

THE FANTASY BEYOND CONTROL (1990)

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This essay was originally published in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*. New York: Aperture/BAVC, 1990, p. 267-273.

A (pre) condition of a video dialogue is that it does not talk back. Rather, it exists as a moving stasis; a one-sided discourse, like a trick mirror that absorbs instead of reflects. Perhaps it was nostalgia that led me to search for an interactive video fantasy – a craving for control, a longing for liveness, a drive toward direct action. This total, cumulative, and chronic condition I suffered from is reputedly a side effect (or for video artists an occupational hazard) of watching too much television, a medium that is by nature fragmentary and incomplete, distanced and unsatisfying, like platonic sex.

My path to interactive works began not with video, but in performance when in 1973, an *alternative identity* named Roberta Breitmore was created. She was a breathing simulacrum, a persona, played first by myself, and then by a series of *multiple* individuals. Roberta existed in both real life and real time and during the decade of her activity engaged in many adventures that typified the culture in which she participated. She had a checking account and driver's license and saw a psychiatrist. The tracking of ephemera such as psychiatric reports and credit ratings proved that she existed. Her construction included specific language and gestures as well as a stereotyped cosmetic ambience. By accumulating artifacts from culture and interacting directly with life, she became a two-way mirror that reflected societal biases absorbed through experiences. Roberta was always seen as a surveillance target. Her decisions were random, only very remotely controlled. Roberta's manipulated reality, or bending of time, became a model for a private system of interactive performance. Instead of a disk or hardware, her records were stored on photographs and texts that could be viewed without predetermined sequences. This allowed viewers to become voyeurs into Roberta's history.¹ Their interpretations shifted depending on the perspective and order of the sequences.

Several years after Roberta's transformation², *LORNA*, the first interactive art videodisk, was completed. Unlike Roberta, whose adventures took place directly in the environment, Lorna was a middle-aged, agoraphobic fearful of leaving her tiny apartment. The premise was that the more she stayed home and watched television, the more fearful she became – primarily because she was absorbing the frightening messages of advertising and news broadcasts. Because she never left home, the objects in her room took on a magnificent proportion; they were to her what Mount St. Victoire was to Cezanne. In this videodisk,

¹ Roberta never was exhibited while she was in process. Rather she was invisible until she became history.

² Roberta was exorcised in 1978 at Lucretia Borgia's crypt in Ferrara, Italy, where her victimization converted to emancipation.

every object in her room is numbered and becomes a chapter in her life that opens into branching sequences. Viewer/participants access information about her past, future, and personal conflicts via these artifacts. Many images on the screen are of the remote control device Lorna uses to change television channels. Because viewer/participants use a nearly identical unit to direct the disk action, a metaphoric link or point of identification is established between the viewer and referent. The viewer/participant activates the live action and makes surrogate decisions for Lorna. Decisions are designed into a branching path. Although there are only seventeen minutes of moving image in the disk, the thirty-six chapters could be sequenced differently for several days. There are three separate endings to the disk, though the plot has multiple variations that include being caught in repeating dream sequences, or using multiple soundtracks, and can be seen backwards, forwards, at increased or decreased speed, and from several points of view, *like electronic cubism*. There is no hierarchy in the ordering of decisions.

Lorna literally is captured by a mediated landscape. Her passivity (presumably caused by being controlled by media) is a counterpoint to the direct action of the player. As the branching path is deconstructed, the player becomes aware of the subtle yet powerful effects of fear caused by media and becomes more empowered (active) through this perception. Playing *Lorna* was designed to have viewer/participants transgress into an inverse labyrinth of information.

Despite some theories to the contrary³, the dominant presumption is that making art is active and viewing it is passive. Radical shifts in communication technology, such as the marriage of image, sound, text and computers, and consummation by the public of this consort, have challenged this assumption. Viewer/participants of *Lorna* reported that they had the impression that they were empowered because they held the option of manipulating Lorna's life. Rather than being remotely controlled, the decision unit was literally placed in their hands. Implications of the relationship reversal between individuals and technological media systems are immense. The media bath of transmitted pre-edited information that surrounds (and some say alienates) people is washed away. It is hosed down by viewer input. Alteration of the basis for exchange of information is subversive in that it encourages participation and therefore creates a different audience dynamic.

Interactive systems *require* viewers to react. Their choices are facilitated by means of a keyboard, mouse or touch-sensitive screen. As technology expands, there will be more permutations available, not only between the viewer and the system, but between elements within the system itself. Some people feel that computer systems will eventually reflect the personality and biases of their users. Yet these systems only appear to talk back. That they are alive or independent is an illusion. They depend upon the architectural strategy of the program. However, there is a space between the system and player in which a link, or

³ For example, some ideas presented by Leo Steinberg.

fusion, or transplant occurs. Truth and fiction blur. Action becomes icon and relies on movement and the plasticity of time - *icono plastics and logomotion*. According to Freud, *reality* may be limited to perceptions that can be verified through words or visual codes. Therefore, perceptions are the drive to action that influences, if not controls, real events. Perceptions therefore become the key to perceived reality.

The terminal, once a sign for closure, has become the matrix for information expansion. The introduction of new mass media in the late 1940s created an unparalleled opportunity to control mass perceptions. Immediate communication tended to increase the importance of media. Beaming pictures into millions of homes every night had the effect of speeding up time, of increasing the pace of life and destabilizing traditional communities, replacing them with a distance *global village*. Individuals were left powerless to affect what was being imposed, other than simply turning off their sets and becoming even more alienated. A similar sense of cultural time displacement had occurred with the invention of the automobile when traditional sense of distance shifted.

There is a debate among scholars of media about whether or not it is possible to observe phenomena without influencing them. In physics this can be equated to Heisenberg's theory. The very act of viewing a *captured* image creates a distance from the original event. The *captured* image becomes a relic of the past. Life is a moving target and any object that is isolated becomes history. Mass media redesign information by replacing the vantage point of the viewer with the frame provided by a cameraperson/journalist photographer. When information is presented beyond individual control, viewers are separated from the referent, resulting in a diminution of their identity. Personal identity is tenuous territory. According to Roman Jakobson, "personal pronouns are the last elements to be acquired in the child's speech and the first to be lost in aphasia."⁴ When an area that was inhabited by a viewer is emptied by a displaced identity, it is replaced by a sense of absence. This loss of anchorage (perhaps healed by a contemporary shaman/anchorperson?) results in a suspension, a flotation, a feeling of discomfort or a low-level cultural virus, perhaps the locus of the nostalgia mentioned in the first sentence of the paper.

Lorna was developed as a research and development guide, but is generally inaccessible. It was pressed in a limited edition of twenty-five, of which only fourteen now exist. It is only occasionally installed in galleries or museums. Creating a truly interactive work demands that it exist on a mass scale, available and accessible to many people. The HyperCard program works on most Macintosh computers and can be

⁴ See Roman Jakobson, "Child Language, Aphasia and Phonologica Universals," *Janua Linguarum* 71 (The Hague: Mouton, 1968) and "Studies on Child Language Aphasia," *Janua Linguarum* 114 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

genlocked to a disk player or a CD-V, or is used alone. It can access moving or still images and has a wide range of sound capabilities, and it is relatively inexpensive. The next two interactive works in progress, which I hope to complete in 1989, will use the HyperCard as a base. The motives of these two very different works are to explore ideas of contact and perception, not only metaphorically but also actually through the process of the playing.

I am currently working on a HyperCard based piece named **Deep Contact: The Incomplete Sexual Fantasy Disk**,⁵ which is designed around historical icons such as Freud, Bach, Joan of Arc, and a vampire. The player will be able to change his or her personality or approach to these icons or change their personality. An emotional *joystick* will be used in concert with a touch-sensitive screen. This piece will work with a real phone modem and programmed surveillance camera allowing the piece to transgress the screen (or distanced observer) into really contacting and interacting with other players as well as others seeing themselves as part of the manipulation.

Because interactive media technology is becoming increasingly visible in all areas of societies (particularly outside the art world), the political impact is spectacular. Traditional narratives (beginnings, middles, and ends) are being restructured as genetic engineering advances simultaneously reshape the meaning of live. Participating personally in the discovery of values that affect and order their lives, allows individuals to dissolve the division that separates them from subversive control, replacing some of the nostalgic longings with a sense of repurposed hope.

⁵ This was originally conceived as a short-lived collaboration among Paula Levine, Starr Sutherland, Christine Tamblyn, and myself.