Body, Mind and Space. 'Diabolizing' the Modern Recipient in Interactive Poetry.

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„By lack of motion and when the above mentioned defects have arisen, a general debility results, especially of the genitals. In the same degree as all other energies decrease, imagination gets over-excited and is burdened by images which aim at the worst of all, and it finally gets such a power that young men, who seemingly are in the best health, suffer excessively frequent ejaculations first during the night, later during the daytime, too, and finally their lives become endangered" (Roling 18f.).

This statement is not a critical voice concerning the interactive and most fictional reading and writing game of sex chats. The quotation comes rather from a serious dissertation from Paul Anton Roling about how reading influences health, dated in 1824 – a curious example of the debate on the so called obsessions of reading in the late 18th and beginning 19th century. However, the worry about how much the artificial images inside the head would affect the mental and bodily well being seems to keep some relevance to the present era of the erotic ontology of cyberspace, as Michael Heim (82) calls it.

The following argument asks about the development of the recipient as influenced by modernization and media evolution. The matter is the changed options combined with advanced interactive poetry. How does the user of this genre differ from the reader or viewer of the modern tradition?

To put it simply I see three phases of the cultural development with respective types of the recipient, three phases which do not replace but overlay each other. These are:

– Phase I (modernity): the desensualized reader as autonomous subjectivity.
– Phase II (modernism): the symbolic model-recipient as reflexive subjectivity.
– Phase III (hybrid culture): the participating observer as empirical subjectivity.

THE DESENSUALIZED READER AS AUTONOMOUS SUBJECTIVITY

To refer shortly to phases I and II: The Europe of the 18th century faced a fundamental change of society and mentality. The civil reading audience emerg-

ing together with the self-organizing system of art and the book market drew an individual of autonomous subjectivity. This is proved by an empathetic reader whose imaginative pleasure of text becomes an hedonistic purpose of its own. As a pleasure to fill spare time, reading brings up an inner production of illusion that demands a loss of sensuality (cf. Schön). Reading aloud be-comes unusual. People – especially women – would read alone, maybe sitting on a chair:

250. Galanter französischer Kupferstich von Hubert nach einem Bilde von Carême. 1777

(fig. 1)

The body is kept calm and at its most stimulated for further imagination: The book – here: „The Art of Love" – may replace the lover. Even special reading furniture was designed to captivate the body in order to open a free space for illusion.

THE SYMBOLIC MODEL-RECIPIENT AS REFLEXIVE SUBJECTIVITY

The awareness of crisis which is soon derived from modernization and media evolution lets subjectivity become reflexive and topples the ideal of the meta-physical subject. In the avant-garde movements since the turn of the century, art

reacts with an extensive self-reflection: modern age, subjective ego, lan-guage, means of art, artwork, author, understanding etc. – all this becomes questionable. Concerning the technically reproducible artwork, the empathy of the audience is related to the apparatus. The recipient gets a distracted expert who thus gains access to authorship, as Walter Benjamin has shown (29). This approach of the artist and the recipient is also expressed by the aesthetic concept of the co-producer. The poet „determines the room to move, the field of energy, the reader, the new reader, takes the sense of the game up and with him or herself", as Eugen Gomringer puts it in his manifesto „from verse to constellation" (157). On the threshold to hybrid culture and in the context of visual poetry, conceptual art and intermedia a very interesting phe-nomenon arises: the new recipient, now the talk of the town, is to participate in the experiment on psychosomatic mechanisms in the use of language, speech, writing, image and other media. The new recipient becomes a symbolic con-cept which mediates – as Oswald Wiener has claimed – the „only serious task of poetics in the era of natural scientific theories of knowledge. This task is to understand the elementary mechanisms of understanding" (92).

A parallel development is text pragmatics and the aesthetics of reception in which there are frequently direct overlappings with poetics. This is true, for example, for Dick Higgins's concept of intermediality which adopts the no-tion of the fusion of horizons from Gadamer's hermeneutics (cf. Higgins). Indetermination, multifunctionality and openness etc. count as reception ori-entated criteria. According to Umberto Eco for example, the openness of the work is based on „the theoretical, mental cooperation of the addressee" (Eco *Kunstwerk* 41). And this would go on to a „making of the work" for the present advanced option of the „artwork in motion" (Eco *Kunstwerk* 41). In *The Role of the Reader* or *The Limits of Interpretation* Eco emphasized, however, that, in the end, these reception concepts are about the *intentio operis* which would prescribe an ideal 'model-reader'.

The aesthetics of reception simply transfer the addressee into the artwork as its semantic and pragmatic side, speaking of the 'implicit reader' (cf. Iser) or the 'viewer inside the image' (cf. Kemp). The ideal recipient *symbolizes,* in the strictest sense of the word, the difference between the once fixed material or syntactical structure of the work and the multifold possibilities of interpreta-tion. The recipient is a construal of immateriality and thus still resembles the modern reader as a non-sensual, mere mental being. Interactive poetry deconstructs, it diabolizes this idealistic symbol.

Interactive media art makes sure that the recipient or user becomes radically empirical in the artistic experiment of machine-man-coupling. At the same time the program of reflexive subjectivity continues. As never before, art and sciences cooperate studying the human mind and body in their subjection to each other and to the technical and cultural construals of their environment. I should claim that concerning the advanced art of our time one cannot speak of a post-cognitive era as suggested by Dick Higgins, but of a meta-cognitive era.

A prominent example are the activities of *CAiiA-STAR:* Founded and directed by Roy Ascott, *CAiiA-STAR* is a world-wide transdisciplinary research community, which combines, as an integrated research platform, *CAiiA,* the Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts established in 1994, at the University of Wales College Newport, and *STAR,* the Science Technology and Art Research centre, established in 1997 at the University of Plymouth. *CAiiA-STAR* and their conferences on „Consciousness Reframed" claim „a transdisciplinary perspective which seeks the integration of art, science, technology, and consciousness research within a post-biological culture, and is involved in advancing the parameters of this emergent field" (http://www.caiia-star.net/mission/).

In this research program the user and his or her participation don't remain a pure idea but they become an empirically observable dimension of the art-work. For me the notion of interactivity means that the users have the possi-bility and the necessity to intervene in the perceptible surface of a media offering. This happens in real time and is as a rule reversible. There exists a dependence of the actual, virtual text space on the perceptive, imaginative, and – mostly quite limited – motor action of the user. In addition, informatics and the research of artificial intelligence strive to design so called intelligent agents. This means any problem solving computer software which should demand a cooperating, time and space sharing 'partnership' with the user. However, these are aesthetically unspecific questions of technology, and one might suspect that the possibilities of digital media tend to trivialize the renewed ideal of the productive reader. The point is how interactivity is artistically conceptualized.

I am going to discuss this point by three examples which all were created around 1990 and each function as a kind of model for further inventions in the 90s. The works have been authored by Bill Seaman from the US, Luc Courchesne from Canada, and the Australian Jeffrey Shaw. These are media artists who for a long time have worked with language whereas, as far as I know, they have been noted only at the periphery of the discourse of media poetry.

(fig. 2)

„The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers" is an interactive generator which combines text fragments, modular music segments and image sequences in a preconceived sentence template. Each module is presented as a word (or words) superimposed over a related visual image, accompanied by a musical fragment. A linear video, 28 minutes in duration, edited to an audio record-ing consisting of 33 short musical 'movements', forms the foundation of the work. Each of the 33 sections presents a sentence comprised of 10 sentence fragments. The CD ROM version starts by randomly generating sentences. I can stop this process and now I may select phrases from a menu by scrolling through 10 lists of word variables. The program facilitates the instantaneous substitution of word/image/sound segments within the sentence template struc-ture – always in a correct grammar. The participants are presented with a series of options through various linked menus. By chance operation the pro-gram may generate sentences, or you can select a sequence of the 33 video sentences which are based on the intact musical tracks. Finally you can play every combination.

I can only touch some few aspects of this work concerning the users. On one hand, they are confronted with questions of generating meaning. The multilinear and intermedial syntax results in different semantic layers. In a multiple and complex referentiality with the function to exemplify. Problems of coherence get crucial whereby the verbal sentences obviously dominate. Based on a philosophical vocabulary they always seem to fit some how – oscil-lating between senseless meaning and meaningful nonsense. That can be taken as an ironic comment on the work itself or on the rhetoric mechanics of the talk about

art. Concerning the user, the quality of his or her action would be considered compared to the generator. Some questions may arise, such as: Aren't my selections and combinations more motivated, creative, beautiful? Can the machine think, one could quote from Turing, is it an intelligent agent, embodying the intelligence of the author, as claimed by Seaman? And are logic and skills of the machine comparable with mine or even much better?

Such questions and the whole work as such are a tradition – the work's title already alludes to surrealism and to the 'cadavre exquisite' – a variant of Žcriture automatique. The line could be extended to the *ars combinatoria* of Anastasius Kircher and further to the *ars inveniendi et investigandi* of Raimundus Lullus. Accordingly, Seaman uses the metaphor of genetic recombination to situate art like this in a general, actually meta-biological context. Seaman was, incidentally, a co-organizer of the conference „Consciousness reframed" in 1997. The autopoietic principle questions the subjectivity of the user also in this way: Am I an autonomous generator or am I rather a bio-module myself or even a result of the generative system?

„PORTRAIT ONE": WHO'S SPEAKING?

Fig3

Also the second example ironically deconstructs the concept of the intelligent agent on both sides of the virtual interface. „Portrait One" of the Canadian Luc

Courchesne stages a dialogue with a virtual being – a first of comparable works which become more complex by extended characters. Here again Turing's test is quoted as the mechanisms of a dialogue are recombined in the hypertext. This means that the dialogical principle of interactivity is exemplified here. Courchesne attempts a hypermedial transformation of portraiture beyond its tradition in painting, photography, or biography. The user has thereby to ac-cept the role to curiously figure out the personality of fictive Marie. The user is provided with various masks, too, to which Marie would react differently, whereby, as a man, I am suggested to experience the „erotic ontology of cyberspace":

> **A dialogue:**
> I: *Excuse me. – May I ask you something?* • Marie: *You can always try. – It depends, really.* •
> I: *What do you do here?* • M: *Er ... I'm here – waiting ... you know, I don't even think about time anymore. I've decided I have all time I need. – Are you ex-pected, maybe. You're in a hurry?* • I: *Not at all.* • M: *Oh well!* • I: *What do you do?* • M: *Nothing in particular ... I watch. I like looking at people. I don't see the time go by. – You?* • I: *Things are okay.* • M: *You are right. When we think about it, we have reason to rejoyce. – What are you interested in?* • I: *Virtual reality!* • M: *Oh well!* • I: *Oh well – what?* • M: *– It doesn't interest me.* • I: *I feel sorry for you.* • M: *Never mind ... it's not important. If you'll excuse me.* (Dialogue interrupted by program).

Comical effects like this treat the thematic context with irony. In another passage Marie unmistakably emphasizes that interacting with her means to interact with an artwork, a portrait: „Je suis l'Art". She reports a story of Bjory- Casares as a parable: „The Invention of Morel". The story is about a man, who tries to escape his fate and flees to an island. There he meets a woman, whom he believes to be real. Much too late he has to recognize that she isn't real at all. „The main character is like you", the user is told by Marie.

This marks and makes observable the distinction between real and virtual. This distinction splits myself as the user into one side in front of the screen and into another side as a second character within the space of the hypertext, being represented by the questions and answers in quotation marks, by the personal scheme of the I/you form, or by the addressed mimic of Marie, by the hardly avoidable arrow, finally by the links between 151 video files. Thus, the user becomes observable as a symbolic distinction. This option is meant by the term 'diabolization': deconstructing a symbol and its hidden mediation between conjunction and separation (cf. Block 180ff.).

Concerning new media poetry, Eduardo Kac is right to emphasize that the user of an interactive artwork cannot function as a model-reader anymore: „The writer [...] must give up the idea of the ideal reader as ideal decoder of the text

and must deal with a reader that makes very personal choices [which] will generate multiple and differentiated experiences of the text and, most importantly, that all of theses occurrences are equally valid textual encounters" (Kac 197). This statement comes from the producer's perspective, and it still sounds a bit idealistic. From the recipients' point of view, the following should be considered: Often, he or she has to face an enormous amount of possibilities, that could be realized – in Seaman's work for instance over 1,5 trillions of possible sentences, through which the machine would unrestingly run. The way of realization is highly determinate. In „Portrait One" this is brought to mind, when the program stops the dialogue, if the user hesitates for more than five seconds or selects a 'wrong' statement. Furthermore, the user's access to the artwork is quite limited, concerning the program, the stored data, and the various symbolic layers of the computer. Just to mention the 'unique reading poems' of the French writer Philippe Bootz as another example: These texts have to be realized by several single readings in an irreversible and unique way. It becomes lucid, that the recipient can hardly catch up the written or pro-grammed text and this may irritate or even frustrate the 'very personal choices' which then could become a subject of self-referential observation.

„The Legible City": Where am I?

This leads us to our third and last example, „The Legible City". This interac-tive environment has been designed by Jeffrey Shaw together with the writer Dirk Groeneveld and the programmer Gideon May since 1988. Here, the body of the user is a constitutive component of the work. Spatially, the per-ceptual including the bodily space is conceived in an intermediate relation to the text space. This is different to the examples of Seaman and Courchesne where the user stays outside the visual and verbal space like a voyeur, being only represented by graphic and verbal indices. In „The Legible City", the body itself becomes an interface, better: an interspace between virtual and real space.
The viewer uses a bicycle to travel through a virtual image space of three-dimensional verbal architecture. The work consists of three versions: Based on the ground plan of Manhattan and of the old inner cities of Amsterdam and Karlsruhe the artists replaced the buildings by solid three dimensional letters that form words and sentences along the sides of the streets (fictional stories in the Manhattan version, a collage of historical archive material in the other ones).

fig 4

The user is able to control the animation, that is to say the speed and the direction by pedaling faster or slower, forward and backward, and by turning the handle bars. Directly in front of the cyclist a small LCD-screen shows a city map, on which a flashing dot indicates his/her actual location. By pushing a button the user is able to switch between each of the three versions.

Regarding the user to be inside the virtual space, a series of well known metaphors concerning the receiver and his/her body is deconsctructed being literally set into the picture: This counts for the metaphor of the text as a city and of the reader as an inhabitant or a flaneur. These metaphors have not only accompanied modern literature and architecture, but they are of crucial importance for the organisation of telepresence, too. Moreover, the reader/viewer is placed 'inside' the text or 'inside' the picture. Thus, the above mentioned concepts of the aesthetics of reception can be reflected as idealistic.

If the user is inside the text or picture, this demonstrates that he or she turns out to be a three dimensional signifier, or an 'inscription into the space', as Roland Barthes has again metaphorically put it concerning the modern city inhabitant (cf. Barthes 1988): the metaphysical and religious metaphors of the body as a house of the soul or of the self and as the incarnation of the word, these metaphors are taken as a theme. Exemplification of metaphors here is achieved by imaginal iconization in the sense of Peirce.

Likewise, the construal of the virtual space and body is deconstructed when the user would orientate him- or herself outside the virtual and inside the 'real' space, where embodied perception, reading, hearing, viewing etc. empirically happen. The interface of the bicycle fits this purpose very well: however much you cycle and plod yourself euphorically, as Shaw twinkling puts it (Shaw 169), using your whole physical strength, inside the environ-ment you won't shift a

millimeter! This irony emphasizes a crucial point of using media: In spite of their 'immaterial' motion the users remain captivated by the interface – this also counts for the frame of the video or computer screen, as elsewhere for the printed page or the picture. In their cognitive and communicative as well as senso-motoric activity, the users generally remain tied to the technical and cultural construals which they need to experience themselves and their environment.

Furthermore, outside the installation several visitors may refer to the art-work. The audience observes the setting including the cyclist. This theatre- like situation accentuates the empirical situation of the user. He or she is potentially observed in a self- or allo-referential perspective. And it is quite interesting, that Dirk Groeneveld reports various situations of reception and quite different types of users of the „Legible City“ (Groeneveld). Art becomes a kind of empirical research of reception – consciousness reframed.

CONCLUSION: „CONSCIOUSNESS REFRAMED“

The observation of the user in interactive art functions as a new level in ex-ploring and questioning our symbolic construal of subjectivity. The interac-tive 'dialogue', if it is ironically staged as in the discussed examples, simulates anthropological patterns – a digital *alter ego*. Iridescent between materiality and immateriality, consciousness is marked and referred back to itself by its difference to the digital agent on the one side and to the body on the other side. Thus, the artistically created interfaces function as „outopoi“, where the symbolic mechanisms of self-creation can be diabolically observed. This me-thodical solipsism is crucial for the reflexive subjectivity of interactive art and poetry. It makes possible for the individual being to regain consciousness, which normally is absorbed by high-tech communication.

Interactive media poetry achieves a historical shift within the aesthetic program of experimental arts because the participant of and now actually *in* the artwork doesn't remain a mere concept of production aesthetics. This con-cept is extended by its embodiment. The recipient becomes an empirical part of poetry. It is to him or her to realize and to perform the artwork in diverse situations of his or her action.

I don't want to claim that the difference between media artists and their audience has been eliminated. Not at all. But the spectators enter the stage while the artist or his team are more or less rigidly directing behind the curtain or better: behind the apparatus they designed. As a participant in the artwork the idealistic recipient turns into an individual, empirical, and dynamic ob-server

who may find pleasure in discovering ways to manipulate his or her own dependence.

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Figure 1. F. Hubert / "Honni soit qui mal y pense", 1777 (cf. Schön [7]).
Figure 2. Bill Seaman, "An Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers", Screenshot.
Figure 3. Luc Courchesne, "Portrait One".
Figure 4. Jeffrey Shaw, "The Legible City".