

Julio Le Parc & the GRAV: Instability, Movement, Active Past. A Perspective Look on his Work and Ideas from the Present of Electronic Art Andrea Sosa

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Abstract

The present paper examines the work of Julio Le Parc and the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) of the 1960's. The concepts proposed in their programmatic writings and the integration of these concepts in some of their emblematic artworks are hereby analyzed in detail. Notions that Le Parc and the Groupe introduced, such as those of the «activated spectator», «work in movement», and «instability», could be examined through the lens of technological art they created and also the evolution of that art in later times. These concepts also anticipate some of the features present in contemporary digital art. Especially, the concept of «instability» is examined in more depth with the help of existing parallels between ideas and the artworks produced by the GRAV. Additionally, we focus and reflect on the tension between technique and aesthetics, and media and artistic production, in their works which were built with new media of the kind whose starting point could be located in the notions forwarded by none other than Le Parc himself.

Keywords

Pioneers, Electronic Art Digital Art, Le Parc, GRAV, Movement, Instability, Active Spectator, Participation, LatinAmerica

Introduction

with two alternatives: either we continue working in the mythical world of painting, with our particular degrees of artistic ability, and accepting the situation of the creative artist as a unique and favored individual, whose social position is currently well-established, or, by demystifying art we reduce it to terms that are equivalent in all human activity. We've made our choice. (GRAV, 1960).

This clear and explicit choice would lead the group to follow their research in different directions—both regarding the work of art and the place of the spectator. By means of concrete propositions, they would encourage a break from the consolidated artistic practices of those times (Classical Art; Naturalist Art; Cubist Art Abstract Constructivism Art; Concrete Art;

Abstract Art Informel, Tachism, etc.), and they would base their operations on the relationships between the human eye and the work of art, and beyond any specific codes or knowledge in relation to art. At the same time, they exalted values such as «work in movement», «instability», and «activated spectator»

As Alexander Alberro (2014) describes: They intensely debated the importance of predetermined mathematical sequences and progressions in artistic compositions, seeing these as capable of eliminating the element of intuition in the construction of art, and contemplating on the possibilities opened up in artistic practice by optical effects and movement, whether actual, virtual, or incurred. (p.39)

The work of Julio Le Parc and the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) constitutes a relevant 20th century precedent in the context of our attempts to recover the work of artists who could be seen as pioneers in the concepts and practices of what we now call Digital or Electronic Art. Born in Argentina, Julio Le Parc traveled to Paris in 1958, and in 1960 he founded—together with other artists—the GRAV. The group would dissolve in November 1968 after a period of extensive activity.

In their production, two aspects stand out. First, conceptual reflection and the adoption of a clear stand as was evident in a body of programmatic writings; second, the artistic work itself embodied the principles and values established by the group.

In the 1960 write-up called the «*Notes pour une appréciation de nos recherches*» (Notes for An Appreciation of Our Research), they clearly set out on their vision of a world of art and their position in an art historical context:

“Our main concern is to adopt a conscious stance in the current art scene on both the artistic and the social levels... We are faced

During the course of their investigations they put aside material from classical painting and incorporated

plastic, plexiglas, metal alloys, electrical equipment, projections, reflections, black light, and the like, finding in them new opportunities to study “the visual phenomenon, perception, law of information, and practical tests on probability and chance” (Alberro quoting GRAV, 2014, p.40).

This perspective encompasses various works: in «Continuel Mobil» (1960-1996) for example where movement and light become essential to a multiple form of modules that change their position in space. In «Déplacement» (1963-1987) the focus lies on the spectators and their movements in space. In «Salle de Jeux» (1963-1968) multiple experiences coexist within the same space, articulating positional changes, movements, and direct manipulation of objects. In works such as «Eléments à essayer» (1965) or «Lunettes à vision autre» (1965), the physical participation of the spectator stands out as the core element of the experience.

Movement and Instability

In the text «*Transformer la situation actuelle de l'art plastique*» (Transforming the Present Situation of Plastic Arts) written in 1961, they explored propositional arguments. The traditional plastic work is characterized as:

Unique, stable, final, subjective, obedient to aesthetics or to a strictly visual situation; establishing a more exact relationship between the work and the human eye; maintaining anonymity and homogeneity of the form and relationships between forms; emphasizing visual instability and the times of perception; searching for The non-Definitive-Work; yet one which is still exact, precise and deliberate; and shifting interest towards new and variable visual situations based on the constants rooted in the work-eye relationship; and finally acknowledging the existence of uncertain phenomena in the structure and reality of the work, and from this, design new possibilities open new areas of investigation. (GRAV, 1961).

Instability would be a core value for the group, which explicitly postulated that: “Each work should include some ‘potentialities’ and an instability that generates visual mutations after completion.” (GRAV, 1963).

The concept of the eye is of similar interest: the work - as they pointed out - is no longer meant to serve the cultivated eye, the sensitive eye, the intellectual eye, the aesthetic eye, or the dilettante eye but for a human eye in its physiological dimension, with its potential peripheral visions as points of contact with the work and ultimately creating the framework of an experience that immerses

them both in space and time.

Through lighting, reflections, movements, and changes of position, compositions would turn out to be multiple and mutable, and the spectator would be immersed in the work, no longer being an individual before a passive work but an integral part of it. The outline and dimension of the work would be subject to multiple factors established through experience, both based on environmental factors (air and light sources, for example), and on the eventual movements of spectators and the volitional manipulation of objects. Thus, an interrelationship would emerge, without which the work of art—as conceived by the GRAV— would not exist.

It Is Prohibited Not to Touch

In its text «*Assez de mystifications 2*» (Enough Mystifications 2) of 1963, the GRAV focuses on analyzing how the work may be received, and the new place they envision for the spectator. They stated:

We want to interest viewers, to lead them out of their inhibitions, to help them relax. We want them to participate. We want to place them in a situation that they could by themselves activate and transform. We want them to be aware of their participation. We want them to move towards interactions with other viewers. We want to develop in the viewer a strong capacity for perception and for action. Viewers who are aware of their ability to act, and who are tired of so much abuse and mystification can make their own real ‘revolution in art.’” The volition they highlight in participation and interaction is crowned by three axioms: “It Is Prohibited Not to Participate”, “It Is Prohibited Not to Touch”, “It Is Prohibited Not to Break”. (GRAV, 1963)

These mandates establish an eloquent contrast with the rhetoric of exhibition spaces within the traditional circuit of art, where people are urged to adopt an attitude of solemnity, silence, and restriction regarding body movement.

It is interesting to observe the taxonomic breakdown described by the group in their text «*L'instabilité - le labyrinthe*» (Instability) written in 1963. The concept of activation is analyzed in its multiple manifestations: 1) Visual Activation, Fixed Works; 2) Visual Activation, Works in Movement; 3) Visual Activation Fixed Works with Spectator Movement; 4) Active Voluntary Participation; 5) Active Spectator, Animation Element; 6) Active Spectator, Observation Subject.

Although, as Alexander Alberro (2014) states, arts

of participation, in the beginning of the 1960s, was not something completely new—and with Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Fluxus, Pierre Boulez, and Stockhausen in music we already started going down that path—the GRAV, Alberro suggests, meant to expand it to a much wider audience, avoiding its circumscription by official art museums and galleries. We may also add that the GRAV strove to conceptualize its practices and highlight qualitative differences among various manifestations of each phenomenon. The taxonomy described suggests a search for precision in order to identify the different levels of complexity in participation – identity was put forward as being the main focus in their proposal.

Reflections

Just as the works of the GRAV conceives light reflections as an essential resource of movement and spatial transformation, conceptual reflection similarly occupies a prominent position in the group's theorizations.

In relation to movement, they postulate that it may be treated under two aspects: 1) gratuitous agitation; 2) development that creates a new visual situation (GRAV, 1961).

The difference between arbitrary movement and the composition of a potential situation — where movement of both the spectator and the elements forming the work may create temporariness, durations, or precise accelerations— there are indications of the possibility of a continuous effort of analysis and observation of phenomena involved in that kind of experience.

In the same direction, they elaborated on a series of factors related to participation. Bearing in mind that participants might experience a feeling of inhibition or apathy, they proposed adopting:

Transitional solutions. For example, minimal participation by people should trigger very sizable changes; or, with the help of facilitators, a level of interaction can be maintained, above all by allowing a great deal of space for personal initiative and improvisation. If need be, the spectators' participation can be solicited by having them take part in a competition with an established prize. Although somewhat limiting, this means that they could stimulate interest in the spectator. The surprise factor should also be taken into consideration. (GRAV, 1963).

Additionally, when referring to artists, Le Parc warned about the sharp edges of becoming commonplace and of adopting certain forms without the genuine urge to

transform the cultural order:

Artists should not forget the reason why the open work was theorized in the first place, which was to close the gap between the artwork and the spectator. Much of the work produced in terms of the New Tendency uses the play of light and movement and only accentuates the 'worrying fact that a whole army of fiddlers and aficionados of electric drills are getting kitted out with electric saws and wires, and the like, simply because games with light and movement are becoming fashionable' (...) Instead of hanging up paintings in the Louvre they now hang up boxes, lights, wooden reliefs, etc. Genuine art, he concludes, strives to transform the prevailing order of culture rather than to produce ever-new versions of what is essentially the same thing. (Alberro quoting Le Parc, 2014, p. 68)

Conclusion

There is a thread that connects the past with the present. The affinity between the features of the GRAV's production and current Digital or Electronic Art may become apparent after examining the texts and works produced.

Interactivity, Participation, Instability, and Movement find their specular counterpart: in contemporary algorithms and interfaces; in the fields of hardware and software; in the growing culture of the tactile, which literally embodies the precept of "It Is Prohibited Not to Touch." Taking a retrospective look, the work of Le Parc and the GRAV constitutes a valuable predecessor to understanding the present, and recovering the hidden threads of the fabric that gave rise to the aesthetics of participation. With the proliferation of technological devices, the practice of "spectator activation" becomes more and more recurring both within and outside of Art, in different disciplinary fields, and even in inter- and transdisciplinary fields.

But there is also a thread from the active past which seems to be connecting the present day with the future, and it is here where the GRAV's proposition does not merely describe what happened in the past or explain the present in terms of an archaeology of vision; its value now also has a prospective dimension. The GRAV points out in its reflections that the uncritical use of materials could take all meaning out of a certain practice. The dozens of texts produced by the GRAV have an underlying acute and reflexive perspective that analyzes artistic practice within a historical and social context, with an intent of rupture and inquiry; far from

Panels

perpetuating the existing order, they strive to put Art at the service of a particular world view that revises what has been established, and formulates specific strategies to introduce new situations. This proposition made by the GRAV may be read today as an intention that the current interface of Art with Technologies has not been able to resolve. At a technological phase planned obsolescence, wires, microprocessors, LEDs, algorithms are quickly interconnected, often reflecting their own original industrial uses and without necessarily having the framework of a project and the conceptual clarity to dive into the consequences of each decision, of each formal articulation.

Our proposal is to think of the GRAV's experience as an open invitation to reflect on Art without an expiry date.

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Her works on new media theory have been selected in festivals such as 404 International Festival of Electronic Art (Argentina), FILE10 (Brazil), ISEA2010 (Germany), FILE 2013 (Brazil), RE-NEW Festival (Denmark), ISEA 2014 (Dubai), Computer Art Congress (Brazil), SIGRADI (Uruguay), ISEA 2015 (Canada), CAC5 (France).