

# On Totalitarian Interactivity

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In "Art, Power, and Communication" (RHIZOME DIGEST: October 11, 1996.

<http://www.rhizome.com>) Alexei Shulgin writes:

Looking at very popular media art form such as "interactive installation" I always wonder how people (viewers) are excited about this new way of manipulation on them. It seems that manipulation is the only form of communication they know and can appreciate. They are happily following very few options given to them by artists: press left or right button, jump or sit. Their manipulator artists feel that and are using seduces of the newest technologies (future now!) to involve people in their pseudo-interactive games obviously based on banal will for power. But what nice words you can hear around it: interaction, interface for self-expression, artificial intelligence, communication even. So, emergence of media art is characterized by transition from representation to manipulation."

Alexei Shulgin is right in analyzing the phenomenon of interactive art and media as a shift from representation to manipulation. Yes, interactive computer installations indeed represent an advanced form of audience manipulation, where the subject is put within a structure very similar to an experimental setup of a psychological laboratory or a high-tech torture chamber of CIA or KGB, the kind we saw frequently in spy films of the Cold War era. Yet — precisely because I — who was in Moscow and grew up there during Brezhnev's era — I am so happy to agree with Shulgin's conclusions — I recognize the limitations of this analysis, or rather, its cultural specificity. It is only a post-communist subject who can see interactive art and media in these terms. (No surprisingly, in a conversation I had last year, another post-communist subject — art critic Boris Groys — analyzed interactive computer installations in a very similar way).

The experiences of East and West structure how new media is seen in both places. For the West, interactivity is a perfect vehicle for the ideas of democracy and equality. For the East, it is another form of manipulation, in which the artist uses advanced technology to impose his / her totalitarian will on the people. (On modern artist as a totalitarian ruler see the works of Boris Groys.) Western media artists usually take technology absolutely seriously and despair when it does not work. Post-communist artists, on the other hand, recognize that the nature of technology is that it does not work, will always break down, will never work as it is supposed to... (For instance, Moscow conceptual artist and poet Dimity Prigov did an event during ISEA '94 in which he used business translation programs to translate a famous nineteenth Russian poem by Pushkin from Russian into Finnish and then from Finnish into English; he declared the mistakes in translation a new work of art.) A Western artist sees the Internet as a perfect tool to break down all hierarchies and bring the art to the people (while in reality more often than not using it as a super-media to promote his / her name). In contrast, as a post-communist subject, I cannot but see the Internet as a communal apartment of the Stalin era: no privacy, everybody spies on everybody else, always present line for common areas such as the toilet or the kitchen. Or I can think of it as a giant garbage site for the information society, with everybody dumping their used products of intellectual labor and nobody cleaning up. Or as a new, Mass Panopticon (which was already realized in communist societies) — complete transparency, everybody can track everybody else.

I apologize if I am making you mad. I promise to write on the blackboard, until the chalk runs out: Internet is good for the people, the Internet is good for the people, the Internet is good for the people, the Internet is good for the people. Down with the Museum, Down with the Museum, Down with the Museum, Down with the Museum. Workers of the World, Connect; Workers of the World, Connect; Workers of the World, Connect; Workers of the World, Connect. I promise to march in happy columns, screaming slogans, my face reflecting the shiny pixels of new version of Netscape browser. Ideology, history, class struggle are finally over, replaced by Microsoft vs. Netscape war and Java objects. Long Live Digital Revolution!

But before I give in, I would like to offer you one more thought, the last download from "the enemy of the people" — one more argument about interactivity as a totalitarian art form. All classical, and even more so modern art was already "interactive," requiring a viewer to fill in missing information (for instance, ellipses in literary narration; "missing" parts of objects in modernist painting) as well as to move his / her eyes (composition in painting and cinema) or the whole body (in experiencing sculpture and architecture). Computer interactive art takes "interaction" literally, equating it with strictly physical interaction between a user and an artwork (pressing a button), at the sake of psychological interaction. The psychological processes of filling-in, hypothesis forming, recall and identification — which are required for us to comprehend any text or image at all — are mistakenly identified strictly with an objectively existing structure of interactive links.

This literal quality can be seen as another example of a larger modern trend of externalization of mental life, the process in which new media technologies — photography, film, VR — have played a key role. On the one hand, we witness recurrent claims by the users and theorists of new media technologies, from Francis Galton (the inventor of composite photography in the 1870s) to Hugo Munsterberg, Sergei Eisenstein and, recently, Jaron Lanier, that these technologies externalize and objectify the mind. On the other hand, modern psychological theories of the mind, from Freud to cognitive psychology, also equate mental processes with external, technologically generated visual forms. Interactive computer media perfectly fits in this trend. Mental processes of reflection, problem solving, memory and association are externalized, equated with following a link, moving to a new image, choosing a new scene or a text. In fact, the very principle of new media — links — objectifies the process of human thinking which involves connecting ideas, images, memories. Now, with interactive media, instead of looking at a painting and mentally following our own private associations to other images, memories, ideas, we are asked to click on the image on the screen in order to go to another image on the screen, and so on. Thus we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations. In short, in what can be read as a new updated version of Althusser's "interpolation," we are asked to mistake the structure of somebody's else mind for our own.

This is a new kind of identification appropriate for the information age of cognitive labor. The cultural technologies of an industrial society — cinema and fashion — asked us to identify with somebody's bodily image. The interactive media asks us to identify with somebody's else mental structure.

P.S. I develop the arguments about modern media technologies and externalization of mental life in more detail in "From the Externalization of the Psyche to the Implantation of Technology." In *Mind Revolution: Interface Brain/Computer*, edited by Florian Rötzer, 90-100. München: Akademie Zum Dritten Jahrtausend, 1995.