

OF COMMUNICATION, INTERACTIVITY AND INTIMACY: MOBILE FEELINGS, MEMBRANE AND N-CHA(N)T

[Art Projects by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, Sponge and David Rokeby]

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A few years ago at a conference, Canadian artist David Rokeby made the following comment: "Interactivity is about the intimacy between the artist and the audience." This remark appears to be straightforward and simple, yet it opens a whole Pandora's box of ontologies, and goes straight to the core of what human experience or – to stretch the case further – human-machine experience might mean. The notion of intimacy is a slippery one; it implies closeness (physical or not), and also draws on knowledge sets. In other words, in an intimate relationship – be it between lovers, artist and audience, human and machine, or machine and machine – the players involved abide by a certain set of rules, a code of conduct, if you will. Not all the rules are known at the outset, and some change as the experience evolves, but it is exactly this malleability, this openness, that calls for an interaction that is engaged, and that is contiguous to the desire to discover. The model of interaction here is reciprocal and dialogic, and far more complex than the by now outdated idea of "reactive" interactivity, in which a click on the mouse is already seen as a participative gesture. Works such as Sponge's *Membrane*,

David Rokeby's *n-cha(n)t*, and Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau's *Mobile Feelings* all question and stretch notions of intimacy, communication and interaction. They do so in very different ways, and address a multitude of interrelated aspects.

Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau's *Mobile Feelings* piece, for example, questions how mobile communication technologies have altered our lifestyles and our conceptions of privacy. In their project description they state that mobile telephony has "transformed ordinary people into actors who narrate their most private details on the theatrical stages of



CHRISTA SOMMERER and
LAURENT MIGNONNEAU
• Mobile Feelings •



train stations, restaurants, public spaces, streets, meeting areas, and any other social gathering places.”¹ Indeed, apart from starring as the most indispensable communication device of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and as a cool functional fashion accessory, the mobile phone has also become – as Sommerer and Mignonneau suggest – a tool for displaced performativity. It is displaced because the interaction between the speaker and the eavesdropping audience is more often than not unintentional. Furthermore, the “real” interaction is supposed to be between the two mobile interlocutors, but somehow it never entirely is. Very different from making a call from a landline phone – calls from which is usually set in loci with a particular etiquette, such as the comfort and safety of the home, the workplace or a designated public place – the mobile phone tends to break protocol and scramble codes. In other words, its very mobility and ubiquity shed the protective layer protocol might offer. That’s why we sometimes feel offended or as if our privacy is being invaded when someone either talks too loud or listens along too enthusiastically. We might experience the intimacy which we share – at times forcibly – with the other as nonconsensual or obtrusive: it is as if the infringement on privacy is the disembodied collateral damage of postmodern connectivity. And we know from the warmongering discourse of recent years that collateral damage is never an innocent thing.

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Mobile Feelings plays with the “ambivalence of sharing personal information with an anonymous audience,” and it reintroduces an element that in an era of virtual communication technologies is becoming increasingly obsolete: tactility. Our technologized communication is characterized by its lack of corpo-reality. We talk on our phones, SMS, email without even seeing – let alone “feeling” – our counterparts. Sommerer and Mignonneau’s piece, however, brings the corporeal back into our communicative domain, albeit also in a mediated fashion:

“*Mobile Feelings*” lets people communicate with strangers through virtual touch and body sensations, including smell and sweat using specially designed mobile phones. [...] Users [...] are provided with specially equipped “*Mobile Feelings*” phone devices that resemble organic or bodily shapes. These devices host miniature bio-sensors and actuators that capture the users’ heartbeat, blood volume pressure and pulse,

skin conductivity, sweat and smell. All data can be sent to other anonymous users who can perceive and feel these most private sensations through actuators, vibrators, ventilators, micro-electromechanical and micro-bio-electrochemical systems which are also embedded in each “*Mobile Feelings*” device. “*Mobile Feelings*” devices communicate with each other through a standard mobile phone network and users can move around freely to use their devices anywhere and anytime just like normal mobile phones. Besides capturing and transmitting the various body data, the *Mobile Feelings* devices also display images of the other connected users. When a user touches her device and selects one of the displayed persons, she can receive this person’s body sensations, through for example a tickle, a vibration, a small wind or humidity, a pulse, a push or a slight stroke, creating a strange and perhaps erotic ambiguity.²

What is interesting here is that in contradistinction to verbal communication, the data of this bio-feedback cannot be consciously controlled: I cannot force my heart to skip a beat or change my skin conductivity. My body shares its most intimate data with a stranger: an interesting comment on the times we live in, where there is an obsession with managing, labeling and containing data; keeping it from leaking and spilling into unwanted places. In *Mobile Feelings*, the return of the flesh, so to speak, is still established by a safe distance: the sensations we feel, and this moment of intimate proximity we share with a stranger, are still facilitated through the technological interface, yet incite interaction on wholly new and different levels, and beg for a critical review of our habitual ways of communication.

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Proposing a novel way of communication through gestural interaction is the responsive installation *Membrane* by the international art research group Sponge:



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Large sheets of translucent fine metal mesh are suspended in the air space of the exhibition hall and responsive video textures are projected over them. As you walk past the Membrane your image leaves a trail on the screen. The effects change depending on the activity of the people around it, and on the course of time over the hours and days. The Membrane invites the people on both sides of the screen to engage with each other because of how it transforms what each person sees through it.

Two video cameras facing out from the Membrane provide live video feed of passers-by on both sides of the Membrane. Approaching the Membrane, you see a video of people on the opposite side re-projected onto the translucent Membrane material. Your movement perturbs the video of the opposite side of the Membrane that is composited with the video of yourself. By sweeping your hand, you reshape what you see of the other person. The real-time calligraphic video effects vary and include dynamics of water, smoke, shockwaves or particles according to the gesture and movement of the passers-by.³

In opposition to *Mobile Feelings*, where interaction is governed by tactility, here it is conveyed by a mediated tangibility devoid of physical touch. Our gestures change our perception of those on the other side of the membrane. Also here, the interface seems to provide a safe distance which makes it easier to interact with other passersby. Yet the membranes are porous: the interaction with other players creates a rich socially and sensorially layered context where physical presence and media worlds merge. Though we are not physically touching those we are engaging with, there is definitely a materiality seeping through the membrane. It is exactly this tangibility that creates the sense of an intimate exchange. Due to the increase of virtuality in our quotidian communication, gestures have lost center stage, however in *Membrane* they play a pivotal role in shaping the responsive media environment: with a wave of the hand or a sway of the head we construct our own calligraphic video sculptures.

What is interesting about both *Membrane* and *Mobile Feelings* is that they create for their players layered experiences, experiential palimpsests if you will, through nonverbal communication. A piece focussing, however, very much on verbal communication – i.e., speech – is David Rokeby's award-winning installation *n-cha(n)t*. The title is a pun on the verbs "enchant," "chat" and "chant" and on the mathematical symbol "n," which signifies an unknown value. *N-cha(n)t* shows how the power of the spoken word creates community, a sense of togetherness and belonging, and how that very system of sociability can go awry when interrupted by a strange voice. In this particular case, the linguistic community consists of a set of cha(n)t(t)ing computers; the intruder is the human participant:

The visitor enters the space, where a number (n) of computers and monitors are suspended from the ceiling, intercommunicating (chanting) with each other. Every computer has its own voice, speaking grammatically correct English sentences. In addition, each entity is equipped with a highly focused microphone and voice recognition software. When a visitor speaks into one of the microphones, these words from the outside 'distract' that system, stimulating a shift in that entity's 'state of mind'. As a result, that individual (i.e. that particular computer) falls away from the chant. As it begins communicating this new input to its nearest neighbours, the community chanting loses its coherence, with the chanting veering towards a party-like chaos of voices. In the absence of further disruptions, the intercommunications reinforce the similarities and draw the community back to the chant. The ears visible on the computer monitors show the state of receptivity of each system. When the system is ready to listen, a listening ear is shown on the screen. If the system hears a sound, it cups its ear to concentrate. When 'thinking', a finger is pressed into the ear. If the system feels over-stimulated, it covers its ear with a hand to indicate its unwillingness to listen. As a system processes speech, the incoming words are displayed in the ear on the monitor. After the incoming speech finishes, the system muses on the input as it internally follows associative links stimulated by the input, and then it resumes speaking, using the recent stimuli as dominant themes of the stream of thoughts.⁴

Though Rokeby claims that this project is not an attempt "to do any deep modelling of human social groups"⁵, is hard not to read the project through a political lens. The contrast in the threefold interaction scripted into the installation: machine-machine, human-machine, machine-human, already evokes a range of associations. The computers communicate and interact with each other, and seem to make up a perfectly closed and harmonious communal system. They could go on chanting forever, yet in comes the human visitor/intruder and disturbs the voices speaking in unison. This process is not an abrupt *coup d'état*-style intervention, but it is gradual and subtle and almost attributes viral qualities to language. By corollary, there is no instant gratification for the visitor. In this sense, *n-cha(n)t* differs from most interactive pieces, in which immediate feedback is a marker of responsiveness. "[I]n interactivity there is a real impulse to create a situation where the user is the god, the user is the whole focus. You go in and you do something, and there must be a response, and it must be very clear."⁶ Here, becoming "intimate" with the system is not so clear-cut; any community – whether machinic or human – has its defence mechanisms ready to fend off



DAVID ROKEBY
• n-cha(n)t •

threats to the consensus or *status quo*. Concurrently, every system in equilibrium holds the promise of becoming imbalanced by having its defences punctured.

Communication with our "others" is always a tightrope walk, involving uncertainties and insecurities yet also playful discoveries and invitations to push our faculties of perception further. It is exactly this friction that works like *n-cha(n)t*, *Mobile Feelings* and *Membrane* negotiate and demonstrate.

1. <http://www.iamas.ac.jp/~christa/WORKS/CONCEPTS/MobileFeelingsIIConcept.html>
2. *ibid*
3. From: *Sponge.org*. "Membrane: a Proposal for DEAF04" (unpublished document)
4. Paraphrased from *n-cha(n)t* project description:
<http://homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/nchant.html>
5. From *n-cha(n)t* project description:
<http://homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/nchant.html>
6. David Rokeby in Conversation with Sabine Breitsameter:
http://www.swr.de/swr2/audiohyperspace/engl_version/interview/rokeby.html

