

# “Your number is 96 – please be patient”

Modes of Liveness and Presence Investigated Through the Lens of Interactive Artworks

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## ABSTRACT

The notions of liveness and presence are essentially contested concepts, denoting human potentials/activities as well as system/media properties. Their ambivalence is due to the fact that they are used to emphasize similarities between technological and human interactions as well as to distinguish them from each other. This paper shows how interactive artworks reveal and reflect this contestedness.

It starts from the ambivalent denotations of ‘liveness’ and ‘presence’ to compare their different modes enabled by social and technological systems. If media technologies have led to a discussion of liveness in the performing arts – calling into question a generally accepted concept, they have at the same time enabled a discussion of liveness within the visual arts, bringing into play a concept formerly considered irrelevant.

In interactive art, the performance of the recipient meets the technological performance of the work – in absence of the artist. As will be argued, in addition to the actual human-computer interaction, other forms of liveness are at stake: a ‘symbolic liveness’ situated within the diegetic realm, and a ‘technological liveness’ based on algorithmic processes. The latter again should be distinguished from ‘technological presence’ as pure readiness for interaction.

In addition to setting the theoretical framework, the different modes of liveness and presence will be demonstrated in the form of a live interaction with two exemplary works.

## KEYWORDS

interactive art, liveness, presence, contemporaneity

### The Liveness of Performances

As is often the case, the notion of ‘liveness’ was introduced to the media context to emphasize a formerly self-evident phenomenon in the moment it became questionable, to distinguish it from the newly emerging practices that challenged it. But – within different contexts – it was used to contrast distinct phenomena, namely the recorded and the mediatized.

Originally, liveness denoted anything “that is in the possession of life (living as opposed to dead)” (OED 1989). It was first related to questions of media in the 1930s, when radio broadcasts made it impossible for the listener to distinguish between the broadcast of sound that was performed in the very moment as opposed to pre-recorded sound. Thus the notion of liveness was introduced as a clarification (Auslander 2008, 58).

If here the live was contrasted to the recorded, recent performance theories contrast it to the mediatized: Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that the co-presence of actor and audience is a necessary condition for the liveness of performances. According to Fischer-Lichte, liveness depends on the ‘autopoietic feedback-loop’ that is characterized by a continuous negotiation of the relation of actor and audience in the course of the performance. As she notes the impossibility of an autopoietic feedback loop within mediatized performances, she does not regard the latter as permitting liveness at all (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 114-126).

We are thus confronted with two different notions of liveness. Though both are based on the idea of the lived experience, the first focuses on concepts of time and relates liveness to simultaneity, whereas the second adds the concept of place and calls for co-attendance as a condition of liveness.

Finally, liveness is given yet another meaning with the increasing importance of interactive media-technologies, as now the ontological status of performer and audience themselves is challenged. As Philip Auslander observes: “The most significant challenge to traditional concepts of presence and interaction between performer and audience now come from digital entities able to perform live and respond both

to other performers and the audience input” (Auslander 2008, 69). Both Auslander and Margaret Morse argue that liveness should not be regarded as a property restricted to humans. Whereas Auslander draws on chatterbots as an example, Morse locates liveness in interactive systems in general, understood as a machine’s responsive agency (Auslander 2008, 61f, Morse 1998, 15).

### **The Presence of Artworks**

Due to their objective being and the non-processual nature of works of visual arts, they are conventionally not related to liveness, but to presence, originally defined as “human being there in the moment” (OED 1989). Like liveness, presence was soon also related to the non-human: it was used to denote things that are “ready at hand, immediately accessible or available” (OED 1989). Even works of visual art are therefore considered to feature presence, referring to their material actuality and effect on the visitor. Media philosopher Dieter Mersch goes one step further by defining presence not as physical characteristic, but as ecstasy and constitution, as material affordance (Mersch 2002).

Like liveness, presence is thus more and more related to systemic processes, understood as readiness (for something or somebody) and therefore related to processes of communication. Together with the growing importance of media in communication processes, this leads to a frequent confusion of both terms. However, as will be argued in the following, there is still a fundamental difference between them, which is of great value for the analysis of interactive artworks: whereas liveness is a property (of processes), presence describes a potential (to affect).

### **Liveness and Presence of Interactive Art**

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the increasing interest of visual artists in processes (of production, reception and material change) and the growing critique of the traditional notion of the work of art understood as a material entity, the boundaries between the visual and the performing arts began to fade. Within this more general development, interactive artworks constitute a unique case. Being based on process and activity forms their performative character, but it is formed by a performance of technical system and audience – in the absence of the artist. They retain the dissociation of artist and work, which is a basic precondition of the visual arts: the distinction between processes of production and contemplation, the basis of the work in a form that has its own objective being – and can thus be preserved – can be considered the distinguishing characteristics of the visual arts, as opposed to other art forms. Interactive art not only constitutes a hybrid between the performative and the visual, it also leads to new interrelations of liveness and presence, which will be analyzed in the following, based on three case studies.

### **Lynn Hershman: Room of One’s Own – Metaphorical Liveness and Technological Presence**

Visitors to the Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum in Duisburg will – at irregular intervals –

notice a cheerful whistling, singing and laughing from one side of the room. Looking for the source of these sounds, they will discover a black box of approximately 30 centimeters edge length, exhibited on a base and therefore at eye level. The front of the box holds a viewing device: a metal cylinder that can be turned by means of a handle. The cylinder has a viewing hole, allowing a glance into the box.

Approaching the box and looking through the cylinder, the visitor sees a dollhouse-like room with a bed, a rug, a chair, a table, a telephone and a TV set. The cheerful utterances stop and at the same time a video projection starts at the back wall of the room: a woman, wearing a red bodysuit, sits on a chair similar to the one in the miniature room, and observes the visitor. A female voice complains: “Excuse me, what are you doing here? How did you get here? Would you please look away?”

Lynn Hershman’s ‘Room of One’s Own’ thus has two states of operation, a state of self-sustained attendance (signified by the cheerful utterances), and a state of visitor-induced interaction (starting with the visitor turning the viewing device). Or, to remain within the diegetic realm: a state of contentment and a state of disturbance. Though on the symbolical level, the cheerful utterances don’t express any affective invitation at all, technologically we can identify an explicit presence of the system awaiting input. Once the interaction

process starts, we can further observe a systemic liveness constituted by the feedback processes between (technological) system and (human) visitor: if the visitor does not obey the voice requesting to be let alone, a further exploration of the work reveals the complex layers that come with its states of operation. Turning the cylinder not only opens the view into other parts of the room, it also changes the video scenes. One may see the woman undressing and hear further accusations, overhear her phone conversation, watch movie fragments or even observe oneself recorded via a miniature closed circuit video system.

One could argue that the work creates an interactive situation that attempts to simulate face-to-face communication. But Hershman does not aim at an immersive experience of the visitor, nor does she create an illusionist consistency of the three-dimensional miniature room and the video sequences. The coherence of the miniature room and video images is impeded by a constant change of the size and position of the images, of the color scheme (black and white versus color), of cuts (insertion of close-ups and texts), and also through the changing costumes of the protagonist.

Furthermore, there is a complex heterogeneity of the visitor space and diegetic space at stake. Although the visitor may initially have the impression of being addressed personally by the woman, this impression is contradicted in three respects. First of all, the visitor looks through a viewing device into a miniature room; second, the person they see is 'only' projected and not present in the room; and third, the voice they hear does not come from the protagonist (her lips don't move), but is an off-voice (the only sequence that shows the woman talking is one where she does not address the visitor, but talks on the phone). If they investigate where the voice comes from, they will realize that it does not even come from within the box, but from holes on its exterior. The voice can thus be interpreted not as belonging to the diegetic realm of the filmic fiction, but to the artwork as an active entity, which accuses the visitor of disturbing it and asks them to look away. If on the one hand the work thus calls into question a liveness of interaction between the protagonist (the woman) and the visitor, on the other hand it evokes the idea of a liveness of the artwork as such, challenging our role as a recipient of artworks in general.

This interpretation of liveness is based on symbolism, as it personates the artwork as a human-like character. This adds to the observed systemic liveness constituted by

the technological processes of feedback." The latter can be further described as turn-based liveness, as any process has to be activated by a human recipient. This term is derived from game theorist Jesper Juul, who distinguishes between real-time games and turn-based games: "[the difference] is that in the latter case the game state only changes when the player takes a turn. In a real-time game, not doing anything also has consequences" (Juul 2005, 142).

If Lynn Hershman's work is based on symbolic liveness on the one hand, technological presence and turn-based liveness on the other, the following example focuses on the pretense of presence, while at the same time introducing real-time liveness into the technical system.

### **Holger Friese, Max Kossatz: Antworten.de – Technological Liveness and Symbolic Presence**

"We are serving number 83 – Your number is: 96. Please be patient." The visitor to the early net.art piece 'Antworten.de' encounters a serving system well known from the meat counters of supermarkets or the registration room at the district branch office of city hall. The number is updated continuously – but once a person's assigned number is due, it is skipped and the visitor is assigned a new one.

The visitor, expecting an interactive work of net.art is therefore bound to passivity, the only thing they can do is wait. It is the expectation of feedback that dominates the interaction – if it should even be called that. At the same time, the technological system is very active – it analyses the clock of the computer and reloads the page with a new number every three minutes. The algorithm reloading the numbers and organizing the assignment of a new number to each visitor is quite elaborate.

Accordingly, in this case, the technological system acts independently. Though it has initially noticed the user (assigning him or her a number), it subsequently only feigns to prepare for further exchange. This leads to the question of whether the mere expectation of feedback, the feeling of being registered and the illusion

to be served suffice to create a situation of co-presence and a sense of live-interaction on the side of the visitor.

Whereas Hershman's piece worked with a machinic presence as readiness for user input, Antworten.de only feigns this readiness. On the other hand, it relies on a self-sustained technological liveness, a feedback between the system time, the work's algorithm and files storing the relevant numbers, which can go on for ages without any user input. Therefore, the work presents a machinic real-time liveness, while reducing presence to a symbolic level.

### **Jonah Brucker-Cohen: BumpList – System Liveness and System Presence**

My last example excludes symbolism completely, while relying on machinic and collaborative liveness and presence at the same time: 'BumpList' by Jonah Brucker-Cohen is a mailing list that only allows for six subscribers. As soon as a new subscriber enters the list, the oldest is bumped out, thus the subscribers start a competition for the longest presence in the list. Usually mailing lists are unrestricted, or they serve as a communication medium for a special group that is defined by selection criteria or through editors. 'BumpList', however, is dependent on purely quantitative criteria. The way the participants deal with this fact makes the piece. It challenges a reflection of the existing as opposed to the possible mechanisms of electronic communication. Ironically, a reflective discussion is not possible on the list itself, as people are constantly bumped off. Therefore subscribers started a second, conventional list on the commercial Yahoo platform to discuss 'BumpList' – and of course the artist also joined.

In contrast to 'Room of One's Own' and much more explicitly than 'Antworten.de', 'BumpList' stores recipients' input and is totally dependent on the users' activity. It combines the turn-based mode (updating each time a subscriber is active) with the real-time mode (counting the total time of presence of a subscriber in the system). Even when no user is actively participating, their status changes according to the sheer duration of the existence of the work.

### **Liveness and Contemporaneity**

As stated above, the asynchronicity of production and reception is a key feature of the visual arts, related to the dissociation of an artwork from its author, which means that it can become a historical artefact. As shown, interactive artworks also retain this characteristic, though they feature modes of liveness that are not commonly assigned to traditional works of visual arts. The question now is to what extent the modes of liveness analysed above are bound to the contemporaneity of a work.

While liveness can be understood as a property – and presence as potential – of the here and/or now, contemporaneity relates an entity to its societal context and thereby covers a broader timespan: 'the contemporary' denotes a period within our cultural flow of time. Artworks are characterized as contemporary from the moment of their creation on, as long as the societal and aesthetic contexts they refer to are considered current. As noted, notwithstanding this phase of contemporaneity, works of visual art have generally already aged in the very moment of their first presentation. But this growing interval between production and presentation is taken for granted until the work encounters another threshold: the threshold between the contemporary and the historical – even if it is generally passed unnoticed, as it comes as a slow transition. The artwork slowly loses its connection to our everyday life. The question is: can an artwork bear liveness even if it is considered historical, or is liveness bound to the contemporary?

All three works considered have already reached a certain age: Hershman's installation was created in 1993, 'Antworten.de' in 1997 and 'BumpList' in 2003. In a way we are dealing with historical artefacts, with preserved interaction offers. We thus have to ask whether the societal and aesthetic contexts they relate to are still considered current.

The questions of privacy and voyeurism addressed in Hershman's piece do still have a great societal relevance, so does the reflection of expectations on interactive media as encouraged by 'Antworten.de'. Also the practice of online communication within the Web 2.0 community addressed by Brucker-Cohen is still part of our everyday-life.

But what about the aesthetics, the formal arrangement and the experienced processes? Technically, all three works have undergone a process of alteration or maintenance over the years: Hershman's piece was technically updated in 2005. Whereas the original piece had a back projection for the videos and a touch sensitive mat for sensing the audience, now the videos are shown on the display of an integrated Laptop and the audience's presence is sensed via infrared sensors. According to the artist though, the audience experience remained unchanged. For her, the importance lies in the experienced interaction processes, which required the technical update of the system's liveness, so to speak. Although the dress and hairstyle of the protagonist, for example, might thus seem outdated to us and reveal the historicity of the piece, the processes of interaction establishing the modes of liveness and presence discussed are not affected.

Antworten.de is written in basic HTML code, still widely used today. Therefore the work still runs online in its original version. When I asked Holger Friese for the permission to publish a screenshot, however, he voluntarily agreed, but send me a screenshot of the work shown on an early 1997 Netscape browser, as this was how it originally looked. Though the code has not changed, the browser displaying and framing it has. Thus technologically the work has not aged, it has even undergone rejuvenation due to the updating of the media technologies it relies on. While a 1997 screenshot conveys an idea of the avant-garde-ness of the work as an 'early net.art piece', a recent screenshot does not. Though the work is still online, its historicity is assigned an intrinsic value by the artist, even if it can only be conveyed through recorded screenshots and not through the live work. The system liveness of the work itself is thus unbroken, but due to its embeddedness in commercial systems, it depends on their liveness and therefore has to cope with a concurrence of historicity and contemporaneity.

Jonah Brucker-Cohen's 'BumpList' was online from 2003 to 2004. It was hosted on the server of Media Lab Europe (Dublin), where the artist had a research position. When the institution closed in 2004, the site went offline. It was reinstalled in October 2008 on the occasion of an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Though the underlying structure changed (it now runs on a shared server), according to the artist the system is exactly the same. Nevertheless he did not build on the records of 2003/2004, but restarted the list anew. He observes a changed attitude on the part of the subscribers, posting less, which he explains with a better understanding of the mechanism that does not honor the number of postings but the mere time of remaining on the list. Therefore we are confronted with a new and altered version of the project, concerning the stored user inputs, though technically and conceptually it is still the same.

The examples show that the aging of the works may or may not change their aesthetics, but it does not affect their liveness. Even if they are no longer considered contemporary or if they have undergone several processes of restoration or updating, their various modes of liveness and presence remain unchallenged – together with their visual and auditory realization, they actually establish the core of the works as artistic expressions. Therefore, restorations and updates are accepted as inevitable (Antworten.de), necessary (Room of one's own), or reasonable (BumpList) adaptations to preserve their status as work of interactive art.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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