The background of the page is a complex geometric pattern. It features a central point from which numerous thin, black lines radiate outwards, creating a fan-like effect. These lines intersect to form a grid of small, irregular shapes, primarily triangles and quadrilaterals, that fill the lower and right portions of the page. The overall aesthetic is minimalist and architectural.

Space is Body Centred

Interview with Sonia Cillari
Annet Dekker

Sonia Cillari's work has an emotional and physical focus. By tracking electromagnetic fields, activity, movements, and the attraction and repulsion between the participants and the performer she explicitly investigates the possibility of using the body as an interface. Cillari's interest lies in measuring human encounters, at the moment that the audience realizes that the boundaries of their bodies extend further than their skin. She is particularly interested in the notion of tactile awareness: how proximity, presence and touch influence the way in which we perceive ourselves and relate to others, and how this process can be imbued with new meaning. Her projects explore the relationships between bodies and between body and space, and Cillari uses digital and electromagnetic energy emitted by human bodies, which function as antennae, to generate dynamic forms. Cillari reveals how the audience models their internal and external worlds by means of their sensory systems, and the way in which our sensory input enables our consciousness to map the world around us. I interviewed Sonia Cillari twice, with an intervening period of two-and-a-half years. The first interview took place during an artist-in-residence at the Netherlands Media Art Institute in Amsterdam (2007) when she developed *Se Mi Sei Vicino*. The second interview was conducted by e-mail and Skype, while I was revising and augmenting the 2007 interview for *Sonic Acts* in the light of *The Poetics of Space*.

You were trained as an architect, and then moved to media art. What was it that attracted you to media art that you couldn't find in architecture?

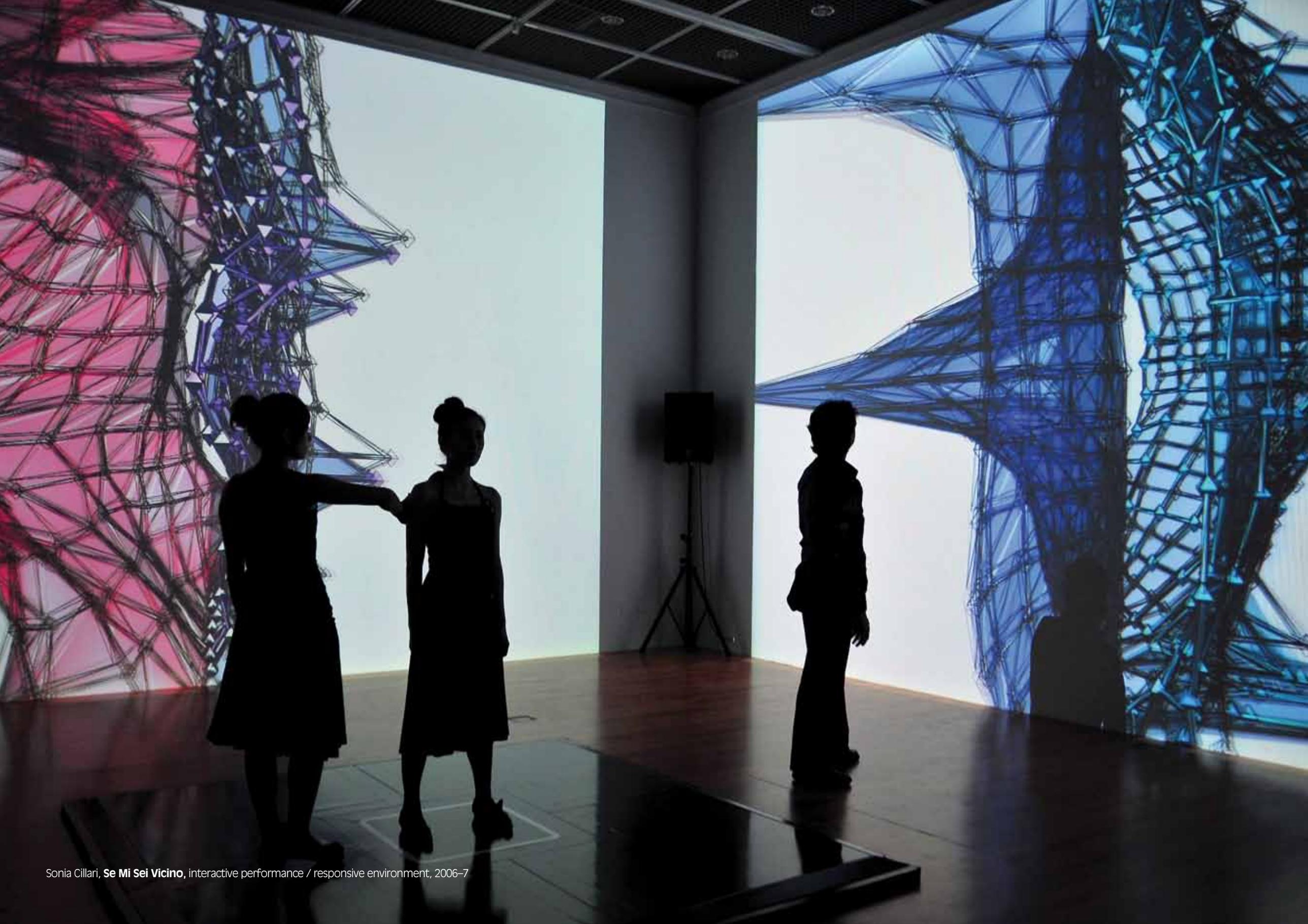
When I was studying architecture I was specifically interested in the theory of space. Later on I choose the electronic arts field to investigate the way humans experience space, how we perceive space and reconstruct our internal and external worlds by means of our sensorial system. During my studies, I used the parameters of digital space. In architecture the functionality – for example gravitational restriction – is essential. I wanted to get away from the restrictions and started studying the 'black space of the digital domain'. Like the physical space that surrounds us, this isn't an empty space but a place where complex fluctuations of energy occur. This initiated my move from architecture to media art. While drawing my digital models I felt free from physical constraints, I was shaping spaces by applying parameters like vectors of transformation, flux, transition and interference. The main theoretical impetus behind my creations was the idea that movement comes before space. I believe that one cannot conceive of space as an inert receiver or as an homogenous and permanent external. Space is a generator of perceptions. My intention has always been to explore and stimulate the implications of our spatial experiences.

The idea of movement comes before space reminds me of Brian Massumi's remarks about the relationship between space and movement: 'When the relation between space and movement inverts, so does the relationship between ourselves and our experience. Experience is no longer in us. We emerge from experience.'¹ This inversion is similar to the importance of the movement in-between, the moving from one point to another, which creates meaningful space. Like Massumi, you move from architecture towards performance practices in order to come to terms with space and the forming of experience. Could you elaborate on this? What does performance mean to you and your work?

I'm very interested in highlighting both the physical and the metaphysical ways in which human beings interact with each other and with their environment. And yes, I believe that performance is one of the best forms of making art, to visualize things that are not in themselves visual. For me the relational and participatory situations are very effective to break the illusion of an objective reality. I intend to increase our perception of complex visions and embodiment in human experiences. It is through performance that we, from our subjective position, can gain access to undiscovered, imaginative, shared phenomena. The same individual recognitions of the basic elements in performance – such as space, time, bodies, emotions and other kind of relationships between the performer and audience – reveal our beings as potential containers of interrelated events. Over the years, my work has fused all these elements into generative and interactive works in which the personal experience of space is an illusion, and in which the body, gestures, images, sound, touch, and recently also taste and smell, play important roles. These are artificial spaces, each segment of which contains potential realities, some mirroring natural phenomena, some not. Another aspect I really care about, especially in my most recent performances, is that I try to minimize the distance between active performers and passive spectators. Asking the audience for a full bodily commitment that includes mostly movement, gestures and touch, blurs the boundaries of passivity and activity: everyone becomes a potential performer. Visitors leave the role of observers and slide in the role of creators of an autonomous reality.

You have referred a few times in previous writings and in interviews to the idea of 'space as body centred' and the notion of 'body as interface'. What do you mean by this, what is the relationship of the body to space as you define it?

I like to start answering this question quoting the philosophers Maturana and Varela. They state: 'Living systems are units of interactions. They exist in an "ambience". From a purely biological point of view they cannot be understood independently of that part of the ambience with which they interact, nor can the ambience be defined independent of the living system that specifies it. The systems that live in a continuous exchange with their environment are called "open systems". All living systems are "open" and in a "stable state". This means that they are never in a "stationary equilibrium" but always in a "state of flux".'² We experience space – this immense not-void that surrounds us – because we are perceptive and thinking beings. However our perception does not identify the outside world as it really is, but only the way we have come to recognize it. We experience electromagnetic waves as images and colours, vibrations as sounds, and chemical compositions



Sonia Cillari, **Se Mi Sei Vicino**, interactive performance / responsive environment, 2006-7

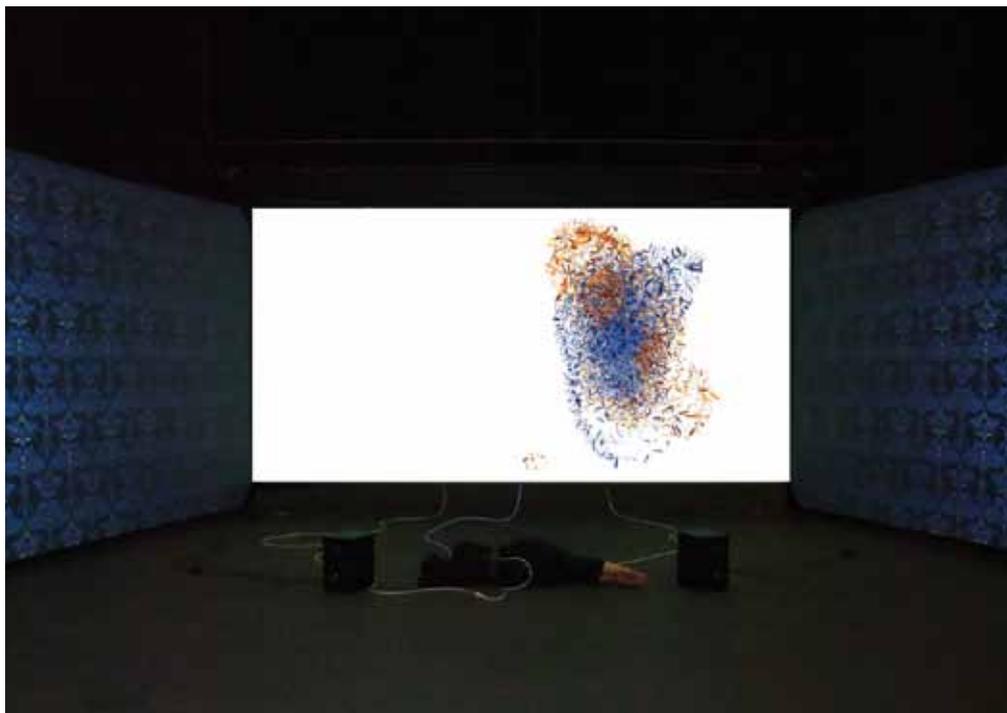
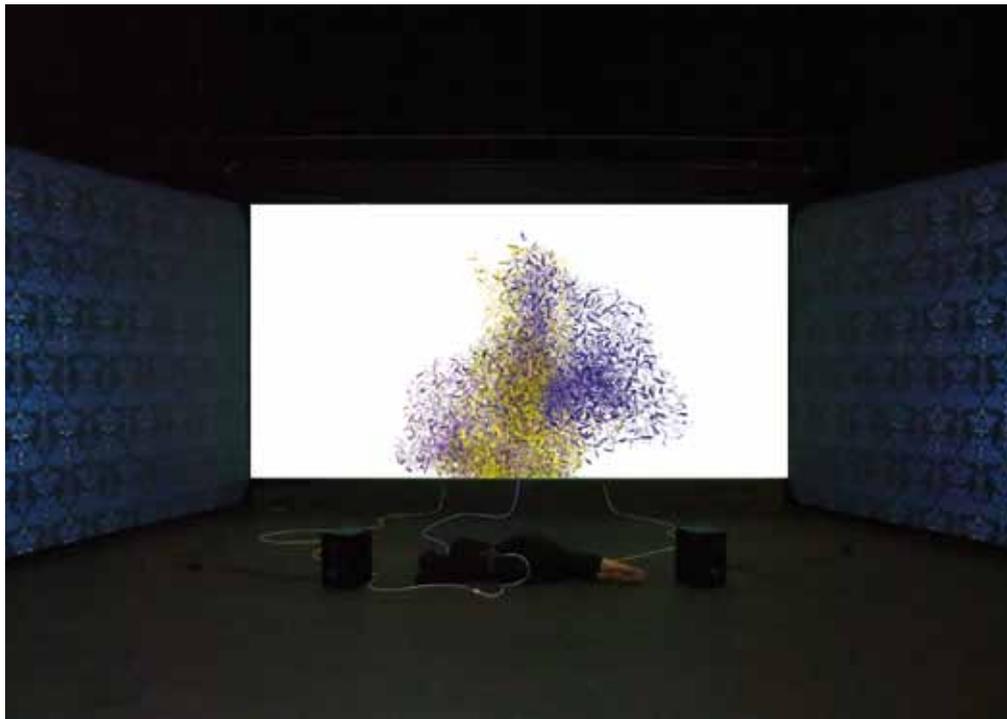


Sonia Cillari, *Se Mi Sei Vicino*, interactive performance / responsive environment, 2006-7

as smells and flavours. Colours, sounds, smells and flavours are products of our mind, built from our sensory experiences. They do not exist, as such, outside our brain. Diametrically opposed to the notion of objective space as an homogeneous 'external', the notion of reality as a learning process has its chief features in heterogeneity and consciousness. In space, I am immersed as a body and as an agent of emotions. I say I am immersed as a body because, I don't have a body, but I am a body, a body that is a vehicle of communication. The body puts us in contact with the outside world. Human beings, thanks to their own *poroi* (Greek for 'the ways in and the ways out'), and therefore by means of their own senses, are in contact with the world. The relationship between space, body and mind is an infinite and continuous interaction. This view places space and body within the dimension of subjectivity. Over the last years, I have become tired of objects representing interfaces between the external world and myself, and I focused on the body as interface. I realized some works that highlight the body as physical input and output in space. *Se Mi Sei Vicino* (If you are close to me) is the work that most satisfies the primary objective because the body of the performer, functioning as a human antenna, is the real interface. When members of the audience come close to or touch the performer, the proximity and the touch of the bodies are registered as electromagnetic activity. The point of departure was the desire to show that the boundaries of the self extend beyond our skin. I wanted to measure human encounters, intersections of our physical being with other physical beings. I was specifically interested in the idea of skin consciousness; in how presence, proximity and touch can redirect the way we understand ourselves and others. Such encounters are visualized and made audible, and the relative distance between the bodies determines what is seen and heard. The generated visuals and sound are a way to draw the audience in, but the interface is about the moment of sharing and contact, when the interaction occurs through our senses.

You also made a long performance titled *As an artist I need to rest* in which your breathing generates and influences the states of being of a digital feather projected on a screen above you. What is it you wanted to achieve or share with the audience?

The performance work *As an artist, I need to rest* results from the tensions in my personal impulses and desires of making art. It is a very intimate piece which confronts me with something I have never done before: an exhausting performance in which I emphasize the creation of my own work in front of the public over a period of time. *As an artist* I place myself in a completely self-possessive role: being in control of my work through my breath. As breathing is one of the few bodily functions that can be controlled both consciously and unconsciously. *I need to rest* to find a symbiosis between myself and the piece. Psychological and physical stamina are required to combat the risk of hyperventilation, in which I might find myself breathing deeper or faster to control the behaviour of the digital feather. During the performance the audience can hear the sound of my respiration becoming more fatigued. In this piece, breath, as the giver of life, represents keeping each other alive, a metaphor of interdependence between the artist and his own creation. Connecting the creation of my work to my own breathing highlights creation as a carnal act of experiencing, and as the vital instinct that can bring the artist into



Sonia Cillari, **As an Artist I Need to Rest**, generative interactive performance, 2009

a continuous state of excitement and frustration. The performative aspect of the piece over time is also very important. The intention is to enter into a certain state of mind, where I can push my body over the limit. I am interested in actions over time because I regard performance as a means of researching mental and physical answers. I like the idea of the audience being in a voyeuristic situation. It is important to confront the audience with this experience. The public has to take the time to see the piece. In fact, *As an artist, I need to rest* confronts me with finding the limits of my body over time, with a long exposure to the public, performing in an intimate situation.

What inspired you to make such a performance?

To highlight creation as a carnal act of experiencing, to emphasize the excitement and frustration in such action. I wanted to question the idea and the role of an artist working with interactive technologies in contemporary art, and to question the way we actually understand interaction in contemporary art. The artist codifies human experiences in numerous sensory languages. This substitution reveals the artist's capacity to feel, envision and believe, becoming sensitive to different kinds of knowing, spatiality and beauty. Technology can help us to extend the present. Peter Weibel once said that the use of technology frees us from instances of reality. By dealing with a real-time generation between my body, as the artist's body, and my interactive work, this piece manifests how the image of one's self and the relationship to one's world is reflected and transformed in interactive works. For me it is important to explore how we, individually, generate empirical concepts of the world, thus relating new impressions to existing ones. In other words: how the interaction between a person and his/her surroundings arises. How we, as perceivers, reconstruct the internal and external worlds by means of our sensory systems, and how our senses achieve the process of consciousness in order to identify these worlds. Against the rationalist notion of objective space and body, the core of my exploration is the creation of sensorial and perceptual mechanisms in immersive and augmented environments to instigate interactive processes. My artistic investigation examines how patterns of consciousness, perception and identity emerge in such settings. A recurring element in my works is an experimental praxis revealing a sense of instability and impermanence. I have always searched for new ways to observe and visualize behaviour. I use interactivity to explore the possibility of distancing oneself from the idea of objective reality.

You want to show the audience that their movements create something, and that these influence other things as well. I can imagine that some people wonder if interactive works are really the best way to convey feelings?

Feelings, communication and interactive strategies, that doesn't sound extraordinary to me. In my work I explore evolutionary and interactive strategies, non-linear behaviours and processes of movement to create communicative spaces that reveal emotional states. I use participation as a continuous mutation of the initial spatial conditions, to get away from the concept of the 'external-to-you' as something invariable. Individual being does not emerge in isolation.

In what way do you feel it is important to enrich our perception with a different spatial sensibility?

Our perception doesn't identify the external world as it really is – organic, fluid, the centre of probabilistic waves – but only in the way the senses allow us to recognize it. We are able to experience the external because of our senses. We need to create environmental stimuli to direct these physical and psychological stages of human behaviour. As the process of becoming aware of the external becomes true by the acquisition of information through sensations, new spatial behaviours need to emerge, creating higher levels of dynamic physical interactions with our environment. Sensing such spatial experiences, thinking about, remembering or evaluating the information, might extend throughout and even beyond the living body.

What direction are you taking now in your new project, *Sensitive to Pleasure*?

Sensitive to Pleasure is a performative electrical-field sensing and ambisonics sound environment. It lasts approximately three hours. It will be realized in Amsterdam and Venice. It is an homage to Pygmalion, the sculptor who falls in love with a statue he has made – as told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. The work deals with an inverted relationship of control between the creator and his own creation. It explores the ambiguity of being in love and the physical sensation of pain, which might or might not be pleasant, as well as performing actions that might conflict with personal conscience.

Notes

1. Brian Massumi, 'Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible', in Stephen Perrella (ed.), 'Hypersurface Architecture', *Architectural Design*, Profile no. 133, vol. 68, no. 5/6, (May–June 1998), p. 17.
2. Humberto R. Maturana, Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition, The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing, 1980), p. 9.

Sensitive to Pleasure will be co-produced by STEIM and the Netherlands Media Art Institute in Amsterdam and Claudio Buziol Foundation in Venice. Expected premiere, Summer 2010. The project is supported by the BKVB Fund.