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## 080808 UpStage Festival

Written by [Bree Hadley](#)

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Left - Amazigh Audience. Cover - *RXEgo Go*

It begins with a welcome to what is promised to be an almost non-stop flight, a night winging our way from port to port, timezone to timezone, seeing and hearing stories from around the world.

It is the *080808 UpStage Festival*, a festival which uses the innovative new UpStage software program to bring spectators at 'nodes' all around the world, and in the comfort of their own loungerooms, into a shared online performance space.

In simple terms, UpStage is a site for Internet

performances – what the creators call cyberperformances – which allows anyone anywhere to log in and see the shows without the need for special software, or (thankfully, for the luddites amongst us), any special computer skills.

This year's *080808 UpStage Festival*, curated by **Helen Varley Jamieson**, **Vicki Smith** and **Dan Agnihotri-Clark** featured more than a dozen performances from new media artists in New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada, Europe and the Middle East.

The program, and the performers that were part of it, were a diverse group.

There were performances from artists working in multimedia labs around the world, which present complex examinations of identity, presence, absence and power inflected through the lens of the strange discontinuities of cyberspace. In *RXEgo-Go*, by **Tara Rebele** (USA), **Miljana Peric** (Serbia), and **Suzon Fuks** (Australia/Belgium), we were taken into the wonderfully well-realised story of a woman who takes a pill, and with a psychedelic swirl of colour and sound falls into UpStage as an avatar, wondering how to get out, while a Teleprompt robot tries to cure her of the interdisciplinarity and erraticitis that's causing her ideosyncracies via a digital lobotomy. In *Noir Night*, by **Kristin Carlson** and **Sheila Page** (USA), a pair of disembodied dresses told the story of a body image stolen – *Frump* feels ugly when she looks in the mirror, covets the image of the slim and sexy *Red Dress*, and the two get caught in a search for a missing self chased by *Mr Big* with his Gangster hat and guns, the audience provoked by questions about whether they're in sync with their own body image.

In *Calling Home – The Big Get Together*, by Active Layers, including **Cherry Truluck** (UK), **Liz Bryce** (New Zealand), **Suzon Fuks** (Australia/Belgium) and **James Cunningham** (Australia), *Grand Uncle* was on the air at FAQ Radio, fielding calls from people on the trail of missing relatives, including the missing *Micheal Finch*, who may have run off to Australia to meet with *Kathy*, or may have been holed up by ex-wife *Jenny* who wants to declare him dead and claim the insurance. The radio show unfolded, together with songs for each of the callers, and line drawings the signified each of the callers, and sometimes started sliding into each other.

Some of the performances addressed more political or personal themes, including intimate stories of how human beings are positioned in their culture and history. In *Venil EA86! Dodjil* to the *Zapata Private/Pirate Birthday Party*. And, *Vice Versa...*, by **Miljana Peric**, **Teodora Peric**, **Jelena Milosavljevic-Rubil**, **Julijana Protic** and **Goran Rubil**, drawings of faces in balaclavas were set against the story of the emergence of Zapatista parties in Mexico in the twentieth century, and electronic music, issuing a call to the audience to "aestheticise what is breaking you", and invoking the political theatre theory of Augusto Boal.

In *Merznet*, by **Ben Unterman**, **Daniel Silverman**, **Maya Jarvis** and **Inouk Touzin** (Canada), avatars and text from Kurt Switters poems and prose were adapted into the story of a growing group which feels challenged by a stranger standing there who won't speak back, until shots and sirens ring out and a riot begins. In *Amazigh Storyteller*, by **Nadia Oufriid** (Lebanon), the artist told the story of the Berbers – known to themselves as the Amazigh – and her struggle to reconcile her identity as Amazigh and Arab, set against a moving slide show of her land and people.

Still other performances considered the way people are placed in their world. In *Noxitera*, by **Antoinette LaFarge** (USA) and **Marlena Corcoran** (USA/Munich/Seoul), we saw slide show of microscopic images of a green-blue world, which, the program told us, was a sort of biome developed from data on global warming. The images were set against a poetic stream of thoughts on seeing, and beginnings, and endings, building into a sort of visual poem based on word association and substitution. In *Workshop Zoo*, by **Katarina Djordjevic Urosevic** with **Matija, Kaja, Isidora, Luka** and **Sofia**, children from Belgrade set images of animals across images of the planet and the ocean, asking where the animals live, what symbolic associations they hold, and what sort of state a closer affinity with animals could produce. In *Mysterious Mali's Drawings*, by **Mali Duckitt**, **Chad Duckitt** and **Louise Phillips** (Australia), with **Helen Varley Jamieson** (Australia/New Zealand), two children from Brisbane used their drawings to tell the tell of *Natureboy*, and his attempts to save the world of *Boozoopi* from Orangebomb, and the evil *Lionmonkey* who wants to keep it crushed forever, with much enthusiastic encouragement from a stage full of spectators.

There was a surprisingly strong sense of thematic unity in the programme of performances presented as part of the *080808 UpStage Festival*, a constant return to themes of identity, emplacement, ecology, close-ups, connections and absences, and a constant emphasis on storytelling in which the group gathered from around the globe become an interactive audience.

What was most engaging about the cyberperformance experience was the sense of the performances forming in the very moment of the encounter, and the sense that spectators participated in this encounter. In each performance, a chat panel to the side of the stage was populated by spectator commentary – all the questions, asides, smart-aleck remarks and sudden revelations that drove the dramatic tension of the stories, slideshows and performances becoming an interactive conversation with a sense of community, and shared creativity.


 

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In some ways, the idea of a digital performance festival challenges the definitions of 'performance' and 'festival' as embodied events in specific spaces and times. But, the experience of the **080808 UpStage Festival** in fact also confirmed some of the most powerful features of these forms. The notion that contemporary performance pushes meaning-making out into the space between stage and spectator, instead of prescribing interpretations, was made concrete. So too the notion that a festival, as a shared experience of a series of performative acts in a specific space/time, allows artists and audiences to connect with different perspectives and consider the bigger questions of what goes on in the world. As the **080808 Upstage Festival** performances unfolded, the chatter amongst the audience made the connections between these shows, as well as the (sometimes critical) connection to other cultural showcases going on around us at the same time, such as the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony, explicit.

In the end, the **080808 UpStage Festival** was an engaging, and above all fun, demonstration of some of the possibilities a program like UpStage may hold for democratising creative practice, and developing new creative communities.

**080808 UpStage Festival**

8 – 9 August 2008

[www.upstage.org.nz](http://www.upstage.org.nz)

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