



For We are Where We are not Mixed-Reality Narratives, Installation Interfaces and Design Sketches

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For the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962) space in its very literal sense creates a milieu of pure intimacy and full of soul. His witty and enlightening analysis of the private home and its rooms, cupboards, containers and personal items are described in his book *The Poetics of Space* (1964) and reveal how spatial surroundings and shapes define our memories, thoughts and identities. His classification of space becomes a portal to imagination, creating a prism in which all physical worlds and objects are enhanced by individual or artistic inner visions and dreams, forming most insightful dialectics of inside and outside, open and closed, being and non-being: leading to what he finally calls 'the phenomenology of roundness' in art and philosophical thinking.

The following project descriptions sketch some major steps in research in this field over the past years and recapture in many ways this metaphor of real but continuously transitory spaces. Over the past decades, I have

been creating artworks that investigate the digital network, human presence and identity as subject to a constant flow of online contributions, data and non-physical body representation. In "Networked Installations", I have been mixing and referencing real, virtual and online spaces, mostly combined with surveillance interfaces.

"Media, Miniature and Shifting Scales" as a distinct format of installation architecture have reflected these different stages of being through the miniscule – hence referring to being inside and outside the medium and screen. Experiments in "Textile Media Narratives" explore digital media and mapping of collective space through fabric print, image patterns, embroidery techniques and other formats of physical object and applied arts. These different methodologies and steps of investigation culminate in "Analogue becoming the new Digital" as a comparative (almost ironic) research focus, that blurs the boundaries, ultimately aiming at intensifying the bond between audience, their understanding and more reflective digital media artwork. The virtual space is framed at as the other place of memory and home by capturing it in analogue paraphernalia, modeled on and manufactured from the digital. Craft and media design objects and artefacts render the digital space domestic and decorative, but with the intention to evoke a surreal and paradoxical sense of longing and belonging to a parallel world.

By focusing on networked media art projects in which the physical is experienced and altered through the digital and vice versa. Installation rooms are set up in the corporeal world or gallery but take the visitors into digital fields of action and reflection. The technology as the actual driving force stays mainly hidden in the background and instead these platforms and stages of audience representation open up surreal and thought-provoking stages of parallel existences.

With the all-pervading Internet being a constant factor in our everyday life, they address human presence as defined by online contributions, material and data. They formulate a creative approach and also a related artistic critique in places and try to reposition our collective understanding of the physical and the virtual, the real and the imaginary

whilst generating a diverse spectrum of visual, telepresent and interactive interfaces and installation architectures.

The Imaginary Hotel, 2002/03



Imaginary Hotel

This networked installation allows visitors to occupy and design their ideal room and fill it with personal content and inspiration. The installation architecture resembles a typical hotel room and by choosing image and video footage from the net via the room TV menu, visitors can alter the standard interior and even hotel location. At the same time Internet participants can interfere by modifying or uploading further material via the hotel website to the project database and image choice. Being able to add their personal material to the window on one side and the picture

frame on the other wall, they create their very own fictitious presence in the installation room. They are also able to ring up the gallery visitors via a specially designed web-telephone interface, which turns online text into voice. A web cam is streaming real time video from the hotel to the website to document the ongoing changes.

The viewer's persona and reflection in front of the computer screen seems to fuse with the virtual substitute beyond it, so that in this way the picture frame in the installation itself turns into a figurative object comparable to a mirror (and the majority of the images sent are made of portraits or similar personalised contents). In an equal emblematic technique, the projection wall is used as a window into the outer – but here digital – world. The public installation setting of the Hotel project, with its surrounding invisible wiring and obscure, circulating information, highlights the theatrical backdrop as a crucial principle. It becomes a gateway to the Net as the main source material, and the boundaries between the individual and dramatic domain become less apparent. The networked platform then hints to the cinematic scenario in which the former actor or performer is giving way to the participant's own visual vocabulary filling the screens. To support this analogy, The Imaginary Hotel is explicitly designed as a wide-open stage, framed by the carpet and accentuated in the two fragile walls, curtains, and props reminiscent of a shoddy TV set. Thus it plays with an evident façade for the imaginary and illusionary.

A hotel as such stands for an anonymous social melting pot in a constant state of flux – The Imaginary Hotel further mirrors digital travel in a distorted concept of space and time. It represents a virtual retreat accommodating permanently migrating residents. Similar to a blank canvas, the vacant room is successively populated and shaped by individuals. Real and virtual guests arrive, meet and disappear from out of nowhere and leave their personal traces, reflecting the seamless border between physical and imaginative places of being.

05 March/10:43 pm, 2005



March 05

The work could be described as a video/webcam installation and consists of a small-scale suburban model house and visitors are encouraged to look through the window into one of the rooms. They discover a live video image of a young man, collapsed on a chair, with a computer screen flickering and a web camera running on a table next to him.

The scenery, in its display very reminiscent of a characteristic web cam setting, recalls an online incident in which a young man – his avatar being "the Ripper" – killed himself at home in front of a net audience, apparently by accident while experimenting with prescription drugs, yet encouraged by fellow users in a chat room.

The miniature domicile as the installation architecture that houses this "virtual" body represents the personal or genuine terrain in general. At

the same time it becomes an icon for the Internet as the virtual home to model a second self.

But the ambiguous visuals inside are contradicting the neat and playful scenery. The actual facts and consequences can only be anticipated within an imaginary surrounding that turns more and more into a disconcerting construct of identity – for observer and observed alike – ultimately questioning real and fictitious online images and their underlying concept of truth and belief.

Unheimlich, 2005/06

(realised together with Steve Dixon and the multimedia theatre company The Chameleons Group), Mathias Fuchs and Paul Sermon



Unheimlich

A real-time performance installation for multiple users, linking and visually compositing audience members with live performers in the UK, it takes Freud's notion of the uncanny as 'unheimlich' (at once familiar, homelike, but also strange, alien and uncomfortable) as its starting point. Spanning a five-hour time zone, audiences at Brown University, Providence, (in 2005), and the Siggraph conference in Boston, (in 2006), were invited to step into the virtual world of two actors at a studio in the UK and take part in improvisation and theatrical play. Video conferencing and 'blue screen' technology created a simultaneous space in which the English and Americans literally 'held hands' across the ocean, interacting in a shared screen environment. The drama used similar technology to that used by weather forecasters, but to create theatrical backgrounds into which the actors and participants were projected together to unfold an impromptu narrative:

It's 1 a.m. in Manchester, England, but two enigmatic sisters have stayed up late to to (telematically) greet the audience as they step into their space, in real time, thousands of miles away. "Stand back in the darkness and watch the events unfold, or step onto the lit, blue carpet to meet and talk to the two siblings, and participate in their eccentric games, secret rituals and compelling conversations. Once on the blue mat, you are visually merged with them on the screens around the space, and can talk to them, dance with them, ask them questions, or just 'hold hands'." Metamorphosing graphical backgrounds and projections were fed live to the arena supporting the unfolding stories, from fantastical computer-game landscapes to mundane English sitting rooms ... depending on which cliff-hanging adventures the sisters decided to take the audience.

Human Avatars, 2005



Avatars

is a media art installation that was created for the exhibition StoryRooms in Manchester. It creates a visual dialogue between real and virtual participants on two networked stages: Visitors in the exhibition space discover a small wooden hut, which they are invited to enter. A live image of their body inside is projected into a remote model version of the hut, complete with model furniture, where other visitors can make contact with the tiny moving figures by peeping through a small window. Yet

unaware that a second camera inside displays their peering faces back on the window of the big shed, with their eyes now overshadowing the participants inside. The changes in size and scale refer to networked media as a representational user stage, hence being big and small or, in other words, outside and inside the medium. The architecture and the scenario appear very playful, but they are both also direct and spare. The participants, once they have grasped the truly voyeuristic nature of the full set up may feel more and more observed and exposed. The project reflects the controlling nature of the gaze identified by Foucault's writings and becomes a sinister evocation of 'surveillance society'. So the immediate interactive experience is controversial, once the voyeuristic strategy behind the idyllic backdrop becomes evident - indirectly hinting at the rather ambivalent and melancholic side effects of surveillance and visual control as an increasingly intrinsic part of media, culture and entertainment.

Eye to Eye, 2006



Eye to eye

This networked installation connected in its first exhibition a gallery in Cheljabinsk, Siberia, with another town in the region, Ekaterinburg.

Two remote identical black wooden boxes are connected via the Internet using I Sight cameras and an I Chat video interface:

Visitors glimpse through a small peephole into the box. An invisible camera inside on the opposite wall captures their eyes and transfers it to the other box, where it is displayed underneath the camera on a small round-shaped projection screen and vice versa. Both participants exchange their views in real-time, looking into each other's eyes. This surveillance interface inside the box is embedded into a stage like miniature set of a small illuminated earth globe below and amidst a starry sky with little colourful planets dotted around that seem to float in the space.

It recalls a satellite perspective, which is underlined by the eye to eye exchange above; but the view onto this small universe glowing in the dark, reminiscent of toys even, implicates ironic commentaries in itself – resulting in thoughts about who controls and who observes whom in a more globally networked sense.

More recently I have extended these research question into the field of textile. Fabric print, pattern and digital embroidery techniques are referencing digital media and networking, together with representational stages of identity, body and virtual habitats. Textile material is explored as another format of screen and interface, linking the virtual to the physical body and environment, whilst creating a new "fabric of society" within what I call Textile Media Narratives:

GOOGLE GAZE, 2009

explores the viewing, reflecting and reminiscing of real and virtual space at different times in its history through different artistic interfaces:



Google Gaze

Three key images/artworks form the base and inspiration for this textile reflection:

A painting: The Rialto Bridge from the North, by Canaletto (1726-27)

A photo: The Ile de la Cite in Paris, by Henri Cartier-Bresson (1952)

A random Internet shot: Manchester City Centre, (2008)

The exact same perspectives were downloaded as aerial views from Google Earth and in the case of Manchester city centre as a screenshot from the Manchester location in the at the time very popular immersive online world Second Life. These virtual representations were then mapped and digitally printed and embroidered onto fabric and canvas. They turned into artefacts that expose how we identify and perceive space, now and then. The textile layout creates the centre narrative. The virtual visit via satellite or the second home in a virtual community represents a most recent trend of visiting, witnessing and sharing a place. However, by re-reading the global surveillance imagery through the ornamental tapestry and embroidery format its original purpose and visual aesthetics are heavily distorted. They are rendered domestic and decorative, almost turned into an object of "virtual kitsch", a physical

postcard from an alternative meeting place, but with the underlying concept of real-time and online authenticity now appearing fictional and illusory and time and space becoming seemingly obsolete, a parallel non-place.

Third Skin, 2011 to present



Third Skin

Third Skin captures imagery of our social, digital or urban neighbourhoods and interiors and transfers them to fabric and dress design. Photography, surveillance and online footage become the source for hand-manufactured dresses, and fabric pattern design is determined by the photo-realistic imagery, creating imaginative media narratives. Fabric is explored as a "skin of culture" and skin itself as a suggestive media surface and layer by mapping and merging both within imagery of physical as well as digital realities. The virtual space is framed as the second habitat by capturing it in analogue artefacts, inspired by and manufactured from the digital. Hence playing with Marshall McLuhan's idea of "clothing being an extension of skin, in the way that media are an extension of the body". The dresses reflect the collective and shared, a media and online world, whilst transferring it onto the private and domestic: a one-off garment as individual statement and choice.

Conclusion and implementation from an educational point of view

The majority of the above projects have been researched and developed within and from an academic analytic perspective. Beyond their site-specific and art exhibition context they also aim to debate the creation of the virtual as an alternative public space and additional level of reality, to the extent of actually replacing reality with the mirrored imagined space. Consequently the discursive function of media art becomes centralised. The works may serve as playful metaphors to be explored by young learners and students; leading to the investigation of current social media platforms as representative and equally fictitious spaces and parallel narratives, and questioning the digital network and Web 2.0 as a central stage for human presence and human identity. With digital environments now primarily functioning as social common meeting spaces, they can then further serve the formation and negotiation of creative and inspired learning networks.