

Who (in the creative sector) profits from remote work and telepresence?

Collaborate
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Telepresence, forecast since the 1980s, has become part of everyday life for both design students and teachers. Suddenly we are all online workers, confronted with overexposure, with work spilling over its boundaries. Professional role models are now changing, as is the relationship between proximity and distance. Are we currently traversing the uncanny valley of home working, on our way to the plateau of productivity? Is Zoom fatigue a solvable design problem? Is it a problem worth solving? And who is the winner if creative workers can be smoothly clicked together into teams on demand, drawing on a global talent pool?

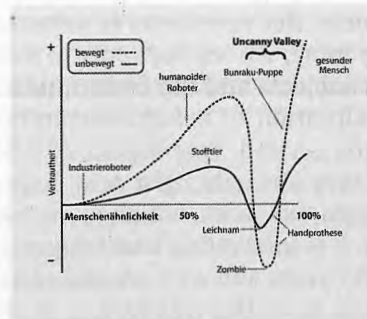
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First of all, we should say that Sebastian Schmieg and I have been researching this field for a long time, but mostly with a birds-eye-view, as it were, not as a thing which concerned us directly. On the other hand, we both always worked from home, of course. But now there is something new and very strange happening; we are suddenly in a similar situation to our research subjects and the communities we investigated. We are in a situation of being constantly virtually present, and constantly on call. One aspect of this is Zoom fatigue, which I feel very strongly right now. I spoke to ninety-four people on Zoom this week, which to my own tastes is clearly far too many. It is interesting that telepresence has been predicted for forty years and we have all been online all the time for a long time now. But this feeling of overexposure – for me at least – has increased greatly in recent times. The relationship of the people you interact with changes between proximity and distance. Video telephony suddenly takes you into other people's private spaces or, conversely, it brings people into your own private areas. The gap that opens up can be compared to the Uncanny Valley, a phenomenon known in 3D-character design, where the representation of an animate object becomes ever more realistic, getting closer to human expression – but not quite. Shortly before reaching its goal of becoming lifelike, the representation suddenly becomes uncanny, which is not the case with more abstract characters. There is an interesting parallel with the way people have been working online for a long time, using e-mail and other techniques, but this puzzlement and disturbance only comes about with high-def video when you notice you have just been stared at, or have been staring at other people all the time.

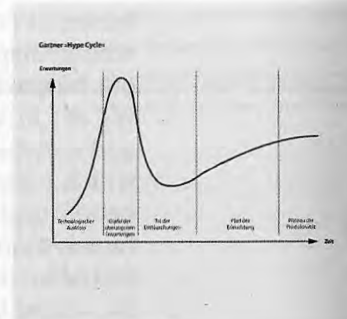
From this, we can derive the question of what this means for us as designers, whether it is our task to improve the design of Zoom or similar formats, and whether this is even possible or desirable. Who gains when global online work gets smoother and smoother? Through our research, Sebastian and I both already had connections to online workers from different parts of the world. In my case, these were people from Venezuela, in Sebastian's case, from Sri Lanka and various other places. Of course, the question of the global pool of workers is now even more urgent for the creative industry. What does the existence of this immediate resource of digital labor actually mean, what role models arise from it, and what changes as a result of it? These are the questions we would like to discuss with you.

Uncanny Valley by Smurrayinchester (which is based on image by Masahiro Mori and Karl MacDorman at <http://www.androidscience.com/theuncannyvalley/proceedings2005/uncannyvalley.html>)

Gartner Hype Cycle
www.gartner.com/en/documents/3887767



Uncanny Valley



Gartner Hype Cycle

These two curves here illustrate the Uncanny Valley. Superimposed over them are Gartner Hype Cycles, a dubious concept which promises that after a valley when new technologies are developed, there is always a phase of new productivity. Whether this promised boost will actually happen, or whether this is actually an "uncanny cliff" is yet to be determined. From my point of view we have reached the valley of disappointment, in terms of permanent Zoom presence. Now the question is whether we are on the path to enlightenment? The interesting thing about this Gartner hype cycle is that each new technology always gets plotted on exactly the same curve, but often these technologies end up disappearing, or becoming irrelevant. That is something that the Gartner Hype Cycle does not provide for, that there can also be different branchings-off. In this model, everything either



Fiverr stock price



Upwork stock price



Zoom stock price



Prof. Dr. Hiroshi Ishiguro (left) and his robot double (right). Photo: Osaka University, Intelligent Robotics Laboratory

SEBASTIAN SCHMIEG

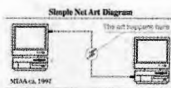


Fiverr advertisement in the streets of Berlin

inevitably leads to a productivity plateau, or it is never mentioned again.

These three economic curves show how the market value of companies relevant in this area has progressed over the course of the Covid-19 crisis. This is the stock price of Fiverr, one of the platforms where you can get people to do things very cheaply. The name says it all: the idea is to have people jump through hoops for a "fiver." Fiverr has in fact greatly diversified what they offer, it now includes very different activities, and in any case they are clearly a winner of the crisis. Two other business examples are Upwork, the largest global provider of online services, which includes design services, similar to Fiverr, but also engineering, programming, and so on. And, unsurprisingly, Zoom, whose stock price shows steady upward development.

I will also try to tell a little story, based on visual similarities. Hiroshi Ishiguro's robot can be seen on the right here; it illustrates the Uncanny Valley quite nicely. It looks a little bit like Ishiguro himself, but precisely because of that, it looks uncanny and makes you feel uncomfortable. Ishiguro says he can teach remotely using this robot. This reminded me of a Fiverr ad recently posted in my neighborhood. We see two entrepreneurs, but one looks like a copy, and seems to be worth less than the other. In a sense, he too is being remote-controlled, like Ishiguro's robot. Having seen it, the subject would just not let me go. Whenever I was walking through the city, I kept passing this Fiverr ad in all possible variations taking photos of them. The uncanny thing about Fiverr is the process of displacement, illustrated here. If I choose to be on the left-hand side, say, then I am the person who is basically dictating what should be done, and I want to have nothing to do with the person on the right-hand side: they work for me. Also, I never



Simple Net Art Diagram, by MTAA, image released under Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 license

want to end up on the right-hand side. This example is specifically about design. On the left it says: "You take care of the big picture" and on the right you can see the entrepreneur on Fiverr who delivers the design: within twenty-four hours, over the course of ten correction loops. The Fiverr logo merges with these two people. Here I had to think of the "Simple Net Art Diagram," by MTAA, which illustrates this connection quite nicely, suggesting that, as with net art, the decisive thing happens somewhere in the middle, within a network. This person on the other side, whom I hire from home and who then works for me, what do they do? And what is my relationship to them? You scroll and click your way through an oversupply of people, each struggling to make it to the top of the list, in order to be selected and "hired," as it were.

I have brought two videos I found which workers on Fiverr produced for their customers. What I find interesting here is that people become, to a certain extent, remote-controlled computer mice. For example, instead of downloading a template yourself, you pick someone on Fiverr and tell them to do that for you. The person then moves the mouse for me, then sends it back, basically simulating creative work. These templates were not made by the people themselves. If you look here from the perspective of interface design, you can see it is the perfect, "natural" interface you want it to be. I can talk to the person, and they'll do exactly what I want. The second topic is screen sharing, which we all do a lot right now. And what happens quite often on Fiverr, because of the oversupply of labor, is that the "exotic" body is then offered to me as a screen I can control remotely from home, which then moves for me. And one other thing about screen sharing – as Florian already mentioned – I was in contact with people on Upwork. This was a few years ago when I wanted to talk to people in Sri Lanka about Google's plans to beam in the internet there via balloons, which is pretty brutal considering the history of the country, which is completely shaken by colonialism and destroyed within. But I couldn't find a contact person, so I had to hire people to talk to me about these topics. While the people I hired were doing the work for me, I found I had full visual access to their screens. I could always see what the person was doing. So I was able to check whether this person was actually working the hours which they charged for. This form of outsourcing, in which I have someone who



Collage of found Fiverr videos (screenshot): gig entrepreneurs who have made their bodies available as message carriers on Fiverr. <http://sebastianschmieg.com/files/hase/fiverr-bodies.mp4>, <http://sebastianschmieg.com/files/hase/fiverr-logos.mp4>



works for me from home, but in another home, always has to do with control and monitoring. Whether you like it or not, you can't turn that monitoring off. Later, the Goethe Institute gave me the opportunity to exhibit in Sri Lanka and I had the chance to meet one of the people I had worked with, her name is Fazeera. Before meeting Fazeera, I felt very insecure because I felt I had used the platform to exploit this person. But it turned out in the conversation that this person understood the employment relationship in a much more differentiated manner, in terms of advantages and disadvantages, and they criticized me for taking a one-sided view. I don't want to stand here and directly defend the platform, but things have more dimensions than I thought at the time. It was very important for me to meet her in Sri Lanka and to talk to her. It was like in the Fiverr advertisement: on the left was me, on the right was this woman, who worked for me.

Sebastian Schmieg and Fazeera L., whom he had hired on the outsourcing platform Upwork as author to write a short text, in Sri Lanka



In my artistic practice over the last couple of years, I have also dealt a lot with bicycle food delivery services, and I designed a project which deals precisely with this moment when the people involved meet. It was designed as an exhibition format, but also a kind of artistic business where you can have exhibitions delivered by bicycle courier.



Gallery.Delivery is both a group exhibition and a performance that can be ordered online

Mark Zuckerberg high-fives Facebook's social VR chief Rachel Franklin as they stand virtually among flooded homes in Puerto Rico (YouTube screenshot)



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Through this exhibition format, what is always invisible in the gallery was made visible: the installation of a show in a gallery and the people who work there, badly-paid. Now those people were present, they spoke, and they occupied a different position of power. That is the ambiguity of these platforms: they also offer the opportunity to make relationships visible, and to get to know the people involved.

But the opposite is also possible. In a video made three or four years ago, Mark Zuckerberg and a Facebook employee presented a new virtual reality tool. Inexplicably, they did this by traveling to different places, including Puerto Rico, which at the time had been completely destroyed by Hurricane Maria. What I find interesting here is the abstract aesthetic of the body. There are no legs and you look somehow different, just a little bit how you normally look. And you also detach yourself from the context. Here, Puerto Rico doesn't really matter, it just becomes your backdrop. Of course, this becomes quite perverse, but you can tell yourself: if I become this character who only has to deal with other people from a distance, I might be able to detach myself from the context. I don't always have to look my best. I may not always have to present myself in my most beautiful room. I don't always have to smile, the whole thing becomes abstract, and maybe I can become this kind of a weird comic book character. I think that is definitely something positive.

I have three more aspects to add on the subject of home and the uncanny, a word which in the original German is *unheimlich*, literally *un-homelike*. The first aspect is a discourse going back to Sigmund Freud, whereby that which appears familiar suddenly appears unfamiliar and unsettling. This uncanniness is associated with the house. The atmosphere of houses in horror films, the haunted retreat: this

1
Vilém Flusser,
"Durchlöchert wie
ein Emmentaler –
Über die Zukunft des
Hauses," *Telepolis*,
March 4, 1998.

2
Karl Brenke, study
on home working, for
the German Institute
for Economic
Research (DIW
Berlin), 2014, [www.
diw.de/documents/
publikationen/73/
diw_01.c.437991.
de/14-8-1.pdf](http://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.437991.de/14-8-1.pdf).

MODERATION

reminds me of the ghostly appearance of faces on video conferences, with these others all telepresent. And then there is always the uncertainty: is the microphone really off? Or the whole thing turned off? Maybe I still have these "ghosts" in my apartment. Then I would like to refer to a text by Vilém Flusser, "Perforated like an Emmentaler cheese." Here, Flusser addresses the role of the house, pointing out that it had always been a shelter and a place of retreat.¹ Flusser here makes reference to Hegel: the classic Hegelian model of going out to experience the world, losing yourself within that world, then returning home to find yourself again and to lose the world which you had wanted to conquer. In the early 1990s, Flusser already described how this division no longer works because the house is so riddled with holes – like an Emmentaler cheese – and perforated with all sorts of channels. Back then, the channels were called television, radio, and so on. But now it is of course much more immediate, because the world comes to your home, you no longer have to leave it. The question arises as to whether we need something like a Zoom exorcism to get rid of it. Flusser also writes that the inner walls become enclosing to the inmates of the house. It is responsible for their safety; the outside wall is uncanny, the inner wall is homely. The inner wall has to protect what is secret from what is uncanny. Today, the separation between an outward-looking and an inward-turning side gets mixed up, because we can now all look into each others' kitchens and apartments. And there is a third aspect. The German "Heimarbeit" is a term that was particularly relevant in the post-war period, but has continued to exist ever since. Home working began with destroyed factories. The clichéd example is screwing ballpoint pens together. There are different degrees of that today, but according to a statistic I have come across, in Germany alone there were 4.7 million people in 2008, in the wake of the last economic crisis, who did some sort of home working.² Since then you have to distinguish between independent and dependent home working. Working at Fiverr, as Sebastian described it, is actually a very dependent activity: just like screwing together ballpoint pens, in the classic example.

Silvio Lorusso already discussed Fiverr in detail in his contribution. I would be interested in the statements made by 99designs, an online marketplace

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specializing in graphic design services, about which you write in your study on crowd design.³ If several people are working on a pitch and in the end only one person gets the job, then the work which went into it is not only unpaid, it is actually being given away. What is the social image of design which is being conveyed here?

My research pursues the question of how certain types of work shape particular platform structures. Because I come from a design background, my original focus was on design platforms. Later I looked into a lot of other types of platforms, but I keep coming back to design. It is interesting that outsourcing design work on platforms is organized completely differently than in all other areas, namely as a contest, where only one person out of many “wins” to get paid. That says a lot about the structure of the job market for designers and the logic of design. One essential factor here is that design activity is perceived as so attractive and so intrinsically rewarding that many people are willing to do it for nothing. That existed before the platforms, for example in the form of unpaid internships. What is comparatively new is that platforms have now realized they can combine this oversupply of work – the work which people just love to do – with the demand coming from people looking for designs. The platforms created structures which initially only matched supply and demand in unregulated markets. Yet, this being a buyer’s market, designers and clients don’t meet on an equal footing. More importantly, the platform makes most of the profit, as a third stakeholder who essentially determines the rules of the game. In addition, there is extreme information asymmetry, because the platform knows everything about the other two parties, and can determine the prices. It makes good profit with every transaction, with high margins, up to 45 percent. For the client, it is a gamble whether they will get something good, or just some copies, or bits of clip art. And for those who work on the platform, it is a gamble if they get paid or not. It’s a kind of “labor of hope,” where the designers are aware that it is exploitation, but play along in the hope that it will eventually materialize into a career path. This is a widespread phenomenon throughout the creative sector, including fine art. It’s a neoliberal logic: you think the others are all amateurs, but somehow you have real talent

yourself. And if you only believe in yourself enough and build yourself up very strongly as an individual, as a brand, then that will lead to success. What you see at Fiverr is even more pronounced within the arts. Everyone is pushing for hyper-individual exposure, which is supposed to somehow lead to success.

MODERATION

Would you say that it has always been like this in the art and culture business, and is now only particularly evident via online platforms, or is it a specific phenomenon of these platforms?

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I think the platforms act as amplifiers in many ways, I almost said they act as “fire accelerators,” but that sounds so dramatic. There is exploitation in other areas of the platform economy too, whenever workers are perceived as interchangeable. The combination of an oversupply of work and exploitation has always existed. But the platforms just make it more efficient, scalable, global, faster. And more visible.

MODERATION

Sebastian, you mentioned earlier that hierarchies in teaching and in relation to students are changing; they are becoming flatter, as a result of Zoom meetings. In contrast, within the platform economy, if we take 99designs as an example, freelancers are subject to a rating system, so there is extreme hierarchy for this reason alone. I wonder if there are already forms of resistance to this? That, for example, freelancers get together and try to found their own alternative platform.

SEBASTIAN
 SCHMIEG

There are cooperative platforms which try to found and program platforms together, so everyone would have a part of this platform. This was tried in Berlin, for example, after Deliveroo and Foodora withdrew from the market here, but there were bicycle deliverers who wanted to continue doing their job under conditions which they determine themselves. In this case, however, all the venture capital which had been previously burned is now missing. In other words, self-exploitation gets worse because there is nothing to earn. The idea that “we will do exactly the same thing, except it will be ours” is of course a step forward, but I don’t think it can change the situation that much on its own.

I wonder if part of the uncanny is the fact that on these platforms the social is completely gone, and only pure work remains. You don't have the feeling of being surrounded by people because you cannot see them. That makes networking almost impossible. But how can that be overcome?

SEBASTIAN
SCHMIEG

The question of how people who work on these platforms organize themselves should go along with how the people who inquire about jobs and assign them could organize themselves together with workers offering services. How can you get out of this market? I tried to make it clear that the uncanny comes from repression. For example, saying, "Ah, I've made it into art college now. I'm doing fine now but over there, there are people who taught themselves Photoshop on YouTube, and I won't have anything to do with them." It is important to establish contact across this separation so that together you can establish that something is out of order with the platform, or the design market.

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I've been pondering over these platforms for a long time now. I have gone through three distinct phases with that: first as a designer, wanting to solve the problem; then as an activist, drawing attention to the exploitation, now I confined myself to the scholarly perspective on the subject. When I first started investigating the topic, I thought it was just a design problem. Then I realized that global capitalism is the problem. So I got in touch with trade unions and thought about it together with them. It turned out, interestingly, that willingness to practice solidarity within creative circles is comparatively low, partly due to the kind of in-group thinking which Sebastian just mentioned. In times of globalized work, it is important whether I see people in Indonesia as my competition or as my partners in solidarity, as people fighting for the same goals. This quickly raises the question of what is actually fair remuneration by global standards. This global gap makes it hard to practice solidarity on that level. And to come back to the question of how you can exchange ideas on platforms. It very much depends on the types of platform, which in turn depends on the type of work that is being mediated. Take the people who do repetitive click work on Mechanical Turk, for example putting keywords on images used by autonomous vehicles. Those people suffer

from the fact that they are reduced to a number in the system, completely invisible to everyone else. They feel treated like machine parts, not at all human. In more creative areas, on the other hand, it is more about overexposure. In contrast, people on platforms for creative work instead suffer from overexposure. You always have to present yourself as super creative and highly motivated, pointing out that you are willing to go that extra mile! So, on some platforms, workers become invisible as humans, on others people have to throw their entire personality into it, just in order to get a job.

Then there is the question of how people see themselves on the platforms. I recently examined platforms which are used for collective production of training data, and I found that people who work there are already organizing, when they have a regional connection and speak the same language, as is the case for crowdworkers in Venezuela. But this organization goes via external channels, outside the platform itself. These workers connect on social media, on Reddit or Facebook, Discord or Telegram. Absurdly enough, the tough economic conditions in Venezuela can also lead to a loss of solidarity. Workers in command of highly-rated accounts, with access to better paid tasks, use the aforementioned channels to rent out access to their account for money. Those who pay for access can use the account while the person they are renting from is not working, for example overnight. The logic of exploitation and sub-sub-outsourcing sneaks its way into networks of self-organization, originally based on solidarity.

MODERATION

Maybe this is actually the kind of work-sharing we all are looking for. But here, only one person benefits...

FLORIAN
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Exactly. This is also reminiscent of the old image of the home sleeper, who shares a bed in shifts. Airbnb is actually a modern form of this. The bed is occupied around the clock, so to speak, and it is profitable for that reason. And the same thing is done with these accounts on the platforms. Of course, you take a margin for letting the other person work on your account. And the other person might otherwise not get the job: for example because they don't speak the language. The anonymity of the platform means that the people who assign the job do not notice that someone else is sitting in front of the screen. And this leads us back to the topic of tracking and

surveillance, as Sebastian mentioned earlier, talking about screen monitoring at Upwork. This not only provides the clients with screenshots from the workers' desktop, but also webcam photos, so they can see who is working for them. This is getting very uncanny indeed. In conversations with workers, however, they say that they are happy with these surveillance features because it means they can prove they are working honestly and efficiently.

PARTICIPANT II

What you are describing are mechanisms which were laboriously worked out in early capitalism: the division of labor, shift work, the delegation of tasks, building hierarchies into production, all the way up to sub-sub-enterprises, like the German meat processing company Tönnies. It was a very complex process to invent these systems in order to circumvent certain wage structures, or legal requirements. These systems, which were actually originally top-down in format, which had to be arranged in the form of shift operations in the classic factory, now have a place in the midst of supposedly independent thinking, now running itself, through self-optimization etc. I find that interesting. There is this automatism, which runs almost more or less invisibly, in the form of deregulated brutalization. To come back to the Fiverr posters: I was pretty shocked how very very clear the images were. The company practices an overt, downright offensive approach to exploitation, even in the visual language. But on the other hand, this exploitation is projected into subjects and work practices, even into their homes. This is true horror.

SEBASTIAN
SCHMIEG

It also always amazes me how openly all this is communicated in advertising campaigns, by Fiverr and by other companies. But I think those responsible for this are not at all clear what perspective we are reading their advertisements from. They understand it in terms of entrepreneurial freedom. There is without question a certain blindness to other points of view.

PARTICIPANT

III

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I have another question, on the trade union issue. Is networking even possible? Personally, I have often asked myself how political networking or political work can take place online. A lot of things were tried out during the pandemic. Online demonstrations, streaming posts, hanging things out of the window, making noise. But protest very much lives on the moment of physically coming together. I ask myself whether digital protest culture can really be learned? If, for example, people can feel connected via forums like Reddit, if they practice it for longer. I've never practiced digital protest, and I personally don't feel like I'm really communicating with people.

That really is a problem which is difficult to solve. When you go out on the street, you are 100 percent in that one place, and of course you feel the physical presence of other people. I am very interested in this paradox: the crowd in physical space is a strong, powerful, and destructive force, which people in power are afraid of. But in online digital space, individuals within the crowd serve to weaken each other, they can very easily be steered, and these crowds are actually quite productive, from the perspective of those in power. Another interesting factor is that many crowd workers think they are in a transitional position anyway, that they will not do this job for life, and so they do not identify with other underpaid workers. Why should they fight for better conditions in a job that they believe they will no longer be doing in six months' time?

Online activism quickly degenerates into clicktivism, sharing petitions and so on, things which rush past you and don't really require any commitment. Another important point is that there has to be an inside and an outside. Historically, a crowd is characterized by the fact that anyone can become a part of it, for example a crowd on the street. In that case, I am physically present the moment I run along with the crowd, but I can also turn back after every corner and say to myself, *OK that's it now*. To create sustainable structures, we would have to say that we are now the group we call such-and-such, and we are in it, and others are outside it, and these are the goals we are fighting for. Having to think along these

concepts of inside and outside is something that is difficult to accept, but I think it is the basic requirement for commitment and for long-term structures. And so we come back again to the globalization effect: Who organizes themselves, and on what basis? Crowdworkers from Germany? From Europe? Or everyone, globally? We have already seen that there are different interests and goals. And unions have the problem of actually only representing permanent employees in traditional professions. They don't really have much to offer to people who are unemployed, or work as temporary independent contractors. The unions try to appeal to crowd workers, but all they can really offer is information, since the group is much too vaguely defined as a group.

SEBASTIAN
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I agree with you, but I would also advise being careful not to create a dualism between the digital world, on the one hand, and "real life" or "away from keyboard," on the other. It can also be a great opportunity for design that there are very many things to be done online, in terms of images and memes. I also think digital coming-together can be very effective; I believe it complements very well with coming together in actual physical space. It all depends on someone holding up the right sign, which then becomes a meme. I think that's something you have to learn in this circular online world: how to set the tone.

PARTICIPANT
IV

I don't see it that way at all. For me, the online world is simply not real. Shouldn't we insist on a stricter separation between "real life" and "non-real life"?

SEBASTIAN
SCHMIEG

I don't know what's not real about what we're doing here, even though we're online right now. So I'm sitting here in front of the computer, I'm sweating because it's warm, I can see you and you can see me. Well, I think that's extremely real and we're so exhausted afterwards, as if we had talked in a real-world space. I understand what you mean, but I personally at least don't see the clear separation you are making.

PARTICIPANT V

Maybe this is all actually just a matter of practice and getting used to things. It's just that now everything supposedly "unproductive," like random conversations, has been rationalized away. And I notice that I lose a lot of passion, because I find it very empowering to be in the presence of other

people. This is something very human, and for me that is "real life."

Something shifts in digital communication when we use it out of necessity, no longer only in our free time, or as a supplement to work, where you could actually still say, I can switch off the smartphone, that is not my "real life." Now we are noticing that in the "uncanny home," which substitutes for our office, we also locate the work in this space much more strongly, and it becomes even more "real," in terms of economic reality. So far, this has not been the case for most people.

SEBASTIAN
SCHMIEG

The hope could have been that the work I've always done at home will now become "real." Because people have always worked at home. The uncanny, for quite a lot of people, is also this threat that arises when suddenly everyone is at home, locked inside, and there are outbreaks of violence and abuse of children. But I think home has always been a brutal and equally hard working place.