

Choreographing the Virtual Domain

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by

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Abstract

This paper was given within a large-scale interactive sound environment created for the event by Alistair MacDonald in collaboration with the author. . The delegates who attended the paper stood, and walked around the space as the paper was delivered. The author also moved around the space as she delivered the paper, triggering events (some of which were fragments of the lecture delivered by a 'virtual' voice) and modulating given elements of the sound environment. Two 'performers' were also present. They like the author could independently trigger and/or modulate sounds within the environment. Although the 'audience' could not trigger or modulate events as individuals, their group movement and the organisation of the group could be used to trigger events (e.g the group as it clustered into one large group, or divided into two or more smaller groups, or dispersed into an amorphous 'crowd', etc served as trigger/modulator for an underlying sound environment). The room was consequently inhabited by a mobile crowd of people, some of whom carved their own pathways through space, creating disturbances and obstacles around which the delegates had to flow.

I write this as a choreographer whose work is increasingly leaning towards the development of responsive environments which are performative, rather than representational. As an artist my main interest lies in the possibilities offered by responsive, or electronically sensitised environments to artists whose work is grounded in, or mediated through, a choreographic sensibility.

The terms I am using have a particular meaning in relation to my work. I am using performative in this sense to mean environments in which viewers are performers in the events they are generating. That is., they are not merely triggers for those events, not merely the 'authors' of the progression of the events embedded in the interactive installation, but they are an integral part of these events, elements in the work itself. It is my hope that spectators find themselves engaging in an informal dance as they interact with the installation space. The electronically sensitised environments in which I am interested are those in which a constructed, shaped cyberspace is mapped onto real space using programmes such as the Very Nervous System or BigEye. These responsive spaces tend to be immersive spaces, requiring full body movement (or what Simon Penny calls 'spatial interactivity') to activate the behaviour of the elements embedded within them. The term interactive is itself used in a very

precise manner. There is considerable dispute amongst digital artists and choreographers working in this field as to what interactive means. The former argue that, strictly, few genuinely 'interactive' spaces are created by interactive artists. (Genuinely interactive spaces tend to use systems based on artificial neural networks.) Rather they constitute (often extremely complex) reactive systems which are programmed to react to given patterns of behaviour in an installation or performance space.

I and many of my colleagues use the term 'responsive' to describe such places inasmuch as genuine interaction does not take place between programme and interactor, rather one reacts to the other. However it is recognised that neither are these spaces merely reactive in a 'click and go' sense. Many are programmed to respond in a variety of ways to human behaviours which take place in the space. Now human behaviour is complex. It has weight, velocity, direction, height and depth, scale and so on. The more complex environments respond not to one, but to a combination of two or more of these features, not only displaying but also modulating visual, sonic or moving images in various parts of the space. The participating viewer's behaviour in turn responds to the changes in the environment, particularly if there is a change in atmosphere. Moving slowly across a space might generate a gradually shifting visual or sonic environment. Moving your arms rapidly might generate display of hundreds of short sharp images and sounds, building up a sense of chaos. Viewers or listeners will modify their behaviour, either to replicate or alter the environment they are inhabiting.

A performative space is a space in which the viewer becomes part of the environment, the work, not merely a trigger for the images. The work is designed to incorporate the viewer into the artistic vision. They become performers, if you like.

The term choreographic sensibility, used in the context of responsive electronically sensitised environments, refers to a very particular way of interpreting and sensing that environment, and the way the environment is shaped by the presence of human bodies. Dancers 'see' not only with their eyes, but also with their bodies. They develop a sensibility which is derived from a finely tuned proprioceptive sense, and an equally finely tuned sense of their relative proximity to the perimeters of the space and to objects in the space. (The 'objects' might be invisible objects, for example sounds, or they might be more tangible objects, such as other people.) We all sense how close we are to people, particularly when they are very close to us, but when her attention is turned to it a dancer can sense the energies which extend the body beyond the limits of the skin. This is an odd way of speaking but it is almost as if you are feeling a delicate touch, even when no contact has taken place.

There is another sensibility of space which a choreographer brings to her sense of a responsive environment. This is derived from the inescapable fact that choreographers shape not only the body shape when they choreograph, but also the space in which the dancers

move. The movement of a body through a space changes the balance of that space to the eye, and also the experience of the body as it inhabits the space. You must have all felt moments of claustrophobia in a small space, where the walls, or other people, are so close that they seem to be constraining your very being, and your ability to breathe. You may also have had a sense of being lost in an unimaginably huge featureless space, one in which it is difficult to orient yourself spatially by the very lack of features. For an artist simply placing a feature in the space allows an empty space to take on a graspable form, the apparently infinite becomes a finite space which it is possible to navigate. The body has something to measure itself against. It can sense, and vary its distance from the object or from the perimeter (a kind of primitive radar). But, and this is where the choreographic sensibility begins to make itself known, as it does so the balance, even the shape of the space changes. 'Space' becomes a variable entity, one which it is impossible to measure because it is always changing. Now if this happens with one person in the space, imagine what can happen with two or more people. The movement of two, three, four, more bodies in even an empty space continually changes the balance of the space as the spatial relationships between the bodies are never endingly reconfigured. For a choreographer, each time a performer moves through the space, or reorients themselves in terms of their facing direction the texture of the space changes, the very shape and texture of the space is reconfigured. It becomes momentarily weightier in one area, and more spacious in another. It morphs from one shape into another, like a continually shifting painting. You might have noticed this in a less formal situation, for example a railway station, or even a football match. The crowd becomes a self-organising system, shifting this way and that according to events in the environment.

As an artist I am interested in developing performative responsive environments in which the space is not reconfigured by participants/viewers by accident, but with some sense of awareness. I want to design environments which have a surface which will encourage viewers to attend to the sense of the environment rather than simply to the images which appear in it, which encourage people to attend to senses other than the visual to shape what I call the space-in-between, and which encourage them to realise that they are part of the overall image generated by the work, not merely the initiators of the images from which it is formed.

Media theorist Margaret Morse¹ suggests that the art of the interactive installation lies as much in the architecture of the space-in-between as it does in the images which are generated when that space is activated. However, the intricacies of that architecture frequently remain invisible to the viewers or activators of the installation, particularly when that space is experienced in company with other users. When I develop and/or work within responsive environments it is this sensibility that is brought into play. The placement of the

¹ Morse, M. (1997) "Video Installation Art: The Body, The Image and the Space-in-between (1989)" in D. Hall and S. J. Fifer (eds), *Illuminating Video*, New York: Aperture/BAVC: pp.154 -167.

sounds, the motion of the imagery is carefully designed to shifts the balance of the space, and to sensitise both users and viewers to the network of movings to and fro which characterise it.

For instance, in this space in which I am talking you are hearing my voice emerging from different places in the room. Your attention is thus shifted to the space (and people) around you, and in which you move, not focused solely on the speaking body you see before you as is the norm in a presentation such as this. At the same time images of me appear and disappear, also speaking, giving footnotes if you like, virtual asides which draw your attention to something else. But those images are more than giving footnotes, they are footnotes in and of themselves. A multiple presentation which changes your sense of the space, and your place within the space. All this creates a palpable network between me and you, between the things I am saying and you, between the things I am saying and the things I have said, between me and me. Your eyes and ears move creating the invisible architecture of the space-in —between from the skeleton framework we have created. The space becomes a dance space.

The effects the spatio-temporal 'architecture' of the visual and/or sonic images, as they emerge in an electronically sensitised environment, have on the users' understanding of the architecture of the space-in-between are significant and may be one of the factors which affects the spatial behaviours of the inhabitants in the environment created by the artist. The participants' experience of the environment in an immersive installation space is spatialised. Sounds come from behind, from above, from the side. Visual images surround you appearing and disappearing, growing or shrinking, moving around the space. This leads to a real sense of the performative amongst the participants as they construct momentary formations of images, and shape an environment of sound and image in the installation space. Concomitantly the participants become performers when viewed by others who watch the events emerge in the installation space. The interactors take on an implicit role as performers within that formation.

Alistair Macdonald and I have attempted to set up a simple environment which illustrates this to an extent. At this moment I am going to invite some colleagues to work with me in the environment. I am then going to invite others into the environment to see whether we can develop an informal 'dance', which requires no dancing.

My colleagues and I are going to demonstrate one result of the application of a choreographic sensibility to a responsive electronically sensitised environment. Note that 'near and far' are sensed, rather than seen. Note how, viewed from the outside, spatial forms are configured and dissolved to give way to new forms. The space is becoming a performative space. We are engaging with it, performers without 'performing'. At the same time we are making visible the invisible architecture of the space which is created by the placement of the sounds in the

space, overlaying it with another, mobile, architecture which is created by relationships between the moving bodies in the space.,

It is this sensibility that I would suggest that a choreographer brings to the design of the architecture of the space of the interactive installation, and in doing so choreographs not only bodies but the space itself.

(Note: The sonic environment generated for this paper was the starting point for the immersive installation Sensuous Geographies (2003) created by Alistair MacDonald and Sarah Rubidge)