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Performing in an Art Fair: Inviting Strangers into the Artistic Action.

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Abstract

The phenomenon researched in this essay is performance art with a particular focus on interactive performance at large-scale events, such as art fairs. This research focuses on two performance art cases performed at the *Supermarket Art Fair* in Sweden in 2017 and at the *ArtVilnius Art Fair*, in Lithuania in 2018. The cases are analyzed by the author from an autoethnographic approach. The data collected during 2017–2018 include video and photo documentation, notes and interviews, and EEG (electroencephalography) data. The cases are analyzed from the following perspectives – emergent responsivity, inhuman interconnections and transcorporeality – as recommended by the author to integrate the performance design when the artwork is created as a social sculpture in a large-scale venue, such as an art fair. This research can be useful for performance artists and designers as well as interaction designers.

Research Question: How can passers-by be invited into an interactive performance with biometric data at an art fair?

Introduction

The art fair as a venue for the performer is very site specific due to the nature of the events that take place for large art-interested audiences. Art fairs usually consist of a large number of booths that have traditionally focused primarily on art objects, which are sold to individuals or collections. Yet during the past decade, more and more art fairs invite artists to present live events and performances. The challenge within the art fair format is to establish a connection between the performer and the visitors who might not be familiar with performance art and may not quite know what to expect from the interactive elements or that they could be invited to co-perform with the artist.

The author of this essay is a performance artist and researcher working with interactive performances involving the performer's biometric data, such as EEG (electroencephalography). She explores the art fair format as an interactive environment where the invitation to visitors to interact is supplemented by monitors that project the bodily conditions of the performer so that the viewers can see what happens as the performer moves among them talking and inviting them to touch her. In a custom-designed program, the monitors show the performer's remediated conditions of concentration and relaxation as a colored running graph on the black background. This digital mediation of the bodily states of the performer aims to create maximum transparency of what happens in the moment of performance and provide an interpersonal connection between the performer and audience members. When connections happen, it impacts the bodily state of the performer, which is immediately visible on the monitor for the audience to see.

Aim

The aim of this essay is to explore how technology-based visualization of the inner state of a performing body (the artist) can be extracted, remediated, and shown live on a screen to reflect the changing inner conditions of concentration and relaxation when the artist interacts with visitors. This interaction produces a visual co-creation, a social sculpture, at the art fair venue, which has traditionally focused on static art objects on sale.

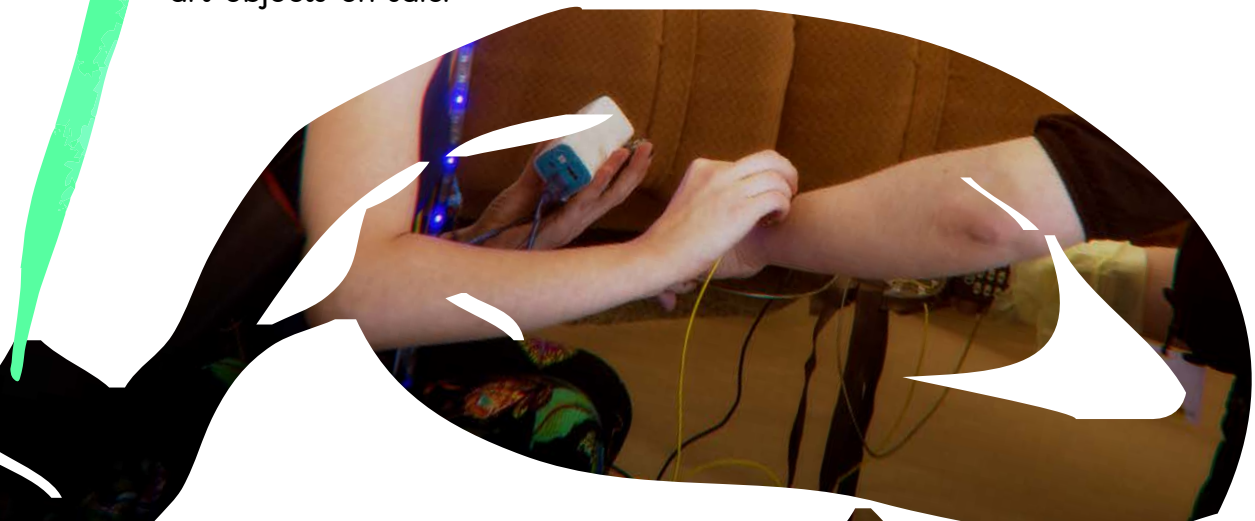


Fig. 1.

Methodology

Theory

Participatory performance is seen here as a work of art consisting of space, time, performing body, and audience (Schechner, 1977) and is built upon interhuman connections as a trigger for interaction (Bishop, 2014). In the present case studies, this interaction is illustrated using digital technology that tracks the bodily condition of the performer in real time and remediates it onto a monitor. The theories within this case study analysis are inhuman interconnections and trans-corporeality (Cohen, 2015; Alaimo 2010; Griniuk, 2021), where the performer's body is extended by technology and projected onto a screen as an additional visual layer that invites the visitors into the interaction. The performer becomes a trans-corporeal body with the involved audience at the art fair.

The site-specificity of the performance (Pearson, 2010) in the art fair venue is, in its own way, trans-corporeality because it is incorporated into a large-scale event, and the visitors, who are the primary audience of the entire art fair event, become the co-creators and/or participants in the performance. Site-specific performance (Pearson, 2010) is a performance developed according to the specific site or place. The case performances for this research were developed specifically for the context of each of the two events; what they have in common is the screens that show the audience the remediated bodily states of the performer.

Materials and Methods

The two cases of performance art with biometric data within this research are analyzed through auto-ethnographic means (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In the auto-ethnographic method the researcher is engaged in telling her own story (Russel, 1999) and the value is in her inner knowing of the research field (Duncan, 2004). In auto-ethnography the self is used as a data source (Holt, 2003). The data of this study is auto-ethnographic, as the author, while conducting the performances in 2017 and 2018, took reflective notes and collected video and photographic data from her own static pre-installed cameras, from the photographers involved in the documentation of the events, and from reflective notes written after the performances. In developing this essay, the author is re-narrating the cases from today's perspective on the past two events while continuing to interact with the material. The research is ongoing, and the author is planning to expand it into new horizons after participation at the *Supermarket Art Fair* and *Affordable Art Fair* in Sweden in 2021.

Fig. 2.

Cases

The first case, "*Mark Making with the Robots*," consists of performances realized at the *Supermarket Art Fair* in Stockholm, Sweden in 2017 (Fig. 3 & 4). The performances were scheduled as daily sessions of one-hour duration and were situated near the entrance of the art fair; the performance was literally the first artwork the visitors encountered after entering the art fair venue. The artwork was about the extension of the performer's body and art practice into a digital reflection uniting the audience, the performer's body, objects, and surroundings into one work of art. The artist integrated technology to make visible not only the performative acts, but the inner bodily states of the performer; the space consisted of the floor covered with paper and moving and drawing DIY (do-it-yourself) robots made from recycled materials, such as an old shoe and old toys. Five DIY electronic instruments were mounted on the performer's body; these were made from the recycled materials that made sounds when the members of the audience touched the performers skin. The performer had an EEG device on her head and the screen, placed on the floor, showed a running graph. The performance was assisted by one person, who was photo documenting the interactions, talking to the audience, and introducing the technology behind the artwork. The walls behind the performance were covered by silkscreen print posters, picturing the performer wearing the technological devices that were the same as what the visitors saw during the live action. Piles of posters were also lying on the floor, and the visitors could take a poster with them.

Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.

Top: Fig. 5.
Middle: Fig 6.
Left: Fig 7.

The second case performance, *"Mark-Making,"* (Fig. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8 & 9) was realized in the context of the art fair, *ArtVilnius*, in 2018 in Vilnius, Lithuania. The performance was realized during a scheduled time and lasted one hour on the last day of the art fair in the booth of the *Meno Parkas Gallery* (Kaunas, Lithuania), which represents the artist. The performance was documented and communicated to the audience members by a representative of the gallery. The site of performance in the gallery booth included brown large-size paper, which covered the floor and was littered with pieces of coal, manuscripts and two computers; a large TV screen was placed vertically by the wall. A large brown retro-style sofa was placed in the space for the visitors and the performer to sit on if they wanted to interact. Silkscreen posters picturing the performer were placed on the floor and the visitors could take those home. The performer wore a silkscreen print dress similar to those on the posters. She had an EEG device mounted on her head. The performance consisted of several sequences where the performer read a text, moved in the space, or talked to the visitors and invited them into the space of the booth. As the performer moved, traces of the coal were left on the brown paper and the visitors, by stepping into the space, left their coal footprints as well. Some of the visitors sat on the sofa and participated in the space. The visitors could see the running graph on the screen that represented the performer's moments of concentration, for example when she was reading the text, or moment of relaxation, for example, when she was sitting on sofa or lying on the floor in her movement sequences. The goal of the performance was to invite the visitors to step into the space with the performer inside the gallery booth, create footprints on the paper together, and witness the digitized co-performance.

Discussion

The two performances took place in large-scale art fair venues, where the invitation of the audience unfamiliar to the performance and the artist was designed by the following means: the involvement of the screens/monitors, where the inner states of the performer were visible, an assistant or representative of the gallery, who communicated the performance to the audience in real time, and the bodily and verbal communication of the performer. The screens incorporated in both performances utilized EEG as a means to transmit to the audience moments when the artist was relaxed or concentrating.

Fig. 8.

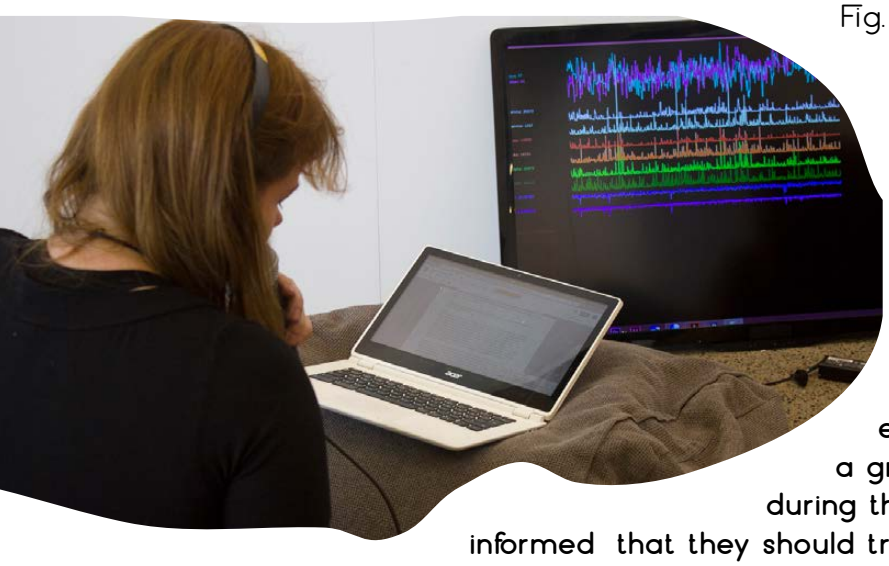


Fig. 9.

EEG, as explained by the scholar and medical scientist, Vuust (2007), reads the small electrical charges from the activated neurons divided into delta, theta, alpha, beta, and gamma frequencies (waves), which each appear as a separate color on a graph projected onto a black screen during the performances. The audience is informed that they should track alpha and beta waves in particular, as alpha waves show the states of physical relaxation and mental non-activity (Noachtar et al, 1999), and the beta waves show the concentrating inner state of the performer (Krugman & Hartley, 1970). The performer in both cases used the *NeuroSky* device mounted on her head, along with up to five devices mounted on her body, which made sounds when touched by the audience members.

This technological complexity of the performance situation, where the spectators are passers-by at a large-scale event, needed assisting individuals to explain to the audience what was shown on the screen and how the technology works. These individuals acted as the primary voice of the performer; the impact of the participatory experience was, in these cases, supplemented with a didactic approach from the position of the external co-facilitator, who explained how to understand the technology involved in the performance and the frameworks of the interactions.

To answer the research question regarding how to invite passers-by into an interaction with a performance artist with biometric data at an art fair, the cases are analyzed from three perspectives. The first perspective is connecting performance on site and video with focus on emergent responsivity when interaction occurs.
The second perspective is inviting the audience to transgress the normative spectatorship by making an empathic digital connection to the performer through props (objects/technology) mounted on the performer's body that read and transmit biometric data or make sounds at the moment of interaction, when the visitor of the art fair touches the skin of the performer. This perspective is conceptualized as "inhuman interconnections" (Griniuk, 2021), in other words, the equal impact of the performance itself and of the objects and video projection, visualizing the performer's inner state on the experience of spectatorship and participation. In this way, technology (interpreted as the objects mounted on the body) impacts the visitors' experience in the same way as the performer, that is, as live subjects within a performance.

Due to the objects and technology involved, the performance becomes a social play where the participating viewers can test their own and the performer's boundaries and see changes in the performer's inner state immediately on the screen. The viewer can speculate about their own inner state in the moment of interaction. In other words, the remediated information, for example, the real-time exploration of the performative situation as a liminal space, results in transformation (Schechner, 1977). Performance and the building of performative interactions can be likened to the process of sculpting; here producing a *social sculpture* which, according to Beuys, is an artwork within the social realm, which requires social engagement and participation (Moore, 2021). The performance thus becomes a social sculpture that emerges as the audience members begin to interact.

The third perspective is transcorporeality (Cohen, 2015; Alaimo 2010, Griniuk, 2021) and in the case of performances, it is connected to the socio-cultural context. This needed to be taken into consideration as the performances were designed site-specifically for each of the two art fairs, which have quite different contexts and histories. Not only the performer and the mounted objects, which invite social play, but also each of the art fair venues, as every event in every country has its own background, which attracts a unique audience. Transcorporeality within the *Supermarket Art Fair* is within its tradition as an art fair for artist-run initiatives and artists. In this case, the transcorporeal approach is within the culture and context of readiness to join the artistic interaction to a higher degree than in the other case. The artist experiences moments when the strangers would touch her face or nose to activate the technology mounted on her body. In contrast, the *ArtVilnius Art Fair* has a more traditional format where the artist successfully involves young representatives of the audience, children, while the majority of the audience remains spectators.

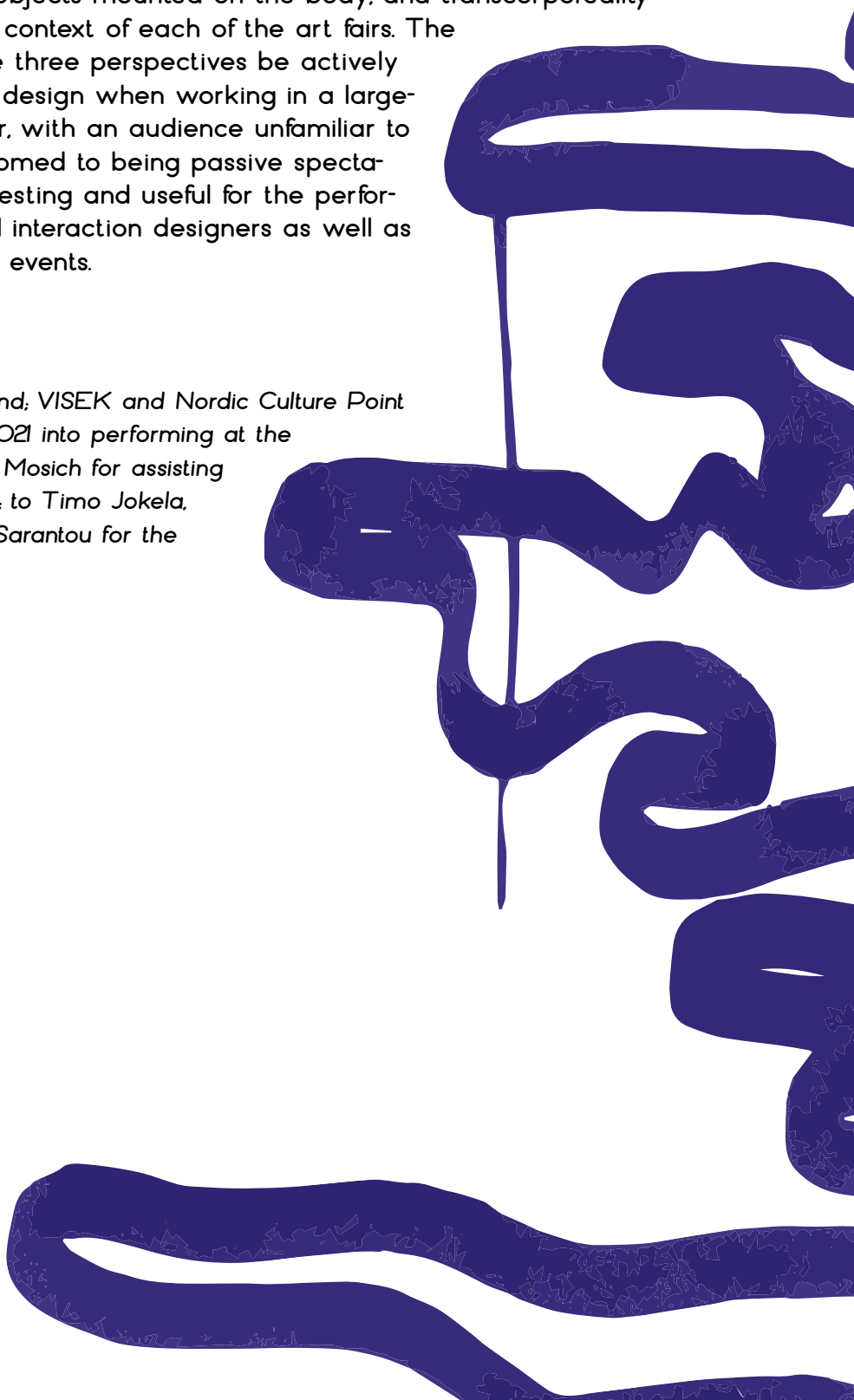
A major difference between the two cases is that in the first case, the artist represented herself and her artistic practice, and in the second case, the artist was represented by the art gallery. All this impacts how the interaction happens, especially in the second case, the performer is facing an audience largely unfamiliar with the performance media within the format of an art fair.

Conclusion

In this research, the author discussed the peculiarity of performing in art fair venues in Sweden and Lithuania. The spectators come to the art fair to see large scale art galleries and venues, represented in the booths, but not single performance art. Therefore, invitation into the active co-creation requires certain tools. Those unfamiliar to the performer, and sometimes to performance as media, were invited into the co-creation of the performative space, as the social sculpture by the following means.

First, the performer extended her body by using technological devices that remediated her inner bodily conditions onto the screens, lying on the floor or standing by the wall of the exhibition space. The up to five electronic devices, mounted on her body, produced sounds as the audience interacted with her by touching her skin. Second, the viewer experience was supplemented by the didactic approach of an assisting person who explained to the audience members how the technology worked and photo-documented the live performance.

The design of the invitation to interact within the performance can be discussed from three perspectives: emergent responsivity to the art of interaction; inhuman interconnections as the equal impact on the audience experience from the performer as the living body and the objects mounted on the body; and transcorporeality as the particular socio-cultural context of each of the art fairs. The author recommends that these three perspectives be actively incorporated into performance design when working in a large-scale venue, such as an art fair, with an audience unfamiliar to the performer who are accustomed to being passive spectators. This research can be interesting and useful for the performance artist, performance and interaction designers as well as curators of art fairs and similar events.



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Images

Fig 3 & 4. Supermarket Art Fair 2017. Video documentation. Stills. Credits: Marija Griniuk

Fig 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8 & 9. ArtVilnius Art Fair 2018. Photo documentation. Credits: Airida Rekštytė

Sketches for the silkscreen prints, used for the performance costumes 2017 – ongoing. Marija Griniuk.