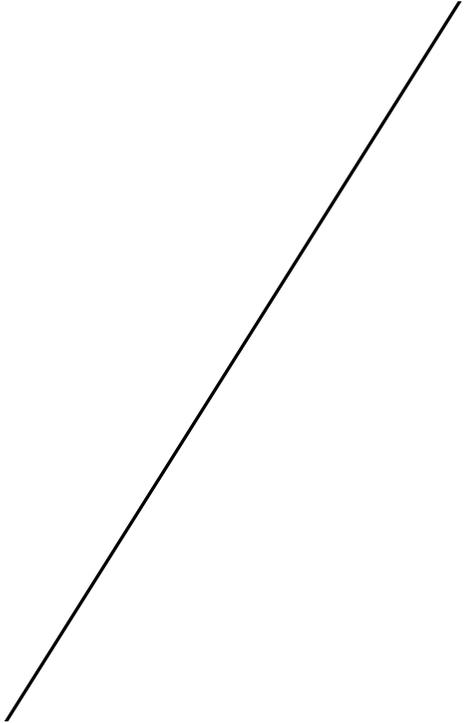




HEIGHTENING EXPERIENCE

Interview with Kurt Hentschläger
ARIE ALTENA



Sonic Acts met Kurt Hentschläger on Sunday 25th November, the day after a performance of *FEED* at the STRP-festival in Eindhoven. *FEED* is an immersive performance for Unreal characters, fog, stroboscopes and pulse lights. In the first part, 3D figures are projected onto a screen where they float through a zero gravity world and perform a unified choreography. Their movements create a corresponding, symphonic drone that fills the venue. The second part is a composition for fog, pulse and stroboscopic light, which leads the audience towards a complete loss of spatial orientation. This impression is augmented by a matching soundscape infused with feedback and intense sub-low bass to generate a heightened physical experience. According to Hentschläger, *FEED* stresses the limits of perception, and what evolves is a pure sensation of light projected directly onto the retinas of the spectators.

AA In *FEED*, you set-up a sort of apparatus or 3D-environment to immerse the audience in visuals and sound. That obviously connects it to the Sonic Acts theme of the cinematic experience. What are you trying to achieve with works like *FEED* and *Karma*?

FEED in particular is almost a summary of my interests. It is immersive and non-narrative, yet intense, and it is somewhere in between performance and installation. It follows a dramaturgical arc that comes from theatre, with a distinct beginning and an end. *FEED* expresses one of the main frustrations I have as an audiovisual artist: that video only exists on a two-dimensional plane. Of course, there is nothing negative about video or film-projection as such, they're just always two-dimensional, in contrast to sound which is by nature three-dimensional. When I was working with Granular Synthesis we made quite an effort to overcome the 2D aspect of video with multi-screens that would envelop the audience and fill one's entire vision, so that the audience would be completely enclosed by sound and visuals. The flickering effect employed in the second working phase was a way of stressing the element of light in the projection, in order to 'lift' the images off the 2D-plane and out into the space. This idea is present in all Granular Synthesis' abstract flickering landscapes – I call them landscapes because they have an abstract ambient quality.

As an audiovisual artist, another frustration is that you always fight with the spatial component, with the architecture in which you present a work. You can create a space within the space, an artificial space within a given space, but the given space cannot be ignored entirely. It can be coped with, and it might be transformed, but there are certain things – like the famous exit sign and the abundance of light it usually emits, that one is not allowed to turn off – that blend into your work. *FEED* finally gets rid of that by erasing the given space, and erasing depth of space. You end up in a void.

The void is created because you fill the space with fog and use the stroboscopic light and flickering effect?

The fog obscures the space and with the flicker I 'project' so to speak directly onto the retina. Actually, I take it inside the brain. The actual event happens in your brain. It is the ultimate invasion. An important aspect of this work, and of music in general, is that it first takes over your body and becomes a sensation. It is the same as when you are going to the opera and you start melting away. You do not understand quite why, but you are melting away.

But in opera, for instance, that is also because there is a certain progression in the music that takes you away, as if on a trip.

In *FEED* there is also a progression. There are two very separate parts. The first part is a deliberately classical, a frontal cinematic experience. It is an ambient audiovisual concert, I'd say. In the second part I use the above mentioned flicker in thick fog. People keep asking me how the first part connects to the second. It is a question to which I never really give an answer. Obviously I like the contrast: firstly the audience is in the position of a normal spectator and then the whole thing collapses onto the audience, and the audience becomes the protagonist. In principle what people 'see' in the second part is patterns of interference in their own head. The sensory input is the same for everybody, but no two people

will tell you afterwards that they have seen the same things. It is a different experience for everybody. Your brain interprets the sensory input and weaves it into whatever was already present in your head, your state of mind really.

Does that have to do with how fast your brain refreshes?

Obviously, it has to do with how your visual cortex works. I am not an expert in this field, but the more I read about it, the more I think I understand. The brain is a highly dynamic 'apparatus', with many centers all running at their own dynamically changing speeds to process different inputs and outputs. The speed depends on what is needed and when. For instance there are these special moments in your life when you have the feeling that everything slows way down. It feels like slowing down because the brain cranks up the refresh-rate and the image intake speeds up to thousands of 'frames', so to speak. So time-wise, you have this hyper-resolution which allows you to understand what is going on around you, to be able to make the right decision that potentially saves your life or not. This process increases the demand for energy, all the sugar you can muster goes to your brain and the brain can go into hyper-speed. And by the sheer intensity it burns the experience vibrantly into your memory.

Is *FEED* a kind of dream-machine?

In a way, yes, a dream-machine or a mind-machine. Do you remember these LED goggles from the late 1980s? They were throttled because when they blink above a certain frequency you can have a photo sensitive episode or go into a trance. *FEED* willfully goes go into that territory, so *FEED* can induce photosensitive phenomena, seizures, forms of trance. Therefore we need to have all these warnings for the audience. I think it is unfortunate we have to do that, but ultimately I decided to do it because I really want to make sure that people susceptible to epileptic fits will not end up experiencing the piece. Actually, in contrast to all these warnings, *FEED* is very peaceful, whereas the early Granular Synthesis works were not at all peaceful.

I might be making so-called non-narrative pieces, but that is only true to a certain extent, because your brain will always try to connect two things that follow each other. The brain is trained to interpret and create meaning. Trying to make a story from events is almost hardwired into the brain. It is primal and located in an old part of the brain that's assures our survival. In order to survive you have to understand how things are connected. When something happens that is completely alien to you, your brain goes into a sort of hyper-drive mode

trying to find out what it means, is it dangerous or benign? For some people this ultimately leads to an overload and a reset of the entire brain. The more I look at it, it is not the photosensitive part working on the retina that is central to *FEED*, but this potential 'freezing-up' of the brain.

There is an essay on *FEED* by Claudia Hart in which she compares what the audience is undergoing with the death of avatars in the game Unreal Tournament, because *FEED* was created with the Unreal game engine. What do you think of that interpretation?

It is certainly one possible interpretation. Actually, a lot of people tell me things like that. The avatars in *FEED* have no eyes, they are completely inside themselves, they are all the same, but they do not recognize each other. They are a group, but also completely solitary, or one solitary being in eight reflections. It actually comes from a deficiency in the software but I embraced it as fitting for the expression. For me this aspect also refers to technology as a mirroring device: we mirror, or feedback ourselves in technological devices. What we are hooked on is an exhilarating process of expanding and empowering ourselves.

Is it meaningful that you have used Unreal for *FEED*?

No. Unreal seemed to provide an inexpensive and handy means of doing what I wanted. But it came out to be very uneconomical because the game engine software has such an unintuitive interface. I started using it because I was stunned by the existence of all the virtual slaughterhouses without meaning or consequence. It is like a parallel world. I hadn't played games for many years and am still not a gamer. I wonder why so many games are geared towards virtual combat training environments, because that is what they really are.

I chose Unreal because there is, from an artistic perspective, one authentic moment in this rather flat and cold environment: when avatars are shot in Unreal, it looks very organic: the avatar starts moving like somebody having an epileptic seizure before finally dissolving into particles.

I started working on this in preparation for a collaboration with the French Ballet Preljocaj in Aix en Provence. I was trying to find something that gave me the possibility of working with dancers in real-time, without having to edit or render images. I was looking for an intuitive toll for this collaboration. That is why I started working exclusively with Unreal. Actually it worked out quite differently, but this is how it started. I made a sort of epileptic seizure machine.

It was a very spooky experience for me when in the second part of *FEED* some people actually had real attacks, some of them of an epileptic nature. It happened a few times, which was really tough for everybody. This at least connects the two parts in a very bizarre way, which obviously was not planned and not part of the concept. 'Luckily' it happens very rarely. One can fantasize that maybe in ten or twenty years there will be a community of people with long term



FEED, Kurt Hentschläger, 2005-06, performance for Unreal Characters, Fog, Stroboscopes & Pulse Lights, courtesy of the artist.

FEED-side-effects, where it transpires they are able to see certain things, like in a Philip K. Dick novel.

How is *FEED*'s sound generated?

In the first part, the avatars' bodies generate the music. As they move, their motions – actually their joints – are being tracked. They control about twenty parameters of eight software instruments. Eight bodies make eight voices, and that creates a drone. In *FEED* the sound comes from a DVD, because it is just too complicated to have another live element. In *Karma*, which uses some of the same elements as *FEED*, the sound and image is rendered live. That is why I really like *Karma*. It is a procedural piece, with no beginning and no end. There is a basic scripted framework, but the rest it is a piece that forever slightly changes.

I made the first version of *Karma* for the CAVE. The CAVE itself is a very unattractive, small space. Once it's switched on though, you get a 3D-stereoscopic effect that's a bit awkward and not really convincing. But what happens with *Karma* is that the space extends through the screen and you see the bodies pass through it as they arrive right there with you in the space. Because *Karma* is a procedural piece, you never know what is going to happen. Sometimes the avatars move together in clusters, sometimes they disperse or even stay away for longer durations. There is no intelligence, it's just a big physics algorithm, but it gives you the impression that these virtual bodies are autonomous.

Karma is a bit of a psychological experiment. As a spectator or player there is not much you can do in *Karma*. The longer you are in there, the less gravity is there. When it is gone, the bodies that hang in a sort of torture chamber start to float. The viewer only has two buttons to use. One is mean-spirited: when you push it gravity returns and sends the bodies crashing to the floor. So do you want to be mean-spirited or benevolent? There is this little bit of interaction, but for the rest you are a spectator.

Do you use art as a way of creating heightened physical experiences?

Absolutely. I would go further and say simply heightened experiences: something that really activates you beyond the means of the pure stimulus. Something that sets you in motion, a process leading a part of you to another spot, point, perspective or connection. I have always loved that art can have this power. Of course, it is man-made, and in this most indirect way you meet the creator too.

Chicago-based Austrian artist Kurt Hentschläger creates audiovisual compositions. The immersive nature of his work reflects on the metaphor of the sublime. Trained as a fine artist, in 1983 he began as a sculptor by building surreal machine objects, followed by works with video, computer animation and sound. Between 1992 and 2003 he worked collaboratively as part of the duo Granular Synthesis. Employing large-scale projected images and drone-like sound environments, his multi-channel performances and installations engage on both physical and emotional levels, overwhelming the audience with sensory information. His most recent solo work is more poetic and further researches the nature of human perception and the accelerated impact of new technologies on individual consciousness.

<http://www.hentschlagler.info>