WHAT IS INTERACTIVE ART?
An uncomplicated (possibly incautious) definition

Giuseppe Torre - 2018
Contents

-?- An Answer  3
-::- A Point  5
-!- The Evidence  15
Bibliography  23
Interaction is the constitutive element of an interactive artwork. *Interaction* means *action between* two subjects: the artist and the audience. Computers and its software, no matter the complexity of the underlying algorithm or the size of their computational resources, are to be intended only as a vehicle through which this exchange takes place (and yet, as the product of a massive scale human-collective effort, not to be intended just as a tool).

Interactive art is a post-structuralist movement which uses digital grammar in lieu of text.
In her press release for Cybernetic Serendipity, Jasia Reichardt, speaking of cybernetic, writes this sentence: ”A cybernetic device responds to stimulus from outside and in turn affects external environment, like a thermostat which responds to the coldness of a room by switching on the heating and thereby altering the temperature”. Who is thinking in this way? Is it the audience concerned to understand itself in the interaction? Is it the man Ihnatowicz endowed by his personal experience with a philosophy of interaction? Is it the artist Ihnatowicz, professing certain ”technical” ideas of interactivity? Is it universal wisdom? or romantic psychology? It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that interaction is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that art is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: art is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all iden-
tity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that creates it.

- Probably this has always been the case: once an action is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer in order to act directly upon reality - that is, finally external to any function but the very exercise of the symbol - this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the artist enters his own death, coding begins. Nevertheless, the feeling about this phenomenon has been variable; in early computer societies, coding is never undertaken by a person, but by an engineer or technical operator, whose "performance" may be admired (that is, his mastery of the coding syntax), but not his genius. The artist is a modern figure, produced no doubt by our society insofar as, at the end of the middle ages, with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, or, to put it more nobly, of the "human person". Hence it is logical that with regard to art it should be positivism, resume and the result of capitalist ideology, which has accorded the greatest importance to the artist’s "person". The artist still rules in manuals of art history, in biographies of artists, in magazine interviews, and even in the awareness of art critics, anxious to unite, by their private journals, their person and their work; the image of
art to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions; criticism still consists, most of the time, in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of the man Baudelaire, Van Gogh's work his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice: the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author which delivered his "confidence".

Though the Author's empire is still very powerful (recent criticism has often merely consolidate it), it is evident that for a long time now certain artists have attempted to topple it. Nicholas Schöffer was doubtless the first to see and foresee in its full extent the necessity of substituting algorithm itself for the man who hitherto was supposed to own it; For Schöffer, as for us, it is the algorithm which speaks, not the artist: to code is to reach, through a preexisting impersonality - never to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realistic artist - that point where language alone act, "perform", and not "oneself". Schöffer entire poetics consists in suppressing the artist for the sake of the coding (which is, as we shall see, to restore the status of the audience.). Roy Ascott, encumbered with a psychology of the Telem-
atic greatly appreciated Schöffer’s ideas, but, turning in a preference for classicism to the lesson of rhetoric, he unceasingly questioned and mocked the Author, emphasized the systematic and almost "chance nature of his activity, and throughout his work championed process over product, just as system supersedes structure., in the face of which any recourse to the artist’s inferiority seemed to him pure superstition. It is clear that Wiener himself, despite the apparent psychological character of what is called cybernetic, undertook the responsibility of inexorably blurring, by an extreme subtilization, the relation of the coder and his code: by making the artist not the person who has seen or felt, nor even the person who codes, but the person who will code, Wiener has give modern coding its epic: by a radical reversal, instead of separating individual and machines, as we say so often, he makes individuals into machines for which his own book was in a sense the model. Net.art lastly - to remain on the level of this prehistory of modernity - net.art doubtless could not accord code a sovereign place, since code is a system and since what the movement sought was, romantically, a direct subversion of all codes - an illusory subversion, moreover, for a code cannot be destroyed, it can only be "played with"; but by abruptly violating expected meanings (this was the famous surrealist "jolt"), by entrusting to the hand the responsibility of coding as fast as possible what the head itself ignores (this was the net.art generator), by accepting the principle and the ex-
perience of a collective coding, net.art helped secularize the image of the Author. Finally, outside of art history itself (actually, these distinctions are being superseded), linguistic has just furnished the destruction of the Author with a precious analytic instrument by showing that utterance in its entirety is a void process, which functions perfectly without requiring to be filled by the person of the interlocutors: linguistically, the interactive artist is never anything more than the man who codes, just as I is no more than the man who says I: coding language knows a ”subject”, not a ”person” and this subject, void outside of the very output which defines it, suffice to make the code ”work”, that is, to exhaust it.

The absence of the Author (with Krueger, we might speak here of a real ”alienation:” the Author diminishing like a tiny figure at the far end of the responsive environment) is not only a historical fact or an act of coding: it utterly transforms the modern program (or - what is the same thing - the program is henceforth written and read so that in it, on every level, the Author absents himself). Time, first of all, is no longer the same. The Author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the past of his own software: the software and the artist take their places of their own accord on the same line, cast as a before and an after: the Author is supposed
to feed the software - that is, he pre-exist-it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child. Quite the contrary, the modern coder (programmer) is born simultaneously with his program; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his coding, he is in no way the subject of which his software is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the output, and every program is written here and now. This is because (or: it follows that) to code can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observing, of representing, of encapsulating (as the classic programming textbooks put it), but rather what the linguists, following the vocabulary of the Oxford school, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given to the first person and to the present), in which output has no other content than the act by which is outputted: something like / Command of kings or the I Sing of the early bards; the modern coder, having buried the Author, can therefore no longer believe, according to the "pathos" of his predecessor, that his typing is too slow for this thought or his passion, and that in consequence, making a law out of necessity, he must accentuate this gap and endlessly "elaborate" his form; for him, on the contrary, his hand, detached from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of rationalisation (and not of expression), traces a filed without origin - or which, at least, has no other origin than the programming language itself, this is, the very
thing which ceaselessly question any origin.

We know that a program does not consist of lines of

code, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimen-
sions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of
codes, no one of which is original: the program is a tissue
of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of cul-
ture. Like Esolangers (Esolang Community), those etern-
al geniuses, both sublime and comical and whose pro-
found absurdity precisely designates the thruth of cod-
ing, the coder can only imitate a gesture forever anterior,
ever original; his only power is to combine the different
kinds of codes, to oppose some by others, so as never to
sustain himself by just one of them; if he wants to express
himself, at least he should know that the internal "thing"
he claims to "translate is itself only a readymade dic-
tionary whose words can be explained (defined) only by
other words, and so on ad infinitum: an experience which
occurred in an exemplary fashion to the young Billy Klun-
ver, so gifted in engineering that in order to translate
into reality certain absolutely modern ideas and images,
Julie Martin tells us, "he created for it a standing cata-
logue much more complex and extensive than the one
which results from the vulgar patience of purely scien-
tific themes" (The Reminiscences of Julie Martin). Suc-
ceeding the Author, the coder no longer contains within himself passions, humors, sentiments, impressions, but that enormous dictionary, from which he derives a coding which can know no end or halt: life can only imitate the software, and the software itself is only a tissue of signs, a lost, infinitely remote imitation.

Once the Author is gone, the claim to "decipher" a program become quite useless. To give an Author to a program is to impose upon that program a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the coding. This conception perfectly suits criticisms, which can then take as its major task the discovery of the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is discovered, the program is "explained": the critic has conquered; hence it is scarcely surprising not only that, historically, the reign of the Author should also have been the one of the Critic, but that criticism (even "new criticism") should be overthrown along with the Author. In a multiple coding, indeed, everything is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered; structure can be followed, "threaded" (like a stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the space of the coding is to be traversed, not penetrated: coding ceaselessly posit meaning but always in order to evapo-
rate it: it proceeds to a systematic exemption of meaning. Thus interactive art (it would be better, henceforth, to say coding), by refusing to assign to the program (and to the world as program) a "secret": that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law.

Let us return to Jasia Reichardt’s sentence: no one (that is, no "person") design such an interaction: its source, its rule in not to be located; and yet it is perfectly experienced; this is because the true locus of an interactive work is performing. Another specific example can make this understood: recent investigations (n. Stern) have shed light upon the constitutively ambiguous nature of an interactive work, the critique of which is woven with actions that have many meanings, each critic understanding them unilaterally (this perpetual interpretative work is precisely what is meant by critical readings); yet there is someone who experiences each event in its duplicity, and understand further, one might say, the very deafness of the critic talking about him: this someone is precisely the participant. In this way is revealed the whole being of coding: a program consists of multiple pieces of code, issuing from several cultures and entering
into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the artist, as we have hitherto said it was, but the audience: the audience is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a piece of code consists of; the unity of the program is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the participant is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who hold gathered into a single field all the paths of which the program is constituted. This is why it is absurd to hear interactive art condemned in the name of a humanism in which hypo-critically appoints itself the champion of the audience’s right. The audience has never been the concern of classical criticism; for it, there is no other man in art but the one who makes it. We are now beginning to be the dupes no longer of such antiphrases, by which our society proudly champions precisely what it dismisses, ignores, smothers or destroy; we know that to restore to coding its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the audience must be ransomed by the death of Author.
-!- The Evidence

The text in the previous chapter is a personal re-take of the famous (or infamous to some) text by Roland Barthes titled "The Death of the Author" from 1967.

Hereafter my notes:
The Death of the Author in Interactive Art

- a retake on

Roland Barthes

by

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The Death of the Author in Interactive Art

In her press release for Cybernetic Serendipity, Jasia Reichardt, speaking of cybernetics in her story-telling style, says: "A cybernetic device responds to stimuli from outside and in turn affects external environment, like a thermostat which responds to the coldness of a room by switching on the heating and thereby altering the temperature."

Who is speaking in this way? Is it the story-teller, concerned to ignore the authorial control over events? Is it the man in a madhouse, endowed by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it the author, professing certain "literary" ideas of femininity? Is it universal wisdom? or romantic psychology? It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that a style such as this is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin. Literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that speaks.

Probably this has always been the case: once an action is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer in order to act directly upon reality — that is, finally external to any function but the very exercise of the symbol — this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins. Nevertheless, the feeling about this phenomenon has been variable: in primitive societies, it has never undertaken by a person, but by a medium-thought or speaker, whose "performance" may be admired (that is, his mastery of the voice) but not his "genius" The author as a modern figure, produced no doubt by our society insofar as, at the end of the middle ages, with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, or, to put it more nobly, of the "human person" Hence it is logical that with regard to literature it should be positivism, resume and the result of capitalist ideology, which has accorded the greatest importance to the author's "person" The author still rules in manuals of literary history, in biographies of writers, in magazine interviews, and even in the awareness of literary historians, anxious to unite, by their private journals, their person and their work; the image of the writer to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions; criticism still consists, most of the time, in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of the man Baudelaire, Van Gogh's work his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice: the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author, which delivered his "confidence."
Though the Author’s empire is still very powerful (recent criticism has often merely consolidated it), it is evident that for a long time now certain variants have attempted to topple it. In France, Montaigne was doubtless the first to see and foresee its full extent; the necessity of substituting language itself for the man who hitherto was supposed to own it. For Montaigne, as for us, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is to reach, through a pre-existing impersonality — never to be confused with the constraining objectivity of the realistic novel — that point where language alone acts, "performs," and not "oneself." Montaigne’s entire poetics consists in suppressing the author for the sake of the writing (which is, as we shall see, to restore the status of the author). Vorticism, encumbered with a psychology of the soul, greatly narrowed Malraux’sencyclopedia, but, turning in a preference for classicism to the lessons of rhetoric, he unceasingly questioned and mocked the Author, emphasized the linguistic and almost "chance" nature of his activity, and throughout his works championed the essentially voluntary condition of literature, in the face of which any recourse to the writer’s inferiority seemed to him sheer superstition. It is clear that from himself, despite the apparent psychological character of what is called his "variety," undertook the responsibility of inexorably blurring, by an extreme sublimization, the relation of the"author" and his "discourse": by making the narrator not the person who has seen or felt, nor even the person who writes, but the person who writes the young man of the novel: but in fact, how is he? and who is he? wants to write but cannot, and the novel ends when at last the writing becomes possible. Present has given modernity its epic: by a radical reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as we say so often, he makes his novel into a life for which his own book was in a sense the model, so that it is quite obvious to us that it is not Charles who imitates Montaigne, but that Montaigne in his anecdotal, historical reality is merely a secondary fragment, derived from Charles. Surrealism, lastly — to remain on the level of this prehistory of modernity — surrealism doubtless could not accord language a sovereign place, since language is a system and since what the movement sought was, romantically, a direct subversion of all codes — an illusory subversion, moreover, for a code cannot be destroyed, it can only be "played with"; but by abruptly violating expected meanings (this was the famous surrealist "joke"), by entrusting to the hand the responsibility of writing as fast as possible what the head itself ignores (this was the collective writing), by accepting the principle and the experience of a collective writing, surrealism helped secularize the image of the Author. Finally, outside of itself (itself, actually, these distinctions are being superseded), linguistics has just furnished the destruction of the Author with a precious analytic instrument by showing that utterance in its entirety is a void process, which functions perfectly without requiring to be filled by the person of the interlocutors: linguistically, the author is never anything more than the man who says just as I is no more than the man who says I: language knows a "subject," not a "person," and this subject, void outside of the very utterance which defines it, suffices to make language "work," that is, to exhaust it.
The Death of the Author in Interactive Art

The absence of the Author (with a capital A) might be seen as the opening of a real "alienation:" the Author diminishing like a tiny figure at the far end of the spectrum of human activity, is not only a historical fact or an act of a time; it utterly transforms the modern text (or — what is the same thing — the text shape): henceforth written and read so that in it, on every level, the Author indeed disappears. Time, first of all, is no longer the same. The Author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the past of his own book; the book and the author take their places on their own accord on the same line, cast as a before and after an alter: the Author is supposed to feed the text — that is, he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child. Quite the contrary, the modern author comes into being simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing; he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the present, and everything is eternally written here and now. This is because (or: it follows that) there can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observing, of representing, of "writing" (as we put it), but rather what the linguists, following the vocabulary of the Oxford school, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given to the first person and to the present), in which the author has no other content than the act by which it is something like the / Command of kings or the I Sing of the early bards; the modern writer, having buried the Author, can therefore no longer believe, according to the "pathos" of his predecessors, that his hand is too slow for his thought or his passion, and that in consequence, making a law out of necessity, he must accentuate this gap and endlessly "elaborate" his form; for him, on the contrary, his hand, detached from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of expression (and not of expression), traces a field without origin — or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself; that is, the very thing which ceaselessly questions any origin.

We know that a text does not consist of a single "logical" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture. Like Descartes' "cogito," these eternal duplets work on this sublime and comical and whose profound absurdity precisely designates the truth of writing; the writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original; his only power is to combine the different kinds of writing to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain himself by just one of them; if he wants to express himself, at least he should know that the
The Death of the Author in Interactive Art

internal “thing” he claims to “translate” is itself only a readymade dictionary whose words can be explained (defined) only by other words, and so on. A sentiment: an experience which occurred in an exemplary fashion to the young De Quincey, so gifted in his gift that in order to translate into a language certain absolutely modern ideas and images, he tells us, “he created for it a standing dictionary much more complex and extensive than the one which results from the vulgar patience of purely literary metaphors” (De Quincey). Succeeding the Author, the writer no longer contains within himself passions, humor, sentiments, impressions, but that enormous dictionary, from which he derives a style which can know no end or halt: life can only imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, a lost, infinitely remote imitation.

Once the Author is gone, the claim to “decipher” a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing. This conception perfectly suits criticism, which can then take as its major task the discovery of the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is discovered, the text is “explained”: the critic has conquered; hence it is scarcely surprising not only that, historically, the reign of the Author should also have been that of the Critic, but that criticism (even “new criticism”) should be overrun along with the Author. In a multiple-author text, indeed, everything is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered; structure can be followed, “threaded” (like a stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the space of the text is to be traversed, not penetrated; ceaselessly, it posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it: it proceeds to a systematic exemption of meaning. Thus, in a text (it would be better, henceforth, to say writing), by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as a whole) a “secret”: that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law.

Let us return to Balzac’s sentence: no one (that is, no “person”) exists: its source, its place is not to be located; and yet it is perfectly evident, this is because the true locus of writing is reading. Another very specific example can be understood: recent investigations (J. E. Young) have shed light upon the constitutively ambiguous nature of C. S. Peirce, the text of which is woven with words that have double meanings, each related to understanding them unilaterally (this perpetual misunderstanding is
precisely what is meant by “the whole”); yet there is someone who understands each
word— in its multiplicity, and understands further, one might say, the very deafness of
the character, speaking in front of him: this someone is precisely the reader (or here
the spectator). In this way is revealed the whole being of writing: a text consists of
multiple voices, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each
other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is
collected, united, and this place is not the Author, as we have hitherto said it was, but
the Reader: the Reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost,
all the citations a text consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its
destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the Reader is a man without
history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds
gathered into a single field all the paths of which the Writer is constituted. This is why it
is absurd to hear the new writing condemned in the name of a humanism which hypo-
critically appoints itself the champion of the Writer’s rights. The Writer has never been
the concern of classical criticism; for it, there is no other man in literature but the one
who writes. We are now beginning to be the dupes no longer of such antiphrases, by
which our society proudly champions precisely what it dismisses, ignores, smothers
or destroys; we know that to restore to writing its future, we must reverse its myth: the
birth of the Reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.

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— translated by Richard Howard
Bibliography


