CHAPTER 7

From Film Studies to Interaction Design—
An Emergent Aesthetics View

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1 Introduction

People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image. No doubt they sense this mystery, but they wish to get rid of it. They are afraid. By asking ‘What does this mean?’ they express a wish that everything be understandable. But if one does not reject the mystery, one has quite a different response. One asks other things.

—RENE MAGRITTE

What Magritte is referring to is the aesthetics experience of paintings, however when we look at other artistic creative works—sculpture, music, film, theater and interactive art—it is also applicable. People often experience this ‘mystery’ in interactive art. When a clear instruction is missing and the ‘meaning’ is not obvious, one applies his or her memory and previous experience to making meaning, and by trying things out, one seeks for his or her own position in the piece.

Muscle Space’ project (Figure 7.1) was a student project by Hyperbody, a research group at Delft University of Technology. The aim of this project was to “design a passage that interacts with passers-by proactively. The movement of the actuated structure is a complex combination of scissoring, folding, bending and falling movements. Along the passage, pressure sensors laid on the floor register the steps of passers-by. Step patterns are fed into algorithms that affect the actuators and the spatial sound environment of the muscle passage.” (hyperbody.nl)

From the description of this work, we understand how this ‘Muscle Space’ reacts to a participant’s movement—The passage gets the input signals (the step patterns and walking speeds of the participant) through the pressure sensors and then this signal will be processed in the computer (brain of the passage) and generate the behavior of the body (of the passage).
This work aims to generate a conversation between the space and its participant, and it achieved this goal in a certain degree, so it can be considered as an interactive space. However, this interaction could be brought to a higher level, if there is more understanding in this conversation—if the step pattern and walking speed can convey the feeling of the participant and this feeling can be connected to the reaction of the passage. And even further, the participant’s aesthetics experience can be changed by adapting the behavior (the movement of the actuated structure) of the space.

Many times, designers are too confident about their ability of predicting the reaction and emotion of the user or the participant. With some general knowledge or personal experience, they state, for example, “people feel welcomed and will be attracted by these opening wings”, without considering the possibility that people can also be experiencing a feeling of being lost or even want to escape, because the behavior of the space proposes a high level of complexity which could be beyond the participant’s appreciated arousal level. This possibility should not be ignored during the design activity. We create a space to talk to people, this space should first be able to listen to people, try to understand people, and then it can give a response based on this understanding. The goal of our study is a fully interactive space design. For reaching that, we need to stay at a clear position, take the right perspective, have a good view of the whole picture, and then use a powerful tool.

2 Emergent Aesthetics and Interactive Space Design

“User experience design” and “emotion design” have become popular terms in the last decade, especially in the fields of industrial design and interaction design. In his earlier book The Design of Everyday Things, Norman emphasized the importance of functionality. “An aesthetically pleasing appearance is only a part of a successful product. The other part is understandability and usability, which are more important than attractiveness.” (Norman, 1990). While in