ISEA2018 Formatting Instruction for Artists - June 23-30

Political New Media Artworks

1st Author Name

Affiliation (s)
Location, Country
Contact Emails

Abstract

In this paper, using a theoretical framework of political interpretation of new media art and interaction, I describe some political new media artworks that I have created and exhibited. Knowing that all relevant enough cultural phenomena admit a political interpretation and, therefore, carry a political stance, new media art's relationship with new technologies carries an extensive phenomenological corpus that intersects many areas of knowledge, rendering sensible the need of awareness of some of these political stances.
.

Keywords

Politics, New Media Art, Interaction, Installation.

Introduction

The core phenomena in any problem of politics, indeed in any problem concerning humanity, are phenomena that have at their center human minds who animate them and who, in turn, are themselves symbolic or cultural processes occurring in the brain; thus, to understand and explain problems of politics one must understand and explain the relevant symbolic and mental processes, which is to understand and explain human actors' forms of consciousness and motivations.
Liah Greenfeld and Eric Malczewski, 2010. {Greenfeld and Malczewski, 2010, #38437}

All cultural phenomena partially codify an understanding of the world, a worldview. This is equivalent to saying that they carry a political stance. New media art involves an extensive phenomenological corpus that intersects many areas of knowledge, rendering necessary the need of awareness of some of these political stances. There is not, and cannot be neither methodology nor praxis ideologically uncontaminated.
Like with other intrinsically interdisciplinary practices which require for both their analysis and practice a multidisciplinary approach (embodied by teams or single persons, what Malina once called "New Leonardos" [2]), new media art does require a high level of fluency in both the arts and technologies. In fact, the *artistic appropriation of scientific and technical knowledge* is the fundamental, defining characteristic of new media art. This appropriation process is not related to a specific knowledge or technology, and allows new media art to omnivorously integrate whatever new inventions and discoveries appear.
However, new media art production is not merely the direct application of new technological knowledge, but instead constitutes a fertile and relevant reflection on the construction of meaning. Because of this, media theories need to move over the fascination of the possibility of technological appropriation. Artistic theory needs to catch up with the practitioners in order to establish a meaningful dialogue, for the theoretical discourse should not be constructed from a fascinated alien perspective.
This appropriation has a direct effect on some of the characteristics of new media art's artistic language. One of the main results is a *systematic explicitation* of elements previously present in art. This explicitation allows these elements to become part of the artistic language, to become words with which artists can build their sentences.
This explicitation can be seen in artworks that are explicitly random (opposed to, for example, oil painting which also is a controlled random process), explicitly interactive (opposed to any artwork that requires the observer to complete it), or explicitly political.
Political new media artworks offer a particular opportunity, for the very act of artistic knowledge appropriation *is* a political one, shifting some of the power inequalities inherent to cognitive capitalism.
If every new media artwork is political (for, as said, knowledge appropriation is a politically subversive act) then explicitly political new media art re-enacts the explicitation process of new media, in a self-reflective manner. Political new media artworks talk as much about the world as they talk about new media art.
The political relationship with technology is a complex one. A complexity that is related to the meta–explicitation and to the inherent oppression that capitalist technological production entails.
In effect, in designing how we interact with technological object, the politicality becomes self-evident: designers and organizations (companies) *sample the world* choosing the problems to be solved and their solutions. It is impossible to think about these decisions without realizing that there is always a political model of reality behind them. In Phoebe

Sengers' words: "the proposed 'solution' tends to be understood as technologies that monitor users' behaviour and either influence them to make a correct choice, where the correct choice is generally determined by the technology's designer." [3]
The worldview that any cultural artefact embodies, becomes obvious when one remembers the assumption (both explicit and implicit) of The Market. This is, the assumption of "the applicability of market models and economic exchange". The rendering of capitalism not only as a natural social arrangement, but as the only possible one. This example of ideological models inserted into the cultural practice, this conception of the market as *natural phenomenon* also shows how technological, scientific, and artistic discourses tend to obscure political, cultural and social contexts. [4].
This obscurity as well as this assumption of naturality is frequently present in capitalistic social processes (such as the systematic public funding of universities that generate knowledge operators that work on the private sector).
Explicitly political artworks, then, can provide alternative points-of-view, vantage points from where investigate the construction of alternative narratives.
In the rest of this paper I will present some of my personal political artistic production.
The artistic landscape poses great opportunities and challenges, in art, and therefore in terms of political design, of ideology.

Hong Kong domestic workers

Foreign Helpers (Figure 1) is an interactive installation created within the Architectural Association Visiting School 2015, in Hong Kong.
Directed by Tomas Laurenzo with the collaboration of AAVS students, the installation explores the relationship of Foreign Domestic Helpers with the city of Hong Kong.
With four projectors and four independent audio channels, interactors can use a hand-held screen to explore images of HK (filmed by AAVS students) paired with interviews of foreign helpers who shared their life experiences.

Figure 1 – Foreign Helpers

Given that one's experiencing of a city is composed of different fragments that add-up, the installation deconstructs and rebuilds a vision of Hong Kong created from (or with) the point of view of the participant helpers.
Foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong are domestic workers employed by Hongkongers, typically families. About three percent of Hong Kong's population, an overwhelming majority are women. The condition of foreign domestic workers is being increasingly scrutinised by human-rights groups and criticised as tantamount to modern slavery. Documented cases of worker abuse, including the successful prosecution of an employer for subjecting Erwiana Sulistyaningsih to grievous bodily harm, assault, criminal intimidation and unpaid wages, are increasing in number. In March 2016, an NGO, Justice Centre, reported its findings that one domestic worker in six in Hong Kong were deemed to have been forced into labour.

Nibia

Background
Nibia Sabalsagaray (1949 – 1974) was a Uruguayan literature teacher and social activist, tortured and killed in captivity at the beginning of the last military dictatorship (1973-1985) in Uruguay.
In 1974, the Military Justice categorized this crime as a suicide by hanging.
Despite Uruguayan Law 15.848 (Ley de Caducidad) granting amnesty to military responsible for crimes committed during the dictatorship, in September 2004, Sabalsagaray's sister–Stella–presented to the Uruguayan Justice a letter requesting the change from to suicide to murder, and the identification and punishment of those responsible.
After a complex and long judicial process, in 2010, Miguel Ángel Dalmao y José Chialanza were sentenced to 28 years of prison.

The piece
Nibia is an interactive installation that questions the relationship between society and its recent past, through the recontextualization of a particular image.
The work consists of a room, dark, with black walls, with only one entrance, blinded by double black curtains.
Hanging towards the end of the room, there is a projection of Sabalsagaray (an image very well known in Uruguay), in sepia tonalities. Two meters from the projection, there is a wooden stool with a standard lighter on top of it.
If the interactor decides to take the lighter and light it, the picture in the area corresponding to the position of the lighter burns and disappears. It is, however, impossible to burn it completely: a short time after a zone is burnt, the image is reconstructed.
Technical details
The detection and tracking of the flame is done with an infrared camera (either a Wii Remote controller or a PS Eye camera), with a simple blob detection algorithm.

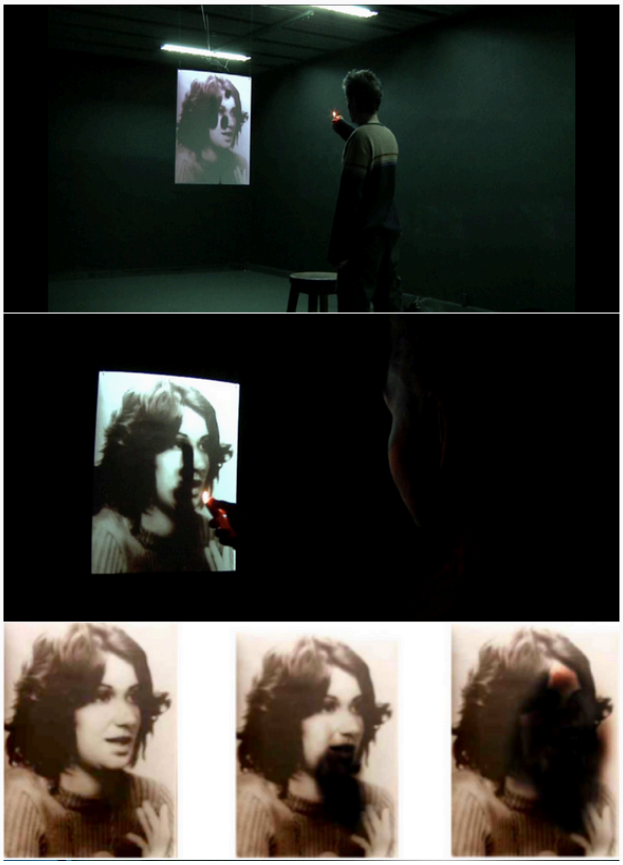

Figure 2 - Nibia

The burning simulation is done by manipulating the pixel values (using an algorithm similar to the burning effect usually present on image manipulation software), following an upward motion constructed by randomly mixing several paths recorded using a drawing tablet.

Two Systems

Two Systems is an interactive installation reflecting on control and its representation.
The installation consists of a tabletop display showing a high-resolution stop motion animation with interactive sound.
The animation consists of a thirteen-frame laser-cut hand drawn animation of a fire. These photos, once photographed, where gradually burned, generating new layers of stop motion animation. This burning created orthogonal axis of animation. There are thirteen different sets of burned pieces, giving a total of 169 possible images that are animated following arbitrary paths in these two axes (time - burning).
The animation path is controlled by the spectator with two knobs. The knobs, directly control the sound the installation creates. This sound is created by algorithmically combining

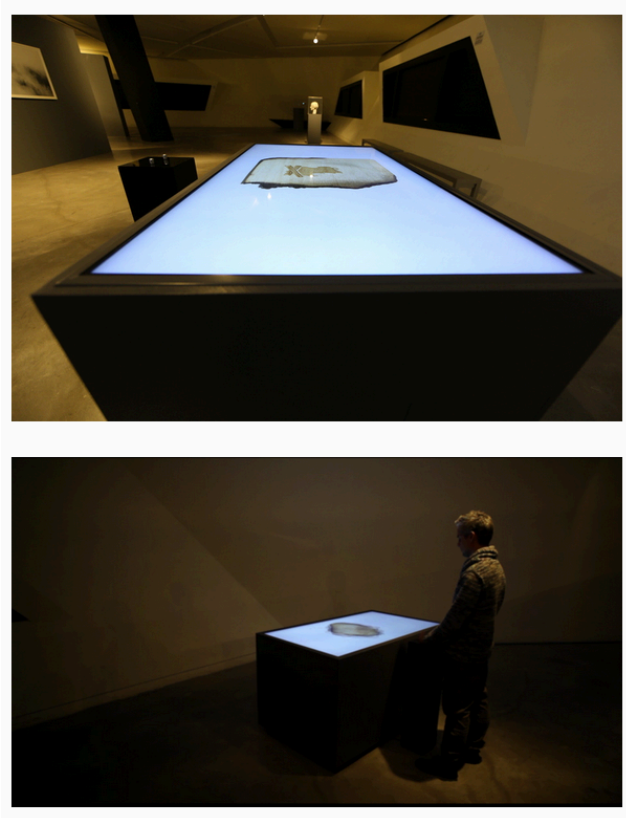

Figure 3 – Two Systems

two different recordings of the Umbrella Revolution (Hong Kong's student-led pro-democracy demonstrations in 2014). Although the two controls have a direct impact in the sound that is being reproduced, the causal relation between the spectator's interaction and the sound changes permanently, turning impossible to learn how to control the sound.

The installation reflects on control, information, and representation.
Two Systems participated on The Age of Experience. A collective show at the School of Creative Media of City University of Hong Kong, curated by Dr. Harald Kraemer.
This work originated at the NYU's 2014 ITP Summer Camp in New York.

5500

> *"The blue waters of the Mediterranean have become a bloodbath for desperate immigrants seeking refuge in the European Union."* — The Migrants' Files

In the period between June 2014 and June 2015, at least 5,500 immigrants died trying to reach Europe from Africa while crossing the Mediterranean Sea.
5500 is both a musical performance and a data visualization performance. It consists of a performance of Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor, Op. 13, commonly known as Sonata Pathétique, where the pianist's execution is disrupted using computer–controlled electrodes

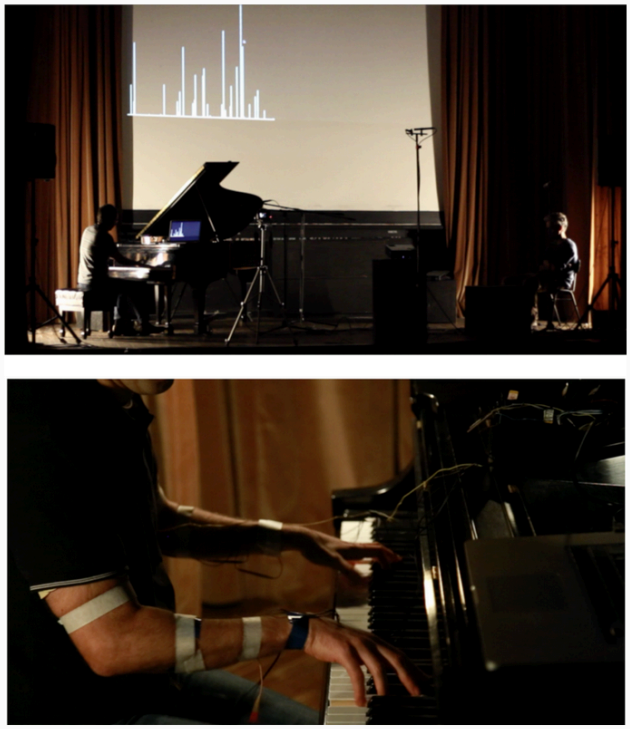

Figure 4 - 5500

which stimulate the nerves in their arms causing involuntary contractions of his or her muscles, and affecting the final musical result.

In this work, the calendar dates on which these deaths occurred are mapped onto the time sequence of the performance, in such a manner that the calendar year is spread over the course of the sonata. This means that, for the average performance length of Sonata Patéthique being around eighteen minutes, the nine-minute mark represents six months into the year.

The data of the immigration incidents was obtained from The Migrants' Files, a project launched in 2013 by a group of European journalists and researchers.

5500's representation of the deaths of the migrants unfolds in two orthogonal axes: a digital muscle memory implant that transforms the body itself into an apparatus for representing and remembering socio-political processes; and the resulting music, a classical piece of European Culture directly affected by its own representation.

The performance was premièred on the 1st of July, at the School of Arts of the University of the Republic, in Montevideo, Uruguay, with pianist Bruno Benedetto.

Technical details

The performance involves a standard piano, a computer, a projector, and the EMS device.

The EMS device consists of a laser–cut black acrylic box, from which the electrodes are connected. Inside the box, there is a medically compliant signal generator. We use an Arduino UNO and four relays to control whether the signal from the pulse generator reaches the electrodes. The communication between the box and the controlling computer is via Bluetooth.

The electrodes are situated on top of the ulnar nerve in both arms of the performer. This way, when electricity is conveyed, the hands of the performer twitch, preventing the normal execution of the piece. We use a frequency of approximately 25Hz and a pulse width of approximately 290 µs; however, these values are calibrated before the performance as they depend on the exact location of the electrodes and on the performer's sensibility.

The system is programmed in Java/Processing.

Epilogue

This paper presented several explicitly political new media artworks. These personal explorations aim at creating a political artistic discourse from the technological appropriation that new media art entails.

The pieces try to escape from the formal assumptions that the involved technological artefacts bring, while simultaneously escaping the *intended use* of these technologies.

These artworks propose an appropriation of the *poetic dimension* of these technologies. New media art proposes this technological dimension as part of the sensible, it inscribes the reason, purpose and technicality of the tools into the art practice, "fractalizing" the technology and its products: each change creates new tools and new possible changes, it systematizes serendipity.

It is natural that in a society of knowledge an art language is created from within this knowledge; therefore, it is in the differences of the relation with knowledge where a big part of the need for a peripheral, conceptualist, new media art, resides.

In fact, what is needed is a meta-appropriation: the socio-political appropriation of the context that would allow for original new media art, that is, *the appropriation of the processes of construction of knowledge.*

Acknowledgements

Blinded.

References

[1] Greenfeld, L. and Malczewski, E. 2010 Politics as a Cultural Phenomenon. In Handbook of Politics, Springer.

[2] Malina, R. F. 2005 Foreword. In At a distance: Precursors to art and activism on the Internet, A. Chandler and N. Neumark,Eds The MIT Press.

[3] Sengers, P. 2010. The Ideology of Modernism in HCI. Critical Dialogue: Interaction, Experience and Cultural Theory Workshop, CHI'10.

[4] Boehner, K., Vertesi, J., Sengers, P., and Dourish, P. 2007. How HCI interprets the probes. Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems, 1077-1086.

Author(s) Biography(ies)

Blinded