

“From Participatory Art Forms to Interactive Culture: Towards a Critique of the Aesthetic Economy”*

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Abstract: Do participatory art forms and relational aesthetics constitute a background for the growingly interactive culture of today? Do they express the same ideals or are they different ideologies? Why is modern and contemporary culture so concerned with the spectator, be it the art lover, TV audiences, or internet users? Why, in spite of their different scopes, are media (art included) so interested in the activation and mobilization of the receiver? Mass media culture secretly dreamed of the full presence and commitment of the spectator, boldly proclaimed as partner by modern and contemporary art and finally given effective participatory tools by digital culture. Are we truly becoming a society of producers and creators? Or rather a different type of consumers? What is the role of art in the era of the new culture economy, where creativity equals capital?

The idea of “Interactivity” has penetrated the discourse of our time, as its everything and nothing and so we seem to hesitate about its true meaning and value. It is everywhere and seems, at the same time, derisive. It is in fact a vague idea that theorists of culture, as well as specialists of technology, already try to avoid, with distrust. However, we may have not yet assessed sufficiently “the utility of this useless concept”¹. Interactivity is a strong ideology of the turn of the century. It belongs to the era of communication and new information technologies, not as novelty which awakes with them, but as imaginary that culminates and is achieved with them. Its roots are prior to the present technological state and its scope is not the same as technique’s, sheltering visions that are even opposed to those of technology. However, as in all great ideologies, tensions and contradictions are concealed within it, producing a powerful vision of the world where everything is combined to make certain intentions irresistible and unavoidable.

The success of “interactivity” is first and foremost the result of the overall triumph of communication, i.e. of the logic of relation and connectivity, together with the dynamics of a technical rationality which mobilizes everything and requires performance from all. But it is also the mirage of the aesthetic reason, of the tuning in of sensitivities, aggregating us into community, as well as the promise of the reawakening of a practical and vigilant reason, of the empowerment of the free and creative individual and of the reinvention of the consumer – a consumer who is now driven by a new libido, the yearning to be a producer. Such is the ideology of interactivity: the panacea to all ills. Emerging from the ruins of modern projectualism and from post-modern solvency, the

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¹ I quote this expression from Graça Simões, in her participation in the Seminar “New Media_New Practices”, held in Lisbon, in June 2005.

ideology of interactivity seems to revive all the ideals that now appear strengthened and, above all, reconciled, based again upon the cement of subjectivity.

A new subject for the twenty-first century is the promise of the ideology of interactivity: a new producer and creator, a new citizen and a new consumer, i.e. a new “spirit of capitalism” (Max Weber²) for the globalized world, under the condition it assumes its new and inexorable purpose – to be connected and to interact. Technique, politics, economics and aesthetics all aspire to it. The “society of the spectacle” (Guy Debord³) did no more than dream of the mobilization of this subject, driven by aesthetics to aspire to artist and activated by technique in such a way that current economics plan to make both productive and profitable. This subject polarizes the imaginary of the present communicational and informational age of technology: neither master nor dominated, but connected and interacting through all technical mediations. Therefore, “interactivity” is not a specifically technological issue. The term is in fact too vague and generic to describe any technical specificity. We can consider our interaction with infinite entities, subjects, objects or machines, more or less independent, autonomous or automatic. Interaction is what makes the very nature of experience (Wilhelm Dilthey⁴). However, it is certainly not by accident that this word became the favourite of information technology marketing and of each new gadget extracted from the computer. Even if “interactivity”, due to its generalization, triggers less enthusiasm today, it still marks our idea of technical object, for there is certainly nothing more uninteresting, useless and obsolete than a technical object which is not interactive. With this we mean an object, conceived and designed to be seized (used, manipulated and even changed), according to the interests, conditions and aims of its user, opening a field of research as vast as that which goes from ergonomics to cognitive sciences, termed Human–Computer Interaction (HCI). This use of the term “interaction” is certainly the most specific and accepted in the context of technology and digital culture. Yet it is possible to argue that the questions of human-computer interaction have little relation with the computer itself or with computational sciences (computational systems, algorithms, programming and information). Surely a useless debate in the era of the ubiquity of computation and of the extraordinary dissemination of the computer. The transformation of computational sciences into “interface art” (Weibel) - computational graphics, data visualization and handy software - corresponds to the era of the generalized use and consumption of technology which is centred on the user and becomes user-friendly.

When all machines are turning into a computer, the computer fulfils its nature of simulacral or universal machine and moulds itself to all practices and contexts of experience. It becomes the central mediator of our apprehension and action in the world, i.e. the means through which, more and more, we build experience. Its interactivity is the very imitation of the interactive nature or structure of experience. This way the “user” is far more than that, as the computer becomes a medium or an apparatus for experience. This makes the user a potential experimenter, experimenting with experience itself. Benjamin said that film was, while apparatus of perception, a kind of test and training of our experience of the world⁵. Interactivity refers to an apprehension

² *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Penguin Books, 2002 (*Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, 1920).

³ *The Society of the Spectacle*, Black & Red, 1977 (*La Société du Spectacle*, 1967).

⁴ *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume I - XXVI, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2006.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The work of art in the era of mechanical reproduction” (1935), in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Harvard University Press, 2008

of the world that now becomes intrinsically active and productive, or rather, that can externalize and achieve almost completely what Bergson described as the true nature of perception – a set of virtual actions on the world. Benjamin’s warning in “The Work of Art” should also be understood in this way: all great, historical transformations are transformations of perception and of the medium in which it occurs.

The medium through which we see the world today – the computer and, in particular, the computer networks like the Internet or the already called Web 2.0 – allows us a perception of the world that is in fact more and more confused with a transforming and productive action upon it. Through new media we actively seek and collect information; we take part in decision processes; we establish communities and participate in several projects. Even more common is to manipulate and transform objects. We can even instantaneously produce and distribute new contents through increasingly used platforms, such as MySpace, Flickr, Facebook, YouTube, etc. What allows all this? The generalization of the logic of communication and connection in its cybernetic state which is today that of information networks; the feedback dimension of computational systems, i.e. the possibility of changing these systems’ states thus transforming the structure of mass media and the forms of reception of culture; the general computerization of cultural objects (images, sounds, texts, graphics or animations); and finally, the possibility of manipulating them through algorithms, i.e. through the logical, calculable and programmable nature of objects and operations which introduces an unprecedented degree of plasticity in the cultural experience.

The so-called “user” of new media resembles an activist and a creator – a producer of cultural and social realities - expression which would describe well the ambition of many contemporary artists. Unlike the predominant vision in modern culture, everything seems to indicate that technology will be the great promoter of creativity in our time. The idea of interactivity fuels the expectation of this dissemination and democratization of creativity, since it allows the potential transformation of each and every receiver into a producer. In fact, through the medial nature of technology, every individual and particular experience (my photos, my friends, my links) can enter the general flux of productivity and exchange. Thus, it is not surprising that economics today so hurriedly speak of “creative industries” and imagine a second age of the “culture industry”, targeting a new type of consumer – the creative consumer – taking seriously that new and surprising workforce of the masses, “creativity”, and seizing its asset (namely, in open source or crowdsourcing⁶ processes).

None of this is neither so absolutely new as it seems nor was only made possible by technology. In fact, these new ideals of technology have been those of art. That “everyone is an artist”⁷ (or can play a creative role in society) was a belief first offered to us by artistic discourse. Joseph Beuys expressed it in the end of the twentieth century as an idea long matured by modern culture, yet still wrapped in some shock. In doing so, he spoke of a new economics whose capital would be, precisely, creativity. Thus, he gave voice (once again and now far more explicitly) to the idea of an “expanded art”, of a general plasticity that would be confused with everyday life. What is in some way

⁶ Crowdsourcing is a neologism for the act of taking a task traditionally performed by an employee or contractor, and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people or community in the form of an open call. For example, the public may be invited to develop a new technology, carry out a design task (also known as community-based design and distributed participatory design), refine or carry out the steps of an algorithm, or help capture, systematize or analyze large amounts of data.(Wikipedia)

⁷ This was one of Joseph Beuys’ fundamental messages, delivered again and again in lectures, interviews, and artworks.

new and disturbing is how discourse on art and on media culture end up being mirrored by each other, or how artistic vanguards inspire the culture industry itself. To say that all avant-garde and anti-art movements have been transmuted into art and museum heritage simply means that art won after all, a fact that ultimately pleases every artistic institution (as well as the art market). However, the collapse of artistic culture within the culture industry seems to be, despite all the courtships (from the ready-made to pop art), an improbable and unwanted fact. Whether because dialectics have after all proved resilient or because the artistic institution has proved a profitable and mass business (although preserving the work of art as central value), this fact has not yet occurred truly. The era of technical reproducibility has not yet radically transformed our idea of “art”. What is now at stake is whether it will happen in the era of technical interactivity.

Once again, the artistic institution seems to be willing to change something so that everything really remains the same. Through the category of “technological”, “digital”, or “interactive” arts, it gradually incorporates a part of these experiences and even accepts their affiliation. This strategy has been used lately, namely by theoretical and critical discourse, and has in fact allowed to provide technological arts with a necessary genealogy, in the good modern way. The indication that contemporary art already aimed at an interactive experience can in fact be illustrated with several examples of twentieth-century art⁸. In cases like optical art or in some of the first video installations, we find the clear intention to incorporate the receiver into the work, starting from perception itself. This intention is also reflected in the debate on minimal and specific object art, triggered by Michael Fried, regarding the confusion these forms of art promoted between the work and the perceptive or space-time experience of the receiver, and which he refers to as “theatre”⁹. We also find this intention in the many ways art has turned into action (happening, performance, action art), in the explicit calling for active participation from the receiver, and in the consequent dissolution of these forms of art into daily experience or ethical, political and social events. We identify in these examples the same emphasis on perception, action and participation as we find in media technology today, the same fusion of aesthesia, productivity and activism, through the same mobilization of the receiver.

The centre of these forms of art is the experience of their receiver and the work a kind of medium or structure allowing that experience. This conception of art and of the work of art is, at its root, strikingly modern, i.e. aesthetic. It is the aesthetic conception of art that specifically turns discourse towards the question of reception, identifying beauty with the “feeling” and “judgement” of beauty, i.e. with the aesthetic experience and judgement. Beautiful art is defined, not as a certain way of doing something (which is what characterizes “mechanical” art), but as the intention and production of a certain type of experience. That is why Kant names it, in the third Critique, “aesthetic art”. And even if, in its appearance, modern art seems to move away from beauty and taste, in its conception and purpose it remains absolutely aesthetic. It sees itself as a form of experience and communication with its receivers. Its ambition is to make that experience “communicable”¹⁰. It leaves to its receivers the task of judging what is art, in

⁸ Cf. Soke Dinkla, “From Participation to Interaction: Toward the Origins of Interactive Art, in Hershman, Leeson (Ed). *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*, Seattle, Bay Press, 1996, 279-290. and Peter Weibel, “User Art”, in, *YOU_ser. The century of the consumer*, Karlsruhe, ZKM, 2007. pp. 1-6

⁹ See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1998.

¹⁰ “We might even define taste as the faculty of estimating what makes our feeling in a given representation universally communicable without the mediation of a concept” (Kant, CJ (1790), Oxford World Classics, 2007, §40, p, 153)

the same way it makes them understand that art is, in fact, indefinable. This understanding of art is only achievable through experience, namely through sensibility. Art is the work of the experience and sensibility of those who produce it and those who receive it; it is the encounter of these two experiences which communicate, reflect and complete each other. Therefore, the reception of the work of art is also part of the work or even of its creation, and all of us, even as receivers, also take part in the “creative act” (Duchamp) and are agents of its presence.

Such is the modern or aesthetic invention of art, a thousand times reflected in modern culture, in a succession of powerful dramatizations: “*Les jugements sur la Poésie ont plus de valeur que la Poésie*” (Lautréamont); “*La sensibilité de chacun est son génie*” (Baudelaire); “*Ce sont les regardeurs qui font les tableaux*” (Duchamp). They open way for this aesthetic structure of the work of art that still echoes, with new consequences, in other theoretical writings of the second half of the twentieth century, such as *The Open Work* (1962) by Umberto Eco, *The Implied Reader* (1972) by Wolfgang Iser, or *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) by Nicolas Bourriaud. It is understandable that the contemporary work of art can also be thought as process and dissolved into in several practices (namely collective), fulfilling a social, ethical and political role which was also already inscribed within the aesthetic vision of art. The relational structure of the work of art allows the interpenetration of production and reception, and adapts well to the communicational logic, particularly to that of interactive media. That is why the so called “new creative possibilities” of new communication technologies, offered to everyone’s creative sensibility, sound to us so little “new”. What is new in them and makes us distrustful, is the technical translation of these creative possibilities whose roots belong to the indefinable of aesthetic experience, and aesthetic communicability.

Umberto Eco’s famous essay *The Open Work* (1962) remains, in this respect, extraordinarily relevant. In this essay, Eco talks of the contemporary work of art as a music score that still has to be played and interpreted, and where the interpreter is allowed great freedom. In this example, the recognition of the interpreter’s creativity stands out. According to Eco, this recognition corresponds to “an evolution of aesthetic sensitivity”¹¹. However, what also stands out is what remains grammatical and dispositional in the work. The interpreter is, on the one hand, a creator, but on the other hand, a kind of user who performs the work or makes it function. Curiously, “*The Open Work*” is contemporary to an exhibition entitled “*Arte Programmata*” (1962), in whose catalogue Eco takes part. The first computer art emerges in the 60’s, as well as a whole set of works with a more or less performing structure, accompanied by instructions for use, directed at their receivers, i.e. at the aesthetic experience. The aesthetic subject clearly becomes a user of the work and the work a kind of apparatus¹², in anticipation of the contemporary, interactive installations where the possibilities of aesthetic and creative experience open to the receiver/user/producer expand in direct proportion to the work’s calculated, algorithmic, and programmable base.

What is surprising is that what prevented art from a possibly scientific and technical definition (aesthetics) adapts today so well to the technical apparatus, becoming fully analyzable and implementable. What is new is the almost perfect matching between

¹¹ Umberto Eco, *L'Oeuvre ouverte*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1965, p. 16.

¹² “an apparatus defines the conditions of a given experience, that is to say the range of possibilities and constraints governing relations between subject, technology, image, environment and participants. It establishes the specific operations that constitute the uniqueness of each works, its very logic” (Anne-Marie Duguet, “Does Interactivity Lead to New Definitions in Art?” in Hans Peter Schwarz and Jeffrey Shaw (orgs.), *Media Art Perspectives*, Edition ZKM, Cantz Verlag, 1996, p.148.

aesthetic experience and technology, which could only happen in the age of communication media; the entry of “aesthetic art” in the era of media technology. Interactivity cements this relation and casts confusion on formerly tense visions of artistic culture and of media culture: the appeal to the active participation of the aesthetic subject in the work of art seems to inspire the technical mobilization of the spectator; and the praise of creativity has become the new motto of culture industries themselves.

One of the virtues of the ideology of interactivity is that it shows how the opposition between passivity and activity (central to certain critical categories of modernity, such as “spectator” and “society of the spectacle”) is insufficient to understand technical mobilization, the kinetics it produces, and the sensitive experience it feeds on. Together, these aspects build up an aesthetic economy which modern and contemporary art – as well as the culture of media and consumer society – have tested. Everyone is and always has been interested in this aesthetic subject who is not purely passive, but contributory and interactive. This aesthetic subject is the spectator and the consumer, just as much as the enjoyer of art. On its senses is based a media economy of attention. On its feeling of beauty were founded the artistic value and the art institution, with all the entities that form it: the museum, critique, curatorship. Its unfulfillable desire (on which marketing was founded) feeds consumer society. Therefore, more is needed, beyond the mere critique of the aesthetic contemplation, of the passivity of passions and senses and of “the society of the spectacle”. What we should question is whether the aesthetic subject is not in fact, at present, the largest, active and net contributor to the capitalist system, to media culture and to the arts¹³. Such is the task of a critique of the aesthetic economy in the age of media technology.

Translated by Moira Difelice

¹³ One of the sharpest interpretation of this remains the work of Pierre Klossovski in *La Monnaie Vivante*, Paris (1970), Paris, Joëlle Losfeld, 1994.

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