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Enter the Event: How is Immanent Participation?

Abstract: This paper starts with the premise that the body is the primal media: a “body-worlding”. This event folds the world into its becoming-self, and unfolds a qualitative vibration. This is the dance of affect: being affected and affecting in return. Our daily lives are made of affective states. The concepts *affective immersion* and *incorporeal materiality* are here articulated in order to think affect embodiment, and embodiment itself, as *body-worlding*. It creates the conditions to rethink media, interactivity, and participatory art. Affective immersion occurs every time we are totally immersed in a situation’s unfolding dynamic relation: we *become* the unfolding relationality. The paper argues for a materiality real but abstract that has been called “incorporeal”. This is the affective territory where affective immersion happens. Deleuze and Guattari would call this territory a “plane of immanence”.

Keywords: immanent participation; interactivity; incorporeal materiality; affective immersion; relation; affect; event.

[...] to be in the world is *to world*, to experience the unfolding, in all of its complexity, of the commingling of all drops of experience.¹

If you are travelling in India – Mumbai, for example – traffic may be one of your greatest difficulties. The mobility challenge is greater if you are walking. From a Western point of view, it seems chaotic. Despite this apparent chaos, Indians cope with it easily. The answer to this query is what I would call *embodied interactivity*. I call it embodied because the emphasis is in the body experience. Yet, “body” must here be understood in a Spinozan way: anything that is either affected or affects is a *body*.² Spinoza believed that the world consisted in one unfolding substance: God, or Nature. Every *body*, is a mode of this substance. The interesting part is that the modes extend as a thinking and a doing – simultaneously. Thus, knowing emerges concurrently

¹ Erin Manning, *Always More than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 128

² Cf. Benedictus Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, trans. by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

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with the body encounters, in a thinking-doing activity that occurs as *interaction*.³ The “thinking,” and the “doing,” are two registers of the same thing: experience. Following this idea, this paper will explore the concepts of interaction, and interface through a microscopical lens: that of the event. It does so by rearticulating the concept of interaction as *immanent participation*, and interface as *incorporeal materiality*.

In new media studies, interactivity is often understood as the user’s ability to respond to so-called “interactive technologies.” This participatory dimension is nevertheless limited by the designer’s predetermined choices, henceforth allowing only for partial interactivity. In considering what he calls “The Myth of Interactivity,”⁴ Lev Manovich discusses interactivity as follows:

All classical, and even moreso modern, art is “interactive” in a number of ways. Ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art, and other representational “shortcuts” require the user to fill in missing information. Theater and painting also rely on techniques of staging and composition to orchestrate the viewer’s attention over time, requiring her to focus on different parts of the display. With sculpture and architecture, the viewer has to move her whole body to experience the spatial structure.⁵

Used in relation to computer-based media, the concept of “interactive media” generally literally equates with physical interaction such as pressing a button, choosing a link, or moving the body. According to Manovich’s approach, on the contrary, the definition of interactivity lies mainly in the fact that media relation asks us to fill in missing information. In doing so, Manovich questions the new media discourse by enquiring into the concept of interactivity itself. The most important aspect of interactivity, according to him, becomes the different ways in which interactivity is enacted. In other words, how the way real-time manipulation of information is effectuated. On the one hand, the noteworthy part of Manovich’s approach is the idea that *interaction* should not be limited to “interactive technologies.” His point of view is not related with a difference between new and old media, but is concerned with relational aesthetics. In other words, with the way we relationally engage with our environment, and the way this relation takes place. On the other hand, his notion of “filling in missing information” points out to a linear situation where the “user” is expected to resolve a narrative, becoming thus the co-author of the work. Hence, the tendency here is to focus on mental processes.

“The Myth of Interactivity” assumes that there is no real interactivity because there is no real co-author. Rather, there is, most of the time, a diversification of possible outcomes. The truth is that, if we focus on the mental processes of experiencing

³ N. J. Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008), 178.

⁴ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 55–61.

⁵ *Ibid*, 56.

interactivity, the thinking-doing is lost. If *interaction* should not be limited to “interactive technologies,” it is because there is interaction everywhere. Manovich undertakes the question of the different ways in which interactivity is enacted by proposing an attempt of classification into different categories of interaction. It does not help, nonetheless, with the following question: How can a real potential for variation be brought into the digital? I would like to argue that, as long as we stay attuned to the technology fascination, it is impossible to answer this question. This fascination is based mainly in participation. The “required participation” present in interactive technologies is a problematic issue in many aspects, but Andrew Goodman succinctly brings it to a question of the “tyranny of interactivity.” He defines it by “the reduction of such participation to the parameters of linear, programmatic and productive exchange.”⁶ His proposition, one that is aligned with what is here articulated, is to rethink the very notion of object through process philosophy. It means thinking interaction at a micro level, as Spinoza does.

The event

When we decide to cross the street, we enter a movement field. To know exactly when you can enter, you need to feel its qualitative vibration. You must virtually move-with it before you enter it. To virtually move-with a movement field means to feel the event’s “subjective form” curve as it *folds*⁷ the situation’s real potential into its own becoming. The event’s becoming is the in-act of its own subjectivity being actualized. That becoming is the event’s “body-worlding”⁸: the heat, the sun, the strong smells, and the sense of danger enter into conjunction to express the inadequacy of the task. Expression: “the subjective form is the way by which the datum is expressed in the subject.”⁹ The quantity of cars does not seem to lessen. Indians, however, cross dangerously the street without a hint of worry. To wait seems to be the answer. Wait for the good moment. However, there is no good moment despite a focused observation. There must be an art of crossing the streets in Mumbai.

In order to accomplish the task, you have no choice, but *enter the event*. In other words, you need to *become* unfolding relationality. It happens through attunement. To move-with, you must feel “the indeterminacy of the not-yet-actual.”¹⁰ To function in an environment where everything goes that fast, you cannot premeditate your movement: it is rather a thinking-doing—or as Brian Massumi would call it, a

⁶ Andrew Goodman, *Gathering Ecologies: Thinking beyond Interactivity* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2018), 36.

⁷ In Deleuze’s words, “the subjective form is [...] the form in which the datum is folded in the subject, a ‘feeling’ or manner, at least when prehension is positive.” See Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (London: Athlone, 1993), 78.

⁸ Cf. Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 2009.

⁹ Deleuze, *The Fold*, 78.

¹⁰ Manning, *Relationescapes*, 90.

“thinking-feeling”¹¹. When you start crossing the street, you will have caused a shock in your previous operation mode. The “decision,” for Alfred North Whitehead, is a cut.¹² This micro-event, decision, can only be felt as it unfolds, in its enactment, as *embodied interactivity*. A becoming-traffic crosses the street, embodies a crossing-body expression. How do you know this is the timely moment to cross? The truth is that you do not know: the event knows. “Microperception”¹³ enables you to attune to the event’s vibration. This attunement “is not smaller perception, it’s a perception of a qualitatively different kind. It’s something that is felt without registering consciously. It registers only in its effects.”¹⁴ Thus conceived, embodied interactivity relies on the premise of “participation understood as immanent to the event”¹⁵.

Attunement is becoming-rhythm. The passage from real potential (indeterminacy) to actuality (and vice versa) is a pulsation. This pulsation composes the situation as it feeds from indeterminacy’s becoming-actual. On the cusp of actuality, there is expression *in-forming*. Real potentiality presents itself as data.¹⁶ Subjective form folds into itself becoming subject. This is the way the event makes sense of data. The event is the basic unit in process philosophy. According to Whitehead, events are classified as follows: “(i) the percipient events, (ii) the situations, (iii) the active conditioning events, (iv) the passive conditioning events.”¹⁷ In our Mumbai traffic example, the percipient event corresponds to the pedestrian’s “relevant bodily state”¹⁸. The situation is the setting (cars, sunlight, road, absence of traffic light, other pedestrians, etc.). The active conditioning events are the speed at which cars pass by, the fact that they do not stop, the rhythm at which they go, and other events that may interfere with the crossing struggle. The passive conditioning events are the ones that do not interfere directly with this situation. The situation is a relational field where objects co-compose the event’s emergence by interacting with each other. Massumi brings this relational position to the forefront as “bare activity”: “an in-mixing, a field of budding relation,” “a brewing, the world stirring,” “a coming event.”¹⁹ The way the different bodies interact affects the waiting in its own singular way. Events rely on their own qualitative force to pulsate. This force is an agitation: “[t]he event is a vibration”²⁰. When you enter the relational field, you vibrate its qualitative rhythm simply by being there: this is *immanent participation*.

¹¹ Cf. Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).

¹² Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Teddington: The Echo Library, 2006), 43.

¹³ Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

¹⁴ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 53.

¹⁵ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 55.

¹⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 23.

¹⁷ Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 80.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁹ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 52.

²⁰ Deleuze, *The Fold*, 77.

Incorporeal materiality

But, in reality, elements of the plane are *diagrammatic features*, whereas concepts are *intensive features*. The former are movements of the infinite, whereas the latter are intensive ordinates of these movements, like original sections or differential positions: finite movements in which the infinite is now only speed and each of which constitutes a surface or a volume, an irregular contour marking a halt in the degree of proliferation. The former are *directions* that are fractal in nature, whereas the latter are absolute *dimensions*, intensively defined, always fragmentary surfaces or volumes. The former are *intuitions*, and the latter *intensions*.²¹

The “diagram”²² is the virtually felt shape of a force-moving. It is felt at the edges of experience, never fully acknowledged, only felt in the effects it has on the becoming-actual experience. It is a felt quality. It is, in this sense, an incorporeal reality of experience. The traffic flow, for instance, is a conditioning event that body-worlds a certain articulated shape that moves the relational field. In the vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari, the traffic is a “diagrammatic feature” of the “plane of immanence.”²³ This plane is constituted by the crossing-road situation and its surroundings. In this sense, the traffic is an element of the plane. It moves in such a way that no one knows from where it comes and where it goes (passive conditioning events certainly have their part to play here). It has speed and rhythm. Its shape-shifting condition is similar to that of Ygramul, the monster, in *The Neverending Story*.²⁴ In fact, the body of Ygramul is not made as a stable one-piece composition. This is why he is called “The Many.” He is made of innumerable insects forming a compact swarm able to take different shapes. The difference is that the traffic follows a “direction” according to the fields’ “intuition,”²⁵ whereas Ygramul has intention. We may not say that the traffic has intention, but its fractal diagrammatic nature in-forms movement, or better said, is movement moving. Its super power is to shape-shift according to direction, flow, rhythm, and related matters. This diagrammatic feature is a movement-force.

And there you are: a percipient event, a singular point, a surface where the event’s vibration reverberates. This affection is an affective expression that forms a relational field; its reality is felt as “incorporeal”²⁶ materiality. You cannot touch it, you cannot see it, but it is nonetheless real since the struggle to cross the street is a felt actuality. But this affective expression is of a different kind of materiality. To be affected by its expression is to co-compose that incorporeal materiality. To be affected

²¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 39–40.

²² Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, Translated by Sean Hand (London: Athlone, 1988).

²³ Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 39.

²⁴ Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*, Translated by Ralph Manheim (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983).

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 40.

²⁶ Cf. Elisabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York; Columbia University Press, 2017).

also means to pass a threshold. Stepping into it is to enter an *affective territory*, except that its borders are purely affective and durational. The experience content is an *event of “differentiation”*²⁷ generated by the stepping into the affective territory. If you have stepped into the event, you won’t interact with it from an external point of view. Here, interacting means *worlding* the event’s unfolding vibration. To immanently vibrate the event is *affective immersion*. In other words, you are an “intensive feature” of the plane of immanence.²⁸ It means that in the event of being affected by the affective territory’s relational dynamic, you are already affecting it in return: inflection. The percipient event is a singular point.

When two hands are joined together, and press into each other, the pressure in itself is an action, and an expression. Experience reverberates. The pressure of the two joined hands resonate throughout the whole body. This resonance is a becoming-relationality that unfolds and reverberates throughout the arms, being felt as a slight tension in the whole body. It is an interface. This encounter reverberates as a relational field. *Incorporeal materiality* revolves around a dynamic process of affect expression, encompassing thus a whole field, the plane of immanence. Every plane of immanence expresses an incorporeal materiality. In fact, every time the conditions for the formation and evolution of affect expression and its effects are met, we must consider it an interface. In this sense, experience itself is the primal interface as the body itself is the primal affect media. The interface *worlds* affective territories. In other words, it is an affect “machine”²⁹ that vibrates the affective quality throughout a whole milieu. It affectively feeds the milieu. The affective territory is a “hungry ghost”³⁰. The more you feed it, the more it grows, and the more it affects you.

As virtual forces move across the interface, extensively, this action may be sensed as an affective territory. You step into it, it has been said. Try to walk into a burst of laughter and stay immune to its reverberations. Soon enough, whoever approaches further extends the laughter-affective territory. It means that the plane of immanence is affectivity in-act. The field stretches into infinity as far as the machinic operation can reach. It does not belong to you, but it makes a difference that you have been there. Of course, this affective territory shifting is not a capacity that pertains only to human bodies. Remember, for Spinoza, anything that is either affected or affects is a *body*. Assume that you are still in the waiting-situation, almost crossing the streets of Mumbai. Hesitation is expressed in your face, in the leg position, and so on.

²⁷ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 39.

²⁹ In Félix Guattari’s vocabulary, the “machine” is deprived of its reference to a technical/technological object in order to foreground a function of production. In this case, we are concerned about the production and reproduction of affect. See Félix Guattari, “À propos des machines.” In *Qu’est-ce que l’écologie?*, ed. by Stéphane Nadaud (Paris: Éditions Lignes, 2013), 111–29.

³⁰ According to Ken McLeod, in Buddhism, “[t]he hungry ghost realm is the realm of greed—hard edged, all-consuming avarice that can never be satisfied.” See Ken McLeod, *Wake Up to Your Life: Discovering the Buddhist Path of Attention* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 140.

Suddenly, a driver looks at you. He knows that you would like to cross, and he does not stop. Why should he? Can't you simply cross like everyone else? The traffic flow, nonetheless, shifts, and something loosens. Have you ever noticed that whenever a car accident happens everyone slows down on the road to see what happened, causing kilometers of traffic simply by this slowing down? The traffic flow is a diagrammatic feature. Now, consider the slowing down in itself as a body. It affects the affective territory, and it is affected in return by its dynamics. The traffic flow, along with other diagrammatic and intensive features, forms the affective territory—which is co-composed by every slight movement.

Reframing interactivity:

Such concepts can begin to challenge how we think of, make and experience interactive art. They imply the need to view art objects, events and subjects as produced through, and a result of, the complex play of forces. This does not deny that objects, bodies and subjects exist prior to the art event, but that further potential can be activated through the event relational engagement.³¹

Along with this enhanced view of the concepts of interaction and interface, we must also consider Whitehead's conception of "novelty as the creation of mixtures that produce new openings, new vistas, new complexities for experience in the making"³². The notion of *affective immersion* attempts to shift the attention from technology towards experience content. In this sense, what happens if we think interactive art not as a trigger for human action, but as a rich affective field? What emerges is the co-composition of a certain experience content that expresses itself subtly. This content is built on different layers of affectivity. The field is alive. Whitehead's conceptual tools allow us to consider newness through a different prism than that of new gadgets. Experience itself is already every time renewed. So, we ask again: How can a real potential for variation be brought into interactive art? According to Goodman, "it is not enough to simply demand more from the interactive artist and critic: more complexity, more imagination, more inventive solutions."³³ The issue lies in the way we frame the work of art, i.e. as an object divested from the event dimension. For Whitehead, an "object is an ingredient in the character of some event."³⁴ It means that, in Whitehead's speculative scheme, objects cannot be considered apart from the events in which they appear. Consequently, the event necessarily brings the question of newness. When applied to new media, the notion of novelty brings a different focus to interactive, participative art. The minute details of experience, not only human, but

³¹ Goodman, *Gathering Ecologies*, 45.

³² Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 58.

³³ Goodman, *Gathering Ecologies*, 44.

³⁴ Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 76.

as an event, acquire great importance. Whitehead's speculative scheme brings to the reframing of interactivity many important contributions. One of them is that it acts as a magnifying glass, bringing our attention to the incredible variety of qualitative textures experience unveils. Even more important, it brings to the foreground the event as the base on which rests our thinking-acting capacities.

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