



Figure 1. 'Digital Synaesthetic E.E.G. Kiss' (Performance Installation). Frascati Theaters 2016.. Photo: Anna van Kooij © Lancel/Maat 2016.

## 'Viral Intimacy'

Karen Lancel and Hermen Maat, 2020

*Social behaviour can be a powerfully contagious virus. (Free to: Rutger Bregman, DDWtv 16-3-2020)*

### 1. Social Distance Behaviour.

Since 2020, we share a new behaviour, called 'social distancing'. The new social distance standard is 1,5 metres at minimum between ourselves and others. Coming closer is dis-encouraged or even prohibited by state, clearly preventing viral contamination. How do we experience this 1,5 metres distance? Already in 1963, cross-cultural researcher and anthropologist E.T. Hall showed how we experience and behave in different 'interpersonal spaces'. In his circular diagram of 'Proxemics' (Fig. 2), he separated 'intimate' (private), 'personal', 'social' and 'public' (forms of staging) distances. He thereby emphasized that these distances

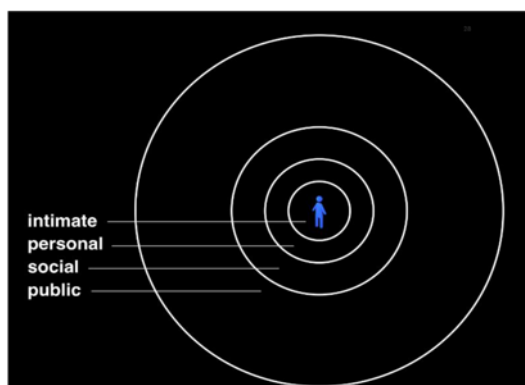


Figure 2. Illustration of Edward T. Hall's Diagram, of 'Proxemics' (1963): of Interpersonal Space

differ in each culture. For example, he found that people in the US seek larger 'interpersonal spaces' than people in Europe. (In the US, 'intimate' space is within 0,45 m; up till 1,2 m is for 'personal' behaviour, a third ring up to 3,6m for 'social' behaviour; a fourth ring shows 7,6m and up for 'public' behaviour).

Following his diagram, the current social distance of 1,5 metres, in fact, disables connections in intimate space. Intimacy: vital to share well-being and feeling present. Essential to being healthy and to trusting each other. As artists we raise the question: can we invent new forms of intimate interaction, tailor-made for connections at 1,5+ meters distance? And can we arrange it in such way that we can publically share it, internalize it as a powerful, contagious virus?<sup>1</sup>

### 2. Intimate Distance Behaviour.

Hall's diagram of 'Proxemics' separates physical distances. Today, our social connections are increasingly shaped (classified, automated and controlled) by digital networks: in social media, AI learning systems, in tele-matic communication, in biofeedback systems and emotion recognition,

<sup>1</sup> In the domain of art, the concept of virus has been gratefully embraced; for example: 'Language is a virus from outer space' (Laurie Anderson/ William Borroughs); 'Beauty is a virus' (Timothy Morton).

with conversational robots, and through brain-to-brain communication. In these hybrid, mixed and merging social realities, Hall's **intimate space and public space are often directly entangled**. For example, in social media, intimate self-disclosure is often publicly exposed, even beyond a user's awareness – while simultaneously feeding unknown corporate systems. In another example, interaction through conversational intelligent robots not only reveal but also teach and shape our intimate expectations, desires and behaviour. A critical note seems urgent: *How do we experience (digital) intimacy? Can we measure a kiss and what kissers feel together? What kind of intimacy do we, Cyborgs, need?* Intimate experience emerges from multiple direct sensory and social aspects. We intimately attune through corporal proximity, such as through touching each other; emotional self-disclosure and vulnerability; social support; and finally, important: shared sense making and reflection. Sharing reflection 'grounds' the intimate experience as a shared experience.

Online intimate interaction often mimics aspects of intimacy. For example, online sex environments enable multiple (simultaneous) multi-modal, multi-sensory connections, to create experiences of intimacy-in-flow. Such connections have been described as 'different', or less 'socially rich', in experience. We can imagine why intimacy online would be different or lack satisfaction: the digitally mediated quality of communication interfering with emotional involvement - and, most of all, the absence of direct intimate touch.

### 3. Intimate Cyborg Behaviour.

Artists have always played an important role in pushing the boundaries of what we experience as 'intimate'.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, they challenge our changing perception of *intimate touch* in symbiosis with technology. In digital performance art and playful rituals, performers seduce the audience in unpredictable somatic encounters, to experiment with unfamiliar forms of interpersonal touch. Embodied vulnerability is a key feature in these artworks, provoking intimate behaviour and social bonds, calling for re-negotiation and dialogue.

For example, in *Se Mi Sei Vicino (If you are close to me)*<sup>3</sup>, Sonia Cillari explores intimate touching with a physical present performer in the gallery. She invites people to approach the performer, who stands in an electro-magnetic field. When touching and embracing the performer, biofeedback is visualized in an emerging architectural video-projection, viewed by the audience on a distance. Paul Sermon challenges distant experience of touch through imagination of touch. In *Telematic Dreaming*<sup>4</sup>, members of the audience are invited to lie down on a bed, surrounded by public. While lying on the bed, one intimately meets with a live-projection of a telematically present performer, who is video-recorded at a distant location. Stelarc explores touch through the network, in *RE-WIRED/RE-MIXED*.<sup>5</sup> He connects his body muscle system to the digital network, enabling participants worldwide to activate (and intimately interfere with) his haptic, motory system. In all these works, audience intimately connect in entanglement with human and non-human (technological) others. They explore what Timothy Morton describes as "**ecological intimacy**, which is to say: intimacy between humans and nonhumans, violently repressed with violent results."<sup>6</sup>

### 4. Viral Intimate Behaviour.

Can Hall's diagram also help to envision mediated intimate encounters in public space for citizens in interplay with each other: *with each other, for each other?* For example, can we invite citizens to kiss, involving other citizens in their intimate experience? Can their kiss be contagious, for co-citizens at 1,5+ meters distance? One approach to involve people in kissing and caressing behaviour in public space would be through 'mirror-touch', or seeing being touched. Seeing someone else being touched, activates neurons in our brains, to mirror and resonate the touch gestures in our imagination and to evoke empathy.<sup>7</sup> As artists, in collaboration with partners in art, design, technology, science and society, we research these insights to explore whether two people touching can be contagious for

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<sup>2</sup> Although intimate interaction seems to deal with private environments, in 1998 Laurent Berlant claimed that intimate connections *experience* emerges from public discourse; and that intimacy is embedded in publicness.

<sup>3</sup> Cillari S (2006, 2009) *Se Mi Sei Vicino (If you are close to me)*

<sup>4</sup> Sermon P (1992) *Telematic Dreaming*

<sup>5</sup> Stelarc (2015) *RE-WIRED / RE-MIXED*

<sup>6</sup> Morton T (2018) *Being ecological*. MIT Press

<sup>7</sup> Ward J (2018) The vicarious perception of touch and pain: embodied empathy. In: Martin D (ed.) *Mirror touch synaesthesia. Thresholds of empathy with art*. Oxford university press

audience to feel intimately involved. Internationally, in artistic performances and installations, we propose future concepts<sup>8</sup> of AI and AE neural networks for intimacy through the power of touching, watching, kissing.

In *live* kissing and caressing experiments, we ask people in public spaces to choose between being an actor *kissing* or a spectator *seeing being kissed*. In *E.E.G. KISS* (2014)<sup>9</sup> and *Kissing Data* (2018)<sup>10</sup>, all actors and spectators wear E.E.G. head-sets connected to a Multi Brain Computer Interface (BCI). Their brain activities are measured and combined, real-time visualized in a streaming E.E.G. data visualization, in a floor projection. Their shared brain activities are used to co-create an immersive, visual data environment, translated to a soundscape - a *Kissing Data Symphony* (Fig. 1). *Empathy Ecologies* (2020)<sup>11</sup> expands this intimate public behaviour to plant-life. Participants are embraced by a five meters high, baroque architecture of white blossoming orchids (aerial root plants). Real-time visual bio-feedback data of kissing acts (EEG of brain activity) and plants (CO2 consumption, photosynthesis) are visualized entangled with the plant architecture; and audible in a human-data-plant symphony (Fig. 3).

And yes, kissing and caressing behaviour in public space appears to be contagious. In different cultural contexts of Asia, US and Europe, where people have different perceptions of Hall's interpersonal spaces. Often, they stand in line to be kissers, caressers and spectators. Couples of all genders, sexual preferences and ages. But gender configurations differ in each cultural context. For example, in the public space of China, hetero-sexual couples can kiss in public, but couples of same gender can only hug. In South Korea, where people touch each other less in general and specifically in public space, two life-long friends told us after the performance: "We never touched. But now I feel much closer to my friend".

What do kissing brain-data in these environments? The brain data of kissing encircles, embraces. It enhances feelings of safety, engagement and immersive experience.<sup>12</sup> And because these data are spontaneous, not measurable (!) and unpredictable, everyone feels safe, to be involved and interpret the kiss as intimate, in personal, creative and secret ways. Around the kissers and the data, everyone sees everyone watching: 'mirror-watch'. Sharing the narrative of hybrid intimacy to go viral.

'Empathy Ecologies' was performed only two days before the COVID19 lock down. After that moment, touch in public space was criminalized. But we do need to reclaim intimate interaction and behaviour. Sharing kisses can be contagious and viral. Through sharing 'mirror-touch' and 'mirror-watch'. In direct cyborgian entanglement of intimacy, publicness and datafication. Intimacy as a critical and creative act. With each other, for each other. We need new versions of Hall's diagrams, for 'Viral Intimacy' - for us, Cyborgs.

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<sup>8</sup> These concepts (2014-2021) emerges from Lancel/Maat's artistic research and PhD at the technical University Delft (*Participatory Systems Initiative, Prof. Dr. Frances Brazier*). This fundamental research means to be a basis from which future AI/AE neural networks can be developed. To this purpose, in collaboration with Ars Electronica Linz & European Media Art Platform (EMAP), interpretation, categorization and classification is explored. New ways to interpret data for AI/AE design are investigated, through artistic and scientific insights, based on data-visualizations, -sonifications and artists observations of participants interaction.

<sup>9</sup> *E.E.G. KISS* (2014) <https://www.lancelmaat.nl/work/e.e.g-kiss/>

<sup>10</sup> *Kissing Data* (2018) <https://www.lancelmaat.nl/work/kissing-data/>

<sup>11</sup> *Empathy Ecologies* (2020) <https://www.lancelmaat.nl/work/empathy-ecologies/>

<sup>12</sup> We call this streaming circle 'Dancing Data': EEG data of two people kissing, placed on top of each other, creating a shared EEG portrait.



Figure 3. 'Empathy Ecologies' (Performance Installation) Come Together #5, Fracati Theatres Amsterdam 2020.  
Photo Pieter Kers. © Lancel/Maat 2020