

International Congress of Aesthetics 2007 “Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”

Interactivity as Performative Articulation

*Renée van de Vall, Maastricht University,
The Netherlands*

In search of interactivity

This spring I visited the Dutch Electronic Art Festival (DEAF), the biennial manifestation of the renowned Rotterdam V2-, Institute for the Unstable Media. The theme of this year was ‘Interact or Die!’. Leaving the exhibition of the festival, I wondered whether the title was meant as a joke. Among the works shown on the exhibition – interesting as they were on many other accounts – only very few provided a more than superficial opportunity to interact. An example of such superficiality was an installation consisting of a dead frog whose intestines were replaced by a miniature webserver. The installation was titled *Experiments in Galvanism* and, according to the text, allowed the visitors to ‘updat[e] Luigi Galvani’s original 1786 experiment causing the legs of a dead frog to twitch simply by touching muscles and nerves with metal’.¹ By pushing a button (or clicking a mouse) the visitor could move the beast’s legs. That was it, at least as far as the interaction was concerned.

The problem I am repeatedly confronted with, in this and comparable expositions, is in figuring out what makes all display of technological sophistication artistically and aesthetically interesting – or rather, what could be valuable starting points for appreciating the overload of multi-media equipment in other, more ‘artful’ terms than their technological sophistication alone. What makes it worthwhile for me, as a visitor, to put on these headsets, push all those buttons, type words on keyboards and see them tumble on screens, run on moving transportation belts, make dancing steps or speak sentences in microphones, very often hoping that no-one would see or hear me? When and why is an installation more than a laboratory experiment for clever software development and interface design?² Where and why do we encounter something like an aesthetic experience?

Counterbalancing the rather disappointing example of the frog, there was another work on the exhibition, however, that I and many other visitors found truly delightful. Zachary Lieberman’s *Drawn* consisted of a table with sheets of white paper, a bottle of black ink and a brush. In front of the table a screen was suspended, more or less separating the table from the remainder of the exhibition space. Visitors could make a drawing which was immediately projected on the screen. Then, after pushing a button, the black marks on the screen started to live a life of their own. They could be moved by the gestures of your hands moving over the table, and while moving made musical sounds. By touching different icons you could vary the rhythms and patterns of the reactions of the marks on your gesturing hands and the sounds they made.³

What this example suggests, in line with for instance Mulder and Post in *The Book for the Electronic Arts*,⁴ is that the interaction itself should become an artistic material, rather than merely an additional trick to transmit an already given content. By this I mean that *in the process of interaction itself*, and because of the dynamics of this interaction, something should happen that is truly new, and in its newness enlightening, moving, impressive, delightful or exhilarating. And with the process of interaction itself I mean exactly that – the actual physical-cum-perceptual-cum-imaginative-cum-conceptual performance *as* a performance. Only a very few works survive this test. But the next question is then, how to theorize the interaction as more than a purely individual (on the side of the subject) or contingent (on the side of the object) occurrence, in other words, how to ground the aesthetic judgment of a work's interactivity?

A complicating factor when it comes to thinking of an aesthetics of interactive media is that is no longer possible to speak of works being 'objects' any longer, let alone objects having a determinable form – which doesn't mean, of course, that they wouldn't consist of objects. This development didn't start with new media art, not even with installation art, yet new media art poses us with new reasons for this indeterminacy. As Joost Bolten has recently argued in her extensive and detailed study of Gary Hill's installations, a tremendous gap has grown between a work as the manifest result of a visitor's trajectory and the underlying, invisible digital database.⁵ Interactive art works like Hill's consist of an inexhaustible reservoir of digitally stored possibilities and what an individual visitor experiences is dependent on his more or less accidental path through the installation – a path which triggers some possible responses and leaves an infinite number of other possibilities dormant. Whereas with paintings one could say that although spectators' visual trajectories and experiences might differ, the material object remains the same, now even the material objects change in accordance with the trajectories that bring them into existence.

Bolten describes Hill's works as labyrinthine spaces, providing what she calls 'performative situations', enabling the visitors to play and to learn. Part of the criteria of an aesthetic judgment, then, could be in assessing the potential richness of a performative situation. Giving the visitor the opportunity of pulling a frog's leg does not contain a particularly rich situational potential. Allowing him to play with painted forms, real and virtual, is already much more promising.

On the other hand, this merely shifts the problem, instead of solving it. The actual richness of a performative situation only becomes apparent in its actualization through its visitors' enactments. What a work *is* only emerges in what visitors *do*. For an audience that is not amused by drawing or by playing with forms, the whole sense of *Drawn* disappears. Audiences differ. Judging from the video provided by the artist, children are *Drawn*'s privileged audience (and that goes for many interactive works), children being much more competent in playing than adults. This means that, when we are searching for an aesthetics for new media art, we need to more closely study the visitors, what they bring to the work, how they 'produce' it and what they subsequently derive from it. I would like to argue that this requires a twofold approach, combining the detailed vocabulary of perceptual engagement of what has recently be called 'post-phenomenology'⁶ with the constructivist ethnography developed in Actor-Network-Theory. In this contribution I will focus on the latter. In line with Bolten's notion of the work as a performative situation and combining this with Bruno Latour's concept of articulation, I have called this process of playful discovery 'performative articulation'.

Performative articulation indicates the process in which new (aspects of) worlds emerge, internally differentiate and structure themselves through the embodied doings of those enacting and experiencing these worlds.

Learning to be affected

Point of departure for the 'articulation' in the performance is Latour's essay on the body as an interface. For Latour, 'to have a body is *to learn to be affected*, meaning 'effectuated', moved, put into motion by other entities, humans and non-humans'.⁷ Latour's example of how a body learns to be affected is the training of 'noses' through a so-called 'odor kit' by the perfume industry. The odor kit consists of series of contrasting fragrances, which one learns to register in a week-long session. People who at first could only distinguish 'sweet' from 'fetid' odors become able to discriminate more and more subtle differences and to tell them apart from one another. They become 'noses'. What was an inarticulate experience – the registration of sweet or fetid odors – becomes an articulate one – let's say the registration of a combination of violet and musk. The crux of the articulation is in the *doing*: in the activities that make a new articulation possible and in those it subsequently solicits. In the process, *both bodies and worlds change* – learning to be affected is *becoming* a nose and progressively inhabiting a more interesting and more complex world.

Of course, an odor kit is not an artwork. Odor kits and art works have different purposes, that of the first being cognitive and instrumental, the latter imaginative and/or affective and playful. What makes the comparison fruitful, and the ANT approach interesting, is the emphasis on the material practices mediating the experience. The subject's body is reconfigured in an interaction with objects, perceptions, gestures and people. And in the interaction something new emerges, that wasn't there before. An interaction is an *event* that cannot be reduced to its constituent elements. In order for an event to happen, though, a twofold openness is required – on the part of the artwork and on that of the spectator. With regard to the artwork, I have argued elsewhere that such openness is not without form and demonstrated this argument by analyzing the visual dynamics of 'sublime' paintings.⁸ The same can be said about the openness of the spectator: it is mediated, in the sense that it requires cultivation. This point is very strikingly underscored by a provocative study of music amateurs and drug users by Emilie Gomart and Antoine Hennion, who try to do for the notion of the subject what Latour has done for scientific facts and technological artifacts, that is to 'open the black box'.⁹

A crucial characteristic of the performativity of Latour's example is indicated by the seemingly paradoxical combination of activity and passivity in the phrase 'learning to be affected'. One actively *does* something, learning, in order to be passively subjected to other entities, in Latour's case odors. For this interweaving of the active and the passive mode, of being object and subject simultaneously, Gomart and Hennion have coined the term 'active dispossession'. What music amateurs and drug users have in common, despite all differences, is 'passion': 'the ways in which subjects may be seized, impassioned and swept away'.¹⁰ The love of music and the love of drugs take the form of a 'surprisingly consensual self-abandonment',¹¹ involving a paradoxical combination of 'passivity and activity, determining and determined, collective and individual, and intention as against causality'.¹² Music amateurs and drug users allow themselves to be possessed by external forces – those of a drug or of music; they suspend their control or will to be seized by something else.

As we have noted, we do not take 'passion' to describe the subject's instrumental mastery of things, nor her mechanical determination by things. Rather, *passion is the abandonment of forces to objects and the suspension of the self.*¹³

This being seized by outside forces doesn't come from nowhere, however: it requires a lot of preparatory work. The focus in Gomart's and Hennion's study is on what they call the socio-technical *dispositifs* of passion, the objects, conditions and means through which states of rapture are achieved. An example of such preparation is provided by the music lover who told how he listened to Bach cantatas. He possessed the complete Harnoncourt-Leonhardt collection – about 200 cantatas – and listened to them box after box, in order, going from first to last and then in reverse, from last to first. He never chose a favorite cantata to listen to, but let the cantatas 'arrive at their own time'.¹⁴ This is just one of the various ways in which experienced music amateurs orchestrate the conditions that allow them to be affected. Being swept away, by music or by drugs, is an event that has to be carefully prepared and involves techniques of discipline – which, Gomart and Hennion add, 'are not just to do with prohibition, regulation and reduction': 'Discipline may also be productive: it may reveal and multiply. And the power of the "dispositif" rests on the proliferation of new competencies that it lets emerge.'¹⁵

Aesthetic performance and interactive art

Aesthetic experiences of any kind, whether solicited by traditional or by interactive art, are marked by a certain measure of passionate abandonment and require active dispossession. It could be more or less, but a tiny bit of abandonment is needed for being affected by a work. But abandonment and dispossession need specific competencies and these might differ for different audiences and genres. Experienced lovers of traditional visual art, just like music amateurs and drug users, have developed the competencies needed to be overwhelmed, touched, impressed or otherwise affected by – for instance – the sublimity of Abstract Expressionist paintings or the emotional depth of Rembrandt's self-portraits. They have developed skills like those of concentrated contemplation, sensitive observation of painterly qualities, and of valuing initial frustration as being a significant ingredient in the search for meanings. They are less competent in pushing buttons, answering questions posed by images on monitors, riding on bicycles in front of enormous screens filled with letters, let alone painting on white sheets and moving hands watched by numerous other visitors.

Whereas on the one hand, an interactive installation should be interesting as a performative situation and endow the visitors' interactions with meaning, on the other hand the visitors need to develop the competencies to be genuinely affected, overwhelmed, or absorbed by what the work has to offer, in order to experience something new. Discipline, a seemingly incongruous term in this context, might for instance consist in the overcoming of one's initial embarrassment of playing in the presence of others or in the determination for further exploration when you get stuck in the navigation. Expertise might involve a general sense of what kind of experiences to look for and how to explore their possible meanings. New generations of audiences bring new competencies and forms of expertise, which in turn will affect the genre. I suspect that cultural practices engendering this expertise may more and more involve another kind of interactivity, which is already apparent in the practices of fan and game culture. An example is the YouTube video of *Drawn* by a DEAF visitor, which contains a lively but somewhat chaotic impression of his interactions with the installation.¹⁶

What hasn't been answered yet is the question why or in what respects this installation is a work of art? Delightful as it is, what makes it more or different than a pleasant game or play? It's the playfulness that distinguishes it from an odor kit, but what distinguishes it from a game of hide and seek? I would say, exactly the aspect of articulation. In the performance a new aspect of the world unfolds together with a new mode of bodily sensitivity. But then the next question is what exactly is articulated? In what sense is the body learning to be affected by this installation? What world is actually disclosed? What bodily sensitivity emerges in the encounter?

Again, I should note that the work may be a different thing for different audiences. For the children in the video, who bring their experience of painting at school or at home, the work may be an interesting extension of making a drawing. For the maker of the YouTube video, it might be an amusing variation on the digital games he usually plays. My provisional answer – the answer of a visitor schooled in a more traditional form of art appreciation – is that in the augmented reality of digital, networked culture, this installation might provoke us to reflect on the dynamics of sense perception arising from our bodily presence on and interaction with screens. In particular the sense of touch. What happens when you play with the installation is that you develop a new kind of touch, a virtual touch composed of the interaction of image, movement and sound, a touch that differs from the feeling of a moving brush on paper. The world that is disclosed is a materialization of the in-between: the space – and time – that separates the physical body from its image on the screen and that, in contrast to how we tend to think about it, is not transparent but shaped in particular ways and charged with experiential meaning. I have not found this in the texts of the artist that went with the installation, but I would range this work with others like Paul Sermons *The Tables Turned* that explore the ethical and aesthetical conditions and consequences of the dispersed sense of presence that comes with our screened and networked embodiment.¹⁷ To explore this side of the performative articulation, we need another approach than Actor-Network-Theory, however, and draw upon the phenomenology of technologically mediated experience – like for instance Vivian Sobchack's brilliant essay on the synaesthesia of film experience.¹⁸ What ANT contributes to phenomenology is the exploration of the 'practicalities' of embodied experience.¹⁹ Precisely in our appreciation of newly emerging forms of art, the processes in which bodies learn and the material artifacts involved in the learning deserve meticulous attention.

¹ http://www.deaf07.nl/index.php?option=com_program&act=project&Itemid=17.

² Which for authors like Bolter and Gromala seems to be a primary function for new media art. Jay David Bolter & Diane Gromala, *Windows and Mirrors. Interaction Design, Digital Art and the Myth of Transparency* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: The MIT Press, 2003).

³ A video by the artist can be watched on <http://www.veoh.com/videos/e576436yXH5S6>.

⁴ Arjen Mulder and Marijke Post, *Book for the Electronic Arts* (Amsterdam and Rotterdam: De Balie/V2, 2000), 114.

⁵ Joost Bolten, *Tussen voorstelling en uitvoering. De plaats van de tekst in het videowerk van Gary Hill*. (Amsterdam: Vossiuspers (PhD-thesis, University of Amsterdam), 2006).

⁶ Peter Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*, trans. R.P. Crease (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

⁷ Bruno Latour, "How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies," *Body & Society* 10.2-3 (2004): 205-229, 225.

⁸ Renée Van de Vall, "What Consciousness Forgets. Lyotard's Concept of the Sublime," in *A Companion to Art Theory*, eds. Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 360-369.

⁹ Emilie Gomart and Antoine Hennion, "A Sociology of Attachment: Music Amateurs, Drug Users," *Actor Network Theory and After*, eds. J. Law and J. Hassard (Oxford: Blackwell/The Sociological Review 1999). 220-247.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 227.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 238-9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EU3-EXOWlg>

¹⁷ Renee Van de Vall, *At the Edges of Vision. A Phenomenological Aesthetics of Contemporary Spectatorship* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming 2008).

¹⁸ Vivian Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," in *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005), 51-84.

¹⁹ Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple. Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 31.

Reneé van de Vall works as an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of Maastricht University, where she is Director of Studies of The MA Media Culture. Her research focuses on the aesthetics of visual art and culture, in particular on the construction of spectatorship. The title of the last book is *At the Edges of Vision. A Phenomenological Aesthetics of Contemporary Spectatorship* (Ashgate, forthcoming 2007).

