

Art of Virtual Bodies

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Abstract

There is a very interesting movement in multimedia art nowadays, with such artists like Simon Penny, Jane Prophet, Christa Sommerer, Laurent Mignonneau, Stelarc, and many others, working on artificial creatures, artificial life and intelligence. Virtual performances, and first of all, communication with those virtual beings seems to be one of the most fascinating aspects of experimental multimedia art today. In my paper I examine some art works as well as their theoretical context and some artistic attitudes concerning that subject.

Keywords: *artificial; body; communication; cyberculture; interaction; multimedia; virtual*

Cyberspace is now becoming a place where an expanding number of people spend more and more time. All kinds of human activities belong both to real and virtual worlds. Art is about to reach the end of the road taken at the beginning of this century which means that it is losing its materiality or physicality. A process of communication is replacing an objective work of art.

The broadening of the aesthetic field of the perception of interactive art with real behaviour in real space is paired with broadening of the sphere of symbolical behaviours. When mental activity is the only way of interacting with a work, coherence and aesthetic perception are given *a priori*. When mental activity is complemented with diverse forms of real participation (interaction), coherence of a work's perception may be achieved only by the behavioural saturation with the same qualities

which characterise mental and emotional activity. Reflection cannot find its realisation only in a purely intellectual form. It has to be incarnated in gestures and movements. Real interactive behaviours should form a continuation of mental activity. Only then perception of an art work, which is understood in a new way, will acquire inner coherence.

For a long time now we have been living in a post-biologic era, although many of us do not realise this. The increasing number of phenomena constituting our lives is mediated, broadened or transformed by technology. Each person's communication with other individuals, with civilisation, with nature, with the sphere of value, and, last but not least, with herself/himself is carried out through extensive recourse to various interfaces, controls, crutches, amplifiers and magnetic cards. Living in real life we nonetheless spend a lot of time every day in cyberspace. The more frequently we inhabit both worlds, the easier we lose the ability to differentiate between them. They unite to form new realities called simulacra. Here no qualities exist which could enable us to distinguish between virtual and real forms.

Simultaneously its identity changes and it takes an open form of unstable process. New technologies become extensions of the human body and as such influence its identity. The body itself, the way it is defined, its history, its gender and substance also undergo multiple transformations, which has an immeasurable effect on our idea of identity.

Another important consequence of these processes is the appearance of the phenomenon

of collective intelligence, which incorporates particular individual intelligences. The collective intelligence is not the resultant of intelligences of individual beings, which constitute its substance but seems to be their source and creative power. As numerous experiments in psychology and physiology of perception indicate, there are cases which influence our contact with the virtual worlds which do not give us the opportunity to control our own activities. Hertha Sturm for instance points out that while watching television we lack time to consciously integrate the assimilated pieces of information, and as a result we become victims to the external power of the audio-visual sequences which are too quick for us.

Individual intelligence, as has already been mentioned, must resist the pressure on the part of the collectivisation process. Apart from this it is confronted with forms of artificial intelligence, appearing in increasing numbers. What follows is abundant phenomena certifying the progress and success of research and experiments on artificial life. They in turn result in the global increase of interest in issues of corporeality. In fact new technologies (especially the virtual ones) change both our perception of the body, of its substance and borders and our attitude towards it. Most of all however, the body itself is transformed - it is operated on, it is transplanted, it is aided with artificial parts and implants, it is re-shaped and cloned. Body art

of the cyberculture era, i.e. artistic activities by Orlan or Stelarc provide convincing evidence of the new status of the body.

Body and identity transformations as well as new concepts of life and intelligence indicate with increasing certainty that we are living through a period of extremely marked and radical change in the whole world we live in.

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The belief by eighteenth century philosophers in the permanence and stability of the human race is with rising frequency perceived as an obstacle in describing the contemporary world, since we are constantly transformed by our own inventions. It doesn't matter whether we like this or not.

The new civilisational situation of human beings and its new, widened environment, where the biosphere has been complemented by the technosphere, strongly influence the shape of contemporary culture. They introduce into it numerous forms, which all together may generally be termed cyberculture. In this context, art has an important role to play.

On the one hand it prepares us for the approaching world, which differs strongly from the past. This world develops and takes shapes faster than the one we know. And the speed of the transformation, too large

considering the stability of a structure undergoing acceleration, may cause its quick mutation or even disintegration (depending on the flexibility of the structure). Neither one nor the other is favourable for psychic health. It is

conducive to stress and conflicts in the frame of social structures, where individual groups in different ways define their interests. Facing intensive acceleration of the transformation processes, the communities are divided by conflicts between tradition and innovation into hostile camps leading to disintegration and catastrophe than a complete system overhaul. In the situation where, in Derrick de Kerckhove's opinion, some of us move into the twenty first century with the psychical design of the nineteenth century countryman, an extremely important role for art is to adapt, create and conduct the rites of passage, and to accustom people to the new approaching world. I will come back to this issue later on.

The above mentioned processes do not and do not have to happen with artists' awareness of them and rarely are controlled or purposeful. On the contrary, the most interesting cases of art functioning as an adapting medium indicate that this function is carried out as if on the side, which is to say that artists take up various issues related to cyberculture, devote themselves to structural and communicative issues and only in consequence open new perspectives and horizons for the public towards the new virtual worlds. Artistic works localised on the Internet space accustom us to globalism. They also encourage us to be active as they offer interaction with the system, as well as are showing values of decentralisation and emphasising the need of freedom.

On the other hand, (multi)media art opens the hostile, rejected aspects of the new, technological worlds. By turning its (and so our) attention towards numerous and versatile problems, revealing doubts, questions and fears, it makes us realise that the new world is by no means going to be a Utopia. Nor even a safe shelter against known dangers or social diseases. On the contrary, they perceive new threats and a new collapse in the human dream of perfection. Moreover, it questions the meaning and worth

of changes undermining both objectives, methods and results of the action. Only in the confrontation of these two stands and opinions can an acute and deep vision of the present and especially the future appear.

There is a very interesting movement in multimedia art nowadays, with artists such as Simon Penny, Jane Prophet, Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, Stelarc, Michael Tolson, among many others, working on artificial creatures, artificial life and intelligence. Virtual performances and, primarily, communication with those virtual beings seem to be one of the most fascinating aspects of experimental multimedia art today.

Let us look at a few examples. Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau in the interactive computer installation *Phototropy* bring our attention to questions related to artificial life. They enable us to interact with artificial creatures - bionic insects, charging us - like in one of their previous works: *A Volve* - with the responsibility of their fate. It induces also a reflection on the complexity of communication processes. A similar approach is presented by Michael Tolson in his installation *Las Meninas*.

We can also meet works of this kind in the area of Internet art. A particularly interesting example of such a realisation is *TechnoSphere*, a joint work by a group of artists consisting of: Andrew Kind, Jane Prophet, Julian Saunderson, Gordon Selley and Tony Taylor-Moran (www.londinst.ac.uk/technosphere/index.html). This work allows Internet users to build from supplied elements (similar to the case of *A Volve*, or, better, *Genma* - another work by Sommerer and Mignonneau) artificial artefacts - virtual creatures. Once formed they exist in a quasi-independent way in the virtual expanses: they persist, create new generations of similar artefacts, and 'die'. Their creators receive e-mailed information about all the important events in the lives of the beings created and

given names by them.

TechnoSphere also creates another level of communication: between various users, those who have created artificial creatures, coming together in mutual relations. In accordance with the character of the medium, the works of net art are developing primarily their communicative aspects.

It is worth also drawing attention to one of the authorial explications of the work described above, i.e. the one which talks about the fulfilling by *TechnoSphere* of the function of a rite of passage. Cyberspace is here understood as an organised mediation, in respect of the problem of the body and identity, between humanism and post-humanism, between an analogue creation and a digital one. As an introduction to a post-biological world.

Those recently made works are rooted in previous activities of such artists like, for instance, Lynn Hershman, or Simon Biggs. In their works (e.g. *Room of One's Own*, *Shadows*) the body appropriated by the look defines a fundamental, almost archetypal situation, when domination is revealed on one side and subjugation on the other. It is a symbol of conquest and bondage. A symbol of enslavement. The rebellion of the body, once it breaks out, is therefore conducted on a total scale; it is aimed both against its internalised controller - the self, the soul or the superego - and against its external guardian - the omnipresent, enthralling look. This struggle sometimes reaches the dimension of a search for rebirth, thus gaining the significance of self-realisation, reconstructing the recently annihilated subjectivity.

I mentioned already that the development of virtual worlds and rising of the cyberculture makes art about to lose its materiality. At the same time there are numerous works of art which present the materiality of the virtual. They reflect one another creating a dynamic, unstable whole.

Kjell Bjorgeengen, for instance, in his

video installation *Shift* addresses the relation between the material and virtual worlds.

Hanging on the wall, at regular distances from each other, there are 10 monitors in a row. The video image skims across the monitors without wanting to fix itself to any particular place. For a moment, the image only exists in the emptiness, the interval between the monitors. During its passage, the image is sometimes spread across two monitors, which shows that the source of the image is elsewhere than on the electronic surface on which it can be seen now and then. In this installation the image becomes more concrete and material than the monitors which support it.

Similar questions on the status of virtual beings are posed by Croatian artist Dalibor Martinis in his video installations presented at the *OBSERVATORIUM* exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in Rijeka at the beginning of this year, and later in the Croatian pavilion in Venice. Installations presented within its scope represent various types of relations between the material and the virtual. Put together they create a paradigm of co-existence.

An illustrative example of this form of co-existence of the material and virtual in the structure of a piece is the installation *Eclipse of the Moon*. Here both spheres are combined in a dynamic relationship heading towards the state of equilibrium. Time and again the one or the other aspect gains over and influences decisively the form of the whole, but anyway each of those states is solely a transitional one and in some time it yields to another one, it eventually and inevitably recedes into a flow of incoming transformations.

Searching for and establishing a temporary and unstable equilibrium is now the main area of Martinis' artistic experiments. A game between the material and virtual has been with grandeur and in a virtuoso way realised in the installation *Circles between Surfaces*. The image

and the narration here, apparently belonging completely to the virtual sphere, reveals its deep dependence from the material, the physical sphere of the work, but to a careful viewer it discloses its true character, that it is spread between the two spheres. The piece as a whole, in its two-dimensionality (material-virtual), becomes in this case a narration itself, and simultaneously it reveals the materiality of the virtual spheres and the virtuality of matter.

The other example comes from the Polish art scene. The group, *The Central Office of Technical Culture*, with its leader Piotr Wyrzykowski in a provocative and radical way raises issues of the place, function and value of technology in human life. Impersonal, anonymous arrangements of space and objects and techno aesthetics of images are accompanied by similarly anonymous manifestos and declarations in bureaucratic stylistics. The environment prepared by the C.O.T.C. is an ambiguously sanitised, cyberpunk vision of the new world made real.

The interests of Piotr Wyrzykowski concentrate around the body. For some years now he has made performances, single channel videos, and installations dealing with different aspects of corporeality. In one of his recent projects using VR medium viewers are encouraged to interact with his digitised body, to transform its shape; etc. In the environment made in 1994 he rejected completely both the idea of representation and interpersonal communication creating instead an audio-visual space of viewers carnal experience.

All the works referred to in this paper create a new space for artistic communication, in a framework within which virtual creatures assume the attributes of real beings and simultaneously real bodies becoming virtual. In cyberspace all is virtual and all is real. Hypermedia art communication provides all subjects with an ambivalent, real-virtual status undermining both their identity and self-consciousness.

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