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*Wi: Journal of Mobile Media, Spring 2009*

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.65968/BTJV6609>

Lemaire, Marie-Hélène. "Blurred and playful intersections: Karmen Franinovic's Flo)(ps". *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media*. Spring (2009). Web. <https://doi.org/10.65968/BTJV6609>

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Image from Oboro.net

*Amplified Intimacies*, curated by Lynn Hughes and Jean Dubois,<sup>1</sup> was a group exhibition presented at Montreal's Oboro Gallery from September 13-October 18, 2008. Bringing together a range of works taken from media arts, experimental architecture, fashion design, and interactive game design the exhibition explored the interpersonal interactions and spaces that are increasingly sculpted by digital technologies and communication networks. *Flo)(ps*, produced by architect, artist and interaction designer Karmen Franinovic,<sup>2</sup> was part of that exhibition.

The paradoxical title, *Amplified Intimacies*, invites us to imagine the many ways in which these 'intimate exchanges' might become stronger by suggesting a disruption

between private and public. *Flo)(ps* explores the oxymoron ‘amplified / intimacies’ by performing, with and for gallery-goers, a process of creative and analytical interaction with others, bodies and objects, and surroundings. This occurs in three stages.

First *Flo)(ps* instigates a connection by offering familiar and everyday objects and settings into the space of the artist-run centre. Second it draws us into an immersive experimentation that allows for a gradual and sensual coming into awareness. Finally, we are given an opportunity to step back and to reflect upon that experience.

Entering into the exhibition space of Oboro, *Flo)(ps* instantly draws my attention. Why ..? Because I *know* this – with such immediacy – it is familiar, striking in its *everydayness*: three luminous drinking glasses in a bar setting, a white counter, three stools, a pitcher, some spoons, cocktail sticks. The luminescence of the glasses seduces me to move towards the objects. Once this first stage of connection is established, the gallery-goer passes on to the next stage.

I sit down on one of the stools and carefully raise one of the glasses. As I perform this simple gesture, the light within the glass becomes purple and a familiar sound of liquid splashing is emitted via one of the three speakers embedded in the counter. I’m intrigued by this association between my gesture and the splashing sound and encouraged to continue experimenting. As I move the glass in a quick circular motion, swirling it in a slightly less habitual and functional manner, it opens up an unusual sonic space. The splashing sound seems to gain in resonance. Soon after a deep howling, evocative of a storm, becomes amplified from the speaker embedded within the counter. I am immersed in the flows of that amplified storm. It gradually confers a sense of *strangeness* to what seemed so *familiar* a minute ago: my gestures, the glasses, the

bar setting, the woman sitting next to me. I look down inside the glass, the luminous purple radiates through, and becomes hypnotic. I'm in a state of *in-between-ness* in the midst of the vortex of the glass and the relative calm of the gallery space. In other words, as soon as one touches the glasses the tactile wireless sensors embedded in them is set into motion.

Via this visual and sonic performance, *Flo* enhances our awareness of these objects, our surroundings and forces us to pay attention to the richness of our gestures. Yet at a certain point, an inversion of our sensibilities occurs. As I become immersed in my experimentation with the drinking glasses their familiarity gradually becomes odd to me, in the way a word can gradually acquire a strangeness if we repeat it over and over again. This turn from familiarity to 'estrangement' allows for a rediscovery and a shift in perspective towards the everyday.

This ironic imposition of distance through the use of tactility, audio amplification, and light is reinforced by the artist's presence at the exhibition and her use of questionnaires to solicit the opinions and advice from her potential audience, in itself strange for an art gallery. On the day that I visit the exhibit, I witness her in action. There I was playing with the wireless sensors when I was abruptly brought back to "reality".

Behind me I could feel a tense presence signaled by the frenetic scratching of pen on paper: three students shoulder to shoulder. They frantically copy in unison every word they can find on a small cardboard sign located on the bar counter. Clearly, they are on a "mission", following orders of a higher level. Suddenly the woman sitting at the bar, the artist, speaks to the threesome: "*You all seem very focused and busy.*" (Laughter). "*Are you doing an assignment?*" She seems to be enjoying their presence and, seems

sincerely curious in knowing what they are doing and thinking. I step back, observe and listen. The three students raise their heads and stop writing. They seem surprised and relieved. In a cacophonous chorus they reply that they are students in an art cégep. *“Our teacher asked us to come to this exhibition. We have to write a paper describing our visit.”*

One student asks: *“You’re the artist?”* But Karmen denies it replying: *“euh...no...”* The student, with a no-nonsense attitude challenges her: *“yes you are, you’re on the picture here, on the explicative cardboard.”* Karmen laughs back chuckling: *“you got me! ... I was trying to go undercover.”* Everyone is laughing now. Spontaneously, one of them sits down on one of the stools, the other gets closer to the glasses. The third student stays still, at a distance, silent, observing.

The second student picks up a glass and asks: *“What is it? How does it work?”* Karmen replies that *“there are sensors in the glasses that capture various type of manipulations.”* She explains that *“It is a work in progress”* but that to *“make these interactive glasses, I worked with various collaborators, mainly Yon Visell, to develop the technology.”* She refuses to say too much, but gives them a sheet of paper with a list of questions and a pencil. She explains that these questions are intended to guide them and to provide her with feedback to continue developing this work in progress. She tells them to *“Have fun”* and is about to step back and leave the room when she is interrupted.

At this point, the student who hadn’t yet spoken, and who distanced herself from her classmates, lights up. Experiencing a kind of ‘eureka’ moment she queries: *“I thought*

*artworks in museums were 'finished' and not to be touched. We can manipulate these glasses? The artist has something to learn from us?"* She walks towards the bar, joins the others, carefully takes a glass, and then grabs a questionnaire and a pen.

Once more, the three students are re-united but by this time their worry is gone. They are playful and collaborative together as they write, touch, listen, talk, read, move, explore, laugh. While I keep my distance from them and observe their interactions, their energy is contagious reminding me this assemblage of wireless sensors can act as a catalyst for interactions between humans, and not simply between human and machine.

Technically speaking *Flop*)s consists of three interactive glasses sitting on a counter. As I came to realize, the glasses light up when you fill them with water; this is why there is a pitcher on the counter. The sounds are triggered by movements. The glasses are inviting gallery-goers to touch their surfaces, toast, drink, experiment with various everyday gestures. All these movements between bodies, objects and context, activate tactile sensors embedded in the glasses, producing various flows of sound and light – within – and between the glasses and the those who wander within its purview. As such, *Flop*)ps develops a type of relationship to its surroundings that Laura U. Marks (2000, p. 138) calls a 'tactile epistemology'; an epistemology which conceives of knowledge as something gained not on the model of vision but through physical contact, experimentation, gesture, action.<sup>3</sup> For instance, infants enact spontaneously this kind of relationship to their surroundings: they represent things to themselves by 'connecting materially' with these things in the concrete here-and-now.

The title *Flop*)ps evokes the unpredictability and riskiness of following and engaging with 'flows'. By looking for the most fruitful and desired connections/flows, there is

always this risk of failure, the risk of disconnection, of seeing things fall apart: of not meeting. On the positive side, this play with words and the unexpected use of inverted brackets evokes the playful character of the piece. It suggests the attitude of ‘openness’ one has when experimenting: the way the brackets are used, it gives a dynamic and circular movement to the title, and the feeling of a never-ending process.

For more information on Karmen Franinovic, please visit [www.zero-th.org](http://www.zero-th.org). Zero-th Association is an independent cultural research organization based in Pula, Croatia and Montreal, Canada, where it is directed by Karmen Franinovic and Yon Visell. Franinovic also cited the following websites as her artistic influences: [usmanhague](http://usmanhague.com) and [foam](http://foam.org).

## Notes

1. *Interstices* is an interuniversity research-creation group that was founded by Lynn Hughes (Concordia University) and Jean Dubois (Université du Québec à Montréal). The group focuses on the aesthetic and poetic potential of tangible interfaces and interactive environments. It provides an environment for the conception, production, critical analysis, and dissemination of experimental projects by professors and graduate students.

2. *Flo(ps)* was produced with the assistance of Yon Visell, who developed the software for the installation and helped with the sound design. Martin Peach offered advice on the electronics that were integrated into the final installation. The creation of this installation was supported by the Interstices Research Group, *Amplified Intimacies*, the EC Project CLOSED, FET-NEST no. 29085.

## Reference

Marks, L. U. (2000). *The skin of film: Intercultural cinema, embodiment and the senses*. Durham: Duke University Press.

## Biography

Marie-Hélène Lemaire is a doctoral student in Communication at Concordia University (Montreal). From 1995 to 2006, she worked as an animator/mediator in various museums in Quebec city and Montreal. Her research interests include issues of embodiment, performance art, mobility, mediation, cultural reception and production in museums, experimental and collaborative research practices.

