

WTTTWWTTC 5D: Who We Talk To When We Talk To Cameras

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Abstract: *This text is based on a script for a lecture-performance for the online symposium Auf der Suche nach der fünften Dimension. Arbeitstagung Fachdidaktik Kunst & Design 2021 presented December 4th, 2021, via Zoom.*

Introduction: THE ONE THING WE HAVE IN UNCERTAINTY IS HOPE

Full disclosure: The bulk of the following text is a script for a performance that was not supposed to happen, which doesn't mean that anything went differently than expected.

At the time of its presentation, everyone involved in the programming, scheduling, and presentation of this work was very much used to things happening in ways that weren't anticipated. Back in late 2021, intentions were sort of becoming a more loose, mushy, and flexible thing. From my personal perspective within the Belgian performance and dance scene, producers and programmers were completely changing their working mental models to something along the lines of a permanent draft; where any preparation, no matter how thorough and researched, was endlessly subject to abrupt, system breaking modifications. Excel budget spreadsheets, Google calendars, and even PDFs of travel tickets were essentially all filler for a murky, unknowable reality. All this is because, concretely, even at the tail end of the pandemic, information about a new variant could entirely change the way face-to-face interactions were permitted and understood.

These circumstances, however exhausting and unnerving, were at the very foundation of the entire *search for the fifth dimension* that was the theme of the

symposium, which primarily asked how art and design didactics and our common abilities to teach and learn had come to exist through the innumerable technologies of the time. A fantastic line of questioning born out of the uncertainty of the pandemic, and I was invited to contribute with my perspective as a performance artist on the gesture of addressing the camera. I was invited to stream *live* in Zurich, and through the ZHDK's immense technical resources, I was able to negotiate my dream technical rider: an audio-visual extravaganza complete with microphones, streaming devices, and three cameras. A room was reserved within the building, plane tickets were booked, and accommodations were set. One week before the symposium, the Swiss Federal Government temporarily closed its borders in order to prevent the spread of the Omicron COVID-19 sub-variant, preventing me from entering the country to work.

On a Zoom call with my colleague Henryetta Duerschlag, she told me that »the one thing we have in uncertainty is hope«. The script for this lecture was thus re-written and adapted to function as a live-streamed and pre-recorded lecture-performance from my apartment in Brussels and includes a cameo from dance artist Eimi Leggett. The script was purposely written in spoken English as a way to link the written and the performative and includes prompts and information for the performer to improvise.

WTTWTTTC 5D: LECTURE PERFORMANCE SCRIPT

Note: *The lecture starts as an online video conference. The audience sees me full-screen on Zoom. I'm standing in front of the camera with a red shirt on (the same shirt that is later seen in a pre-recorded video filmed in the same location). The camera background does not use a digital background, allowing the surroundings to be visible. My colleague Henryetta introduces me and I begin my script:*

HELLO EVERYONE

My name is André Chapatte, he/him, and I'm a multimedia artist and performer based in Brussels, Belgium, but originally from Geneva, Switzerland. I'd like to thank Miriam and Henryetta for inviting me to help search for the 5th dimension, this space between DISTANCE/DIGITALITY/DIALOGUE/DIDACTICS, and I hope that some of the ideas and experiments that I will present today will bring about some new perspectives regarding contemporary camera technology.

Before formally beginning, I would like to begin by also expressing my gratitude to all of you on Zoom for inviting me into your homes. I feel that it's important to acknowledge that, in some way or another, and especially for those of you who have left your cameras on, I have been brought into your personal spaces. You are allowing me to speak to you in your home offices, living rooms, and bedrooms. And I know that it's not the same as my whole body being in your private spaces, I'm quite aware that this interaction is being mediated through a strange combination of private, public, corporate space... but we'll get back to that. In the meantime, I believe it's important to note that there is some part of me that is present in your homes, and if you want to turn off your camera, make a cup of tea, or text on your phone, please feel free to do so.

This being said, I would like to welcome you to my apartment on Avenue Du Roi in Brussels, where I live with my partner, my plants, my yoga mats, and workout equipment. Here, let me give you a quick tour:

Prompt for improvisation: *show apartment + plants and tools + kitchen + Eimi + outdoors. I take the laptop in my hands and use the device to show the audience throughout my house, explaining details as I go. The tone is like the usual house tour someone would have as a guest in someone's home.*

So yeah, welcome to my home studio.

Now that you know a bit more about where I'm streaming from, I can begin by sharing with you the fact that there's a reason behind me presenting all the banal things in my surroundings, and that has to do with something called digital charisma, or »e-charisma« (Smith 2020). Apparently, when it comes to being understood as convincing or persuasive with communication technology, it's best to be SEEN. Which means that someone who is beamed into a space via video conference is much more apt to be listened to than someone who is just heard via telephone. And this has to do with our brains wanting to know who is giving us information/what is giving us information – a voice coming out of the ether is somewhat confusing. So seeing someone in front of us is much more convincing than simply hearing them. But not only that, if you can show your surroundings, tell a bit about yourself, where you came from, and what your day will be like, show your pet, or share your favorite recipe, you create a much richer context surrounding the image of yourself on people's screens, and that makes it apparently easier for people to listen to you.

In essence, creating a narrative about the image of yourself on screen reduces cognitive friction and helps people get the information they need

from you without constantly having to imagine who that voice is, what they look like, and where they come from.

Prompt: mention that the notion of *e-charisma* is referring to the following article from the *Wall Street Journal*: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/do-you-have-e-charisma-on-zoo-m-heres-how-to-get-it-11606651200>

So that being said, it might be a good idea to tell you a bit more about what I mean by being a multimedia artist and performer. Which could be anything, really.

What do I mean by multimedia artist and performer?

Maybe I can start with the performer part.

The Oxford Learner's Dictionary (2023) has the following definitions for »performance«:

»1. an act of performing a play, concert, or other form of entertainment«
– And indeed, I do work as a dancer, singer, speaker, and mover for other artists in Switzerland and abroad, as well as for myself.

»2. the action or process of performing a task or function«.

And in that sense, Oxford Languages is right about me. I perform within social interactions, with gender roles, and within hierarchical relations every day. But I'm not the only one to do that. We're all performing right now, in the sense that all of us are performing the task of creating this conference call together with our computers, and none of us has started disrupting the chat with disgusting jokes, or has grabbed our computer screen to shake it around, or anything like that. At least not yet, but that will come later. But in a nutshell, the performer part means that I'll use the multiple languages of the body to serve different ideas and narratives. Sometimes for other artists as well.

So what about the multimedia part? Well, by that I mean that I use many different media to produce my work. Though I'm mostly working towards presenting bodies on stage, I generally combine sound, video, music, and choreography to enhance how the body is experienced by audiences.

And the artist part means that I can basically make fiction, contrary to someone working within an academic context. I can potentially bring change and insight through poetics, entertainment, abstraction, boredom, half-truths, and storytelling.

In short, I'm in the business of narrative stimulus (Pérez et al. 2021), of creating spaces for your brain to simulate different weird and impossible situations, and to try things out, and potentially take some of those things back into daily life or *the real world*. I really love the idea of an emancipated

audience that comes in with whatever they are dealing with and includes thoughts, feelings, obsessions, and worries on an associative journey with the work. I feel that you should sometimes trust people to make sense of things for themselves.

So how do I do this narrative stimulus in a reliable way? Well, as humans, we've always had to rely on images. And by images I don't mean drawings, photos, necessarily VISUAL stimulus at all. And the person I know who has best described what I mean by image is neurologist, neuroscientist, and author Antonio Damasio (1994, p. 96f.) in this fantastic, though rather long quote from his 1994 book *Descartes' Error*:

If you look out the window at the autumn landscape, or listen to the music playing in the background, or run your fingers over a smooth metal surface, or read these words, line after line down this page, you are perceiving, and thereby forming images of varied sensory modalities. The images so formed are called perceptual images. But you may stop attending to that landscape or music or surface or text, distract yourself from it. Perhaps you are now thinking of your Aunt Maggie, or the Eiffel Tower, or the voice of Plácido Domingo, or of what I just said about images. Any of those thoughts is also constituted by images, regardless of whether they are made up mostly of shapes, colors, movements, tones or spoken or unspoken words. Those images, which occur as you conjure up a remembrance of things past, are known as recalled images, so to distinguish them from the perceptual variety. By using recalled images you can bring back a particular type of past image, one formed when you are planning something that has not yet happened but that you intend to have happen, for example, reorganizing your library come this weekend. As the planning process unfolded, you were forming images of objects and movements, and consolidating a memory of that fiction in your mind. Images of something that has not yet happened and that may in fact never come to pass are no different in nature from the images you hold of something that has already happened. They constitute the memory of a possible future rather than of the past that was. These various images — perceptual, recalled from real past, and recalled from plans of the future — are constructions of your organism's brain. All that you can know for certain is that they are real to yourself, and that other beings make comparable images. We share our image-based concept of the world with other humans, and even with some animals; there is a remarkable consistency in the constructions different individuals make of the essential aspects of the environment (textures, sounds, shapes, colors, space). If our organisms were designed differently, the constructions we make of the world around us would be different as well. We do not

know, and it is improbable that we will ever know, what ›absolute‹ reality is like.

And the oldest way I can think we've been using perceptual images and recalled images has been through visual storytelling, assembling words, tone, gestures, and eventually ceremonial garments and make-up to create a common experience for a group of individuals witnessing the narrative. And it seems that this is so built in that we've got a whole series of neural pathways that are dedicated to receiving information through stories, with recent studies showing that subjects' breath and heart rates will match in terms of slowing down or accelerating depending on which part of the story is being presented. And this even if subjects are hearing the stories at different times and places.

Narrative stimulus, i.e., images juxtaposed through time, can include pretty much ANYTHING. Photos, videos, voice clips, sounds, commands, objects, memories, questions, affirmations, spaces, temperatures, volume, brightness, major keys, minor keys, danger, text messages... You see what I mean. All of these things can become perceptual images, and if you recall them, they become recalled images. And to make things even more complicated, all these things can COMBINE to create moments, scenes, instants, flashes...images within images.

Some of you might point out that going this deep into the CONSTITUTION OF IMAGES could be looked at through the lens of semiotics or semantics. And though this field is indeed really useful at breaking down language into its functional components, not knowing about signs and signifiers doesn't stop billions of people from communicating with images every day, in the most creative and addictive ways.

So what does this all have to do with camera technology?

To change gears a bit, I'm sure you all have your own thoughts about the overwhelming, frightening, and thrilling technological revolution we're all churning through at the moment. One transitional culture with the next, tightly connected to transitional technologies – no homeostasis for humanity. Some of you, I'm certain, have or are researching this subject in one way or another with much seriousness. Others might be totally sick of it at this point. Yet, here I am, talking to my laptop in order to speak to YOU. The stories I'm telling you now, about images and narratives, are made possible thanks to dozens of tiny cameras. This change has happened so quickly, in just the past 15 years.

YouTube itself started in 2005, and I feel that it is at least as disruptive to the way we communicate as the printing press. I basically feel like I barely know what I'm dealing with. I don't know if I have a screen addiction or if I'm struggling to keep up with all the changes anymore. But one thing I do

know is that cameras are powerful tools, and that our relationship to them has CHANGED.

Prompt for improvisation: *Wolfgang Tillmans' 2019 exhibition Today is The First Day at WIELS in Brussels: Recount when my mom was in town and I took her to see the Wolfgang Tillmans exhibit. Recount how we went to the top floor of the show first, where a video was on display where Wolfgang himself explains some of his feelings on making images, and how he feels that people don't understand how powerful the device in our pockets is. Wolfgang describes how we're just blasting photos constantly without taking the time to understand the incredible potential of each single image.*

There's an almost mystical power to video and photography that has taken over the world, creating new spaces for us to relate to one another, to share things, to buy and consume and judge, to modify ourselves, our ideas, what we are and want to be. And again, most of the time, this is now in a strange hybrid space between public/private/corporate.

Claire Bishop (2017, p. 4) speaks about this idea in her publication for *Skulptur Projekte Münster*, called: OUT OF BODY/OUT OF TIME/OUT OF SPACE which came out in 2017:

The temporal and spatial fluidity induced by digital technology is matched by the new fluidity of public and private (or collapse, if we want to be more pessimistic), brought about by social media. The impact of this continual self-broadcasting to our ›followers‹ has been extensively debated by scholars; it is not difficult to read such personal expressions of identity as a performance. But it is a performance not for audiences as conventionally understood as fixed in a particular time and space – neither mass media nor private media, but an ambiguous region between the two. It is an endless exhibition for an indeterminate audience whose only register of paying attention is ›liking‹ and ›commenting‹. Increasingly we exist at the interface of two gazes: on the one hand, we are perpetually surveilled (by cameras in urban environments, by ›cookies‹ when surfing online); on the other, we perpetually self-perform for this gaze, taking selfies and posting updates on social media. Caught between this crossfire of surveillance and self-performance, the definition of ›public space‹ becomes an increasingly elusive concept. How these tendencies play out in contemporary art is yet to be resolved, since we are in the early days of both phenomena, but it is striking that there is very little art that tackles both of these themes head on. [...] They tend to be swept up in their self-presentation on- and off-line rather than contributing to a greater understanding of this phenomenon [...]. What we need to understand is the relationship of this

artistic temporality to the retemporalization of daily life under the pressures of neoliberalism and digital technology. Whether artists are merely a support and symptom of these hallmarks of our age, or attempting to produce meta-commentaries and alternatives to them, is, at the current moment, undecidable.

Bishop poses a great challenge, and I have to admit I haven't really been able to see my work online and with photo and video in the same way since. And it also brought me to the question: how does one investigate the spaces created by digital camera technologies? One can so easily be dragged in different directions, pulled apart by the sheer urgency of it all: Surveillance capitalism/the exploitation of our neuro-chemical systems/teenagers and screen addiction/data storage infrastructures/the legislation of social media/the ethics of rare earth mining/TikTok's algorithm/is there any hope in the metaverse?

Prompt for improvisation: *Show the gesture of filming oneself by holding a phone with an arm extended (horizontally) and speaking towards it in the style of a vlogger who is addressing an audience through his camera. While addressing the phone camera, explain to the audience how, in order to not get lost in investigating Bishop's notion of public space, the area of research was simplified to the gesture of filming oneself and what it does to the body. Have the audience notice how strange the body looks while addressing an invisible audience. Ask the audience: »Am I moving the technology, or is the technology moving me?«*

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

Note: *In this part of the lecture, the audience is asked to participate in a series of physical exercises in relation to their computer cameras and screens. The reasoning for these exercises is based on allowing one's nervous system to integrate more awareness in regard to what the body is actually doing while addressing a screen. These practices are inspired by The Feldenkrais Method, a series of somatic practices that allow for more freedom of movement by using one's nervous system to integrate more information. The explanation ends with an anecdotal quote by Moshe Feldenkrais: »If you don't know what you're doing, how are you going to do it well?«*

Prompt for guiding audience participation: *Ask the audience members to turn on their cameras and to be able to see themselves on their screens. Ask them to make sure there is enough space behind them and to stand back from their computers. Ask the audience to notice the corners of their screens and to place their fingertips on the two top*

corners of their screen. Ask them to notice where their fingertips are on their screens and where their fingertips are within the space around them. Ask the audience to approach their computers and, while doing so, to keep their fingertips in the corner of their screens. Ask them to repeat the process and to notice how the camera's field of view correlates to a space that resembles an invisible tapered rectangle. Ask the audience to try and integrate this reality as best they can.

Next, ask the audience to take their devices (computers, tablets, or whatever) and begin moving them through space in order to break the ›upright-facing posture‹ that the device's camera is designed to show. Acknowledge that the whole process may feel silly, but that it is by remaining in this awkwardness that the central nervous system will begin to understand the technology in unexpected ways.

Once the audience participation portion is finished, thank the audience, and propose to them to take a moment to try to consider the technology they have in front of them differently, and invite them to hold and contextualize the experience as best as they can.

PRE-RECORDED SCREEN-PERFORMANCE

Note: This video was recorded to create the illusion of the performer (me) being in the same location with the same clothes. In the eyes of the audience, this video performance is simply a continuation of the lecture within the digital space mediated by streaming and recording technology. Both the full lecture-performance and the performance itself are available to watch:

Lecture and performance: <https://vimeo.com/659940930>

Just the performance: <https://vimeo.com/653146667/e7cfe347>

This piece of ›screen dance‹ or ›screen performance‹ was shot and edited yesterday, and due to me setting auto-tune out of key, it proudly includes one of the worst vocal performances I have ever done.

This being said, please sit back, relax, keep it running in the background, or pay close attention, but whatever you choose to do, I would like you to try to take notice of your current relationship to the cameras around you at that moment and where your body is in relation to them. What is your history is with them? What moments did you experience with them? What those moments may have looked like from the outside? What did you learn from them?

Prompt: broadcast screen-performance – <https://vimeo.com/653146667/e7cfe347>

Conclusion: WHO ARE WE ADDRESSING WHEN WE SPEAK TO A CAMERA LENS?

One year after the presentation of this lecture, I find myself reflecting on something that has never explicitly been the focus point for this artistic research: the camera lens itself. Though omnipresent in one's ontological experience of ›speaking towards a camera‹, I realize that I didn't want to bring the interest of my research too close to the camera lens, which as an object could be seen as a way to speculate and reflect on the underlying global supply chains, communication technologies, and societal impacts. My interest, on the other hand, was in focusing on the relationship between the embodied act of communication (talking to) and the mysterious hyperobject of ›the audience‹ (via cameras). In essence, my wish was to try and make the lens just a sort of steppingstone towards our collective, heartfelt need to reach out and connect to each other, through whatever technological means necessary. My interest was in ›what it takes‹ to embody the space between someone who is speaking to a camera and the mystery of where that performance is going. To put it simply, when you talk towards a camera you are speaking towards an object with some kind of sense of an audience. That sense, when considered and examined more closely, is almost unfathomable in nature. By speaking towards a camera lens, one is engaging in creating a trace or mark that is supported by a vast technological framework, and where that trace will end up is mostly unknowable to regular people.

Though the term ›viewers‹ is commonly used to quantify or describe the invisible group of people receiving the communication mediated by camera technology, I found myself much more interested in a different description than one that is defined by social media companies whose focus is on growth through the efficient delivery of dopamine to ›users. Rather, my interest with *Who We Talk To When We Talk To Cameras* was in revealing and validating the clumsy, awkward experiences that the body goes through as part of communicating with camera technology. I wished for the camera lens to have the potential of not only fitting within the context of analyzing architectures of mass media, but also to exist within the personal, intimate, and often invisible relations that people experience: A clumsy late night video message to a crush from a lonely bed. Teenagers observing themselves through the lens of web cameras with judgment and empathy. A young man sitting on the edge of a cliff while rapping towards a drone. An old memory of awkwardly filming oneself with a Super 8 camera and witnessing the grainy footage weeks later. All of these sit-

uations require one thing in common: the relationship between an expressive body and the comprehensive abyss that lies within the camera lens.

As a final note to this text, I wish to invite you to see the performance of WWTWWTTC that was presented at the Titanik Gallery in Turku, Finland, during the darkest days of December 2019: <https://vimeo.com/394752659/247e5531ad>

Literature

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