Interaction/Participation

Disembodied Performance in New Media Art

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Human–Human Interaction (computer programmes as party hosts)

> Successful pieces that feature 'interactivity for groups' are usually out-of-control. For me, a piece is successful if the behaviours and relationships that emerge from participation manage to surprise the artist/designer... in other words, the outcomes have not been pre-programmed.
>
> Rafael Lozano-Hemmer[33]

Conversation is a highly elaborate skill involving exchange, evolution, creativity, interpretation, empathy and ambiguous language. Computer logic may just about be able to manage the first two factors, but beyond that it needs firm rules and predictable structures. It is little coincidence that computers have now beaten Grand Masters of chess, although they still founder in the Turing test. Games, it would seem, weave into both the history of computer programming as well as the history of art. Regina Cornwell has pointed out that Marcel Duchamp's interest in chess was a sustained time-based commitment, when compared to the 'fun' of computer games,[34] but nevertheless, many artists are giving serious thought to the subversive and engaging potential of games. Anne-Marie Schleiner, for example, has been involved in the locative political game *OUT* (2004)[35] around New York City, and on *Velvet-Strike* (2004), a shoot-em-up game with anti-war graffiti opportunities.[36] These games, however, often necessarily follow the interests of the individual competitor, whereas historically, games have also been formal ways to break the social ice between groups of people.

Toshio Iwai's game *Resonance of 4* (1994) is a very elegant means of getting strangers to interact and collaborate, which even works in that most icy of social venues – the white cube art gallery. Four computer mice on podia each control a grid projected on the floor. The intuitive interface soon reveals that each grid is a grid of notes that can be played like a different musical instrument. Clever programming means that it's easy to stay in some kind of collective harmony, but that for a true resonance of four people, the ability to cooperate through patterns and sounds greatly enhances the work. This generosity of spirit, where the artist is using computer programmes to act as a kind of subtle party host, enabling human–human interaction of a much more elaborate kind than that possible between individual and machine, is a rare but crucial happening.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer came to appreciate the unpredictable but rich nature of this kind of interaction through a series of individual and group works. His work *Body Movies, Relational Architecture 6* (2001–) used projected digital images, the shadows of people in public squares and computer programmes which tracked the position of the shadows. People both interacted with the programme by covering the projected images of people with their own shadows, and also used the sociable tools provided to interact with each other's shadows, in a simply mediated way. Mock violence, flirting and cheerful obscenity were obvious popular themes, as were quite elaborate mimes and props – pouring water into the mouths of smaller shadows, making combined body shapes, children towering over parents, or acting out stories. If any one group became too dominant, violent or obscene, there were also ways in which groups could block out their light by standing together. As the works toured, national differences in interaction became apparent. Liverpudlians, apparently, show a marked tendency to take their clothes off when faced with silhouette opportunities. The artist welcomes this kind of free-range true participation, and has found that this particular role of the artist is a very important and delicate one. 'Dependency on participation', he has found, 'is a humbling affair'.

The particular skills needed to enable this kind of interactive, participative or 'relational architecture' come from not only an understanding of performance in Lozano-Hemmer's case, but also from a history of conceptual and post-modern art. Nicolas Bourriaud cites the artists Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Philippe Parreno in his theory of 'relational aesthetics', all of whom use use-low tech methods of encouraging participation as a site of 'where the art happens'. Ritsuko Taho's *Zeromorphosis: Swans and Pigeons* (1996), to take another example, used the low-tech materials of grass-seed, shredded money and duplicate notes to make an artwork which grows grass through time, as each participant leaves their own contribution. This work is wholly dependent upon participation, and demonstrates the history of Fluxus games and projects, including Yoko Ono's sets of instructions for participation. Bourriaud, however, is convinced that contemporary relational artwork differs significantly from these precedents ('How are these apparently elusive works to be decoded, be they process-related or behavioural by ceasing to take shelter behind sixties art history?')[37]

Outside the art world, the history of participative activist work has used 'any media necessary', including new media, to attract attention and real participation. The Spanish group La Fiambrera, for example, have scanned in development corporation logos to protest against city decline-and-gentrification cycles. These logos were digitally manipulated and made into small flags which were carefully placed into rubbish and dog faeces in order to protest against declining street cleaning. Handing out hard hats to the public alongside a dangerously neglected wall also made the events into 'performances' to stimulate live debate. The current form of 'flash mobs' (where, for instance, a group of people connected by mobile phones turn up at Liverpool Street station to dance simultaneously to different tunes on their cheap earphone radios)[38] is perhaps the child of the 'phone trees' of early eco-activism, to alert participants of local actions. In the world of activism, tools for group use are assumed to be important and necessary, whereas the world of visual art, being based on the individual artist, and the individual viewer having a personal epiphany, has found this group ethic particularly difficult to deal with. Thus when a group such as Mongrel makes software such as *Linker*, intended for free group use as a tool (merely a shell to enable future human–human interaction) then a conventional gallery faces the challenge of locating not only the art 'object', but the audience and the author.

Graham, Beryl. *Interaction/Participation : Disembodied Performance in New Media Art*, Dead History, Live Art?, 2007, p.254-258

6 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Body Movies, Relational Architecture 6*, V2, Rotterdam, Cultural Capital of Europe 2001, photo by Arie Kievit. Courtesy of the artist

7 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Body Movies, Relational Architecture 6*, V2, Rotterdam, Cultural Capital of Europe 2001, photo by Jan Sprij. Courtesy of the artist

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There is always a need to question whether the art, the interaction or the performance is happening between computer and computer (as with *The Lovers*), between human and computer (*Rehearsal of Memory*), or between human and human (and maybe digital new media can help, if the artist is a good enough host, as with *Resonance of 4*). If the popular media are anything to go by, then the latter option (mobile phones for example) would seem to be rather more in demand than the 'press the red button' struggles of the human–computer option.

In considering the early exhibition *Cybernetic Serendipity* (1968), Gloria Sutton points out that interaction is not only a basic logistical problem for the point of exhibition in conventional galleries, but also for questions of documentation.

> Computer generated films were shown as projected films during the evenings, but then represented in the exhibition and in the catalogue as black and white stills. Through this process, the exhibition transferred the experience of interacting with the machines into iconic images. Visitors were denied the usual spectacles or frustrations that accompany trying to use any type of electronic device in a public space, and the interaction remained confined to a surface glance.[39]

The question of how the performance or artwork is relating to the audience (whether this is called relational aesthetics, interaction, participation or merely reception) is therefore of enduring importance to the whole field.

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