Would the Artist Then Become a Demiurge?

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Numéro 102, juin–octobre 2014

URI : id.erudit.org/iderudit/72269ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Revue d’art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN 2368-030X (imprimé)
2368-0318 (numérique)

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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” 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 offers viewers a conversational space, 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. 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 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 interaction 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 downsides. 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 work is experienced carries into action as a direct response to perception. In a 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 thus opens up, in which the climate of reflection becomes the very subject of the work.

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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.” Jea 147. 2 (2013): 64-72.