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New Media as “Technologies of Self”.

Introduction

The ontological distinctions between mind, body, thinking and action dissolve in recently developed areas of artificial intelligence and robotics research where models of embodied cognition can be traced back to philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and cognitive linguist George Lakoff. The discourse of post-humanism interprets our body as an extensible structure involved in active perception (seen as a senso-motoric loop) (Gossman 2010).

Our field of interest – interactive technologies – bring to light questions of agency and individual conduct, which previously belonged predominantly to the realm of philosophy, primarily Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault (Dreyfus 2004a).

Stoic practices.

Foucault once noted that he tried to “mark the three fundamental domains of experience”: “that of truth, that of power, and that of individual conduct. These three domains of experience can be understood only in relation to each other and only with each other” (cited in Dreyfus 2004a).

In his search for technologies which an individual can develop in order to counter the Power, Foucault described practices of self-mastery by means of which the Ancient Greek individual sought to transform himself into a work of art (“aesthetics of existence”). Foucault called these practices Technologies of Self.

Though these skills were mostly based on speaking and writing, they were designed for the development of a form of behaviour rather than a volume of learned knowledge. Rather, the knowledge was to be transformed into particular standard of behaviour.

Ideally, the person was expected to reach a high degree of self-control. To be stronger than oneself meant to be always vigilant, to keep oneself always under suspicion. The flux of representations and ideas also was to be controlled and mastered.

The aim of taking over these old Socratic-Stoic practices was to create ‘kind of relative unity and stability’. Due to their ability to provide self-mastery and vigilance the skills were seen as “arms for future battles”, as a protective ‘shield’ – Paraskeuea (Foucault 1982/2004).

Modernity.

What is particularly important for our argument is that ancient Greeks developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together (Dreyfus 2004a). Ubiquitous interactive media of our times intensify those practices in number and frequency, which brings back to agenda the urgency of conceptualisation of individual conduct.

“We think of the twentieth century as the era of modernity primarily because of the shift from industrial to communicational technologies” (Connor 1997). But it should not escape from us that the rise of communication brings about the rise of non-informational exchange (both verbal and non-verbal). Connor continues: “Early commentators on the telephone were fascinated, not so much by its capacity to convey messages and information as by its faithful preservation of the individuating tones and accidents of speech and even the non-verbal sounds of the body”.

Even verbal exchange can be non-informational. As Zeynep Tufekci explains, “We are a deeply social species and we engage in “social grooming” all the time, i.e. acts that have no particular informational importance but are about connecting, forming, displaying and

strengthening bonds... I personally doubt that there is substantially more social grooming going on today... compared to the pre-Internet era. The only difference is that the Internet makes it visible.” (Tufekci 2011)

In communication theory “acts that have no particular informational importance”, but have a function of social grooming, are defined as “phatic communication”. But when we deal with self-relationship, self-grooming, self-mastery, the best way to call such acts is “Technologies of Self”.

Indeed, we all witness how “Technologies of Self” of “art of existence” of Stoics – namely, how to ‘read one’s life like a book’, ‘build one’s life like an artwork’, ‘develop attitudes towards circumstances which do not depend on one’, ‘see one’s life as a chain of lessons, which make one stronger’ – modern young people unconsciously learn via daily use of new media.

Modernity enmeshes us into a constant flux of ever changing information. In this environment it becomes particularly important to learn skills which would create anchors of stability. Some may think that the optimal script here would be a detached reflection. Quite to the contrary, both Foucault and Kierkegaard assert that a stable identity is gained when one is committed to involved action (Dreyfus 2004a, b).

We believe that everyday habits of using interactive technologies are good tools in learning how to switch from reflection to action. On the other hand, these technologies are already ‘transparent’ to us in their use (Gossmann 2010) and these habits have already grown into “silent habits”. Foucault insisted though that “there is always thought even in silent habits” (cited in Colapietro 2011). One can use criticism to uncover that thought. “Such criticism is both derived from and aimed at experience ...adopting...the over-flowing form of local resistance. Such resistance enjoins immersion and saturation in the situations into which one has been thrown [which] involves the intensification of experience...[via] “the auditing of present impulse and habit” (Colapietro 2011).

We believe that artistic use of interactive technologies is able to ‘give voice’ to these ‘silent habits’ of modern ubiquitous interactivity, providing tools for such “auditing”.

3. ‘Acoustic Images’.

Our artist-run laboratory ‘Acoustic Images’ created a series of art projects which make people conscious of the activities, which would normally go unnoticed.

Since 2008 our laboratory has been presenting an interactive audio-visual installation “**Acoustic Images**” (Dronyaeva, Senko 2009a). This project is about interdependence of audience’s movements, sound and video. A camera captures movements of the audience and transforms them into sound. Different motions produce different pitches, timbers and volumes and panoramic position of sound. At the same time the resulting music produces video images. Thus the audience can simultaneously see and hear results of their motions. It is a “concert sculpture” where a full-length 40-minute 4 parts concert can be performed solely by the audience.

Originally we expected participants to enjoy the power of being able to control the process of music production. It was our aim and the main challenge to incorporate public members’ manipulations in the end result. To our surprise though, the participants did not want to eliminate the cacophony by controlling sounds. Instead they enjoyed the very act of the interaction.

The conduct of the audience in the unfamiliar circumstances of immersive interactive settings has become our main research topic. We created two immersive installations, both designed to produce uncomfortable settings – an interactive theatrical installation “**Partorg Dunaev**” (Dronyaeva, Senko 2008a) and an interactive sound installation “**Silencing the Muses**” (Dronyaeva, Senko 2010). Just like with the “Acoustic Images” installation, their audience was able to affect the set-up and change it to a more comfortable one, but this time its algorithm was not as obvious. The task became more complicated.

We discovered that in the unfamiliar settings people turn to their gadgets both to create a distance (between themselves and the surroundings) and to make the immersive setting more familiar and comfortable. That is how we arrived at the term “Technologies of Self”. See in more details Dronyaeva (in print).

4. Sound in interactive artworks.

All our installations are either audio-visual or purely sonic. Only sound is capable of creating truly immersive settings: it takes up all available space and even spills over the exhibition space. Unlike visual arts, the very physics of sound allows it to involve the bodies to such a degree that it can affect the way people imagine themselves: “The self defined in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self imaged not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises and musics travel” (Connor). Similarly, Gossmann suggests that we use a metaphor of a tunnel to imagine our ‘directed attention’ (2011).

Thus in the sound installation the visitor interacts with the artwork not by pressing buttons but with her whole body. For example, in our ‘**Garbage Sound**’ installation visitors affect the sound composition by moving from one room to another. Extended through 3 connected rooms, the composition was perceived (heard) differently depending on the direction the visitor chose to move between the rooms. The end result existed only in the visitor’s mind and depended only on her conduct (Dronyaeva, Senko 2009b).

Artworks usually invite audiences to ‘interact’ purely mechanically: the audience is invited to press buttons or to produce movements in order to trigger the triggers etc. Our conceptual artworks create environments where the audience is already placed in the interactive situation, i.e. the artwork reacts to the audience before the audience is conscious of it. Here the participants’ conduct is not something which ‘produces’ the artwork, but something which ‘responds’ to the artwork. It is a reaction to the reaction: a human reaction to the reaction of the machine.

It is not only others’ responses to the settings that interest us. Our own ways to cope with unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable circumstances also provide us with artistic material. Conceptual sound artworks “**Spam Art**” and “**The Ideal Politolog**” are both dedicated to our ways we cope with informational flow. “Spam Art” (Dronyaeva 2011) is a sonification of a flow of real spam letters coming to our email, while “The Ideal Politolog” (Dronyaeva, Senko 2008b) is a mash up of excerpts of numerous political radio shows (using PureData and stochastic processes).

“For me, producing mash-ups is a non-informational way to respond to the spam or to the radio show. Like the audience in our sound installations, here too I am emerged in the environment, of which I have no control: I cannot change the content of the incoming spam, hardly can stop it to come into my mailbox, and even cannot respond to the mail. Unlike gallery visitors I cannot even leave the environment, created for me by my mailbox! Thus the only way to ‘respond’ to it is to produce manipulations, by which I signal to myself (not to the others) my own attitude towards the issue. I do not respond to the mail or the radio show, I respond to my own emotions triggered by them. Thus my conduct becomes philosophy.” (Dronyaeva 2011)

Foucault considered such ‘relationship with self’ and its development “a vital, politically necessary task, if indeed there is nothing else to rely on when resisting the political power” (Foucault 1982/2004), because “thought is potentially efficacious... The self in dialogue with itself can be a matrix of novelty, a source of innovation” (Foucault cited in Colapietro 2011).

Our manipulations (in shape of mashing up) are manifestations of thoughts, visualisation (or more precisely, sonification) of this dialogue.

Conclusion.

Modern technologies provide us with aptly instruments for dialogue of self with itself. Foucault noted that he used writing books as one such instrument (Colapietro 2011), while

‘talking’ can be an instrument of healing (or even instrument of silencing!) (Caputo 2000). We are provided with new – interactive – tools. And it is up to us whether they become extension of silencing tools or develop into tools for dialogue and a “source of innovation.”

These tools Foucault called ‘Technologies of Self’. In our work, the term proved to be useful in description of the aesthetic response of the interactive arts’ audiences because, as the results of our research suggest, in the human – machine interaction people put the interaction first, over the content. The further implementation of the term ‘Technologies of Self’ may enrich both the creation of interactive artworks and the thinking behind them.

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