



LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC

VOL 18 NO 3 VOLUME EDITORS LANFRANCO ACETI, JANIS JEFFERIES,

IRINI PAPADIMITRIOU / EDITORS JONATHAN MUNRO AND ÖZDEN ŞAHİN

Touch and Go is published in collaboration with Watermans and Goldsmiths College in occasion of the Watermans' International Festival of Digital Art, 2012, which coincides with the Olympics and Paralympics in London. The issue explores the impact of technology in art as well as the meaning, possibilities and issues around human interaction and engagement. *Touch and Go* investigates interactivity and participation, as well as light art and new media approaches to the public space as tools that foster engagement and shared forms of participation.



TOUCH AND GO

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Leonardo Electronic Almanac

Volume 18 Issue 3

August 2012

ISSN 1071-4391

ISBN 978-1-906897-18-5

The ISBN is provided by Goldsmiths, University of London.

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Leonardo, the International Society for the Arts,
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Leonardo Electronic Almanac is published by:

Leonardo/ISAST
211 Sutter Street, suite 501
San Francisco, CA 94108
USA

Leonardo Electronic Almanac (LEA) is a project of Leonardo/
The International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technol-
ogy. For more information about Leonardo/ISAST's publica-
tions and programs, see <http://www.leonardo.info> or contact
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Leonardo Electronic Almanac is produced by
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Touch and Go

VOLUME EDITORS

LANFRANCO ACETI, JANIS JEFFERIES, IRINI PAPADIMITRIOU

EDITORS

JONATHAN MUNRO, ÖZDEN ŞAHİN

Watermans International Festival of Digital Art, 2012

Touch and Go is a title that I chose together with Irini Papadimitriou for this LEA special issue. On my part with this title I wanted to stress several aspects that characterize that branch of contemporary art in love with interaction, be it delivered by allowing the audience to touch the art object or by becoming part of a complex electronic sensory experience in which the artwork may somehow respond and touch back in return.

With the above statement, I wanted to deliberately avoid the terminology 'interactive art' in order to not fall in the trap of characterizing art that has an element of interaction as principally defined by the word interactive; as if this were the only way to describe contemporary art that elicits interactions and responses between the artist, the audience and the art objects.

I remember when I was at Central Saint Martins writing a paper on the sub-distinctions within contemporary media arts and tracing the debates that distinguished between electronic art, robotic art, new media art, digital art, computer art, computer based art, internet art, web art... At some point of that analysis and argument I realized that the common thread that characterized all of these sub-genres of aesthetic representations was the word art and it did not matter (at least not that much in my opinion) if the manifestation was material or immaterial, conceptual or physical, electronic or painterly, analogue or digital.

I increasingly felt that this rejection of the technical component would be necessary in order for the electronic-robotic-new-media-digital-computer-based-internet art object to re-gain entry within the field of fine art. Mine was a reaction to an hyper-fragmented

and indeed extensive and in-depth taxonomy that seemed to have as its main effect that of pushing these experimental and innovative art forms – through the emphasis of their technological characterization – away from the fine arts and into a ghetto of isolation and self-reference. Steve Dietz's question – *Why Have There Been No Great Net Artists?*¹ – remains unanswered, but I believe that there are changes that are happening – albeit slowly – that will see the sensorial and technical elements become important parts of the aesthetic aspects of the art object as much as the brush technique of Vincent Willem van Gogh or the sculptural fluidity of Henry Moore.

Hence the substitution in the title of this special issue of the word interactivity with the word touch, with the desire of looking at the artwork as something that can be touched in material and immaterial ways, interfered with, interacted with and 'touched and reprocessed' with the help of media tools but that can also 'touch' us back in return, both individually and collectively. I also wanted to stress the fast interrelation between the art object and the consumer in a commodified relationship that is based on immediate engagement and fast disengagement, touch and go. But a fast food approach is perhaps incorrect if we consider as part of the interactivity equation the viewers' mediated processes of consumption and memorization of both the image and the public experience.

Nevertheless, the problems and issues that interactivity and its multiple definitions and interpretations in the 20th and 21st century raise cannot be overlooked, as much as cannot be dismissed the complex set of emotive and digital interactions that can be set in motion by artworks that reach and engage large groups of people within the public space. These interactions

generate public shows in which the space of the city becomes the background to an experiential event that is characterized by impermanence and memorization. It is a process in which thousands of people engage, capture data, memorize and at times memorialize the event and re-process, mash-up, re-disseminate and re-contextualize the images within multiple media contexts.

The possibility of capturing, viewing and understanding the entire mass of data produced by these aesthetic sensory experiences becomes an impossible task due to easy access to an unprecedented amount of media and an unprecedented multiplication of data, as Lev Manovich argues.²

In *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds* Timothy Murray writes that "the retrospective nature of repetition and digital coding—how initial images, forms, and narratives are refigured through their contemplative re-citation and re-presentation—consistently inscribes the new media in the memory and memorization of its antecedents, cinema and video."³

The difference between memorization and memorialization may be one of the further aspects in which the interaction evolves – beyond the artwork but still linked to it. The memory of the event with its happening and performative elements, its traces and records both official and unofficial, the re-processing and mash-ups; all of these elements become part of and contribute to a collective narrative and pattern of engagement and interaction.

These are issues and problems that the artists and writers of this LEA special issue have analyzed from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds, offering to the reader the opportunity of a glimpse into the complexity of today's art interactions within the contemporary social and cultural media landscapes.

Touch and Go is one of those issues that are truly born from a collaborative effort and in which all editors have contributed and worked hard in order to

deliver a documentation of contemporary art research, thought and aesthetic able to stand on the international scene.

For this reason I wish to thank Prof. Janis Jefferies and Irini Papadimitriou together with Jonathan Munro and Özden Şahin for their efforts. The design is by Deniz Cem Önduygu who as LEA's Art Director continues to deliver brilliantly designed issues.

Lanfranco Aceti

Editor in Chief, *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*
Director, Kasa Gallery



1. "Nevertheless, there is this constant apparently inherent need to try and categorize and classify. In *Beyond Interface*, an exhibition I organized in 1998, I 'datamined' ten categories: net.art, storytelling, socio-cultural, biographical, tools, performance, analog-hybrid, interactive art, interfacers + artificers. David Ross, in his lecture here at the CAD-RE Laboratory for New Media, suggested 21 characteristics of net art. Stephen Wilson, a pioneering practitioner, has a virtual – albeit well-ordered – jungle of categories. Rhizome has developed a list of dozens of keyword categories for its ArtBase. Lev Manovich, in his *Computing Culture: Defining New Media Genres* symposium focused on the categories of database, interface, spatialization, and navigation. To my mind, there is no question that such categorization is useful, especially in a distributed system like the Internet. But, in truth, to paraphrase Barnett Newman, "ornithology is for the birds what categorization is for the artist." Perhaps especially at a time of rapid change and explosive growth of the underlying infrastructure and toolsets, it is critical that description follow practice and not vice versa." Steve Dietz, *Why Have There Been No Great Net Artists? Web Walker Daily* 28, April 4, 2000, <http://bit.ly/QJEWIY> (accessed July 1, 2012).
2. This link to a Google+ conversation is an example of this argument on massive data and multiple media engagements across diverse platforms: <http://bit.ly/pGgDsS> (accessed July 1, 2012).
3. Timothy Murray, *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 138.

Touch and Go: The Magic Touch Of Contemporary Art

It is with some excitement that I write this preface to Watermans International Festival of Digital Art, 2012. It has been a monumental achievement by the curator Irini Papadimitriou to pull together 6 groundbreaking installations exploring interactivity, viewer participation, collaboration and the use or importance of new and emerging technologies in Media and Digital Art.

From an initial call in December 2010 over 500 submissions arrived in our inboxes in March 2011. It was rather an overwhelming and daunting task to review, look and encounter a diverse range of submissions that were additionally asked to reflect on the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Submissions came from all over the world, from Africa and Korea, Austria and Australia, China and the UK, Latvia and Canada and ranged from the spectacularly complicated to the imaginatively humorous. Of course each selector, me, onedotzero, London's leading digital media innovation organization, the curatorial team at Athens Video Art Festival and Irini herself, had particular favorites and attachments but the final grouping I believe does reflect a sense of the challenges and opportunities that such an open competition offers. It is though a significant move on behalf of the curator that each work is given the Watermans space for 6 weeks which enables people to take part in the cultural activities surrounding each installation, fulfilling, promoting and incorporating the Cultural Olympiad themes and values 'inspiration, participation and creativity.'

Some, like Gail Pearce's *Going with the Flow* was made because rowing at the 2012 Olympics will be held near Egham and it was an opportunity to respond and create an installation offering the public a more interactive way of rowing, while remaining on dry land, not only watching but also participating and having an effect on the images by their actions. On the other hand, Michele Barker and Anna Munster's collaborative *Hocus Pocus* will be a 3-screen interactive artwork that uses illusionistic and performative aspects of magical tricks to explore human perception, senses and movement. As they have suggested, "Magic – like interactivity – relies on shifting the perceptual relations between vision and movement, focusing and diverting attention at key moments. Participants will become aware of this relation as their perception catches up with the audiovisual illusion(s)" (artists statement, February 2011). Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi and Emeka Ogboh are artists who also work collaboratively and working under name of One-Room Shack. *UNITY* is built like a navigable labyrinth to reflect the idea of unity in diversity that the Games signify. In an increasingly globalized world they are interested in the ways in which the discourse of globalization opens up and closes off discursive space whereas Suguru Goto is a musician who creates real spaces that are both metaphysical and spiritual. *Cymatics* is a kinetic sculpture and sound installation. Wave patterns are created on liquid as a result of sound vibrations generated by visitors. Another sound work is Phoebe Hui's *Granular Graph*, a sound instrument about musical gesture and its notation.


Audiences are invited to become a living pendulum. The apparatus itself can create geometric images to represent harmonies and intervals in musical scales. Finally, Joseph Farbrook's *Strata-caster* explores the topography of power, prestige, and position through an art installation, which exists in the virtual world of Second Life, a place populated by over 50,000 people at any given moment.

Goldsmiths, as the leading academic partner, has been working closely with Watermans in developing a series of seminars and events to coincide with the 2012 Festival. I am the artistic director of Goldsmiths Digital Studios (GDS), which is dedicated to multi-disciplinary research and practice across arts, technologies and cultural studies. GDS engages in a number of research projects and provides its own postgraduate teaching through the PhD in Arts and Computational Technology, the MFA in Computational Studio Arts and the MA in Computational Art. Irini is also an alumni of the MFA in *Curating* (Goldsmiths, University of London) and it has been an exceptional pleasure working with her generating ideas and platforms that can form an artistic legacy long after the Games and the Festival have ended. The catalogue and detailed blogging/documentation and social networking will be one of our responsibilities but another of mine is to ensure that the next generation of practitioners test the conventions of the white cube gallery, reconsider and reevaluate artistic productions, their information structure and significance; engage in the museum sector whilst at the same time challenging the spaces for the reception of 'public' art. In addition those who wish to increase an audience's interaction and enjoyment of their work have a firm grounding in artistic practice and computing skills.

Consequently, I am particularly excited that the 2012 Festival Watermans will introduce a mentoring scheme for students interested in participatory interactive digital / new media work. The mentoring scheme involves video interviews with the 6 selected artists and their work, briefly introduced earlier in this preface, and discussions initiated by the student. As so often debated in our seminars at Goldsmiths and

elsewhere, what are the expectations of the audience, the viewer, the spectator, and the engager? How do exhibitions and festival celebrations revisit the traditional roles of performer/artist and audiences? Can they facilitate collaborative approaches to creativity? How do sound works get curated in exhibitions that include interactive objects, physical performances and screens? What are the issues around technical support? How are the ways of working online and off, including collaboration and social networking, affecting physical forms of display and publishing?

As I write this in Wollongong during the wettest New South Wales summer for 50 years, I want to end with a quote used by the Australia, Sydney based conjurers Michele Barker and Anna Munster

Illusions occur when the physical reality does not match the perception. 

The world is upside down in so many alarming ways but perhaps 2012 at Watermans will offer some momentary ideas of unity in diversity that the Games signify and *UNITY* proposes. Such anticipation and such promise!

Janis Jefferies

*Professor of Visual Arts
Goldsmiths
University of London, UK*

23rd Dec 2011, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia

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1. Stephen L. Malnik and Susana Martinez-Conde, *Sleights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals about our Everyday Deceptions* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2010), 8.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Going with the Flow



GAIL PEARCE

Going with the Flow, Gail Pearce, 2010, interactive installation.

in conversation with

Jonathan Munro

Department of Computing, Goldsmiths,
University of London

Jonathan Munro: Your work includes a rowing boat that people can sit and row, what was the initial starting point for the project, had this come about directly because of the London Olympics coming here or does it have a longer history?

Gail Pearce: The idea for *Going with the Flow* came in a response to a call from the Cultural Olympiad in 2010. Royal Holloway is based in Egham, where the campus, as part of the University of London, is to be used as a residential center for the rowers of the Olympics. At the time I knew little about rowing, but



Going with the Flow, Gail Pearce, 2010, interactive installation.

a chance overhearing of part of a conversation with a colleague, Kishore Verma, gave me the idea that a rowing installation, immersive and interactive would be possible. I had made interactive installations in the past and enjoyed the direct action of the user on the art.

What were the challenges in getting the work made?

We began to plan a rowing machine that would self generate electricity and where users would see images that were powered from their actions. It was to be a connection between analogue and digital, quirky, amusing and of historical relevance. *Going with the Flow* almost became Push and Pull, then the analogue/digital compatibility became too problematic and the digital form took over. A form of Wii technology made it all possible. Filming on a boat upriver from Egham was one of the most pleasurable parts of the process, as was discovering weirs and low tide sections of the Thames. Finding a boat was surprisingly difficult as they are now sold at a profit to pubs and restaurants even if they are damaged. Other challenges would be to do with the size of the half rowing eight, 15 meters long, and not having transport long enough to move it, or the space to store it, as well as exhibiting it in enough darkness to make the projections visible.

The direct interaction with the work is a main element, why did you decide to make a piece of work which is responsive to the user?

As mentioned before, I had made successful interactive installations before. *Mirror, Mirror* (1996) was a dressing table, a two way mirror and projection, on the theme of murder and revenge after provocation, where participants could realize choices of vengeance. Using the theme of rowing, and never having rowed, I wanted to give the experience of quietly moving through water and experiencing nature. It also had its first appearance at an open day where there would be both children and adults, so I hoped to provide something all ages could engage with.

Do you find interaction as futile ground for exploration?

I want interaction to open up new worlds of art, thinking and experience. I find it less liberating that ideally I would want. As maker, I control the options that users can access. The technology colludes in this, the whole of my chosen world is not as available as I would like. Also, technology has a horrible habit of failing at crucial moments. The important part was to make sure users had the experience of affecting the images by their actions so the design had to be clear and the ensuing images also.



Gail Pearce, *Going with the Flow*, 2010, interactive installation.

Why did you choose to include woman rowers' stories in the installation?

I wanted to address the existence of women rowers, as my impression up until then was that the sport was predominantly male. My ideas changed after I explored the archives of Bedford College, Royal Holloway's past incarnation as a women's college.

Looking at your previous projects the use of journey is prominent. In your project, *Time Flies*, you filmed a bus journey from the center of St Peters-

burg through the suburbs to the outskirts, what is it about taking a journey that interests you?

Any body of work develops themes. My interests lie in documentary and how to present ideas in a range of formats. I also enjoy collaborating. *Time Flies* was a collaboration with a Russian architect from St Petersburg, Irena Golovenok, who tempted me to explore the city and to refer to the architectural styles. It was the 300th anniversary of the founding of the city, so architectural change was particularly relevant. This work was shown reflected in a shop window of a watchmaking factory on the street, so the public engaged with it easily.



I am interested in how small changes reflect larger ones. I wanted a restricted field of view so that what the people said would be really heard.



As well as journeys you also seem interested in the history of people, in *Credit Crunch* you filmed people's purses and wallets, with the audio of the person talking about this particular item and what it reveals about them. Could you tell us some more about this?

I'm interested in people's personal stories and how to reveal them. *Credit Crunch* was based on an exercise used in Gestalt therapy, where you describe an object from the first person, for example, "I am made of black leather, I am worn out and much handled, I am useful and sometimes I hold a lot of interesting information. I have never been lost..." If you are watching the person saying this, it immediately becomes personally revealing. And can feel quite nerve wracking as the person becomes more involved in telling the story of the object, not realizing it becomes their own story. Of course, each person describes the same object differently. I was interested in this experiment having seen it working in the past, and when the financial markets began their steady fall, I wanted to make the way people react personally to large events visible. I always thought of it as a documentary although it was often presented as an 'art' piece as well. I am interested in how small changes reflect larger ones. I wanted a restricted field of view so that what the people said would be really heard. In some ways the audio of *Going with the Flow* is the key part, the basis of it. The rowing stories are constant, unaffected by the images or the actions.

Finally going back to *Going with the Flow*, there are two different versions you will be offered on the installation, one is the sludge of the river and the other is a more tranquil scene of tropical fish. why did you include two different videos when people row?

There are in fact several different videos, aligned to what the user is doing in the boat. There is gushing water as the holding sequence when nobody does

anything, footage of moving up the river as a response for the user moving the rower's seat back and forth, the faster they move it, the faster the journey up the river. And if two people 'row' the image changes to underwater sequences, there are two types, not just tropical fish, also destroyed shopping trolleys and other detritus. Now you know all the secrets, although there will probably be more choices in the future. It goes back to trying to give the user a clear experience where the user action is followed by a result. ■



Going with the Flow, Gail Pearce, 2010, interactive installation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gail Pearce would like to thank for their support in the project:
Media Arts Department and Royal Holloway, University of London,
Sarah Angliss, digital artist and technologist for this project
Watermans Gallery,
Ann Uttley, Chrisy Fox, tellers of rowers' tales,
Erica Matlow, boat steering.

