HEADROOM - A space between presence and absence

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This paper represents the first theoretical account of 'HEADROOM', a site-specific interactive art installation produced by Paul Sermon in Taipei as the successful recipient of the 2006 Taiwan Visiting Arts Fellowship. This residency programme was a joint initiative between Visiting Arts, the Council for Cultural Affairs Taiwan, British Council Taipei and Arts Council England. The development of this interactive art installation has been extensively documented as part of the AHRC Performing-Presence project [1] led by Prof. Nick Kaye from Exeter University in partnership with Stanford University. HEADROOM was exhibited at Xinyi Assembly Hall Taipei, April 2006.

HEADROOM is a juxtaposition of the artist's 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?' (1990) [2], and reminiscent of Nam June Paik's early TV-Buddha installations [3], 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' [4]. 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 where unable see each other. However this allowed the audience inside the gallery to observe both participants in the space through the glass walls. The rooms where only about 2 meters by 3.5 meters wide, and 2.5 meters high. The original houses were longer, but no 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 countless incarnations of the Buddha.

Fig. 1. Left: decorated headroom cavity space, right: lived in room with lowered ceiling.

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. See fig. 1. 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 feed 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 the two heads opposite each other within the same live video image, as in fig. 2.

Fig. 2. 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, where meant to have something in common and yet, somehow, they never become a telepresent synthesis. For Gabriella Giannachi [5] 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.

References

[1] AHRC Performing-Presence project. *http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/500*
[2] Ascott, Roy. 2003. *Telematic Embrace.* Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 232-246.
[3] Nam June Paik's TV-Buddha. *http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/tv-buddha/*
[4] Kaye, Nick. 2000. *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, Documentation.* London: Routledge.
[5] Gabriella Giannachi *http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/500*