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S P A C E F O R I N T E R A C T I O N :

W I T H T H E A R T I S T A N D

T H E P U B L I C

- 92 Virtual reality is a new materiality. For four weeks I performed in Paul Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming*. The installation was part of a large exhibition of contemporary art in central Amsterdam called *I + the Other: dignity for all, reflections on humanity*.² Spending several hours a day over a period of weeks in virtual space allowed me to explore in greater depth the relation between my “cyber-body” and my fleshly body, and gave me greater insight into some of the sexual and political implications of the technology.

With *Telematic Dreaming* Sermon created a space for interaction between a performer and members of the public using a technology called telepresence. Using video projectors and monitors Sermon drew together people in two separate rooms. There was a bed in each room. I was alone on a bed in a room well removed from the public visiting the exhibition. My image was projected onto the bed in the room that was open to visitors, where they had the option to join me. Then video cameras in the public room transmitted the actions of the person on the bed with my image back to me in my room upstairs. I was able to interact with the person on the bed downstairs by watching both of our images on the monitors placed around my bed. The bed became my performance space. Our movement occurred in real time, but in a space that was entirely created by technology. I was alone on my bed, moving my arms and legs in physical space as if in some sort of hypnotic ritual dance, yet in virtual space I carried on intense physical improvisation with other unknown bodies.

Whereas the playwright and the filmmaker both try to communicate the idea of an experience, the spacemaker tries to communicate the experience itself. A spacemaker sets up a world for an audience to act directly within. . . .

—RANDALL WALSER, “Elements of a Cyberspace Playhouse”

Virtual reality (VR) is the name for the computer technologies that create the illusion of being immersed in an artificial world, or of being present in a remote location in the physical world. In many VR applications, such as architectural design, medical imaging, and flight simulation, the virtual space is reached by placing a head-mounted display (HMD) on your head and donning a dataglove. The HMD can resemble a large scuba mask or lighter-weight sunglasses. It replaces your view of the world with a three-dimensional computer-graphic depiction of a world provided by a computer, while the glove contains the digital controls that allow you to navigate in the computer-generated space. This was not the space of *Telematic Dreaming*: my body was not abandoned while my consciousness traveled in an all-encompassing three-dimensional space. Yet my body did take on an electric state, for the only way I could move was by relying on the video images of both myself and the others.

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TRUST

In *Telematic Dreaming* human interaction was reduced to its simplest states: touch, trust, vulnerability. Movement usually began in a hesitant way with hand contact taking on excessive importance. The impact of slow and small movement became enormous. Great care and concentration was required to make intricate web patterns with the fingers of a stranger, or to cause one fleshly



94 finger to meet up with one video finger. When the movement progressed from these early stages to a sort of full-body choreography, the piece became an emotional investment that shocked and sometimes disturbed people. Some people simply froze, and fled the installation once they realized what was happening. When politicians or members of the Dutch royal family visited, they did not even venture onto the bed for fear of being recorded in a compromising position.

The occasions when the movement worked well felt very much like good contact improvisation: a hypnotic feeling of not knowing what is coming next but letting the strong flow of movement carry you onward. When the movement moved through us in this way, based on openness and trust, the distinction between which bodies were real and which were virtual became irrelevant.

Performing the piece was emotionally taxing as well as enriching. For a time I worried that by being drawn into tender and intimate interchanges with dozens of strangers who got on the bed, I would be desensitizing myself to the detriment of relations with my real lovers, exhausting myself, rendering myself mechanical or cynical. This concern in itself is an indication of the strong physicality of the piece, of the powerful link between the body on the screen and the bundle of emotions, thoughts, and movement that make up my material body. The mechanization or computerization of human experience is generally thought to diminish the physical and emotional sides of life, yet in the virtual world of *Telematic Dreaming* questions of privacy, intimacy, and identity were central.

FIG. 17 above, *Telematic Dreaming*, 1994



This was not just my experience as a performer: many members of the public were overwhelmed by their experiences on the other bed. Some felt protective toward me, or stayed on the bed because they didn't want me to be alone in my virtual world. Others claimed to have been "changed" by the experience. The installation was paradoxical not only for using technology to provide a forum for experiencing the basics of human intimacy, but also for situating this private interaction within a public domain.

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PAIN

My back and neck rebelled after two days of performance, forcing me to evaluate the relation between my physical self and my virtual body through that ultimately corporeal experience: *pain*. I couldn't turn my head to the right and the mobility in my right arm was reduced by more than half. My feet, knees, hips, and spine cracked at the slightest turn. I felt as if I were disintegrating. Through pain I was able to see a link between the seemingly abstract image of myself and my flesh. My pain was discernible in my image, giving my movement a peculiar stiffness.

At the same time I became obsessed with the invisible side of my body: digestion, intestines, breathing. Also when to eat, what to eat, how it affected my moods, and the way my body felt.

FIG. 18 above, *Telematic Dreaming*, 1994



96 It was as if my involuntary organs could not be counted upon to perform their usual roles unassisted by my conscious self. They called attention to themselves through pain and cramps. My real body asserted its presence as a response to the virtual image that had come to dominate my movement while performing. The invisible elements of my body began to take on a new, demanding significance, as if needing to assert themselves to balance the scale. Digestion does not appear on the screen. Admittedly it does not appear through flesh, but it is even less present in a context where the body has lost its three-dimensionality. The more I ventured into the visual, virtual world, the more my visceral body called attention to itself like an anchor, like ballast. I seemed to be pulled between the two extremes of an imaginary spectrum: the abjection of flesh and the sanitization of technology.

SEX AND VIOLENCE

Someone took out a knife. Not in a threatening way, yet I felt the predictable shiver and it set off alarm bells in my mind. The most he could do was slash the duvet, but I still felt uncomfortable. The knife is a loaded item: it entered the virtual space of *Telematic Dreaming* as a heavily inscribed object, meaning that it could not be separated from a code of behaviors and a set of emotional and physical responses, particularly since the knife wielder was a man and I was a woman on a bed.

FIG. 19 above, *Telematic Dreaming*, 1994



Someone elbowed me hard in the stomach and I doubled over, wondering why since I didn't actually feel it. But I felt something. I was shaken for a while; it was a betrayal of trust. The famous claim associated with virtual technology is that the body is obsolete, replaced by an infinitely enhanced electronic construct. If this is so, then why did nastiness or violence enacted upon my image hurt? How could the body be irrelevant yet still exert a basic visceral control over my movement?

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The potential for violent as well as highly pleasurable interchanges was inherent in *Telematic Dreaming*. Frequently I allowed myself to play, and at times I luxuriated in the physical intimacy and sheer decadence of it all. After a tender and intimate quarter of an hour of improvised movement, a man returned with a rose. He presented it to me in virtual space so there was no way I could take hold of it, beyond tracing its outline or passing my hand through it. It became a metaphor, and fundamentally immaterial. It occurred to me that what preserves the distinction between materiality and immateriality in the technology is movement: as moving beings people take on an alternative materiality, while objects become immaterial in their inertia. Virtuality is a verb-space, dynamic, shifting.

An unlikely character dressed in blue and green, wearing philosopher's glasses, calmly stroked my thigh, brushed delicately over my hips and up my torso. He remained partly detached, or at least quizzical, and his movements were languid but not overtly sexual. I felt little electric shocks pass

FIG. 20 above, *Telematic Dreaming*, 1994



through my body as I accepted the caresses. Not five minutes after this, I experienced the worst cybersexual violence of the entire time. Two men in leather jackets jumped my image on the bed. One attacked my head and the other my pelvic area. After three or four body-twisting blows, they fled. It was a back-alley scenario. What did I feel? Very little. This amazed me, after my body had felt so much in the subtly erotic context and through earlier acts of aggression. I believe that the extreme violence of the attack caused me to separate my physical self from my virtual self. A split-second after they began to hit me I found myself watching my image in the video monitor, paralyzed with horror at what they were doing to the woman's body—no longer *my* body. This was the only moment in the entire four weeks when I divorced my two selves, and it was the result of an involuntary act of self-preservation—a primordial reaction in a sophisticated technological context.