

# **(Dis)Embodiment**

Paul Sermon  
The University of Salford  
School of Art & Design  
Peru Street, Salford, Greater Manchester, United Kingdom  
p.sermon@salford.ac.uk

**Keywords:** Embodiment, telematics, performance, presence, avatar, gender.

## **1. The disembodied telepresent human avatar**

Through discursive accounts of my own practice I will explore issues of (dis)embodiment in relation to presence and intimacy as experienced and performed in telematic and virtual environments. At what point is the participant embodying the virtual performer in front of them? And have they become disembodied in doing so? A number of interactive telematic artworks are looked at in detail, establishing case-study examples to provide answers to these questions. Stemming from my telematic experiments in the early 1990s and recent site-specific user-generated presence and performance work to current immersing creative/critical practice in 'Second Life' that polarizes fundamental existential questions concerning identity, the self, the ego and the (dis)embodied avatar.

This chapter investigates how the experience of tactility and physicality, as explored in my creative practice makes both the participants/performers and the artists/directors more susceptible to new forms of social narrative, yet also offers altered ways for generating effective responsive experiences. These latter projects deal with the ironies and stereotypes in multi-user virtual environments such as cultural identity, gender roles, digital consumption and virtual desire. This work aims to specifically utilise alternative interactive functionality and techniques in multi-user virtual environments that allow the participants to embody performer roles to interact and direct new social networked creative narratives by their communication, presence and movements.

## **2. Paul Sermon's telematic practice**

My work of the early 1990s explores the emergence of user-determined narrative by bringing remote participants together in a shared telepresent environment. Through the use of live chroma-keying and videoconferencing technology, two public rooms or installations and their audiences are joined in a virtual duplicate that turns into a mutual space of activity.

This work locates itself in the telematics discourse and has continually drawn on the concepts of user-generated content and communication. The audiences form an integral part within these telematic experiments, which simply wouldn't function without their presence and participation. Initially the viewers seem to enter a passive space, but they are instantly thrown into the performer role by discovering their own body-double in communication with another physically remote user on video monitors in front of them. They usually adapt to the situation quickly and start controlling and choreographing their human avatar. Nevertheless, because the installation is set up in the form of an open accessible platform, it offers a second choice of engagement: the passive mode of just observing the public action, which often appears to be a well-rehearsed piece of drama confidently played out by actors. Compelling to watch, it can be a complex issue to discover that the performers are also part of the audience and are merely engaging in a role. The entire installation space then represents two dynamic dramatic functions: the players, controllers, or puppeteers of

their own avatar, absorbed by the performing role; and the off-camera members of the audience, who are themselves awaiting the next available slot on the telematic stage, soon to be sharing this split dynamic. However, the episodes that unfold are not only determined by the participants, but by the given dramatic context. As artistic creator, I am then designer of the environment and, consequently, 'director' of the narrative, which is determined through the social and political milieu that I choose to play out in the telepresent encounter.

### **3. HEADROOM - A space between presence and absence**

Since the early 2000s this telematic practice has further explored the stage and narrative environment through specific social and cultural contexts, most recently in the installation HEADROOM; A site-specific interactive telematic installation produced in Taipei as a result of the 2006 Taiwan Visiting Arts Fellowship programme, a joint initiative between Visiting Arts, the Council for Cultural Affairs Taiwan, British Council Taipei and Arts Council England.

HEADROOM was a juxtaposition of my ethnographic research experiences in Taipei, between the way people 'live' and the ways people 'escape' this city, as an analogy between the solitude presence of the 'bedroom' (private) space and the social networking telepresent aspirations of the 'headroom' (Internet) space. Also referencing Roy Ascott's essay, 'Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?' (Ascott 1990), and reminiscent of Nam June Paik's early TV-Buddha installation 1974, HEADROOM is a reflection of the self within the telepresent space, as both the viewer and performer. The television 'screen' is transformed into a stage or portal between the causes and effects that simultaneously take place in the minds of the solitary viewers. The installation overtly intertwines private and public space, and the sense of the 'inside' and 'outside' of the installation's 'place' (see Kaye 2000). It is partly in this breaking down of oppositions that the participants' sense of the 'presence' of their co-performers is amplified. In this aspect, HEADROOM radically extends a disruption of oppositions in which video art/installation and site-specific work has frequently operated. The co-performers discover themselves acting out a series of intertwinings of public/private, inside/outside. The installation itself and title emphasize the intimate nature of this overlaying of spaces - the aspect of fantasy or dream - while the public nature of the installation sanctions or appears to give permission or consent to this closeness. In this context, co-performers discover themselves 'coming closer' in a paradoxical distribution of presence - an intimacy produced by a telepresent distance. Here, then, visitors discover themselves occupying and acting out their co-performer's private space, while seeing their own private space acted out by their telepresent partner. The spatial rules of public interaction are breached, producing an intimacy, a particular and shocking closeness, and a dialectic between the explicit sense of being here (in the bedroom, for example) and being there (acting out the space of the other), while seeing and responding to their co-performer's mirrored reaction.

Located in the east of Taipei city in the shadow of the 101 Tower and Taipei's World Trade Centre is a Taiwanese War Veterans housing complex built around 1949. This site has been renovated and converted into a museum and exhibition space. It sits on some of the most commercially sought after space in the city, but because of its historical importance to the liberation of Taiwan it remains a listed building. The back-to-back terraced streets have been knocked through into entire buildings, creating three large exhibition halls that retain their original appearance of the houses on the outside. The spaces that interested me most were the small facade rooms created by the larger space conversion, which have been separated from the gallery space by interior glass walls and are only accessible from existing external front doors. The two facade rooms I used for the installation were identical in size and were used to

house a connected telepresent installation where the audience participants in the separate facade rooms were unable to see each other. However, this allowed the audience inside the gallery to observe both participants in the space through the glass walls. The rooms were only about 2 meters by 3.5 meters wide, and 2.5 meters high. The original houses were longer, but not wider and the original inhabitants often halved the height of the rooms to create separate sleeping and living areas. This two-level use of the space interested me, and also reminded me of the outside of the space with the 101 Tower in stark contrast to the little houses huddled around its base. This paradox can be seen in much of Taipei's culture, from very basic noodle bars and soup kitchens between Karaoke TV clubs, 7/11 convenience stores, high-rise office blocks to countless temples devoted to countless incarnations of the Buddha.

The project functioned by combining the two identical room installations within the same video image via simple videoconference techniques. The system worked as follows: The two rooms both had false ceilings lowered to a level of approximately 1.5 meters, which left a cavity space above each room of approximately 1 meter high and forced the gallery visitors to bend down when entering the spaces. However, there was one location in each room where the viewer was able to stand up straight and put their head and hands through a hole in the false ceiling and into the cavity space above. Although each room shared identical dimensions, they had a strikingly different appearance. One of the rooms contained drab used furniture in the lower part with a very lived-in appearance, the cavity space above it was brightly decorated, appearing to be a personal shrine or Karaoke bar containing a large video screen at one end. The other room, by contrast, was empty in the lower section and very bright in the cavity above, including illuminated blue walls and another large video screen. A video camera in each space recorded a live image of the head and hands of each participant and fed it directly to a video chroma-key mixer. The background in the profile head shot recorded against the bright blue walls was extracted by the video mixer and replaced with the other live profile head shot - placing two heads opposite each other within the same live video image, as in fig. 1.



*Fig. 1. Video stills captured when audience participants enter the headroom space.*

The red room represented a very theatrical, illusionary space. The blue room, by contrast, appeared to be a more functional back stage space. However, from the outside point of view there was not so much a front and back stage division as a juxtaposition of two entirely separate spaces, which, due to their sheer proximity, were meant to have something in common and yet, somehow, they never become a telepresent synthesis. For Gabriella Giannachi there is a post-modern dialectic here, expressed visually in the impossibility of the two spaces to become one. That the external viewer, standing in front of the two spaces, actually sees 'nothing' but the real, whereas to see the telepresent space you actually have to be willing to be within it (Giannachi 2006). The development of this interactive art installation has been extensively documented as part of the AHRC Performing-Presence project led by Prof. Nick Kaye from Exeter University in partnership with Stanford University. HEADROOM was exhibited at Xinyi Assembly Hall Taipei, April 2006.

#### **4. Liberate your Avatar**

Since May 2007 my practice and research has undergone what might appear to be a paradigm shift, focusing on the creative possibilities of the on-line multi-user virtual environment of 'Second Life'. Whilst this represents a major departure from my established telematic projects, there are significant parallels between the earlier telematic video experiments and the presences and absence experiments I am currently developing in Second life. Together these aspects of telepresence and the merger of first and Second Life aim to question fundamental assumptions of the Second Life phenomena.

My most recent experiments look specifically at the concepts of presence and performance within Second Life and 'first life', and attempts to bridge these two spaces through mixed reality techniques and interfaces. The work further examines the notion of telepresence in Second Life and first life spaces through a blurring between 'online' and 'offline' identities, and the signifiers and conditions that make us feel present in this world. This artistic practice questions how subjectivity is articulated in relation to embodiment and disembodiment. It explores the avatar in relation to its activating first life agent, focusing on the avatar's multiple identifications, such as gender roles, human/animal hybrids, and other archetypes, identifiable through visible codes and body forms in Second Life.

Liberate your Avatar (Sermon 2007) was an interactive public telepresence performance incorporating Second Life users in a real life environment, as shown in fig 3. Located on All Saints Gardens, Oxford Road, Manchester, for the Urban Screens Festival, October 2007, this installation merged the realities of 'All Saints Gardens' with its online three-dimensional counterpart in 'Second Life', and for the first time allowed 'first life' visitors and 'second life' avatars to coexist and share the same park bench in a live interactive public video installation. By entering into this feedback loop through a portal between these two parallel worlds this event exposed the identity paradox in Second Life. Liberate your Avatar brought together theoretical and practical methods from the field to address this identity crisis in first and Second Life. Although online communities have been studied in-depth for sometime now, the focus here was upon an ethnographic, multidisciplinary and practice-based discussion in order to paint a richer picture for future experiences.



*Fig. 2. Liberate Your Avatar, a merged reality performance, Manchester, 2007*

This unique Second Life project, commissioned by Lets Go Global Manchester, brought together previous practice-based telepresence research projects with current experiments and experiences in the online three-dimensional world of Second Life. The installation investigated the notion of demonstration and how it has been transposed from the real into the virtual environment. Liberate your Avatar exposed the history of All Saints Gardens; relocating Mancunian Suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst as an avatar within Second Life, where she remained locked to the railings of the park, just as she did 100 years ago, reminding us of the need to continually evaluate our role in this new online digital society. The installation examined this new crisis whilst drawing upon the history of the site, creating a rich, provoking and entirely innovative, interactive experience.

The project consisted of three specific spaces, two of which were located in the virtual world of Second Life and the other one in the actual All Saints Gardens on Oxford Road, Manchester. The two virtual environments included a blue box studio and a three-dimensional replica of the All Saints Gardens, and were located adjacent to each other, allowing the Second Life avatars to move freely between the two spaces. When an avatar entered the blue box space their image became chroma-keyed with a live video image from the real 'All Saints Gardens'. This combined live video image of the avatar in the actual square was then streamed back onto the Internet and presented on a virtual screen in both Second Life spaces. An image of the Second Life version of All Saints Gardens with its virtual 'big screen' was then presented on the actual public video screen in the first life All Saints Gardens.

##### **5. There are no mirrors in Second Life**

The aim of this current creative practice is to critically investigate how online participants in three-dimensional worlds, Second Life in particular, socially interact within innovative creative environments, appropriate these cultural experiences as part of their everyday lives, and question what is 'real' in this relationship. This

telepresent practice brings together ethnographic and creative practice-based methods that identify and develop original, innovative interactive applications, interface design and necessary cultural and sociological knowledge. Each of these will help shape and define the emerging online 'metaverse' (See Stephenson, N. 1992) society, significantly contributing to the quality of both first and second life.

The ontological questions associated with identity in virtual reality, be it online or offline, have been at the centre of the contemporary media arts and science debate for the past three decades, and this discourse continues to dominate the annual conference themes of Ars Electronica Linz, the Transmediale Berlin and SIGGRAPH USA. The recent rapid increase in users of multi-user virtual environments has now brought them under this microscope, noticeably by inclusion at Ars Electronic 2007 in 'Second City', a festival strand that paralleled first and second life in mixed-reality artworks, scientific experiments and theoretical debate. This creative practice and debate is firmly rooted in the discourse of semiotics, reflecting a poststructuralist debate from the linguistic origins of F. de Saussure's notion of reality as a construct of language (Saussure 1964) to Jacques Lacan's construction of identity through the mirror image of the self (Lacan 1949), and Jean Baudrillard's concept of reality as 'Simulacra' or simulations of it (Baudrillard 1981).

So as to explore this emerging relationship between first and second life I have developed interfaces that focus on the interaction and exchange between online and offline identities through social practices, such as performance, narrative, embodiment, activism, place and identity construction. Their collaborative experiments seek to question whether Second Life is a platform for potential social and cultural change - appropriated as a mirror image of first life. By consciously deciding to refer to this image that is mirrored as 'first' life rather than 'real' life, the central question poses a paradox in Second Life when we consider Jacques Lacan's proposition that the 'self' (or ego) is a formulation of our own body image reflected in the 'mirror stage' (Lacan 1949). However, there is no 'mirror stage' in Second Life. This would suggest that the computer screen itself is the very mirror we are looking for, one that allows the user to formulate her/his 'second self'. Although an 'alter ego', this is nonetheless a self that can have an engaged social identity.

In Second Life you create an avatar that lives out an online existence. There are no set objectives, you can buy property, clothing, accessories, furnish your home, modify your identity, and interact with other users. This online community has grown to seventeen million residents since launching in 2003, generating a thriving economy. However, while the virtual shopping malls, nightclubs, bars and beaches often reach their user capacity, there is a noticeable lack of creative and sociological modes of attraction. Consequently, the growing media attention around Second Life warns that this expanding community has become ambivalent and numbed by their virtual consumption, and there is an increasing need to identify new forms of interaction, creativity, cultural production and sociability.

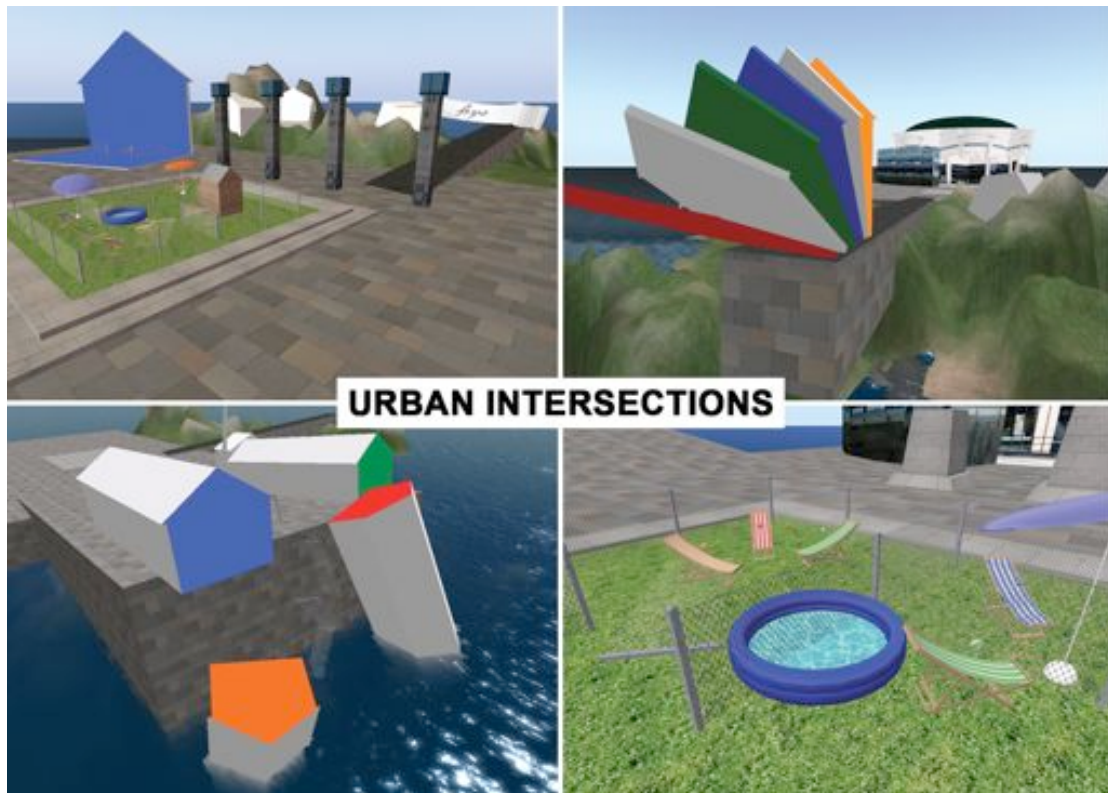


Fig 3. *Peace Games* by Paul Sermon, Kunsthalle Vienna May 2008

However, when the 'Front National', the far right French political party of Jean-Marie Le Pen opened their Second Life headquarters in January 2007, the Second Life residents reacted in a way that would suggest they are far from complacent avatars wandering around a virtual landscape, and that they possess a far greater degree of social conscience than the consumerist aesthetics of Second Life suggest. Through prolonged mass virtual protest the centre was raised to the ground in the space of a week and has not returned since. The reaction to the Le Pen Second Life office suggests that Second Life is indeed a platform for potential social and cultural change. And there is a hidden desire and ambition to interact and engage with this online community at an intellectual and creative level that transcends the collective 'I shop therefore I am' (See Kruger 1987) apparentness of its community. Moreover, Second Life could then influence our first lives. As the landmass and population of Second Life expands at an ever-increasing rate it is clear that essential research into the intersection and interplay between first and Second Life, and both new and old patterns of consumption, cultural production and sociability is urgently needed.

## **6. Urban Intersections**

These research activities and outcomes have now come together within a collaborative site-specific public installation entitled *Urban Intersections* focused on contested virtual spaces that mirror the social and political history of Belfast as a divided city, and presented at ISEA09 (International Symposium of Electronic Arts 2009). This collaborative project specifically reflected on the ironies of contested spaces, and stereotypes in multi-user virtual environments, exposing an absurd online world that consists of perimeter fences, public surveillance, and national identity. These futile efforts to divide and deny movement and social interaction were an uncanny reflection of the first life urban and social landscape of Belfast. So whilst it is possible to defy and transcend these restrictions in Second Life where we can fly, teleport and communicate without political constraint and national identity, we can question the need for such social and political boundaries enforced in first life and consider the opportunity to initiate social change in first life through our Second Life experience.



*Fig 4. Urban Intersections Sermon & Gould at ISEA Belfast August 2009*

The installation was located on the regenerated landscape of the Waterfront Plaza Belfast, directly outside the newly developed concert hall building. This utilitarian environment was used as a stage set to represent an augmented garden that explored the concept of boundaries and territories, a virtual plaza encapsulated by the ironies, contradictions and obscurities of a divided city, and a metaphor of Belfast's social history. As the participants walked through this urban landscape, both first and second life inhabitants came 'face-to-face' on screen, in the form of a live digital mural projected on the façade of the Waterfront building. This mural formed the central focus of the installation and immediately spoke of the infamous painted murals on houses across West Belfast. Those depict a deep political divide, but post-conflict society now refers to them as a stark reminder of recent troubles, and thereby maintaining the peace that now prevails. In a city such as Belfast it would be impossible to evade such references when projecting images onto a building, as though the project itself were projected onto the gable end wall of a house on the Falls Road or the Shankill Estate.





*Fig 5. Proposed Second Life projection for ISEA Belfast 2009*

The local audience formed an integral part of this installation that relied on user interaction and aimed to transcend boundaries through user-generated storytelling and memory building in a post-conflict society. The complete installation utilised three interface techniques. A motion tracking interface, developed by interactive media artist Charlotte Gould, allowed visitors in Belfast to wear a large puppet-like copy of her unique avatar head. Covered in an array of LED lights that were tracked, participants could then control the movements of the Second Life avatar as a means of alternative navigation through a maze of chain-link garden fences (see Gould 2009). My own interface combined first life visitors and Second Life avatars within the same live video stream. By constructing a blue chroma-key studio in Second Life it was possible to mix live video images of online avatars with the audience in Belfast, enabling these participants to play and converse on a collaborative video stream simultaneously displayed in both first and second life situations. The third interface, developed by sound and media artist Peter Appleton, included a barbecue on the Waterfront plaza that simultaneously controlled the conditions of an identical Second Life barbecue. Through a series of light and heat sensors it was possible to relay commands to the online situation, so that when the first life barbecue was lit so too was the Second Life barbecue and as food started to cook and brown so did its online duplicate (see Appleton 2009). All these interfaces referred to the domestic garden and the infamous Belfast perimeter fences. The aim was to break down these boundaries through social interaction that prevailed, be it through a video portal, a didactic maze or over a grilled sausage.



Fig 6. Barbecue in first life controlling Second Life barbecue, Peter Appleton ISEA09 Belfast, August 2009

### **7. Empowerment through disembodiment**

This final collaborative work of Sermon, Gould and Appleton will continue to explore the wider social consequence of multi-user virtual environments, be that on Second Life or the platform that supersedes it. Whichever is the case, it is essential that multi-user virtual environments such as Second Life move away from the imbedded Linden dollar economy that intrinsically defines its capitalist principles and growth. The *Urban Intersections* project has already contributed to this paradigm shift by alternatively locating itself on an OpenSim, currently available as a derivative open-source beta version of Second Life that locates its island sims on geographically distributed servers. Following a similar model to the WWW, this fundamental network architecture shift moves away from the centralised San Francisco Linden Lab monopoly to an open source networked model, and is in many ways reminiscent of the VRML architecture of the mid 1990s and its collective ideology. This distributed content and ownership will inevitably lead to social growth, cohesion and public empowerment, and like all social networking platforms, contribute to greater social and political change.

### **REFERENCES**

Ascott, Roy. 2003 (first published 1990). *Telematic Embrace: Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?* Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 232-246

Baudrillard, Jean. (Glaser, Sheila F. - Translator). 1995 (first published 1981). *Simulacra and Simulation (The Body, In Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism)*. University of Michigan Press

Barbara Kruger, a prominent American artist, coined the term 'I shop therefore I am' in 1987, as a pun on consumerism and René Descartes' statement 'I think therefore I am'

Giannachi, Gabriella. 2006 "Performing Presence"  
<http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/500>

Kaye, Nick. 2000. *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, Documentation*. London: Routledge.

Lacan, Jacques. 2007 (first published 1966). *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. W. W. Norton

Paik, Nam June. 1974 "TV-Buddha".  
<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/tv-buddha/>

de Saussure, Ferdinand. (Harris, Roy). 1998 (first published 1964). *Course in General Linguistics*. Open Court Classics

Sermon, Paul. 2007. "Liberate your Avatar".  
<http://www.paulsermon.org/liberate/>

Sermon, Paul. Gould, Charlotte. Appleton, Peter. 2009. "Urban Intersections".  
<http://www.paulsermon.org/urban/>

Stephenson, Neil. 2000 (first published 1992). *Snow Crash*. Spectra Paperback

AHRC Performing-Presence project.  
<http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/500>