

Ghosts as an audience

A Guest + A Host = A Ghost¹

Ghosts as an audience is a proposition, a thought game, an exercise to explore the possibility of non-material entities as direct participants in my work. It is not intended to be an exercise in chasing down, or trying to prove the existence of ghosts. It is a way to put audience, artwork and the space in which they are entertained into question.

I have long been interested in invisible, intangible, mediated aspects of life. From the suggestion of omnipotent beings watching over me, to playground auditory hallucinations as a child, my experience of the matter of fact, material world has always seemed fluid. The uncanny idea that ghosts and other non-material entities could be involved with my work does not seem out of reach. A stretch, maybe. But, as I have said, this is a proposition.

I am not a ghost story enthusiast. I appreciate what they are and how they interface humans with experience in the world. I have witnessed unexplainable events and do not have a problem imagining how residual life energy could be hovering on the surface of the planet suspended amongst dimensional planes. When I learn of ghost encounters my skeptical perceptions take on the menacing attributes afforded to haunting spirits. I choose to let the person telling the story believe what they want and try not impose my rational imaginations and alternatives to their scene. My interest with ghosts is not to try and trap them in some kind of quantifiable cage, or to put those with whom they interact on suspicious terms. I want to think about what they suggest about the world, our perceptions and the assumptions we make about how it all works.

One curiosity that initially comes to mind is why would ghosts want to be participants in my work in the first place? What business would they have with the question of audience and the intersubjectivity of participants in an art context? Unless they were active art practitioners in their previous life, how could I just assume that they would be waiting around for an opportunity to get

involved, to expand their cultural horizons? A clever thought experiment with ghosts reeks of presumption. It may be an impossible project, similar to the studio class assignments sculptor Mowry Baden² gives to students to push beyond the fear of failure. But why does this seem like an interesting question to ask, or a generative curiosity to pursue? The problem is that my project is not about putting the presence of non-material entities into question. I don't have a beef with the ghosts themselves. What I find is that it is more interesting for me to problematize my own existence, to challenge my own participation with art.

Asking ghosts whether they would like to be involved is a good place to start. However, the idea of engaging in mediumistic rituals, performing séances and opening portals between worlds doesn't seem appropriate for this task. I do not dispute that certain individuals are in conversation with the energies of past and present spirits. I think that using those channels in this context would simply put them under the microscope and draw attention to research methodologies, bringing up the language of double-blind experiments and measured results. This could be argued as ignoring the efficacy of the séance as a means of communication with other entities, developed over centuries of practice. My intent is not to put these practices into question. I want to put my own existence and cultural conditioning into question.

A few years ago I wrote a technological autobiography for a media and politics class that asked for a meditation on technology as a part of my life. I described a past relationship with musical instruments and how the groups with whom I performed mediated this association. This was before the language of digital technologies and virtual environments. The immersive feeling of playing in brass bands and the sound as an extension of my body was not that different. The coupling of the metal tubing and my breath would define spaces and communicate from a distance. This became the foundation for how I situate the world around me and my involvement in it. The devices may have changed, but my sense of being somewhere still persists.

In 2005 I embarked on a research initiative with Jeremy Turner and Todd A. Davis to examine an early telecommunications art at the Open Space artist-run centre³ in Victoria, British Columbia in 1978. Bill Bartlett, an artist from California, had been working with slow-scan video⁴, a technology introduced to him by the Experiments in Art and Technology⁵ group of San

Francisco. He developed a curatorial program in Victoria to expose the local audience to the latest telecommunications systems, utilizing computers and satellites. A specific project entitled SAT-TEL-COMP⁶ connected nodes around the world in the proto-internet transmission of images, video and sound over telephone and satellite networks. Writing about the project Bartlett mentioned an interest in humanizing these technologies, engaging with them on his own terms before corporate interests fully dictated their use⁷. He felt that it was important for general gallery visitors to be able to experience the sensations of tele-matic art in ways that were not necessarily intended by their designers.

Inspired by this research and a mutual interest to engage with current technologies ourselves, Jeremy Turner and I decided to work together on another project. Turner had been visiting DigitalSpace Traveler⁸, an early online virtual environment, interviewing the residents and creating a documentary entitled AVATARA⁹. He and I had discussed the idea of developing a project that would be an extension of the research we had done on Bartlett's SAT-TEL-COMP. This was twenty six years later and the internet was a different entity itself. Turner had been in personal correspondence with Patrick Lichty¹⁰ of the online magazine Intelligent Agent¹¹. Lichty had shown an interest in our slow-scan video research that we had presented at the REFRESH: History of New Media and Technology¹² conference at the Banff Centre¹³ in 2006. Shortly after that time I attended a thematic residency at the Banff Centre where I met Scott Kildall¹⁴, a media artist from San Francisco. Kildall presented a talk about his work in Second Life¹⁵, another online virtual world and was encouraging other artists to explore the environment as a site for making art. Turner had already created an identity in Second Life and had the idea to create an avatar performance group inspired by the early performance projects of the Western Front¹⁶, another early artist-run centre in Vancouver, BC. He suggested that we call the new avatar group Second Front¹⁷. We invited other media and performance based artists that we knew, and had previously worked with, and starting engaging with the Second Life platform.

Second Front is still performing after three years and a few group member changes. We will be launching our second DVD of performance videos this fall, 2009. In this time, Second Life has grown and the idea of virtual environments and avatars has entered the public imagination at a greater degree. James Cameron of *Titanic* fame is about to release a major motion picture entitled

*Avatar*¹⁸. The online and console gaming industries have overtaken the motion picture business in terms of gross annual sales. All of this historical, economic and cultural information is interesting to me in terms of the development of communications technology and use of graphical interfaces in contemporary society. However, it is important for me to discuss these facts and details about the broader context in which I find myself. It is this kind of surface of the world, the way that information is presented, accessed and utilized that adds an interesting backdrop to the idea of who and what can be considered an audience in this day and age.

I have been building a relationship with Tran Spire my avatar in Second Life. Tran is the graphic manifestation of my interactions with a keyboard computer interface. If I press certain keys Tran will perform specific actions. If I log out of the application, Tran stays dormant in the Inventory folder. I have no problem with Tran being an information agent, an expression of my relationship with a coded space but, I don't think that that is all that is going on.

I don't mean to embark on a deep analysis of digital identity nor am I trying to politely approach a desire to escape to other social relations to satiate a hidden longing for personal interaction. I understand how that can be an appeal for some and that eighteen hours of online activity per day can have altering effects on ones sense of being. What I want to talk about are the possibilities that programmed agents can have on the way that I engage, sustain and make meaning in the world. I work with what I call art logic, similar to Bill Bartlett's sentiment to humanize technology. I experiment with my avatar to see what it can and can't do and how it can move around with my prompting and without. I am curious how my engagement with Tran Spire, on a variety of terms, will alter the assumptions that I have about virtual and physical space and challenge the way that I communicate and potentially exist within these spaces.

I have observed that since my engagement with a virtual performance character I have experienced moments of rupture of possibility on certain platforms. I attended a gallery opening once at a physical, familiar space shortly after having performed with Second Front for a number of hours. I remember standing idle in the room with an anxious sensation of wanting to be able to manipulate the environment around me with the touch of a finger and render a helicopter to intersect the small human space. These shadows of previous actions in Second Life persisted.

They were still options, haunting me on a certain level, still game, just not playable at that moment, in that domain.

I recently attended one of the popular ghostly walks by the storyteller John Adams in¹⁹ Victoria, BC. I was curious how Adams would approach the topic and situate the concept of ghosts. He described ghosts as the energy residue that is left behind after someone dies. He explained that in places such as Victoria that sits on the southern point of Vancouver Island, atop generations of indigenous presence, surrounded by salt water, ghosts and spirits tend to reside. He further described a few of the geographical details of the city and how spirits had come to be situated in buildings, burial grounds and sites of tragedy and violence. What made an impression on me was his explanation of ghosts as residual energy and the relationship to the rock of the island and the effect of being surrounded by the ocean.

The retention of energy in the land is discussed, in a sense, by Jennifer Fisher in her introduction to *Technologies of Intuition*²⁰. During World War 1 interest in the Spiritualism movement in America increased as bereaved families were seeking out communication with their relations killed on the battlefields. Stanley McMullin²¹ talks about a closed-knit group in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, who would perform séances on a regular basis creating audio tape recordings of their frequent meetings with loved ones and family members. He expressed that the content of the tapes was not very dynamic apart from his realization that what he was witnessing was the day-to-day correspondence of this group gossiping and keeping in touch with their deceased relations. The desire to simply be in touch with the spirits was their intent, not to sensationalize the communications, just to be in contact. This aspect of holding audience with ghosts intrigues me as it gives examples of human ghost interaction, but not from the side of the ghost coming to haunt the living, but from the living seeking out solstice from the dead.

In this sense ghosts become a vehicle for the longing and emptiness that living entities experience. They become a convenient construct for things that don't make sense, a collective place to put things that cannot fit into other categories. In this way ghosts are defined by the contexts and situations in which they participate²². This is where ghosts and avatars start to share common attributes. Avatars are also defined by their context, getting trapped in the interpretation

of their actions. Multi User Virtual Environments (MUVE's) such as Second Life are often criticised for being domains of escapism, places of unreal interactions that cannot be fulfilled in the real world. This is where ghosts and avatars are treated similar, as vehicles for the manifestation of human desires, ambitions and fears, in other environments and worlds.

Ghosts have been depicted for centuries as disgruntled spirits returning to the living to settle their debts, or to achieve unfinished business with members of the living. The reason for the form that they take is customisable to the age in which they are experienced. Kathryn Edwards²³ talks about how ghosts have historically changed form in the public imagination. They have been known to exist just as any other living being, such as a human sitting across the table from you, talking in conversation but with one unique feature, a missing toe. Edwards also mentions that the burial shrouds used in specific regions of Europe would often prop the way the ghostly spirits would be dressed; white, draped figures looming in the murky light²⁴. The influence of the time and how the public imagined what was considered real and what was uncanny, changes. Ghosts are as much a product of their time and culture as living humans are of theirs.

This kind of customization is very prevalent with the contemporary avatar. Randall Anderson, a Canadian artist and writer has described the creation of avatars in Second Life as a way to take on another identity. “Artists have been challenging notions about who we are since Duchamp morphed into Rose Selavy in 1921.”²⁵ The idea that the avatar could be inhabited, constructed and engaged in ways that extend how we can imagine ourselves in the world is of interest to me. It is this relationship to our selves, to what we consider our make-up, physically, conceptually, spiritually that brings the forms of ghosts and avatars into the same space.

I don't want to suggest now that everything can be a ghost or that every finger print you leave on a subway railing is now your avatar. I think that what these versions of the human form do represent are a fluidity with the architecture we take for granted as the terrain of our corporeal forms. The way that we imagine ourselves in the world is always already influenced by where we live and who we are family to. It is this surface that is changing. The way that we can think of ourselves and the possibilities as to what shape, form and constitution we take on seems to have

more options. It is the idea of virtual that I find to be quite generative. How does the virtual relate to the idea of audience? Could ghosts inhabit virtual entities?

In *Becoming Virtual – Reality in the Digital Age*, Pierre Levy talks about the speed and rapid change of society brought on by technology and how the process of virtualization brings on a kind of morphing or mutation of the human form. Different generations are alternating back and forth, not in a good, bad or neutral way, but a “becoming other.”²⁶ To address this fluctuation in the real he argues that the virtual should not be compared to reality, but to the actual. “The virtual is a kind of problematic complex, the knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity, and which invokes a process of resolution: actualization.” (pg 26)²⁷ He goes on to discuss how the virtual and actual are two different ways of being. Does this mean that an audience can be both virtual and present? Are we accustomed to only think of an audience as actual, as what we commonly think of as real? Why can’t we then think of an audience as being virtual and really there? Not an imagined audience that has no direct effect or consequence, but a real audience that can influence and change the work itself.

Levy argues that to virtualize an entity you need to shape the terms and conditions of its engagement, “mutating the entity in the direction of this question and redefining the initial actuality as the response to a specific question.”²⁸ So, if “ghosts as audience” is our specific question, do we need to think of them in terms of being real by being virtual as compared to actual? If we give them the benefit of a different centre of gravity (of the real) as a “process of organization of a continuously renewed problem, rather than a stable solution,”²⁹ will this afford them the agency that they need to be a part of the equation? Will this mean that ghosts can be audience as they interpret presence and participation, not as a reaction to my assumptions, but in response to their own?

Since I have already ruled out the assistance of professional mediums as a means of getting some answers to these questions from ghosts themselves, I am going to have to approach from another angle. My initial proposition was ghosts as an audience. I have wandered around and described some of the ways that non-material entities are manifest by the living and their affinity with avatars as representative of human dynamics. I have tried to mutate my own sense of what is

actually virtually real. And, I have come to the idea that if ghosts inhabit an avatar I may have a chance of recognizing that they are, in fact participating in my work. Serendipitously, a colleague introduced me to a new science fiction television series entitled *Caprica*³⁰ that explores the idea of avatars persisting after death. The pilot program introduces a scenario where the protagonists' avatar has knowledge of her "creators" death. She could feel that something had changed. This consciousness is attributed to the quality and sheer quantity of information that was resourced from her physical counterpart's life.

This is where art and life get to mingle as the ghost inhabits the avatar. I want to create my own project based on a similar premise. In *Caprica* the avatar was formed from a database search of all of the information that existed about the character in her life world. Science fiction has the advantage of creating fictional content and ways of collecting personal information about an individual. However, it is the idea that a digitally infused environment, such as my own, would be able to suspend a human likeness post-humously that interests me. I see this as being similar to grave stones that sit on burial sites; some inscribe familial links, or famous last words, others now have photo-realistic images of the deceased. I want to create a memorial avatar, something that will perform as a presentation of my life after I have moved on to another space. The thought is a bit morbid. Any venture that requires your own demise is going to create some challenges, one being a lack of motivation as a self preservation device itself. But fear of death should not be what stops working with the idea of something persisting beyond the parameters of what seems real, actual or virtual. And as I have discussed, ghosts are attributed with many ways of coming into existence and performing a variety of tasks; residual energy, vehicles of grievance, instruments of retribution, or sites of being.

Mowry Baden told me a story about seeing the ghosts of previous neighbors on the property of his studio³¹. The interesting part was that the people in question had not died yet. This makes me think, the option of ghosts being manifestation of living entities that have not died, as we know it, can add another dimension to my project. If I combine the idea of myself as a ghost of the living version of me with the formula of the *Caprica* avatar, I can start to build the memory of myself, as an ghost inhabiting an avatar, before I have gone anywhere. *But I'm not dead yet*, could be the title. I will have to deal with the cultural taboos of being dead before death. At the same time,

this is an opportunity to compound the spatial and temporal coordination's of my sense of the world. It is a way to conflate my suspension of interior and exterior worlds with virtual and actual domains to become audience to a present and future past of myself, simultaneously.

The only caveat being, I will need to assume my own participation.

¹ Marcel DUCHAMP: A Guest + A Host = A Ghost. 1953.

<http://pagesperso-orange.fr/archives.carre/Duchamp%20Marcel.html>

² Studio visit with the artist, sculptor Mowry Baden. As part of the MFA program University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, October 2009.

³ <http://www.openspace.ca/>

⁴ <http://alien.mur.at/rax/BIO/telecom.html>

⁵ <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=306>

⁶ <http://www.openspace.ca/web/outerspace/index.html>

⁷ I conducted research of the paper archives housed at Open Space which contained personal correspondence as well as documentation of a variety of Bill Bartlett's projects.

⁸ <http://www.travelercommunity.com/>

⁹ <http://www.flickharrison.com/avataara/>

¹⁰ <http://www.voyd.com/>

¹¹ <http://www.intelligentagent.com/>

¹² <http://www.mediaarthistory.org/refresh/refresh/refresh.html>

¹³ <http://www.banffcentre.ca/bnmi/events/refresh/>

¹⁴ <http://www.kildall.com/>

¹⁵ <http://secondlife.com/>

¹⁶ <http://www.front.bc.ca/>

¹⁷ <http://www.secondfront.org/>

¹⁸ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/>

¹⁹ <http://www.discoverthepast.com/gwalks.htm>

²⁰ Fisher, Jennifer, Editor. Technologies of Intuition. Toronto: YYZ Books, 2007. Introduction.

²¹ McMullin, Stanley. Anatomy of a seance: a history of spirit communication in central Canada. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004. Page xiii.

²² Edwards, Kathryn, Editor. Werewolves, Witches, and Wandering Spirits: Traditional Belief and Folklore in Early Modern Europe. Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2002. Page 27.

²³ Edwards, Kathryn, Editor. Werewolves, Witches, and Wandering Spirits: Traditional Belief and Folklore in Early Modern Europe. Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2002. Introduction.

²⁴ Edwards, Kathryn, Editor. Werewolves, Witches, and Wandering Spirits: Traditional Belief and Folklore in Early Modern Europe. Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2002. Introduction.

²⁵ Anderson, Randall. Born Again – A Prosthetic You. Border Crossings, Issue 101, March, 2007. Pages 66-71.

²⁶ Levy, Pierre. Becoming Virtual – Reality in the Digital Age. New York: Plenum Trade, 1998. Page 25.

²⁷ Levy, Pierre. Becoming Virtual – Reality in the Digital Age. New York: Plenum Trade, 1998. Page 26.

²⁸ Levy, Pierre. Becoming Virtual – Reality in the Digital Age. New York: Plenum Trade, 1998. Page 26.

²⁹ Levy, Pierre. Becoming Virtual – Reality in the Digital Age. New York: Plenum Trade, 1998. Page 27.

³⁰ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0799862/>

³¹ Studio visit with the artist, sculptor Mowry Baden. As part of the MFA program University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, October 2009.