Char Davies.
Forest Stream, *Ephémère* (1998).
Digital still image captured during immersive
performance of the virtual environment *Ephémère*.

Media, art and knowledge: interview with Char Davies

Por Maria Antonieta Pereira e Luiz Fernando Ferreira Sá

Char Davies is an internationally known for pioneering artworks using the technologies of virtual reality. Her first VR environment, Osmose (1995), is considered a landmark in new media art. Originally a painter, Davies transitioned to digital media in the late 80s, becoming a founding director of the 3-D software company Softimage. Recently, Davies' concerns have expanded from "virtual" to "actual" place: working with forest, streams, boulders and the surrounding horizon — her iconic elements for 30 years — she is currently creating another immersive environment, of landscape, on 500 acres in southern Québec.

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I want to preface my remarks by saying that it has been a decade since I have actively worked with the medium of immersive virtual space. More recently, I have been engaged with landscape, a truly immersive and time-based medium which seems particularly relevant given the current state of the world. I want to emphasize however that I would not be working with such 'actual place' if I had not worked first in virtual space: my responses to the following questions are made from this perspective.

Maria Antonieta/Luiz Fernando - In your personal life and artistic career you studied art, philosophy and themes of nature, sensory perception and space. Do you consider that the connexions between many fields of knowledge were important for your media art? Who are your favorite artists or authors in art and philosophy?

Char Davies - My art practice - whether I was painting in the 1980's, constructing virtual environments in the 90's, or engaging with actual landscape now - has always been informed by extensive reading in other fields. Studies in visuality, phenomenology and geo-philosophy (particularly embodiment, spatiality and place), as well as landscape theory, ecology and environmental ethics have been and continue to be relevant to my inquiry. Some of the philosophers who have kept me company over the years include Gaston Bachelard, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Keiji Nishitani and David Michael Levin. Other writers include the biologist Rachel Carson, whose seminal work Silent Spring I read as a teenager, and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Among artists no longer living, I most value the panoramic landscapes of the sixteenth-century Flemish painter Joachim Patinir and the late nearly abstract paintings of J.W. Turner. Contemporary artists I admire include Anselm Keifer and James Turrell.

You interpreted your work like a desire to recreate and to communicate a feminine sensibility. What are the links between this point of view and high technology and art?

I have never said that I wanted to recreate or communicate a specifically 'feminine' sensibility: what I have said many times is that I have sought to 'light a lamp in a dark corner' in order to draw attention to what I believe, even now, is the still-overlooked potential of the medium of immersive virtual space. What is this potential? I would say it is the capacity

to serve as a spatiotemporal bodily-experiential arena whereby everyday perceptions/assumptions about the world can be de-habitualized or de-automatized, enabling us to re-cognize our own being-in-the-world 'freshly', even if only temporarily. My desire to use the medium to subvert or least circumvent various conventions of the traditional western (and yes) patriarchal worldview has been key to my work in the field. I do believe that being 'femalely embodied' has obvious significance in terms of my sensibilities and intentions: in other words, how I pass through the world is hugely shaped by the fact that 'I' am grounded in a female body at this particular time. It should therefore not be surprising that I have sought to communicate an alternative to the masculine, patriarchal worldview, in terms of facilitating a situation whereby participants - or 'immersants' as I have named them - can relinquish the culturally valorized (and conventionalized) urge to dominate everything in sight and 'do-this-to-that', and instead experience a non-goal-oriented way of being whereby attention is refocused or rather de-focused...

The experiences of immersion and interaction are very important in your work. Could we consider these experiences like contemporary narratives where the people play the part of characters?

No: human-to-human interaction or role-playing has never been my concern - on the contrary. My intent has always been to turn the immersant's attention away from other people and outward-directed activity back to the very 'is-ness' of his or her own embodiment. In other words, rather than enabling participants to engage in socializing or fantasy, my goal has been to redirect their awareness to the very reality of their own existence in the most fundamental sense: not so much in terms of 'seeing themselves seeing' but feeling wonderment at the very fact that they see at all, that they 'are', that they and all-this exists… To potentially facilitate such experience, it was necessary to develop an alternative interface which - instead of rewarding manual skill and reducing the immersive experience to that of hands and eyes only - shifts the mode of interaction to that of breath and balance, involving a proprioceptive awareness, as in sensing one's own embodied being in space. Most notably, in Osmose and Ephémère this enables an unusual sensation of floating as if gravity-free. When combined with semi-transparent visuals (thereby allowing immersants to see-through and pass-through everything), the experiential effect is one of spatial ambiguity whereby habitually-perceived boundaries between interior self and exterior world, between 'I' and 'it', subject and object, become confused or rather inter-fused, eliciting a 'questioning' instead of a taking-for-granted as we do in everyday life.

What kind of sensibility and knowledge Osmose and Ephémère arouse in the people? What was the more frequent reaction of the visitors? Is it foregone?

In the past dozen years, approximately thirty thousand individuals have immersed themselves in these two works in various exhibitions around the world. The works are widely known for their unusually emotional effects on participants. Many articles have been written on this subject by others as well as myself, most of which can be found at www.immersence.com (most relevantly, see Davies, Changing Space: Virtual Reality as an Arena of Embodied Being). Here is a most interesting quote from an immersant in 1996: "Osmose heightened an awareness of my body as a site of consciousness and [an awareness] of the experience and sensation of consciousness occupying space. It's the most evocative exploration of the perception of consciousness that I have experienced since I can't remember when."

What are your plans about media art?

Even though I am mostly known for making computer-based virtual environments, I have never thought of my work specifically as 'media art': I have always used whatever medium was most effective for exploring and communicating what I have wanted to say. As I mentioned earlier, I am currently working with landscape, and have, for now at least, exchanged my team of programmers and animators for a team of farmers, foresters and stone cutters, and have traded in computers for tractors. Even so, my creative process, my way of working, remains the same. It should be noted that I have always been interested in landscape: twenty-five years ago, I was quite traditionally concerned with representing what land 'looks like' on a painterly two-dimensional surface; then, with representing what it 'feels like' to be inside such landscape fluxing through time, but inadequately so on a static two-dimensional surface. Such efforts eventually led me to explore 3D computer technology and then virtual space, where it was possible to construct three-dimensionally enveloping and flowing landscapes within which the viewer, now active participant, could effectively be bodily immersed. The virtual environments Osmose and Ephémère were originally inspired by an actual, particular, expanse of land on a mountainside in the province of Quebec along the Canadian/American border. I have now gone into this land, physically, bodily, and am creating with/in it as my medium. Such a medium is truly immersive, all-enveloping, with infinite scope and depth as well as temporality. And, in comparison to my virtual environments (which were, after all, human-created) this actual environment which I call Rêverie - with its myriad of living and non-living beings and entities, all in unceasing

and intricate transformation - has an unfathomable 'otherness', or more accurately 'othernesses', which invite not domination but care-ful engagement (and much patience and learning on my part). While I may introduce technology here in the future, it is too soon to speak of this.

In 1996, Arjun Appadurai coined five terms that serve as "the basis for the tentative formulation about the conditions under which current global flows occur:"ethnoscape (the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which in live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, etc), technoscape (technology moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries), financescapes (the disposition of global capital is now a more mysterious, rapid and difficult landscape to follow), mediascapes (the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information), ideoscapes (concatenations of political imagesthat are linked to ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it). Would you situate your work with (dis)embodiment and deautomatization in any of the abovementioned disjunctures?

From my perspective, this list is composed from a conventionally anthropocentric (as in human-centered) point-of-view, indicative of the very problem my work has sought to counter. The various 'scapes' listed above include global flows of people, technology, financial capital, electronic information and political images: all extremely relevant, except there is no consideration of, or for, the non-human. In the decade since Appadurai coined his terms, it has become increasingly apparent that we ignore non-human (but certainly human-affected) flows and 'scapes' at our peril. Urban culture's continuing addiction to the virtualizing effects of contemporary technology - including the recent phenomenon of computer-based social networking - blinds us to the fact that non-human life on earth is undergoing a vast alteration and diminishing of unprecedented scale. Our own well-being is dependent on the well-being of such non-human flows which now span globally with vast implications. (To name a single, small, localized example: many tree species native to my area are being threatened by insects arriving from Asia, transported via wooden construction palettes and newly viable because of warming temperatures - with no natural predators here, the consequences are potentially catastrophic.) In this context, my work with immersive virtual space can paradoxically be seen not only as an attempt to de-automatize habitual behavior and assumptions but also to reaffirm our essential embodiment and embeddedness in the Earth, returning participants to a sense of wonder and awe at the very fact of their own existence, reminding them how each of us is only

passing through this extraordinary bittersweet place we call Life. Accordingly, it seems a natural progression (no pun intended) for me to be working with actual earth, stone, water, trees, light and so on: for now, 'communing with' instead of 'communicating about'...

We all know that art is meant to be seen "in the flesh", live and on stage (on scene), where the scale, the texture, the immediacy, sometimes even the sound and the smell of a work confront or tease the audience. To what extent is your work attempting the (im)possible task of replacing the experience of art? Or yet, to what extent does your work deal with the ever-shifting boundaries of art?

My immersive virtual works are not an attempt to replace the experience of seeing art 'in the flesh': they were specifically made to be experienced 'in the flesh' since they do not exist in their fullest form unless someone is bodily breathing and balancing his or her way through them. (Another aspect is that of witnessing others' live immersions, but this is secondary.) Some might say the fact that the works only really exist while being subjectively experienced/performed might preclude their being considered art, because as such they do not exist separately, objectively, from the viewer. I would disagree with this however: one of my specific intentions was to collapse the subject/object divide. It should also be said that I was quite happy to make art which could not be approached as a thing, as a commodity to be bought and sold...

We would like to hear you respond to Deleuze in that "a life contains only virtual. It is made of virtualities, events, singularities. What we call virtual is not something that lacks reality, but something that enters into a process of actualization by following the plane that gives it its own reality." Would your poetics of (de)spacing, an aesthetics bent on "desolidifying" things and dissolving spatial distinctions, encounter a poetics of immanence?

Not being a Deleuzean scholar, I hesitate to explain my work through his terms, but one could see certain correspondences between his concept of immanence and my construction of an experiential realm wherein there are no separate hard-edged objects, no 'things', but only dimensions of transparency, fluxes and flow. It should be noted that my interest in de-solidifying objects and dissolving spatial distinctions has its origins in my own bodily experience of vision rather than philosophy: artistic investigation into my myopic eyesight many years ago led me to begin questioning our conventional understanding of the world as a collection of separate solid objects in so-called empty space. I am particularly interested

in the virtual's actualizing qualities in relation to 'becoming' as in the Greek notion of 'poiesis'. As such, my interest is in 'bringing-forth' - first as techne, in terms of a poetical 'manifesting into appearance'; secondly as physis, as in the 'arising of something from out of itself', suggestive of the emergent life-force in nature; and thirdly, in reference to Heidegger's suggestion that it is only through poetic revealing or questioning that we can reflect on the situation we have been placed in by an 'instrumentalizing techne' whereby the world has been transformed into a 'standing reserve' for human exploitation. Most recently - working with actual place rather than virtual space, where everything is in a state of flow, even if beyond the threshold of our perceptions - I am beginning to formulate another sense of actuality and solidity: the fact that a boulder before me has endured for thousands of years, and will continue to be there (or here) long after I am not evokes a certain respect for its very being, as a relative still-point amid the flux.

In a fairly recent interview (1996) with Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva stated the following: "so let's talk about lucidity … we must not idealize liberty. Liberty can also be deadly." Do you feel at ease to talk about lucidity, liberty, and possibly influence? Are you lucid about the influences you suffer(ed) and the influence you exert on other artists? To what extent can influence be a deadly liberty?

At first glance, I did not understand this question: but let me try further at the risk of responding too literally. I have already listed a few of the philosophers, poets and painters who have, as I like to say, 'kept me company'. As I see it, this is different than 'influence' but suggests that I found a certain kind of 'resonance' with their ideas or sensibilities which made me feel less alone on what has essentially been a solitary path of inquiry. As for any influence I may have exerted on other artists, I can only say that one of my original goals was to demonstrate that the medium of immersive virtual space could be approached in an alternative way than was being conventionally conceived at that time (mid-late 90's). I have phrased this in the past as seeking to 'light a lamp in a dark corner' in an effort to draw attention to such potential: if, because of my efforts, other artists and even contemporary philosophers have begun to explore that dark corner then my goal has been achieved. That said, I tend to believe that on the whole, the sensitizing potential of immersive virtual space is still being overlooked.

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