

Context Providers :

Conditions of meaning in Interactive Art

Introduction

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MISSING IN ACTION: AGENCY AND MEANING IN INTERACTIVE ART

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I. A Legend of Interactivity

Cynthia Mailman fell through the roof of a garage on which she was dancing as a participant in Al Hansen's "Hall Street Happening," 1963. Bleeding and hurt, she screamed for help but at first no one came to her rescue.

Participants and viewers alike considered her action to be an integral part of the structure of the happening and ignored her pleas for assistance. Writing about the event several years later, Hansen remarked,

I ran out into the warm midnight-Brooklyn slum street and looked up and down each way -- my first impulse was to hitchhike to Mexico and forget the whole thing. Then an ambulance and the police arrived....It was a fine bit of mayhem and quite abstract.

For better or worse, only a few Happenings resembled Hansen's "Hall Street Happening" in its total interactive obliteration of the tangible, objective difference between aesthetic and ordinary events, artist and spectator.

Although the aim of Happenings, according to Allan Kaprow, an early theorist and practitioner of interactive events, was to keep "the line between art and life...as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible" and "to eliminate audiences entirely," by 1965 he had abandoned Happenings after finding audiences culturally unprepared to interact responsibly in constructing a work of art. While little has changed in the public's capacity to interact in art or life, fostering audience agency remains a utopian activist goal for many artists, and it would seem to be a foregone conclusion of the technological structure of digital multimedia. Yet, the extent and quality of interaction by which an individual actually contributes to the process of creating meaning remains troublesome.

Using "Hall Street Happening" as simultaneously a model and anti-model of

interactivity we ask: "In what ways, or to what degree, is interactive art meaningful?" We begin with a consideration of the commercialization of the notion of interactivity and its rhetoric of "the new," discourses that serve to transform technology into ideology in order to serve commercial interests, be they those of the markets of industry or art. Next we turn to the role of agency in interactive digital multimedia, its humanist underpinnings, and several artists who have deconstructed the myths of technologically mediated agency and interactivity. Finally, we suggest a collectivist strategy that enables agency to set empathy in motion as a meaningful direction for interactive art.

II. Preliminary Observations

In the 1990s, the concept of interactivity became a marketing mantra of Silicon Valley, a phenomenon that Simon Penny described as "consumer commodity economics." He pointed out that three years after Canadian artist Nancy Paterson completed "Bicycle TV," 1990, an interactive laser disc that interfaced with a bicycle and its rider, "exercise cycles were available with simulated travel on graphic displays." Such commercial saturation of interactive multimedia challenges its ability to resonate with artistic meaning. Indeed, much of the extensive, heterogeneous history of interactivity had pursued a decidedly anti-commercial direction.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, performance, process, installation, environmental art, and other experimental tendencies provided a fertile and interconnected ground for the evolution of digital interactive media. Artists, especially on the Left, developed interactivity as a means to widen the social base for art, and as an exercise in active interconnection with the cultural and political milieu. But as sophisticated interactive installations using laser disc, virtual reality, and telematics emerged, concentration on the newest technologies, rather than on the quality of interaction, tended to diminish the activist dimension of digital media. In many cases, digital art served the interests of industry by popularizing its products and promoting the ideology of interactivity and agency, which already had been co-opted by commercial concerns. In an era marked by the proliferation of digital technology, widespread social passivity and political conservatism, and awakening public awareness of massive technological surveillance, the augmentation of personal agency - however superficial - offered a veneer of imagined personal control to consumers, and insured instant cash rewards to the technologists who brought interactive merchandise to market.

Advertisements for digital media (ranging from CD-ROMS to VR and CU-SeeMe cams) emphasized novelty, interactivity, and enhanced personal agency. In the 1990s, industry journals (which often were difficult to distinguish from advertisements) heralded such technologies as the new social paradigm aimed at creating a global consciousness and interactive community. Artists were theorized as architects of interactive contexts in which an imagined, ever-eager public would be able to generate new images and experiences for themselves. Indeed, the rhetoric of "the new" promoting digital technologies in the 1990s was as rampant in propagandizing electronic multimedia as it was in the 1980s when critics made similarly over-determined claims for postmodernism. In both cases, postmodernism and multimedia belong to what Harold Rosenberg had described in 1960 as "the tradition of the new." Moreover, the appropriation of the concept of interactivity as a unique feature of specific technologies falsely implied that interactivity did not exist before or without those technologies.

Interactivity has become intimately and commercially paired with technology as new, chic, active, and empowering, while non-digital forms of conventional, experimental, and interactive art by comparison are presented as old-fashioned, passive, and lacking structures of empowerment. This false competition is exacerbated by widespread critical claims (from the 1960s on) that art (especially painting) was dead, and the avant-garde no longer possessed a social purpose. Part of the strategy for theorizing digital art as "new" was to relate it to the latest theoretical and aesthetic movement, "postmodernism" and its "new" strategies of the loss of aura, death of the author, stylistic pastiche, and so on. Paradoxically those who proclaimed the avant-garde dead also invoked the postmodern "new." Fredric Jameson is a good example. He breathlessly sited such constellations as postmodernism's "new international division,... vertiginous new dynamic,... new forms of media interrelationship,... new structure,... new system,... 'new structure of feeling,'... new technological prerequisites of the 'new long wave' of capitalism's third stage,... the psychic habitus of the new age," and so on (to quote just two of many paragraphs) in the Introduction to his *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Since the periodicity of postmodernism is now more clear, continuing to draw parallels between multimedia and postmodernism serves to relegate the former to an antiquated genre. For postmodernism was just one brief moment in the history of the avant-garde's pursuit of interactivity and the use of experimental media to reorder aesthetic structures and empower interpersonal interconnection as a force against domination.

The cultures of both technology and art are pervaded and driven by the economies of novelty, making digital multimedia art doubly bound to its

doctrines. Thus the purported qualities (agency) and conditions (empowerment) of the "new" digital media served as proselytizer slogans for the social imaginary and the cultural and industrial marketplaces. Combining capitalist strategies with the symbolic means of art, the rhetoric of "the new" has been used to sell interactivity as technology when it is really ideology, as Dieter Daniels has observed:

Due to the interweaving of human society and its digital back-up, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell whether we are communicating with machines instead of people, or with people by means of machines, or talking to people about machines, or to machines about people. This entails a blurring of the boundary between ideology and technology, and technology is indeed a central part of ideology in the '90s."

The concepts, basic technological functions, and ideology of personal agency that are being promoted are anything but new or meaningful, and even the rhetoric and packaging follow predictable formulas.

III. Agency

Agency is implicitly the primary goal and meaning of interactive multimedia art. Meaning is purposive. It entails having an intention, aim, and object. If the purpose of multimedia is agency, then meaning is derived from the qualities that agency obtains in interaction. Obviously a semiotics of meaning is always inherent in the interactive exchange between artist, artwork, and audience. But in order to be meaningful, agency and interaction must not only have semiotic signification, they must both literally be full of meaning. Interactive multimedia art, therefore, can be meaningful when it enhances agency meaningfully, otherwise meaning is missing in interaction, and meaningfulness is missing in agency.

Discussions of multimedia have tended to abstract the concept of agency by attributing meaning to its formal components and deferring the question of meaningfulness. But such formal elements as moving a trackball or clicking a mouse to recombine images and texts, moving the body to negotiate a VR environment, and posing questions for which there is no substantive feedback neither enhance agency or meaningfulness. While works employing these limited ranges of physical and mental activities are routinely described as "interactive," if the works have meaning at all, it resides primarily in artists' decisions rather than in participants' agency to shuffle or activate images, sounds, texts, and sequencing patterns, etc. The

physical interaction by which viewers can trigger different effects may be pleasing and even surprising, like playing with a kaleidoscope, but the visual and conceptual stakes, and the value and quality of the work finally reside in the artist's aesthetic choices. Such art, then, remains astonishingly conventional regardless of all the bells and whistles. It may be meaningful for reasons that have little or nothing to do with interactivity or agency, but as a result of those qualities that have made works of art meaningful throughout history, notably the ability to change (or affirm) the way one sees, understands, and acts upon the world and one's place in it. Similarly, the interactive features of multimedia become meaningful when they engage and activate complex emotional and decision-making responses in the viewer, such that the interaction itself reinforces the transformative effects of the overall piece and play a constructive role in creative change. However, given the limited forms of agency currently exercised in much interactive multimedia, it is useful to consider the concept of agency in order to imagine different forms of engagement.

An opposition between active agent/participator (in interactive multimedia) and passive/observer (the recipient of pre-coded and unalterable meaning in traditional media) has been frequently identified in discussions of interactive art. This polarity has had the effect of sanctioning the digital side of the equation and discrediting the non-digital. Interactive multimedia is claimed to strengthen agency by allowing individuals or groups to alter the artistic composition or determine an artwork's meaning by contributing to the construction of its narrative path. But the philosophic goal of agency is to function as a locus of morality and individuality, as Douglas Browning pointed out nearly forty years ago: "The concept of the agent is required in order to allow for the possibility of freedom, communication, comprehension, and mystery... [C]ulture in general... rests upon the being of agency." Agency has also been tied to the execution of volition: "a person is the agent of an event if and only if there is a description of what [s/]he did that makes true a sentence that says [s/]he did it intentionally." Indeed, agency involves the freedom to create, change, and influence institutions and events, or to act as a proxy on behalf of someone else. In both cases, agency is measured by the ability and the responsibility to have a meaningful effect in a real world, inter-subjective social context. Given that that agency is necessary for the coherency of individual identity and social interaction, it is not surprising that the commercial multimedia industry has seized upon it as the principle underlying their rhetoric of individual empowerment through technology and that the discourses of interactive art have adopted similar promotional strategies.

Technology, however, complicates agency by mediating the "accordion

effect" of agents, intentions, acts, and events. In telerobotic systems, for example, it is expected that the intentions and acts of an active human agent (master) in location A will be executed by corresponding acts performed on his/her behalf by a passive robot (slave) in location B. Because intention is a prerequisite, robots generally are not thought of as capable of agency. Yet, masters endow robot slaves with the responsibility to act as proxies, or agents on their behalf, presenting a conundrum regarding agency in human-machine systems. To complicate this problem further, suppose there is not a 1:1 correspondence between the master's expressed intention and the robotic event, or that the master is unable to ascertain unequivocally that his/her intended action has been executed. A master might be said to have lost or relinquished agency in proportion to the difference and uncertainty between the expressed intention and the acts carried out by the robot. Who or what, then, is the agent responsible for the behavior of the system? Attempts to consider the varying forms and degrees of agency negotiated and exchanged between artist, participants, and technologies in multimedia works of art become even more convoluted, and will pose increasingly paradoxical problems with the continued advance of artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. In this context, the contemplation and construction of meaningful interaction matters even more.

Bruno Latour, contributing to the long philosophical discussion of these issues, turns the above notions of agency inside out. He suggests that systems comprised of humans and their technology display unique hybrid characteristics that are not properly attributable to either one or the other, and that since such hybridity characterizes human history, the concept of agency as a trait particular to humans must be questioned. Thus, it could be argued that notions like freedom, individuality, and responsibility demand rethinking. As in much post-structuralist philosophy, the centered, autonomous, humanist subject ceases to exist as subject qua subject, but is always already constructed as a social entity in relation to technology. Technology, in this sense, is inseparable from various instruments of control and the legal, moral, and religious codes embodied and reified in the cultural institutions, economic systems, and social conventions that structure human relations. In other words, the very concept of agency (and the interrelated constellation of humanist values associated with individuality, freedom, and responsibility) is complicit with a system of power that denies agency by demanding conformity. From this vantage, the pursuit of individual agency amounts to doing the devil's handiwork; thus shifting the "good fight" to the deconstruction of the vast ideological apparatus that enlists individuals willingly in their own self-subjugation. While such a perspective may initially appear to be dystopic, we believe it also offers a potentially rich utopic project for rethinking agency around tropes of collective empathy.

Before we discuss this subject, however, we want to cite several very different artistic projects in interactive multimedia that have been critical of the hyperbole of interactivity and agency.

In 1969, Kaprow created "Hello," an interactive video happening for "The Medium Is the Medium," a thirty-minute experimental television program. Five television cameras and twenty-seven monitors connected four remote locations over a closed-circuit television network.

Groups of people were dispatched to the various locations with instructions as to what they would say on camera, such as "Hello, I see you," when acknowledging their own image or that of a friend. Kaprow functioned as "director" in the studio control room. If someone at the airport were talking to someone at M.I.T., the picture might suddenly switch and one would be talking to doctors at the hospital.

Kaprow explained that he was interested in the idea of "communications media as non-communications," and that the most important message was the idea of "oneself in connection with someone else." "Hello" offered a critique of the disruptive manner by which technology mediates interaction. It metaphorically short-circuited the television network, thereby calling attention to the connections made between actual people.

Following a similarly critical logic, in 1978, Peter D'Agostino proposed using QUBE (Warner Cable's interactive television system) in a video installation that interrogated the degree of participation that QUBE advertised to offer users:

The "interactive" system available to QUBE subscribers takes the form of a console attached to the television set that enables the home viewer to "participate" in selected programs by pushing one of five "response" buttons ... the console feeds a central computer and the results of the home responses are flashed on the screen.

D'Agostino noted that in a 1978 program on eggs, "forty-eight percent of the homes had pressed the scrambled button." Commenting on a newspaper headline that celebrated the QUBE system, the artist wryly added, "This is how viewers are 'talking back to their television sets.'" While Warner Cable chairman Gustave M. Hauser used the rhetorics of novelty and opposition to claim that, "We are entering the era of participatory as opposed to passive television," D'Agostino argued that such "participation is defined solely by the formal properties of the medium - rather than its content." Predictably,

the cable-cast component of the artist's proposal was cancelled "due to 'special programming'" and was never rescheduled by the network.

More recently Keith Seward and Eric Swensen created the CD-ROM journal "BLAM!," 1993, a raw critique of the rhetoric of interactivity. Produced at a time when CD-ROM drives were relatively uncommon, "BLAM!" attacked concepts of empowerment at the foundation of technological correctness. Wielding irony like a blunt sword, "The Ode to Interactivity" segment, for example, bludgeons users into submission with a hyper-kinetic montage of sexually explicit images and the false promises of technological utopianism. In the "Necro-Enema Amalgamated Agenda" manifesto, the authors explained their use of digital multimedia as an assault on naïve conceptions of interactivity:

"Interactivity" is one of those euphemisms like "democracy" or "equality." There's no color to the word. It paints a grey picture of a world where used-car salesmen would give you your dollar's worth, little boys wouldn't pick on little girls, and snakes wouldn't eat cute little furry creatures... All that no-caffeine rhetoric about empowering users makes us laugh - not with but at... Giving a user more buttons to click is like giving extra links to a dog chain. Sure you can call three feet of mobility "freedom," if you want. You can think of BLAM! as empowering you, but we know that we're the ones jerking the end of your chain... We train you to use BLAM! Just as Pavlov trained dogs to salivate...

Here, technology becomes the handmaiden not of personal liberation in communal intercourse, but of an onanistic, anti-social, repressive, and degrading diatribe.

Distinguishing between agency in conventional "active-passive" telerobots (as in the master-slave relationship described above) and agency in "active-active" systems offers further insights into the moral and empathic conditions of interactivity. In Norman White's and Doug Back's "Telephonic Arm Wrestling," 1986, and Paul Sermon's "Telematic Vision," 1994, agency is symmetrically balanced between identical human-machine interfaces at remote locations. Such works may be interpreted as interrogating the hierarchical organization of occidental systems of knowledge (and their embodiment in the master-slave relationships that characterize colonialism) and opening up alternative spaces for co-mutual interaction between equal partners. These philosophical issues and artistic examples demonstrate diverse forms of agency and the various ways that technology can both usurp and amplify them.

If expanded forms of interactive agency are to be desired of and claimed for digital media, the following questions might serve as a prolegomena: How do the goals and works of contemporary digital artists compare with various historical efforts to produce interactive aesthetic contexts? In what ways do digital multimedia: a) challenge or change the creative process and the ways in which artistic meaning is constructed and received? b) enable alternative or expanded roles for the viewer as a producer of meaning? c) enhance individual and collective agency as a vehicle for social change? How are the intention of the artist and the intention of the participant related to the events that result from encounters with interactive art? Do participants have the freedom to influence real-world events or assume interconnected responsibility? How meaningful is the act of making meaning in the context of multimedia? These kinds of questions challenge the medium of interactive multimedia, and draw out the utopian instrumentality of augmenting social efficacy and responsible, empathic interdependent action amongst individuals, collectives, and their technologies in cultural and political systems. In what follows, we shall propose some tentative ideas for a meaningful interactive aesthetic social praxis.

IV. Empathy and Collective Interaction

"All arts can be considered interactive," Itsuo Sakane has noted, "if we consider viewing and interpreting a work of art as a kind of participation." In short, viewers of conventional artworks are not passive recipients of encoded messages, but active interpreters, who construct meaning through empathic engagement with symbolic form. In digital art, participation in the processes of creative interaction becomes the very content of a work, and to see one's volition materialized heightens viewer involvement. The nexus of movement and empathy is key in charting the intellectual history of "involvement" in art to particular aesthetic themes. From cave paintings to chronophotography, virtual reality installation, and genetic art, artists have sought to represent and connect art to life through representations and presentations of movement. Movement was used to activate viewer perception and eventually to include "the spectator in the center of the picture." With live action and the appearance of the artist in, and as, the work of art in the 1950s, life itself routinely entered the frame of art. During this period interactive works in both technological and non-technological media linked theories of empathy to movement in life and the motility of interpersonal relationships. Henri Bergson's influential concept of *durée* (duration) is significant here, for the ways in which it suggested the blurring of subject and object in the fluid, temporal continuity of consciousness.

Moreover, Theodor Lipps's concept of *Einfühlung* (empathy in the sense of "feeling-in") claimed that a viewer might "imaginatively project himself [sic] into the object"; and Wilhelm Worringer brought these notions into widespread discussion in *Abstraction and Empathy*, 1953. The unity of concepts regarding empathic projection and research in movement occurred precisely at the moment when artists introduced the body in interaction with the viewer. This conjunction augmented a structural change in art: it increased interrelation through metonymic extension, drew the physiological processes underlying visual perception into the terrain of interactive contingency, and altered the communicative means of art from a dependence on metaphor to one of virtual and actual connection. The history of motion, empathy, and performance have shown that interactivity is not simply a question of media or technology, but involves art audiences in the most critical conditions of political life: intersubjective engagement and interpersonal responsibility.

Such changes in art bring us back to 1963 and Al Hansen's "Hall Street Happening," which established the limits of interactivity by dissolving the boundaries between art and life so effectively as to endanger a participant. In this way, it unleashed the anarchy of unmediated levels of the real, enabling complete, indistinguishable interaction, and illuminating the extreme poles of agency in art. It has been theorized that, "the closer to actuality the artwork approaches, and the more it behaves like the real thing, the greater is the strain on [the] mimetic contract." Not surprisigly, when his ill-fated event raised the stakes of physical interaction and personal liability to a dangerous level, Hanson wanted to flee the scene. In addition to signaling the boundaries of interactivity, Hanson's happening also exposed the circumscribed codes of conduct that govern art and disable empathic, responsible interaction by dictating that art is autonomous and must remain at an aesthetic distance. In "Hall Street Happening," viewers and participants, paradoxically, rescinded their ubiquitous agency to the etiquette of art, while participating in an interactive work that itself dissolved the boundaries between art and life. In short, indeterminate interactivity vacated agency and with it responsibility. Participants and viewers alike did not know what to do with their empathy for the screaming dancer. Hansen's "Hall Street Happening" is both an ideal model of interactivity in its total synthesis of art and viewer, and a counter-model that failed to activate agency at the deeper levels of meaningfulness that structure interaction. For agency that sets empathy in motion toward responsible interaction and constructive change is meaningful.

The meaningfulness of interpersonal engagement and the psychological stakes of interaction must be extended. Once this territory is accessed, the

moral, political, and affective considerations of human activity come into question - and that, too, is meaningful. As we noted above, despite exaggerated claims to the contrary, authorial power and agency in digital multimedia remain almost wholly entrenched in the artist, while viewers, as D'Agostino so astutely noted in 1978, get to select how they like their eggs cooked. Such kinds of interactivity remain tied to a paradigm of Enlightenment individualism, and are distinctly apolitical. This is especially true in the context of capitalism, where commerce and the culture/theory industries readily coopt artistic products. At the other end of the spectrum from capitalist individualism, communist socialism has proved equally hegemonic, as the history of the former Soviet Union has shown.

Between these poles, meaningful collective exchange remains a model for art to pursue. Andrew Feenberg has noted:

[I]n reality subjects and means are dialectically intertwined: the carpenter and the hammer appear accidentally related only so long as one does not consider carpentry as a vocation shaping the carpenter through a relation to the tools of the trade....In such cases, the agent is its means of action viewed from another angle; they are not accidentally related.

Feenberg further observed that "technology is not neutral but fundamentally biased toward a particular hegemony, [and] all action undertaken within its framework tends to reproduce that hegemony," both within "authoritarian socialism and reformist capitalism." Because individuals and society are not autonomous, but interdependent, he concluded that, "a coherent conception of radical change must identify contradictions and potentialities traversing both society and its individual members in ways specific to each." In other words, social transformations that challenge the status quo can occur when interconnectivity is honored and when the complicity of technology in hegemony is acknowledged and reformed.

Fluid electronic networks can enable exchange and revitalize collectivist strategies in ways that may alter entrenched structures of power and capital by waging critical philosophical and aesthetic offensives of interconnected, interdependent participants. We would like to suggest some principles of collective exchange that may contribute to making digital multimedia more interactive, empathic, political, and meaningful. For the meaningfulness of interactivity is tied to the ability of an agent to change a work, the audience, and the larger cultural and social milieus.

Meaningful digital multimedia:

- 1) extend the heterogeneous history of interactivity;
- 2) eschew "the new" for the ways in which it suppresses prior research and discovery;
- 3) exploit commercial markets for collective ends;
- 4) acknowledge the limits of conventional aesthetic codes and reconfigure them;
- 5) construct situations for responsible interaction;
- 6) utilize advanced technological apparatus to link individual experience to collectives rather than as a means in itself;
- 7) support self-determined exchanges between participants;
- 8) effect personal, cultural, social, and political change;
- 9) create forms of agency that set empathy in motion.

In 1985, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe imagined "a radical democratic politics" of shifting vortexes of shared power and diversified discourses. Fifteen years later, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identified radical political interchange in different but related terms: "Today the militant...must rediscover what has always been its proper form: not representational but constituent activity." Constituent activity implies acts of empathy, responsibility, and interdependency demanded by contingency. To expect anything less from interactivity is to be missing in action.