SKYPE AND VIDEOPERFORMANCE: RELATIONAL SCREENS

CINZIA CREMONA

This paper argues that Skype communication on the one hand, and videoperformance on the other have been converging into a set of art practices that adopts the screen as a relational device informed syncretically by the qualities of both practices.

The project *Skype Me!* sits at the convergence of videoconferencing with two art traditions: performance-to-camera and networked performance practices.

Skype Me!, 2010, Cinzia Cremona with Terry Smith, live Skype collaborative performance. Copyright of the artist.

Introduction

This paper examines an instance of art practice that utilises Skype as a platform for videoperformances.

I have been exploring the foundations of a theory of the relational screen in the context of videoperformance art practice. The core argument of this paper is based on the observation that the relational qualities of networked screens in peer-to-peer communication and of videoperformance reciprocally inform each other's relational potential.

This paper argues that Skype communication on the one hand, and videoperformance on the other have been converging into a set of art practices that adopts the screen as a relational mediator informed syncretically by the qualities of both practices.

Overview of Skype Me!

Skype Me! took place in August 2010 in the context of an artist residency and solo exhibition at firstsite (Colchester, UK). This project was driven by a set of research questions to problematize the crossovers

between videoperformance and screen-based communication. The structure of the project was deliberately open to the emergence of features to be discussed in the context of videoperformance and recent relational approaches to contemporary visual art.

In August 2010, I invited a number of artists to contribute remotely via Skype - I left the invitation intentionally open to elicit a variety of responses. This productive variety allowed me to analyze a number of features of screen-mediated relationality on the boundary of communication, performance and relational art practice, and to highlight synergies and crossovers between the use of screens in networked communication and in videoperformance art practices.

Some examples

Chooc Ly Tan's contribution, a presentation about the inventor Walter Josef Steinerson, culminated in a minute silence in memory of the subject. As the talk progressed, Steinerson emerges as a fictional figure and a catalyst for political satire and performance. Especially evident in the recording of the interaction between myself and Chooc Ly, this fact becomes progressively embodied in my own expressions and reactions. In particular, the moment I realise the ploy unfolding in front of me, my facial expression changes visibly, and the connection between Chooc Ly and myself comes to life. This simple observation points to a relational *space* between the screens within which the work takes place.

Daniel Lehan, an experienced and prolific live performer, admitted to using Skype for the first time. Daniel simply performed a text-based work as he would for a live audience. Andrea Giulivi connected from Italy to recite a touching poem by Giacomo Leopardi wearing a mirrored Futurism-inspired mask. The contrast between the high poetry and the grotesque attire suited the paradoxes inherent to Skype-based art practice – low resolution/intense performance; geographical distance/visual closeness. These practices adopt the screen as a vehicle for the delivery of the work, and ignore the particular connotations of the videoperformance setting, and the triangulation with viewers in the gallery. Conversely, the artist Terry Smith had devised a small work to suit the low bandwidth of his connection, and framing the keyboard of his computer with an independent camera, typed noisily on the keys with one finger.

The painter Corinne Charton took the invitation to a different emotional pitch with a very intense message to her younger self. Corinne had not prepared any performance, and asked me to tell her what to do. In conversation Corinne responded with interest to the idea of leaving a personal message for her younger self. Corinne appeared attuned to the paradoxical qualities of *Skype Me!* - the combination of liveness, intimate connection between the two sides of the networked screens, and the delay afforded by recording.

The next section will discuss two of the artists' contributions in more detail. These instances convey more directly the potential for a creative focus on videoconferencing affordances and limitations within visual art practices. Corinne Charlton's personal message reflects Skype's core paradox of complementing relational presence and physical absence. Marsha Bradfield's penetrating conversation helps uncover some of the conceptual dynamics of the project itself. It also highlights the relational openness that can be created by projects that soften the separation between public and private approach to communication.

Corinne Charton

During our introductory chat, Corinne Charton focuses on the lack of eye-contact in our Skype conversation. 'I can see that you can't see my eyes, but I'm desperate to look into yours!'. Corinne expresses her initial discomfort with emotionally intensity, but later in the conversation cannot avoid addressing me instead of her younger self, until I switch off my webcam. After having delivered her emotional message to her own screen/webcam, Corinne acknowledges that only after 'I left' – but I have only left her visual field – she can now address her own image and her absent younger self.

I would argue that, contrary to recorded videoperformances, the live networked screen of videoconferencing conveys direct connections and relationality despite the lack of eye-contact. Conversely, it could be argued that mediated eye contact [1] is an indispensable component to activate the relational effectiveness of the screen in videoperformances, and at the same time that it depends on the complicity of viewers. The familiarity with the televisual convention of eye contact adopted by newsreaders and early television continuity announcers enhances the relational power of the recorded moving image through a sense of liveness. On the basis of my own videoperformance practice, I would also argue that this screen-mediated relationality is often activated at the production stage by evoking an imagined viewer as present beyond the camera. I use the video camera and screen as relational tools from the inception of the work by already addressing the viewer long before the performance becomes an image on a screen in a gallery and meets the gaze of others. At the stage of performance, the lens of the camera is the substitute for the viewer.

Seeing the other is an integral part of the experience of videoconferencing; therefore it is expected that interlocutors will be looking at the image of the other on the screen, and not straight into camera. This tacit agreement sidesteps the need for mediated eye contact, and highlights the effectiveness of the screen as a mediator of relationships. By being the last interface of a networked system, the screen offers a visual proof that the other is there *now*. In videoperformances that directly reference networked real time communication, the viewer becomes a substitute for the interlocutor only at the latest stage of the process – when the videoperformance is displayed on screen in the gallery.

These pragmatic observations about videoperformance and videoconference practices suggest a wide range of questions that concern the practices of screen mediated relationality and their ethical implications. Power imbalance between the interlocutors on and off screen, issues of seduction and perceived intimacy, the lack of reciprocity, and the more general debate on the traps of conviviality in relational practices, all echo in the questions raised by this project.

Marsha Bradfield

Marsha and I are both member of the research cluster Critical Practice, supported by Chelsea College of Art and Design (University of the Arts, London) . Formed by artists, researchers, academics and others, Critical Practice activates participatory events to research in practice issues of organization, governance and knowledge production within the field of culture. Marsha's art practice and research focus on dialogue, as she adopts a 'combination of participatory and collaborative models to create more participant-authored works of art.' (Bradfield, 2007). Calling from the privacy of her family home in Johannesburg, Marsha engaged in a critical conversation that contested the context of*Skype Me!* as an instance of art practice:

'**Marsha Bradfield**: I'm wandering if you could say something about how this for you is performative? How is the way you are behaving now different from how you would in the privacy of your own home?

Cinzia Cremona: In one way, I am literally in the window of the gallery. Knowing that I am visible from the street makes me feel that I am performing for a large, random audience. The second way is that I am in a public space – anybody could walk into the gallery and talk to me about this. But they will also be your audience. You are not only talking to me. Then, this is being recorded. And I'm doing this as a subject of research – I'll be thinking about the difference between Skyping with you here, talking to you on the phone, seeing you in a meeting, or going for coffee with you. I'm also going to reflect on how this can be shared with someone else.'

Marsha's interview-style conversation pressurized me into articulating the dynamics of the project as it was still in process. I find this a valuable element of this experiment, and a quality of the platform itself – the potential for meta-discourse during the production of the discourse itself. In other words, the same structure that materializes the research questions, also nurtures reflection on the structure and the questions themselves. This becomes a generative process as the contribution offer stimuli for the project to change as it progresses. Moreover, the potential for other interlocutors to benefit and/or contribute to the process keeps the project open to active participation. Left alone with a member of the audience, Marsha engaged in a conversation about who is the public or audience of the project with Caroline, an art student who entered the gallery. Caroline listened for sometime, taking notes and photographs. When I was called away, Marsha and Caroline continued the conversation:

'**Caroline**: I'm interested in the concept of me being the audience, listening to this Skype conversation that I wouldn't normally be listening to. You two were having a talk publicly, even if you are actually doing it privately. I find this quite an interesting concept. This is new phase … as well as it being performative between you and the artist.

MB: Something that I fascinated by is: are you he public? Are you the audience? Am I the public? In a way this project is contesting those distinctions, or certainly problematizing them.

Caroline: I don't feel like I'm the public right now – I feel like you are the public. But I am also watching you. In a sense you are the art piece. But then there is public going past the window … It's a different situation; one that I haven't thought about before. Maybe there is a new concept in there.

MB: I still find the idea that this is performative problematic. For me it's complicated to speak about this in terms of performance. In terms of a practice, I don't know for example how I might talk about this as being something different from, say, my teaching practice, or my interpersonal practice – the way that I communicate with my friends and family.

Caroline: I see this as more *relational* – at the more performative end of relational aesthetics. We are building relations as two strangers in a public atmosphere, in a sense. Maybe what I am doing now is more spontaneous then a planned performance, but I think this is a cross section between a more spontaneous understanding of performance and a planned, thought out one.

Throughout the 1990s a number of thinkers adopted phenomenological approaches to examine how screens mediate intersubjective encounters. Peggy Phelan and Amelia Jones concentrate on the body of

the viewer and how this shapes the perception of the body represented on the screen. Taking this concept further, Jones (1998) proposes that 'the video screen *becomes* the skin/the body' (p. 200). These authors share an interest in theorizing the dynamics of subjectivity as constructed in interactions between the subjects themselves. Screens fulfil this process by acting as psychoanalytic mirrors (Phelan, 1993), and recalling the fact that the body is already a screen for symbolic projections. In this reciprocal relationship, the formation of subjectivity is the focus of these phenomenological discourses. The relationships activated by the encounters between screens and bodies/selves are instrumental to the emergence of subjects and not the focus of analysis.

Similarly, Laura U Marks (2002) developed a theoretical concept of haptic images[2] as images that 'do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image.' (p.3). Whilst Marks proposes a narrow definition of haptic images as low resolution, fragmented and difficult to read – as these qualities move viewers' focus towards the surface of the video as if this was its skin – she also offers a theoretical premise to articulate the relationality mediated by the screen. Referring to Sobchack (1992) and her understanding of 'viewing as an exchange between two bodies' (Marks, 2002, p. 13), Marks conceives of an act of viewing in which 'both I and the object of my vision constitute each other.' (p.13) Both Marks and Sobchack develop their argument on phenomenological premises of an embodied viewer in-the-world (Sobchack, 1994), but it could be argued that they also transcend phenomenology by conceptualising screens and moving images as relational and active in themselves.

The publication of *Relational Aesthetics* (Bourriaud, 2002) marked the development of a parallel discourse, which has no roots in psychoanalytic or phenomenological thought. Not an academic conceptualisation of relational issues, but a collection of curator Nicolas Bourriaud's statements about emerging approaches in contemporary art practices, this text has nevertheless crystallised the association of the term *relational* with a particular set of contemporary art projects. Bourriaud generically defines the term relations as 'relations outside the field of art (in contrast to relations inside it, offering it its socio-economic underlay): relations between individuals and groups, between the artist and the world, and, by way of transitivity, between the beholder and the world.' (Bourriaud, 2002, p.26).

Despite the vague meaning given to 'relations with the world' and 'human relationships' throughout the book, *Relational Aesthetics* makes a strong case for the performative relational power of art practice in general and moving image works in particular.

In parallel with Bourriaud's concept of Relational Aesthetics, Grant Kester (2004) has developed the more politically engaged idea of 'Dialogical Aesthetics'. Based on ethical principles derived from Bakhtin and Levinas (p. 118), dialogical practices also sustain a sense of subjectivity built through face-to-face dialogue. Kester maintains that this approach 'requires that we understand the work of art as a process of communicative exchange rather than a physical object.' (p.90). Whilst Bourriaud promotes art practices that engender convivial relationality, Kester focuses on overtly political interventions in the fabric of the community.

Bruno Latour (2007) has provided an effective analysis of face-to-face and mediated interactions in the context of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) (pp. 199-203), in which are described as generally distributed, mediated and interfered with. Within an ANT approach, inanimate objects and animate beings with a will are considered equally as actors (active agencies within a network of events) (p.63). In other words, a face-to-face encounter constitutes only one possible iteration in a chain of mediated encounters. Coming to the question of relationships from a very different angle, Latour offers a hybrid form of sociology

that denies direct affiliations to philosophical thought. The relationality proposed by ANT is pragmatic and performative – it does not exist unless it is being enacted.

The public Skype conversation with Marsha and Caroline articulates these concepts in practice, and throws wide open the question of reciprocal influences between the screen-based tools of communication and of contemporary art practice.

Conclusions

The project *Skype Me!*, paradoxically materializes a core quality of the crossover between videoperformance and videoconferencing – the potential for the work to exist both *on screen* and *between screens*. Although some of the works were not designed to conform to Skype's characteristics – the artists regularly perform the same piece for a live audience – the dynamics and timings of the exchanges, the mixing with conversational modes, and the blurring of the distinction between private and public materialize a relational engagement rooted in the exchanges uniquely mediated by the screen.

By conflating the practices of videoconferencing as communication and as videoperformance art practice, *Skype Me!* contributes to research in both fields – the practices discussed here propose the networked screen in videoperformance and in peer-to-peer videoconferencing as a device for mediating relational responsibility.

[1] This expression describes a paradox, as one set of eyes encounters a representation of eyes instead of another present gaze. I would argue that the screen functions very effectively as an interface as it conveys this representation, allowing the represented eyes to become performative in a relational context.

[2] 'Haptic *perception* is usually defined as the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies. In haptic *visuality*, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch.' (Marks, 2002, p.2).

References and Notes:

Marsha Bradfield, "Research Project described," Critical Practice, 2010

http://criticalpracticechelsea.org/wiki/index.php?title=Research_Project_Described(accessed June 20, 2011)

Nicholas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, trans Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002)

Charlie Gere, Art, Time and Technology (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006)

Amelia Jones, Body art/performing the subject (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1998)

Graham Kester, Conversation pieces: community +`communication in modern art (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2004)

Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Laura U. Marks, Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)

Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London: Routledge, 1993)

Paul Sermon, Telematic Dreaming, http://creativetechnology.salford.ac.uk/paulsermon/dream/ (accessed June 24, 2011)

Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)