Performative Space – architecture beyond media?

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Abstract

When the space of design and architecture becomes interactive it becomes performative – you have to perform to use the potential of the space. The performative act is pointing at the border between presentation and representation and thereby dragging the media beyond the screen of representation. When you present you have to immerse your body and spirit, and the media goes post-medium in danger of blurring the balance of will, power and possession. Seduction becomes an operational strategy for the performative space.

The performative space as breeding ground for innovation

The architectural practise is part of the contemporary cyber culture that thrills through the elusive space of the digital foundation of production. Cyber culture is a whole new culture energized by electricity that is transformed via bits to information patterns. Culture begins with turning on the switch, and ends when the switch is turned off. No doubt this is a unique opportunity for a new and expansible architectural practise. New social relationships are waiting to be imagined and visualised, yet the new space is not empty, nor is it void or a vacuum. One could argue that social relations are the foundation of space. Information patterns and productive behavioural modes has entered the endless electronic space, where humans has to perform their every day life.

The performative is dealing with the spaces of identity, power, creativity, representation, seduction and desire. Applying the performative thought into the process of design suggests interactive spaces based on the interplay between digital and physical spaces. A performative space is, ultimately, a user oriented or user required space. The inhabitant of space is understood as a participant more than a visitor, more using the space than being in space. The implementation of information technology has set out explicitly the understanding of space as loaded with information. Henry Lefevbre uses the term *social space* to bring out the fact that space can never be neutral nor innocent, but exists as a composition of factors.

> *A social space cannot be adequately accounted for either by nature (climate, site) or by its previous history. Nor does the growth of the forces of production give rise to any direct causal fashion to a particular space or a particular time. Mediations, and mediators, have to be taken into consideration: the action of groups, factors within knowledge, within ideology, or within the domain of representations. Social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information.* (Lefevbre 1991)

With computer technology the diversity and complexity of space has been conspicuous. The ways we are exposed to objects of media has fundamentally changed whit the rise of computing. Different kinds of media are somehow brought into the same level, where the relations between non-hierarchical elements becomes essential.

> *Such 'objects' are thus not only things but also relations. As objects, they possess discernible peculiarities, contour and form. Social labour transforms them, rearranging their positions within spatio-temporal configurations without necessarily affecting their materiality, their natural state.* (Lefevbre 1991)

The foundation of design and architecture becomes interactive and related to relations. The human body and mind becomes part of this network of relations within – humans has to perform in an information-loaded and non-linear space. You have to perform to use the potential of space. The challenge of designing architectural space based on the described conditions is, to optimise the quality and likelihood for interaction, contemplation and play to occur. The notion of performance might be a helpful approach in the process of organizing a non-linear environment where the correlation of body and space is of importance, where inhabitants both generate and become an integral part of the environment as they engage with it. When activated by the interaction between the user and space the environment exists simultaneously as a durational 'performance' and an immersive installation environment.

Immersion – Eversion

The medium of immersive virtual space is not merely a conceptual space but also a experienced physical space, due to the potential of three-dimensional extension and envelopment. As such it is an entirely new kind of space that is without precedent. The immersive virtual space is a spatial and temporal arena, wherein mental models or abstract constructs of the world can be given virtual embodiment in three dimensions, and then artificially and synaesthetically explored and operated through interaction. But in the words of the American architect Marcos Novak the immersive element of the digital space is not a 'complete conceptual apparatus' (Novak 1999). A complementary concept is missing, a complementary description of the outpouring of virtuality into the physical space.

> *"Eversion" is the term I employ to describe a motion complementary to the familiar notion of immersion. Whereas "immersion" describes a vector moving from ordinary to virtual space, "eversion" describes the counter-vector of the virtual leaking out into the actual. Eversion predicts that the content of augmented reality and ubiquitous computing will be the population of the physical world with phenomena and entities first encountered in virtual space.* (Marcos Novak 2001)
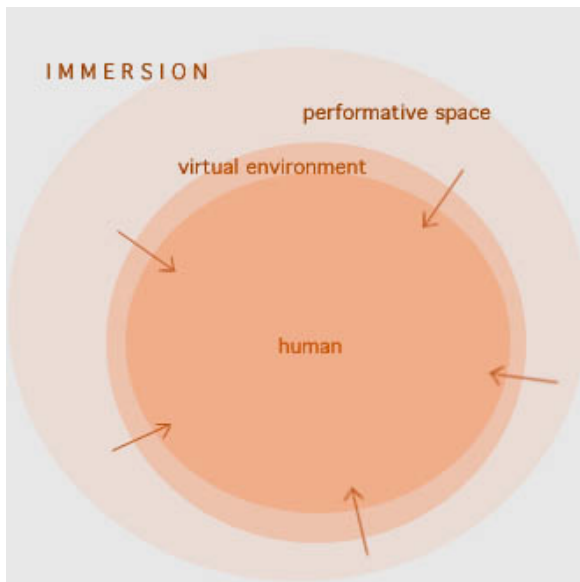
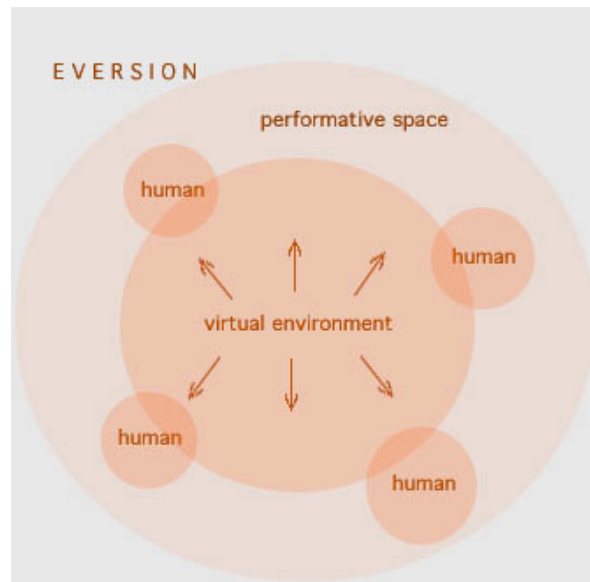Figure 2: Immersion describes a vector moving from ordinary to virtual space.

Figure 3: Eversion describes the counter-vector of the virtual leaking out into the actual.

By introducing the term eversion Novak emphasizes the importance of trans-coding between digital and analogue space. We cannot fully immerse into digital space without slipping our embodiment. But even though the body is encircled by a virtual environment it is not possible to abandon the physical space – the interplay between immersion and eversion continuously occur, and the body is present between this bipolar constellation of mental processes in a continuous variation of density. A challenge of designprocesses seems to be mastering the virtuality of physical space as well as the physics of virtual space.

Post-Media

The performative act, closely connected to real time events, within this field of eversion and immersion is pointing at the border between presentation and representation, and is thereby dragging media in general beyond the screen of representation or beyond Baudrillard's world of simulacra (Baudrillard 1979). The performative act requires a mental investment in the process that is balancing on the edge between presenting one self and representing an other self. In the digital world the seen is not only a cultural signifier of abstract ideas, feelings and emotions. It is also an unmentionable number of interactions of identities, values, representations and relations, which appear visually on the computer screen through the means of changeable elements based on bits. The representation of creative elements as architecture or inhabitable environments becomes operational, paradoxical, metamorphic and nomadic – it becomes presentation. The act of presenting forces the inhabitant to leave the secure and distant seat of the voyeur and immerse the body and spirit in a boundless media that goes post-medium in danger of blurring the balance of will, power and possession.

Felix Guattari uses the post-media state as a possibility for mankind to walk away from earlier paths where *power over exterior territorialities* or *deterritorialized modes of knowledge about human activities and machines* are controlling sociality. When those paths are abandoned in favour of a path of *creativity proper to subjective mutations* the social space *"…. takes consistency in the direction of self-reference – carrying us from the consensual media era to the dissensual postmedia era – will each*

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be able to assume his or her processual potential and, perhaps, transform this planet – a living hell for over three quarters of its population – into a universe of creative enchantments" (Guattari 1992)

Post-media practices as the ubiquitous computer technology have swallowed any media on its widespread distribution tour. Post-media is a practice that knows no boundaries or discipline. You can organise and create within post-media but not control it. It is a social practice of cultural creation made entirely for and on its own terms. It is driven by desire, intuition and curiosity. Within post-media practice there is an intensified redefinition of relationships between individual and collective means, private and social spheres and terms of success and failure. Judging the values of individual versus collective, private versus social and good versus bad looses its relevance. Users become producers and all elements are of their own genre, operating in an expanding physic and virtual space, where no sense of a specific person, group or event is taking the lead. The post-media state is a practice of addition without accumulation (Slater 1998).
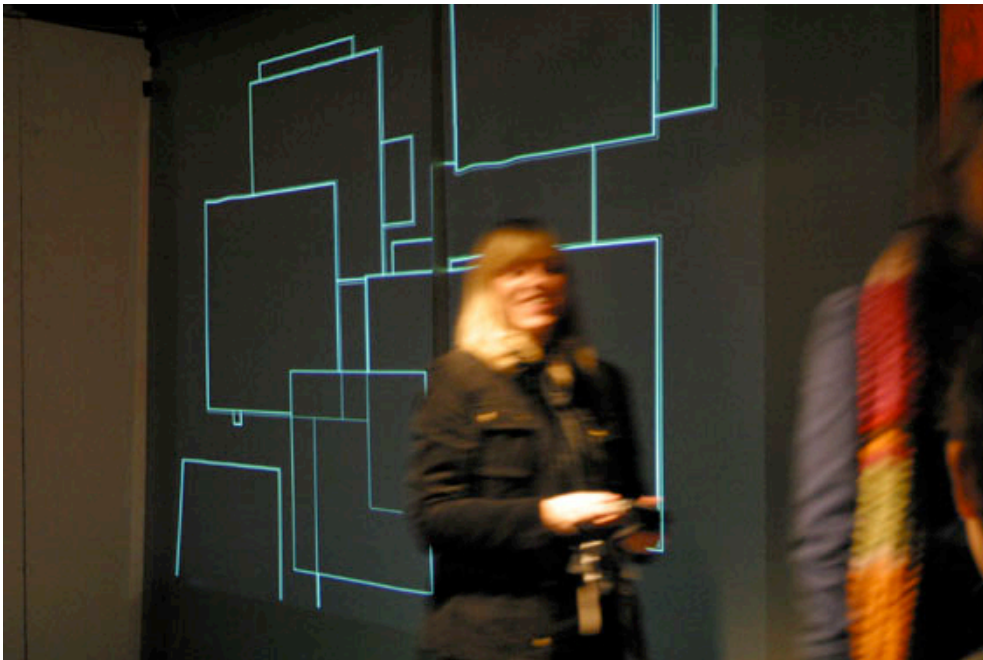

Figure 4: People are interacting in a space where many former separate medias are present. Movement, music, images, video and game are mixed together and have become inseparable. The different medias are beyond matter – what matters is the interaction and relations defining the real time performative space.

As defined by Guattari post-media is in opposition to the mass media and is characterised by small, diverse, distributed networks of operators who make use of the new, digital means of production and distribution (Guattari 1992). Post-media practice grows out of the networked activities where former boundaries caused by the use of different media has disappeared from the epicentre. Difference is not eliminated but pleased as uniqueness in concept and not in media – media is beyond matter. Post-media practice is characterised by a critical attitude towards the media in use, acting in lateral rather than vertical configurations, and an acceptance of the processuality and continuous transformation of context and practice. In my opinion it is crucial to take these conditions in consideration and use them as a creative, artistic and technical tool in the designing process.

The boundaries of the end of one act and the beginning of the next is blurred by post-media that becomes a pre-orgasmic state of mind where the catharsis never occurs, and the fear of the emptiness on the other side of redemption exceeds the lack of purification.

The Cyborg as human engagement in space
By introducing thoughts about the cyborg I want to emphasize the importance of the body, when speaking about the performative space. The cyborg is connected to the history of representing the body. Bodily representations has always to some extend idealized the body often with artificial elements. When the cyborg at first was created the most important artificial elements were those of the machine, why it seems natural to work with a constellation of body and machine. (The same sort of connection between human and leading artificial elements was introduced by da Vinci in his study of human proportions)

Nowadays the network, or the abstract machine of relations, has substituted the mechanical machine as leading artificial device. The matrix of cyberspace holds the potential for new dimensions of time and space, where access is abundant and the possibility for idealizing our body by merging with this matrix waits around the corner. Consequently, everyone is welcome to dwell inside cyberspace, under the condition of a free choice to change into cyborgs. The performative space and thereby the performative body choosing to become a cyborg is free of the limiting and defining qualities of time and space. This optimistic view, however, must be seen in the light of the artificial as a crucial element of the cyborg that signifies alienation and exploitation. The human drive to idealize our body holds within impossibility – a desire to fulfil an ever present feeling of insufficiency. This illusion of a perfect body, through the presence of the artificial, is a manifestations of an unstable field of desire, employed to express the basic longing that functions as a ground of the production of bodily images and manners of visibility, representation and performance.

The other element of the cyborg is the human. The human embodies prospects for contradicting the artificial, alienating aspect of the cyborg by exposing and negating the oppressive aspect of its existence. The human side is the conscience, able to tame the embodiment of the alien and bring it to a more humanistic comprehension and behaviour by exposing. With the merging of human and the abstract machine, based on relations, hybridization, or the symbiosis between humans and complicated 'tools', seems to have greater potential than ever.

But again a balance of needs, power, desire and consciousness of the impossible fulfilment have to be maintained in order to take Guattari's path of *creativity proper to subjective mutations*. Subjective mutations could easily be driven by less controllable abilities than creativity – possession or seduction for instance.

The desire to be seduced
To be seduced is to explore and maintain a pre-orgasmic situation. Seduction can most easily be seen when things do not try to confuse themselves with the real, but instead use play and artifice to mimic and exceed the effects of the real. Things are seductive when they undermine the apparent factuality of the world, by the illusion of the real. Illusionism makes one think there is more reality than there

really is, and an excess of appearance is created with no underlying reality - in signs with no reality behind, the secret of seduction lies (Baudrillard 1980).

Seduction is destiny, anatomy is not, nor is politics, says Baudrillard. (Baudrillard 1980) Seduction is the remains of a magic fateful world – a risky, vertiginous and predestined world. Simulation or the simulacra is only a disenchanted version of the enchanted seduction. The seduction is able to penetrate the screen that is blinding the real even though seduction is a surface play. In this post-media state one can argument that substitution fills the place of a former simulation through media and thereby give way to the enhanced seduction beyond simulation. It offers opportunity to go with the seducer all the way to the end.

This desire for the end is the desire to be seduced, a flow of pure desire and a wish even to erase desire. It is a dream of being before or outside of language, within a symbiotic state escaping into and away from will, a dream of non-differentiation where the desire is on anything or nothing at all. Left behind is only a door into absence and relief from oneself. At the same time the desire for the end is a desire to return to the perfect authorship with a perfect empowerment over a given process. Nostalgia is able to bring forth the desire to be seduced, it is a sense of loss, longing and desire for something that is missing – something inside our memory and imagination that once was there – something that left a bodily trace of memory. Nostalgia feeds an intensity of emotion, because it is a real want. Applying a common hallucinatory memory between the performing body and space bring forth some sort of desire very close to nostalgia.

The creation of technology show a wish to be seduced, a need to feel intensity of emotion, which, turnes nostalgia into a desire to be seduced, and a desire to lose control, because the conception of 'the real' is not what genuine reality is. The reality of pure seduction is engagement in all action, in the ability to spiral out of control and not care, and to be daring and go with the desire to be seduced.

Intuition as strategy
The French philosopher Henri Bergson introduced the term duration as the nerve of life (Bergson 1889). Duration is marked by an utopian notion of consciousness in which multiple elements are harmonized in unification. It is the conjugal union of memory and sensation, reason and intuition.

Bergson argues that knowledge of the world is cultivated more through the intuition than through rational, analytical investigation. He argues that from intuition one can pass to analysis, but not from analysis to intuition. This distinction between analysis and intuition brings out a contrast between two ways of understanding the world. The first is characterised by the intellect which approaches events externally from some point of view alien to it. The intellect uses symbols to express its findings, and yields knowledge that is always relative. The second understanding is the process of intuition, whereby the world is approached and identified by a kind of intellectual sympathy. Bergson insists that we must not confuse intuition with mere feeling or emotion, but look upon intuition as the basis for intellectual and emotional processes. Intuition is rather an act, or a series of acts, of direct participation in the immediacy of experience, and thereby an important player in a one-to-one real time performative space. Bergson introduces a concept of the intellect's desire for symbolic expression through the construction of boundaries. Because in order to represent intuition's participation in the immediacy of

experience the best intentions we still have at the moment of perception is to see a given space as a whole, or as a territory defined by its boundaries. After intuition we grow passionate, tragic or distant with intellect and emotions – dividing the perceived (Bergson 1889).

Bergson argues against the distribution of time into single measurable moments, proposing instead the notion of time as one continuous process. Time itself is measured according to the eternal cycles of the sun and moon. The work of the intellect dividing time into seconds, minutes and hours imposes boundaries that lead to the death of the timeless moment and conscious participation in the immediacy of experience as perceived by the intuition (Bergson 1889). Here the paradox of human thinking exists in our simultaneous desires to pursue both the uncontrollable flow and the perfection of pure control. The intention to understand in every detail by dividing, cutting, and analysing exists along with a desire to let go of detailed knowledge and look at the world in a broader perspective. Approaching the events we wish to understand (and through understanding, to posses), we attempt to linger in the moment between desire and desire fulfilled.

Seductive design
Seduction is both asymmetric and reciprocal. It is asymmetric since if there is a seducer there is also one seduced, who is captured by the former. It is reciprocal because the seducer and seduced has to interplay to sustain the magic and is both, to some extent, seduced. But asymmetry and reciprocity appears seldom in their purest form, most cases will be situated between the two extremes and evolve in time within the range defined by them. In fact seduction, in general, is not instantaneous, rather it is progressing over time.

Seduction is made of gestures, acts, phrases and silences by creating a special atmosphere in the relation with the seduces, in order to make the seduced feel different and better than before. Seducing is not about sharing lives. A professional seducer may fail, not only because the person to be seduced resists, but also because the seducer becomes to engaged in the relation beyond the original intention.

In approaching a seductive space, one has to have in mind that the design process is, in fact, creating among its participants a special relation that couples them together. Through a performative event the participants feel that being together they do and understand something that they could not have done and understood without the others (others includes space as player). In this relation, progressing and growing in time, users and technology play asymmetric roles, but a certain amount of reciprocity is needed. When a performative system is developed the space and technology has to be engaged to the project and seduce the users, since only seducing can create a system that meets their needs and expectations. But, conversely, if the space does not 'listen' to the users, if the space do not 'understand' their viewpoint, if the space is not 'enriched' by the time spent, the system is exposed to failure. The art of seduction must be taken into consideration in the design and development of a computer-based performative system.

The development of new technology forces designers to imagine new scenarios of use, need, interaction and performance without any external reference point guiding their design. Like in any creative activity with aesthetic value, the quality of the designed artefact is a subjective matter based on intuition, sensibility and interpreting user needs and desires. For a design to be convincing it has to

seduce the users, and be ready to be seduced by them in a real-time environment where mass-media is transformed into subjective post-media.

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