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The Aesthetic Experience of Interactive Art: A Challenge for the Humanities – and for the Audience

Due to its processuality and multi-modality, interactive new media art presents a challenge for the humanities. Not only is it a hybrid of visual and performative arts, it even exceeds both fields of research through its foundation of aesthetic experience on action as opposed to contemplation.

Interactive art is, on the one hand, a technical system designed by an artist (or any entity that can be considered author of the system). This system has a (more or less) permanent existence as material or coded interaction offer, independent from its actual realization by the visitor. This characteristic determines two basic parameters of interactive art: It is usually presented in the context of an exhibition (not as a scheduled performance), and it can age, i. e. become a historic “work of art”.

The asynchronicity of the interaction design and its realization thus suggests its analysis in the context of the visual arts.

On the other hand, interactive art manifests itself in its full complexity only through the ever new realization and actualization by the visitor – the active experience of the work is considered the basic source of aesthetic experience. The visitor is thus turned from audience into actor, although they retain the role of observer, expected to perform and contemplate at the same time. A thorough analysis of interactive art therefore has to do justice to their status as referable ‘works of art’ as well as their multiple possible manifestations and their potential for manifold experiences.

Art history’s competence lies in the analysis of relations between formal design and emergence of meaning, but they usually deal with static entities. The processual nature of interactive art demands its interpretation within the context of time based arts: Due to its potential use or production of moving images, parallels to film and video can be observed, though the process of interaction itself shows closer similarities to the performative arts. Like them, interactive art is based on staging and performance. But, as opposed

to other performative arts, the active participation of the visitor is indispensable and there is usually no co-presence of artist and visitor during the realization of the work. Instead, roles are reversed: the beholder becomes performer himself. To do justice to the foundation of aesthetic experience on action instead of contemplation, interactive art research eventually has to look for models outside of the humanities: As will be argued within this paper, the analysis of the aesthetic experience of interactive art can gain from the consideration of theories of game and play, also focusing on action that is distanced from the everyday.

An aesthetic analysis of interactive art therefore has to take into account research in the areas of art history, theatre and performance studies, and multidisciplinary game studies – and of course also further disciplines, such as informatics and interface design, can offer pertinent insights into interactive art. But the challenges presented by interactive art are not limited to its need for transdisciplinary contextualization. If we agree that the aesthetics of interactive art reside within the aesthetic experience of its realization, we have to find ways to actually study this process.

Art history, but also performance and literature studies, are generally based on individual observation and analysis (even if accompanied by the study of documents or prior research), thereby accepting the subjectivity of perception and interpretation of the research object. This approach can also be considered the main approach of interactive art history, it even lead to an imperative that has become a 'code of conduct' of interactive art research: "Never write about an interactive work that you did not experience yourself!"

But if, as is usually argued, interactive art is not only characterized by the need for active realization per se, but is based especially on the potential of manifold and ever new realizations by different visitors, shouldn't the imperative be: "Never write about a work of interactive art only from your own experience!"? Can the analysis of interactive art gain from sociological and anthropological methods of reception research, based on observations and interviews? Or does the verbalization of aesthetic experience demand skills of language, knowledge of art and readiness for reflection that remain, in the end, the domain of experts?

This leads to a final but all the more pertinent topic, already suggested in the headline: The challenge interactive art presents for the researcher is deeply related to what it demands from the audience. If the goal of each realization of a work is aesthetic experience, each visitor has to accomplish the balancing act between active control or exploration of a system which is completely unfamiliar to him, its contemplation (pleasurable, discomfoting, alarming, or nerve-racking), and its reflective contextualization. Interactive art that does not content itself with presenting technical skills or entertaining its audience has to find ways to support aesthetic experiences that actually enable a heightened awareness and/or reflective examination of the processes presented. Audiences expecting this kind of insights have to develop a readiness – and maybe even skills – to accommodate contemplation and reflection within the active realization of the works.