

Urban Interface:

New Position of Art Museum for Social Interactions

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Abstract:

The term interface is commonly known as a device or program enabling man to use machine, and mainly associated with relationship between users and computer. Generally it means a point where two systems, subjects, organization, etc. meet and interact. A good interface would effectively raise efficiency and improve experience of the users. In concepts it also helps to interpret art museum as interface, related with question: What is the future of experiencing art? We could interpret interface in architecture from two aspects: the intangible side, i.e., socio-cultural relation; the tangible side, like doors, windows. The interface attribution of architecture differentiates architects with engineers. Then what does museum mean as an interface? There are multiple relations to cope with in an art museum. Zooming into building scale, obviously museum should mediate visitors with art. However, the visitors are varied from different education level and culture background considering the international immigrant identity of South Rotterdam. Art is abstract for unprofessionals, who would be the major group among audience. Thus, museum should offer inclusive and interactive experience. It is also the spirit of contemporary art, to engage visitors into artwork with the help of new media. In this sense, the role of museum in community is also changing. It is not an exclusive art temple anymore, but a cultural infrastructure adapted into communal activity. It asks for a new relation between public, curators and artists. As professionals, curators and artists should invite public into

artwork producing and curating process. Their cooperation is important in contemporary museum. Zooming out to a larger scale, museum as a public space should immerse itself into urban life, revitalizing urban public sphere. Nowadays new digital technology has blurred the boundary between virtual world and physical reality which results in isolation between individual and social relation. Hence, museum as interface between virtuality (i.e. art) and physical reality should help to strengthen this social relation by attracting passer-by into relational urban life with the help of art. In conclusion, museum should function as interface to not only mediate the artworks with people from no matter what socio-cultural background, but also adapt individual to physical urban life, so as to stimulate social relations among urban populations.

Keywords:

Interface; art experience; new media; relation; museum

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Introduction

In recent decades we witness how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has dramatically changed our daily life. The new media transformed the way people receive information, also made an impact on art domain. Through visiting art museums and browsing social media, we could detect transformations started to happen in display method, art form, artistic relations and other artistic elements. In this sense, from a perspective of audience, what is the future of experiencing art?

This paper looks into the idea of the *interface* as a departure point to answer this question. In the first chapter, theoretical research about interface design domain is conducted in order to give an essential and general interpretation of this term rather than superficially understand it as a technological component. In the second chapter, it further explores meaning of interface under architecture context by applying Robert Venturi's *architecture as communication* theory. In the final chapter, back to central topic, a brief chronography of art museum is introduced to understand its contemporary position. Then investigation of how art museums function as interface is taken from three scales: building, community and urban, with a case study of the relational artwork *Body Movies*.

Interface Design Theory

Speaking of interface, the first thing comes to our mind probably is a screen that facilitates us to use digital device like computer and smart phone, more broadly considered with the GUI (Graphic User Interface). A general definition of interface was “a connection between two pieces of electronic equipment, or between a person and a computer” (Cambridge Dictionary). However, this definition emphasizes attributes over interaction, implying that interface is

merely a thing, or more specifically a tool. Probing into the history of interface design theory, we could know that interface is more than a thing.

In his important book, Gui Bonsiepe interprets interface by his tripartite “ontological design diagram”, in which he describes interface as a connection between three heterogeneous areas: a body, a purposeful action, and artifact, or information in an act of communication.¹ According to him, the interface is not entirely dependent on the tool itself, but on the interaction between users, actions, and tools. The essence of interface design is to organize these relations and realize the actions.² To explain this relation vividly he takes the scissors as example. The two cutting edges are only the necessary condition for an object being called scissors. They also need a handle in order to link themselves to the human body, so that a cutting action could be realized. “Only when the handle is attached is the object a pair of scissors. The interface creates the tool.”³

Following Bonsiepe’s theory, Don Ihde made further interpretation of this human-technology relation. In his theory, four modes are proposed elaborating how technology mediates human experience of the world:

1. *Embodiment relations*. It is similar to an augmentation mode, that interface is incorporated into user’s embodied perception to experience the world. A good example is how a visually impaired man extended his perception with a technological artifact, experiencing the world by the tip of a cane.⁴
2. *Hermeneutic relations*. In this situation, instead of integrated into the human senses, the technology itself “becomes the object of perception while simultaneously referring beyond itself to what is not immediately seen.”⁵ Through the interface users are able to “read” some aspects of the world by their interpretive capacity, like email communication.

3. *Alterity relations*. It implies a quasi-otherness in some technology when related with people.⁶ Users could learn or gain information through this difference. To better understand this relation, we could imagine how we learn dancing by perceiving the difference of gesture between instructor and us.
4. *Background relations*. We could comprehend it as an immersive mode. Users experience the interface as contextual for their actions in the world. Ihde described this technology as “a present absence”, one example for this type of relation as he mentioned involves experience with “sheltering technologies”, like homes.⁷

By referring to Bonsiepe and Ihde’s theory, we can think beyond representational models of interface, i.e., the screen of electronic device for human to operate. As Johanna Drucker argued, it need not to be understood mechanically as a thing, but “ecologically as a border zone between cultural systems, with all the complexity and emergent relations that implies.”⁸ Nowadays this term is used in many fields by sociologists, engineers, cognitive scientists, artists and so on. They define it in terms of the principle of their disciplines, but always in a “relational paradigm”.⁹ Therefore, to propose an interface in a new domain, we should start from understanding its relational activity.

Architecture as Interface

So far there is few literatures discussing interface in an architecture context. Before we construe architecture as an interface, it is necessary to think about why it is important. In essence architecture belongs to design discipline. The interface concept could contribute to position design expertise in relation to other disciplines, as Bonsiepe claims:

“The concept of interface will help to explain the difference between engineering and design, insofar as both are design disciplines. A designer looks at the phenomena of use

with interest that focuses on socio-cultural efficiency. Categories in engineering do not include user functionality; they are based on the idea of physical efficiency that is accessed through the means of the exact sciences. Design, however, builds the bridge between the black box of technology and everyday practice.”¹⁰

What differs contemporary architects with civil engineers or craftsmen is their focus. Architects start their design from researching socio-cultural context and user experience over more than technique and mechanics while engineers focus on physical efficiency of material and structure. Through referring to interface design theory, architects could understand their position more clearly. From a more practical perspective, nowadays society appeals to an interdisciplinary collaboration. Interface notion could link architecture with other sectors, like industrial design and ICT (e.g., smart city), as Seconmandi and Snelders expect that it “presents an opportunity to reflect on the evolving meanings of design in a world highly saturated with the exchange of services.”¹¹

Then how should we interpret interface in the architecture context? On the basis of Bonsiepe and Ihde’s theory, the building is regarded as a tool for human to conduct “relational activity”. Architecture has its tangible face which is easy to understand: the solid building structure (e.g., walls, columns, floors), accessory (e.g., doors and windows), equipment and façade. They represent the thingness of architecture as interface, like the computer screen and blind man’s cane. Beyond the building entity there are intangible aspects hidden behind it – the relations. That is the critical part for architecture function as an interface. Through these relations architecture helps human experiencing the world, or in Robert Venturi’s view, transmits messages to human. In his famous manifesto *Learning from Las Vegas*, architecture was interpreted as a means of communication, one similar to that of a television set that a building could be interpreted as a screen transmitting messages.¹² He suggested an architecture of “bold communication rather than one of subtle expression”.¹³ To understand these relations or

communication, we could take church and library as examples. Church is the holy place where religious activities conduct. People come here in order to relate themselves with God. In this sense, church functions as interface between human and the Bible. In the same way, people come to library in order to acquire certain knowledge, so library functions as interface mediating human with information. Then what about an art museum? In next chapter, I will further investigate the relations within art museum and its socio-cultural context in order to discover how a new art museum could function as an interface.

Museum as Interface

A brief chronology of art museum could help us to better understand its contemporary position. There are two turning points in the history of museum, according to Martin Grossman. The first type of art museum, built in neoclassical age between 19th and 20th century, specifically served for the elitist and was “defined by exclusive use” at that time.¹⁴ They showed a “conscious isolation” from the urban context and were detached from daily life.¹⁵ Common examples are: Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin and The National Gallery in London. The first evolution came along with modernisation at the beginning of 20th century, inaugurated with the opening of MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) in 1939, featured with a new ideology for the art space famously known as “white cube”.¹⁶ In the meantime, modern art was driven by mass media and reproducibility, and the new relation between artworks (artists) and museums (curators) was guided by “the prerequisites of Consumer Society”.¹⁷ Art became accessible by commons and more connection was established between museums and urban public. The second evolution happened just in our age and is still ongoing, as Grossman argued, “with a new force shaped by digital and electro-electronic technology”.¹⁸ The transition of the role museum plays in society is deeply influenced by the French Revolution in 1789 which “institutionalised these cultural apparatuses as public spaces and community property”.¹⁹ In this sense, contemporary art

museums is shifting its focus from exclusive art space to an inclusive public space, and new relations are consciously established within art system's agents like artists, visitors, curators, educators and so on. Starting with this socio-cultural context, the question is: what is the future of experiencing art? To answer this question, this research is conducted in three levels: building, community and urban.

Today museums are facing more heterogenous groups of visitors due to the globalisation. Museum audience are varied from different ages, social class, education levels, political opinions and culture identity. For some of them, the abstractness of modern artwork obstructs their interaction, as Bourdieu argued that "artworks were coded with exclusive symbolic meanings" that can be understood only by those with sufficient cultural capital-professional skills and knowledge acquired through education.²⁰ Obviously the "white cube" space (paintings or installation coldly fixed on the white wall or floors with a cold distance from the audience) is too passive for this communication between audience and artwork. As a curator, Nanette Snoep detected this problem. She argued that curating job is more like making a musical score or a film that "the consideration of the spectator are important components".²¹ From her point of view, curating is a comprehensive activity that "combines the 'language' of anthropology with the 'language' of artistic reflection and the 'language' of exhibitions".²² She suggested a new fashion to curate an exhibition not merely departing from researching on artworks, but also on the audience, meaning taking into account people's previous experience and knowledge level. In other words, museums in the future should concentrate on the relations between visitors and exhibitions. How many messages the exhibition could convey to the audience determines the quality of art experience. From the artists' perspective, a new trend commonly seen in contemporary art is that new generation artists emphasize more on the interactivity of artwork, dedicating to make "audience to better understand the works and enjoy greater social interaction".²³ In the building scale, it creates a new relation between audience

and artwork which is closer than neoclassic and modern period. As Scott et al. argued that contemporary interactive art disrupts the traditional transmission model of knowledge transfer (i.e., audience need to decipher the messages inside artworks conveying from the artists) instead for a “two-way conversational process”.²⁴ It means the messages are co-defined and communicated through an “open-ended dialogue” between artist and audience instead of being fixed intrinsically in the artwork or its creator.²⁵ Such a new spirit of contemporary art (i.e., interactivity) asks for a new mediation quality in museum space. The contemporary artworks are usually composed and displayed through new media (e.g., digital art, sound art and interactive art). Unlike old visual art (e.g., painting, sculpture and installation) conveying messages in a two-dimension mode (artworks to audience), new media art permeates space environment as the third-dimension mediating audience with artworks. By the virtue of advanced technology, the audience are invited to interact with artworks both emotionally and physically. All four relation modes in Ihde’s theory could be detected within this human-artwork relationship: *embodiment relations*-artworks provide a specific perceptual context that highlights its effect; *hermeneutic relations*-artists collaborate with institution to interpret scientific knowledge by artistic expression; *alterity relations*-artworks trigger audience’s body movement to follow the demonstration so as to achieve certain goal; *background relations*-artworks together with exhibition space co-create an immersive environment that induces audience’s familiar experience. In conclusion, art museum itself is undergoing a paradigm shift from “showing” to “interacting” in terms of the exhibition function. In a building scale its interface mediates audience with artworks through an interactive art experience.

Usually, the surrounding context of museum will influence its position and programs which we cannot overlook. Back to my design project, the specificity of the site is its location next to an immigrant community-Tarwewijk, Rotterdam South. Through the demographic research we found that more than three fourths of the inhabitant (78.6%)²⁶ have immigrant background and

near half of them are non-western descendants.²⁷ Meanwhile, the statistics show that the main characters of community members are low education level (near half of them did not receive a secondary education)²⁸ and low income (reflected in low housing fee which is only two thirds of that in downtown)²⁹ compared with population of the whole Rotterdam. To most of them, art seems to be the last thing to care about. Community and museum, these two heterogeneous groups form the most contradictory relation in this project. It becomes critical issues in defining the politics of contemporary museum. Some radical voices argue that when dealing with social justice and rights-based practices, museums should consider the “productive potential of conflicts”, including the right of people to resist the museum itself.³⁰ But as architects, it is our instinct to neutralise conflict through relational programming and creating public space. We could conceive an interface relating community with museum which leads to a purposed balance. In Mark Rectanus’s book he mentioned a similar concept named *Collective Museum* which demonstrates:

“not only how artist-led initiatives play a crucial role in rethinking the relations between museums and audiences but also how communities can be engaged in collaborative and performative processes of co-curating and museum-making.”³¹

It means that community members are not regarded as target consumers of museums but initiators and co-creators for culture programs and exhibitions. Public are empowered to participate into the daily operation of museum. A more practical example is the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA). Its director Alistair Hudson envisioned a new notion of *Museum 3.0* - a “useful museum” that “redefines the participatory museum and community participation as social practice”.³² It places emphasis on projects which matter to commons-housing, food, education, employment, technology, religion, ecology, politics, identity, popular culture, industry-instead of commissioning or exhibiting artworks merely in relation to the context of museum gallery.³³ In my proposal such collaborative activities between community,

artists, curators happen in *public gallery*, contrary to typical *specialist gallery* aiming for exhibition of professional artists. It is a public place where information exchanges: community inhabitants could learn to use advanced new media technology or acquire knowledge which connects them with the world; while museum agents could furtherly integrate culture-specificity derived from immigrant community into their art practice. In a practical level, besides exhibition, *public gallery* also holds other relational activities like lecture, workshop, seminar, etc. By the performative modes of art and participatory actions, museums turn into a “stable locus of communal identity”³⁴ where social relations are established. Here art functions as a mediation tool that enables Tarwewijk community coexist with the new art museum. For the local inhabitants their art experience would be participatory and performative.

Zooming out to the urban scale, there are two social problems in relation to public realm. Firstly, although advanced technology gives art new forms which is more interactive, it also blurs the boundary of virtuality and reality. It becomes a serious social issue that people are overly satisfied in their own virtual networks via screens of laptop and smartphone. They gradually avoid encountering strangers physically which cause them detached from social relations. Richard Sennett criticized that the urban public domain is increasingly dominated by non-communication: “There grew up the notion that strangers had no right to speak to each other, that each man possessed as a public right an invisible shield, a right to be left alone”.³⁵ In addition, the COVID-19 makes this situation increasingly worse. Museum with its public property need to take responsibility to rebuild social relations, its public function becomes a pivotal part in urban space. How does art museum trigger social interactions among urban populations? As mentioned before, one characteristic of contemporary art is interactivity. There are two modes the interactive system works (see fig. 1):

Take turns-public use the installation one at a time in which they each influence the installation in their own way.³⁶

Take averages-the system utilizes a mechanism to gauge the average user and produces a result on this base.³⁷

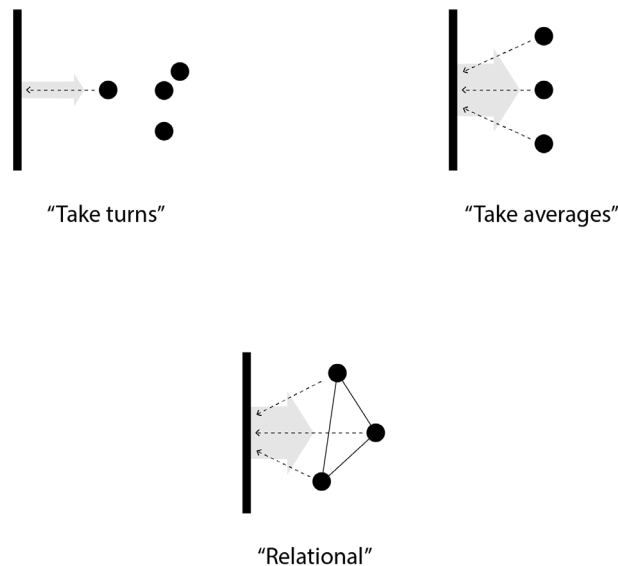


Figure 1. Diagram of "interactivity" and "relational". Source from: self-made by author

This shows interactivity of art only stresses on relation between audience and artwork. It is noneffective in stimulating interactions among audience. Therefore, some art critics argue that art should also be *relational*. The term "relational" is intended to express the multiplicity of relationships that artists' work can produce.³⁸ One of the most famous theories support this standpoint is Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational aesthetics*. He defined it as a theory "consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt".³⁹ In his point of view, artists should "create artworks based on encounters with others".⁴⁰ In this sense, relational artworks usually demand an active engagement within audience, and the feedback will reflect this social interaction. (see fig. 1) One good example embodied "relational" is *Body Movies-Relational Architecture 6* by the Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. It was an outdoor installation composed in Rotterdam in September 2011. Two bright xenon lamps were fixed at ground level on the Schouwburgplein, projecting a powerful beam onto the wall of the Pathe cinema complex, displaying the shadow of passers-

by.⁴¹ Meanwhile, he also projected images of people walking in Rotterdam from a higher place, but it is too vague to perceive under the bright light till someone revealing it in his or her shadow. The distance and position between passers-by and lamps determined the clarity and size of their shadow, as many of them usually started to play with this effect when they realised that they are “revealing” the images. The artist added another interactive system to the installation: if the shadow of passers-by exactly matches the outlines of the people in the images, a new image would be projected. As expected, it encouraged strangers to cooperate together in order to switch the images (see fig. 2). The role of *Body Movies* turned into an interface in the mediation of various social relations, as Scott McQuire remarked that the installation “attracts a temporary audience of strangers who briefly engage in a playful experience with each other and who discover that they can influence the ambience by performing a collective choreography”⁴² From the case *Body Movies* we see the potency artwork has in influencing the public urban domain. The crisis is that our city is becoming “flat”. People encounter, conflict, exchange more through screen-huge as the digital billboards in shopping street; tiny as the mobile phone. To some extent this virtual environment weakens social relations as people tend to contact with those who exist in their Contacts. To tackle this, public art could function as a mediation tool between individual and collectives, virtuality and physical environment, and museum need to create space for it. Public space combined with relational artwork forms the urban interface which endows social relations with spatial form. While being engaged in interacting with art and strangers, urban populations are also experiencing life in a relational way.



Figure 2. Photo of passers-by play with the relational artwork. (Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. “Body Movies – Relational Architecture 6”, Rotterdam, 2001. Photo courtesy of Antimodular Research)

Conclusion

In this paper a new perspective is introduced to interpret the term *interface*. It does not simply mean the screen for operation, but connotes the relational activity between two realms—generally regarded as human-technology. In this sense, architecture could be seen as an interface since it also embodies relational activities depending on the programs. And it is the interface aspect that differentiates positions of architects and engineers. Then it brings us to the main topic of research. Comparing an art museum as interface, the research was conducted in three scales to explore the future of experiencing art:

In the *building* scale, museum should mediate relations between audience and artwork. When curating an exhibition, curators need to take into consideration the heterogeneous groups of

audience so that artwork could fully convey information to them. Besides, it is a new trend that audience will experience art in an interactive way by the virtue of new media technology.

In the *community* scale, it becomes a politic issue when mediating museum with community members. Taking Tarwewijk as example, museum could collaborate with inhabitants in daily operation. Community shows its culture specificity which could be integrated with artwork, and for exchange museum offers community opportunity to use advanced technology and acquire knowledge. The space where information exchanged is defined as *public gallery*, where community members get participatory and performative experience of art.

In the *urban* scale, museum need to mediate between individual and collectives, as an interface between virtual world and physical environment. Through the *relational aesthetics* theory and the case study of *Body Movies*, artworks could be used as a mediation tool connecting individual with urban life by physical encounters with others, so as to stimulate social interactions in urban public domain. From the perspective of urban population, the art experience will be relational.

Nevertheless, discussing in three scales does not mean that museum will function by three isolated parts. Between three scales there is still an interrelation, like building and city. The ultimate research object is the new position of museum in urban public sphere, not an isolated object. The relational activities happened in building and community scale will fundamentally affect social communication systems of city, together contributing to social interaction and stimulation.

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¹ Bonsiepe, *Interface: An Approach to Design*, 28-29.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 30.

⁴ Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld*, 40.

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- ⁵ Ibid., 82.
- ⁶ Ibid., 98.
- ⁷ Ibid., 109-110.
- ⁸ Drucker, *Reading Interface*, 216.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Bonsiepe, *Interface: An Approach to Design*, 36.
- ¹¹ Seconmandi and Snelders, *Interface Design in Services*, 12.
- ¹² Pierce, “*Democratic and Dangerous*”, 51
- ¹³ Venturi, Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 9.
- ¹⁴ Grossman, “*Museum as Interface*”, 96.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 92.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 94.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 92.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Scott, Smith, Härmä and Broome, “*Goffman in the Gallery*”, 421.
- ²¹ Snoep, “*Suggestion for a Post-Museum*”, 325
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Blas, Renault and Jarrier, “*Bridge the Identity Gap*”, 54.
- ²⁴ Scott, Smith, Härmä and Broome, “*Goffman in the Gallery*”, 419.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Public Building Studio, *People Research Booklet*, 33.
- ²⁷ Public Building Studio, *Culture Research Booklet*, 39.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 43.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 45.
- ³⁰ Rectanus, “*Rethinking Museums*”, 27.
- ³¹ Ibid., 28.
- ³² Ibid., 55.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 31.
- ³⁵ Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 23.
- ³⁶ Waal, “*The City as Interface*”, 67
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Baurriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 112.
- ⁴⁰ Choi, *Engendering Visitors’ Narratives*, 55.
- ⁴¹ Waal, “*The City as Interface*”, 64.
- ⁴² Ibid., 67.