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Reflexive Figures: The Encounter in Interactive Arts
By Jean Dubois

Interaction is about encounter rather than control.
- David Rokeby

Since the early 1970s, with the emergence of closed circuit video and installations, artists have endeavoured to immerse spectators within the artistic representation itself. One thinks of the works of Peter Campus (Interface, 1972), Dan Graham (Present, Continuous Past(s), 1974), or Bill Viola (He Weeps for You, 1976), whose video installations cause a temporal or spatial shift in spectators' relationship with their own image. While this does not yet involve interactivity between spectator and device, one can nonetheless speak of the presence of a retroactive portrait generated through video feedback, as spectators are led to examine their participation as subjects of the work. Artworks now require, not just the body's implicit participation in their reception, but the spectator's explicit physical involvement—or the work remains inoperative. The spectator's individuality is thus staged in the device-generated gap between his or her own image and their actual presence in the physical space. It is often a question of exploring the phenomenology of the present through the specular effects of closed circuit video.

Beginning in the 1990s, this mirroring characteristic of video feedback extends into the interactive experimentations of digital installations. Among other things, what artists propose is a critique of the spectator's narcissistic gaze by way of devices using or simulating the mirror. Christian Möller's Electronic Mirror (1993) is equipped with a motion detector and reacts to the viewer's approach. As the spectator moves toward the mirror, a liquid crystal display covering the reflective surface thickens and veils the specular image. Spectators are thus deprived of their mirror image precisely when they move up for a closer look. The critical nod to the Narcissus myth is clearly delineated in this instance. Less ironical, but just as straightforward, is the Narcissus reference in Liquid Views (1993), by Monika Fleischmann and Wolfgang Strauß. In this setup, spectators can contemplate their own image in a cathode ray monitor that's turned upward. Here, the closed circuit video image can be touched and altered, like the ripples on the surface of a basin of water. And the effect is more equivocal. One hesitates between a fascination with the image treatment, which allows one to simulate instant surface fluidity, and an embarrassing feeling of being placed in the position of a character subjugated by his own reflection.

Other artistic approaches focused on intersubjectivity as an identificatory factor, in both explicit and dynamic fashion. The basic principle of this approach implies a self-awareness that relies on cognizance of others developed through directly expressed interactions, particularly in the face-to-face context of conversation, reciprocal gestures, or any similar "symbolic interaction." The subject is thus closely connected with the interiorization of the "generalized other." (1) The human spirit can only develop through social life, which also prompts us to consider introspective thought as a form of dialogue with oneself modelled on interpersonal communications.

"Interaction encompasses not only the co-presence of participating actors, but also a multitude of others who invisibly permeate their rapport with the world. No man is an island. Our socially constructed character is under the manifold gaze of the innumerable others who accompany us, physically and morally. Actress Simone Signoret, for instance, could declare having accomplished all the actions in her life under the gaze of four or five people, both alive and departed, who mattered to her and whose consciousness continued to inhabit her. A kind of ghostly audience attends to every interaction." (2)

By drawing the notion of symbolic interaction toward that of interactivity, one can shift a certain logic of interpersonal relations toward person-machine relations—particularly when that machine plays a participating role among the real, flesh-and-blood participants who haunt our memories or imaginations. Doubtless, this is partly why Edmond Couchot turns the "encounter" into an artistic genre in its own right, (3) whether the relationship is directed toward a character, an object, or a virtual environment.

Gary Hill's Tall Ships (1992) proposes a silent video encounter with a community of twelve individuals who grow nearer and farther from us as we proceed through a corridor. As soon as these luminous, ghostly figures detect our presence, they seem to approach and almost to beckon us. Silence gives way to gradual familiarization as the rapport between spectator and device-generated character becomes increasingly close, until the character images reach human scale and allow for eye-to-eye contact. The scene suggests an Orphic journey, a spectral quest in search of a lost being that one meets again, fleetingly and partially. When viewers turn up in sufficient numbers, Tall Ships offers another form of encounter. Participants' paths constantly cross and, as the luminous characters approach and become large enough to light the corridor, spectators' own silhouettes begin to appear, the contours of their faces subtly revealing themselves. Thus, another community of bodies emerges from the darkness. Though quite real, and despite the participants' very physical presence, this community leaves spectators with a feeling no less peculiar and strange. In the guise of blurring boundaries between this world and the next, Tall Ships opens a fleeting doorway between the tangible universe and our imaginary world. As George Quasha and Charles Stein recount, (4) each visitor experiences something different. Some feel as though they're being watched, or vaguely perceived. Some feel no anxiety in the encounter, knowing that one doesn't have to speak or move to establish contact. For others, it brings out a

discomfort with the ambivalence and superficiality that the situation suggests. Consequently, Quasha and Stein tie the work to a mirror effect, a space in which anything can happen and where each viewer may apprehend a different reality while being aware that one's mind is simply a refection. In this experience, the notion of projection breaks down and reforms according to mental and physical understandings of it. While the interplay of optics and geometry in video projections enables the isomorphic reproduction of evanescent luminous rays from the monitor surface to the walls, the same process can also trigger a defensiveness in spectators who transpose to the characters ideas and feelings not easily identified in themselves. The process also reflects the artist's intent, since in his view spectators complete the "circuit" of the work by consciously taking part in the event. The character images in Tall Ships act as shifters for an introspective reading, inasmuch as they are the descriptive signs of these characters. While the experience explicitly suggests an encounter with the other, it also strongly favours an implicit encounter with oneself.

More explicit still is Max Dean's Be Me (2002), an installation he created together with Kristan Horton, which enables spectators to unequivocally project themselves into the artist's interactive portrait. As the session begins, the artist's voice prompts spectators to appropriate the artist's identity and to say something. As soon as the spectator accepts the involvement, the artificial figure imitates his expressions and pronunciation. A camcorder and microphone capture the spectator's facial expressions and speech and transpose them to the digital model to produce a real-time animation that approximates his or her behaviour. If spectators' gestures are too sudden or erratic, the response becomes unstable, and the face distorted and strangely grimaced. Control of the virtual face, then, correlates to the spectator's control over his or her own behaviour. A mere gesture lies between the congruous and the monstrous. Once again, the spectator seems to be at the heart of the situation, the interactive portrait simply offering a pretext or an intermediary favouring an intriguing encounter with oneself. Dean thus highlights concerns accompanying the definition of personal, if not human identity. In the case of Be Me, the mirror effect occurs through an extended sequence of procedures involving audiovisual pick-up, artificial intelligence, form recognition, and digital modelization and animation. Yet the self-relationship is rendered not merely by the array of dovetailed technologies, but especially by the mask of an image borrowed from the artist's foreign identity. Is the spectator striving simply to be another, or to be the indispensable soul animating a polymorphic machine? To what extent can one recognize oneself in the process? The artist's self-portrait is only a pretext. Spectators learn nothing of his identity or personality. Rather, with a hint of dark humour, the digital visage embodies the awkwardness of automated identification by the humanoid machine.

While critic Rosalind Krauss connected the aesthetics of video art with Narcissus, (5) artist David Rokeby places interactive arts in the purview of the Echo myth. (6) Rather than set spectators plainly before their own image, interactive arts give them back an echo of their

actions. By causing a gradual discrepancy between form and sound, the echo, Rokeby says, better represents the interactive relationship between person and machine. A certain distortion would necessarily occur between human behavioural contributions and what the machines return. Contrary to what happens with closed circuit video installations, the spectator's profile and movements are generally transposed to conditions very different to his or her physical situation. As in the case of Graham's and Campus' video installations of the 1970s, interactive works are first and foremost "distorting mirrors," where spectators test out contorted relationships with themselves. The interactive work is then potentially defined by the outcome of an encounter with situations composed by the artist. (7)

In offering transformed reflections of our identity, interactive arts are following artistic tradition while integrating original symbolic strategies that are of our time—not limited to the newfangled technology du jour. The artistic desire to create an interpersonal relationship rather than merely a personal description doesn't just come from the technology in use. It takes into account ideological and cultural perspectives that view personal development and identity as constituted in relation to life in society and relationships with others. Nonetheless, at a time when interpersonal relationships are increasingly mediatized through ever more sophisticated digital devices, one may wonder about their impact on human relations and on the process of defining personal identity. While they may induce a fascination with technology, the previously examined devices raise questions regarding the possibility of resolving the problems of defining a personal identity. In our information-based civilization, they may even suggest a critical self-examination of technological mediation by questioning the bases of the reasoning, aesthetics, and ethics of our human engagements. Through the process of bringing about the interactive simulation of an encounter, one may glimpse the issue of subjectivity confronted with itself. Besides mere anthropomorphic representation, what seems to emerge is an exploration of human nature. Art, human sciences, and technology jostle together here, in a quest to define our rapport with others and with ourselves. The use of digital media serves to generate a specular experience that can return us an image of our social condition and of our personal actions. The creation of such interactive automata offers an occasion to develop a critical poetry of human relationships and, perhaps, a new artistic genre adopting terms specific to an artifice of encounter.

[Translated from the French by Ron Ross]

NOTES
1. George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self and Society (1932), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
2. David Le Breton, L'Interactionnisme symbolique (Paris: PUF, 2004), 53.
3. Edmond Couchot, La technologie dans l'art (Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 1998), 196.
4. George Quasha and Charles Stein, Tall Ships: Gary Hill's Projective Installations (New York: Station Hill Arts, Barrytown, 1997).

5. Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," October, Vol. 1 (Spring 1976): 50-64.

6. David Rokeby, "Transforming Mirrors," ed. Simon Penny, Critical Issues in Electronic Media (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 133-57.

7. Rokeby, 152-53.