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FOR ARTICLE

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Uncanny Interactions

STEVE DIXON

INTRODUCTION

In the creation of a dynamic dialogic work, the artist tends to become a mediatory agent. The openness to play in a work essentially depends on the grounds for communication that are constructed and on the boundaries and politics of control established through interfaces and navigation structures. Navigation and process, as well as the creation of meaning in an environment without fixed entry points and hierarchies, are amongst the issues that challenge traditional ideas about art.

(Lovejoy 2004: 237)

I walk forward from a table brimming with computers, video mixers and cables, and into an entirely blue, brightly lit stage area surrounded by large plasma screen monitors, onto which my live image is relayed. I tell the large audience that there will be no show without their participation – they too must venture on the blue stage otherwise no performance is possible. I explain to this audience in Boston, USA that two sisters in London, England are waiting to meet them, but the siblings won't come out unless the audience also wants to play. The sisters will take you on a journey, I explain, as the intense blueness haloing my body on the plasma screens slowly transforms into the image of a winding road that I now appear to be standing upon. Tentatively, a few audience members begin to rise from their seats, mount the steps of the raised platform and venture to the edge of the blue, finally stepping onto the azure material and into the glare of the telematic stage. Four of

them wander around the blue space, turning front, left and right to observe themselves on the keyed image of the road, on the screens all around them. The two sister characters suddenly appear on the screen space, but not the physical space, and stand amongst the small crowd. 'Hellos' are exchanged, and as real and virtual hands shake one another in thin air, the performance begins.



Unheimlich conjoins two identical blue screen spaces (a large wall and floor made of chromakey cloth), one in England, one in the United States, that are linked in real time over the Internet through a videoconferencing system. Cameras observing each space are aligned so that when the images from the two sites are videomixed and chromakeyed together,

• Audience members at SIGGRAPH in Boston, USA telematically meet and greet *The Chameleons* Group performers Anna Fenimore (left) and Niki Woods (right) in Brunel University, London, UK.

the scale of the figures from both sites are identical. The performers in an empty studio at Brunel University in London and audience members in a theatre at the SIGGRAPH exhibition in Boston, Massachusetts thus appear to co-habit a third space, the screen space, which they can see on monitors placed



• (above) A chat room enables a remote Internet audience to direct the live actors and to suggest dialogue and action for *The Chameleons Group's Chameleons 3: Net Congestion* (2000); (below) the image of dancer Susan Kozel is projected onto a bed occupied by a gallery visitor in Paul Sermon's installation *Telematic Dreaming* (1992).

around the three open sides of both spaces. The placement of the monitors around 270 degrees enables the participants to turn in any direction (other than the blue wall behind them) to see themselves and their remote partners, and eye lines between them appear accurate. The blue stage environments enable 2D and 3D virtual backgrounds to be keyed in, and these are changed and manipulated in real time in response to the developing action.

CONTEXT

Unheimlich was premiered at the 2005 Performance Studies International conference at Brown University, Providence, USA, and was further developed during performances at the 2006 SIGGRAPH exhibition in Boston, Massachusetts. *Unheimlich* is a collaborative experiment between four artists who have each pioneered different forms of digital arts and performance work, and who are using the ongoing project to extend and develop their artistic research into new territories. I initiated and conceived the project, and acted as co-producer and performance director; Paul Sermon co-produced, designed the telematic installation spaces, and directed technical aspects; Andrea Zapp conceived and designed an array of background *Photoshop* narrative images, photomontages and scenographies; and Mathias Fuchs used videogame engine systems to create and operate a series of navigable 3D worlds, some inhabited by graphical avatars. Two members of *The Chameleons Group*, Anna Fenemore and Niki Woods, performed the enigmatic sisters who meet and interact with the audience participants.

The project has built upon and expanded each artist's previous ideas and aesthetic concerns. My work as director of *The Chameleons Group* (since 1994) has experimented with Artaudian and digital conceptions of the 'double', and has explored the development of new interactive cyber-theatre paradigms, including a series of performances where online audience members in a chat room directed and spontaneously 'wrote' a performance for ten actors (in an empty theatre) to perform in real time (*Chameleons 3: Net Congestion*, 2000; see Dixon 2003).

Where my cyber-theatre had previously seen the actors at the mercy of a remote, anonymous and mischievous chatroom audience, now the performers spoke and physically interacted with the audience (telepresently) face-to-face. Sermon is widely acknowledged as the most important

telematics artist in the world, and has pioneered the conjunction of videoconferencing and chromakey technologies to visually bring together remote participants for intimate interactions on a bed (*Telematic Dreaming* 1992), a sofa (*Telematic Vision* 1993), in a shower (*A Body of Water* 1999, with Andrea Zapp), and around a UN-style ambassadorial table (*Peace Talks* 2004).

Where Sermon's former telematic conjunctions had primarily been non-verbal and were enacted between remote gallery visitors, now the interaction involved theatre audience members interacting with professional performers who could speak to, as well as see, one another. Zapp's work investigates issues around surveillance and virtual community (*Little Sister - A 24-Hr Online Surveillance Soap*, 2000), and the use of virtual scenography, as in her *The Imaginary Hotel* (2002) installation where visitors inhabit a quasi-movie set hotel room and digitally redesign its projected walls and the view from its window (see Zapp 2004).

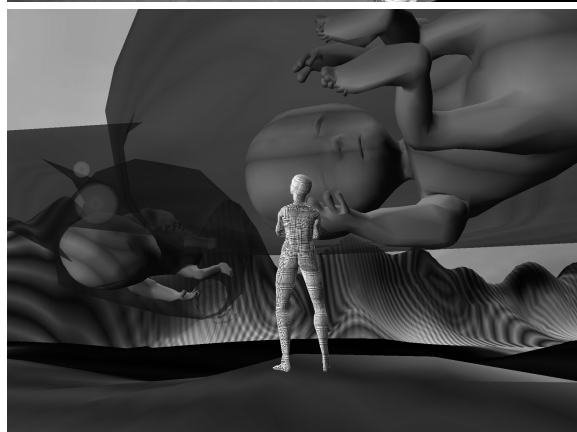
Where these virtual hotel sets had been transformed by visitors as a solo gallery pursuit, now the transformative backdrops triggered dramatic, dialogic theatre exchanges, and were operated by her 'offstage'. Fuchs has used and abused videogame engines and paradigms to create visually rich and semiotically complex navigable worlds where players can explore mnemonic museums (*Expositur*, aka *Unreal Museum* 2000, with Sylvia Eckermann; see Fuchs 2001), and the fluid and ever context-related nature of their identities (*FluID: Arena of Identities* 2003, with Sylvia Eckermann).

Where Fuchs' art games were formerly explored and played on screen by a solo user, now the game environments essentially 'played' the (multiple) users, transporting them through space, and visually enveloping them.

PERFORMANCE

As we were concerned to make the performances participatory and improvisational, we did not impose any pre-rehearsed narrative threads, and

rather the changing virtual backgrounds made *location*, and the idea of a journey, the key narrative and dramaturgical element. The sister characters tended to guide the journeys at the start of the events, but audience members quickly became accustomed to the scenic metamorphoses and would prompt the changes



themselves - 'let's go to the beach' said one, 'can we go somewhere very strange?' asked another - and Zapp and Fuchs quickly called up relevant 2D and 3D backgrounds from their computer databases. They also acted as independent 'performers' in the events, free to respond to the action and to affect the pace, dynamics, mood or humour of the improvisations by making their own interventions by switching the digital backdrops at any point they chose.

Via the Internet, *Unheimlich's* uncanny

• (above) Andrea Zapp's transformative scenographic installation *The Imaginary Hotel* (2002); (below) Mathias Fuchs's videogame art exploration of the liquid nature of identity, *FluID: Arena of Identities* (2003, with Sylvia Eckermann).



• Audience members experiment with their spatial placement within the frame and their sense of telematic touch in *Unheimlich* (2005–6).

interactions span thousands of miles and several time zones. Although cyberspace has been popularly conceptualised as a limbo, a non-space, the cyberspatial meetings here are framed within concrete (albeit virtual) spaces defined by the continually metamorphosing, keyed-in backgrounds location – a forest, a road, a train carriage, heaven, hell, and so on. The feeling of occupying and exploring a shared space is highly defined, and audience members who enter the blue screen space intuitively adapt to the space and their virtual partners within it. They become absorbed by the media mise-en-scène and compose themselves spatially within the projected locations and landscapes, like actors ‘blocking’ a scene on stage; and where background scenographies delineate, for example, land and water, they scurry to position themselves on terra firma. The human communication and interaction within these spaces is very much the same as in the quotidian world, using speech, body language, and proxemic relationships.

VIRTUAL TOUCH

The key human sense missing is touch, although ironically it is one that is frequently explored, as participants seek to shake hands, embrace, push, physically fight with, or caress the sisters. Machiko Kushahara has noted the paradoxical nature of video-conferenced virtual intimacy in Paul Sermon’s art. He contends that although the bodies of the people on the other side of the conference link are ghostlike and without substance, ‘this contradictory situation not only confounds the audience’ but releases them ‘from the logic and restrictions of daily life . . . 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 theatricality and the context of daily life at the same time’ (quoted in Wilson 2002: 520).

The sense of virtual touch is something that delights *Unheimlich* participants, a sense of the body being extended in space, in McLuhanesque fashion, by way of technology. This leads to some moments of real contact and intimacy across the networks, for example through the most delicate stroking of hair in one performance. This telematic paradigm prompted Roy Ascott’s famous question in the title of his 1990 article ‘Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?’ (Ascott 1990). Ascott’s conundrum has been explored by many artists and performers utilising telematics, such as Sita Popat and her Satorimedia company. Their *TouchDown* (2000) is a ‘duet for hands’ rehearsed and performed both in real space and over the Internet, and examines the delicate relationship and peculiar dynamic that exists in the real time meeting of the hands of two live but remote telematic bodies. Although the touch is not physical in *TouchDown*, the hands move with extraordinary sensitivity and awareness of each other, perhaps even more than they would in physical space. The company believe that increasing technological communication means

that 'we have more cerebral contact than ever before, but the comfort and sensual pleasures of physical touch may be fading sensations in this advancing world' (Sartorimedia 2000).

TouchDown offers both 'a celebration and a warning' in relation to networked technologies and virtual bodies, contrasting 'the physicality of children with the distances which form between adults, both in virtual and real-space relationships' (ibid.).

The Brazilian and French collaborators of the *Corpos Informáticos* Research Group place great emphasis on the theoretical implications of the digitally distributed body, creating ambitious networked tele-performances with invited guests from all over the world. Their *Hungry@Corpos* (2000) centred on a shared 'virtual banquet', with the company eating for an entire day in a space at the University of Brasilia whilst interacting with other invited, video-conference guests who similarly ate and drank throughout the day. Their performances *Infoporto* (1999), *Entrasite* (1999) and *Media@terra* (2000) explore the sense in which the telematic body itself becomes a machine, yet nonetheless resists its imprisonment through physical performance. The group draws on the theoretical perspectives of Wittgenstein and Deleuze to examine and demonstrate how the presence of a virtual body in front of us elicits our desire, pleasure, and will for an intimate encounter. They suggest that this now operates to such a high degree that 'the quotidian is jealous of the telepresence, jealous of the virtual. . . . The researches on teleperformance demand a higher engagement. . . . The numeric body (telepresence) imposes itself broken, the quotidian seems to draw the other off from virtual space' (*Corpos Informáticos* Research Group 1999). This potential jealousy and conflict between the real and virtual body is a potent idea that is continually played out and explored by *Unheimlich* participants.

UNCANNY BODIES

In *Unheimlich*, the participant undergoes a curious bodily and psychological effect when viewing herself on the screens and improvising physically and visually with others - both any other participants sharing the same physical blue-screen space, and the remote telematically-transmitted sisters. As many commentators have noted in relation to the performing virtual body, there is a marked transference of psychic and bodily attention away from the real space and into the virtual space of the screen. In early discourses on the virtual body, this effect was argued to confirm techno-postmodernist theories of split-subjectivity, and was commonly hyperbolised and mythologised into Cartesian or quasi-spiritual narratives of disembodiment. But of course the performance does not involve 'an escape from the body, but the opportunity to observe oneself from a new perspective', as Stephen Wilson has observed in relation to Paul Sermon's earlier works (Wilson 2002: 520).

The Lacanian resonances are clear, and have been central to both Sermon's installations and my own multimedia theatre work for over a decade, where technology is utilised to evoke a 'mature' mirror stage, confirming and digitally revisiting the Lacanian child's misconceived, 'fictitious invention' of identity and the ego 'by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power' (Lacan 1977: 2), and extending it into adulthood by means of interactive art. But where the Lacanian mirror of misrecognition points to identity's false construction as a unity, and where 'by identifying with the imaginary mirage of the whole body, the 'real' of the fragmented body is repressed' (Herzogenrath 2002: 10), *Unheimlich*'s simultaneous fragmentation and conjunction of remote bodies and spaces makes explicit and thereby releases the repressed and deferred status and ontology of the phenomenological body, and the participant's false sense of unified self within a unified image world.



• The sisters take an audience member on an adventure from a train station to a beach, through a forest fire, and finally to the gates of hell, where he tells them that the heat is so intense he has to take off his trousers.

UNCANNY SPACE

The performance engages not only with the relationships between physical and virtual bodies, but between physical and virtual spaces, relating to numerous theoretical ideas such as Slavoj Žižek's topological notion of virtual space as a 'hole in reality', a type of supernatural fracture in the fabric of space which is always just out of view, 'a floating anamorphic shimmer, only accessible with a glance over the corner of one's eye' (Žižek 1996: 110). The 'hole in reality' metaphor was famously invoked in 1980 by the most important pre-Internet telematic performance experiment, *Hole-in-Space* (1980) when Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz used television satellite technology to link The Broadway department store in Los Angeles and the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City. Large screens in the two spaces enabled passers-by to hear, see and communicate with each other. During the three-day period that the linked installation was active, relationships were struck up and developed between some of the remote

participants who would return each day; and relatives and friends in the two cities arranged times to 'meet', using the artwork 'as a medium to re-establish contact' (Collins 2004: 51). Their earlier *Satellite Arts Project: A Space with No Geographical Boundaries* (1977) created the first composite image space to combine live dancers from remote locations (the NASA Goddard Flight Center in Maryland and Menlo Park in California) using video keying techniques, prompting Rabinowitz to reflect how:

The video image becomes the real architecture for the performance because the image is a place. It's a real place and your image is your ambassador, and your two images meet in the image. . . . So it incorporates all the video effects that are used in traditional video art, but it's a live place. It becomes visual architecture.

(Quoted in Lovejoy, p. 233)

Later, in 1994, Marcos Novak would famously coin the term 'liquid architecture' in relation to cyberspace, poetically conceiving it as a fluidly responsive and abstracted, yet still physical form of space. This notion is central to our *Unheimlich* performances, where Zapp's background narrative scenographic images change fluidly and continually in response to the action, while Fuchs kinetically navigates the participants through his surreal 3D game worlds.

UNCANNY THEORY

The title, *Unheimlich*, references Sigmund Freud's 1919 book of that name, translated as 'The Uncanny'. Freud's notion of the uncanny concerns the emergence of a dark self or 'other', and relates to that which seems at once familiar and homelike, but also strange, alien and uncomfortable: 'the unheimlich is what was once heimisch, home-like, familiar; the prefix 'un' [un-] is the token of repression (Freud 1985: 368). When repressive barriers to the subconscious are pricked or come down, the uncanny may emerge to create a doubled reality where the familiar becomes frighteningly unfamiliar,

'laying bare . . . hidden forces' (ibid.: 366). Our performance also closely interrelates with Martin Heidegger's understanding of the uncanny as a fundamental condition of existential being, an anxious and fearful sense of separation from reality, both 'tranquillised and familiar' where the feeling of 'not-being-at-home [das Nicht-zuhause-sein]' is a 'primordial phenomenon' (Heidegger 1962: 233-4).

The German notion of *Heimweh* (homesickness), whereby one never feels at home wherever one is, has been central to German philosophical thought since Hegel, and elsewhere Heidegger would note: 'We who philosophize are away from home everywhere' (1992: 21). Nicholas Royle's rich and brilliant study of *The Uncanny* (2003) traces the notion through the writings of Kant, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Derrida, and goes on to explore its relationship to Brecht's alienation-effect, to genetic engineering and cloning, and to the concept of the double. He also notes the value of philosophical readings of the uncanny in understanding computer technologies:

As a theory of the ghostly (the ghostliness of machines but also of feelings, concepts and beliefs), the uncanny is as much concerned with the question of computers and 'new technology' as it is with questions of religion. Spectrally affective and conceptual, demanding rationalization yet uncertainly exceeding or falling short of it, the uncanny offers new ways of thinking about the contemporary 'return to the religious' . . . as well as about the strangeness of 'programming' in general.

(Royle 2003: 23-4)

ORIGINALITY

In 1984, Nam June Paik published an article/manifesto 'Art and Satellite' ruminating on the rich potentials of satellite technologies to conjoin artists from remote locations: 'what was being discovered was not new THINGS but merely new RELATIONSHIPS between things already existing. We are again in the fin de siècle', he said, 'this time we are discovering

much new software . . . which are not new things but new thinks' (Paik 2001: 41-2). Satellite art is not about sending Mozart over the wires, Paik stressed, it is a way to discover unique new processes and communicational relationships in art: two-way, improvisational models which play intimately with the very notions of time and space. By the mid 1990s, John Reaves, co-director of pioneering New York telematic performance group, The Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre, was pronouncing that Internet videoconferencing meant that 'It becomes ridiculous to think of theater as what can happen in one room, with one audience . . . we start to conceive of the Web as an eventspace, a place where things can happen' (Reaves 1995).

Many artists now use videoconferencing to conjoin professional performers, but to my knowledge no-one has combined telematics, chromakey techniques and digital world backgrounds as we have done in *Unheimlich* to fuse audiences and actors within a shared virtual stage where they interact, journey and

• Audience members join the telepresent sister characters on the virtual world stage to experience surreal encounters, desert heat, glacial cold, and a telematic marriage.



perform together. The simplicity of the bright blue-screen space counterpointed with the playfully changing landscapes on the monitors around it provides a tempting and welcoming stage threshold that audience members are prepared to cross. While most would never dare to mount a stage to improvise with professional flesh-and-blood performers, the sisters' *virtuality* encourages and enables it. Like a *séance* or a lucid dream, participants contact and undertake dialogues and adventures with ethereal figures from another plane.

Stephen Wilson observes how 'Telepresence represents a major goal of telecommunications in both research and art' (Wilson 2002: 526), and I believe we have succeeded in taking ideas forward to establish a significant and original performative model. Scott Fisher and Brenda Laurel define telepresence as enabling 'people to feel as if they are actually present in a different place or time' (quoted in Wilson 2002: 527), and *Unheimlich* strives to achieve that end, to imaginatively and viscerally transport participants to virtual fantasy worlds in the presence of two ghostly and very distant, but also extremely close, companions.

CONCLUSION

Unheimlich is an interactive theatre performance, a telematic installation, and a virtual world role-play environment. It is situated within emerging telepresence research and new genres of interactive arts and digital performance, and also sits within the field of relational aesthetics as described by Nicholas Bourriaud. Bourriaud identifies a trend in recent arts practices towards what he calls '*Artwork as interstice*' using Karl Marx's term for trading and exchange that does not involve profit or capitalism. He defines relational art as:

an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interaction and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space . . . [an] arena of

exchange, [that] must be judged on the basis of aesthetic criteria, in other words, by analysing the coherence of its form, and then the symbolic value of the 'world' it suggests to us, and of the image of human relations reflected by it. . . . Art is a state of encounter . . . In looking at contemporary artistic practices, we ought to talk of 'formations' rather than 'forms'.

(Bourriaud 2002)

Like the communal interactive telematic events staged by the Corpos Informáticos Research Group that Bourriaud holds up as an exemplar, *Unheimlich* also epitomises the relational art aesthetic, catalysing 'an arena of exchange', a 'micro-community', an artistic practice that 'resides in the invention of relations between consciousness' (ibid.). *Unheimlich* invents a relational stage bridging time and space for ritualised exchange and communal drama. It is a stage where, in Bourriaud's Sartrean formulation, we cast an eye on ourselves and realise that our very form, our very being is nothing more than a relational property, where we contemplate ourselves as 'nothing other than the result of perpetual transactions with the subjectivity of others' (ibid.). The performance installation's collapse of distance and the participants' etheric dialogues and embraces with those far away manifests, heightens and encapsulates this troublesome existential given. Across the telematic void we gesticulate and verbalise at one another, just as we've always done in physical space, unaware of quite where we are or whom we are, apart from in relation to others.

The relational aesthetics of *Unheimlich* offers play, journey, companionship and fantasy as its naïve and uncanny existential path and solution, providing a performance proscenium for defiant, communal *jouissance* to wilfully celebrate our relativity and relationship to an always-already virtualised world and its ghostly humanity. Two simultaneous stages and two sets of people buzz across the wires and conjoin, fizzing with theatricality and existential chance, choice, and cherishment.

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