The Dreaming in Telematic Dreaming and Other Stories

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Abstract

The practice of telematic arts is not immortalised in artefacts and collections but has and continues to be accessed, participated in, contributed to, and experienced Everywhen. This article positions the co-creative principles of telematic arts from the 1980s and my subsequent telepresence practice since the early 1990s as a lived experience in the context of The Dreaming, as understood by anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner. My installation *Telematic Dreaming* (1992) is discussed as a prime example of extending bodily 'oneness' in the specular image, within a patchwork of telematic artworks that expound the coexistent states of intimacy, touch, and empathy. These stories identify characteristic phenomenological findings that are analogous to Stanner's account of The Dreaming. By reflecting on line-out video recordings from these telepresence installations, as well as early films, we experience the Everywhen. Like a 'totem' it teleports us into a collective narrative of those who participated in it. A story told in and between geographically dispersed encounters and events that unfolded in a collective state of flux.

Introduction

This article aims to situate and conceptualise the vision and co-creative practice of telematic art from the 1980s and my telematic telepresence installations since the 1990s, within the context of the Everywhen; the omnipresent concept of time and space as a simultaneous experience of past, present and future. In doing so the article will reflect on anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner's work with First Nations people during the 1950s to 1970s, and specifically on his depiction and understanding of The Dreaming as 'a complex of meanings,' [1] core to our understanding of the Everywhen. In respect of Stanner's work and wishes:

'Clearly, The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of *logos* or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man. If I am correct in saying so, it is much more complex philosophically than we have so far realised. I greatly hope that artists and men of letters who (it seems increasingly) find inspiration in Aboriginal Australia will use all their gifts of empathy, but avoid banal projection and subjectivism, if they seek to honour the notion.' [2]

I will therefore (and as a white European) avoid making direct correlations between my phenomenological telematic encounters and The Dreaming. Instead, and in keeping with the interlaced telematic storytelling approach, I merely allude to such synergies and leave the reader to draw their parallels and conclusions from the analogies, sentiment and empathy I hopefully provide, in honour of this notion of The Dreaming.

Telematic Everywhen

Since the early 1980s networked art practice has been entered and manifested through telematic workstations, performances, installations, and networked happenings. The beginnings were extensively documented in Art Telecommunication, edited by Heidi Grundmann (1984), including the work of Roy Ascott, [3] *La Plissure du Texte* (1983), Eric Gidney, Tom Klinkowstein, and Bill Bartlett (amongst others), and Robert Adrian X with *The World in 24 Hours* (1982). [4] These works only existed through collaborative networked participation, and the only record of these happenings taking place is in the thermal printouts, video and audio tapes, photographs and ephemera, and the stories they tell. The entire premise and existence of these works relied on the co-creative engagement of others.

To view the work, you had to participate in the work. It was necessary to log-in and enter the work, play a role, reflect, respond, contribute, and splice its content, be that through email text, ASCII image or telephony sound. During the 1980s, these telematic artworks were accessed through private timesharing networks (IP Sharp Associates IPSA – a computer timesharing system based in Toronto, operating a worldwide network of computer services) and telephone lines via word processor terminals and telephone couplers (analogue modems), thermal printers, fax machines and slow-scan transmissions (Slow-scan television SSTV – a picture transmission method, used to send and receive static video pictures via radio waves and telephone lines).

As a student of Roy Ascott myself in the late 1980s, I participated in similar telematic projects, including *Le Palais ideal* in April 1987, a 'telematic workstation' conceived by Ascott and run by a group of six fine art students from Newport School of Fine Art, UK in collaboration with artists and visiting lecturers Robert Pepperell and Mike Phillips, for the

1st Biennial Festival of European Art Schools in Toulouse, France (see figure 1). Inspired by the original 'Le Palais ideal', built circa 1900 in Hauterives, France, by postman and 'outsider artist' Ferdinand Cheval, the networked participants' interlaced stories, verses and accounts of a metaphysical journey towards an ideal palace, developed and revealed over a week-long email exchange with collaborators, Robert Adrian X (Vienna, Austria), Bruce Breland (Pittsburgh, USA), Hank Bull (Vancouver, Canada), Eric Gidney (Sydney, Australia), Paul Thomas (Perth, Australia) and Zelko Wiener (Vienna, Austria).

Figure 1. *Le Palais Ideal* (1987) by a group of six fine art students from Newport School of Fine Art. Telematic workstation using email, fax and slow-scan TV. 1st Biennial Festival of European Art Schools in Toulouse, France. ©Paul Sermon

These co-authored experiences echoed the sentiment of Roland Barthes' announcement of 'the death of the author' (1967), manifested through telematic artworks, born out through the interaction between its dispersed authorship of writers/readers in its interweaving content and meaning. Ascott's work and title *La Plissure du Texte* (1983) (The Pleating of the Text) itself, directly recalls Roland Barthes' later essay 'Le plaisir du texte' (1973) (The Pleasure of the Text) continuing the same discourse, 'but pleating (plissure) [was] not intended to replace pleasure (plaisir) only to amplify and enhance it.' [5] For Ascott and others, this pleating pleasure (jouissance) of the text was a co-created telematic experience on a planetary scale.

Telematic events are omnipresent, globally networked happenings. My aim here is to avoid talking about telematic artworks as historic events or as 'artefacts', or to talk of them chronologically through the development of my telematic art practice. But rather as access points to the continuous flow of dispersed co-creative practice, or as portals to the Telematic Everywhen, an ongoing timeless experience of coexistence and participation in a collective story-making and telling process. Logging-in and picking up where we left off in a globally networked space. In doing so I am urged to follow Roy Ascott's instruction to 'stop

thinking about artworks as objects and start thinking about them as triggers for experiences,' as quoted by Brian Eno, another former student of Ascott. [6] The triggered experience in the case of the telematic artwork is a portal to the Everywhen; the ambiguous rhythm and the uncertain dance of the telematic story, not unlike W. E. H. Stanner's description of The Dreaming as 'fanciful and poetic in content … based on visionary and intuitive insights,' [7] echoed in Roy Ascott's description of Art and Telematics in 1983.

'To be involved with creative work in the telematic mode is to search for and to play with uncertainty and ambiguity rather than to strive for semantic outcomes of the finite kind. To 'understand' what is going on in the transactional process of network art is to merge into the waves of planetary inputs, the modulation of ideas passed around the multiplicity of terminals, and to identify with the patterns of change which surge through the lines of communication. It can feel, not just as an extension of mind but an extension of the body. There can be this sense of out-of-body experience, joining up with others in the aetheric, electronic, and totally timeless space.' [8]

My telematic practice departed from the 'telematic workstation' mode in search of this out-of-body timeless space through telepresence video installations. A portal to a phenomenological manifestation of a bodily telematic experience told through the stories of telepresence and the encounters with the self as other in a networked third space.

Like a travelling improvisation theatre, it sets the stage and turns on the lights to invite us into the experience of The Dreaming as a telematic encounter. Whatever the date and wherever the venue, we enter the telematic portal to reembody, recapitulate and continue to co-experience the discursive discourse of co-creation, performance, and improvisation as part of the collective other.

The [Telematic] Dreaming

My own particular telematic art practice commenced in the early 1990s, coinciding with the introduction to new videoconferencing technologies and fibre-optic telephone lines, first used in my installation *Telematic Dreaming* in 1992. This was an experimental telepresence performance installation, produced for the summer exhibition at the Kajaani Art Museum in Finland, originating a unique third-person experience of telepresence. *Telematic Dreaming* was linked through customized videoconferencing technologies between Kajaani Art Museum and the Finnish Telecom's Telegalleria in Helsinki. A video camera in Helsinki picked up a birds-eye view above me on a queen-size double bed, which was the same aspect ratio (3:4) as the PAL video format of the time. The camera image of myself on the bed was sent to Kajaani via videoconference and projected down onto another double bed of the same size, and upon which a gallery visitor was also lying. A further camera, situated next to the video projector in Kajaani captured the superimposed images of my projected body and the gallery visitor together on the same bed (see figure 2). This combined telepresent image was then relayed back via

videoconference to screens surrounding my bed in Helsinki, enabling me to monitor and control my body at a distance and thereby allow the participants to physically interact.
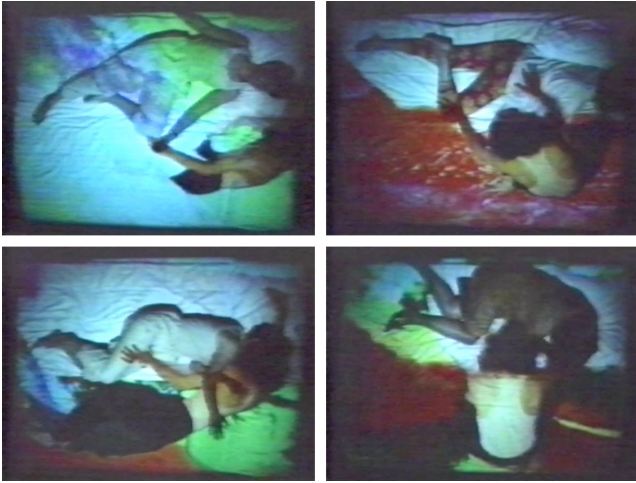

Figure 2. Line-out video stills from *Telematic Dreaming* of a superimposed projected body and gallery visitor together on the same bed relayed via videoconference between Helsinki and Kajaani, 1992. ©Paul Sermon

This telepresent specular image became an extension of my body. *Telematic Dreaming* provided a stage (or totem) for extending the monist body, rather than being separate from it. The remote 'digital other' body was an extension of its carbon original. Its physical movements were taking place locally whilst its cause and effects were taking place remotely – simply extending the sensory inputs from the cognitive process. *Telematic Dreaming* and its inferences of intimacy and dream states extended telepresence beyond the screen to spatialize the site of interaction and transform it into a live theatrical event in which visitors were key performers, exploring presence, absence and human interaction within technologically mediated space. The telepresent specular image was a bodily auxiliary, or what phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty would refer to as an 'extension of the bodily synthesis.' [9] In *Telematic Dreaming* the extension of bodily synthesis occurs through our proprioception with the telepresent body image, like a phantom limb/body or as one's own shadow, where the sense of touch has shifted from our hands to our eyes and the view of our phantom body (shadow) – touching with our eyes as if touching with our hands.

In his writings on The Dreaming, W. E. H. Stanner refers extensively to the shadow as an extension of 'oneness' that 'connects The Dreaming and the Here-and-Now.' [10] According to Stanner, a monist view is essential to embrace The Dreaming phenomenon.

> '[O]ne has not succeeded in thinking as a [First Nation person] until one's mind can, without intellectual struggle, enfold into some kind of oneness the notions of body, spirit, ghost, shadow, name, spirit-site, and totem … [that] are all present in the metaphysical heart of the idea

of 'person'. [For First Nations people] a man's name, spirit, and shadow are 'him' … to threaten a man's shadow is to threaten him.' [11]

This echoes the projected sense of self in Jacque Lacan's psychoanalytical reflections on our mirror image as 'a bodily wholeness constructed as if on stage in front of us.' [12]. A concept that has become increasingly significant in the development of my practice, where one can observe a similar process of identity construction in the telepresent specular image. However, my work similarly concurs with Jean-Paul Sartre's provocation on the 'gaze' upon the other as confirmation of their presence; we perceive ourselves as being perceived and come to objectify ourselves in the same way we are being objectified [13]. My telematic practice conflates Lacan's view of the self and Sartre's gaze on the other. In my installations the participants not only share the reflection of the self but also the gaze upon the other from the same remote camera location. They are effectively sharing the same 'eyes' – the same point of view, where one's gaze on the other and view of the self are combined. The objectification of gaze is confronted on equal empathetic terms through this process of sharing our presence in a third space environment from a single viewpoint portal. Literally, seeing something from someone else's point of view.

Telematic Dreaming has been exhibited on over thirty occasions since 1992, most recently in Singapore in 2020. However, every exhibition has been an opportunity to enter the same space and time, like a recurring dream. Participants display consistent reactions and interactions, regardless of time. Their interactions commence with a recurring discovery of touch and connection, they typically play and learn from each other, and discover moments of stillness, intimacy, and empathy. Their interactions underline and reiterate what took place previously, picking up from where we last left off. *Telematic Dreaming* is not watched, it is entered, and in doing so participants leave their physical vulnerabilities behind, along with self-conscious inhibitions to engage in the specular image through the objectification of the self as other. *Telematic Dreaming* is not an installation artefact, collected and owned, it is a portal [totem] to a timeless coexistent encounter [The Dreaming].

Other Stories

I have continued to take a phenomenological telematic approach to combine and relocate distant participants in various familiar settings, in social and fictional contexts, from life-size projections on shared beds and sitting together on the same green-screen sofa, to virtual peace negotiation tables and sharing the same telepresent room. The following is a patchwork of examples, reflections, and moments that expound the coexistent states of intimacy, touch, and empathy within my practice.

Such as when two Deaf participants used sign language via *Telematic Vision* (1993) (see figure 3) to 'talk' purely by visual means as an 'extension of bodily synthesis.' [14] It was possible to hear their inner conversation in the telepresent third space. In the same way, inner laughter was extended in *Peoples Screen* (2015). Laughter was the

soundtrack that connected and combined participants through the 'comic that had wandered outside of one's own self.' [15] Sharing in the laughter of the group through their telepresent co-experience as a conduit to trust and empathy between coexistent performing 'selves'.

Figure 3. *Telematic Vision* exhibited in 'Imagining Media@ZKM' exhibition at the ZKM Centre for Art and Media, 2009. ©ZKM

In *Peace Talks* (2003) the participants were immediately aware of themselves both internally and externally, reflecting on the objective point of view they found themselves within and adjusted their pose accordingly to find empathy with the 'other' and the 'self' simultaneously. Reaffirmed by a participant's comment, 'quite often you can both be on the same side' – because you are observing the conversation from the same point of view. In the context of the domestic environment, the formation of the 'I' [16] in the telepresent specular image became as readily accepted as the bathroom mirror in *There's no simulation like home* (1999) regardless of its telematic mediated form.

Figure 4. Video still from line-out video feed of participants in Delhi and London in *3×4*, superimposed on computer-generated backgrounds created by online participants, at Khōj Studios in Delhi and Southbank in London, 2014. ©Paul Sermon

Conversely, a theatrical experience detached from the 'everyday' in *All the Worlds a Screen* (2011) indicated a

counter-reality. Liberating them to perform through invented role-play, enhancing relationships and empathy across the boundaries of culture and language. Similarly, for the children in *3×4* (2014), who shifted their space of play from the street to a telematic metaspace between London and Delhi (see figure 4), staying for several hours, establishing new bonds and co-creating memories between them. This was not a technological meeting place void of human emotion, but an intimate digital space, as in *HEADROOM* (2006) (see figure 5), bestowed with trust and empathy through the simultaneous discovery of the self and other in a private specular image that answered Roy Ascott's question 'Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?' [17] with an emphatic yes!

Figure 5. Video still from the line-out video recording of participants confronting each other in *HEADROOM* at the Xinyi Public Assembly Hall, Taipei, 2006. ©Paul Sermon

Phenomenological Characteristics

By reflecting on line-out video recordings and observations of audience interactions, behaviours, responses, and conversations over many years, I have been provided with consistent evidence of characteristic phenomenological findings from a wide range telematic telepresence installations. Characteristics that identify a greater sense of empathy in the telematic third space, that chimes with Stanner's account of The Dreaming and the Everywhen:

- An increased sensory awareness of coexistence has a lasting impression and effect on the participant after leaving the installation.

- Communicating and interacting without being able to speak provokes intuitive performer roles through improvised melodrama and mimicry.

- The desire to play and perform tricks and illusions is communicated through laughter and gesticulation.

- Interacting and performing in unison through improvisation, dance, choreography, acting and visual dialogue.

- Being sensitive and open to telepresent intimacy through touching, holding and caressing, which would not normally be possible.

- Feelings of increased ethical responsibility and respect for the body simultaneously as 'self' and 'other'.
- Losing all sense of time and forgetting other previous engagements.
- Transcending geographical space and distance.
- Increased well-being, confidence, and a loss of self-conscious inhibition.
- Respecting and converging cultural differences.
- Having a sense of one body that exists in multiple locations through a process of disembodiment and re-embodiment.
- Experiencing body-transfer, akin to the body of a marionette puppeteer extended into the body of the puppet.
- The gradual loss of localised self-awareness and an increase in telepresent self-awareness through prolonged interaction.
- A shift of senses occurs through a process of touching through sight.
- Encountering a monist relationship between the carbon signifier and the digital signified body in the telepresent body image.
- Difficulty in holding a conversation locally whilst simultaneously communicating and coexisting in a telepresent space.
- The psychological complexity of leaving the installation and returning to an original state of being.
- Experiencing a state of double consciousness, 'The state of being that gives access, at one and the same time, to two distinctly different fields of experience: psychic space and cyberspace, the material world and the virtual, in an artwork and outside of it.' [18]

Experiencing the Now

All my previous telematic work has involved networked videoconference technology, video screens and video compositing techniques, which have consistently provided the opportunity to record a line-out video feed of the final composited telepresent image directly from the installation. Every effort was made to document these transitory telepresent happenings through photographs and video footage, and whilst I have witnessed the telematic characteristics and the empathetic nature of the participant's interactions and experiences first-hand and in conversation, the richest and most valuable source of reflection has resulted from the line-out video recordings I have made of every installation since 1992: The final composited/chroma-keyed image of the audience participants within the installation itself.

These direct line-out video recordings from the installations have provided the opportunity to observe the exact same image that caused the participants' interactions at the time. Like a 'two-way mirror', we can look them in the eye and embody the position of the participant within the installation, watching the very same image that caused the effect we are now viewing, contemplating, and ultimately 're-experiencing' ourselves. These unique line-out recordings provide direct insights into each participant's journey of discovery, from initial hesitation and intrigue between strangers to confident collaboration and trust with a fellow participant, viewed not separately, but as a coexistent whole. The line-out video is an experience of the now, like a 'totem' it teleports us into a collective narrative of those who participated in it. A story told in and between geographically dispersed human encounters and events that unfolded in a state of flux.

The Cycle of Telepresence

However, it appears we have been here before. When reflecting on some of the very early films of everyday public life in the late 19th and early 20th century, by Auguste and Louis Lumière (The Lumière Brothers) and their English contemporaries Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon, there are stark resemblances with the ways participants and audience respond and perform in telematic telepresence installations. These Edwardian films were neither fiction nor documentary but were entertainment. Films of workers, including children, leaving the factories and mills, and families on a Sunday promenade were filmed in full public knowledge with the sole intention of showing them at the public fair the following day. Audiences attended in droves, including those filmed playing and acting to the camera, solely intent on watching themselves perform on screen to rapturous laughter. This was a latent telepresence experience, delayed by 24 hours for processing. These films possess all the unique traits of telepresent interaction. They are performing to themselves as well as everyone else, in a continual dialogue with them where the conscious experience of the group has melded from camera to screen and back. These films were made to be watched by the people in them, and in doing so we too are transported and embodied in the characters acting, dancing and laughing in front of us.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that my telematic telepresent artworks since the 1990s have somehow come to fruition within our daily video chat meetings, particularly following COVID-19. I am sometimes asked if my audiences respond differently today because of the ubiquity of Zoom. The simple answer is no! As highlighted in my characteristic phenomenological findings, and similarly with the films of Mitchell and Kenyon, my telematic artworks are everything (and everywhen) that Zoom is not. My installations have been and continue to be intimate phenomenological encounters between the self as other and another participant in a coexistent third space. Conversely, video chat platforms such as Zoom have condemned and confined us to boxes of talking heads.

My telematic installations are not always connected between geographically distant locations and can function equally well between adjacent gallery rooms, as was recently the case with *Telematic Vision* (1993) for Topologies of the Real: Techne Shenzhen 2023. In this instance, the

specular television image is the portal to the extension of bodily synthesis and has more in common with Nam June Paik's *TV-Buddha* [19] than our experiences in a Zoom meeting. Moreover, the currently isolating, data-snatching, and self-promoting social media platforms are incomparable and incompatible with the flux and flow of telematic art, its discursive dialogues, telepresent empathy, and dreaming.

W. E. H. Stanner acknowledges, 'We shall not understand The Dreaming fully except as a complex of meanings. … A concept so impalpable and subtle naturally suffers badly by translation.' [20] This article has respectfully reflected on this complexity and the notions of oneness, timelessness and totem[ness] as analogous to the experience of telematic arts practices. The experience of embodying one's own shadow is in complete accord with the extension of consciousness in the telepresent specular image. The concept (or absence) of time is reflected in the cyclical telepresence encounter as a timeless episode and the telematic experience of logging-in and continuing from where we left off, regardless of where or when. The telematic installation and interface, be it beds, sofas, tables, or telematic workstations are merely entrances, portals, or totems to encounter stories retold and untold. Similarly, line-out video recordings can teleport us Everywhen. The Dreaming in *Telematic Dreaming* opens the way to a greater sense of empathy by expounding the juncture between self as other, and time as presence.

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