As is often the case, this work arose from two colliding thoughts.

The first was to do with our relationship to created things. It strikes me that our creations usually need to be noticed. It’s as though we have a basic human intolerance to the idea that something might exist meaningfully outside of our immediate needs. Perhaps we fear indifference to us, and can’t help but imprint this neediness onto everything we make.
The second source of inspiration has haunted me for more than 30 years. The CS Lewis book *The Magician’s Nephew* is a sort of origin story of Narnia. Throughout the adventure, the young protagonists, Polly and Digory, experience a number of in-between places, including a continuous loft space much like the one above my terraced house. This exciting rat run joins all the attics ultimately allowing the children access to their neighbours’ homes (and lives). The magical counterpart to the linked lofts is an ethereal place called ‘The Wood Between The Worlds’, a beautiful forest filled with dark pools, each one leading to a different reality.

The children soon find themselves leaping into these pools and tumbling through the sky into unknown universes. Imagine the courage required to submerge yourself in a mysterious liquid – the faith, or at least hope, that there will not only be air on the other side, but that it will be breathable. Picture the long, awful moment of uncertainty, sinking into this strange water, waiting for the magic to kick in.

Water takes us back to the beginning, whether we believe in the Flood or evolution or just a mother’s womb. It represents a moment before decision, and is freeing, because it gives us chances. Anything can happen when we’re submerged. We can be anyone, or anything as, suspended in there, we start to lose track of our humanness. But water brings with it a condition to this freedom: we must relinquish the known for the unknown, and there’s no guarantee of safety. It can take us everywhere, but it can also take everything we have. Water dismantles us.

In the end, it is always easier to stay where we are.

### The Real Wood between the Worlds

Part of the point of this project is about the future of tech, with water symbolising a classic sci-fi technology dream - glittering fluid intelligence liberated from wires.

The goalposts of magic keep shifting, and the idea of truly autonomous tech, free from physicality and free from us, is secular Westerner’s last bastion of impossibility. As science’s senses get sharper, mysteries are chased into the pits of the oceans. Liquidised machine minds seem full of potential and somewhere (we hope) a common language might inexplicably emerge. Water is always an in-between world, but this wonderful communication medium comes at a price. Something will usually be taken.

It has never been more normal to aggressively define who we are by means of a wall keeping out who we are not. Online, we no longer see ourselves as individual bodies, but as political instances speaking on behalf of bracketed collections of ideas. Cynical algorithms keep us in line with our disembodied political armies, and shield us from challengers. I sometimes think we’re not really afraid of virtual minds arising at all, and that what we really fear is the prospect of meeting real humans with views just as valid as our own. That kind of confrontation would cost us a lot: identity, pride, time, energy, community. The idea of losing ourselves in this way, the revelation that we’ve been wrong, and wrong, and wrong again, might be so traumatic we can’t contemplate it directly. It’s easier to pretend we’re really worried about a self check-out machine coming to life.

How does the Wood Between The Worlds connect to these hazy windows, and the idea of creations that don’t care if they’re seen?

We need to be OK with not being involved. Polly and Digory were alone in the woods. They weren’t performing their feats for anyone else. Beautiful rituals without spectators go on all the time, and digital technology is a master of them, running its algorithms for its own reasons, forever. Highly realised virtual worlds are already there, carrying on around us all the time; they’re just not for human eyes.

If there is a common motivation, a similar need, value, even way of moving, then some sort of conversation is possible between any two entities, regardless of their respective backgrounds. There is a natural joy to this kind of ‘meet in the middle’ conversation. When we wade out into the waters of the in-between world, anything is possible, but our culture is sometimes as fragile as our identity, and we often feel the risk of losing it is too great.

While most of us are busily training ourselves to resist this alternative conversation, dancers study its value without fear. That’s why I feel dancers are the natural mediators of these cultural binaries: human and other; human and human; human and machine - three expressions of the same inherent crisis. Everything that moves can be conversed with through everything else that moves, and dancers are masters of the bridging power of physical language.

Is it possible for our minds to imagine something significantly different to us? Or can we only really picture things we see in ourselves?

This isn’t about the silly hysteria around AI becoming sentient; the key to understanding in the modern world won’t be found in Christmas cracker riddles about imaginary apex predators. The real ‘hard problem’ is much more difficult and interesting, and we encounter it every time we attempt to interact with another human. If we can find a way to shift our perspective away from our own points of reference, even for a moment, then perhaps we will really have transcended something.

Technology might actually offer some clues to understanding other minds, just not in the Terminator way. Analogy is the key and tech is a treasure trove of comparisons that we have yet to properly plunder. Computers are like us because we made them. They are a bit like a time-bound body, but also a bit like immortality. They are supposed to speed us up, but are ultimately physical, and more often than not, they get in the way. Tech is the difficult alien in our midst, the black box, the similar-but-different ‘someone else’ with which we all must deal, every day.
If you had the power to make anything, you would make a new world, eventually. Here religious and digital approaches draw from the same impulse. Both behave as though created material arises only in the orbit of an observer; that things are made marvellous not for their own sake, but principally to be seen.

Like all things digital, virtual worlds often surround the experiencer in a carefully curated bubble. But what if tech is most instructive on empathy when it is indifferent to us, when it’s being its truest self, and not performing? Maybe the in-between places linking the digital realm and the physical world are the spaces that spring up to please themselves, rather than to delight our eyes. We could then be true witnesses to virtual worlds, not entitled to experience them but simply very lucky to be there, empowered by the happening, and sensing the language — if not yet understanding.

Where does that leave us? Are we still us, if we are not at the centre of every story? Can immersion in indifferent digital worlds give us our first push down a path to something else?

Inverting VR’s impulse to surround us would mean an instant change in our status. We peer, like ghosts, through clouded windows, anonymous witnesses to the mysterious, eternal rituals. But this should be a sort of relief, too. Whether we’re here or not, these worlds will keep going. We have been granted a taste of otherness and a choice: as we are no longer the point, we can leave any time we want. We are off the hook.

Leila Johnston

Events

Centres of Gravity: Inverting the Virtual
Wednesday 05 December 2018, 7pm - 8:30pm

Artist Leila Johnston will talk through her experience of her residency, which incorporated a creative tech and dance workshop with NHS Derby. This installation combines dreamlike footage of dancers, a 360 degree demo, and some original writing undertaken during Leila’s residency at QUAD.

She will explain her new body of work, which aims to subvert the usual solipsistic bubble of digital tech, offering instead a kind of ‘reverse VR’: orderly portals that show glimpses of worlds oblivious to us. When the viewer’s universe is no longer central, we are stripped of agency and instead adopt the important role of witness — to the puzzling, ritualistic beauty of magnified ordinariness.

This publication was printed as part of Centres of Gravity, an exhibition by Leila Johnston, in QUAD Extra Gallery Spaces, 10 November 2018 – 3rd February 2019 and designed by Firecatcher. Special thanks to the dancers in the piece, Megan Smith and Daniel Longhurst.