Before the reset: transformative practice of interactive media art

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In computer-based interactive media art, the artwork should be practiced in the installation: the show and the interaction establish and expand its meaning and interpretation, including discourses through and on technology.[1] This makes the artwork alive and viable as a transformative practice of aesthetic object and experience.

For a long time, people have talked about art as alive: in the practice of art making, the artist has surely felt that art is indeed alive. When the artist makes an artwork, s/he does not always know what the result will be and often the artwork gives an idea back to him/her during the making process. Here, 'contingency' is an appropriate word for expressing the phenomenon. Contingency means the artwork is alive and responsive. With today's computer-based artwork, the artist usually depends on the collaborator - an engineer or a programmer - to complete the system. The artist does not fully understand the system, and does not need to. However when the artist is simultaneously the programmer, - which happens more and more frequently these days - the contingency does not work effectively. When the artist knows too much

about the system s/he does not allow 'a bug' to work, because it is not recognised: the artist wants to make the system perfect, and ignores and discards the contingent fault or bug within the work. If instead s/he allows the artwork go its own way, it could prove productive. This letting-go by the artist could be a new and viable venue for computer-based interactive media artwork.

By using computer vision and graphics technology Dongho Kim's *Mirror 2* looks like a mirror but it remembers only still objects and space [2]. Moving viewers are shown in the distance and they disappear gradually as they approach the mirror. The major functional element is for the viewer in front of the mirror is to appear and disappear depending on his/her distance from it. A major problem with this work is that still objects and space should remain when the system resets - with the still objects and space being a kind of background for the moving viewers. Each time the show begins the artist has to reset the system without any moving features. On one particular opening day, after the artist had set up and reset the system, a gallery attendant accidentally turned on one of the lights, and temporarily set in the room, bouquets of flowers sent by sponsors and supporters, he then turned the light off. This meant the background space was changed. The result was that when the viewer sees him/herself in the mirror from distance and approaches the mirror, the viewer disappears gradually, then the light is turned on, and bouquets of flowers appear gradually and ghostly: the past returns when a viewer tries to see him/herself closely in the mirror. We can ask - which experience is better: a background without any change, or a background that brings back the past? This work questions traditional art practice and notions of what art might be.

Art historical relevance: minimal and maximal

The framed painting hanging on the wall of a gallery has been the traditional form of installation for over 500 years. The image shows us its denotative meaning, and the viewers make efforts to discover its connotative meanings. Whether the viewer moves his body or eyes in front of the paining, it does not answer or respond: the viewer is eager to know about the painting through articles, texts etc., while the work stands there silently. Painting and other traditional aesthetic objects have been located in the firm and simple relationship of the artist, artwork and viewer for a long time. Art historical research focuses on what the painting tells us, how the painting is

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[2] Dongho Kim, 'Mirror 2', 29 inch LCD monitor, CPU, webcam, in house software, 2008.

composed and who the artist is. Simply put, the painting does not care what the viewer sees, how it is understood, nor who the viewer is.[3] It is not fitting to relate new media art with traditional artistic notions.

During the 1900s, the form and content of artworks have changed dramatically, and they seem to have overcome traditional materiality. In Minimalism, artworks minimise their hidden meanings and connotations and depend upon the viewers' experience to interpret. This is the goal of Minimalism - the maximisation of the viewer's experience rather than the artist's intention or message. *Primary Structure* was an exhibition held in the Jewish museum, New York, 1966. Extremely simplified sculptures were shown and the exhibition is regarded as triggering Minimalism. *The Art of the Real* in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968 escaped from the traditional way of exhibiting. It highlighted 'the brutally unframed character of the work in its abandonment of any sculptural pedestal in order to share the real space of its viewer.' The viewer could walk through objects and structures of the work, and even sit on the artwork. The major aim was to make the viewer experience the artwork by being within its space, and for the viewer to complete the work by their presence. The artwork was no longer an aesthetic object the viewer beheld. Although Minimalism began with sculpture, these artworks were made of industrial products, such as wood or acrylic panels, that could be made by anyone. For example Dan Flavin's work is composed of fluorescent light bulbs that can be purchased in any hardware store. At this point in time, Minimalists seem to proclaim. 'If you like it, make it. If you want to invest in it, buy it.' The Minimalists' slogan woke us up: a reconsideration of the art world - artists, galleries, museums and even art schools. Minimalism moved the aesthetic object to the centre of the viewer's experience.[4]

Transformation of artistic practice: the technologist and the artist

Through the practice of the Minimalists, interactivity between the artwork and the viewer shifted from passivity to participation of the viewer. The effect of this development could be said to lessen the artist's influence in the artwork. However digital media based interactive artworks are promoted in artistic and commercial venues, and role and status of the artist needs to be reconsidered. Through the practices of media art, the traditional attachment of the artist to the artwork

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[3] Joonsung Yoon and Jaehwa Kim, 'The Interactive Artwork as the Aesthetic Object: Aesthetic Technology Converging Technological Applications and Aesthetic Discourses,' S. Göbel, R. Malkewitz, and I. Iurgel, eds., *TIDSE 2006, LNCS 4326* (Springer-Verlag: Berlin, Heidelberg, 2006) 116-126.
[4] Ibid.

diminishes. Instead, the location of the artist seems to be replaced by the system, or the collaborative work of artist and technologist, and the authority of the interactive media artist has yet to find its own voice.

The Minimalists' use of commodities and industrial products have already shifted creative production to the creative definition or use, for example, Damien Hirst's artistic practice using Rachel Howard's assistance with his factory system.[5] Digital media based interactive art is not in fact so different from the context it emanates from, but there is today a new role for the emerging technologist. However there are some problems in this (new) media arts field. Artists with young practices may not have the financial resources that established artists have to hire assistants or technical staff. Another problem can be the technologist - interested in the creative challenge of making a new systems - might not be content with a small fee, and perhaps overly interested with the rights of the artwork i.e. who the work belongs to. Furthermore in a collaboration where there is a computer scientist or programming technician involved, it can be very difficult to understand each other, and subsequently reaching the goals of an artwork. Another problem can be the artist is simply not interested in, or does not know much about, the technology. Furthermore when the work is shown in an art venue, the authority usually remains within the artist's territory, with the technologist as merely 'staff': sometimes interactive media artwork has been presented as a form of the artists with 'technical support'. Some of these problems are being overcome through the use of open source software and an interdisciplinary education. Without knowledge of the system, the artist cannot do other than compromise and minimize the idea. Even though there are some collaborating artists (such as Gilbert and George) the real need for inter-disciplinary collaborative work has been exacerbated by the huge growth of interactive media art and today the inspiration for a new artwork need come from the artist but from technologists, digital media researchers, computer scientists etc.

The transformative practice, aesthetic technology

With interactive media artworks, the activity of creation reveals a somewhat different atmosphere from the conventional and traditional experience and the most distinctive

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[5] Nigel Reynolds, 'Charles Saatchi Could Have Bought Four Davids for the Price of Tracey Emin's Bed,' *The Daily Telegraph,* 7 January 2006. This kind of story always recalls the school system of the art world, such as Rembrandt School.

element is the source of the artistic idea.[6] Artistic subject, theme, content, motivation, etc. usually stem from the artist's mind. With new media art, usable technologies are often found by the artist, who then develops or adds his/her ideas based upon the technology, then further adjusts the artistic idea and the technology. Characteristically the social and cultural phenomena of the new technology become the environment, the topic, the theme and the venue of a new media artwork.

The interactive media artwork, *Mirror 2* is based on these elements. The fundamental technological explanation is a simple division of moving and still imagery. These two factors are computational differences. Here the set up defines the initial still shot from the webcam - the still image, and after the set up, the moving things in front of the webcam become the moving image. In the software developed by the artist, the moving image is controlled i.e. the more the moving factor approaches the webcam, the more the factor fades out. This work did not originally stem from the conceptual dichotomy of appearing/disappearing, or distance/nearness, but from the differentiation of the background and foreground in graphics - a genre of computer science. Interestingly the artist is not trained traditionally i.e. in art per se, but is a computer scientist who specializes in computer graphics, in particular, real-time rendering. The question we posed earlier: which version is better - the one with a background without any change, or a background which brings back the past? is, interestingly, a traditional artistic question - which speaks to contingency in art making and the belief in the viable life an artwork can have.

Arguably interactive media art could take away the traditional joy in art making and art appreciation, but also it can transform our senses and experiment with the seemingly firm canons in art. From the Avant-garde to Minimalism these transformative practices seem quite tame by today's standards, but in fact these practices were extremely revolutionary in the time: they transformed aesthetic objects, aesthetic experiences, and, aesthetic subjects. Contemporary technologies and technologists are transforming these aesthetic elements again, and we might add 'aesthetic technology' to the discourse of art.

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[6] Hyunkyoung Cho and Joonsung Yoon, 'Performative Art; The Politics of The Doubleness,' Leonardo 42:3 (Cambridge: MIT P., 2009) 282-283. Here, it is asserted that the instrumental definition of technology is wrong.

References

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