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Aesthetically Potent Environments

An exploration of technology, meaning and embodied interaction.

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Abstract

When an artistic or aesthetic experience no longer relies on an audience to “passively” consume it, but rather entices the viewer to become an active participant in the artwork, how is the perception of the work and, subsequently, the audience affected? How does the audience encounter and make meaningful these types of experience? Squidsoup have, for the past 10 years, been exploring these questions through their practice-based research. Their interactive artworks engage the audience as part of a sociotechnical network, as both a component of the overall aesthetic experience and as a catalyst for compositional change within the artwork.

In our everyday lives we experience the world as a physical and social space. In order to elicit the greatest action and interaction from an audience Squidsoup attempt to make the intangible tangible, and create works where social interaction between the participants is encouraged. As computing becomes more ubiquitous, moves away from the desktop and starts to occupy the “physical” spaces around us, the ways in which people engage with technology, and each other, will change. Squidsoup’s most recent work – *Ocean of Light: Surface* – seeks to explore the interrelationship between people, technology and space and how this could manifest as a potential aesthetic experience. *Ocean of Light: Surface* looks to bring digital interactive artworks into the physical and spatial realm of the audience in order to explore the effect this has on the way they interact with, and consequently understand, the work.

This research will draw on my current and previous practice as part of Squidsoup and locate it within a wider historic, artistic and theoretical context. The thesis will detail the development of the concepts underpinning our artistic practice by relating case study examples to historic and contemporary art practice and relevant theoretical literature. *Ocean of Light: Surface* will be the physical and practical manifestation of this research embodied within an artwork.

Contents

List of Figures - v

Preface - vii

Acknowledgements - xi

Introduction - 1

Activity – 5

Setting the Scene - 5

Art as Activity – A New Aesthetic - 7

Acting with Technology - 9

Social and Tangible - 11

Social - 11

Tangible - 13

Embodiment – 17

Frescoes, Panoramas and VR - 17

Abstraction and the Outer Circle - 18

Embodied Interaction - 21

Conclusion - 23

Looking Forward - 25

Bibliography - 29

List of Figures

Figure 1. *altzero* - 7

Figure 2. *Glowing Pathfinder Bugs* - 12

Figure 3. *Ocean of Light: Surface* - 19

Preface

For the past 10 years I have had the privilege to work as part of the digital arts collective Squidsoup. Squidsoup is a loose interdisciplinary group of designers, musicians and artists who focus on constructing engaging digital “spaces” through which meaningful and creative interaction can take place as part of a social and collaborative experience. A central theme to all of the artworks produced by Squidsoup is the notion of creating interactive, user friendly and relational works that provide the audience with a means of generating relationships with (and through) both the technological and human elements of the artwork in order to create an aesthetic experience (Bourriaud, 2002). Squidsoup is not concerned with the creation of artifacts that represent the world, but concentrate more on providing opportunities for what French writer Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) has called “relational interaction” within it.

Squidsoup’s work requires the audience to share their individual experiences as an externalized intersubjective experience, as opposed to a private internal moment so that they may engage with the artwork in a powerful and dynamic manner. That is to say that engaged participants experience the artwork not only on an individual basis, but also collectively as part of a shared conscious experience with other members of the audience. The enjoyment of each piece comes from a physical and collective elaboration of meaning that integrates the viewer as part of the artwork.

As with most interactive art, Squidsoup’s work is characterised by the audience participating physically with the artwork in order to change not only the work itself, but also their understanding of the work. As Muller and Edmonds (2006) note, participants “achieve” meaning in their encounters with interactive artifacts through action. The historical precedent for audience involvement within artworks in this way was set in the 1960s and 1970s through an attitude in art known as Fluxus. Fluxus artists attempted to integrate their audiences into their artwork through the use of event scores for performance artworks and so-called happenings. What Fluxus brought to art was the concept that an audience could be involved in the creation of a piece of work by “doing it”, a concept congruent with Duchamp’s theory of the viewer completing the artwork¹ (Rush, 2005). The work of the Fluxus artists looked to blur the boundary between artist and performer. Among the early Fluxus pioneers were Nam June Paik, Dick Higgins, Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, La Monte Young, Joseph Byrd, and Yoko Ono, all of who worked in a diverse range of media from performance to poetry.

¹ Duchamp’s theory was that the viewer is as important as the artist in the creative process. It is only through the viewer’s active participation in interpreting the work that the creative process is completed.

The concept of using an audience in an artwork, or using them as an artwork, is extensively documented in Bourriaud's (2002) writings on relational aesthetics. He notes that the 1990s onwards saw a significant shift in the focus of contemporary artists. This period is exemplified by a proliferation of artists seeking to explore inter-human relationships as the subject of their artworks². Temporality and intersubjectivity are key elements of these types of work. Bourriaud states that they provide a specific "arena of exchange" and only exist in the encounter and dynamic relationship formed between the audience, artwork and artist. "Otherwise put, the role of the artworks 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" (Bourriaud, 2002). Artists cited by Bourriaud include Carsten Holler, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Gabriel Orozco and Pierre Huyghe.

Phenomenology provides an important theoretical parallel to both of these artistic genres. A philosophical movement founded early in the 20th century by Edmund Husserl, Phenomenology contends that the social interactions we encounter everyday are the means by which we understand the world. Phenomenology posits that the way in which we experience and understand the world is intrinsically linked to us physically "being" in it. The influential German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, hypothesised that the meaningfulness of everyday experience lies *not* in the head, but in the world around us. Phenomenology takes a diametrically opposed view to Cartesian Dualism, Descartes famous line "I think therefore I am" is turned around by Heidegger who proposes that one needed to *be* in order to *think*. Being comes first; thinking is derived from being. (Heidegger, 1962).

This is congruent with a more contemporary area of theory that emanates from the social sciences known as Activity Theory. Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) define Activity Theory as "an approach in psychology and other social sciences that aims to understand individual human beings, as well as the social entities they compose, in their natural everyday life circumstances, through an analysis of the genesis, structure, and process of their activities." The concept of activity is unsurprisingly at the heart of activity theory, but not just human activity, the activity of subjects in the world generally. Activity theory supports the notion of a mutual transformation between audience and artwork through purposeful interaction (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006) that lies at the heart of Squidsoup's work.

The scope of this essay does not allow for extensive exploration or explanation of any of these areas individually, however they all present us with two unifying factors. Firstly, we encounter the world as a physical place in which we act. It is the way in which we act – the tangible tasks in which we are engaged, and how they are accommodated into the world – that makes the world meaningful for us (Dourish, 2001). Secondly, that the creation of meaning needs to be intersubjective in order

² Bourriaud states that the Italian Renaissance opened up the relational arena within art through its focus on Humankind's relation with deity. Cubism changed the relational aspect of artworks by focusing on Humankind's relation with the object.

for there to be a shared understanding of the world. Using examples from Fluxus, Relational Aesthetics, Phenomenology and Activity Theory as supporting arguments, this essay will seek to illustrate how physical and social activity can be manifested as a meaningful aesthetic experience. It will further demonstrate that technology has an important role to play in the mediation and facilitation of frameworks that allow for the possibility of such action and interaction.

Acknowledgments

All of the Squidsoup projects mentioned in this essay are the result of collaborations with a talented array of artists, programmers, musicians and designers. These artworks have only come to fruition over the years due to the tireless energy and enthusiasm that Squidsoup co-founder Anthony Rowe has poured into them. Anthony remains the driving, organisational force behind Squidsoup and is a constant inspiration in terms of his leadership, dedication and belief in what he is creating as an artist. I would like to thank Anthony firstly for giving me a job all those years ago, but more importantly acknowledge his ongoing commitment and vision for Squidsoup. Anthony's management of the Squidsoup venture has resulted in our work being exhibited internationally at some of the most prestigious galleries and festivals in our field.

Gareth Bushell is the other long-serving member of Squidsoup whose ability to visualise ideas through code always amazes me. Gareth is the creative programming force behind nearly all of the Squidsoup projects. He is an immensely talented programmer and artist, without whom many of the Squidsoup visions would not have been brought to life.

The latest addition to Squidsoup, Liam Birtles, was responsible for some of the initial ideas and technical solutions behind *Glowing Pathfinder Bugs*. As our artworks are becoming more "physical" and spatial, Liam's skills and knowledge will be an invaluable addition to the group.

I would also like to thank Dr. David Cross and Dr. Martin Patrick for their guidance, direction and advice with the writing of the thesis and Sadie Hawker for her patience and proof reading it. Lastly, I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Squidsoup co-founder James Lane who worked on *altzero*, and musician Ollie Bown for creating the audio component for *Ocean of Light: Surface*.