

SuckerToday

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ABSTRACT

This paper by Ennio Bertrand presents some of his interactive installations dealing with news media. It focuses on one of his latest works: *SuckerToday* (2002). This installation is dedicated to the clashes between demonstrators, black blocks and policemen which took place in Genoa (Italy) during the G8 summit in July 2001. It invites the user to explore media stills captured from news programs (organised in a labyrinth and accompanied by unrelated sounds and voices), through a classical videogame setting with joystick and screen.

Keywords

Interactive installation, news media, art

1. INTRODUCTION

A large part of my work focuses on news media, tv news especially. I'm very much interested in the way news are processed, mediated, and then perceived, memorized, newly elaborated by the audience.

The same is true for the interactive installation *SuckerToday* I'll present and discuss here. This work is part of a long lasting research I've been doing during the last 10-15 years, which I'll briefly sum up.

2. INTERACTIVE INSTALLATIONS PLAYING WITH NEWS

For many years (starting approximately in 1990) I've been capturing stills from tv news programs and documentaries. I am used to print them, usually covering unimportant parts of the images with a golden or silver leave (somehow like the golden medieval paintings) in order to put in front those details which I find more interesting. I often create sequences of up to 12 images, usually summarising an unnoticed little story happening during (and covered by) some bigger event: e.g., the men carrying Lady D's coffin, each of them looking directly inside the camera as soon as he enters the church where the funeral is to be celebrated. Through this time-freezing process I want to remove the images (and the events) from the tv flow, with its flattening effect, and to give them their dramatic consistency back.

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Figure 1: Lady # 2, 1998

I've started thinking of doing some interactive installations in 1992. For example *Lux sonet in tenebris*, that was built out of 144 little self-made loudspeakers, each with a built in light sensor. As soon as the sensor is covered by a shadow, the loudspeaker emits a little squeaking sound: so that a person can produce sounds through moving in front of the loudspeakers. The installation is very playful and easy to interact with. Another installation, *Smell Link* (1996), was meant to play with people's misunderstanding of what exactly we send through the web when we connect to the internet. It allowed people in Torino (Italy), Cuenca (Spain), Aix-en-Provence (France), Trieste (Italy), to exchange smelling portraits (with a perfume chosen by each user) to one another.

The very first interactive installation I did that uses sound and video images was *Memory of the surface* (1992-1998). *Memory of the surface* recalls the shadow which some person's body left on a wall in Hiroshima as a consequence of the H-bomb explosion, as documented by a famous photograph. A video-camera monitors the silhouettes of those who stand in front of a blank light cloth screen surrounded by debris. There is a crescendo of a gloomy sound, recalling the American bombers, culminating with a flash and a sudden silence. In this very moment those standing are photographed and their silhouettes reproduced on the screen. The image is shortly after inverted in its black and white values (somehow recovering some hope for light and life) and then slowly, gradually fades away.

In the following sections I will describe some interactive installations of mine which use found tv footage and sound.



Figure 2: Memory of the surface, 1992 – 1998

2.1. Broadway - 2000

Broadway is an interactive sound installation. There is nothing to be seen but a free square space of three meters, visually delimited by a strip on the ground. People move freely inside this virtual space. *Broadway* evokes distant places through sounds. Real, imaginary, possible, fantastic, probable, seen, narrated – a single super-place described by sounds and noises. Moving through the space the visitor gives life to the installation which otherwise remains silent and anonymous. He/she rebuilds an intimate space by pasting perceived sounds and private memories.

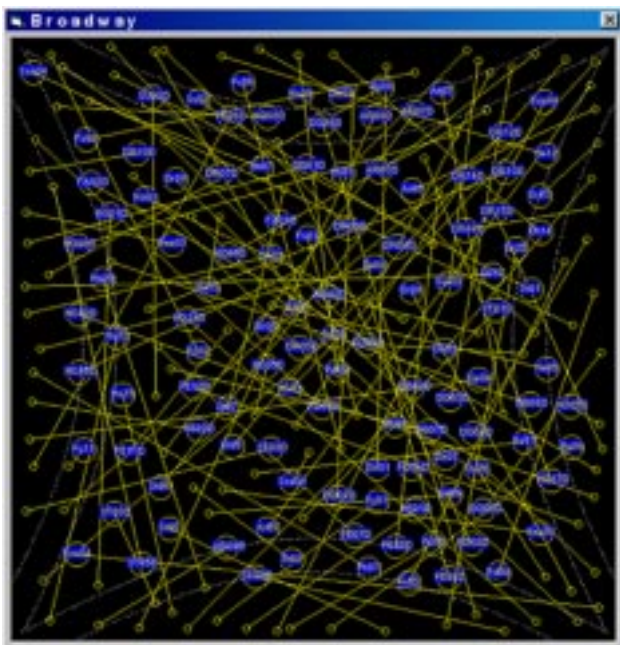


Figure 3: Graphical interface of Broadway's software, 1992 – 1998

Technically the real space corresponds to a virtual space residing in the memory of the computer. The visitor's movement are constantly monitored by a video-camera. As soon as he/she steps into an active area, a previously memorised and spatialised sound is to be heard. The sounds have been gathered on the Internet and in radio and tv programs.

It is not indispensable to see, as far as you can move and recognise possible obstacles. You have to be able to use your internal ability to see, to use your mind's eye in order to combine your personal images to the heard sounds – In contrast to the common ocular sight. Every sound recovers some images' fragment in the visitor's mind (possibly collected watching tv), that gives individual sense to the sound itself: pixel to pixel.

Broadway is a work about memory. It creates an autonomous territory, which comes through each time a visitor walks by, thanks to his/her interaction – that is a physical interaction as well as an interaction that plays on a memory level: combining his/hers and the computer's memory.

2.2. BornBlind - 2000

BornBlind uses the same technical equipment of *Broadway*. It is dedicated to those women who've been raped in Pristina by the Serbs. While the sounds in *Broadway* are set randomly, here they respect a centripetal organisation, like in Mediterranean cities, where the centre is more important than its surroundings. The more one gets closer to the centre of the installation the more one gets closer to the problem. In the virtual space's perimeter there are the sounds captured on the streets in Pristina today, then voices talking about the overall situation (like the general women's condition in that society), while in the virtual space's centre there are the voices of people who are involved in the problem of the rapes and its consequences for mothers and children. No victim is to be heard directly: it's like a black hole, their voices are missing.

(sounds and voices are captured from interviews made by the journalist Seyed Farian Sabahi)

2.3. Viaggi (Journeys) - 2001

Some years ago, I can't remember when exactly, a group of Mexicans trying to leave their country in order to get inside the Usa, were found dead inside a railroad van, which had been sealed. A similar destiny have the protagonists of a book by a Palestinian writer, Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the sun*, which tells the story of three men looking for work outside their country: they try to illegally reach the rich Kuwait and find instead a horrible death inside an empty red-hot water cistern under the desert's sun.

These stories have guided me in the *Viaggi (Journeys)* project, which was meant to deal with "work" as a main theme.

I decided to focus on the difficulties of the search for work, on the moves that have left their mark on generations of people, on entire regions and nations. I've collected and invented the sounds of these journeys, using these as the only means to evoke nightly crossings, illegal embarkations, the violence, anguish and fear mixed with hope of the migrants.

Viaggi is a hostile and claustrophobic territory made exclusively of sounds which the user explores by moving around. It collects screams, moans, sharp orders, reassuring words of a mother to her child (all spoken in different languages), and the sounds of waters

and streets. The installation doesn't want to be didactic. It freezes the moment where the tension is at its height, at the crossing of the border, when two or more different cultures get in touch with one another.

2.4. UnderAttack - 2001

UnderAttack is an interactive video installation dedicated to the WTC attacks. It collects 9 videos documenting the airplanes hitting the towers. The only editing I've done is a slight change of the chromatic values. The sound has been switched off. The work is hosted in a small box which contains a flat screen with the computer hidden behind it and a proximity sensor. Whenever the user moves closer to the monitor, the video plays forward; if the user steps back the video plays backwards too. If the user halts for more than a few seconds, the installation switches to the following video.

UnderAttack is not a work about terror. It is a work dealing with the relationship between the viewer and tv information, about the perception of a mediated reality, about the watcher's obsessive voyeuristic attitude which is protected by the screen – the latter assuring a safety distance between him/her and the real world. It questions the responsibility of the spectator.



Figure 4: UnderAttack, 2001

2.5. LipstickJoystick - 2002

LipstickJoystick is an interactive video installation which gathers a vast number of fragments extracted from cartoons like *Tom & Jerry*. All fragments have been chosen for their extremely violent content, which we do no more perceive as harming. The installation is made of a box with a flat screen and the computer behind it (like *UnderAttack*), but instead of the proximity sensor there is a little joystick through which the user can interact with the cartoons' fragments.

2.6. SuckerToday - 2002

SuckerToday has the shape of a labyrinth, it is a metaphor of a city, of whatever place inhabited by people and by their dialectic thinking and speaking out different cultures and values, in a way which sometimes might be very aggressive.



Figure 5: LipstickJoystick, 2002

SuckerToday is a personal rendering of two violent days in the Italian city Genua during the G8 summit in 2001. While most people were peacefully demonstrating on the streets, there were some very violent little groups, the so called Black Blocks, who went around damaging and destroying. The police reacted by charging the multitudes of those who were peacefully marching. Tension grew heavily and culminated on Friday the 20th of July with the death of Carlo Giuliani, a young man killed by the police with a gun.

Hundreds of stills captured from tv programs have been used to document these facts inside the labyrinth.

SuckerToday is meant to underline the affinities between the police and the Black Blocks: both black dressed, with helmets or headgear impeding face recognition, both carrying sticks or truncheons, using rude slogans, moving through the urban space with similar rituals, looking for a physical clash through aggression.

While virtually moving around in the digital landscape of the labyrinth (by means of a joystick, like in a videogame), the visitor activates sounds hidden in the streets: they are fragments from sound works by many artists, poets, musicians which I have collected in the Internet. There is no direct relation with what we see, but a strange and perturbing affinity emerges: maybe because of both the images and the sounds being somehow artificial and excessive.

Technical realization

SuckerToday is a digital labyrinth realised with a proprietary software called *Spray*, which can manage images, texts, sounds and the interactive movement by the user inside the labyrinth through different input devices: mouse, joystick or an external ultrasound system.

In this case the labyrinth is made of about 400 walls which have been designed with a Cad program, and which are inscribed in a closed space (otherwise you might get lost). On each wall a still captured from television programs has been pasted, while the ground hosts about fifty sound fragments (wav), which are not visible and are activated by the user whenever he/she passes.

SuckerToday, 2002

3. CONCLUSIONS

In my work I recurrently use the following strategies: extracting fragments of sounds *or* images from the never-ending flow of sounds *and* images we (as an audience) are immersed in – these fragments are usually very small and coherent; combining unrelated sound and images; creating a new neutral context for these visual or audio fragments; using simple game-like dynamics and setting (e.g., exploration of a virtual space through the body movements or a joystick).

Through these strategies I want to induce a critical reconsideration both of our role as spectators and of stories or images we usually are familiar with, very often related to dramatic events of our present days. It is my aim never to be assertive or to present a one

way interpretation: on the contrary, the user is urged to bring out his memories, feelings, thoughts (in a very private way, though) in order to get an understanding of what is happening in the installation. It is the user through his/her physical and intellectual interaction that gives sense to the installations which otherwise stand still.

The fragmentation of familiar information has a time freezing and estrangement effect that, together with the new neutral context in which the information is set, helps us look at known realities with different eyes. I try to foster the user's active participation through easily understandable, sometimes playful means of interaction.

Another very important aspect is the narrative structure which I try to give to my works: not a tight one but always a legible one. Narrative is something games and media share. And it's it that ideally holds together my installations and that encourages the user's imagination.