

Home: A Performative Space
Robertson'n'Blum

Evaluation



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Overview of *Home: A Performative Space*

Home: A Performative Space is a participatory performance by Robertson'n'Blum and first took place on Friday 7th May 2021 via Zoom.

Created in collaboration between Clare Robertson and Stefanie Blum, the performance encourages participants to repurpose household objects within their own home. After months of closed art galleries and postponed exhibitions, we explored participatory performance art within domestic spaces.

The project rethinks Zoom; not perpetuating the limitations of digital communication, but using it to build a sense of connectivity and expanding the expectations around where art can be found and experienced.

Participants were invited to strap themselves in as if on a ride at the fairground and be guided, safely and gently on a virtual journey. By means of auditory and visual instructions, participants were guided towards new perspectives, a sense of community and connectivity.

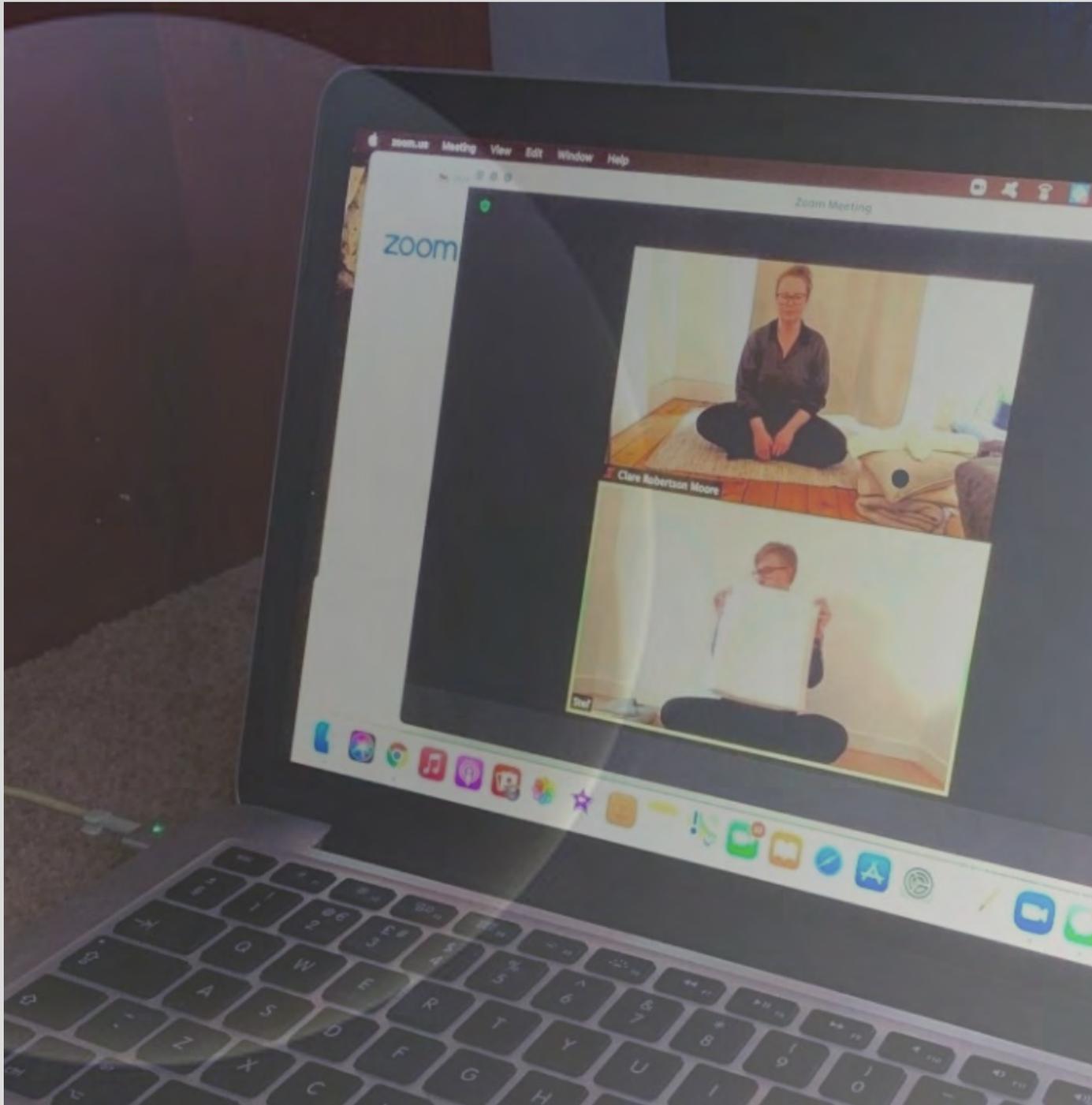
The event was sponsored by Thrive Edinburgh and was part of the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival (SMHAF) 2021.

For a moment
everything is black and
darkness is all you can
see until you spot a
light far in the distance
and then another and
another until the whole
galaxy appears before
you.

Feedback from participants



Very enjoyable, is how I experienced it. Thank you for the event. I am new to participatory art events and I liked the way it was so clearly set out beforehand - I could see what I was getting into before committing to it - very accessible.



I thought the two-person and two-part structure was very successful, for me, for the sense of event. It drew attention to the importance of the preparation stage and the extent of the prep stage focused me on the seriousness of the journey ahead.

And having Stef using a flat tone and plain clothing and slow movements, and the direct tableau-ish camera, it all moved me out of the everyday, into an imagined journey to this other time / place / realm / mood / state.

I liked the bit where Clare was listing off the participants' locations, the sudden sense of this thing happening elsewhere in parallel, the same moments of travel, that was good!

Interview for the Scottish Mental Health Art Festival

A conversation between Clare Robertson, Stefanie Blum and Talking Heads volunteer Bilyana Palankasova about the participatory performance Home: A Performative Space, which featured at SMHAF 2021 with support from Thrive Edinburgh.

Bilyana: How did you decide to work together and how does that sit with your individual practices? How do you see your individual practices fitting in a more collaborative framework?

Clare: Stef, do you want to talk about our walk first of all. That's a good place to start.

Stefanie: We went for a walk last summer, it was a social, "let's catch up" thing and Clare was looking after a dog at the time. Basically we talked about our artistic practices and our experience of lockdown and the limitations of, obviously, availability of space. But also, how we have a whole new way of living since that. I was just saying I would be really interested in finding someone to collaborate with and do something and Clare then suggested we could think about how we might find a space to make work, it was a challenge and we started thinking about working together and it's been roughly a year now.

C: And it was sort of also instigated by conversations about how both of us, as many others like us, working with installation, had felt suddenly all such spaces were completely non-existent. We'd both

been at an online talk hosted by the Talbot Rice Gallery. We didn't know because I was over Zoom that we were there, obviously there were probably over 100 people. But what came out of that was the relief that there was a conversation about art happening somewhere, and that we were both a part of it. We usually bump into each other at different arts events. So, it was a bit like that and it felt like a lifeline. It really stimulated a conversation about an opportunity that was potentially there and that we could create something together. So, yeah, that's kind of where we started.

B: Yeah, it was very much a good time for it, to pick up collaborative work like this.

S: Absolutely. And you know, as we then started talking about what we could do, we realised that in an exhibition, I had done a piece where people could lay down on mattresses and Clare had done an audio piece. And without us intending it really, we had already created an environment where people were able to experience my work and listen to Clare's at the same time. It was really interesting to rediscover that. At the time, we didn't think about that, did we?

C: No, but there was a realisation that we had a lot more crossover than we thought in terms of what we were both trying to achieve. I think when Stef had mentioned the word "collaboration" while chatting, I just thought that there might be something here.

B: Sounds ideal! It's really interesting how in a sense you had a work where people would lay on the floor and they would engage with your work simultaneously and that sort of creates a more expanded space.

C: Absolutely! How do we tackle that space that was taken away from us really. Or from everyone.

B: This answer sort of bled into my next question, which was how you initiated the collaborative work, which you kind of responded to already. Can you talk more about the process of working together and how the performance was developed in that year since your walk?

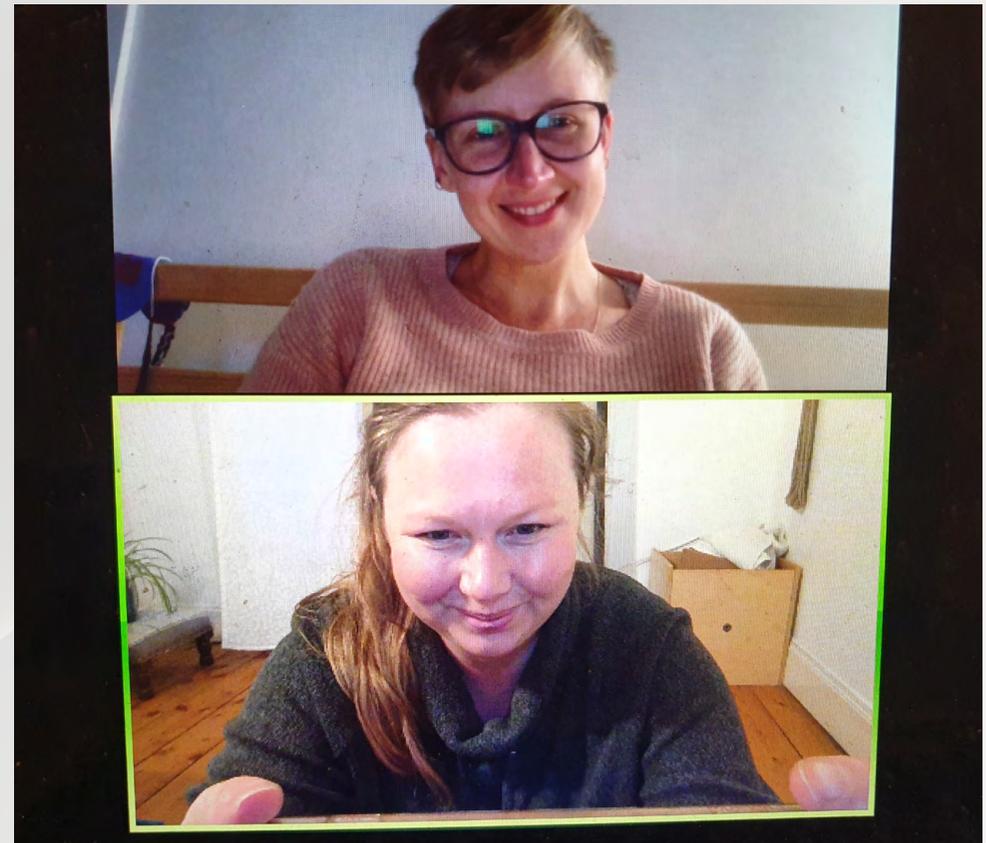
C: On a very practical level, in terms of how this unfolded, of course, all our conversations were on Zoom and so that felt like a really natural and organic way to prepare for the kind of piece of work as it were. And in many ways, it developed quite organically. We can jump on Zoom, at half past eight in the morning and do a bit of workshoping together or later in the evening and that worked well for us. We put aside several hours over the space of about six months and experimented, we tried different things out, we invited a small audience along to get some critique and it was a really satisfying development process. Steph, what do you think?

S: I think that's absolutely right, in practice as you said. I think in terms of working together, I was quite surprised how natural it felt, to be honest, because even when you know someone you don't know how it is to work together. But it was more intuitive and straightforward than it could have been. And I would also say that something that we discovered quite early on was that we really wanted to invest in that contrast between having an IKEA instruction type voice preparing participants and a softer voice taking the participants on the journey.

C: That's interesting because actually when we were practicing this

together and with people who joined us, it took on a slightly different shape each time. And we allowed for that, so depending on how each of us felt in the moment on that particular day and who came on board, there was a bit of space to just kind of feel out what was right in that moment. And I think as Steph said, that has really brought out the contrast between those two voices, which is quite exciting.

B: Completely! It's really interesting that in the context of the collaboration, you leave each other space for improvisation on the spot. I'm very curious about the props that were involved, the household items. Can you tell me more about that?



S: That took quite a long time. We'd both like to develop this for a gallery setting where we'd have so much more control. Because we wanted to make an event which is accessible whilst also trying to max out what we can do. So, we played a lot with more unrelated objects like books and bottles and handheld things, and all sorts of stuff and we had much more clothing items at some point. And it was all a matter of testing what would function for the work, balancing it with what we could expect people to have at their homes. And then also, ultimately, making it comfortable. At the start we set out with wanting to do something more experimental than we ended up doing in the end, which is quite interesting. And I think this is a particular part of the work that I don't see as finished at all, where we're both looking very much forward to developing it for a [physical] space.

C: And I think that was a challenge in some ways to know when to pull back in terms of what we were offering, what we were asking from the participants. Because I think we both identified there is so much scope for a sensory and auditory experience to be pushed but ultimately, we have to respect that we are infiltrating someone's home and what, we hope, is their safe space. So, there was a bit of us having to pull back. Having said that, as Stef said, there's just so much scope for when we take this into a kind of a real gallery space, and this is something that can very much run alongside it. Which makes it incredibly accessible, which is also exciting. Ultimately, it had to have been about the participant. It had to be about them being able to find their place of, hopefully, stillness.

B: Yeah, absolutely! And that really came through because it was very meditative. I was in bed and I made almost a nest in bed and was so excited by what it looked like. It was really calming, meditative and still, it felt like a meditation session but over Zoom. It'd be interesting to talk a bit about the narration on it.

C: There are two parts really. As Stef highlighted, it was an instructional voice we were looking for. I think we mentioned this on the invite, it's very much about being almost as if you're going on fairground rides in Disneyland and before you get on that ride, everyone's ushered into a room and they are given their instructions and their safety manual. We really want them to understand the contrast of the initial introduction to the very free flowing voice. And I think it works. Again, as Stef said, that was something that we really went through again and again and tried to make it sharp. I think that part of the work was very much a performance. And I think there's room to push that further.

S: Yeah, I think it was [about] this contrast. I wrote it but there was a lot of editing and discussion about really defining [it] and trying to find the right terminology. English is my second language and it was really good to have that part be right. There was one example where I wrote "stretch out your arm" and for me that was just letting it hang loose, and Clare said "Well, you know what, that actually feels like it has to be way more active than we want it to be." So, my part was written together and pretty much delivered, word by word, as we wrote it. Whereas [with] Clare's, we had a structure, and obviously there were keywords for handover. A good picture or a good metaphor is that I was a leader in the sense of I tell you what to do and Clare was the guide who is going with you.

C: Yeah, that's really nice, Stef. It was something we developed over the course of time, wasn't it? It was really important for us to have a moment where the participants came together. And that could have happened at pretty much any point throughout whatever is going on with the participant's imagination but bringing the group setting together was key. And looking around at who else was with us, to really value the sense of connectivity. Actually, that was the fundamental point of the work.

B: It's interesting thinking about further developing that for a more traditional space. If the focal point of this iteration was being at home and home being your safe space, how would you translate that in a public space? Would it have the same angle, or would it be a different iteration of that performance but in another setting?

S: We're seeing it as a development of the work because we're very aware that what we've done relied on, we hoped, on [home as] a safe space, and obviously we're aware that's not true for everyone but



that's the hope. We're very aware that means we were able to ask for a lot more vulnerability of participants and openness to things that we don't expect of someone in a gallery setting, because in this instance, no one was watching you, there was no one else who invaded, other than the people you know. Whereas for a gallery setting that part has to change quite a lot to allow for someone to feel safe and feel like it's an accessible work. But what we're really interested in is being able to create the entire experience more, what sort of chair there is, what's the lighting like, what's the voice like and so many more options where I think, at this point, we were not able to play with as much as we'd like.

C: I think this aspect of the online world that we've all uncovered in the last year is going to continue alongside us opening back into new spaces. Hopefully we can take the best of it. And I think that concept will inform this work as we progress. So certainly, Stef is absolutely right, it's reconsidering how we can create the space so that somebody does feel that they can let go. And there are many ways that we can do that. I really like the idea of running it almost on a sort of loop so that people, wherever they are in the world, can tap in and whoever's moving throughout the gallery space can tap in. Stef does incredibly fascinating installation pieces, and I think we're both very keen to explore that in the sense of developing props that we have a little bit more control over.

B: For sure. It's interesting thinking about how technologies, which facilitate events, such as this one, during lockdown, will be incorporated into real life events. Because it did do a lot for accessibility for sure and it really did create a lot of opportunities for people to just participate in things that they wouldn't otherwise, or they would not be able to, so I certainly think there's value in trying to incorporate that in a physical setting.

S: And when it comes to participatory performance, it can be so

daunting. You go into a gallery, and you don't know what happens, that is a massive barrier.

B: Absolutely! I'm someone who's like that. Even working with arts, I am very intimidated by participatory performance just because you don't know what to expect. It could be thrilling but certainly often difficult to access.

C: It's interesting because when asked for feedback, that's exactly what came back – that participatory art could be alienating at times, and this wasn't. So it's actually something I seek wholeheartedly going forward with this.

B: For sure! And I thought it was very well put together in the sense that it didn't demand too much interaction. There wasn't an interaction to get involved in with other participants or reply to, you sit in your space, and you take it in, while still having this sense of connectedness. Do you think there was any limitations to that too? It was designed for a Zoom setting but was there anything that you wished you could have done differently?

C: When we were reflecting back, on what we could have done differently, certainly we would like to incorporate a third person who's almost a caretaker of our participants. We felt like, because we couldn't really break character so to speak, we didn't have the ability to reassure someone who'd left a comment for example. And I think actually Stef said that you picked something up for us.

B: Yeah, I did. Because I myself was confused at first how to change Zoom's settings so it shows only the two of you and had literally just figured it out two seconds before, so took the liberty of answering in the chat. But completely, having that support is important.

C: Yeah, it's important we iron that out. And it leads to another point, which we were discussing earlier, which is we wanted to set up the camera screens to be host only, because we both experienced that elsewhere and when we researched into it, we realised it's a whole other Zoom price point. As in hundreds of pounds and it's not something that's accessible to us. If we are moving into this era of hybrid real/digital space, it can't just be institutions that have access. So, there's a conversation to be had there.

B: Yeah, that is a really good point. The trouble there is that even some smaller institutions don't have access to premium version of software, which obviously creates limitations.

S: Yeah, because we both work partly online as well, we were really aware that we didn't want people to have to share their videos. It's obviously nice to see other people but for us it was far more about the individual experience and allowing for your experience and your consciousness to be aware that there are other people with you rather than having to see them to validate that. I think that really worked well.

C: I completely agree.

B: Really, in that sense, the mental health relationship to this work is very clear. How did the performance become part of the programme of the SMHAF?

S: I can walk you through the practicalities and then Clare can take over. We applied for a Thrive Edinburgh funding to do an event and that is actually two events, another one in October. Our funding application was successful, and we had wanted to be included in the festival, so it was quite straightforward.

C: In terms of the themes, we really wanted to offer something during

difficult times and that's why, thinking about the individual was so important but I think maybe an overarching theme is the idea that the world we live in, or the society that we live in, is becoming ever more fast paced, and we are increasingly attached to technology. We were chatting about this earlier on, it's really, I think this is really important that the idea of rest and stopping and almost giving yourself over and trusting in the process of doing nothing is almost revolutionary, it's like an act of revolt to actually stop. I think fundamentally, that's really important, regardless of whether or not you're coming along as a participatory art person or you're taking time in your life to slow down, especially probably for younger generations.

B: Yeah, completely. And especially in this recent period of time, when we are constantly plugged in, it's really been nonstop in the past year. There's been nowhere else to be with people and we'd really ended up trapped by the screen in one way or another for work and leisure.

C: We are trapped, yeah.

S: Yeah, and I think we were interested in using the screen or technology on the Internet in order to make a pause happen.

B: That's really interesting you say that. How you would use that technology as a facilitator, a carrier, for a performance, which is participatory, but you'd avoid direct engagement with the technology itself.

C: Yeah, that was really important for us from the beginning because there is obviously a contradiction there but it's what we're trying to do in this context.

B: Have you been happy with the feedback so far?

C: It's exciting. I think we're both just delighted we were able to actually get this going under quite difficult circumstances. And we both feel there's so much scope to take this forward and so our next conversations will be about where we're taking this next. And we've had some really nice feedback, haven't we, Stef?

S: Yeah, I think it's quite nice to have that and for us it was important to actively ask for feedback too. And not just when we did the test runs but also when we did the real thing, because it's a new thing for both of us to work this way. And considering it's part of the SMHAF, we wanted to allow for sharing as well.

B: Yeah, I think it was great. It just created a really nice space and I thought it fit lovely within the programme. When I was asked to respond to the programme, it was the thing that really grabbed my attention. And it was really great, thank you for it.

by Bilyana Palankasova

Bilyana is a researcher and curator based in Glasgow. She is interested in collaboration, institutional attitudes and digital arts and is particularly drawn to artistic practices at the interface of nature and technology. Bilyana is currently pursuing an AHRC-funded Collaborative Doctoral Studentship with the University of Glasgow, The University of Edinburgh and NEoN Digital Arts.

The interview was published on the [SMHAF website](#)

About the Artists



Clare Robertson Moore is an Interdisciplinary Artist and writer, Shortlisted for the New Writers Award, Hospitalfields Interdisciplinary Resident, Founder of the Contemplative Practice and has exhibited her work extensively including video and performance works at the Talbot Rice Gallery. Under the pseudonym Automated Luxury Robertson Moore has a deeply anthropological approach to her work seeking to further explore the human condition. Further works can be seen on her [website](#).

Stefanie Blum works across media with a focus on creating installations that amplify the bodily perception of spaces and how we navigate them. She frequently participates in residencies, following invitations from the Common Ground (UK), Lebenshaus (DE), and Thermokoitides (GK) and gained funding support including Hope Scott Visual Art Funding, the Andrew Grant Scholarship, and the Karin Halft Grant. Stefanie is an experienced art tutor, a curatorial practitioner, and co-founder of the Tragicom Collective. Her work can be seen on her [website](#).

Robertson'n'Blum first met during their Masters degree in Contemporary Art at Edinburgh College of Art. We both explored different ways of using physical spaces for performative and installation works and found ourselves questioning our artistic practice when lockdowns and travel restrictions limited the accessibility of gallery spaces. Consequently, we joined forces to create a performative art work which allows audiences to experience art in their own homes.



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