

# DIGITAL DYNAMICS IN NORDIC CONTEMPORARY ART

Edited by Tanya Toft Ag



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# Interactivity Dynamics

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Lorella Scacco

In the 1990s, globalization, access, flexibility and openness created the conditions for the expansion of personal experience, with the spread of digitization processes enabling the automatic processing of information. Cyberspace, our computerized environment that embraces many computer users and computer data, has facilitated connections, coordination and synergies between individual intelligences. This fluidity of thought has increasingly marked our society, thanks to the spread of social networks. Evolution today seems to concern more co-evolution: we learn and grow through a variety of encounters and relationships, whether real and/or virtual. Things are no longer governed by one sovereign principle but rather by a phenomenon of 'reciprocity'. It is the part of the whole that the self expands. Now, keywords are 'sharing' and 'interacting'.

This is significantly the case for contemporary art where cohabiting styles, languages and techniques are very different from each other in the single artwork. The digital revolution has made the image infinitely more malleable, with great cost and time advantages. The term 'interactive' can be used to mark this age. The dynamic of interactivity that guides my essay is investigated not only as a tool but also as an ongoing interchange of digital information, culture and lifestyles. To interact means 'to act reciprocally', to cause and undergo at the same time. The desire to actively involve the viewer into the inception, creation and completion of the same work of art is a phenomenon that has its roots in the historical avant-garde. Just think of Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), where a wheel rotates on a painted stool inviting the viewer to turn it, to 'interact' with the ready-made. The birth of binary language has allowed artists to have increasingly powerful and engaging interactive devices. In the case of Nordic artists, for instance, the digital dynamics have introduced a new hybrid relationship with nature and with that altered the ancient Nordic canon of nature.

## Interactive Devices

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In computer culture, interaction is the active participation of a user through a data, information or image transaction. The physical devices that perform this connection function are called 'interfaces': they transform and reconvert movements, audible signs and visual signs at will. The information is not limited to an exchange of electrical impulses but goes through the gestures and sounds of the people who produce the interaction. Through interactivity, the work of art is 'in our hands', that is, you can participate in its construction or re-invention. It is not just a mode of participation in the construction of its meaning (as with 'traditional' art), but a co-production

of the work since the viewer is often called upon to directly intervene and create a sequence of signs or events. It is a collective creation, often a work-event, meaning the final result of interactive or participatory work is determined by the actions of the public. Interactive artists like Jeffrey Shaw, Lynn Hershman and Perry Hoberman, encouraged the audience to create their own narratives and associations with their actions. We can recall the interactive environment *Lorna* (1979) by Californian artist Lynn Hershman, which critics widely consider to be the first 'interactive media art' piece (Rush 1999: 203). The video presents the story of a woman, Lorna, who lives in her apartment without any contact with the outside world. Through the video, the viewer can communicate with the woman's world and save her from her loneliness. The changing on-screen sequences determine the development of the story, creating a personal version.

The latest technologies – and in particular interactivity – are oriented towards the stimulation of our multi-sensory experience, which simultaneously target many of the recipient's senses. Interactivity in art not only involves the eye but increasingly engages touch, kinaesthesia and proprioception. The 'point of view' is flanked by proprioception, that is, from the information gathered by our muscles and tendons, which allow us to identify, for example, our position in space. The design of these 'virtual' spaces also exploits temporal processes of our senses. Changes in our awareness of time are adjusted by our emotions (you only need to think about how different time is experienced when you are waiting or if you are angry). In these virtual and interactive environments, our involvement depends upon the relationship that is going to be established between the environments and our temporality. Digital technologies are developing new perceptual alphabets that we are learning to understand and use. They create new sensibilities, which interlace, analogize, overlap and blend between the digital and analogue, between the organic and the inorganic. Today, we live – increasingly – in the oscillation between physical/material perception and virtual/intangible perception. We can live without continuity between these two dimensions.

## Digital and Biological

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Scientists are transforming computers into organic machines. Whilst the scientist Gerald M. Edelman claimed that the computer cannot hear, Marchesini has announced that:

new 'bioputer' is born, a biological computer system. In America, DNA molecules are already being used to perform complicated calculations. Other experiments use leech neurons connected to chips, which are a hybrid of silicon and carbon, of technology and essence of life, producing autonomous biological realities.

(Marchesini 2009)

The new intelligent machines will be a mix of consciousness, emotionality and social skills. They are currently somewhere between interactivity based on silicon and that which comes



from organic life. In that case we have to deal with a new kind of sensory communication between us and the machines.

Laura Beloff is working in this direction and may be considered one of the pioneering artists in this area of research in the Nordic countries. The Finnish artist has always been interested in the crossover of science, technology and art to make the public aware of important issues and get their opinions on them, as shown by her first interactive installations that created new inclusive realities rather than simply reproduce reality in a virtual way. In these experiments, based on the physical and emotional effects of an interactive system in real time, Beloff very soon noticed that the strong expectation from viewers of what would happen after their interactions became a limit for the development of her work. So her attention shifted from the reactions of people to the reactions of 'systems', since they allowed her to work on a technological element that fed on her own life and was modified according to her environment with less dependence on public actions. In her 'wearable works' such as *Head* (2004–7) and *Heart Donor* (2007) the role of the target audience is fundamental. These works are designed to increase new potential users over a long period of time rather than to get quick responses to their actions. In this sense, Beloff hopes that this technological clothing will be used in peoples' everyday lives instead of only being shown in museums.

After this phase of research, Beloff has explored the divide between the digital and physical universe, for example in *Seven Mile Boots* (2003–4). Here the person who wears the boots designed by Beloff, along with Berger and Pichlmair, can simultaneously 'walk' in the physical world and the Internet world whilst listening to various chats. The work is 'open' (Eco [1962] 1989), expanding upon the semiotic concept of such words in a technological way, which brings together real people in real time, or rather, in 'real life,' as the artist herself states. It creates

a possibility of space which pushes the users forward in a search for more. This deficit creates the desire for substance, a desire to consume and to experience. The piece seduces in one hand with knowing and on the other hand with not yet knowing; What will happen now? What will be the next response?

(Randomseed Official Website 2003–04)

It is a work in progress that evolves in close contact with the users and the real and digital space that surrounds them.

The perfusion of bio-technology connection and the connectivity of technological support made the miniaturization of computer systems possible, allowing the creation of hybrid products in continuous transformation and redefinition. Recently, Laura Beloff has created new bio-technological connections in perceptual or experiential fields by working towards a university research project titled *Hybrid Matters*. One of her experiments predicts the inclusion of non-human biological organisms inside technological networks, as in the recent project titled *Fly Printer*. One of the three finalized versions, *Fly Printer – Extended* (2016), is a work that raises philosophical and existential questions about standardized methods of printing, and therefore on the current predominance of a uniform and standard visual communication. The

artist has created three versions of the installation, which consists of a printing device where a glass sphere is home to a group of midges. These small organisms feed on inks mixed with food and, after digestion, form small coloured dots in no particular order on paper placed under the transparent globe. Biological organisms must therefore replace a technological function of our common printer. *Fly Printer* indicates a gap between the engineering and the organic and at the same time holds back human control on information and biological species. The results of the printer designed by Beloff are indeed uncontrollable because the printouts are random traces of biological processes. As the artist, along with co-creator of the installation Klaus, states:

The biological and the cultural are reunited in this apparatus as a possibility to break through a common way of depicting the world, trying to find different surfaces and using a strange apparatus to insist in the interstice of visibility. Through the *Fly Printer* happens the becoming of a colourful dot, what is there to be seen? To be interpreted? This is a disruption of the chances of sense.

(Laura Beloff Official Website 2017)

In another version of the printing device, the artist presents advancement in research by inserting the Artificial Intelligence reasoning to interpret the coloured dots left by midges. In *Fly Printer – Extended*, biological organisms are in fact considered elements of signs that produce technology, but the printer also includes an intelligent system with a camera and convolutional neural network (CNN) to recognize and interpret the images. So the installation creates a system that first produces images with flies; secondly, an artificial vision system observes these images as models and finally, artificial intelligence (CNN) will interpret these abstract images to a human observer. The observer will see on the one hand the real dots produced by flies (under the sphere), and on the other hand the interpretation of the dots made by artificial intelligence (in projection) being able to make comparisons in its subsequent decoding. Here the interactive artwork is no longer ‘in our hands’ because the viewer is not directly involved in its construction or re-invention but is allowed to interrogate it to form their own opinion about the meaning of a hybrid nature work. This establishes a comparison between biological and artificial interaction with an evolutionary and synergetic potential to be discovered. With the *Fly Printer* project, Laura Beloff and her co-author raise questions about digital aesthetics and its future developments.

## Life Space

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The atypical nature of some projected, particularly moving, images in some places and the ability to interact with them raises new poetic imagery and extraordinary physical entanglements. Take for example Mona Hatoum’s installation *Corps étranger* (1994) in which the artist made the public experience a ‘simulated walk’ inside of her vital organs by projecting them on the floor. The author had inserted a small camera inside her body, which

recorded the functioning of her internal organs. Ever since this innovative installation, contemporary art has continued to impress us with exciting new forms and expressions.

From the point of view of perception, objects – regardless of whether they are real or virtual – never refer to a homogeneous reality; objects are never ‘all in one piece’, passive and unchanging in front of us. Already in the 1930s, Kurt Lewin, the father of topological psychology, suggested the perception of objects to be studied in the context of what he called the *life space* (Lewin [1936] 1961). This is a heterogeneous, complex and articulate space, which of course includes objects and the relationship between things and people, not just between people and places. Norwegian artist HC Gilje works in this direction with his installations, seeking to stimulate a resonance between the physical space and the mental space of audiences. The artist conceives his work as a moment of pulsating life in inanimate environments with the goal of transforming the place. Although starting from the concept of a dialogue between himself and the site preselected for the installation, his spatial projections and moving light installations trigger new perceptions in the audience. This happens for example in the installation *Projected Light Objects: Circles* (2011), which revolves around the boundary between projected light and real space through a series of circular projections, which constantly change the perception of the physical circle, and in *Revolver* (2013), where the shadow of the viewer interacts with the light and shadow installation.

The Norwegian artist uses technology to control our perception of motion. The slightest change, or lack thereof, also has an impact on our experience of time. As Gilje himself states: ‘If there is little or no change in an environment, this affects our experience of time. If there is motion happening at various speeds (like the pulses of light in *Trace*), both the experience of space and time seem to expand and contract’ (Gilje 2016). The installation *Lightspan Forest Flares* (2014) triggers our perception in a similar manner. Originally situated in a forest outside of Oslo, pulsating lights moving on a string between trees allow us to briefly discover a clearing in the forest before it closes again in the dark. In the installation *Flimmer* (2015), black strips are hanging from a gallery ceiling, and light breaking through the strips and their shadows animate the space, as wind passes through it. Gilje’s light installations distort the concept of static space and container objects. In another of his installation works, *In Transit* (2012), hanging white frames are lit gradually by a passage of light, one by one marking the space and moving the homogeneous environment. The site-specific installation *Snitt* (2010) is a straight line that slowly moves through the three rooms of the gallery space, ‘cutting’ the environment into different sections. The movement of the line, viewing the space from various angles, focuses the viewer’s attention on the physical quality of the gallery, like the walls, ceiling, floor, door openings, pipes, lighting, etc. The moving line of light, however, modulates and interrupts its straight linearity with a series of continuously evolving segments according to the observer’s position and the angle of the line, with respect to the architecture. The theme of movement is still under investigation in *Puls*, which is a light installation from 2010 commissioned for the Bybanen-Bergen city tunnel. This is formed by two waveforms lights with a total length of about 400 metres, in one side of the tunnel blue and white and in

the other side red and white. The movement of a train through the tunnel makes the waves appear as if animated, creating an emotional state in the traveller.

The concept of *life space* returns in Mogens Jacobsen's installation entitled *Hörbar/Audiobar* (2006) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde, Denmark. This installation allows you to explore a large collection of sounds through social interaction with physical objects – bottles, which can be placed on a table in the middle. The visitor can interact with the sounds in the 'audio-bar' by way of moving the bottles. As the Danish artist explains: 'The bottle- and bar-metaphor was chosen to facilitate social interaction between the visitors at the *Hörbar/Audiobar*' (Mogens Jacobsen Official Website 2006). Each bottle has a label indicating its contents, which may have different percentages of rhythms and vocals. All sounds gathered come from the Art Museum of Roskilde's collection of international audio-art from 1890 to present day.

Renowned as a Danish pioneer in 'net art', in 2001 Jacobsen nonetheless left behind the monitor and the computer as a means of expression, which he felt to be too limiting, and dedicated his practice to creating objects and installations with electronic and algorithmic elements (Jacobsen 2008). In his recent works, electronic data and network connectivity are often key elements, as for example in *Electric Shadows of Wu*, an interactive installation created in 2014 at the Vallensbæk station, near Copenhagen, playing with concepts of theatre, shadow puppetry and cinema. The installation consists of projected images and texts inspired by the Soviet novel *We* (1921) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, which are activated by the movement of passengers waiting for trains at night and in the early morning hours. The visual spectacle is determined by the travellers who become performers of words and poetic images.

## Digital Dynamics

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Thanks to the digital language, the image becomes information on the computer and all data can be manipulated, in contrast to the fixity of the traditional visual image in painting or sculpture. Peter Weibel once noted that: 'For the first time in history, the image is a dynamic system' (Weibel cited in Rush 1999: 170). Photography has quickly taken possession of digital language to alter and transform images. Photographs are translated into computer language by scanning, a simple process that transforms two-dimensional images into a mathematical binary. The raw material becomes malleable from the moment it becomes constituted of digits. The digital photography duo Aziz + Cucher has stated that: 'with the end of truth in photography has come a corresponding loss of trust; every image, every representation, is now a potential fraud' (cited in Rush 1999: 187–88). Digital technology cannot only be faked but can also expand the visual and creative new possibilities for a photographic work. This we find in the work of the Canadian artist Jeff Wall, who uses the computer to make montages of images that he could not otherwise do. The computer has also allowed the creation of objective reality alterations for which there is no correlation in the outside world, the surrounding reality. All of this has generated new feelings of

uncertainty and instability that are connected to the absence of mimesis, that is, the system of representation of the world, which however has crumbled since the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, interactive visualization replaces representation and simulation follows mimesis. As stated by the scholar Franco Fileni: 'A continuous work of digitization leads to increasingly larger abstractions, but doing so leads further and further away from the first references' (Fileni 1999); i.e. from reality – creating a sense of a 'safe distance' from reality.

This mode of drifting away from the physical object is found not only in architecture, industrial design and design, but also in the transmission of television images, the Internet, video-games, etc. The Icelandic artist Egill Sæbjörnsson's artistic research involves the link between mental reality and phenomenal reality in an original and ironic way, sometimes reversing the positions to test the viewer and his 'safe distance' from the things that are authentic or digital. Born in 1973 in Reykjavík, and with a background in painting, drawing and music, Sæbjörnsson has always been fascinated by video and animation and in particular by the potential to replicate reality. In his installation works, the artist creates different interactive environments through everyday sculptures and objects that emit sounds or words, while video is often projected on elements of the installation. This is the case with *Ping Pong Dance* (2006), where the filmic image of two playing balls is projected to look like they are flying out of two real baskets. They move in all directions, in spite of the laws of gravity, and emit specific sounds. In this way the viewer participates in a virtual event under construction. Through the projection of videos onto objects, Sæbjörnsson expresses his interest in the connection between what we think and what is happening in the world around us. The videos can be considered a replica of reality, or vice versa. The individual constantly projects her or his thoughts onto the world as s/he registers through her or his own senses. In the installation *Kugeln* (2008), a few common objects illuminated by light beams coming from the video start emitting colours of lights and variations through the reflections. Here the projection of the video onto objects is meant as a metaphor for projection of our imagination onto reality. Other humorous video animations, such as *The Wall* (2005) and *Wall to Wall* (2008) and the musical *Bonsai* (2014), are ways to communicate and interact with various conceptions of reality. A dialogue between real and digital, between physical and virtual, is reflected both in the choice of instruments and the concepts. Sæbjörnsson says:

I have always been interested in new technologies. In a way, new technology enables us to express the way we feel in a new way and reflect on who we are in a new and often a fresh way. Sometimes expressing is better with older methods and sometimes new. I prefer doing both. For a few years, I have been looking at Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality. I am also interested in all the new chemicals that are being produced. It is always interesting to see how artists deal with new inventions. But sometimes new perceptions can also be made using old methods, put into a new context.

(Sæbjörnsson 2016)

Recently, the artist has been wondering how the computer has changed communicative relationships between people and how the computer is one of the most vital inventions of mankind as it connects us both for business and for relationships between millions of people in every moment of our day (Sæbjörnsson 2016).

### Observations on the Effects of Digitalization in the Nordic Context

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Today, the reproduction of light and the Nordic landscapes by contemporary artists has been reworked in the post-modern and globalized field, towards a closer attention to socio-technological nature. For example, in the practice of Laura Beloff we find important themes such as the consequences of climate change and our changing relationship with nature. The Finnish artist is always influenced by digital technology, exploring new types of relationships with the natural environment produced by networks, as in *Midnight Sun* (developed with Erich Berger and Anu Osva, 2009), in which light is transmitted from the midnight sun from Lapland in Austria in real time. Or, in *The Condition – cloned Christmas trees* (developed with Jonas Jørgensen, 2016), which raises questions concerning conditions of the planet Earth, for example: Which forms of life can survive in the future? Among the interesting questions Beloff poses in this articulate project – on the existence and commercialization of Christmas trees in Denmark, cloned to meet the aesthetic preferences of buyers, is: How can we evolve our relationship with nature when mankind designs it?

Jana Winderen, one of the most important sound artists in the contemporary Nordic art scene, makes sounds of nature yet unknown to the public known through new technologies. The advent of digitization has allowed the Norwegian artist to create an original sound archive by recording sounds from hidden sources, which are imperceptible to human senses and from places and creatures that are difficult to access, such as those coming from the depths of the glaciers and oceans. In an interview with Sonia Harmon, the artist explains about her research:

I get surprised every time I'm out recording; there are new discoveries all the time. The first time I heard underwater insects I was in a river in Russia. It sounded like crickets, but I just thought, *what is this!* I like giving the headphones to people to listen so I can see the look that comes over their faces.

(Harmon 2016, original emphasis)

The Norwegian artist scours the hidden depths of nature with the most advanced digital technologies, revealing the complexity and strangeness of the world that is invisible to most people. During expeditions, she takes several hours to record in various places, documenting those sounds that become the 'time capsule of sounds.' In the same interview, Winderen notes that ocean sounds may be rapidly different in the next couple of years due to the disappearance of coral reefs and some fish species. Her work constitutes an archive of sounds

coming from the natural environment over time. Contemporary artists like Beloff and Winderen exemplify the new course of Nordic contemporary art, which seems to express a shift in interest from the romantic and melancholic inspiration of nature towards the urgent need to protect it by making the public aware of fundamental questions about how to safeguard natural resources, and by documenting some habitats before they disappear. Today, moreover, the reality of climate change and ecological issues has become a constant part of the visual imagination of all of us.

Thanks to digital culture, Nordic artistic expression was eradicated more easily than it originally was and migrated to new international influences. In the case of Iceland, a remote nation in the North Atlantic Ocean, Egill Sæbjörnsson for example explains:

I think I am very Icelandic, whatever that means, growing up in Iceland during the Cold War, when it felt like Iceland was a thousand times more isolated from the world than it is today. It was a whole different experience from visiting the tourist-loved Iceland of today. Both the ending of the Cold War and the Internet changed very much for Icelanders who are born after that time. As Iceland had almost no visual arts tradition when I was growing up, my eyes were always looking outside of Iceland. I also lived for twenty years in Berlin and Paris and have quite some central-European influence in me.

(Egill Sæbjörnsson, artist testimonial in this volume: 71)

The networkedness of Scandinavia has closed gaps between different national cultures and caused that Scandinavia today is less isolated. Digitization has affected the canons of Nordic culture to blend not only with other European cultures, or at least with a western approach, preparing countries to the flow of migration, which has occurred intensively over the last two decades in countries like Sweden, Norway and Finland. Just think of a recent speech given by the King of Norway, Harald V, on September 2016 at the Royal Palace in Oslo, who said: ‘We are all Norwegians: girls who like other girls, guys who like other guys and girls and boys who love each other [...] Norwegians believe in God, in Allah, in everything or nothing. Norwegians are also those who came from Afghanistan or Pakistan, Poland, Sweden, Somalia and Syria’ (King Harald V. of Norway 2016).<sup>1</sup> Future Nordic generations will be increasingly more genetically varied, which will have cultural and political consequences such as new behaviours and lifestyles. The multiplication of access to communication channels has already partially contributed to the opening and socio-cultural integration in the Finno-Scandinavian area, although not free from fear and rigidity, which Southern Europe has experienced for centuries, thanks to its geographic location. In a general sense, the advent of some new scientific developments, such as nanotechnology, protein engineering, biocomputing and the use of stem cells, will change the human individual into a hybrid entity, continuously transforming and redefining. Instead, human cultural autarchy will establish a new vision of the concept of humanity founded on connection with non-human otherness that goes beyond any boundary line or ethnicity.

## Conclusion

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Returning to the aesthetic field, in the era of ‘morphing’ in which every individual can alter or blend into anyone and simulations turn into reality, the question of the ‘status of the visible’ becomes central. The work of art becomes a ‘fixed point’, a still, in today’s flow of thought and action. This is thanks to the art’s ‘uniqueness’ and ‘durability’. Citing the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer: ‘the work of art [...] is not only the sense of the being carried to finish it. [...] here the meaning is placed on solid ground so that it cannot flow away and become confused, but remains fixed and enclosed in shape’ (Gadamer [1960] 1974: 36). The work of art is the crystallization of an experience where an emotional and cognitive expertise is temporarily formed. From here, the artist’s responsibility is renewed and s/he creates a work of art with her or his thoughts in the incessant flow of information. The artwork certifies the uniqueness and irreducibility of human individuality and its experience in the era of pixels. The work of art is a statement of existence; it is a time of self-assertion with respect to the changing thoughts of digital communities. Within the interrelated processes of digitization and ongoing globalization, which conform to the complexity of certain channels and partially atrophy thought and sensitivity, the artistic experience acquires great importance because it becomes a point of view transmitted to others. We only need to think of the artistic project *Fly Printer* by Laura Beloff, made together with M. A. González Valerio, which questions homogenous contemporary aesthetics causing the standardization of digital print processes and which offers an alternative experimental biotechnology. The work of art, be it digital or not, is always the sign of ‘global peculiarities’. The impact of the digital dynamic of interactivity on art is profound, enabling local visual traditions to amplify to the global realm of aesthetics – through digitalization.

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## Note

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- 1 Section from the King of Norway's speech on 1 September 2016 at the Royal Palace in Oslo (La Stampa, 2016).