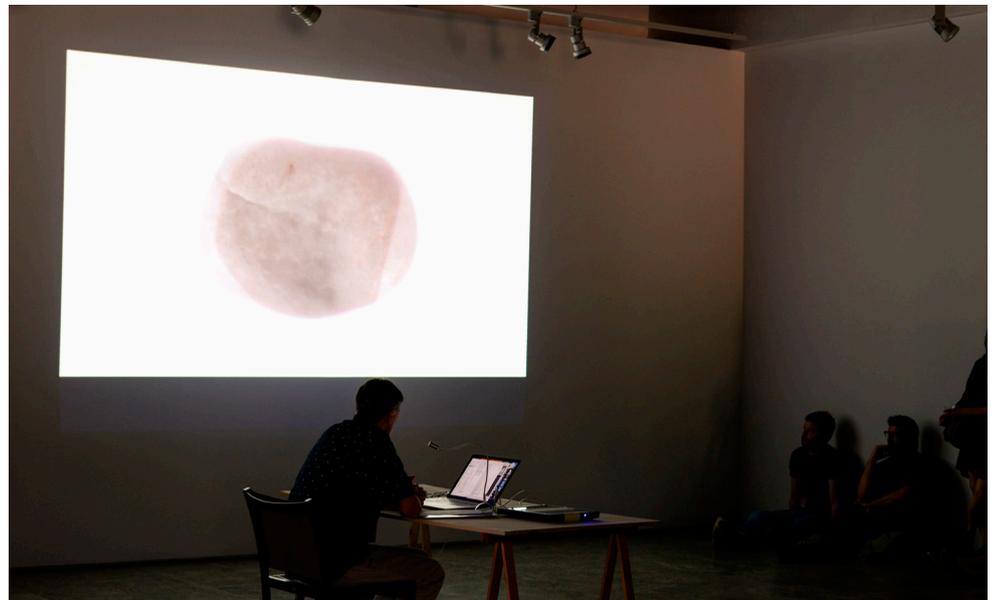Peter Williams
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Grasping Elapsing 3.6

Keywords: Performance; Participatory; Archive; Image Processing; Sustained Present; Embodiment; Memory; Scanning; Generative; Twitter; Input / Output; Geologic Time; Timescales.

Abstract:

Grasping Elapsing 3.6 is a hybrid, digitally-augmented participatory performance of thirty minutes and an indefinitely-extended digital component that is conducted online. The piece uses custom software, live scanning, archiving, databanking, spoken-word, text, image processing, social media components, participant contributions and conversation to combine varied temporal, spatial, locational, and situational moments through the use of digital practices and face-to-face discussion.

1. INTRODUCTION

A series of hybrid media interactive installations and performance artworks, *Grasping Elapsing* (2003-) attempts to show embodied thought process by creating open-ended connections among objects, images and words. *Grasping Elapsing 3.6* is a participatory performance with a live component of approximately thirty minutes and an extended digital component 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 presented before an audience that, after an approximately ten-minute introduction, is invited to participate by contributing images through the use of scanning. The artist sits at the table with scanner 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 improvise with a custom-made software application designed specifically for the performance. The application displays animation generated through live processing of artist-produced video and imagery both contributed by participants and appropriated from online sources. A flatbed scanner is made available for participants to use in order to digitize images for contribution to the piece; scanned images are automatically added to a databank from which the application draws in real time.

Exploring the play of meaning as words emerge and resonate as image/objects in specific physical contexts, *Grasping Elapsing 3.6* 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 numerically denoted in the title, *Grasping Elapsing 3.6* is a part of an iterative and ongoing series. Changes to the piece in each iteration specifically reflect 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.

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, and images. The performance begins with the artist describing memories that have influenced and motivated the piece. Cycling and dissolving images of stones are projected, denoting geologic time. Images representing current world events are interspersed, rapidly bringing viewers / participants up to the present. Subsequently, participants are invited 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 and participant-contributions are continuously 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.

2. A FLOW OF TIME, PLACES AND SITUATIONS

In *Grasping Elapsing,* the notion of embodiment is both abstract and very literal. The project's various components — dynamically-recombined image/text, spoken word, participant interaction and scanning, conversation, as well as the subsequent and continual processing and uploading of output screen captures — all weave together at a slow, measured pace. By dwelling on the past, the artist suggests isolated events and individual experiences, which later open up to broader cultural and political themes. 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) Implied here is that both natural settings and technologies of various types have facilitated the collecting and archiving of objects, physical and digital in form. The accumulation of such objects over time has required greater levels of sophistication in terms of archiving technology, with digital practices introducing the possibility of a "living archive" that develops and changes in the absence of a collector or curator. The volume of accumulated materials is also correlated with the artist's integration with the world. Digital practices form an extension of this, with social media simultaneously functioning as archive, reliquary, rumination and communication channel.

Reflecting these lived experiences, the performance is presented with slowness and rhythm in order to convey to the audience 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.

3. TWITTER ARCHIVE AND THE CONTEST OF VOICE

Before, during and after the performance, output from the digital component is captured 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. This incomplete and yet indefinite process is presented using the microblogging site Twitter as an interpretation of social media's competitive nature. 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).

4. SCANNING AS PROLONGED, 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 that exploit the Cartesian concept of a mind / body split can also evoke in us an acute awareness of the present (for example, 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 aware of the more complex and satisfying experience of meditative interaction elicited by the piece.

In *Grasping Elapsing 3.6,* 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. While contemporary lens-based cameras offer sufficient resolution to replace flatbed scanning as a faster, more convenient means of creating digital images of many physical documents and objects, scanning is unique as a lensless, reflective photographic technique. Objects are placed directly onto the glass of a scanner bed, and an imaging sensor passes immediately underneath. The close proximity conveys a very immediate and heightened sense of indexicality. This technique is therefore used as both an aesthetic and conceptual component, as contributing participants must consider which object(s) they would like to scan, physically approach the table, open the scanner lid, carefully place their object(s) 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(s). This entire process typically takes about two-to-three minutes, 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 and displayed at a resolution of 1280x720 pixels.

5. CONCLUDING THE TECHNOLOGICAL TRADEOFF

The performance trails off, leaving the audience to gradually take over. This indeterminate (in)conclusion provides leeway into a durational process that implicitly continues after the performance ends. Through the indefinite process of collecting, scanning, processing and tweeting, each word, image and moment becomes an object to be "turned over" again and again.

6. FIGURES

Fig. 1. Performance space with table, projection laptop, scanner, areas for viewers and participant.

Presenter sits here, facing participants. This computer & scanner is provided by the presenter.

Participants sit here. Suggested 2-3 computers & scanners provided by conference organizers

Area for audience/participants to gather and view the performance

Table with computers and scanners

Artist sits facing audience/participants

Participants may use computers and scanners provided in order to contribute and manipulate the compositions seen in the projected image

Panel TV

Displays *input* raw/unmanipulated scans and appropriated images/texts from online sources, selected by artist and participants

Projected image

Displays *output* generatively-altered and artist/participant-manipulated images and animations

This output is automatically uploaded to Twitter at 10-30 second intervals

Participants/artist can download *output* images from Twitter site to re-incorporate into the *input* database.
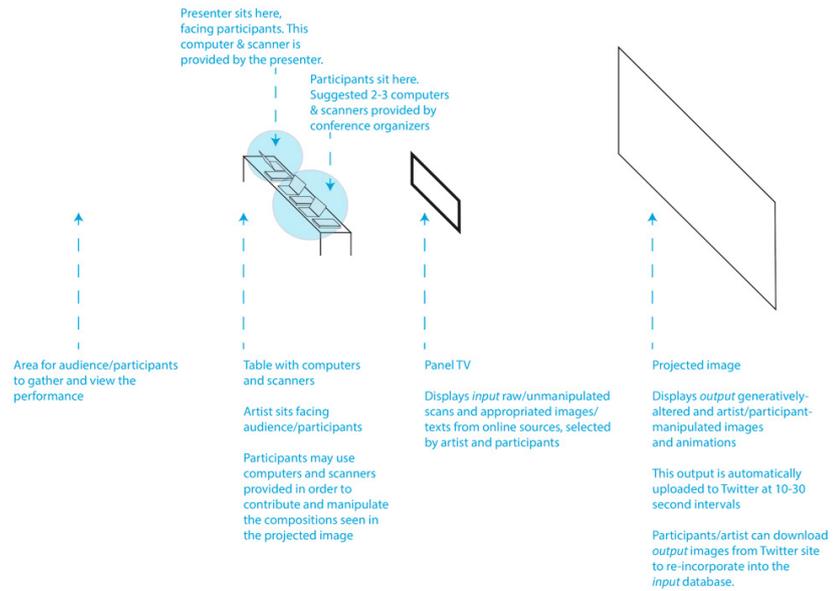
Fig. 2. Videos of bodies of water located near locations where the piece has been performed.

Fig. 3. Examples of processed imagery — combinations of participant scans with artist-produced video.

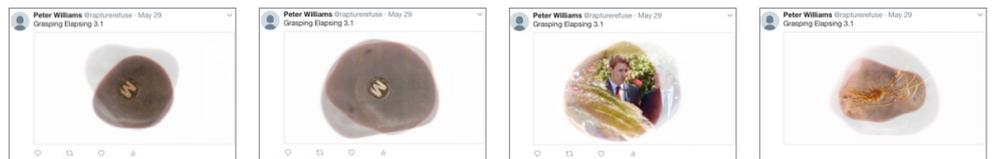Fig. 4. Tweeted images of participant's images, generatively processed and "supplanted" over time.

Fig. 5. Example of a participant engaged in the process of scanning during the performance of *Grasping Elapsing 3.1* (an earlier iteration of this project).

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