

Staging the Gaze in Rimini Protokoll's *Situation Rooms*

Melanie Wilmink

I am standing in front of a bright yellow door as my pulse begins to race. Stamped on the centre of the door is a black number matching that of the digital tablet that I selected off a long, narrow table moments earlier. The utilitarian black stencil and its lemon-coloured background are echoed on the surface of the tablet; as I align my body with the door, I familiarize myself with the solid weight of the digital screen awkwardly balanced on top of a wood-dowelled handle. After a few moments, text captioning begins to fade in and out at the top of the image:

You will play 10 different roles.

My hand and your hand will merge. My situation will become your situation.

Follow the film carefully. Stay with me, and you won't get lost!
Let's go.
Let's open this door together. (Rimini Protokoll 2014)

A hand enters the frame at the bottom of the screen, reaching toward the metal door handle. Obediently, I extend my own hand to grasp the physical version of that same handle and pull the door open.

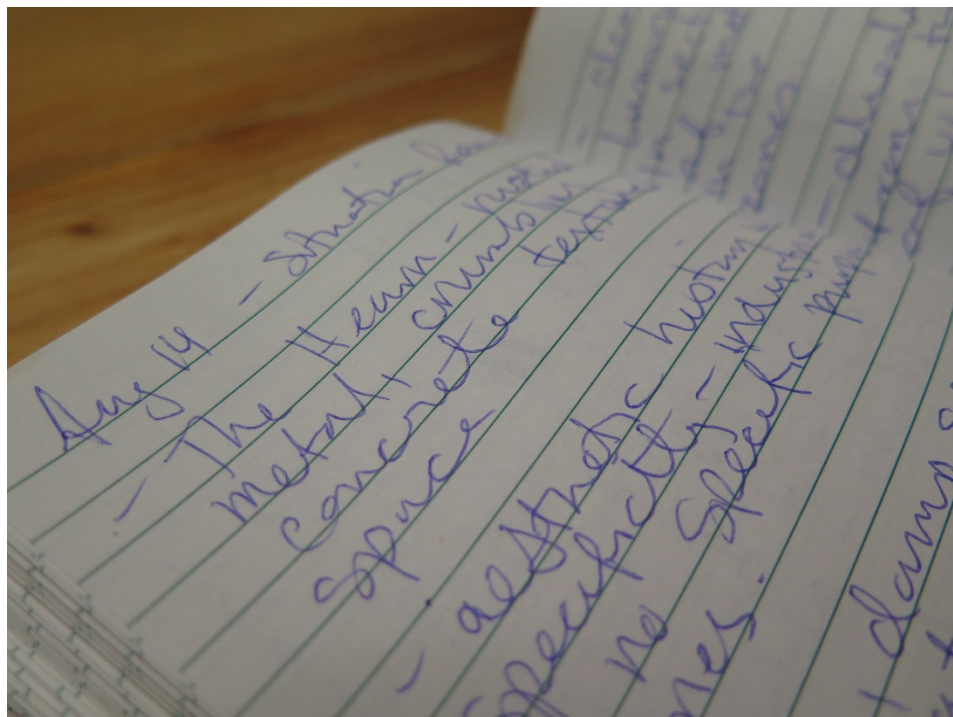
When I enter, I step into a mausoleum. A marbled wall and bench are set out in front of me, and as the video footage pans through a virtual duplicate of the space, I navigate both the screen and physical versions of the environment simultaneously. The screen-image guides my body to a seated position on the bench, facing the marbled wall with its various memorial trinkets, while I examine the surfaces in an attempt to reconcile artificial surfaces with visual illusions. I bounce between screen and space; the sensation is abrupt, confusing, and hectic, as my brain and body try to make sense of all the stimuli. For a few moments, I sit still on the bench, taking in the environment while my headphones begin to play the audio of a man describing the memorial in front of me. He situates me in the space of the mausoleum and then recalls his experience with death as part of a Mexican drug cartel. As this audio plays, the video image flips between the doubled virtual set, archival, and staged footage. While the sensation of distraction remained, I begin to settle into the story, trying to focus on the narrator's words and recollections.

Suddenly there is a noise from behind me, and as I look over my shoulder toward the sound, I see a woman in a fedora pop through a door and run across the room to disappear into what had previously been a solid wall. I do not remember her looking at me—instead, her gaze was focused intently at her own tablet—but she must have been equally surprised by my presence.

She vanished so quickly that it could have been a dream.

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These moments were my introduction to the interdisciplinary production *Situation Rooms*, by Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel under the banner of Rimini Protokoll. Most often described as “theatrical” and produced within theatre festivals, this project brings together the staging of theatre, cinematic mediation, and the spectatorial immersivity of art installation as part of what the team describes on their website as a “multiplayer video piece” (Rimini Protokoll n.d.). Here, the contexts of theatre, cinema, gallery, and video game collide to produce a highly unusual experience of art experience.

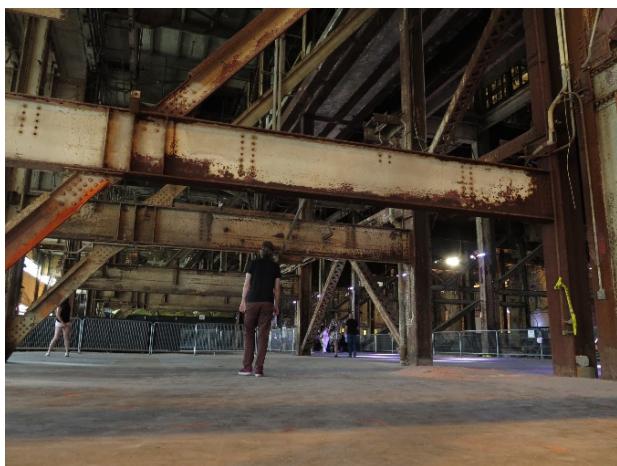


Rimini Protokoll notes. Photo: Melanie Wilmink.

The question of what this new form of spectatorship looks—and feels—like anchors my larger doctoral research project. It is a viewing situation that simultaneously wraps the spectator in an unfolding aesthetic encounter while paradoxically disrupting that immersion by revealing the construction of that experience. What follows here is an early draft for one of my dissertation case studies, as a gesture of thinking-through that echoes the push and pull between experience and criticality within the artwork itself. My writing describes and moves through images and memories in order to understand how *Situation Rooms* produces its spectatorial effects. As part of the process of building this understanding, I took the unusual tack of making paintings that filtered my memories into a more concrete form. Together, the paintings, my related notes, and longer text make visible some of the hidden labours that go into finalizing ideas and producing critical writing. Ironically, as with so many preparation processes, the painting itself remains unfinished. The task of stimulating the writing and shaping ideas was accomplished, and the image itself had to be set aside in favour of the higher priority of writing the dissertation. Like this textual description of the work, it exists in limbo, on its way to becoming something else. So, in the spirit of demonstrating my thinking-in-process, I share with you some of these fragments, which have not yet become what they will be.

When I saw the work at Toronto’s Luminato Festival in June 2016, *Situation Rooms* was installed in a defunct power plant called the Hearn. The space, which was decommissioned in 1995, has largely

been left to decay except for its occasional use as a film set for dystopian movies¹ (Luminato 2016). In 2016, Luminato retrofitted the space for minor public use by cleaning some of the rubble, stabilizing structural issues, and creating a temporary 1,200 seat theatre as well as a pop-up restaurant (Flack 2016). Luminato maintained the industrial ambience of the space by cordoning off areas that were not cleaned or were unsafe for public access and installed a variety of small, temporary art installations and theatre productions within the larger maze of the industrial plant. The festival was an exciting chance for spectators to experience the ruinous aesthetic of the building for themselves, since the urban exploration of the Hearn was as much a draw as the art that was displayed. This site-specific appeal certainly drove many of the curatorial choices of that edition of Luminato, and the *Situation Rooms* set-piece fit well with the industrial aesthetic and alternative quality of the space as a theatrical venue.



The Hearn. Photo: Melanie Wilmink.



Situation Rooms painting, layer I. Photo: Melanie Wilmink.

From the exterior, the set-space of *Situation Rooms* looked ad-hoc, resonating with the industrial surroundings in the Hearn. Plywood beams and sheets were painted gunmetal grey, with their unfinished texture facing outward to reveal wall joints, piping, electrical work, and further construction necessities. Other sections of the set revealed some of the interior set-space materials, like the geometric screening from a middle-eastern themed room, a corrugated iron rooftop, shabby window draperies, and a modern cityscape projected onto a fabric wall. These surface textures stratified, stacking one story onto another, and creating the illusion of a haphazard shanty-town that had organically developed out of these materials.

Since this set was primarily designed for a theatrical experience from the interior (where spectators would be surrounded by an immersive and realistic environment), the gesture of revealing the unfinished surfaces of the exterior created a tension between the interior and exterior of the set. From the exterior, the set flats could be seen from the back-side, in an angle that is unusual within theatrical staging. For the most part, stage sets are built to be seen from the immersive interior—where the illusion of walls and landscapes are maintained by the smooth, decorated surface. In this case, we see usually faces toward the hidden backstage of a theatre: the raw fabrication of the structure that supports the decorated scenery. For exterior viewers, the normal operation of a theatrical set is turned inside out, and access to the fictional world that plays out in the time of performance is thwarted. For viewers positioned on the exterior, the set would never become a theatrical experience. Instead, it was positioned as an object—as an installation art-piece that could only be viewed, not lived in. Simultaneously, it was clear that this space was accessible to some

human bodies; docents and technicians circulated behind the barrier, along with the audiences that lined up to enter the space at the appropriate time. Occasionally one could also see bodies navigating the interior of the architecture. The implications of this, however, are that the sets were navigable from two sides: the interior immersive reality for the theatrical audience members and the exterior distanced construction for the visual arts viewer.

Against the rough and worn textures of the set exterior and the Hearn's architectural ruin, the yellow doors of *Situation Rooms* contrasted sharply with this surface. The hue was warm and saturated, with a glossy finish that seemed fresh and untouched by time and travel. These doors were tantalizing but solidly refused access to the interior spaces that are hinted at through the wooden screens and window portals. Only the chosen were allowed entry. The chosen included the twenty participants who bought tickets to the performance event. The *Situation Rooms* narrative requires that each run includes exactly this number, since there are moments where stories intersect and produce some interactivity between spectators. To ensure a full run, rush tickets were used to fill any no-show gaps, and failing that, one of the volunteer staff would step into the role of spectator. Although there were twenty possible narratives, each spectator only rotated through a sequence of ten, depending on which tablet they picked up at the start of the event. Most of these stories were also experienced by several other spectators, but the order and timing differed so that participants were arranged and guided smoothly through the space without colliding.



The *Situation Rooms* at the Hearn. Photo: Melanie Wilmink.

The theatrical experience was structured so that each spectator was given a unique role to play out in their unique time, which would then cycle on to the next narrative so that the spectator could enact ten different stories. This cycle produces a unique sensation of shared—yet fragmented—memory. Throughout the “play,” spectators were aware of being both isolated in their individual narratives and in a communal relationship with the other spectators who also shared the set-space. For the

most part, spectators remained focused on their own narratives, staring intently at the screens for navigation instructions and narrative content; however, it was impossible to ignore the fact that other bodies were also circulating within their own stories. Occasionally, Rimini Protokoll also arranged the sequences in such a way as to force interaction between the spectators, where one viewer had to hand objects over to another, shake hands or otherwise acknowledge the living human bodies around them. In these scenarios, spectators may have shared a sly look that recognized their play-acting: their performance of instructions supporting a fictional narrative, while being simultaneously present as spectators of a theatrical event.

(the narrative pace of the video continues so quickly that it's hard to dwell on any weirdness - couldn't explore the hole she went through, or look very carefully at sets because we were already moving on to something else and if you don't follow you get lost)

– *Wilmink reflective notes*

Within my run of the production, some of the most powerful moments occurred when the presence of real spectators doubled the fictional narrative, disrupting the forward momentum of narrative. Early in my run, as I exited the doors of the mausoleum to transition into a new story, the video screen made me pause to gaze at a bland-looking office hallway. As the image

turned my view from left to right, another spectator rounded the corner at the end of the hallway, staring intently at their own screen. Simultaneously, a virtual character appeared on my tablet, pointing a gun in my direction.

My stomach clenched in visceral reaction to the synchronized appearance of spectator/character and their doubled gesture of pointing the gun/tablet in my direction. This moment was entirely scripted by the production, which timed and manoeuvred the movement of spectators perfectly. Similarly, other moments incorporated actual interactivity between spectators and even props or set-pieces, asking the spectator to pick and move objects or to pass objects or articles of clothing to other spectators. In one scenario, I was asked to pick up a bullet-proof vest and help another spectator dress in it. The weight of the jacket forced me to struggle with my tablet while awkwardly placing the vest onto another human being. I made eye contact with the other spectator, and for a moment we were bound in the gesture of “acting together,” of play-acting along with the narrative, but also knowing that we were looking at it from the outside at the same time and remembering our role as theatre-goers within the strange immersive fiction.

Later in the production, I was able to experience the other side of this equation, as the person being dressed in the flak jacket. The sequential narratives produce exciting opportunities to see multiple perspectives of the same situation, to observe how they change depending on the subjective positioning. The play-acting of different roles is enriched by “seeing both sides” as it were. I could feel the weight of the flak jacket resting on my torso, pulling at my shoulders and compressing my breath. I recall being surprised by how heavy it was. My only other experience with bullet-proof vests is through the movies—where actors wear them like fashion accessories, performing limber stunts, and shaking off bullet wounds with ease. This was the first time it had occurred to me how awkward wearing such an object would be. How it would constantly remind you of its presence, and the ever-present danger that would necessitate wearing it. In this situation, I did not have to juggle my video tablet as much—I merely moved it from arm to arm as my assistant did all the work. Perhaps this enabled me to focus more on the physicality of what was occurring, rather than the performative action I was required to take up.

In moments like these, the experience of time became a loop. A tension developed between the linear sequence of the different narratives and the recursivity of returning to something that you had experienced previously, but from a slightly different perspective. Spectators saw the same thing play out, recognizing their earlier experience as it impacted the new iteration. This gesture of looping time resisted the linear flow from one story to another, disrupting the normal chronology of bodily experience that moved in a continuity. Halfway through the *Situation Rooms* production, I came up against a powerful example of this unstable positionality. As with the previous example with the flak jacket, I encountered a temporal loop, transitioning from doctor to patient in a single gesture, experiencing both the act of treating a body, and of being treated, in sequence.

As Volker Herzog (a surgeon from Doctors Without Borders), I began seated in a conference room where I leafed through various briefing documents for his upcoming mission in Sierra Leone. From there, I was asked to get up and walk into the next room, passing through a brightly patterned African wax-cloth curtain and appearing in a temporary medical field office. In this brightly lit room, the plastic walls moved softly as a fan blew warm air back and forth. Although I cannot be certain it is true, I distinctly remember this space feeling warmer than other areas of the building. The air drifted on my skin, and I immediately felt as if I had moved through space and time into a different country. Further aiding this sensation was the striking smell of Dettol, which permeated the space. While the other spaces in the set were extremely multi-sensory (lighting simulated outdoor luminescence and shadows, and at one point spectators were asked to serve and eat a bowl of borscht), this room struck me in particular. The smell of Dettol was for me what Roland Barthes might call a “punctum,” the detail that “pricks” the viewer by engaging their personal, embodied experience (2010, 52). Although its usual function is merely as a cheap antiseptic, Dettol is imbricated into my personal experience and childhood growing up in South Africa. Because it is cheap and easily accessible, this chemical was used everywhere from households to medical clinics, and its powerful odour immediately grounded me in the sense of place that *Situation Rooms* was trying to replicate. Even though Western countries like Canada have the same sterilization needs in both homes and hospitals, Dettol does not seem to be the chemical of choice; perhaps it is outdated, or simply replaced by North American products like Mr. Clean or Pine-sol.



Situation Rooms painting, layer 2. Photo: Melanie Wilmink.

Beyond the smell was an entire immersive set-space that replicated a medical tent. In front of the door a metal cabinet and table were covered with medical paraphernalia, and to the side stood a hospital bed where one of the other spectators was already reclined. Through my headphones, Herzog described his work life in Sierra Leone and asked me to mark Abu (the reclining “victim”) with a sticker denoting the severity of his gunshot wound. Following Herzog’s gesture on screen, I was supposed to reach out and pull a yellow sticker from a roll, and then walk over to the hospital bed, where I again traced Herzog’s movement to place the sticker on the warm, and very real hand of the spectator who was lying there with their eyes locked to their own digital screen. The Abu/spectator quickly sat up and exited the room while Herzog returned to the cabinet. From there, Herzog/I began to open cabinets revealing graphic medical photographs of men who have been mutilated by the violence from the civil war, all the while narrating his treatment of those wounds: “these face to face mutilations had a severe impact on me personally, and more than a gunshot wound. Perhaps injuries administered by war-drones will touch me even less, because there is no personal contact between victim and attacker” (Rimini Protokoll 2014). Herzog subsequently instructs the spectator to take a seat on the hospital bed, where he/I reclined as he recalled that: “these events haunted me in my dreams. As a result, I got up in the middle of the night to check if my kids were still in their beds.” While I lay still on the sticky, plastic vinyl of the cot, Herzog went silent, and the sound of crickets came up to merge with the sound of the fan that continued to move air around the small tent. Herzog’s narrative slowly faded to black, and the story of Abu Abdu Al Homssi faded into view.

On screen, I saw Herzog’s patient again, only this time he began to speak in Arabic, describing how he was shot during a protest in Syria. I lay on the bed, looking down at the screen which showed footage of Abu’s bloodied body from his viewpoint. From this position, my torso and legs aligned with Abu’s, and I watched as the video oscillated between this footage and archival recordings of the protests.

When the image came back from the protest, Dr. Herzog entered the frame. We (Abu and I) watch him (Herzog and that spectator) grab a sticker and place it on our hand(s), and then Abu abruptly instructs me to get up and exit the room, continuing Abu’s narrative in a different set-piece. This moment is important because it physically doubles the same gesture—placing the sticker—from two different perspectives. As with the previous example of the flak jacket, this move positioned the spectator within two points of view simultaneously. As Abu, we received the sticker, but we also recalled placing the sticker as Herzog just moments before. Abu’s narrative of being shot was tinted with the earlier descriptions of violence and traumatic effects on the healer. Trauma was represented as not just something that happens to immediate victims, but also has complicated effects on everyone who interacts with the situation. It functions as a microcosmic representation of Rimini Protokoll’s larger point that the arms trade operates with global effects on a variety of different subjects, who are all intertwined.

During my experience of *Situation Rooms*, this effect was doubly underscored by a personal coincidence. Although I had come to the performance with a group of people, we were separated at the beginning to pursue our own paths through the set-space. Now, while I was lying on the bed, trying to reconcile the graphic images I had just seen as Herzog and the bloody wounds of the Abu/me body, my boyfriend walked into the room as the new Herzog. Focused intently on our own tablets, we briefly made eye contact, and he enacted the same gestures I had recently completed. When he walked over with the sticker, this encounter even further fractured beyond the

spectator/character doppelgangers. His presence carried the deep connotations of our shared history but was distanced by our focus on the narratives and our play-acting. As he placed the sticker, the brush of his skin against mine was both familiar and perfunctory, moving quickly to keep up with the pace of the video image. When I recently asked Luke about his memories of the *Situation Rooms* (two years after the fact), he didn't even recall this moment until I mentioned it, noting only that there was someone else in the room when he entered as Herzog. He did, however, remember the quality of the set-design in various spaces—including the mausoleum and the field hospital—and his intent focus on framing the screen properly to ensure that he was aligning his movements as instructed. Although Luke and I were similarly drawn to the intersections between the real and

- screening - dappled shadows in space, creates atmosphere. - layering - subtle colours and depths that create dimensionality in room. - sitting in chair, back to window. Light coming in through patterned screen, creating a sense of a fictional outdoors entering my space. I could touch the light, see it affect my body. - but no such thing in the actual exterior inside the Hearn, clash of sensation.
- Wilmink reflective notes

virtual as well as the elaborate design of the physical environments, and felt engaged in the overall production, it is interesting to note that our attention was held differently. For Luke, the video narratives were paramount, and aligning his body

to the images meant paying more attention to the screen than his surroundings, whereas my attention was often directed toward the materiality of the piece and the way it was engaging spectatorial bodies. There were many instances where I remember only half-listening to the video narratives and struggling to pay attention to the content, but I distinctly remember the spaces and interactions with other viewers.

Situation Rooms uses this clash between physical reality and the virtual image to create tension. The viewer's body is scripted like any other element in the production, controlling and synchronizing their actions with the repeatable aspects of the event (video recordings, audio and lighting cues, the introductions and other gestures of acting by the production staff, the physicality of the theatrical staging, etc.). The spectator's experience is staged for themselves, and for other viewers, as a key part of the theatrical narrative. It is a situation that calls attention to the viewer's actions within the context of the work and their roles and responsibilities as a participant. Within the broader themes of the production, the spectator is implicated in the same processes of the global arms race as the figures we see on screen (who are themselves doubly complicated as real people who are acting out versions of their own stories).

These entanglements drew me to the *Situation Rooms* as I selected case studies that centred viewers in new forms of aesthetic experience. Just as the production staging at the Hearn showcased the exterior seams of the set to passers-by while only showing the immersive interior sets to participants, here the narratives function similarly by showing us the outside and inside of experience at the same time. My dissertation writing aims to convey these effects in the case studies, tracing the way that artworks make spectators think and feel simultaneously, and interior and exterior perception coalesce. Through writing style, I try to approximate the sensations of being with the artworks, tracing the flow between the moment-to-moment experience as well as the distance that comes with stepping back to produce critical discourse. This performative writing is enacted through, and grounded, by the fragments and processes I have staged in this paper, as something comprising memories of experience, but also something that is always incomplete and in the process of becoming something else.



Close-up of *Situation Rooms* painting. Photo: Melanie Wilmink.

Note

1. *Pacific Rim* (2013) and *Robocop* (2014) are two of the most notable examples.

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