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## My Voice Shall Now Come From the Other Side of the Room (Presentation of the Interactive Demo: Choreographing Absences – The Viewer as a Medium)

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### Abstract

*This document describes the research and practice of Lundahl&Seitl, a duo working as practitioners and researchers within the area of conceptual art and choreography. This text focuses on one of Lundahl&Seitl's research project “My voice shall now come from the other side of the room” which is their proposed work for Presencia 2008, ‘exhibitions and demonstration’. One of the main questions explored within this work is: how can the sense of the body and location in space be manipulated and heightened by the isolation of sensory inputs and multisensory synchronous stimulation?*

### 1. An introduction of the work by Lundahl & Seitl

From a background in contemporary visual art and choreography the artist's work has included exhibitions, large-scale participatory research projects and performances. Being on the border of both art and science they actively create own networks to implement a sense of community around their practice. Recently, at Weld, Stockholm, April 2008 a seminar; “Subjectivity and the Virtual” was organized to analyze and consider the practice of the artists from a broad range of professional perspectives. This seminar included speakers; Dr Henrik Ehrsson \*, Cognitive Neurologist researching into body perception and the ‘rubber hand illusion’, Phd Malin Zimm\*\* – Architect, author of Architecture of Parallel Realities and Gemma Sharpe \*\*\* – contemporary art critic working at Afterall and Gasworks, London

Their practice explores virtualization of self/surroundings and methods of communication, through methodically attempting to manipulate the corporeal presence of the viewer's body.

In their work, the role of the viewer (or visitor) is often reversed and treated as the material of the performance itself.

Instructions from headphones give an intimate binaural sound. As Bishop Berkeley commented;” sound is as close to us as our thoughts, it troubles the clear distinction between subject and object, inside and the outside, self and the world” (Berkeley in Jones, 2006 :12 )(5).

The recorded sound in Lundahl&Seitl's work; choreographs the visitor's movements and cognition, forming a

personal itinerary in time and space, and with its 3-dimensional sculptural quality it shapes each visitor's experience into an individual virtual architecture. The space traced by the ear in the darkness (or “white out”) of Lundahl&Seitl's work becomes a cavity sculpted directly in the interior of the visitor's mind, eventually creating a physical resonate of the body.

The visitor of Lundahl&Seitl's work is choreographed and manipulated but yet nearly slipping away from becoming an object of reflection for others and herself/himself. The essence of the artwork becomes non-graspable almost insubstantial and can only be experienced through a continuous passage of time.

As the philosopher/phenomenologist Sheets-Johnstone would say the artwork comes to life through the visitor's existence; a living and conscious/self-conscious body (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999) . Drawing influences from Heidegger, the primary nature of the work is “reduced” into the visitor's means of Being within space, time and matter (the own body).

The art practice of Lundahl&Seitl partly aims to make the visitor able to isolate experience from context. For instance, when being within the superlative darkness of the space that the artists offer or using “white out” goggles, the visitor can sometimes sense the presence of someone's hand on their back. This “touch” is taken out of a context that may complicate it or overlook it; social codes, sexual, expectations or cultural/political codification, which is normally built into our interpretation of the world. In describing Lundahl&Seitl's work the art critic Gemma Sharpe defines it as “white touch” which could be described as the *qualia* of a touch itself. Philosopher Daniel Dennett defines *qualia* as ineffable; it cannot be communicated or apprehended by any other means than direct experience. *Qualia* is a raw feel, perception of itself considered entirely in isolation from any effect it might have on behaviour and behaviour disposition. It could in Lundahl&Seitl's work be described as a collapse of the signifier into an unconditional floating and kinetic flux. The content of the work that is taking place within the subject is not a representation nor a sign but an immediate bodily presence.

Our society and daily life is a world of composed events prearranged in a fixed usually visual configuration, like locations on a map. But where are we ourselves the creatures who construct the map, to be found in the world it presents? Within Lundahl&Seitl's work there are very few set physical points of reference external to the visitor to hold onto.

In Lundahl&Seitl's latest work *Work/workshop*, 2008 as well as "My voice shall now come from the other side of the room" the only point of reference the visitor had was his/her transient and changing state of "Being", triggered by the guide of verbal instructions and the situation of sensory deprivation. How do the needs and relationship to self/surrounding change in a void like this? The author and architect Malin Zimm describes *Work/Workshop* and "My voice shall now come from the other side of the room" (Zimm, Stockholm 2008) (7);

*"Within the absence of external references the visitor is given increased possibility in exploring the boundaries of self through allowing her/his basic perception to be challenged towards a point where it becomes a physical experience: body parts disappear, the point of view alters magically, disorientation and groundedness alter".*

If the visitor moves the images, kinetic and hypnagogic illusions that may be experienced moves with him/her, indicating the visitor as the absolute centre point of the artwork.

## 2. Methods and research

Lundahl&Seitl's practice has grown out of; observations and workshops broadly exploring the cognitive processes and underlying structures of perception in natural presence, spanning research into body ownership, subjectivity and the first person perspective. They have been looking into the functions of mirror neurons and a subjects interrelation between his/her viewing, doing imagination and memory as well as methods of mediated presence; remote presence or presence projected onto another persons body, orchestrated multi-sensory stimulation or isolated sensory input and removal or suspension of intention within a subject.

Through various methodologies and technologies the artists manipulate the participant (single and multiple users) by multisensory stimulation. As a result from workshops and observations Lundahl&Seitl developed their own methods of multisensory stimulation in order to guide the participant towards a state of perception where the participant becomes more receptive to the control of activating/externalizing thoughts into physical kinesthetic experience.

This research has informed the choreography of designed group situations - staged workshop environments with limited circumstances for visual spatial orientation and everyday 'face to face' communication.

## 3. My voice shall now come from the other side of the room - Part of choreographing absences series

Via language (verbal instructions), three-dimensional sound and synchronized multi-sensory stimulation we have achieved to create an illusion of a new interface to the external world within our participants.

Through sensory deprivation of vision and synchronized audio-tactile input, the mind starts to construct its own

experience of space; multi-sensory illusions, independent from the physical space, here imagination becomes the only true vantage point for experience.

Our methods have been to deconstruct the individual first person perspective. The procedure of doing this has involved removing a person's vision and aural input and replaced it with a recorded track of voice instructions how to navigate in this new situation of perceiving the world. The instructions are not limited to spatial navigation but also involve basic yet detailed descriptions of the room and the potential presence of someone else in it.

The recorded voice is usually experienced as intimate and "close to us" and after not to long we surrender to it, trust it and assimilate it, with our self.

Loosing the sense of vision, for someone that is not a dancer or in other way has exceptional control of the own body, has the possibility to evoke an immediate sense of a new 3-dimensional bodily experience and therefore a heightened sense of 3-dimensional bodily presence. In our everyday life, through our ocular dominated society we normally think and feel of our bodies as a 2-dimensional frontal surface. The aim of My Voice is for that reason to re-awaken the visitors full bodily awareness (consciously and/or unconsciously) in order to be bodily present.

However the condition can also create a temporal loss of bodily control and conscious awareness of for example directions of up and down, left and right, scales of the own body and the internal position of limbs in relation to each other. On the other hand, the condition could also create a conscious "hyper awareness" of directions and internal positions, depending on the individual entering the work.

If the visitor experiences a loss of proximity between the own body and the space where it is situated, it could at times be filled out with spatial illusions experienced as their own body shrinking/growing in relation to the surrounding space and the bodies within it. This sensation can be increased by a specific part of the choreography called "Alice" where a selected and detailed guided touch, distort/manipulate sensations of the own body's size in relation to the imagined or kinesthetically approximated surrounding space.

Our aim has been to simplify the subjects 'being in the world' to an individual experience, where reality cannot be divided as internal and external, observer and the observed, signifier and the signified, subject and object. In My Voice... these divisions has collapsed into one reality where the viewer experience a choreographed itinerary of time, where every quale is experienced isolated; perception of perception itself. Imagination becomes the only true vantage point for the experience; a reality produced exclusively by and for one single person - a subjective form of virtual reality.

Being deprived by vision (through 'white-out' goggles) and having the sense of own will exchanged by a voice giving instructions from sound isolated headphones, the individual navigates in an 'unseen' space. In My voice... the individuals role, as participant in his own reality, is temporally suspended in a position somewhat in-between the embodied protagonist

and the disembodied viewer. He/She is both experiencing a heightened sense of a higher (monitoring) self that overview the actions that he/she takes, but however have not intentionally decided. This removal of intentionality (any motivation or desire the lays outside the self) also confuses the individuals *interactive situated self* ( the part of the self that adapts and *perform* accordingly to any given social situation) results in an increased sense of bodily presence. Not by increased control and multiple choices to interact, but through the right opposite; by positioning the interactive situated self as a bystander the individual are being able to fully be aware of the own body's presence in space, of being here and now.

### 3.1 General (technical) description of the format and functions within the work

The work is a system for physical and mental interaction in-between one single individual and two guides, in an environment of total white-out (created by a pair of goggles used by the participant to cancel visual stimulation).

The duration of this experience lasts 10 minutes per person.

The work is very portable, however it requires a room with the spatial dimensions of approximate minimum of 5 x 5 meters (preferably in a bright room with natural light or by a bright electrical light, or in a darkened room. All other equipment are already in place with the artist.

## 4. Exploring spatial presence within “My voice shall now come from the other side of the room”

Rather than trying to neglect the experience of space the artists first wish to acknowledge the awareness of space, in order to activate the whole body kinesthetically. When this is achieved through specific guidance and the removal of visual impressions the participant becomes more responsive to the space surrounding his/her own body. The next step is then to manipulate/choreograph perception of space/time, the sense of the own body and the sense of surrounding bodies by touch and audio stimulation. The manipulation also takes place through activating the motor cortex by asking the participant to think of certain movement without performing them physically. Memory is also manipulated through adding suggestions to it by use of imagination. Utilizing the tight connection between memory and imagination [1].

The participant is given the possibility to transform his/her thoughts into physical kinesthetic experience. Even though the thoughts may be induced into the participant through the guiding voice, he/she may still experience a sense of ownership of the thoughts as they become “real” in the participant's body (Dr H. Ehrsson, 2008)<sup>1</sup>.

## 4.1 Sound recording techniques and sound creating spatial illusions in a non-visual environment

Our exploration also deals with how spatial perception of voices in 3D space can enhance the feeling of ‘being there’ and produce ‘social presence’, i.e. sensing other individuals in near-personal space.

The sound is recorded with a dummy-head with inbuilt microphones for 3d-binaural recording of voices, footsteps and other spatial sounds to be located above, behind etc. This creates an effective space-illusion that manipulates the participant's perception of space and his/her spatial relationship to physical interactions/ illusion of a physical interaction taking place within the dark. For instance, sometimes the instructing voice seems to be experienced as emerging from inside the upper part of the participant's head (microphones have been turned inwards towards the dummy head). This technique is used for the voice that gives instructions of navigation and reflections on the experience to simulate an inner thinking process and ‘induced intention’ within the participant. After a while within the environment many participants, after agreeing to trust and follow the voice, experience to become assimilated with the voice.

The participant also hears a background sound; a mesmerizing white noise, to guide the participant towards a changed state of consciousness, possibly a change in rhythms of brainwaves (Forberg, 2006)<sup>ii</sup>. This will guide the participant towards a state where he/she becomes more ‘experientially open’ and therefore possibly more capable to activate/externalize thoughts in to physical kinesthetic experience.

Some participants describe the experience of presence in “My voice shall now come from the other side of the room” in theory comparable to what the quantum theorists describes as a “presence field” or what Einstein called a “ghost field”; an overall presence in the room of possible outcomes of a situation existing all at the same time before collapsed by human consciousness (Forberg, 2006). The inability to visually see in our work, together with the knowledge that one shares the room with someone (social presence) one can't see or physically feel, sometimes creates a specific sense of presence for the participant. It has been described by participants as an “overall disembodied presence stretching indefinitely out into the room”. The tension in-between presence and absence is in the participant merging into one. Once an actual physical contact is finally established with the “presence” (a performer or another participant) the experience of “spread out presence” collapses its tension in-between absence and presence into a definite position and placement in space.

## 5. The works relevance for presence research

Dr Henrik Ehrsson, Cognitive Neurologist, researcher Pressencia, commenting on the artists' work at a recent presentation at Weld, Stockholm 2008.

A major goal in the EU funded Presencia project is to create a virtual body that feels and acts just as a real body with 'complete presence' [2]. Lundahl&Seitl's work manipulates very similar mechanisms of body presence by touch and auditory stimulation. Furthermore, the work explores the sense of space surrounding the body which is central to the 'place illusion' in presence [3]. Their exploration of how the spatial perception of voices in 3D space can enhance the feeling of 'being there' and produce 'social presence', i.e. sensing other individuals in near-personal space, is highly relevant for presence research.

Their presentation could give researchers new, 'un-orthodox' ideas for developing experiments to study presence since as artists they are free to explore the human conscious experience without being constrained by particular theoretical frameworks.

The artists explore issues and perceptual process that are at the very heart of presence research today [4]. For example, the question of how the sense of the body and sense of self-location in space can be manipulated by multisensory stimulation.

## Conclusion

The artists bring a unique perspective into this growing area of research and understanding. Their creative approach opens up new possibilities and ideas not necessarily constrained but the need for hypothesis. Their practice enriches this current and emergent debate not simply by setting up situations such as My Voice.. but by continuing the debate through the discussion with participants after the events.

Today we trust in external components such as technology and medicine etc. Without neglecting the importance of such knowledge we still underestimate the intrinsic resources and capacity of the body.

Through exhibiting My Voice... we hope to widen the understanding of the body's own technology of natural presence and cognition, in order to create a virtual presence that is 'experienced as real'.

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- \* Dr Henrik Ehrsson (Sweden) is a researcher at the Brain and Self Laboratory Department of Neuroscience Karolinska Institute, Stockholm. Dr Ehrsson is also involved in the EU funded Presencia project. In a recent experiment his research group at Karolinska were induced with an 'out of body experience' within a laboratory situation. At the seminar Ehrsson focused on the question of how we come to feel that we own our body. This problem can be formulated in terms of a multisensory binding problem: how to combine visual, tactile, and proprioceptive information into a single coherent object that is your own limb.
- \*\* Phd Malin Zimm (Sweden) is an architect and writer. Currently she is the chief director for the magazine RUM. Within the area of theoretical architecture her work has included: *The Dying Dreamer*— an architecture of parallel worlds and *The Synesthetic Mediator*. Zimm's practice explores architectonical processes where the virtual space of the mind is overlapped and extended out into the physical world. At the seminar Zimm elaborated on how the concept of the virtual is embodied within the human imagination, and how it exist in Work/Workshop.
- \*\*\* Gemma Sharpe (UK) is a writer and academic based in London. She writes for *Untitled* and works with organizations including Gasworks and Afterall. In her presentation, Gemma positioned the practice of Lundahl&Seitl in terms of current thinking on visitor experience and performance within contemporary art.