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Telematic practice and research discourses: Three practice-based research project case

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14	Introduction	14
15		15
16	This chapter focuses on the production, documentation and preservation of the	16
17	author's telematic, practice-based research in the interactive media arts. It reflects	17
18	a timely practice review with significant implications for the future of exhibiting	18
19	and archiving the broad range of creative arts in this field. These fundamental	19
20	research questions also have relevance across a number of practice-based research	20
21	fields including performance arts and the ephemeral nature of open-system	21
22	interactive artworks. The objective of this chapter is to propose research methods	22
23	that will approach the question of how to document and archive appropriately this	23
24	transient creative practice that is so often reliant on its immediate cultural and	24
25	historic context.	25
26	Since the early 1990s my artistic practice has identified and questioned the	26
27	notions of embodiment and disembodiment in relation to the interacting performer	27
28	in telematic and telepresent art installations. At what point is the performer	28
29	embodying the virtual performer in front of them? Have they therefore become	29
30	disembodied by doing so? A number of interactive telematic artworks will be	30
31	looked at in detail in this chapter. These case studies range from Kit Galloway	31
32	and Sherrie Rabinowitz's seminal work <i>Hole-in-Space</i> to my own telepresent	32
33	experiments with <i>Telematic Dreaming</i> and include the current emerging creative/	33
34	critical discourse in Second Life, the networked virtual/social environment, that	34
35	polarizes fundamental existential questions concerning identity, the self, the ego	35
36	and the (dis)embodied avatar.	36
37	The preservation and documentation of this work is extremely problematic	37
38	when we consider the innate issues of (dis)embodiment in relation to presence and	38
39	intimacy, as experienced and performed in telematic and virtual environments.	39
40	How can it become possible to reencounter a performance of dispersed and	40
41	expanded bodies, multiple and interconnected identities, spectral representations	41
42	and auras: in short, hybrid bodies (selves) made of flesh and digital technologies,	42
43	and the intimate connections between them.	43
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1	Telematic practice	1
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3	My work in the field of telematic arts explores the emergence of a user-determined	3
4	narrative by bringing remote participants together in a shared telepresent	4
5	environment. Through the use of live chroma-keying and videoconferencing	5
6	technology, two public rooms, or installations, and their audiences are joined in	6
7	a virtual duplicate that turns into a mutual, visual space of activity. Linked via an	7
8	internet videoconference connection, this form of immersive interactive exchange	8
9	can be established between two locations almost anywhere in the world.	9
10	The audiences form an integral part of these telematic experiments, which	10
11	simply would not function without their presence and participation. Initially,	11
12	the viewers seem to enter a passive space, but they are instantly thrown into the	12
13	performer role by discovering their own body-double in communication with	13
14	another physically remote user on video monitors in front of them. They usually	14
15	adapt to the situation quickly and start controlling and choreographing their human	15
16	avatar. The installation, which is set up in the form of an open accessible platform,	16
17	also offers a second choice of engagement: the passive mode of just observing the	17
18	public action, which often appears to be a well-rehearsed piece of drama confidently	18
19	played out by actors. Compelling to watch, it can be a complex issue to discover	19
20	that the performers are also part of the audience and are merely engaging in a role.	20
21	The entire installation space then represents two dynamic dramatic functions: the	21
22	players, controllers or puppeteers of their own avatar, absorbed by the performing	22
23	role; and the off-camera members of the audience, who are themselves awaiting	23
24	the next available slot on the telematic stage, soon to share this split dynamic.	24
25	However, the episodes that unfold are not only determined by the participants, but	25
26	by the given dramatic context. As an artist I am both designer of the environment	26
27	and therefore 'director' of the narrative, which I determine through the social and	27
28	political milieu that I choose to play out in these telepresent encounters.	28
29		29
30		30
31	HEADROOM: A space between presence and absence (2006)	31
32		32
33	This case study represents the first theoretical account of <i>HEADROOM</i> ¹ a site-	33
34	specific interactive art installation produced in Taipei by myself, as the successful	34
35	recipient of the 2006 Taiwan Visiting Arts Fellowship. This residency programme	35
36	was a joint initiative between Visiting Arts, the Council for Cultural Affairs	36
37	Taiwan, British Council Taipei and Arts Council England. The development	37
38	of this interactive art installation was extensively documented as part of the	38
39	AHRC Performing-Presence project led by Professor Nick Kaye from Exeter	39
40		40
41		41
42		42
43	1 Artist's website and documentation < http://www.paulsermon.org/headroom/ > (All	43
44	urls current at the time of writing)	44

1 University in partnership with Stanford University.² *HEADROOM* was exhibited at 1
 2 Xinyi Assembly Hall Taipei in April 2006. 2
 3 *HEADROOM* is a juxtaposition of the artist's ethnographic research experiences 3
 4 in Taipei, between the ways people 'live' and the ways that they 'escape' the 4
 5 city, as an analogy between the social networking telepresent aspirations of the 5
 6 'headroom' (internet) space and the solitude of the 'bedroom' (private) space. 6
 7 Referencing Roy Ascott's essay, 'Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?' 7
 8 (1990),³ and reminiscent of Nam June Paik's early TV-Buddha installations,⁴ 8
 9 *HEADROOM* is a reflection of the self within the telepresent space, as both the viewer 9
 10 and the performer. The television 'screen' is transformed into a stage or portal 10
 11 between the causes and effects that simultaneously take place in the minds of the 11
 12 solitary viewers. The installation overtly intertwines private and public space, and 12
 13 the sense of the 'inside' and 'outside' of the installation's 'place'.⁵ It is partly in 13
 14 this breaking down of oppositions that the participants' sense of the 'presence' 14
 15 of their co-performers is amplified. In this aspect, *HEADROOM* radically extends a 15
 16 disruption of oppositions in which video art/installation and site-specific work has 16
 17 frequently operated. The co-performers discover themselves acting out a series of 17
 18 intertwinings of public/private, inside/outside. The installation itself and its title 18
 19 emphasize the intimate nature of this overlaying of spaces – the aspect of fantasy 19
 20 or dream – while the public nature of the installation sanctions or appears to give 20
 21 permission or consent to this closeness. In this context, co-performers discover 21
 22 themselves 'coming closer' in a paradoxical distribution of presence – an intimacy 22
 23 produced by a telepresent distance. Here, visitors discover themselves occupying 23
 24 and acting out their co-performer's private space, while seeing their own private 24
 25 space acted out by their telepresent partner. The spatial rules of public interaction 25
 26 are breached, producing an intimacy, a particular and shocking closeness, and a 26
 27 dialectic between the explicit sense of being here (in the bedroom, for example) 27
 28 and being there (acting out the space of the other), while seeing and responding to 28
 29 their co-performer's mirrored reaction. [Plate 9.1] 29
 30 Located in the east of Taipei city in the shadow of the 101 Tower and Taipei's 30
 31 World Trade Centre is a Taiwanese war veterans' housing complex built around 31
 32 1949. This site has been renovated and converted into a museum and exhibition 32
 33 space. It sits on some of the most commercially sought-after space in the city, 33
 34 but because of its historical importance to the liberation of Taiwan it remains a 34
 35 listed building. The back-to-back terraced streets have been knocked through 35
 36 into entire buildings, creating three large exhibition halls that retain the original 36
 37 37
 38 2 AHRC Performing-Presence project, <[http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/](http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/500) 38
 39 [Collaboratory/500](http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/500)>. 39
 40 3 R. Ascott, *Telematic Embrace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 40
 41 232–46. 41
 42 4 N. J. Paik's TV-Buddha, <<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/tv-buddha/>>. 42
 43 5 N. Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, Documentation* (London: 43
 44 Routledge, 2000). 44

1 appearance of the houses on the outside. The spaces that interested me most were 1
 2 the small facade rooms created by the larger space conversion, which have been 2
 3 separated from the gallery space by interior glass walls and are only accessible 3
 4 from existing external front doors. The two facade rooms I used for the installation 4
 5 were identical in size and were used to house a connected telepresent installation 5
 6 where the audience participants in the separate facade rooms were unable see 6
 7 each other. However, this allowed the audience inside the gallery to observe both 7
 8 participants in the space through the glass walls. The rooms were only about 2 8
 9 m by 3.5 m wide, and 2.5 m high. The original houses were longer, but no wider 9
 10 and the original inhabitants often halved the height of the rooms to create separate 10
 11 sleeping and living areas. This two-level use of the space interested me, and also 11
 12 reminded me of the outside of the space, with the 101 Tower in stark contrast to 12
 13 the little houses huddled around its base. This paradox can be seen in much of 13
 14 Taipei's culture, from very basic noodle bars and soup kitchens between Karaoke 14
 15 TV clubs, 7/11 convenience stores and high-rise office blocks to countless temples 15
 16 devoted to countless incarnations of the Buddha. 16

17 The project functioned by combining the two identical room installations 17
 18 within the same video image via simple videoconference techniques. The system 18
 19 worked as follows: The two rooms both had false ceilings lowered to a level of 19
 20 approximately 1.5 m, which left a cavity space above each room of approximately 20
 21 1 m high and which forced the gallery visitors to bend down when entering the 21
 22 spaces. However, there was one location in each room where the viewer was able to 22
 23 stand up straight and put his or her head and hands through a hole in the false ceiling 23
 24 and into the cavity space above. Although each room shared identical dimensions, 24
 25 each had a strikingly different appearance. One of the rooms contained drab, used 25
 26 furniture in the lower part and had a very lived-in appearance; the cavity space 26
 27 above it was brightly decorated, appearing to be a personal shrine or Karaoke bar, 27
 28 containing a large video screen at one end. The other room by contrast, was empty 28
 29 in the lower section and very bright in the cavity above, including illuminated blue 29
 30 walls and another large video screen. A video camera in each space recorded a live 30
 31 image of the head and hands of each participant and fed this recording directly 31
 32 to a video chroma-key mixer. The background in the profile head-shot recorded 32
 33 against the bright blue walls was extracted by the video mixer and replaced with 33
 34 the other live profile head shot – placing the two heads opposite each other within 34
 35 the same live video image. [Figures 9.1., 9.2 and 9.3] 35

36 The red room represented a very theatrical, illusionary space. The blue room, 36
 37 by contrast, appeared to be a more functional backstage space. However, from the 37
 38 outside point of view there was not so much a front and backstage division as a 38
 39 juxtaposition of two entirely separate spaces, which, due to their sheer proximity, 39
 40 were meant to have something in common and yet, somehow, never became a 40
 41 telepresent synthesis. For Gabriella Giannachi there is a postmodern dialectic 41
 42 here,⁶ expressed visually in the impossibility of the two spaces to become one: 42

43 _____ 43
 44 6 G. Giannachi, <<http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/500>>. 44

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21 **Figure 9.1** *HEADROOM*, Paul Sermon, 2006. Video still

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44 **Figure 9.2** *HEADROOM*, Paul Sermon, 2006. Video still



Figure 9.3 *HEADROOM*, Paul Sermon, 2006. Video still

the external viewer, standing in front of the two spaces, actually sees 'nothing' but the real, whereas to see the telepresence space you actually have to be willing to be within it.

Liberate your Avatar (2007)

Since May 2007 my practice and research has undergone what might appear to be a paradigm shift, focusing on the creative possibilities of the online multi-user virtual environment of Second Life. Whilst this represents a major departure from my established telematic projects, there are significant parallels between the earlier telematic video experiments and the presence and absence experiments currently being developed in Second Life. Together, these aspects of telepresence and the merger of 'first life' and Second Life aim to question fundamental assumptions of the Second Life phenomenon.

The aim of this project is to investigate critically how online participants in three-dimensional worlds, Second Life in particular, interact socially within innovative creative environments and appropriate these cultural experiences as part of their everyday lives, and question what is 'real' in this relationship. The project brings together ethnographic and creative practice-based methods that identify and develop original and innovative interactive applications, interface design and imperative cultural and sociological knowledge that will help shape and

1 define the emerging online society and ‘metaverse’⁷ of Second Life, significantly 1
 2 contributing to the quality of both ‘first life’ and Second Life. 2

3 In Second Life you create an avatar that lives out an online existence. There are 3
 4 no set objectives; you can buy property, clothing, accessories, furnish your home, 4
 5 modify your identity, and interact with other users. This online community has 5
 6 grown to eleven million residents since launching in 2000, generating a thriving 6
 7 economy. However, whilst the virtual shopping malls, nightclubs, bars and 7
 8 beaches often reach their user capacity, there is a noticeable lack of creative and 8
 9 sociological modes of attraction and consequently the growing media attention 9
 10 around Second Life warns that this expanding community has become ambivalent 10
 11 and numbed by its virtual consumption and that there is an increasing need to 11
 12 identify new forms of interaction, creativity, cultural production and sociability. 12

13 However, when the Front National, the far-right French political party of Jean- 13
 14 Marie Le Pen, opened its Second Life headquarters in January 2007, the Second 14
 15 Life residents reacted in a way that would suggest they are far from complacent 15
 16 avatars wandering around a virtual landscape and that they possess a far greater 16
 17 degree of social conscience than the consumer aesthetics of Second Life suggest. 17
 18 Through prolonged mass virtual protest the centre was razed to the ground in the 18
 19 space of a week and has not returned since. The reaction to the Le Pen Second 19
 20 Life office begs the question: is Second Life a platform for potential social and 20
 21 cultural change? Is there a hidden desire and ambition to interact and engage 21
 22 with this online community at an intellectual and creative level that transcends 22
 23 the collective ‘I shop therefore I am’ apparentness of its community?⁸ Moreover, 23
 24 does Second Life influence ‘first lives’? If so, could our ‘first life’ existence start 24
 25 to reflect our Second Life conscience as this community continues to grow and 25
 26 develop into the future? As the landmass and population of Second Life expands 26
 27 at an ever-increasing rate, it is clear that essential research into the intersection and 27
 28 interplay between ‘first life’ and Second Life, and both new and old patterns of 28
 29 consumption, cultural production and sociability is urgently needed. 29

30 This second case study focuses on some of my most recent Second Life 30
 31 experiments entitled *Liberate your Avatar*, an interactive, public video art 31
 32 performance incorporating Second Life users in a real-life environment, as shown 32
 33 in Figure 9.2.⁹ Located in All Saints Gardens, Oxford Road, Manchester, for the 33
 34 Urban Screens Festival, 12 October 2007 from 5.00 pm to 6.00 pm, this installation 34
 35 merged the realities of ‘All Saints Gardens’ on Oxford Road with its online three- 35
 36 dimensional counterpart in Second Life, and for the first time allowed ‘first life’ 36
 37 visitors and Second Life avatars to coexist and share the same park bench in a live 37

38
 39
 40 7 The term ‘metaverse’ comes from Neal Stephenson’s 1992 classic science fiction 40
 41 novel *Snow Crash*, and is now widely used to describe the vision behind current work on 41
 42 fully immersive 3D virtual spaces.

42 8 The phrase ‘I shop therefore I am’ was used by artist Barbara Kruger in 1998 as a 42
 43 pun on consumerism and René Descartes’ statement ‘I think therefore I am.’ 43

44 9 Artist’s website and documentation, <<http://www.paulsermon.org/liberate/>>. 44

1 interactive public video installation. By entering into this feedback loop through 1
 2 a portal between these two parallel worlds this event exposed the identity paradox 2
 3 in Second Life. [Plate 9.2] 3

4 This unique project, commissioned by Lets Go Global in Manchester, 4
 5 brought together earlier practice-based telepresence research projects and current 5
 6 experiments and experiences in the online three-dimensional world of Second 6
 7 Life. The installation investigated the notion of demonstration and how it has 7
 8 been transposed from the real into the virtual environment. *Liberate your Avatar* 8
 9 exposed the history of All Saints Gardens; relocating Mancunian Suffragette 9
 10 Emmeline Pankhurst as an avatar within Second Life, where she remained locked 10
 11 to the railings of the park, just as she did a hundred years ago, reminding us of 11
 12 the continual need to evaluate our role in this new online digital society. *Liberate* 12
 13 *Your Avatar* examined this new crisis whilst drawing upon the history of the site, 13
 14 creating a rich, provoking and entirely innovative interactive experience. 14

15 The installation consisted of three specific spaces, two of which were located 15
 16 in the virtual world of Second Life while the third was physically located in All 16
 17 Saints Gardens on Oxford Road, in Manchester. The two virtual environments 17
 18 included a blue box studio and a three-dimensional replica of All Saints Gardens. 18
 19 They were located adjacent to each other, allowing the Second Life avatars to move 19
 20 freely between the two spaces. When an avatar entered the blue box space his/her 20
 21 image became chroma-keyed with a live video image from All Saints Gardens. 21
 22 This combined live video image of the avatar in the 'real' All Saints Gardens was 22
 23 then streamed back onto the internet and presented on a virtual screen in both 23
 24 Second Life spaces. An image of the Second Life version of All Saints Gardens, 24
 25 with its virtual 'big screen' was then presented on the public video screen in the 25
 26 'real' All Saints Gardens. 26

27 *Liberate your Avatar* brought together theoretical and practical methods from 27
 28 the field to address this identity crisis in 'first life' and Second Life. Although 28
 29 online communities have been studied in-depth for some time now, the focus here 29
 30 will be upon an ethnographic, multidisciplinary and practice-based discussion in 30
 31 order to paint a richer picture of future experiences. 31

32 In this respect, the project uncovered more question than answers, principally 32
 33 concerning identity and self. The ontological questions of virtual reality and 33
 34 identity, online or offline, have been at the centre of the contemporary media 34
 35 arts and science debate for the past three decades. *Liberate your Avatar* points 35
 36 at the social, political and cultural significance of Second Life by questioning 36
 37 the emerging relationship between 'first life' and Second Life as a platform 37
 38 for potential social and cultural change: which is potentially appropriated as a 38
 39 mirror image of 'first life'? Through this discourse the project questioned whether 39
 40 Second Life is a reflection of 'first life' or if 'first life' is actually a reflection of 40
 41 Second Life? By consciously deciding to refer to this mirrored image as 'first' life 41
 42 rather than 'real' life, this central question polarized the paradox in Second Life, 42
 43 considering Lacan's proposition that the 'self' (or ego) is a formulation of our 43
 44 44

1 own body image reflected in the mirror ‘stage’.¹⁰ However, there are no mirrors 1
 2 in Second Life, which raises the fundamental question of whether it is possible to 2
 3 formulate our second self (or alter ego) in Second Life at all. Or is the computer 3
 4 screen itself the very mirror we are looking at? 4

5 5
 6 6
 7 ***Hidden Voices: Memoryscape (2006)*** 7
 8 8

9 The final case study project *Hidden Voices: Memoryscape*¹¹ was commissioned by 9
 10 the Taipei City Department of Cultural Affairs for the fourth ‘City on the Move Art 10
 11 Festival’: ‘From Encounter to Encounter – Expounding the Playground’, which 11
 12 took place at the Children’s Recreation Centre Taipei, Taiwan, in November 2006. 12
 13 *Hidden Voices: Memoryscape* invited visitors to enter the amusement park and, 13
 14 guided by PDAs and maps, to search out randomly stories taking place amidst 14
 15 the physical terrain – for example, unusual past experiences that people had at the 15
 16 amusement park when they were children: ‘a strawberry ice cream dripping on an 16
 17 orange skirt, a lost shoe, falling over and grazing a knee or how the space appeared 17
 18 then ...’.¹² Stories and incidental experiences allow adults to reinterpret this place, 18
 19 which is the ‘territory of children’, while memories in synch with the archetypal 19
 20 concept of the venue induce the expansion of the subconscious, constructing an 20
 21 aesthetic of imagined memories in relation to the venue. Thus, the augmentation 21
 22 of individual memories is transformed into collective memory. In addition to the 22
 23 augmented mediascape, I presented a series of video-projected images in the 23
 24 tunnel of the miniature train ride. These video sequences referred to a momentary 24
 25 transition between the past and present experience of the amusement park and thus 25
 26 further assisted in augmenting the participants’ journey around the environment 26
 27 [Plate 9.3]. 27

28 This project commenced by interviewing parents and visitors at the adventure 28
 29 playground over a one-week period and recording two-to-five-minute episodes 29
 30 about their own childhood experiences and memories of the adventure playground 30
 31 – intimate personal stories and strange and unusual memories about incidental 31
 32 experiences. In order to create this dynamic audio and video narrative, the work 32
 33 was partly constructed/dramatized and partly real-life stories/interviews. 33

34 This layering of augmented memories over the actual experience of visiting 34
 35 the adventure playground today was further assisted by providing visitors with 35
 36 a map that guided them through the locations and the stories attached to them. 36
 37 Whilst further conceptual information was provided in this guide, other discrete 37
 38 and unusual sounds and visuals that the user stumbled across were included, 38
 39 providing an abstract story or chain of events that brought the piece together 39
 40 40

41 10 J. Lacan, ‘The Mirror Stage’, in *Jacques Lacan, Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 41
 42 1966). 42

43 11 Artist’s website and documentation, <<http://www.paulsermon.org/playground/>>. 43

44 12 Ibid. 44

1	within an interactive experience of a collective memory of the playground. The	1
2	audio sequences were recorded using binaural microphones which placed the	2
3	sounds spatially as they were when recorded. Additional visual references to	3
4	this augmented narrative were provided as video clips projected in the interior of	4
5	the tunnel of the children's train ride. A combination of slow-motion and strobe-	5
6	flashing image sequences took the visitor further into this augmented memoryscape,	6
7	a momentary return to the history and collective memory of the environment.	7
8	Augmented reality involves the overlaying of digital information onto real	8
9	space. By moving through the real environment users experienced the digital	9
10	information at the location to which it referred. Headphones were connected	10
11	to a Hewlett Packard iPAQ PDA, a small hand-held computer, that played the	11
12	appropriate sound file corresponding to the position of the user in the playground.	12
13	The location of the user was determined by a GPS (Global Positioning System)	13
14	receiver unit attached to the PDA. GPS is a worldwide radio navigation system	14
15	that uses satellites to calculate position. The playing of sound and video sequences	15
16	was defined according to a software authoring tool. The authoring tool used a map	16
17	of the area as a background onto which regions were drawn. Specific commands	17
18	were associated with each region and defined what the user should experience	18
19	when they entered or re-entered the space, and a client program running on the	19
20	PDA worked out which sound file should be played depending on where they were	20
21	in the region. ¹³	21
22		22
23		23
24	Conclusion	24
25		25
26	I have tried to keep as much as possible of the original notes, video recordings,	26
27	and documentation of all my projects. I started doing this with with <i>Telematic</i>	27
28	<i>Dreaming</i> in 1992, even though then I had no idea how important this material	28
29	would become. It is interesting that I would hear my own commentary on a project	29
30	– often no more than a couple of sentences, or a kind of short story – told by	30
31	others, who often had not seen the installation, and told with perfect clarity.	31
32	Each time <i>Telematic Dreaming</i> is shown it is as if the empty bed is filled with	32
33	potential. When the 'story' that allows the arrangement and idea of the piece to be	33
34	understood is told, it enables an immediate understanding of that potential. The	34
35	participant or user becomes the creator or artist, and my role is to imagine and	35
36	make possible the space for all that is potential to happen. For me the archived	36
37	'lineout' images are the single most important archived element of these telematic	37
38	encounters, such as that shown in fig 9.1. They are far more significant than	38
39	documented images of the installation, representing as they do the moment of	39
40	communication, meaning and creation of the work.	40
41		41
42		42
43	¹³ Software development by HP Labs Bristol. Supported by the University of Salford	43
44	UK with financial assistance from Arts Council England and the British Council Taipei.	44

1 I have a considerable archive of this recorded lineout video feed. Watching 1
2 it is something like a portal to the past; you are looking at the very images that 2
3 caused the scene or effect you are looking at. As the viewer of this archive watches 3
4 this continual loop of self-reflective experience, the emotions and sensations are 4
5 brought back to life. There is something almost spiritual about this. 5
6 What remains for me as the developer or composer of these installations is the 6
7 concept – a few pieces of paper or a set of instructions as simple as: ‘projector 7
8 mounted to ceiling, monitors positioned left and right, camera connected to mixer 8
9 etc.’ Like a musical score the concept remains the same, even as the instruments 9
10 upon which and circumstances in which it is played change. 10
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