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“Sensuous Geographies: The Space in Between”

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Today I speak to you as an artist, more specifically as a maker of collaborative multi-user interactive installations in which several strands of imagery, including live movement, interweave in any installation event. The installations are driven by interactive systems which are themselves multistranded. In this paper I will be discussing these works from both the perspective of their artistic intentionalities and from the philosophical frameworks which underpin them. However, any theory I introduce does not explain the installations – nor do the installations do not demonstrate the theory. Rather theory and practice engage in an improvisational duet of ideas and artistic incarnations of those ideas. The installations are a complex interweaving of the practice and theory - an embodiment, a composite expression, if you like, of the initially inchoate *ideas* which drive my work. That stage of inchoacy is an important one in the making of a work ... an important space-of-the-in-between where ideas and expression are fluid, tentative. It is here that the integration between my practice and theory takes place usually intuitively.

SHOW MOVIE 1

As a practitioner I trust my undermind (a term coined by Guy Claxton¹ (1994) to describe ‘intuition’, the thinking that goes on beneath thought). I trust it to identify and exploit in my works the philosophical ideas I garner as I read. In short my work consistently constitutes an intricate dance between the formulation and realisation of my (often non-conscious) artistic intentions and the philosophical ideas which seem to resonate most closely with

¹ Claxton, G. (1997). Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind. London, Fourth Estate.

them ... generating a simultaneous interweaving of responses to the same underlying artistic idea. The term 'resonate' articulates most accurately the relationship that obtains between practice and theory in my artistic working process.

In this presentation I will be discussing the dance of theory and practice which took place between *Sensuous Geographies*, a large scale immersive, interactive and performative installation created with composer Alistair MacDonald in 2003, and the notions of multiplicities, sensation and the 'space-in-between' which are a central theme in Deleuze's philosophy.

Sensuous Geographies is a complex multiuser interactive installation, in which technology, philosophy and artistic intentions interweave and interrelate. Driven by a failure to resolve certain problems in earlier installations, the original artistic intention was prosaic, namely to develop a system which would allow several participants in a large-scale installation space to be tracked individually without suffering from the problems of occlusion which so often beleaguer multi-user tracking systems in large space. In short we wanted to individuate each participant in the interactive space.

SHOW MOVIE 2

In order to achieve this the visitors are tracked when they enter the interactive space, using a colour tracking system (the visitors wear full-length richly coloured silk robes to allow the system to recognise them individually). On entering the space a sound is initiated by each participant, and then modulated as they move through the active installation space. In this way multistranded spatialised sound environment merges, and unfolds as they move in the space

But the piece is so much more than that. Aesthetic qualities emerged as we worked to resolve the technical problems we were facing. The installation space became a space of ritual, surrounded by a labyrinth through which viewers wandered. Traces of colour, echoes of the activity of the interacting participants, appeared and disappeared on hanging

translucent screens which created permeable boundaries in the space yet another manifestation of a space of the in between.

As the participants engage with the installation, the interface between the *computer system* and its material manifestations (in particular sound) -- and the *human systems* which interact with it generates an even more complex network of material – of sound, of interweaving colour, of motion, of hidden computer behaviours. As the strands of this network engage with each other, visible and invisibly, an emergent audio-visual performance event unfolds in all its complexity – a network of shifting themes emerges as the elements configure and reconfigure and they engage in their informal dance.

This is the visible/audible *Sensuous Geographies*, the event which is observed by those who wait outside of the interactive central space, the event which takes on the tenor of a performance, even though it is not a formal performance event. Here as participants ebb and flow, cluster and disperse, pause, and move through the space *Sensuous Geographies'* characteristics as a multiplicity are made evident. Replete with strands of sound, visual imagery, weaving, affecting and being affected by each other, its identity as a multistranded, multidimensional, multiqualitative dynamic system becomes evident.

But its dynamic presence is not only evident in the interactions between the visitors but is also rooted in the physical sensations of the participants and observers. These physical sensations are grounded in the physiological systems and are multiplicities in their own right. So, although *Sensuous Geographies* has an incarnation as a performance event, it has the potential to affect participants at another level.

SHOW MOVIE 4

Given enough time to relinquish the need to 'know', to 'understand' the installation, visitors can experience liminal physiological sensations as they engage with it, sensations which guide their behaviour once conscious intention to move is allowed to relinquish its hold on action (which does not happen at once). These sensations are generated in part by the physiological effect of sound on the body, in part by the effect of the silk of the costume, in part by the fact that sight is obscured by veils which hang over the face. They

come to the attention of ‘felt’ consciousness once the visitor has surrendered him/herself to the sensation-al qualities of the installation space, relinquished the desire to control it, but allowing themselves to be controlled by it.

In Bergson’s writings, and indeed those of contemporary physiologists and neurophysiologists, this level of consciousness is seen as a multiplicity, a complex dynamic system which comprises multiple parallel sources of ‘understanding’, of ‘knowing’, derived from our biological systems – chemical, circulatory, neuronal, skeletal, muscular. These respond to the environment, interweave, modulate each other as these parallel systems of response interweave. They simultaneously affect and are affected by each other as they go about their business, in a biological dance which never ends.

As such participants and the installation share both a dynamic structure and processes of operation – and are manifestations of a mode of thinking which does not depend on linear logic, but which is more akin to a rhizomatic network of imagery, thought and feeling.

Thus, the art of *Sensuous Geographies* lies not *only* in the material interrelationship between the images (sonic and/or visual) which are displayed, nor *solely* in the relationship between the player and the system, the viewer and the material installation as displayed over time, but *also* in the even more fluid space-in-between which incorporates the immaterial space of the embodied thought/s which lie between, and are generated, by the visual and sonic imagery as it ebbs and flows, appears and disappears in the space of the installation.

This space of thought is special, it is a Deleuzian space of motion and transformation rather than a space of discursive thought.

SHOW MOVIE 5

It is the space *of* the in betweenⁱ, a very useful description of the space through which *Sensuous Geographies* as an event is constituted. Much as Grosz’s ‘space of the in between’ it is characterised by “...the transformation and realignment of the relations between identities and elements, rather than [by]...identities, intentions, or...the wills of

individuals or groups” (Grosz 2001, p 91) This description seems to articulate the fluid event space which emerges in the installation as a group of individuals interact independently in the same space, but at the same time are necessarily effecting a group response, which is made up of the interweaving of the movements generated by their individual intentions. As a result they inhabit an emergent environment in which no one person has control over the emerging events which take place within it, but in which the fluid interaction between individuals, each intent on their own experience, requires that personal intentions are constantly renegotiated and realigned. Consequently, in both terms of the emergent event and the sensations which drive it, the active space in the installation becomes a space of transition, always in the process of becoming, but never ‘realised’ as a space.

However, as an artist I was not merely interested in the performative event which emerged from the installation space, I am also deeply interested in the ‘space in between’ of the liminal sensations generated in and through the installation. In *Sensuous Geographies* I wanted to set up the conditions for participants to understand their presence in a manner which did not rely on the imposition of reflective consciousness or on conscious control of the environment or. Rather I wanted to find a way of creating an environment which would encourage participants to understand the experience more from the perspective of a dancer who dances without activating mind-driven consciousness about their actions and the results of those action. The being-in-the-body of dancing is a state I love to experience – it is what has kept me involved in dance all these years...and I find myself wanting to give others the opportunity to experience it.

Although reflective consciousness comes into play in *Sensuous Geographies*, particularly in early forays into the space (and particularly with people who either make installations of this kind themselves, or are interested in how the technology works) given time, if one surrenders oneself to the space, what Deleuze calls Affect begins to permeate the experience.

SHOW MOVIE 6

Affect is non-representational, (thought as we normally think it is representational). Indeed Deleuze calls Affect 'non-representational thought'. (Deleuze 1978) Hope or love, for example, whilst both might have objects, are manifestations of affect inasmuch as, in and of themselves, they represent nothing, it *generates* rather than represents states of being. Indeed, Deleuze suggests that one aspect of affect is "the continuous or passage from one degree of reality to another [in which] our force of existing is increased or diminished in a continuous manner... this is what we call existing." (ibid) It was this that I wanted to become accessible to those who wished to experience it. In the context of works which generate transitory events such as *Sensuous Geographies* Affect lies at the heart of the work. Given time, the 'art' of such works goes beyond visible or audial imagery, beyond primary and secondary aesthetic characteristics - these are the domain of the 'percept' (a mode of understanding which relates to perception of the material) - to the compounds of 'sensation' to which the work gives rise. It is these sensations that interest me in the installations I have created.

Ultimately it is my hope that some participants will understand *Sensuous Geographies* through the deeper layers of consciousness which are buried in the ever-shifting relationships between physiological systems as they interweave, form and decompose. Although this level of consciousness lies beneath conscious awareness (reflective consciousness), neuroscientists such as Damasio 2000 and Edelman & Tononi, 2001ⁱⁱ tell us that it is inextricably implicated in what we like to call 'mind'. They argue that to be 'mindful' of something is not merely to know through the mind, but also to be corporeally aware of that thing. We 'know' when there is danger, we 'know' when an empty environment is 'threatening' through something other than the knowledge of facts. Even scientists acknowledge that we 'know' through the deeper physiological systems, the systems which ensure our survival from the level of the cell to the level of the complex entity we call a human being. It is this that Damasio argues constitute our core consciousness, it is the that Edelman calls primary consciousness, it is this that Claxton calls the undermind. and it is this which give rise to a awareness of inhabiting different states of being. It is this that I hope to encourage people towards.

Because these systems of awareness cannot necessarily be identified as individual physical sensations but rather are felt as a fluid interlocking web of sensori-motor anticipations and responses too subtle to be recognised at a ‘conscious’ levelⁱⁱⁱ I think I have given myself something of a task. However, if we take it that these barely recognised responses generate a ‘mood’, an underlying state in our bodies, which colours understanding, and may even *be* the understanding itself (as Deleuze’s Affect is purported to be) installations such as *Sensuous Geographies*, which many claim have a therapeutic quality, might be environments which can get us in touch with a deeper sense of being, of self, and a deeper understanding of the world. This other state of understanding, which is not dependent on language, reason, or representational thought, lies on the threshold of extended consciousness, in the ‘space of the in between’ of our biological, psychological and intellectual being. It is composed of necessarily transitional, which never reach fulfilment, which are ever on the edge of our understanding – they are, if you like what Bergson and Deleuze call states of becoming. Although often they cannot be consciously fully identified or defined, they nevertheless exist - and if the neuroscientists are right, affect our thinking and our ways of knowing.

So how does *Sensuous Geographies*, and indeed other work, for all my work aims for this, provide a space which allows its visitors to begin to experience the state of ‘becoming’, the state of pre-verbal ‘sensation’, of pre-verbal dynamic consciousness? Can it, indeed does it, generate a ‘space of the in-between’?

I think it is because the digital installations that I generate with my collaborators are embodied not in their material form, although it is through this that they are revealed, not merely in their systems, although it is through this too that they are revealed, but through their systems in motion^{iv}. The system of each installation comprises both the bespoke software programme which drives the installation and the images generated through the system-in-motion.

SHOW MOVIE 7

Any change in one strand of the system (and those strands include not only the images, the material environment, the processes, but also each of the visitors inhabiting the installation

at any given time) effects a change in other strands of the system, which in turn generate changes on other strands. Consequently, the flow of modulation and modification of the visible and audible images, and *of the forces which flow between* them, is never ending. The system, the piece, and with it the visitors' consciousness of themselves in the installation, is always in flux.. These digital installations, like the visitors which initiate their behaviour, are in a constant state of internal motion.

Now the only way that these installations can be grasped is experientially, through the 'core' consciousness, through the liminal ebbs and flows of 'sensation'. They are, in a very real sense, indescribable. Any description to others or oneself, whether it be a visual depiction, a video record or a word-picture, is partial. It can only convey one aspect of the multi-stranded phenomenon, and then at a very crude, reductive level. For the work of the work, and the work itself, lies in the ever-present state of becoming, both of itself and of those who inhabit it, it initiates not in the transient forms which are momentarily composed as the work is brought to being.

I would suggest that these installations are not 'works' as such (unless we redefine work to accommodate the non-artefactual aspects of the artwork) but compositions of the conditions for becoming. They are not compositions, or representations, of becoming, but compositions of the elements, components and processes through which the potentialities of the works are temporarily revealed. They are pieces which can exhibit an elusive, but deeply affecting, subliminal life, yet which never reach closure. Pieces through and in which we might be encouraged to turn our attention to the subtle movements of our 'deep' consciousness, to the core self which underlies and colours the being of the 'autobiographical', conscious, self. Pieces which, if they are to be 'understood' at their deepest level, require attention to the delicate flows of energy in the body, to the hidden perceptions - a sense in the skin of the colour which permeates the space, a sense in the viscera of the sound which surrounds you, a sense of subtle flows of energy between people, a sense of the edges of the space through the permeable membrane which suddenly ceases to separate inside from outside.

But they are not solipsistic spaces. Because they are multi-user installations they are spaces in which a subtle dialogue is continually taking place, not only between visitor and images, and between visitor and environment, but also between visitor and visitor. These are spaces for play, a space where the goal is to play for its own sake, to explore and enjoy a shifting world of liminal images and sounds. But they are nascent worlds where our very behaviour changes the underlying state of the environment before it has been come to fruition as a ‘something’, but where that environment at the same time subtly changes the state of our liminal background emotions.

None of these sensations can be captured, because they are always on the edge of realisation. The body, the mind, the being is forever caught in a transitional state, where intentions which expect a goal to be fulfilled are constantly thwarted, and must be replaced by an intentionality which accepts the sense of ‘being’ of the moment as an experience for its own sake, but equally accepts it as an experience which cannot be held, grasped, for it is necessarily fleeting.

The installations I have been working on aim to provide the conditions for such experiences, to allow the visitors to reach beyond the level of extended consciousness to that which lies below, to provide a moment of access to the inarticulable space of the body-mind, with all that that implies.

ⁱ Grosz, Elizabeth (2001) “In-Between: The Natural in Architecture and Culture” in *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* Massachusetts MIT

ⁱⁱ Damasio, A. (2000) *The Feeling of What Happens*. London: Vintage.; Edelman, G. M & G Tononi (2001) *Consciousness: How Matter Becomes Imagination*. London: Penguin.

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘Conscious’ here refers to what is generally known as consciousness, that is the consciousness that can be reported verbally, what Damasio (2000) calls ‘extended’ consciousness, and Edelman (2001) calls ‘higher-order consciousness’. Its use in no way denies that there are other modes of consciousness, as will become clear.

^{iv} Like biological organisms, or consciousness itself, the digital system which drives any multi-levelled interactive installation is a complex combination of parallel systems, each of which interweaves, interacts, responds and generates responses in its fellow systems.