



Program to Perform

Exploring Dance and New Media

Edited by Ine Therese Berg & Lise Amy Hansen

A call for attention

Amanda Steggell

Is nature real?

Is science true?

Does technology have to work? (If so, for who?)

Can art tell?

Calling for attention

I am interested in how new media and digital communications technologies affect my experiences and perceptions of the world and try to grasp how my understanding of time, space and body become altered by them. I try to make these aspects visible – not the technology per say, but the correlations between time, space and the body in the lived world where technology has become a natural part of my natural self and my everyday life to the extent that I can hardly remember what it was like when it was not – or even whether it ever was not.

For example, I remember the weight of lifting the telephone receiver in my childhood home. It was black and as long as the length of my elbow to my fingertips. I can recall its abrasive ringing tone demanding attention and with it, my adversity to answering it; I had been told not to talk to strangers and I did not know who would be on the other end of the line. I rarely phoned anyone myself due to the unnatural sound of the speaker's voice and their lack of visual presence – which I found uncanny at that time. And then there were my parents' restrictions on outward calls due to the expenses they entailed.

Me v TV

On the other hand, I loved our black and white TV and would go to almost any risk to turn it on outside the permitted watching hours. I even watched the white noise if that was all that was on. In those days we had to put fifty pence in a slot on its front control panel to get a signal from the BBC.

I was a sleep walking child and could occasionally be found sitting in front of the TV with my school skirt pulled over my pajamas, peering into its electric snowfall in the middle of the night. I can still see myself doing it in my mind's eye. By conjuring up this out-of-body vision, I can recreate almost every detail of our living room in a house that I lived in till the age of six. Without it I remember almost nothing. Make what you will of it, but I think that when the push comes to shove I am an epitome of embodied experience, which is perhaps a trait I share with those drawn to dance and the praxis of choreography.

I am currently trying to give away a very decent TV – Sony, wide screen, in pristine condition – but one of the chunky, tube versions that nobody seems to want nowadays. I like the TV, but I do not want to watch it anymore.



Amanda Steggell:
self portrait

It puts me to sort-of-sleep in which I see my reflection in the programmes I watch, while its consequent propaganda is reflected back and reproduced on me. (I wonder if this was what Elvis was trying convey to his hoards of screaming admirers when he sang;

You are always on my mind – and pointed his microphone towards his fans, who stretched out their arms to him and sang... *You are always on my mind!*).

Emotional hijack

I no longer have a land line, but an iPhone which is as advertised, much more than just a phone – or much less of one, depending on which angle you look at things. In reality it is just a computer but with a greater capacity than my previous clumsy desktop versions². It incorporates many of the features previously assigned to peripheral devices (camera, microphone, modem, motion sensor, etc) and all at a size that I can fit in my pocket. I like the way it appeals to my senses – the look, feel and sound of it, and the way it can respond to the sleight of my hand. It takes care of the data that I need to organise my life, as well as documents I may be required to recall in the future. It wakes me up gently with the echoing blip of an echo-sounder-like sound, sings me to sleep at night, provides me with various types of entertainment, allows me to keep in touch with people in different ways, and is very convenient for checking mail in bed. It even has an electronic leveler which is extremely handy when setting up installations that demand precise horizontal alignment, and when I need to take a call at the same time, I can (do I really need to, or could it wait till later?).

I pay a flat rate for using it (predictable), unless I go abroad or make overseas calls (terrifying). I very rarely switch it off and I make sure that it is always on my person or in my peri personal space. I love it but I hate it too, because having invested so much of myself into it I get a feeling of insecurity that just the very thought of going anywhere (even to the corner shop) without it, or moving out of the range of its network evokes. As long as I have it on my body it always knows where I am, and with its GPS abilities and Google maps it can tell me where I have to go (I have an inherent ability to get lost). I realise that this enables others to pin point my position, but I try not to worry too much about it. That would make me paranoid – right?

Like a river flows

Gently to the sea

Darlin' don't you know

Some things are meant to be³

As a physical object it is appealing, yet its body is just a vestige for depositing data and sending and receiving signals. However much of me I put into it my iPhone it is not really my phone. There are restrictions on what I can and cannot do with it. For example, in order to use applications that are not endorsed by Apple I have to 'jail break' it; a process that is admittedly not as risky its nickname entails, but it does say something about the situation. When something goes wrong – I forget it, it crashes or the battery has ran out (random) – the bad feeling it evokes is immediately replaced by a feeling of intense relief when the situation is resolved. At that moment I love it more (as programmed).

Take my hand
Take my whole life too
'Coz I can't help
Falling in love with you.⁴

– I think I need help.

Invisible twin

My network services provider feeds my iPhone with data via its allotted frequency range of the electromagnetic spectrum whose total range, while administered by the government for the good of the people, is franchised out to commercial enterprises who have their own interests. The electromagnetic waves that carry signals of wireless transmissions to and fro travel at the speed of light. They rush through my body, my home and the city creating a mirror-city that, while it can neither be seen, heard, touched, tasted or smelt, is just as real as its visible twin. In order to be perceived by humans, some technological intervention is required. An electromagnetic sniffer that detects and transforms these waves into audible signals does the job nicely.

It was when I first got my hands on one of these devices that I understood that there was nothing immaterial about the waves it detected, despite their ethereal qualities. By listening to the pulsing, whining, screaming and rushing sounds of them I could sense the movement that was occurring around me. In other words, they appealed to my kinaesthetic awareness, which functions in all senses and purposes as my very own personal antenna. With headphones on, waving an antenna around and immersed in the act of hunting down signals, I discovered an alternative way of navigating through the city. It opened a portal through which I could experience my world anew with the same sense of awe as a child.



Photo © HC Gilje

Transmission space as narrative place

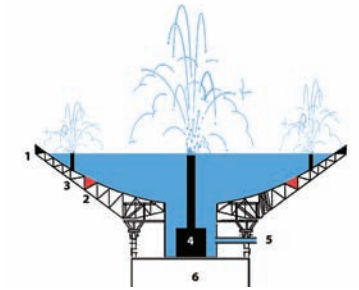
Markers in the city and surrounding landscape took on a significance that I had not paid too much attention to before. My gaze turned to the sky as I looked for the source of the emissions. Antennas on buildings, traffic- and street light masts, as well as distant towers on the hills surrounding Oslo entered my visual field, each with their specific aesthetics and grades of visibility. Here, a stealthy wireless security camera that would rather not be noticed. There, an industrial-looking cell phone mast resembling a totem pole. Hidden in my pocket – my iPhone, and way over there a TV transmission tower with its paraphernalia of parabola dishes appearing as a set of marimbas upon which giants could beat out messages from afar all over the city. And filling the gaps between all these fixed and roaming emitters, the space of transmission emerged as an intricate narrative of territories, traffic streams and daily rhythms.

The very act of sniffing out hot spots of electromagnetic activity consequently changed the way that I moved through the streets such that my unusual body language caught the attention of passers by, as did the mysterious device with which I was probing the thin air. Perhaps if I had

been wearing an official-looking uniform things would have been different. As it was I was making a scene out in the streets, while in my mind I envisaged a machine which could possibly reflect my experiences and thoughts back into the urban space as a temporary form of public art. I called it the *Electromagnetic Fountain* even before I knew what it would look like or how I could build it.

Streams of consciousness

Surfing on streams of consciousness I thought of the wildfire of wifi; how the ebbs and flows of data streams had become natural elements of the modern world, and how elements of 'nature' are manifested in urban space. I considered the ability of fountains to create an oasis as both a reflection of nature, a decorative element and a meeting place in the midst of the visible city. I recalled watching the jumping jets and illuminations of the spectacular Bellagio Fountain in Las Vegas programmed to dance to music, and the crowds of people that flock round to watch it each day – on the hour, every hour. Though easier to describe in terms of entertainment than nature, the Bellagio Fountain fits naturally into the virtual reality of Vegas. On the surface, what is natural in one sense seems unnatural in another, and yet the twain are unfathomably intertwined. In contrast, I envisaged a more modest, transportable water fountain equipped with electromagnetic detectors programmed to perform a structured aquatic, illuminated improvisation to the sound of electromagnetic waves as they made their way to a myriad of unknown destinations.



Sketch: Per Platou

To give it performance value I imagined hoisting the fountain off a lorry and dumping it onto a city square, and how its sudden appearance and peculiar choreography could capture people's attention, make them stop in their tracks, entertain their thoughts, and influence the ambiance



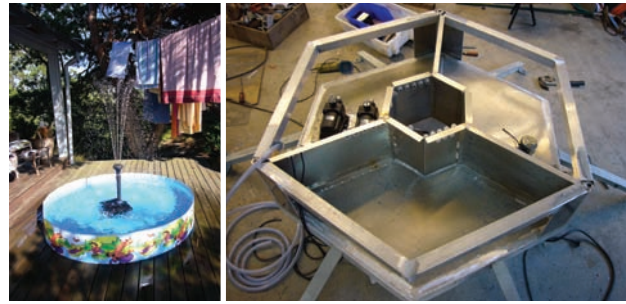
Photos © Amanda Steggell

of the square. I envisaged how the public, with emitters on their persons, could participate in its choreography either passively – just by walking past or standing close to it, or actively – by operating their phones (or other electrical devices) close to the fountain's antenna to make it dance more wildly.

I thought about the impending switch from analogue to digital TV transmission signals that was about to take place at the time, and how a parabola antenna dish would be the perfect solution for the fountain bowl. As if by magic I acquired a redundant parabola dish, 2.5m in diameter, from the foot of Norway's most famous TV tower that would eventually fulfill this purpose.

Time passes quickly

Having envisaged, designed and built the fountain with the help of friends, colleagues and industry partners, all that remained was to try it out in public. On the brink of its first performance I was occupied by several questions. Without time to properly test the functioning of its electrical circuits, two pumps, five valves and programming, my main concern was whether it would work at all, not to mention survive exposure to the elements once placed outdoors.



Photos © Amanda Steggell

Once dumped on the square, would its aesthetics and the little wifi sticker that marks the place where the detector is installed, provide a key to allow the public to enter its world and encourage them to interact with it? Would it be perceived as art – or even noticed at all amongst the



Photos © Amanda Steggell

hustling and bustling of city life? While thinking all this, I suddenly became aware of a connection I had forgotten about, but that must certainly have been lurking under the surface influencing my project from within, not in the least with regards to the aesthetics of the body of the *Electromagnetic Fountain* itself.

Dr Who?

This connection is located in a particular scene of an episode from the most popular and longest running BBC TV sci-fi series of all time; Dr Who. I used to watch it every Saturday evening with my dad, and what made it extra special for us was that some of the episodes were filmed at the nuclear power station⁵ where he worked as I was growing up. For those not familiar with this series, please let me explain: Dr Who is an eccentric Timelord from an alien planet with the ability to regenerate his body when acquiring life-threatening injuries. He fights injustice in the galaxy, traveling through time and space in the TARDIS, which stands for Time And Relative Dimension(s) In Space. Due to a malfunction that occurred when landing in London in 1963 the TARDIS, which is supposed to disguise itself to fit in with its surroundings, became stuck in the guise of a British police box.



Photo: www.zetacity.com



TARDIS illustration: Lawrence Simon

Pre-dating mobile phones, a police box is a telephone kiosk situated in a public place for use of both members of the police force and public to contact the police headquarters. Unlike an ordinary phone box, its telephone is mounted on a door so it can be used from the outside, while the interior of the box functions a miniature police station. However, the TARDIS is vastly bigger on the inside than its exterior suggests and its navigation system often malfunctions, causing it to land where it is not supposed to.

When I look at TARDIS it is impossible not to notice elements that relate directly to the *Electromagnetic Fountain*, except that I seem to have inverted things and put its interior on the exterior. The fountain looks like the TARDIS's console turned upside down, and many of the elements that appear on the surface of it are hidden away in the base of the *Electromagnetic Fountain*. Just as the phone-booth exterior of the TARDIS, the fountain bowl is divorced from its original functions and has acquired new ones. Though all the devices for controlling its pumps, valves and lights are located within its body, the fountain is operated from the outside rather than the inside – and it doesn't require a Doctor to operate it. It only needs to be filled with water (preferably by the fire brigade for maximum impact) and plugged in. The rest happens automatically, according to the signals it detects in the environment.

The TARDIS as art

I came across the afore-mentioned scene quite serendipitously on youtube after a google search about something or another. It comes from the era when actor Tom Baker played the role of Doctor Who.⁶ In the scene the TARDIS makes an unexpected appearance in a posh commercial art gallery in London. Below is a transcript of this occurrence where actress Eleanor Bron and actor John Cleese make a brief appearance as art critics and consider the significance of the TARDIS as art.



Dr. Who, screenshot youtube.com ref: i7VglzL_NZE (both images)

Imagine that two enlightened art critics are standing in front of the TARDIS, which was not supposed to be there in the first place, and are contemplating its artistic quality:

JC: For me one of the most curious things about this art is its wonderful afunctionalism.

EB: Yes, I see what you mean. Divorced from its function and seen purely as a piece of art, it's such of line and colour which are curiously counterpointed by the redundant vestiges of its function.

JC: And since it has no call to be here the art lies in the fact that it is here.

At this point Dr Who, closely followed on the heels by two accomplices, rushes past them and enter the TARDIS. They close the door and a few seconds later the red light on its roof starts to flash, while at the same time comes a roaring noise that sounds like a cross between a siren and an elephant. The TARDIS fades before their eyes until it vanishes into thin air. They are puzzled yet watch with an awe-stricken soberness.

After a pregnant pause comes the critics' conclusion:

EB: *Exquisite. Absolutely exquisite*

JC: *(Nods in agreement)*

Filtering perceptions

A particularly interesting aspect of this scene is that it is one of the few times in the multitude of Dr. Who episodes that the TARDIS actually gets noticed, despite the loss of its chameleon abilities. It has a special 'perception filter' that is supposed to deflect attention away from it. Yet in this scene it is not powerful enough to overcome the intense scrutiny of the art critics, suggesting that their perceptive powers are greater than others. However, once spotted in the gallery it escapes becoming discovered for what it is. Perceived as art, it becomes normalized in its surroundings – yet embedded with an aura that would probably make Walter Benjamin turn in his grave: an aura which grows, even as the object itself dematerializes and before the critics have time to even consider who the unknown artist might have been.⁷



Dr. Who, screenshot youtube.com ref: i7VglzL_NZE (both images)



Photo © Amanda Steggell

one person with 'the knowledge' and a desire to share it with others to put the pieces of the puzzle in place and start the ball rolling. News spreads quickly by word of mouth and people tend to imitate each other's behaviour, especially if their curiosity has been aroused. I have observed this happening again and again when exhibiting the fountain.

My strategy for distributing information about the fountain is to leave it up to the organisers of the events it is invited to, and then wait for the press become aware of it, take photos of it and talk to both myself and the public about it. It has worked quite well so far, to the extent

In the case of the *Electromagnetic Fountain* my aim was that it should not have time to become normalized in its surroundings. I wanted it to stick out from the crowd, even at night at which time its colour-changing underwater lights come into full play. However, when placed in public space it is perhaps because it has no apparent call to be there that draws attention and causes people to flock around it.

Presented without a sign to tell them where it comes from, what it is doing there or how it works, not everyone manages to discover that they can influence its behaviour. As such, it becomes an enigma. However, it only takes

that prior to its participation in Article 08 biannual exhibition for electronic and unstable art in Stavanger, Norway, a seminar was organised to discuss the territorial, environmental and health concerns related to the increasing use of wireless technology.

Upon its appearance as part of the exhibition a month or so later the *Electromagnetic Fountain* received a good deal of attention from the local media, with one of the newspaper articles causing quite a stir.⁸ The editor of the paper contacted me to tell me that he was being inundated by calls expressing concerns that the fountain was posing a health risk to the public. He even asked me to confirm that it would not have a detrimental effect on people with pacemakers. I told him that there was nothing to fear; the fountain probably emitted less radiation than the homes and the workplaces of the people who had phoned him. I also suggested that the calls were provoked more by the headline "Fountain measures electromagnetic radiation", rather than by the fountain itself.⁹ Admittedly, I had mentioned to the journalist that the fountain could function as an unusual form of information display – as an electromagnetic barometer, but that is just part of the story. While I can talk about other aspects of the fountain until I am blue in the face,¹⁰ it is generally the health and safety issues that are highlighted, rather than the broader picture.

One of the main aims of the *Electromagnetic Fountain* is to create a playful experience for the public where they can participate in changing the ambiance of the city square on their terms, and with their own electronic devices. Having observed a teenage girl return to the fountain several times with her friends and family, I asked her what she thought about it. She said;

It's really cool... I had a very strong signal from my mobile phone, and the jet in the middle jumped high in the air. I then asked her what kind of phone she had, to which she replied without a moment's hesitation; *Sony Erikson W580i!*

I didn't bother to ask her whether she knew that the fountain was part of an art exhibition, or what she thought about it 'as art'. Her answer was so simple, direct and switched on that it seemed neither relevant or necessary.

Depth perceptions

I believe there are depths that can be achieved by multiple types of collaborations, and to be sure, they were achieved during the process of visualizing, designing, constructing and exhibiting the *Electromagnetic Fountain*. For a start, I am grateful to Erich Berger and Martin Howse and all the people who attended the Maxwell City workshop at Atelier Nord, Oslo. It was here that I first got my hands on an electromagnetic detector and together with the other participants, walked out to explore the electromagnetic substance of Oslo and its surrounding area. From this workshop came the idea of the 'invisible twin city' which I have later taken the liberty of adopting in my texts. Martin Howse later contributed by designing and building detectors specially for the fountain.

I thank Per Platou who collaborated with me in the early stage of the project, both conceptually and practically (he made a budget for the funding application, a task that I found almost impossible to do myself at the time). Then there is Arts Council Norway who collaborated by responding to the application positively, followed closely behind by Atle Barcley of ROM3. He suggested using my idea as a pilot project for a new art and industry partnership project he was

about to launch in the municipality of Grenland, Norway. As a result I had my first experience of attempting to build a machine that would meet industry standards. I worked with a team of engineers and electricians from NLI Engineering AS as well as metal worker Frank Ralle, who cut and welded the fountain parts into shape in his own special way. Though the aspired 'industry standard' did not quite work out, the fountain still has an as yet unlocated glitch that causes one of its signal boxes to shut down intermittently, though it can be fixed with a flick of a cable, it was never the less a valuable and challenging experience. What I found out was that while the project ended for the team at the point when all the parts were put together, for me it was just beginning. I had to figure out exactly how I wanted the fountain to behave, and needed time to experiment with it in order to do so. When I realised that time was running out on me, and there was not enough of it left to plod on with my slow programming abilities I turned to Trond Lossius of BEK (Bergen Electronic Art Centre) for help.

Exhibiting the fountain at Article 08 brought me in close contact with a local community who were more than willing to participate. Take the raunchy firemen, for example. They filled the fountain with water upon its arrival and rescued it some ten days later when the temperature unexpectedly dropped well below zero and the water froze in its bowl.

I learnt the hard way that it is not a bright idea to build and exhibit a fountain for the first time during the Norwegian winter months. Luckily, and through the generosity of others, we both survived the experience. Each day a considerable amount of water was blown away by the strong coastal winds of Stavanger. Each day people came forth with buckets of water and formed chain gangs to help replace it.

The security guards from the surrounding shops took it upon themselves to protect the fountain from destructive activity during the dark hours. The *Electromagnetic Fountain* enthusiasts acted upon their own initiative to demonstrate its abilities to others. The employees at Bautas AS in Skien gave me shelter in their store room and an oven to keep me warm as the fountain was being developed, and have generously housed it ever since. Most recently there are the organisers of the national annual research days at Grenland University College who, despite its unresolved glitch, still chose to exhibit the fountain in the college grounds. Henceforth I will think of the glitch as a special feature that contributes to making the *Electromagnetic Fountain* quite unique!

Perhaps one of the most moving experiences I had during the exhibition was meeting a retired engineer with insomnia who came to watch the fountain each night. It became a ritual to sit together on a bench and discuss its functions and disfunctions and tweaking its feature, while contemplating over the more lofty topics of art, life, the universe and everything. Lastly, I am grateful to both Michelle Teran and Ine Therese Berg, who with their analytic abilities have helped me to bring this text back together when it was about to fall apart.

Depth can be understood both as a measurable size and, in metaphysical terms as a quality that culture aspires to, but is very hard to locate.¹¹ I understand perception as being a bodily skill that starts with the collaboration of the senses and precedes thought and language, though each can inform and modify the other. How else could we come up with descriptions such as 'loud tie', 'sharp cheese', 'cool dude' or 'sweet music'?

As a choreographer I became interested in various types of cross overs between disciplines. I have practiced and taught choreography, media, video art and more, working in many areas of the world. I have also been drawn to the complexities of working with people from diverse cultures and disciplines (artistic and otherwise) and find that the learning from each of them offers each discipline new avenues for exploration and understanding of their own fields.

When I was three I dreamt about becoming a ballerina and trained hard for many years to try and make my dream a reality. My dreams changed as the years passed and the future came into the present. Today I reserve the right to be critical through the tools of a choreographic practice that channels everything through my body. Communications technologies, their media and related devices become instruments for my imagination through which I envisage what a possible new future could be and experiment with ways of how I and my art can adapt to survive and participate in it. It becomes in the present as a practice-based science fiction.

Notes

- 1 Incidentally, I came upon this thought while performing karaoke in the kitchen, care of Youtube. I love to sing Elvis Presley songs while waiting for the kettle to boil as they conveniently take approximately the same time.
- 2 I have a Macbook Pro right now, though I don't think of it as a book at all; there are truths to be found on the surface of advertisements.
- 3 *Can't Help Falling in Love*, by George Weiss, Hugo Peretti and Luigi Creatore...
- 4 ...sang in the style of Elvis Presly, *Blue Hawaii* album, 1961.
- 5 Dungeness Power Station, located on the Dungeness headland in Kent, on the south eastern coast of England.
- 6 Somewhere between nineteen seventy and eighty, though I cannot locate the actual episode. You can watch it for yourself <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7VglzL_NZE>.
- 7 I can but imagine their perplexity as the critics try to relate their experiences of the 'exquisite' work of art to others.
- 8 "A plaything with a serious undertone, fountain measures electromagnetic radiation", Næsheim, E. (14 Nov 2008) *Vindfallet*. Stavanger Aftenbladet.
- 9 The following day a tiny notice appeared in the paper saying something like; the artist confirms that the *Electromagnetic Fountain* does not interfere with pacemakers. And that was the end of the story.
- 10 ...such as the open, inner city wireless network that could be used for free during 2008. It was initiated as part of the celebrations that marked Stavanger as the European Capital of Culture in 2008. To gain access to it required

sending personal data via sms to a obtain a 'key'. The key allowed you to be online for 15 minutes at a time (if I remember correctly), after which a new key was required. I found this quite discerning when considering the slogan adopted by the city; *Open Port!*. I have failed to mention that the *Electromagnetic Fountain* was also part of these celebrations, and that it stood outside the Stavanger 2008 building.

11 This sentence was formulate as part of a description of an underwater sculpture of a naked woman that was to be viewed as a 2D image on an echosounder display. It was called "The 8th Sister, an exercise into the depths of Freudian perception" (2005), and was initiated and produced by *Motherboard* – an art project that I co-directed with Per Platou from 1996 to 2008. Our archives can be found at www.liveart.org.

Amanda Steggell (opposite) has a background in dance/choreography and is associate professor at Bergen National Academy of the Arts. Her interest is in the allurements and uncanniness of technology and its related devices with which she shares her life. As a collaborative and solo artist, her interdisciplinary work combines and shifts across the scope of the performing, visual, sonic and media arts. In 2007 she gained a PhD-alternative qualification for artists in Norway for her artistic research in synaesthesia and contemporary live art practice.

Photo © Stein Jarle Olsen, Teknisk Ukeblad

