

Dabbling with Original Syn

First Author

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Abstract

Drawing on a practical/theoretic exploration of the term "synaesthesia" in a Liveart context, this paper asks whether it is possible to evoke a 'true' synaesthetic experience without using psychoactive drugs.

Keywords

Synaesthesia, perception, simulation, intoxication, emotion.

Introduction

Over the centuries many artists have been inspired by the notion of synaesthesia, devising ways to try and simulate it by eliciting one media out of another, and attempting to communicate their work to the public as joined sensations. Historically, synaesthetic art has referred to a wide range of artistic experiments that synthesize different art disciplines, evident in genres such as Visual Music, abstract painting and film, experimental theatre and dance, symbolist poetry, science fiction and intermedial, electronic and generative art. Since even before the first recorded attempt to build an ocular harpsichord (devised to create a visual equivalent to music in the mid-18th C), synaesthesia has raised questions about whether the arts can be divided into disciplines that work with separately perceived stimuli, or whether these disciplines are part of a larger system that unites the different disciplines. This is analogous to debates about whether we have separate sensory organs, or whether these are just parts of a holistic sensory system. Even when expressed via abstract forms on a flat canvas, or whether by analogue or digital means, the intended immediate reception of synaesthetic art via cross-modal sensory stimulation is performative in nature and enforces the value of art as active, lived experiences rather than stable, commodifiable objects.

Interest in synaesthesia has risen to the surface of consciousness during periods of rapid scientific and technological development and social and cultural change. At other times it has been forgotten. Each time it emerges it carries along a message of liberating the potential of the senses as a noetic form of knowledge, disrupting normal perceptions and challenging conventions of society.

During the late 19th, early 20th C travelers brought home with them their experiences of *The Orient* – from religion, philosophy and science to drugs, spices, perfumes, fabrics and ritualistic art forms. At the same time artists from Russia to America were dabbling in pseudo-religious and -scientific dreams enthused with the prospects of a new synthetic, fusionary experience of art where the divide between material world, image, word and sound would dissolve into a sensuous, spiritual ecstasy. They often exploited the latest technological developments to invent new methods and devices for experimenting with their ideas. Similar practices are evident in the intermedial and psychedelic '60s and the underground acid/techno/house club scene of the late '80s early '90s. The former driven by an inner ideology of broadening self-consciousness and notoriously connected to experiments with psychoactive drugs. The latter a youth movement that celebrated a sense of self-empowerment, seeking to renew a mindset for coping with the reality of an increasingly technological environment. Ecstasy enhanced the efforts of VJs and DJs to fuse projected imagery with the primeval beats of the new synthesized music, its chemical coding and powerful sub-bass speaker systems helping to unite the clubbers on the dance floor by intensifying both their social and sensational experience.

Around the turn of the 21st C a number of retrospective exhibitions thematically curated around synaesthesia with a focus on Visual Music occurred both in Europe and the United States. Several of them have also included the work of current day artists who mainly use the 'syn' word as a theoretic reference - as being detached, yet connected to it, rather than as an

origin or inspiration.

While a 'sender' may infuse their work with real or simulated synaesthetic experiences, there is no guarantee, nor any substantial way of proving that it will be received as being synaesthetic. It is this paradox that has led me to the somewhat speculative question: Is it possible to evoke, even for a moment, an experience comparable to 'true' synaesthesia through art - without resorting to psychoactive drugs?

Inspired by a clapped-out parlour organ in my studio and a fictive invention called the Mood Organ that features in Philip K. Dick's novel *We Can Build You* (1972), I invented the Emotion Organ to put this question to the test. Not through science, but through the guise of my own art praxis. First I took the criteria for diagnosing 'true' synaesthesia as proposed by neurologist Richard Cytowic who claims that we are all born as Syns but that our synaesthetic abilities diminish as we grow older. He says that it is; (i) *involuntary but elicited* (you can't turn it on and off, it just happens to you, and it is elicited by a stimulus that is easily identifiable), (ii) *projected* (in visual terms, like an hallucination occurring in peri-personal space, and perceived as being "near" rather than tele-receptive), (iii) *durable and generic* (the cross-wired connections between the senses don't change over time, and the experiences are abstract rather than pictorial), (iv) *memorable* (such that experience rather than thought is primary), (v) *genetic* (can be passed down through generations), and (vi) *emotional* (connected to a noetic, "this is it" feeling of certitude)[2]. Then I applied this criteria as an initial blueprint for designing and programming the Emotion Organ. It took three years to research and build and has since been tested by some 300 members of the public in 3 host-venues related to theatre, dance and film respectively.

The Emotion Organ is a synaesthetic simulacrum machine where players can explore the sensational interplay of feeling, seeing, hearing, smelling and motion. It is also a time machine - a restored, re-engineered parlor organ from 1895 that builds upon a trajectory of several centuries-worth of ideas about synaesthetic phenomena, combining both antiquated and emerging technology to achieve a media-archaeological synthesis. Without electricity it can be played as a conventional musical instrument, but when plugged in the organ produces varying combinations and intensities of sound, light, colour, scent, vibration and movement. When played it can stimulate a highly subjective, cause-and-effect sensory immersion. When experienced as a spectator, the subjective affect of the player is modulated through the hypnotic visual effects of a foot-controlled propeller-screen, electronically processed organ sounds, lights and emitted scents.

The organ brings the emotional journey of the player into the material world in its own special way. Its effects and affects are emergent and moody, and can range from crashing a plane into the sunset to strolling through a garden of vibrant flowers. In order to explore the organ's potentials a player must experiment with the way in which the combined activity of the hands and feet on its 61 keys, 8 stops and 2 foot pumps can produce different phenomenological results. You do not have to be a musician or an artist to play the organ. It can be played by people of all ages and abilities. It is the perceptions of the player that are at stake. Playing the organ in the public setting of a participatory installation demands some performative commitment and experience has shown that most players would prefer to be alone with it. They want to take it home with them. Get their daily dose of it.

I am still not sure that what I have made is an art object, an instrument for Liveart performance, a therapeutic device or a somewhat large and clumsy gadget that has, like many previous attempts to elicit 'true' synaesthesia, failed to reach its aims. But it is as if, having once managed to grab hold of the dragon's tail (so to speak) the trip is so invigorating for some that it is hard to let go. Each time I plug the organ in I am afraid that a glitch in my DIY electronics will cause an explosion - but surprisingly enough it just keeps running. Though technology and science have expanded and mapped the knowledge of our physical environment to a point almost beyond belief, the mythical creatures of the uncharted inner world - the dragons - never seem to tire.

References: inspirational texts

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[5]Plant, S., (2000). Writing on Drugs. Picador. ISBN 0312278748

Additional Online Material

Use this page (maximum one A4 page) to provide a maximum of 10 links to additional online material (websites, photos, videos, animations, etc.). Provide a brief description or title and the hyperlink.

1. Mind, the Gap. Synaesthesia and contemporary live art practice. Research website:
<http://www.notam02.no/motherboard/synaesthesia>