Artstations Practice and a Cybernetic Canon

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Abstract:

This paper demonstrates how the cybernetic theory of Gordon Pask and others has evolved into a resilient and highly usable canon of concepts in Artstation's distinctive international practice; a canon that in turn illuminates an epistemological and methodological trend in the arts. Thus, Artstation's practice demonstrates the transmutability of cybernetic thinking within emergent discourse within contemporary visual art. The canon is examined through art placements in Amsterdam and – at greater length - in Brussels and Cardiff.

Keywords: Cybernetic, Feedback. Metaphor, User Language, Bifurcation

1. Early Contacts

In 1986 Hayes, Davidson and their artist collaborator Hugh Thomas had met Ranulph Glanville through an exhibition performance of "Locomotion", a kinetic art work for participating groups of up to 80 people. The following year Glanville facilitated introduction of the artists' work at a conference in Amsterdam: The Possibility of Impossible Worlds, organised by Professor Gerard De Zeeuw and colleagues of the OOC[i] programme. Here the artists met Gordon Pask for the first time. In 1988 Hayes and Davidson became guest fellows of the OOC where Pask had also taken up a chair. Here they worked with Pask on art installations, computer visualisations and spatial elaboration of Conversation Theory[ii] (CT).

2. Conversation

The transformative qualities of conversation are a residual reminder of Pask's friendship with the artists. At this time Pask had already developed CT and was now in the process of developing his Interaction of Actors (IA) theory, which builds upon CT. Fundamental to CT is the notion of a shared concept between two conversing actors, defined and articulated through limits and rules of engagement, which he described as essentially `kinematic' since it has a beginning and an end as actions have. In turn CT is the primary construct behind Artstation's approach to authorship and collaborative practice, prompting the derivation of ethical codes and responsibilities and the boundaries of participation. The ideas in CT are scaleable and relate to the networks of relationships which are Artstation's art practice. IA theory introduces the dimension of time into the architecture of the conversation-domain and examines the interaction of the processes contained therein. From the viewpoint of art-practice the outstanding elements of Pask's work form a coherent canon.

3. The Canon

Feedback, as defined by Norbert Wiener (Wiener 1949), denotes a specific class of processes, where information is looped back into a system, providing regulatory information on which the system can adapt, referring equally to the nervous system of animals and the design of machines. A simple physical notation of feedback could be produced in the form of a three dimensional topological surface or torus[iii] which self intersects. Pask proposed conversation operated in a related and "second order" manifestation of multiple toroidal spaces. The living properties of conversation; the truth values, entailment mesh, bifurcation and coherence, as defined in CT, were created and maintained through the generative forces of orthogonal emergence; tori within tori connected to tori at ninety degrees.

Hayes and Davidson had computed and visually animated a multiple toroidal process within a CAD model during the Amsterdam fellowship. The first use of the Torus form in Artstation's public installation work was Bi Tori[iv] - a pair of orthogonally intersecting tori – a commissioned artwork for the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC) at Virginia Beach, USA. Pask himself stepped inside the work with the artists, placing the thinker himself inside a model of his own theory of mind.

Bifurcation is a key process within the dynamics of CT, occurring where a process branches to create new distinctions and generating new surfaces or carapaces. CT says that bifurcations occur in order to maintain distinction, where distinctions are otherwise likely to break down. Artstation's Bi Tori with its built-in bifurcation was a mind-changing experience for many of those who entered its space.

De Zeeuw's concept of the **User Language**[v] (UL) is also in general operation at the level of design and intention within Artstations work, manifest through the technologies and methods Artstation employs. Translation of conversations into a three dimensional computer aided design (CAD) representation, typically involves many people and generates the first part of the user language. Through conversation varieties of classification and representational equivalence may be discussed and agreed upon. The translation of these products into paper architectural forms and installations, associated films, website and direct action are considered the second part of the User Language.

Cybernetics, said Pask, is the art and science of defensible **metaphor**. Artstation's working process moves through conversation, a questioning of questions[vi] and final consensus, towards the emergence of a `defensible metaphor' in the sense of Pask – one which unifies and mediates the subject-material. All elements of the canon were fully active in Artstation's Installation Paperwork (2002)

4. Paperwork

In 2002 Artstation established a placement in Brussels at Europe's oldest and largest asylum reception centre, within a multi-tiered socio-political system, as part of the prospective promotion of Cardiff as European Capital of Culture for 2008 (Cardiff 2008). Curator Yvette Vaughan Jones[vii] had known Artstation's work over an extended period time. From her own professional experience with the Welsh European Centre in Brussels she had established a readymade network of connections. In discussion with Artstation a placement at Le Petit Chateau was seen as providing a European dimension to arguments supporting the cultural capital bid. The background for this decision was that Cardiff's bid to become European Capital of Culture for 2008[viii] (Cardiff 2008) centred on the competitive delivery of a plan for cultural inclusion. Bidding cities across UK identified involvement with the widest number and variety of community links. In this way a city could demonstrate its identity as a worthy Capital of European Culture.

A significant blemish on Cardiff's participation in this dictum occurred in summer 2001, when it was discovered that 50 asylum seekers had been held in draconian conditions in Cardiff prison, treated as if they were criminals. Media reports of this period, News Wales[ix] and BBC Wales[x] reported asylum seekers held in appalling conditions with no consideration being give to religious, cultural and dietary needs. Detainees were locked up like remand prisoners for 24 hours a day with no access to the open air. They were not told the length of time they will have to spend in prison. This topical starting point was and deeply resonant with public sources and opinions of that period and fed negative image of the wider issues of intercultural and racial acceptance in Wales. These people were evidently not welcome, a visible digression from the ethos of a `city of culture'. In the circumstances a European dimension to the bid was clearly required to adjust and broaden the debate about 'otherness': a situation which gave added relevance to the proposed placement in Brussels. Whilst Cardiff looked to discover its own identity, Artstation would explore connections with a group for whom identity was compromised within a liminal space on the margins of society. Paperwork was designed to explore the issues of asylum from the European perspective providing a comparative reflection on issues facing the larger community.

As a first step Davidson flew to Brussels for a site visit and meeting with stakeholders in Paperwork; Wales European Centre, British Council Brussels and Bob Playsier Director of Le Petit Chateau. The Chateau was a fortress of dirty, uneven, chipped tiled floors and echoing corridors. The old national service army barracks had been thrown together by conscripts. The edifice was unwholesome, chilling and in the most part inhuman. In one or two giant wings of the castle efforts had been made to provide basic bunk and wash rooms. Life for the asylum seeker was sparse and hard. People everywhere looked vacant, lifeless worn out and fearful. Hard working staff required serious political conviction and physical stealth to work in this system. Any support for asylum-seekers, it emerged, went against the grain of Belgian asylum policy.

During the initial conversation phase which is always the start of Artstation's working process, an individual staff member (Bart) self-elected each month to compile a report. This, it turned out, was the only hard statistical evidential report on immigration and asylum applicants available to Belgian immigration policy makers. (In Bart's own words the policy was: "Send them all home and do not reveal this policy").

Time constraints were placed on these proceedings by the political need for evidence of cultural production in the

run-up to the Cardiff 2008 bid. Curatorial confidence in Artstation meant it was possible to embark on Paperwork without further formal project definition – effectively, a placement on an open brief [xi]. Arriving at Le Petit Chateau first job was to established internet link between Cardiff and Brussels a task as we experienced Belgian bureaucracy for the first time. Anne Hayes set up a public studio at the Old Library in Cardiff City Centre, administrative home of the Cardiff 2008 bid. Glenn Davidson convened a project team in Brussels, filmmaker Wyn Mason from Cardiff and Herve Gouget a meteorological physicist living in Brussels.

The first Conversational domain between systems was in place, Cardiff 2008 and Le Petit Chateau. First day in Le Petit Chateau a studio working base was created. A poster was placed on the door inviting asylum seekers to discuss their lives with the team. Slowly people came, children first, men next, then women. People were eager to participate once initial suspicions had been overcome.

The work started as a process of informal conversations conducted in French and English – out of many languages in the Chateau. These quickly developed into illustrative poses and small performed actions. The team documented these with digital video, still camera and mini-disk sound. Amongst the participants: The members of an extended Iranian family.

Before the Iranian regime-change the head of the family had been a successful Architect with a flourishing business and life-style to match. Full of confidence, the family's intellectual and libertarian beliefs, affluent appearance and pro-Western attitudes marked them out for disfavour in the new political and religious landscape. The family had subsequently been targeted, imprisoned, members tortured, some had escaped, but some family members had lost their lives. All bore the mental and physical scars. Their business was completely destroyed; they had fled for their lives. If the group's application for asylum was turned down the head of the family said he would kill them all and then himself.

A teenager from Chechnya. He had fled after running out of the family house to see a Russian bomb make a crater where seconds before the family house had stood. His farther had given him some savings and begged him to leave. The young man then walked alone to Europe. He never heard from his farther again. During conversation he was helped by Davidson to make a CAD form in the projects computer. He had wanted to be an architect, before leaving his home. He drew and dimensioned and upturned arc to represent the bomb crater. This was photographed and the model saved.

A young woman from Tibet had fled the Chinese showed the team how Tibetans had been forbidden to use their written language. She was in fear of her life and her culture when she fled. The team filmed her hands writing - but not making a mark.

A Congolese man had grown up with war, been attacked and tortured. He fled from warring militia.
In conversation with Artstation he enacted his own hopelessness, speaking quickly in French and involving each of the team in small performances, where miming hands were placed just beyond reach, all balance and proportion lost. These were filmed and recorded.

The extreme dislocation of reception-centre residents was palpable and overpowering. With each harrowing story the team itself came closer to emotional exhaustion. Barely halfway through the first week of residency the team, overloaded by more information than they could fully understand or process, could take no more. The cultural bid seemed far away, as an all-encompassing sense of helplessness set in for the team.

What possible use could the team be in the face of these peoples' pain? The question disempowered the team.

Privately project leader Davidson began to loose faith in his role as artist, in the role of art and in the project's role within the hell hole reception centre and also with the wider theme of placement. What could art possibly do in the face of this living catastrophe? Within 72 hours of the team arriving, the project was in crisis.

Now the connection between Hayes and Davidson through the internet became crucial. Hayes as an external agent to the situation used her collaborative knowledge. The artists shared the concept from their respective insider/outsider and outsider/insider perspectives. This was not the first time in Artstation's 27 years of public work that a project had reached this precipitous state: as in cognitive therapy, the intervention of the outside observer within the crisis becomes an element in the system itself, opening up a new topological space in which, in a state of submission, openness and complete vulnerability the artist releases control of self and in doing so transforms the performance, potentially gaining access to new meaning and understanding.

Hayes and Davidson's discussion is the first point at which CT actually becomes an explicit subject for conversation in itself. Both artists recognised themselves at the threshold which Pask called a *singularity*, an unpredictable and unquantifiable point, in the dynamically evolving topology of the event, at which bifurcation has to occur.

Mid way through the project's first working week, the team can begin to envisage an enlarging conversational domain, which we here characterise by the extended Venn diagram of connecting circles in Fig 1. Rotated into three dimensional forms as tori within tori, they model the actions of the team as they attempt to connect and

name elements of the work and their consequent effects. This aspect is consistent with IA theory (IA) and introduces the dimension of time into CT. Next the team turned in search for metaphor.
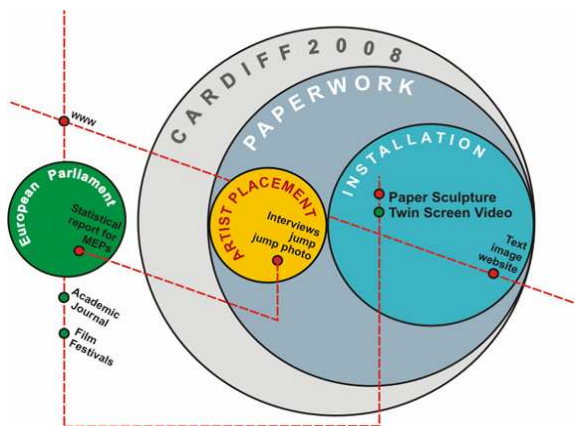
Figure 1: A systemic view of Paperwork.

Turning experience of the asylum centre into a collectively agreed (and thereby `defensible') metaphor requires much creative energy. Pask utilised metaphor and allegory in a particularly interesting way. In Davidson's own paraphrase of many conversations with Pask: the truth value of a conversation is equivalent to the existence value of a conversation. Conversation is an analogy, having at least one similarity and at least one difference. It is designated by a metaphor or allegory. It is peculiar insofar as, in the case of a conversation between A and B, the difference is between A and B, the participants, and the similarity is composed from the concepts that A and B share.

Artstation's Paperwork conversations with asylum residents became the pursuit of a metaphor arising from conversation. Certain key points consistently returned. Asylum seekers wanted official immigration papers saying they could stay in the European Union. Therefore an absence of Paperwork suspends lives caught in the asylum system. Having the correct Paperwork can save the life of a refugee or asylum seeker. Paperwork creates and maintains the potentials of lives within the system. Paperwork creates un-liveable and discontinuous lives. Having paperwork can create new possibilities. An analogous descriptor was suddenly available summarising all conversations to date:…."Suspension".

With little contact time left the team started using "Suspension" to promote a range of actions and ideas. The idea was captured in various statements which extended and communicated the suspension metaphor.

Paperwork, also the project title, is what all asylum seekers required and by virtue of this lack they were literally and figuratively in suspension. The suspension metaphor made many problems visible. It elevated and crystallised perceptions, moving the work to another level of operation.

The team observed the suspension of cultural norms, suspension of personal liberties, suspension of viable life - the list was suddenly endless. The suspension of "time" and how residents were caught aimlessly "hanging around" waiting. In so many ways these seemed the most intolerable aspects of asylum seekers' lives. They were also plagued by the suspension of their ability to work to earn money. This led inevitably to the creation of a black market, to racketeering and to health and safety abuses.

The suspension concept was discussed with centre director Bob Pleysier and his staff and as many asylum seekers as we could contact. Everyone quickly concurred that this summarising concept, which had emerged the hard way through conversation, had, exactly as Pask would have put it, a self evident 'truth-value'.

A number of actions then followed:

A jump photograph was created. 100 asylum seekers gathered to express the statistic 96 percent of applicants to Belgium who are sent home vis-à-vis the 4 percent allowed to stay, according to the project's own internally-generated report. Four participants remained on the ground whilst 96 jumped into the air in unison, to be viewed hovering in the air, literally in suspension. That single image communicated with dramatic effect the brutal implications of the information contained within the report and the waste of the life-times of so many people.

Prior to the Jump photograph, Davidson emailed De Zeeuw proposing the jump as a user language. He was delighted to be quoted in such an unexpected manner and context and energetically replied in the positive.

People at the reception centre, asylum seekers staff adopted jumping as a form of communication. Jumping rapidly became a non verbal expression of agreement with the concept of suspension.

Jumping proceed all over Le Petit Chateau. Jumping off chairs, images were taken at the moment of suspension before gravity returned jumpers to the ground. Video sequences captured groups and team members hanging off roof bars appearing to walk in the air.

Wyn Mason the film-maker, in conforming to Artstation's wishes not to pre-write a shooting script, was now able to script for the project's video element. He had two and a half days to use the suspension metaphor. A narrative emerged and material for film produced with the asylum seekers. The rushes were taken back to Cardiff

where a 9 minute looped video was constructed using two frames side by side in conversation. One frame reporting in a documentary evidence-based style, whilst the other frame worked with metaphoric reference.

The Staff member (Bart) who had produced the asylum statistics commented on them as dull and of little penetrating power, and indeed the report went unnoticed and unacted by the policy in the European Parliament when it was first presented, with consequential corrosive effect on the morale of the asylum applicants.

The Jump image was therefore placed on the cover of the statistical report, bringing the dry data to life with a representation and reminder of a desperate human condition. Subsequently a group of MEPs - Glenys Kinnock (Labour), Eluned Morgan (Labour) and Eurig Wyn (Plaid Cymru) - were invited to and attended the opening ceremony of Paperwork at Le Petit Chateau in Brussels, along with the Chateau's asylum seekers, centre staff, director and other interested agencies.

The following summary of the significance of the event was proposed by Davidson:

"…As artists, staff and members of the asylum service as bureaucrats and as politicians, we can jump as an expression of empathy for those suspended in the European Asylum System. In doing so we also express our understanding of the damaging suspension of peoples lives, an unintended effect of slow decision-making…"

This visit was the first time that members of the European Parliament had set foot inside Le Petit Chateau. The action set a precedent; that remote policy makers could and should visit places like Le Petit Chateau to know how they effect the lives of those they rule. The MEPs where amazed and supportive and offered help on further projects. Indeed this support was called on in the first attempt to raise money for Agora, phase II of Paperwork, an installation based project to bring asylum seekers inside the European Parliament in conversation with MEPs and EU officials and members of NGOs ("a technical impossibility"[xii]) – see Fig 2.

The exhibition of Paperwork at the Old Library in Cardiff opened to approximately 200 people Yvette Vaughan Jones in her opening speech denoted the work as a cornerstone of the cultural bid. The Paperwork installation itself consisted of a paper arch, derived from the inversion of the Chechnian teenager's CAD drawing. At architectural scale the installation was mounted high above the central stairway connecting nowhere with nowhere between the walls of the building, creating a fragile image of suspension. Other elements of the exhibition included: large photographs, texts, graphic panels and a website[xiii] containing interviews conducted in Brussels exhibited in the lower area. Midway and orthogonal to the arching installation was Paperwork the film[xiv]
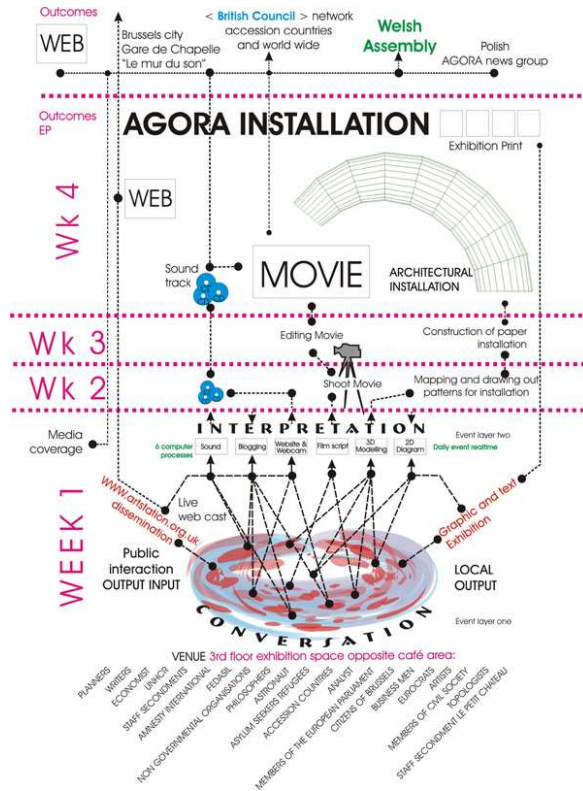

Figure 2. Artstation's AGORA proposal –
Phase II systemic design

5. Conclusion

Hayes and Davidson utilise their knowledge of Pask's work gained through direct contact and friendship with the Author and most importantly the works they created together. The utility of the ideas comes from an embodied understanding they both gained from this experience. The Amsterdam fellowship provided an opportunity for the artists to produce the first moving, participant viewpoints from within the architecture of CT. The experience became a method of learning and the generation of new works.

These happened in the Amsterdam studio, at various conferences, universities and public spaces and constituted presentations and performances. The Installation Bi Tori revealed to Davidson, whilst he and Pask stood inside, looking up into the vast white bifurcating architectural form, the attraction of opposite actors; Love and the association Pask had for the story of Orpheus in the underworld. Artstation carry the effect of such moments within their work and continue to do so within latest projects like ArtMap and Of Arising Nature. Functions

found within cybernetics of Pask, De Zeeuw and Glanville are an act of interpretation, reflection and Love. For Artstation CT provides a constellation of ideas which inform the decision making process in their art practice. Particular parts of what has been proposed as a Cybernetic Canon express additionality and linkages between cybernetic works, forged in close professional contact with one another, they retain their distinctive quality of practice.

Artstation's experience poses questions about cybernetics, how in use further meaning may be constructed. Paperwork was also a process by which cybernetic form was generated through actors and revealed through the possibility of impossible worlds.

[i] Organised by Gerard De Zeeuw, Ranulph Glanville and Mike Robinson, Ondersteuning Overlaving und Cultuur – OOC (Support Survival and Culture). OOC was a University of Amsterdam PhD. programme funded by Dutch Government at the Faculty of Andragology,. Later becoming the Centre for Innovative Co-Operative Technology - CICT.

[ii] Conversation Theory establishes the metaphor of conversation in support of improved competence in learning situations. (Pask G., 1975) Conversation, Cognition and Learning: a Cybernetic Theory and Methodology. New York: Elsevier.

[iii] The Torus notation is used in Biology to denote a living systems. (Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J.Varela) The Tree of Knowledge 1987

[iv] Bitori (Galuska, F) – 1990. ASC newsletter Art Critic and Chair of the American Society of Cybernetics Commission for the conference in Virginia Beach. www.artstation.org.uk/bitori/bitori.doc -.

[v] User Language - the languistic constraints (the alphabet plus the grammar) on the interaction between an actor and what the actor is using to ensure that the effects of an action are as intended such that unintended side-effects can be avoided." (Gerard De Zeeuw, 1995) 'Values, Science and the Quest for Demarcation'. Systems Research , 12:1,pp.15-25.

[vi] Art Critic Gordon Dalton writing for the Cardiff Festival of Creative Technology, Wales UK 2005. ArtMap Incubator newspaper available from Artstation. Also see www.mayyouliveininterestingtimes.org.uk

[vii] Yvette Vaughan Jones wrote the Capital bid document and created the arguments for the City of Cardiff.

[viii] Derivation of the **European City of Culture** launched on June 13, 1985 by Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri - Brussels. Mercouris whos son helped Artstation establish Agora, See www.artstation.org.uk AGORA http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_capital_of_culture and advice from WEC Wales European Centre

[ix] http://www.newswales.co.uk/index.php?section=Culture&F=1&id=3836

[x] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/1488467.stm

[xi] Placement of artists in public institutions on an *open brief* was a defining feature of the pioneering work of the London-based *Artist Placement Group* (APG) in the 1970s-80s

[xii] Security in the European Parliament in Brussels requires all visitors must have a passport.

[xiii] Project website: www.artstation.org.uk/paperwork

[xiv] (Mason W., Davidson.G.,2007) http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journalissues.php?issn=14682753&v=8&i=2