

„Interactive telematic art defies a means of mechanical reproduction“

A conversation between Paul Sermon (PS) and Rolf Wolfensberger (RW)

The conversation took place at the School of Art and Design at the University of Salford on August 12, 2008. It focuses on *Telematic Vision* and is a mixture of very concrete questions and answers on technical aspects and a narrative about the creation and the history of the artwork. But the conversation also touches on very general issues of preservation and the documentation of the participants' experience.

RW: Starting point of the following conversation on Telematic Vision is the title of your presentation at the Danube Tele-Lecture series in Vienna in 2007: „Interactive telematic art defies a means of mechanical reproduction“ and your concept: „The artwork itself is not the installation but the action of the interacting participants (...) the viewer is the spectacle. (...) The apparatus is only a means to achieve the meaning (...) the hardware is allowed to change – it has to be adapted to the concept.“
You developed Telematic Vision in 1993 during your residency at the ZKM Institute for Visual Media. Based on the artistic concept of the work you created then a material ‚dispositif‘ or a specific technical apparatus. Does this original apparatus have the status of a model apparatus?

PS: The title of my talk in Vienna takes up the Walter Benjamin notion of reproduction, concerning the way the work is reproduced. I was just trying to highlight that the work itself is not necessarily reproduced. It is a system that is reproduced and the results of which can be similar but never identical. So in a sense I am referring to this notion of it being an open system, that the outcomes are undefined. To some extent the outcomes can be predicted, but they are not finite. The result is that the audience will engage in some ways they have never been engaged in before. There might be similarities but the audience will eventually come up with new narratives and new ways of engaging with the piece. So the outcomes are not finite. That's what I have been trying to hint at, that it is trying to transcend that paradigm.

History of the creative process

RW: So the technical model you created in 1993 was just the apparatus that was possible there at that time. And it was also part of the open system. The apparatus is conceived as being variable under the condition that the artistic concept is observed.

*PS: I developed the piece in Karlsruhe as I started a residency there in February 1993 and I made a first prototype presentation in Cologne in September for the *Interactiva*. The time of the residency was used to develop this apparatus, to test and find out how it could work. The only work that had preceded it was the piece with the two beds, *Telematic Dreaming*, that I had produced in Finland in June of the previous year, in 1992. In fact I have done one piece in between, we should probably be talking about, which is important for me, because in my view it did not work in some ways. I am referring to *Telematic Séance*. In Karlsruhe I used the studio and the equipment and was able to play around, it was almost like a kind of a stage set. And some of the first experiments I did were very much based on the bed piece. The experiments involved projection and I also had a white sofa first. I was projecting the image on the white surface of a sofa. I was literally trying to replicate the previous piece using a sofa, but for me it didn't really work. I felt uncomfortable with this bent figure projected on the surface of the sofa, going out of focus because it was not a flat surface at all. The proportions were not right and all sorts of issues around it were a bit of a concern. I wasn't getting satisfactory results at all. These experiments were done around Easter time in 1993. And then I also went to Finland to do a new piece of work, because they invited me back to take part in the second New Media Festival in Espo. They asked me to produce a new piece for the Otso Gallery. As I was already working on Telematic Vision for the ZKM I had to come up with some new idea. And I actually produced the piece called *Telematic Séance* I was mentioning. And it turned out to be a hard piece to do and in some ways it wasn't really working. I didn't have the opportunity to test it out. I literally went there with a concept. I had done this also with *Telematic Dreaming*. I arrived with a concept, not having previously experimented with it or tried it out at all. But with *Telematic Dreaming* I was very lucky in fact that it actually*

worked. And I took up that experimental approach again with *Telematic Séance* and projected an image of me on a round table on the surface of another table and relayed these images backwards and forwards between two locations. But I think with the title of the piece people didn't really get what to do, it was too complicated. They were not familiar with the topic of a séance. I was this figure moving on the table and people were just sort of tapping on my head. And they were talking to each other because I also had to introduce audio. But the audience was not interacting the way I thought they might or they were not interacting at all. They were a little uncomfortable.

The piece completely drained me out because it was the opposite of the really successful bed. Technically it was exactly the identical apparatus but with a different context, a different surface for the projection, and the result was completely different. Which got me to start thinking about what is it then. It is not necessarily purely the technical apparatus that I had setup that makes it work. And I became uncomfortable about replicating the projection idea on the sofas.

During this year at Karlsruhe I was also reproducing the bed again for V2 when they were still based at s-Hertogenbosch. That was the time when I became very much concerned with the projection surface and the monitors on either side of the bed. And I realised how people were not looking at the bed surface but they were looking at the monitors. They were not only concerned with this other person but with themselves as well. For me this was a sort of an awakening, an understanding, that it is all about not only viewing the other person but viewing yourself, yourself as the actor, as the performer, the puppet, the avatar. The screen is the place which is interesting, where things are going on, in that composite image. It was quite a radical step technically, in the development of the piece for Karlsruhe, that I decided not to introduce any video projection. Only to use chroma-key technology between the two sites, and monitors. By doing that I also solved the problem of having to have a darkened space because of the projection and the camera view on it and so on. It allowed me now to have two bright locations. That's how I arrived at the technical setup of *Telematic Vision* more or less. I had to find out where to place the screens after having observed how people interact. So having one in front and one on each side of the arm of the sofa was very important.

RW: Eventually it was like a shift of where the action takes place. You moved it from the real space of the bed or the sofa into this virtual space on the monitor. Participants find themselves in a new place.

PS: I found, that with doing the bed, for me the most interesting place was this blue bed space. It was also a kind of control room where I was the performer at that time. For me that was a much more interesting location, I didn't have this other figure on the bed. So I was not concerned with this kind of presence. I had to become more concerned with absence, the absence of the person and our collaborative presence on the screen.

On the sofa the person next to me was not a present figure in the projection, but the person was still there in some ways. The visible thing was on the screen and the invisible thing was sitting next to me on the sofa. There was far more a poignancy about presence in space going on there than it was the case with the projection. This I explored more with the sofa.

RW: With all the different versions of Telematic Vision that have been staged since 1993 would you still point to an apparatus that could be called the original one or do you see it more in a continuum, in the sense of different material realisations for the re-enactment of the original idea?

PS: I think there are some things that are essential. The two main aspects are the sofa and the front TV and the relational situation of these two objects. The sofa very rarely moves closer than two meters or further than three meters away from the TV, which kind of replicates the usual living room situation. The other thing is of course the camera angle. I always had this kind of a bleak view at about 45°. The camera isn't a straight on shot, it is always situated higher above the TV monitor. It can be done other ways but my interest really is to try to get a 45° view, to get a full body image of the person sitting on the sofa. The legs might be cut, but when you lean back on the sofa you are almost at a 45° angle. This has a lot to do with the video format at that range and the resolution. The idea is that you should have this kind of view of the people. That is a requirement of the piece.

Another requirement is that there is at least one video screen on one side of the sofa, to the left or to the right. Actually if one is on the left, the other one should be on the right. So that when one person looks at the screen and the other person looks at her screen they will be looking at each other. So they can make this visual connection being face to face and also have the possibility to see their profile image. I originally did it with two monitors on each side and I have a preference to do it with two, because it offers more possibilities. That is essentially the main thing. The way how I have relocated this setup gives some more possibilities. I like to experiment with site specific situations, to do it in unexpected ways, e.g. in situations where people think nothing is actually going to happen, where they think they are just looking at a sofa and a TV.

Variations of the score

RW: But there were variations in the setup, especially with additional possibilities you offered the interactors. Because the current version at the MoC does not offer those features any more, like the live TV feed that was part of the first version through a third chroma-key level. When or why did you allow this feature to be dropped?

PS: I initially introduced it because I wanted the audience to understand that the installation is a place to watch TV and sort of make them aware or make them think about that the normal TV situation is a state of passiveness or disempowerment. I wanted to let them discover that their own presence is re-empowering them, that they can take control and that they are in fact the focus. Which they actually are, even without the TV background image. I thought that the TV background would enforce that message. But now I think I don't necessarily need this feature because everyone is familiar with the situation and they will discover it themselves. Even if they don't it is not a problem either. They will still be empowered to some extent by enjoying the situation.

RW: In the early versions they even had the possibility to change channels with a remote control. This underlined the everyday TV situation.

PS: This was part of the same thing. Both sofas had different options in the original version. On one of them you could simply just change the channels. 1993 was a time when in Europe suddenly a huge amount of TV channels emerged and could be seen through satellite and cable. Particularly in central Europe you got TV broadcasts from everywhere. I wanted to point at that whole couch potato type of flicking through channels. I wanted to make this again part of the message. That the notion of being in control at this level was just a complete farce.

The additional feature on the other sofa is quite similar, where participants could flip through predefined text messages. I struggled with the content of those text messages. I tried to make it look as they were referencing the communication between the two locations in a way that was kind of obvious, like subtitles. Again suggesting that there is some level of empowerment through interactive elements in television, but in fact that this is not the case. On the contrary the empowerment is the image itself and the performing. I felt that I don't need those features, so I did not do it again. Certainly not the remote controls after Karlsruhe, that was the first thing to go. And then later the TV background image was the second thing to go, which made the installation also easier technically speaking. I didn't have to bother with too many chroma-key levels and chroma-key lighting and I could also have one of the sofas in a different colour.

RW: The first time we staged Telematic Vision in Berne in 1998 you reintroduced the live TV feed, but then you also allowed to drop it.

PS: I have also used TV background images, not live TV feed, but prerecorded images in some versions of *Telematic Vision* and recently in some other installations. They were still images, not moving images. The problem is: If you have too much movement in these background images they take up a lot of bandwidth. At that time when you had some vibrant MTV video with lots of movement and editing in the background it sucked up your bandwidth and sometimes even the connections broke. And without it you also had a much clearer image, because of how the compression of the codec worked. So that was another reason why we took it away.

Varying material components

RW: Talking of bandwidth: when we first presented Telematic Vision in Berne there was one sofa in a shop window at the train station and the other at the museum. They were linked via 6 ISDN lines and there was this slight delay in the images because of the bandwidth possible at that time. This delay gave a special feature to the possibility of communication between the two remote locations. This phenomenon has disappeared because of broader bandwidth today and when you link the two locations in the museum via BNC cables. There is no delay in these cases. Is this an improvement or is there something missing without the delay?

PS: There are both positives and negatives about doing it in either way. Ultimately at the time video conferencing was possible via ISDN through telephone lines. You get a slight delay but it was interesting. It produces almost something like a delayed reaction. You do something and then you watch what you are doing, a moment after you have done something it happens. You get into this kind of sync to slow the space-time continuum down to see where you are, to see what you're doing, to understand your presence. This is interesting. Neuroscientists like Daniel Dennett have written about it, that perception is happening like that in

any case. It is this notion of the conscious experience which is actually a delayed experience. We are talking of course of milliseconds, but there is a kind of processing going on in the mind and the conscious experience emerges later. It is a little bit like a display of this parallel processing going on in the mind. And on the sofa your slowing down this theatre the other way round. You think of things, you are doing things and then they happen. But you are actually conscious of it.

RW: You had to slow down, because if you did not you could not communicate with the other people. Both had to slow down. Now it is instantaneous, real time, there is no delay. It is a technical improvement, but it has changed the look of the enactment.

PS: Yes that is in fact very interesting. I have never tried to recreate this feature, to bring back in the delay artificially. But I am equally happy with the result of it all being more real time.

RW: Let us turn to some more technical components that influence the preservation of the apparatus: For example the chroma-key mixer, which is still the one from 1997. It still works but might break down anytime. In the meantime you yourself have been using other types of mixers.

PS: The type or company is not so important. I always happen to keep an eye on these things. With mixing there have been a lot of changes since then, especially concerning the online or offline digital mixing facilities for video editing on computers, but this is not very good for our needs. We need plug and play live feeds, live in and live out. And these kind of mixers are more used in the VJ culture of today. The VJ market has introduced lots of new smaller, compact, simple in and out devices. That has been something that has been quite useful, like the Edirol V4, which gives the best key I have seen at the moment. We have to keep an eye on such technical things changing.

RW: A similar problem pops up with the cameras we used at the museum. At the moment it is the third generation of cameras in use: we changed from MiniDV cameras to video-conferencing cameras and at the moment to CCTV cameras.

PS: With all these things you should try to get the best specifications you can. This can change though. The best camera for this might not be the best to use with Telematic Vision. I always used to recommend to use 3 chip CCD cameras, but now if you find a camera with a large chip with enough lines, it is worth trying. On the other hand I have not used HD so far. This would also be interesting to test.

RW: There is another related burning question, not because of the cameras but because of the monitors. We are still using 4:3 CRT monitors on the two sides of the sofas and a large rear-projection monitor for the front. CRT's are disappearing and the image on the rear-projection monitors is causing problems because of difficult replacements for the lamps. The actual solution would be using flat screens but there you have the problem of the ratio of 16:9, where you would have to show the image with pillar box format.

PS: I only think you should avoid stretching people, to keep a true image of the persons on the sofas. Because of the size of the sofas, a standard 4:3 ratio seems better than the stretched letter box format. But still it might be interesting to try to do the whole thing in HD. Edirol for example has developed a similar HD version of their mixer.

RW: We have been talking about the sofas, the distance of the sofas to the monitors etc., as parameters which are set. There is the sofa itself that suffers from the use. And then there are the plinths for the monitors and, depending on the type of monitors, you have to have other plinths. How important for example is the design or the colour of the sofas, or the surrounding environment and such?

PS: The main thing about the sofas is that when you are sitting on it you should see the images on the monitors at eye level. And the distance for the front monitor I have mentioned above. The side monitors may be up to a meter from the sofa arm, just to allow people to move around the sofa. I think the whole sofa should be free. It works best if you can actually also get behind the sofa. So the whole thing becomes a stage, an object in itself. So you can go behind it and play with the whole space around it. That became quite clear when we first did the piece. But we have also tried out different kinds of settings. It should be an isolated object, so that participants can explore what they can do with their bodies. You were talking of the sofas that had to be repaired and replaced because of the use. I remember that when I went to pick up the installation after the Biennial in Lyon in 1995 the sofas were completely shredded. It was a sign that people were using the installation, which was a good sign.

Licensing the score

RW: Let us also talk about the licence. Because the museum did not buy Telematic Vision, it purchased a license instead, limited to Switzerland, which came with a specific set of instructions of how to install the piece. Do you think licensing is an appropriate model for the presentation of process-oriented conceptual artworks in general, have you done this often or do you know this solution of other colleagues?

PS: This was recommended to me in the past, and I think I have the same arrangement with the National Museum of Film and Photography in Bradford for *Telematic Dreaming*. They had a licence to show the piece in the UK. And of course the ZKM has similar sort of license for *The Tables Turned*. Which means that I could not reproduce that work in Germany without their agreement. This is the same type of agreement I have with your museum in Switzerland.

RW: Yes, the MoC has the exclusive license for Switzerland. Of course you have to be informed all the time about where and when the piece is shown. And there are special rules if the installation is planned to go on loan to other institutions or to be shown abroad, in locations outside the range of the license. If you look at media art, electronic art, which is process-oriented, conceptual, performative, interactive, etc., instead of selling the artwork to one institution or producing multiples or limited editions, you sort of license the concept. This to me seems very appropriate for this kind of art, meaning, that not only the concept is process-oriented but also the way of presenting the work.

PS: For me it works well like that. It is actually like a piece of music, like the musical score. The written notation is the substance of it, the instructions, the manual.

Varying contexts of experience

RW: Telematic Vision is part of the permanent exhibition at the MoC since 2003 and before that it has been put up several times. With this repeat performance it also becomes something like a laboratory where you can watch social phenomena slightly changing. Participants acting with these kind of media are bringing with them their 'knowledge of media' and they are confronted with a medial situation, they perhaps did already know or did not know. How do you judge this aspect of this 'long-term temporality' of the artwork with regard to the original concept?

PS: Yes with regard to temporality: if the work is only shown temporarily and within intermediate periods or if it is shown permanently, the knowledge that builds around it or the knowledge the audience brings with it play an important role.

People will ultimately try and do different things in the space. For example at your museum with regard to the whole context of the museum, if you take a group of school children that have already gone through a whole journey in the exhibition and they end up in front of the sofas, what has been before and what is coming after will certainly have an effect. I think what is very much important is that it is always understood as an artwork. It is useful for people to understand the context it sits within, particularly in the context of the MoC. While we understand it as an artwork that culturally sort of sits in the context of media technology and interactivity and raising questions in this area: We should not lose this notion. And maybe also for older students or scholars it might be useful to contextualise it even further as a resource for archives or media archives. And of course the aspect of people just experiencing it or watching other people experiencing it. I think it should sit quite comfortably in any context.

RW: When I watch people sitting on the sofas and when we did the documentation only recently for preservation issues, I had the feeling that, when we had the first presentation of Telematic Vision ten years ago, people did not react to it the same way. Their behaviour on the sofas has changed with the medial environment. So, kind of provocatively speaking, I wondered if there might be a point in time where the audience will only have a nostalgic reaction towards it because they find the technology used so common or so outdated. Or going even a step further: If you want to preserve the concept of providing this communicative system that participants can interact with someone who is not physically present in a place which is not real, you might have to come up with an apparatus which is far distant from the one you designed in 1993.

PS: I think this is more a question of context, where the work is located and how it is understood. I'm sure people now experience a certain familiarity about it, about the concept. When it was produced for the first time there was still a certain magical sense to it. They wondered how it is done. Perhaps the novelty of something like that being done over long distance via ISDN communication is also lost.

Therefore I think it should be historically contextualised, especially in your museum, which is the place where such things are historically contextualised. It might be that I would feel comfortable that there is information, contextual information maybe even through video material, that might help people to understand, what it was meaning then and how it works now. People have heard about it, I mean people with a specific interest in this kind of work, people who are familiar with my work. For them it is different, more like: I have heard so much about this piece, finally I have a chance to see it. On the whole, I think people are still very fascinated about it. I have been doing a lot of new things in different areas in the meantime, particularly in *Second Life*, where I was researching this combination of *Second Life* with the *First Life*, creating similar sorts of things actually, but in a different environment. The feature of not being able to speak remains still quite interesting with these earlier installations. You are forcing people into a situation where they otherwise would think they should be able to speak. We have video communication, why can't we have audio communication? These were the questions I was confronted with when I produced the piece. I think there were good reasons not to have provided audio, rather offering a communication people are not usually familiar with. So, I think, as the piece gets older, it may need contextualising. It has been contextualised of course through literature, but I mean, especially in this museum situation, it needs other kinds of methods of communicating back to people with regard to context.

Documentation and discourse

*RW: That's where documentation comes in. In your presentation at Vienna you were referring to the piece *Hole in Space* by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz from 1980 where you have this video footage, where you can see how people reacted to the piece at that time. And you can try to reconstruct how this experience must have been for them. The footage provides you with what the artwork consisted of. Maybe the only traces that are left are the documentations. And considering the sofas, if you have documentation on how people behaved and what they tell you how they experienced it...*

PS: I think it is a story, it is a narrative....

RW: Like a narrative of 1993, you have one of 1998, a narrative of 2003 or 2008...? And if you want to contextualise it in perhaps 20 years, you would have to present these different narratives?

PS: I think the notion of the story also relates back to the first questions about the apparatus. If you explain the system to the audience, they have almost understood the work and all the possibilities with it are emerging in their own minds. If you tell them, for the sofa, well, it has got a camera, and you send the image through a video line and mix it with another image from a second camera on another sofa, etc., and that they cannot talk but only see their bodies moving, etc., so this is a story. And people will start to go testing it out by themselves. Which is like a little story you can tell by attaching things together. This is also a kind of a story with which I am trying to contextualise it as well.

As with *Hole in Space*, it is also a story, a story I was being told even before I have seen any documentation of it. People would talk about it and tell the story. With such pieces there will always be the story that unfolds about the whole context of it. And if you finally come to see the video you have the feeling of already knowing it, because you have heard the story that has built up an image of what it could have possibly been like. I think that it is the same with the stories people tell about the sofa or the bed. And these stories add up to contextualising a work.

You know, I guess Kit and Sherrie would have more visual documentation on *Hole in Space*, but they are consulted and contacted all the time with regard to this early work, because people have heard so much about it only through stories. It is like if the narrative had become more important somehow.

RW: The artwork itself has a history, gets its story. If it is interactive or participative the artwork is ephemeral, because it emerges at that moment when people are using it. So you capture this kind of work only by documenting it through video. In such a case the video footage of people using the work is like a substitution of the work itself.

PS: What actually recently has been done at a show at the Cornerhouse Gallery in Manchester in 2007: They presented *Hole in Space* at a show called *Outside the Box*. They had two large screens with life size images of the footage that was to be seen in the shop windows in 1980 in New York and Los Angeles. And these images were projected on two walls opposite each other and synchronised. So the participants of 1980 were again like talking to each other and you could sit and watch this historical conversation, then realised through satellite. That was quite an effective way of showing the work, or better a documentation of that piece.

RW: Even if you have this kind of documentation or even if you happen to have commentaries of eyewitnesses about their experiences, the individual experience itself can't be preserved of course.

PS: I think the Cornerhouse Gallery did not use documentary footage in the strict sense of the word, from the point of view of the documentor. They used the line-out material as the means of documentation. That is the same kind of documentation I have got on *Telematic Vision* which is mostly line-out material. I put a great value on that, because it brings me back to my idea about the screen. The image on the screen is not an image that is just being presented, it is actually conveying the most purest means of the communication that is going on. It is where the communication took place. It is not a recording of a conversation, it is the conversation. So when two bodies are kind of playing around with each other, those people who are doing that are looking at what you are looking at. They are looking at exactly what you are looking at. Of course you haven't got the people around them that were perhaps watching them and making jokes and such. But, when you are actually in that situation you are pretty isolated. You are channeling your thoughts into that screen image. The important person is the one in the screen. There is a sort of disembodiment and re-embodiment situation going on, that you are re-embodied in the screen. So the line-out feed is in fact the richest source of documentation.