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*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.



# TOUCH AND GO

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LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC, VOLUME 18 ISSUE 3

# Touch and Go

VOLUME EDITORS

**LANFRANCO ACETI, JANIS JEFFERIES, IRINI PAPADIMITRIOU**

EDITORS

**JONATHAN MUNRO, ÖZDEN ŞAHİN**

# 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 fall in the trap of characterizing art that has an element of interaction as principally defined by the word interactive; as if this were the only way to describe contemporary art that elicits interactions and responses between the artist, 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, analogue 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?*<sup>1</sup> – remains unanswered, but I believe that there are changes that are happening – albeit slowly – that will see the sensorial 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 but 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 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 refigured through their contemplative re-citation and re-presentation—consistently inscribes the new media in the memory and memorization of its antecedents, cinema and video."<sup>3</sup>

The difference between memorization and memorialization 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 Özden Şahin for their efforts. The design is by Deniz Cem Önduygu who as LEA's Art Director continues to deliver brilliantly designed issues.

**Lanfranco Aceti**

Editor in Chief, *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*  
Director, Kasa Gallery



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, interfacers + artificers. 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 toolsets, 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/QJEWIY> (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/pGgDsS> (accessed July 1, 2012).
3. Timothy Murray, *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 138.

# 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 groundbreaking 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 complicated to the imaginatively humorous. Of course each selector, me, onedotzero, London's leading digital media innovation organization, the curatorial team at Athens Video Art Festival and Irini herself, had particular favorites and attachments but the final grouping I believe does reflect a sense of the challenges and opportunities that such an open competition offers. It is though a significant move on behalf of the curator that each work is given the Watermans space for 6 weeks which enables people to take part in the cultural activities surrounding each installation, fulfilling, promoting and incorporating the Cultural Olympiad themes and values 'inspiration, participation and creativity.'

Some, like Gail Pearce's *Going with the Flow* was made because rowing at the 2012 Olympics will be held near Egham and it was an opportunity to respond and create an installation offering the public a more interactive way of rowing, while remaining on dry land, not only watching but also participating and having an effect on the images by their actions. On the other hand, Michele Barker and Anna Munster's collaborative *Hocus Pocus* will be a 3-screen interactive artwork that uses illusionistic and performative aspects of magical tricks to explore human perception, senses and movement. As they have suggested, "Magic – like interactivity – relies on shifting the perceptual relations between vision and movement, focusing and diverting attention at key moments. Participants will become aware of this relation as their perception catches up with the audiovisual illusion(s)" (artists statement, February 2011). Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi and Emeka Ogboh are artists who also work collaboratively and working under name of One-Room Shack. *UNITY* is built like a navigable labyrinth to reflect the idea of unity in diversity that the Games signify. In an increasingly globalized world they are interested in the ways in which the discourse of globalization opens up and closes off discursive space whereas Suguru Goto is a musician who creates real spaces that are both metaphysical and spiritual. *Cymatics* is a kinetic sculpture and sound installation. Wave patterns are created on liquid as a result of sound vibrations generated by visitors. Another sound work is Phoebe Hui's *Granular Graph*, a sound instrument about musical gesture and its notation.


Audiences are invited to become a living pendulum. The apparatus itself can create geometric images to represent harmonies and intervals in musical scales. Finally, Joseph Farbrook's *Strata-caster* explores the topography of power, prestige, and position through an art installation, which exists in the virtual world of Second Life, a place populated by over 50,000 people at any given moment.

Goldsmiths, as the leading academic partner, has been working closely with Watermans in developing a series of seminars and events to coincide with the 2012 Festival. I am the artistic director of Goldsmiths Digital Studios (GDS), which is dedicated to multi-disciplinary research and practice across arts, technologies and cultural studies. GDS engages in a number of research projects and provides its own postgraduate teaching through the PhD in Arts and Computational Technology, the MFA in Computational Studio Arts and the MA in Computational Art. Irini is also an alumni of the MFA in *Curating* (Goldsmiths, University of London) and it has been an exceptional 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 ensure that the next generation of practitioners test the conventions of the white cube gallery, reconsider and reevaluate artistic productions, their information structure and significance; engage in the museum sector whilst at the same time challenging the spaces for the reception of 'public' art. In addition those who wish to increase an audience's interaction and enjoyment of their work have a firm grounding in artistic practice and computing skills.

Consequently, I am particularly excited that the 2012 Festival Watermans will introduce a mentoring scheme for students interested in participatory interactive digital / new media work. The mentoring scheme 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* proposes. Such anticipation and such promise!

**Janis Jefferies**

*Professor of Visual Arts  
Goldsmiths  
University of London, UK*

23<sup>rd</sup> Dec 2011, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia

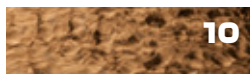
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1. Stephen L. Malnik and Susana Martinez-Conde, *Sleights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals about our Everyday Deceptions* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2010), 8.



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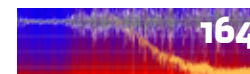


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Strata-caster, virtual art installation, video projection, wheelchair controller. Dimensions variable.

# STRATA-CASTER

An exploration into the topography of power, prestige, and position

by

Joseph Farbrook

Associate Professor, Humanities & Arts, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA USA

**Strata-Caster is an art installation that exists in the virtual world of Second Life (secondlife.com), a place populated by over 50,000 people at any given moment.** Although virtual and infinite, it continues to mirror the physical world in startling ways, complete with representations of prestige and exclusivity. Even without the limitations of the physical, why are borders and separation still prized so highly?



*Electronic communication has compressed time and deleted space. It has the power to level the playing field of voices and opinions.*

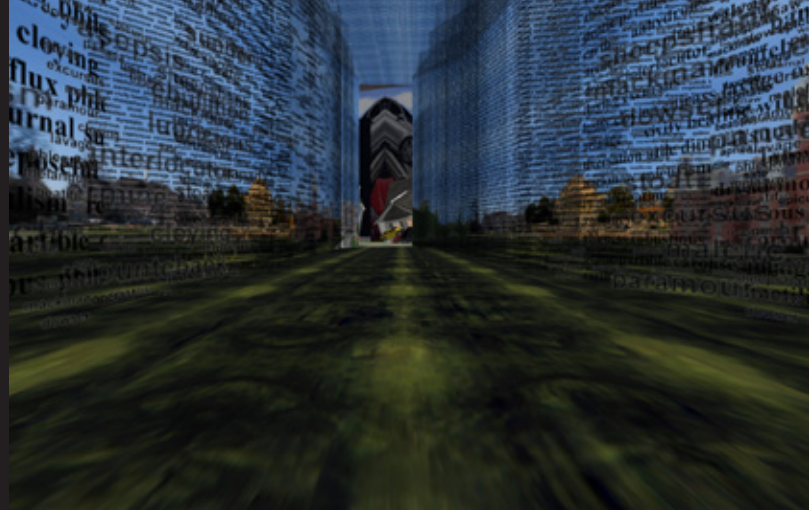


Remove all physical limitation, identity, and hierarchy, and people will still carry this around as perceptual baggage. This baggage controls points of view and determines structures where none are present. The physical world is being represented in the virtual world and although this may make it seem more realistic, it is not necessarily constructive to import every asset. There are things that may be better left out of an imagined world if there is going to be any hope of moving past stratification paradigms.

Electronic communication has compressed time and deleted space. It has the power to level the playing field of voices and opinions. Large, well-funded entities no longer hold exclusive power to dictate the narrative of humanity. Individuals can make personal propaganda. Repressed voices can emerge and command attention, usurping the intentions of those in the upper echelons of power. Open lines of communication are making the lines that divide people dizzyingly fuzzy.

Cultural hierarchy dictates an unequal distribution of power, and stratification limits cultural movement.





*Strata-caster*,  
virtual art installation, video  
projection, wheelchair con-  
troller.  
Dimensions variable.

These are things entirely constructed by mutual consent. This consent comes from being able to persuade people into believing a particular reality. As the ability to persuade is fueled by communication, democratization of voices holds the threat of tearing down hierarchical structures.

*Strata-caster* is an on-line virtual art installation created on an island in Second Life. Traveling through it by way of a wheel chair, viewers are acutely aware of their physical and virtual status, and invited to re-examine their position in life in relation to others (both physical and virtual). ■

*Stata-caster* explores the fallout of social stratification that is contained in the collective consciousness and imported into a collectively imagined space. Entry into this installation is by wheelchair, an unfamiliar interface to the limitless expanse of virtual space, but one that continuously calls attention to limitation and position.



# JOSEPH FARBROOK

*in conversation with*

Emilie Giles

**Emilie Giles: Your piece *Strata-caster* is an installation created in *Second Life*. Please can you explain what the piece is about and what the themes explored within it are?**

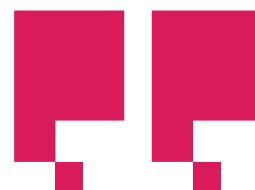
Joseph Farbrook: Since the inception of the *Second Life* metaverse, I have been interested in creating art installations in this virtual public space. As I began to explore the user created landscape, I couldn't help but be astonished by how so much of it mirrors and expresses the material goals of the physical world; big houses, fancy cars, stylish clothes, exclusive clubs, security fences. These things have no inherent meaning in virtual space. Nobody eats or sleeps there, or has to wear any clothes for that matter. These things are arbitrary baggage brought over from the physical world. This of course calls into question the many things that exist in physical space that could be considered arbitrary baggage. It's a bit like the lyrics to John Lennon's 'Imagine.' Things have to happen in the cultural imagination first, before they can be perceived as 'real.' Perhaps the metaverse will be a facilitator for the transformation of the physical world.

**The International Festival of Digital Art at Watermans explores ideas around interaction and participation within New Media art, whilst also discussing the boundaries. Could you describe how *Strata-caster* touches on these themes, particularly with regards to the installation's use of the wheelchair as an entry of interaction to a 'limitless expanse of virtual space,' whilst also referencing limitation?**

The wheelchair that is used as an entry point into this installation serves as a device to make the user off-balance, regarding their expected position while in virtual space. It is also a way of keeping the user connected with boundaries in both the physical and virtual world. When one is confined to a wheelchair in physical space, there is nothing virtual about it. When in virtual space, a wheelchair is arbitrary, and this raises questions about what else is arbitrary. I am also exploring positions of power, which of course only exist by mutual agreement. Standing and sitting positions are easily grasped symbols of a power differential.

**First-person shooter games aim to mimic real life situations, blurring the lines of reality and make believe. A lot of your work uses virtual and video game spaces to challenge how we perceive our reality, particularly looking at ideas of simulacra with relation to the media. Can you expand on how you feel video game spaces allow you to explore these themes?**

I'm interested in the idea of video games as simulation of an activity. Shooter games enable one to act out as if in a war. A real war enables one to act like a serial killer. Electronic media brings the real and the imaginary to the same screen, so it all looks like a simulation. If this is inadvertently training people to respond to everything as if it is a simulation, then perhaps video games can elicit a stronger response by being more extreme and exaggerated than reality. Perhaps a simulation is more effective now at communicating what is real.



*By symbolically representing cultural reality in virtual space, I'm really just trying to turn on some lights and just call things for what they are. Power is virtual. Money is virtual. Ownership is virtual.*



**You touch on the idea of embodiment through the use of the avatar in a number of your pieces, thus entering the user into a hyper-real fiction. How does this form of interaction determine the audience's engagement with your work?**

Whenever we communicate through electronic media we are projecting an avatar or elements of an avatar. The voices coming from our cell phones are audio avatars. Email messages are textual avatars. Our avatars exist by themselves as an Internet presence through things like Facebook or other websites that have information about us. In much of my work, I invite people to explore their avatars as they would their own body, to become intimately familiar with their electronic prosthetics.

**I'm very interested in the theme of the digital self within your work and concepts around the virtual body, particularly with regards to the notion of fluidity which we have when taking on a digital self. How do you feel that video game mediums shape this?**

Video games are driving simulation technology forward, because they are generating so much money as

popular entertainment. A byproduct of these technological advancements and innovations is that virtual bodies are getting more intricate, and virtual spaces are a more rich experience. Sandbox games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and environments like *Second Life* create a place where one can really stretch out the virtual limbs.

**A lot of your pieces conceptually discuss ideas around the freedom which the digital world appears to give us, but on the other hand has limitations attached to it. How does creating your work in a video game space respond to this?**

By symbolically representing cultural reality in virtual space, I'm really just trying to turn on some lights and just call things for what they are. Power is virtual. Money is virtual. Ownership is virtual. A country's prosperity or poverty has become determined by flows of digital information. How real is a stock market crash? What has physically changed from the day before? Believing too heavily in the virtual can lead to some very heavy consequences in the physical world. ■



