We have become so accustomed to the computer-human interface that its strangeness has become numbed by habit. Media artists often provide the most forceful articulation of this habit. Their work reminds us of the strange relations between embodiment and disembodiment, presence and telepresence. This essay examines Zoe Beloff’s 2001 interactive video installation 'The Influencing Machine of Miss Natalija A.' in the context of these relations. The idea of media as a means of affect, of virtually reaching out and touching someone, is critiqued in this work. Beloff defamiliarizes our intimacy with our machines, offering a timely allegory of the impact of technology on our lives.

In that visceral instant of virtual touch, Case momentarily remembers the strangeness of co-presence, the unverifiable sensation of being influenced by someone in your absence. It is a revelation, an epiphany that, in a mysterious electrical apparatus capable of affecting people across distances. Tausk’s essay, “On the Origin of the ‘Influencing Machine’ in Schizophrenia” is considered to be the principal source on the psychiatric phenomenon of the frisson it offers Case. It is a wonderful story, a cautionary tale about the human perception of technology and its impact on our lives, as well as the dysfunction that ensues when preoccupation becomes obsession. It is an experience of embodied reality. Case encounters the uncanny displacement of the world in the context of these relations. The idea of media as a means of affect, of virtually reaching out and touching someone, is critiqued in this work. Beloff defamiliarizes our intimacy with our machines, offering a timely allegory of the impact of technology on our lives. It dramatically fulfills the adage that media allow you to reach out and touch someone.

Neourmann may be over twenty years old and much has happened since its publication. But it has enduringly come to represent a particular historical moment. Computers have become pervasive and define the way we do things in the contemporary world, from work, to socializing to commerce. The Internet, while not the Machine as Gibson conceived it, is the dominant global space of flows and has integrated the world in ways unimaginable in the age of broadcasting. Viruses, hacking and spyware have entered into the collective vocabulary and consciousness of a techno-savvy generation whose hands have forgotten what it means to write with anything other than a keyboard. If Neourmann anticipated a networked world to come, it also imagined the mediation of total sensory immersion at a distance. Holly’s virtual touch is still science fantasy but it is an instance of both the demand and the desire for media to yield more presence, to accommodate all the senses. It resonates as an allegory of telethlysis as a mechanism of affect as much as a means of total communication.

Cyberculture is one term that has been co-opted to describe this emerging state of mediated telethlysis. A decade ago there was still something new, exciting and even strange about the relations between virtual and physical space, between embodiment and disembodiment, presence and telepresence. In the developed world, this interaction and commingling of local and remote states of presence is so much a part of everyday life that it has become second nature. It has become as intuitive as driving a car or riding a bicycle, as intimate as the cities we live in and the daily round of quotidian experience. McKenzie Wark goes further and posits this telethlysis as a historical condition by tele-theories and their potential for a new abstraction of space from social order (1995: 31). Third nature implies a transformed concept of the human as much as it describes an expanded notion of space. Donna Haraway (1991) and Katherine Hayles (1999) have described this altered state of cyber subjectivity and posthumanism respectively. Both terms have been largely misunderstood, often invoked as terminal conditions announcing a technological transformation of humanity, in the form of a Stelarc-like assemblage of flesh, metal and circuitry. But they are, in fact, metaphorical evocations of what it means to live in a world in which telepresence cannot be dissociated from the business of being human. At the societal level of being in the world, Bill Mitchell has described this evolving e-topia as an “economy of presence” to account for “the different grades of presence that are now available to us: the illusory, the absurdly complex and always changing, the economy of presence and presence itself” (2002: 20). The idea of media as a means of affect, of virtually reaching out and touching someone, is critiqued in this work. Beloff defamiliarizes our intimacy with our machines, offering a timely allegory of the impact of technology on our lives. It is an experience of embodied reality. Case encounters the uncanny displacement of the world in the context of these relations. The idea of media as a means of affect, of virtually reaching out and touching someone, is critiqued in this work. Beloff defamiliarizes our intimacy with our machines, offering a timely allegory of the impact of technology on our lives.

The idea of virtual touch is particularly pertinent in Beloff’s 2001 interactive video installation 'The Influencing Machine of Miss Natalija A.' In this work, though, it is very much an unawakened and detextualizing gesture, lacking the frisson it offers Case. It is a wonderful story, a cautionary tale about the human perception of technology and its impact on our lives, as well as the dysfunction that ensues when preoccupation becomes obsession. It is an experience of embodied reality. Case encounters the uncanny displacement of the world in the context of these relations. The idea of media as a means of affect, of virtually reaching out and touching someone, is critiqued in this work. Beloff defamiliarizes our intimacy with our machines, offering a timely allegory of the impact of technology on our lives. It dramatically fulfills the adage that media allow you to reach out and touch someone.

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The idea of a virtual body double is a symptom of Natalija A's state of mind. Tauks's diagnosis was telling in this respect, in that he believed that her hallucination of persecution by an unseen and distant machine "represented the patient's own body that had become alien and strange to her" (13). Other cases of schizophrenia-persecution involving influencing machines describe the identification and gradual amalgamation of the patient's body with the machine itself. Beloff points out that in the original case history of Natalija A's description of the influencing machine was vaguely human, a body without organs animated by electricity:

"The truck had the shape of a lid, resembling the lid of a coffin. In the first interview she described the limbs as entirely natural parts of the body. A few weeks later, these limbs were not placed on the coffin lid in their normal form, but were merely drawn in two dimensions. The inner parts of the body consisted of electric batteries (5)."

Ever the Freudian, Tauks observed in this anthropomorphization that machines "produced by man's ingenuity [...], are unconscious projections of man's bodily structure" (4).

[10] The perception of Natalija A's mind and body being physically manipulated by physicians at a distance brings to mind McLuhan's observations on television as an extension of the sensation of touch rather than vision. Beloff is clearly engaged by the idea of television as a form of virtual touch and McLuhan's account of the "tactile power" of television echoes Natalija A's fear of the haptic as well as somatic and mental influences of the "diabolical apparatus."

The TV image is a mosaic mesh not only of horizontal lines but of millions of tiny dots, of which the viewer is physically able to pick up only 50 or 60 from which he shapes the image; thus he is constantly filling in vague and blurry images, bringing himself into in-depth involvement with the screen and acting out a constant creative dialog with the iconoscope. The contours of the resultant cardboard image are fleshed out within the image of the viewer, which thus gains great personal involvement and participation; the viewer, in fact, becomes the screen, whereas in film he becomes the camera. By requiring us to constantly fill in the spaces of the mosaic mesh, the iconoscope is tattooing its message directly on our skins (McLuhan 1969).

A kind of writing on the body, McLuhan's metaphor of tattooing is particularly suggestive. If the medium is the message, Natalija A's sense of its touch reveals that it is capable of inflicting pain as well as pleasure. Demanding the "interplay of all the senses," the virtual touch of television was for McLuhan the "most significant of the electric media." Permeating domestic space, it had the power to influence thought through its "lines of force," working over and molding "the entire sensorium with the ultimate message." Before the guru of hot and cool media had written a word about the power of television's reach, Eugen Hadomovsky in Germany realized that the new medium was the ultimate carrier wave of Nazi ideology.

[11] Natalija A's paranoia has much to offer media theory. She is very much, as Beloff has suggested, a technological visionary (1). Her sense of estrangement from her own body was imagined as an subtracting and distancing of her central nervous system beyond her own corporeal presence. It is a powerful visual image of the disembodiment and remote sensing of mediated conditions. This projection of a doppleganger invades the virtual person we construct when communicating with an absent interlocutor. In her extensive study of presence, Esther Hinn points out that "a material medium (the postal service or email system) supports the creation of an imagined body, and a spiritual, almost telepathic, sense of the other's presence" (3). But in this instance, Natalija A's imagined body is in her own, not someone else's.

Beloff demonstrates in The Influencing Machine of Miss Natalija A that the psychological and etymological sense of a division or splitting of the self within schizophrenia becomes a metaphor for mediation and telecommunications generally. An analogous work in this respect is Stelarc's 1995 networked performance piece Ping Body/Proto-Parasite. For three decades Stelarc has explored the relations between the body and technology, in particular the idea of electronic and prosthetic doppelgangers that amplify and extend the body's limits. His work of the 1990s, in particular Fractal Flesh (1995) and Parasite: Event for Invaded and Invulnerable Body (1997), investigate the potential of the Internet as a medium of connectivity between remote bodies. As a cyphematic performance artist, Stelarc probes the outer limits of what could be possible in the name of telepresence and remote sensing. He has referred to his work in this respect as the desire to collapse "spatial separation, of generating intimacy without proximity" (quoted in Clarke, 200). Ping Body/Proto-Parasite was conceived for the Teleopolis event at the Center Pompidou in Paris and was designed to separate Stelarc from his audience, while at the same time enabling them to interact with the body at a distance. On the main stage in Luxembourg, the body was electronically linked between Paris, Helsinki and Amsterdam. A six channel muscle-stimulation system, controlled by a touch screen interface, allowed remote audiences to access and actuate the movement of the left hand side of the body, which would jerk and thrash involuntarily. Beyond the control of the artist, the body is a trace of Natalija A's perception that she is subject, in Stelarc's words, to "the promptings of another body in another place" (Stelarc). The design for this interface featured a stylized representation of the human body, a "virtual surrogate" that resembled an electronic acupuncture chart. A simulacrum of Stelarc's physical absence, it enabled the control and stimulation of the body's proprioception. Its visual design and function bears an uncanny resemblance to Natalija A's image of the influencing machine, as does its ability to affect the motor functions of the distant subject.

The trunk had the shape of a lid, resembling the lid of a coffin. In the first interview she described the limbs as entirely natural parts of the body. A few weeks later, these limbs were not placed on the coffin lid in their normal form, but were merely drawn in two dimensions. The inner parts of the body consisted of electric batteries (5).

[12] In his interview with Tatiana A the patient's belief that the suggestion apparatus produced or removed thoughts by means of waves, rays or mysterious forces. Indeed it was a torture machine. When someone drunk the machine she fell a corresponding blow to her body. Through interacting, the participant finds themselves visierably implicated, placed in the position of the sinister physician/technicen (always male) whom believed were probing her mind (9).

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[13] Ping Body/Proto-Parasite and The Influencing Machine of Natalija A are similar in their situation of the mediated subject as a kind of puppet being manipulated at a distance. Indeed, Stelarc often refers to the body being "choreographed" in such Internet actualized performances. Both engage with the question of mediation as a compromise of and adjunct to individual agency. The emphasis on involuntary action in Stelarc's Internet-based works of art, such as Ping Body/Proto-Parasite, is particularly suggestive. If the medium is the message, Natalija A's sense of its touch reveals that it is capable of inflicting pain as well as pleasure. Demanding the "interplay of all the senses," the virtual touch of television was for McLuhan the "most significant of the electric media." Permeating domestic space, it had the power to influence thought through its "lines of force," working over and molding "the entire sensorium with the ultimate message." Before the guru of hot and cool media had written a word about the power of television's reach, Eugen Hadomovsky in Germany realized that the new medium was the ultimate carrier wave of Nazi ideology.

[14] The implications of choreographing the actions of others over the Internet were dramatically and infamously enacted in the "rape in cyberspace" incident of the early 1990s. Also known as the Mr. Bungle Affair, the rape in question involved the possession and control of the identity and actions of someone else in the course of a series of real-time encounters in LambdaMOO in March 1992. The participant known as Mr. Bungle created a phantom, "a programming trick referred to as a 'voodoo doll' that allows me and then another of the room's occupants to perform sexual acts on him" (Turkle 1995, 251). For the people in question, they would have been watching themselves speak and act on the screen, in ways beyond their volition or control, without typing a word on the screen. The textual attribution of violation was explained by those affected as figurative rape. However the stylization of sexual violence expressed the more profound sense of rape as the losing control over oneself, of compromised agency, of an act of taking without consent. As Julian Dibbell pointed out in his detailed account of the incident, many "were the casual references to Bungle's deed as simply 'rape,' but those in no way implied that the players had lost all sight of the distinctions between the virtual and physical versions" (Dibbell 1994, 249). But nor was the slippage between sexual and textual violence mere affectation or sophistry. The insidious masquerade of the voodoo doll is a particularly malicious instance of an involuntary response perpetrated by an invisible
At a time when television was an emergent broadcasting medium, the sensation of being split or divided from the self, simultaneously here and there, would appear strange to anyone. But to a schizophrenic suffering delusions of persecution, it would be positively terrifying. Indeed, the somatic effect of Natalija A’s sense of disembodiment was dramatically expressed in terms of disgusting smells and disagreeable slime extruding from her nose (Beloff 2003, 5). Projecting herself as a remote other, in the form of the object of her persecution, she metaphorically embodies the dissonance that we would naturalize and eventually forget in the age of advanced telecommunications. She is displaced, here and there at the same time, a dislocated self. Katz and Aakhus also remark on a similar revelation of strangeness, of defamiliarization, in terms of the advent of mobile telephony. They note that “the telephone’s becoming mobile has re-familiarized many people with the amazement felt by its early witnesses” (Katz & Aakhus 2002, 1).

The idea of mixed worlds adds a further grade to Mitchell’s economy of presence. In the context of Second Life, Natalija A’s nightmare can be thought of as a kind of sentence, a premonition of a technological world to come, in which the self and its avatars constitute a relational or mixed form of identity. This is certainly one way of appropriating the work as a form of media theory. Indeed, Beloff refers to her projects as “philosophical toys, objects to think with.” The Influencing Machine of Miss Natalija A engages with “the experience of hallucination, thought transmission in psychoanalysis and the development of broadcasting technologies” (Beloff). As well as an allegory of television as virtual touch, it is also a story of the digital. Or more precisely it is an allegory of any media capable of affect, an intriguing text that materialises an individual’s unconscious as an exploratory theatre of delusional presence and of mediation in an age of new media.

Natalija A’s sense of persecution may in fact be a sign of the strangeness of telepresence and of mediation generally. Her estranged alienation of herself from herself is an allegory of the somatic shock of co-presence that we all must forget for mediation to make sense. Her nightmare of being watched, probed and affected by people she cannot see. Such encounters are indeed note that “the telephone’s becoming mobile has re-familiarized many people with the amazement felt by its early witnesses” (Beloff 2003, 5). Projecting herself as a remote other, in the form of the object of her persecution, she metaphorically embodies the dissonance that we would naturalize and eventually forget in the age of advanced telecommunications. She is displaced, here and there at the same time, a dislocated self. Katz and Aakhus also remark on a similar revelation of strangeness, of defamiliarization, in terms of the advent of mobile telephony. They note that “the telephone’s becoming mobile has re-familiarized many people with the amazement felt by its early witnesses” (Katz & Aakhus 2002, 1).

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Notes
[1] I am grateful to Zoe Beloff for drawing this to my attention.
[2] Beloff describes how this type of image “bricks the brain because it incorporates two incompatible types of perspective, orthogonal and vanishing point projection” (8).
[3] Beloff has created a Flash version of the installation with detailed documentation of its original gallery exhibition. It also simulates the workings of the influencing machine: http://www.zoebeloff.com/Influencing/

Works Cited