

Interaction and Play

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I prefer the form of seduction for it stems from a mysterious duality/confrontational relationship, an enticing, intense, and covert attraction between the living and the non-living. It is not a form of response, but a challenge, a duel, imbued with an intriguing sense of distance and constant antagonism on which the rules of theme are also based."

— Jean Baudrillard

Reflecting upon the frantic commotion surrounding the new media, one can easily gain the impression of a world turned upside down. Naturally, there are technologies available today that in the course of evolution have attained a certain degree of complexity and perfection offering mind-boggling possibilities not only for the entertainment industry but for the artist as well. However, when we consider the perilously desolate state of computer art, it is difficult to understand why in our so-called post-modern era—inured as we are to the euphoria of technological advances—so much rhetorical and institutional endeavor is being invested in persuading artists to take up technologies that neither they nor their recipients really comprehend. Traditional modernists might, of course, take a more balanced view and contend that a different artistic concept is needed. They may also view that the arts simply have to yield to state-of-the-art technology and its inherent forms of perception in order to remain contemporary, or offer viable alternatives to the prevailing forms of application. But occasionally it is difficult to avoid the impression that instead of the artist creating the art, it is the art and the artists that now have to be manufactured for a technology, which has not arrived but has made deep inroads into our daily existence. If we exclude musicians and composers, artists have been very reticent in availing themselves of the computer, in the area of computer

graphics, it was the technicians, programmers, and scientists who first submitted computer images as art. Quite the contrary was true in photography, cinema, or video, where artists soon seized upon this technology and began developing it in the initial phases without the generous support from the state and patrons of the arts.

Assuming the even partial validity of this analysis, this situation is at least worthy of further inquiry. The need to cloak a popular technology as an artistic guise certainly bears testimony to the fact that art per se generally enjoys a privileged position in our society. In this respect, our inquiry should not only focus on the media arts, since artists have been re-defining the forms of traditional art since the beginning of the Modern era or even since the discovery of photography; demonstrating that there is really nothing under the sun that does not lend itself to artistic or aesthetic treatment. However, this process is both ambivalent and even paradoxical. If art is to embrace all things, then the contours delineating the artistic from the non-artistic or non-aesthetic will become blurred, eliminating the basis on which to appraise art. Furthermore, with the advent of electronics and the computer as the universal machine, a much closer link has been established between technology, commerce, and art than was previously the case with the analogous media of photography and film. Here, I will not expound on the possible commercial interests of industry, which are motivated by more pragmatic and pecuniary considerations than those champions of culture seeking to "interface" the new media to that strange species known as artists—who, for whatever reason, still enjoy blue-chip status. Perhaps we will only be able to observe the establishment of a new art form, traditionally defined in common with painting, sculpture, music, etc. This is realized by creating institu-

tions, theories, exhibition facilities, audiences, and artists and by creating a demand and a market niche, while simultaneously reassuring that this new form is still in the experimental phase—i.e., "Don't expect too much." The "other" established arts are not exonerated from this criticism. They continue to operate along their traditional channels—which is why the vague term "art" is open to so many different interpretations and why no one is really quite sure of its true meaning or indeed has ever been. A different situation still prevails in the new computer-based media, where the need for legitimation is considerably higher, but the artistic threshold is set much lower. Just consider what is being marketed nowadays as art at international exhibitions.

Today's common strategies of sanctioning or trying to infuse kitsch with an aesthetic quality does not function as a form of self-reflection because computer art has not yet developed the aesthetic dogma found in modern art. This may not transpire until well in the future because computer technology is still in a phase of continual innovation. Modernism, on the other hand, assumes that the technique applied in a painting, for example, can in essence be developed no further; and secondly, that the aesthetic sensation is no longer paramount. Furthermore, artists no longer simply produce works of art but strive to infuse their work with multiple layers of self-reflection—posing questions like, "What is a work of art?" This can only function on the basis of an established set of criteria and expectations—which again is not the case in computer art. There, kitsch, banality, or certain other "effects" can only be taken at face value. Aesthetic fascination or the skilled mastery of a technique no longer constitute a work of art; much more, they are themselves the object of artistic inquiry.

At the same time it is both intransigent and illusory of computer artists to adopt as a model the

visual arts and their attendance institutions and forms of presentation and reception. Omitting for the time being the marginal and in fact regressive area of computer graphics, we can say that computer art distinguishes itself by virtue of the moving image and by permitting the construction of environments that are capable not only of eliciting reactions but also for manipulating interactively these events. Here lies the essence of computer art's distinctively playful dimension for the observer or user, which in the traditional arts has always been marginal and led to the still prevalent exclusion of entertainment as an artistic form. Even in the case of television, the most celebrated form of entertainment in terms of viewer time, the spectator is becoming increasingly involved in the playing of games, which, in turn, are observed by other viewers. Still, in keeping with our social customs, these games tend to be based on athletic skills or dexterity. On the other hand, toys or computer games, which possess at most some didactic but not aesthetic significance, have developed their own particular market.

If, for example, Paik's "Video-Buddha" had been revered as the icon of the electronic era in contrast to other closed-circuit installations, this certainly would not be attributable to its manifestly symbolic character, but also to the exclusion of viewer-interaction. Indeed, the activity of the spectator, in so far as he or she playfully interacts with such an installation, is difficult for the artist to control. Does he use an interactive installation as a work of art? And what is the meaning of this? Similar questions arise concerning the work of Myron Krueger, a pioneer of interactive electronic art. Is he merely the inventor of toys for people to amuse themselves with? Do such works allow meaningful experiences in a space/time context, free of purpose or intention? But are not all works of art simply an invitation for each person to experience, grapple with, and interpret differently? If perception is action, why should there always be a dichotomy between perception and physical action? Must man's encounter with art be devoid of action, purpose, and intention for it to be of significance? Taken one step further: Is Odysseus, bound to the mast, a metaphor for man's reception of art?

Interaction is merely one more stage in the incorporation of the traditionally passive spectator into a creative process. This effectively means desegregating the work and the viewer, whose involvement hitherto was merely intellectual or emotional. This artistic endeavor did not arrive with the computer but emerged in the sixties in the movements known

as kinetic art, action art, or the happening. To a certain degree, conceptual art and even pop art also belong to those movements that assert that the work of art is only realized when the spectator is present, or that attempt to undermine the divisions between serious and popular art. These artists employed rather simple installations, environments, and situations designed to incorporate the audience by challenging them to become active or by integrating their very presence into the work; for example, by entering a room, the spectator immediately transforms the environment or sees him/herself on a monitor. Typical for such works are those that encourage the spectator to alter his or her location to create different visual perspectives, while the picture requires that it can only be viewed correctly from one angle.

In the theater, efforts were made to correspondingly alter the principle of the proscenium, and in literature there was a transition from linear plot development to a more multi-layered, rhizomatic structure. In painting, the "all-over" art of Jackson Pollack bore witness to the fact that not only had the artist relinquished his focal point, but the painting itself was no longer subsumed within a centrally organized structure—thus permitting the viewer many different perspectives. This could also give birth to the idea that a painting could result from the collective efforts of a group of artists working on equal terms. This principle could only presuppose that the work or the space created within it is of a pluralistic nature. Even the tendency towards abstraction sought to realize this plurality on a semantic level. On the production level, the artist was transformed from the role of the manufacturer to someone devoid of a fixed pictorial objective, who uses a more or less random matrix of lines and colors as an imaginative surface on which the image starts to take on form as the artist intervenes.

Behind all these diverse endeavors was the conviction of avant-garde artists that by presenting an open and incomplete work, the spectator completes the work through his/her own participation. The intention of this interactive process is to transform the spectator into the artist, while simultaneously striving to make the "expert" superfluous.

Aside from art, the playing of games has come to be regarded as an area of voluntary human activity, not inspired by intention or motives. Play represents a surplus activity that negates the restraints imposed by reality and the urgency to satisfy primary needs. Moreover, play either inhabits or discovers other realities. Seen in this light, it is not surprising

that the combination of play and art is a clear expression of a truly free and creative society, in which production and reception, creation and play co-exist in harmony. Today, interaction and "open" art works are easily reconciled with the insights revealed by the chaos theory and the resulting epistemological tenets of endophysics and constructivism. The model of the external observer, who seeks to objectively describe a system separate from him/herself, is gradually being superseded, not only in science but also in the arts. Instead we have come to accept the model of an internal observer situated in the world observed by him/her and affected or distorted by his/her activities—which, in turn, are influenced by this distorted world.

It is no secret that Duchamp had already begun to treat the system of art as a game or form of play, by manifestly devoting himself to chess. Similarly, the situationist had the declared program of overturning the traditionally accepted concept of art in order to create the conditions favorable for *Homo ludens*, the free, active, and creative human being. At the very same time, the Marxist sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre, inspired by romantic projects of the situationists, developed his "Critique of Everyday Life," which in turn influenced Jean Baudrillard. He proposed the idea of the playful seduction or seduction as the basis of play in an illusionary world as the antithesis to a world obsessed with reality and power in which rational behavior is the driving force. During the sixties, the painter Constant, a member of the Cobra art movement and later a situationist, experimented with urbanistic designs; work that could be varied at will and was thus characterized by its intrinsic instability. He drew a strict distinction between a playful culture where each person develops his/her own creativity and a consumer culture that only permits choice between pre-ordained alternatives. According to Constant, the playful being, who purportedly emerged from the automatization of the production processes liberating him from utilitarian activities and bestowing upon him leisure time, is a nomad, whose behavior in every sense of the word can be conceived of as "drifting." Furthermore, this nomad has abandoned the conventional game that consists of sport and the attainment of an objective. Instead the nomad drifts along, encountering typical urban situations together with his fellow man, embarking on a quest for experience and adventure, constantly developing new environments, and, at the same time, modifying the rules of the game. Here, the situationists have excelled in developing inge-

nious scenarios. Homo Ludens, according to Constant, is no longer concerned with exploring the given, for example, nature, but instead pursues the creation of an environment "by artistically developing ambient structures" suitable for nomadic life: "Life becomes a single, never-ending journey. Entire environments are in a state of incessant change, suspended for only the briefest of intervals, and thus continually providing new opportunities for exploration and experience." The model of the "wishing machines," the deterritorialization, and the rhizomatic structures of Deleuze/Guattari represent the philosophical expansion of these objectives.

Does contemporary interactive art constitute the fulfillment of such utopian schemes—which may even appear less attractive today? At least from a technological point of view, architectonic space can soon find itself submerged beneath a continuous flow of changing virtual images. Using virtual reality technology it will soon be possible to enter virtual realities as one would a real environment. As far as interactive computer installations are concerned, the user is generally granted only a relative degree of freedom, determined by the artists or the creator of the system itself. The user has, at his/her disposal, a set of building blocks, from which various elements are selected and assembled. Here, the significance of the machines as an opponent can also be enhanced by integrating a "random generator" to exclude controlled manipulation. It may be possible to choose various strategies in combining elements in a montage or in exploring or to experiencing an artificial world or simply aesthetically structuring a given object or concept by adding new creative tools. Of course, when interactive works are exhibited in public, they are normally meant for use by one person, while the other participants assume the role of spectators of a performance. That means we are still dealing with a form of theater, but one that is lacking the seriousness traditionally associated with so-called "profound art." The users of interactive art not only play with the system, they simultaneously become performers portraying themselves. This is also true when the system permits the involvement of several players at the same time. On the other hand, this performance has absolutely nothing in common with drama, where the action is linearly pre-structured. In interactive art, the action develops spontaneously. To some extent, the artist resembles an animator by only providing a framework for action and thereby challenging the users to fill up this space with their own imagination. As theater, this can no doubt prove

to be extremely boring for the viewers, but sufficiently intriguing for the participants.

Of course, interactive works of art like computer games tend to lose their novelty. Kees Aafjes, for example, created a bizarre sculpture with the title "Petting," which looked like an insect and also vaguely resembled a vagina. The interactive machine prompts the guest to touch it, to be intimate with it, to pet it. If the visitor complies with this request, the computer measures his "skin resistance" and the object begins making gurgling sounds, sighing and uttering a few phrases. There are ten variations available. Even if the petting with the machine could be symbolically amplified, the sensation would soon become redundant due to the lack of complexity, even if 100 different reactions were possible. Once the visitor sees through the mechanisms, the aura of the object presented disappears in spite of the sophisticated intentions of its maker. The game becomes boring when there is nothing to "win." But games incorporating the "win" aspect require skill or are subject to the laws of probability, which can hardly be reconciled to the concept of art and the way art is ordinarily received. That is the reason why these kinds of games rarely involve artists. Furthermore, the actual entering into a creative, playful process is contingent not only upon operating a pre-given system, but also upon the user's ability to devise his/her own games with new rules and material. Should this go beyond the elementary experimental stage, then this would be tantamount to the recognition gained from a public presentation—sought after by the artist and experienced by the user at most during his/her operation of the system. One gains the unerring impression here that the "cat is chasing its own tail." This also applies to the hypertext systems, no matter how well-structured, fascinating, and intelligent they are conceived as, for instance, in William Seaman's, "The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers." Here the user has a considerable amount of image-sound text sequences to choose from, which can be combined and merged in a generally straightforward manner. Using the materials at hand, anyone could create his/her film, and not only ephemerally; this system permits the product to be sorted for future viewing. However, it is precisely this predetermined material that is restricting the imagination. One is tempted to use one's own material to fill in the formal structures, so as to transcend the mere administration of a system capable only of accepting variations in syntax.

Consequently, reverting to the conventional role of the passive viewer is more satisfying. In probable

awareness of the underlying imperfection and paradoxical nature of interactive work, William Seaman introduced a random generator that can combine the image-sound-text elements independent of the viewer's action.

Making the public aware of such questions with all their implications has been one of the achievements of interactive art. But, of course, we are a long way from the aesthetics of interaction. The systems purporting to be art are still at the exploration stage. Does this mean that we have no alternative but to wait until this experimental phase has been overcome, as some more modest observers of computer art would maintain? Or is it the case that the spectacular and primarily entertaining elements of the interactive system must first be indulged before aesthetically demanding forms of interaction or play can be developed at a more relaxed pace, in order to avoid making the mistake of trying to infuse this process with aesthetic elements? Or will the playful staging of "experience scenarios," where something happens, develop into a new essential dimension of art meriting greater exposure in the area of the traditional arts? Will the passive spectator, and with him/her, the artist become a thing of the past, banished from the stage of the art world? Do we as recipients of the arts want to become active participants? Are we not being seduced more by the perception of something, which we ourselves have not created, than by all the enticements offered by interaction? Have not illusion and art always existed side by side—with a common source and many overlapping features—without ever having managed to merge again following the arts' coming of age?

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