Tim Crouch and Dan Rebellato in Conversation.

Edited by Louise LePage

On 19 March 2011, postgraduates from the Department of Drama and Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London, hosted a symposium titled 'Who Do We Think We Are: Representing the Human' at the Centre for Creative Collaboration in London – a symposium out of which this edition of *Platform* has grown. What follows is a transcript of a conversation which took place that day between writer and scholar Dan Rebellato and the playwright and performance maker Tim Crouch. The Q&A which followed was chaired by Louise LePage.

Dan Rebellato: What is particularly relevant for this symposium is of course the fact that, I think, in those four shows that you've premiered in the last ten years, the adult shows, each one, in a very different way, makes a specific attempt to try to reconvene the way we represent human beings on stage and I thought it might just be a good idea to go through each one just thinking about what the process is, what the journey is, and what the implied, I suppose, image of the world is – if that's not too grand a way of thinking about it. Just starting with *My Arm* –

Tim Crouch: Yes.

DR: The central device, for those of you who maybe haven't seen it, is that it's a one-man show, a first person monologue describing a boy who decides one day to put his arm in the air and then never thereafter takes it down again until he dies from complications caused by holding your arm in the air for sixteen years or however many –

TC: More: thirty years.

DR: Thirty years. Theatrically, of course, the weird device is that at no point in the show does Tim Crouch, who is playing

this character, put his arm in the air: so the audience is faced with a kind of theatrical puzzle. Was that the starting point?

TC: So, thinking about the theme of the day ['Representing the Human']: having been an actor for my 20s and most of my 30s, I was encouraged to explore notions of humanity and humanness in a very particular process, a psychologically driven process, which takes as its fundamental a sort of notion of psychological action, you know, that psychology is the reason for our actions. I became increasingly disenchanted, I suppose, with that process and so *My Arm* is a very strong reaction to that process: by presenting a series of sort of models that refute that psychological basis. There's an action, a big action, the action of a boy who actually puts his arm above his head, but there is never any attempt to psychologically explain that action or explore that action. Everything that happens happens *to* that action, not from *within* that action, if that makes sense. And maybe traditional processes would want to go into the action and work backwards from the action and then try and explain or excuse the action. There's no attempt in *My Arm* to do that; also, formally, that statement is picked up by objects that are used, that are supplied by the audience at the beginning of the show, and those objects are selected entirely at random to represent or portray the main characters in the story, the other main characters in the story – mother, father, brother. And also other objects of art are represented by randomly selected objects. And that's another sort of poke in the eye, I think, for all that kind of stuff that was getting me so down in my 30s. By trying not to think, I suppose, by the performer trying not to think, or the performer trying not to feel, as well, but in such a context whereby thought and feeling is engendered predominantly in the audience rather than on stage. So all these performances, all these pieces are very simple for me to perform on one level in that I don't, *at all*, go through those routes and those practices that I had been doing in my 20s and 30s. I don't need to do that anymore. I feel very militant in a way about not needing to do that anymore. So, yeah, *My Arm* takes that on as a full frontal assault, I think. Go on –

DR: When you said that the work is done by the audience, one of the things of course that happens is that we *do* see the image of

the boy with his arm in the air because you have an Action Man on a table at the side and you put his arm in the air and there's a video camera, so we're seeing that image quite clearly. So, in a sense, there's a kind of multiplication of the human: we're having to condense or combine two images together and in fact there are other kinds of representations –

TC: Yeah, yeah –

DR: Video and –

TC: But it's a mediatisation of the human in a way: layers being placed in-between me and me, me and the other me. I mean, on a very basic level, the absence of any empirical evidence is another kind of mediatisation or a way of disjointing me from what I am representing myself as, if that makes sense –

DR: A lack of empirical evidence of –

TC: I don't have my arm above my head.

DR: I see what you mean.

TC: Do you know what I mean? I indicate a finger that's been amputated and the finger is still there; I indicate a scar on my back and there is no scar on my back. These are all kinds of disjuncture for an audience, I hope, partly to stop an audience from loving itself into an easily sort of rendered reality, I think. And then that's happening in terms of scale with a figure, a doll, that is the only one that literally does that action and then there are those other objects I've taken from the audience [which] are also presented under the glare of a camera. The boy, the doll, is also under a camera; there's a feed to a TV like you said. So, we're looking at different scales, at the human scale, of the abstracted human scale, of the *super* abstracted human scale, which might be a cigarette packet or a mobile phone being my mother. And I'm excited about how, again, how impossible it is for a mobile phone to commit to a psychological action. [*Laughter*] So what's happening, then, for an audience is a free-wheeling, I hope, or free-ranging process of

association for themselves on those abstractions or those disjunctures. And that seems to then crack open some space, you know, in the performance terrain and into that space or into those gaps, I hope, comes a little bit more activity from the audience: thought and authorship from the audience.

DR: Obviously, when you first did that show, there must have been a part of you that thought, 'Is the audience just going to be completely baffled by it?' I mean, I imagine you will have had multiple kinds of reaction from an audience because on the one hand I think there are those very clear sort of, let's call them, alienation effects.

TC: Yes, yes.

DR: But on the other hand, when you say something like how hard it is for a mobile phone to commit to some sort of motivation, on the other hand, as an audience, you can kind of invest in almost anything.

TC: You can, yes you can.

DR: Some kind of emotional effect.

TC: I mean, I always say it's no more unusual, really, saying that this mobile phone is my mother, than saying that I am the Prince of Denmark. I mean, maybe there's a slight difference there, a *slight* difference, but it's still a request that is made to an audience to believe that what I am is not what I am. And so I think that with *My Arm* I just, very effortlessly on my part, I pushed that to a very far extreme and, yeah, the surprise and the joy has been how willing people are, like you say, prepared, to just invest: people coming in tears at the end because their watch was the mother and the mother in the story dies. Ideas of audience participation become very keen for me I think in this, in *all* the pieces, not, as in, come up on stage and make an idiot of yourself, but how you get an audience to actively participate in the fabric of the piece. So you find that in *My Arm* where investment comes entirely from the audience. I make a point of not selecting the objects to type, you know, I don't

find a feminine object to represent a mother; I don't find a masculine object to present a father. I'm most excited, in a way, when my hand randomly selects a lipstick and that's my dad because then there's just a lot more work for you to do, there's a lot more interest, I think, and again the crack gets wider and you, I hope, pour into it, you know, you fill the spaces without me as a performer. I think when I was in my 20s and 30s I was trained to fill the spaces for you.

DR: Right. That idea of audience participation and somebody getting up on stage, while that's not the exact situation in *An Oak Tree*, what you have in *An Oak Tree* – again, if you haven't seen it, it's a show, it's a two-hander; Tim is one of the performers; the other performer has never seen or read the play before, is basically, sort of, booked or –

TC: Uh, booked, yeah. I don't need to know who's booked but people book actors.

[…]

DR: And you guide them through the whole performance: sometimes you hand them bits of script, sometimes to a headset – you are communicating directly with them, and sometimes you just say it for them. […] And you've had male actors, female actors, black, white, young, and old and there's very much, rather like in *My Arm*, there's an arbitrary relation between –

TC: Yes, very important.

DR: The image and the sort of fictional reality. Why did that emerge as a particular device, that sort of… It's like getting the objects from the audience but now a person.

TC: Well, you've started that question… That's where it started, in the idea of the objects and then a long discussion with my friend Andy Smith, a smith, who is one of the co-directors of my work. Having hit upon a whole series of ideas that were sprung from *My Arm* […]. So, yeah, the idea of taking not an object but a human

being… I initially asked Andy if he would play the character. The character is a 46 year-old father, a grieving father, and I didn't want an actor to play that part. I'd had considerations of 'How could I not have an actor play that part? Someone who would not do all those ghastly things that I found myself doing in my 20s and 30s? How could I prevent that without it being an object?' So I thought of Andy Smith who is not an object [*laughter*] but he's also not an actor. He's an extremely *true* person, if that makes sense? He doesn't really do deceit or pretence, really. And Andy and I, in a conversation, hit upon the idea of bringing a different actor in every time, which is an idea that I had fleetingly thought about and thought was not possible. Then, in rehearsal for that play, *An Oak Tree*, we always stopped at the end of the day and would test whether the device was gonna remain just a device or whether it would actually be a deepening technique for the telling of the story and I think it is that, that the actor, who doesn't know the play, plays a character who doesn't know their world, from grief, really, and that character is played by someone who doesn't know their world, by not knowing the play they're in, so there is a nice constant sort of movement back and forward between those two things. And in the spirit of the nonhuman, one particular actor I'd worked with in my 30s who had just come out of Drama Centre who had been inducted fully in the Drama Centre process, you know, the carrying round a book with objectives and transitive verbs and the whole thing. And I worked with him on a Mark Ravenhill play, actually, and had a very difficult time with him and in a way *An Oak Tree* was kind of written for him. Not that I ever wanted him to do it but I was excited about showing how a performance could be made without all that nonsense. […] And so how exciting to think about theatre as not being a by-product of that or an end product of that process but of theatre being something more live and something more alert to the moment, rather than alert to a process that has been carefully considered and developed and rehearsed. So, the character of the father, whose name in the play is Andy Smith, in honour of Andy Smith who, in rehearsal, was always that actor and then, when we got more confident, [we] moved out and we brought people in. So that's, yeah, it's very exciting for me that there can be something generated which, for me, is very narratively grounded, ideologically grounded, and performatively grounded

in terms of what I might think a theatre performance should be about, which is transformation and transformation taking place without any of the sort of due processes that have become so central to many of the more mainstream schools of theatre.

[…]

DR: You mention that it's, that you're using a device but in a sense retaining some of the virtues, let's say, of dramatic theatre in that it's a very moving story. It's a good story –

TC: Yeah, it's a good story, *great* story.

[*Laughter*]

DR: It builds to that. There's a particular moment where, it seems to me, it's kind of where everything – for me, anyway – comes together where the father, who has lost his daughter, has formed the view that his daughter has been transformed into an oak tree.

TC: A tree, a tree next to where his daughter was killed; he has transformed that tree into his daughter. It's connected to a work of art called *An Oak Tree* by Michael Craig Martin who transforms a glass of water into a tree. In *An Oak Tree* a tree is transformed through loss and through an uncensored artistic impulse, really, an unconscious artistic impulse to transform something, to deal with absence.

DR: And that moment culminates, doesn't it, in a scene where what we are looking at is you and this other arbitrary actor pointing at a piano stool and one of you is saying, 'It's just an oak tree' and the other is saying, 'No, it's –

TC: 'It's a daughter'.

DR: 'It's a daughter'.

TC: Yeah.

DR: And we're looking at a piano stool and there are these different levels, layers of –

TC: But […] I, at that moment of the play, am actually playing the father's wife. I'm holding a chair to my hip and the chair is playing a five year-old girl called Marcy. Earlier on in the play the actor in the script says, 'Do we ever get to see her?' and I say, 'Yes, she appears as a chair'. So later on I fulfil my prophecy. I am Dawn, the wife; the chair is Marcy, the girl; the piano stool is, from my point of view, a tree: so the mantra is, 'That is a tree, I am your wife, this is our daughter, and that is a road. This is what matters: *this*. This is what we have to deal with: *this*'. And there's a playfulness in that, in that everything she says is not true, is not true, but everything she says in the context of performance becomes true. And it was very fascinating, actually: the character's name, Dawn, became completely subconsciously rendered that name. There is a lot of reference to dusk in the play: the accident where the child dies, it happens in the dusk. It's a moment where there is an abstraction of clear light and I called the wife Dawn without really realising why I was calling her Dawn. But Dawn, she's an absolute. She wants the empirical, she wants everything named, and the play at that point kind of does her down really by pulling the rug from under all her emphatic statements.

DR: And in *My Arm*, as you said, there are some very large-scale projections –

TC: As big as we can get them.

DR: That's right. And one of the things that kind of struck me then is in a sense that across the four shows there is almost a move *towards* the human scale rather than… Because, you know, as you say – as large as you can – that image dominates the stage, which makes the human figure seem small and I think in quite a lot of multimedia work, to use that rather ugly phrase, […] in something like Katie Mitchell's *Attempts on Her Life*, the image dominates and minimises the figure of the human being […]. Whereas you seem to have moved in another direction, you don't seem that interested in –

TC: No, I'm very excited about *The Author* being the last in that sequence, in a way. It is a profoundly human scale because there is no stage at all. The scale that we operate on is one-to-one. That's the scale, you know, because in that play, if you don't know it, the audience sit in two banks of seating facing each other. There is no stage in-between although it's interesting how often reviewers or audience members go, 'Why didn't you use the stage?' And you go, 'Well, this is the fucking stage, this *is* the stage, *this* is the stage'. So in terms of, yes, scale, there is no […] perspective in *The Author*. It's like one of those old paintings where there was no perspective. Everything was that and everything was this and that's that and this is this and they are one and the same thing, I think.

DR: But then, of course, it's very complicated because it's almost the opposite of *My Arm*, because in *My Arm* lots of different images are having to be mentally combined into one; in *The Author* I am having to sort of, when I am in the audience, I am having to sort of disaggregate you into the person of the character, the author, and so on –

TC: Yes, okay. But I'd say that was very similar to *My Arm*. So, I see big connections between the two plays in that in *My Arm* it's me and it isn't me and there is no, there is nothing that is gonna help you, that will be manifested to help you in this disaggregation of me and other me and it's the same with *The Author*: there's me and there is other me and there is nothing physically and materially that will help you in the transformation. So it's throwing the emphasis onto your abilities.

[…]

DR: Rather like the moments in *My Arm* that you mention where you say, you know, my finger was amputated and –

TC: And *this* is the finger –

DR: That was amputated: there's a different sort of pressure, isn't there, put on *The Author* because, I mean, you're talking, you're saying you're Tim Crouch, you're saying you're a playwright.

If people don't follow your work as nerdishly as I do, they won't necessarily know that the play you're talking about is not one you've written, and then of course you do, I suppose, basically, a quite dangerous thing in the end where you have the character talk about watching Internet paedophile pornography and, of course, you're forcing an audience to sort of go, 'Could he really have…? Is that…? Maybe he's confessing something'.

TC: Yeah.

DR: 'To us…?' And I suppose it's only the point where, of course, you have the character kill himself: that's the point where, unless you're really slow…

[*Laughter*]

TC: Er, we've met a lot of slow people.

[*Laughter*]

DR: So, I mean, did you think, 'God, this is a dangerous thing to do. I don't, you know?' Who wants to have people go around thinking that?

TC: Yeah, yeah, golly, that's a good question. No, I think it's really important. […] [I]t felt very important that the author should – *an*-author, *un*-author – should be held responsible. So that's kind of what that final statement is, really, in the play, is that we are, we have to understand our responsibilities and they are not glibly to be located in another alternative reality or an easily demarcated character or a fictional location. The responsibilities are here in us and they are now in *The Author*, they are in the performers, they're in the audience and I hope with *The Author* we flatten the division as much as possible, so that we all understand how close we all are in terms of our responsibilities. […] [T]here is no neat tying up [at the end of *The Author*]; there is no neat tying up of the character. He says – the character of Tim Crouch, says – some profoundly questionable things at the very end. He says, 'Nobody was hurt': which is kind of a big, big shout to the audience to confront those

thoughts and those ideas. And yes, interesting in that that character looks like me and speaks like me and has my name. But then with *My Arm*, people who don't know my work will come to see that play and, for the first thirty minutes, will think it's my story. *My Arm* is kind of more helpful. *An Oak Tree* is really helpful in terms of explaining what the rules are. *ENGLAND*, to a degree, also explains the rules. It takes a little longer for an audience to understand where they are in the second act of *ENGLAND* but in *The Author* no rules are explained at all.

DR: Moving on to think about *ENGLAND*, I mean, the device, there, […] certainly in the first half, [is] that one character is played by two people: a man and a woman.

TC: Yes.

DR: So what we experience for the first – well, for the whole play – is we get a really well realised, fully developed sense of a person.

TC: Yeah.

DR: Whose gender we don't know.

TC: Yeah. Yeah, that's right. That's really good for today, isn't it? [*Laughter*] I hadn't really thought about it. *That's* why I'm here!

DR: Yeah, so –

TC: Good.

DR: It's noticeable, isn't it, that some of the reviews just decided –

TC: Yeah, just decide it's a man, it's a woman, they're gay, they're straight. I think we worked really hard to remove any, any kind of definite, definitive ascription of gender to that character and I'm excited about that, about, again, making a character. We talk about, you know, the container or the vessel for a character, the actor being a container for the idea of the character and interest for me, as a theatre-goer, is to see the idea of the character embodied in

the idea of the actor. That's exciting. But in *ENGLAND* there is no easily identifiable container; it sort of vibrates between myself and Hannah Ringham who is the other performer in the production of the play that we do. And it's, again, it's a bit like, you know, the threads are all there in all the other pieces: it's about whatever you make of it; you are welcome to make that. We can't say that you are wrong if you think it's a man; we can't say you're wrong if you think it's a woman. I can't say you're wrong if you think I really did watch Internet child pornography because, of course, I'm opening that out as a possibility. And I want *you* to have to navigate *your* journey rather than have that journey navigated for you by the actors on stage.

DR: Is the idea – or maybe the idea is not something that was particularly focused on in terms of what you thought it might mean – but you could see this device where you sort of… You create a person but imaginatively are subtracting gender and sexuality from them as being a way of creating a character that is, in a sense, more like a *human*, as it were, than an individual person.

TC: Okay, yes, an idea of a –

DR: Or it could be a partial person, if you see what I mean: so it could be kind of less than a person or more than a person.

TC: Maybe. I think it is. Again, I don't know, crassly, if it's about empowerment as well. It can be anything and everything. This person can be anything and everything and as soon as I start to prescribe then anything and everything becomes prescribed and restricted to some degree: so the idea that that character is yours for the making, not ours. […] *ENGLAND* takes place in a gallery of work and there are certain moments of rewriting that reference the gallery but, by and large, whatever association you have in relation to the artwork and the narrative is entirely yours. So that play has been performed at the Andy Warhol museum in Pittsburgh where the theme of Warhol just screamed, you know, just hit the theme of that play with huge force. We performed that play in the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven where there were Constables and Turners and the themes of those pieces of Empire and history

and Englishness hit the play with huge force, but completely differently. So rather than making a fixed piece that sort of controls what it means on stage, I'm trying, I hope, to make an open piece, or a fluid piece, that allows interpretive meaning to come and go. I think art should be pretty subjective in that respect and should be moving, should always be moving and if you try and sort of fix it and go, 'That's why he did that; that's why that character did that', it feels reductive.

DR: That links to a question I wanted to ask you about performance style because, basically, from *My Arm* right the way through, you, personally, have a kind of performance style which, I guess, is about trying to, in a certain way, be blank.

TC: Yeah, to a certain degree, in the knowledge that that's kind of probably not possible.

DR: But maybe psychologically?

[…]

TC: I am 47 now and there's been that length of time to find the style that I feel is pertinent to this work. And […] that style has not only come from the work, but the work has also come from the style, if that makes sense. So in terms of thinking about how a performer is on stage and that sense of distance, neutrality, perhaps? Of the absence of ownership. You know, to see a performer own their character is a problem for me because, actually, the person who I want to own character should be the audience. That's where I want ownership to exist, really, and there are performances that I will see where I don't feel like I'm allowed to own any of that stuff. I am so not needed in what you are doing on stage. So, trying to then generate a style where you are needed – you as an audience are absolutely needed – to make complexity here where I will give you simplicity as much as possible in the knowledge that the simplicity is a generative thing for complexity.

[During the Q&A, Louise LePage asked Tim the following question:]

Louise LePage: Tim, it strikes me that your characters and performers, to a degree, are inherently plastic; they're acted upon by spaces, by other people, such that they affect them and how they behave and how they feel. I'm really struck by, in *The Author*, how there are two characters, Esther and Vic, who are actors who talk about their process of a kind of immersive –

TC: Yeah

LP: Psychological process into these abused and abusive characters and that, very powerfully, it strikes me, you're showing them as being transformed as people.

TC: Yes.

LP: Particularly Vic who, having started a *really* nice man becomes really hideously abusive himself because he's been affected by his character. So I'm just really interested in how much thought you've given to where the borders of each of us, as individuals, *are*. Are they fixed? Because it seems to me, what you seem to be suggesting is that we are actually inherently plastic people, connected to our environments, to our technologies, to our friends, to our families, and we change. Is that –

TC: Yeah, it's funny: the phrase that comes to mind is the given circumstances, which is a great Stanislavskian phrase. You know, what is an actor? What is a character? A character is just you but in a fictional set of given circumstances and you respond, as an actor, as a human being, to those fictional given circumstances and there, lo and behold, is character. *There* it becomes. It's not that you are transformed into someone other than yourself, but it's the circumstances, the external circumstances, the given circumstances, that have the transformatory impact on you. Does that make sense?

LP: Sort of. It's just that for me it seems to be that for Vic and Esther, they can't let go, they can't take the costume off, you know, the characters off with the costume. It's something more fundamental than –

TC: But what happens to Vic and Esther is not so much, not only to do with the characters they are playing, they are made to play in this other, in this abusive play, but it's how they are treated by me. Do you know what I mean? The given circumstances they find themselves in, not just in performance but actually in their lives, how they are inducted to a de-sensitisation, I suppose, and it's *that*. It's nothing to do with the play that they are in but the context that they are placed in. I mean there's so much stuff in *The Author* which is me working through my demons about that kind of world, really: being placed in those situations, those situations where unethical treatment is excused for the purpose of making good art, you know? So, there's a big, big issue for me in that play of having had those experiences and less about the characters I've been made to play but more the character of the actor in the rehearsal and the character of the director in the rehearsal who is acting upon *me*, altering *me*. So, yeah, going into a rehearsal process with a fixed understanding of self is kind of ridiculous; of course it's nonsense, but that idea of self then becomes the currency for rehearsal process. It also becomes the currency for the play you're in. And that sense of self, I suppose, is stretched and battered and abused in those situations for Vic and Esther.

LP: Thank you.

An MP3 recording of the entire and unedited conversation is available at:
http://www.rhul.ac.uk/dramaandtheatre/media/whodowe/timcrouchconversation-web.mp3