Mirrors

By JOsh Bross

A true reflection, completely void of any distortion, has a questionable existence at best, but is commonly misconceived to be captured in a household mirror. A simple flat mirror distorts a viewing subject in both space and time. The flat mirror's distortion is as such that nobody minds and visual mental models of ourselves are aided by the reflection. Is it 'incorrect' to use slightly distorted information as precise, accurate information while forming mental models of ourselves, or anything for that matter? Is it 'incorrect' to intentionally supply distorted information to individuals, merely to observe their interactions (based upon their newly created mental model) with some object? Is it 'incorrect' to assume Peter Vogel is deliberately misguiding mental models of people observing his artistic pieces?

Peter Vogel considers himself a Cybernetic Artist, while others call him anything from an Electronic Artist to a Sound Artist. Vogel has been creating interactive artwork (cybernetic means, Vogel states, that they are reactive) since 1969. Being a prominent international artist, Vogel is arguably the most renowned artists in the Federal Republic of Germany. His work has been and is still seen around the world.

Born in Freiburg im Breisgau in 1937 and educated in physics[1] from 1957 to 1967, Vogel is properly educated to pursue neurophysiological research and development, which he did from 1965 to 1975 at Hoffmann-LaRoche in Basel, Switzerland. Vogel seemingly switched direction, to the art side, in 1955[2], when he dedicated himself to the composition of electronic music, painting and pictorial art, dance and choreography. In 1968, Vogel began studying physiological and neuro-physiological cybernetic models, but did not seemingly come full circle until 1969, upon the creation of his first interactive piece. Vogel incorporates and draws influence from both disciplines he has pursued, art and science.

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[1] He is a graduate of the University of Freibug
[2] This date seems incorrect and I was unable to verify it.

Vogel's first employment was in development of medical apparatus for brain research and now Vogel continues exploring human mental states through his artistic work. For Vogel, his interest lays in the interaction between the viewer and the piece. Many of Vogel's cybernetic pieces involve circuitry, photo cells and produce sounds. Vogel lays out all working components (in many of his pieces) in full sight of the viewer. The viewer becomes a user when their shadow overlaps a photo cell, at which point a sound is produced. Whether the interaction is discovered accidentally or previously known is irrelevant, it is in what happens after the initial 'shadow is cast' that is of interest to Vogel.

When a user knows they can affect a piece, what do they do? If a single effect is always produced from a specific interaction, the audience will naturally try to understand and ultimately make explanations (correct or not) about the underlying model. In a Vogel cybernetic piece, cause and effect are not one to one; an action at one point in time may produce an effect that is completely different than the effect produced from the exact same action at another point in time. The flavor of randomness skews all equations and is this where Vogel's true interest lies?

"I want to provoke a kind of reflection." Vogel states, but how distorted is this reflection? "I very often use the word mirror, because the object reflects, in a certain way, the behavior of the human person, but in a transformed manor." Vogel admits to the distortion of the reflection seen in his pieces. The questions naturally lead to why distort a reflection? which answers: to what extent should the distortion be? and can be summed up with: what does Vogel want to view from his viewers?

Vogel's presentation in his pieces is impeccable, as such, an assumption that nothing is done on accident is assumed. The Black Box (above) does not give a good representation of Vogel's work, but it does have the same level of presentation. Observe how clean, smooth and inconspicuous the exterior is. The Black Box is a literal black box, but it seems to be more. In Computer Science, there is a notion of a black box, which a user supplies something, the black box does something (completely unknown to the user) and then the black box returns something to the user. Is the Black Box the same concept as a black box in Computer Science? This is the only question that can be answered in this paper, yes.

The Black Box seems isolated from the external world upon simple observation, but when approached, the Black Box will interact with the user, producing sounds when movement is seen. A series of produced sounds by the Black Box from user interaction does not seem reproducible by the same series of movements by the user. "I wouldn't call it a musical object; I would call it reaction object which uses sound for showing certain time patterns." Vogel says when speaking of his work in general. The slight disconnection between action and cause must be intentional, but what sort of distorted reflection is created? and what does the reflection itself show?

Circular Structure (bellow) is a good representation of Vogel's work. Notice how everything is out in the open, nothing is hidden. The viewer can literally look through the piece and see everything (viewable) about the piece. It is only when the user approaches the piece that another dimension is observed. The new observed dimension is in a space between deterministic and random. The user has complete control over their movement and can affect the piece, but the effect is random. The feedback from the piece[3] is obscure, inconsistent and merely has an "ok. You did something" feel to it. What possible feedback could there be for Vogel in the user's reaction to their feedback from the piece?

The level of presentation and the 'added dimension' Vogel is able to execute in his pieces is phenomenal. His international fame is well deserved. However, the questions that are left after viewing a user interacts with a Vogel piece are frustrating and possibly distracts from the focus. "For me the esthetic's in the interaction" Vogel explains, but further explanation is quite desired.

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[3] In my own opinion