

# Bill Seaman: Exchange Fields. An interactive video-sound installation about the body

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## Abstract

There are three ways to experience this piece: 1. being taken by the hypnotic composition of visuals, sound, and material environment, subscribing to the attached buzzword "interaction. 2. asking, after having seen so many interactive installations, with a weary shrug: So what! 3. considering the grammar of the interface and come to an adventurous conclusion.

## 1.

Bill Seaman's interactive video-sound installation "Exchange Fields" was commissioned by the Vision Ruhr Exhibition in Dortmund Germany in 2000. In February and March 2004 it has been exhibited in the David Winton Bell Gallery in Providence. "Exchange Fields" is remarkable in at least two regards: 1. Its combination of dance and technology. 2. Its interface. How is this piece situated in both regards?

1. The combination of dance and technology has generated interesting artworks in which dancers incorporate technology as an extension or mirror of their action. Thus, in "Vodka Konkav", a performance of Wenedikt Jerafejew's poem "The Journey to Petuschki" directed by Helena Waldmann, the dancers act behind a milk-glass wall and can be seen by the audience only via five big, transparent mirrors, which multiply, fragment, and distort the dancers. Here technology has stepped between the dancers and the audience not to make the presentation chic and modern, as in many other cases, but to render the surreal-hallucinatory journey of a drunkard through real and virtual worlds.

In other cases the marriage starts from the other side: technology incorporates dance as its subject. An example are the Macromedia Director pieces "Legato" or

"Cellos" by Nicolas Clauss which invite the users to choreograph their own ballet by activating the dance of stick-figures and the assigned audio files through mouse over contact (see review on Clauss' work in *dichtung-digital* 2/2003).

2. The interface may be considered the most important part of an interactive installation. Its role is "to visualize the meanings inside the system and to be transparent." Interfaces can be manipulated "and must also explain to the user how to use them."<sup>1</sup> Fujihata speaks of the *grammar of the interface*, which the user has to understand in order to "interact with something that lies behind, with certain meaning." Once the grammar has been grasped, the reader can as easily read as she can write for in an interactive environment reading is just the other side of writing. To put it this way: The user can read her writing.

To make the process easy one can apply interfaces that are simple to understand such as the bicycle in Jeffrey Shaws "Legible City" (1990/91) which invites the user to bicycle through a city whose street consist of letters. The city is projected onto the screen in front of the cyclist who can navigate through by moving the wheel. Such an interface is based on 'practical literacy'. It does not threaten the volunteering user to find herself in an embarrassing situation watched by the other viewers who do not interact with the system.

Other interfaces deliberately deny the user such control over the system driven by philosophical concern and pedagogical intention. "For the most part, sense of control is a dangerous illusion," as David Rokeby states whose "Very Nervous System"-Installations are "systems of inexact control" that negate the fetishization of control. According to Rokeby in a good interaction system "each action on the part of the user is as much a question as a statement," which proclaims interface-illiteracy appears as a useful experience. (See the interview with Rokeby in *dichtung-digital* 1/2003)

What concerns Seaman's installation, it kind of merges both extremes with respect to both subjects discussed above. It presents the dance of a real person but only projected as video and as a response to the audience's action. The audience interacts with an easy to read and to control interface, but only to learn that it is absolutely controlled by the required actions. How does "Exchange Fields" work?

## 2.

In "Exchange Fields" the viewer can interact with 13 furniture-like objects made of pressed wood displayed on the gallery floor in front of three video projections. Each object - Seaman calls it "furniture/sculpture" - is designed and labeled in relationship to a particular part of the body. If the viewer puts her leg into the appropriate box

she will trigger the projection of a dance sequence - choreographed and danced by Regina van Berkel - focusing on the leg. If the user puts her hand in the appropriate box, a moving hand will appear on the screen. The installation is able to project four overlapping dance sequences thus allowing four viewers to interact with four furniture/sculpture at the same time.



exhibition in Dortmund, 2000



sketch and drawing for arm sculpture



video sequence for arm object

In addition to the video sequences, which are almost the only source of light in the gallery, one hears "meditative sound playing in the background, blending with the chanting of Seaman's lyrics reflecting on human-machine relations." As Bill Seaman states, the central question of "Exchange Fields" deals with the generation of a new kind of interface: "how might an embodied experience of interface be layered into

the content of an interactive media/dance comprised of video, text, a sculptural installation and music?"<sup>2</sup> There are at least three ways to experience this piece.

Freshmen in the field of new media art will be taken by the hypnotic composition of visuals, sound, and material environment. They will subscribe to the attached buzzword "interaction," test the action-reaction-circle and enjoy the piece as cool and fun.

Sophomores have seen things like this before and may ask with a weary shrug: So what! The pure fact of being involved in the presentation of the work excites them as little as the fact that there is a theory and a history behind the concept of interaction and that the voice-over-text includes clandestine quotes from it. They may test the action-reaction-circle and enjoy that they could tricks the system which triggers a food-focussed video sequence while a hand was moved into the food box.

Juniors finally have grown beyond both the naïve enthusiasm and the been-there-done-that ennui. They will consider what actually happens in this interaction. They will take into account that the interface partly looks like x-ray-boxes in which one has to immobilize one's limbs to have 'them' appearing and moving on the screen. This is what they may think:

### 3.



The fact that I have to wait before my immobilized leg triggers the video clip of its alter ego first seems to be a flaw in the program. However, soon I understand that it goes well with the demand for immobilization. By the same logic, if I move my body again its alter ego on the screen disappears. It is as if I trade my body for hers, leg for leg, arm for arm, and head for head. The reality of my body, which I haven't been very content with lately since - because of all the assignments - I don't find time to work out anymore, the reality of this very body of mine is traded for the projection of a foreign body on the screen, that appears in dramatic lighting and camera moves and is imbued with implicit eroticism. The corporal (thick, fleshy, old, exhausted) body is exchanged for the ideal body.



To an extent - our juniors' mind may proceed - one can see this installation as a way to convert the viewer into the sculpture. This sculpture is not still as those great sculptures of the ancient time, however it idealizes, transcends the body as much as those do. One change in the setting would make this clear. Imagine the immobilization of your body would trigger the appearance of an old, wrinkled, washed-out body. Would you still want to interact within this installation? How would this change your reception?

Seaman's voice-over text ends with the words: "Motion becomes you, emergent of flows." This line is ambiguous enough to be read in different ways. One surely would be right to understand it as an emphasis on the substitution of bodies. The other body, whose motion is triggered by my immobilization, becomes me, becomes my ideal. I project myself onto the screen. This screen represents more than itself - the

juniors would move on entering a new hermeneutic level - it embodies TV, cinema, and advertisement on billboards: places that confront us with the beautiful body, inform our own body ideal. But only here, in this interactive setting of exchanged bodies are we really urged to discover this ongoing substitution and our contribution to it. Here we think about it; and half the thinking is feeling (the end of my actual body) while conducting this interaction (putting my body out of action).

#### 4.



This perspective does not stop with the notion that the interface is designed to bring out movement of the viewer's body. It is true the furniture-objects cause the viewer walking through the room to reach them. However, this movement is actually part of any installation or even classical sculpture requiring the viewers to walk around it. The point is that after reaching the object one is expected to move certain parts of the body, to put them in or at the furniture/sculptures. As we have seen, this is only half the grammar this interface requires us to grasp. Part of the "physical engagement of the participant", which Seaman announces for his installation, is the demand to stop moving in order to carry out the interaction. The juniors above have shown how this 'writing' can be read.

Tilman Baumgärtl, who obviously does not like "Exchange Fields" very much, reports that maleficent viewers try to make the system crash.<sup>3</sup> Baumgärtl considers this as the revenge of friends of art who dislike to be made into interactive guinea pig. We

now know what is really behind it. Such intention is either the unintended result of freshmen enthusiasm or the blind reaction of bored sophomores - or it is the defense of those who have seen through the system of substitution.

## Notes

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1. Masaki Fujihata: On Interactivity. In: Takeover. Who's doing the art of tomorrow (ARS Electronica 2001), Wien, New York: Springer 2001, pp. 316-319; 318
2. Description of "Exchange Fields" on <http://www.billseaman.com> section Work/Major Works
3. Tilman Baumgärtel: Heute ist morgen, in: Telepolis 3.6.2000: [www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/sa/3532/1.html](http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/sa/3532/1.html)