutes, the audience discovered that the performance had in fact already started; unaware that the camera positioned in front of them was recording the entire time. The recording of the audience and their movements was played back, confronting audience members with their own reflections from a few minutes before. In this performance and in many others during the evening, the reflection of the mirror was replaced by the eye of the camera. Digital technology was used to constantly record, repeat and reproduce what had just taken place.

Through digital technology and social networks even the limits of time and space in performances can be transcended. Artist Emile Zile made this especially apparent in his performance *Performer/Audience/Lens* in which he not only described his movements, but also referenced the 4G, 5G and a little 3G that he felt were present in the space. Zile took out his phone and filmed himself via Instagram with his back facing the audience. He described the large cables on the ocean bottom that transport his recording to big data centres, store his performance and spread it throughout the internet. He described the future iterations of the documentation of his performance, including how he would return to it every 10 years and how he thinks his life will have changed.



Emile Zile performing *Performer/Audience/Lens* at UNFOLD: Audience/Performer/Mirror at LIMA. Photo by Jose Miguel Biscaya.

## Record and Repeat

The reinterpretations at LIMA addressed not only our obsession with documenting everything, but also the endless repetitions that are left online. In the browser-based artwork of artist Jan Robert Leegte, artist Miron Galić performed his piece *Cursor* (2016) by tracing his face with a computer cursor. The audience observed his face, projected onto a large screen facing the artist. There was an intimacy in this moment, almost as if the performer was applying makeup. After completion, the cursor continued moving, seemingly autonomously, on the dark screen of the browser. Before long it became clear that Leegte had programmed the cursor to repeat Galić's every movement.



Miron Galić performs *Cursor* (2016) by Jan Robert Leegte during UNFOLD: Audience/Performer/Mirror at LIMA. Photo by Jose Miguel Biscaya.

Repetition was also evident in several performances by students of the Rietveld Academy. One performer asked the audience to take out their phones and follow her recording on Instagram, and then requested that everyone record themselves and walk through the room. While still describing the movements she was making, the echo of her voice repeated itself through the speakers of the phones of the participating audience members and spread across the room. This form of documentation and repetition harked back to the reflection in the mirror in Graham's performance. However, the use of digital technology and social networks implied that this contemporary reflection never ceases and can be interpreted as more aggressive.

## **Entropy Between the Performer and Audience**

The performers' re-enactments did not only deconstruct the relation between the audience and the mirror. Their use of social networks in the performances also fundamentally changed the dynamic between the audience and the performers. In one instance, a Rietveld student asked the audience to post what they were thinking on Twitter with the hashtag #unfoldgraham. The performer then turned her back on the audience and faced a screen where a thread with the live tweets were slowly being streamed. She read and commented on the tweets, which at first were very observant but became ever-more critical as the performance continued, culminating in a tweet about how boring the performance was. Here, the demarcation between the performer and the audience was completely erased. Both parties had the possibility to comment on each other, although the performer still had the power to decide when the performance ended.

The power dynamic that exists between the audience and the performer was emphasised in the performance by Keren Cytter. A female performer stood next to the camera behind the audience and read a poem about her father. Then a man in the audience stood up, walked in front of the mirror and re-enacted Dan Graham's performance. He later turned his attention to the audience, commenting on their appearance, which was at times humorous but also cruel. When his performance ended the audio-recording of the poem echoed throughout the space. The performers were intertwined with one another by mirroring each other's actions. The initial reading of the poem positioned the male performer as a potential father figure controlling the audience. Yet, it was as if the female performer standing across from him next to the camera was indeed the director.

Through the reflection of the mirror Graham understood the discord between the performer and the audience. The contemporary reinterpretations that took place on the evening of 15 January 2020 at LIMA extended this notion by using digital technology and online social networks, creating even more entropy. Endless repetitions and reflections of the performance can be made online and the audience can participate and comment on the performance through social networks, and in this way become part of it. These manifold reinterpretations of the original performance by Dan Graham made for an interesting mode of artwork conservation. The originals were reactivated, giving the public not only the opportunity to experience the performance live, but also adding - and creating new meaning - to an artwork that resonates with a contemporary audience, while still staying true to the essence of Graham's original piece. Afterall, control still rests with the performer in this structure. "You are the audience and I am the performer" still holds up.

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Participating students from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy: Gijs Ruttenberg, Melody Raven, Kristjan Radakovic, Raul Leal Rodriguez, Dorin Budusan, Sara Pezzolesi, Sofia Fernandez Blanco, Clara Fernández Rojas, Gabriella Kakulya, Ydwine Zanstra, Rachel Walker.