Chapter 2
Bare Nothingness:
Situated Subjects in Embodied Artists' Systems

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the current state of digital artworks, arguing that they have not yet made a ground-breaking impact on the cultural landscape of the early 21st century and suggesting that a reason for this lack of notoriety is the obsolete model of agency deployed by many digital artists. As an alternative to what is framed as out-of-date forms of interactivity, the chapter highlights evolving research into interactive systems, artists' tools, applications, and techniques that will provide readers with an insightful and up-to-date examination of emerging multimedia technology trends. In particular, the chapter looks at situated computing and embodied systems, in which context-aware models of human subjects can be combined with sensor technology to expand the agencies at play in interactive works. The chapter connects these technologies to Big Data, Crowdsourcing and other techniques from artificial intelligence that expand our understanding of interaction and participation.

INTRODUCTION

The philosopher Alfred Whitehead wrote that "apart from the experiences of subjects there is, nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness" (Whitehead, 1929, pp. 252-254). The present chapter will look at innovative interactive multimedia systems that integrate new conceptions of the subject into creative digital practice. Drawing on specific case studies and art historical framing the chapter will argue that digital artworks have not yet made a ground-breaking impact on the cultural landscape of the early twenty-first century, one main reason for this being the obsolete model of agency deployed by many artists who use computation as an artistic medium.

This chapter presents the argument that a great number of the most current and high profile digital art works have not yet made a significant use of the core technological innovations that have occurred in the last 10 years, and that they are largely out of sync with advances in Computer Science and Web application development, in particular with the framing of subjects and agency.

As an alternative to what is contextualised here as out-of-date forms of interactivity, it will highlight evolving research in interactive systems, artists' tools, applications, and techniques that will provide readers with an insightful and up-to-date examination of emerging multimedia technology trends. More precisely, it will look at situated computing and embodied systems, in which context-aware models of human subjects can be combined with sensor technology to expand the agencies at play in interactive works. The chapter will connect these technologies to Big Data, Crowdsourcing and other techniques from artificial intelligence that expand our understanding of interaction and participation.

The case studies presented here will elucidate the specific technical and design strategies used in real world projects, clearly explaining the mathematical and conceptual processes and procedures at play. Basic code examples are provided, in order to allow readers to hack into and play with the concepts outlined.

The first half of the chapter will look at the emergence of new media art and put it in historical and theoretical context. The second part of the chapter will present a typology of interaction modes and propose a radical vision for digital art, one that deploys a far more sophisticated notion of agency within the participant/creator dyad than the one currently used; it will look at the formation of temporally specific contextualised relationships between subjects and digital works. The final part of the chapter will suggest solutions by examining case studies, describing how a range of more recent artworks (including two by the co-author, Eleanor Dare) present multi-linear, situated and embodied forms of *intra-activity* as an alternative to more linear forms of interaction deployed by most contemporary, high profile, digital art works.

SETTING THE STAGE

The late 1960s and early 1970s signalled the arrival of a new era for exhibition practices as well as the birth of what was later to be called 'media art'. It is appropriate to briefly examine the events of this period, since it laid the foundations for the inclusion of digital works as an acceptable art practice and various issues around display strategies (in relation to new media and technological innovation) that occupied curators, historians and critics at the time and which still prevail today[1].

At the beginning of the decade (1960), the art critic Clement Greenberg wrote "Modernist Painting". The essay came to typify the Modernist critical position on the visual arts and acted as an inspiration for the 'white cube' as the ideal exhibition space. According to Greenberg, the "advanced" or "ambitious" Art was an art that could "test society's capacity for high art"; those called "purists", who defended abstract art as the only defence against kitsch and the decline in culture, were also those who valued art the most. Modernism had to establish itself in the social arena, by demonstrating that the kind of experience it provided was valuable "in its own right and not to be obtained by any other kind of activity" (Greenberg, 1992, p. 775)[3]. The area of competence of each art would lie in the uniqueness of the nature of its medium. Thus, the shared elements between the artistic disciplines should be eliminated in order for each art to reach a culmination with the absolute purity of its particular form. Greenberg's account of artistic standards - and particularly of the ways in which art's separateness as a social practice is secured - called into question his hope that art could become a provider of value in its own right.

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