

---

Antoni Porczak

Media interaction  
and operating perception\*

---

In perception of an interactive work of art, there is a value in the process of transforming the artefact's form by the addressee. For him/her, this work of art consists more in non-material activity, without any stable states of things in a real space. "Perception" in the interactivity context is close to Latin *percipere*, meaning "to take possession of something" – it means not only to notice and feel, but also to **take hold of something and operate it physically** in ways depending on the agent, with a conviction that this activity is artistic. This perception has the nature of operation, in which a work of art is no longer a one-way information transfer encoded by the author, but becomes, most of all, a sphere of multi-layered transformation done by the perceiving subject. During perception of stable images the form is interpreted into various meanings, while in interactive art there occur also a transformation of the artefact's form performed intentionally by a "recipient" and then an interpretation of this transformation.

Such situation seems to be typical of art of the new millennium, *when a work of art ceases to convey ready messages between the artist and the recipient and becomes a field of diverse possible behaviours of the recipient towards the artefact*. The distinguishing feature of media interaction is not contemplation (disengagement from reality) or intellectual reflection, but involvement in activity on the border of reality and fiction. What is happening to our senses in operating perception is not finished – it is in a state of transformation, so both perception and expression occur within the same activity, either simultaneously or in turns and saltatoriously. We are invited to act, manipulate, experience, and study situations (also physical) which have been foreign to art so far. We are invited to the boundary between real and "virtual" reality in order to step from one to the other, "stitching up" the experience of two formerly opposite worlds into one whole.

Objects and devices are important as far as manipulating them brings about quick transformations of one momentary state (of an image or sound) into another, equally transient. Installations (environments) change the status of real objects (monitors, cables, loudspeakers, interfaces) which we encounter in the process of perception. Their appearances do not matter any more, what becomes important is their technical capabilities, necessarily enclosed in *designed* packaging. These packagings are not without any meaning, but they do not take part in determining the denotation of the whole thing; an *aesthetic* situation does not arise between the objects and the recipient, but between the states s/he creates while operating the machines.

The interactor, creating the *object* of his/her own perception, develops towards it an attitude different than an attitude towards someone else's creation. S/he does not need to be afraid of being manipulated, on the contrary – s/he has control over someone else's material. What we know about media such as television or video does not fit interactive art.

Interactivity is a phenomenon new to art, as it fundamentally changes the situation and function of the perceiving recipient<sup>1</sup>. It requires an ability to operate technical appliances or interfaces. There is an essential difference between action and contemplation: the process of contemplative perception is intimate and hidden from on-lookers, while media interaction, especially if taking place in the presence of other people, reveals our psychophysical capabilities and aesthetic tastes.

Perception gets mixed with expression, the situation is full of surprises and requires quick reactions, sometimes a sense of humour, and involvement without keeping a safe distance. The distance characteristic of the printed word culture has lost its sense in the art of activity, where thinking is non-discursive and remains in the background. It is visible in

---

\* The lecture given during "Spotkania Pracowni" in Wozownia Art Gallery in Toruń (May 2004) is a compilation of various texts on interactivity by the author, published mainly by university publishing houses in years 1999–2004.

<sup>1</sup> The notion of interactivity will be understood here as a mutual influence between the user and the machine, in real time.

computer games, which enforce the tempo determined by the program, usually so fast that one has to learn to keep up with it first.

Interactive installations often do not provide ready rules how to use them, so we do not know how to behave "correctly". We learn everything from the scratch: limits of the space, technical capabilities, transformation modes, responses to stimuli. There are many repetitions, failed operations, etc. This situation anticipates our situation in social space, where activity is more and more often determined by technological systems of values. Interactive media also reflect the *truth* about us. Interactive art aided by technology may "falsify" some behaviours typical in traditional culture.

This art does not claim to show the truth, it multiplies contexts and points of view and does not offer ready values. For the interactor, the framework of perception is movable, s/he positions it as they wish. It is important to remember the sequence of transitions of images or states, for meanings are created in momentary juxtapositions, and not, as it used to be, as a result of cultural coding.

Values appear *for a moment*, in individual contexts, and for such transformations the avant-garde artist is not necessary. The art of interactive media is not art of artists, but rather art created by a perceiving *subject*. S/he gets involved in a self-regulating mechanism of technical environment, and his/her actions have qualities of both perception and expression.

Constant mutual transformation is a feature of the addressee-programmed device configuration, but the *ecology* of the media technological environment is not a substitute for nature. Rather, it blends with nature, creating an artificial "natural" environment. Former adaptation of the subject to the environment is now being substituted by transacting transformation between the two parts, directed towards self-regulation.

Biological world is powered by the pursuit of domination, while in technological world the pursuit of harmonised adjustment is the most important. Modern art sought the artist's domination over the recipient and avant-garde's domination over society. Post-modern art favours self-regulating adjustment of the subject to environmental contexts. This concept, which is theoretically attractive and useful in describing media practices, seems inadequate in the field of social practice, for the biological instinct of domination overrules other instincts. Intolerance is primary to any doctrine, "it has biological roots, exists among animals as a territorial instinct, is based on often shallow emotions"<sup>2</sup>. Tolerance increases in interactive art, because the author has to think

most of all about the interactor, while his/her self-expression becomes secondary.

Perception of stable images endorsed reflection, complementing sensory experience. Media interaction with its nature of operating activity endorses manipulation of stimuli rather than their contemplation. In everyday activities we constantly perceive results of our actions and so always did the artist in the act of creation, but the recipient was not entitled to it. Only in interactive culture is this division between the addresser and the addressee annulled, and they are given equal rights in a dialogue in the form of transacting communication. This change does not happen because the "recipient" becomes equal to the artist (in his/her talent and capability to use technology to create a message), but is a consequence of the need to transform environment according to one's interests.

It seems that non-interactive artistic messages can no longer satisfy a perceiving agent used to transacting communication in everyday life. It also seems that contemporary recipients are reluctant to accept persuasive messages or to conceptually fill gaps in ready artistic messages. Today's creation is at the same time a kind of consumption, and vice versa – it is more of an act of continuous exchange, change of roles, when the addresser and the addressee change places and cannot be permanently distinguished.

The intention of the author in culture so far has been to reduce ambiguity and freedom of interpretation in favour of clarity of the message. In interactive culture meanings are rather negotiated than transferred. If this situation develops, "mass transfer" media will be replaced by 'mass access' media. The difference is not as slight as it might seem: transfer is done with some intention, around which the whole context is constructed (like TV or radio schedule), while data accessible *on demand* (e.g. on servers), although also structured, are not read in the same way as they were put together, for the user takes only what they need. Transfer complies with the interests of the addresser, while *storage of data* to be accessed on demand is more compatible with the interests of the addressee.

Conditions of social communication are also altered. The addresser (including an artist) is no longer capable of imposing associations s/he desires on the addressee, and the interactor no longer wants to admire or even interpret a ready work of art, s/he **wants to transform it** and the work of art serves him/her rather to express him/herself than to admire others.

Operating perception allows us to observe our own actions transforming the form of an artefact from one state to another. What is most characteristic in this process are transformation, repetition, and co-existence of the successful and the failed (in the user's opinion). It is similar to sensory

<sup>2</sup> U. Eco, *Plęć plsm moralnych*, Kraków 1999, p. 90.

perception, practising, and free learning as opposed to merely doing something in order to achieve something else. In an utilitarian enterprise, the objective is determined pragmatically and success makes the whole process worthwhile. Also a work of art of this kind concentrates on the final effect and its developmental stages are usually undetectable. An interactor, creating the object of his/her own perception, is an integral part of this process, which is in turn visible to other observers.

Critics of media interactivity accuse such perception of the lack of reflection and merely communicating with the program, which is always limited and schematic. But similar things can be said of traditional culture – it is also schematic and imposes its own ways of seeing and thinking. Tangible (interactive) art modifies the function of a work of art, from representation to manipulation of its elements. The content of images appearing at the recipient's will is not crucial – it is the way they are used by him/her. They are transformed not only by senses and reason in the sphere of mentality, but also by hands and body movements in real space.

In earlier days, words described images, and nowadays we realise that verbal language, although it created philosophy and abstract thinking, is insufficient to describe reality, and the knowledge it conveys is indigent. Old linear narratives are replaced by mixtures of parts not contiguous or collateral, but joined together by the "gravity" of the subject, generating various individual meanings. It is hard to say what encodes

these dispersed fractions, freed from codified meanings of the linear order. Some code seems to be necessary for communication – or is it? Our thinking and actions always function through associations, but are verbal and linear discourses the only ones legitimate for knowing? In operating activities, the way the addressee uses the message is more important than the message itself.

Are we in the stage of seeking non-verbal codes? Or maybe, in our thinking of media communication, we are too attached to the belief in the meaning of the message? Meanwhile, there are more and more images being created, which do not record reality but create their own universes, not attempting to produce analogues of reality. Young generation has the boldness of transforming everything they can, often without honouring the originals. They think "all images are ours", because they can be transformed.

Interactive culture (its communicative consequences) cannot be successfully analysed with the use of modern ideas. It seems to be thoroughly post-modern: its works of art are not formally completed by the author; its addressee is not just a recipient but more of a co-author; it is not based on one-way communication (from the artist to the recipient) but is a dialogue created in a mutual stimulation. That is why it is impracticable to use the notion of interactivity with relation to modern arts, as they are formally complete, their artefacts are intangible and not meant to be transformed by a perceiving addressee.