

Dossier | Collective Actions: The Interactive Installation Work of Marc Fournel

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Collective Actions: The Interactive Installation Work of Marc Fournel **By Caroline Seck Langill**

Since media began to engage interactively with its audience the art community has witnessed an attendant diversification of sources for both production of interactive art and its conceptual scaffolding. The inter-disciplinary nature of the work, with its genesis in the military-industrial complex draws from science, art and technological practices and histories. Interactive media art pays homage to much of the early research into cybernetic systems relying on feedback loops that perpetuate unpredictable events creating surprising outcomes for the audience/inter-actor. The tendency to mimic real-life systems, to re-create our relationship to organic forms has led to work that often parallels our experience of our everyday environment. Norman White, David Rokeby, Diana Burgoyne, Catherine Richards, Marc Fournel, and Luc Courchesne are just a few of the artists engaged in these practices in this country.

In this brief discussion I will look at Marc Fournel's work in particular, noting the evolution of interactive systems in his work and the way biological systems, and even theories, are implicated.

In 2004 Marc Fournel mounted his complex interactive work Tontauben at Oboro, a centre devoted to, among other things, the production and presentation of new media. Tontauben incorporated a 3D positioning system to create what Ricardo Dal Farra has called a "proposed sound universe." On entering the space the audience found, situated on the floor, a group of small spheres, each about half the size of a bowling ball. By picking up a ball the inter-actor could manipulate, or perhaps stimulate, the local positioning system (LPS) that transformed the ball's movement into sound. With three possible categories to elicit—organic-non-human (waves, wind, rocks, seagulls), organic-human (laughter, footsteps, kids on a swing), mechanical (gears, rolling trains, paper folding)—there was little prediction in what sounds one might hear. However, the acoustic space could be played like an instrument once a familiarity with various modes was achieved.

The reciprocal and dialogical nature of this work can be considered typical of interactive art. Marc Fournel achieves this in Tontauben through the work's ability to provide reassuring feedback for the inter-actor. What this allows for is intuitive interaction that lessens the burden of conscious thought. Consequently, the audience is able to be more spontaneous in their response.

Le Puits (1999-2000), Fournel's first interactive installation, revolved around a sculptural component, a deep well-like structure in the middle of the space. By approaching the well the audience could activate alternate sounds, interfering with the soundtrack of a video projected onto the ceiling and into the well. The possibility for collective action as layers of sound created by individuals began to form a new sonic environment for the work inspired Fournel to strip down the components and focus solely on sound and audience-machine interaction. Tontauben takes this sensibility and collapses it with a positioning system, enabling interaction that generates the work. The title of the work translates from German into "sound pigeon." Fournel recognized that the nature of the sound mimicked pigeons flying around the space. The individual sounds are the "pigeons" that orient to and around each other. Introducing a microphone, enabling additions of sound objects enables the audience to affect the environment and "perform" the work. For Tontauben Fournel created a meta-instrument using the X, Y, Z axes as direct variables of custom-made sound algorithms and virtual synthesizers that were integrated in meta-instrument programming. The artist's desire to have a more integrated influence on the movement of the user in the system led Fournel to the boids software program for his next work FLOCK (2007), where the inter-actor influences the behaviour of the sound objects, but doesn't directly control them. The boids program was designed by Craig Reynolds in 1986. An A-Life program simulating coordinated animal motion, it creates flock-like behaviours in the objects it is controlling. The "boids" have three-dimensional access to the space, but are dependent for their "separation, alignment and cohesion" on their neighbours. (1) In Tontauben audience members may have been distracted by the type of sounds they were hearing and did not associate them with birds. In fact, the cryptic nature of Fournel's title suggests that even he was reluctant to make the biological dimension in this work explicit and instead left it within the realm of environmental sound-scape art. Also, Fournel's collaboration with the new-media artist and programmer Thomas Ouellet Fredericks was new and untested. Although Tontauben can be considered a fully resolved work, in light of its successor, FLOCK, it feels much like a prototype, a necessary step, but one that researches how an artist might incorporate 3D positioning systems in order to transcend their ontology.

Questions of ontology are worth considering here since the conflation of ontologies that come with the incorporation of scientific tools, whether they are hardware or software, impacts on the reception of the work by the audience. Andrew Pickering posits that science, and in turn the material world, exists within a performative idiom. If it is agreed that the world is continually doing things, "things that bear upon us not as observation statements upon disembodied intellects, but as forces upon material beings," (2) then one may assume that we can respond to the material agency of that body that is acting upon us. Pickering uses the example of weather and its effects, but it is possible to transfer this notion to artworks that act on the body in similar ways. In addition to this notion of material agency Pickering posits the notion of tuning in a goal-oriented practice as a dance of agency. The scientist, after the machine has been produced, waits for the emergence of material agency, placing her or him in a temporary passive role. As the machine is tuned and honed to

assure it is performing as intended, the dance of agency takes the form of a dialectic of resistance and accommodation “where resistance denotes the failure to achieve an intended capture of agency in practice, and accommodation an active human strategy of response to resistance.” (3)

The dance of agency was evident in Tontauben, but is explicit in FLOCK. This recent installation, by the collaborative team PLAN B (Marc Fournel and Thomas Ouellet Fredericks), involves not only sound, but also visual objects. On entering the gallery the audience finds itself in a darkened space. In one corner, at the ceiling, there is an elaborate machine, a mirror array projecting small bird-like visual objects, in the shape of Vs, onto the floor of the gallery. As attention is eventually drawn away from the apparatus—difficult considering its complexity—the audience sees a group of balls, similar to the spheres of Tontauben, but covered in brightly coloured fuzzy fabric. Compelled to pick them up by their toy-like nature, the inter-actor finds the projected objects following her around the gallery. Like the gaggle of goslings imprinted on Konrad Lorenz, these material agents shift and dance in conjunction with the handling of the balls. The audience member, inter-actor, performs the installation adding to the complexity of the environment. However, the experience of this work is unique in that it seems to refer to something more innate. The dance of agency facilitated by the installation is not doubled as suggested in Pickering’s reading, i.e., between the machine and the scientist, but rather tripled between the apparatus (program), the artwork and the audience/participant/inter-actor. A performative “ménage à trois” where agency oscillates back and forth, mimicking an experience akin to something one might experience with animals or even other humans. The work solicits a social experience for the viewer, a window into what satisfies us about connecting with other beings. Separated from the viewer, as entities independently moving in space, the objects mimic their digital boids counterparts and appear as a flock of birds, or a school of fish. But their attraction to the ball, as manipulated by the inter-actor shifts this representation to an experience akin to imprinting. They appear to follow the inter-actor, their jerky tentative movements suggestive of immature birds. This subtle structural change solicits a shift in meaning that shows us the potential of interactive media to create new social realities.

In 1995 new media artist and theorist Simon Penny asked the question “Why do we want our machines to appear alive?” (4) Penny doesn’t answer the question, but the human desire for reflection within the machine has paralleled industrialization and mechanization. From Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein to the robotic assemblages of Bill Vorn, we have witnessed the need to spontaneously animate the machines on which we are co-dependent. Pickering’s work suggests agency will emerge whether or not our desire for animation exists. With FLOCK Fournel and Fredericks map the potential of our machines to create environments that connect us with the experience of collectivity and communication, so that actions are not just mutual between two entities but with many human and non-human actors.

NOTES

1. See <http://www.red3d.com/cwr/boids/> for an in-depth description of Craig Reynolds' boids program.
2. Andrew Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency and Science* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 6.
3. Pickering, 22.
4. Simon Penny, "The Pursuit of the Living Machine," *Scientific American*, vol. 273, issue 3 (Sept. 1995).