Interaction and Performativity in Digital Art Exhibitions

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Abstract: *There is a growing commitment within cultural institutions such as museums and galleries to develop exhibitions that attract the public to engage with art. Digital technological innovations play an important role in this regard, enabling visitors to experience artworks in new ways. Contemporary museums and galleries have become increasingly concerned with promoting public engagement through the consumption of interactive installations, as opposed to the traditional approach of housing static curiosities and authentic pieces. In this article, I will explore the visitors' responses to the technologically mediated artworks and the new forms of interaction(s) that arise in exhibition areas. The changed forms of interaction are twofold: participation with artworks creates interaction with the exhibit as well as with fellow visitors and members of staff. These new forms of interactions are linked to the individuals' performance and thereafter to their subjective experience of the art exhibition. This article approaches the museum visit from a sociological perspective in order to find out what exactly happens in interactive digital exhibitions. The analysis addresses the ways in which these different forms of interactions affect the experience of visiting a museum, as well as perceptions of the arts and culture.*

Key words: Interaction, pervasive technology, cultural institutions, symbolic interactionism.

The funding bodies from both public and private sectors have been placing pressure on cultural institutions to increase the public's engagement with arts and culture. This development is partially driven by a desire to increase the number of visitors from wider backgrounds, but also to create opportunities for participation and learning. In order to attract children and young people, the museums have installed so-called 'hands on' exhibits, which allow people to touch and play

around with artworks. More recently, the benefits of interactive artworks as part of 'informal learning' have been extended to reach museum visitors of all ages. In past few decades, digital technologies have been placed in museums and galleries to support the informative side of the museum visit: touchscreen information desks and personal digital assistants are relatively common in museums and galleries nowadays. Alongside with this development, artists and designers

have adopted the use of digital technologies as part of their work. The digital interactive element in artworks is aimed at creating meaningful experiences for the visitors. Interactive art is discussed in the literature as 'computer art', 'new media art', 'digital art' and so on, and in other contexts interactive art is understood as non-technological hands-on artwork. In this paper, I have coined the term Digital Interactive Art (DIA) to cover art exhibits that are mediated to the public through digitally interactive technology, and which require active participation from the visitor.

DIA exhibitions have significant emphasis on participation that appears to attract a wider public to become interested in visiting art exhibitions. However, despite the increased amount of DIA in cultural institutions, surprisingly little research has been conducted to discover how visitors actually perceive their visiting experience and what happens during the visit. Museums use resources on researching their visitors with quantitative surveys and evaluation and occasionally interviews and focus groups. However, these methods do not really reveal the patterns of interactions with both artworks and fellow visitors, nor do they intend to find an understanding of how visitors respond to these new forms of exhibits. I believe that the importance of social interaction of the museum visit cannot be ignored if one desires to understand the actual visiting experience. In this paper, I intend to briefly examine the forms of interactions that arise within and around in DIA.

METHODOLOGY

The paper uses the data collected in collaboration with Dr. Susie Scott and Dr.

Tamsin Hinton-Smith, sociologists from the University of Sussex, as part of the WINES3-project¹ called 'Supporting Shy Users in Pervasive Computing'. We examined two contrasting case studies; Fabrica, a small local contemporary art gallery in Brighton that hosted Tina Gonsalves' Chameleon, a multimedia artwork exhibition which utilizes facial recognition technology to provide emotional feedback to interactants i.e. visitors; and the V&A (Victoria and Albert Museum), a large traditional museum in London that hosted an exhibition called DeCode, which included a range of digital artworks by different artists that incorporate varying types of interactions from visitors. For the purpose of this paper, I have selected three particular exhibits from our data to illuminate the changed patterns of interaction in DIA, these examples will be discussed in depth later on this paper.

Our methodological approach was simulating methods used in ethnographic tradition; this was the most suitable for our theoretical framework. The methods included qualitative observational field notes, visitor tracking maps, self-completion visitor questionnaires, emotion maps, and visitor interviews conducted face-to-face, by email and by telephone. We also conducted 'walkaround interviews', a mobile methodology (Ross *et al* 2009) that involved the researcher accompanying a participant as they moved around the gallery and recording 'live' their responses to exhibits. In addressing different forms of interaction in the exhibition area, including interaction with the exhibits and among other people, it became evident that intended aims such as informal learning, perception and experiencing arts were distracted by the performative dilemma of the visitor.

100 THEORETICAL APPROACH

Sociologists' interests with regard to art have focused on the socially organized settings in which art is produced (Becker 1982) and exhibited (MacDonald 2002), as well as experienced by visitors (Heath and vom Lehn 2004). Museums and galleries have traditionally been seen as locations of 'high' culture (Williams 1958) whose visual and textual contents and spatial arrangements signify sophistication. Bourdieu and Darbel's classic study of European museums (1969) notes that the certain visitor groups may feel that they lack the cultural capital (knowledge, skills and experience) needed to perceive and experience arts in 'correct ways'. Bourdieu suggests that the 'correct' perception of artworks is a matter of cultural competence, acquired through socialization and education. Contemporary museums are adopting ideas from the visitor-centred design (Falk and Dierking 1992), participatory museums (Simon 2010) and inclusive museums. These ideas are examples of cultural institutions' aims to increase accessibility to sectors of the public who might otherwise be excluded. Revisiting Bourdieu and Darbel in the context of DIA, it can be said that the visit to the DIA exhibition requires new levels of technological competences, which were not necessary in traditional one-dimensional art exhibition. The visitor's roles are also changing in DIA exhibitions as they are resulting in the visitors adopting the interchangeable roles as experience creator as well as the experiencer. The visit to the interactive exhibition is created for the user who utilizes the technology but also for the *visitor* whose interests are aimed to be accommodated. However, museums' and galleries as public spaces are still strictly coded with social rules and norms to which the

visitors' self-presentation is tied. Sociological analysis aims to understand how the transformations of cultural institutions are affectively changing the role of the visiting public. To participate successfully, the visitor should be equipped with relevant cultural and social capital in order to feel competent to interact (Bourdieu and Darbel 1969).

As discussed, the sociological approach offers a new way of analyzing the visitors' experiences of the museum visit. I have adopted a social theory of Symbolic Interactionism (SI) in order to link the aforementioned social and cultural competences to the social interaction taking place in DIA exhibition areas. The theory of Symbolic Interactionism is central to conceptualizing the social interaction in exhibition area as a social encounter whose meaning is negotiated between the actors (Denzin 1970, Silverman 1987). In particular, Erwin Goffman's (1959) idea of presentation of self has been used to analyze the visitors' emotional responses to the public engagement with interactive art. Following SI analysis in social emotions, it can be seen that they are emergent products of interaction and relative to the social context rather than a psychological trait or individual pathology (Scott 2006). Shyness and embarrassment can be defined as a situational state of dramaturgical stress (Freund 1998; cf. Goffman 1959), which arises from an actor's perceived relative incompetence at managing a social encounter and their anticipation of embarrassment resulting from the communication of an unwanted impression of oneself to others (Scott 2007a; cf. Schlenker & Leary 1982). This notion leads to the Goffman's (*ibid*) presentation of self in everyday life, where he sees interactions as forms of performances with audience, back-stage and front stage regions. Following

Goffman's (see also Scott 2004) approach the feeling or fear of breaking the rule or norm and appearing to others as an incompetent visitor is actually a reflection to the *competent other*; the actual or anticipated audience. The exhibition design is failing to acknowledge the affects of presence of other people in the exhibition area. In traditional museum or gallery settings, the visitors' level of performativity is relatively low, as they could just stroll around passively. In the interactive exhibition, the increased performativity can be seen as a trigger for the feelings of relative incompetence.

DISCUSSION: INTERACTION IN AND WITHIN THE EXHIBITION

The museum visit consists of different elements which could be loosely included under the concept of 'interaction'. In other words, in order to understand visitors' position in the DIA exhibition, we should define the different forms of interactions and compare and contrast them to the traditional museum visit. The DIA exhibits and artworks are designed to encourage participation amongst the visitors. The art is therefore aimed to encourage experience through interaction with the artwork. DIA often relies on the relatively basic computerised technologies where the interaction takes place either with traditional push buttons or via touchscreens. More recently, pervasive technology has entered onto the art scene. Pervasive technology, or fit-in-the-environment technology, is used in exhibitions to offer complex and often passively captured forms of interaction, such as through sensors that monitor movements or other embodied activities. From our research data, I have selected three examples of DIA exhibits to illustrate the forms of interaction with artwork.

Vocal contribution, embodied movements and emotional feedback are examples of different forms of interactions that are captured in the DIA exhibits. Vocal contribution refers to the exhibit in DeCode (V&A London) which relied on the voice tracking technology, where the visitor's voice was creating images on the screen. These images² were changing due to the different tones, levels or frequencies of the voice. The interaction with this exhibit required vocal contribution from the visitors (Image 1.1). Another exhibit from DeCode was utilizing body movement trackers, where the visitors' embodied movements were creating sprays of colours on the large display screen (Image 1.2). The participation required exaggerated movements in front of the large white interactive wall. The third example comes from Fabrica gallery which hosted Tina Gonsalve's exhibition Chameleon (Image 1.3). The exhibition area had a number of screens which displayed an image of a human face. With the emotion tracker, the human face on the screen responded to the visitor's face (a sad face made the screen face cry; smiling made the screen face laugh). The interaction in this exhibition simulated the real human-to-human interaction with emotional feedback. The DIA exhibition expects participation and engagement from the visitors, and it has the potential to create truly engendered experiences. These types of exhibitions require a competence to take part because they are so highly computerized and in order to understand the function and the mechanisms of the artwork, the visitor should be equipped with some knowledge of technology.

The museums and galleries are public spaces, where the rules and norms of the social interaction between people should be enacted. It has been estimated that approximately 75% of

102 museum visitors come in accompanied by others – friends, family, groups, and the like (Butler and Sussman 1989; Heath and vom Lehn 2008). And even when alone, the visitor is likely to be surrounded by other people. As vom Lehn (*et al* 2001) argues, the actions of others have an important impact on people's perception and experience of the exhibition. For example, the vocal contribution exhibit (see Image 1.1) in DeCode was perceived as 'uneasy, discomfoting and scary' by the participants of our research. The visitors felt self-conscious when having to use their voice to

Fig. 1: Vocal contribution (Universal Everything: Everyone Forever (2006) in DeCode Victoria & Albert Museum in London, March 2010. Photo. Vuokko Harma.

Fig. 2: Embodied experience. ('Body Paint' (2009) by Mehmet Akten in DeCode in Victoria & Albert Museum, London. March 2010. Photo: Vuokko Harma.

activate the exhibit, particularly if there were other people around. Using one's own voice was considered as 'too intimate' or some people reported to 'not really know what to say' when asked what made them feel uneasy. These statements highlight the performativeness of the interaction, where the visitor feels self-conscious and fears revealing something unwanted about him/her. The interaction with the artwork along with the presence and interaction with others can be approached with Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1959), where he describes social situation as a front stage region and a personal space as a back stage region. The front stage requires acts i.e. performance which are enacted to an 'audience'.

Just as in the previous example, we discovered similar outcomes in the embodied movement exhibit (Image 1.2). People approached the exhibit with caution, and many reported feelings of uncertainty and fear about unexpected events, and therefore preferred to look aside while 'others' were interacting. Therefore, it can be seen that the 'watching

others' was their back stage region, a comfort zone, whereas interaction with artwork was performative front stage. The third example of the DIA exhibition is from the Fabrica case study (Image 1.3). The exhibition required the visitors to enact different emotions with their face movements. Visitor's negative experiences were mainly related on the situations where the screen face 'misunderstood' the intended emotion, for example a participant felt embarrassed when she smiled at the screen and the screen face started to cry. Feelings of confusion and embarrassment were reported in such situations.

These examples illustrate both practical and emotional implications, as they prevented the visitors from interacting fully with the artworks by creating additional demands upon their own performance. The visitors also wanted to know in advance what was going to happen in the interaction, and they requested more information from the staff members or by carefully reading the information provided. Some of the visitors stated that they wanted to look at other people interacting before they were willing to 'give it a go', to avoid embarrassment of doing it 'wrong'. This scenario signifies people feeling incompetence in comparison to other visitors. These examples also relate back to Bourdieu and Darbel and these notions signify that in public perception there is still an idea of 'correct way' to participate and interact with artwork. Technological incompetence was also reported as being one of the factors that made the visitors feeling hindered to take part. Several respondents reported feelings of embarrassment, fear, shyness and anxiety, which can be labelled as social emotions (see more: Hochschild 1983, Bendelow and Williams 1998) or 'self-conscious emotions' (Tangney and Fischer

Fig. 3: Emotional feedback. 'Chameleon' (09) by Tina Gonsalves. Fabrica Gallery, Brighton. October 2009. Photo: Philip Carr.

1995) that occur when people reflect upon their own behaviour or status in social interaction.

CONCLUSION

The changed forms of interaction are particularly evident in DIA exhibitions. The visitor's response to the exhibits forms a part of its communicative power and creates the meaningful experiences for the visitor. The artworks and installations on display in exhibition areas are seen as incomplete without the agency of the visitor, whose active engagement brings the artwork 'alive'. The interactivity pressures the visitors to the new performative actions as they engage with such exhibits. Ironically, interactive artwork objectifies the visitor by forcing each of them to become part of the artwork, a spectacle to look at and a possession of the artist. The visitors' interaction becomes a performance that is observed by other passing visitors and staff, which may leave them feeling hindered or evaluated. This could bring in the concerns

104 about misunderstanding the intended meanings of the artwork and feelings of lacking the cultural competence. Digital technology transforms the norms as the visitor is present in the exhibition area through sensors and his or her performance could be tracked or even displayed with artworks. The positive museum experience arises from successful interaction with artwork and fellow visitors i.e. feelings of competence. Drawing from social theory of symbolic interactionism, I have noted that the situationally emerging emotions are interconnected with increased performativity; instead of experiencing or perceiving arts the visitors are observing their own performances and those of fellow visitors. The performative turn in museum visits will change the way visitors perceive and experiencing arts. Museum and galleries want to attract more visitors and wider visitor groups, but by doing so they should also pay attention what the existing visitors do and how they act upon the exhibition area. The visitors may enjoy interactive artworks, but in this regard more support, knowledge and background information is required in order to build a truly exciting DIA exhibition.

NOTES

1. WINES3 (Wired and Wireless Intelligent Networked Systems 3) is a research project funded by EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, UK). More information about the project mentioned in this paper: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sociology/research/researchprojects/pervasivecomputing>
2. All the images are taken with the permission of the museum.

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