

Electronic Cruelty

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Is it the form of interactive work that separates it from and opposes it to the tech-spectacle of massive pop-concerts, VJ clubbing and “shoot'em up” online games despite the similarity in terms of the technology employed? Is interactive work another immersive narcotic or is it potentially a form through which ritual can re-incarnate?

The ambiguity between fascination and consternation in experiencing interactive work might be inherent in this art's very nature - a hybrid of art and science. However, the influence of the installation's body onto the bodies of participants remains enigmatic.

The world is divided into a complex caste system defined in direct proportion with the level of technological development. The flux of financial and information data exchange within a network of interconnected cities forms the Global City: the a-locus of superpower. The transparent hyper-real world of the obsolete horizon shaped by new technologies defines the contemporary aesthetics of abstraction and obsolete bodies. The citizen of the Global City is bombarded with the obscene pornographic banality of the mass-media spectacle. Perception fractures and disperses suffocating in noise. The body and mind are permanently overwhelmed with a kaleidoscope of noise: street noise, media-noise, electromagnetic noise, genetic noise.

Immersed in the borderless ocean of the city, the contemporary citizen has the confidence that technological development has harnessed natural forces.

Nature is a trophy, an ornament, an abstraction. The archaic fear of natural forces is replaced by the fear of technology and eternal progress. The force that sustains us is also that which destroys us. The network that forms the blood-

circulating system of the Global City is spreading fear like a virus. Lulled by noise, bewitched by the spectacle of fear, in the screen-luminescent eternal twilight, global citizens are daydreaming artificial daydreams.

Interactive aesthetics has arisen in these conditions and unless it strikes out its own path, it is in danger of turning into another form of tech-spectacle. Interactive installation, with its paradox of simultaneous repulsion and fear from the impersonal automatised process on the one hand and the acceptance of the oneiric immersion on the other is the ultimate battleground between art and science and between the living body and technology. The symbolic conflict between man and machine takes on a ritual form. Instead of attempting to implant or reconstruct primordial ritual embedded in tribal society, interactive installation can be seen as a symbolic act of resolving contemporary tensions. Parallels are dangerous but useful, both where they fail and where they succeed. Consequently, I do not attempt to equate interactive installation with ritual but merely to use certain parallels that can shed light onto some specifics of interactive installation.

The definition of interactivity and spectacularity significantly changes with the hypothesis that interactive installation can take a ritual form. The root of the word spectacle is in latin *spectaculum* or *spectare*: to watch. It is related to the art of theatre that originated in and gradually replaced the ancient rituals in Western culture. It refers nowadays to the blend of mass-media and the entertainment industry, reflected in all segments of contemporary life to the extent that it has become a paradigm for contemporary social relations. However it can be applied to a certain extent to ritual and interactive installation, this term is in opposition with the essence of both: the active participation of the audience is the *conditio sine qua non*, either in ritual or in interactive installation.

Spectacularity in interactive installation is of an entirely different nature than mass-spectacles. It is the fluid, changeable form of interactive installation that separates it from and opposes it to the uniform immersive anaesthetic of tech-spectacle. From the screen and virtual space of a particular personal computer, through endless spatial and dimensional diversities, interactive work merges virtual and real space each time in a unique manner. Custom-designed software and hardware architecture forms the basis of the contrast with typified entertainment industry production. The technology employed is to a large extent conspicuous as a constituent of the aesthetic. Non-linearity of segmented and unstable modules, consisting of loops in permanent change, is entirely circumstantial: intervals of participation replace continuous duration. It is the fusion of participant and technology in interaction that defines it and brings it into existence.

In interactive work the process of interaction materialized in electro-magnetic

and sound waves as a different class of matter is replacing the object of art. Einstein's theory of relativity, Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, quantum physics - brought up a new aesthetics. "Electronic ritual" can be embodied in an invisible flux - the blend of the installation's aura and participants' auras in a reverberating process of a cathartic collective experience within space/time/matter. Interactive installation as "electronic ritual" might change the notion of seeing only through our visual sensory apparatus into an awakening of archaic "seeing" as a complex cerebro-emotional process of perceiving the invisible: the participant "sees feelingly".

Participation in ritual is a complete mental and physical engagement located in a very particular space. It is a closed event of the sacral genre that excludes spectators and audience. Only individuals that undergo a process of initiation are invited to participate. Physical activity in its endless varieties is inseparable from mental processes of total unity with space resulting in transitions through levels of changed consciousnesses. Ritual operates in liminal spheres that are defined as a sensory threshold of changed consciousness introducing participants into esoteric meta-physicality. Participants reach deep levels of physical self-consciousness by dissolving their bodies in space and the symbolic dramaturgy. The entrancing experience leads to archetypal knowledge, reaching, according to Roy Ascott, even the primordial cell levels.

Spectacularity in ritual functions as a major formal element. It creates a dramatic tension that symbolically signifies its inviolability and by designating the distinctness of the event separates it from the perception of everyday reality. Instead of voyeuristic spectating - there is active participation. It is the participant who actively creates dramatic tension through interaction and unity with the otherness of the event. Its metaphoric language personifies formidable forces beyond human control. There is an embrace and overcoming of primordial fears through uncanny, fearsome experiences.

Interactive work and ritual create drama through a language of signs and symbols in contrast to the logic of narration. The emblematic sonic and visual language of interactive installation and the specific radiant energy generated by its body, the reversible stream between the participants and environment through interaction amalgamates participants' bodies with installation parallel to the unity of body and space in ritual. Repetitiveness of the visual and the aural elements within a changeable flow of audiovisual modules as the common structure of interactive works operates as a classical mantric, trance-inducing ritual instrument. The sum of sensational stimuli changes the perception of time, space and matter leading to mental and physical self-awareness. The process of interaction transforms the characteristics and the apprehension of the particular space, incorporating and transfiguring technology.

The omnipresent conflict between man and technology is played out through the tension between the living body and the body of the installation. The human body becomes fluid, transparent, immersed and dissolved. Skin becomes a propulsive membrane. The sum of various sensations increases sensitivity and level of self-consciousness of the body through a symbolic process of de-composing and re-composing. The participant's body is immersed in the environment, it feels and processes these impulses in its own right, reading the received data within but also beyond the levels of conscious perception. It is exposed not only to various audiovisual sensations, but also to the installation's body generating different electromagnetic phenomena. However a small number of works deliberately instrumentalize these effects, the way that interactive installations engage our sensory apparatus and the impact of the installation's environment on participants' personal bio-electric system is still enigmatic.

The aesthetics and functional mode of interactive installation are significantly determined through the architecture of hardware and software. Regardless of their scale and complexity there is a division between works that can be called "interactive instruments" and so-called "responsive environments". The structure of the "interactive instrument" invites participants to follow a specified routine in order to establish interaction. Or - they can be lead by the "shamanic" individuality of Stelarc, par exemple, whose body is in the role of mediator in interaction. On the other hand there are so-called "responsive environments". Through a sensory system, the installation "feels" and "responds" to the presence of participants. A particular reaction that can be invoked by responsive environment is the specific web of participants' trajectories through space and/or spontaneous gestures, a specific "choreography" as a form of ritual activity. They can be immersed into an oneiric environment of intimate nature that involves the individual in a meditative trancelike experience as in the works by Paul Sermon; or they can participate in Rafael Lozano Hemmer's spectacular phantasmagoric "theatre of shadows" in an open public space. My installation works "behave" as autonomous entities or as another participant in interaction. They should engage participants in a spontaneous dialogue of non-verbal communication mediated by non-tactile technology.

With interactive installation, the artwork is a disturbing autonomous entity, generating itself through an unstable process. The anxiety of entering dramatically charged dark spaces with unpredictable scenery is similar to the fear of entering phantasmagoric spheres of the unconscious. The instant feeling of unease conjoined with fascination releases primordial fears. Art can have a purifying function in overcoming fear of fear through the uncanny pleasure of experiencing it in controlled circumstances. We find examples in ancient cultures' rituals and art works, in medieval scenes of the Last Judgement and martyrdom, from Eleusinian mysteries, through Dürer's Apocalypse and Goya's

phantasmagorias to various interventions on the human body in contemporary art. The metaphoric language of interactive installation is a powerful instrument that might create conditions for a cathartic experience of embracing and overcoming fears procreated by global spectacle of fear and alienation caused by technology. The ritual nature of the cathartic collective experience of multiplying consciousnesses could be used as a basis for releasing a spirituality of a different class in interactive art that could oppose the materialistic terrorizing abuse of technology in global spectacle. It can bring about a form through which ritual can re-incarnate.

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