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The Emergence of a User Determined Narrative In Telematic Environments

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My work in the field of telematic arts explores the emergence of user-determined narrative between remote participants who are brought together within a shared telepresent environment. Through the use of live chroma-keying and videoconferencing technology these divided audience participants enter a video installation and initially suppose they entering a passive space - either sitting, standing or sometimes lying within it. Their presence within the space is recorded on self-view cameras and mapped in real-time, via a chroma-key video mixer, with an identical camera view of another participant in an identical installation space. The two spaces which can be any geographical distance apart are linked via an H.323 internet videoconference connection.

This is essentially how all my installation projects function. Most surprisingly to the viewer is that they form an integral part within these telematic experiments. Which simply wouldn't function without their presence and forced participation within it. The audience participant rapidly becomes a user, or at best an actor within these spaces, by observing their body within a telepresent space represented on self view video monitors. The user/actor ascends a rapid learning curve and begins to control and choreograph their human avatar representation of themselves in a new telematic space, in combination with another physically remote role playing user.

Once the audience participant enters this space they immediately represent two dynamic performer roles; consciously as the controller, or puppeteer, of their own avatar performer, yet unaware of their secondary performing role to the off camera members of the audience. Who are themselves awaiting the next available slot on the telematic stage - soon to be sharing in this split dynamic. The Narrative that unfolds here would appear to be self determined by the user, on and off camera. But what is essential in such experiments is the architecture of this installation. As an artist I am both designer of the environment and director of the narrative, which I determine through the social and political context that I choose to play out these telepresent encounters. This is exemplified in my installation "There's no simulation like home" produced at Fabrica Gallery Brighton in 1999

This installation entitled "There's no simulation like home" is the culmination of telepresent and telematic research since 1992. The exterior of the installation resembles the back of a plasterboard stage set, or as if the bricks of a house had been removed to reveal the back of the inner plasterboard skin. Electricity and video cables are traced and attached all around the surface of the structure, looking like the back of large circuit board. The installation is architected on the typical floor plan of the English terraced house and by using a walk through narrative sequence, from front door to back door, the audience encounter differing telepresent interfaces in each of the four rooms: the living room sofa, the bedroom, the dining room table and the bathroom mirror. Before entering the installation the audience have the possibility to view the installation through a series of peepholes positioned along the plasterboard exterior. Offering a passive form of viewing other users who are already involved in the process of navigating the installation narrative as an actor within it.

Inside the installation the audience are encompassed within a simulated domestic home environment, exemplified in the dimensions of the rooms, the wood-chip wallpaper, the light fittings, skirting board and wall sockets. The living room sofa and television screen form the first telematic link outside the installation space, where a second sofa and video monitor are located. By using a system of live chroma keying the two separate people, who could be any distance apart, share the same sofa on the same telepresent screen. In the bedroom the viewer can lie down on a bed onto which a live video projection is being made of another person, who is located outside the installation space on a second bed. A video image of the combined audiences together on the projection bed allows the viewers to interact in a telepresent space by touching with their eyes. The exterior installation space communicates a contrasting image to the domestic interior. Unlike the inside, the technology is very visible - akin to a back-stage environment. The telepresent interfaces located on the outside of the installation, appear as areas for interaction and observation of the experiment like situation taking place inside the installation. In keeping with the reference to user/actor within the space and the observer of the performance outside the installation, video images from small surveillance cameras inside are constantly being displayed on monitors outside.

The dining room table is the third telematic interface to the outside installation. Offering a slightly less psychological complex platform for interaction. Again working with a system of live chroma keying between two separate tables the remote viewers are able to sit at the same table in the same telepresent room. The final room and interface the user/actor confronts before exiting out the back door, is the bathroom mirror. What initially appears to be a normal mirror, lacks one essential truth - the viewers own image. A momentary illusion that is broken only when the user realises the mirror is in fact a window into an identical room. Whilst the actor has become accustomed to accept their existence in telepresent forms throughout the installation they are finally denied the most simple telepresent truth they expect from a mirror, putting the notion of the real and the virtual into question. By representing the domestic reality inside the installation as a fabrication of the technological apparatus outside. There's no simulation like home attempts to present all realities as a construct of language.

The following extract from Margaret Mores describes the process of induced mime and mimicry extremely accurately and has been influential to me in further opening up this discussion around user defined narratives.

“By not transmitting sound, Sermon has chosen to explore the visual and kinetic codes of proxemic relations, that is, the relative distance of human bodies in private/social exchange, rather than verbal exchanges. A cyberspace couple on the bed can interact in any way gesture allows. The dematerialization of gestures and objects tendered, far from undermining their meaning, makes images and actions naked of anything but symbolic meaning and all the more powerful therefore. Thus, the stage has been set for an exploration of the effect of symbolic acts on the psyche. ...

...Paul Sermon's experiments with "telematics" or "telepresence" continue research that began in the late 1960's using satellites to link live interaction in sound and image between two or more sites. This strand of experimentation also has predecessors in the closed-circuit video and installation art of the early 1970's. Artists of the time experimented not only with "narcissism, but with temporal and spatial displacements of body and its image that reveal the gap between a body and its imaginary self or "identity." Sermon's work is the site of a collective imaginary, a public "family" reunion, albeit as a surreal composition of bodies without a counterpart in physical reality, akin to the condensations Freud identified in dreams. What the "live" mixture of bodies in Sermon's work exposes is the far from explored field of human relations as they have become inflected with and transformed by technology".

In the seminal telematic installation *Hole in Space*, produced by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, in 1980, geographically remote public audiences were instantly transformed into performers in the first networked narrative performance in a social context of its kind. What initially appears to be a random choice of locations for this public intervention - from the point of view of the user/actor, becomes increasingly apparent that the artists chose these cities and locations for very specific social and political reasons, creating a networked narrative within an extremely dynamic context. Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz describe the work as follows.

HOLE-IN-SPACE was a Public Communication Sculpture. On a November evening in 1980 the unsuspecting public walking past the Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts in New York City, and "The Broadway" department store located in the open air Shopping Centre in Century City (LA), had a surprising counter with each other.

Suddenly head-to-toe, life-sized, television images of the people on the opposite coast appeared. They could now see, hear, and speak with each other as if encountering each other on the same sidewalk. No signs, sponsor logos, or credits were posted -- no explanation at all was offered. No self-view video monitors to distract from the phenomena of this life-size encounter. Self-view video monitors would have degraded the situation into a self-conscience videoconference.

If you have ever had the opportunity to see what the award winning video documentation captured then you would have laughed and cried at the amazing human drama and events that were played out over the evolution of the three evenings. Hole-In-Space suddenly severed the distance between both cities and created an outrageous pedestrian intersection. There was the evening of discovery, followed by the evening of intentional word-of-mouth rendezvous, followed by a mass migration of families and trans-continental loved ones, some of which had not seen each other for over twenty years.

In looking for further historical references and sources for emergent user defined narrative, I would like to turn to the monumental figure of Sergei Eisenstein. However, not in reference to his films, but of his lesser know theatre productions with the Proletcult Theatre in the 1920's. This was one of the most influential periods of his career - firstly as a theatre designer and later as director after having studied at the Directors Studio of Vsevolod Meyerhold in 1921. This is where most of the issues relevant to us were developed, described in his "Mon-tage of Attractions"; which established a new principle of dramaturgy, producing extremely strong effects on the audience by means of combining posters, slogans, circus, variety show, gymnastics, scenery and theatre effects. In 1923 Eisenstein staged "Gas Masks", a play about the employees of a gasworks, where he actually moved the play entirely out of the theatre and staged it in the Moscow Gas Factory. The play, which depicted life in the gas factory, ended each performance as the new shift came to work - thereby breaking the bounds of theatre in very similar ways to our current experiments with network narrative structures. As Eisenstein then explained it.

"In Gas Masks we see all the elements of film tendencies meeting. The turbines, the factory background, negated the last remnants of make-up and theatrical costumes, and all elements appeared as independently fused. Theatre accessories in the midst of real factory plastics appeared ridiculous. The element of 'play' was incompatible with the acrid smell of gas. The pitiful platform kept getting lost among the real platforms of labour activity"

Eisenstein's use of the Moscow Gas Factory as a determining social narrative context brings me back to my own work, and one particular installation that I produced in collaboration with Andrea Zapp in 1999, entitled "A Body of water". Similarly to Eisenstein's "Gas Works" this installation is entirely situated in a disused coal miners changing and shower room, and is also relying on the sound and smell of coal dust and running water in order to determine the context of telepresent showering and the users/actors performance within it.

The final work I will present is entitled "Peace Talks" and was commissioned by FACT for the BitParts Exhibition in February 2003. In this installation I chose to take the theme of the United Nations negotiations room as its determining narrative environment. Needless to say under the political climate the participants engaged and debated issues concerning what was then the looming invasion of Iraq. The immersive nature of the narrative in this piece was further enhanced by the use of head mounted displays that physically denied the user/actor any visible connection to the outside installation space - as one participant exclaims after 20 minutes of dialogue "I've just realised I'm talking to myself here, people outside must be wondering what an earth is going on"

I would like to conclude with a quote from Machiko Kusahara, referring to the topology of body and space in my telematic performance, specifically the bed interface included in "There's no simulation like home" which was first realised as "Telematic Dreaming" in 1992 in Finland.

Within this series of works that employ the teleconference mechanism Telematic Dreaming surely has the most powerful impact because of the dissimilating effect of the bed, a sign shared by everyone. By putting audience participants in that familiar situation from TV drama of getting into bed with someone one has just met, this work drives one, or the member of the audience before one's eyes (the performer), into a state of bewilderment. Members of the audience are placed in the positions of the actor who plays out a bed scene on stage or before a camera, or the voyeur who peeps in on the acts of others. This is a secret act taking place in a public space, and that public space is a virtual space that does not exist in reality. Furthermore, despite the fact that the body is the only means of communication therein, the body of the other party is ghost-like, without substance. This contradictory situation not only confounds the audience, but also, after first releasing them from the logic and restrictions of daily life and dismantling the various elements of signatory identity and the biological environment of the body, it enables experimentation with and enjoyment of the role the body plays in communication. The virtuality of the space enables it to maintain both theatrically and the context of daily life at the same time.

In the interstice between material physicality and an informational space in which electronic signals collide, Sermon reverses the meanings and sensibilities tied to daily life and provides us with an opportunity to think about the essence of communication. Commercial applications like bringing a shopping bag into virtual space and filling it with items for purchase picked up with a 3D mouse are nothing more than a proxy for real experience, but a good artist is capable of liberating people from such patterns of daily life and creating a topos wherein they will discover something about themselves.

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