Digital Synesthesia

A Model for the Aesthetics of Digital Art

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Sensory experiences are at the forefront of cultural analysis today, overturning linguistic and textual analysis and supporting both experiential and phenomenological inquiry. Embodiment theories attempt to understand the mind as a set of physical processes derived throughout the brain and body of a human, which ultimately serve his or her action in the physical world. Embodiment is multisensory and results from effects of visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory cues; it is an immersive entanglement through and with context and environment. The body carries time into the experience of place, and landscape and past and present fold in upon each other.

Embodiment offers us a strategy to revive the “synesthetic project” in the trajectory of the post-human and hyper-virtual, and allow it to cohere with the promise of “the art to come.” “Synesthetic art historically refers to multi-sensory experiments in the genres of visual music, music visualization, audiovisual art, abstract film, and intermedia. Distinct from neuroscience, the concept of synesthesia in the arts is regarded as the simultaneous perception of multiple stimuli in one gestalt experience” (Wikipedia). These “multi-sensory” experiments were a hallmark of art practices that emerged in the 50s and 60s, and were an ineluctable inspiration for artists who were looking for new...
avenues of expression and experience. For example, earlier endeavors in “visual music” such as Alexander Scriabin’s color organ Chromola were given new life in the liquid light shows that surfaced in the early 1960s as an accompaniment to electronic music and avant-garde theater performances and were later adapted for performances of rock or psychedelic music. Furthermore, the artists Mark Boyle and Joan Hills took the legacy of Piero Manzoni’s seminal explorations of the conjunction between art production and human production (Merda d’artista, Fiato d’artista) to directly infuse these liquid light shows with their own bodily fluids.

In the installation Black Airground (1968) at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art, Jeffrey Shaw used a first generation sound reactive light controller to modulate three 1000-watt light bulbs at various frequencies of sound input, so that the illumination of the exhibition space was entirely dependent on vocalization from the visitors. This was an expression of a further and more fundamental development of the contemporary “multi-sensory” experience whereby “interactivity” and the engagement of the viewer via various technological prostheses created a dynamic conjunction of between the artwork and the bodily action of the viewer. A seminal work in this respect was Julio Le Parc’s Glasses for a Different Vision (1965), which proposed the optical prosthesis as an interactive apparatus to re-view the world, and thereby prefigures the now-emerging ubiquity of VR goggles such as the Oculus Rift and Google Glass. And even more so than “virtual reality”, it is “augmented reality” (the audio and/or visual conjunction of real and virtual elements) that signals one of the most compulsive and eloquent expressions of “the simultaneous perception of multiple stimuli in one gestalt experience” in our time. Jeffrey Shaw explored the generative capacity of AR in numerous artworks including Virtual Sculpture (1981), Inventer La Terre (1986), and The Golden Call (1994), and underlying each of these works was the principle of the viewer’s embodied engagement as a necessary precondition for a synesthetic conjunction of perception and experience. That precondition also drove the formulation of his earlier audience participation inflatable “eventstructures” (Waterwalk 1969) and “expanded cinema situations” (CorpoCinema 1967) which were manifestly directed at incorporating the viewer’s body as being integral to the expression and operation of the artwork.

This precondition remains central to Jeffrey Shaw and Sarah Kenderdine’s recent joint practice, albeit as a concomitant to research that focuses on strategies of immersive interactive visualization. In this respect we can single out one particular installation, Place-HAMPI (2006), to elucidate the dynamic “multi-sensory” conjunction that emerges from the conjunction of 3D panoramic visualization with the performative engagement of an audience, which is actualized by the unique design of a technological apparatus. Assuming the reader is already familiar with this installation (http://www.place-hampi.museum/) we focus on a visitor survey done by Anita Kocsis during its exhibition at the Martin Gropius-Bau in Berlin in 2008. In this particular questionnaire, the visitors were offered a simple outline drawing of a human figure and asked to put marks on it in response to the question “where on your body did you experience this work?”

Figs. 1–6 show a selection of the responses that were received. Fig. 7 is a composite drawing of all visitor responses, which substantiate the notion of embodiment as being at the heart of the multi-sensory experiment.

In his book Body and Image: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology (2008), Christopher Tilley contrasts iconographic approaches to the study of representation with a perspective based on kinesthetic enquiry. “Iconographic approaches … grant the primacy to the human mind as a producer of the meaning of the images through sensory perception. It is the mind that responds in a disembodied way. Kinesthetic approaches, by contrast, stress the role of the carnal human body. The general claim is that the manner in which we perceive, and therefore relate to visual imagery, is fundamentally related to the kinds of bodies we have. The body both limits and constrains and enables us to perceive and react to imagery in specific embodied ways.”
One could say that IN_S!DE VIEW is an allegory for the multi-sensory encounter between the body and the perceptual imaginary, where the imaginary itself embodies a further encounter between the natural and made world. In this respect it contributes to the paradoxical connection between the concepts of nature and culture proposed by Vilem Flusser (Natural: Mind, 1967), by setting up an assembly of confrontations and concurrences – amongst others between tongue and apparatus, between mouth and eye, between stone and vegetation, steel and conflagration, form and dissolution, purpose and affliction, past and present, biology and machine, the gratuitous and the necessary, between survival and ataxia. Nature-society is seen as a complex entanglement of people-things, here played out in an embodied theater of hybrid realities induced through immersive display systems. IN_S!DE VIEW concedes with a pataphysical riposte to these technological affordances that now constitute contemporaneity’s diametric spaces of phenomenological encounter.

Figs. 1-6
These are a selection of the responses that were received.
Fig. 7
Co-Designing New Media Spaces, Anita Kocsis, 2007

THEORIES ON DIGITAL SYNESTHESIA
Jeffrey Shaw / Sarah Kenderdine

Artistic media: Immersive installation
Primary sensory modalities: Orality (Tastel, Touch, Vision, Kinesthetics
2015

"In_side a pataphysical allegory for the multi-sensory
encounter between the body and the perceptual imaginary, between nature, manufacture and ataxia."

"The huge snake roots, the vaster / serpent arms fallen / octopus over the roof / in a square courtyard – curved / roofcombs looked Dragon-back- / stone-scaled / As frail as stone is, this harder wooden / life crushing them // with the cricket-glare and parrot / squads walking across the roof/ – last nite full moon in misted heaven / and slow girl dance bent elbow and insp[ì]ring / fingers snaking it thru the middle – “
(Allen Ginsberg: "Angkor Wat", 1963)

"In forging the narrative of things, senses are separated to make sense of the myriad impressions" (Virginia Woolf). In IN\_SIDE VIEW senses are senselessly conjoined, the world put back together, "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms" (ibid), seeing oneself as another, in side out, in the circle of confusion\(^1\), amongst trees / stone-scaled / snake roots // eyed / tongue in cheek / switchback // past / future! / present // cable / tie // wrap / around // heady / giddy / techy / tacky / vroom // memory / aromatic / terror // ruination / fervid bedlam. The where-with-all in\_side a pataphysical allegory for the multi-sensory encounter between the body and the perceptual imaginary, between nature, manufacture and ataxia.

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\(^1\) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circle_of_confusion

\[ Application\ space: \] Leith Chan
\[ Hardware: \] Samsung Gear VR,
Conceptus tongue switch

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