THE INTERFACE AND I
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TONI DOVE AND BRIAN MASSUMI

BM: The way movement and language come together in *Artificial Changelings* is very different from the cinema experience. In cinema your body is immobilized and that puts you in a fairly cerebral relation to the screen that encourages you to identify with the character. You feel that you're melding into the screen. The immobilization erases the space between the spectator and the screen in a way that brings the screen space to the fore.

TD: So it becomes a kind of inhabitation.

BM: Cinema addresses other senses through vision, but privileges the visual identification. The effect you achieve depends on a certain distancing or uncanniness. The in-between space takes on a thickness of experience.

TD: Initially I thought there would be an oscillation between inhabitation and manipulation of a character--an escalation of the voyeurism of film. I wasn't sure how that oscillation would work. What I didn't expect was the uncanny effect that happens because it's not a direct mapping of body to screen (she doesn't mirror your motions). You have a very powerful sense of responsiveness that's also out of your control. The movie is talking back. You become highly conscious of whatever it is that's connecting you to the character, which is unfathomable.

BM: It's unfathomable because it's on so many levels at the same time. It's not manipulation or inhabitation. You can't manipulate it because it takes a while to understand what effects your actions are having. The effects aren't exactly repeatable, and sometimes you get very subtle responses or no response at all. So you're always a bit off-balance. It doesn't feel like manipulation. But it's not inhabitation either because whenever you make a connection you immediately fall out of it. You're always drawn out of your position into a searching for the connection, trying to sense where it might be. When you find it you feel a fusion. You're sucked into experiencing a movement that isn't quite yours, but doesn't feel totally outside you.

TD: Like the Vulcan mind meld.

BM: (laughs)

TD: It's true. Watching rock videos and action movies has made me think about the way these forms use the visual as a path into the whole internet of the sensorium. For

example, you're experiencing a car chase and your stomach drops. You're getting visual cues that are giving you physical sensations. I use responsiveness to create a circle of exchange between the viewer and the screen that escalates sensation. You tend to think of a gesture as a single thing, and what you don't realize is that a gesture contains a rubbery avalanche of slow and fast. It starts slow and it escalates and de-escalates. The motion-sensing system picks minor variations of fast and slow and filters them in a constant modulation. It makes it difficult to predict what will happen.

BM: It's based on rhythm. You have to sense an unpredictable rhythm and try to unite your movement with it. It's not on an object basis, where movement begins and ends in a particular place, and has a destination "out there." It's an open-ended rhythmic space that's neither here nor there.

TD: It like a trance, the desire to maintain a connection even when it can't be kept. And it's quite easy to get it back. It's not frustrating. It doesn't go away for so long that it's irritating.

BM: There's the comfort of returning to the narrative. You can stand still and it will start to unfold again. And there's the escape hatch of the time tunnel. There are oases of passive spectatorship you can escape into.

TD: Viewers tend to slow down into it after they've discovered how it works, because you can get a subtle relationship with the character based on smaller movements, and you get a more intimate space. I was thinking about the cutting of action movies. The physicality of action movies. The scale of them. And bringing that style into the nuance of conversational exchange. One of the things that interests me in interactive narrative is giving the user a certain amount of control, but not complete control. I think if the user has total agency it's actually boring, because every gesture becomes a loop that comes back--it flattens out the experience. What's interesting is that people get this kind of whoosh when they've connected. They lock into the character and it's a physical sensation. It can't be rationally predicted or reproduced, but it's there, and it will come back.

BM: Do you think about the uncanny as a state that's out of the ordinary, or does it bring out a dimension of ordinary experience?

TD: The uncanny is the other side of ordinary experience. It's the heimlich and the unheimlich--if you don't have the familiar, the comfortble, you can't have the strange. But it operates on many levels. For me, it's as a path into genre fiction recipes that can be used in combination with the interface to produce a powerful immersive environment. I think that an interface has within it a recipe for the suspension of disbelief that is a self-enclosed system, in the same way that genre fiction does. I'm using cinema as a familiar ground, a place to locate yourself and be at ease, and then these new technologies make the cinematic experience go strange on you. I don't

know if that will continue to be true. Maybe in two years everything will be talking back and it will become mundane.

 BM: But there are different ways of talking back. The dominant way in the industry is to humanize the screen and the interface, to make it mimic human interaction. That subtracts uncanniness from the situation. I don't think that the kinds of effects you're experimenting with will ever become that familiar.

 TD: What you're saying is if the operations of the system become completely comprehensible, then the film becomes a kind of prosthesis, like false fingernails or something.

 BM: That's part of the industry philosophy, extending the prosthetic function of the screen and the interface. You're not doing that, but you're not doing the opposite either. You're not defamiliarizing in the Brechtian sense, trying to shock people completely out of the ordinary in order to trigger a critical coming to consciousness. What you're doing is accepting the familiar and the unfamiliar as two sides of the same coin, coming in the same literal movement.

 TD: For me, the development process is like a laboratory. You build a machine and you get in it and see what happens. And some of the things that happen are a new platform to build from. I'm interested in the unstable intimacy you have with the thing.

 BM: It's close to what we experience in everyday conversation, where there's all these awkward silences, and you never know if what you've said is received in the way you intended, or exactly what's going to come next.

 TD: I'm now thinking about a situation where two people have to cooperate to create dialogue between characters, and where the viewer may visually haunt the movie in elliptical moments, in peripheral traces, pointing toward the slipperiness of the experience--the way it's undeniable and still can't be fully grasped. I'd like to ask you about the notion of doubling, about the extension of the body beyond the skin and how the space around the body becomes the body. What do you think is going on there?

 BM: Now that your piece is done and can be experienced it's become clear that the doubling takes place in the space between the screen and the body. What happens, happens in-between, in the relationships and rhythms, the movements and connections. I think that's a really important step, because it gets away from the idea that the virtual is what's on the screen or what's behind the screen in the machine.What's on the screen is an icon. What's behind it is a set of permutations and algorithms and logical possibilities. None of these things are the virtual. It seems to me that the virtual is that slipperiness of experience. It has to do with the relation and what happens in between. This makes virtuality a dimension of everyday reality that the work is bringing out and expressing more directly.

TD: What we're talking about is something in the space between the body and the screen, an exchange that charges that space.

BM: It raises the whole question of what means to have a body, and where that body is. If it draws you out of the boundaries of your skin, then it's demonstrating that there is a kind abstractness that is part of the body. That means that the abstract is not the opposite of the concrete, but that they can come together. And that happens in movement.

TD: A kind of sensual afterimage.

BM: An afterimage and an anticipation. So the body is outside of itself in the movement, and moving through itself at the same time.

TD: That's interesting because it contradicts a lot of the generic rhetoric that has to do with anxieties about getting lost in virtual space. It's not a disembodied space, your body goes in. It begins to alter the notion of the body as a kind of container that ends at our skin.

BM: When we talk about bodilessness we're ignoring the body in front of the screen. Even immobilization is a bodily state, it's a technique of the body that's very deliberately designed into the technology. But you might get up and get something to eat, or play music, or talk to your housemate, or go to the bathroom. These things are a part of the interactive context but aren't acknowledged. What your work does is foreground those ambient aspects as well as the sensual dimensions of the experience, especially the experience of movement, and brings all that into the work. And that's a very different approach to interactive technology in general.

TD: I'm curious how our sense of individuality or singularity will be metamorphized in this space.

BM: I think we take the rhetoric about our individuality too much at its word. There are always multiple registers within an individual's experience. They're brought out in different technological and social contexts. So the question is how you connect with that multiplicity, what you bring out, and where you take it.

TD: And when it's brought out, individualities may mix. One of the characters in the piece is the other's dream. The dream's the tool she finally uses to empower herself. And that dream character becomes a prophetic future.

BM: Now that you've seen the work set up in two countries and experienced various reactions to it, where do you think you'll go from here?

TD: It's gotten me involved in thinking about doubling and the uncanny and the history of the uncanny. There was a point at the end of the 18th century where the

supernatural lost credence, splits and goes in two different directions. On the one hand, it's internalized and becomes the unconscious, and on the other hand it's commodified and becomes the beginnings of pulp fiction, horror, and other kinds of popular theatrics. I'm fascinated by that split. This piece is the first in a trilogy about the unconscious of consumer economies. It's generated content for the next piece, *Spectropia*, which I'd like to do as a feature film with an interactive component. It's a ghost story about selling short. I have a number of ideas about how to evolve the interface. I'm interested in the kinds of links the body can make between language and sensation in the context of narrative. In the way in which embodiment can be enhanced as a narrative element.

BM: Maybe you'd like to say something about the role of kleptomania in the narrative of *Artificial Changelings*.

TD: The theater of commerce (laughs). Kleptomania is interesting because it's a pathology that gets codified in the 1860s when the department store emerges and becomes a theater of commerce, a site of incredible spectacle of advertising and seduction. Upper- and middle-class women started stealing things from stores. It was the only place they could be alone in public without a chaperone--shopping. Apparently either the pillars of society were corruptible or the forces of merchandising were problematic. Neither position was acceptable, so they pathologized the behavior. The women were no longer responsible for their actions. Commerce could march on.

BM: It strikes me that your interface and the elusiveness of the connection shares something with the processes of commodity culture. There's a slipperiness to consumerism. You can connect with an object and buy it or steal it, but that's never enough. There's so much more that you could have and places to take your desire for objects. The consumer's desire is never satisfied with the purchase, which is just another step towards the next purchase. There's a perpetual promise mediated by a very abstract technology--money.

TD: I'm also thinking about that for the next piece. I'm thinking about the installment plan, and the credit explosion. How it was contradictory to the notion of thrift that was so important to the personality structure that was part of the original building block of capitalism. As concepts like thrift erode the whole edifice floats on this continual platform of unreachable desires and deferred payments.

BM: It puts individual lives in movement, following the movement of deferral. Money is the motor for a perpetual motion machine. If you think of it in terms of lack, of desire as lack, you miss the movement. If you think of it in terms of deferral, the whole process takes on a broad experiential thickness you're swept up in and explore. So it's not just something negative. It's not just a lack it's a whole new positive way of being.

TD: It's a continuum. It's a process. It's that rubbery avalanche of slow and fast that's in the modulations of the interface.

BM: It's a kind of fullness that isn't just gratification or pleasure, or their absence either. It's continuation, and that has to do with what happens in-between, rather than with ends or objects. That makes the perspective of your work post-postmodern.

TD: Post-postmodern (laughs) No movement that can't figure out a name for itself is worth talking about. We'll have to come up with something better.

BM: Or maybe it's just outside of that framework, modern versus postmodern. Because postmodernism was either this terrible nostalgia for the plenitude promised by modernity, or a celebration of its impossibility, with a sense of emptiness, as if nothing would come after it--the whole rhetoric of the end of history and the apocalyptic tone of a lot of cybertalk. What you're doing is completely outside that. It's not after something, after the end. It's revisiting continuity.

TD: In film, the cut moves you through time. While interactive experience contains some rupture within it, the engine that moves it through time is not based on rupture. And rupture, of course, is a key to collage and montage, which were so significant to modernist practice. The move that interests me is away from the cut into something that's about fluidity and the continuum.

BM: Turning away from rupture, but not going back into linearity.

TD: Like the Japanese word of "hashi," which is both a border and a bridge.