The Work, the Performance and the Interactive Installation

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As an artist much of my work is concerned with the development of immersive interactive installations, and of performances designed to engage in a dialogue with those installations[1]. During the making of these pieces I have been much exercised by questions concerning the identity of such performance works *as* works. The identity of a performance enacted in an interactive installation is ambiguous, inasmuch as the performance work occupies the ontological space-in-between an autonomous work, which has its own identity, and a performance work which is an integral element of certain actualisations of that work. Now, inasmuch as the choreography of the performance is designed in relation to the structures of the interactive environment of the installation and thus is dependent upon that environment, it could be claimed that the performance work does not have an identity of it own as a work. Rather, the argument might go, it is merely a sophisticated triggering device used to bring the installation work to presence in a particular way. That last option seems to privilege the workhood of the installation, which is one element of the performance work, over that of the performance work, which incorporates the installation work. This is a position I find difficult to accept, both as artist and theorist.

In order to get to grips with the theoretical issues raised by the question of the ontological status of performance works designed for interactive environments, it is necessary to understand what the ontology of the interactive installation is. Only then can we begin to arrive at an understanding of what the ontological status of such performance 'works' is.

The immersive interactive installations with which I engage as a choreographer comprise what are often called electronically sensitised spaces which 'house' an invisible network of electronic 'triggers' which initiate responses in the interactive system to the trajectories and/or gestures of the viewer in the space-in-between. The 'built environment' generally constitutes large screens upon which imagery is projected. It is this imagery, and the sound environment, which responds to the motion of viewers in the space. The installation, therefore, can only be brought to presence through a physicalised dialogue between interactors and the systems which drive the installation, for without such a dialogue the installation, as a work, remains inert. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that an inactive installation work does not exist as a work. In what sense, then, can the inactive

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[1] An immersive interactive installation constitutes an electronically sensitised space into which sonic and/or visual images are projected. Interactive triggers are embedded in the space, which respond to the behaviours of the interactors. (For example if an interactor enters a particular area of the space images or sounds appear in response to their presence in that space.) It can take the form of a conventional performance space in a theatre environment, or an enclosed environment in a gallery space.

interactive installation be said to be a 'work' - and it will most certainly be seen as such by the artist who has spent many months generating it as an artwork.

And here we must address the issue of what a 'work' is in this context. In many ways the work is a Barthean 'text', inasmuch as it is constructed as a "…network with a thousand entrances" (Barthes 1975: p.12) Further, like a text it is not an artefact but "…a process of demonstration…[it] only exists in the moment of discourse…[and] is experienced only in the *activity of production*" (Barthes 1977) *(my italics)*. But this is not quite enough to understand the ontological status of the interactive installation work. The 'work-ness' of an interactive installation, I would suggest, has at least two, if not three, planes. The first comprises the interactive system through which the work operates, the second comprises its aesthetic qualities (both primary and secondary). Neither plane is more or less important than the other, rather they are symbiotic, each equally important in accessing what Andrew Benjamin (1981) call the 'work' of the work. Benjamin argues that all artworks, even fixed-form artworks, undergo a continuous transformation during their life as works. This process of transformation is initiated by the dialogue between the work, the viewer and the cultural frameworks through which it is viewed. The work is not at the mercy of the viewer, but is an integral part of the dialogue. It is here that the 'work' of the work lies. Now this transformational process underpins the very concept of the interactive installation work. The 'work' is, therefore, more of an activity than an entity.

Let us look more carefully at this dual structure of an interactive work. One plane, or stratum, of the interactive installation work is a given, inasmuch as it exists independently of any engagement, or dialogue, with the installation, and indeed independently of the built environment.. Strictly it comprises the progamme which activates the responses of the installation to the behaviour of interactors within it. This plane does not at any time appear as part of the aesthetic surface of the work, although the elegance of its structure may give the work-in-action an ineffable sense of being perfectly proportioned for the thematic frame of the work. (It is in this sense that the programming of an interactive installation is an artistic rather than a merely technical exercise.) As such we might see the interactive system as the conditions which allow the 'work' to be brought to presence. The other plane of the interactive installation work, the imagery, is only revealed when the installation is in dialogue with interactors. The imagery is generally made available to perception through the presence of a third stratum, the built environment into which sound and visual imagery is projected. Unwittingly, the interactor engages with each of these in equal proportion, and in doing so activates the interactive programme. Although interactors access the work as an art experience through the work's aesthetic qualities, in order to bring the work's (always potential) range of qualities to presence they must wittingly engage with the structures of the interactive system. (In many interactive installations viewers find themselves engaging unwittingly with the interactive system. Things happen, but they know not why. This may engender an interesting experience, but only accesses one, relatively superficial plane of the installation.)

Only when some understanding of the interactive system is reached will the viewer begin to access the 'work' of the work, for it is this system which activates the 'work' of the interactive installation. The interactive work is ever in a process of transformation both in terms of its sensuous, aesthetic qualities, and its 'work', both made manifest through the interactive behaviours required to bring the work to presence. As a consequence, in a very real sense, the 'work' of the work is realised through the behaviour of the system as it responds to the behaviour of the interactors. However, that behaviour is not a response to the system itself, but to the sensuous, or aesthetic, qualities which the behaviour of the system brings to presence. The three (the interactors' behaviour, the system and the ever-changing aesthetic surface) are locked into a continuous feedback loop, each entirely dependent upon the other. The interactors' behaviours are, therefore, yet another 'system' or plane, which intersects with the constructed system generated by the originating author of the work. This clearly has implications for my enquiry into the ontological status of the kind of performance works I have been making.

Let me recap for a moment. I have now identified at least four 'planes' which are integral to an interactive installation work. These planes intersect, and in doing so enter a complex three, even four-way, interactive feedback system in which no single plane can be said to be dominant. Each planes can be identified independently, but no plane can operate without an engagement with the other planes. We are clearly describing a Barthian text. However, I would suggest that, however, fitting Barthes notion of the text is, that an understanding of the ontological status of the interactive installation work is articulated even more clearly in the work of Deleuze and Guattari.

Sophisticated interactive installations comprise a collection of short images, or events. These may or may not comprise fragments of larger images. (For example, several fragments of sound or movement, when linked become sound/movement images in their own right.) The interactive system constitutes a complex network of *possible* connections between images, and between behaviours, both internal ('system' behaviours) and external (interactor) behaviours). Several possible pathways to and from individual elements of the multiple planes of the authored interactive system (e.g. sound imagery, visual imagery, motion of visual imagery, etc) are built in to the interactive programme, allowing several different progressions of events, or composite images to be formed from the same collection of elements. The range of possible outcomes built into such an interactive system are such that frequently not even the originating author can predict the way in which they will be actualised on any given occasion.

The interactive system (which as an entity does not include interactor behaviour) is what a Deleuzian ontology would refer to as a plane of consistency, or a plane of composition. The plane of consistency of an interactive installation is the "…unformed unorganised, nonstratified body and all its flows," D&G 1987. P.43). It is not, however, *dis*organised. Rather it is a plane of elements,

potential links and networks designed by the originating author/s, which can be assembled into a multiplicity of entities and occurences which have identifiable forms, functions and intensities. An interactive installation has no form without the presence and behaviour of the interactor, and thus could be said to be a Deleuzian plane of composition. Any form such an installation may take on a given occasion depends upon the actions taken by the interactors as they respond to the ambience of the installation imagery, which they themselves are generating *in situ*. (So you can begin to see the problem when attempting to decide just what the installation 'work' as work is. It is a very slippery customer indeed.) The behaviour of the interactors Deleuze and Guattari would refer to as a 'system of capture'. Deleuze and Guattari use the term 'system of capture' to describe the processes through which unorganised planes of composition are formulated into 'coherent' events. Through a system of capture (which may be physical activity or the imposition of a particular conceptual framework onto a work) molecular elements (in an nstallation fragments of images or sound) are linked into a (temporary) aggregate. This may itself become a molecular element, which is then subject to further aggregation. (In Simon Biggs's *Halo* for example each individual movement image is composed of tiny fragments of movement. These are the molecular elements. Each fragment can be used in several different aggregates, and thus become part of several different movement images.) Thus, through a system of capture, very small elements become part of large entities, which, in a new framework, are treated as elements in their own right. (In *Halo* each individual movement pattern becomes part of a further movement image, for example, a group pattern.) In an interactive installation any clusters of elements (movement or sound images) which are formed are temporary, because the intervention of other systems, for instance, spontaneous interactor behaviours, continually cause their dispersal and, through the resulting reconfiguration of the interactive system, the reconfiguration of the fragments into different forms. The reconfiguration of the interactive system consequently results in the reconfiguration of the aesthetic nuances of the imagery. This now becomes a system of capture in and of itself, for it is the ambience created by the reconfiguration of the elements of the installation which precipitates a reconfiguration of the interactors' behaviours, and thus initiates a new system of capture, which in turn leads to a new ambience and the subsequent reconfiguration of the system…..and so the story goes on.

As can be seen the processes involved in interactive installations are complex, and militate against an easy conclusion as to what the nature of the work is. Although it can be identified as an autonomous artwork, the work is dependent upon the integration of the system/s of capture of the interactors and the various elements of the interactive system. The work *as* work therefore cannot exist except as an interaction between two or more dynamic systems. Because the engagement between viewer and system is genuinely dialogic (that is a response from one side of the dialogue modifies the behaviour of the other party involved in the dialogue), each set of responses generates fresh sets of connections in the interactive system, which in turn generates new responses and so on. Each interactive engagement gives rise to a unique *dynamic* event which has no precedent and cannot be reiterated.

Now if we are discussing *Halo* as an autonomous installation, we have reached some kind of conclusion with respect to its ontological status. It is an open-ended Deleuzian plane of consistency, which is subject to modulation and transformation form moment to moment through the intersection of external events, which become integrated into the plane of composition which is *Halo. Halo in Performance,* however, is a different matter. *Halo in Performance* is a performance work which was designed to generate a semi-constructed dialogic engagement with the installation *Halo*. As such it constitutes a plane of composition in its own right, which interpenetrates the plane of composition which is *Halo.* In *Halo in Performance* the eighteen figures which constituted the visual imagery of the installation became a cast of 'virtual' performers. Because each virtual cast member was independently interactive, whilst at the same time programmed to interact with eight other performers as a member of a group choreography[2] it was possible to devise an improvisational system which would 'choreograph' those figures 'on the fly'. As such the figures (and thus the installation environment) became participating performers in a complex group improvisation. Although at a mechanical level the installation is generally unable to respond in new ways to the behaviour of the performers, insasmuch as they are constrained to a pre-programmed set of behaviours and cannot construct original behaviours, the dialogue between performers and installation is an equal one. The ambience generated by the installation in response to the performers' behaviour affects subsequent performance behaviours, which in turn generates a modified ambience, which modifies the performers' behaviours. In each performance, just as performers become an integral element of the installation as they interact with it, so the installation becomes an integral part of the performance work as it responds to the performers' behaviour. The live structured improvisation constitutes a second interactive system composed of fragmentary events and rules for their activation and interrelationships. It is this that intersects with the interactive system of *Halo.* As a result, in *Halo in Performance* neither performance work nor installation system is in control. Rather the control, such as it is, passes back and forth between the two as each responds to the other with each change in the configuration of on the one hand performers, on the other the installation events. The ontological status of this composite work lies in the differential relations which obtain between them as the two complex systems engage with one another.

Halo in Performance, then*,* is a strange kind of 'work', neither independent of, nor under the control of the installation in which it takes place. Because it could not have be conceived, and cannot be performed independently of *Halo,* it is not an autonomous performance work. However, it is distinguishable from a mere manifestation, or performance of the installation. It constitutes its own

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[2] As such the system which drove the installation was analogous to a structured improvisation in dance or theatre. Each of the virtual figures was programmed to 'perform' within a prescribed set of behavioural parameters, that is to respond in certain ways to the structure of the environment in which they found themselves, just as performers follow a set of behavioural parameters (rules) established by either themselves or a choreographer.

interactive system, and is thus a plane of composition in its own right. Yet it can only come to presence through its interaction with *Halo.* Thus, like *Halo*, which cannot exist independently of the behaviour of the interactors which engage with it, so *Halo in Performance* cannot exist without the behaviour of *Halo.* Thus as an 'entity', works such as *Halo in Performance* lie somewhere in the space-in-between their identity as performance works and the installations to which they are bound. Together *Halo* and *Halo in Performance* are a dynamic 'becoming', pure processes the ontological status of which cannot be accessed through recourse to a description of their material or structural properties, but only through reference to the differential relations which obtain between them when they engage with each other.

Ontologically, then, *Halo in Performance* is not a 'work' *per se*, an artefact, an entity, but rather a 'state' which lies between the two planes of composition. An interpenetration of two distinctive systems in which boundaries are breached and reconfigured as new systems of capture work upon it, it is ever subject to modification and modulation. As such, its identity lies not in its material, or re-iterable features (the images, the sounds, the motion) but in the differential relations which lie between them and between the two planes of composition (the installation system and the performance system) from which it is composed.

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