

## THE EFFECT OF VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS IN DISPLACING REAL PLACES

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### SUMMARY

The sudden change of my communication medium after moving to UK had a great impact on my daily life. My intimate relations with my family and friends started to happen and lost between lines of virtual environment. While trying to situate myself within that new environment I started to question its abilities and disabilities versus face to face communication that I am used to, with all hand gestures and mimics that are totally lost in that new environment. On the other hand, I discover the great potential of telematic environment that helps me to share my daily life in UK with people that I left in Turkey. I can involve two different cultural contexts at the same time just with one click; webcam creates within its small square shaped frame the visual link at real time and improves the quality of interaction within a distance of thousands of kilometres.

Currently, I am narrating my own personal experience with a short film that is made out of stills, which are taken many different moments from celebrations to faced empty, dark rooms; from video calls between two countries. The potential of virtual environment has been discussed and takes part in art world as telepresence art since 1990. People are highly interested in telematic projects due to the big opportunity to experience a new environment, that hasn't been possible until the public spread of World Wide Web. The possibility to link different people at the real time also helps widen the scope of public art not only in terms of a new medium, but also in terms of the possibility to reach wide range of people all over the world while still being able to connect everywhere.

### RESUMEN

El cambio repentino de mi medio de comunicación después de mudarme al Reino Unido tuvo un gran impacto en mi vida diaria. Mis relaciones íntimas con mi familia y amigos empezaron a cambiar y perderse entre las líneas de entorno virtual. Al tratar de situarme a mí misma dentro de ese nuevo medio empecé a dudar de su capacidad y discapacidad frente a la comunicación cara a cara a la que estoy acostumbrada, con todos los gestos con las manos y simulando que estoy totalmente perdida en ese nuevo entorno. Por otro lado, descubrí el gran potencial del entorno telemático que me ayuda a compartir mi vida cotidiana en el Reino Unido con las personas que quedaron en Turquía. Me muevo en dos contextos culturales diferentes al mismo tiempo con sólo un clic, creando dentro de la Webcams una pequeña plaza en forma de marco visual de la conexión en tiempo real y mejora la calidad de la interacción dentro de una distancia a miles de kilómetros.

Actualmente, estoy narrando mi propia experiencia personal con un cortometraje que está hecho de alambiques, tomando diferentes momentos de las celebraciones que se enfrentan al vacío, habitaciones oscuras, llamadas de video entre los dos países. El potencial del entorno virtual ha sido objeto de debate y forma parte del mundo del arte como arte de telepresencia desde 1990. La gente está muy interesada en los proyectos telemáticos, debido a la gran oportunidad de experimentar un nuevo entorno, que no ha sido posible hasta la propagación de la World Wide Web. La posibilidad de vincular diferentes personas en tiempo real también ayuda a ampliar el alcance del arte público no sólo en términos de un nuevo medio, sino también en términos de la posibilidad para llegar a una amplia gama de personas de todo el mundo sin dejar de ser capaz de conectar en todas partes.

My current practice concerns the notion of communication particularly shaped around the use of messengers on the internet such as; Yahoo Messenger and Windows Live Messenger. The core of the practice is based on my everyday life; the very personal experience which passes between my family, my friends and I and helps me to question the communication via internet. I wish to explore critically how communication is affected by virtual environments and how this might change our understanding of the 'real world' and our understanding of communication. Definition refers to questions: how do we communicate within this virtual environment and how do we situate ourselves towards it? Having rejected the use of these mediums while living in Turkey because I found them soulless and dull helps me to create an external view point to the current situation.

After moving to the UK my position changed. Everyday, from Manchester, through the webcam, I journey to the "computer room" of my house in Turkey, back home. However, I am currently not a *real* part of my family's daily life as they never bring any bad news or genuine feelings to this room. I assume, myself, to be a part of this room while being able to interact with everything within the *webcam's frame*. I can only



Telematic Dreaming, Paul Sermon, 1992



The Imaginary Hotel, Andrea Zapp, 2002, photo: Sylvia Eckermann

ever achieve a partial presence that is bounded with the webcam's frame and the microphone's sensitivity. In addition, this room has become a heterotopic place, a place which remains at a frozen time interval that is only concerned with happy moments. When messenger is used, this room is transformed into a placeless place.

On the other hand, thanks to the video call technology, while living in the UK I can be present within my own cultural context as well. As an example, while being ready in front of the webcam to celebrate a Turkish festival with a cup of Turkish coffee in the UK, my family members in Turkey sit in front of their webcam. I live in the present of two different cultural contexts just with a click of the mouse. These kinds of moments that don't have any place out of their own context became a part of my daily life, carried by the wire of the internet to my room in Manchester. Without this particular technology these surreal interactions wouldn't be possible for us.

Moreover, that specific situation, that I just explained, runs contrary to the general concerns and empirical studies that computer-mediated communication distances people from each other and that this form of communication is less personal and socioemotional than face-to-face communication. As Walther and Burgoon suggest: "...impersonal qualities imputed to computer-mediated communication may not be inherent to the medium but strictly bounded to certain specifiable conditions and kinds of partners." (1)

Their study between zero-history groups of three who use either computer-mediated communication or face-to-face communication shows that computer-mediated groups approximated to face-to-face groups while constructing many different dimensional relations.

Also, while using these mediums, unforeseen conditions have great impact on our communications that result in miscommunications. These conditions can be exemplified as grammatically wrong sentences with randomly abbreviated words, as at instant messaging urges you to write as fast as possible. Sentences which do not follow each other block the flow of conversation as a result of the speed difference between typing and thinking ability of each person. Frustration is furthered by the lack of punctuation and dislocated emphasis on words. Subsequently, so called communication is turned into an arbitrary conversation of fragments which are no different from random sentences picked up while walking on the street. All these gaps are filled with the personal interpretations that can vary according to the situation and the person.

The sequence differences between my voice and the sound that reach my family in Turkey create unexpected communication gaps resulting in misunderstandings. Consequently unanswered questions, broken conversations cause disappointment to both sides. As a result of broken sound and vision synchronizations voice becomes disembodied. The continuous explanations about previous parts of the conversation, apologies and questions generate unexpected tension from both sides.

Clearly, words are not the only medium that helps communication. Body language, gestures and the tone of voice also create a big part of our conversations. They were almost the complementary of conversations for me, as being a Turkish. A small hand gesture will easily be enough instead of a missing word, depending on the situation. Moreover, some conditions don't have a word just a small gesture or touch will be more than enough to explain the person's feeling; body as language as opposed to body language. Body as language was widely questioned and used. Lea Vergine explains:

*'Body as language always involves, for example, a loss of personal identity, a refusal to allow the sense of reality to invade and control the sphere of the emotions and a romantic rebellion against dependence upon both people and things.'* (2)

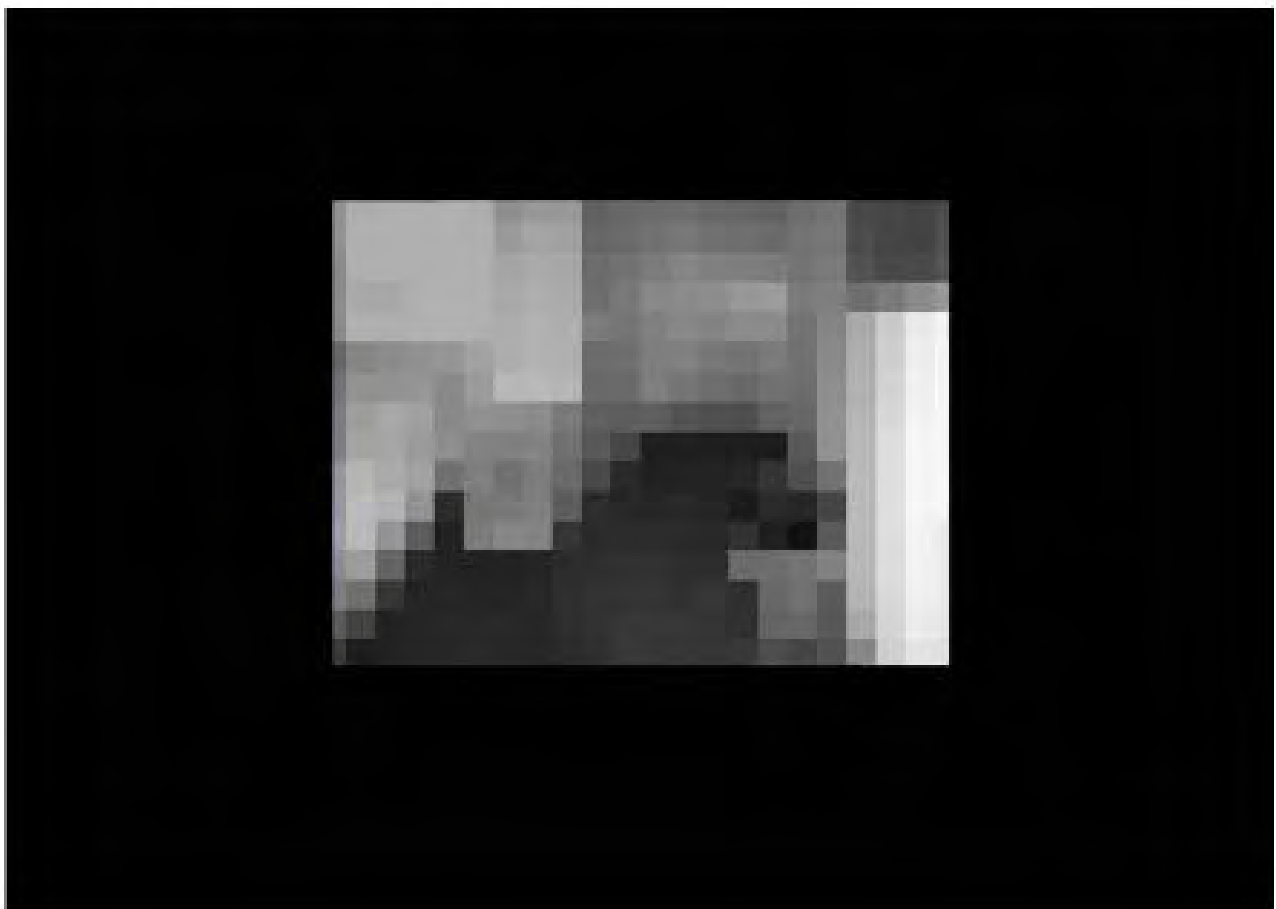
Presently, I am editing a short film, which narrates my journey from the beginning of becoming acquainted with messengers until today, formed by images that are mostly taken at different moments of video calls. This journey contains celebrations and new experiences and sometimes pictures of an empty, dark room or blurred picture that try to show a new object. There is the sound of tense typing, which is tired of explaining the same thing over and over again. In desperation, the mouse runs across the screen from one conversation to another with different people trying not to miss anything. The typing noise as a kind of continuous process as oppose to still pictures. Viewers also create another perspective while watching the film, but they can't clearly predict these sudden changes that may cause discomfort. Still pictures that form a big part of the film suit the nature of miscommunication. And sometimes images that don't catch the previous image of a whole narrative are presented as lost fragments between lines of the virtual environment.

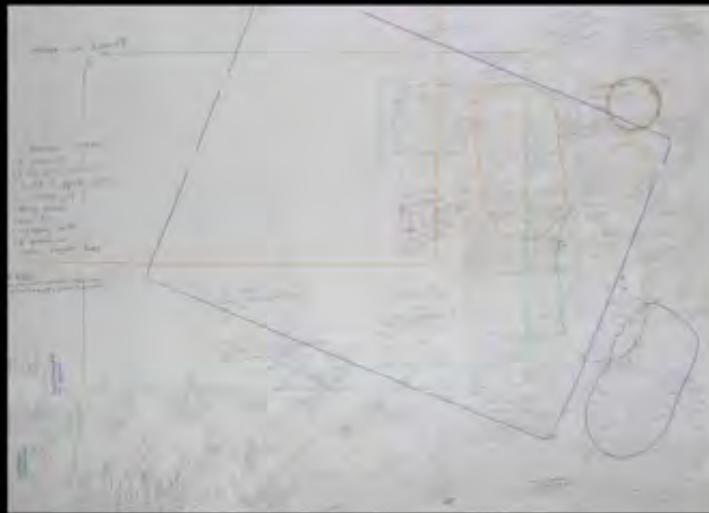
With this short film, I wish to show the dichotomy between real face to face communication and messenger as a virtual communication. The main questions that help me to create that piece are 'How can I reflect upon my self within this unreal world?', 'How does this virtual environment, that I can reach from



Hole in Space, Kid Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, 1980, video stills

Stills from the video I am working, 2007:







my room with the help of my computer, enable me to feel the real setting of my home in Ankara?’, ‘How far can I be a part of that small room through the webcam’s frame?’.

The possibilities of intimate relations with the help of virtual environment have been discussed since 1990’s. British artist Paul Sermon’s live telematic installation called “Telematic Dreaming” in Finland is an example of this. He was questioning the possibility of intimate relation and the sense of touch, the images of a partner who are thousands of kilometres away from each others on a bed setting. Observers found that experience deeply thoughtful. Oliver Grau argues:

*“The images of another person in close proximity have such a strong effect that the visual impression stimulates a suggestion of tactility. This is a mechanism employed by art throughout the ages, and we encounter it here again in the phenomenon of telepresence.”* (3)

We can add many other examples that link two or more different sites, perhaps many thousand of kilometres away, altogether with the help of interfaces and World Wide Web such as; Andrea Zapp, Michael Bielick, Bernd Linteman, Simone Penny and so on. Most of these artists’s projects are highly popular as a result of being a new experience open to everyone. Web based project ‘The Imaginary Hotel’ by Andrea Zapp where you are invited to create your own room with the help of interfaces and you can send messages to the site with the web-telephone to communicate with other users. The project had 507 users within 10 days at 2002 users were around the world from Tokyo to Montreal.(4)

Virtual environment is a public space by its nature where you can interact with people from all over the world with your own identity or created identities. Probably, the first exhibition at its own genre was ‘Hole in Space’ by Kid Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, which touches the public notion of virtual environment; actually it was a Public Communication Sculpture. Two situated large screens in Los Angeles and New York that connected each other with video call. The instalation welcome the cultural cliché of East Coast/West Coast of North America by supponentaneous pasers-by. Galloway and Rabinowitz describe: *“The viewers were instantly transformed into the cast of an East-Coast-meets-West-Coast soap opera by bringing them together on a telematic stage to tell jokes, ‘Questions: How many New Yorkers does it take to change a light bulb?...’* (5)

The nature of the virtual environment provide wide opportunity for public art that isn’t bounded with any boundary, across the world and between different cultures. Moreover, may help people to understand other cultures while partially involving others daily life and interacting with them in telepresent. Present rejections of internet will give its place to acceptance with the time we get used to be a part of it and also with technological development that will solve all these current problems. As Naisbitt argues:

*“High tech/high touch is a formula...to describe the way we have responded to technology. What happens is that whenever a new technology is introduced into society, there must be a counterbalancing human response- that is, high touch-or the technology is rejected. The more high tech, the more high touch.”*(6)

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