

DIGIMAG26/LUG-AGO07



FEED, VISIBLE SPACE COLLAPSE

Txt: Marco Mancuso

Feed, an audiovisual performance on sensorial, spatialized, electronic experimentation produced by austrian artist **Kurt Hentschlag** (for the ones that don't know him, he, together with **Ulf Langheinrich**, is one of the two souls of Granular Synthesis) is, at this time, a project that is unique in its genre, outside of the aesthetic and technical languages currently spoken in the contemporary world of performances and multimedia installations. There's really nothing to discuss: opinions are in total accordance among audience and critics.



Whoever was able to "experience" **Feed** (experience: this is its main significance) truly knows what I'm talking about. Designed for the **Biennale di Teatro di Venezia in 2005**, passed through **Netmage in 2006** and replicated many times all over the world up to its arrival, a short time ago, to the Sonar festival in Barcelona , **Feed** is the artistic and research project effectively enclosing the whole of the path, ideas, theories of one of the pioneers of the aesthetic and sensorial research on the relationships intercurring between sound and images.

Feed is, in today's panorama, the artistic project that can represent a "reference model" and a "change in direction" of a whole scene, the multimedia audio-visual art scene. A scene that has not yet developed the potential offered by human interaction, and that can start to investigate, through Kurt Hentschlag's project, on the physical-sensorial-perceptive relationships that artists can create between the work of art and the audience. Because **Feed** is an artistic project offered in the form of a live performance playing on the loss of the usual physical-spatial coordinates, on the continuous solicitation of the retina and on the direct relation that it bears to specific areas of the human brain, on the multisensorial, synesthetic approach to sound and 2D/3D patterns that are autonomously created by any single object present in the performance, on the physical-sensorial immersivity and on the resulting emotional stimulation, deriving from direct experience and by the direct establishment of a correspondence between our body and technology.

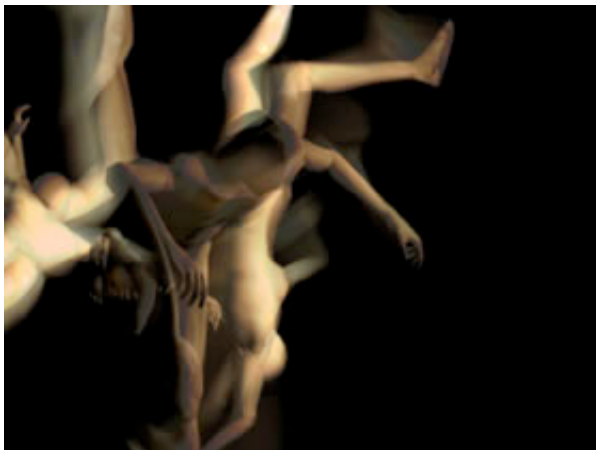


In the end, **Feed** "simply" is an experience to be had, to be lived, to be used to be able to allow ourselves to be astonished by our own reactions when faced with precise stimuli. I had the chance of directly talking to **Kurt Hentschlager** in occasion of the **Elektra festival in Montreal**, and many were the questions that, inevitably, rose after the performance. Sit down, relax, wait until the digital sound rises in volume, and when smoke starts to rapidly fill the room, until you can't see anything, just relax, let yourselves go to the loss of any three-dimensional perception of the space surrounding you, and look around: the stroboscopic lights will wrap the space beside you with a blinding, flashing white light, and beautiful 2D and 3D patterns will appear in front of you without the slightest effort. From then on it will be we and astonishment, for more than 20 (really too short) minutes...

Marco Mancuso: Would you like to tell me the concept behind Feed project? We discussed in Montreal about the relationship between sound, light, audience physical perception, loss of tridimensional space. And we spoke about the way of relationship and signal neural transmission between our retina and images in specific areas of our brain....

Kurt Hentschlager: It's probably fair to say, that Feed covers in one piece all the subject matter that aesthetically and psychologically has interested me over time. It's at once a summary of my long term research into immersion and audiovisual composition, both in terms of installation and performance, as well as an outlook of where I'd like to venture from here.

The piece has 2 parts, seemingly the opposite of each other, the first one being classically frontal, a cinematic experience in the widest of senses, non narrative (or barely so), displaying a kind of sinister ballet of convulsing and sounding 3D bodies. The second part then is the moment when the perception of space, and for that matter the classical cinematic set, vanishes in an instant, wiped out by a massive injection of artificial fog. The video projection is replaced by stroboscopic flicker and pulse lights, creating an impression of complete immersion, a collapse of visible space and a familiar sense of perception. .



While the sound-scape of the first part is mostly emanating from the motions of the 3D characters on screen, in the second part it originates from the lights, from acoustic and solar pickups channeled through a chain of effects and feedback. I try to create an equivalent in sound to the sublime quality of the tripping interferences phenomena in the second part.

It's hard to describe what one actually sees in the strobo-fog part, it also differs from person to person and it certainly can't be documented with a video camera. I love that because I always find this to be one of the major frustrations, the need for documentation of ephemeral and for that matter physical events, something that should be

experienced by putting one self right into the event, but for many, e.g. historical, reasons is documented and in the form of its documentation becomes something very different. So the second part of Feed is not documentable, because the visual impression unfolding is rendered in the brain, its not really seen, even though one seems to "see" it. Or rather, what's actually seen through the eye and fed into the visual cortex is straight and "flat" high contrast flicker while the psychedelic 2D/3D patterns and whatever else individual members of the audience believe to be "seeing" is visualized inside our brain.



According to my research - which by no means is exhaustive - what happens is a clash between the internal brain refresh cycle (of the visual processing parts of the brain) and the external flicker cycles of the stroboscopes. Once the fog part is under way, the strobos fade in at about 8hz, from there, until the end of the piece, they go up to a maximum of about 25hz. Normally, at the beginning of the fog part, people in the audience will, in terms of brain refresh cycles, have arrived in an alpha state, their brain, or more specifically their visual cortex, individually refreshing in between 8-13hz. Now two things seem to happen, A) Generally, stroboscopic flicker in a range between 8-13Hz appears to break down some of the physiological barriers between different regions of the brain and B) The (external) flicker rates of the strobos interfere with the (internal) brain refresh rates of the visual cortex resulting in actual interference patterns. These 2D/3D psychedelic patterns, experienced in such an environment, are differing from individual to individual depending on the respective personal brain refresh rate and other factors linked to imaginative and other predispositions.

The intensity of the patterns changes according to increase / decrease in light intensity of the strobos-, the flicker frequency and flash duration - all of which I am actually improvising with in the show. It also changes with the intersected pulse lights, which temporarily subdue and reignite the impression. Feed uses two independent sections of strobos, which, when set to differing frequencies, are creating interferences on their own, all of which is constantly "frustrating" the brain's attempt to properly "see" and thus constantly animating the brain to ever new interpretations of the reality at hand.

Generally the brighter the flicker and the more filling one's entire field of view, the more instantly the patterns emerge. This relies for the most part on the very dense fog, which erases any idea of physical space, depth of space and resets one's sense of orientation. The fog really brings the flicker to the plane of the retina, allowing no distance or escape from it, the eye is reduced to a basic brightness-, contrast- and color sensor, all the perceived patterns then being "invented" in brain.



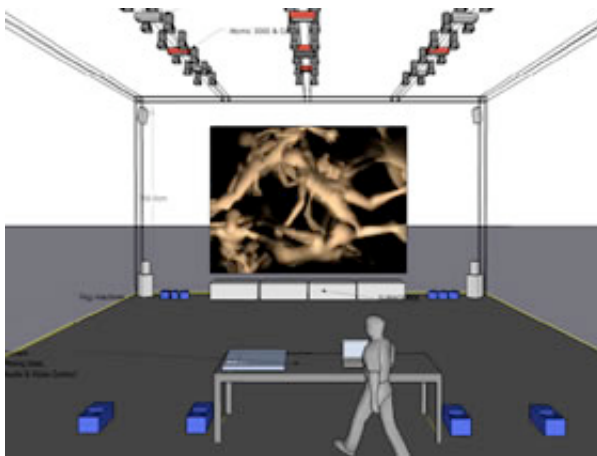
Marco Mancuso: When and how do you decide to start working on Feed? Of course, is a step of your wide

research on audiovisual synesthesia and immersivity with new electronic artforms you started with Granular Synthesis. In the same time, it seems to be a step over, something on the border between the emotive and the physical experience.

Kurt Hentschlager: I experimented with flicker in my video and sound work with <Granular Synthesis> for about 6 years in an attempt to at least somewhat lifting video off the flat screen and have it visually reverberating in space. The element of light in video becomes equally prominent when using flicker, but still the inherent flatness of projected video remained a source of frustration.

The idea to work with fog and strobes goes back to a couple of intense experiences in fog, both up in the mountains, where walking into a bank of clouds on an otherwise sunny day leads one into this evenly lit serene moment of peace and beauty, but also finding myself in a hard core techno club in Brussels sometime in the early nineties, which was just packed with fog. Like ever and so often with ideas, I carried this one around for a few years before I eventually found the right moment to get to it. Ordered a fog machine, hooked up my existing strobes and started working, most of it empirical in nature in my studio. I was quite thrilled from the beginning, to see that my imagination was surpassed by the early results. From there, through a series of tests and sequences, I started building a vocabulary, which I continue expanding upon. I feel this is still very much in progress and will become a bigger body of work.

Feed was a creation for the Theater Biennial in Venice in 2005 and fittingly it does stage "humans", well humanoid 3D puppets, in its first part. Even in that first part its all about the void and I mean it less in terms of the bodies inhabiting what could be interpreted as dark interstellar space, but more in the sense of their complete isolation. They appear to be a group, but they neither can see each other, nor vaguely are aware of each other, their bodies going through each other as if all of them were ghosts. So the second part of Feed in a way does reflect this virtual setup of the first part in the physical audience space. Wherein the physical space collapses to a void, kind of turns outside > in. And its not even scary... but rather contemplative.



Marco Mancuso: In Montreal, you told that you worked with scientists and neuro-psychiatrists, to understand which are the effects of strobo-lights, smog and sounds on our perception. You told me that you studied a lot, you browse the internet, you read many books. Could you tell me which were the references of your work, and how was to work with these scientists and psychitrists?

Kurt Hentschlager: Actually I haven't worked with neurologists yet, but obviously done quite a bit of reading in an effort to understand the process inside the human brain and also the very possible side effects on some people, especially in regard to what is called photo sensitive epilepsy. For photosensitive people, flicker can induce effects ranging from nausea to short term unconsciousness & memory loss and seizures. So these are serious side effects albeit for a very select few people. They are of a benign nature and ephemeral but nevertheless disturbing for anybody experiencing them. A few such incidents have occurred in Feed shows and so a modus operandi has been established providing information and warning for the audience, guides inside and outside the performance space, first aid team etc.

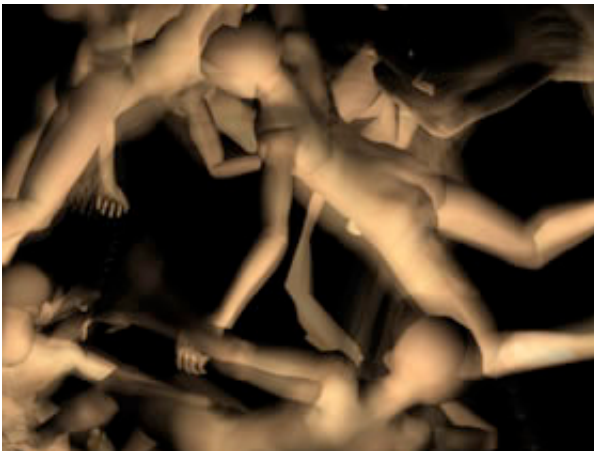
There is a perfect introduction on the topic in a book called "Chapel of the Extreme Experience - A short history of Stroboscopic Flicker and the Dream Machine" by John Geiger, Soft Skull Press. it looks at the scientific flicker findings from the 1950-70ies from an art perspective in reference to beatnik, psychedelic culture and flicker film, highly recommend it. Another one I like is "A brief tour of human consciousness" by V.S. Ramachandran, Pi Press. This one looks at how the brain can create illusions and delusions, synesthesia and its relation to metaphor and art, by analyzing and locating processes in the brain by studying defects in the perception of neurological patients.



Marco Mancuso: Which are the Feed historical, scientific and art references from the past? In other words, are there some other artistic or scientific projects from the past which inspired your work?

Kurt Hentschlager: I think if anything then structural film, like **Paul Sharits, Tony Konrad and Peter Kubelka** are an obvious reference. I saw many of those experimental films back at the end of the 70ies but really for the most part forgot about them. Once I rediscovered flicker as something that emerged within the software video sampler that Ulf and I developed in 1997, I went back and looked at some of those films again. Paul Sharits work thankfully had a kind of a revival in the beginning of this decade

Also come to think of it, as a young artist I was seriously intrigued by the op art work of the hungarian painter **Viktor Vasarely**, the work he did in the 80ies, he was considered to be almost a kitsch artist, or rather he was too pop, I went to his museum in Budapest and remember being mesmerized.



Marco Mancuso: Finally, I was speaking in Montreal with Scanner about the actual need/change of live electronic performances and installations, to be not focused on impressive audiovisual fluxus, but more on an emotive dialogue with the audience, on physical immersivity, on loose of perception, on concepts and deep messages too. Electronic live art passed on many changes in the last years, and now with new tools, softwares and devices, with a direct dialogue between art, communication and commercial, Tv, mobile and Internet, many people and profesionists become "artists". What do you think about this expecially speaking about Feed?

Kurt Hentschlager: I feel pretty much the same, my fatigue with some of electronic sound and art is that it often relies so much on the sensation of its technological advances that the "art" part seems to become negligible. There is a clear hierarchy established e.g. in the term "new media art" – first there is the "new", then the "media", finally at the end comes the "art". This is telling. The formal aspect of it becomes dominant and acts like a facade in front of an otherwise inexistent building. There generally seems to be some confusion in terms of terminology, a lot of cultural expression today is labeled as art while in essence its really design or applied art. And yes there are blurry borders but still, its not the same.

I look at media as an extension of our body or better our sensory and communication organs. Because it's that close to us we are connecting to it on a deeper level, are emotionally involved and extensively mirroring ourselves in it. My work is informed by this relationship, in particular by the feedback loop within our very core, being both the creators and consumers of technology and media. This interests me for the longest of time not the least because of the fair amount of denial and propaganda surrounding it.

www.hentschlagel.info/

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photosensitive_epilepsy

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_waves

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visual_perception

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structural_film

www.fondationvasarely.fr/main.html?lang=fr
