

EXPERT APPRAISAL OF AMANDA STEGGELL'S ARTISTIC RESEARCH PROJECT

Norwegian Theatre Academy

Østfold University College

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THE APPRAISAL COMMITTEE:

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(Relevant excerpts)

- Problems addressed
- Methods/approaches
- Form of communication
- The result

General introduction

Based on its findings, the committee unanimously endorses the high artistic quality of Steggell's research. There is no doubt that the artwork itself fulfils high international criteria for contemporary art practice. The Emotion Organ is a unique, complex and multi-faceted creation that can function both in instrumental, performative and experiential roles. It raises provocative issues, building upon a historical trajectory of synaesthetic phenomena, yet managing to add fresh and original insights. As Steggell demonstrates, synaesthesia is an engaging, provocative and evolving frontier in neuroscience, psychology and the arts that provides a contextual framework for the investigation of sensory perception. She successfully situates her research within an aesthetic field that resonates with contemporary transversal concerns (social, biological and technological), bridging these issues through individual experience.

Problems Addressed

The main problem Steggell's research addresses is the question whether "it is possible to evoke, even for a moment, an experience comparable to 'true' synaesthesia through art - without resorting to psychedelic drugs?". The Emotion Organ therefore functions as the site where this issue is probed experimentally and interactively by both professional musicians and the general public. Steggell deliberately leaves any conclusive outcome of the research open-ended, as the experience of each user is markedly different. She addresses her problem by admitting that the wide-ranging results are consistent with the quirks and mysteries inherent to synaesthesia research. Steggell is aware that no two synaesthetes experience identical sensory fusions. When played, the Emotion Organ stimulates a highly subjective, cause-and-effect sensory immersion. When experienced as a spectator, the subjective affect of the player is modulated through the hypnotic visual effects of the propeller-screen, the processed organ sounds and, to a lesser degree, the emitted scents.

Methods/Approaches

In her work Steggell combines old and emerging technology, achieving a media-archaeological synthesis. Her methods for sensory experience are largely empirical, still she uses historical references as inspirational and connotative elements in her investigation. The work also references digital arts, techno culture and Live Art practice in which parameters (hue, amplitude, size, etc) of discreet modalities (visual, aural, haptic) and media formats (video, sound, image, text) are cross-wired. This digitally enabled form of sensory fusion complements Steggell's argument and subsequent research in "synthetic" synaesthesia.

The methods were well researched. Steggell looked for outside expertise when required. Her email communication with synaesthetes on user lists and participation in professional conferences provided expert support and feedback during her research process.

Steggell uses observation techniques and feedback from the users/players to adjust her on-going experimentation. This empirical approach to gathering data to fine-tune her concepts has been an important research methodology.

Form of communication

All aspects were suitably presented to a broad spectrum of audience. The setting of the presentation was deliberately theatrical and historicist, reminiscent of David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, a place Steggell visited as part of her research process.

Though this premiere presentation was not, according to Steggell, the ideal setting as she prefers a dark room to a theatrical setting, it did provide a comfortable ambiance for this rather special showing/assessment, emphasizing the cultural connotations of the antique pump-organ. The organ itself is not intimidating as it represents a familiar object/instrument. Though not an entirely friendly user-experience for some, as it demands a certain public performative commitment, for those that venture to sit and play, the piece communicates immediately and effortlessly.

The result

The Emotion Organ demonstrates clearly its purpose(s) by giving the user a possibility to probe interactively the different relationships between sensory modalities. The experience of combining the activities of the hands and the feet is particularly interesting, because it promotes continuous haptic and proprioceptive activity by momentary, rapid immersion through physical integration. The committee found the combination of the foot pedal interface and the propeller screen particularly ingenious. The committee also appreciated the subtle and unpretentious ways in which Steggell has handled the issue of visible/hidden technology, a major issue in technology-based art. The integration of high-tech tools into the guts of the antique pump organ, visible when circumnavigating the instrument, provided a straight-forward, self-explanatory double-façade. This generated a fine balance between the media-archaeological references, including the physical presence of the antique pump-organ itself, and the use of contemporary technology. The work functions on multiple levels and is open to many different interpretations, features that are characteristic of a successful artwork.

Conclusion:

The panel's collective recommendation is to endorse the successful outcome of a PASS, and would like to congratulate Amanda Steggell on her achievements during her three year Research Fellowship Programme. We all look forward to seeing more of her work on the international art scene and wish her every success for the future with the exhibition and continued dissemination and findings with the Emotion Organ.