RefleCT/Xion,
Installing an ambience

Ricardo Atienza, Gabriel Bérubé, Aurore Bonnet, Damien Masson, Julien McOisans.

Abstract

This paper presents the results of an artistic research experiment. The proposed installation intended that visitors – or passers-by – shall become aware; aware of their own body, of the relationship between it and the surrounding environment, and finally of the effects of their passage on proximate ambience. The aim of this experiment was thus to induce and amplify "enactive" interactions between people and their environment without making use of electronic devices or interfaces. The focus was thereby set on fundamental body-in-context links that are sometimes neglected by studies dealing with enaction.

The installation took place in an ascending gallery, in which the passage affected environmental conditions (light, visual, sound, etc.) in non-interactive and, furthermore, non-obvious ways. Thus, visitors could not immediately realize the effect of their presence and movements on the ambience. As a response, three types of individual reactions could be observed among the visitors, which confirm that body-environment awareness is definitely not prominent in ordinary situations.

Keywords: enaction, body-in-motion, environment, ambience, installation

Ambience phenomena are frequently born as embodied impressions and/or expressions. The exchanges between our body and its daily environment exert a decisive influence on the particular mood, sensibility and knowledge (comprehension) that together constitute what we call ambience. This interaction is sometimes immediate and even conditioned; some other times, it is composed of a progressive compilation of minor relations. In any case, ambiences, though being "incorporeal", are entirely corporal.

The installation presented in this article explores our consciousness of how we contribute to construct ambiences, and focuses to this aim on the enactive exchanges with our environment. The concept of enaction deals with a bodily experience, i.e. a knowledge acquired through action. The body-in-movement is not a pure figure of action. Furthermore, the body-in-movement takes necessarily place in a "medium", which is not a simple "bodies and things container", but a specific world we are able to interact with. Jakob von Uexkull's (2004) notion of *Umwelt* describes perfectly this unbreakable relation between bodies and action environment. Subsequently, considering body-in-movement means to take into account one essential mode of experiencing, understanding and learning from our environment. Enaction reveals us the limits of our own body, the qualities of the surrounding space and, of course, the ways of acting, moving and even modifying this environment.

Can this “body in motion” be considered as a first condition for immersion in and description of an ambience?

Some approaches to enaction are based on the notion of “interface”, perhaps neglecting thereby the central question: the tension between body and space. Instead, such an approach places the focus on the possible devices and mechanisms mediating this relationship. These interfaces come in shape of different devices, from simple hand tools to more complex technical expressions that largely rely on computer equipment. The concept of enaction is thus restrained to an inter-relation between man and machine, in order to emphasize certain qualities of a space, or to create a virtual space superimposed on the physical context.

In contrast to these ‘indirect’ modes, there exists a primitive and direct enaction, related to the corporal and sensible experience of space. In this mode, the inter-relation between man and machine is replaced by the multiple relationships between man and environment. When we move, touch, listen, watch and feel, the body “understands” its surroundings. Browsing an area is the first condition for any appropriation. Some senses allow us to touch from a distance, whereas others require a direct contact – our skin, the last frontier with the world, is an essential gatherer of information from and about our environment. The body-in-movement provides us with a dynamic reading (and writing) of our environment, i.e. its sensitive variations (temperature, wind, light, sound, smell, etc.) will compose a complex and evolving perception and interpretation of an ambience.

The action of walking is then a fundamental idea of this proposal: walking from, to and within; walking as a daily experience that sets our senses in motion and teaches us balance, orientation, intuition that leads us to intention.

The experience of everyday life

Despite being commonly applied to technological R&D fields, enaction is foremost an inherent mechanism in everyday life. Therefore, our approach intends to focus on this very ordinary experience of space that could be named “daily enaction”. By means of this enactive experience, we propose an empirical assessment of CRESSON’s research on “ambiences” and daily environments. The field of architectural and urban ambiences developed by CRESSON constitutes an interdisciplinary domain that combines physical, social and human sciences, in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of ordinary phenomena and situations.

In our installation in “Fort de la Bastille” we have chosen to explore the sensory interactions between man and the “world” he experiences daily. These interactions are numerous and simultaneously encompass the perception of oneself, of others and of the built and non-built environment. Addressing such multiple interactions as well as everyday sensory experience provides a way to understand enaction in its ecological perspective, by focusing on the “middle ground” that exists between built forms and human behaviour. One way of revealing this “in-between” is proposed by James J. Gibson in his pragmatic notion of “affordance”, which deals with the action possibilities

allowed by space and objects. Another approach, which underlies our installation, is to focus on the "effects" that qualify this "in-between".

The "intermediary concept of effect" (Amphoux, 2001) is a useful means for describing what happens between phenomena and perception. By emphasizing the fact that people co-produce effects while they are acting in an environment and by considering their sensations (and not only their perception), this notion rejects any consideration of the "middle ground" phenomena and perception in terms of causal relations. We have thus chosen to work on the sensory effects that structure an individual's perception of space in order to address their "daily enaction".

Erwin Straus (1935) proposed to understand perception by way of the dialectical link between sensations and movement. We have chosen to focus our attention on the act of walking as a way to reveal enaction in the mundane experience of space. Subsequently, our purpose is to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary through the common act of walking. In our exploration of the installation "ambiance", we focus on the possibilities for subtle alterations that might help visitors to become aware of their enaction. We then propose to implement some unsophisticated devices, which will both alter some sensory properties of the space and react to the visitor's presence; the principle that guides this implementation is thus "Reflection", understood both as sensory (i.e. visual, sound) reflection and mental reflection (termed "reflexion" in French).

"RefleCT/Xions", an enactive ambience installation.

Mirroring our simple and common actions confronts us with how we behave in a particular situation and where this behaviour comes from. Our "daily enactions" become concrete through this "reflexion". The inter-relation between our body and the space is revealed thanks to sensitive effects. And, in order to become aware of these ordinary effects we need to emphasize them, to accentuate what is simply usual in our daily experience. To this purpose, one possible strategy is to manipulate the physical context that originates such effects.

"RefleCT/Xions" was installed in "Fort de la Bastille", a former military fortress dominating the city of Grenoble. This fortress is a "labyrinth" of excavated galleries and external structures. One of these excavated galleries, more precisely its access corridor, constituted the scenario for this installation: a ~5 meter large, vaulted and dark corridor in stone, characterized by its gently ascending stairs leading to an upper hall invested with natural light. In this gallery, the ground was sequentially textured with different natural materials (fig. 1, *upper panel*) while the corridor volume was plastically remodelled with a second textile "skin" (fig. 1, *lower panel*).

Fig. 1. *Upper panel*: Gallery ground textured with different natural materials: wood, leaves, gravel, boulders, sand and chalk. *Lower panel*: Textile skin remodelling the gallery volume; real-time distorted projections on the textiles.

The visitor was invited to traverse this space while his own sonic and visual expressions, subjected to slight distortions, were reflected in real-time. This distorted reflection was achieved by an uncoupled audiovisual system, able to record, process and diffuse back sound and image. Sound recording was performed in the textured floor itself in order to primarily capture step rhythms and timbres, while image recording was centred on the whole body in motion. Through these artefacts, an “amplified” and even “interfered” consciousness is induced where time, space and corporal perception are questioned.

The experience of the ground textures confronts the visitor with the act of walking from a physical perspective. When stepping on a ground covered with different materials (pebbles, dry leaves, strips of wood, etc.), an amplified consciousness is evoked through the kinesic experience itself, as well as through the ‘sounding’ of the visitor’s steps. Because of the “dirty” or dispersible materials chosen, such as chalk, sand and the fragile dry leaves, the visitor’s path leaves a trace as the ground itself evolves. Footprints, rubbing, creaks, rumblings and echoes generated by steps invite the visitors to experience their relationship to the ground on which they walk.

The use of suspended textiles allowed us to reconfigure the space: modelling, partitioning without creating rigid walls, sequencing the gallery volume, adding depth, etc. Textiles are also used as supports to project real time captured images of the visitors. The density, transparency or reflectivity of the textiles and plastics (tulle, lycra, rhodoid, mylar, etc.) allow successive projection planes, which alter the perception of the self into space (fig. 2, *centre*).

As for sound, these projections offer a reflection of ourselves, our corporal experience, our body in motion. In order to emphasize this self-experience, these reflections are modelled as if they proceeded from a slightly deforming or moving mirror: larsen, delay, distortion, echo were some of the effects that the visitor could encounter, but always as a thin limit between perception and suggestion. As the visitor becomes aware of his sonic, kinesic and visual enaction with space, the immediacy of the action / reaction principle is eventually questioned.

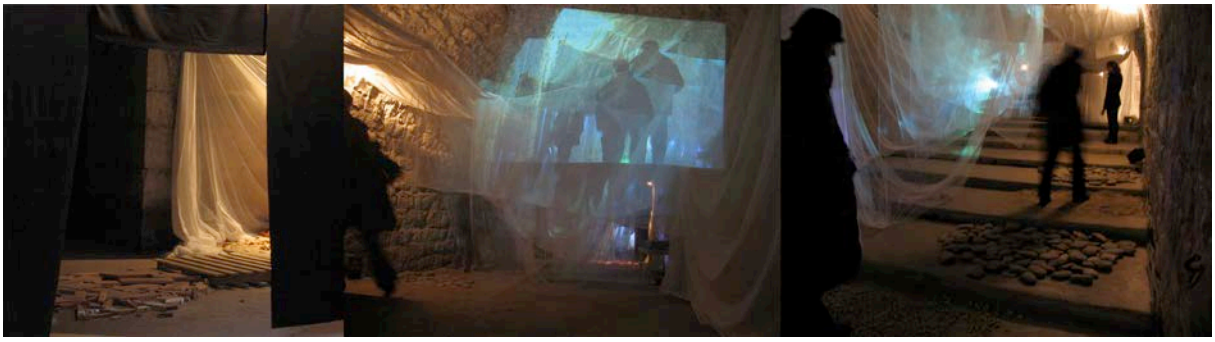

Fig. 2: From the entrance (*left*), the visitor is invited to traverse the installation gallery, in which his visual (*centre*) and sonic expressions (cf. *right* for ground textures) will be multiply "reflected".

Back to daily ambiences: the installation feedback.

Among the visitors in the installation, one feeling was shared: there was some exchange or dialogue happening between them and the surrounding space. However, three sorts of reactions were observed:

- For a first group of visitors, this exchange was mono-directional, from their bodies towards its sonic and visual environment.

- Other people were engaged in an improvised dialogue in which they had to "learn" how to interact with this "virtual" ambience. In this second group, we could distinguish people who were trying to manage, to "control" this particular environment under an action/reaction model, from those who were looking for self-reflection and further self-exploration. For the latter, the intention was not anymore to make use of the possibilities of this particular ambience, but to put into question their own modes, reactions and behaviours when confronted to daily situations.

- A third group of visitors prolonged this experience outside the installation, once back in a "normal" (non amplified) enactive mode: they reacted with surprise to their mundane quotidian environment. New habits had been created during the time of the installation (mainly after long-lasting "journeys" in the gallery) that questioned later what was completely assumed before.

The achieved interference with the visitor's daily enaction modes was the main goal aimed at by "RefleCT/Xions". The observed reactions showed how enaction constitutes a common and efficient learning mechanism, especially appropriate for complex ambience phenomena. The particular issue of interfered, distorted or amplified ambiences is nowadays entirely relevant, since we are confronted, on a daily basis, to situations in which this is no more an extraordinary event (e.g. mobile exchange modes and devices, media advertising in public space, etc.).

Bibliography

AMPHOUX P., THIBAUD J.-P., CHELKOFF G. (eds.), *Ambiances en débats*, Bernin: À la croisée, 2004.

AMPHOUX P., L'observation récurrente : une approche reconstructive de l'environnement construit, *in* MOSER G., WEISS K. (eds.), *Espaces de vie. Aspects de la relation homme-environnement*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2003, p. 227-245.

ATIENZA, R./ BERUBE, G./ BONNET, A./ MASSON, D./ MACOISANS, J., *RefleCT/Xion from enaction to "daily enaction".* In: *Enactive07/Enaction_in_Arts*, Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Enactive Interfaces, Grenoble-France. L'Acroe, 2007, p.315-317

AUGOYARD J.-F., *Pas à pas*. *Essai sur les cheminements quotidiens en milieu urbain*. Paris, Le Seuil, 1979. BERTHOZ A. *Le sens du mouvement*, Paris: Odile Jacob, 1997.

AUGOYARD J.-F./ TORGUE, H. (éds.), *Sonic Experience. A Guide to Everyday Sounds.* McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2006. 216 p.

GIBSON J.J., *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.

GIBSON J.J., Le système haptique et ses composantes, *Nouvelles de Danse*, 2001, n°48-49, p. 94-120.

STRAUS E., *Du sens des sens*, Grenoble: J. Millon, 2000 (1st ed. 1935).

UEXKULL von, J., *Mondes animaux et monde humain*. Paris, Pocket, 2004. 188p.