Touch and Go is published in collaboration with Watermans and Goldsmiths College in occasion of the Watermans' International Festival of Digital Art, 2012, which coincides with the Olympics and Paralympics in London. The issue explores the impact of technology in art as well as the meaning, possibilities and issues around human interaction and engagement. Touch and Go investigates interactivity and participation, as well as light art and new media approaches to the public space as tools that foster engagement and shared forms of participation.
LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC, VOLUME 18 ISSUE 3

Touch and Go

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**Watermans International Festival of Digital Art, 2012**

*Touch and Go is a title that I chose together with Irini Papadimitriou for this LEA special issue. On my part with this title I wanted to stress several aspects that characterize that branch of contemporary art in love with interaction, be it delivered by allowing the audience to touch the art object or by becoming part of a complex electronic sensory experience in which the artwork may somehow respond and touch back in return.*

With the above statement, I wanted to deliberately avoid the terminology ‘interactive art’ in order to not allow the audience to touch the art object or by becoming part of the artist’s and the audience and the art objects.

I remember when I was at Central Saint Martins writing a paper on the sub-distinctions within contemporary media arts and tracing the debates that distinguished between electronic art, robotic art, new media art, digital art, computer art, computer based art, internet art, web art. At some point of that analysis and argument I realized that the common thread that characterized all of these sub-genres of aesthetic representations was the word art and it did not matter (at least not that much in my opinion) if the manifestation was material or immaterial, conceptual or physical, electronic or painterly, analogical or digital.

I increasingly felt that this rejection of the technical component would be necessary in order for the electronic-robotic-new-media-digital-computer-based-internet art object to re-gain entry within the field of fine art. Mine was a reaction to an hyper-fragmented and indeed extensive and in-depth taxonomy that seemed to have as its main effect that of pushing these experimental and innovative art forms – through the emphasis of their technological characterization – away from the fine arts and into a ghetto of isolation and self-reference. Steve Dietz’s question – *Why Have There Been No Great Net Artists?* – remains unanswered, but I believe that there are changes that are happening – albeit slowly – that will see the sensory and technical elements become important parts of the aesthetic aspects of the art object as much as the brush technique of Vincent Willem van Gogh or the sculptural fluidity of Henry Moore.

Hence the substitution in the title of this special issue of the word interactivity with the word touch, with the desire of looking at the artwork as something that can be touched in material and immaterial ways, interfered with, interacted with and ‘touched and reprocessed’ with the help of media tools that can also ‘touch’ us back in return, both individually and collectively. I also wanted to stress the fast interrelation between the art object and the consumer in a commodified relationship that is based on immediate engagement and fast disengagement, touch and go. But a fast food approach is perhaps incorrect if we consider as part of the interactivity equation the viewers’ mediated processes of consumption and memorization of both the image and the public experience.

Nevertheless, the problems and issues that interactivity and its multiple definitions and interpretations in the 20th and 21st century raise cannot be overlooked, as much as cannot be dismissed the complex set of emotive and digital interactions that can be set in motion by artworks that reach and engage large groups of people within the public space. These interactions generate public shows in which the space of the city becomes the background to an experiential event that is characterized by impermanence and memorization. It is a process in which thousands of people engage, capture data, memorize and at times memorialize the event and re-process, mash-up, re-disseminate and re-contextualize the images within multiple media contexts.

The possibility of capturing, viewing and understanding the entire mass of data produced by these aesthetic sensory experiences becomes an impossible task due to easy access to an unprecedented amount of media and an unprecedented multiplication of data, as Lev Manovich argues.

In Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds Timothy Murray writes that “the retrospective nature of repetition and digital coding—how initial images, forms, and narratives are refuged through their contemporaneous re-citation and re-presentation—consistently inscribes the new media in the memory and memorization of its antecedents, cinema and video.”

The difference between memorization and memorization may be one of the further aspects in which the interaction evolves – beyond the artwork but still linked to it. The memory of the event with its happening and performative elements, its traces and records both official and unofficial, the re-processing and mash-ups; all of these elements become part of and contribute to a collective narrative and pattern of engagement and interaction.

These are issues and problems that the artists and writers of this LEA special issue have analyzed from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds, offering to the reader the opportunity of a glimpse into the complexity of today’s art interactions within the contemporary social and cultural media landscapes.

*Touch and Go is one of those issues that are truly born from a collaborative effort and in which all editors have contributed and worked hard in order to deliver a documentation of contemporary art research, thought and aesthetic able to stand on the international scene.*

For this reason I wish to thank Prof. Janis Jefferies and Irini Papadimitriou together with Jonathan Munro and Ozden Şahin for their efforts. The design is by Deniz Cem Öndüygu who as LEA’s Art Director continues to deliver brilliantly designed issues.

**Franco Aceti**

Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Director, Kasa Gallery

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1. “Nevertheless, there is this constant apparently inherent need to try and categorize and classify. In Beyond Interface, an exhibition I organized in 1998, I ’datamined’ ten categories: net art, storytelling, socio-cultural, biographical, tools, performance, analog-hybrid, interactive art, interacers + artifacts. David Ross, in his lecture here at the CAD-RE Laboratory for New Media, suggested 21 characteristics of net art. Stephen Wilson, a pioneering practitioner, has a virtual – albeit well-ordered – jungle of categories. Rhizome has developed a list of dozens of keyword categories for its ArtBase. Lev Manovich, in his Computing Culture: Defining New Media Genres symposium focused on the categories of database, interface, spatialization, and navigation. To my mind, there is no question that such categorization is useful, especially in a distributed system like the Internet. But, in truth, to paraphrase Barnett Newman, ‘ornithology is for the birds what categorization is for the artist.’ Perhaps especially at a time of rapid change and explosive growth of the underlying infrastructure and toolkits, it is critical that description follow practice and not vice versa.” Steve Dietz, *Why Have There Been No Great Net Artists?* Web Walker Daily 28, April 4, 2000, [http://bit.ly/QjEWlY](http://bit.ly/QjEWlY) (accessed July 1, 2012).

2. This link to a Google+ conversation is an example of this argument on massive data and multiple media engagements across diverse platforms: [http://bit.ly/p6gDxS](http://bit.ly/p6gDxS) (accessed July 1, 2012).

EDITORIAL

Touch and Go: The Magic Touch Of Contemporary Art

It is with some excitement that I write this preface to Watermans International Festival of Digital Art, 2012. It has been a monumental achievement by the curator Irini Papadimitriou to pull together 6 ground-breaking installations exploring interactivity, viewer participation, collaboration and the use or importance of new and emerging technologies in Media and Digital Art.

From an initial call in December 2010 over 500 submissions arrived in our inboxes in March 2011. It was rather an overwhelming and daunting task to review, look and encounter a diverse range of submissions that were additionally asked to reflect on the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Submissions came from all over the world, from Africa and Korea, Austria and Australia, China and the uk, Latvia and Canada and ranged from the spectacularly complex to the imaginatively humorous. Of course each curator Irini Papadimitriou to pull together 6 ground missions arrived in our inboxes in March 2011. It was a quote used by the Australia, Sydney based conjurers Michele Barker and Anna Munster: pilot's, situated in a setting that is intentionally designed to be in Computational Art. Irini is also an alumni of the ffa in Curating (Goldsmiths, University of London) and it has been a monumental pleasure working with her generating ideas and platforms that can form an artistic legacy long after the Games and the Festival have ended. The catalogue and detailed blogging/documentation and social networking will be one of our responsibilities but another of mine is to is to ensure that the next generation of practitioners test the conventions of the white cube gallery, reconsider and reorientate the perception of 'public' art. In addition those who wish to increase an audience’s interaction and enjoyment of art by defining and exploring new media work. The mentoring programme involves video interviews with the 6 selected artists and their work, briefly introduced earlier in this preface, and discussions initiated by the student. As so often debated in our seminars at Goldsmiths and elsewhere, what are the expectations of the audience, the viewer, the spectator, and the engager? How do exhibitions and festival celebrations revisit the traditional roles of performer/artist and audiences? Can they facilitate collaborative approaches to creativity? How do sound works get curated in exhibitions that include interactive objects, physical performances and screens? What are the issues around technical support? How are the ways of working online and off, including collaboration and social networking, affecting physical forms of display and publishing?

As I write this in Wollongong during the wettest New South Wales summer for 50 years, I want to end with a quote used by the Australia, Sydney based conjurers Michele Barker and Anna Munster: illusions occur when the physical reality does not match the perception.

The world is upside down in so many alarming ways but perhaps 2012 at Watermans will offer some momentary ideas of unity in diversity that the Games signify and unity signifies. Propose such an artwork and such promise!

Janis Jeffries
Professor of Visual Arts
Goldsmiths
University of London, UK

23rd Dec 2011, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia

Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Volume 18 Issue 3

4 EDITORIAL Lanfranco Aceti
6 INTRODUCTION Janis Jefferies

10 SUGURU GOTO, CYMATICS, 2011 – AN ACTION SHARING PRODUCTION Simona Lodi & Luca Barbieri
+ SUGURU GOTO in conversation with Paul Squires

30 INTERACTIVITY, PLAY AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT Tine Bech

44 UNITY: IN PURSUIT OF THE HUMANISTIC SPIRIT One-Room Shack Collective
+ ONE-ROOM SHACK COLLECTIVE in conversation with Evelyn Owen

52 HOKUSPOKUS Michele Barker & Anna Munster

58 AS IF BY MAGIC Anna Gibbs

60 BLACK BOXES AND GOD-TRICKS: AN ACCOUNT OF USING MEDICAL IMAGING SYSTEMS TO PHOTOGRAPH CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE CONTEXT OF A DIGITAL ARTS PRACTICE Eleanor Dare

72 CO-AUTHORED NARRATIVE EXPERIENCE: AFFECTIVE, EMBODIED INTERACTION THROUGH COMBINING THE DIACHRONIC WITH THE SYNCHRONISTIC Carol MacGillivray & Bruno Mathez

84 UNTITLED Phoebe Hui
+ PHOEBE HUI in conversation with Jonathan Munro

98 GOING WITH THE FLOW GAIL PEARCE in conversation with Jonathan Munro

102 THE SWEET SPOT Graeme Crowley in collaboration with The Mustard and Blood Orchestra

108 STRATA-CASTER: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE TOPOGRAPHY OF POWER, PRESTIGE, AND POSITION Joseph Farbrook
+ JOSEPH FAR BROOK in conversation with Emilie Giles

114 WHERE IS LOURENÇO MARQUES?: A MOSAIC OF VOICES IN A 3D VIRTUAL WORLD Rui Filipe Antunes

122 GEOMETRY FÉLICIE D’ESTIENNE D’ORVES in conversation with Claire Le Gouellec

130 THE EMPOWERING POTENTIAL OF RE-STAGING Birgitta Cappelen & Anders-Petter Andersson

140 SCENOCOSME: BODY AND CLOUDS Grégoire Lasserre & Anaïs met den Ancxt

154 LIGHT, DATA, AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION Dave Colangelo & Patricio Davila

164 INCARNATED SOUND IN MUSIC FOR FLESH II: DEFINING GESTURE IN BIOLOGICALLY INFORMED MUSICAL PERFORMANCE Marco Donnarumma

176 THE STORY OF PARCIVAL: DESIGNING INTERACTION FOR AN INTERDISCIPLINARY DANCE PERFORMANCE Gesa Friederichs-Büttnner & Benjamin Walther-Franks

190 INTERACTION’S ROLE AS CATALYST OF SYNTHESIZED INTELLIGENCE IN ART Judson Wright

200 IN SEARCH OF A DIGITAL MASTERPIECE (OR TWO): STANZA Maria Chatzichristodoulou [aka Maria X]

212 TELEMATIC TOUCH AND GO Ellen Pearlman, Newman Lau & Kenny Lozowski

224 HAPTIC UNCONSCIOUS: A PREHISTORY OF AFFECTIVITY IN MOHOLY-NAGY’S PEDAGOGY AT THE NEW BAUHAUS Charissa N. Terranova

236 THE GESTALT OF STREET TEAM: GUERRILLA TACTICS, GIFS, AND THE MUSEUM Charissa N. Terranova

240 BIOGRAPHIES

250 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
SCENOCOSME: BODY AND CLOUDS

by
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ABSTRACT

As media artists, we explore the capacities of technologies in order to draw sensitive relationships through artworks that are based on the enhancement of sensory experiences. Our works spring from hybridization processes between the living world and technology which inspire us to invent new sensitive and poetic languages. Our artworks explore and engage elements of reality which are invisible or we cannot perceive with our normal senses. We use the idea of the cloud as a metaphor of the invisible. The cloud has an unpredictable form, since it is in an indeterminate status of metamorphosis, and its processes escape human perception. Our interactive works create sound and visual languages, translating the exchanges between living beings, the body and the environment.
As interactive artists, we explore the capacities of technologies in order to develop sensory relationships that are rooted in specific stagings where the human senses are augmented. Our works spring from possible hybridizations between the living world and technology and this is a meeting point that pushes us to develop sensory and poetic languages.

**MYSTERIOUS CLOUDS**

We suggest to seek out the hidden, to feel elements of reality which are invisible or to which we are insensitive. We use the idea of the cloud as a metaphor of the invisible because it has an unpredictable form, it is in an indeterminate status of metamorphosis, and because its process escapes our perception. Various natural and artificial clouds surround us (climatic, biological, energetic or electromagnetic). Through our artworks, we wish to evoke invisible energetic clouds (electrostatic) that follow living beings like unpredictable shadows. Sometimes, these clouds happen to cross paths and by doing so they exchange pieces of information. We interpret these invisible links through sonorous and visual stagings. If we take as an example the energetic clouds of living beings, the physical boundaries of their bodies can become permeable through the usage of sensory technology and we take advantage of this permeability in order to design extraordinary relationships between humans, living beings and the surrounding environment.

The Cloud is a virtual and poetic projection of the invisible that is mysterious: almost similar to a continuous veil between the body and the surrounding world. The Cloud with its undefined outlines shrouded on the world renders reality as not fully intelligible. This lack of intelligibility is a source of inspiration for us, since we don’t want to measure invisible data. We seek to develop and create languages that by celebrating undefined borders provide multiple layers of interpretations. By sketching the outlines of invisible clouds that surround us, we leave a great space for the imagination. Our approach could be compared with the “continuous mystery” describes by John Ruskin. “Mystery includes not only the partial and variable kind that clouds and mists serve so well, but also the kind that is continuous, permanent, and that corresponds, in all spaces, to the infinity of things.”

According to John Ruskin, “WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY. [...] [S]o that there is literally no point of clear sight, and there never can be.” “For the fact is that there is no absolutely clear and distinct perception what matters is knowing where the mystery begin, ‘with the point of intelligibility [varying] in distance.’”

The Interactions we offer to the public in our works *Akousmaflore, Lights Contacts, Escales tactiles or Fluides,...* make invisible exchanges visible through sensory experiences. Rather than revealing their technological complexity, they use the artworks’ aesthetics to open up everyone’s imagination. Between the reality and our perception of it there is always a ‘blind spot,’ which stimulates the imagination.

**INVISIBLE EXCHANGES: TO INVENT LANGUAGES**

When we create interactive works, we create sonorous and/or visual languages. They translate the exchanges between living beings and between the body and its environment. We suggest interrelations where the invisible becomes perceptible and our sensations are augmented.

As artists we focus our attention on the spectator’s body because of the body’s ability to build relationships with the surrounding environment. Our installations create dramaturgic spaces, as Erving Goffman describes them, in which the body comes in to play and becomes a communication tool. The fleetingness of a caress, the thickness of a presence, the intensity of a contact... All of these different gestures and postures can generate in our artworks sonorous reactions from plants (*Akousmaflore*) or from stones (*Kymape Tra*). Also, the interaction by physical contact between two or several people is transformed in to light and sounds (*Lights Contacts*).

With *Akousmaflore* we created an interactive hanging garden composed of living musical plants, which react to the gentle touch by the audience. By ‘feeling’ the energetic clouds of human bodies, each plant reacts...
to touch in a different way producing a specific sound characteristic to that specific interaction. Through Akousmaflore, we created an hybrid system of communication between plants and people that through digital technology makes the exchange of energy audible. Plants are natural sensors and are sensitive to different energy flows and the sound emitted by the plants in our artwork displays the effects of random data flow and plant interaction. The data is modified as the spectator meanders around and touches the plants, resulting in a random musical universe. This artwork proposes a specific vegetal language which is expressed through sound compositions and that embodies a character, a behavioral feedback or an influence of the plant on the reactions, the feelings and the actions of the spectator.

The installation Lights Contacts explores further this approach and sounds and lights are generated by the contact between human bodies. Here we created a sensorial experience that makes audible and visible the bodies’ energetic (electrostatic) contacts with one another. This convivial space activates extraordinary meetings, exchanges and sharing opportunities. The flashes of light and the sound vibrations are a fragile reflection of the electrostatic exchanges between spectators who barely know one another.

Sound textures evolve as an integral part of people’s behaviors and the energy’s intensity of their bodies. As artists we study the modalities in which sensory experiences can influence relations between spectators. We explore its power of retroaction, and how it can change common understanding of touch between people by transforming the feeling of a caress and make that gesture feel like playing a music instrument.

In order to explore further artworks that raise questions of proximity, we have created a show titled Tactile Sensations with the K-Danse company. It is a sensorial experience with a choreographic staging of touching between two dancers. One circular reactive
dance floor mat creates a close relationship between the dancers and the audience surrounding it. This is a space of meetings and clashes, similar to a ring or an arena. The interactive device is based on a reactive costume with various sensitive zones. The mat reacts differently with sounds and lights varying in intensity according to the location of the contact with the dancer’s body and to the ‘quality’ of the touch: strong or soft.

The choreographic composition between the dancers is a visual and aural score based on touch. The performance investigates the many levels and meanings of touch and its social construction: memory, behaviors and emotions such as desire and revulsion. The performance is developed and made more clearly perceptible to the audience by ensuring that each moment the dancers touch each other this gesture produces a specific sound connected to the meaning, timing and quality of this touch.


Sphéroïdes, Scenocosme, interactive artwork, (fabrics, wood, metal, interactive device, lights, audio system).

Exhibition at Share Festival/ Festival internazionale di arte e cultura digitale/ Turin (Italy) – 2009.

Credit: Scenocosme.
Most of our artworks are ‘mediators’ between spectators in order to gather them, to stimulate relationships, exchanges, beyond basic connections.

With the artwork Fluides, we choose water as a sensitive unifying thread, which gathers the electrostatic energies of bodies. These energies are transformed into infinite, sonorous, colored and luminous fluid landscapes. In this artwork the energetic clouds are liquefied. According to the intensity of the energy and the audience’s interactions the artwork manifests itself as sound waves that appear and disappear on the surface.

The body itself becomes a continuous sensorial interface with the world: through lungs and through the skin, which act as a protective and porous border. As David Le Breton writes: “[I]t (the skin) is alive in the way it breathes, exchanges with the environment, smells, translates moods through its texture, its heat, its colour. Between the outside and the inside, it allows a way through for stimulation and sensing. As a separation process, it fences in the individuality, but at the same time, it is a place of exchange with the world; heat, light, pleasure or pain passing through it.”

By visualizing the biological interrelations of the body with its surroundings, spectators are invited to think about their physical and symbolical relation to the world. These interrelations can be seen in our creations Soufflés (Breaths) and Ecorces (Barks).

Soufflés (Breaths) is an interactive and collective artwork where the breaths of the audience gradually reveal the narrative of a generative circular video. The video shows sequences of landscape video loops shot in the South of France. Soufflés as an artwork can be interpreted as the continuous exploration of the territory surrounding our body through in-take and out-take. The exploration of the principles of breathing has allowed us to present the atmosphere as a shared territory that we forget that we modify with even our simplest and most basic activity: breathing.

Ecorces suggest a sensory interrelation with wood and materials made of wood. The artwork through touch, body heat and breath gradually reveals the intimate nature of wood as a material.

This intimacy is explored through the virtual and it becomes the representation of the internal workings and psychological hidden corners of each person. “Ecorces” refers to the skin of a tree, which like that of humans, is a skin made of multiple successions of physical and symbolic layers.

MEDIATORS ARTWORKS: SOCIAL VISION OF INTERACTIVITY

When we conceptualize our creations, we try to always take into account the place occupied by the spectators in order to create an intimate environment. We pay particular attention to the ‘règle du jeu’ (rules of the game) which are at the basis of the interaction between the spectators and our installations. By focusing on the rules of the game it becomes necessary to ensure a smooth dialogue between all engaged participants: human beings, objects, and other living beings. We focus on the relationships that individuals can develop and suggest with our artworks new possibility for interaction.

Most of our artworks are ‘mediators’ between spectators in order to gather them, to stimulate relationships, exchanges, beyond basic connections.

With SphérAléas spectators enter in a half-spherical structure. Inside the dome they are required to sit around a ‘heart,’ which is materialized by a hemispherical mirror. In this space the spectators can manipulate sensitive devices in order to create symphonies of visuals and sounds. The audience’s interactions are interpreted by a software which produces in real time sound and 3D visual compositions of a virtual universes.

Like for the learning of a musical instrument, people must take time to experiment with it. The spectators also have to operate collectively, they must pay particular attention to each other in order to compose a melody. By manipulating the sensors, spectators can...
One person is invited to put his/her hand on a small shiny metal sphere. If the person stands alone, nothing happens, the artwork does not react. Someone else has to be invited in and has to touch the first person's skin. Each touch generates sounds and lights, which vary according to the length of the contacts or the number of people that join in. The installation generates a space where proxemics distances are reduced or broken. According to David Le Breton, “in our societies, the body designs the limits of ‘I’, it embodies the individual. The border of the skin is doubled by a non less present symbolic border which distinguishes itself from the others and builds a personal sovereignty that no one could cross without its approval.” In this artwork where the energy (electrostatic) of the contacts with the other are rendered visible, the distances between known and unknown are shortened, and people’s hierarchical positions and social distances are banished for the duration of the engagement. Lights Contacts creates a transgressive space-time where social relations are suddenly pushed aside, inverted. Here energetic clouds take form of ‘proxemics clouds’ which, by becoming sensed and made tangible, allow to play with the distances between bodies.

Through our poetic interpretation of invisible mechanisms, technology allows us to draw sensory interactions linked to living beings and their unpredictability. More than the sensory interrelations, our artworks play with the public by creating an augmented separation world using technology and people’s voluntary and involuntary. More than physical and behavior relationship, our artworks are source of meetings and dialogs. In Light Contacts, visitors create human chains, they interpret sounds and direct themselves into actions and games which lead others to engage.

Our artworks’ experience happens through instants of emotional sharing, social and verbal exchanges. Visitors play the game of the interaction by suddenly abandoning social conventions and sharing new spaces for personal narratives and shared engagements with total strangers.

REFERENCES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Co-productions of artworks:
Lights Contacts: Centre des arts d’Enghien-les-Bains, Scène conventionnée pour les écritures numériques
Flûtes: La Maison des Arts de Créteil, le Manège de Maubeuge, Lille3000
SphèrAléas: CNC DCREAM, Médias-Cité
Souffles: Fêtes d’hiver, Zinc Marseille
Écorces: SCAN Région Rhône-Alpes, Les Abattoirs de Bourgoin-Jallieu