

# Introduction\*

*Barbara Grespi*

(University of Milan)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9133-3251>

DOI: [10.54103/milanoup.232.c661](https://doi.org/10.54103/milanoup.232.c661)

The experience of positioning oneself and moving inside a virtual space, with the ability to interact and act at a distance, is part of our everyday life as users of the internet, immersive technologies, videotelephony, and satellite systems. Contemporary tele-media—if this term may be used to group the various media configurations that enable increasingly comprehensive and effective forms of communication at a distance—belong to a genealogy that emerges with the rise of radio and the telephone and expands significantly between the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, television reached full social penetration; the telefax and satellite networks appeared (Telstar 1 in 1962); and the first commercial data-transfer modems were introduced (the Bell 103 in 1962).

Between the 1960s and 1970s, art also recognized telepresence as one of the defining challenges of the time and addressed it through a vast array of works that engaged both with foundational technological devices—capable of producing the virtual self and installing it within screen space—and, more broadly, with telematics and forms of remote telecommunications, using the then “new” media to push them beyond their operational limits (Paulsen 2017). This type of artistic experimentation was rarely separate from the industrial research, as demonstrated by the emblematic case of Bell Labs—the world-leading AT&T research laboratory where artists and technologists worked together—which supported many of the major inventions of the digital era (Wershler et al. 2022).

The concept of telepresence itself, introduced and debated a couple of decades later, takes shape at the intersection of the scientific-technological sphere and the artistic domain. In 1980, Marvin Minsky, then director of the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, defined telepresence as a *technique for operating at a distance* and envisioned the design of new technologies capable of extending

---

\* This research was funded under the Project PRIN 2022 PNRR (Code G53D23007070001) awarded by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) and was developed within EXT – Coordinated Research Center “Extended Realities” of the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” of the University of Milan in the frame of the project “Departments of Excellence 2023-2027.” The PRIN 2022 PNRR project is titled *ARTCHAE. Rediscovering video and installation art as an archaeology of telepresence* and is conducted in collaboration with the archive *Le Radici del Nuovo* (MEET | Digital Culture Center, Milan).

our hands, enabling them to act upon remote environments, modify them, and perceive their feedback. For Roy Ascott, a pioneer of cybernetic and telematic art and promoter of *technoetics* (1991), telepresence instead signifies *the feeling of sharing a consciousness*, directly derived from sharing a virtual space. Ascott emphasizes the idea of overcoming the barrier of individuality through telematic arts in order to create a collective subject emerging from the transcendence of bodily boundaries and the interconnection of minds.

These are therefore two visions shaped by opposing orientations: one directed toward remote operation and intervention without engaging the body—and without the risks that bodily presence may entail—, the other toward forms of transcendence in which the absence of the physical body produces equality and deep connection. Yet despite this divergence, both Minsky's and Ascott's formulations reactivate an imaginary that belongs to Zielinski's "deep time" of tele-media (Zielinski 2006) and entered modernity through nineteenth-century esotericism, with its out-of-body experiences (Rheingold 1991; Grau 2003), and through parapsychology, encompassing psychokinesis, extrasensory perception, and telepathy (Andriopoulos 2005).

As "interpreters of the technological imagination of industrial society," as Simone Dotto writes in this section, artists "excavate" the roots of tele-mediality and explore the challenges that this new experience entails. They reflect on the consequences of the increasingly radical compression of spatial distances and on the new geographical perception that emerges from it, as well as on the distribution of power embedded in the design of the devices and the infrastructures employed. The two prevailing directions of their inquiry correspond to what Doron Galili identifies as the central pillars—or tropes—of remote transmission: "the feted modern trope of the 'annihilation of time and space,' which expresses a fascination with (and sometimes anxiety about) technology's conquests over natural condition [...] and the configuration of network" (Galili 2020, 28).

The latter trope is addressed by the first article in this section, which also serves as a bridge to the previous part. The contribution by Rossana Galimi returns to the theme of closed-circuit systems in order to identify, within a strand of feminist video art, the media-archaeological intuition of its most evident mediatic destiny: its transformation into CCTV, a surveillance system which, in women's artworks, becomes a key framework for interpreting the processual formation of subjective identity. By rediscovering a number of overlooked female video artists who were pioneers of the medium, Galimi's article shows how the technological affordances of video—namely, the circularity of recording and transmission—brought to light the structures of the gaze, and in particular the constant self-surveillance exercised by the female subject, even in intimate settings, due to her internalization of the patriarchal gaze.

The artists reexamined by Galimi reappropriate video within “other networks”—to use the fitting expression of Lori Emerson in her recent contribution on the topic, partially included in the third section of this volume—the most significant of which is the International Videoleters Network. Recovering this remarkable experiment from the archives, Galimi recognized the concrete creation of a collective subjectivity in a 1970s feminist practice, which “opens” tele-vision, creatively embedding its audience in the video flow.

These attempts to “open” the circuit by transforming spectators into actors are also characteristic of the early media art experiments by the Argentine Marta Minujín, who in the late 1960s created three works that challenged the unidirectionality of television, rethinking it as a two-directional, telephone-like device that allows forms of reciprocal presence. The essay devoted to Minujín’s works focuses in particular on her *Minuphone* (1967), an installation in which a telephone booth becomes a multimedia space that produces telepresence—an extended-reality medium *avant la lettre*. The telephone booth is indeed an object of significant archaeological interest, as it prefigures the contemporary “digital bubble” (Casetti 2023) and brings to light the crucial role of the telephone in shaping virtual spaces.

The three following articles explore the first trope of telepresence, namely the space-time compression at the basis of signal transmission. Art precociously recognized the discursive—or mythical—quality of telepresence, which Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton (1997) defined as the ultimate phantasmagoria: an illusion of nonmediation depending on the invisibilization of the medium through “transparent” interfaces, or its transformation into a social entity perceived as a living organism.

This phantasmagorical aspect is highlighted above all in Simone Dotto’s article, which contrasts the ideologies of telepresence with its aesthetic re-functionalization in sound art works. The contribution usefully focuses on the radio as a medium that generated the imagination of an immaterial space composed of waves through which it is possible to travel. This ranges from Guglielmo Marconi’s vision of an “increasingly resonating, interconnected, simultaneous space, where everything can be heard everywhere as soon as it happens” (*infra*) to the sound sculptures of Bill Fontana, which create temporary circuits of audio transmission through which sounds from wild spaces are overlaid onto urban landscapes. Central here is again the distinction between forms that close the circuit and those that open it: the possibility of neutralizing external sounds by including them in the safe space of domesticity as opposed to the pursuit of sensory contrasts that disorient perception and open it to experiences of complex chronoesthesia in which past and present intertwine.

The temporal dimension is central to telepresence: beyond the mere possibility of navigating the past through its sounds, the simultaneity celebrated by telepresence is, in fact, a mythical construction based on a subtle mixing of

times. The following essay by Maria Teresa Soldani demonstrates this primarily at a phenomenological level, analyzing the multiple temporalities of the transmitted signal, which—whether in the case of video or sound—consists of a network of thin slices of time corresponding to the successive instants in which lines and frames appear on the screen. Feedback aesthetics—the focus of her contribution—stem from a reflection on the materiality of the signal and highlight a frequently misrepresented genealogy that redistributes the relationships between technologies, tracing the electronic camera not to cinema or photography, but to the telegraph, or, as Nam June Paik notes, to the microphone (*infra*). Building on this convergence, Soldani reconstructs the US cultural scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s, uncovering a dense network of coordinated sites for experimentation in intermedia events. The detailed mapping of relationships between artists, media centers, laboratories, and projects drawn up by Soldani derives from extensive archival research conducted in North American archives and leads to the rediscovery of forgotten works, or works that have received insufficient attention, as in the key case of Maryanne Amacher’s long distance music.

This section concludes with the seminal contribution of Kris Paulsen, who illuminates the issue of space-time entanglement in telepresence experiences through the analysis of a contemporary media artwork: a limit case study that challenges the notion of simultaneous interaction over long distances promised by algorithmic tele-media. Paulsen focuses primarily on David Bowen’s *Tele-present Wind (Mars Wind Version)* (2024), an installation based on the transmission to Earth of Martian wind, made possible by data collected from the wind sensor on the Perseverance Rover. The artwork provides the occasion for a rich theoretical reflection on the “thickness” of the present moment and on the delay inherent in every form of telecommunication, which, in the case of interplanetary distances becomes significant and generates new forms of human-machine interaction. Paulsen’s physics and philosophy of telepresence draw attention to the materiality of the video stream and its legibility according to the frame of reference, while also highlighting the role of imagination in filling the long stretches of waiting with a sense of future. Offering an ideal conclusion to this section, Paulsen defines algorithmic telepresence as a “new phenomenological means of being entangled with others in space and time.”

## References

- Andriopoulos, Stefan. 2005. "Psychic Television." *Critical Inquiry* 31 (3): 618–37.
- Ascott, Roy. 1991. "Connectivity: Art and Interactive Telecommunications." *Leonardo* 24 (2): 115–17.
- Casetti, Francesco. 2023. *Screening Fears: On Protective Media*. New York: Zone Books.
- Galili, Doron. 2020. *Seeing By Electricity. The Emergence of Television 1878-1939*. Duke University Press.
- Grau, Oliver. 2003. *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion*. The MIT Press.
- Lombard, Matthew, and Theresa Ditton. 1997. "At the Heart of it All. The Concept of Presence." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00072.x>.
- Minsky, Marvin. 1980. "Telepresence." *Omni* June: 44–52.
- Paulsen, Kris. 2017. *Here/There: Telepresence, Touch, and Art at the Interface*. The MIT Press.
- Rheingold, Howard. 1991. *Virtual reality*. Summit Books.
- Wershler, Darren, Lori Emerson, and Jussi Parikka. 2022. *The Lab Book: Situated Practices in Media Studies*. University of Minnesota Press.