Remote and Embodied Sensing: Observations on Interactive Art and Politically Engaged Practice

Margaret Seymour

Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney
Rozelle, NSW, 2039, Australia
margaret.seymour@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

Remote Sensing is an interactive artwork that previewed during The Image in Question conference at the University of Sydney in August 2014. Making the work led me to ask, “Why has interactive art been sidelined in recent publications about participatory art and politically engaged practice?” In this paper I discuss recent theoretical perspectives on participatory art and interactive art and the sociopolitical and cultural contexts for my work Remote Sensing, which seeks to raise awareness about surveillance. As a vehicle for social and political comment, interactive art objects might not have the ‘hit-and-run’ appeal of tactical media and augmented reality projects but as divisions between art forms become increasingly blurred perhaps it is time to rethink interactive art, which engages the user in embodied actions.

Keywords

Interactive art, participatory art, politically engaged art, digital art, new media art, surveillance, embodiment, interactivity.

Introduction

Interactive artworks by their nature involve users in various forms of participation. Depending on the artwork the interaction can be either predictable or full of surprises. Interactive artworks can be found online and in public spaces, but my concern here is primarily with interactive artworks presented in galleries or museums. By encouraging viewers to physically engage with the work, interactive artworks challenge the established viewing conventions of the ‘white cube’.

Over the last two decades there has been a lot of interest in various forms of participatory artwork. Works with a dialogic or collaborative element have increasingly been presented in museums and in major art exhibitions. These works have also found strong support in key publications, including Claire Bishop’s book Artificial Hells. But Bishop chooses to leave interactive art out of her discussions perhaps because she sees it as a sub-category of ‘new media art’ rather than ‘participatory art’ even though it combines aspects of both. In this paper I examine the changing nature of participation and the discourses that have grown up around digital art, participatory practice, politically engaged practice and interactive art, before discussing how my own work, Remote Sensing, is positioned at the interface between these discourses.

The Changing Nature of Participation

In her 2012 book Artificial Hells: participatory art and the politics of spectatorship Claire Bishop notes that since the 1990s there has been a “surge of artistic interest in participation and collaboration.” [1] She names the following art forms as examples: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art, and social practice. [2] Interactive art and other digital art forms are conspicuously absent from her book. Bishop justifies the omission saying that participatory art involves many people “as opposed to the one-to-one relationship of ‘interactivity,’” [3] and that according to her definition of participation “people constitute the central artistic medium and material.” [4] However, not all interactive art is made for a single user. For example, augmented reality art projects allow multiple users to interact online and in public spaces. Interactive projects made for public spaces, for example Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s Under Scan, also often involve multiple users who can collaborate to deepen their experience of the work. What is clear is that digital media open up new forms of participatory interaction. Internet forums and social media give new importance to the practice of ‘sharing’ as a form of participation. Online campaign groups like GetUp! in Australia, the global organisation Avaaz and MoveOn in the US, inspire users to ‘take action’ online and in the physical world. Like life, which today involves both digital and embodied interactions, participation often straddles Bishop’s so-called ‘digital divide’.

Heralded as a democratic space by many, it seemed in the 90s that the internet might eclipse the elitist and commercial models that operate in the art world. But artists and theorists have long recognized the benefits of occupying the physical as well as the digital realms. Back in 1997 when they published The ABC of Tactical Media, Geert Lovink and David Garcia accepted “the paradox of *centers* of tactical media.” [5] They argued that, “As well as castles in the air, we need fortresses of bricks and mortar, to resist a world of unconstrained nomadic capital.” [6] Deterritorialisation is not empowering in itself; it is in...
fact a characteristic of capital. As “flexible media tacticians,” they were also happy to adopt ‘strategies’ of power when needed, specifically a physical base in the centre of Amsterdam where they could consolidate their efforts. [7] A space to “plan not just improvise.” [8]

This is a theme that Garcia takes up again in 2014 in From Tactical Media to the Neo-pragmatists of the Web. [9] Here he argues that “despite the powerful forces seeking to domesticate the internet” it is still a powerful platform for political activism. [10] Partly this is because of the way online activists have sought to negotiate and perhaps embrace their own contradictions. According to Garcia, organisations like Avaaz have “the vision to step out of the established conception of how to do politics and into the new hybrid spaces that combine the virtual and the street.” [11] Garcia argues that rather than clinging to “avant-garde rituals and tribal affiliations”, the corporate look and feel of groups like Avaaz is a form of neo-pragmatism. He argues that Avaaz, and organisations like them, engage with the mainstream while acknowledging the risk and contradictions that entails.

In a similar way, media artists who previously shunned mainstream art institutions are now included in major exhibitions and festivals. Perhaps it is therefore time to re-think the tactical advantages of interactive art, which often combines digital and physical elements and can more easily penetrate the elitist art world. Conscious of Bishop’s criticism that art institutions often co-opt participatory art practices by marketing them as enjoyable museum experiences, how might interactive artists maintain their political punch? Can limiting the interactive aspects of an artwork help focus attention on the meaning of the work?

**Interactive Art and Participatory Art Practice**

An interactive artwork is not an object in the traditional sense but a ‘system’ that works in concert with its users. It is often evaluated according to how much freedom the user has and how responsive the system is. For example, Beryl Graham in her chapter What Kind of Participatory System? Critical vocabularies from new media art says that very little new media art is actually interactive. She says that more often artworks are reactive; they respond to the viewers’ actions but do not “physically act upon the audience in return.” [12] The binary of interaction versus reaction perhaps grew out of criticisms of the hyperbole that surrounded early screen-based interactive works. Many were sceptical of the claim that these works give the user freedom to create his or her own experience or narrative because even though the user can chose a pathway through the material, the pathways themselves are predetermined by the programmer. However, the concept of participation itself is not static. As Graham notes, the critical vocabularies that have grown up around participatory systems are informed by the histories of previous art movements. [13] Allan Kaprow’s Happenings in the 50s and 60s built upon but also challenged strategies developed by Dada artists who aimed to break the passivity of the audience, usually by confronting them with unexpected actions. However, Kaprow argued that to “assemble people unprepared for an event and say that they are ‘participating’ if apples are thrown at them or they are herded about is to ask very little of the whole notion of participation.” [14] Kaprow sought to involve participants in a more democratic way: “I think that it is a mark of mutual respect that all persons involved in a happening will be willing and committed participants.” [15] The rhetoric of human empowerment and democratic decision-making has become strongly associated with participatory art today.

In her book The ‘do-it-yourself’ artwork Anna Dezeuze notes that participatory works are often “promised on the belief that participation will encourage individuals and groups to take control of their own social and political existence.” [16] But participation is not always liberating. Artist Bruce Nauman was reportedly very sceptical about user participation; Janet Kraynak in her perceptive analysis of Nauman’s work Dependent Participation: Bruce Nauman’s Environments, quotes him saying, “I mistrust audience participation. That’s why I try to make these works as limiting as possible.” [17] Kraynak argues that participation is “a historical rather than a static concept.” [18] She places Nauman’s work in the context of the technocratic space that developed in the 1960s, which was characterized not simply by media culture and technological developments like television and computers, but by the “increasingly administrative order” that accompanied these changes. [19] The limited audience interaction that Nauman stages in works like Going Around the Corner Piece mirrors the Kafkaesque feeling of being stuck in a bureaucratic cycle.

**Surveillance and Secrecy**

Today we have a new ‘administrative order’, one that also encourages and has perhaps refined participation as a form of social control. The networks that provide ready access to information and communication are also used to capture and store information about us. The legality of mass surveillance has been hotly debated, not only in the US but also around the world, but the extent of its reach and operational details are often shrouded in secrecy. Even so, most would be unwilling to give up access to the internet. We depend on it to receive and share information, yet while we ‘participate’ we are also giving up information, the metadata which internet and telephone companies are required to store. Civil libertarians argue that mass surveillance violates the right to privacy. Others argue that these powers are needed to protect citizens and infrastructure from non-state actors who are using the internet to recruit followers and plan attacks. It is not within the scope of this paper to weigh arguments for individual freedom against national security. My interest is in how art can reframe ethico-political questions, not only in my own work but also in the work of others.

In November 2013 artist Trevor Paglen photographed three intelligence agencies in the US: the National Security Agency (NSA), the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) in Chantilly, Virginia and the National Geospatial-
Intelligence Agency (NGA) in Springfield, Virginia. Challenging the secrecy surrounding mass surveillance, Paglen posted the three images online saying they could “be used by anyone for any purpose whatsoever, with or without attribution.” [20] Prior to this, the most commonly used photograph of the NSA facility appears to have been taken in the 1970s. It shows a corporate-looking building photographed on a clear day. In contrast, Paglen’s new image shows the NSA facility at night, which gives it a slightly sinister feeling. The largely empty car park is bathed in orange light. The main building itself seems to have undergone little change since the 70s, but thanks to whistleblower Edward Snowden we know a little more about the way surveillance has changed.

Paglen hopes his images of these facilities help people to think about what these institutions do and about the effects they have on the society around them. [21] Images capture the public imagination and have the ability to shift public perceptions. But unlike images in the past, which were distributed through more traditional channels, today images are instantly uploaded and available globally. Paglen has posted his photographs of the NSA, NRO and NGA online with a creative commons licence that allows others to use them with or without attribution. This not only ensures a wider audience for the original images but also facilitates creative reinterpretations of his work.

Remote Sensing

My work Remote Sensing (Figure 1) incorporates Paglen’s photograph of the NSA facility and its surrounding car park. The work comprises a small trolley on wheels that users push around the gallery. A computer screen embedded in the trolley’s top surface displays a small section of Paglen’s image. As the user manipulates the trolley left, right, forward or backward, the screen updates to show contiguous parts of the image. If the trolley swivels on an angle, so does the onscreen image. For all intents and purposes, it is as if a large virtual image was mapped onto the floor of the gallery but viewers can only see a small part of it on the trolley’s screen. In order to see more of the image, the user pushes the trolley towards the corresponding section of the floor. It’s a form of ‘blinkered’ vision. The user is unable to see the whole image simultaneously.

Fabricated in unpainted galvanised steel and supported on industrial swivel castors, the trolley object appears old-fashioned, though its bent acrylic hood gives a nod to the sleek and sexy mobile devices used today. Artist, writer and curator Wes Hill argues that the renewed interest in obsolete technologies in art today is partly due to digital artists trying to overcome the speed with which their own works become out-dated. [22] However, my interest in obsolete technologies goes hand in hand with my interest in physical interaction. Both strategies are used in order to give physical form to contemporary issues, many of which, like surveillance, are dematerialised and/or disembodied.

The action of ‘scanning’ the floor to reveal Paglen’s image of the NSA is a bit like searching a microfiche library catalogue. A transitional technology between paper cards and computer catalogue, microfiche miniaturised the catalogue, thereby compressing the catalogue into a smaller physical area. The user navigated the tiny text records by winding a film spool or sliding a film cradle to the desired magnification point. Today computers have changed the way we store and access information, allowing ever increasing quantities of data to be captured and searched.

The image on the horizontal screen of Remote Sensing is also a bit like augmented reality in that a virtual image is overlaid onto real space. Unlike most augmented reality works, however, the screen shows a 2D image that ‘replaces’ the floor rather than producing a composite of floor and image. In Remote Sensing the horizontal orientation of the image echoes Borges’ story about the cartographers who make a map the size of the empire that replaces the empire point for point. [23] And perhaps one day the vast repositories of data amassed by governments, internet and phone companies will face the same fate as Borges’ map:

The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitylessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

Jorge Luis Borges, On Exactitude in Science

Like Nauman’s tactic of limiting the actions available to viewers of his works, Remote Sensing also allows only a limited range of user interaction. If the user moves the trolley outside the area marked up on the floor, the image is replaced by static, as if an analogue signal has been lost. This is suggestive of the fact that online we have the freedom to explore a vast network of information and to engage and maintain contact with others who have similar interests, but only within given parameters and technical constraints.
I chose Paglen’s image because I wanted to contrast the secrecy surrounding surveillance with the philosophy of open access to information in the digital commons. I was struck by this contrast during the debate about privacy versus security in the US, but also particularly because of the conservatism of the debate in Australia. In October 2014, the Australian government introduced legislation that mandates data retention for two years. The government, with the support of the opposition, has also passed new anti-whistleblower legislation. The National Security Legislation Amendment Bill “increases the penalty for disclosing information about a special intelligence operation to a maximum of five years imprisonment, and 10 years if the person intended to endanger someone.” These are worrying developments, especially for journalists who are rightly concerned about protecting their sources. Rather than opening up a conversation about individual freedom and national security the Australian government seems determined to place tighter regulations on the digital realm.

Remote Sensing aims to extend and amplify the conversation about surveillance by engaging the viewer in embodied actions. The work slows viewing down to walking pace in order to allow time for contemplation. The act of revealing one part of the image necessarily conceals another part; but after spending some time with the work, the viewer might recognize the whole image, which was taken by Paglen from a helicopter. Although the camera’s point of view doesn’t match the horizontality of the screen exactly, both the camera and the trolley place the viewer above the object of interest and looking down. The trolley has a handle that viewers must bend down to reach. This action focuses attention on the screen beneath, so that the rest of the gallery tends to drop out of the user’s field of view. This ungainly pose can make the user feel self-conscious, concerned perhaps about other gallery visitors who may be watching them and whom they cannot see with their head down. The image is not immediately present for the viewer but has to be assembled piece by piece in his or her mind through a process of gradual revelation. In the act of revealing the image the viewer is also observed by a small web camera (attached to one of the roof beams above the work) and by other people in the gallery, thereby inverting the spectatorial power dynamic in the gallery. The viewer is both surveyor and surveyed.

Consciousness of being under surveillance prompts in the viewer a mix of anxiety, self-censorship and caution. Some users reported feeling nervous about using the device and asked if their actions were being recorded. They wanted to know how the onscreen image was being updated. Only a few noticed the web camera. Perhaps the hazard tape marking out the boundaries of the virtual image on the floor also made people feel self-conscious. In a gallery or workshop, markup tape on the floor usually indicates danger and shows how far the viewer should stand from an artwork or a piece of machinery. Also, without a sign saying ‘please interact with the work’, some people were naturally wary. These responses confirm that physical engagement with interactive works of art can produce affective responses, in this case curiosity and anxiety.

Conclusion
If, as Bishop states, the most striking participatory projects “unseat all of the polarities on which this discourse is founded (individual/collective, author/spectator, active/passive, real life/art),” perhaps it is time to unseat another polarity, the one Bishop identifies in her article the Digital Divide. When Bishop’s article was published in 2012, it prompted a lively outpouring of criticism from academics and artists. Her characterization of new media as a ‘specialised’ discipline seemed to sum up the longstanding neglect with which it had been met by major art institutions. It is not my intention to revisit the criticisms of Bishop’s Digital Divide. Digital works can be critically evaluated according to the discourse that has grown up around them, but they also challenge existing criteria and push art discourse in new directions. Rather than looking for ways to transplant the digital into physical space, many artists are already blurring the boundaries across the digital divide. With a stake in both the digital and the physical world, interactive works can engage the user in contemplation and participation – in remote and embodied sensing.

References
2. Claire Bishop, Artificial Hells, 1.

Bibliography


