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Changing Human Relationships Through Interactive Art

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B.F.A. Thesis

Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts

Washington University in St. Louis

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“...[I]t’s very empowering, right, to not be judged on your appearance? To have created a mechanism that allows you, or any wearer, to enter the space, but not be immediately pigeonholed by unchangeable aspects of who you are—it gives you a real kind of freedom to instill people with a different feeling than maybe you usually do, and what kind of an opportunity that is, on both sides.”

–Sarah Rose Sharp, “Nick Cave on ‘Tackling Really Hard Issues’ with Art.”

Abstract

In our current society, there is a constant endeavor to reconcile our differences while respecting our individuality. Since the 1990s, a large amount of artworks begin focusing on human relationships. In this essay, I discuss the question: how can interactive artworks create common ground between people while respecting their individual identity? Through creating a sequence of interactive artworks, I determine the three factors that are necessary for connecting people of different backgrounds—mutual vulnerability, anonymity, and the leveling of power dynamics. *Mutual vulnerability* entails an interaction where two people reveal themselves to each other, and connect through this reciprocal action. *Anonymity* involves having people reveal only single aspects of their body to avoid pigeonholing, and encourage them to focus on feeling the humanistic presence of each other. *Leveling of power dynamics* regulates this process further by ensuring the interactions are initiated by both people simultaneously, so neither person can initiate nor feel obligated to respond. These constraints on an interaction create situations where people, regardless of their identities, can quickly connect and build a sense of mutual fondness and respect. In conclusion, I discuss the ethics of an artist's control over an interpersonal interaction, and how my works perpetuates the importance of individuality.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been a steady growth of artworks that focus on creating interpersonal relationships. Art critic Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term *relational aesthetics* to describe these works, which are typically interactive objects that require the simultaneous participation of multiple people (Bourriaud 28). These objects facilitate specific kinds of interactions between participants, such as listening to each other's voices (*Voice Tunnel*, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer), enjoying a meal together (*Untitled (free)*, Rirkrit Tiravanija), or discussing a social issue (*Between the Door and the Street*, Suzanne Lacy). These works aim to foster mutual respect and appreciation through dialogue, and tackle the discrimination and misunderstanding between people of different backgrounds.



Fig. 1. Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Free)*, 1992, Installation

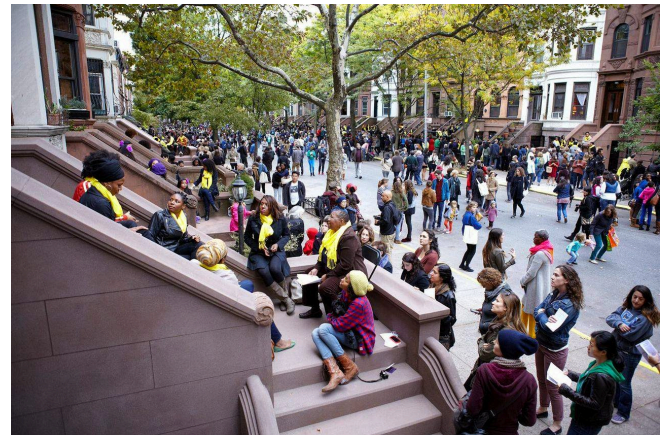


Fig. 2. Suzanne Lacy, *Between the Door and the Street*, 2013, Installation and Performance



Fig. 3. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Voice Tunnel*, 2013, Audio Installation

My thesis works follow this trajectory of building human relationships, but with a specific question in mind: how can we reconcile our differences during the short experience of an interactive artwork? Apathy or hostility inevitably arises between people of different values and identities. However, by utilizing alternative forms of interpersonal interactions, we can temporarily divorce ourselves from our apparent differences, and connect with others as mutually fascinated individuals. To do so, I begin inventing forms of interpersonal interactions with three factors—mutual vulnerability, anonymity, and the leveling of power dynamics. In this essay, I discuss the effects of each factor on participants of my interactive artworks, and how the combination of these factors creates a common ground that unites people of different backgrounds.

Mutual Vulnerability

In an interaction where mutual vulnerability is at play, two or more participants are encouraged to appear emotionally vulnerable to each other. New York based artist Shani Ha's *Table For Two* reflects this concept. In this work, she installed half of a table against a coffee shop on the streets of New York, and encouraged people to sit face to face with a stranger



Fig. 4. Shani Ha, *Table for Two*, 2015, Installation

through the window. To participate in this piece, you must decide to sit down at the table on either side, and make yourself vulnerable to another person's gaze. Doing so, and knowing that the other person is doing the same for you, instantly creates an intimate moment between you and the other. The excitement and awkwardness of this interaction immerse participants in the moment, and divert their focus away from the superficial characteristics of the other person.

In my work, *Light Booth*, I set up a situation where two people have to interact on opposite sides of a full-length two-way mirror. A button is attached to the mirror on both sides, and controls a spotlight on its own side. Participants can choose to press the button to turn on a light above their heads, and reveal him/herself to the other person. When only one light is on, the illuminated participant will see his/her own reflection, while the other participant observes him/her in the dark. However, once one participant sums up the courage to reveal him/herself, the other is often compelled to do the same. This process of presenting oneself to another person, and having him/her reciprocate one's action creates the mutual vulnerability necessary for an instant emotional connection, without either individual having to explain themselves.



Fig. 5. Daniel Shieh, *Light Booth*, 2015, Multimedia Installation

Anonymity

In the next stage of my thesis work, I started to create interactions with an additional constraint—anonymity. In these interactions, participants go through the process of mutual self-revelation, but present only a single aspect of themselves. This makes it difficult for participants to contextualize each other within existing societal categories, and encourages them to understand each other in a new way. For participants to feel equal to one another, they must be divorced from the modes of social conduct that they feel obliged to follow when interacting with different people. This prevents participants from modifying their appearances in response to their social milieu, and relieves them from the pressure of trying to appear a certain way.

A level of anonymity is maintained so that participants cannot locate each other within their self-defined social-hierarchy scale, yet can still physically sense each other's humanity. In these interactions, only biometric characteristics such as voice, moving eyes, or body warmth are revealed. By exchanging these intimate aspects of one's body, participants can connect on an emotional level without knowledge of each other's full appearance and social identity.

In Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pulse Room*, the artist installed several light bulbs and a heartbeat sensor in a large room. When a person grabs the sensor, his/her heartbeat is recorded,

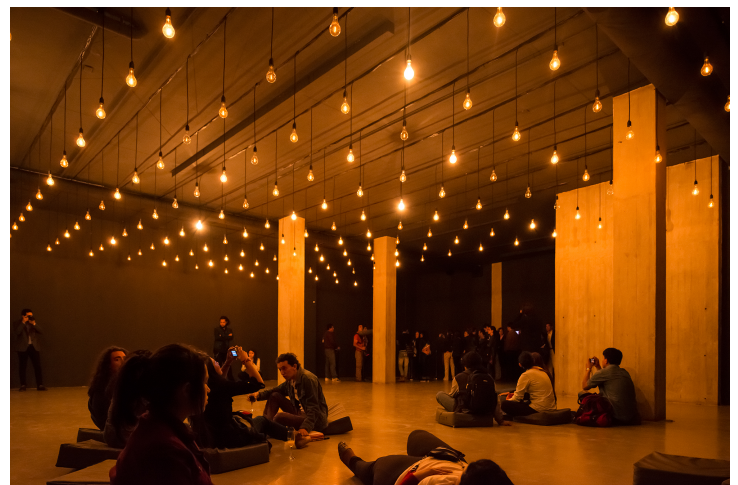
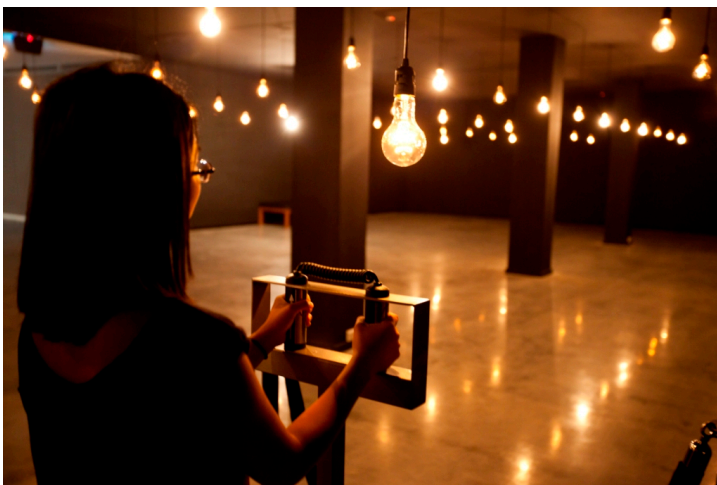


Fig. 6. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Pulse Room*, 2007, Multimedia Installation

and the lights then flicker to its rhythm. Other people in the room are caught in this glimmering spectacle, and encouraged to view what they see as a representation of a person near them; they then form a connection with the person through this representation.

In my work *Conversation Tubes*, I installed several talking tubes in three different parks in University City, MO. These talking tubes each contain a cellphone inside; through the push of a button on the exterior of the tubes, people can randomly call strangers in the two other parks. People are encouraged to understand someone—whom they'll likely never meet—solely through their voices. Knowing that the other person will only perceive a part of you, participants can temporarily forget about the certain images that they're pressured to maintain when interacting with strangers in the public space.



Fig. 7. Daniel Shieh, *Conversation Tubes*, 2016, Multimedia Installation



Fig. 8. Daniel Shieh, *Untitled (We)*, 2016, Performance

In *Untitled (We)*, I invited three or more participants to wear earplugs and goggles that illuminate their eyes, and go into a completely dark room for two minutes. While inside this room, participants can only see each other's eyes, while everything else is hidden in the darkness. Knowing that only their eyes are visible to others, participants are freed from the pressure of trying to look a certain way, and allowed to simply be in the moment and connect through this shared experience.

Leveling the Power Dynamics

In the final stage of my thesis work, I created interactions with an additional constraint. These interactions are set up so that the power dynamics in an interpersonal interaction is leveled. In common interactions such as talking or gesturing, there is always an inequality between two people—one person has to initiate by talking, while the other person has to respond. This becomes a back-and-forth process, where one person perpetually exerts more control over the interaction at any given moment. To create an interaction where this power dynamic does not exist, two people must simultaneously act as both the initiator and respondent. This requires two

people to initiate an interaction at the same time, and “talk” and “listen” simultaneously. Thus, I created intimate interactions where two people reveal themselves and connect with each other, but in a way that resists the usual power hierarchy.

In *Talk (At the Same Time)*, I set up a tin-can-telephone-like apparatus and placed the two ends on opposite walls in the same room. On each end, there is a pair of headphones and a wooden box with a microphone inside. Participants may talk into the microphone, but the electronic circuits inside the boxes allow participants to hear each other only if they talk at the same time—both participants thus act as initiators of this interpersonal interaction. In the brief moments of contact, participants will not be able to decipher what each other is saying, but will

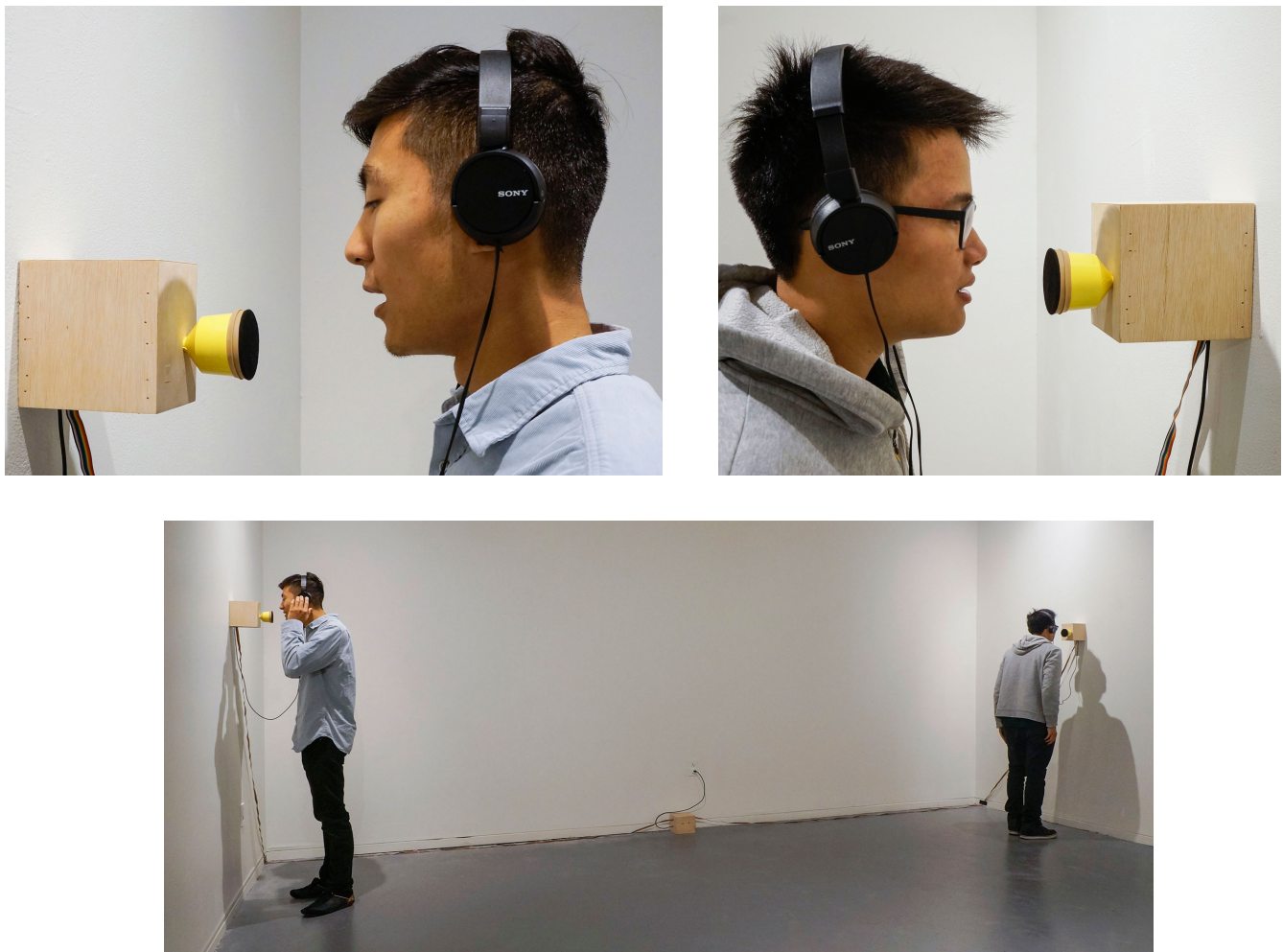


Fig. 9. Daniel Shieh, *Talk (At the Same Time)*, 2016, Multimedia Installation

hear their own voices overlapped with each other's. Through this mechanism, both voices receive equal emphasis, as neither person can start a conversation or feel obligated to respond. The participants thus connect through the intimate act of mutual listening, while feeling equal to each other.

For my final thesis work, I focused on tactile communication. When a person touches another person, both of them feel the touch at the same time. This allows both people to concurrently send and receive messages with their bodies. However, there is an inherent power hierarchy, as one person must initiate the touch, and another person must accept it. For two people to be equal in a touching interaction, they must be reaching for each other's body at the same time, and simultaneously act as initiator and respondent. In *Trace*, a black fabric screen separates two participants; on both sides of the screen, there are multicolored dots and lines painted in the same composition. To interact with the screen, participants must put on headphones that play instructions in a robotic voice. The voice instructs the participants on both sides to touch and trace the same places simultaneously. In these moments, participants feel the warmth and slight quiver of the other person's hand, and connect through this fragment of humanity while feeling equally in control.

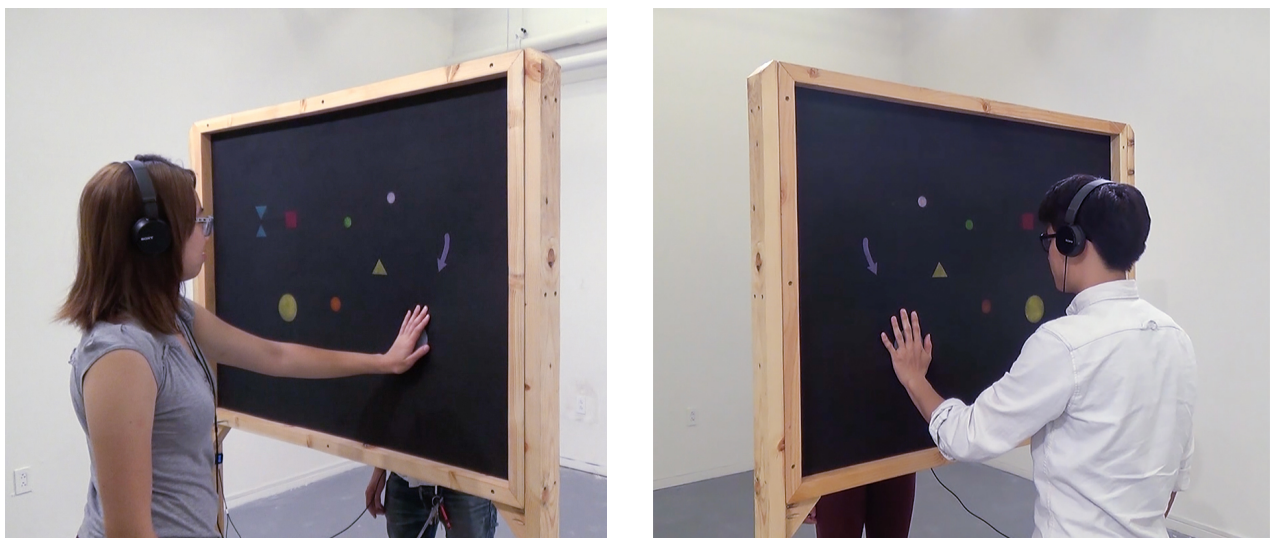


Fig. 10. Daniel Shieh, *Trace*, 2016, Multimedia Installation

The Constructed Barrier, and the Ethics of an Artist's Control

All of the works discussed in this essay involve creating some forms of physical barrier, through which an artist mandates an interpersonal relationship. To participate in the works, participants must relinquish their freedom and follow the constraints created by the artworks, and connect with others only in ways that the works permit. While the barrier prevents two people from connecting in the conventional sense, where two people appreciate each other's identity and personality, it does foster affection and respect toward someone we wouldn't normally try to understand.

The artist as an authoritarian mediator of social conduct then raises the question—is it ethical for someone to decide the correct way to interact? As Bishop states in her essay on relational art, “the task is to balance the tension between imaginary ideal and pragmatic management of a social positivity without lapsing into the totalitarian” (Bishop 66). The ethical ground wavers only when participants are enforced by an inviolable higher power such as a Totalitarian government. When this control manifests only within the experience of a curious art form, the viewer has freedom to either examine or ignore the artwork. Viewers of this artwork can then decide whether or not to use the structure and submit to its constraints. Take the playground slide for example—if one wants to enjoy the experience of sliding down a slope, one must position one's body in a certain way and follow the rules of the structure.

Conclusion: Preserving Individuality

While my works control people's appearances in an interaction, it does not aim to suppress their individual identities. In Bishop's essay, she draws from Laclau and Mouffe's idea and argues that “a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are sustained, not

erased. Without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order” (Bishop 66). Thus, rather than erasing the differences, the three factors discussed in the essay create situations where people simply focus on a fragment of each other. Reducing a person’s appearance down to a single, controlled aspect may seem to greatly subdue his/her individuality, but in fact, this process prevents others from imposing prejudgments about the person’s identity, and reestablishes the opportunity for mutual understanding. After the brief interactions through the artworks, people may view each other in a different light, and treat each other’s differences with a newfound respect.

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