TOUCH AND GO
Watermans International Festival of Digital Art, 2012

Touch and Go is a title that I chose together with Irini Papadimitriou for this LEA special issue. On my part with this title I wanted to stress several aspects that characterize that branch of contemporary art in love with interaction, be it delivered by allowing the audience to touch the art object or by becoming part of a complex electronic sensory experience in which the artwork may somehow respond and touch back in return.

With the above statement, I wanted to deliberately avoid the terminology ‘interactive art’ in order to not fall in the trap of characterizing art that has an element of interaction as primarily defined by the word interactive; as if this were the only way to describe contemporary art that elicits interactions and responses between the artist, the audience and the art objects.

I remember when I was at Central Saint Martins writing a paper on the sub-distinctions within contemporary media arts and tracing the debates that distinguished between electronic art, robotic art, new objects. The possibility of capturing, viewing and understanding the entire mass of data produced by these aesthetic sensory experiences becomes an impossible task due to easy access to an unprecedented amount of media and an unprecedented multiplication of data, as Lev Manovich argues.

The difference between memorization and memorization may be one of the further aspects in which the interaction evolves – beyond the artwork but still linked to it. The memory of the event with its happening and performative elements, its traces and records both official and unofficial, the re-processing and mash-ups; all of these elements become part of and contribute to a collective narrative and pattern of engagement and interaction.

These are issues and problems that the artists and writers of this LEA special issue have analyzed from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds, offering to the reader the opportunity of a glimpse into the complexity of today’s art interactions within the contemporary social and cultural media landscapes.

1. “Nevertheless, there is this constant apparently inherent need to try and categorize and classify. In Beyond Interface, an exhibition I organized in 1998, I ‘datamined’ ten categories: net.art, storytelling, socio-cultural, biographical, tools, performance, analog-hybrid, interactive art, interfacers + artists. David Ross, in his lecture here at the CADRE Laboratory for New Media, suggested 21 characteristics of net art. Stephen Wilson, a pioneering practitioner, has a virtual – albeit well-ordered – jungle of categories. Rhizome has developed a list of dozens of keyword categories for its ArtBase. Lev Manovich, in his Computing Culture: Defining New Media Genres symposium focused on the categories of database, interface, spatialization, and navigation. To my mind, there is no question that such categorization is useful, especially in a distributed system like the Internet. But, in truth, to paraphrase Barnett Newman, “ornithology is for the birds what categorization is for the artist.” Perhaps especially at a time of rapid change and explosive growth of the underlying infrastructure and toolkits, it is critical that description follow practice and not vice versa.” Steve Dietz, Why Have There Been No Great Net Artists? Web Walker Daily 28, April 4, 2000, http://bit.ly/QjEWlY (accessed July 1, 2012).

2. This link to a Google+ conversation is an example of this argument on massive data and multiple media engagements across diverse platforms: http://bit.ly/pGgDsS (accessed July 1, 2012).

Touch and Go:
The Magic Touch Of Contemporary Art

It is with some excitement that I write this preface to Watermans International Festival of Digital Art, 2012. It has been a monumental achievement by the curator Irini Papadimitriou to pull together 6 ground-breaking installations exploring interactivity, viewer participation, collaboration and the use or importance of new and emerging technologies in Media and Digital Art.

From an initial call in December 2010 over 500 submissions arrived in our inboxes in March 2011. It was rather an overwhelming and daunting task to review, look and encounter a diverse range of submissions that were additionally asked to reflect on the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Submissions came from all over the world, from Africa and Korea, Austria and Australia, China and the uk, Latvia and Canada and ranged from the spectacularly complicated to the imaginatively humorous. Of course each selector, me, onedotzero, London’s leading digital media innovation organization, the curatorial team at Athens Video Art Festival and Irini herself, had particular favorites and attachments but the final grouping I believe does reflect a sense of the challenges and opportunities that such an open competition offers. It of new and emerging technologies in Media and Digital Art.

Some, like Gail Pearce’s Going with the Flow was made because rowing at the 2012 Olympics will be held near Egham and it was an opportunity to respond and create an installation offering the public a more interactive way of rowing, while remaining on dry land, not only watching but also participating and having an effect on the images by their actions. On the other hand, Michele Barker and Anna Munster’s collaborative Hocus Pocus will be a 3-screen interactive artwork that uses illusionistic and performative aspects of magical tricks to explore human perception, senses and movement. As they have suggested, ‘Magic – like interactivity – relies on shifting the perceptual relations between vision and movement, focusing and diverting attention at key moments. Participants will become aware of this relation as their perception catches up with the audiovisual illusio(n(s))’ (artists statement, February 2011). Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi and Emeka Ogboh are artists who also work collaboratively and working under name of One-Room Shack. Unity is built like a navigable labyrinth to reflect the idea of unity in diversity that the Games signify. In an increasingly globalized world they are interested in the ways in which the discourse of globalization opens up and closes off discursive space whereas Suguru Goto is a musician who creates real spaces that are both metaphysical and spiritual.

Cymatics is a kinetic sculpture and sound installation. Wave patterns are created on liquid as a result of sound vibrations generated by visitors. Another sound work is Phoebe Hu’s Granular Graph, a sound instrument about musical gesture and its notation. Consequently, I am particularly excited that the 2012 Festival Watermans will introduce a mentoring scheme for students interested in participatory interactive digital / new media work. The mentoring scheme involves video interviews with the 6 selected artists and their work, briefly introduced earlier in this preface, and discussions initiated by the student. As so often debated in our seminars at Goldsmiths and elsewhere, what are the expectations of the audience, the viewer, the spectator, and the engager? Why do exhibitions and festival celebrations revisit the traditional roles of performer/artist and audiences? Can they facilitate collaborative approaches to creativity? How do sound works get curated in exhibitions that include interactive objects, physical performances and screens? What are the issues around technical support? How are the ways of working online and off, including collaboration and social networking, affecting physical forms of display and publishing?

As I write this in Wollongong during the wettest New South Wales summer for 50 years, I want to end with a quote used by the Australia, Sydney based conjurers Michele Barker and Anna Munster: “Illusions occur when the physical reality does not match the perception.”

The world is upside down in so many alarming ways but perhaps 2012 at Watermans will offer some momentary ideas of unity in diversity that the Games signify and Unity proposes. Such anticipation and such promise!

Janis Jeffries
Professor of Visual Arts
Goldsmiths
University of London, UK

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In Munster’s and Barker’s new work, *HokusPokus*, a robotic environment comes alive when we make our entrance, transforming darkened space into a responsive place enabling exploration of the relationship between our attention and what we see or what we miss via engagement with the entrancing performances of a consummate stage magician. He performs his magic, but it is we who are staged so that in observing ourselves we might discover something about both what it is and why it is we fail to see.

Our own movements might trigger the unfolding sequences of performance or might actively intervene in the moment to provoke changes in what is seen, producing a redistribution of movement between the three screens involved, the slowing of an action or its doubling and repetition – an intensification and amplification of gesture captured in close up as the magician performs his sleight of hand. He is a charismatic and seductive figure, looking into the camera, soliciting our attention with his eyes and then completing our sensory capture with his hands which are fluttering, expressive: alive with constant motion. The arcing gesture made with one hand draws our eyes away from his body and our attention away from just what his other hand is doing. These fluid movements are part of the repertoire of techniques of misdirection, by which our attention is channeled, and diverted so that while we concentrate on one thing, he is able to do something else without us noticing. It is this disjunction of cause and effect, of reality and perception, that creates both the illusion of magic, and the magic of illusion.

The multi-screen choreography mimics the entrancing movements so that the environment itself plays role of magician, redistributing attention by virtue of what we bring about with our own movements. In its play between responsiveness and restraint, the work opens a gap between the duration of performance and the discrete moment of a certain gesture. Yet its effect is not so much to reveal or unmask as to invite us to consider the workings of attention in our entrance, transforming darkened space into an open, responsive place enabling exploration of the relationship between our attention and what we see or what we miss via engagement with the entrancing performances of a consummate stage magician.

‘HokusPokus’ points towards this potential as its proto-cinematic, zootropic, effects and the intensity of color in the image recall the way the history of magic shows and the art of cinema are intertwined – for example, in the career of pioneering and prolific director, Georges Méliès, who began his career as a stage magician. Méliès carried over the techniques of his magical theatre shows into films in which cinematic effects are exploited so that things appear and disappear, or objects grow and shrink in the wonderland of illusion. Meanwhile the sound work of the installation conjures the other-worldly voices born of the various rituals – like séances, or prayer – that involve communing with the dead: things half-heard or incompletely uttered. In this it recalls the way the history of relations between magic and neuroscience doubles that of psychoanalysis and hypnosis: both sciences repudiate the nonrational as it manifests in magic and suggestion and constitute themselves in and by this repudiation. Yet it is nevertheless the case that art often knows first, and knows by different means from those of science. What better figure for this than the seductive magician whose conjuring, even when you know how it works, remains captivating?

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REFERENCES

