

Janez Strehovec: **The Touch With Tact**

**On the *Superohm* Installation by Tanja Vujinović**

Translated by Melita Silič

Tanja Vujinović: *Superohm, D.E.I.N.D. \* Study#15*

Installation (objects, loudspeakers, video projection, custom electronics, computers, live video and sound processing)

Production: Ultramono, [www.ultramono.org](http://www.ultramono.org)

Executive producer: Jan Kušej

Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana, 10 October – 21 October, 2011

The *Superohm* project, exhibited in October 2011 at the Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana, is part of the *Discreet Events in Noisy Domains* (fifteenth study) series, which first of all means that it is an event, and thereby the participant's intervention in time, and there are also noisy domains – hence the effect of sound is an essential component of the event, which has been a constant in Tanja Vujinović's projects. This event doesn't only imply the temporal dimension; indeed, something happens only if we bear witness through intensive participation, which is, in the case of "Discreet Events", a discreet one. This occurs when things are not just observed – which is characteristic of the spectator's visit to traditional art shows – but rather when an intense and individualised relationship comprising a comprehensive sensory and emotional arrangement is established with them. Such an arrangement presumes the involvement of all of the senses, including touch incorporated in a kinaesthetic dispositif due to the fact that a static engagement of touch does not result in a lot of data. It requires a visitor's/user's circulation in the space of the installation, touching objects in motion, their acceleration and stopping, directing and loading.

What are the objects involved? They remind one of living beings, such as stuffed dog toys, as well as (completely harmless) reptiles and vivacious baby goats. They are fitted with sensors and capable of programmed and random behaviour alike; not smart enough to be real robots and too smart to be considered ordinary toys. They produce sounds (constituting noisy domains) and their movement is incorporated into an artificial life in the sandbox (playground) in which they are placed. They can be divided into three types: the largest and laziest, which are supplied with electricity in the centre of the sandbox, the dog-car toys (if pushed by visitors, they gladly move in a particular direction) and jumpy and tumbling stuffed

baby goats, which demonstrate the most life (as if they were sort of spinning tops). Everything that is happening in the sandbox is being recorded by the cameras above, and the modulated shots are projected live onto the screen in the installation's background, whereas the artificial life in the sandbox (based on interactions between various analogue and digital components of the system – objects, spectators, light sources, cameras, controller devices) generates a soundscape that one should listen to as well as try to affect it by the ever new kinaesthetic interventions upon the objects placed in the sandbox-playground. The video and sound maps generated on the basis of interactions between objects, visitors and smart devices produce data streams collected and processed by computer software.

Being a project of new media art, *Superohm* is a challenge to theory due to complex interactions between system components, which lead to artificial life based on hybrid states between the analogue and digital as well as the algorithmic. The components include optic sensors, stroboscopic and LED lights, video cameras, microphones and loudspeakers, computer components and mechanical parts in the stuffed object-dogs, baby goats and reptiles. This installation also features a modular approach – flexible components can be adapted to new settings in other spaces and it is also important that the author herself is a programmer in her projects. However, what the contributor of this text considers a huge challenge is to address the tactile perception established by this work.

Indeed, such perception is essential in order to pave the way from (un)usual sensory experience to intensive event, and hybrid objects in the form of stuffed dogs, reptiles and baby goats play an important role in this. They are dressed in durable, warm and touch-friendly textile (which reminds one of the neo-avant-garde artist Joseph Beuys, who also used warm materials, such as grease, wax and plush) that literally invites the visitor to touch it, caress it, until the eventual, resolute taking hold of these half-alive toys. Not only the kinaesthetic, but also the motor skills, of the visitor/user are addressed, because from the initial (timid) observation of things in front of her (when she first enters the gallery space), she passes on to a considerably more intense and investigative relationship with the environment and the objects within. The visitor/user starts taking away the strangeness from these things, which is accomplished through touch, which allows directness, the experience of materiality and incorporation of environmental components into her body schema (Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept).

The visitor/user is suddenly interested in the things that are there. She reaches for them and, like a child, enjoys seeing that her activity has produced certain changes in the environment, which demonstrates itself henceforth as being an open and friendly one. In

addition to this, she sees her interventions documented in real time in a video projection as well as hears sound changes generated by her interaction with the objects. What is this interaction all about? It is about the visitor/user touching the objects, as well as moving them, directing and redirecting, accelerating and stopping. It is important that the things do not evade the touching hand or seduce it, there are no empty interventions or asides; this is about touches and grasps aimed at amiable and warm surfaces of objects constituting the principal and distinctive part of *Superohm*. A hundred other visitors/users and theoreticians who encounter Vujinović's projects are attracted by a hundred other things (qualities, properties, dimensions), but the author of this text prefers to concentrate on her original as-if-alive objects.

The perception of this project as described above is definitely not the only possibility to enter this installation. Particularly in new media art projects, smart technologies enable a dispositif that makes the artist ask essential and even existential questions. They allow for an opening in space surrounded by atmospheres, which "breathe" questions as if it were *2000: A Space Odyssey*, *Solaris*, *Stalker*, *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix* or *Avatar*. Undoubtedly, some visitors/users of Vujinović's installation may find the tactile and motor entry in it as described in the previous paragraphs totally alien. Due to the complex dispositif produced by this work, they might find this installation enigmatic and emotionally discomfoting. There are only a few things clear to them, they feel helpless in front of cameras and sensors, they realise they're being watched and that every step they take in the space is being mapped and monitored. They feel uncomfortable in front of objects in the sandbox; they wonder whether they are alive, half-alive or merely simulations of life?

*Superohm* is an interactive installation that belongs to the concept of "second technique" (Walter Benjamin's term), which is not based on exploitation of nature and is not accompanied by alienation but rather presumes a playful relationship between human and environment. And due to the fact that it is a technical system, it is clear to the visitor/user that these objects reflect a double nature: they are robot toys (this aspect of the artificial life in the "sandbox" in particular attracted the author of this article) and simultaneously interfaces allowing the spectator/user to experience a complex system of artificial life also expressed in visual and sound manifestations that generate discreet events of emotional discomfort when the spectator/user confronts a situation she doesn't control and which alienates her everyday perception.

Due to the fact that we insist on interpretation focused on tactile and motor perception, let us note that work with such interfaces in an original way stimulates and forms user's

movements that are characteristic of such a configuration of object-toys. A modified force feedback is also of relevance, i.e. the information on the object's resistance after being hit, touched or pushed away, pushed or turned upside-down. The *Superohm* user is stimulated to a hybrid perception that results in an integration of senses in new perceptive forms. As a special example of such profiled perception originating from work with contemporary interfaces and smart devices, we would like to refer to *tactile seeing*, based on the collaboration of sight and touch in real time. The user touches the objects and when she sees this has generated changes in the projected landscape (a visual, live camera-recorded system), she starts a new series of touches, which again produce a visual feedback.

When we touch, the principal data about the object touched is supplied by its geometry; when our fingers follow the contours of a particular object, its geometry becomes a guide for our fingers and palms. The geometry defines the movement of our fingers when they hit upon hollows and protrusions; it will send them either upwards or downwards. Therefore, the zero point of touch is reaching into a void, i.e. in its intention to touch something the organ of touch does not strike against a thing that would resist it or react to its movement directed towards it in any other way. This fact is a starting point for a procedure we might call the seduction of touch – which doesn't occur in *Superohm*, there is no evasion involved, “warm dressed objects” do not resist the user but rather stimulate a cultivated, to a certain extent remote touch, which considers the interface nature of touching. This is a touch (as an otherwise eminent sense of proximity, similar to smell) that doesn't grasp but rather keeps things at a distance; it is a touch with tact. It is afraid of the profanity of grasping, it doesn't want to damage things, it investigates surfaces in motion, it is “grateful” to a thing allowing it to get so close but it doesn't want to directly enter the thing. A touch (in the form of a reticent grasp with tact) thus allows the user to enter Vujanović's installation and provides fundamental orientation in it.

It has already been mentioned that the project allows different readings and different entry points and approaches. When it comes to modular, hybrid and the highest possible complex works of new media art, there are definitely no unambiguous and prescribed modes of perception. The author of this article discovers a lot in this work if entering it from a tactile approach, though a programmer's approach, who would first address the software of this project, wouldn't be any less interesting. A programmer wouldn't apply a tactile approach, there wouldn't be any emotions or atmospheres of the extraordinary, raised by noisy domains; she would only be interested in the code of this project and the arrangement of the hardware components that allow movement monitoring in this artificial environment.