

Ethics in aesthetics: experiencing Women's Rights

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Ethics in Aesthetics: Experiencing Women's Rights

Abstract

In this paper, we describe an interactive exhibition entitled *Ballade of Women* that explored perspectives on women's rights. The installation was designed as an immersive experience aimed at engaging visitors to trigger meaningful and personal reflections on women's rights. Visitors moved through a dynamic environment, where they experienced three themes: violence, emancipation and self-determination, represented by three artworks. Digital representations of the three paintings were fragmented in moving panels. The movement of the panels was determined by the movement and presence of visitors as well as by the input received by online communities discussing the topic of the exhibition. The installation created awareness, and stimulated reflection through a bodily involvement, demonstrating how complex and controversial taking a position on such topics can be. The experience concurred in stimulating and reinforcing a reflection on their relevance, complexity and universality.

Keywords

Ethics, Aesthetics, Embodiment, Interactive installation.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we present an interactive exhibition, entitled *Ballade of Women*, that explored contemporary issues of women's rights (Video: [1]).

The design approach leveraged concepts of embodiment [2] and active perception to create an interactive installation that highlights complex socio-cultural themes to the public. By making the topic on women's rights experienceable, the work actively engaged visitors rather than intellectually instructing them [3]. This forced them to take a stance based on their personal perspectives and reflections regarding the issue at hand. In what follows, we briefly present the design's concept and implementation of *Ballade of Women*, describing the engagement that the installation elicited both offline (in presence) and online (remotely). We conclude with reflections on how the work engaged visitors and triggered personal reflections on the issue of women's rights.

2. Concept and Implementation

The content for the installation was based on three historical characters, depicted on paintings selected from the extensive, private art collection of the *Fondazione Monte de' Paschi di Siena*. The three characters and paintings were: Maria Magdalena (by Rutilio Manetti, XVII century), Lucia from Siracusa (by Maestro dell'Osservanza, XV century) and Cleopatra (Marco Pino, XVI century). They were chosen to support the three themes of the exhibition: Cleopatra was known for her seductive skills and her ravaging intelligence. The painting supported the theme of emancipation; Maria Magdalena changed her life to embrace Christianity. She represented the theme

of self-determination.; and Santa Lucia who was prosecuted for her religious beliefs. She symbolized the theme of violence [4].

The installation was conceived as a dynamic space. Digital acquisitions of the paintings, provided by *Fondazione Monte de' Paschi di Siena*, were fragmented and floated in the space, projected on moving panels. Acrylic panels were cutout according to the contours of the three paintings. These contours were scaled and suspended in three-dimensional space, hanging from a triangular aluminum structure (See Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Visitors exploring the installation during the opening.

Each panel was connected to a motor, controlled by an *Arduino*, allowing it to rotate individually. The motors could turn the panels to deny or reward the viewer with a view of the full painting when projected. The fragmentation was used to evoke the information that we have about the subject, which has been fragmented by history, politics and the speed of our world. Three *Kinect* cameras mounted on the structure were used to track movements of visitors around the installation and influence the behaviour of the panels. The image of the painting was projected onto the panels, along with continuously changing representations of sentiments and statements regarding the exhibition themes, sourced from the web by a software crawler, *WhatsOn* (see below for details).

3 Bridging the Real and Virtual

The movement of visitors in the space activated the motors that controlled the rotation of each panel, resulting in the paintings effectively hiding or revealing themselves from visitors as they explored the space. Only when aligned, the panels revealed a complete view of the painting. A single person, standing for

more than 5 seconds in a specific point in the room, triggered the alignment.

Without instructions on how to interact, visitors were triggered to move around the space and through this bodily engagement, explore the responsive behaviour of the installation in an ambiguous dialogue. The dynamics and fragmented visuals and audio created a complex, immersive whole. This elicited visitors to relate all of the fragments to form a personal narrative on the exhibition themes. By bodily engaging with the installation, they were triggered to take a personal perspective on the relationship between the historical narratives, contemporary statements and their dynamic interplay.



Fig. 2. A sequence showing the panels of *Santa Lucia* lining up to reveal the painting. The image on the far right is overlaid with a statement on violence against women, sourced from Facebook by *WhatsOn*.

Ballade of Women was a mixed reality experience and a dynamic space. The projections of the paintings had graphic overlays containing information streamed directly from the Internet and social media, together with facts, statistics and graphs pertaining to the issues highlighted. This information flow was enabled by the software crawler *WhatsOn*, developed by *QuestIt*, which continuously monitored news regarding the topics of self-determination, emancipation and violence. Sentiments and statements related to the themes, detected by the crawler, were used to move the motors handling the panels and modify the content projected on them. The theme that gathered the biggest number of new posts resulted in a slight movement of the motors. Allowing online behaviour to influence movements, made the embodied dialogue between visitors and the physical installation even more ambiguous. This particular combination of embodied interaction with social computing fits with certain views of embodiment (e.g. [2]).

4 Conclusive Reflections

The exhibition took place in Siena from 18 June to 2 July 2013. It offered a space for bodily reflection for visitors and designers on the relationship between gender and human rights. Visitors had to take an active stance in the exhibition. Their movement in the space influenced the aesthetics of the installation, and different choreographies were produced by the online debates occurring in real time. The ambiguity of interpretation elicited by the interactive installation was connected to the ambiguity of information and its controversial nature, offering different points of view and suggesting the need for a clearer understanding and embodiment of these issues.

Worth mentioning is the interplay between online and offline behaviour in highlighting the themes and provoking personal thoughts and discussions. In addition to the posts monitored before and during the showcase, several tweets were generated by visitors on the twitter account *@BalladeOfWomen* and overlaid on the panels. Some of these posts concerned generic comments on the exhibition, but others presented explicit references to political or social events connected to women's rights. For example, a discussion thread was related to the Istanbul convention adopted by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers on 7 April 2011. The purposes of the Convention is to protect women against all forms of violence and to contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women through the design of policies and measures. This was discussed online during the exhibition. For example, a post "*the Istanbul Convention is now law of the Italian state*" was displayed and overlaid on the digital fragments of the Santa Lucia painting. Another observation that is worth to mention is the list of followers of the Twitter account. Both the Italian Minister of Education Maria Chiara Carrozza and the Minister for Integration Cécile Kyenge followed *@BalladeofWomen* Twitter account.

These observations suggest that the installation's synthesis of both offline and online behaviour was able to actively involve people to take a personal stance connecting local and global with historical and contemporary perspectives on women's rights.

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