Poetics of Responsive Spaces
A Topological Approach to the Design of Responsive Environments[1]

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Abstract

My project concerns subjectivation, performativity and embodiment, as inflected by notions of process and field. These questions were inspired by recent work in the margins of experimental performance, sound arts, computational media, and philosophy of process. They are informed by, and critically respond to Leibniz's continuous substance, Whitehead's "unbifurcated" process ontology, and Petitot's approach to morphogenesis. Beginning with a concern with the materiality of writing, the project explores the ethico-aesthetics of touch and movement, and poetic architecture or installation events as sites for speculative action.

The kind of events I describe, are collective, co-present, embodied, and a-linguistic. The potential for physical contact is a condition for the collective embodied experiences needed to conduct experimental phenomenology. Our events are designed for four or more participants, three to destabilize dyadic pairing, and lower the threshold to improvising being in that space, and a fourth for potential sociality. Having dissolved line between actor and spectator, we may adopt the disposition of an agent of change, or equally a witness of the event.

Relinquishing also a categoreal fixation on objects in favor of continua, we inhabit ambient environments thick with media and matter that evolve in concert with movement or gesture.

Introduction

TGarden is a branching family of responsive playspace events and installations, with curious cousins and descendants.

What I discuss in this essay, however, are not particular playspace installations and events like trg, tg2001, or the recent Remedios Terrarium exhibit (2008)[2] but some of the passionate critiques and questions motivating the creation of such responsive environments, and the desired qualities of experimental experience that make some of the background and potential for such playspaces still so compelling with respect to that pre-history. Given all the heart, craft, knowledge and energy that have been poured into making and presenting these installation-events, it's natural to ask what's at stake? Why should we creators and participant players care about making these playspaces? I hope this essay will encourage some of you to, as Maja Kuzmanovic put it, grow your own worlds weedily and wildly.

My interest in these responsive media spaces stems from two intertwined conversations. The first is a series of conversations about agency, language, and hybrid ontology, going back to a seminar on interaction and media (IMG) with Niklas Damiris, Helga Wild, Ben Robinson, Ann Weinstone, Alice Rayner, and other humanist scholars affiliated with Stanford University in California.   For three years, 1995-1997, we met every week, reading gem essays smuggled out from the heart of their disciplines, recasting what insights and arguments we found into ways to articulate and maybe work with the hybrid computational/physical "interactive" media that we saw emerging around us.   But we put