

How We Experience Art

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Have you ever noticed that when you go into an art gallery the most populated exhibits are always the ones that allow you to interact in some way? These exhibits seem to be perpetually surrounded by a crowd, all eager to see how their interaction can personalise the experience or leave some impact. Now you could be a cynic and say this is merely a reflection of unappreciative philistines exhibiting their short attention spans... OR... perhaps you could hypothesise that such activity reflects on how society's perception and appreciation of art is changing. As contemporary technology and ideology have revolutionised our society, so too have they revolutionised the possibilities for art. This is no longer the solo realm of a paint brush or pencil, but rather one of imagination. Interactive art caters to a society that feels the need to belong, to impact on the world in which it exists.

Interactive art takes an audience to the next level, impacting beyond simple appreciation of content. However interactive art is a very broad category, basically describing all art that allows its audience to be more than just voyeurs, but to play active roles. These roles are as diverse as the artworks themselves, creating a variety of experiences through the requirements of their interactivity. Yet often these requirements create limitations within the artwork that affect the interactive experience. For instance, an interactive artwork's purpose might be to place the viewer as the central and transient focus of the artwork, making each viewing a personal experience. Alternatively 'interactive art' can refer to artworks that are more communal in their approach to construction and appreciation; artworks that allow individual viewers to contribute a small action or component of themselves that adds to the overall work. Despite the differences that exist between the aims of the artists producing these various forms of interactive art, we could say that the general purpose is to engage their audience in a contemporary and appealing way. Today art is no longer a voyeuristic practice but rather a participatory experience.

As a general rule the more individualistically focused these artworks are the narrower and more limited they are in their scope. John Tonkin's *Time and Motion Study v2* (2008) is a beautiful piece that uses pre-cinematic technology to capture and dissect its viewer as the temporary focus of his artwork. Using a camera mounted at the top of the viewing screen, Tonkin takes images of the installations surroundings. These images are then sliced wafer thin and projected onto the screen as a chain of multiple overlapping shots, creating an aesthetically lyrical feel of movement in still form. This artwork is very clever in that it simultaneously acknowledges the presence of a viewer and engages them in a spontaneous and immediately conceivable interaction. The participant not only is flattered by their presence and importance in the artwork but this is reinforced by their ability to then manipulate the image to a certain extent through a mouse. While elegant and engaging, this form of artwork is limited in its function, being perhaps overly self-centred, feeding into the need of participants to be recognised and rewarded simply for their presence. While the sequences of images are stored, this artwork is more about the temporary thrill and intoxication of having one's own image presented as art or a significant moment. Through its limitations and intent Tonkin's striking piece is rendered as a reflection of a society that needs to constantly reassert its self importance.

Alternatively in the work inspired by Yayoi Kusama for the Queensland Art Gallery's Kids Asia Pacific Triennial 2002, it is not the artist facilitating a viewer's self perception but rather an artist utilising her audience to perpetuate and perceive her own reality. At a young age Kusama began experiencing severely obsessive hallucinations which inspired her polka dot works or 'infinity nets', as she refers to them. These fields appeared before her eyes in limitless plains of coloured dots of different sizes and hues. The installation was initially set up as a sterile room or area in solitary white. Into this environment participants were unleashed, each clutching in their hand a sheet of stickers. The premise of the interaction was simple: take stickers depicting dots of various colours and sizes and place them in a position of their choice. This interaction, in its simplicity, placed a solemn importance on each individual's actions, as well as creating enthusiasm. Each participant was made to feel that their individual action was in some way important and integral to the construction of Kusama's overall vision. The work was an occasional and popular feature of the children's section of the Queensland Art Gallery. It was instantly recognisable by the swarms of enthusiastic children

and their parents trying to find the perfect spot to place their all important contribution of various dots. By allowing participants to allocate how they contribute, the artwork has skilfully combined contemporary society's egotism and the selfless activism that is necessary to allow the creation of a communal artwork. By operating within a framework that allows participants to nominate how they interact, the work created a more liberal interactive environment for its audience. Through this style of interaction participants are not manipulated to feel that they are the sole focus or figure of importance in the artwork. Rather they gain satisfaction from the importance of their contribution and their ability to have an impact on their surrounding world.

This is symbolic of a culture of addition; a society in which artwork becomes more an experience than an object, with people implanting themselves into the work. Instead of being separate from the artwork participants gain satisfaction from leaving their virtual fingerprint. Perhaps we are keen to make an aesthetic difference, and have an impact in a way that allows others to see how our contribution was significant, creative and valued. The less framework an artist puts in place, the fewer limitations participants face, thus reducing their collective inhibitions and need for conformity. Taken to the extreme, this style of art is one in which an artist presents participants with merely an idea, allowing communal interaction, not the artist, to create the artwork. Artist Olafur Eliasson created such a public interaction through his *The cubic structural evolution project* (2004). In this work participants are invited to assist in the creation of unique 'cityscapes' through their construction of individual and unique buildings. Over three hundred kilograms of Lego are on offer to participants who are then left to their own devices to create a metropolis limited only by their imaginations. This constantly evolving installation is the epitome of interactive art on a public level, and represents another variation on the theme of death of the author. Eliasson refuses to construct a single structure, relying rather on audience collaboration to erect his artistic city concept. In *The cubic structural evolution project* the artist is the conceptual maker not the constructor: artist as author of the idea. Interactive art in this style creates work that is owned by many, no longer the sole property of the artist but of those whose combined experiences worked to enhance and construct meaning.

It is interesting to note that the more freedom participants are given and the less focus placed upon their sole interaction, the more fruitful and constructive their interaction becomes. By allowing each participant to be individual in their contribution, artists actually infer more importance to the overall artwork, the whole being greater than the sum of all its parts. In interactive art of this calibre the artist is more than a mere master of media but rather a facilitator for people's creative and constructive instincts. It is in this way that artists override the need of contemporary viewers to be constantly entertained, stimulated and made to feel important, thus both embracing today's need to be significant and stripping away this petty necessity, bringing humanity together as a collective that is capable of feeling, appreciating and constructing the art which traditionally it simply viewed.

Contemporary art is an experience, not just an image, and it is the experience that many gallery goers will continue to cherish after leaving the unique environment created by such extraordinary and revolutionary artists.