

Potentials for Trance Through Telepresence

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Portable Sacred Grounds: Telepresence
World
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The epistemic experience of things "distant" as "here and now"—in a word, telepresence—was originally associated with para-operational technologies that sprang from industrial robotics for working in extreme environments beyond human range. And then, as these efforts played into the development of "virtual reality," telepresence has come into recognition in its own right . . . there should be no need to go into historical details.

Still, when it comes to how to present a distant object "up close" the choices are wide open. Were not "tele+vision" and "tele+phone" prime examples of far-made-near technologies? Or even before that, there can be little doubt that film, photography, painting, indeed all visual media functioned as devices of "transport," bringing forth their "somewhere, sometime" dimensions "here and now." (In this regard, we may give a nod of recognition at the various multiple time-space film works shown as a sub-program of the Exhibition.) This perspective further traces back to humankind's greatest invention, our notational system of "language." For what were tales and myths, if not to portray scenes of distant realms and times long past, ways and ideas among people a vast remove from ourselves.

Of course, the counter-argument might run, this confuses two forms of "vision"—"imagination" and "manifestation."



MINATO Chihiro and
MORIWAKI Hiroyuki «Garden of
Memory»

That is, in order for something to be "present" it cannot just be some vague notion; it must carry sensate weight by looking/ sounding/ feeling (just like) real. Hence the hierarchy: audiovisuals over print, photos over painted depictions, motion pictures over stills. How much more so, then, interactivity with sound and interfaces? We may thus appreciate escalating degrees of telepresence in the so-called multimedia. Naturally this all calls "reality" into question, yet even more to the point than the spatial or temporal distance of the object to be made manifest is what must be termed its relational "remove."

In fact, most 20th century persons such as ourselves tend to accept geopolitical/ historical world models as "givens" via whatever the means of learning. No longer is the issue simply the distance from places afar or times past, but rather one of manifesting what is removed from reality . . . not merely "replaying" the real as real, but (by now) giving the feeling of "realness" to the unreal . . . therein lies the unique promise of the telepresence experience. Which leads us to think that the "World of Telepresence" is not just some ultra-enhanced Virtual Reality, but might actually encompass a worldview of such contextualized breadth of experience that it carries its own sense of wonder. Thus the "spiritualism," "animism" or "shamanism" implicit in the concept "Portable Sacred Grounds" may be understood not as

a facile merger of advanced technology and mysticism, but rather as a necessary problematic whose time has come.

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Even so, was not "Portable Sacred Grounds" all-too-grand a theme? As more than one religious scholar noted during the Talk Sessions held in tandem with the Exhibition, "Surely a place is a sanctuary precisely because it moves not one millimeter"—obviously taking the phrase at rhetorical value. For an "immovable sanctuary" to be hypothetically manifested in essence "here and now" would seem to propose extracting the "holiness" of the fixed place in portable form so as to afford an instant, convenient, contemporary test-trial simulation of a "pilgrimage."

Likewise, it may be said that the four installations shown did not fully bear out the overall Exhibition concept. But as indicated by the subthemes "Shared Space," "Co-Creation," "Multiple Realities," "World Elements," "Creation Myths," "Primitive Sensibilities" and "Spiritual Communion," the "discrepancies" and "divergences" only served to underscore the irreducible potential of the telepresence experience.

All works exhibited were equipped with interfaces that allowed participants to variously manipulate the percepts that appeared on the "other side." Images from around the world and fragmentary texts interwoven on a screen in the corner of a



Tjebbe VAN TIJEN and Fred GALES «Neo Shamanism»

garden (MINATO Chihiro and MORWAKI Hiroyuki «Garden of Memory»). A skin drum that, when struck on projected icons, screened video projections of shamanistic images (Tjebbe VAN TĪEN and Fred GALES «Neo Shamanism»). Two persons wandering freely through a shared hypothetical space, selecting and positioning 3-D models and "poetic text fragments" (Bill SEAMAN with Gideon MAY «The World Generator/ The Engine of Desire»). A globe-like trackball mechanism that rotates a world globe projection on a screen ahead and allows the viewer to "drop in" like an angel on everything from present-day horizons to scenes from the past (Art+Com «Terra-Present/ Terra-Past»).

"Experiencing" all four works was illuminating, yet no matter how advanced or complex the level of sensory interactivity provided by means of audiovisual data, no one work could be said to impart a truly intense direct sense of multidimensional time-space layering. Rather, the feel of the stones placed here and there, the flow of water, the textures of sand and rope, the tilt of the swing—these very material elements, their concrete physical stimuli seemed to hold the key to swaying participants' sense of reality. It can hardly be incidental that repeated mention was made during the Talk Sessions of the "special significance" of stone and buildings—the material aspects of

"sanctuaries."

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Come to mention it, once when Exhibition Supervisor ITOH Toshiharu spoke on the "Portable Sacred Grounds" theme, some students responded, "Isn't that just a Rave Party?" Fair enough, parts of the Exhibition did smack of techno(logical) shamanism. But how would the other techno(sound) shamanism of the rave party react to the Exhibition or to telepresence itself? Let us imagine what they might make of each other.

From the '90s on, rave emerges as a trend simultaneously around the world. But what exactly is a psychedelic trance party like? Without going into details, we can describe it as an outdoor happening where (trance) techno music is played full blast with people dancing day and night oblivious to the time is a sort of mass collective "sacramental" atmosphere. While the psychedelic trance sound itself is something of a coelacanth in techno, a mold-oldie retrogression off the evolutionary scale of music, it persists as a style for the very pragmatic virtue of being "the easiest thing to dance to." The site decorations are equally distinctive: an eclectic patchwork of blacklight designs, icons, signs and symbols culled from Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism, set off by layered patterns all over the dance area, not to mention



Bill SEAMAN with Gideon MAY
«The World Generator/The
Engine of Desire»

computer-generated op-art swirls and video landscape projections In short, updated '60s psychedelia freely thrown together in building-block fashion on the simplistic proviso that "Anyone who opens his or her channels can access altered states of consciousness." While not every party may fully exhibit such "neo shamanistic" effects, never before has such a convenient, open-ended formula so skillfully extracted the essence of a "sanctuary"—a true late-20th century "original."

Yet whatever values and premises the "celebratory" environment of a trance party and the "operational" installations of this Exhibition might share, the respective experiences are quite different. The most obvious difference being the physical "dance" orientation and collective "group" vibration of the former. But of course, that gap would hardly be filled even were a crowd of people to swarm the Exhibition space and dance wildly before the installations. Very well, then, what if «Garden of Memory» were placed in a party chill-out space, or the «Neo Shamanism» drum turned into a playable instrument? Surely that would subtly alter the "quality" of the (pseudo) telepresence experience . . . such were my idle thoughts,

I at last confess, as I strolled through the Exhibition.

[See pp.168-179 and pp.184-189 for more detailed discussion of the six Talk Sessions and Screenings held in conjunction with this Exhibition.]

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Art+Com «Terra-Present/Terra-Past»