

Intimate Transactions: Close Encounters of Another Kind by Tony Fry

The conventional view is that an artwork is product - a finished thing, be it visual, literary, musical or multimedia. Given this perception, what a critic does is to comment and pass judgment of some kind on a work's aesthetic, social or political qualities. But as we shall see, *Intimate Transactions* is more process than product and as such it confounds views of detached objects available for critical scrutiny. *Intimate Transactions* ever remains an unfinished work until realised through user interaction. Observation is thus denied by the primacy of enacted and individuated experience (looking is displaced by acting).

It follows that writing critically about *Intimate Transactions* cannot reveal any innate truth or definitive qualities of 'the work', but nonetheless it can have prefigurative or retrospective transformative ability. Which is to say: reading what is written can alter how the work is approached, understood, experienced and reflected upon. In this respect, writing about the work becomes itself an 'intimate transaction'. Of course, everybody who engages the work does so with their experience prefigured by knowledge. Central to the ambition of the work is to bring such knowledge (as 'felt', if not consciously recognised) into question.

Before going further and opening the door on more issues, we need to briefly sketch what *Intimate Transactions* is and does functionally - to better position the reader to contextualise what is to be said in this essay.

The thing itself

Intimate Transactions appears as an electronically generated screen-based world of rendered three-dimensional quasi-organic 'creatures' - this is entered by two 'users' via their presence as ethereal embryo-looking avatars. Interaction within this world is enabled through hardware that converts the bodily movement of the user to the movement of the avatar on the screen - it does this by the users being wired to sensors and placed on an angled platform facing the screen. The users, who may be a short or vast distance away from each other, are linked electronically in order to co-habit the world of the screen in their avatar forms. Depending upon their disposition, these individuals can resist, or strive to embrace, becoming a unified immaterial body as they dance and glide around their creature-populated screen world.

Interaction in such a setting is between individual users *and* the technology as well as between the users *via* the technology. Interestingly, at the end of the interactive exchange, which runs for around twenty minutes, the actual bodily image of the respective users is revealed to each other.

What is absent from the outline just given (besides any description of the complexity of the technology) is the fact that users can get to know the artificial world encountered and can gain competence to function within it. More importantly, the exercise does not centre on the technology but with the experience of the interactions that it makes possible. By nature this experience has been designed to pass through a number of stages: beginning with learning a set of operational rules; to an initial exploration of the immaterial environment and the virtual creatures within it, learning that the creatures can be 'stripped' and 'rebuilt'; then onto discovering one's present avatar partner and the relation attempted to be negotiated via the dance of forms. Finally, after gaining basic abilities, there is the potential for the user to be able to manipulate the whole system.

Where did *Intimate Transactions* come from?

This question is directed at the origins of the idea rather than its history as a fusion between art and technology, and its appropriation and inversion of computer game forms and methods. Keith Armstrong, as Artistic Director of the *Intimate Transactions* project, gives an account of its underpinning ideas.¹ To do so he evokes and mobilises a plural notion of 'ecosophy'.

Ecosophy gathers together a variety of philosophical positions that think about the underlying human-centredness of 'an ecological crisis' in the contemporary world and how to counter it. Essentially, and correctly, Armstrong understands that the economic, social, political and cultural conditions of human existence place human beings centrally within the problem due to their acquired values and conduct. This is not to reduce the cause of 'the crisis' to individual human failings, rather to the impacts of the world in which we humans come into being as they in turn impact upon our 'nature' and conduct. The problem is circular – we cause ecological/environmental problems that threaten, but these problems are inherent in the world that contributes to forming the way we are. Ecosophy names a way to break into and maybe out of this vicious circle. As Felix Guattari put it – 'The ecological crisis can be traced to a more general crisis of the social, political and existential.' He then went on to point out that dealing with this crisis 'involves a type of revolution of mentalities'². In turn, he believed that this required *the development of new kinds of socio-environmental subjects* (new kinds of people), rather than increased productivism (the means of exchange by which existing social subjects are replicated and their world extended). In this setting, *Intimate Transactions* can be posed as a particular kind of cultural project aiming (albeit in a small way) to help create this new type of subject.

Ecosophical thinking is underscored by ecological phenomenology and existentialism. What environmental phenomenology tells us is that our being is indivisible from 'being as a whole', and that our body is part of the porous organism of life through which the elements pass. In this respect, we are designed by the world of our being. But on the other hand, existentialism tells us we are designed by our actions in this world. Ecosophy can bring such understandings to problems of the unsustainable as they take (our) futures away. Certainly, it can also make the need for cultural action visible, although the actual creation of viable and vibrant cultural forms is still massively underdeveloped. In this context, the designing power of 'art' (as aesthetic experience) needs a more enabling framework. Realising this framework can be assisted by philosophy and by the creation of forms of criticism that are critical in a fundamental sense (here the critical is what divides life and death). Cultural action, so approached, implies the artist, designer, philosopher and critic form part of the 'change community'. In an age that is starting to understand that without sustainment we human beings have nothing, art for art's sake, design in the service of productivism, philosophy divorced from other practices, and criticism as cultural gate-keeping can no longer be afforded. By necessity, artists, designers, philosophers and critics (and others) have to join together to make the 'change community'.

The Art of Interaction

Most people encountering *Intimate Transactions* will do so with an existing set of assumptions about what art is – which is not to imply that a diverse group of people will share a common view. Yet it's likely that all will assume a critical distance exists between the viewer and the viewed (that is between themselves and a work). *Intimate Transactions* totally undercuts this assumption. It dissolves any critical distance between the 'it' and the 'I'. The work cannot be known without the experience of interacting with it (and another person). As already intimated, one cannot critically observe what 'one is

a part of' – to interact is to be of the work. The work acts to structure the actual experience of interaction through bringing the work to momentary completion. But insofar as users and interactions are never identical, the work is never completed as exactly the same experience – it always returns to being unfinished in order to be remade.

Crucially, the interactive intent of the work was to create a means to reflect upon a particular kind of experience – *the experience of our being relationally connected* as a collective body. The form of its materiality functions as a means towards this end. As such, rather than being understood within the genre of 'art and environment', it arrives in the more adventurous domain of 'art as environment'. Moreover, as an environment, it has its own created immaterial ecology (an ecology of the image). Here it's worth reminding ourselves that the relation between environment (the constituent features of space, place, location) and ecology (the dynamic system that functions within and maintains the character and conditions of the environment) is always mediated by image for us (we see via created ways of seeing).

To better understand this, and how an artwork and its technology can be deemed to be an ecology, we need to grasp that we humans exist within four inter- connected ecologies: (i) the biophysical ecology of the natural world (biologically we always remain animal); (ii) the ecology of the artificial (we do not just dwell in the world of nature, but equally in a fabricated world of our own creation that we now depend upon to survive); (iii) a social ecology in which we depend upon each other – we simply cannot be without others; and (iv) an ecology of the image (be the image pictorial or literary) that mediates the other three ecologies.

On this last point, how we see and conduct ourselves in biophysical, artificial and social ecologies is in large part structured by how they arrive in front of us as objects of perception. The very notion of 'world' is a good example of this. We only have a sense of the world by dint of an image. While being located in the world we cannot see it as an object. Reiterating, everything we see is refracted via knowledge gained via images (visual and literary). As Plato put it, 'we see with our mind not our eyes' (mere optical instruments).

It is not a...

Intimate Transactions cannot be reduced to an object; rather it is an active 'thing', animated in various ways. Consider this: what turns the 'thingness' of the thing (its materiality and informational content) into the 'thinging' of the thing is *its function to produce and mediate the experience of two 'users'* as joined in competitive and/or cooperative relations. It does not reveal itself outside of being engaged – knowing is doing. But knowing itself is not just one thing – there is, for instance, a functional relation wherein familiarity increases competence. Equally, there is a conceptual knowing.

As has been emphasised, the work exists as a means *not an end*. The question that now arrives is: does the work have the ability to actually prompt a user's reflection on experience beyond the subjective? (Did I enjoy it? How did it work? What kind of relationship did I have with my partner?) This question begs to be left open for each user to answer.

Conclusion

Intimate Transactions is not reducible to the consequence of any single practice. Its hybridised form and content straddles art, design, education and entertainment. If it has any singular quality, it is its ambition to create embodied learning, which of course will

be qualitatively different between users. Two possibilities always travel with embodied learning: the possibility of transferability (for example, to acquire hand/eye coordination obviously can be useful in many contexts); and the possibility of reflection transmuting into conscious knowledge. In both cases, the person who experiences *Intimate Transactions* is left with the question: what is it that I have experienced and what have I learnt? Equally, its creators have to ask themselves: what is the potential of this kind of mechanism of mediation – can it actually break out of the productivist circle and really contribute, albeit modestly, to bringing a new kind of human subject into being? Answering this question is both the challenge and the test of ecosophical commitment. It also goes to the choice of trying to inject new life into old practices or to the launching of new ones.

Tony Fry is a designer, theorist, writer and Adjunct Professor, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. His latest book *Design Futuring* is currently at press.

Endnotes

1. Keith Armstrong, 'Towards a Connective and Ecosophical New Media Art Practice' in *Intimate Transactions: Art, Exhibition and Interaction within Distributed Network Environments* (ed Jillian Hamilton), Brisbane: ACID, 2006, pp 12-35.

2. Felix Guattari, 'The ecosophic object' in *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm* (trans Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis), Sydney: Power Publications, 1995, p 119.

GLOSSARY

Appropriation – taking, transferring or adopting without consent in order to use in another context.

Avatars – forms taken by symbolic beings that stand in for those beings.

Ecological – related to ecology, the basic meaning of which is the relationship of living organisms (bacterial, plant, animal and insect) to their environments/habitats.

Existential – as related to (human) existence.

Fabricated – the putting together of parts; the assembly of components.

Genre – common groupings of the same types within a collection (for example types of painting, writing or films that are all in the same style).

Hybridised – the end result of creating something new out of combining the elements of two or more things; or interbreeding different animal or plant species.

Immaterial – not based on material substance (for example electronically- transmitted images).

Inversion – the act of reversal; turning upside down.

Literary – having the quality of or being connected to literature.

Phenomenology – a major branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of the essence and existence of things (phenomena).

Pictorial – having the quality of a picture.

Porous – the quality of an organic or non-organic material that allows air or liquids to pass through it.

Quasi-organic – almost, but not quite, organic.

Prefigurative – that which goes before and which has directive capacity, such as the act of designing.

Refracted – being redirected, deflected or reflected by.

Retrospective – going or looking back to something past in order to review, revise or modify how it is viewed, understood or treated.

Transmuting – the act of altering, transforming or converting in order to turn one thing into another.

The unsustainable – an ecology or environment unable to be maintained and continued.