

ARTCHAE

For a Media Ar(t)chaeology of Telepresence

Edited by Barbara Grespi, Miriam De Rosa,
Maria Teresa Soldani, Lorenzo Lazzari



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Foreword*

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The *ARTCHAE* project stems from reflections on the pervasiveness of basic forms of telepresence that have become part of our lives since the beginning of the health emergency caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus in March 2020. During this time, the necessity to carry out most personal and professional communications via video conferencing platforms has reinstated video's significance as a means of live image transmission through two-way (or multiple) streaming. This mode of telepresence forms part of a pivotal chapter in media history, in terms of both industrial experimentation with telephone and television technologies, and artistic practices. From a media archaeology perspective, this history has its roots in nineteenth century media imaginary and finds its full completion in contemporary forms of extended reality. From WhatsApp video calls to circuit-based media such as smartphone photography and desktop video interaction, or again, to live media forms such as virtual and augmented reality worlds and clubs, telepresence has become a central dimension of the contemporary mediascape.

The need to research the archaeology of this key aspect of our mediated present was first expressed in the article “Closed Circuit Faces. Archeologie del volto in telepresenza” by Anna Caterina Dalmasso and Barbara Grespi. In this essay—republished in English in this volume—the authors interpreted the self-transmission modes adopted by common platforms such as Meet, Teams,

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and Zoom as a radical remodeling of the CCTV mediation experimented with by early video artists such as famously Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, and Peter Campus. On the other hand, the area of research devoted to artistic moving images has long inquired into the multifarious modes in which the issues of inhabiting space can be explored, manipulated, and represented in creative ways by means of so-called post-cinematic media configurations that provide interesting insights and technical solutions to think telepresence as we know it today. The project *ARTCHAE. Rediscovering Video and Installation Art as an Archaeology of Telepresence*, which was written in November 2022 and funded through the Prin 2022 PNRR call for proposals in Autumn 2023, initiates a broader and more detailed reflection on these strands. The project, developed by two research units—the leading unit at the University of Milan and the local unit at Ca’ Foscari University Venice—primarily focuses on the role of art in conceiving telepresence as an open dimension with significant aesthetic and political potential, particularly with regard to the democratic sharing of experiences and the critical nature of self-mediation. Secondly, *ARTCHAE* has worked to expand the historical corpus of artworks focusing on CCTV. The team has traced a rich line of experimentation with telepresence developed by numerous female artists who are rarely mentioned in the history of video and media art. Recognizing the productivity of the technological model of circular recording-transmission system as a tool for reflection on specific themes of female identity, these artists explored discarded forms of telepresence that offered an alternative future to our current reality.

From this perspective, the *ARTCHAE* project has intended to advocate for a media archaeology of telepresence. To extend the corpus of artworks in an inclusive sense, the research team has partnered with important Italian and international archives gathering electronic and video art works, a selection of which is explored in some of the contributions collected in this volume. Our main partner has been MEET | Digital Culture Center in Milan, which is home to the *Le Radici del Nuovo* [“The Roots of the New”] archive. This contains a vast and varied collection of video documentation—assembled by Maria Grazia Mattei—relating to computer and telematic art from the 1960s to the present day. Our key collaborations in the Italian scene include the video art archives of Careof, Ondavideo, Invideo, explored on-site by the Milan unit, and a selection of Venice-based institutions such as Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa and the Cardazzo Fund at Fondazione Giorgio Cini, where the Venice team has carried out on-site research. In-depth research was also conducted internationally at Electronic Art Intermix (New York), where the Milan team—composed of Barbara Grespi, Maria Teresa Soldani, and Rossana Galimi—has spent several months, and ARGOS—Centre for Audiovisual Art (Brussels), where the Venetian unit—composed of Miriam De Rosa, Lorenzo Lazzari, and Miriam Rejas Del Pino—has worked.

The *ARTCHAE* team also curated a series of scientific meetings with national and international scholars—the *ARTCHAE seminars* at Ca' Foscari University Venice; the conferences *ARTCHAE #1: Inside and Outside the Circuit* (keynote speakers: Matana Roberts, Wanda Strauven) and *ARTCHAE #2: Archaeologies of Telematic Presence* (keynote speakers: Lori Emerson, Kris Paulsen, Benjamin Piekut) at the University of Milan—plus a final event at MEET | Digital Culture Center with Maria Grazia Mattei, in which the *Le Radici del Nuovo* archive was opened to the public.

Thanks to these collaborations, the contributions collected in this volume are able to offer insights from Italian and international scholars alike that can provide readers with a theoretical and applied toolkit: on the one hand, the *ARTCHAE* research units have in effect interrogated the genealogies of contemporary telepresence by identifying key concepts and categories that may help in describing the mechanisms and technological opportunities opened by video and the tele-transmission of images. These are retrievable throughout a vast array of artistic works ranging from early videotapes up to CCTV-based installations, from multi-channel moving image works to TV clips. On the other hand, the project has focused on artistic practices as such, emphasizing the experimental element that allowed for a sort of “research-and-development” activity to unfold: analyzing the selected archives and artworks, it becomes quite apparent how artistic practice offers a lab space to test new technical solutions, expressive styles and aesthetic strategies.

In response to the complexity of the scenario, the volume is divided into three sections.¹ The first section (“Looking for Telepresence across Artistic Practice”) addresses methodological issues, beginning with a material and technological analysis of experimental video practices as a site to start thinking and testing telepresence. It then conducts specific media archaeological explorations on the theme of telemediated corporeality in relation to spatiality and cultural belonging, offering insights into analogue and digital doubles and questioning the crucial archaeological role of the archive. The second section (“Telematic Art: Circuits for Space-Time Navigation”) explores multimodal genealogies of tele transmission, focusing particularly on the role of sound and feminist video art. It investigates the attempted dismantling of broadcasting and concludes with an analysis of a limit case of contemporary tele-media art, in which the distance bridged by media is interplanetary. The third section (“Documents, Perspectives, and New Frontiers”) brings together different forms of engagement with media art, combining first-hand accounts from figures active in the artistic and curatorial scene with already published essays that provide historical

1 The sections were conceived as distinct editorial units under the direction of their respective editors, who bear the full scientific and editorial responsibility for the content and iconographic materials included therein, as well as for their conformity to the established standards.

and theoretical framing, and concludes with the latest article by leading media archaeologist Wanda Strauven. Her article opens up new and fruitful avenues for media archaeology research, where video art intersects with reflections on screen genealogies.

By composing a catalogue of theoretical categories, artistic practices, and key testimonies, *ARTCHAE* highlights many points of continuity between the so-called “old” and “new” media. Moreover, it contributes to build strong cultural awareness and historical knowledge of the genealogical lineages of recent media formations, in the realm of the digital, not only offering ground for an informed consideration of our media practices, but also opening up avenues for future research that will hopefully tap into a sense of belonging and participation that we demonstrate to be historically fueled by both art practices and media.

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