REPORT

Grasping Elapsing

Peter Williams [a]

An iterative series of hybrid media installations and generative, participatory performance projects, Grasping Elapsing (2003-present) attempts to show embodied thought process by creating open-ended connections among object, image, archive, digital process and word. The project is comprised of a combination of installations, performances, images created by the artist over time, images created by participants in prior and current performances/installations, live-sourced, appropriated images accessed through software, generative software that processes combinations of the above-described images, and a Twitter feed/archive. Given the highly-temporal nature of the project, it is difficult to analyze specific juxtapositions that might arise. This report will therefore mainly address the projects' ongoing conceptual framework while referencing specific moments in time where it might be helpful for contemporary readers. The current iteration, Grasping Elapsing 3.1 is a digitally-augmented participatory performance with a "live" component of approximately twenty minutes and an indefinitely-extended digital component which is conducted online. The piece expresses a convergence of history, place and present moment through the use of digital practices and face-to-face discussion. It is conducted with an audience that, after an approximately eight-minute introduction, is invited to participate by contributing images through the use of scanning. The entire piece is enacted at a table with a large projection behind it. The artist sits at the table facing audience-participants. Throughout the performance, the artist delivers spoken-word content and participatory instructions. On the table are a laptop computer which the artist uses to improvisationally control a custom-made software application designed specifically for the performance. The application displays artist-produced, appropriated and past-and-current participant-contributed imagery, and also imagery generatively processed from combinations of all of the above-mentioned source materials. The output of this application is shown on the projection screen. Also on the table is a flatbed scanner which participants use to digitize images for contribution to the piece; scanned images are automatically added to a databank from which the application draws in real time.

Keywords: performance, hybrid media, participatory, archive, sustained present, language, embodiment, memory, scanning, generative, Twitter, input, output, geologic time, timescales

Introduction

Exploring the play of meaning as words emerge and resonate as image/objects in specific physical contexts, Grasping Elapsing is grounded in the recognition that language is the basis of thought and that meaning is historically and culturally constructed. However, it is not the intent of this text to present a philosophical or theoretical argument, but rather to discuss the contents and methodology of the piece, and to articulate its progress since inception. As denoted by its iterative nature, Grasping Elapsing undergoes changes to reflect the parallel newness and obsolescence in both technology and related social norms and, in more recent iterations, has come to constitute meta-commentary on social media as a venue for perpetual archiving.

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Depiction and description of events at various timescales plays an important role in the work as a transportive experience through a continuum of memories, thoughts, images and language. The performance begins with the artist describing memories that have continued to influence and motivate the project. Images of stones, pre-produced through scannography, are projected. Each stone, gathered from the area surrounding the artists' homes over time, is individually isolated and hypnotically centered within a stark, white negative space. The exact number of stones represented within the work is unknown to the audience, for they are drawn dynamically and at random from a growing databank, a product of the artist's daily practice and movement throughout the earth. However, the consistency of form/composition, slow, indeterminate pace and extended use of dissolve transition produces a lulling atmosphere and suggests geologic time/process. After several minutes, this period of quiet reflection is disrupted with interspersed images representing both current world events and aesthetic responses from the artist himself, rapidly bringing viewers/participants up to the present. Subsequently, participants are brought further into the moment with an invitation to contribute with their own images, captured and digitized through scanning. Scanning is used as a relatively convenient and yet also drawn-out digitization process, acting as a contemplative timescale bridge. Image-combinations of the stone, current events, artist-selected imagery and participant-contributions are finally remixed and processed by a custom, networked generative application, with its resulting output automatically posted to the Twitter account @rapturerefuse every ten seconds.

Throughout the performance, face-to-face discussion among the artist and participants further heightens the immediacy of what is seen and enacted. The artist-directed content of the live performance trails off in an indeterminate fashion, while the work itself is carried on through contributions of participants both physically present at the performance and online. Furthermore, the project application's continual, generative processing and automated social media posting can potentially occur indefinitely after the "end" of the performance's live component, and discussion can also continue in the form of user-submitted posts and comments. Thus, the "liveness" and "presence" of the performance is dispersed in terms of place and time through digital practices which in turn augment a daily and ongoing process of personal and public archiving.

A flow of time, place and context

In Grasping Elapsing, the notion of embodiment is both abstract and very literal. The project's various components – images/visual content, spoken word, participant engagement and scanning, as well as the subsequent and continual processing and uploading of output screen captures – all weave together at a slow, measured pace, interspersed with jolts into the present moment. In the performance, the artist sits at a table with a laptop and a scanner, in front of a projection and before an audience, with space for audience members to approach, interact and converse with the artist (Figure 1). The artist begins by describing memories that have influenced and motivated the piece:

> *I grew up in a remote area of Ontario, Canada, in a particularly geographically and socially isolating situation. These images come from beaches that surround my childhood home, the places where I spent many days looking at interesting stones, shells, bits of smoothed glass and the occasional, interesting small object that someone had dropped into the sand.*

Through his voice, the artist brings us into the past, into personal events and experiences and a subjective, intimate moment suggesting isolated, individual and subjectively-interpreted encounters. This mode frames our viewing experience for what we are yet to see, yet unknown by both the artist and us, the audience. At the same time, we are encouraged to join the artist in acts of remembering/archiving and discarding/editing. Accompanying this is a series of videos showing bodies of water, filmed at various locations including the beach described by the artist and

also different sites where the piece has been performed (Figure 2). This imagery produces a sense of travel – water flows, and the passage of time is shown through changes in light and location. Rivers, rapidly-flowing, directional and green-brown; lakes, calm and blue; and oceans, tumultuous and steel-grey, are juxtaposed and suggest vast changes in distance and geographic terrain.
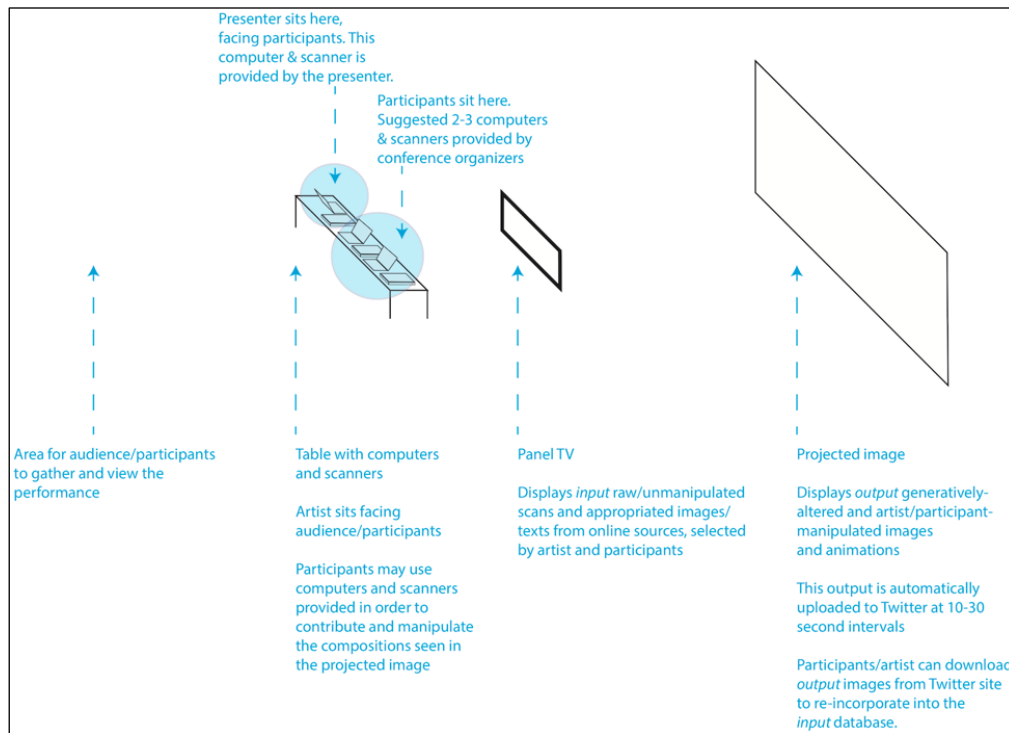

Figure 1: performance space with table, projection laptop, scanner, areas for viewers and participants
Source: generated by the author

Figure 2: videos of bodies of water located near locations where the piece has been performed
Source: generated by the author

The artist continues by describing a daily practice of collecting physical objects and archiving digital representations of them:

> *Departing from these remote surroundings of relative solitude, I began to find art as a way for me to connect with the rest of the world. Stones, and the vast horizon, have been recurring images in my work, along with small, found objects that I pick up from the ground, just as I had from the beach and serving as a metaphor for finding yourself within the world around you.*

> *I now understand the sand and the beach itself as a repository and perhaps even an archive of objects lost by past visitors. I connect this foundation with other methods of archiving that I have found and used over the years since – I've long had evolving practices of keeping small, lost-and-found objects, from dozens of shoeboxes stacked in my closet, to repurposed photo albums, to chests of drawers, rented storage lockers, etc. and also through digitization.*

Implied here is that technologies of various types have both augmented and facilitated the practice of collecting ephemera. Greater-levels of technological sophistication have permitted the artist to comfortably bridge object, word and image, with digital practices introducing the possibility of a "living archive," itself an object that can, in its collectivity, substitute for the physical presence of accumulated objects.

> *Scanning and digitization has also been a way for me to augment my ability to "keep" bits of ephemera. I think the web and social media have a similar function – they extend our ability to connect with the world and to preserve bits of our everyday lives.*

We, the audience, are given pause to consider what we have on hand. Conference or exhibition materials, restaurant receipts, business cards, texts from loved ones, website tabs open but yet unread: things saved and variously set aside for preservation and disposal.

The volume of accumulated materials is also correlated with the artists' integration with the world. Digital practices form an extension of this, with the archival function of social media simultaneously functioning as reliquary, rumination and communication channel. As related imagery is introduced within the presentation, audiences and participants relate to their own primary experiences of the world. Reflecting these lived experiences, the performance is presented with slowness and rhythm in order to convey a meditative or contemplative state. This aesthetic is intended to reveal a flow of thoughts, words and objects that are mutually constructed in the course of daily life. A jumble of impressions arises: we live in the moment, we relate, we communicate, we preserve, and we discard.

Slowly-dissolving images of (literally) concrete images (stones) give way to more abrupt, immediate ones: between igneous and metamorphic comes political and divisive. Donald Trump might appear upon the surface of a river rock. In the midst of a calming flow, the temporal and material effect are jarring. From one performance to the next, these current-day images are undefined: dynamically drawn from programmatic website searches, the most recent headlines are referenced through associated imagery: beyond "stone as frame" and the tempo of image-progression, very little is provided for in the way of editing. The strict intent here is to pull the viewer from past into present and back-again. Within the projects' Twitter archive, however, one can find a variety of specific images: as of 2016, a jovial Will Smith is juxtaposed with Justin Trudeau meeting amicably with Emmanuel Macron; a sachet of sugar; a disabled Carnival cruise ship; a determined Kim Jong Un; a formidable Large Hadron Collider; a wilted blade of grass. The contents of this archive are an interplay of curated and programmatically-appropriated images of which the artist has given up control. The artist will fully allow his humble archive to be subsumed by materials from other sources, known and unknown; he invites his participants to engage in this act. The immediate and culminating affect is disorienting and confusing. In sum, among a myriad of other possible past and present references, places and moments, however, reveals an overwhelming vacillation of temporal and contextual experiences that can only compel one to grasp tightly to the potential of agency as it exists in the here and now.

Application

A custom application was written in the Processing Integrated Development Environment for the performance. This application organizes and generatively processes pre-produced, dynamically-appropriated and participant-contributed content and saves and uploads screen captures of the resulting imagery to the Twitter account @rapturerefuse. While the application runs indefinitely, during live performance it progresses linearly through a series of phases: artist-produced videos, randomly and dynamically-combined images and Internet-sourced images, a range of live, participant-contributed images produced through scanning, and a series of images produced through generative processing of all previously-described sources (Figure 3).

Figure 3: examples of processed imagery – combinations of participant scans with artist-produced video

Source: generated by the author

Twitter archive and the contest of language

Before, during and after the performance, output from the combined artist, past-and-prior participants, and Internet-sourced imagery are generatively recombined and processed into still images and uploaded to social media microblogging website Twitter at ten-second intervals. While the artist is careful to notify participants that their contributions will be represented in such a fashion (and also encourages participants to view and comment upon/respond to these posts), it is not overtly a part of the live presentation but instead constitutes a living archive or process of documentation. However, this archival document is incomplete, capturing only individual frames at intervals from a continuous process, and will serve as material for future performances. This incomplete and yet indefinite process is presented in reference to the fact of language as power: some fragments ("utterances") survive while others fade into oblivion. Even those utterances that prevail are ultimately vulnerable and always subject to losing out to competing utterances (Twitter organizes its posts chronologically, so that newer content appears to visitors first; individual posts are subject to evaluation in the form of visitor "likes" and comments). A visitor to the Twitter site is more likely to see newer and more "liked" tweets. Upon subsequent visits, a different set of tweets may "rise to the top," supplanting others in terms of viewer attention. As more and more images are contributed to the project databank, it becomes less and less likely that any given image will actually be seen (Figure 4).

Figure 4: tweeted images of participant's images, generatively processed and "supplanted" over time

Source: generated by the author

Scanning as prolonged, labored embodied digitization process

Much of computer graphics technology facilitates the illusion that sight can be located outside of the body and the present. For example, period films can allow us to live in the past and science fiction propels us into the future. Paradoxically, these "immersive" technologies which exploit the Cartesian concept of a mind/body split can also evoke in us an acute awareness of the present, as propelled by the instant gratification of real-time response that ever-increasing processor speeds promise. In a conscious effort to subvert the viewer's assumptions about participation and interaction, and the expectation that contemplation occurs exclusively in the mind, *Grasping Elapsing* engages the viewer/participant in a physical experience in which images and events are generated through physical labor (Figure 5). As the desire for immediate gratification is frustrated, the viewer becomes increasingly aware of the more complex and satisfying experience of meditative interaction elicited by the piece.

The artist discusses his earliest experiences with scanning, in particular describing the embodied slowness of the technique:

> *The first scanner I ever used was a Logitech ScanMan Plus, circa 1991, purchased by my father for our family's Windows 3.0 computer. It was a handheld, grayscale scanner, and I delighted in carefully running it across different materials and objects. Since then, I've always enjoyed the act of scanning as it creates immediately new, digital materials from existing physical ones.*

Figure 5: example of a participant engaged in the process of scanning during the performance
Source: sIREN Conference 2017

In *Grasping Elapsing 3.1,* an Epson Perfection V39 flatbed scanner is used for participant image input. This desktop scanner uses a Contact Image Sensor to resolve 2-dimensional images of opaque objects and surfaces. As a method of digitization, scanning remains a relatively slow and labored process. This technique is therefore used as an aesthetic component as contributing participants must physically approach the table, open the scanner lid, carefully place their object/image onto the glass, close the scanner lid, press a button to begin the scan, wait for the scan to complete, open the scanner lid and finally retrieve their object/image. This entire process typically takes about thirty seconds, affording an individual moment of reflection and a shift in one's mental and physical presence. Furthermore, the participant must wait before seeing her contribution within the projected image/animation. The technology is arranged to be as simple as possible so that it does not impede upon the intended embodied aesthetic experience: activating the scan is accomplished through a single button press, and there is no need for the participant to perform any save or post-processing – the project's application saves and retrieves the resulting images automatically. Images are digitized at a resolution of 1280x720 pixels, matching the output resolution of the performance's custom application.

Concluding the technological tradeoff

> *But there is a tradeoff, of course, when you use technology as a way of holding on to more than you otherwise might be able to, extending your reach, your capacity for understanding, your ability to "know" more than a few dozen people at a time. Like the scanner, all forms of digitization result in something new and inherently different from the original object (act, phenomenon, etc.) that you started with. And at some point, the screen, the display, becomes a barrier.*

> *I am interested in a paradoxical moment that I have experienced many times – when the computer isn't enough, and I have to go back to a place of remoteness in order to understand the world.*

The performance intentionally trails off, leaving the audience to gradually take over and determine the "end" of the presentation:

> *This project, Grasping Elapsing, comes out of my need to vacillate between physical and digital forms of making and connecting, and also in terms of my everyday life – so how I gather information about the world happens also both physically and digitally. These modes and experiences are inextricable, and so you will see images from media coverage of recent news events that I have appropriated from online sources.*

> *For the remainder of my presentation, I would like to invite you to join me at the table and to scan any object that you would like, anything that you happen to have immediate access to. I'll also invite any comments, questions, or discussion you might like to have – either with me one-on-one or addressed more broadly to the entire room.*

This indeterminate (in)conclusion provides leeway into an implicitly continual process of past and present. Through the digital, participatory, programmatic, generative and indefinite process of collecting, scanning, processing and tweeting, each word, image and moment becomes an object to be "turned over" again and again.

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