

INTERACTIVITY MEANS INTERPASSIVITY

Terms such as 'interactivity', 'virtual reality', and 'cyberspace' are among the biggest buzzwords of technological progress, media and media-art. This paper challenges certain claims made in relation to the subject of 'interactivity' in media-art, and especially of the tenor and choice of words such formulations often invoke.

The predominant view holds that by programming a computer and connecting it to an interface that can receive and translate special movements in its surrounding into information that can be understood by the computer – which subsequently performs certain parts of its program according to the functions triggered by the spectator's movements – we are presented with a liberating 'interactive' work. Cybernetic 'communication' between the technical installation and its user is said to be achieved.

The emphasis here is on 'the technical installation' and 'the spectator', not on 'the programmer' of the installation and its 'user'. In my opinion there are two reasons for this particular slant. The first is not difficult: the technical deficiencies of interactivity are suppressed by the computer industry, which of course needs to sell its products and therefore build up sophisticated superstructures and PR campaigns which can advertise the products' capabilities:

The recipient gets out of his passive role and can actively intervene. Through the dissolution of stiff structures he can zoom himself into the complexity of the performance, being able to compose it with a new spatiality and temporality (Reller 1992).

Such currently circulating catch phrases end up being adopted in a careless and

uncritical manner by many 'artists' and 'philosophers':

The interface becomes a zone of experience, a multi-dimensional encounter ... The feedback is not simply 'negative' or 'positive' ... The loop is subject to constant transformation as the elements, human and computer, change in response to each other. The two interpenetrate until the notion of control is lost and the relationship becomes encounter and involvement (Rokeby 1991).

In my view, the claim to turn away from stiffness, isolation and so on, towards flexibility and the recipient's activity is just wishful thinking. It should be quite clear that no meaningful communication – in the sense of a true exchange of ideas, thoughts, opinions, or discussion (where one interlocutor might suddenly lead the conversation into an unexpected direction due to his partner's response) – can never emerge from a programmed technology. What we get instead is a simple alternation, based on the rules set by the programmer.

This is the first reason why 'interactivity' reveals itself to be aimed at passivity. The user remains a 'user' who will not magically turn into a 'creator' (as we are constantly lead to believe) but will continue to resemble a puppet responding to the artist's/technician's programmed vision.

Why is this the case? On the one hand the user's capacity to act is reduced to button-pushing, with little comprehension of the technical relations. On the other hand our heads are stuffed with fairy tales about the holographic universe we are just about to enter through our own creation. If we mix these two aspects the result will lead to a minimisation of

human activity and a monumentalisation of technological effects.

In traditional arts, now labelled 'doctrinaire' and 'anti-social', the recipient at least moved on the familiar level of verbal and mental communication – even if the artist's vision was not totally clear, the viewer could intellectually join in the discussion. If there is anything to join now (besides joystick-pushing), it is a discussion about emotions. But as is well enough known, emotional bombardment without any intellectual foundation will do little to rectify the present situation. The user should really be provided with the technical know-how and thus with the competence to see through and to judge the interactive work. Unfortunately this is rarely the case with most audiences, who are easily swayed by demagogically presented nebulous theories. Hence the user is the first victim in this sneaky passivity-seeking interactivity-campaign.

Communication also has a lot to do with the unsaid. The way people look, gestures, or the expression in a voice can sometimes tell much more than what is actually said. How shall the unsaid be brought into a system based on well-defined input, on data?

To do this requires genuine artificial intelligence, which presently does not exist. So why do so many artists and theorists enthusiastically share the industry's songs of praise? Simply in order to join the new wave, to be considered avant-garde and hence to be enthusiastically sponsored by the industry? It would be soothing if the motives were of such a superficial nature. The second factor that contributes to the aforementioned falsification is not only much harder to crystallise, but must also be taken much more seriously. It lies in mankind's long-lasting desire for 'self-surrender'. In other words, the big song and dance around technology is just one side of a coin whose flipside is to do with making oneself small. This tendency towards the decomposition of the self can be seen in linguistic terms along with 'the programmer', 'the maker' and so on, which are being completely abstracted through impersonal formulations as 'the interactive installation', which reflects the desire to avoid any mention of the producing subject.

Indeed, many artists declare themselves to be against the image of the lone originator, as

this is considered to be the equivalent of a unidirectional transmission of messages – dominant, inaccessible and forced upon the recipient. Instead they vote for an artist who 'works in an industrial-like, anonymous process of production, with the technical and conceptual help of co-workers' (Weibel 1989).

The logical short-circuit herein is obvious: whether the transmission of a message is unidirectional, boring, demagogic or 'open' has nothing to do with the process of production (whether alone or in collaboration) nor with the means (computer or no computer). If this were true, mankind would have finally found the recipe for quality artwork! So as not to be completely misunderstood: I do not doubt that good art can be produced by anonymous collectives; nor do I doubt that the cult built around the nineteenth century category of artist-as-genius is just an idea like the many others mankind has brought up at one time and disposed of at another.

This guarantees neither 'narrow' nor 'open' mindedness, neither good nor bad art. But I am nonetheless very suspicious of the hypocritical longing for unselfishness which is implicit in certain catch-phrases: 'Through computers we have finally reached a democratic art, an equal exchange of thoughts!'. What does such unselfishness actually mean? It is actually nothing but the desire to get rid of oneself!

Historically speaking, this principle is not so new. For example, the creators of those great masterpieces, the Gothic cathedrals, also attached great importance to their anonymous status. They did so in order to leave the full glory to God, to whom they delivered themselves, which of course implies not only a loss of freedom and autonomy but also of responsibility. Getting rid of one's self is a declaration of irresponsibility and dependence. Nowadays it seems the full glory will be left to the machines (along with our selves).

Let me give as an example the following project entitled 'Breathe' by the German media-artist Ulrike Gabriel: an oxygen-mask (or similar device) functions as the interface, and is connected to a high-tech Silicon Graphics computer capable of performing real-time calculations and 'animation'. Each

time a spectator breathes, the computer converts the frequency of the breathing into abstract 'graphs', which are instantaneously projected onto huge screens surrounding the spectator. The graphics are not fed into the computer beforehand, but are generated in real-time. There is therefore a certain element of chance introduced, as the programming artist does not provide the exact shape and form of the computed images. In a way, it is a higher level of interactive programming, but it still does not bring the computer or the spectator into a more equal and active partnership. Because the computer is unable to react to anything outside of its program, what is the job of the spectator? It is literally to breathe life into the machine.

Next to heartbeat, breathing is the most essential human function – one cannot live without moving one's lungs. To take this essential motion as the trigger for the technological performance is like handing human life over to the machine. On top of this, the user is enclosed in a cramped, dark space where the slightest breathing is immediately answered by an surrounding bombardment of huge projections and sounds. Considering the proportions of the installation (narrow cabinet, huge projection walls) and considering the manner in which the artist praises the ability of the technology to create and organise things almost autonomously, it becomes clear that the second victim of passivity-inducing 'interactivity' is actually the artist/maker. However, the difference here is that the retreat from the action of the user happens deliberately.

The user is told to be creative, in order to make the whole conception more grand – a trick that tempts/forces them into this emotional nirvana. I do not suspect the artists and theorists are even aware of it. My impression is that they honestly believe in it all, which is even worse! I have never met a media-artist who is genuinely interested in the audience's health and happiness. What they are interested in is their own mania. Frankly, this seems sick to me. It seems like an ardent desire, almost a mania for getting lost in self-produced intoxications, whose home-made character is disguised and repressed with an incredibly vehement determination.

Thus we end up finally in hallelujah-songs such as:

The diffuse, parallel nature of the interaction and the intensity of the interactive feedback loop can produce a state that is almost shamanistic. The self expands (and loses itself) to fill the installation environment and by implication the world (Rokeby 1991).

Gadgeteering, the symbiosis of human and computer brings the liberation from the philosophical affront of freedom (Bolz 1991).

Here lies the crux of the matter. From the second quote we can see why Gothic masterpieces and computer art cannot be put on the same level, even though a parallel can be drawn in the basic attitude of the subject towards itself. The philosophical affront to freedom had not yet started in the Gothic. Therefore it is actually wrong to speak of a basic attitude of the subject towards itself in the Gothic universe, as there was none. It is exactly this 'innocence' that makes the pieces so convincing and credible. Beyond that, they were created for God. Today we face a deeper level of fetishism, since the tool of creation itself is adopted as the alpha and omega.

How else should the effort to hide the computer as an apparatus and to unfold it as an incarnation of transparency and transcendence be read?

If it is the project of our time to make the invisible visible ... then we have to realise the necessity of making the presently very visible computer invisible. The computer as a thing, as machine is too near to us, too dominant ... Instead of regarding the computer-interface as a membrane, separating the computer as a thing on its own from us, we ought to understand it as a door into dataspace ... a synaptic interval in the symbiosis human-computer (Ascott 1989).

The same efforts are to be found in the computer industry – for example in certain company's attempts to sell multimedia CD-players not as computers, but as supplement to their hi-fi and video systems. Their intention is quite obviously to place the fancier aspect of 'interactive' TV in the foreground and mask its sobering character as 'thing'.

But while the industry's deceptions are due to pragmatic reasons, the artists, sincerely believing in their own formulations, deceive their audience and themselves. According to

Nietzsche, 'whoever degrades himself wants to be raised'. The willingness to let oneself disintegrate into 'natural forces' (whose self-production is denied), is nothing but a tricky way to both hide and feel powerful in the shadow of a protecting authority.

It would seem that what is active about 'interactivity' is finally the human activation of all possibilities from all angles in order to push activity away from oneself to someone/something else, and towards interpassivity.

References

- Ascott, Roy, 1989, 'Gestamdatenwerk', *Kunstforum*, Vol 103, September/October, pp100-108.
- Bolz, Norbert, 1991, 'Der Rausch aus dem Datenfluss', *Leonardo*, Special Supplement, October, pp50-52.

Reller, Christiane, 1992, 'Wie man einen Traum verkauft. Experten diskutieren über Multimedia', *Keys*, Number 4, July/August, pp102-107.

Rokeby, David, 1991, *Prix Arts Electronica Catalogue*, Linz.

Weibel, Peter, 1989, 'Der Ausstieg aus der Kunst als höchste Form der Kunst', *Kunstforum*, Volume 98, January/February.

Mona Sarkis is an artist who has won numerous awards in painting and interactive art and participated in various international exhibitions. She has received grants from the Foundation Cartier, Paris, and from the 'Studienstiftung des Deutsches Volkes', Bonn. She is currently working on a doctoral thesis on the use of video and computer onstage.