

A note on digital art, virtuality and bodily transmissions

By Art Historian, Ulla Angkjær Jørgensen, Norwegian University of Technology and Science.

The status of the virtual is a recurrent problem. Its relation to reality is ambiguous. Often the virtual is perceived as something non-real, something immaterial and artificial. But what does the word actually mean? It derives from the Latin "virtualis", meaning "possessing an inner power or possibility". Thus in its original meaning virtuality refers to a potential force. In English the word virtual is used to denote a state close to what can be described with a known designation: a state of being not quite, but almost - as for example in the phrase "he married a virtual stranger." The difference between one state and the other is as good as non-existent, and yet it is there. The word's other main use in English is in the term Virtual Reality (abbreviated to VR), which has become the standard international term for the specific simulated reality that can be programmed in a computer. This is an artificial reality that is generated digitally. In Danish this quality of artificiality clings to the meaning of the term: it denotes a reality that is artificially created. But let us make a distinction here, referring to our everyday concrete reality as physical-concrete reality and to the computer's as virtual reality, while agreeing that the one is no more real than the other. Here I will consider the question of the status of the virtual by reflecting on how we as physical bodies are influenced by and interact with it.

Virtual reality should not be understood as something radically other than the reality we stand and move about in, but rather as a potential part of the latter. In our encounter with digital art we can explore the virtual as something artificially created that is on its way to becoming concrete reality, and look at how it concretely influences the physical world. Jette Gejl Kristensen's films in 3D stereometry shows how virtual forms and spaces actually affect the viewer physically. Her work *Sten* (Stone, 2001) gives me an overwhelmingly direct sensation of drowning. The three-dimensional signal creates a wave that slowly moves out into the room on floor-level, lapping over my feet and rising up over my body. The feeling of suffocation comes when it reaches my throat. Astonishingly enough, the virtual abstraction proves to have a physical effect on my material body.

Virtual reality is a function of digital signals. The digital signal is discrete in time, because its value as a signal applies at only one moment and each signal consists of a single sequence of discrete signal values. The signal is transitory: it takes place here and now. The fact that digital art is transitory and immaterial forces us to speak about art in new ways. The digital signal breaks up

the classic work into bits – or, in computer language, into *bytes*. We can talk about events, happenings or transmissions; these are new ways of conceptualising art that have entered into artistic forms of practice ever since the 1960s.

In his book *Parables for the Virtual*¹ the philosopher Brian Massumi develops a concept of the event that is hitched to the body and its virtual capacities. In his theory virtuality is an aspect of the body at any given time. The body's virtual capacities are what allow us to navigate and to be in the world: they are, so to speak, part of the body's communicative system. One might say that the virtual is the body's abstract intelligence. Starting as he does from the faculty of sight, Massumi refers to our everyday experiences as mirror-vision (Massumi: 46ff). Mirror-vision should be understood as a simple axis in which you see yourself from a fixed point. Mirror-vision is not movable, because in order to see yourself in a mirror you must keep your gaze still. You cannot see yourself move. This is in fact the conscious experience of sight that we move around with in everyday life. It is like seeing from one point on an axis to another. The perspective is simple. You can of course change your point of view, but the new viewpoint will also be static. The double-identity structure of the mirror image can quite unproblematically be transferred to an inter-subjective perspective. We mirror ourselves daily in one another.

By contrast *movement-vision*, which we also use, but which is invisible to ourselves, consists of constantly moving positions and hence perspectives. Mirror-vision and movement-vision are discontinuous and the cleft between them cannot be filled, but it may be crossed. You can never see yourself move as others see you move. If you could you would have moved radically into the position of the other. But since you cannot concretely move outside yourself this cannot be done. Movement vision is relational and is guaranteed by an observer. However, it is possible for the subject to assume this observer-position *virtually*. By assuming the virtual position, the subject moves outside him/herself. Seeing oneself as others see one actually means finding yourself on the axis of sight at a tangent to the self and the other, understood both as factual entities and as conditions for identity. It is to enter a space that opens out an external perspective on the relation between the self and the other, on the subject-object axis. The tangential point at which motion-vision meets mirror-vision and diverges from it is the space between the subject/object poles (Massumi: 51). Massumi refers to this substance-less moment, which is without duration, as *pure event*, the virtual defined as that which is at once as abstract as possible and yet real. The event is potential and potentially transforming. The event is super-empirical. It moves in relation to both past and future: from being to becoming. Massumi calls the

¹ Brian Massumi 2002: *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

blind point of motion-vision *the body without an image*: an accumulation of relative perspectives and the passages between them. This is not a space in the empirical sense, but rather a hole in space. So in its spatial sense the body-without-an-image is a development of subject/object relations in the observer's body, and of the body in itself. Massumi takes the same point that Jacques Lacan uses to demonstrate the splitting of the subject, and extrapolates it as the very thing that makes the subject corporeally intelligent. The coordination of sight in the body and out of the body is what makes us capable of understanding space. But there are also other properties of perception in the body that contribute to our spatial understanding.

The interplay between the senses, which is the cooperation between the body's exterior and its interior, constitutes the body's spatiality. Massumi operates with three different senses: thus *proprioception*, which provides feedback on the relative positions of bodily parts via muscles and ligaments, is contrasted with *exteroception*, the body's tactile perception of the outer world (e.g. through sight, taste, smell, touch, hearing and balance) and with *visceral perception*, which delivers information on the state of the inner organs. Exteroception, the realm of the tactile, belongs to the domain of the skin which creates the contact surface between the subject and outwardly perceived objects. Proprioception folds tactility into the body, in the sense that it closes off the skin's contact with the outer world and thereby joins the epidermis and the viscera. Proprioception translates the easy performance of the body's encounter with objects into relational muscular memory. It is the cumulative memory of skills, habits and bodily attitudes.

A great deal happens in the body all the time; feelings and impressions arise and go. Indeed, the body is a huge arena for affects and emotions. According to Massumi, emotions and affects follow different logics and it is important to distinguish between the two. Emotion has a subjective content. It has to do with the subject's recollections and therefore with thinking and language. Affect, by contrast, is an intensity in the body, something physically felt or noticed. Affects are tensions and resolutions in the body. Physical intensities arise in the exchange between the outside world and the inner corporeal world. In Massumi's terms, the brain and the skin together constitute a resounding container, in which impressions from outside are captured and new ones arise. This container is a kind of folding mechanism: stimuli are turned inwards and folded into the body, and others in turn are folded out into the world. The body at one and the same time absorbs and despatches impulses faster than thought can perceive. It is a constantly vibrating event. One can also therefore say that it is radically open.

Massumi asserts straight out that the body is faster than both thought and language. The continuous transporting of information through the sensory apparatus - the fact that the body is a constantly vibrating, fluid, productive organism, radically open to the world, a recipient and

producer of happenings, means that the physical body is faster than language or thought. One needs to imagine that, by virtue of its function as a recipient and sender of signals, the body is a split second ahead of thought. The body is pre-present whereas thought is present, and it is this very distance between the two that constitutes the virtual, the potential that is about to happen. The virtual capacities are the body's emergency services. The sensation one sometimes has that something is happening too quickly, or that it's happening before it actually happens, can be attributed to these virtual capacities. Virtual and digital art can teach us something new about the body as a producer and transporter of invisible signals, about the body as a hyper-intelligent navigator.

