Interactive Strategies of Network Art

Relationships and Agency

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Abstract: Every single artistic project based on computer networking can be leaded back to a different kind of interactivity and different qualities of interaction. Of course interactivity is inner to the Net, but specific interactive properties of projects and their designed conditions for the interaction process are evidence of an artistic strategy, aesthetic or whatever else.
1. Selective Interactivity vs. Creative Interactivity

When the outcome of my action is a new web page, a video, a sound or retrieved information, I can realize only what is already possible. This condition is independent from the range of my selection, that can be a site or, in principle, the whole Net. It is the domain of the hypertextual link: intentional agency or transformation of humanist notion of intentional agency goes along client-server system.

In a different way, when I can create a content, it is not only the realization of an option. My action is not a series of possible paths or searches, but it is properly creative. I can really partecipate or collaborate to artwork, better I can get involved in different ways with creative experience. The outcome of action is not the web page or multimedia file selected and served with hyperlink, but unforeseen outcomes of actions allowed by performativity of the designed system, through the interface. This is the more and more experienced and tested creative interactivity.

2. At the Border of Selection: Flux Selection and Operational Selection

Brinkmann-Zhang Ga and Marius Watz’s artworks are experiences on the boundary of selection inclined towards two opposite directions. The first moves towards a linguistic research inside and on the line of contemporary art (videoart in particular), the second towards a creative interactivity of individual nature.

Zhang Ga’s multimedia pieces find in cyberspace their ideal “trans-formative” dimension.

The networked art, an art that is free-flow and has none definit form, it assembles and dissolves. The object oriented art with an allegorical underline and projection of an deceptive "meaning" that derived from duchampian tradition has come to the end of wits, though it is still the dominant force and practice in the artistic experience today, yet it is stagnant and repetitive. An art which trans-form the concept of FORM into a new linguistic definition which represents fluxs of data bits and a "status", rather than a "being" of formated and finished - an art of evolving and distribution, either to its increase or to its decrease, to its magnitude or marginality, that's stripped of its objectivity both ethically and physically.\(^1\)

\(^1\) From an interview with Brinkmann-Zhang Ga, personal email.
I can choose flowing and indefinite forms by the windows designed for their selection, and in some case I can regulate times and rhythms of fluxus themselves. I am involved in a sort of selection of flux, an unusual and visually fascinating selection. Interaction turns into “trans-formative” representation, an extreme function of reading against our perceptive inertia.

In the opposite direction selectivity tested by Marius Watz moves the notion of selection on the ground of variables beyond the range of options. Inspired by Evolutionary Art of William Latham and Stephen Todd, he investigates organic form, having developed a personal graphic style through his mathematical algorithms. His Java applets let forms grow and change in real time on the Web and open themselves to interaction. I can choose a parameter of modification (i.e. the degree of bending or the translation vector), decide a x-y position on the starting image and generate morphological evolutions or different views. Selection is no more simple clicking on a hypertextual link, but selection of a parameter of action or visualization by the means of both the buttons of mouse and combinations of commands from keyboard. Experience is single and individual, while outcome of operational selection is not properly a new content, but a variable one.

3. From Something to Someone and Beyond: Ways of Creative Interaction

Considering etymology of words, we could say that when I partecipate I take part in something and when I collaborate I work with someone. From something to someone (in the meaning of agency): aesthetical and philosophical basic difference (Giaccardi 1998), turning to new relationships and agencies.

When a project chooses an interactive strategy of partecipation, agent is invited to take part in an artwork where interaction is regulated from fixed laws, independent by the interactive process. Agents’ contribution, brought about in different times and sometimes never exhausted, has already its a priori or ideal location in the frame of artwork making. Usually contribution is sent by the means of forms or emails and it is a text or a graphic or multimedia file previously created by the agent on his hard-disk. The creative process is filed and creative agency is singular, naturally out of real time and working in stand alone modality.

So partecipating can mean free contributions, unbroken, collected in a huge accumulation as the historical “The First Collaborative Sentence…” of Douglas Davies. It can mean to the point contributions, placed in a context structurally definite, but open to emergent meanings and to discourse, as the evergreen “The File Room” of Antonio Muntadas. It can still mean specific contributions integrated in production plots, wide projects inside and outside the Net, as the experience
of the cyberopera “Honoria in Ciberspazio” conceived and grown at the ACTLab of Austin. These are some of good and clear examples.

3.1 COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES

In the domain of collaboration, the range is not a site with his hyperlinks or a grid - with or without borders -to fill, but global (talking about creating and meaning) performativity of the interactive system. Artwork will appear and disappear into networked processes, leaving sometimes only a documentation, a trace, a generational path. It is a creative experience where authorship inclines towards a relational processing and new agencies.

3.1.1 Dialogical Agency

In dialogical interactions the basic point are interpersonal relationships, or “embracing”.

We prefer to regard creation, which is usually believed to be a solitary monologue, as being accomplished in dialogue with many other people within ourselves. This was a revelation to me. I used to believe that “the self” was a set of elements different from others, contained in a hard shell.\(^2\)

Individual work often tends to chop things into pieces but when you work with “Renju” you have to start with other elements. You can’t create anything by trying to separate yourself from others.\(^3\)

Dynamics of Renga pictures can be linear or crossing and vectorial, between two or among more “Renju” (each member of the group involved in the creative process, properly “linked person”). But quality of interaction and creative dimension remain based on a deep and conscious dialogue.

3.1.2 Collective Agency

Collective interactions are based on real-time and work through retro-active loops and mechanisms of auto-organization. They are instant and synchronized interactions among a wide number of people,

\(^2\) From a written of Rieko Nakamura on Renga (http://www.renga.com).
\(^3\) From a written of Toshihiro Anzai on Renga (http://www.renga.com).
each action conditioning actions immediately subsequent, while collective mechanisms as pattern recognition, mimetism, symmetry, etc. work. Olivier Auber’s Le Générateur Poétique is a distributed interactive system that allows agents to create an everchanging and ephemeral virtual image. The global image is the result of single images, each one controlled by a single agent through a palette of instinctive pixels and colors. According to the idea of “temporal perspective” of Olivier Auber, the new escape point is not constituted by a particular server, but by all the computing points representing the agents of the process. It is the theoretical place of construction of a new rhizomatic representation.

3.1.3 Public Agency

IO_DENCIES project of Knowbotic Research investigates the force fields of urban situations. Considering the complex urban processes that can take place in distributed and networked environments, IO_DENCIES explores how to act in them and to rethinking urban planning and construction through a public agency. As Andreas Broeckmann well underlines (Broeckmann 1999), the project tries to achieve its aim not by the means of avatars, but through the complex visualization of the activities of agents.

IO_DENCIES creates a topological cut through the heterogeneous assemblage of physical spaces, data environments, urban imaginations, connective agencies and individual experiences, and forms a model for the complex way in which network topologies will have to be questioned.4

3.1.4 Community Agency

Ruled interactions of the projects of SITO Sinergy place collaborative experience in a community context. This context and the times of creative sessions lead again interaction to its autonomy, in spite of the rules (but this is the game!). Working with FTP or on the Web, and communicating with IRC and CUSeeME, members of the community have found their way to creative interaction. The Gridcosm project is particularly interesting. In Gridcosm each image, outcome of the collaboration of more agents, is contracted and put in the center of a next future image, as in a cosm continuously expanding. Times of collaboration are concentrated in four hours. If the image isn’t create in that period, prenotation declines. So concentration and reaction capacity, thinking velocity and ability to grasp creative stimulus are very important. In all the Sinergy projects we deal with the idea of
“matrix”. The costitutive processing of Le Génératrice Poïétique gives up its place to a collaborative relationship of different nature. Like in a sort of “tradition”, every square image is directly connected to a near square image, generation by generation. Only in Gridcosm contribution of all is as it was under metabolism and we can talk about a kind of indirect action and retroaction. But basically in SITO community processing is evolution, generational growing. So the sinergetic experience of SITO community pushes collaborative creation in an hyper-spatial dimension tightly connected to the nature of WWW and to a generational perspective that, compared with Le Génératrice Poïétique or even the Renga pictures, gives back artwork to time, to the history of a community agency.

3.1.5 Multiple Embodied Agency

When we deal with telerobotic, sometimes we can deal with multi-user machines. For example Coredump, the projected multi-user webmachine of Garnet Hertz. It is a drawing machine and it can be remote controlled by more people at the same time, through their own computer terminals. A strange symbiosis, a multiple agency dumping into a corporeal space.

4. “In Between”

It is the “in between” of online events and live events, the “in between” of real and virtual spaces, of projects that interestingly connect, in which interaction is played through overlaps and intersections of different strategies. But it is also the basic “in between” of collaboration, of new creation agencies, of the decentralized system. It is the “in between” that the interface must strategically design.

References

4 From IO_DENCIES project (http://www.khm.de/people/krcf/IO/)