

FROM THE PARADIGM OF SEEING TO THE TOUCH PARADIGM: THE BECOMING HAPTIC IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC CREATION

Salif Silva, MSc in Design and Communication Sciences

University of Cape Verde (Uni-CV), Cape Verde

Abstract

The haptic perception claims a central place in the interactive experience. The interactive art is tactile art by definition. This paper aims to deepen the relationship between the haptic perception and the media art, reinforcing the relationship between the user and interfaces, as well as the tactile attribute of that experience where the user acts and updates artwork; Explore the meaning of the tactile sense for our experience and understanding of the world; Questioning the primacy of the visual experience and the rhetoric of oculo-centrism, combining three elements: the haptic perception, the field of media art, and phenomenological thought of Merleau-Ponty;

What is the role of haptic perception towards the intensification of sensory stimuli of digital culture? This is a question about interfaces and the becoming haptic in the experience of art, not as an aesthetic trend in general, but as a possibility of the art.

Keywords: Haptic, interactivity, media art, interface, technology, body

Introduction

There are an increasing number of studies in various subjects that focus on the haptic perception issue. That given impulse to research in fields such as physiology, psychology and sociology isn't casual. The concept of haptic, associated to the exploration of the sense of touch, or in other words, to gesture and to the skin, has been recently used to define a type of perception that subverts the optic- spacial organization, namely, the Alberti¹ perspective, with its linear coordinates, with its fixed and exterior point of view. The haptic perception, a synonym for the instauration of a multisensory access to images, articulates two sensory modalities: kinesthesia and tactile. This concept contains the ideas of continuity, direct contact and resonance when it comes to the sense of proximity and empathy towards the object.

Main Text

The haptic has been mentioned progressively in relation to new image technologies with the culmination of the abstractization of the body and the experience. The haptic potentializes as an alternative pathway to the immaterial notion itself and to the subjectivation of the image experience. The technologic images explore a new amplified corporality, connected and haptic in which the computer arises as "incarnated virtuality". New perceptive phenomena emerge from the incorporated interaction and the technified kinesthesia. Hence, appears an artificial sensitivity based on the multisensory and multimodal experience impregnated by "tactility" and "gestuality".

¹ Panofsky states that "the subjective visual impression was indeed so rationalized that this very impression could itself become the foundation for a solidly grounded and yet, in an entirely modern sense, infinite (...)The result was the transformation of psycho physiological space into mathematical space; in other words, an objectification of the subjective". Panofsky, Erwin: *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Tusquets, Barcelona, 1973

In historical terms, a haptic expression appears for the first time in studies by Alois Riegl² in *Spatromische Kunstindustrie*³, related to aesthetics. Riegl had considered the term tactile too limited and proposed therefore, haptic to define the visual tactility. Deleuze takes hand on the term and expands it. He considers the haptic space as the tactile sense of the eye; an approximated vision, made up of sensation and rapture opposed to the calculated distance of representation. For Deleuze, the sensory organs do not oppose each other in the haptic space, beforehand, they suppose that their functions overcome the limits that are commonly attributed to them⁴.

In the beginning of the 20th century, Filippo Marinetti had already proposed a new art form based on tactile perception⁵. After this Italian futurist, many other artists explored the concept, at different moments and with distinct technologies. These artists sought above all to validate the perceptive construction linked to body – space relation in the poetic field. From the 50s and 60s, perception and body then became central themes of art⁶. Artists such as Joseph Beuys, Dennis Oppenheim and Bruce Nauman explored the senses and questioned the limits of vision, the overcoming of visual staticity of perspective and the visual inputs. They sought above all, a criticism to the instrumental vision, in rupture and distancing from traditional speeches concerning the body in art. They abandoned the formal speech structures and began to operate on a more transcendent level on the relation with the material. Various artistic projects such as *Sensory Masks* (1967) by Lygia Clark, proposed to rethink the bodily actions and seek bodily relationships with the spectator and its transformation into a work of art. By inserting interactivity, they anticipate the line of strength of the actual technologic arts. Stelarc, for example, uses the concept of “obsolete body” to frame his works, which are structured by the connection to robotic/biologic prosthetics and telematic devices of perception expansion.

While in convergence with Sterlac’s proposals in cinema, Cronenberg questions the body and its adequacy to the current necessities in films⁷. He confronts the classic representation of the body with new discussions: of the closed body, finished, delimited, exhibited from the exterior, and reveals a body in transformation and hybrid – the becoming body underlying the cyborg idea.

In the last decades, the contamination of art by digital technology has had profound implications on the cultural, as well as on the social texture. The artistic practices of the virtual reality, linked to the sensory consciousness, amplify, subvert and question our perception of what is real⁸. As an integrant part of the contemporary artistic creation context, the media art has exhaustively explored all the possibilities conquered by the digital world and the contingencies of manipulation of our perceptions. By subverting the functioning of digital

² Riegl developed the term while working as a curator of the Art and Industry Museum (applied arts) in Vienna during the second half of the 19th century. He held a privileged position - the one of a tactile and textural contact with materials – to lecture on the haptic theory. In Bruno, Giuliana: *Atlas of emotion: journeys in art, architecture, and film*. Verso, New York, 2007.

³ Riegl, Alois: *Late Roman Art Industry*. Giorgio Bretschneider, Roma, 1985.

⁴ Deleuze, Gilles. *Logic of Sensation*. Continuum. Londres, 2003, p. 99. Vid. Silvio Ferraz, *Música e repetição: a diferença na composição contemporânea*. EDUC, São Paulo, 1998, pp. 160-161.

⁵ In his *Manifesto of Tactilism*, published in *INComoedia* on January 1921, he would propose to develop a new form of art that sought in it the haptic sense and that was absolutely separated from the genre of the worlds engendered by the visual artists.

⁶ Impulsed mainly by several avant – garde artistic movements, such as happenings, fluxus action art and body art.

⁷ His movies *Videodrome* (1983) and *Existenz* (1999) share the relations between the body and technology on the recurrent contemporary art of technologic apparatus as extensions of bodily capabilities and positioning itself between the humanization of the machine and the human dehumanization.

⁸ Hoyas, Gema: *Percepción Táctil e Interactividad en la Creación Artística de Realidades Virtuales*.

Laboratório de Creações Intermedia. UPV. Em linha:

http://www.upv.es/intermedia/pages/laboratori/grup_investigacio/textos/docs/gema_hoyas_percepcion_tactil.PDF (23-10-2011).

equipments, the artists problematize the dichotomies between perception and thought, with emphasis on the experience of the body as the creating field of senses.

At this reaffirmation of digital incarnation, it is the touch that gains relevance in the field of interaction in virtual environments. The haptic aesthetics – arising from the haptic interaction and from the digital interfaces in the artistic experiences – emerges, thereby, in rupture with the traditional visual arts. Its creative strategies focus essentially in the sensory – motor dynamics and on the multi – sensory experience and offers new perspectives of the construction of what is real in a profound sensitive reformulation. Artists such as Harold Cohen, Jeffrey Shaw, Gideon May, Berndt Lintermann, Rafael Lozano Hemmer and Will Bauer present innumerable works that exemplify well the discursive approaches ensuing the haptic perception.

Myron Krueger had demonstrated in the 70s, through his work titled as *Videoplace*, the endless possibilities regarding forms and processes of human – computer interaction in the field of media art, with the introduction of artificial reality in facilities of digital art.

Monika Fleischmann, Christian A. Bohn and Wolfgang Strauss, in *Liquid Views – Narcissus' Virtual Mirror* (1993), problematize the sense of touch in virtual environments. In this piece of work, the user provokes undulations and his reflex dissolves in the liquid image by touching the screen. On the other hand, in *Interactive Plants Growing* (1992) by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, when real plants are touched, virtual plants are generated and appear on the screen in real time. Michael Gleich, in *Web of Life* (2002), introduces tactile interfaces that establish patterns of normatized abstraction on the perceptive, cognitive and emotional level, out of summary images from the digitalized palm of the hands of participants. Golan Levin and Zach Lieberman, in *Manual Input Session*⁹ (2004), emphasize perception and interpellate new ways of understanding experience while exploring the expressive possibilities of manual gestures and of finger movements. Tecla Schiphorst in *Bodymaps: Artifacts of Touch* (1995 -1997) presents the space inhabited by the body, mediated by technology, in which proximity, the touch and the gestures from the participants evoke sounds and images. Throughout touch, the skin confronts with technology, the interaction the proprioceptive experience and the integration of the senses. Also regarding cinema, the haptic perception finds support to construct kinesthetic experiences from the connection between moving images and physical objects, memory and the user's interaction¹⁰. Thus, the artists seek to establish objective connections between data belonging to heterogeneous sensory spheres. Through technologic interfaces and the perceptive unfolding of the body, complex forms of aesthetic appropriations expand the perceptive limits. However, inter-relations between body image – interaction in organic interfaces subsist in these artistic experiences. From image – time, we head on to image – body that is fluid and malleable from the inputs of the spectator. It is a matter of a displacement of the hegemony of the look and the passive posture of the public contemplating the image to the demand of an active presence of the user.

The media artistic productions of digital technologies allow rethinking phenomenologically the world we live in.

Merleau-Ponty¹¹, by defining perception as a cradle of the sense of the general experience, and furthermore, by relating it with the bodily attitude, emphasizes the experience of the body as a field creator of senses and the perceptive world. The phenomenological body arises consequently, as being primordial and the bodily learning as the principal factor of attribution of sense to the images. Thus, the phenomenological knowledge that leads to the

⁹ It is an explicit evoking to this language invented by Myron Krueger in *Videoplace*.

¹⁰ As elucidated by works like “Blindness Series” of T. Kim – Trang, *Aletheia* (1992), *Operculum* (1993), *Kore* (1994), *Ocularis: Eye Surrogates* (1997), *Ekeleipsis* (1999) and *Alexia* (2000). Marks, L. U. (2002). *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. U of Minnesota Press.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Fenomenologia da Percepção*. Martins Fontes Editora, São Paulo, 1994

discovery of the creative center in rhythm, body and senses, is allied to the promotion of individual expansion of the consciousness as well as sensory capacity of the individual.

Conclusion

Therefore, it can be sintetized that the haptic perception claims without any doubt, a highlighted role in the media art panorama. However, this approach implies to have a look at its multiplicities. If on one hand, the digital technologies convert art into a reality simulation on a digital immaterial structure that groups kinesthetic spaces, on the other hand, the digital interfaces, the digital hipersensory and the image saturation lead to the affective sensory mutilation in a certain perceptive irony.

Art contains critical sectors that can help the body not to fade in the experience field that offers the possibility to reinvent it in its own experience. The media art emerges as a catalyst instrument of a consciousness expansion through multiple interactions, while based on a participative embodiment. Hence, it reveals as it has already been mentioned, new possibilities to rethink the world phenomenologically based on the body's experience. In summary, it is in the fluidity of digital media and throughout the bonds of perception that the artists search for new existential forms.

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