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## Would the Artist Then Become a Demiurge?

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# Would the Artist Then Become a Demiurge?

Interactive work is increasingly the subject of contemporary art. Whether by using new technologies in installations or tactics that invite the viewer to physically interact with the work, contemporary art is soliciting the viewer's direct participation more and more. This raises questions about the role interactivity plays in the reception of the artwork.

When a work holds the viewer's gaze for a few extra seconds, it sometimes manages, through this move, to cause the viewer to take a second look. Though not unique to interactive work, this phenomenon by which something in the work holds my gaze and thus reveals itself to me is technically present in the interactive apparatus. Except that in interactive work, not only is the gaze solicited, but the entire body. In such a case, we cannot examine the work without participating in it. Participation in many interactive works allows the viewer to gaze at the work more extensively and experience the environment, which offers another viewpoint on the world. By means of prostheses, the body is freed from its constraints and comprehends the environment differently. Once the combination of steps are taken or the prostheses installed, viewers must surrender themselves and experience, at times inadvertently, their own modesty. This paradigm shift introduces "action as a direct response to perception"<sup>1</sup> into the aesthetic process. The experience, conditional upon participation, integrates the viewer into the work. This leads to the following question: does the constraint requiring the viewer to interact with the work facilitate the possibility of an encounter? For some, the interactive work appears as an invitation from the artist—whose practice is directly concerned with the position of the viewer—to reverse roles. Thus, viewers consent to the physical experience that the artist has set out for them. The invitation to participate is perceived as a welcoming gesture. Yet, as the rules of hospitality dictate, the host does everything possible so that the guest feels at home, while the guest knows that it is not really a matter of feeling at home. Rather, in accepting the invitation, it is more a question of consenting to the other's game. For other viewers, the feeling of being forced to participate hinders their ability to freely gaze at the work and, therefore, partially ruins the conditions of their receptivity to it. Perhaps this is why some artists create apparatuses through which viewers inadvertently activate the work, without hav-

ing time to consider whether or not they wish to participate in it. In the work *Subtitled Public* (2005), by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, a viewer is detected, then pursued by a beam of light that projects a verb conjugated in the third person singular onto their body. To get rid of the word without leaving the

space, the viewer must touch another person. The other thus frees us from our captivity.

The apparatuses of interactive works usually demand some time commitment and require viewers to undertake a series of actions and reactions causing them to change their opinions several times. "Real action,"<sup>2</sup> during which experience has precedence over judgement, goes on while the work unfolds before the viewer. "Integrating the viewer into a chain of actions and reactions alters the facts of the experience and leads to new behaviours."<sup>3</sup> Whereas before a work that is not explicitly interactive, the duration of the "real action" is determined by the viewer's comprehension, in an interactive work, the artist is the first to partially control the viewer's comprehension through the apparatus. Just as with performance art, interactive art introduces the possibility of technically controlling the duration of "real action" in the visual arts. Thus, the work gains time. The artist imposes on the viewer a length of time during which to examine the work. In our society, in which an enormous quantity of images is consumed daily, in which every event is salvaged, immediately transformed, and linguistically reduced to a cliché, interactivity can enable the possibility of maintaining an openness, at least a technical one. When we get tired of looking at a work, or even if we haven't glanced at it yet, we can always leave the space. In contrast, in consenting to follow, from start to finish, the procedure of the interactive apparatus, viewers can be left with the impression of having fully examined the work. Yet, since a work can only be partially examined, this impression will only arise from the technical apparatus and not from the expression's design, which cannot be entirely grasped. The perception of movement in an interactive work, even if this movement is triggered by the viewer, doesn't match the movement of perception. Moreover, the movement of the work is always subject to that of thought. Strangely, when interactivity occurs between the work's constituent elements, we suddenly have the impression that a part of the work is equipped with perception. I am thinking in particular of the installation *La Harpe à Nuages* (1997), by Nicolas Reeves, which translated the structure of clouds passing above the "harp" into sound in real time. The work of composer Luc Ferrari, *J'ai tort, j'ai tort, j'ai mon très grand tort* (1969), is a dialogue-imitation for mixed chorus involving audience participation. In this work, besides having to read

the score, the chorus is instructed to imitate the audience. Thus, every cough, sneeze, clearing of the throat, or whisper becomes a constituent act of the work. The work becomes a public forum in which some audience members are eager to participate while others hold their breath, afraid that even their breaths will be taken up by the chorus. In this kind of concert, reception is a symptom.

In the age of communication, we might wonder if interactive work is not the most direct way for artists to communicate the experience that they wish viewers to have. Would the artist then become a demiurge? Even so, interactivity has some downfalls. No matter the precision of the apparatus, there will always be viewers who will not understand and find themselves in a place where they shouldn't be. For example, what can be said of viewers who, instead of experiencing the interactive work, choose or inadvertently find themselves watching other viewers experience the work? Is their experience complete?

When interactivity allows the viewer to play the role of interpreter and endow the apparatus with their own subjectivity, the manner in which the action is experienced condenses into action as a direct response to perception. In such a case, the reception of the work is rendered partly visible. Viewers show their position, voluntarily or inadvertently, through the ways in which they participate.

I see myself sitting on the floor in *This Situation* (2007), a work carefully developed by Tino Sehgal, and presented in 2013 at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal by curator Lesley Johnstone. *This Situation* is a work with no object or image, in which the viewer participates in a discussion organized around quotations and questions that are of concern to the artist. This work offers viewers a conversational space, in which they are invited, at certain moments, to participate in the discussion. In *This Situation*, the viewer is a real interlocutor who can, through their replies, alter the course of the conversation between the interpreters. A real space of mutuality<sup>4</sup> thus opens up, in which the climate of reflection becomes the very subject of the work. In the choreography set up by the artist, the interpreters make slow gestures, immersing us into a strange context of spoken exchanges, which remind us that we are inside a work, irreducibly implicated in an intersubjective relationship, no matter the nature of the interface.

Sophie Castonguay

1 Morignat, Valérie. "Environnements virtuels et nouvelles stratégies actantielles." *Arts de la scène, scène des arts*, vol. III, Spec. issue of *Études théâtrales* 30.3, École d'Architecture de Nantes/Centre d'études théâtrales de Louvain, (2004). (My translation.)

2 A concept developed by Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory* (1896), and taken up by Gilles Deleuze, in *Cinema*, to elaborate his thought on cinema.

3 Morignat, Valérie. *ibid.*

4 As contextualized by Gilbert Turp in his article "Mon nom est personne." *Jeu* 147. 2 (2013): 64-72.