Interactive Matter: Expanded Perception between the Analogue and the Digital

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1. Foreword

Still of Nikunja's 'Measure of Men': (44:59min, 2011, HDD, HD reframes, videosampling)

Interactivity is usually defined by an effect, or the succession of effects, manifested as actions and reactions in a causal relation of cause and effect. While Interactivity is of fundamental importance for various scientific branches, it is also a central concept of contemporary art: especially since the 1990ies – the age of the 'internet boom' – interactive art environments became a part of the artistic landscape. Often such artworks took and take the shape of technical, mostly digitally based, infrastructure with which the human as organic being can interact to initiate "(…) a transformative dialogue between the audience and the interactive (art) system."[1] Yet after several decades of interactive art history it stands to reason to ask: how *transformative* are these artistic environments really?

Relational Aesthetics, as formulated by Nicolas Bourriaud, establishes equality between the artist and participator and aims for the establishment of a space of interaction and dialogue, in which the collective elaboration of meaning takes place.[2] Even though criticism towards capitalism and human alienation is articulated by Bourriaud in his ambition to "(…) achieve modest connections"[3] and to "(…) open up (one or two) obstructed passages"[4] through art, one might – perhaps mischievously – ask, if those "relational (micro-) territories"[5] are not, in

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[1] Jennifer Seevinck. *Emergence in Interactive Art*. Cham: Springer Publishing International, 2017. P. 39.

[2] Nicolas Bourriaud. „Relational Aesthetics" in *Participation. Documents of Contemporary Art* edited by Claire Bishop. London, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. P. 161.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

reality, "artificial hells."[6] While relational art installations might offer more or less intricate forms of interactive participation and through its immersive qualities, enable a temporary rupture with every-day consciousness in a embrace of the socio-cultural 'status quo', there doesn't seem to be much space for more daring endeavours. With its fixation upon human relations and organisation in their social context, with a strong disregard for the sphere of the 'private' - and thus the very root of that which is existential, relational aesthetics seem to be an example of art, whose transformative potential has not been fulfilled.

Paradoxically, this seems to be especially true for a more reflexive and conscious use of digital technology: while interactive art in general may offer clear opportunities to analyse and confront one's quotidian use of media and technology, it seems that such artworks rarely create a lasting impression. Being firmly rooted in the digital optimism of the 1990ies, much of these artworks are strongly focussed on the technological dimension of the media-installation. Even though the participator and artist are said to be on an equal footing, the infrastructure of the interactive art environment is invested with a strong sense of authority:

"The main problem of contemporary interactive art is the illusion, born from conceptual art in the 60ties, that form is content; but without the content being consciously put at the interface of all media and authorities involved in the artwork, anything is possible and the artwork loses its content and very soul. The artist needs to work from content to form in its broadest encompassing sense."[7]

While certain academic approaches to interactive art have in recent years been moving away from technocratic modes of description and reflection, towards a more balanced – and scientifically more difficult – analysis of this art-form (by considering the importance of the participant's experiences), one might ask to which extent a new and broader understanding of interactive environments has been formulated by artists through their artistic work.

The aim of this text is to present such a new understanding and formulation of interactive art, in which the *expansion of perception* is of fundamental importance and which allows to *rethink and redefine the relationship of the human with the analogue and the digital*. During the last 20 years, Swiss-French artist Nikunja developed the concept of *Interactive Matter* as a fundament for artistic, personal as well as societal evolution. It relates to the comprehension of interaction as a matter to be creatively formulated: Interactive Matter is perceived as a multi-layered dynamic field environment in a static condition of time and volume between

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[h] Neither André Breton's nor Claire Bishop's use of the term are intended to be (wholly) negative. Here however, the term is used to highlight the thought that such participatory culture can also lead to artistic stagnation.

[7] Cited from personal correspondences with the artist Nikunja

zero and infinite. According to the artist, his installations and artworks allow the direct experience of Interactive Matter "(…) as spreading between analogue and digital reality."[8]

This alternative approach to interactivity puts an emphasis on the participator's / user's / performer's multi-layered existential experience in dealing with an artwork and thus moves away from the strictly social interpretation and relevance of interactive art. To put it bluntly: to evolve with our environment, we first need to evolve ourselves, and in order to evolve ourselves, we need to expand our perception. Yet this possible expansion, as will be discussed in the coming pages, is not only a result of a technological infrastructure that allows an optimal immersion in and focus on the interactive art system, but of the creation and cultivation of associative sensory and intellectual impressions, related to each user's life-experience and psychic condition. Consequently, such an installation cannot ascribe the full authority to the 'technical', but aims at 'breaking its authority' and creating 'a space in between' the organic and an-organic – the analogue and the digital, in which the experience of Interactive Matter can take place.

"To achieve the conscious formulation of Interactive Matter, the artist needs to formulate - in relation to all technological, media, physical, philosophical realities present in the artwork - the interactivity between the user's / performer's authority and his own: the artist needs to create from a space of conscious 'Split Authority' and formulate the reality in between his own authority and the authority of 'The Other'. The possible 'Other', 'the Foreign', 'the Stranger' is in reality the catalyst of Interactive Matter through 'Split Authority' (…)"[9]

If this perspective is first and foremost based on the enlargement of perception in a non-moral and non-judgmental way, such change of perception (for the participants) may ultimately lead to a change of awareness: not only for the Self, but possibly also for social and societal questions.

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

2. Methodology

Nikunja: RESEARCH ON INTERACTIVE MATTER
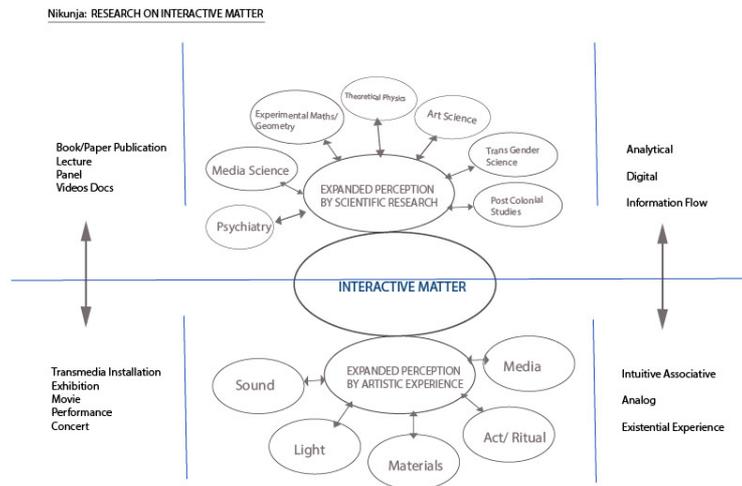
The difficulty with this topic is that Interactive Matter – first and foremost – is an artistic concept that can be experienced through the participation in an interactive art installation. Only in a second step, a theory and abstraction of this perspective on interactivity becomes relevant; namely in presenting an alternative to current artistic concepts and cultural practices. This theory – while clearly based on artistic work and experience – bears interesting connections to anthropological, media-scientific, philosophical, psychological and geometrical concepts, as can be seen on the diagram (see picture) which describes the relation of Interactive Matter to those different areas of interest: these connections and comparisons are meant to be understood as context-specific ones, adding points of reference and orientation to a perceptual phenomenon central to Nikunja's artistic practice. Therefore, only the most central concepts shall be presented here – those that illustrate the relation of a new comprehension of interactive art to a new comprehension of the relationship of the human with analogue and digital technologies. The first part of this paper will be a theoretical one: the definition of Interactive Matter and (as a concept of expanded perception) its correlation to contemporary psychiatry and Gestalt therapy 'field theory' will be explained. At the end of this first part, the concept of *Interactive Matter* will be compared to other theories of interactive art, to underline its specific use of and approach to media-technology. This chapter highlights how the specific use of digital and analogue media within interactive installations can expand the perception of the participant and how, in turn, such expansion can lead to a new awareness regarding the use of analogue and digital media. The connection to the second part will be established through a short summary of Nikunja's artistic work of the 1990ies and 2000s in and through which the concept of Interactive Matter has been developed.

The second part of this paper will focus on a fully planned and not yet realized installation-project: 'Xanadu – The Contemporary Dream Temple' shall be described in regards to its media-structure, its artistic conception and its primary cultural references. As the framework of the installation-project does not ascribe the full authority to the technical infrastructure and its digital projections, the participator is confronted with dynamics different from what is usually expected from interactive art environments. As this very specific form of 'Split-Authority' favours perceptual states of 'inbetweeness', Victor Turner's liminality shall be explained as a concept, which may help to grasp the phenomenon of Interactive Matter at the threshold of digital technology and analogue / organic experience. Lastly, Walter Benjamin's idea of the cinema as medium for the awakening from the history as dream shall be discussed, while its implications for the artistic use of the moving image as *multifaceted, existential matter betwixt vision and memory, between presence and death* shall be elaborated.

3. The Theory and Concept of Interactive Matter

Still of Nikunja's 'Measure of Men': (44:59min, 2011, HDD, HD reframes, videosampling),
performer Peter McCoy ('The Sky above My House', Geneva University, 2001)

3.1 The Definition of Interactive Matter

"Interactive Matter is the totality of tension, space, rejection, and attraction emerging in the present between two or multiple objects, subjects, materials, ideas, causalities, histories, media, universes, worlds, personalities, etc. on a physical, psychological and spiritual level."[10]

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[10] Ibid.

This definition given by the artist underlines a certain number of properties attributed to the phenomenon of interactivity: firstly it implies that – rather than being perceived as a multidirectional connection between two or more poles – interaction is to be comprehended as a "(…) multilayered dynamic field environment in a static condition of time and volume between zero and infinite, simultaneously macro- and micro-cosmic."[11] Secondly, it implies a notion of "(…) interactivity as a matter to be creatively formulated and experienced."[12] Nikunja states that his artworks allow the direct experience of Interactive Matter as spreading between media, material, causality, analogue and digital reality. Therefore, the artist views interactive phenomenon, quite literally, as a substance that is potentially (omni-) present and which becomes accessible in the 'space between' different analytically perceived elements and positions. Transmedia-art, for Nikunja, is one means through which this substance can be formed and experienced, as precisely the connection between the above-mentioned material, technological and causal positions is crucial in granting access to the perception and experience of Interactive Matter. From that perspective, transmedia-installations allow to create tension, attraction and rejection between the different components of the artwork, through which a phenomenological field is established. While bi- or multidirectional communication is based on a direct connection between the different positions / subjects / objects, comparable to an electrical current established between different poles, the concept of the field suggests something different:

"Interactive Matter is understood as a multilayered phenomenological field conception as a new basis of perception of matter and intelligence. Interactive Matter expands in between analytically perceived and defined positions of any kind. But to understand its nature correctly, one must conclude, that Interactive Matter is NOT the consequence of the positions, but that the positions are the consequence of Interactive Matter. This comprehension is of adamantine importance: Interactive Matter correctly understood, makes the definition of positions as such only possibly through its multilayered field expansion: thus, the awareness and creative formulation of Interactive Matter can and must also lead to the discovery of a multitude of new positions regarding a subject of interest."[13]

3.2 Interactive Matter, Gestalt Therapy and the Phenomenological Field-Perception

In a broader sense, the idea of 'the field' emphasizes interactivity's temporal (and at the same time a-temporal) properties; it signals the entanglement of past experiences with all that can potentially be the future through an electrifying moment in the present. This

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

interconnectedness in the 'here and now' may address different modes of perception at the same time and brings the aesthetic notion of 'presence' to the forefront. While it could be tempting to connect the concept of Interactive Matter to already established aesthetic theories of a (post-modern) paradigm of 'presence' within culture – such as those of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht[14] or Erika Fischer-Lichte[15] – it would not do much for the actual explanation of the key elements of this understanding of interactivity. Approaches such as those of the two above-mentioned theorists might denote an "epistemological shift"[16] in cultural expression, yet they do not offer much that could enlarge the understanding of the 'field-perception' central to the concept of Interactive Matter.

Gestalt-Therapy is a form of psychotherapy, in which the field-conception is of great importance: it constitutes one of its three main pillars, together with phenomenology and dialogic theory.[17] While Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman alluded to 'the field' in their work, it was mainly the later Gestalt therapists (such as Latner, Parlett and Yontef) that developed this concept for clinical psychiatric practice:

"In order to make field theory more useful for clinical psychology, these contemporary writers began to articulate principles of a field perspective. Four of those principles are holism, the idea that phenomena are determined by the whole field, the principle of contemporaneity, or the here and now, and field self-organization."[18]

The holistic characteristic of this theory implies, that an isolated aspect of a specific phenomenon cannot divulge sufficient information regarding its relation with the totality of the system. Rather, the "(…) dynamics of the entire system working together (…)"[19] need to be focused upon. This approach conveys the idea that "(…) everything is part of a larger field (…)"[20] in which the systematic web of relationships is part of an even larger context. This leads to the conclusion, that "(e)very event, experience, object or organism is determined by the field of which it is part."[21] In assuming this perspective, it becomes difficult to establish a

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[14] See for instance: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. *Production of Presence*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
[15] See for instance: Erika Fischer-Lichte. *The Transformative Power of Performance*. London / New York: Routledge, 2008.
[16] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. *Production of Presence*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. P. 3.
[17] Friedmann Schulz, „In dialogue with roots and shoots of Gestalt therapy field-theory", in: *Gestalt Journal of Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Nov 2013. P. 24.
[18] Ibid. P. 30.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid. P. 31.
[21] Ibid.

causal succession of events within such field, as it is „(...) not a static thing, but instead refers to a dynamic interactional process.“[22] Consequently, the notion of 'presence', of the 'here and now', gains tremendous importance, as experience – according to phenomenology – arises on the proverbial crossroads of "perceptual faculties"[23] and "the raw matter of the world"[24]. Lastly, the process of field self-organisation constitutes a crucial element of Gestalt therapy:

„For example, water adapts to its conditions by flowing within its environment, and by changing its properties as it is exposed to heat or cold, turning into steam or ice. The way water adapts to field conditions, yet at the same time shapes its environment (...) illustrates how a phenomenon, in this case the behavior of water, organizes itself given the circumstances within the field. However, this serves only as an analogy for the much more complex physiological, emotional and intellectual processes within the human realm of meaning making.“[25]

If this field-perception and –comprehension is applied to the web of aesthetic reference that constitutes an interactive art installation, then one might begin to grasp the merit of such an approach in regards to the concept and experience of Interactive Matter. The importance of holism within this context can be understood in the fact that not only the wholeness of the artistic installation is to be grasped as a unity, but that the personalities, states of mind, perspectives and personal histories of the participants constitute an integral part of the artwork. Also, the second principle of Gestalt therapy field-theory resonates well with the primary definition of Interactive Matter formulated earlier: if the phenomena are determined by the whole field, then – one might argue – it would not seem far-fetched to assume that the field, with its non-linear properties, is not the consequence of the positions within its perimeter, but that these positions are the consequences of the field. While the aspect of contemporaneity has already been mentioned in the beginning of this chapter and appears to be rather obvious in regards to any form of participative art, the correlation to the principle of field self-organisation seems intriguing. The above citation comparing the water's capacity of adaptation to the idea of the phenomenological field could also be applicable to the concept of Interactive Matter: Nikunja's definition implies that art is a possibility to access and express a substance that lies at the base of all interactivity and that the creative formulation of such leads to the expansion of perception. As Interactive Matter – according to the artist – is the fundament of any interaction, it has to adapt to any and all relations of attraction, tension and

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[22]Ibid.
[23] Ibid. P. 32.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid. P. 32-33.

rejection, thus seems to possess certain characteristics of self-organisation. In turn, Interactive Matter exerts an influence on the different participants, like how water forms its surroundings.

While the notion of the 'field' hitherto has been treated in the context of 'perception', it is foremost connected to historical and contemporary physics. Even though natural sciences seem to differ vastly from art, field theories such as those of Faraday, Maxwell and Einstein and the non-resolved theory of 'Dark Matter' may be interesting to examine in relation to the concept of Interactive Matter: such comparison could help to delineate and grasp the idea of 'Interactive Matter as matter' – a fundamental aspect of Nikunja's theory that needs further explanation, reference and research. Although the space for such a comparison is unfortunately lacking here, it still is interesting to note that, during the 20th century, certain aspects of Einstein's field theory were integrated into other areas of expertise: Max Wertheimer, a friend of Albert Einstein, was responsible for one of those advances.[26] His efforts, together with those of his associates, led to the founding of Gestalt psychology, whereby ideas originating from the domain of physics were linked to the research and examination of perception. On the other hand, ideas of philosophy, such as Gilles Deuleze's concept of the Time Crystal, via Nobelprize laureate Frank Wilczek entered theoretical and now experimental physics.[27] Thus, new perceptions of the 'reality of matter as such' may well converge into a conception like Interactive Matter.

3.3 Interactive Matter and Media-Technology

Of course, the importance of contemporaneity and the use of holistic ideas in regards to artistic practice is nothing new: while in traditional arts 'production' and 'reception' are considered as separate modes of experience, participatory and interactive art forms enable a field of experimentation, in which the participator can be both creator and beholder. Roy Ascott could be mentioned as an early artist that aimed for a change from the 'field of objects' to the 'field of behaviour', through a form of "telematic art"[28] that establishes equality between the artist and the participator.

The concept of Interactive Matter expands this notion in different ways. The perception of the

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[26] Ibid. P. 28.

[27] Much gratitude to Renate Quehenberger for pointing to: A.Shapere, F. Wilczek (2012), Classical Time Crystals, arXiv:1202.2537v2 [cond-mat.other])

[28] Roy Ascott. Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology and Consciousness. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. P. 3.

field as dynamic interactional process exemplified in the second principle of Gestalt therapy field-theory (and here projected on the domain of art), enables cross-references that transcend any simple 'triangle relationship' between artist, art and participator: „In contrast, the field perspective asserts that within a field, forces exert influence on each other in unpredictable, non-linear ways. Non-linearity here refers to a dynamic multifaceted causality(...)".[29] This aspect of non-linear interconnectedness is crucial for Nikunja's "grammar of interaction"[30]: while the "(…) oscillation between different modes of experience, different levels of reality, different systems of reference (...)"[31] is – according to Katja Kwastek – a general characteristic of interactive art, the concept of Interactive Matter (and it's creative artistic formulation) serves as 'connective element' between those different modes, levels and systems; thus allows their simultaneous experience and conscious formulation emerging from the proposed artistic content.

Furthermore, this difference leads to contrasts in the strategic use of the different media within art: Roy Ascott's art may also strive for an expansion of perception, but specifically to "unite minds around the world in a global telematic embrace (…)"[32]. This means that "at the core of telematic art (is) technicity in its most contemporary incarnations: information, telecommunication, global reach."[33] On the contrary, Nikunja's concept of Interactive Matter finds its artistic expression in a subtle convergence of the different media within the interactive installation. This approach is based on the concept of 'Split-Authority', which asserts that – within the context of interactive art – it is only through the fracture of and rupture with the authority of all the media involved, that an expansion of perception could take place. This fracture of authority is a fracture with the different media's hermetic appearance: through the creation of a web of inter-dependence and cross-reference, in which all media are of equal importance, the artist makes 'mistakes' and 'disturbances' an integral part of his installations, and thus allows and provokes 'disruption' in the otherwise immersive and opaque impression of a medium.

In other words, it is not through the playful use of media technology, neither through the

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[29] Friedmann Schulz, „In dialogue with roots and shoots of Gestalt therapy field-theory", in: *Gestalt Journal of Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Nov 2013. P. 34.

[30] Roberto Simanowski. *Digital Art and Meaning*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. P. 129.

[31] Katja Kwastek. *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art*. Cambridge / London: MIT Press, 2013. P. 163.

[32] Roy Ascott. Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology and Consciousness. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. P. 3.

[33] Krzysztof Ziarek. *The Force of Art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. P. 84.

establishment of relational micro-territories, that Nikunja's installations (intend to) allow reflection on the quotidian use of media-technology, but through the temporary transcendence of social and societal discourses leading to an expanded perception 'between the analogue and the digital': according to the artist, the above mentioned 'disruptions' create a state "betwixt and between"[34] the usual modes of perception, in which Interactive Matter can be accessed and experienced. Through this state, the very own perceptual authority of the participant can emerge and convey an enlarged perception of himself / herself and the world. In turn, such a new perception can lead to an *enlarged awareness* of the participant's surrounding social and technological power-structures, *including his / her own use of and approach to the digital and analogue.*

4. Interactive Matter in Nikunja's Artistic Work
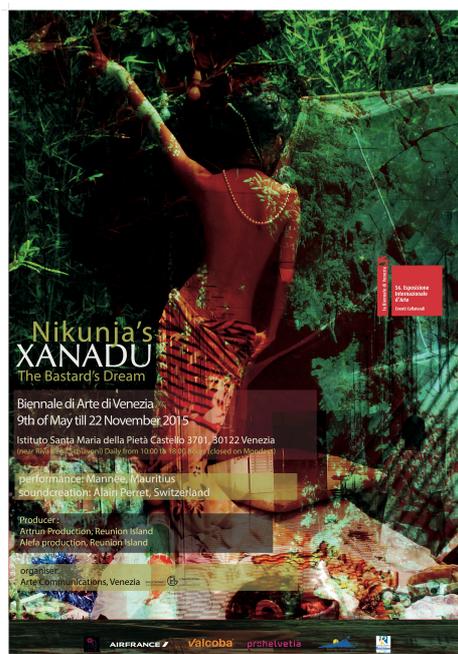
Poster of Nikunja's 'Xanadu: The Bastard's Dream'
56th Biennale of Venice, Collaterals, 2015

The first artistic developments that lead to the concept of Interactive Matter are to be found in Nikunja's works of the 1990ies. In 1995, the artist realized the 'Czech Flag' project, a first public and interactive performance work on the Republic Square in the center of Prague. During several days, mask-like intimate portrait paintings were created on and through the 7 x 4.2-meter large Czech Flag. The participant would take place on a comfortable armchair. The

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[34] Sumiala, Johanna. *Media and Ritual*. London & New York: Routledge, 2013. P.30.

artist would cover his / her face with the flag and transport the intuitive impressions he would perceive from the person into an informal mask-like painting. The work – according to the artist – destroyed the 'absolute' form of the original design of the national symbol through the intuitive, subjective forms. The work underlines the relation of the 'intimate' towards the 'public', the 'individual' to the 'institutional' but at the same time also the creative tension between the artist and the respective volunteer that manifested in form of the portrait executed on a medium *literally in-between* the two parties, at once connecting and separating. Two years later, in a monumental version of the concept on a multitude of large-scale 'flag-projects' as evolving installation-exhibition supported by the City of Geneva, the project then titled 'Oneness-World Vision-Reality' was exposed at the Palais de Nations of the UNO in Geneva 1997 under the patronage of its Director General Vladimir Petrovsky, and 1998 at the UNESCO in Paris for the 50th anniversary of the Human Rights declaration, formulating the individual and institutional in-between the in a unique way.

'The Sky above My House', Geneva University, 2001, Installation/Performance View photo: Alexander Barrymore

From 1997 to 2002, Nikunja pursued his artistic research in Geneva, using the concept of 'Split Authority' in interdisciplinary performance. He created a large-scale performance 'The Sky Over my House' at the University of Geneva in 2001. 800 spectators attended the unique evening long performance piece. It was created for a stage of 75 by 15 meters and involved choreography, live music and live painting on 14 art objects, created by the artist from industrial waste. The different performances were shaped through a process of subtle convergence, interdependence and 'cross-fertilization' of the different media, forms of

expression and artists involved. Due to the dimensions of the stage and the structure of the performances, the members of the public had to constantly (re-) adjust and find their own (spatial and personal) positions in order to witness the whole event. The content was revealed at the interface of the artist's, media and spectator's authority.
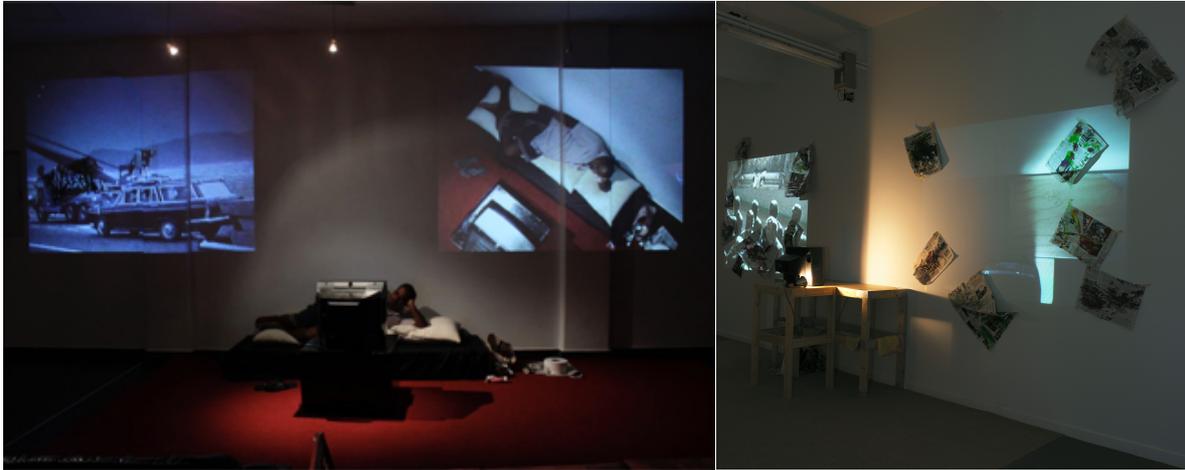
'Fellini Now !' Interactive Transmedia Installation at TENT., Rotterdam, 2005 and Centre d'Image, Reunion Island 2008 , French Institute Mauritius, 2011

After other performances in Amsterdam in 2005, the strategy of creating and precisely articulating an 'interface of the authorities' between the different artistic media, artist and spectator / performer involved became formulated further in 'Fellini Now!' – a multimedia-installation firstly realized at the Contemporary Art Centre TENT, Rotterdam, in 2005: moving pre-produced images (PP) of a digital camera reframing a television screen playing Federico Fellini's 'Roma' (1972) were projected onto the left-side of the 6m large wall, while the original analogue images and Italian sounds of the movie were played on a television-screen turned to the wall in about 70cm distance, that was installed on a wooden bench in front of the white wall, centered between the two projections. The spectators, turning performers had to climb on the wooden bench, lie down like the Romans on the cushions to see the original, the 'true' movie. The digital video camera placed above the TV set / bench installation focused on the space between television-screen and wall, so that the spectators / performers would appear in real time (RT) in the projection to the right of the installation. So, the digital RT camera 's images were projected by a second beamer on the wall to the right side of the television-set / bench-situation creating a triptych of PP projection / television-set-bench-installation / RT projection. The whole installation was part of a lounge setting with carpet, low tables and two couches and a living room lamp, in which the spectators could sit and follow the projections and performances by the fellow spectator-performers and the artist

could work with and on the participants and various exchanges could happen. Hazardously selected spectator-performers were invited, once lying on the bench, to determine a part of their body to be painted by the artist in an informal way and imprinted on the page of a daily newspaper of the respective day, to then be stacked on the wall into either one of the projections. This created a multi-layered visual experience related to the multi-layered reality of the perception of the spectator-performer.

The projections, in which the artist reframed 'Roma', concentrated on specific parts of the television screen, thus 're-evaluating the subjective look' of the potential beholder. The cross-reference of analogue movie-images, their subjective interpretation by 'faulty' and 'poor' digital images, the installation-specific digital real time projections and the 'analogue', 'poor' informal paintings on newspaper paper meant to create ruptures in the otherwise hermetic and immersive nature of the media (projectors/technical flawlessness), the institution and the 'meaning creation' involved: according to the artist, it is through these ruptures in the otherwise opaque media-surface and exhibition environment, that the participant can realize his own perceptual authority and realize the interface to the media and artist's authority. The artist felt that Federico Fellini carried a similar intention in his Nouvelle Vague movie 'Roma' in 1972, were the questioning of spectator / performer / creator of the movie as such and the various inter-relations was constantly revealed in parallel to the 'narration'. There the interactive space in between media, form, meaning creation, artistic content and perception is started and evolves from the recorded past into the immediate present of the actual transmedia-installation of 'Fellini Now!'. The melodramatic screams of the woman, complaining the subterranean, thousands of years old Roman paintings, dissolving into nothingness by the contemporary 'culture's wind' of contemporary civilization, echoes in the perception of the multi-layered art environment the spectator-performer finds himself in, interrogating his own cultural awareness in the here and now as part of a process and continuous civilisatory evolution. Between all media and authority aspects the Interactive Matter is the agent, allowing the unfolding of a vaster awareness.[35]

Nikunja further developed various aspects of his trans-media art-form through several projects and experimental art movies, to finally install 'Xanadu: The Bastard's Dream' at the 56th

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[35] Details regarding the mentioned projects and artworks can be found on the website of the artist: www.nikunja.net

Biennale of Contemporary Art in Venice 2015 (curated by Okwui Enwezor), which brought about the theoretical formulation of Interactive Matter as such, first based on the multi-faceted formulation of the *light* in-between artificial light sources and the natural day-light, connecting all media, the performance on-screen and off-screen, digital PP-movie and RT-projection, interactive and non-interactive painting, micro and macro art installation. *'Xanadu: The Contemporary Dream Temple'* – a hitherto fully planned yet unreleased installation – is the most complex and consequent conception of an art-installation-performance to date formulating Interactive Matter and making available its multilayered physical, psychological and spiritual experience.

'Xanadu: The Bastard's Dream', Interactive Transmedia Installation, 56th Biennale Contemporary Art Venice, 2015, at Istituto Santa Maria della Pieta, overview, filmstill with Mauritian perfomer MANNEE and visitor-performers

5. Xanadu – The Contemporary Dream Temple
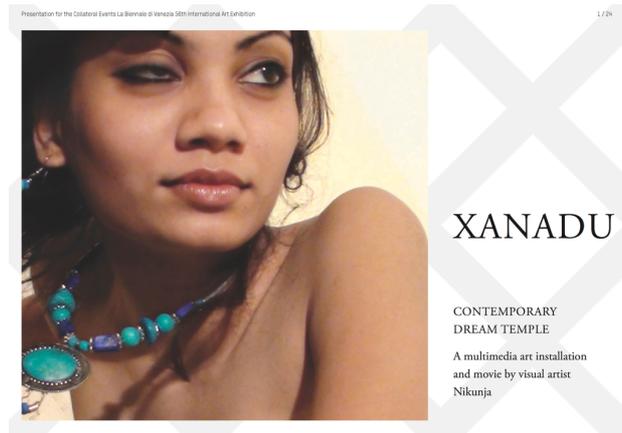
project presentation at www.nikunja.net

5.1 Description of the Installation

Nikunja's Xanadu reinterprets the motive of antiquity's dream-temples: this multi-layered and interactive art-installation places the participator / user at an interface between digital technology and analogue experience. As a process-oriented and mobile artwork, Xanadu relates to dreams as an extended form of perception and individual creative potential. It is comprised of a four-channel cinematographic projection and an eight-channel sound composition inside of a 200-squaremeter mobile bamboo structure, at its centre an art - installation made from a 'bed-shrine' in lava-stone and copper, surrounded by two large-scale paintings on glass and various objects.
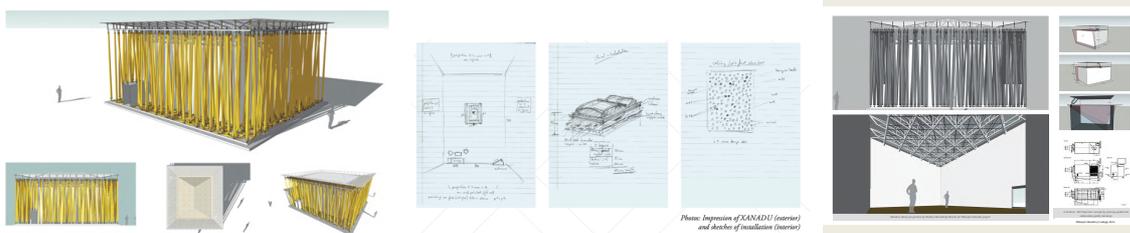
Bamboo Pavilion by Markus Heinsdorff, Interior Installation scetches by nikunja and 4K projector installation by syntrope GmbH for Nikunja's Xanadu project

Dreams are intuitive forms of experience that are accessible to each human being, irrespective of social status, education, age and world-view. These allow the procession and interpretation of past experiences, as well as the intuitive realisation of new perspectives, insights and impressions.

Even if religion, science and philosophy may treat and interpret dreams in their own respective ways, art has unique and interesting possibilities in relation to the subject matter: it

does not only allow the representation and analysis of dream-scenarios, but constitutes a meeting point of creative activity and existential interrogation.

Within the framework of this installation the participator finds himself absorbed by digital cinematographic projections – two of them in real-time – which, being the only light source in the space, constantly redefine the space by their light in colour and brightness. Together with the sounds, the central art object of the bed-shrine, the large-scale paintings on glass and his own movements, this multi-layered immersive environment in between 'broken' and interdependent media structures create an environment that should convey to the participant the enlarged self-awareness and perception mentioned in earlier chapters. According to the artist, the installation creates and cultivates associative sensory and intellectual impressions, related to each user's life-experience and psychic condition, that could be defined as ,open-ended poetry on an infinite timeline' determined by the immediateness of the 'Here and Now'.

The associative cinematographic formulations, based on art performances staged and filmed in the landscapes of the volcanic Indian Ocean island of Reunion, are comparable to the fluid – yet often 'strange' and non-linear – experience of dreams. In this sense, Nikunja's Xanadu bridges digital media to dream-perception and the analogue body (the physical body) to the self-awareness of the participant. But contrary to video-games and 'augmented reality', it clearly puts the full authority of the recipient in his <u>analogue reality</u> in the centre of the evolving narrative of the experience, frees inside of the subjective fragment the awareness of a universal interconnectedness, beyond the historical and societal structure of any convention. The seemingly exclusive autocracy of the digital is merged, in the experience, to the dominant analogon of the user's biological reality, its intellectual and intuitive components.

5.2 On the Name 'Xanadu'

The installations title is based upon the name of the summer residence of the Chinese emperor Khublai Khan: a governmental building whose structure was wholly based on a dream of the ruler of the largest empire of human history, in which he envisioned his future palace.[36] Besides the monumental building, a nomadic pavilion was utilised on the emperors many journeys. Being reported by Marco Polo[37] to consist of bamboo, this pavilion serves as

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[36] Timothy May. *The Mongol Empire – A Historical Encyclopaedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2016. P. 164.
[37] Tim McNeese. *Marco Polo and the Realm of Kublai Khan*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2009. P. 83.

template for the installation's mobile structure, which was designed by the German architect Markus Heinssdorf.

While the historical building was destroyed in 1369, the publication of Marco Polo's travel-accounts made the name 'Xanadu' known to the world: Samuel Taylor Coleridge read Polo's description of Khublai Khan's Summer residence in 1797 and – in the same night – dreamt of its splendour. The next morning he wrote a poem, which he aptly entitled „Kubla Khan – or a Vision in a Dream".[38] This work, which later will be acknowledged as one of the most important literary contributions of early romanticism, conveys Coleridge's oneiric impressions of the Chinese emperor's palace. In the movie ‚Citizen Kane' the castle of the newspaper tycoon Charles Foster Kane is also named Xanadu and described to be a place where all cultural riches of the world are assembled. Thus – step by step – the term 'Xanadu' becomes more than a mere palace – it becomes a synonym for universal remembrance. In analogy to this thought, the Internet pioneer Ted Nelson developed a two-way hypertext-project in the 1960ies with the same name: it should function as a universal encyclopaedia of human knowledge.[39] It still stands as an enlarged interactive concept versus the one-way hypertext project we all know and use.

5.3 Dreams - from Dream-Incubation to Binary Logic

still of installation movie 'Xanadu: The Bastard's Dream' with MANNEE

Since the dawn of mankind and its first African civilizations (for example Yoruba[40] or Xhosa Zulu[41]), dreams have a special significance in almost all cultures: they provided insight of the

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[38] David Perkins. „The Imaginative Vision of Kubla Khan" in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* edited by Harold Bloom. Yale: Infobase Publishing, 2010. P. 45.
[39] Jakob Nielsen. *Multimedia and Hypertext*. San Francisco: Academic Press, 1995. P. 38.
[40] William Bascom. *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991. P. 14.

past, present and future, offered the means for the identification and cure of diseases, as well as a deeper understanding of the 'conditio humana' in general. Not only were dreams relevant in antique cultures within their respective spiritual settings, they also had the power to help worldly leaders in their political and strategic decisions – thus also had a concrete impact on quotidian matters. At the same time, not only the spiritual and political elite had access to dream temples: in Aborigine, African, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Vedic and Japanese cultures also common people could seek guidance through dreams within those temples and through those ritual practices; the content of the dream – a possible message from the gods or a vaster existential perception in general – was then interpreted with the help of a priest or shaman.[42] While the practice of dream incubation was crucial for antiquity, oneiric experiences were also of interest for the scholars of later times: for instance, during the 19th and 20th Century, the topic of dreams was of high significance for the development of psychoanalysis, whose most illustrious representatives are to be found in C.G Jung and Sigmund Freud.

Joseph Campbell, in many ways a successor to Jung, understood myths as depersonalized dreams and dreams as personalized myths, thus attributing to dreams a culture-endowing characteristic[43]: dreams are not only subject to individual perception and reflection – they may be part of a collective unconscious.

Dreams, whether perceived from a cultic, analytical or artistic perspective, have one thing in common: no matter how seemingly trivial or deeply moving, the remembered experience always affects the one awakening. Also, sleep and the experience of dreams could in many ways be related to the sensation of control-loss. To sleep, and thus to dream, means on one hand to temporarily exit the known world and on the other hand it corresponds to a natural and irreplaceable need. This loss of control could also be described as a process of opening one's Self to thoughts, structures and impressions that do not necessarily correspond to one's individual self-image. With this in mind, the focus on dreams can indeed be perceived as relevant in relation to the question how new reflections on the use of and approach to digital (and ultimately also analogue) media could be furthered: the binary code – more than just the fundament of computer language – can be described as a constitutive element of capitalistic and digitally-oriented societies. To comprehend the world as a succession of completely

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[41] Lily-Rose Nomfundo. „Intuition as Divination among the Xhosa of South Africa" in *Reviewing Reality: Dynamics of African Divination* edited by Walter van Beek and Phillip Peek. Berlin: LIT Publishing, 2013. P. 63.

[42] See for instance: Kelly Bulkeley. *Dreaming in the World's Religions*. New York / London: New York University Press, 2008. P. 37, 95, 129, 162, 287.

[43] Joseph Campbell. *The Mythic Image*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. P. 362.

quantifiable, digital phenomena certainly is important for the solution of mathematical questions and problems; but has the choice between 1 and 0, between 'right' and 'wrong' the potential of a cultural leitmotiv? Dreams as not totally controllable experiences stand in contrast to such binary logic. They are fraught with ambivalence – in them fantasies can be explored and supposed paradoxes appear to be completely normal. Therefore, in the terms of the artist, dreams "(…) are neither to be attributed to the 1 or 0. Rather, they could be described as a 'gap' between these two options and thus represent the 'Other' that allows new perspectives in contemporary, digitally-regulated societies."[44]

Xanadu uses the structure of the temple consciously; by choosing a sacral place as context for the installation, the artist aims to highlight the transformative potential of the participant's dreamlike experiences. Temples can cross-culturally be understood as places of inspiration, empowerment and transformation – therefore transcend the domain of the purely social. Yet, through impressions, thoughts and experiences beyond the scope of mundane consciousness, new impulses and perspectives on personal and social matters can take form.

5.4 On Liminality

The installation's emphasis on states-in-between and the above-mentioned thoughts on dreams allow furthermore to contemplate the idea of liminality: while its origins are found in the work of Arnold van Genneps, it is Victor Turner who strongly influenced this concept of change and transformation. Denoting a state "betwixt and between"[45] the framework of the rites of passage, Turner understands liminality as a phase of evolutionary potential, where an individual separation from the social norms and cultural values takes place.[46] While separation from prevailing customs might be the outward appearance of this temporary threshold-experience, it is – on the other hand – an opportunity to forge new interpersonal bonds and relationships, beyond what the respective society would deem as fitting and appropriate. From this perspective, going beyond the horizon of what is accepted as right or wrong is a necessary step, if opportunities for (societal) change are to be taken to heart. This aspect is of clear significance for Nikunja's Xanadu. The art-project's liminal qualities are twofold: firstly, the principle of 'Split-Authority' – as already explained – consists in fragmenting the authority of all media involved. This process, while not concerning social

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[44] Cited from personal correspondences with the artist Nikunja
[45] Sumiala, Johanna. *Media and Ritual*. London & New York: Routledge, 2013. P.30.
[46] Ibid. P. 31.

norms as such, can also be considered a temporary separation from cultural customs – namely those of 'every-day' perception. Secondly, the artist's view of dreams as 'gap' in the binary digital logic corresponds well with liminality as a transformative state-in-between. Nikunja's use of associative, suggestive and dreamlike imagery within the framework of the installation creates an opening to "Otherness, or 'a Third', necessary for personal as well as collective change."[47]

Still of Nikunja's 'Cheikh Anta Diop': (92min, 2010, HDD, HD reframes, videosampling)

5.5 *Awakening from the History as Dream*

Walter Benjamin envisioned a cinema that is consciously used as tool for the "(…) awakening from the history as dream."[48] He focused on the peculiar relationship of moving image, oneiric exploration and the subsequent experience of awakening, with the intention to provoke and enable revolutionary developments in the collective social consciousness. As such, Benjamin emphasized the social relevance of the purposeful use of cinema to change perception: „Film is able to detach an object from tradition, to emancipate it from ritual and to produce a renewal / actualization of the object and of humanity."[49] In the present context, the notion of object is importantly expanded into the reality of performance, both, on screen (actors) and off screen (users). Nikunja's Xanadu bears a strong connection to said perspective: this reflects in the precise use of the moving image as multifaceted, existential

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[47] Cited from personal correspondences with the artist Nikunja

[48] Mourenza, Daniel. Awakening Images*: Walter Benjamin's Concepts of History, Technology and Film*.
http://www.academia.edu/2639067/Awakening_Images_Walter_Benjamin_s_Concepts_of_History_Technology_and_Film (accessed 28.05.2017).

[49] Ibid.

matter betwixt vision and memory, between presence and death. The associative flow of images and consciousness enables a creative dynamic comparable to a natural form of self-hypnosis or meditation: the experience of dreams in the awakened state and sensations shifting between the (perceived) presence and absence of corporality. Xanadu's principle of liminality, based on the concept of Interactive Matter, enables a detachment from every-day consciousness and allows the participator to realize, that dreams are not only present while being asleep, but exact their influence in all other states of mind. It contrasts the multifaceted qualities of human consciousness with the often manipulative and mono-dimensional imageries of mass media and quotidian life. Based on this approach, Interactive Matter allows the conscious appropriation of the images by the user, and thus permits his full authority, freedom and responsibility to act.

6. Conclusion

'Transposed Heads', 2009, Transmedia Performance, Hangar D2, Le Port- Reunion Island

While this examination of the concept of Interactive Matter has led us to discuss different theories of contemporary art, many of subject matters presented within this paper are situated outside the domain of art proper. There are different reasons for this diversity: as this paper is foremost concerned with the question, how art may expand consciousness and how such expansion may lead to a different approach in regards to the use of digital and analogue media, psychological and psychiatric research, such as Gestalt therapy, offers opportunities to

take a closer look at the conditions and processes of human perception. Nikunja's perspective on and approach to art, as was hopefully shown in the last few pages, puts an emphasis on the fragmentation of media-authority and the perceptual habits of the participants. This process of fragmentation could be compared to an opened circle, in which the free flow of information takes the form of a perception not solely limited by and to the self-image of the participant. In analogy, the diversity in the subject matters and areas of research related to the theory of Interactive Matter could therefore be considered as symptomatic: Interactive Matter understood as a *trans-physical, trans-social and trans-medial reality* implies its possible applications on a vast number of different domains. This new perspective on art – one might say – leads not only to an expanded perception of the Self (and perhaps also to a change of perspective regarding social and societal matters), but also to an expanded perception of 'matter' itself. Further research related to the correlation of the concept of Interactive Matter with physical 'field theories' alluded to in the chapter 3.2 seems crucial in that regard and will be published in the future. At the same time, the idea of the free flow of information leads us back to the beginning of this paper, where a contrast between Nikunja's artistic concept and more known and established approaches towards interactive art has been established. While the idea of the 'interstice' may be central for both the theory Interactive Matter and Relational Aesthetics, it is not the achievement of modest connections that should be sought through art, according to the Swiss-French artist, but the creation of means with which the unknown can be made known. Art, based on this perspective, not only achieves an enlarged comprehension of its own practice, but may help to "transcend established and worn-out civilisatory systems (…)"[50] and further new impulses of perception.

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[50] Cited from personal correspondences with the artist Nikunja

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