

# 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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# Introduction\*

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When Marco Scotini presented the 2024 iteration of his ongoing project *Disobedience Archive* at the 60th Biennial of Art in Venice, he was probably not aware that his new zoetrope setup would have provided a paradigmatic artwork for the *ARTCHAE* project. Focused on the idea of retrieving antecedents of the contemporary applications of telepresence (Paulsen 2017, see also the author's contribution in section 2) into video and installation art, this research project seeks to explore archives gathering collections in the afore-mentioned art fields with the aim of sampling recurring tropes and symptomatic pieces or technologies, able to represent what Erkki Huhtamo (2013) would term *topoi*, but also what Jonathan Crary (1990) would describe as a fracture in the way of conceiving the technologies of the visual thus far adopted. Whilst some of the possible inquiry avenues sparked by this approach will be discussed in the contributions gathered in the second and third part of this book *ARTCHAE: For a Media Ar(t)chaeology of Telepresence*, section 1 sets the methodological premise of the overall project by explicitly embracing one of Wanda Strauven's suggestions regarding the key role of media artists (2007). In line with her lesson and in full media archaeological spirit, the texts that follow all move from the analysis of artistic practices, taking advantage of the freedom from strict methodological rules or disciplinary *caveat* exercised by video artists, filmmakers and experimenters more broadly, to build up possible readings of the genealogy at stake. From pioneering personalities employing video tape in their works in the Seventies, up to contemporary diasporic filmmaking experiences, from

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techno-pop groups up to cutting-edge curatorial projects crystallising the 2020s *zeitgeist*, the very different artistic experiences discussed in what follows all share the conviction that

Not only does the artistic approach facilitate a multilayered excavation into time and space more easily than scholarly writing; generally speaking, the media artist also operates in direct, physical contact with the medium or, even better, with its materiality. Therefore, the media artist can dig into the technological past as well as in the potentialities of old and new media more straightforwardly than a (traditional) media historian. The media artist then becomes an example that the new media historian, or media archaeologist, might wish to follow, even if his/her academic toolbox and framework do not “allow” him/her to do so. (Strauven 2007, 73-74)

Far from simply providing case studies that move in the sky of art as monadic and disjointed stars connected to each other in a merely exemplificative fashion, the chapters gathered in this section offer each and every one a focus that works according to an associative thinking that is typical of the media archaeological approach. Echoing, to some extent, a Warburghian logic (the *Atlas Mnemosyne* was famously composed on dark cloth, where the different themed tables emerged from a combination and association of pictures are pinned in a temporary way, so that new positions and new connections may be produced continuously), this way of proceeding is well illustrated in Siegfried Zielinski’s scholarly work (2019) and we believe fits for the purpose of this strand of the *ARTCHAE* project, too.

In this view, then, the *Disobedience Archive* provides with a brilliant opportunity to apply this approach, as regards to at least two aspects in particular. First, the use of the archive and its heterogeneous composition, as well as the idea of employing it in a malleable way so as to highlight its dynamic nature point to the multilayered and non-linear notion of history that characterises the media archaeological approach. Here, it takes shape thanks to the disposition in round across the gallery, where the various items preserved in the archive are in fact a series of videos from various authors and periods in time. Whilst a specific analysis of the pieces is offered in Miriam Rejas Del Pino’s contribution, alongside a discussion of the genealogical element endowing Scotini’s project, here is worth underlying the importance of these videos as the epitome of a “memory technology” (Blom 2016, 16)—a groundbreaking feature emerged in the 1970s when video starts to be used, which is well thematised here. This speaks of video’s capacity to access memory in a non-linear manner, precisely as the *ARTCHAE* research team did as several different archives were explored over the course of the project. These include the *Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa* archive, the *Cardazzo Fund* at *Giorgio Cini Foundation*, both in Venice; Michele

Sambin's private collection; the collection at *ARGOS – Centre for Audiovisual Art* (Brussels) and the *Electronic Art Intermix* archive in NYC.<sup>1</sup>

Going back to the *Disobedience Archive* as a paradigmatic artwork for the whole project, the second element which we deem significant to dwell upon is the specific setup designed for its Biennial iteration. As just quickly anticipated, this is reminiscent of a zoetrope: the eco to the optical toy shall be seen both literally in the disposition of the artwork and its components in space, as well as metaphorically. As far as the installation in the gallery space is concerned, the correspondence between the figurines pictured in series on a cylinder and the videos is quite apparent. The key feature of the zoetrope, that is, the cuts on the cylinder allowing for the images not to blur one into the other are replaced here by the dark wall separating each video. In the same way, the spinning movement of the cylinder which produced the illusion of motion between the figurines in the pre-cinema device, is turned into our own movement, as spectators, browsing across the exhibition space. The overall effect is that of a massive carousel that offers archival images edited in a different way, every time they are watched in a different order by a different spectator. That is the exact same rationale we adopt to compile this section of the present volume: readers are invited to spin the cylinder of an imaginary zoetrope and follow the movement before their eyes, except that the trajectory taking shape leaves them the agency to alter the motion deciding how to construct their visual journey. In effect this is not a conclusive journey, a given story, but rather one designed and re-designed at every reading, depending on the connections between the different chapters that we present here. Each stand as one of the figurines of the zoetrope—or one of the videos of the *Disobedience Archive*—and has a story to tell about how videoart provides with constitutive elements, motifs or techniques that shall be found still today in our telepresenced world. The non-linear temporal reconstruction and mode of watching the videos of Scotini's artwork opens up a set of possible interpretive paths across the plural genealogies of contemporary modes of telepresence.

Already in the 1970s, video artists were immediately drawn to experimenting with this then-new medium, engaging with all its components and protocols—from the two open-reels of the Video Taper Recorder to the feedback with the control monitor. The role that artists played in the experimentation with the video apparatus and its materiality is particularly explored in Lorenzo Lazzari's *At the Thresholds of the Medium: CCTV, Playback, and Feedback Breaking the Possibilities*

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1 The authors would like to thank Stefano Coletto and Matilde Ferrarin at Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Michele Sambin for allowing us to work on his personal archive, Fondazione Cini for granting the access to the Cardazzo Fund, the whole staff at ARGOS - Centre for Audiovisual Arts in Brussels and at Electronic Art Intermix in New York for facilitating the access and renting of artworks in their respective collections, which find a theoretical readings in the chapters gathered in this section.

of *Video*. Analysing three works created by Goran Trbuljak, Michele Sambin, and Dalibor Martinis in the late 1970s and now part of the *Cardazzo Fund*, Lazzari highlights how these artists were able to push the limits of the medium and its protocols in order to enhance the performative space activated around both the medium and the artists themselves.

In the examination of these works, another subject immediately emerges in the scene beyond the artist and the apparatus, namely, the double. Indeed, video—with its real-time quality—enhances the presence of the double (of the artist, the audience, and the medium itself), something that was not possible with film except through pre-recorded sequences. Perhaps as a consequence of what was first experimented with in the 1970s, the concept of doubling became predominant during the 1980s. This is evident in Francesco Spampinato's contribution. Entitled *Techno-Pop: Virtual Doubles and Dystopian Futures Around 1984*, this text navigates between postmodernism and cyberpunk culture to highlight how the notion of the virtual double served as a *fil rouge* in the artistic production of Giovanotti Mondani Meccanici and *Max Headroom*—both alter egos of artists' collectives—as well as in the animated mannequins of Rebecca Allen.

The presence of one's own double immediately comes from a longlasting expressive and technical research based on another visual artefact which, as Rosalind Krauss reminded us (1976), is closely related to video: the mirror. Rather than considering them as two entities that exist only in separation, it is important to examine the cases in which the video image and that on the mirror coexist within an art piece, thereby creating a short circuit in the viewer's perception of which image is reflected and which is in fact produced by video. That is particularly interesting when the impression of a multiplied subject relates to the context where this is located: distance and proximity, presence and absence are questioned and critically explored, while the artist wandering (or movements) across the frame becomes a way of wondering how to navigate it in between the on- and off-screen space. An analysis of these mechanisms is offered by Miriam De Rosa via selected video works by Joan Jonas and Lili Dujourie, in her chapter *Navigating the Frame: Videoart, Lines of Flight, Deixis*.

As these two artists demonstrate, the mirror is also always a frame, implying that something is invariably excluded from its inner surface. It also enables a series of movements through which objects and bodies may pass between the realms of existence and non-existence, memory and oblivion. This is a feature shared with the archive that allows thus to circle back that reflection where opened it, by way of Lucy Reynolds' text, which closes the section. Looking at a specific artistic moving image work, her essay *Speculative Materializations in Erika Tan's Barang Barang: Spectral Entanglements* (2021) highlights how what is preserved within archives raises not only questions about the content of the documents themselves but, even more significantly, about the gaps that exist between them—about what has been excluded by a filter that pre-orders the

real (Ernst 2015, 13–15). Thematising the issue of absence, the author addresses the impossible presence of women from different epochs and geographies who, in Erika Tan’s work are—with Vivian Sobchack (2011)—re-presented. This is made possible through a speculative video fiction that inspires Reynolds’ thinking about the intertwined stories of the characters, raising questions about what constitutes a colonial archive and what, precisely, lies within its gaps and ellipses.

In sum, this section of the book intends to reconstruct, mobilise and suggest possible connections between the moments in the history of media and in the videography of the artists we discuss crystallised in the various contributions collected herein. Moving along a dynamic trajectory running across a variety of media configurations ranging from installation art, video art, performance art (and re-enactment), the collected texts process the lessons of artists to offer different points of access into the rich and multilayered archaeology of contemporary telepresence.

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