

Resonance, Inspiration and Resolution: A Phenomenological Investigation of the Zoom Platform through the Lens of Performance Art.

Dr Angela Viora, Monash University (AUS)

Hello everybody,

Thank you very much for having me.

My name is Angela Viora,

I am an artist and scholar currently working at Monash University, Australia.

I wish to share with you an auto-ethnographic investigation of my experience of the Zoom platform as a teacher.

During the pandemic outbreak in 2020, as I guess all of you,
I suddenly found myself catapulted out of the “outside world”
and into the virtual world of Zoom — at the same time.

I was struggling, and I asked myself:

What does this remote-teaching experience feel like to me?

Which kind of experience am I performing,
and which kind of performance am I subject to?

I employed performance art to attempt to answer these questions,
And to survive the lockdown while coping with the remote teaching.
The intertwining of art and life characterising performance art
has allowed me to take inspiration from this practice
and draw lessons from it.

Four elements characterised my experience of both the lockdown and the remote teaching:
isolation and the lack of physical proximity, vulnerability,
the out-of-sync time/space, and the human relationship with virtuality and devices.
The body is here conceived as *sōma*,
emerging as both the struggling place
in which various narratives inscribe,
and the alive element from which solutions can arise.

Through a phenomenological approach, I draw lessons from my own artistic practice and that of pivotal artists such as Joseph Beuys and Stelarc, according to two main tangents: resonance, inspiration and resolution.

Resonance means that an artwork resonates to my feelings about the Zoom experience.

Inspiration consists of the approach characterising an action that I could apply to my own experience to cope with it and improve it.

By combining self-observation and reflection with collected data, in conjunction with performance practices and art history, I reflected on how it feels to be a teacher and a practitioner in 2020.

Performing vulnerability to create an energy-bond in the absence of physical proximity: drawing upon my own practice. *The Foreigner* (2016, 2018) and *Mapping the Sound / Soundscape Portrait* (2016).

My performances centre on repetition, vulnerability, and participation.

I decentralise my persona as ‘the artist’ and I shift the focus to the action in progress, with which the audience is invited to engage.

This participatory approach implies physical proximity and/or interaction, which is paramount to create an energy bond between the performer and the audience, turning the action into a shared experience.

The same can be said of a face-to-face class:

teachers and facilitators constantly perform to engage with their student-audiences and make them feel part of the learning process.

We know how much the energy of the group and the atmosphere of a class can be draining as well as energising.

Sharing space and time physically is fundamental for this phenomenon to occur, but I had never met my students in person before.

Although Zoom classes are still face-to-face events happening live, they are “likely to affect feelings of isolation—or the absence of social bonds”.¹

I wondered how I could create this energy bond with my students through a screen.

¹ Bellocchi, A., Mills, K.A. & Ritchie, S.M. “Emotional experiences of preservice science teachers in online learning: the formation, disruption and maintenance of social bonds”. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, vol.11, 2016, pp. 629–652

The body, or the absence of it, is at the centre of the matter.

The ‘solution’, to me, has been to create some humanness
and the ‘feeling of being human beings’, rather than bodiless voices or images
talking through a screen from the chest up.

I created this bond by allowing room in my classes to show some aspects of being humans
to which each person can relate, starting from the body.

What is more real than a living body in the flesh displaying its own needs and vulnerability?

As simple as it is, I slightly overridden the formalism required by the class protocol.

For instance, I allowed some students to eat their breakfast
during our early-morning classes
without switching their screens off,
or to quickly arrange a meal during breaks,
or to show their very sleepy night-owl faces on video
without feeling embarrassed.

I did so to create a relaxed and warm environment in which everybody could feel
comfortable, starting from myself:

I am not an early-bird, and I tend to be slow in the morning.

I showed my struggle with my morning-class students
and I nominated a different co-host among the early-birds each week,
who assisted me with managing the Zoom interface.

Although performed and displayed in more dramatic ways,
this is what in performance art we call ‘displaying vulnerability’:
the artist shows their corporeal, mental, and emotional limits before and for the audience.

The vulnerability and fragility of the performer
create a silent energy dialogue with the members of the public
because pain and fatigue prevent the artist from acting, as Marina Abramovic said:
what the audience sees is an authentic human process to which they can relate.
This way, through empathy, visitors step into the work.

Although not adventuring in extreme actions,
my students and I mutually connected through our physicality, which is missing on Zoom,
by sharing bodily processes such as being hungry or sleepy, which involved us all.

The more awoken students patiently reminded me
of recording the class,
unmuting my microphone before talking,
not sharing my screen while I was replying to emails during breaks.
These little flaws of mine did not happen often, but they had happened,
and I felt safe knowing that I was not working alone
because the rest of the team supported me in doing my job.

My students and I did not hide, and this made us feel close and connected
despite the physical distance.
Far from presenting myself as incompetent and unprofessional, as I initially feared,
this vulnerability-approach increased the students' engagement with the class,
and their commitment to the units.
Many students gradually turned their screens on,
participating more actively in class
and improving their general performance.
When struggling with the remote learning, students reached out to ask for help
because they knew that they could do so:
our classes were safe spaces because there was room for vulnerability.

Bodies Suspended Between Dimensions: Joseph Beuys' *I like America and America likes me* (1974), and Stelarc's *Suspensions* (1984, 2012) and *Ear on Arm* (since 1996):

The body comes back at the centre of my reflection
when I am wondering to which place I belong when I am on Zoom:
to the house in which I live, and where I am placed with my own body,
or to the place represented by Zoom in that moment,
such as a class or a collegial meeting?

This dilemma recalls Joseph Beuys' performance *I like America and America likes me*,
a work in which I can place my uprooting sensation of misplacement
and give shape to what I feel as a shapeless workplace.
Beuys, indeed, performed this work in New York in 1974 without even touching its soil.
He did not experience the city fully through his body,

witnessing portions of it through the gallery windows,
and knowing about the rest of the world through newspapers.
The poignant image of the artist looking at the city through a window
portrays my online experience of the world while in isolation.
Giving an image to my feelings, helped me to make sense of them
And made the whole experience more bearable.

The Zoom screen is a window from which I can ‘enter’ my students’ and colleagues’ houses
or offices wherever they are located.
Through Zoom, I perform my role as a Monash University staff member:
when I open my laptop and connect online, I am going to work.
However, I have never been in the lecture rooms originally assigned to my classes
and in many other places on campus that would normally characterise my job.

I cannot experience my workplace physically
and I miss what I call the ‘locus touch’.
This is the element of physical presence as “the most fundamental aspect of proximity”
foundational to socialisation that happens within places,
intended as loci of possibilities where relational processes develop as ecosystems.
An ecosystem refers to the community of both living and nonliving organisms
residing in that environment,
which intertwine in relationships of mutual influence and exchange.
Ecosystems involve processes generated by relationships
and relationships shaped by processes.
This is also my conception of the performance art process: an ecosystem.
Which kind of environment is the Zoom dimension
and which kinds of ecosystems does it host, if any?

Laini Burton claims that “space acts upon bodies as much as bodies act upon space”.²
what does happen when we cannot fully act upon places by means of our bodies?
Stelarc’s *Suspensions* portray my sense of being suspended between dimensions,
the physical one and the virtual one.

² Burton, Laini. “Space-Actant-Event.” What Is Performance Art? Australian Perspectives, edited by A. Geczy and M. Kelly, vol. 1, Power, 2018, pp. 93–106. (page 94).

While I am on Zoom, my body is placed in my bedroom or living room,
and at the same time, part of it is projected in the houses of other people
through sight, hearing, and attention.

I am in my room through the awareness of my limbs and temperature,
And all my senses.

I am also in those environments that open up to me on Zoom
that I can see and listen to, and from where I can be seen and heard.

I cannot step into those places, however, and realise how big and lit they are,
how cold or warm, which odours pervade them—
because I am not fully placed in them with my body.

“To be suspended is to be between states”, Stelarc claims,

“To be neither one nor the other.

This is where my dissociating sensations of being out-of-time-and-space,
out-of-sync, come from.

Embodiment, indeed, is presence:

it is the condition of the body that makes itself present to itself in the place-world.

From a phenomenological perspective,

philosopher Edward Casey tells us that the first condition of being embodied is being placed.

Geographer Doreen Massey claims that the place-world is a spatial-temporal dimension,
acknowledging the intimate bond
between space and time as “time-space compression”.

I reflect now on whether it would be possible for us
to overcome the suspension in which we are trapped with our own bodies,
hanging between what surrounds us and what Zoom opens up in front of us,
and attune the rhythm of our experience to these two spheres.

Zoom is quick and fluid in itself but our physical relationship to it is not.

Is our human, fleshy body prepared to live in and live through the Zoom dimension?

Zoom allows us to see and hear each other in real time,
but smell and touch are excluded from this experience.

Is Zoom prepared to fully host the multiplicities of our bodies?

I do not think so, unless we find alternative, more intimate ways to perform with-in it.

As Stelarc shows us in *Ear on Arm*,

an effective approach toward this is to shift our attention from the body's identity to the body's "connectivity—not its mobility or location, but its interface."

Stelarc embarked in the 12-year project called Ear on Arm, resulting in the artist having an acoustic, prosthetic device shaped like a left ear transplanted into his left arm.

The ear was partly grown using the artist's adult stem cells, and can be connected to a Bluetooth system while a speaker and a receiver are placed in Stelarc's mouth.

This way, one can call the artist with a mobile phone and he would be able to listen to them in his mind and respond through that ear.

More sensationally, people close to the artist could listen to the conversation if he opens his mouth, "as an acoustical presence of another body from somewhere else.

This additional and enabled EAR ON ARM effectively becomes an Internet organ for the body."

Before the screen,

I wondered how I could possibly enter Zoom to participate in it fully with my own body, Stelarc, instead, explores how we can make the virtual dimension enter our bodies by introducing in our flesh the qualities offered by this dimension.

This is the value of his approach that, although seeing the biological body as "not well organ-ized" and obsolete, still recognises it as the starting point for possible solutions.

Stelarc's work makes us realise how Zoom, and the Internet in general, is a landscape from which we cannot escape because it has already become an integral part of our lives.

We now have to integrate this in our bodies, understood as "portals of sensory experiences".

Stelarc's practice fosters further reflections and offers insightful propositions on the liveability of the Zoom platform upon which scholars and artists are called to reflect.

Thank you 🐼

Please, do not hesitate to contact me at angela.viora1@monash.edu.