

Action, Sensation and Intentionality in Physically Interactive Artworks delivered at 'Moving Forward'. The 3rd College of Arts and Social Sciences Postgraduate Conference at The University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen. June 28th and 29th. 2006.

General project description

In my research project I am looking at artwork where a physical contribution is invited from a participant. Such work introduces an observable action alongside more contemplative acts of interpretation. In these works it could be said that artists now understand their audience as potential 'co-authors' in the completion of the work.

The artworks I have been looking at involve moments of engagement by an audience such as the moving of elements or the movement of the participant's body in acts of touching. It could be said that these works all broadly involve a sensory 'interaction'.

The aim of the project is to more clearly define what an interaction is and what artwork may be relevant. I also aim to explore relevant aesthetic theories and find their strengths and weaknesses in explaining aesthetics and interaction.

Furthermore to get a fuller sense of what is meant by 'interaction', I propose that we first have to understand what 'action' is. Action may be captured as it is 'known' in analytical philosophy, then as it is 'lived' in phenomenology and finally it can be described in the broader context of sociology.

In this paper the aim is to introduce some examples of the kind of interactive artworks that interest me and relate these to a phenomenological understanding of action, paying particular attention to the early phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur. I will not attempt to define interaction here. I will only show some examples of how it has appeared as art in non-digital form.

Examples

Cuban artist: Felix Gonzalez Torres

The piles of posters are a free reproduction that can be taken away by the viewer. The 'candy spills' consist of wrapped confectionary piled in a corner. The viewer is invited to take a sweet.

American artist: Christian Marclay

Marclay created carpet-like floor pieces from vinyl records. The resulting scratched recordings were then sold.

Brazilian artist: Ernesto Neto

Neto's works invite our curiosity. In this case you can touch the polystyrene pellets that the work is stuffed with.

Mexican artist: Gabriel Orozco

A ball of plasticine, the weight of the artist rolled around the streets of Monterey. It sustained accumulations of impressions of the surrounding space, the artist's proddings and other anonymous human traces.

Austrian artist: Franz West

In these works started in 1970 West solicits a bodily, as well a contemplative, response to his sculpture. In his words he describes them as operating as "a prosthesis for (non-technological) culture [...]" (Benezra, Curinger and Fleck, 1999: 17)

Yugoslavian artist: Marina Abramovic

Abramovic provided simple instructions for engagement with these works made of various stones and crystals. "I don't consider these works as sculptures but as transitory objects to trigger off public experiences through interaction with them, physical or mental" (Abramovic, M: 1998, 'The Bridge', Charta, Milan)

Brazilian artist: Lygia Clark

This is a participatory sculpture made out of a series of metal plates connected with hinges. The viewer is invited to select new positions for the work.

Activated spectatorship

In the examples of work I have shown it could also be said that there is a tendency to *present* rather than *represent* a set of circumstances. In experiencing such work you move through actual space and witness real texture. In such a case none of these phenomena are being depicted, they are present in a way that they are ordinarily present. Claire Bishop claims that because phenomena are not being *represented* but *presented*, because the viewer directly experiences these phenomena by being involved with the actual work rather than remaining detached in the way that one does when viewing a depiction of space or texture, the viewer is *active* rather than *passive*.

Rosalind Krauss in 'Passages in modern sculpture' comes to similar conclusions. Pre-modern sculptural space was originally understood to be separate from the literal space of daily life and was thought of as a metaphorical space. Modernists clung on to this metaphorical space as an opportunity to depict concepts or mental states.

For Krauss minimalism discarded this metaphorical space and the premise that it guaranteed artistic autonomy. Minimalism instead embraced the continuum of everyday space.

These examples tend to question some assumptions we have about our experiences of art works. By acknowledging an active viewer we are accepting that contemplative stillness goes hand in hand with a sense of activity. There are further grounds for accepting this when we consider that you have to walk round architecture to appreciate its spaces, that there are also numerous art forms where participation is encouraged such as singing or dancing and it can also be shown that the external appearance of stillness does not necessarily indicate an inner experience of stillness.

Sensory experience

A straight-forward perception of a spruce tree is given by Robert Audi:

"There are at least four elements in perception. All evident in our example: the perceiver, me; the object, the spruce; the sensory experience, my visual experience of colours and shapes; and the relation between the object and the subject, commonly taken to be a causal relation by which the object seems to produce sensory experience in the perceiver." (Audi, R. 1988: 8)

For the works under consideration in this paper the most relevant element in this description is 'sensory experience', but from a phenomenological point of view it can be argued that this definition makes assumptions about the relationship between our experiences and our knowledge of these experiences. For example when you experience a spruce tree, you encounter a spruce tree in its environment. You experience a tree as it is for you. You may encounter it as shade or as an obstacle but you encounter it primarily as it appears in an everyday way. You don't encounter spruce tree sensations that you then combine with an assessment of the quality of its wood and its height. From a phenomenological point of view the spruce tree is encountered in life as it exists for us, rather than as an aspect of knowledge. Audi's description also introduces a causal relation between an external object and an internal experience where the perceiver is somehow

passively surveying what is going on. This description asserts that we have a causal sequence that starts with a spruce tree and ends with a sensory experience of shape, colour and smell. We then somehow imagine that these shapes, colours and smells are examined by our consciousnesses inside our heads. If we instead picture the perceiver as somehow more fully engaged in the sensory experience and in some ways determined by these experiences, then we begin to capture a phenomenological perspective on the spruce tree. The spruce tree experienced as shade from the sun feels different to the spruce tree that is an obstacle in your path. Consciousness doesn't simply *register* the spruce tree as 'shade' or as 'obstacle', the experience of 'shade' or 'obstacle' *embodies* our consciousness of the spruce tree. It is this different *feel to the engagement* that gives us the fundamentals of a phenomenological description of sensory experience.

Husserl's sensation and experience

Edmond Husserl describes sensation as "the Ego's first subjective possession" (Husserl, E 1928: 225). There is a rudimentary consciousness that accompanies the appearance of sensation and at this point it changes. It is no longer sense data. We experience the world, through the senses, and this sensation is inwardly interpreted. It is described as an "inner perception", an "inner consciousness" and also as an "apperception" (Husserl, E 1900: 539). All of these terms have roughly the same meaning. We 'inwardly perceive' or we are 'inwardly conscious' of our sensations. Husserl also calls this 'intentionality'.

Intentionality

Intentionality is a fundamental term in phenomenology. A phenomenologist would say that every kind of experience we have must be understood in terms of intentionality. From the outset we should distinguish intentionality as it is used in phenomenology from the common usage of intention. Ordinarily we use the word intention in a practical sense to mean: 'To have a plan or expectation'. In phenomenology intentionality means something different. It means something like 'directed toward' or the 'directedness' of the mind. When you think, you always think about something. When you perceive, you always perceive something. When you hope, you always hope for something. Intentionality is the thought, perception and hope. It is a mental state that aims towards something. Intentionality means, "what is before the mind in thought" (Craig, E 1998: 816). In this sense the day-to-day use of intending fits in alongside other intentional states such as believing something, remembering something, anticipating something, loving something and hating something.

Advantages of recognising intentionality

One advantage of recognising intentionality is that it helps us to understand that consciousness is not “univocal” (Sokolowski, R. 2000: 13). Roughly this means that we don’t consider the self in terms of a single voice. We question the sense that consciousness is understood to be an isolated, uniform medium that we imagine to be inside and silent until mental states like hope or fear come along. Phenomenology replaces this model with intentionality. There is no neutral inner state that is not affected by a mental state. One is always subject to some kind of intentionality even if you are in a state of introspection. In this way Sokolowski can say that the main aim of phenomenology is: “Sorting out and differentiating all these intentionalities [...]” (Sokolowski, R. 2000: 13). Phenomenology tries to find out the links between intentional states and the realities that correspond with them.

Another advantage is that intentionality serves to defend against a reductive physical explanation of mental states. As a natural science psychology begins to treat consciousness as composed of actual events in the material world. Now, it is undeniable that aspects of consciousness register as physical events, but it is arguable whether this offers us an exhaustive account of consciousness. De Boer argues that by treating experience as merely a “causal succession of facts” (De Boer, T 1978: 204), we only theorise about possible causes of experience. The experience of the visual is reduced to a process occurring in the optic nerves. Phenomenology withdraws from explanations of the physical events that cause consciousness and instead attempts to describe consciousness as it is found, as it appears to us.

Ricoeur’s use of these ideas

Paul Ricoeur questions our tendency to use objective descriptions when we come to explain the self. He demonstrates how explanations of the body by natural science tend to become confused with descriptions of the self. He comments that this occurs: “[...] bit by bit” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 8). The terms of the body as an object are inappropriately called up to serve as a means of psychological explanation. Ricoeur proposes that we cannot explain consciousness in terms of the causal laws of physics. Instead the self must be determined by the basic realities of intentionality. Descriptions of the self must be determined by concepts associated with our participation in acts of “existence” or “incarnation” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 14). Following Husserl, Ricoeur isn’t attempting to preside over the detached facts of an objectified world, but to present something that is closer to life as it appears to us. For Ricoeur this life “overflows” any objective description (Ricoeur, P 1950: 17). From this

phenomenological perspective he looks at voluntary and involuntary action and explains what role the body has in explanations of, among other things, decision, motivation, choice, acting, moving and effort.

Need as lack or impetus

The rudimentary emergence of 'need' is called upon by Ricoeur to highlight that the body remains a central condition of action. Ricoeur claims that "To experience is always more than to understand" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 86). *Existence or life* comes to us as fundamentally as *thought or judgement*. Emphasizing reciprocity of the situation he shows how this comes to light initially in the characterisation of need as at once a lack, and an impetus. 'Need' is considered as a complex, "[...] uneasy, alert absence, an active, directed lack" which has an "other-directedness" which can "carry me beyond myself" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 90). So hunger drives me toward food, tiredness towards sleep etc. Ricoeur emphasizes the participation of the whole self in this experience showing that objective knowledge must be tied to a personal experience. In this way he describes such basic experiences as being secured through a contrast between of the 'personal-body' of phenomenology and the 'object-body' of physiology.

Preformed skills

In a further portrayal of the roots of involuntary behaviour Ricoeur asserts from the outset that he is not interested in 'reflexes'. He argues that "preformed skills (know-how)" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 231) fit the description more fully. I would take these to be know-how in our bodily movements, like a capacity to estimate how to pick up a ball, etc. Reflexes are of little importance because they are completely unrelated to any kind of willing. They cannot be decided on. They appear suddenly with a natural force. However in comparing the two, Ricoeur is able to throw their characteristics into sharper relief. Their main difference is that a reflex is a response to something outside that produces an action like a blink in the form of a "signal" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 242). There is no persuasive element, no reflecting will. In carrying out a 'preformed skill' there is more of a negotiation between ourselves and the world. This is skill that "regulates" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 242) between something outside itself and an emerging recognition of a potential impetus to move. The important difference is therefore that reflex is a sharp occurrence with no development. While a preformed skill is initiated from a sense of making-even a situation that is fluctuating. For Ricoeur this conception of rudimentary skill forms the ground of all action. He criticizes any reductionism which uses 'reflex' as a base. This only offers the "addition of rigid partial movements" as an account of the elements of action (Ricoeur, P

1950: 244). In its place he proposes a primitive situation for action embodied in a “[...] dynamic tension capable of variable resolution” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 244).

The paradox of choice

In coming to a description of choice Ricoeur clearly proposes that a choice is an event. To choose is to sum up all previous hesitations and to end the argument. “[...] it completes it and at the same time breaks it off.” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 164). A choice brings everything together and starts something new simultaneously. This state of affairs is described by Ricoeur as offering us the main paradox in the description of choice. How do we escape endlessly considering our options if we don't interrupt the considering? When we interrupt our considerations we decide, but in deciding, everything we went through previously becomes concealed in a sudden outcome that is unlike the process.

Deliberation and irruption

Ricoeur tackles the problem by viewing the situation in terms of “deliberation” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 168) and “irruption” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 171). A ‘deliberation’ aimed at a choice is understood to be a slow process. A choice may appear suddenly to engulf the deliberation, but for Ricoeur the ‘project’ under consideration becomes the trying out of ‘hesitations’. In the trying out of hesitations we seek to refine a mess of in-decision. “Thus choice is a resolution of deliberation.” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 169). Understood in terms of an ‘irruption’ all our trials join together. They become a singular “leap” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 171). There is no slow acquisition of certainty, precision is arrived at through a sharp declaration. Ricoeur couches his descriptions of the moment with reference to daring and risking. In this way he is able to propose that choice, captured as a risk, is comparable to how we actually ‘materially’ engage with the world. We make choices “[...] on the basis of limited information and in urgent situations which will not wait” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 175). He concludes that in order to achieve a description that can do justice to the full scope of the journey towards a choice Ricoeur argues for a reconciliation between ‘deliberation’ and ‘irruption’. The inner conflicts and considerations, the hesitations and choices, the deliberations and the ‘leaps’ are all resolved in the physical act. “The act reconciles practically the theoretical discord of the two readings” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 181).

Pragma and traversing

For Ricoeur without an action, a decision remains partial. It is only through one's willingness to take part in the advancement of actual possibilities that a complete outcome occurs as an “[...] insertion of the possible into the actual” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 203). It's this

'actuality' that appears to lead to the inevitable objectification of action in the world. Action becomes associated with physical representations of force rather than less substantial notions like decision. For this reason voluntary action is prone to being divorced from thought and meaning and viewed as a force of nature or an "object among objects" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 207). Ricoeur extends this idea by claiming that in describing an action merely as a physical movement we are succumbing to a treatment of the body as an object. Plain movement of the body doesn't fully secure a sense of an action. Instead he describes how, "the action "traverses" my body" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 210). He attempts to sum it up as ""the being done by me", the *pragma*" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 210). Husserl alternatively describes the action of the individual as "a theme of his freedom" (Husserl, E 1928: 228). In an action the doing is delivered into the thing done. There is an overlap that is difficult to encapsulate. The physicality of the action seems to swallow up and stand in for the impetus of decision. Additionally in arresting the act to describe it, we lose its identity as action.

Docility and resistance

Action is also understood to be 'in the world' in a way that differs from objects. I come across objects, they are already there, but my action "depends on me" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 309). He conceives of action as something in which the body becomes an organ of the will. Like an internal organ it isn't considered when we ordinarily act. It disappears. It may occur 'after' the result or 'alongside' the action but it is usually disregarded. In this sense he is able to describe an action as something that 'traverses', "*the docility of a yielding body*" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 309). We could conceive of the optimum conditions for an action in an athletic performance. However Ricoeur indicates that such 'absolutes' of freedom in the movement of a docile body are a momentary flaring up of just one side of the real situation. This must also include resistance like a consciousness of muscular heaviness. In acknowledging this we arrive at the central conception of 'effort'.

Effort is active not sensed

In his conception of how effort relates to the actual act of movement, Ricoeur again points to the inadequacy of descriptions of action and effort that deal with the situation as a group of component parts. In such cases a theory of effort is sought in terms of how we 'sense' effort. For Ricoeur sensations cannot fully account for an effort. They don't coalesce to explain the unity of an effort. Sensations may indicate our movements as numerous pieces of data, but they don't illuminate the effort. He states that "sensation is a register of fact.[...] strewn about the muscles" (Ricoeur, P 1950: 319). The very fact that sensations are so easily measurable should be enough for us to realise that it cannot give us the full

picture. Ricoeur posits instead that effort inhabits a totally different level of experience: “ a radically non-representative, radically practical dimension” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 319). He suggests that we must always keep the “properly *active* moment” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 319) to the forefront of our conceptions of effort, otherwise we degrade its practical and transitional nature to a succession of theoretical components. We speak of an event as though it were an object. We settle for a, “*spectator* representation of effort” (Ricoeur, P 1950: 320).

Conclusion

In highlighting the importance of intentionality in phenomenological accounts of experience the hope is that an extended understanding of the senses is revealed. The aim was to avoid a reductive categorisation of the senses as the ‘data of sensation’ by considering them alongside their accompanying mental states.

The goal was also to demonstrate that in combining sensation with intentionality we don’t relegate sensory experience to a lower rung in the hierarchy of knowledge. We capture a fuller picture of sensation if we consider it as interconnected with rational thought and emotional states.

Lastly the objective was to select some key phenomenological perspectives on action to show that the action of the selected interactive works cannot be fully captured as physical force. The objective was to show the usefulness of capturing an action as an overlap between the mental state and the physical act. By showing this it is hoped that we avoid any simplistic models of the phenomenon of action.

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