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Here/There: The Slash Between Screens and Physical Bodies

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Abstract:

Here/There: Telepresence, Touch and Art at the Interface by Kris Paulsen critically examines telecommunication technologies that allow real-time interactions between remote subjects and areas. Discussing the works of seminal performance, video, and new media artists that experiment with telepresence technologies, Paulsen exposes the contradictory states of being that inhere the use of their interfaces, and how asymmetrical movements of power and agency are produced within them. In doing so, the book offers novel perspectives from which to discuss the ever-increasing interactions between the tangible world and the “physics of screens”.

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Paulsen, Kris. *Here/There: Telepresence, Touch and Art at the Interface*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017. 264 Pages, 32,95 GBP. ISBN: 9780262035729.

Abstract:

Here/There: Telepresence, Touch and Art at the Interface by Kris Paulsen critically examines telecommunication technologies that allow real-time interactions between remote subjects and areas. Discussing the works of seminal performance, video, and new media artists that experiment with telepresence technologies, Paulsen exposes the contradictory states of being that inhere the use of their interfaces, and how asymmetrical movements of power and agency are produced within them. In doing so, the book offers novel perspectives from which to discuss the ever-increasing interactions between the tangible world and the “physics of screens”.

Telepresence, defined as “the feeling of being present at a remote location by means of real-time telecommunications devices” (p. 2), is a ubiquitous state of being in today’s globalized society. Skype/FaceTime and military UAVs (drones) constitute two of the most well-known current examples. In the humanities, many discussions around telepresence and the machines and interfaces that support them tend to be either exultations of the new possibilities that they enable, or bleak warnings about the dangers that accompany them. In *Here/There: Telepresence, Touch and Art at the Interface*, Kris Paulsen avoids positioning her analysis on either side of such a moral axis, focusing instead on the constant contradictions and fluctuations that present themselves in, on, and through these technologies’ interfaces. The book critically surveys the development of real-time telecommunication devices, from analog video and CCTV set-ups to satellite telecommunication systems, digital telerobotics and UAV drones. Discussing seminal performance, video, and new-media artists that use or reference these technologies, Paulsen scrutinizes how dynamics of power move through these devices, and where and how agency is being repositioned within their interactive networks.

The book begins with a compelling and thorough re-reading of semiologist Charles Sanders Peirce's discussion of the "index". Paulsen argues against positioning the uncanny and contradictory states of telepresence in the qualities of digital media as such, claiming that "digital doubt" – the suspicions towards digitally mediated events on the basis of their supposed ontological immateriality – neglects the fact that digital processes are never only immaterial. Referring to Peirce, she shows how equating indexicality with materiality fails to recognize the inconclusiveness and contingency always already present in our encounters with mediated images, signs, and symbols as such. Instead of understanding the index as "a material trace of a past moment" (p. 11), Paulsen shows how indices necessarily involve abstraction and interpretation. It is in these in-between moments that the book tries to situate the different experiences of telepresence that it proceeds to discuss.

Chapters two and three analyze the use of video and CCTV set-ups by artists Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, and Chris Burden. Following Samuel Weber's description of television's "uncanny confusion" (the inability to conclusively determine whether television images are live or pre-recorded), Paulsen discusses early video works by Acconci and Jonas. She succeeds in showing how the viewing of video recordings that do not occur in real-time, thus precluding any intervention on the part of the spectator, nevertheless anticipate and establish the spectator's presence as both virtual and actual. A comparative analysis of Guy Debord's description of the spectacle and Marshal McLuhan's definition of "cool media" is used to try and locate where individual and collective agency is situated within Chris Burden's CCTV installations. For Paulsen, Burden's performances display "the spectacular spread of a televisual logic into real spaces" (p. 91), which manifests itself in modes of passive interaction that persist even when an active engagement between subjects, screens, and spectators is possible.

Moving on from situations in which the "here" and "there" are in relatively close proximity to each other, chapter four explores satellite telecommunication that visually connects inter- and trans-continental spaces and people. Paulsen continues to focus on the particular forms of presence and absence that these technologies produce, in this case examining the phenomena of latency, delay, and signal noise. Looking at the rehearsal process and performances of Kit Galloway's and Sherrie Rabinowitz's satellite performances of the 1970s, Paulsen describes how these moments of "unworkability" not only expose the materiality and inherent dysfunctionality of satellite communications, but also allow new perspectives of the body to emerge in relation to their avatars on the screens.

The final chapter then deals with video-game simulations and telepresence-interfaces that the military uses for combat training, therapy, and the controlling of UAV's. Particularly in Wafaa Bilal's *Domestic Tension*, as well as in Harun Farocki's *Serious Games* series, Paulsen outlines the discourses surrounding the use of drones and VR technology, namely with regard to the problematic distancing

that they enable and the vulnerable subjectivities that they produce. Most striking and original in this chapter, however, is her description of a specifically asymmetrical shift in the *either/or* divide that these technologies have imposed. Rather than being at once “now” and “then”, Paulsen shows how drones (and this could be extended to include other government/military surveillance technologies) produce a sense of “now” and “not yet”. The specific omnipresence of drones turn them into distinct biopolitical technologies, producing subjects that live the present in anticipation of their upcoming subjugation to these planes. Referring to Hito Steyerl’s *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .Mov File*, Paulsen ends by acknowledging that radically new ways of maneuvering our way through these interstitial moments and their disconcerting productions of subjectivities have become necessary, even as they have presented themselves as more difficult to perform. All in all, *Here/There* is an in-depth analysis offering many compelling reasons why continuous critical research and experimentation is necessary in our coming to terms with these technologies, adeptly offering relevant theoretical and aesthetic pointers.

German Abstract:

Hier/Dort: Zwischen Bildschirmen und physischen Körpern

Here/There: Telepresence, Touch and Art at the Interface von Kris Paulsen untersucht Telekommunikationstechnologien, die Echtzeit-Interaktionen zwischen entfernten Subjekten und Orten ermöglichen. Anhand von Performance-, Video- und New Media-Künstler_innen, die allesamt mit Telepräsenz-Technologien experimentieren, stellt Paulsen dar, wie widersprüchliche Momente aus der Nutzung jener Interfaces entstehen und wie diese asymmetrische Bewegungen von Macht und Handlungsmacht hervorbringen. Dabei bietet das Buch neue Perspektiven von denen aus die stetig zunehmenden Interaktionen zwischen der fühlbaren Welt und einer „physics of screens“ diskutiert werden können.

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