Chapter 2

Be[ing] You: In[bodi]mental a Real–Time Body Swapping Video Performance

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the one-to-one interactions between participants in the video performance In[bodi]mental. It presents personal accounts of users’ body swapping experiences through real-time Head Mounted Display systems. These inter-corporeal encounters are articulated through the lens of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and his work on the “Mirror Stage” (1977), phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) and his writings on the Chiasm, and anthropologist Rane Willerslev’s (2007) research on mimesis. The study of these positions provides new insights into the blurred relationship between the corporeal Self and the digital Other. The way the material body is stretched across these divisions highlights the way digital media is the catalyst in this in[bodied] experience of be[ing] in the world. The purpose of this chapter is to challenge the relationship between the body and video performance to appreciate the impact digital media has on one’s perception of a single bounded self and how two selves become an inter-corporeal experience shared through the technology.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will present a discourse on the live video performance In[bodi]mental performed at The Public in West Bromwich 2011 which was part of the authors practice-led PhD research. As a long term video performance artist, the author demonstrates the necessary transition from analogue to digital to articulate the way the digital has developed her art practice. Her concerns investigate what happens to our perception of self when we move across the boundary between the corporeal Self and the live digital image as Other. She questions the constitution of the self and what happens to this construct as we move across the corporeal and into the digital within real-time video performance practice. She interrogates the materiality of the self in particular, to the real-time video image as digital Other. Do we lose the self and become something else or can we maintain a self/other position simultaneously which adds to our phenomenological experience?

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The work *In(bodi)mental* draws the performer/participant through the video frame where both participants are immersed in each other. Both performers are suspended in the belief that the live digital image of the other performer is a part of their own corporeality. A moment were they experience their ‘other’ which is now afforded by the digital technology. Writing primarily from a phenomenological viewpoint the chapter draws on some aspects of anthropology to examine the self-other relationship in video performance when the actual/physical self is projected within the digital other. In simulating the self of another through video interaction it is reasoned that one can experience the self of another as part of one’s corporeality. The interrelationship between the digital body and the corporeal body overlap where each is implicated in the other so sameness and difference can be maintained where there is no distinction between them.

The main objective of the chapter demonstrates how emerging digital technology is the catalyst in creating a continuity between the participant of the work (self) and the video performance (other). The blurring of these modalities is deliberated through real-time video performance where there is no obvious beginning, middle or end during an interaction between subjects in the performance. Though *In(bodi)mental* emerged as a performance investigation looking to find new ways to immerse the viewer/participant within the artwork the outcome was surprising. The research completed in December 2013 discovered that the participant/performer encountered a hyper-real experience which appeared to be analogous with the Lacanian Real, magnified through an uncanny moment. The aim to bridge the gap between the performer and the performed, subject and object, was a phenomenological stretching of the materiality of the body beyond the parameters of a single bounded self where an inter-corporeal experience was articulated. The research also revealed the way the digital technology could facilitate the movement of one self into another to understand the way the multiple self is a composite of the material and the immaterial. The chapter proceeds with the following questions. Can we experience more of the other via emerging technologies through art practice and can we experience the phenomenology of an[other]? To what extent is digital technology changing the way we experience be[ing] in the world and what are the implications of our perceptions of self? The term be[ing] has been defined as being *in* the moment – the here and now.

Emerging digital technologies are demonstrating that one can experience an overlap between subjects where the binary oppositions between self and other are no longer clear cut divisions but are now emerging as blurred modalities of be[ing] in the world. If most of our experiences of being in the world are past or present encounters the focus to be *in* the now as a result of video performance can be an invigorating experience. To articulate these ideas the author has coined the term In[bodi]ment to conceptualize the interaction between subjects during *In(bodi)mental*. This is understood as an experience where one has perceptually felt they were *in* the body of the other subject. A space where body matter and digital media collide. This chapter will focus on those participants lived experience of the video performance, and the implications of those collisions between the corporeal self and the digital other.

**BACKGROUND**

The author draws on Roy Ascott (2005) a pioneer in consciousness studies, and his work on syncretic reality alongside phenomenology, psychoanalysis and anthropology. Locating the research within these fields articulates the impact *In(bodi)mental* has had on a participants perception of self in relation to the digital other. The connection between phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) work on the *chiasm* and digital culture is demonstrating the
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