

Carnival/Wearable-Art/Presence

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Intro

Carnival is said to be not only a celebration but also a critique of the existing social order. By initiating an event of the *world upside down* carnival indicates the artificiality of any social structure. Likewise, emerging from the field of wearable technologies one can detect wearable artistic works that seem to follow an opposite logic than the more technologically-and design-oriented experiments within wearable technologies. In a similar manner as carnival breaks the everyday routines and keeps alive the possibility of change, wearable technology art presents to us a fresh perspective with the potential for surprise. By being strongly visual, peculiar looking, and most of all physically present, these artistic wearables can be seen as a carnevalesque hap of our contemporary indulgence with technology.

This paper investigates the relationship between carnival and artistic approaches to wearable technologies. The first two parts introduce the concept of carnival and three artists from the Brazilian cultural movement known as *Tropicalism* from the late 1960's. The later part of this paper focuses on wearable technology art, its (possible) correlation with the concept of carnevalesque and the property of presence.

Carnevalesque

Carnevalesque has been theorized during the last decades by many scholars, one of the most influential theories within literary criticism has been written by Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin focused on the carnival tradition of Middle Ages and Renaissance Europe, which origins could be traced back to the Dionysian Festivities of the Greeks and the Saturnalia of the Romans.

Bakhtin saw carnival as an alternative perspective that undermined hierarchies, and the status of social classes, and enabled a construction of life free from conventions and restrictions. Bakhtin has described several aspects of carnival. For example, carnival allowed celebrations of bisexuality and transvestitism as a release from the socially imposed sex roles and of grotesque body opposing the puritanical view of the body. It showed an image of *world upside down* where the kings and the jesters changed their social roles in an ambivalent atmosphere of the carnival, which also implied the permanence of continuous change. Carnival was considered as a participatory spectacle,

which erases boundaries between spectators and performers; carnival is not a performance but one exists in it, and every viewer is also a performer. (Stam, 1989)

The logic of the carnival is to turn things upside down, which – when considering carnival as an opposing force towards the existing social system - can be seen as satiric commentary on the existing system, as it shows the artificiality of all the systems, like J. Willman has stated. (Willman, 2007) A typical characteristic of a carnival is ambivalence and duality, which is not based on the emphasis of the opposing features but rather on compilation of contradicting elements. According to Bakhtin the opposing features, such as freedom and order or indulgence and fasting, were never really separate. Neither feature could be fully perceived without the other. In carnival aesthetic where “everything is pregnant with its opposite, implies an alternative logic of nonexclusive opposites and permanent contradiction that transgresses the monologic true-or-false thinking typical of Western Enlightenment rationalism.”(Stam, 1989) Carnival showed a possibility for a different construction of society, an alternative life of the oppressed.

It has been claimed that carnival died in Europe simultaneously with the rise of industrial management, the bourgeois, and the middle-class. These changes in society did not leave space for a folk culture’s grotesque expressions, and in many cases carnival was forbidden. (Willman, 2007) An Eurocentric analysis of carnival assumes that contemporary carnivals can only be seen in mass media, where the figures that once had a low social status, such as actors, musicians, sportsmen and other performers, have later become the inheritors of the fame and popularity similar to carnival kings and jesters of the renaissance Europe. Stam points out that mass-media capitalize on the frustrated desire for truly egalitarian society by offering the simulacra of carnival-style festivity. “But that is hardly the same thing as offering carnival itself, or even using carnevalesque strategies, for carnival is participatory, joyfully critical, and potentially subversive.” (Stam, 1989) Traces of the disappeared carnival can nevertheless be found in art, for example in surrealism, in the provocations of Dada, and in general in avant-garde. “Marginal and subversive art, with its adversary relationship to power and to official culture, thus reincarnates the spirit of carnival.” (Stam, 1989)

However, carnival is still a continuing, living and vibrant tradition in Latin America and the Caribbean. One of the well-known celebrations is the Rio Carnival in Brazil¹.

Robert Stam points to another interesting aspect about Latin American cultural production, which has been impacted by the political, economical and cultural marginalization. Stam references Monegal’s and de Campos’s² arguments that the best artists of Latin America have made “this marginalization, this ironic sense of belonging to two cultures-one’s own and that of the metropolitan centers of power- absolutely central to their work.” The Latin American artists living in bicultural or tri-cultural situation inhabit a peculiar realm of irony where words and images are seldom taken at face value, and carnivalization is important “ambivalent” solution within a situation of

¹ Carnival is celebrated in the whole Brazil, but different regions and cities have major differences in the customs and the style of the celebrations. <http://www.rio-carnival.net/>

² Emir Rodriguez Monegal (1921–1985) *Carnaval/ Antropofagia/ Parodia*, Haroldo de Campos (1929–2003) *A Escritura Mefistofelica*.

cultural asymmetry. (Stam, 1989) Carnival is concretely creating tangible reality that challenges the existing situation, albeit temporarily.

Tropicalism

In the late sixties emerged a cultural movement in Brazil called Tropicalism, which found its expression especially in the music, arts, theatre and cinema. Tropicalism has been defined as “carnevalization” of culture. (Oliveira) The style was syncretistic and innovative; it mixed the folkloric and the industrial, the native and the foreign, and broke the rigid barriers between high and low culture. Tropicalism combined the experimental characteristics with a tone of social criticism. Although Tropicalism is best known for its music, visual arts was an active field of in the movement. For example artists such as Helio Oiticica, Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape³ were active in and influenced by the movement, which was crossing boundaries and re-evaluating the arts. In 1968 Oiticica defined anti-art as following:

“[A]n experimental art, distant from the conventional, going beyond the classic dimensions of painting and sculpture and invading the spaces that lay beyond the museums and galleries. Anti-art broke the passive relationship between the spectator and the work of art, inviting them in and provoking their direct participation in the work that was being seen or experienced. Besides this, it started to use new materials from everyday life and invested in the precariousness of these materials. This new perspective took art out of the realm where it was wholly dominated by the visual image and transferred the esthetic experience of an artwork to the “body” or to other elements.”
(Oliveira)

While this paper is looking at carnevalesque as cultural and political product and investigates its (possible) relationship with the wearable technology art⁴, the interest in these specific artists is their production of works that are wearable although non-technological at the time. Helio Oiticica created *Parangoles* between 1964-79. *Parangoles* are cape-like garments that are properly seen only when worn by someone, typically in the gestures and in the movements of the person. His works questioned the traditional observer–art object relationship and expected that the viewer experiences and participates in the artwork. Lygia Clark’s art in the late 1960’s and during 70’s was concerned with sensorial experiences. She created series of goggles with mirrors that manipulated the wearer’s perception of the world, and variety of clothes and masks offered for experimentation for the public. *Encyclopedia Itaú Cultural* (Anon n.d.) Lygia Clark as well as Lygia Pape were both interested of Moebius Strip as a physical instantiation for a metaphor, Pape described it in a following way: “when you have a strip, initially there is always an inside and an outside; but if you twist one of the ends, connect it and run your finger through it, then you don't have an inside nor an outside anymore. You will have a continuous plane, a concept that goes from an internal space to an external space in a sliding move (...) It introduces the idea of art and life mingling,

³ Oiticica Hélio (1937–1980), Clark Lygia (1920–1988), Pape Lygia (1929–2004)

⁴ Wearable Technology Art is a term coined by Susan E. Ryan. (Ryan 2008)

abolishing or denying the sacralized space of the exhibition room.” *Projeto Lygia Pape* (Anon n.d.) Lygia Pape’s works integrated the aesthetic, ethical and political spheres. They are located in an ambiguous territory, somewhere between the collective perception and the individual perception. For example Pape’s work *Divisor* (1968) is a huge white fabric to be worn collectively by individuals. Comparable types of approaches to art, such as the above-mentioned works, can be traced back to the current day works of artists like Brazilian Luisa Paraguai working with wearable technologies, and artists developing conceptual clothing, such as Lucy Orta, Ana Rewakowicz, Alicia Framis, among others.

Artistic Wearables

Wearable technology art is an art practice, which continues to be impacted by wearable and mobile technologies. It is a field that has traces and references from visual and performative arts, fashion, happenings, body art and Situationist’s ideas. This paper focuses on wearable technology art-works that appear peculiar, often strongly visual and seem to create a kind of carnivalization. These works give an impression of following their own criteria that seems contradictory to the common expectations projected towards wearable technologies, such as purposeful functionality, disappearance of hardware and fashionable look. (Barfield and Caudell, 2001, Barfield et al., 2001), (Seymore and Beloff, 2006 (forthcoming)) One of the primary characteristic of wearable technologies, which seems often to be forgotten, is their present-ness. They are intrinsically dealing with presence, rather than representation.

Krzysztof Wodiczko’s wearable technological art contains an engaging construct and explicates a functional yet artistic approach to wearable technologies. His works are devices with emphasized aesthetics that attract the attention of the public as the devices engage people into a dialogue with the wearer. The designed functionality of the works point to the social problems he is concerned with. The physical presence of the devices, as an intermediary between the public and the user, creates a concrete part of the existing world with a distinct viewpoint..⁵ (Wodiczko, 1997)

Along the lines of Wodiczko, yet unique in their approach that focuses primarily in presence and experience (in contrast to more task-oriented approach) within physical and virtual environment, the author’s artistic works are constructed as peculiar looking, networked, wearable devices that are offered for (long-term) public use⁶.

⁵Many of Wodiczko’s wearable works focus on the problems of immigrants or other marginalized groups in the contemporary cities, and their development of identity within a foreign society. He has written: “In the complexity of the contemporary urban context, this equipment becomes a device for communication and mediation -design as tactical media, its purpose being to treat not only the individual human suffering but also the external society that produced the wound.”

⁶Information about the works can be found: <http://www.realitydisfunction.org>
E.g. Heart-Donor by Laura Beloff & Erich Berger with Elina Mitrunen (2007) is a wearable vest addressing our life in hybrid space. You can "wear" the hearts of your own selected network, and observe the presence of these people in physical and virtual space. The work takes its point of departure by rejecting the concept of the differentiation of virtual and physical layers of the world. The work Heart-Donor is a physical instantiation of a concept concerning personal social networks and life in hybrid space. It is imagined as one’s personal apparel for long-term everyday use.

The author's artistic research has introduced a figure of Hybronaut, which is a person coupled with wearable equipment. (Beloff, 2008) The Hybronaut is a type of *space traveler* who is equipped to exist within a continuously connected hybrid space⁷. The Hybronaut explores its self-directed possibilities within this hybrid space by producing a non-standardized perspective on this space, per se, as well as by pointing to the restricted manners in which we are currently allowed to use the technologically constructed hybrid spaces. Like Wodiczko's artistic equipment, also the Hybronaut is strongly visual figure on the street that fosters interaction with the public. One could say that the Hybronaut is a user turned into a performer, whose physical presence is one of the main factors functioning as a connection point between the physical and the virtual. Simultaneously the Hybronaut is a material, public commentary challenging people with concerns about technology, virtuality and presence.

Presence culture

Carnival executes itself through its very *presence* and, therefore, it is not representational. Carnival is based on the concretely created presence of a reality, which abolishes the distance between the performers and the spectators; to *see* a carnival, is to participate in it. Similar argument can be also said about some works within wearable technology art and specifically about the Hybronaut. Jens Hauser has written referencing H.U. Gumbrecht's ideas about *meaning culture* and *presence culture*. "In a presence culture, humans consider their bodies in their surrounding space to be rhythmically part of cosmology that makes inherent, magical sense, and in which knowledge is revealed." (Hauser 2008)

Gumbrecht writes that the Western culture during the last centuries has been dominated by the meaning culture. Meaning culture is based on the view of the human figure as a disembodied, purely intellectual entity. The primary function assigned to this figure is that of being an observer of the world because, in large part, the entity has been provided with sufficient cognitive faculties. Therefore the dominant human self-reference is the mind in meaning culture. Conversely, in the presence culture, the dominant self-reference is the body. Here the human is part of a cosmology and present in being part of the physical world. Presence culture is affected by the senses, while meaning culture is inherently related to interpretation. However, according to Gumbrecht, presence and meaning always appear together and they are always in tension. Gumbrecht's text suggests a possibility that "a relation to the things of the world that could oscillate between presence effects and meaning effects." (Gumbrecht, 2004) He argues that the closer our contemporary communication technologies have come in fulfilling the dream of omnipresence – having experience independent of the physical location - and the more definite seems the subsequent loss of our bodies and of the spatial dimension in our existence, "the greater the possibility becomes of reigniting the desire that attracts us to the things of the world and wraps us into their space."(Gumbrecht, 2004)

Returning to wearable technologies, one of the main characteristics is their inherent relation to the presence and the body. In contrast to earlier media art, virtual reality and telematic art practices, which celebrated freedom from the limitations of the

⁷ Hybrid space is used by many scholars, the author references here the definition by A. Souza e Silva. (Souza e Silva 2006)

physical body, wearable technology art is reconsidering the importance of the body and the physical presence. These works reconnect the world and the body that has regained its mobility and is now (possibly) networked. This body is offered and expected of participation and physical presence.

Conclusion

According to Bakhtin the concept of carnevalesque is polyphonic and working against monolithic culture. Wearable technology art can be seen as influenced by the polyphonic viewpoint that opposes a standpoint dictated by a single center, but creates a situation of multiple experiences and opinions in dialogue. The potential for surprise and delight is never lost. It can be considered as a playful but critical strategy, which attempts to reveal new viewpoints into art and into technology and our relation to them. A characteristic of this strategy is its relation to presence, which is also an inherent factor of the carnival and of the arts that are not primarily based on representative qualities, for example, such as bio art⁸, body art and wearable technology art. To experience a carnival is to participate in it — there exists no separation between the performers and the audience.

Wearable technology art and, specifically, approaches suggested by the concept of Hybronaut offer a concrete possibility for experimentation in uncovering the potential for unexpected insights. Such knowledge simply presents itself to us as an integrated experience between the user as the Hybronaut, and the unknown. Therefore, one participates in an experience with the elements of the world that are possibly and unusually turned upside down.

⁸ E.g. Jens Hauser has written about bio art and its relation to presence. (Hauser 2008)

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