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The Impact of Active Viewing, and Visual Literacy in Art Exhibitions

Active participation of the recipient is one of the basic themes in 20th-century artistic production. In the 1950s and 60s, op art and kinetic art, on the basis of analogue media, already revealed the artists' intention to involve the audience in the completion of the artwork. Interactive pieces of the 1990s bring new media to the fore and pose new challenges to the viewer. The dwindling distance between artist and viewer, adumbrated, for example, by the work of Sommerer and Mignonneau, "The Interactive Plants Growing" from 1992, can be observed today in numerous works that demand a high degree of engagement on the side of the viewer, e.g. "Messa di Voce" (Levin/Lieberman, 2003) or "Flick_KA" (Weibel/ Gommel, 2007). Viewers increasingly take charge of the visual part in the work's genesis, based on the implemented concept provided by the artist. This observation leads to the question of the viewers' constitution. It is less about their sensory perception of the work than their capabilities. With which aesthetic awareness do exhibition visitors act, and what degree of creativity do they bring along? Is it legitimate to attribute to viewers a certain amount of creativity in their dealing with interactive works, thus lifting them above the role of "mere" spectators?

Media culture, consisting of interactive media artworks per se, implies competence on the side of the recipient, something, which can be roughly described using the concept of visual literacy. Visual literacy is an essential component of communicative competence (Baacke, 1996) and can be defined as the ability "to recognize, analyse, evaluate, and produce visual messages" (Lacy, 1987). In regard to the question of creativity, visual literacy appears fundamental, for without being connected to the knowledge of present-day gaze culture, the production of mental results would be impossible, or at least extremely difficult. A first suspicion of creativity on the part of the exhibition visitor arises when encountering the interactive artwork. The approach to an interactive work and the willingness to get involved with

instructions given by the artist demand openness toward a course of action that cannot be fully gauged at the beginning. The subsequent pause, considering things, and the following "aha-experience" or a "sudden insight" refer to how creative processes are structured. The ensuing repetition, or trying things out again, can then indeed be identified with the phase of "verification" – "making sure that the solution works." Although it hasn't been empirically proven, this model may offer initial orientation. Creativity opens up potential situations and is generally described as the ability to create something new (Barron, 1965). Its criteria lie in the originality and novelty of solving problems and in a certain usefulness to society (Dorsch, 1994).

The lecture examines the situation of present-day viewers of interactive media artworks and investigates the possibilities of newly describing their role, now brought about by the decreasing distance between producer and recipient. The productive achievements of viewers, as well as the current reintroduction of dated concepts such as amateur or dilettante, especially in the field of Web 2.0, give rise to the question of whether the designation of an "active viewer" is still sufficient today. The focus is on contemporary gaze culture and the viewers' visual literacy, which makes a certain degree of creativity possible in the first place. The aim is to elicit the potential of creativity and thus the role of the viewer – which may have to be newly defined.