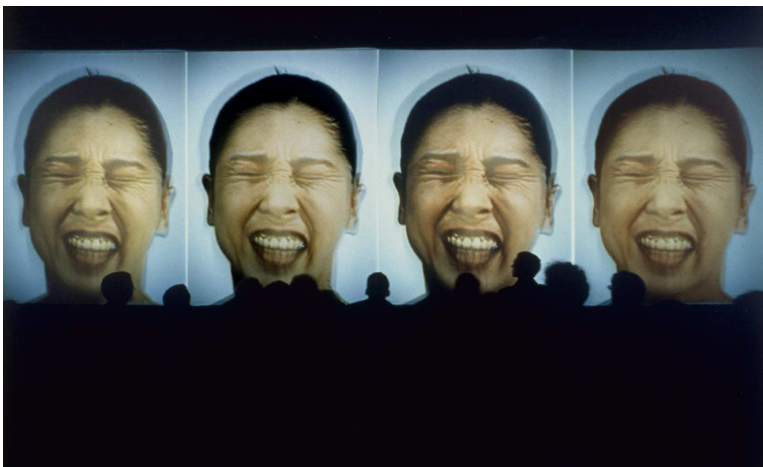


Thoughts on Passibility, Interactivity and the Potential of Computer Art

By Hannes Andersson

Passibility is defined by Lyotard (1992) as a state of subjective sensation: "It is a capacity or awareness, a receptivity for experience that does not pre-calculate that experience, but receives it as a donation" (Van de Vall, 2008). I like this term as it encapsulates well the quality of art perceived, something quite difficult to theorise. Why do we appreciate the art that we do?

For example, I was the other day introduced by a fellow student to Mike Stubbs' work "Granular Synthesis": a multichannel video piece that displays a woman's face looping



through minute incomplete movements, presented in four screens.

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My friend sent it to me with the words: *I think you would like this.* I did. I liked it a lot, but why is that?

What is my reason for liking it, and how did she know that I would? On an emotional level these things are not very hard to grasp; I often encounter works, which I suspect that a colleague or friend would appreciate, and if I recommend them to look into the work in question, the assumption is often proven to be correct. You know your aesthetic, and you know the aesthetics of the people that you spend time with. Intellectually this is much more difficult to reason, as I at least find this aesthetic of art to be quite intangible and hence very hard to define. My comments on the video-piece were

along the lines of: *I like how there is an alien-ness in the way that the body is being presented, how there is grotesqueness to the body if viewed in detail.* These notions contribute to an understanding why I appreciate the work. However these characteristics of the video do not capture my main reason for liking it. I liked it because of the possibility that occurs when I view it; the sensation that the work introduces in me.

So we could say that the quality of the work inspired a certain emotional response in me, which I appreciated, but: Where is this quality contained? It is not solely contained in me, but it is neither inherent within the work alone, since it needs me, and my subjective emotional response to generate the appreciated affect. The quality - what Lyotard terms possibility - is generated in between, in my interaction with the work. It is subjective and exists only in that very moment.

According to Lyotard this sensation comes from the encounter with the otherness of the artwork's materiality. However, he also claims this otherness would be missing in technologically mediated art (Lyotard, 1992). Echoing Adorno and McLuhan, he assumes such tech art to be characterized by "determination and calculation" (Van de Vall, 2008) leaving no room for free play. Van de Vall regards this dichotomy between traditional forms of art (such as painting) and technologically mediated art as a false one, as the attention of the viewer is being equally directed and programmed in both cases. She further points to the argument by Verbeek (2005) that even if a technology is designed to have a certain effect, it is not evident that this will be the case. For example, the Internet has been designed as a military technology. While it was intended for very specific usage, it is not limited to this application as a medium today. Although it can be argued that the fact of Internet being built upon military technology to a degree still dictates the possibilities of the mediums usage (Turner, 2006).

Like Van de Vall, I neither take a utopian nor dystopian view on technological mediation. Instead, I think interactive media holds a great potential as an artistic medium because it allows for the creation of new valuable experiences unique to this medium. This quality should not be ignored nor demonised. However, we should not uncritically follow a “logic of innovation”, which either assumes such qualities to be inherent in interactive media (Slater, 2014) or regards the audiences’ active involvement necessarily as improvement of their experience or elevate the quality of the work (Bishop, 2004).

Interactivity is in itself a tricky term. Many works described as interactive are (to me) not interactive at all. With the promise of interactivity we are often “...asked to mistake the structure of somebody else’s mind for our own” (Manovich, 2001). Predefined narratives are often presented as interactive, because these narratives progress through our engagement with them, but this (to me) cannot be described as interactive as we do not have a mandate in this case. Instead, the work could be described as *reactive*, although I find *interfaced* to be the more appropriate term.

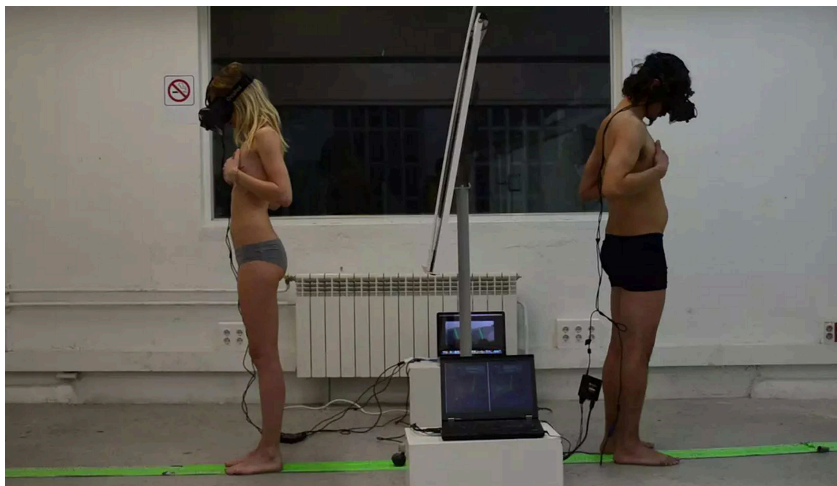
How can we identify the pros and cons of interactivity when the term is so loosely defined? Van de Vall regards paintings as interactive because of the passibility that occurs when we experience them. However, I favour a differentiation between *active perception* and *interactivity*. Our experience of an artwork, and the passibility that occurs when we experience it, is always interactive because we, together with the maker of the work, are co-creators of this experience. This however does not necessarily mean that the work itself is interactive. Attempting to avoid this very general usage of interactivity, McIver Lopez (2010) defines art as being interactive only if the viewers’ actions “effects the work’s display”. Only if these actions actually change the way the work *is*, or the way it *is behaving*, does he speak of an interactive art piece.

This definition to me is not sufficient either, as it also encapsulates the interfaced pre-defined narratives described

earlier. Jan Simmons argues that interaction is divisible in three distinct actions: 1) the interaction between users; 2) users manipulating digital objects; and 3) users navigating through a (digital) information space (Van de Vall, 2005). These criteria however, cannot generate a proper dialogue either: The first point will render pretty much any artwork interactive, as if the artwork triggers for example a conversation, this criteria has been fulfilled. The second point is also too ambiguous, it does not exclude the possibility that these “digital object” would be reacting only in a predefined singular manner, and hence assumes *reactive* or *interfaced* to be the same process as *interactive*. The latter also applies to the third point, which encompasses everything from television to PDFs under the umbrella of interactive media.

So how can we talk about the value of interactivity in art? And why should we? There is a unique form of passibility that can occur in interactive art, when the work itself, and not only the sensation of it, is really a co-creation between the artist and the audience.

One example of such a work is “*The Machine to Be Another*”



by BeAnotherLab: a pseudo-physical virtual reality experience that allows its users to swap bodies with each other, that was made in order to investigate as well stimulate empathy.

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The work enables an interaction between its

users through technological mediation which otherwise would not be possible, but how the users perform this interaction is entirely up to them as the medium does not prescribe a specific narrative.

I have worked closely with BeAnotherLab for some time and

have been present in many situations where this work has been presented. I have every time been amazed at the emotional impact it has upon its users, in spite of being such a simple idea (no matter how sceptical these users might have been to begin with).

Another example is “Ilinx” made in collaboration between Chris Salter, TeZ and Lamontagne. >>>

Ilinx is an immersive experience where the users visual input is disturbed and redirected through the use of sensory deprivation, haptics



and light. The art-piece induces in the user a perceptual shift and a change of emotional state. The nature of this state varies widely from user to user, but most report that they do experience a profound momentary change in their perception, thought and emotion.

These two artworks are quite different, but they share this interactive quality that I am attempting to describe, as both are examples of art that mediates experience without dictating how this experience plays out.

In order to discuss the qualities particular to this type of art we need a term for it, a term, which we at the moment do not have. So instead of again attempting to redefine interactivity in order to capture this quality, I propose that we engage with another term: “*affectability*”, “*affectable art*”, art that allows the participant to not only effect it but to change it’s very nature and sentiment, it’s affect. I see little value in qualitatively comparing art of this kind to for example painting in a hierarchical manner. I do however think that this form of passibility that can be found in affectable art deserves more attention in the philosophical debate surrounding new forms of art, as it is liable to get lost if this form of art is grouped together with non-affectable forms of “interactive” art.

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