

ARE YOU REALLY T/HERE? AFFECT, AFFORDANCE AND VITALITY IN HETEROTOPII OF FLOWS

Kate Richards

Immersive media art provides opportunities for audiences to engage with spaces, embodiment, processes and systems. Often predicated on audience mobility, it can allow for the creation of new relations and aesthetics of immersion, vitality affects and embodiment. Agency should now be understood as a process of participation and becoming rather than a simple facility. It is a calling and an inclination to act not simply a human 'affordance'.



Video still of Hong Kong harbour ferry from 'grove', an immersive media artwork by Kate Richards 2011. Image copyright Kate Richards.

INTRODUCTION

Media artists are increasingly concerned with creating works that are opportunities for audiences to engage with spaces and embodiment, processes and systems - in short, affective porous experiences that touch us pre-cognitively or before signification is brought into play. The event-space is often predicated on audience mobility, and aims to allow for the creation of new relations. There is a demonstrable shift away from reliance on content and signification, towards an aesthetics of immersion, affect and embodiment. Exemplars include James Turrell *Dhatu* (2010), and Olaf Eliasson *The Weather Project* (2003).

Media art practices aiming for immersion and intense embodied experience are framed by philosophies of affect, a fascinating and multi-dimensional field. Although its genealogy includes late 18Cth Romanticism and aesthetic discourses around the sublime, it has more recently been informed by innovations in neuroscience, embodiment and cognitive psychology. The affect theory taken up in this paper concentrates mainly on these latter areas of contribution. Simultaneously, media artists generating affective

artworks are influenced by - and sometimes driven by - new forms of engagement based on participation and interactivity, features now ubiquitous in mainstream and popular culture under the umbrella of experience design. In 2001 Erik Davis argued that we were already operating in an economy enacting predetermined 'experiences', and that the new material "being worked here" (Davies, 2001, p. 1) is experience itself. Necessarily embodied, Davies' summary of human experience is "... the phenomenal unfolding of awareness in real time, a movement which tugs against the network of concepts and significations while tending toward the condition of more direct sensation or intuitive perception. In other words, experience may not be able to escape the prison house of language, but it willingly sticks its nose out the barred window and inhales" (Davies, 2001, p. 1). Today, popular 'experiences' of embodiment are designed to easily incorporate the visceral, the narrative, the symbolic and the participatory.

Yet techniques of designing for interactivity and participation are strongly informed by theories of affordance as articulated through human computer interface (HCI) and design disciplines which hinge on object/subject dichotomies. The preoccupation with interactivity, affordance and participation can be restrictive and may be realised at the expense of affect. As Andrew Murphie explains it, agency should now be understood as a process of "participation and becoming" (Murphie, 2008) rather than a simple facility. It is a calling and an inclination to act not simply a human 'affordance'.

My practice-led research raises the questions: In an immersive porous environment of flows and particles, how do we understand and create for affordance? Can the affective flows and materials *themselves* have affordance?

AFFECT

Brian Massumi defines affect as the experience of an intense, embodied action/reaction sequence in response to the affordance offered by a space or event. Affect is essentially an intensity - a confluence of the physiological, the autonomic, the embodied that is not connected to the content of the image or the space in any direct or sequential way (Massumi, 2002, pp. 23-45). While both intensity/affect and qualification (depth reactions belonging to form/content level) are immediately embodied, it is affect that is a "non-conscious, never to be conscious autonomic reminder" (p. 25). For Massumi, the human subject will experience a series of embodied active reactions that precipitate their cognition of and their emotional response to, their physical environment. Affect precedes the human subject's cognitive and emotional states.

This pre-linguistic call-and-response between our bodies, other bodies and objects happens in the first nano-seconds of visual/aural encounter. The natural and built environments offer us degrees of affordance, that is, opportunities to engage with three-dimensional spaces and objects. At these initial moments of embodied perception, we have already virtualised the object of our gaze – despite it being two-dimensional at the visual level. We perceive, we know, we ken, its potential as a navigable three-dimensional thing – we imagine its reverse side; we get its texture and mass as the light bounces and plays upon its surface; we sense its weight from these other factors. In its virtual, already-perceived form - a form given to us by our affective, embodied relations with it – the environment suggests to us its affordances - it offers ways in which we can engage it, embody ourselves with it.

AFFECT AS VITAL, CONTAGIOUS AND ECOLOGICAL

Massumi's work draws in Whitehead's radical empiricism and the 'extensive continuum' – affective events are continually emerging and layering in various dynamics, shedding light on the relationship between quantum physics and radical empiricism - quantum physics describes constantly shifting relationship that can only be fully understood retroactively - radical empiricism describes how every shifting moment is retroactively revealed in consciousness. Massumi discusses William James' analogy of experience coming in drops. But the accumulation of drops can also "come with "oceanic" feeling" (Massumi, 2010, p. 13)

Affect is everywhere in us, through us and beyond us – it's the culmination of a sequence of actions/reactions occurring in various and multiple registers of the physiology, a culmination that touches, animates and draws-in that elusive philosophical 'other' – consciousness. Minute instances assemble and connect to other events, evoking a sense of rhythmic waves of thinking-feeling that are simultaneously embodied and ephemeral. A recurrent theme is the vitality of affect, that there "is no subject, apart from the singular aliveness appearing in the object's generic wake. The subject is life. This life." (Massumi, 2010, p. 12) Affect varies in scale and intensity - occurring at a quantum level, and at a macro level. Like a fractal geometry it is manifold - its rhythms and patterns are discernable but not always 'true' to their physiology. For Stern, generalised affect moments precede the categorisation of feeling - there is a vital generality, a vitality in transitory experiences, ordinary everydayness. (Stern, 2004). For Ednie-Brown, vitality is a collective affair, life is in the resonance of events (Ednie-Brown, 2011). For Munster, there is vitality in transitory experiences, and affectivity goes viral, folding back on itself (Munster, 2011). For Stewart, "The ordinary registers intensities..." (Stewart, 2007, p. 10)

In this sense experience is an *ecology* that engages us with affective resonance - a vital, flowing, compelling and dynamic system of which the human is an active participant at registers variously molecular, physiological, aesthetic and philosophical. Affordances are not fixed but are moving, dynamic, surging qualities across time and space; experiences are layered in us like geomorphological strata, and these can be enacted and re-evoked in various combinative registers under different circumstances.

HETEROTOPIA

An interesting way of analyzing the affective resonance of immersive spaces is to posit them as heterotopii. In 1967 Foucault contextualized the idea of heterotopia within a conception of space that historicised three meta-eras – the hierarchical, pre-industrial of the Middle Ages; the Cartesian industrial space of modernism; and the post industrial era of a grid-space of emplacement. For Foucault "...we are in an epoch in which space is given to us in the form of relations between emplacements..." and "...emplacement is defined by relations of proximity between points or elements - series, trees, grids". (Foucault, 2008, p. 15). In his highly significant exposition on the rise of the network space, time is only one of the possible operations of distribution between elements that are distributed in space; "... the anxiety of today fundamentally concerns space, no doubt much more than time." (p. 18).

For Foucault heterotopii are not utopias in the Hegelian sense of transcendence - rather they are:

"...real places, effective places, places that are written into the institution of society itself, and that are sort of counter-emplacements, sort of effectively realised utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted; a kind of places that are outside all places, even though they are actually localisable." (p.17).

Here there is disruption, modification or suspension of the apparent normalcy and continuity of everyday space; they are lacunae in the space of flows - they embody "the tension between place and non-place that today reshapes the nature of public space" (p. 5). Heterotopii are neither public nor private - existing in the overlaps they are collective and shared spaces in their own time/space framework.

Foucault posited six principles of the heterotopia. Their often-multiplicitious and juxtaposing functions have been culturally and historically specific. A heterotopia can embrace several temporal modes – cyclical, perpetual, transitory, accumulative. Apparently open yet exclusive, one might need to perform ritual gestures to enter. They may offer an illusory compensation. For example, the ship is "...a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is self-enclosed and at the same time given over to the infinity of the sea and that from port to port...goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens...the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence." (p. 22)

The idea of heterotopia has proven highly resonant since its inception, and has permeated urban, architectural and cultural theories. Most salient here for media artists is the idea of heterotopia as a strategy for reclaiming places of otherness in the inside of an economised public life (Dehaene, 2008, p. 4) which is a good way of describing the role art and particularly the ways in which an immersive experience as a lacunae in the urban fabric, can provide a space of reflection, interiority and immanence. Stickells' (Stickells, 2008) looks at several urban design projects that emerge out of the tensions between the city's fragmenting physical fabric and its multiplying electronic socio-economic networks. The relevance and power of figurative, symbolic urban architecture is being replaced by spaces that respond to and manipulate existing flows, manifesting as "fields of movement with no structural orientation". Thus "a new form of public space emerges alongside an alternative social ordering of public space" (p. 255). The author describes the flux and mutability, the architectural potentials of dataspace as "socially integrative spaces: heterotopia of flow" that reflect new spatial continuums in which unimpeded flow is a new way of experiencing the city (p. 247). This new discipline of 'flow urbanism' aims to create integrative urban gestures, seamless continuous landscapes that are about the 'field of movement' and reflect the participants as 'plural and heterogeneous urban actors'.

Flow urbanisms arise out of a "network bound rather than a site bound reading". (p. 251). They foreground networking and aim to balance, integrate and design for mobility and event. Stickells asks how designers can balance intensity and flexibility, fluctuation and diversity of use - "the thrill of mobility and speed with...considered tactile and social engagement" (p. 250). This conundrum is close to the heart of making art that accounts for interactivity and participation in immersive spaces. As was my experience with the artworks *Bystander*, *Wayfarer* and *Foul Whisperings, Strange Matters* and my work on large public installations such as *Beautiful Minds – 100 Years of the Nobel Prizes* and *Lost City* for the Museum of Sydney (Richards, 2011), the success of such spaces "to function as social condensers is dependent on the relationship between space and programming [of events]..." (Stickells, 2008, p. 256).

AFFORDANCES OF FLOW

The contemporary focus on interaction in media modes is participatory and behavioural – audiences are encouraged to change, modify, personalise, add content and 'play' using game-like modes of engagement. So the focus for creation and analysis tends to be on the participatory, the performative, the procedural. Affect has an increasing relevancy because "... affect is much more powerful and central than

we may have thought—in everyday life as much as in theory. It is increasingly seen as key... to our understanding of cultural effects and also key to concept and process such as reason and agency.” (Murphie A. , 2010) There is such an openness of outcome in interaction design that it's easy to understand that the whole question of affect is about a continuous process of drawing behaviour from the audience, in evoking rhythms and scales of intensities across time and space.

Massumi reminds us that form is actually a non-fixed attribute, and therefore we can apply the concept of form to generative, to participatory and to networked media art. Vision is always dynamic (as neuroscience now evidences) so that it brings movement and change to the form of the object at each viewing and during each viewing instance. (Massumi, 2010) This suggests that we might benefit from looking at and understanding different kinds of movement. Experiential dynamics, distinctions between kinds of movement and what difference they make are aspects of affordance that are relevant for artists working with immersive spaces.

For the design and creation of interactive artworks these attributes of form have real implications as the (art)work continues to unfold and engage the audience – if the interactivity is token, and if the work does not continue to evolve under the drive of audience input, then the affective potentials would presumably be limited. This may depend on the signification-load of the image: if we have to 'read' it and connect the elements with, e.g. narrativity 'what does that object, movement, sound signify in relation to what has gone before?' then those particular affordances might mitigate against affect.

In this way the engaged subject is a contemporary instance of the rhizome as described by Deleuze and Guattari. A rhizome is a flow not an imprint; it is not unconscious and closed in on itself but it is a structure of organised interconnection, a machinic assemblage of utterances embedded intrinsically within social discourses of power, drawing its roots and tubers from that power discourse. A rhizome is “agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages” (Deleuze/Guattari, 1987). And just as we understand the 'subject' as not unified, the rhizome has no fixed centre on which to pivot but exists as a set of dynamic imperatives across scale. There is a constant movement of meaning, non dominant and not fixed - and the rhizome can be ceaselessly modified - unhinged, ripped, inverted - by any configuration of audience. Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome is an important and resonant precedent in understanding digital terrains; as a model it accounts for heterogeneous, mobile, and imperfect networks.

Delueze and Guattari explain how the rhizome always has multiple entry points, and is open to performance. By fostering dynamic and rupturing 'lines of flight' between bodies, between fields, it is open and connectable - it is a system of intensities, variable speeds, transformations. Famously, the philosophers go on to describe the human body as rhizome, its nerve endings as tubers, and hence the body is able to engage with other rhizomes in an exchange and deterritorialisation.

SUMMARY

In devising for participation and agency in immersive interactive media art experiences, artists can move beyond conventional HCI ideas of affordance and the subject/object dichotomy. Audiences engage and interface with affective ecologies that afford embodied flows between the space and the audience as an open system of nerves, consciousness, shifting subjectivities. Thus the audience is the co-creator of the

embodied experience, rhizome to rhizome. The theory of the heterotopia of flows is particularly applicable for media artists because it can account for spaces that are fluid and porous, with soft borders conflating interiority and exteriority. Offering a moving field of inter- and intra-relations, dissolving the subject/object dichotomy with multiple affective affordances and the potential for affective resonance, the immersive media artwork can be a heterotopia of self- or interiorised knowledge.

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