

# Absence in Common: An Operator for the Inoperative Community

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*I have intimated that, especially in a secular context, a commonly desired ultimate foundation or ground is full unity, community, or consensus, which is often, if not typically, figured as lost or perhaps lacking, usually because of the intrusive presence of others seen as outsiders or polluters of the city or the body politic. One may, however, insist that such unity, community, or consensus is absent and that the sociopolitical problem is how to deal with that absence as well as the differences and forms of conflict that accompany it.*

Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss" [1]



The Mojave Phone Booth. Courtesy of <http://www.flickr.com/photos/eyetwist>

This paper will argue for the relevance of a phenomenology of presence to a discussion of where and how a "community domain" is possible.

As an ideal within modernity, community has enjoyed remarkable staying power. Dreams of universal language, perfectly organized spaces, and augmented conversation never seem to lose their allure. But as the refuse of failed utopias mounds high, many people question whether ideals of community have not hurt more than they have helped. Among the skeptics are philosophers and political theorists, artists and historians of technology. Significant about this body of critique is that communication itself, and the technological means

by which it is achieved, have emerged as an important and material way in which ideals of community are habitualized and inscribed into culture.

## Community, Communication, and Communion

In *Speaking into the Air, a History of the Idea of Communication*, John Durham Peters examines communication as a historicized cultural form, one that has inhibited our ability to actually relate to one another. In Peters' history, ideal and authentic communication between individuals typically takes the form of wordless exchange, a perfect transfer in which mediation falls away to allow for fusion of souls. As far back as Plato, and driven home by modern mass communication, missed connections drive the desire for a less material form of social relations. Our ideals and technologies trap us within a cycle of utopia and dystopia. "Too often," Peters writes, "'communication' misleads us from the task of building worlds together. It invites us into a world of unions without politics, understandings without language, and souls without bodies, only to make politics, language and bodies reappear as obstacles rather than blessings." [2]

"The fully realized person of individualistic or communistic humanism is the dead person," writes Jean Luc Nancy in a related work, *The Inoperative Community*. [3] Nancy shares with Peters a concern for how often difference is treated as a barrier to be overcome, or a boundary that defines the fully realized person. Where Peters urges us to celebrate the mutable and faulted nature of language, Nancy calls for a new definition of subjecthood. As singular beings, rather than individuals, we come into being through recognizing the boundaries of the self at another. Community results not from fusion with another or through autonomous subscription to a common body, but through mutual acknowledgment of difference. Selfhood emerges only where one person ends, and another (or even death) begins. Nancy writes:

*Communication consists before all else in this sharing and this [co-appearance] of finitude: that is, in the dislocation and in the interpellation that reveal themselves to be constitutive of being-in-common - precisely inasmuch as being-in-common is not a common being [...] Only in this communication are singular beings given - without a bond and without communion, equally distant from any notion of connection or joining from the outside and from any notion of a common and fusional interiority. [4]*

Common to the problematic ideals identified by Nancy and Peters is a failure to account for absence – the absence of being and selfhood beyond the limits of one's own sensorium. [Fig. 1] Instead of recognizing the limits of death or difference as that which we hold in common, utopian communicants attempt to transcend death through pursuit of universal language, or extension of the self into a common being that cannot abide difference.



Figure 1. An orientalized naïf listens closely for a voice that will never come. *The Questioner of the Sphinx*, Elihu Vedder, 1863. Courtesy of <http://www.artcyclopedia.com>

## Enacted Absence

Importantly for new media practitioners, Peters believes that we realize and routinize such reactions to absence through our technologies of communication. He traces a helpful and now familiar history in which 19th-century spiritualism directly influences early understanding of telegraphy, telephony, eventually satellites and even the search for extra-terrestrials. [5] Across these attempts to communicate lies a common test for presence, a test coincident with the test for limits to the self. At the seance, a medium "pings" the wooden table to see if a spirit will rap in return – contact with the world beyond is constituted through an echo, an aural mirror, but also a disjuncture of sense and belief. The presence of an other is only achievable through a break of time and space, a detachment of the senses.

Leigh Eric Schmidt demonstrates how such an epistemological break serves even secularist agendas, through a "re-education of the senses" based on enacted absence. In his book *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion and the American Enlightenment*, Schmidt tells of scientists examining oracular statues with stethoscopes, and traveling magicians who re-create Delphi through props and speaking tubes. [6] Each performance of simulated aural revelation concluded by pulling back the curtain, allowing audience members to then speak through the mouth of a goddess.

In these histories of telepresence, absence is either quickly filled (even haunted), or left gaping to revisit as a fetishized site of trauma – the structural trauma of realizing one's own finitude, and the impossibility of community (or sometimes divinity). In his study of the concept of "ether," by which absence is often materialized, Joe Milutis quotes the early Russian radio artist Khlebnikov:

*Where has this great stream of sound come from, this inundation of the whole country in supernatural singing, in the sound of beating wings, this broad silver stream full of whistlings and clangor and marvelous mad bells surging from somewhere we are not, mingling with children's voices singing and the sound of wings?*

*Over the center of every town in the country these voices pour down, a silver shower of sound. Amazing silver bells mixed with whistlings surge down from above. Are these perhaps the voices of heaven, spirits flying low over the farmhouse roof?*

No. [7]

Our technologies of presence set us up to expect communication and connection where it will never happen, to imagine community in ways that are bound to fail. How might telepresent technology instead acknowledge absence without fetishizing it, abhor the void without filling it? Neither Peters nor Nancy address this question in detail, though their analyses fully articulate the need. If the histories related by Schmidt and others are any indication, we will need to answer this question through practice as well as theory. First however, I would like to enlist one other area of discourse – that of trauma and memory, especially as manifest in memorial spatial, aural, and pictorial practices.

## The Trauma of Absence

Failures to confront absence in communication bear a close resemblance to failures to confront and work *through* the experience of trauma. As we benefit from a large body of work analyzing material responses to trauma, perhaps we might answer the calls of Peters or Nancy through some cross-disciplinary discussion.

Telemediated experience, photography and even the recorded voice rely on some small set of data to bridge a temporal-spatial gap between persons. Likewise, recovery from trauma involves the utilization of present sensory experience to bridge a temporal gap introduced by traumatic dislocation of sense and consciousness. Victims of trauma "work through" their experience after having perceived it; as the brain cannot comprehend the event in real-time, only remnants are available for examination. As part of recovery, victims and witnesses revisit the site of trauma through material recreation or inscription.



Important to this possibly dangerous analogy, however, are some distinctions made by Dominick LaCapra. He describes recovery from trauma as a process of separating absence from *loss*, where loss involves a particular historical event, and absence the perception of something as "missing" that was never present to begin with. Conflation or confusion of these is part of traumatic experience, but could also result from inappropriate identification with another's loss, mistaking felt absence for experienced loss. Failure to properly distinguish between the two can have disastrous consequences.

*When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.* [8]

Treated as loss, absence pushes witnesses to fill voids that cannot be filled, through retaliation, or through misplaced identification with real victims. Alternately, a witness or victim may choose to preserve the void, and revisit the site of perceived historical loss with compulsive regularity.

*To blur the distinction between, or to conflate, absence and loss may itself bear striking witness to the impact of trauma and the post-traumatic, which create a state of disorientation, agitation, or even confusion and may induce a gripping response whose power and force of attraction can be compelling. The very conflation attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions (such as that between absence and loss). Indeed, in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the here and now with future possibilities. I would argue that the response of even secondary witnesses (including historians) to traumatic events must involve empathic unsettlement that should register in one's very mode of address in ways of revealing both similarities and differences across genres (such as history and literature). But a difficulty arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity. And a post-traumatic response of unsettlement becomes questionable when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts compulsive repetition, including the compulsively repetitive turn to the aporia, paradox, or impasse.* [9]

LaCapra's descriptions of conflated absence and loss are reminiscent of utopian attempts at community or communication, which typically blur distinctions between self and other, then and now, here and there. Reading Nancy or Peters through LaCapra, the absence of perfect communion with others is sometimes misconstrued as an Edenic loss, a historic Fall from which we must struggle to recover. For all three of these scholars, we ignore this void or fill it to the peril of ourselves and others. In a secularized world, there has been no golden time of communion, no perfect place of immanence and clear transfer of thought, nor will there be. Yet new media are both lauded and derided as the progenitors or destroyers of such a place. [10]

LaCapra alludes to ways in which absence misunderstood as loss can manifest itself in destructive forms of nationalism. He also identifies in such confusion a more subtle violence towards difference, through misplaced empathy that folds the other (the real victim) into the self. To violently empathize is to expand the space of the self, constructing social symmetry where there is none.

Certainly there are echoes here of the ways in which telecommunication constructs symmetrical social experiences that mask or obscure the real power dynamics at work. Alternately, if in communication we decline to fill the void of absence, we are still often predisposed to fetishizing it, revisiting the wound with compulsive regularity. We scan the stations for a signal, lift the receiver to see if anyone is on the party line, perhaps even compulsively re-check our email. Like Donnie Darko's Beckett-hero Roberta Sparrow, we spend our days pacing back and forth to see if the void is still there in the mailbox. [Fig. 2]



Figure 2. Roberta Sparrow (aka "Grandma Death") checks her mail again in *Donnie Darko*.

## Representing Traumatic Loss: Space

Turning back to the comparison of absent community and trauma, what might we learn from memorial responses to traumatic loss? Remaining alert to the danger of equating absence with historical loss, what might we learn from spatial, pictorial, or aural attempts to recover from trauma?

In his book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Andreas Huyssen surveys recent attempts to grapple with loss through monument and public space. With Berlin as a focus, he discusses Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag and the commercial redevelopment of a war-razed Potsdamer Platz before turning to Libeskind's Jewish Museum. Maya Lin's popular Vietnam Memorial prompted a near institutionalization of the physical void as a way of remembering loss, and Berlin has more than its share of holes. Huyssen outlines some of the dangers of preserving absence before lauding Libeskind's design, in which a jagged meander of a building is transected by a series of inaccessible spaces. Visitors encounter these humanless voids through interior windows from every floor, but can never enter. He writes:

*There is a danger of romanticizing or naturalizing the voided center of Berlin, just as Libeskind's building may ultimately not avoid the reproach of aestheticizing or monumentalizing the void architecturally. But then the very articulation of this museal space demonstrates the architect's awareness of the dangers of monumentality: huge as the expansion is, the spectator can never see or experience it as a whole. Both the void inside and the building as perceived from outside elude the totalizing gaze upon which monumental effects are predicated. [11]*

Huyssen is aware of the dangers outlined by LaCapra, especially when manifest in the design of public space. To pretend as if there had been no loss would of course be unjust, and would inhibit recovery from trauma. On the other hand, to fetishize the void (through piles of shoes, or the glass chairs of Oklahoma City, or the reconstructed footprint-holes of the World Trade Center) is to encourage mourning that is both non-specific and too easily grasped. At best it facilitates inappropriate identification with the victims, and at worst endangers the memory of specific atrocities through abstraction.



Figure 3. A visitor looks into the void at Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, Berlin.

For Huyssen, Libeskind avoids these dangers through the construction of a void that is beyond full human comprehension, but which is still visible from the periph-

ery. [Fig. 3] Like historical loss, the void in the Jewish Museum has a finite shape and existence in the world, but it is not one easily known or ordered, appropriated. Though only a simple axis, Libeskind's void emerges unpredictably, asserting itself back into the path of the museum visitor. We are prevented from projecting ourselves fully into these spaces, as there are always some portions obscured from view – they cannot be ours. The design preserves rather than obscures the traumatic break between knowledge and perception – the real loss remains larger than we can imagine, beyond rational scale, yet we are given an analogical sensory experience that resists metonymy, and perhaps even metaphor.

Libeskind has facilitated a site for recovery from trauma that utilizes space to make loss physical, sensory, and thus seemingly obvious, yet ultimately not assumable into experience. For witnesses as distant as those born in another century and another continent, the experience still attempts to bridge a gap of sense, yet without succumbing to the ungrantable desire to know "what it was like."

## Representing Traumatic Loss: Image

Where Huyssen and Libeskind seek to facilitate recovery through spatial organization, others have approached the process as temporal, through image or sound. In *Spectral Evidence*, Ulrich Baer explores the interrelated temporalities of trauma and photography, with an emphasis on representations of the Jewish Holocaust. Some pictures, according to Baer, resist conventional comprehension as a frozen moment within a stream of time. As in traumatic experience, these images seem to establish their own time, remaining apart from history, and defying contextualization. He goes on to wonder if perhaps all photography might share this quality:

*If we analyze photographs exclusively through establishing the context of their production, we may overlook the constitutive breakdown of context that, in a structural analogy to trauma, is staged by every photograph. In some photographs, the impression of timelessness coincides with a strange temporality and contradictory sense of the present surrounding the experiences depicted. To analyze images that focus on such interruptions and loss of context, therefore, it is not sufficient to refer to the extrapictorial "social and psychic formations of the [photograph's] author / reader." Rather, we must consider such photographs in the light of what Eduardo Cadava has identified as the peculiar structure that lies between "the photographic image and any particular referent," which is, in fact, "the absence of relation." This absence of relation may come into focus when reading photography through trauma theory – and vice versa, when reading trauma theory through the startling effect of reality created by*



*photography. Photographs present their referents as peculiarly severed from the time in which they were shot, thus precluding simple recourse to the contexts established by individual and collective forms of historical consciousness. [12]*

Baer's account invites us to see pictures as analogous to the sensory evidence of a traumatic event. Though we may desire a reconstruction of the original event using available data, the gap between sense and history is ultimately impossible to close. A picture invites either inclusion in the present or placement in a specific past, through attachment to a particular referent. For Baer, neither is fully possible, nor desirable.



Figure 4. Untitled. Mikael Levin, from *War Story*. Courtesy of [www.mikaellevin.com](http://www.mikaellevin.com)

For examples of this, he looks to the concentration camp photographs of Mikael Levin [Fig. 4] and Dirk Reinartz. In each case, the picture is neither conventionally picturesque nor compositionally resistant to the gaze; instead of architectural ruins or other obvious signs of trauma, we see an unremarkable yet accessible landscape. A title or published context invites closer inspection, in order to place a banal image in the context of known historical atrocities.

*Because they do not contain evidence of their importance, these photographs ask to be regarded on strictly modernist terms – as if their significance and merit derived not from our knowledge of context but from intrinsic formal criteria alone. By representing the Holocaust in such stringently formal terms, Reinhartz and Levin force us to see that there is nothing to see there; and they show us that there is something in a catastrophe as vast as the Holocaust that remains inassimilable to historicist or contextual readings. Just when they posit the event as radically singular, and thus when they risk investing absence with spiritual meaning, Reinhartz and Levin retract the promise that we can transcend the pho-*

*tographed void to reach some comprehensive, and thus consoling, meaning. [13]*

We are left with a picture that refers only to absence, an absence that implicates us in our desire to assimilate another time into ours. Referring to the images more often associated with death camps, Baer writes, "The rush of moral indignation that often accompanies the encounter with other graphic pictures of atrocities may be narcissistically satisfying, but it may also free us from the responsibility of placing our own experiences in relation to something that remains, finally, incomprehensible." [14] Like the gaps between beings, like the end of self, these atrocities invite assimilation into our world, but ultimately refuse it.

Through the use of perspective and conventional pictorial composition, the photos of Reinartz and Levin invite involvement by the viewer. Textual identification of the horrible, invisible histories of these sites pushes the viewer back out again. Baer describes this tension as catching the viewer between place (belonging) and space (exclusion), leaving her to confront her own "subject-position," a phrase he borrows from LaCapra. The only ways out of this dilemma are sentimental identification with a lost victim, or restoration of sense to the image through its location within an archive. The former violently asserts subjectivity at the expense of acknowledging an unknowable loss; the latter uses objectivity as pretense for an equally violent refusal to confront the singularity of the event.

Like Nancy's "singular being," a visitor to Berlin's Jewish Museum remains no more or less isolated from others, or from loss. Likewise, viewers of Baer's photographs confront the gap between their time and that of a victim's downfall. They look, and compare, at first experiencing confusion before growing gradually more aware of their own position in a space of multiple and discontinuous times and histories. At the limit of photography, a viewer discovers her beginning.

## Representing Traumatic Loss: Sound

Responsible application of memorial practice toward a technologized sensorium of beings-in-common requires that we examine the aural as well as the spatial, temporal, and pictorial. Sonic representations of traumatic loss are not hard to find; the events of September 11, 2001, yielded numerous and powerful artifacts. We could listen to the recordings of artist Stephen Vitiello, who before 9/11 captured wind noise on a window of the World Trade Center's 91st floor; or to Mark Bain's record of the sounds of impact and collapse via seismic recordings made in Manhattan; Janet Cardiff's *40 Part Motet*, coincidentally on display at P.S.1, became a de facto monument to loss for many; the aspirationally democratic *Sonic Memorial* collected audio artifacts in an online archive; we might even listen to recently-released

recordings of emergency calls by stranded Trade Center workers. In these eerie "cut-ups," the victims' voices have been edited out by court order, though breathing is still audible over the responses of dispatchers.

Ultimately, however, the most applicable artifacts for our project are the unlikely sonic monuments of Richard Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops*. [Fig. 5] What began as a formal exercise in private melancholy suddenly found enormous public resonance, eventually reaching critical acclaim and unheard-of popularity for an avant-garde experiment.



Figure 5. Poster for a film version of Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops*. Courtesy of <http://www.mmlxii.com/>

During August and September of 2001, Basinski digitally recorded the degradation of decades-old magnetic tape loops, remnants of former projects. On each track, a simple and pastoral musical phrase repeats regularly, dirge-like and elegiac, for as little as 12 minutes or as long as an hour, until the tape loop presumably falls apart. Gaps and distortions grow progressively worse – to play these fragile loops was literally to destroy them, and we are hearing their last performance. Already a poignant meditation on ephemerality and the passing of one form to another at millenium's end, *The Disintegration Loops* found a whole new function on September 11. As the artist worked that day, he watched the planes hit and the towers fall through his window in Brooklyn. Basinski and friends then went to the roof, where he finished the project as the smoke continued to rise, and the world sank into a whole new political dynamic.

The four compact disks of *The Disintegration Loops* are incredibly and surprisingly moving. Each disk's cover contains the same image at different stages of dusk, a view from afar of the World Financial Center dome, visible beneath a plume of smoke in the growing darkness. Like Baer's chosen photographs, Basinski's tracks invite an unverifiable association through contextual narrative.

Listening to the recordings, we hear nothing to indicate the presence of the burning pile across the river. As the piece is more musical than pictorial, we lack even the benefit of perspectival space to invite us in. In its place, however, we are offered sentiment, the sentiment of Satie-like melodies, of Eno's ambience, and two decades or more of moody electronic synthesis. The phrases invite emotion, constructing safety through repetition and assuring chords.

As each loop breaks down, however, two things happen – the music forms an analogical relation to the Trade Center and the lives lost, and we are literally prevented from listening to it. The closer *Disintegration Loops* comes to closing the gap between representation and referent, the more impossible it is for us to hear it.

Less satisfactory examples reveal the power of Basinski's project. Compare this work to the equally repetitive video clips on network news at the time, or to the sensational sound collage that begins Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. In the former, repetition compulsively preserves the traumatic site of perceptual disjuncture; in the latter, an attempt at reconstructive representation invites us to imagine that day in vivid detail, yet without a space for mourning or reflection.

*The Disintegration Loops* preserve absence without fetishizing or colonizing it; they leave the gap of sense and consciousness intact, but facilitate mourning through separation of absence from loss. The people and places of the World Trade Center were lost, along with perhaps a particular identity for New York. We may feel that we lost other things – security, for example, or a continuous and rational sense of time, or a reliable sensorium in which perception results in comprehension – but these were never present to begin with. Critic David Keenan wrote in his review of the project for *The Wire*:

*Its process of (de)composition mirrors one way people work through their memories of disaster. Basinski describes both processes as simply "letting go of the important sustains." But the music speaks for itself and in much more poignant terms than any act of 'auto-destructive' art for art's sake. Subjected to the uncontrollable chance factor of tape decay, The Disintegration Loops is sound as matter being seized by time, the remorseless logic of its destruction counterpointing the staggered decay of memory. [15]*

Among the most unsettling qualities of Basinski's project is that once each loop has died, we can push a button to replay the digital record, resurrecting the dead only to re-experience the process of passing. Though the tendencies toward unhelpful preservation of absence through repetition are there, this discontinuity also maintains distance between the representation and referent – the loops, in the end, were simply tape; the listener-subject imagines any other connection.

## Design for a Phenomenology of Acknowledged Absence

Nancy and Peters only begin to demonstrate the destructive effects of expecting community or communion where there can be none; indeed some of the more traumatic events of the past century can be linked to just such utopias.

In the end, though, comparison of failed communication to trauma functions better at the level of structural and phenomenological experience than at the political or even moral levels. Particularly in the example of telecommunication, both trauma and communication involve a temporal or spatial break, in which present phenomena provide the only bridge to "the other side" as well as confirmation of the impossibility of closing the gap.

This paper's cited examples demonstrate ways in which this gap may be negotiated using built space or the technologies of recorded sound or image. We require bodily, sensory manifestations of felt absence, as a way of enacting the limits to communication, and of reminding ourselves about difference. We also need to be wary of the dangers of abstracting such absences, preserving them solely for the purposes of vicarious participation in the suffering of others, or of re-experiencing trauma as way of realizing autonomy.

Based on this brief survey of embodied memorial practices, I would venture the following guidelines for constructing more constructive and progressive telepresent experiences:

1. Create an experience that is bigger than the body's sensory capacities, but not so big as to be perceived as monumental or ineffable.
2. Work through synchronization, simultaneity or spatial illusion to facilitate perceived co-presence, but do not leave this illusion undisturbed.
3. Design for specific ruptures and breaks at the levels of form, content or context. Take care not to let these ruptures form the focus or end of the work.

Certainly these suggestions resemble familiar modernist approaches to media as simultaneously transparent and opaque, "hot" and "cool." Heeding LaCapra's warning, however, I discourage such reflexivity or remediation solely in the service of paradox. There are a myriad ways in which two persons might share a space, a time, a perceptual set, without pretending to union, or retreating to isolation. For Jean Luc Nancy's *Inoperative Community*, reflexivity constitutes acknowledgment of the Other, not the self.

We need interfaces and networks that facilitate just this sort of connection, and we need them to appear unexpectedly, not in the safe spaces of the gallery or festival. Others have examined how the human operator-experts

of our networks once functioned in this way, as agents or mediums through which information flowed with varying degrees of ease and attention to the process. Even apart from the politics of placing persons in such a position, we are certainly beyond the technological need for such a labor-dependent network. Perhaps, however, as our artificial agents and operators grow smarter, we might train them to facilitate remote connection with more attention to the need for resistance, for reminders of the chasms that constitute community.

## Appendix / Application

Unfortunately, examples of new media projects that demonstrate constructive acknowledgment of absence are hard to find. Since negative examples could serve an applied discourse as well, I will offer here a brief discussion of some better and worse attempts at telemediated "community domain." Any of these works would merit a longer examination – this effort is intended to briefly demonstrate application of this paper's premise.

### PostSecret

<http://postsecret.blogspot.com>

Frank Warren

On this blog, Frank Warren posts, without comment, the handmade, mailed postcards of anonymous people who wish to share a "secret." Whether or not the project originated in a new media discourse, *PostSecret* applies a strategy that is quite common in explicitly social applications of digital media. As in any number of projects, viewers are invited to contribute to the perceived shared space of a webpage; one at a time, strangers get a chance at the podium of a weekly blog post, where they share a secret no one else has heard. (These participants have certainly found an audience – as I write, the project in book form ranks at #75 on Amazon's popularity list.)

The problem with this strategy, as in many such works, lies in the identification and production of subjectivity with self-contained difference, through formal variation. Each postcard's distinguishing hand-made qualities metonymously represent the speaker, lend authenticity to the secret, and lend the project an appearance of inclusivity and diversity. A particular "community domain" is here comprised of an atomistic archive in which no individual stands in different relation to any other. Though Warren provides links to a suicide hotline, and even a testimonial as to how the page helps others "know that they are not alone in their secrets," I would argue that such projects ultimately fetishize solitude and compound the pain of isolation. The project facilitates no substantive interrelation between contributors, or between contributors and readers, despite the painful, polemical and politicized content of some of the secrets. In a departure from normative blog practice, not even comments are allowed.



*PostSecret* almost perfectly captures the non-participatory status of representative democracy in the United States, and the role of formalism or style as a substitute for subjectivity in capitalism. Like the worst attempts at memorializing public loss, Warren's domain ignores a gaping absence of discourse under the guise of facilitating a safe public space, and encourages vicarious participation in the pain of others. *PostSecret* relies on fear of communication between familiars as motivation for participation in a "community" of strangers that owe each other nothing, and yet appear to be part of something. Here one gets the appearance of filled absence, without surrendering the fetishized void.

## IN Network

<http://turbulence.org/Works/innetwork/>

Michael Mandiberg and Julia Steinmetz

Commissioned by Turbulence.org, *IN Network* consisted of a month-long multimedia blog. For all of March 2005, the couple Michael Mandiberg and Julia Steinmetz posted every image, text message, or phone conversation shared between them. As they had been recently separated by Mandiberg's move to New York, this was no small amount of information; the pair pushed their service-provider's offer of free "in network" calls past the limit, including at least one night spent sleeping "together" over a live cellular connection.

The project presents a curious intersection of alienation and banality. Like most surveillance footage, there is almost nothing of interest here for the voyeur, and in fact the invitation into another couple's world is quite exclusionary. Seemingly no recognition of an outside audience takes place – we do not know what they are talking about half the time, and even the text messages are presented just as sent, in abbreviated and opaque IM-speak. Due to the original deployment of the project through podcasts and RSS feeds, reception after the fact takes some *Memento*-like reconstruction – the posts appear in reverse order for each day. The opacity and insularity of the project begs the question of why they made the exchange public at all.

*IN Network* is an elaborate fiction – by never alluding to the presumably watching public, but purposely pushing everything (except e-mails) out there for us to see, Steinmetz and Mandiberg construct an opaque (and fairly boring) narrative for us. What do they achieve for themselves and others? Admittedly, I have not listened to every sound file, but it troubles me that they never seem to explicitly address their relationship to each other or to us as determined and shaped by these chosen media. Beyond some cloying exchanges about "how many seconds" remain until they are re-united, we see no overt comparison of telemediated experience to shared physical experience, and so I assume they must be content with the product offered them by commerce. It is hard not to see the couple as blithe to the impact of absence on relationships.

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The two might have better included the audience through a more structured performance, or a more overt and faulted exploration of their own limits. By refusing to do so, these artists demonstrate utopian faith in the power of networks to supply surrogate presence. The month's documentation becomes like one giant *Postsecret* card, dismissable as the sentiment of an isolated couple who believe themselves to be one despite the geographical gap between them. If their demographic did not represent a dominant power (young, white, cosmopolitan, and mobile), the project could be accused of exoticization through refusal to address the function of public display. Otherness is left totally unexamined, through their own lack of mutual exploration and their neglect of our role in the process.

This project could learn a thing or two from Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena's *Couple in the Cage*, or even Dan Graham's *Past Future / Split Attention*.

## Mojave Phone Booth

<http://www.deuceofclubs.com/moj/mojave.htm>

(760) 733-9969

N35°17'07.3" W115°41'04.2"

The *Mojave Phone Booth* [Fig. 6] was an accidental telemediated experience, a highly unusual physical and virtual destination for a few years until the Park Service removed it. The remnant of a once-busy mining community, the functional phone booth appeared as a dream-like apparition of urban infrastructure in the middle of a remote desert landscape. Boosted by word-of-mouth and early Internet exposure, the phone became a busy hub of activity for callers and drivers from around the world. Through incoming calls from people who found the number online or in print, or through outgoing calls from tourists on the hunt for a legend, the desert payphone sometimes stayed busy around the clock. Visitors to the booth often camped out all night, taking shifts answering anonymous calls.

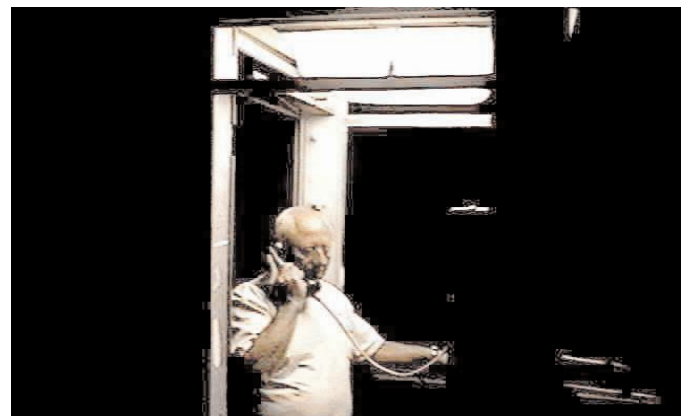


Figure 6. Charlie on the line at the *Mojave Phone Booth*. Image courtesy of Desert Tripper.

The site held a beautifully complex, yet finite nexus of communicative scenarios. Consider all of the possible callers:



- The person who calls from outside and has visited the booth
- The person who calls from outside and has never visited the booth
- The person who answers the phone on site
- The call out from the booth to friends or family who have never visited (or perhaps even heard of) the booth
- The call out from the booth to friends or family who have visited the booth
- The person who calls out from the booth to a stranger
- The call to the booth answered
- The call to the booth unanswered
- The call from the booth answered
- The call from the booth unanswered

Consider all the combinations therein, the ways in which each completed or incompleting call varies. Every case involves some combination of familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown, for the caller and the receiver. As gathered from the documentary *Mojave Mirage*, a typical scenario might go like this:

[phone rings, someone standing around the booth answers]

Caller: "Am I really calling a phone booth in the middle of a desert?"

Receiver: "Yes, believe me, I'm right here, it's crazy, you wouldn't believe it if you saw it – who is this, where are you calling from?"

Caller: "Germany, in Berlin!"

Receiver: "(laughs) No way! For real? I've never talked to anyone from Germany, what's it like?"

The project retains a perceptual rupture – neither caller can really imagine what the other is seeing, and perhaps even doubts the veracity of the claim. Telemediated conversations between strangers or familiars alternate between attention to the medium ("Can you believe this thing? It's surreal!") and attention to the other person or site through description or questions. Of course, as in any such opportunity for anonymous and distanced interaction with strangers, callers on either end explored and crossed lines of intimacy. Here, however, the recipient of an unwanted advance held the full and public power to respond through hanging up, cutting off the other from access to the experience, before sharing the experience with others. ("What did he say? .... Ewww, what a pig!")

Callers and visitors describe achieving a sense of *community*, of elated and temporary belonging. (One caller is quoted: "It helps make people, people again!") The *Mojave Phone Booth* fulfilled the desire for connection, for community, for communication, without pretending to remove the gaps and differences between persons. Each call brought home the contrast between two spaces and two people, but that disparity became a [communitydomain.hamilton.absenceincommon.09](http://communitydomain.hamilton.absenceincommon.09)

subject of wonderment that propelled conversations forward. Simultaneous and heterogeneous networks grew over at least two forms of telecommunication, intersecting with and embedded in the physical world. These networks were temporary and ephemeral but not dystopian, contingent, and even vulnerable without aestheticizing the void.

## Transitions

[http://www.fusedspace.org/show\\_contribution.php?id=96](http://www.fusedspace.org/show_contribution.php?id=96)  
*Ulrika Wachtmeister*

This project exists only as a proposal, but still serves as a useful example. The winning entry from 2004's Fusedspace competition, *Transitions* asks us to imagine a particular epistemological, social, spatial scenario, one that richly engages absence between strangers as a site for contemplating loss.

Wachtmeister's project identifies an important need in the process of separating absence from loss after the death of a loved one. Those who grieve without a specific and finite space for social, public remembrance risk forgetting historical loss, leaving only the absence of a companion or family member. For those who choose secular means of burial, in particular through the dispersion of cremains to the wind, earth, or sea, no such space exists.

*Transitions* imagines a new company that meets this need in two parts: one physical / geographical, the other virtual. Through provision of online memorials via websites, Pepparholm Ltd. invites survivors to engage in "personal memorial pages, condolences, correspondence, [and] support-groups." Where this virtual space serves as a finite destination for intentional visitors, the coterminous physical site consists solely of transitory anonymous encounters. There, Wachtmeister proposes a field of solar-powered lamps that light up on occasion of a visit to one of the virtual memorials. She locates this field on the artificial island of Pepparholm, which currently hosts only a transition from bridge to tunnel for commuters between Copenhagen and Malmo; no one may stop on Pepparholm, they only pass through.

A passenger or driver passing through Pepparholm at night glimpses a lit lamp before vanishing into a tunnel. Assuming she is aware of the project, we can imagine her thoughts going to at least two absent persons – the grieved and the grieving. Both are strangers to her, but were familiar to each other. Both are absent from our commuter's perception; one by an immeasurable and unknowable distance of time and space, the other by an immeasurable physical distance but a finite temporal gap. She knows where and when in virtual space the grieving survivor is located; this knowledge is reciprocated through the survivor's awareness of a public manifestation on Pepparholm. The two share a moment, as well as a constructively asymmetrical experience of absence.

The commuter experiences death in this project only as an abstraction, but is aware that an unreachable specificity is painfully clear to another person. As if the names on Maya Lin's monument were visible only to the families of the lost, Transitions forgoes creation of unfounded empathy or connection with others in favor of mutual recognition of the distance caused by loss.

Spanning memorial and communicative practices, Transitions employs telemediation and multiple physical and virtual spaces to produce an asymmetrical and temporary connection between strangers. Founded on loss, but refusing anyone a permanent stay, Wachtmeister's connection is another helpful example of founding community on the impossibility of communion.

## Isophone

<http://web.media.mit.edu/~stefan/hc/projects/isophone/>  
*Human Connectedness Group, MIT Media Lab Europe*  
James Auger, Jimmy Loizeau, Stefan Agamanolis  
Isophone originated within a research group of the now defunct European branch of the MIT Media Lab. The mission and projects of this group, now a static archive, bear deep examination in light of this paper's premise. Much of the work represents a likely application of "acknowledged absence" to telemediated experiences, and finds continued resonance in other research efforts. Examination and historicization of the lab's rhetoric and products would assuredly help hone an applied phenomenology of absence; ultimately, however, many of the projects fall prey to utopian and individualist ideals.

LaCapra offers a sobering warning against misplaced desire in the form of limitless pursuit of "an infinite series of displacements in quest of a surrogate for what has presumably been lost." Such pursuit inevitably takes the form of melancholy:

When absence, approximated to loss, becomes the object of mourning, the mourning may (perhaps must) become impossible and turn continually back into endless melancholy. The approximation or even conflation of absence and loss induces a melancholic or possibly mournful response to the closure of metaphysics, a generalized "hauntology," and even a dubious assimilation (or at least an insufficiently differentiated treatment) of other problems (notably a limit-event such as the Holocaust and its effects on victims) with respect to a metaphysical or meta-metaphysical frame of reference. [16]

This description uncannily captures the collected projects of the Human Connectedness group (and admittedly, of the more dangerous applications of this paper), particularly when examined in light of the group's location within a research-driven consumerist economy. Isophone is among the most captivating of their efforts, as well as the most sobering.

For this project, illustrated in a melancholic video, two individuals separated by great distance are united via a symmetrical telemediated experience. Each person (in this case, perhaps a woman and her ex-boyfriend) enters a swimming pool and dons a singular piece of headgear. The *Isophone* helmet wholly encloses the face and head, obscuring vision and supplying a live audio connection with the other communicant. Three attached buoys allow the user to hang from the helmet like a noose, an arrangement that looks surprisingly comfortable on video.

Here, sensory deprivation appears to create a common space, a perceptual bridge intended to parallel the telephonic link. Isophone's creators describe it as "a telephonic communication space of heightened purity and focus." On the video, the reunited couple catches up on where each of them lives, which friends they are in touch with. As in IN Network, we are invited (for the sake of documentation) to observe one couple's attempt at connection; also like that project, the effort appears to be a success ("We should try to do this more often," she concludes.)

It is an uncomfortable experience to watch for very different reasons. The camera is forced to choose between views of the head or views of the swimsuit-clad body beneath the surface, an uncanny and objectifying gesture that colors any understanding of the concept. We watch two mobile young white people willingly adopt stances of immobility as an attempt to bridge absence, in a weird inversion of contemporary torture techniques, in which prisoners are forced to stand immobile as a way of creating self-inflicted solitude.

Though *Isophone's* relation to absence would likely vary depending on context of use, it depends on an unpromising sensory premise – that any input from the present world is merely a distraction to achieving union with another. More contingent, even agitational conditions might help prevent this couple from sinking into the melancholy of the video's accompanying electronica soundtrack. Sensory isolation sets *Isophone's* users up for a fall, through an initial promise of common space that eventually slams them back into knowing nothing but what they hear, what they depend on from technology.

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