Project proposal for <u>Extended Ecologies</u>*-Social and Cultural Ecosystems*

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Performance-video, sound, 2 artist-performers

Summary

Do we unwittingly disconnect ourselves from others in our deep desire to connect through technology? **Alone** is a performance project that deals with our modern mediated lives; a duet exploring how two people interact body-to-media-to-body, as opposed to how they interact body-to-body "in real life".

Background

Late nineteenth-century Germany saw the development of a neo-Luddite movement as a reaction against the industrialization that brought with it the attendant problems of mass migration to larger urban centers, resulting in overcrowded and unhygienic living conditions. Taylorization of labour processes further aggravated industrialization's dehumanizing effects. This movement, which went under the generic name of *Lebensreform* ("life reform"), propagated a back-to-nature lifestyle and advocated dietary and religious reforms, concern with ecology and the importance of organic farming, vegetarianism, sexual liberation, alternative medicine[1] and—most important for our purposes—naturalism, the theory and practice of which went under the name of *Freikörperkultur.* The artistic practices associated with this body culture—and they were widespread—went under the name of *Nacktkultur* (naked culture). Many also proposed that abstention from alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and vaccines had beneficial effects.

The movement was a precursor of the "hippie" movement that developed in California in the 1960s. In fact, they were directly related. Practitioners of *Lebensreform,* such as Bill Pester, Benedict Lust, and Arnold Ehret, immigrated to California in the late 19th (Lust) or early 20th century and directly influenced that later development.[2]

The body culture that emerged in association with *Lebensreform* and hippyism continues to speak for something that the juggernaut of history has put into a precarious position. These movements spoke of the importance of according respect to the body's role in all forms of knowledge. Near the beginning of my book, *A Body of Vision: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry*, I mention a passage in Jean-Luc Godard's *Hélas pour moi*. There, a woman says to a businessman, "I learned yesterday that the flesh can be sad." "Who taught you that?" he asks. "My body," the woman says. "I don't know what you're talking about," he

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[1] Naturopathy found widespread support in these circles.
[2] See Gordon Kennedy, *Children of the Sun: A Pictorial Anthology From Germany To California 1883–1949* (Ojai: Nivaria Press, 1998).

responds. He speaks for experience in its most empty form—experience that has no connection to its wellspring. He speaks the language of modernity, which lacks true appreciation for the diversity of the ways of knowing and for the role of the body in all. This performance piece is a protest against that condition.

Grounded in the history/practice above, the proposed performance is centered on the concern for the body's role in all forms of knowledge. This is expressed through performance's mimicking a life-drawing session, where one artist-performer attempts to know another through the act of looking deeply, taking the other's form into oneself through the eye and allowing what is seen to move the hand. This mutual exposure to each other's gaze creates a vulnerability and an intimacy required to create the grounds for charity, as it is usually called—invoking the Christian idea of *agápē* (ἀγάπη), or unconditional love (and, following C.S. Lewis, "God-love", the love that brings one to care for an other—and, ultimately, all others—regardless of circumstance). Though (again following Lewis), the sort of affection that the practice aimed at bringing forth is probably something closer to *storgē* (στοργή), that is, a fondness that develops through familiarity, and grows as one knows the others more deeply and thoroughly. Thus, it is the kind of love a parent has for a child.[3] This is likely the most emotive of the forms of love, and potentially the most broadly encompassing, for of the forms of affection it is the one that pays the least attention to those characteristics deemed "valuable" or worthy of love. Though there may not be enough precise language to describe this state of care for another, there is a deep knowing and empathy that comes when one person is connected to another through seeing and being seen. This knowing cannot be replaced by discrete, Newtonian data.

The project offers a critical view of technology for its potential to engender loss of affect and loss of connection, and for its tyrannical potential (which are clearly a threat of the new technologies, and, unless curbed, will carry us all towards the universal homogenous state—a totally administered state that tolerates no difference). But this dystopic potential is balanced by another, and that is the triumph of what I have taken to calling the electrologic conception of reality— a conception of space that denies there is any such thing as empty space and, rather, sees space as filled with energy fields, which interpenetrate each other, changing the other inwardly and being changed by the other in response. Beginning with the work of Michael Faraday and John Clerk Maxwell, this conception of reality began to attract increasing numbers of artists and thinkers, including the Futurists (in the early 20th century), the artists of Berkeley/San Francisco Renaissance (in the mid-20th century), and cybernetic/new media artists (of the late 20th and early 21st centuries). This project embraces an electrical universe—one full of interconnected objects and interpenetrating energy fields as opposed to straight lines, separate forms, and empty space that comprise the Newtonian realm. This indeed, becomes the new model of affection in this new conception, one that (picking up again on C.S. Lewis's commentary on the different forms of love) is closer to erōs (ἔρως) than to any of the other forms of intense affection. One might remember that *eros*, while it can be a form of selfishness

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[3] C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960).

and even impel one towards evil acts, can also be a force that impels one towards the splendour of true unselfishness and the giving oneself over to complete, selfless care for the other.

It is my strong belief that in outputting many channels of projection—many energy fields—a person is shattered out of their tiny personal universe and enters a different state of consciousness. There is no way to control all of the channels, they are all interacting and changing and flowing. Instead we must accept a grander, more complex universe and surrender to it all. This is why the performance will consist of many channels of projection and sound.

Technology

The project makes use of instruments that are supposed to provide computers with natural user interfaces (Microsoft Kinect v2, Intel RealSense, and Leap Technology's Leap), Neurosky's consumer-grade EEG's (electroencephalograms), and Troikatronix, to coordinate (in our case) four channels of HD video projection, two channels of video live projection and Fast FreeFrameGL video effects.

· The video/camera systems (Kinect and RealSense) are used to collect live-feed footage of the artist-performers. This footage is filtered (to create effects that twist, warp, and deform the imagery) and these modified images are projected onto mobile screens.

· The electroencephalograms (EEG's) detect electrical activity in the brain using electrodes connected to the scalp. The data that is collected is then analyzed to detect patterns (that are believed to have a connection to mood) and these patterns are mapped to musical phrases that (arguably) could be connected with that feeling, and performed by computer and synthesizer. This music is the background of the performance piece.

Performance

· **Audio** The performers are wearing the EEG's and a live score is produced from the data outputting in any given moment—an electrical score. (I hope that this device will suggest both the new technology's potential for promoting tyranny by giving us access what, until recently, was thought of as a subject's private domain.)

But the more important aural element will be a poem composed somewhat in the style of the Surrealist masters of free association, and read by high-quality, almost lifelike, voice. In the film that I have just finished (to be titled *A Gathering of Crystals*), I experimented with inverting the standard hierarchy of image and sound in moving-image productions. Traditionally, the imagery is given higher priority, while sound (including so-called "voice-over") is relegated to secondary condition. But I was interested in that film's creating a more immersive experience, and sound, it seems to me, constitutes an environment that engulfs us[4]. In *A Gathering of*

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[4] 1970s-era critiques of the spectator position constructed by the perspectival system would definitely be relevant to developing and highlighting the greater immersive potential of the experience where aural component overpowers the visual. Images constructed on the perspective—which, of course, is what camera-lenses give us—situate the viewer as an "outside spectator," positioned at the apex of the viewing cone and unable to become enveloped in one's experience of the perceptual event.

Crystals, sound takes precedence over the image. While I believe its imagery is compelling, I hope that the overall experience is that of hearing a poem being read to the accompaniment of images (with several images—the number increases during the course of the film, according to a harmonic principle—presented simultaneously). I intend to continue exploring the effects of this inversion of the standard hierarchy of image and sound in *Alone*. It seems completely appropriate to my interests to seek to create as immersive an experience for the audience as possible—and experience that can engulf them, not one that deploys haptic gimmicks.

The surreal content (and method) of the poem also provides a counterpart/counterbalance to the projected Touch Designer images and the image-products of the Real Sense "emotion analyzer". All of them supposed to present forms of understanding, and both the Touch Designer images and the content of the poem are intended to suggest immediate projections of consciousness. But I believe that the poetic will turn out be a truer home of being than the hyper-accelerated electric images.

· **Video** The performance (the ardours of a life-drawing session) occurs against a backdrop of co-ordinated video stream, projected onto mobile (fabric) video screens (this co-ordination is achieved by using Troikatronix Isadora). Some of these screens present processed images of the performance taking place: the electrically-processed images suggest the performers' mediated seeing: the life-drawing session, which should be an exercise in seeing flesh accurately, of receiving an accurate image of the other and letting it enter the core of oneself and guide one's hand, has been electrically transformed. These projections, then, suggest that the two artist/performers do not see one another, but mediated images. Other screen present the various pre-industrial landscapes (vineyards and rural images from Ontario, Canada, and Upper New York State) and cityscapes (the old town in Québec City, and Barcelona *modernismo*) that, I hope suggest simultaneously both the warmth of the traditional styles of living that are being eradicated by technology's destructive effects and the staidness of the Newtonian conception of reality, which conceived of space as a rigid grid system and treated objects as discrete, spatially-localized, and (generally) non-interacting objects. (I hope this will help raise the question whether the surpassing of the Newtonian conception of space by that of the Faraday-Maxwell's might not in the end be rich and imaginatively productive.)

The purpose for including of vineyards and rural communities in Ontario, Canada, and Upper New York State, and the old town in Québec City should be evident. The purpose for including images of Barcelona *modernismo*, on the other hand, probably needs a comment. Inspired in part by the work of my compatriot Marshall McLuhan, the brilliant Bolognese art historian Renato Barilli suggests that the group of styles usually referred to as *l'art nouveau* or *Jugendstil* and, indeed, the larger yet group of styles emerged at the breaking point when the Newtonian paradigm was being supplanted by the Faraday-Maxwell paradigm[5]. The latter's botanomorphic forms break with the Newtonian grid system, to suggest interacting energy fields,

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[5] Barilli expounds these ideas in such works as *L'arte contemporanea: da Cézanne alle ultime tendenze* (Bologna: Feltrinelli, 2005) and *Scienza della cultura e fenomenologia degli stili* (Bologna: Il Mulino editore, 1991)

which produce forms more elaborate and rambunctiously curvilinear than the schematized generally rectilinear forms of the earlier eras (consider the contrast between Mies van der Rohe's architecture and that of Antoni Gaudí). In the videos incorporated into this performance, *modernismo* is used to suggest the emerging world-picture—and surely Gaudí's Sagrada Família is the exemplar of botanomorphic form being sacralised.

· The Kinect and the other camera/video systems collect live feed footage of one performer and output data about them in various ways—through skeleton recognition, facial/emotional recognition, hand tracking and others. The live feeds are also manipulated through Touch Designer. The data being fed through the system is used to suggest the new way an image of the other is received (the new mode of reception involves a higher degree of analysis and lesser quantum of contemplation than that which characterized the way artists were traditionally trained to rely on in the life-drawing studio). The warped, twisted and distorted body imagery produced by Touch Designer is meant to project the mediated images that now occupy our collective imaginations and through which we see the world and one another. (Finally, they suggest the new images of the electrologic era, in which areas of the image do not so much suggest bounded, localized objects as interpenetrating and interacting force fields—and the imaginative richness of these electric images, celebrated by my compatriot Marshall McLuhan, just might constitute their saving power.)

· **Artist-Performers** The artist-performers are drawing portraits of each other in the attempt to learn about them, but instead of looking at the body as in a life-drawing class, they are "looking" and learning about the other through algorithmically derived knowledge—data outputted from various digital devices. Performers' visual senses are threatened to be completely replaced with the digital data collected with the aid of a technological camera's "eye"; in their perceptions of each other they rely on the binary logic of a computer. Are they still able to look into each other's eyes?

There is great work to be done in understanding each other and the universe—does this detailed digital "knowledge" of another bring us closer or further away from our partner? For some time, I have been convinced that the greatest deficit of our time is absence of a compelling philosophical anthropology. Beliefs about the nature of human beings, about the obligations imposed on us by humans' need to live together in societies[6], about what we owe to one another, about our relations to nature and to super-nature inflect our political discourses of economics, of morality (including humans' obligations to the other-than-human life-forms), of art, art theory and aesthetics, yet we ignore the urgency to address its topics directly and explicitly. We drift from one fruitless conversation to another, because our impotent attempts to have a dialogue with one another lack a foundation in a comprehensive and precisely elaborated conception of what a human being is. Much of the discussion analogizing humans and machines is guilty of the same oversight—something that becomes gruesomely obvious as

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[6] The term itself derives from the Greek *anthrōpos* (ἄνθρωπος) and has the connotation that the discipline is concerned with discourse concerns the reality that we live together in communities

cognition is compared to string-rewriting methods, and the role of what in cognitive sciences is dreadfully termed affect is likened to a disposition to accord various propositions different weights at different times.

Many thinkers—both artists and scientists alike—have rushed to embrace these ideas, whose potential for tyranny is truly shocking. A recent scientific article remarks excitedly on the real-world potential of EEG devices (which only recently became affordable for individual and mass uses):

> Access to brain data would be useful for novel software that could be streamlined to a particular user; an aid in a host of applications. A driver falling asleep at the wheel could be detected and awakened before an incident. A nurse overworked and unable to focus well could be given rest breaks before administering incorrect medicine or dosages to patients. An important interface could filter away non-critical information from a pressured worker. These kinds of automated control actions were once fiction, but can be realizable today, because of brain data.[7]

This project is a statement against the inhuman, even tyrannical dimensions of the cyborg project that so many have embraced enthusiastically. Above all, the proposed project is a protest against ideas of the quantitative human, which the development of Big Data methods have made more compelling, at least for some. It confronts methods of data analysis that are transforming the rudimentary, underdeveloped, and largely unconscious conceptions of a human being we espouse. "Alone" applies Big Data methods to streams of data transmitted from EEG devices—standard methods for the analysis of brain-atlas imagery—and implements rational, algorithmic procedures in facial analysis and emotion recognition software. It also deploys surveillance techniques that have become ubiquitous in the era of Big Data, including speech recognition and voice analysis.

One might be inclined to believe that the failure (after years of trying) of efforts to mimic the life of a cell *in silicium*—efforts that have shown the intractability of the problem of developing an utterly exact, fully predictive, computer model of a cell's entire behavior—would have brought to an end all claims that the quantitative methods will reveal the wonder of life. One might have thought that the fact that these efforts, after having been pursued as long as they have been, and at such an extraordinary cost, only exposed the limitations in our understanding of molecular dynamics and cell biology and brought forth the necessity of adopting largely simplifying assumptions. To run the life *in silicium* models even on today's hyper-powerful computers would have established the lack of their usefulness.

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[7] Alexis Morris and Mihaela Ulieru, "FRIENDs [sic]: Brain-monitoring agents for adaptive socio-technical systems" *Multiagent and Grid Systems—An International Journa*l 8 (2012) 32.

But if one were to think that, one would be sorely mistaken. And what is principally left out by the tawdry philosophical anthropology underlying these sordid efforts is the basic importance that love plays in fostering a true understanding of a human being. Indeed, it is not extreme to say that love itself is a noetic process, though no one could get away with such a simple, basic, and uncontestably true statement in any research institute, anywhere. Just try it (I have). Yet, in my everyday life, amongst friends and with lovers and loved ones, I am certain of its being true. Which one of us, in going about our lives, would contest that we know our lovers and our children in ways that love alone makes possible? Which one of us would not agree that our grasp of ethical principles has been deepened by our love for those closest to us. But say that amongst university researchers (especially those in the pseudo-sciences that lie nearest to cultural studies) and you'll find people scoffing and suggesting the need to get on the real work. That is how ideas like Human+ begin—we know that the loveless metal, plastic, and rubber surrogates that we construct will not be more than us: their lovelessness can only make the poorer knowers.

At the same time, these devices might be strengthening the conception (consistent with the electrologic paradigm I referred to above) of beings as force-fields that interpenetrate one another, each potentially revitalizing each other. The great prophet of the electrologic conception, after all, was that wonderful philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead noted that "The teleology of the universe is directed to the production of Beauty." We can hope that, in the end, history will reveal this to be the meaning of the new technologies. The fundamental image Whitehead's cosmology offers resembles the Jewel Net of Indra: in every event (and events, not objects, are the fundamental ontological category of Whitehead's metaphysics) bear the influence (call it image) of every other event, and every event is reflected in every other event. Consider each as an evanescent jewel: each jewel contains an image of all the other jewels; and also the images of the images of all other jewels; and also the images of the images of the images of all other jewels; and so ad infinitum. This is a deep image of interpenetration, and of the creative principle that governs it all, striving to bring for Beauty, in all its evanescence.