

# Strategies of Engagement and Attraction in Interactive Artworks<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article examines interactive artworks through the lens of ‘attraction/engagement strategy’ that functions as a compromise between non-interactive and interactive exhibition strategies. The paper investigates the methods employed to attract the attention of an audience and to solicit their interaction with the piece. In connection with various interactive works audiences may encounter a phenomenon that could be termed the ‘default functioning artwork’, with the piece in its ‘default presentation mode’, meaning that it is already active as a looping visual representation even before audience interaction has been engaged. The different modes of an interactive artwork, such as its default presentation and active states, are introduced and discussed.

**Keywords:** default mode, active mode, interactive art, attraction/engagement strategy.

## 1. Introduction

A noticeable phenomenon in exhibition spaces displaying interactive artworks is that viewers encounter works that seem to function even without the presence and activity of the user: to be more accurate, they function as a loop and are in a passive state. Such art installations may present visuals or sounds to indicate that something is to be expected and it could be said that they are idling and ‘self-interactive’, seemingly inviting the audience to act and participate. They function as digital sirens calling out at a distance. When the participant makes his/her determinant move to be engaged with the artwork then the work responds, awakens and springs to life—in other words, it enters its active interaction state. The magic of interactive art now occurs, the previously separated viewer becomes a participant or interactor and the physical body of the artwork wakes up from its sleepy loop and begins its collaboration with the interactor.

In Sommerer/Mignonneau's work *Haze Express* (1999) visual objects, images, accumulations of forms, shapes, and colours move on-screen even in the default presentation mode when the work is not being used by an active participant. When a viewer lays hands on the screen and moves them around, the “non-deterministic evolutionary image composition” (Sommerer & Mignonneau 1999) starts to move according to the direction given by the viewer, resulting in a “semi-realistic and semi-virtual trip through data landscapes” (Sommerer & Mignonneau 1999).

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Zoom Pavilion* (2015) functions without a participant's voluntary interaction. In the terminology of Varvara Guljajeva, this work is post-participative. Viewers enter a room in which they are surrounded by walls covered with multiple projections (Figure 1). Each viewer should hopefully discover their own image on the wall a few moments later. A similar situation, in which interactive processes are happening prior to

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the activity of the visitor, is demonstrated in Lozano-Hemmer's work **Zero Noon** (2013) (Lozano-Hemmer 2013) and **Voice Array, Subsculpture 13** (2011) (Lozano-Hemmer 2011). Lozano-Hemmer refers to the invisibility of his work when nobody interacts: "My pieces do not exist unless someone dedicates some time to them" (Ranzenbacher 2001). This subjective sentence sums up what is obvious about interactive artworks: that they become 'real' after somebody starts to use and dedicate time to them. It could even be said that before this time has been dedicated to the work it remains invisible or outside the perception of the senses. Naturally, interactive works need not only be seen and touched, but could be heard or even involve the sense of smell.



Figure 1. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Zoom Pavilion", 2016. Photo by: Antimodular Research.

Varvara & Mar's artwork **Binoculars to... Binoculars from...** (2013) (Varvara & Mar 2013) is similarly designed to take into account both passive and active viewers. Visitors and pedestrians on the street see the projected image of a collection of chaotically moving eyes. If audience members decide to participate, they must look into a telematically connected device, which streams the image of the captured eye to another location (Figure 2). Both modes, active and passive, are intentionally integrated into the artwork.



Figure 2. Binoculars to... Binoculars from... (2013) by Varvara & Mar

There are also works which demonstrate a variety of different states of interaction. Some utilise a recording history, a memory of past interactions. In this kind of art piece, each participant leaves a mark in the artwork. Examples of this are to be found in Varvara & Mar's projects *Three of Hands*, (Varvara & Mar 2015), *Wishing Wall* (Varvara & Mar 2014) and *Wishing Well* (Varvara & Mar 2018). The use of recordings of previous participants is also observable in Scott Snibbe's *Deep Walls* (2003) (Snibbe 2002) and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Voice Array* (Lozano-Hemmer 2011). In Lozano-Hemmer's work, each new recording is combined with the cumulative soundscape of the previous 288 participants' recordings, accompanied by flashes of light. In Tomas Lorenzo's *Memoirs of the Blind* (2018) (Lorenzo 2019) the visitor's face is recorded after he/she blinks their eyes. In this type of work the recordings form the 'default presentation mode' of the installation, and are used to attract the next participant. The recording history becomes the content of the default (idling) image of the installation and each active participant is related to the subsequent participant as an experimenter, advertiser or introducer of the installation.

## 2. Saturation modes of interaction

Regarding the aforementioned states of interaction, it is possible to say that there are interactive installations that have low, middle, and high 'saturation modes' of interaction, defined according to the level of activity of the audience: installations that require different amounts of interaction exhibit different levels of saturation. To exemplify saturation modes of interaction we can firstly identify works with low interaction as being those art pieces or environments where a participant does nothing (as in Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Zoom Pavilion*) and all activity occurs autonomously. A minimal activity or reactive mode is involved when the spectator switches on and off the installation (as in Lawrence Malstaf's *Nemo Observatorium*, 2002) (Malstaf 2002). At the other extreme are

works where the artistic concept becomes evident only through the full-body activity of the interactor, in which case the saturation of interactivity is at its maximum and the visitors' location and activity occurs within the work itself—as in Jeffrey Shaw's classic *Legible City* (Shaw 1989) or Kaffe Matthews' *Sonic Bed-London* (Matthews 2005) in which the visitor must lay down their whole body to experience the soundscape. Many other works from different decades of interactive and telecommunication art could be added here such as: Paul Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming* (1992) (Sermon 1992); Satoshi Morita's *Sound Capsule* (2008), (Morita 2008); and *Ilinx* (2014) by Chris Salter, Valerie Lamontagne and TeZ (Salter, Lamontagne, TeZ 2014). Most interactive artworks therefore, from the point of view of interactivity saturation, could be categorized between two poles: at one extreme the spectator does nothing, and at the other he/she is physically located and bodily connected to the installation.

Extreme examples of 'being within the artwork' are those projects shown in an artistic context but which actually resemble psychological experiments. Steve Maher's *Overhead* (2018) allows participants to observe themselves from above their own bodies. Maher writes: "Overhead is a real-time cartographical perspective device, which allows for an instantaneous shift from ground level "first-person" perspective to that of an over-head "out of body" view" (Maher 2019). This type of work involving out of body experiences erases the distinction between the artwork and the viewer: they become one. Similar experiments with cognitive illusions have been carried out by **BeAnotherLab** (BeAnotherLab 2012), a multinational research group dedicated to understanding and expanding subjective experiences. This research seems to have a strong political agenda behind it (how to improve empathy and understanding between people), nevertheless experiments in 'swapping' bodies and illusionary embodiment are certainly remarkable, this being a phenomenon which does not occur in reality—perhaps only in dreams. The above examples demonstrate various extensions of participation and interactivity: from simple works where the participant does nothing to projects where the spectator undergoes an imaginary transfer to outside their own body.

There are certainly many clear reasons for building an interactive work that uses the idling, self-interactive mode. Firstly, the artist's intention to fill the room with moving and inviting visuality so as to indicate something is going on before a visitor decides to interact with a work; secondly to manifest the presence and location of the work; third, the desire of the curator or host institution to have a 'screen saver' that reveals the presence and location of the work and shows that the room is not empty (a similar motivation to that of the artist); fourthly, to enrich the installation by adding its recording history, thereby turning it into an evolving piece.

Consequently, we can discuss artworks on a scale of openness. On the one hand are those works that manifest themselves through interaction and hence exist only by the activity of the participant and always present the same sonic/visual experience as a result of what might be termed 'closed programming'. At the other extreme are works that are also born through interaction, but which incorporate the history of past interactions, the user history, and are thus in permanent change—these works 'live', exist and change in time even without active use. We can say that this second group is evolving and generative, is in constant change and could in certain cases be deemed intelligent by means of its use of information gathered from earlier users. In theory, interacting with such works means encountering a new artwork each time.

### 3. Interpassivity

To a certain extent, we could describe as a decoying or attraction strategy the situation in which the default and idle mode of the artwork offers the promise of interaction and provides an invitation to collaboration. This terminology can additionally accommodate the passive participant who may undergo an experience without the need to interact: such audience members, preferring to observe the interaction of others, are not uncommon. It could be argued, however, that the non-participative presence of the passive viewer is a sort of pre-mode and post-mode of every active interactor in the exhibition space upon entering or leaving the artwork—this is completely different from the case where viewers stay willingly aside and do not embrace interaction at all. This may depend on the individual characteristics of the viewer who might be considered shy or introverted, but may

be part of a wider cultural phenomenon identified by Robert Pfaller using the concept of 'interpassivity' (Pfaller 2017). Perhaps to this could be added the wider cultural phenomenon of the abundance of interactivity which became omnipresent and therefore potentially uninteresting, with interactive forms of communication becoming the everyday necessities of existence across practically all generations.

Despite the attractiveness of Pfaller's position in proposing interpassivity back in 1996, his motivation seems to have been to oppose the contemporary excitement about interactivity and he himself now admits that the term "originally fulfilled a primary critical function for media and theory" (Pfaller 2017, 2). To this he adds that "...this original opponent has now largely vanished into thin air" (Pfaller 2017, 2). This particular opinion—that debates about interactivity have vanished—is without doubt contestable, because in the context of interactive art it suggests the artworks to be only shallow experiments. In fact there are many such artworks that deserve attention from aesthetic, historical, technological, psychological or sociological points of view and which provide inspiration for innumerable researchers to re-examine the interactivity paradigm in the wider context of classical art history. In that sense the concept of interpassivity, and the 'delegation of enjoyment', is only one concept among many that expand the discussion around attraction strategies in the exhibition space. Pfaller writes that interactivity discourse was more of an ideology than a theory and sadly enough, his concept of interpassivity resembles above all an anti-interactivity agenda that carries strong contra-ideological intentions.

#### **4. The manipulation of the audience and the 'myth of interactivity'**

Criticism of interactivity was a highly visible thread in the 1990s in the writing of many researchers and artists. Texts written by Alexei Shulgin and Lev Manovich in 1996 are worthy of mention here. Shulgin noted "...that media art means a transition from representation to manipulation" in his Nettime e-mail "Art, Power, and Communication" dated 6 Oct 1996 (Shulgin 1996). Lev Manovich wrote:

"Yes, interactive computer installations indeed represent an advanced form of audience manipulation, where the subject is put within a structure very similar to an experimental setup of a psychological laboratory or a high-tech torture chamber of CIA or KGB, the kind we saw frequently in spy films of the Cold War era." (Manovich 1996)

Almost diagnosing the situation Manovich states that:

"For the West, interactivity is a perfect vehicle for the ideas of democracy and equality. For the East, it is another form of manipulation, in which the artist uses advanced technology to impose his / her totalitarian will on the people." (Manovich 1996)

Certainly Manovich tries to paint the post-Communism human in a better light, as being very cautious of attempts at manipulation from some external force or person. Interestingly, Manovich almost predicts the future described by Shoshana Zuboff as 'surveillance capitalism' which was already approaching in the mid-1990s (Zuboff's book "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism" was published in 2019). Whereas Western artists were using the Internet as a tool to break hierarchies and bring art to the people, "In contrast, as a post-communist subject, I cannot but see the Internet as a communal apartment of the Stalin era: no privacy, everybody spies on everybody else, always a present line for common areas such as the toilet or the kitchen" (Manovich 1996). Manovich adds another argument about interactivity being a totalitarian form: "All classical, and even more so modern art was already "interactive," requiring a viewer to fill in missing information ..."missing" parts of objects in modernist painting..." He states that "... these technologies externalize and objectify the mind" (Manovich 1996).

Interestingly, these opinions existed before the climax of interactive art, which we identify with the beginning of the 2000s (the boom of interactive art started in the mid-1990s). The second, and perhaps final, phase of criticism started in the mid-2000s, and could be linked to Erkki Huhtamo's article "Trouble at the Interface 2.0" (Huhtamo

2004/2007) and the subsequent debate about 'non-interactive interactive artworks' caused by the Prix Ars Electronica category of Interactive Art being awarded in 2004 to a non-interactive (in classical terms) artwork entitled *Listening Post* (2001) created by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin (Hansen and Rubin 2004).

## Conclusion

Returning firstly to the phenomenon of idle and non-interactive interactive artworks, it may be asked whether the reasons for creating the 'screen savers' and self-interactive artworks, as explained earlier, are indeed sufficient. Is the strategy of attraction/engagement and the practice of filling the room and inviting the viewer just a necessary compromise required of artists exhibiting in the white cube or do we see here a new aesthetic canon? In conclusion it seems both hold true: the necessary compromise between the curators and the traditional visiting habits of the public, as well as a new aesthetic canon.

Another question arising is whether the paradigm of attraction/engagement from a distance is typical only of technical and interactive art or can attraction and invitation strategies be equally observed in classical or other forms of art? Our answer would be affirmative, but this argument would benefit from expansion into future academic research and the possibility is only referred to here in order to bind different research threads concerning the position of the spectator in relation to the artwork.

A third question is whether non-interactive interactive artworks are actually a backlash against the period of manipulation and interactivity in the media arts: is this low phase in the wave of interactive art a normal result of fatigue and the overuse of this form? Again our answer is somewhat affirmative: the trend of reactive artworks and participant interactivity has certainly become mainstream and there is no longer any novelty in it, yet at the same time, the modes of audience interactivity and the systems they use have become considerably more complex and varied. New technologies offer a wide range of possibilities for artists to express themselves and to make the audience experience much richer. We can observe a large variety of different approaches, modes of audience involvement and visual appearances in today's artworks and these will undoubtedly expand yet further in the future.

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