

Performing Space – Performing Body

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Performing Space – Performing Body

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Abstract

Performing Space is investigating the emotional relation between body, mind and space, by adjusting the space in order to match the number and behaviour of the inhabitants. The space becomes an extension of emotion. The aim is to create comfort in a psychological space – dynamic and flexible – a space that could change into several spaces according to numbers and activities. This room would be a multifunctional context related room based on the everyday *performing body*.

Keywords

Performative space, relations, flow, seduction, visual culture, aesthetic, blurring

The design statement of Diffus

Diffus is investigating the field between culture, aesthetic and technology. Not aiming to embrace all three subjects but rather to operate in between these elements. Diffus is an organisation driven by search, investigation and curiosity resulting in different arrangements, projects, discussions and articles. Diffus focuses equally on form, content and the interplay between the two, aiming at a necessity for each element and thereby preventing excess of information.

Diffus equates relations. The relations between culture, aesthetic and technology at first hand, but also the relations between theoretical analytical approach towards practical elements and practical experimental approach towards theoretical problematic themes. The goal is to merge theory with practice to a limit where it becomes impossible to separate. Where the structure of merging itself becomes infiltrated within this rhizomatic network.

Diffus seeks the evolutionary, whose drive is relations that is actualising and positioning fix points. The relation between the virtual substance of technology – mapable and computable in all aspects and the physical presence in a world of surprise and unpredictability. The evolutionary becomes carrier of meaning.

Diffus is thereby a mental process where the real, the virtual, passed events and present unfoldings is actualised through intuition, seduction and flow.

The design practise Diffus

The relational and evolutional as carrier of meaning in a world of information is fundamental for every activity driven by Diffus. Information is our building material, and getting the most out of information we are working with the blurring of theory and practice. We are inviting different people to work with us when ever a project is started and thereby squeeze an expert knowledge into our synergetic design process. We are trying to work against presumptions of separation between the creative process and the analyses of the same process. We want to point out that theorising actually infiltrates creativity. Theory can be a creative process in itself just as creation can harbour theoretical knowledge. Theory and practise is complementary during any given event and the blurring is a continuous precondition.

An other very important aspect of Diffus is the connection to educational institutions. This bond is both in a theoretical humanistic field (visual Cultural Studies at University of Copenhagen), a theoretical computer scientific field (Medialogy at the University of Aalborg) and a practical field (The Danish School of Design in Copenhagen). Every one of us is on a daily professional basis working with information, design and technology and having the room for experimenting with ways of teaching brings innovation and unpredictability into our working process. We are very apparent using the interaction with the students in our design processes as well as the students are allowed to build upon our ideas. This element works both when teaching in depth in our own fields and teaching interdisciplinary in collaborative projects. The educational environment fosters experiments that are not restricted by profitable boundaries and function as a breeding ground for new ideas, and this quality is transferred to Diffus by its members. A playful approach towards teaching as well as project building gives us the possibility to welcome every idea, no matter how distant from the starting point, as part of creation.

Communication is a crucial component of our activities. We aim at a continuously interaction with students and companions. We listen to them, propose new scenarios to them, and explain to them the relevant features of the new interaction patterns made possible by innovative systems. The support of these conversations and interactions by means of visualization systems and thought experiments, aims to present to them, something that does not yet exist. All these communication activities are not marketing actions accompanying the design. Quite the contrary they are an intrinsic part of the design

process itself. The degree of success achieved by a design, depends not only on its technical or aesthetic qualities but also by the elements of play.

Project description of the installation *Performing Space*:

Performing Space is a result of one of our interdisciplinary courses available for students in the fields of both theory and design. It was a workshop that stretched over three weeks. The students were given a room with static outer walls measuring 3 x 5 m and a height of 2,5 m. The task was to bring interaction and emotion into the room, using software like FlashMX (for the graphical content), Vlight and MIDI protocol, and hardware as sensors, projectors and speakers. Those are a limited set of tools, but nonetheless complex and powerful. Participants were bringing their different backgrounds and working methods as building element of spaces of meanings. Four different teachers from four different areas, all listening to one another, gave the students a common ground of references.

One of the most important elements we wanted the students to take into consideration was to maintain an interest of the user either by seduction or playfulness – if these can be separated. Here the consideration of a balance between fascination and fixation of the user were discussed. In the other end of activity level is finding a balance between contemplation and boredom relevant. We asked the students to be conscious about which state of mind they wanted to bring their users, in order to apply the right ‘economy’ of experience.

An other aspect was the performative act or the relation between the space and the body, remembering that a space is never innocent. We urged the students to work with latent possibilities of emotional interactions already positioned in space. We taught the students that the notion of the cyborg is not only about man mixed with a machine physically speaking, it is also a mental state where the body connects to the artificial, and in this case the artificial is virtual like the mental process.

Performing space is one of the results of the workshop. The project contains and problematize all the elements we were aiming to achieve and discuss in that particular collaboration. The playfulness is achieved through the idea of a performing body as the founding ground for activity. This way the body and the space is linked together in a real time play of elements. The performable space enters a symbiotic state with the performing body and movements and state of mind becomes actors of the event. Entering a

performative space will always be an event because movement becomes the architecture of appearance and disappearance.

The American dancer and choreographer William Forsythe has described dance as 'The Architecture of Disappearance'. The movement carrying the dance as the ever ongoing loss of form and the constant interplay between falling and hindering the fall. Forsythe is inspired by the deconstructivist architect Daniel Libeskind, who also focuses on the moment of disequilibrium, in a way that addresses Forsythe's method as well, when Libeskind describes the space of non equilibrium – from which freedom eternally departs and towards which it moves without homecoming – constitutes a place in which architecture comes upon itself as beginning at the end (Baudoin & Gilpin 2004). Libeskind turns to the concept of the disappearance of presence when he describes the spaces of memory and creation.

What reveals itself in different points in different ways is really the gap between the moments of time. The parts which really make it continue are the parts which cannot be shown because they are missing. (Devised for the Third International Biennale of Architecture in 1985: Baudoin & Gilpin 2004)

In Forsythe's choreography, the double edged tension of disequilibrium is a state which emerges from the infinite operations that dismantle historically established bodily configurations. It is a concentrated, almost meditative act of finding those points where the balance is lost and the fall begins. This state reveals what is always in the process of disappearing; the dancing thereby highlights the continuous vanishing moments of movement.

Movement is, so to speak, living architecture – living in the sense of changing emplacements as well as changing cohesion. The architecture is created by human movements and is made up of pathways tracing shapes in space [which] we may call "trace-forms." (Baudoin & Gilpin 2004)

The architect group dECOi took up the ideas of Forsythe and has been trying to give form to the disappeared movement (Goulthorpe 2001). DECOi works with the embodiments of a transitional phase from one state to another. The trace of an absent presence becomes the generating element of the architectural process where a surface also becomes a depth. If dance is an "architecture of disappearance" architecture becomes embodiment of presence. But in the case of dECOi the trace becomes a scar of nostalgia because it represents things

passed by. Among other Liebeskind, Forsythe and dECOi were presented to the students to discuss the real time aspect of the design they were building. The question of real time action raised discussions about the possibility to represent anything at all – real time action will always be a presentation and thereby a part of the nostalgic field of disappearance.

The space created in *Performing Space* was a working mock-up in a 1:1 scale of a studio. Moving abstract images and symbols were projected on different surfaces: On walls and on the ceiling above the bed. The used symbols were quite simple but moving in random complex systems. The visual output was affected and controlled by movements in the room. Movements are registered by one sensor and two web cams, placed strategically in order to cover the entire space, though with overlappings. The studio was divided into different zones: Two passive and one active. One of the wall projections registered movement with a delay of 2 minutes. The second passive zone likewise has an element of delay, both to illustrate moods that are soft and poetic.

Activity is immediately projected in the active zone showing forms that appear aggressive and hard-edged, with an additional visualisation of movement in space illustrated by the way that the projected forms are layered and eventually dissolved. By means of interactive engagement, the space appears to dissolve.

To bring the discussion of *Performing Space* further, you have to imagine a meeting room. A space that seems too big, empty and uncomfortable when only occupied by few individuals. This room might feel smaller and more relaxing with more people in it. *Performing Space* is trying to mirror that situation, and then bring forth some sort of solution to the ‘problem’, by investigating the emotional relation between body, mind and space, and by adjusting the space in order to match the number and behaviour of the inhabitants. The space becomes an extension of emotion.

The aim is to create comfort with a psychological space – dynamic and flexible – a space that could change into several spaces according to numbers and activities. This room would be a multifunctional context related room based on the everyday *performing body*.

Results, conclusion and future perspectives

Performing Space is focusing on the interplay between the performing body and the environment – between ambient potential media and active media. The approach is playful and uses flow experience to express and explore the symbiotic or seamless relation between consciousness and behaviour.

At the same time this project is made with the awareness of potential control. When you are performing space you are unprotected in a one to one relationship with the media and not able to withdraw to a safer position of the voyeur. The critical aspects of the project are pointing out the line between playful immersion and control. But in order to know what side of the line Performing Space offers its users, the specific space has to be explored further. We do not yet know to what extent the idea of creating a space that is able to adjust its users needs, moods and desires is in fact desired. And if so, we do not fully know if this project fulfils these goals.

Technically speaking other sensors, graphic software, colours, sounds etc., has to be explored. Designing in the context of interactivity seems to open doors to a new world of possibilities that is beyond the possibilities of a three week workshop. More has to be investigated towards content, interplay and usability. So far the major concentration has been focused on the notion of aesthetic: Working, as an architect and an art historian, with students of Art History, Visual Culture and Design, aesthetic seems to be of great importance. Sociality and usability are elements of just as great importance and will be the areas we have to explore further.

The appeal of *Performing Space* as a product

We expect our interactive design project to appeal to a contemporary, global and increasingly mobile society. We will focus here on a type of nomadic lifestyle, which is voluntary, as it is the case for people travelling for professional purpose or people who have chosen such kind of lifestyle at some moment in their life. The demand from the nomad implies a certain socio-economic profile that permits some degree of choice and freedom. This form of mobility require normally some dependency upon specific products and technologies like mobile phone, laptop and data access. But urban nomadism requires also an emotional and psychological environment in correlation with the underlying lifestyle and adapted to specific situations and places.

A typical space of choice could be the hotel-space: Hotels are emblematic places for the urban nomads: They often suggest a state of mind which is successfully captured in a film like "Lost in Translation" by Sofia Coppola and which tells a story about modern rootlessness. It tells a story about being present without being there. A somehow trans-territorial state where it is not possible to relate or get access to the social space because of linguistic and cultural barriers. The story is not as much about the translation of language as

the translation of social relations. The hotel offers a safe harbour for the nomad, because it is outside territory, consisting its own manageable space.

Bob and Charlotte's (the main characters of 'Lost in Translation') 'wanderlust' or 'nomadic' needs are driven by a need to find some meaning in life beyond daily routine. The hotel place is here the indispensable setting for their modern quest characterised by the sense of being apart, of being different than everyone else, of feeling exposed and at the same time alone. As suggested in this film, the new urban nomad is expecting, from his hotel, to define a whole travel experience.

Hotel emporiums, as the one owned by Ian Schrager, are working closely with Star-architects like Philippe Starck (the Hudson hotel in NY) and Frank Gehry (Astoria hotel, abandoned after September 11th tragedy) to satisfy the wishes of hipness expressed by their sophisticated clients. An other recent and interesting example for this new trend is "The Hotel" in Lucerne, Switzerland designed by Jean Nouvel. "The hotel celebrates simplicity and spirituality as much as it does elegance and refinement. The central idea is to create something quite unique – unlike anything before – that provides guests with a magical, exciting and unforgettable feeling. The hotel is not just a place to sleep but a reinvention of the hotel experience for the new millennium era..." (El Croquis 112 p138). The lounge seems to float magically above the restaurant and the ground floor. But most interesting in Nouvel's hotel is the conscious effort to create private rooms, which offer stunning experiences: Ceilings designs are consisting in wall-to-wall prints of known film scenes. To overnight in that room, projects the client into an imaginary world, an internalised travel experience echoing the physical travel, which is effectuated. In this regard, Nouvel's project is emblematic for a new trend: Having until now concentrated much energy to the theatrical experience of the lobby and public rooms, trendy hotel manager and their designers are getting aware that the private and intimate rooms have to be defined very carefully. After all, this is where the client will spend most of his time, and this is the perfect place to offer him emotional experiences. Our project, if applied to the context of a hotel room, would take this emotional experience a step further as what Nouvel proposes: The kinetic energy, which is typically experienced in the lobby rooms, should find its counterpoints in the private places through an interactive environment defined as an ambient media. Such a playful environment, not limited to still pictures, as the case of Nouvel's hotel in Lucerne, would become a mean of getting the hyped businessman distressed and the

aesthetes uplifted. Also such environments could easily adapt themselves from party mood to rest, private to theatrical and sexy to professional.

Other nomadic places where we expect such a system to have potential are bars and cafés: In such places, those interactive environments would be a part of creating a sense of momentary community because it would be able to involve many people at the same time by sensing and mapping the global activity level inside the place. We are thus proposing an interplay between the installation and the public. The evanescent and unstable outputs generated by such a system will have to mirror the everyday reality of urban-nomadic people whose life is characterised by a high degree of impermanence and fluidity in their relationships, connection to places and to objects.

Public rooms connected to transportation are also possible targets: Waiting rooms in airport, train stations, escalators connecting a metro platform. Those are all iconic places for individuals in transit through life. "I am where I am" is the mantra for any urban nomad allowing him to zap his body and his mind through a multitude of (sub)cultures and environments.

It is not to find itself, but to place itself - where the best and most attractive stories are. Those stories have to provide some kind of "higher" meaning, aesthetics and emotions. *Performing Space* is an invitation to the perfect travel: A travel where body and mind are both dematerialized and have melted into a fluid 'dataspace' without any physical constraints. It mentally and emotively prepares users to the aesthetic of travel.

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