Trilogy

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The paper Trilogy was accepted for 'the Online Journal of Embodied Technology' in January 2004.
See: http://www.wac.ucla.edu/extensionsjournal/Essays/essay_index.html

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will describe a practice-based research project, Trilogy, which explores the nature of interactive webdance animations. The project embodies a theoretical framework concerning the status of digital artworks in relation to constructs like interactivity, open work and identity.

a monologue of my body
a dialogue with you

you move your hand, I fall to the ground
coordinated eye-hand movements
at a distant space
my actions depend on your actions

this is about you

INTERACTION

Trilogy consists of three animations made in Flash. The animations are interactive, the computer-user can manipulate imagery and sound with his/her own keyboard and mouse. In this research project I am interested in the nature of interactivity, especially: (1)the interaction between image and user, (2) the interaction between real body and projected body

```
On (press) {
n=1;
if (_root.startup ==4) {
bn = "dans" add n;
duplicateMovieClip ("kast", bn, n);
root.startup = 1; }
```

What is interactivity? Interactivity allows the computer-user to actively engage with imagery. For example, when the user clicks on the image, the movie is duplicated (see action script above). The image is wired to a programming code, to an action script. By dragging, rolling, pressing, releasing the mouse over the image, the user activates a program. The image is no longer only a window into a different reality, the image also allows for remotely affecting reality in real-time (Manovich, 2001). The image is hyperlinked to other images, texts and sounds. This means that the image is no longer an enclosed entity: it does not only point to itself but it awakens a set of other images, text phrases and sound samples.
The dynamic image creates possibilities for interaction. The user has considerable freedom to create his own unique art work out of the original composition. What comes out is the shared result of my input and the users input. The webdance animations are completed pieces since the user is not able to open a window which hasn't been programmed on forehand. However different interpretations, perspectives and outcomes are possible. Every user responds uniquely to the set of preprogrammed elements: the user brings his own personal taste, his cultural references, his mood and prejudices along. The original components of the piece are handed over to the user, it is up to him to create his own imagery out of it.
I can speak of a completed/closed piece on the one hand, due to the pre-programmed links and of an open piece on the other hand. The result is dependent on choices and decisions made by the user. The original work is the starting point from which a multitude of intentions and meanings arise. The user however is not completely free in his associations; he follows a path of preprogrammed associations. Interpretations are given to him: he is caught in a web of associations. He is not able to follow his own associations: in that sense the user is not free at all. He can only move around in a given set of associations. The interactivity suggests openness and freedom of interpretation: in reality personal interpretations are restricted and limited. In other words: the subjective interpretation of the artwork is directed by the objective codes of the computer program.

Instead of using the term 'interactivity' it is maybe better to talk about an 'artwork in movement' (Umberto Eco, 1989) since the final result depends on the user's choices. Body movement of the user is necessary to create the artwork in the first place. The user moves through a field of possibilities: he chooses which possibility becomes a temporal reality.

THE OPEN WORK: A WORK IN MOVEMENT

….not so much the creation of a different reality, but the creation of possibilities
What is an open work? Is Roland Barthes notion of 'the death of the author' true? Are there as many artworks as there are spectators? Is narrativity and linearity replaced by nomadic ruptures and discontinuity?

The interactive artworks are designed as open-ended systems, literally referred to as 'unfinished pieces' with no point of closure. Just as John Cage stated that his compositions have a beginning, a middle and an ending but not necessarily in that order, interactive webdance leaves considerable autonomy to the computer-player. The computer-player temporarily gains the status of a co-author: his spontaneous actions define the end result of the work. The artwork is no longer one-directional: *'now a complex interplay of motive forces is envisaged, a configuration of possible events, a complete dynamism of structure'* (Umberto Eco, p.15, 1989). The open work constitutes a dialogue between computer-user and projected imagery. It is multi-directional, that is to say, the computer-user engages in the work and the work responds to the actions of the user in a preprogrammed way. The user decides which possibilities are actualised. The digital open works are not linear in their movement, nor narrative but nomadic, flexible and non-hierarchical. The nomadic open artwork: *'privileges mobile, shifting pathways and interconnections between a network of concepts, events, objects and singularities'* (Rubidge, p.148, 2003). In the digital computer world the maker can literally program pathways, the user then decides which pathway he will open. The user chooses his own personal trajectory through the imagery, his actions determine the final result of the work-in-movement. It is non-deterministic by nature: the artwork is unfinished at the moment it is handed over to the computer user.
This non-determinism reflects a widespread tendency in contemporary science, especially philosophy and cognitive science: the human mind is no longer seen as a static information processor but is perceived as a dynamic, constantly changing system of multi-agents. Concepts like indeterminacy and discontinuity are used to explain cognitive processes. Identity is not a fixed construct but a fluid and dynamic system in movement. At the heart of every human act lies indeterminacy and discontinuity: our perspective to the world is nomadic, it travels on a horizon of options, never to be completed since other perspectives always remain available.

The open artwork symbolises the undetermined nature of the self.

IDENTIFICATION

Identification is an important issue for me. How is the body involved in meaning-giving and experience?

I am my body.
According to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962), it is precisely through the body that we have access to the world. Action and perception are intertwined. In this notion, the concept of "flesh" becomes relevant. Merleau-Ponty uses the word 'flesh', as the domain in which experiences exist. Experiences are the mode of functioning by which we, inevitably, participate in the flesh. In terms of "the flesh" we are able to have direct, immediate contact with others and the world. My body is not able to forget its flesh. Although not always consciously, my body is always present and is involved in every action I undertake.

The user moves his hand over the mouse and the keyboard, in order to manipulate the image. The tactile experience of the user is just as important as the visual and audio information. The sensations are embedded in the body of the user. The keyboard and mouse can be seen as prosthetic devices. This prosthetic device becomes an "area of sensitivity" which extends "the scope and active radius of the touch". Hand-eye movements of the user are necessary to set the projected image in motion. It creates a direct connection between the user's movements and the dancer's movements. The user identifies with some-one else's body (and he uses his own body as a mediator).
The user enters the world beyond the screen from a rather stable point of view. Although he only uses hand-eye movements in order to control the projected imagery, his whole body is engaged in the experience. The user does not only observe the actions of the projected body; he simulates the actions in his own body! This is nothing new. William James (1890, p.526) already mentioned that 'every representation of a movement awakens in some degree the actual movement'. The observation of movements is by no means a passive process: the perceived motion awakens a set of impulses in the user's body. The user's body simulates the perceived action. Research findings from the field of neuroscience confirm this hypothesis. Various researchers have identified brain areas that are activated not only when the subject performs an action but also when the subject observes the action of another (Jeannerod, 2002).

The body of the user is the signifier: he actively re-constructs a fragmented and associative digital world. With his real and imagined movements he actively shapes the signified. This identification process is mediated by the computer screen.

SCREEN AND USER

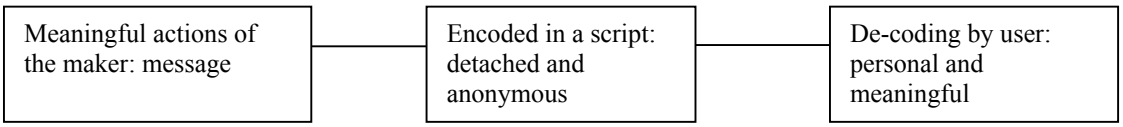
Question: Is a screen revealing outside space or inside space? How is the user's body engaged in this artwork? What is the function of the screen? Is the screen the mediator between two separate worlds?

I am walking on a leather chair. Place: a building site. It is a private performance, the borderline between performance and daily life movement is blurred. I took my camera with me , to record the evidence.

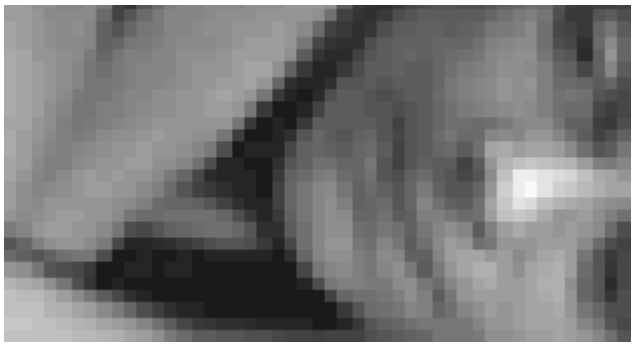
Result: the memorized image of a dismembered body.

The user looks to a flat screen. The screen opens a window into another space, it soaks the user into 2 spaces, the physical space of the real body and the virtual space (projected space) of the image. The dynamic image is however more then the re-presentation of physical reality. The user is engaged in 2 spaces simultaneously. His own body is located in front of the computer screen in a rather passive way since only eye-hand movements are actively controlling the environment. His other body is located inside the computer: it consists of binary codes. This body is pure image, it is surface, it is a body without organs. It contains no flesh, no bones, no skeleton. The computer screen mediates between the real, physical body and the digitized body. The screen is the in-between, the zone that connects two distant spaces, the mediator between the user's gaze and the projected imagery. It is an interval, a pause. It is a space where the user's body coincides with the Other body. The user seems to be more aware of the other body then of his own body. He feels, senses and experiences through the other digitised body. His own body is pushed back to the periphery of his awareness. It is absent and present at the same time. The user's body re-presents itself in the projected body.
This is what the human mind naturally does. Although I am always with my body, *I am my body,* my attention and concentration are drawn away to the outside, in an almost desperate attempt to constitute my body in the world. My own body, which I live from the inside, feels invisible to me. (As if I am the third person shooter in a game environment.) I have to look in the mirror to confront myself with my body-image. However, I perceive clearly how my actions affect the environment. I make my body visible through the actions I undertake, thereby incorporating the real objects in objectified space. The body tries to free itself from its absent nature, by provoking reactions in the direct environment the body makes itself visible and present at the same time. The subjective body re-presents itself in the objective outside world.
The user moves his hand over the mouse. Result: the digitised dancer starts to move. Simple law of cause and effect: if I click here, something will happen. It reflects the ultimate desire to control the environment. But there

is more at stake. The gaze of the user captures the dancer's body, it tames the image. In other words: the gaze hunts the image of the dancer like prey. As soon as the gaze fixates (masters) the image, the image is no longer part of objective space, it is incorporated in the subjective state of the user's body. Now the user is free to manipulate the image.
The screen directs the user's gaze. The gaze of the user is always meaningful. The image is in itself empty and meaningless, the binary codes create only the possibility for meaning. It is the user's gaze which creates a field of meanings around it.



The human body reads intentions: the computer reads codes. The body is immersed in subjectiveness, the computer on the other hand belongs to the objective world. The computer, as a technical device, seems so incorporeal (Laermans, 2003) nevertheless it not only creates distance but also intimacy. The machine brings two worlds, two separate spaces, closer. The screen is a window into another imaginary world: it amplifies our experience.
The computer, as any machine, is an extension of the body and its perceptual system (McLuhan, 1964). For centuries technology has been extending the range of our senses. The telescopic discoveries led to a revolutionary shift in our worldview. Spectroscopy uncovered the structure of DNA. In the 20th century, prosthetic devices are a part of our daily life. Although most sense-extending instruments cannot be said to be a part of us, others have come to seem more intimately connected. Glasses and contact lenses extend the range of one's eyes. Technology now provides many new prosthetic tools for extending our perception: the video camera and the computer enhance the range of our human perception.
The user moves his mouse over the image. Result: a close-up of the naked body. The image does not only reveal very intimate body parts but it also reveals the nature of the digitised image: pixels.



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