

# Missing the Point - Situated User Experience and the Materiality of Interaction

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## Introduction

How to speak about interactive media art? That question concerns me both from a media artist's perspective and from a researcher's. As a practicing media artist I often face the difficulty of communicating my work to someone, who has not experienced it, for in the case of interactive work, seeing is not enough. As a researcher of interactive art I observe a similar concern. In order to be able to discuss an interactive piece, I have to have encountered it personally. And when speaking about an interactive experience, witnessing someone else's interaction with a piece is not enough. One has to place oneself into the place of the user in order to really grasp the work in its complexity.

In many cases however, one has to settle with the conceptualization of the piece: descriptions of spatial arrangements, visuals and various schematizations of interactivity. But something is missing there, something, that immediately changes the entire perception of the piece, once it is entered. In this paper I am interested in approaching that aspect of interactive media art that cannot be reduced into a concept of an interactive situation. I will address this irreducibility as the materiality of an interactive experience.

The notion of materiality, has to be handled with caution. It is not my intention to posit materiality itself as the sign of irreducibility. Instead, I am interested in inquiring into the constitution of that material dimension of interactive art, which risks staying outside the general conventions of media art discourse. For me, it seems, this materiality involves the embodied and psychical aspects of an interactive experience, but it also involves an entire field of technology, that consists of various human and non human actors, setups and decisions concerning their place.

For me then, the question of how to speak about interactive media art is both a strategical and a methodological question. In my own work I pursue what I call a situated user experience. It consists of a sense of locatedness and embodiment as well as a more or less complex series of identificatory positions that the user will occupy when interacting with the piece. Now I will propose that this kind of situatedness should also concern the place from which interactive media art is approached theoretically. It seems to me symptomatic, that in contemporary media theory, only a handful of interactive installations are being discussed. Moreover, many of these installations seem to have rigidified into concepts that are being circulated between texts, as the various discussions addressing them appear surprisingly identical. And as long as interactive installations are approached through concepts of interactive situations, leaving out the writers situated user experience this homogeneity of the discourse is likely to continue.

I want, therefore, to argue for the fruitfulness of a situated perspective for writing about interactive media art. It seems to me that if one is willing to put oneself into the picture, that picture would also accommodate more personal accounts of one's situated user experiences. Would that change the way interactive art is being theorized in contemporary discourse? Perhaps not entirely. It might, however, introduce a more nuanced understanding of interactive media by opening up spaces for discussing socially and culturally specific, embodied encounters staged and structured by contemporary media installations. It might also contribute to bringing into

the realm of intelligibility some interactive experiences that might now be absent in the contemporary discourse.

But how to bring oneself into the picture? How to frame one's experience? Presently, I find it necessary to overlap two frames: that of the user and of the spectator. From a user's perspective I am able to focus into the interactive experience. My problem with the notion of the user is that, as the product of a usability discourse, it lacks the cultural and philosophical depth provided by contemporary visual theory. Therefore, it seems essential to carry out my discussion also in relation to spectatorship. Both in my artistic and my research work I am interested in inquiring into the idea of border breakdowns, shared by many contemporary discourses. I have previously elaborated on the notion of skin in this context, investigating those discourses under which skin as the border between the inside and the outside becomes technologized.

In this paper, however, I propose to frame the user experience from the point of view of trauma, which for me figures as the border breakdown between the subject and the world. I am interested in the experience in which something, as if by chance emerges from outside the frame of the situation, agitating and agonizing the user. In the discourse that draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis, this traumatic encounter is referred to as the return of the real. Within this frame, I will narrate two encounters with interactive installations, that left me in the state of anxiety. In these rather embarrassing encounters something unanticipated took place: in the first case someone got hurt, in the second one my excessive bodily presence overshadowed the idea of a smooth interactive exchange.

## **Epizoo**

Epizoo is a computer mediated, participatory performance. In Epizoo, Marcelli Antunez Roca offers his body for the members of the audience to play with and essentially, to torture. In the beginning of the performance, Marcelli's body gets connected to a series of devices that move separate areas of muscles and skin in his body. These devices are operated by a computer. The user interface for the system consists of a visualization of a stylized male body, the avatar of Marcelli, that the user manipulates with a mouse.

Epizoo displays an excessive male body in a ridiculous and humiliating situation. It turns that body into an object of control, taking away its autonomy and as such repeats the theme of the male body as a (sexual) automaton, that characterizes some of Marcelli's work. In another piece by him, a natural sized male robot, constructed from pig skin, displays its member in erection every time the audience whistles or yells loud enough. In Epizoo, his performance consists of a stylized audiovisual dance, triggered by the audience input. This input can be looked at in two ways at least. On one hand he represents his male body as an automaton, that the audience is free to control and humiliate. On the other, he can be seen to take the audience input as the inspiration for his performance. In that sense the performance becomes more like a perverse, improvisational dance. When following the performance, one learns to tell the difference between different moments of exchange with audience. Whenever somebody tortures his body imaginatively enough, the pain he experiences perceivably electrifies his performance.

In Epizoo, Marcelli obviously plays with both the themes of control and the materiality of the body. The graphical user interface, that in the everyday experience tends to situate the user into a simulational space, in which the actions do not have direct material consequences in the "real world", is here used to produce direct effects in the flesh of the performer. This excessive control that reaches beyond simulation, has, as its outcome, a body that seems to be out of control, and as such, a bit too much. The body performed by Marcelli is rude, exaggerated, decomposed and loud. But in all its ridiculous excess, it also recalls and carnevalizes some historical

moments in the technologization of the body: the body as the instrument of Inquisition, the body as the source of medical precision and inquiry - and the apparent failure to conceive of the cyborg body as seamless and neat. All these moments suggest certain loss in the autonomy of the body. And as such they facilitate the perception of the performed body as an automaton, subject to endless repetition of trauma.

But what is the trauma that is being repeated? In order to approach it I need to resituate myself. Now I am playing with Marcelli's representation on screen. It is a pleasurable game. I am astonished at how fast his body becomes instrumentalized in my perception. I don't feel his pain at all. Instead I engage in, what I imagine is a mutual improvisation. I try to torture him as cleverly as I can. I am having fun. But gradually I notice that something has taken place. Marcelli is being hurt. His harness is malfunctioning and the pain he now experiences is more than just an input for a little improvisational dance. His pain is real. But the pain does not show at once. What I, we notice first, are the clicks from a little box hanging from his waist as he tries to reset the system. The performance stops for a moment. Marcelli's technical assistant, who is the builder of the system, enters on stage. Marcelli looks upset and we know that something is wrong. But he continues to play. Somehow he manages to the end.

Later I feel horrified. Was it my fault? Was it my sense of omnipotence that produced the accident. With these guilt feelings I am being thrown into some unrecognized childhood experience. Or, perhaps it is the other way round. Perhaps this accident that appears as if by chance, is called by something, a missed encounter from my childhood that has something to do with omnipotency and guilt. Perhaps it was not even during my play that the accident happened. For we did not see it happen. Perhaps there was no accident at all - just an accumulating set of malfunctioning parts that gradually gained visibility.

It seems to me then, that the failure of the technology to function properly in this particular case produced a set of effects, that, in spite of their heterogeneity should be considered together. The failure brought an entire set of new performers on stage: the clicking box, another person, cables, electricity, a rupture in the flow of the performance. But for me this new staging appeared as an accident by chance, that produced another rupture in my subjective reality. The coincidence then marks a certain border breakdown in my relation to the work, for the rupture opens simultaneously towards my psychic reality and the reality in which Epizoo as a piece of technology is conceived.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, what emerges from the dimension of the real, emerges from outside the frame of the symbolic. In this schematization, repetition serves to screen the traumatic real. Repetition, in a sense can be understood as a continuously failing effort to integrate the traumatic event into the psychic reality of the subject. And as such, repetition also marks the failure of representation, as the traumatic real insists outside the frame in which it would become representable. What interests me then is, how technology in Epizoo functions as if such a frame. It seems to me that in Epizoo technology operates on two levels at least. On one hand technology serves as a dramatic display, as the stage onto which the user subject enters. But on the other, technology is used to produce that stage in a particular way, for a certain subject position. And in this role, technology is essentially organized to stay out of frame. An instance of a machine jam that emerges from outside the frame into which the user subject is integrated, appears then as a traumatic event.

Interestingly enough, that, exactly, it seems to me, is the structure that Marcelli plays with on a representational level as well. The obscene bodily gestures generated by his interactive system figure as a certain refusal to become completely integrated into the technology as it is framed by his installation. In a sense then, the failure of the technical system in this case strangely duplicates and haunts that which takes place as the representation of an automaton.

## **InConversation**

The second encounter, that I am going to discuss, although more briefly, is an interactive installation staged on street: InConversation by Susan Collins. The piece consists of an exchange between two participants, one on street and the other one in the internet. On street, there is a video projection of a mouth, that may address a person passing by, if there is someone on line in the web site. The street situation is made visible in the website that enables the user to not only see but also intervene in the situation by typing his or her comments anonymously. These comments will then be transcribed into spoken words, heard on the street as if spoken by the video mouth. The piece can then be seen as a strange interface connecting two participants in two incommensurate spaces, the global space of the internet and the local space of a particular street corner.

Here I am, on street, eight months pregnant. As one of the curators of the event in which InConversation is participating, I think I know what the piece is about. My intention is just to have my interactive experience documented. It is raining, I feel exhausted, my baby has just woken up and keeps pushing his body against my rib, I want to get home - and yet, I will be surprised. The surprise is how vulnerable I feel talking to or through the piece. Standing there, in front of the two video cameras, the one documenting my presence for the web site and the other for future reference, I do not know who to talk to, the projection of the mouth on the sidewalk or the invisible camera mounted somewhere above me. I feel as if my bequeen body was watched from everywhere: from the unlocatable spatiality of somewhere in the internet, from the exterior point of the video camera next to me articulating the place of the other, the place from which I cannot see myself ... and from that impossible place inside me, where this strange consciousness, already displaying the will of his own is about to emerge. These impossible places from which I am being "seen" unfold in a space that is unimaginable within Euclidean coordinates.

My sense of confusion is accentuated by the apparent presence of several participants in the conversation through various locations in the internet - and God knows how many others just silently observing the streamed video footage. The entity represented by the video mouth has a split personality to say the least. I have to pick up threads of conversations that keep shifting as users on line come and go. Interestingly, nobody comments on my pregnancy. It is interesting, because, in a sense, my pregnancy insists on the multiplicity that structures exchange in InConversation. In my experience of the piece, the embodied multiplicity of myself constitutes a mirror image for that fluid entity, the giant orifice of a mouth personifying the collective anonymous user. Moreover, the certain overpresence of my body seems to push the audiovisual representation of the mouth towards other kinds of oral pleasures. However, in this situation, as much as in the previous one, this sense of overpresence is produced as much in relation to technology as to my carnal existence. In the encounter, my body does not only become multiplied as the pregnant body but also as the body of someone being videotaped as if behind the scenes, but which is nevertheless visible for the other camera. This overpresence that keeps pushing from outside the edges of the frame in which the work would be digestible, prompts someone to ask: Are you an artist? And I, missing the point of the question completely, simply answer: Yes, I am.

## **Conclusion**

How then, should these kinds of narratives be placed? As contingent and particular experiences they obviously cannot claim any truth for themselves. I would like to suggest however, that the place of a situated user might turn out be extremely productive for writing about interactive media. What I have been developing here, could perhaps be understood as an effort to address the significance of failure. It seems to me,

both as an artist and as a writer, that interactive work is characterized by an aspect of materiality and heterogeneity that only becomes approachable through personal involvement. However, this involvement may also include the failure to conceptualize the work from the point of view in which it is visible in its entirety. In the place of a situated user one is likely to miss that point.

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