

Project Group Proposal – Winter, Spring and Fall, 2011

Faculty - Kate Edmunds, David Cuthbert, James Bierman

Research Foci – Performative Technologies

Title – Designing and creating a media-rich interactive environment for theatrical or gallery showing

Abstract

The intention of this collaborative research group is to push at the traditional boundaries that define the relationships between performers, spectators and a theatrical environment by creating an empowered performance environment that usurps some of the traditional roles allocated to the spectators and the performers. In effect, we will be attempting to create an environment that itself performs rather than merely supporting performance, and that responds to the presence, movements, touch, and sounds of people within that environment – be they performers or spectators.

Within the theater, this sort of exploration had a continuous history of development in the 20th century, starting with the second act of Alfred Jarry's *Caesar Antichrist* (an act written entirely for performing scenery alone), and including the "Figural Cabinets" of Oskar Schlemmer and his Bauhaus collaborators, and the much-celebrated environmental theatrical productions and theoretical writing of Richard Schechner. It is also apparent in the environmental and site-specific art of a great variety of studio artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Dan Flavin, and Robert Smithson. In addition, there have been a number of artists who have worked in the space between the artist's studio (and gallery space) and the theater including Claus Oldenburg, Anna Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Alan Kaprow, and Bill Viola. It incorporates both the participatory experience of the theater and the pleasure of relating to physical objects and sounds of the studio or gallery.

Our intention is to extend the exploration of environmental art and theater by creating an environment that will be 1) media rich, 2) engaging, 3) reactive, and 4) digital. Determining the shape and nature of the environment we create will depend largely on the interests and skills of the members of the collaborative research group. What follows is a list of some of the characteristics we expect will inform the space that we create.

Media: We are enthusiastic about exploring projection surfaces and shapes of a wide variety that could accommodate images fed to them live from other parts of the world or from collaborators on site or at different locations as well as pre-planned images and videos. Some of the projection surfaces could be mutable – fluid or thin walls of fog on which images could be projected and through which performers or spectators could pass. Others could be unconventional shapes. Spaces could be defined by light or sound as well as material partitions.

Engagement: The environment should be beautiful to behold or otherwise attractive from the outside as well as from within. The staging of the spaces could be inviting in such a way as to provide one or several narratives, depending on the

participant's movement through the space defined. The segments of the space could be thematically (or otherwise) related.

Reactive: The environment could respond to the movements of those near or within it. It could invite them to make sounds, to touch things, to pick up or move objects, to walk from one place to another, etc., and all these actions would automatically evoke reactions from the environment itself. By responding to the sounds and movements of the spectators within the environment, it would encourage playfulness and invite them to become performers rather than pure spectators.

Digital: The mutable elements of the environment could be controlled as theatrical cues. Some of them might result from the execution of complex programs involving a variety of variables. This could result in a wide range of effects produced by different combinations of the limited number of environmental triggers available. Part of the pleasure of the experience for the spectator might come from trying to figure out which combinations of triggers result in which effects, and what patterns can be repeated.

Deliverables

The Performative Technologies environment will attempt to agglomerate individual projects and interests into a consistent and integral whole. During the process of development, we hope to use a studio space dedicated to the project for one quarter (Spring 2011). In the following fall, it will be moved into an exhibition space in the DARC building or within the Theater Arts complex and will be made open to the public during a specified period of time.

As a secondary performance consideration, dance and theater students may wish to compose a work that takes advantage of the environment – using it as a sort of extended visual and musical instrument. The prospect of such a performance may prove attractive to DANM students, but it will not be the principle aim of the Performative Technologies project group.

If the campus exhibition of the Performative Technologies environment proves sufficiently successful, it could subsequently be shown at another venue outside the UCSC campus.