

NETWORKED PROXIMITIES

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This paper undertakes a critical reflection on experiments with audience participation in artistic practices involving networked performance and cyberformance. The performativity of webcamming and, in a more general sense, the presentation of the self and participation in digital networks are considered in the context of the current intensification of self-surveillance and participatory surveillance on social networks.

In 1972, Robert Whitman, one of the founders of the famous artists and engineers' collective Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T) of the 1960s, conceived the performance *News*. Broadcast live from the New York radio station WBAI, *News* can now be considered as a forerunner not only of the participatory culture of digital media but also, more specifically, of contemporary artistic experimentation in the field of networked performance. In *News*, the participants were sent to particular pay phones in Manhattan and asked to move from phone to phone and to make a report at each one about what they saw when they made a call and got on the air. A network of voices was thereby woven, a kind of aural Twitter stream that juxtaposed prosaic reports and testimonies of everyday life marked by subjectivity and poetic description.

News laid the foundation for a series of subsequent performances in which the basic structure was repeated: thirty people located in different parts of a city telephone and describe what they see at that moment. The calls are broadcast live through the intervention of Robert Whitman, who ends the call when the participant creates a coherent image.

In *21st Century Happening*, which took place in Leeds in 2002, Whitman updated the performance technology making use of cell phones that allowed a more mobile narrative to be created. In *Local Report* (2005), the participants contributed audio calls and video clips (recorded on mobile phone cameras) of the places where they were. The voice and video calls came in separately but were played together during the performance. During the thirty minutes that the performance lasted, a 'cultural map of the quotidian' was composed in real time. The reports were streamed live to the project's website and subsequently screened at five shopping centers in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. The choice of shopping centers to present the visual and sound recordings that made up *Local Report* highlights the hybrid boundaries of the project, which approximates to the experience of the quotidian through repetition, fluidity and even a certain banality as well as a sense of openness and possibility.

Whitman's performances *News*, *21st Century Happening* and *Local Report* are based on media networks and also work the network from an expressive and conceptual point of view to the extent that they create an assemblage of sonic and visual fragments and because they invoke the rhizomatic, diffuse and imprecise experience of our memory.

In 2004, Jo-Anne Green, Michelle Riel and Helen Thorington (who make up the publishing project *Networked_Performance*) defined the scope of networked performance as being that of “[...] any live event that is network enabled,” including “any form of networking in which computational devices speak to each other and create a feedback loop.” [1] For the authors, networked performances are therefore characterized by being live or experienced at the moment of creation or reception and their origins lie in mail art and fax, telephone or satellite art. Nowadays, the ubiquity, convergence and mobility of digital media enhance the intensification of the experience of telepresence that is entwined in the distributed nature of networked performance.

In parallel, the concept of cyberformance, as developed by Helen Varley Jamieson in *Adventures in Cyberformance: Experiments at the Interface of Theatre and the Internet*, presents clear affinities with that of the networked performance, although it is more specifically inscribed in the participatory world of the Internet. In Helen Varley Jamieson’s words:

When I first coined the term cyberformance in 2000, I was struggling to find a way to describe this emerging form. I knew that two aspects at least were fundamental: location and liveness. The site for this new form was the Internet, or rather the overlapping and fluid spaces emerging between physical realities and the ethereal digital/electric space: a third space grafted from the real-time confluence of the stage and remote locations. [2]

We can therefore state that cyberformance is a subgenre of the vaster category of networked performance and it is precisely in the light of these concepts that we now analyze the project *cctvecstasy* by the collective WebCam Operators, which was developed in 2009 within the scope of the Radiator Festival in Nottingham. This cyberformance included participations by Paula Roush at the QUAD, Derby, Marie Josiane Agossou at South Bank University, London, Lina Jungergård at Area 10, London, Deej Fabyc at the Elastic Gallery, Sweden, Lara Morais and Maria Lusitano at the Malmo Academy of Art, Sweden, and Aaron de Montesse and Anne Overaa in their homes. Susana Mendes Silva was also a member of the collective but last-minute technical problems prevented her from participating.

The performance *cctvecstasy* can be considered a site-specific project to the extent that it took place at the online community WebCamNow.com, which establishes live webcam connections all over the world without the user needing to create a homepage or even a personal profile. The platform WebCamNow consists of a ready-made interface and is divided into two networks: the open area, which is licensed for adult content and is mainly used by participants seeking intimate experiences; and a second area, of family and friends, in which the participants know that their actions can be monitored. Unlike the more recent live streaming and social networks, which combine video streams and videologs, thus creating dynamic archives, the WebCamNow community does not make video files, images or messages available. Rather, it involves the use of webcams to broadcast live from intimate environments (webcamming). The WebCamNow interface includes video channels, text chat, and a bar that indicates who is connected to each video room, functioning as a popularity gauge similar to the life bars found in computer games.

Thus, after a period of research, the project *cctvecstasy* developed around a narrative suggested by the encounters between the performers and other participants in the community. The performances took

place on various video channels and questioned the conditions of reception and participation characteristic of the spectators and users of the WebCamNow platform. According to Paula Roush:

[In the open area of WebcamNow] a variety of hetero and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) people operate their webcams, playing with multiple strategies: from the staged authenticity of those that set up the webcam in their rooms, placing their life under scrutiny, to others that masquerade into hyperstaged versions of femininity/masculinity and fetish, performing to a particular group of devotees. We used the webcamming and textual chat tools freely available to us to work synchronously across separate rooms and communicate with other videochat rooms. [3]

The performance took place online in front of a live audience at the QUAD Gallery in Derby, with seven performers on live streaming, while Paula Roush operated the transition between the various spaces. The audience itself was filmed and broadcast via a live feed to a video channel. We can therefore speak of a hybrid space at play in the cyberperformance *cctvecstasy*. From chat room to chat room, the various performances in turn become the subject of intervention by the performer, who is in the physical space of the gallery, alongside the audience, manipulating the visibility of the actions and spaces in real time.

Thus, it must be stressed that contact zones and transitional movements are expanded in this project: they are the interactions and overlaps of the users of the platform; the diluted boundaries between the banality of the quotidian images and the intentionally performative element; the interventions of the participants of the WebCamNow community in the real-time performance via chat; and, finally, the cross-pollination between the remote physical spaces inhabited by the performers, the telematic space of the World Wide Web, and the space of the gallery where the live audience is located.

In this context, it is pertinent to mention Susan Broadhurst's concept of the 'liminal performance,' which "plays with the limit of the possible" and whose fundamental characteristics are "hybridisation, indetermination, the absence of 'aura' and the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between popular and high culture." [4] In parallel, the notion of the 'intermedial audience,' proposed by Helen Varley Jamieson, is equally relevant since it simultaneously covers both online and live audiences who become mentally and physically involved in multiple tasks by assuming various roles – namely, those of spectator, performer, author, reader, commentator, chatter and voyeur.

It is also worth drawing attention to the low-tech and D.I.Y. (Do-It-Yourself) aesthetic of the cyberperformance *cctvecstasy* and the central role played by the webcam in creating an intimate, texture-laden space that awakens a desire to caress and hold the image, to pass to the other side and inhabit the space of the performer's body. The intimate gaze of the webcam is almost like the gaze that results from an amorous interlacing, in which we are too close to really see. [5]

Webcamming: The presentation of the self and participation in digital networks

In fact, the voyeurism associated with webcamming must be assessed in the light of this proximity, of the low-resolution of its image and the manipulation of its supposed aesthetic of authenticity. It is perhaps for this reason that masks are frequently used in cyberperformance practices. The mask highlights the mercurial nature of online identity and the mixture of fiction and reality at play in the telepresence experience precipitated by the networked performance. Effectively, an ambiguous play between hiding and revealing, simulation and authenticity, and intimacy and voyeurism runs through the artistic practices that emerge from digital networks. In this respect, attention must be drawn to Annie Abrahams's

body of performance work in which 'communication' and 'intimacy,' in their myriad variations, become 'problems' in the Deleuzian sense of the term. [6]

It is also worth highlighting the fertile dialogue that has been established between other artistic practices based, for example, on video and photography and the performativity of webcamming and, in a more general sense, the presentation of the self and participation in digital networks. A particularly interesting case in this context is David Valentine's film *Computer Love* (2010), filmed entirely on webcams. This fiction dance-film reinterprets the famous balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* staging an adolescent couple who exchange messages in a chat room named Computer Love (a euphemism for cyber-sex as well as an allusion to Kraftwerk's song of the same name).

The audience observes the young couple's reactions through images captured by webcams on their computers placed alongside a chat window in which we see a version of Shakespeare's dialogues in the highly abbreviated, pared-down language that is characteristic of instant messaging. The protagonists express the intensity of their feelings through urban dance (choreographed by James Hall and Joe Livermore of the Methods of Movement collective) and the messages in the chat window are echoed by the voice-over that recites Shakespeare's original text.

The tiny space of the young people's bedrooms is reduced still further by the static, vigilant and fragmentary gaze of the webcams; while the use of the split screen intensifies the expression of desire as well as the cultural and racial boundaries between the two young lovers. The use of webcams as a staging and filming device questions our relations of attraction — particularly those of digital natives —, participation and captivity in social networks.

In this context, the work of the photographer Evan Baden is also relevant; in particular his series *Technically Intimate* (2009) and *The Illuminati* (2007), which invoke the way in which teenage privacy and intimacy are being redefined by the Internet and mobile phones. In *Technically Intimate*, Baden takes as a starting point videos and images with sexually explicit content that he has found online. In the text introducing the series *Technically Intimate*, Baden explains how, on the basis of this material, he selected an image and subsequently worked with participants who answered the request for collaborators that he posted on social networks. The models adopt provocative poses staged for their cameras (mobile phone or webcams) but their status as 'sex objects' is re-contextualized precisely by the retreat of the point of view (of the photographer's gaze), which, in 'opening up' the shot, allows the quotidian space to enter the frame — the bedrooms full of objects and adolescent passions — shifting the sexually explicit meaning of the image and confronting the spectator with the ambiguity and discomfort that it provokes.

In turn, in *The Illuminati* Baden creates a series of portraits of solitary young people whose faces, suspended, hypnotized and absorbed, are bathed in the light coming off the screens of the gadgets that they are touching. In these photographs, the light that reveals their faces captures the adolescents' fixed gaze at a screen and a communication that we spectators cannot access because it is turned away from us.

In the face of this ambivalent dissolving of limits, the various artistic projects invoked here examine the current intensification of the flow of personal narratives on Web 2.0 and the new practices of self-surveillance and participatory surveillance on social networks. Effectively, while the potential dangers of surveillance on the World Wide Web are well known (particularly, the invasion of privacy, mapping and the management of information relating to particular social groups, fraud and so forth), according to Anders Albrechtslund, participative surveillance practices could also be considered as forms of subjective,

relational, shared and mutual experimentation. [7] In our view, the various artistic works being analyzed here address the irresolvable multiplicity of dimensions that traverse our presence, identity and participation in the digital world.

Conclusion: The hybrid space

In this context, we would like to conclude by invoking the work *Tele_Trust* (2009 – underway) developed by the Dutch duo Karen Lancel and Herman Maat in collaboration with the V2_Lab. *Tele_Trust* consists of a networked performance and an installation that investigates the relations between surveillance, privacy and trust in the public space and on digital networks.

Lancel and Matt created a ‘data veil’ inspired by the robes of monks; which also calls to mind a burka or Darth Vader's cloak (*Star Wars*). The dark and opaque fabric of this veil is weaved in a network of sensors that transform it into an interactive communication membrane. The performance *Tele_Trust* involves several interlinked data-veils and takes place in public spaces where members of the audience are invited to participate. The veil functions like a second skin: when the participant touches it she does not feel the sensors but the warmth of her own body. However, when the cloak is caressed, voices are activated in the headset, which ask her questions centering on the idea of trust. These voices belong to other members of the audience, who use their smartphones to communicate with whoever is hidden under the cloak.

Before being covered, the participant is photographed with a webcam and her photograph is sent to an online project database. When the participant attains invisibility under the veil, the members of the audience, by interacting with her via their smartphones, reveal her face online. It appears on the website of the *Tele_Trust* project, on the public screens of the installation and on the screens of the mobile phones accompanied by the questions: “Do I need to see your eyes to trust you? Do I need to touch you? Who is looking at whom? Who is controlling whom?”

The project *Tele_Trust* thereby helps us to reflect on the way in which interfaces can create an experience of presence and trust in a world impregnated with technology and media in which face-to-face communication is becoming scarce. In parallel, the participatory dimension of this work must be examined in the light of the notion of the “[...] digital aesthetic as *transmedial* experience, in other words, an interactive action or effect that involves hopping from medium to medium across a patchwork that makes use of intertextuality and ‘live’ recombination.” [8]

Questions, statements, short narratives about trust, intimacy and control created by the participants flow into the data veils that are active at that moment. All of the testimonies and contributions gathered during the public performances are available on the website of the project *Tele_Trust* and are activated and recombined when the data veils are used.

A mesh of stories generated by the users is interwoven, mediated by these sensitive and moving membranes which, in covering the wearers’ bodies, reveal their faces, thereby invoking the paradoxical play of hiding, transparency, nomadism and capture that traverses the ‘hybrid space’ [9] of contemporary digital networks. *Tele_Trust*, and the other artistic projects analyzed here, address the shifting experience of the hybrid space, marked by a conflation of presence and distance and blurred boundaries between intimacy and publicness, poetically and politically re-imagining our experience in this multi-layered and intensive networked spatiality.

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