

## Nina Czegledy

### On Audience Response

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I would like to begin by adding to the ongoing artist/curator discussion. While I remain an exhibiting artist, in the last two decades I have mostly curated Canadian exhibitions for museums and galleries and festivals, in altogether thirty-eight countries. This doesn't make me a star curator; if I could share with you the list of my adventures then you would understand what all this entails. Because I'm often working abroad and because people are not necessarily aware of these festivals and Canadian touring exhibitions, many people are unaware that I exist. To counteract this, I always develop some other projects here in Canada. I mainly work on thematic exhibitions and exchange programs, with the view of the local venue context. I think this is a very important and is sometimes a forgotten issue. We should remind ourselves that we don't curate an exhibition for ourselves, we curate it for the audience. When we show abroad we really have to adjust a little bit to what is happening there, how do they view us and so forth.

Observing the impressive landscape of Canadian as well as international media art, I find that conceptual and/or pragmatic evaluation of audience consciousness remains missing. Investigation of this topic clearly enables the search for enhanced communication between the artwork and the audience, providing a variety of options for an effective exploration of the state of consciousness within the interactive loop. On examination, however, underneath the most obvious and often dazzling exterior layer of an interactive work, one mostly encounters a pre-determined set of responses nested in preframed constructions.

In terms of digital art and interactive art, I have been working for two years as a curator on a Heritage-supported digital database project. This project, which hopefully will involve all of you, as we intend eventually to list all museums and public galleries as well as exhibitors of media or new media art, is going to be online shortly, launched this fall. Hopefully soon, information about exhibitions, production, dissemination, funding will be available in terms of digital culture

in Canada. The site will also have an international section and it will be self-uploadable, so new information addition will be always possible.

Getting back to the interactive issue, recent explorations into the nature of consciousness and awareness have found new currency among scientists and artists alike. In addition to biological expressions, including neuroscience and psychology, the subject has also been reviewed from an interdisciplinary point of view, incorporating philosophical, spiritual, and techno-scientific factors. Various aspects of awareness related to the interrelations between man and machine, including artworks, have been researched, presented, and widely published. This is a project by Louise Wilson, who volunteered herself for neurological experiments in order to create this artwork. Further to academic considerations, artists have developed novel consciousness-related interactive projects, yet observing the impressive landscape of interactive installations, it seems that conceptual or pragmatic evaluation of audience awareness is not readily available.

This is an installation by Orshi Drozdik, a Hungarian/American artist. Awareness indicates comprehension, knowledge, cognition, perception, and recognition. Consciousness is defined as the mental and emotional awareness of an individual or a group. How do these concepts correspond to the notions of interactivity? How is consciousness, of the participant or the viewer, addressed in interactive works? How can interactive technology be used to enrich social interaction? How can the current cultural environment be effectively evaluated? How can these issues be best addressed by artists and especially by curators? A detailed analysis of the topic is outside the scope of this text. I can pose these questions and a few examples will be discussed.

David Rokeby in *Giver of Names* engages the awareness of his audience by creating a complex feedback loop through the perception, consciousness, and memory of the viewer. This image shows the first stage of image processing. The installation consists of a video camera, a computer, and a sound source. The camera observes objects presented to it by the audience, by the individual viewer or participant, and, as Rokeby wrote, “thinks about them, associates metaphorically, and then speaks aloud a sentence it formulates about its impressions of the object”. This

image then shows a section of the background of the computer screen in *Giver of Names*. Rokeby here is challenging the viewer's preconceptions of the "presented objects", in quotation marks, while he draws them in to speculative explorations. *Giver of Names* presents us with a dialogue between man and machine, art object and audience.

Norman White has eminently addressed audience awareness in the communication loop of interactivity via his *Helpless Robot*. The artificial personality of this robot responds to the behaviour of the viewer/participant by using a multitude of phrases utilizing an electronic voice. The speech that is delivered depends on its present and past experience of "emotions", in quotation marks, ranging from boredom, frustration, and arrogance and overstimulation. By his own admission, White has tried to develop electromechanical systems endowed with a life of their own. "I started out", White wrote, "asking myself, can a machine that is fundamentally a product of the intellect also model emotions? Are there primary emotions, like primary colors, from which all other emotions evolve?" *Helpless Robot* aims to elucidate this issue.

Nell Tenhaaf's *UCBM*, or *You Could Be Me*, does not resolve the issue of audience awareness, but it articulates pertinent questions and responses by inventing a simulated situation. Tenhaaf is deeply interested in how the viewer/participant is experiencing his or her own sense of subjectivity. *UCBM* presents a position-sensitive interactive video installation where visitors are tested and evaluated by a video-projected surrogate of the artist under adaptation to artificial empathy. Tenhaaf described her concept as follows: "The intention in foregrounding simulated empathy is not to advocate more mediated or artificial relations with other humans. Rather it is to create an art experience that is aligned with the life goal of embodying techno-scientific knowledge as well as taking into consideration its narrative and interpretive dimensions."

*UCBM* investigates the nature of the interactive exchange by extending the viewer's experience. The viewer entering the space activates the video projector. A research scientist—so-called scientist—clad in a white lab coat, becomes visible on the screen and after a little time turns to the viewer, asking, "Now, what can I find

about you? I want to know about your fitness, your empathy factor, your willingness to get involved.” Her script revolves around ironic, scientific, and theoretical commentary, and she solicits from viewers as much input and intimacy as she can get. She wants to make an objective/subjective picture of which viewers are, by assessing the willingness to relate. She proceeds with questions such as “Do you feel exposed? Answer yes or no, please.” Through the interaction, the viewer not only becomes mindful of his or her subjectivity but also enters into the loop in the exchange of information. While the whole interchange is presented as a de facto interview, the discourse is simultaneously imbued with an amusing sense of irony that contributes to the slightly whimsical atmosphere created at the site of the installation. The presentation technology of *UCBM* reveals Tenhaaf’s ambition of building systems that hide their technical limits. Tenhaaf notes “*UCBM* offers a way of picturing the active interfaces we construct with the world and how we are enmeshed in its always emerging flux.” A genetic algorithm is used both to generate some of the imagery and as a method for assessing viewers’ empathy factor. The GA—the Genetic Algorithm—takes the viewer’s empathy score, calculated from their speed of approach and calculated. Each viewer is given feedback on how they did through voice, a light display, and a fitness chart. Thus, *UCBM* is really investigating the nature of exchange with the viewer, extending his or her experience by constituting a situation where issues are revealed, such as “This is what you are like.” I can attest that we have shown this several times together in Sweden and in other countries, and we received a very interesting, intriguing audience response.

In summary, Tenhaaf’s *UCBM* and similar artworks by artists opened up experimental inquiries beyond traditional considerations to evaluate the emotional state and awareness of interactive audiences. It is important to note that without these initial landmarks it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to progress forward on the long journey of investigating audience awareness concerning interactive digital artworks.

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