ISEA2015
Proceedings of the 21st International Symposium on Electronic Art
ISSN: 2451-8611
ISBN: 978-1-910172-00-1

The Aesthetics of Activism: See-through Effect

1st Vicki Moulder and 2nd Michael Heidt

[1]Simon Fraser University, Canada, vmoulder@sfu.ca,
[2]Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany, michael.heidt@cs.tu-chemnitz.de

Abstract

For this demonstration the authors intend to present the *Aesthetics of Activism* as a work-in-progress. This interactive artwork explores the nature both of audience engagement as well as the interdisciplinary conditions of its making. The work is designed to visually represent an assemblage driven by people's bodies that are tracked and translated into interactive collage elements via motion sensors. Images projected are composed from a mixture of algorithmically scavenged social web resources and artistically curated and altered videos. The demonstration will present a new interactivity feature that continuously tracks a body, coupling it with a distinct eyehole (a region distributing transparency), allowing one of the composition's retrial layers to be viewed. The experience provided points towards the ways technological advances transform and shape public spaces, thereby subverting familiar strategies of activist practice while rendering possible new forms of aesthetic resistance.

Keywords

Interactive Art; Aesthetics; Code Literacy; Activism.

Introduction

The *Aesthetics of Activism*[1] is an interactive work-in-progress designed to facilitate aggregation of visual material from social networks to form themed compositions that can be explored jointly within a shared interactive space. It seeks to combine reflection on the algorithmic conditions of contemporary digital attention economies with an awareness of the interdisciplinary circumstances of technology production. To this end, aesthetic principles underlying human-made visual compositions are translated into algorithm. Generated and curated content is combined within interactive collages exhibiting a multi-layered structure. The work is part of a larger research study that investigates the broader context of social, digital, and cultural production [3].

For this demonstration, we worked with social web resources related to Canada's Kinder Morgan protest[2] to present a new feature that couples every tracked body with an eyehole shaped lens that allows one of the composition's retrial layers to be viewed. As seen in Figure 1 each time a new body enters the interactive zone a distinct eyehole transition (i.e. region redistributing transparency) is created. Each tracked body is coupled with a distinct eyehole such that a different layer becomes accessible to the respective audience. When more bodies enter the interactive zone, more layers are partially revealed. The exact configuration and structure of visibility thus depends both on the number of present bodies as well as their collocation.

Whenever no people are present within the interactive zone, the system slowly cycles through available compositions as seen in Figure 2. The nature of the composition is a variable that rests on the described 'see-through' effect, revealing additional content or creating a thematically motivated contrast. Depending on the site of demonstration the work illuminates glimpses of hidden layers or invites sustained exploration amongst people interested in the retrial layers.

Figure 1. This illustration demonstrates the effects of four people collocated within an interactive zone.

Figure 2. This illustration demonstrates the effects of the system generating image composition without people present. As time lapses the image layers thin until they fade completely.

[1] Aesthetics of Activism documentation: interactionart.org
[2] David Suzuki Foundation's blog on Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain pipeline project: http://davidsuzuki.org/blogs/panther-lounge/2012/07/we-are-the-kalamazoo/

Layered images are seldom exported to visual 'consumers'. By exhibiting a multi-layered surface the piece hints towards the interdisciplinary circumstances that produced the artwork. Our goal is to demonstrate how traditions both from the visual arts such as assemblage making [1], as well as, digital practices such as interactive collage [2] can be used to make statements about real-life events.

The proposed demonstration as illustrated in Figure 3 can be projected onto a white wall, projection screen or, ideally, a glass surface for rear projection (e.g. a store front window). The generative part of the composition is created from aggregated social web resources as displayed in Figure 4. As seen in Figure 5 the installation requires reduced lighting and an unobstructed interactive zone infront of the display surface.

Figure 3. Aesthetics of Activism work-in-progress projected onto the Surrey Central Library, BC, Canada

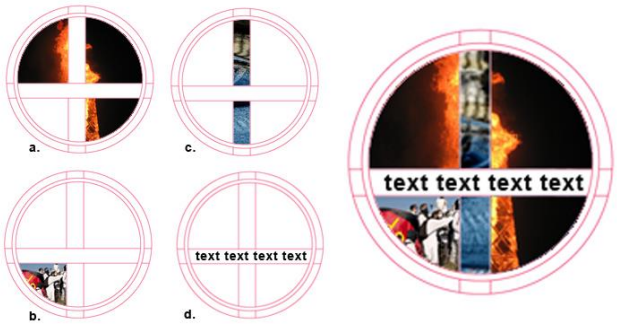

Figure 4. This illustration maps the generative composition aggregated from social web resources. The placement of each layer represents: a) context, b) contrast, c) people protesting, and d) text related to theme.

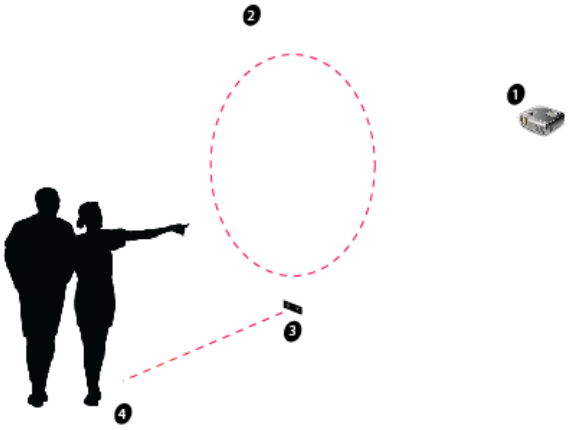

Figure 5. This illustration shows the general set-up: 1) Projector and Laptop computer, 2) Screen, 3) Kinect sensor, and 4) Interactive zone in front of the projected images.

Conclusion

In this submission we have briefly introduced the *Aesthetics of Activism* as a work-in-progress investigating the broader context of social, digital, and cultural production. Our proposed demonstration intends to invite conference attendees to experience our new interactive feature that couples every tracked body with an eyehole shaped lens activating the retrial layers of the artwork as seen in Figures 1 and 2. Our future work will continue to explore the creation and detection of social media patterns and interactivity as a mode of cultural production combining formal and non-formal aspects of aesthetic phenomena such as painting, nature, or mathematics.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the creative support of our colleagues at Simon Fraser University and Chemnitz University. This research was funded in part by the German Research Foundation and SSHRC, Canada.

References

Book

1. William C. Seitz, "The Art of Assemblage." *New York: The Museum of Modern Art* (1961).

Proceedings Paper Published

2. Andruid Kerne, William A. Hamilton, & Zachary O. Toups. "Culturally based design: embodying trans- surface interaction in rummy." *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, pp. 509-518. ACM, 2012.
3. Victoria Moulder & Michael Heidt. "Transcoding the Aesthetics of Activism." *Proceedings of the International Symposium of Electronic Art Conference*, Vancouver, Canada. 2015.