

Chapter 10

Learning from Baroque

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ABSTRACT

The development of ubiquitous computing has brought up the emergence of a new type of space, sensitive and neither fully material nor totally virtual, within our environments. This chapter discusses, from a cultural perspective, aesthetic and philosophical issues related to what has been called “mixed reality spaces”. It aims to show how early examples of interactive art can be found in Baroque architecture and, through analysis of the perceptual means used in some of those works, proposes a strategy for bringing aesthetic depth and relevance into mixed reality installations. Depicting philosophical implications between vision and touch and their consequences for aesthetics, this essay proposes that, while designing mixed reality installations, artists operate a radical shift from the vision to touch in order to create meaningful experiences and preserve freedom for the participant.

INTRODUCTION

Through pervasive technologies, environments have become sensitive. Body movements can be sensed and restored in real time, often through images projected onto the built space. As situated technologies continue to penetrate our environments, irreversibly changing the way we experience space, important questions arise: what kind of relationship do such images establish with their

hosting space? How do they alter our perception of it? Do they enhance our experience of space, or disturb it? Are they works of art? Are they “contemporary”? Do we want them? The issues that lie behind these questions are whether or not the use of cutting-edge technology automatically makes a piece an expression of its time; and upon which criteria we might consider a specific technology to be relevant within the context of art. They question us in our relationship to space and change.

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In addition to what has just been said, the question of how these spaces affect our body needs to be asked as well, both from a physical and a from a philosophical standpoint. Indeed, the body is the main agent through which these virtual spaces emerge. Unlike what happens in other artistic languages, in an interactive installation we manipulate images directly and with the whole body -not just vision. This fact intensifies the impression of reality we get from these virtual spaces or, more precisely, creates a new perception of reality that includes them. Freed from mediation devices such as mouse and keyboard, we interiorize all the more so those spaces, as their transformation, sometimes even their generation, happens through our bodies. It is clear, though, that there are many possible ways to address the body, and that different ways will produce different aesthetic experiences. This chapter aims to expose different aspects of bodily implication in mixed reality installation, showing how they might produce radically different effects, among which some that might be desirable for us as participants, and others that might not. I will claim that if we want a mixed reality installation to be something more than a technological demonstration, its essence must be intimately tied to the technical apparatus, the images' content, and the physical space within which it exists. Making environments sensitive through computers is not enough, nor is the quality of the images alone. Mixed reality installations can be considered as works of art only from the moment they strike up a dialogue between the space, the projected images, and the viewer's body. It's in this way that this medium can do better than previous languages did. Yet, very often, such dialogue doesn't take place. If interactive installations often fail to embody the expressive capabilities of this new medium, it's mainly because they focus on technology rather than aesthetic experience. In the words of Anthony Dunne (2006, p.3), "*electronic art has become so technology-driven that it seems concerned only with the aesthetic expression of technology for*

its own sake". This is an important aspect of the problem, and one of the main obstacles to overcome, for when technological fascination takes over, the machine rules, producing superficially exciting pieces that mechanize the body and leave us unsatisfied. Instead, we need to consider what question mixed spaces are an answer to, and what examples in the history of art and design could help us unfold the opportunities that lie beyond the simple illustration of movement flow through space, which, as Usman Haque has pointed out, "*is just as representational, metaphor-encumbered and unchallenging as a polite watercolour landscape*"(2006). Instead, I will argue that Baroque, (with the term considered in a broad sense), provide us with a good paradigm onto which we can rely to build meaningful space events.

MIXED SPACES, REAL PLACES

Why Baroque? Much debate has been held around the term "Baroque". Even the best authors on the subject have had doubts about the notion's weight. Alternatively, either the concept was reduced to the sole realm of Architecture, or restricted to an increasingly limited period of time. Its elusive essence kept escaping categorization until in 1988 french philosopher Gilles Deleuze provided in his book *The Fold*, a definition that anchors the concept not in form or style, but in transformation. Rooting Baroque in Leibniz's thinking, Deleuze extracts the concept from its historical reference, and makes it a trans-temporal feature. He shows how artists with no apparent connection (such as Caravaggio and Paul Klee, for instance) are in fact linked by a secret tie: the fold. Deleuze understands it not as a result (the folded object), but, rather, as an operative mode.

Mathematically speaking, the fold lies in inflection, with the inflection point being the place of all potential places. Considered from a philosophical standpoint, this idea expresses a multi-dimensional conception of reality, where

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