From instrument to interactive spectacle: transformations of participatory culture

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New media art, or digital media art, is characterized first and foremost by qualities deriving from its digital foundation. Some of them, such as multimediality or virtuality, can be used to describe all of its instances. Others, such as telematicity, hypertextuality or interactivity, which are only characteristic for certain media (albeit, arguably, those most representative for current artistic practice), appear, as a result, only in certain areas of digital art. The network of interrelations between all the aforementioned attributes defines the internal dynamics of new media art and determines the interrelations between its miscellaneous varieties.

Interactive art is a singular phenomenon in the area of digital creativity: it is cross-border, cross-generic, cross-medial. After all, its defining attribute – interactivity – can be found in various domains of digital practice: in CD-ROM / DVD-ROM art, hypermedia installations, net art or virtual reality art. This means, therefore, that interactive creativity combines characteristics of diverse arts involving interactive digital media. Certain theoretical approaches identify its instances also beyond the domain of new media. Together with its characteristic definition disparity (arising from the multiplicity and diversity of research perspectives interested in it), as well as the numerous terminological aporiae related to it, the aforesaid wealth and diversity regarding the occurrence of correlated phenomena imparts to the category of interactivity a quality of vagueness, openness, perhaps even hybridity, whereas the interactive art defined by it assumes a scope that is far from precise, as well as obtaining an equally heterogeneous character.

Reflection on interactive art, and particularly reflection which tends towards theoretical resolutions concerning the understanding of interactivity in the domain of artistic practice, analyzing the circumstances of its occurrence as well as its variations, is always primarily determined by the manner in which one defines the relations between its foundational aspects: the social and technical, on the one hand, and the artistic – variously embedded in the former two – on the other. I am

convinced that those aspects, their hierarchy and interrelations, are particularly important, possibly essential, for determining the significance of the category of interactivity in art. By granting priority (greater significance) to one of the former aspects while defining artistic interactivity, we are in fact determining the perspective from which to view the issue.

The first of the aforementioned aspects – the social one – situates the reflection on interactive art in the context of social process analysis, deriving artistic interactivity from and characterizing it through the general category of social interaction. The second aspect – the technical one – introduces the context of IT and communications, emphasizing the relation between the human and the machine, the computer, the complex cybernetic systems. Lastly, the third, artistic aspect – depending on the treatment of the two previous aspects and interrelated with them, as well as confronted with the system of the institution of art – determines the set of qualities characterizing interactive art and defines its history.

It is not my intention to privilege either of them. It seems more beneficial, both for an accurate description of the history of interactive art thus far and for an analysis/interpretation of particular realizations, to propose a model in which artistic interactivity is shaped by the coexistence of both indicated aspects. After all, since the very beginning of the history of interactive art, invariably, realizations have appeared in which one or the other aspect is dominant, or – no less frequently – works in which these two aspects are variously interrelated. Therefore, their interrelations determine all dimensions and cross-sections of the interactive art territory, and it is in this manner that interactive art ought to be perceived. Combining all those perspectives within one model allows one to discern not only the dynamics of transformations which interactive art undergoes, but also the dynamics of its duration. In this way, history can be viewed as several histories and particular works can be analyzed as positioned in a network of paradigmatic references.

The traditional work of art is regarded as a finished whole, its various dimensions permanently integrated. In an interactive work, however, these dimensions are severed from one another, and, moreover, at least some of them lose their finality, obtaining in return the status of a process, a series of ephemeral events, a potentiality of many diverse states. Nevertheless, the dissociated and liberated dimensions do not achieve full autonomy, or even a restricted independence, because all the dimensions, levels or elements of the work exist in a network relationship.

I postulate a distinction of two levels within the organization of an interactive artwork:

> (1) The artwork as 'dispositive'

> (2) The artwork produced by recipients/interactors.

The first level – roughly speaking the product of the artist – I described as the context for the second level, where I perceived the work proper: a product of the recipient's interaction and, simultaneously, the object of his or her productive/receptive experience. The duality of the recipient's interactive attitude, thus defined, is also well represented by the term '(v)user', offered as a name for the new role of the (former) recipient by Miroslaw Rogala and Bill Seaman. My approach, rather than present the structure of the work, focuses on the field of interactive communication. A multi-level interactive work is thus inscribed into a broader, dynamic communicative context, which results in revealing the processual character of the work. In this model, interaction occurs between the interactor and the network – comprising the interface, hardware, software and the material (data) –, which I term the 'dispositive'. Therefore, let us reiterate the amended formula: interaction transpires between the interactor and the dispositive. The interaction between the recipient and the dispositive executes the artwork. With regard to certain works, in which the dispositive represents the artist, constructing a balance between the freedom of interaction and their systematic restrictions (Umberto Eco would see this as a balance between the intention of the work and the intention of the recipient), yet another factor comes into play – the implied artist. In this case, the term 'implied' denotes the artist's submission to the interactor, who establishes the artist's position and role as a result of a particular, individual interpretation of the interactive process experienced by himself or herself. As for interactive works in which the artist's position is not established (implied), we are instead faced with diffuse (shared) authorship.

I wish now to present *an open typology of interactive works*. An outcome of reflection on the history of interactive art thus far, shows that it lays claims neither to systematicity nor to definiteness. Each type is associated with a particular repertoire of interactive strategies and leads to particular range of experiences. If it should so happen – as it often does in interactive art – that the work becomes equated with the interaction, and the latter is, at the same time, the only form (dictated by the logic of

interactivity) in which the work may be experienced, then the relationship between the three categories is of paramount importance. I wish to emphasize that certain qualities which help to characterize particular types are also frequently encountered in works belonging to other categories, where they do not have however, a defining role, i.e. they do not determine the work's affiliation with a given group. For example, variously understood instrumentality or game structure are features, which occur in interactive works almost invariably.

1. The instrument artwork

Works of this type do not offer an experience of a previously established form; what is more, they do not even offer an experience of navigating a structure, which is hypertextual (and hence, in a way, established as preceding the experience ontologically). The nature of the experience is totally executive. The interface allows a series of determined activities, performed in order to realize one of the very numerous possible outputs, as exemplified in *Telegarden* (a 1995 telerobotic installation authored by Ken Goldberg and Joseph Santarromana), *Portrait No. 1* (Luc Courchesne's 1990 work, which allows the recipient to hold a conversation with a digital partner), *Sinking Feeling* (2001, Ken Feingold) or *Piano as an Image Medium* (a 1995 example of audiovisual performance, authored by Toshio Iwai).

2. The game artwork

This type of work invites the recipient to an experience structured like a game (not infrequently, such works employ processed versions of games already available on the market). The participants have at their disposal the rules, gear and a fixed location. The space of the game is often virtual reality, as, for instance, in Feng Mengbo's *Ah_Q – A Mirror of Death* (2003), or, perhaps even more interestingly, a network of cross-border relations is activated, and the game develops in spaces between various worlds. An example of the latter may be *Can You See Me Now?* (2001), a collaboration between the Blast Theory group and the Mixed Reality Lab (University of Nottingham), a work situated between the virtuality of the Internet and the materiality of the real world. Works like these, exploiting mixed reality as game space, appeared at the very beginning of the history of interactive art, as evidenced in *Psychic Space*, the work by Myron W. Krueger.

3. The archive artwork

Works belonging to this category offer structures of data organized into a lucid database structure as the space of the experience. The experience assumes the form of exploring the territory of the database with the help of a map, supplied by the work. Therefore, in this case, the structure of the experience's virtual space does not determine the work's significant quality (or value). This function is performed first and foremost by the material gathered in the archive, and also, to a lesser extent, by the relations shaped within the material by the user's navigational choices. The type may be exemplified by George Legrady's CD-ROM work entitled *An Anecdoted Archive from the Cold War* (1994) or Agnes Hegedus *Things Spoken* (1998). Occasionally a work of this category will offer the interactor an opportunity to enrich the archival resources, as in the case of Antonio Muntadas' *The File Room* (1994 -), a realization involving gallery space and the Internet, or another piece by George Legrady Pockets full of Memories (2001).

4. The labyrinth artwork

In case of the labyrinth work's hypertextual structure the interactor does not possess the knowledge of the experience's virtual construction. What is more, this construction may alter in the course of the experience (the so-called 'dynamic mapping'), rendering the obtained knowledge useless. An example of such a devious realization is Miroslaw Rogala's interactive environment *Lovers Leap* (1995). Since the recipient is ignorant of the space in which the experience occurs, the very exploration of this space and the induced emotions and sensations (as well as intellectual behaviour), such as astonishment, unease, a sense of being lost mixed with a sense of challenge, the decisions and actions such as seeking, analyzing, etc., become essential attributes of the work. This type of work is particularly popular among interactive artists, the upshot of which is the staggering number of works offering the labyrinthine experience. Other possible examples might be Jeffrey Shaw's *Legible City* (1988-1991) and Grahame Weinbren's *Sonata* (1991-1993).

5. The rhizome artwork

Works belonging to this group represent one of the most remarkable forms of interactive art. While sharing numerous traits with the previous type, work-rhizomes

differ primarily in that they develop in the course of, and as a result of, the interactive experience. Additionally, they employ miscellaneous strategies; they may retain a memory of its initial shape (which means that the interactors are able to experience both the original form of the work and the phases of its transformation; such is the case with Piotr Wyrzykowski's installation *The Gallery of Polish Kings*, 1993), or they accept permanent mutability (e.g. Douglas Davis' *The World's First Collaborative Sentence*, 1994–). Works of this type are mostly encountered on the Internet, the architecture of which is particularly conducive to rhizome work projects. While the structure of the labyrinth artwork, and game artwork is hypertextual in character, archive artwork is related to the database, and the instrument work seen from this perspective, can be characterized as a generator of textuality, then, employing Espen Aarseth's concept, I shall describe the structure of the rhizome work as cybertextual.

6. The system artwork

We deal hear with artworks which discard interaction with humans, what is a confusing aspect for everyone who wants to see interactive art as engaging interactive communication between artwork and its user. As seen, for instance, in Steve Heimbecker's 2004 work entitled *POD (Wind Array Cascade Machine)*, these projects develop their interactive dynamics by building system structures which function solely in technological contexts. Sometimes they may use data provided by users, as in the Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen installation *Listening Post* (2002), or Paul De Marinis piece *The Messenger* (1998 / revised 2005). In other cases the artwork is open to interactors' contributions but at the same time lets them know that it is not welcomed, as for instance in the David Rokeby installation *n-Cha(n)t* (2001). I name the interactivity characteristic for this type of the artwork as internal. It creates a dialogue among active elements of the construction of the dispositive.

7. The net artwork

In this group I would see such artistic strategies, which engage different forms of places and activities, in many cases independent (to some extent), many of them even non-interactive, composing together a net of events interconnected into a sort of artistic action, or campaign. Locative media art is a field many examples of such artwork come from. I may indicate for instance, Michelle Teran's installation/performance *Buscando Al Sr. Goodbar* (2009). GPS artworks compose

an important part of this territory, as well as projects connecting real spaces with virtual components of Second Life, as is the case of Paul Sermon's *Liberate Your Avatar* (2007). The type of interactivity I recognize as characteristic for all these works is somehow related to the form of interactivity Eric Zimmerman called meta-interactivity.

8. The spectacle artwork.

This type was quite typical for the very early stage of development of interactive art when its territory resembled a battlefield between, on the one hand, the traditional notion of art, wishing to serve the audience a spectacle composed in full accordance with the previously formed idea of its visual structure (resulting from a traditionally understood creative process), and, on the other, the notion of interactive art, where the creative process preceding the experience of the work finds its extension in the process of creative reception. The early responsive artworks often took the interactive spectacle form. Nowadays we encounter quite often versions of this strategy, connecting interactive limited activity with spectacular effects: possibly the result of the art establishment institutions' slow process of making new media art accommodate the realities of art system. A recent example of such an artwork which may serve is Yoko Ishi and Hiroshi Homura's piece *It's fire, you can touch it* (2007). Another example comes from some interactive artworks involving the Internet, dividing their audience into two parts. One, smaller group of active participants is engaged in the production of spectacle for the second, much larger group. An is Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Vectorial Elevation* (2000).

The suggested typology of interactive artworks is – as previously stated – a proposition of preliminary nature. Subsequent discoveries may result from the development of new tendencies in this field of artistic creativity, or even from a more rigorous scrutiny of the existing achievement. To conclude, I wish to add that a very significant tendency at the moment is type-crossing (nowadays numerous works appear along the type borderlines).