

The Gaze of the Artwork and the Symbiotic Interaction

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Abstract

The goal of this presentation is to discuss and analyse viewer-sensitive artworks and the reversed situation in the exhibition space where artworks 'look' at the viewer. To answer these questions I firstly looked at the topics of machine vision, computer vision, biovision and the evolution of vision.

Dividing interactive artworks into four categories (distant, contact, chance-based and bio-based/symbiotic interaction) enabled me to illustrate developments in feedback systems which became evident in recent decades.

Keywords

Interactive art, digital art, spectator paradigm, gaze of the artwork, symbiotic interaction, biofeedback art, machine vision, surveillance art, viewer-sensitive artworks.

'Seeing Machines' and Interactive Art

The meeting of the viewer and the artwork is a meeting between the living and non-living. Traditionally, one is looking and the other is looked at; one is moving and the other is static. However, exhibitions of contemporary media art offer encounters with artworks which are themselves 'looking' at the viewer. The visitor remains (willingly or not) in the zone of the artwork's sensors and his image—or other activity-based information—becomes the raw material for manipulation of the artwork. We can describe this as a situation where the relationship of the viewer and the viewed is reversed: the artwork's 'gaze' is turned toward the viewer, such that the owner of the 'gaze' is the artwork, not the viewer.

I would like to elaborate different categories of interactive and biofeedback art from the point of view of 'seeing machines'. This helps answer the following questions: do we have here a new spectator paradigm in which the artwork is active and no longer simply an object under observation? Can we justifiably say that the artwork's 'gaze' is projected onto

the spectator? Are there parallels to be found in art history or do we see here something which belongs to the digital era? Is this phenomenon only common to technical and interactive art?

I would like to bring an example from the interactive art field, which illustrates the changed situation and art trends. Golan Levin's and Greg Baltus' *Opto-Isolator* (2007) reverses the audience position: a sculptural eye on the wall follows the eyes of the viewer. [1] The viewer encounters a framed mechanical blinking sculpture on the wall—a mechatronical eye—which follows the movement of the spectator's eyes and responds with psychosocial behaviour: looking at the viewer, turning eyes away as if shy when looked at too long etc. Rather similar is *Double-Taker (Snout)* (2008) and also *Eyecode* (2007). All the above offer clear examples of ironic artworks based around looking at the viewer(s).

We can approach this topic mentioning video feedback artworks of the 1970ties: works by Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, Peter Campus, Bill Viola, Peter Weibel, Jeffrey Shaw and others. The real-time reproduction of the viewer in the artwork was part of the concept.

I am discussing the situation where artworks 'sensitivity' is higher and viewer is embedded in the artwork unknowingly, being unaware. Here, first, the term 'unaware participation' would be appropriate to describe this 'post-interactive' situation, where the spectator is unwillingly put in the context of the artwork.

In the early 1970s we already encounter viewer-sensitive computer environments designed by Myron Krueger: here the viewer was embedded in a computer-based projection where he could play with his own silhouette and with a graphical actor added by a computer programme. A perfect example of an installation that follows the viewer's gaze from a distance is Dirk Lüsebrink's and Joachim Sauter's *Zerseher* [2], which uses Giovanni Francesco Caroto's painting (c. 1515) as source material.

Many other early interactive artworks could be mentioned where the viewer is situated within the field of vision of the artwork and switches on or off its auditive and visual elements: Peter Weibel's (1973), [3] David Rokeby's (1990) *and* Simon Penny's (1993) works.

Additional works may be mentioned in which the artwork is 'looking' at the viewer: Carl-Johan Rosén's (2006) *Predator*, Togo Kida's (2005) *Move*, Random International's (2012) *Rain Room*. An emblematic work is Marie Sester's (2003) (Figure 1) surveillance installation *Access*, [4] where people passing by are tracked by a robotic spotlight and a directional acoustic beam system. Samuel Bianchini's (2007) *niform* has similar aspects in that the viewer's physical proximity reveals images of policemen in the projection.



Figure 1. Marie Sester, *Access*, 2003. © <http://www.sester.net/access>

Four Categories

I would like to classify 'artworks-which-see-the-spectator', or 'viewer-sensitive artworks', into four categories according to their methods of engagement with the spectator's consciousness.

The four categories are: distant interaction, contact interaction, chance-based distant and contact interaction, symbiotic interaction.

The viewer-sensitive artworks in the following classification are defined by the degree of closeness between the machine and human parts of the situation. The contact between the pre-artwork and the viewer changes from distant (non-contact) to tangible, tactile and physiological. These categories reveal how sensors get closer to the viewer's body until they reach information sources beneath the skin (blood, brainwaves etc.).

These categories exemplify the artwork's "gaze" approaching the body of the viewer until it penetrates its surface, reaching "under the skin" areas. Cheaper and more widespread technology has made this possible—various sensors are used in such works, which show a tendency from sensing the viewer as a distant subject to detecting physiological reactions using sensors that literally enter the viewer's body. In all these artworks and categories the viewer is in the position of being surveyed.

Conclusion

Interactive art reflects clearly the activity of an artwork—these are not passive objects. An interactive artwork is 'emancipated', it behaves according to its 'will' and is not solely an 'object'. The artwork is the active viewer and its behaviour is that of a viewer, as a subject.

The functioning of the artwork influences the viewer and vice versa. It is a reciprocal relationship which is born because the artwork 'sees': it perceives the viewer and exerts its influence on the aesthetic experience.

References

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Biography

Raivo Kelomees, PhD (art history), artist, critic and new media researcher. Presently working as senior researcher at the Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn. He studied psychology, art history, and design at Tartu University and the Academy of Arts in Tallinn. He has published articles in the main Estonian cultural and art magazines and newspapers since 1985. His works include the book "Surrealism" (Kunst Publishers, 1993) and an article collection "Screen as a Membrane" (Tartu Art College proceedings, 2007), "Social Games in Art Space" (EAA, 2013). His Doctoral thesis was "Postmateriality in Art. Indeterministic Art Practices and Non-Material

Art" (Dissertationes Academiae Artium
Estoniae 3, 2009).