Chapter 2
Liquid Views and the Unconscious Perception

Monika Fleischmann
Fleischmann-Strauss.de, Germany

Wolfgang Strauss
Fleischmann-Strauss.de, Germany

ABSTRACT

The central theme of interactive media art installation "Liquid Views" is the virtual well in which the visitor - Ovid's Narcissus of today - discovers her reflection. The work was first exhibited at Siggraph 1993 in Simon Penny's "Machine Culture" show. Since then it was presented worldwide in more than 50 cities with different cultural background across the globe. Now, more than 20 years later, the work is on exhibition again to study the changed conditions of human media communication and to examine the meaning of the interactive mirror installation in the time of the Selfie as screen identity.

INTRODUCTION

Liquid Views represents Narcissus' Mirror, a parable of Ovid's Metamorphoses, as an act of self-reflection in the media age that transforms into a visual and intellectual reflection on presence and awareness (Fleischmann & Strauss 1993). At the same time, the interactive installation mirrors unconscious perception. The cultural scientist Christoph Wulf (1982) writes about looking into the mirror:

While the magical power of the evil eye holds the other, the 'Spiegelblick' comprises a conversation of the viewer with him- or herself. In the mirror the viewer meets herself; her body becomes an image; she sees it, without being able to repeal the distance between her and her mirror image. The mirror image consists only of a moment; unlike the painted self-portrait or the painted mirror image, which gives temporal duration of a moment and a living body becomes a permanent image.

In contrast to the self-portrait and photographic image, the mirror does not preserve the image of the seer, it changes with the alteration of the seer. The described properties of the mirror are reversed

in artificial, virtual mirrors. The digital mirror image can be preserved by storing, it never forgets and cannot break (Schwarz 1997). The digital image is transmitted and stored as a constant stream of the unconscious. Thus, the digital mirror shows not only the external image, but also the inner state of un-consciousness. The viewer's image in Liquid Views is transformed interactively by her touch and thus she becomes immersed. Through immersion the viewer's distance to the mirror image is performatively repealed (Fleischmann & Strauss 1996).

Today's Media Narcissus experiences reality as boundless. The viewer's transition into the virtual world occurs by touching her virtual body. Touch is the interface and the mediator of different languages and perceptions. The immersive environment of Liquid Views, in which the impact of virtual worlds is tested, offers a critical and at the same time poetic view on the attractiveness of images that renders the world of fiction as Mixed Reality barely discernible from that of reality. The interface to the machine is imperceptible. The fact of seeing without noticing and that one is being seen by others unnoticed, is an allegory to the Internet. Liquid Views deals with the virtual body, with memory, observation and surveillance (see Figure 1). Through these elemental references, it *"is a metaphor (…) for the use of the World Wide Web and its capacity to manipulate and control the real."* (Giannachi 2004).

PICTORIAL MECHANISM FOR INTUITIVE PERFORMANCE

A horizontal touch screen shows the simulation of a blue shimmering water surface on which the view-ers see their own reflection. The artificial nature is steered by artificial intelligence. The algorithm of the pictorial mechanism that generates Liquid Views is programmed on three levels: first a program for generating the waves and distorting the texture coordinates of the Camera Image, second a program for reading the video stream from the camera to the above texture, and third a program for reading the touch-screen output to the wave generator. Thus the first real-time morphing for an interactive art installation was realized in 1992. At this time morphing was only to be seen in rendered animation for music videos.

While approaching Liquid Views, the sound of water is to be heard. Overlooking the virtual water, the visitor is recorded by a hidden video camera. The software superimposes the visitor's image with the water simulation. Curator Stefan Iglhaut writes for the exhibition catalog "Deep Storage" in 1998:

Figure 1. Stages of Liquid Views. © 1996 Fleischmann & Strauss

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