

4 INTERACTIVE INSTALLATIONS

ONCE UPON A TIME, visual art was simple: it originated with an artist's conception and craft, which the viewer acknowledged and then strove to understand while standing before the object. When paintings turned abstract, when found objects were glued to the canvas, and when urinals were brought into the museum, art changed. But it still observed the classic triad of artist, viewer, and art object: one viewed a static object on which an artist had bestowed meaning. A further change took place with the introduction of interactive art, which insisted that the viewer become some part of the work of art and participate in its creation. Such notions are fraught with simplifications, which are already exposed by my fairy-tale opening. As will be discussed below, it was never a simple matter of the artist endowing an artifact with meaning, which the spectator then discovered in careful analysis. Long before the advent of interactive art, the meaning of an artwork was also created as a dialogue between the work and its audience. In the case of interactive art, however, the work itself is created within such dialogue, which complicates the issue of meaning tremendously.

The unfinished work is linked to the unfinished body. Rather than presenting a message to be deciphered, theoreticians and practitioners of interactive art create spaces and moments that inaugurate a dialogue. This dialogue is mostly thought of as a physical dialogue and often as a dialogue not (only) with other interactors but (also) with oneself. Interactive art is conceptualized as a place to encounter one's own body, to connect to it in a way that is independent of the strictures and inner dialogues inculcated and developed over the years. In a sense, in interactive installations the body of the performer—made explicit in its social relations through performance art—is outsourced to the audience looking for its implicit body, with political and semiotic consequences.

Performance art, and especially performance art by women, has highlighted the fact that the body is an object of desire, a commodity to be consumed. It has often played with the expectations of conventional theatrical spectatorship. After video art allowed the spectator to resume her position as observer from within the darkness of interiority, interactive installations disturbed this setting and required the audience to move onto the stage and to become physically involved in the artwork. Turning the spectator into an actor rearranged the schematics of exhibitionism and voyeurism, redirecting the question of identification away from the exhibited foreign body and toward the interactor's own body. The interactor may initially perceive this body as foreign to itself as it unfolds and recovers from restraint and suppression. However, the experience of interaction sets out to overwrite and undo the social construction of the body. The interactor's uncertainty is a function of the extent to which her body is subjugated and her relative degree of awareness. Although interactive installation art cannot guarantee that every spectator follows the call, inevitably, if indirectly, it puts those who stand to one side into the spotlight: They are recognized as people who do not join in, who watch in detachment. Interactive installation art is the perfect deconstruction of the voyeur.

However, such perspective is grounded in a conception of the body that presupposes that the discovery of the implicit body is a natural goal. Such a conception of the body is itself the result of social construction, more likely to be found in the discourse of body-focused performance theory than meaning-focused literary studies.¹ From a different, more skeptical, more critical point of view, one can also argue that interactive installation art represents a further step in the ongoing visual exploitation of the body: It implicitly discloses the inhibited body in its social and cultural inferiority, failing to step into the limelight of public attention in the age of surveillance cameras, Facebook, YouTube, and other technologies that expose the individual to a new form of the public. Any offense to the body and its wearer is unlikely to be intended by the artists, and this is far from being the only way to look at the situation. Rather than try to argue which perspective is more accurate, this chapter is going to focus on the other consequence that the outsourcing of the performing body entails.

While performance art is considered a shift from the semiotic to the phenomenal body, interactive art is considered a shift from facts to events, from offering a message to inaugurating a dialogue. In both cases, the shift is understood and described as a shift away from meaning. This seems to be appropriate, especially with respect to interactive artwork, which, by

definition, is unfinished and is realized only as a function of audience interaction. However, such a viewpoint is sometimes based on a misconception of what constitutes a (un)finished work, and it fails to distinguish between central and marginal elements of an interactive installation. The activity of the interactors is often framed by a carefully designed system of symbolically articulated options. If one closely reads the grammar of interaction and the symbolic articulation used in an interactive installation, one often realizes that the actual behavior of the interactors is constrained, does not contribute greatly to the overall meaning of the work, or both.

In addition to the audience's invitation to (physical) self-discovery during its encounter with an interactive work, reading the structures of such work will be the objective of this chapter. Although it focuses on specific works rather than on a systematic examination of the philosophy and historic context of interactive installation art, this chapter will nonetheless also discuss the importance of distance from and emergence in the artwork, and the risk that physical engagement results in cognitive passivity. The credo of this chapter is that the body privileged by interactive installation art shall not be prevented from interpretation but shall become a favored, interpretable subject of this art.

Turn to Interactivity

The elevation of the audience took place hand in hand with the degradation of the artist, which was hailed not just by theorists but also by the artists themselves. For example, John Cage, in 1966, declared the artist no more extraordinary than the audience and demanded that the artist be cast down from the pedestal (2002, 93). The same year, Roy Ascott stated, "In the past the artist played to win and so set the conditions that he always dominated the play. The spectator was positioned to lose, in the sense that his moves were predetermined and he could form no strategy of his own" (2003, 111). Ascott promoted behaviorist art, whose necessary condition is "that the spectator is involved and that the artwork in some way *behaves*" (129). The shift was also conceived as one from passive spectator to active user or interactor. One can, Ascott writes, no longer be at the window looking in on a scene composed by another, but is instead "invited to enter the doorway into a world where interaction is all" (226).

Behaviorist art or "responsive environments" (Krueger 2002) have their predecessors and contemporary colleagues in modern art genres such as performance and happenings.² Another source is chance art. As David

Rokeby (1996), a prominent representative of interactive art, points out, the structure of interactive artworks can be similar to those used by Cage in his chance compositions: "The primary difference is that the chance element is replaced by a complex, indeterminate yet sentient element, the spectator." While both chance art and interactive art diminish the role of the artist in the process of creation, the latter also enables, in exchange, a more powerful role for the audience. Instead of mirroring nature's manner of operation, as chance art does, the interactive artist, Rokeby continues, holds up a mirror to the spectator. This mirror not only reflects the interactor within the interactive system, but it also allows the interactor to experience herself in a new way, reflecting who she is. Interactive art is an opportunity for self-discovery; it is an invitation to explore one's own body in the process of interaction.

However, interactive art also holds a mirror up to the interactors as a group by producing space-times of interhuman experiences. Nicolas Bourriaud speaks of "spaces where we can elaborate alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality" (2002, 44). Such spaces and moments are important as alternatives to the ideology of mass communications but also to various utopias of the New Man and the calls for a better world to be found in futurist manifestos. Utopia, Bourriaud holds, is now experienced as a day-to-day subjectivity, in the real time of concrete experiments; "the role of artwork is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist" (13), and "the artwork now looks like a *social interstice* in which these experiences and these new 'life possibilities' prove to be possible. Inventing new relations with our neighbours seems to be a matter of much greater urgency than 'making tomorrow sing.' That is all, but it is still a lot" (44). This perspective, especially given this final sentence, sounds like an answer to the loss of grand narratives in postmodern times. Art, which learned to abstain from providing ideological orientation and metaphysical consolation, becomes modest and pragmatic. It still wants to make a difference, but now on the spot and among neighbors. In this regard, Bourriaud claims that relational art represents the heritage of the avant-gardes while rejecting their dogmatism and teleology: It is an art that does attempt "not to tell (like theater), but rather to provoke" relationships between subjects, as Josette Féral stated for performance art in 1982 (2003, 215). Similar connections and expectations can be found with other theorists. Dieter Mersch, for example, sees performance- and interaction-based

installation art in relation to the aesthetics of the event in classical avant-garde and underlines that this kind of art turns the audience from recipients into participants who interact with each other. The aesthetics of *response*, Mersch, playing with words, concludes, implies an ethics of *responsibility* (2002, 20). Erika Fischer-Lichte describes the performative turn—which she sees as symptomatic of the early 1960s—as a turn from the artwork to the event, in which not only the artist but also the audience is involved (2008, 22).

Convincing examples for such claims may be *Text Rain* (1999), where participants work together in order to collect enough letters so they can read an entire line, and *RE:Positioning Fear* (1997), where participants may not team up to gain access to the hidden text on the wall but nonetheless to interact with their shadows, as discussed in chapter 1. Another example, from chapter 2, is *Illuminated Manuscript* (2002), which calls on interactors to coordinate their actions in order to make the text legible. However, as described in chapter 2, we have also seen cases—*Screen* (2004) and *Still Standing* (2005)—where the participant only interacts with the program and is not required to respond to other participants or to create mutual responsibility. We may note here that although not all interactive artworks directly contribute to the invention of “new relations with our neighbours,” as Bourriaud (2002, 44) claims, most of them do invite interactors to self-discovery. We will see that this self-discovery directly or ultimately can still have an effect on the interactor’s neighbor.

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Rokeby’s *Very Nervous System* (1986–90) provides a space in which the movements of the interactor’s body (recorded by a video camera and processed by computers) create sound that is fed back into the space and thus affects the movement of the interactor.³ As Nicole Ridgeway and Nathaniel Stern put it, “Rokeby turns the body into an improvisational jazz instrument” (2008, 123). Likewise, Camille Utterback’s *Untitled 5* (2004) uses body-tracking software and creates abstract paintings according to the interactor’s movement through space, turning her body into “a painterly tool for an ever-changing visual feedback system” (129).⁴ The status of the body as instrument and tool enhances its role in the process of perception—in opposition to the suppression of the body in Christian religion and in the perception of art since the eighteenth century.⁵ Although traditional Western art—painting, literature, theater, sculpture—served the eye as locus of perception, in interactive art, the interface is no longer exclusively focused on vision but engages the entire body and turns it into

a privileged site for experience. The boundaries between body and world dissolve in favor of an affective contact. Interactive art restores the intrinsic link of affect and the body: one is “seeing with the body,” as Hansen titles an essay on the digital, reactive image (2001), and one is “seeing through the hand,” as he entitles a subchapter of his book *Bodies in Code: Interface with Digital Media* (2006).

If interactive art is so much grounded in the body, it insists that we revisit the concepts of ocularcentrism and disembodiment whose traces in Western culture go back not only to Descartes’ “Cogito ergo sum” but at least as far as Plato’s *Nominalism*. Although initially digital technology contributed to the notion of disembodiment—the keywords here are *artificial intelligence*, *cyberspace*, and *neo-Cartesian*⁶—it later fostered the return of the body through an engagement with physical immersion and interactivity. It is generally conceded, for example, that electronic digitality “invests in bodily affectivity” and that virtual reality engenders “non-representational experience” (Ridgeway and Stern 2008, 119). This return of the body points us in the direction of theories on the correlation of body and mind in Western intellectual history, suggesting, as in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, that “the body is our general medium for having a world” (2002, 169).⁷ Although it is apt and imperative to underline the central role the body is playing in our being bodily in the world, N. Katherine Hayles is correct in her response to Mark B. Hansen that the body only sees in the ways that the technology involved allows (2008, 108). By analogy, one is inclined to say that the “world” we are “having” through the body can only be understood in the detailed manner allowed by our mind-set.

When considering interactive installation art, however, it is common to promote the body over reflection on the ground of the body’s return as the privileged site for experience.⁸ Granted such a turn, it would be appropriate to point out that the interactive environment encourages the body to find itself. As Brian Massumi notes, “In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary” (2002, 4). Interactive installations are a playground for cognition, or rather the site for potential implicit experiences that the body might accomplish. Ridgeway and Stern therefore argue that “interaction is incipient action, in which an implicit body emerges alongside an unfinished art work,” and interaction “inaugurates rather than enacts a priori script” (2008, 117).⁹ We will explore below to what extent interactive installations really invite their interactors to search for the implicit, nonpresent body. First we shall