

Interview with Paul Sermon, pioneer of the interactive media art

Paul Sermon, the interactive media artist and Professor of Visual Communication at the University of Brighton in UK, came to Singapore as a guest of the *LASALLE Public Lecture Series* and shared with the public an overview of his 25 years of experience in the field. The audience who attended the event at LASALLE had the opportunity to experience a witty live performance from Sermon at the start of his lecture, which can be seen [here](#). The artist gave an exclusive interview to Artitude, sharing some highlights of his career from the Golden Nica award to Nam June Paik's interaction with his piece. Sermon also shared his view on the future of virtual reality and talked about his teaching and creative practice.



Paul Sermon. Image courtesy LASALLE College of the Arts

Christine Veras: From your Graduation project to the *Prix Ars Electronica* in 1991, what has changed in your career?

Paul Sermon: Without doubt the Prix Ars Electronica in 1991 was a major turning point in my career. I was only 26 at the time and had just completed my final Master of Fine Arts degree project *Think about the people now* for which the Golden Nica was

awarded. Although this brought an overnight transformation of my reputation from postgraduate art student to international media artist, it didn't significantly affect my practice, in fact *Think about the people now* is probably my least most telematic/telepresent artwork I am known for. It wasn't until I produced *Telematic Dreaming* a year later that the most significant change in my career occurred. However, the particular opportunity to create that work would not have happened if I hadn't won the Golden Nica the previous year.

CV: How was the idea for your most famous piece *Telematic Dreaming* created?

PS: I often ask myself the same question. *Telematic Dreaming* was a response to a number of particular circumstances at the time. I had just won the Prix Ars Electronica Golden Nica for a work that didn't really express my concerns with open interactive systems, for me it was still very closed. I wanted to create a new work that pushed the telematic arts practice I had been introduced to earlier by Roy Ascott, when I was a Fine Art undergraduate student of his in the late 80s... A lot of the thinking behind *Telematic Dreaming* was drawn from these experiences of networked arts practice and interactive video installation. So when I was commissioned to produce a new work for a group exhibition at the Kajaani Art Museum in Finland I really wanted to return to this telematic theme. The show was called 'Koti', the Finnish word for home, derived from the notion 'home' as understood by Jean Baudrillard in his essay *The Ecstasy of Communication* and was financially supported by the Finnish Telecom. The Kajaani Art Museum was also a former police station and before visiting it there was talk of the museum still housing a former jail, which initially interested me as a potential site for an installation using the jail cell and bed. Together with the opportunity to access the Finnish Telecom's latest videoconferencing technology I quickly arrived at a concept to connect the Kajaani Art Museum and the Finnish Telecom Museum in Helsinki... in what became *Telematic Dreaming*. I find it difficult to recollect the exact turn of events that led to this concept, but all these factors did play a significant part in it.



Telematic Dreaming. Image: Paul Sermon, Telematic Dreaming © Courtesy of the artist

CV: In your lecture, you referred to a phrase from Roy Ascott 'Stop thinking about artworks as objects and start thinking about them as triggers for experiences'. How has his guidance helped to shape your artistic practice?

PS: Since my time as an undergraduate art student Roy Ascott has made a profound effect on my career and thinking... and still to this day when thinking about my work and new challenges, I often ask myself, how would Roy approach this? Central to this has been his vision of a collaborative co-created arts practice, borrowing from Roland Barthes *The Death of the Author* that envisions the roles of the artist and viewer becoming one... a cybernetic model of telematic arts practice that predated and foresaw the Internet. Through his writings, lectures and projects Roy Ascott's ideas are fundamental to the way I approach my practice and installations, his ability to entwine semantic discourses with expanded experiences of consciousness continue to captivate and enlighten me.

CV: As a professor yourself what do you do in your school practice to motivate the students to explore the cybernetic world in an unusual and innovative way?

PS: I often think students today are saturated in a social networked global environment. Whilst I am positive about the opportunities the Internet presents I am also concerned about the dominance of certain social networking platforms and how this prevents new ways they can take advantage of the Internet's full potential. I therefore encourage my students explore, code, solder, build, make and break as well as share, collaborate, discuss, intervene and create. I run student projects and workshops... asking them to build their own physical computer network with only pulleys, washing lines, pegs, paper and pens... to better understand open-source approaches to everything, what's possible and why. I particularly encourage them to show their work, make interventions and observe what is happening. The artist's studio today is everywhere and involves everyone in the process of creating the work and I believe our teaching should reflect that. Just as with my own practice, I set up situations and opportunities for potential to motivate my students and reflect on what occurs. I also believe it's essential for students to gain a deeper understanding of the creative research methods and insights presented in lectures and public talks by practicing artists. Therefore I very much appreciate Professor Steve Dixon's recent invitation to present my work as part of the LASALLE Public Lecture Series and I hope my lecture provoked the students at LASALLE to reflect on the broader cultural and social implications of my work and think differently about the creative practice of interactive media arts.

CV: Thinking about the past, who were the artists who influenced your work? And considering the future, which are the new interactive media artists that you would recommend us to keep an eye on?

PS: I always find this a difficult question to answer, and I suspect I'm not alone. Art historians would have us believe all artists are influenced by the work of others – it makes history much easier to write and exhibitions easier to curate... But I simply can't single out particular influential artists. I have found many works interesting some more closely related to my own practice than others, but they haven't influenced my work any more than other aspects and events in my life, be it from arts, science and technology or society, culture and philosophy. In terms of what to keep an eye on, I would suggest looking in the places you would least expect to find it.

CV: In your lecture, you have mentioned that Nam June Paik experienced one of your pieces. Where was it and what was his reaction? I believe there is a feeling of accomplishment in that. Do you have any documentation of this moment?

PS: In 1995 I exhibited *Telematic Vision* at the Lyon Biennale which linked two

exhibition sites across Lyon using two large blue sofas – whereby the separate participants appeared to be sitting together on the same sofa, on screens in front of them. I had the honour of having one of these sofas located directly next to a large installation by Nam June Paik and it was not until the opening day that he actually attended the Biennale. The sofa was initially used to conduct an interview with Nam June Paik, but after he quickly realised he was in fact sharing a telepresent sofa he found it increasingly difficult to leave and spent the rest of the day playing, interacting and laughing with the Biennale visitors. Whilst I was personally flattered that he found the installation so engaging I was struck by the similarity of the scene to his *TV-Buddha* work from 1974, where a small Buddha statue is watching its own image on TV... which I think was a resemblance he could also see and enjoyed. But sadly this moment was never documented... to my knowledge.

CV: Your pieces invite the public to participate in a playful sensorial exploration. What are some of the unusual reactions that your interactive pieces have elicited?

PS: When a member of the audience enters my installation they ascend a very rapid leaning curve and quickly realise they are now in complete control of their telepresent 'other' body, interacting and sharing in a space with another person... who isn't physically present next to them. Once in this space anything is possible and it's difficult to recount particular reactions, each installation environment tends to imply different exchanges. *Telematic Dreaming* has possibly received the most unusual reactions, varying from a group of young boys insisting on hitting the image of the other participant, believing it to be a computer generated simulation. When they were told it was in fact a 'real' person they quickly stopped and appeared to be very apologetic to the other participant and the people around them. Other reactions on the bed in *Telematic Dreaming* included participants actually getting in under the sheets, or large crowds of people standing around the bed waiting for someone to dare to go on it. On one occasion a couple had arranged to go to two different gallery openings in the same city on the same night, not knowing they were in fact linked through *Telematic Dreaming*... upon seeing his wife on the bed, the man screamed in disbelief "my wife!" and leapt on the bed to kiss her projected image, continuing to exclaim to everyone else around him "this really is my wife!"



Telematic Dreaming. Image: Paul Sermon, Telematic Dreaming © Courtesy of the artist

CV: What is the role and importance of sound in your work? When people are interacting can they hear each other? I have noticed through your videos that people tend to be silent in communicating with each other across the screen, although they can be very noisy in their own reality. Maybe this happens because of the language barriers? How does that affect the work?

PS: Sound is very important in my installations, or rather the absence of it to be precise. I very rarely use audio communication in my networked telematic installations... relying purely on video communication encourages the audience to interact through body movement, expression and gesture alone. The interaction is played out like a silent-movie melodrama, with audiences adopting Chaplinesque roles and exaggerated body language... helping the audience to further distance themselves from their physical bodies to identify more playfully with their telepresent ones on screen. When thinking about this aspect of my work I'm often reminded of Charlie Chaplin's comments on the introduction of the 'talkies' and his disappointment that the art form and language of silent movies will be lost forever. Paradoxically this aspect has become characteristic of my own work.

CV: Considering all the advances in digital technology nowadays, what will be the next steps in your artistic exploration to include (or not) these technologies? For instance: Google cardboard, Oculus Rift, and other virtual reality technologies.

PS: I think it is interesting how virtual reality and head mounted displays are making a come back after 25 years since they first appeared in the early 90s – the only significant difference being the image quality and most importantly the price, which will mean far greater access and future development... so I'm very interested to see what will come out of that. However, as was the case back in 1991 I'm still personally not enthralled by a technology that attaches itself to the body, but rather more interested in the creative and theoretical debates that develop around it, which is what drives and inspires my work.