Living with images: the logic of simulation in the work of Edward Thomson

Frans-Willem Korsten, Erasmus University Rotterdam – University of Leiden

The latest work of Edward Thomson consists in a double version of of three pieces that can be seen together in one space, as a result of which they not only provoked the question as to how they relate, but also allow us to see better what the work is doing. On one side there is one audio piece which presents us with a series of descriptions of what appear to be landscapes, some of which contain people, others are uninhabited. In the middle there is a folding screen that has an architectural quality because of its crystalline shaped cut outs, but also carries a large black and white photograph of some lane in a wood. Then on the other side there is either a sphere covered with a morphed photographs of what appears to be some kind of space filled with tropical plants, or a photograph of a house of cards that is made up of holiday pictures – entitled 'Borderline Picturesque'.

The audio piece could have filled the entire space, of course, but it only allows us to hear what is being described within the privacy of a headphone, a privacy moreover that is provided by the folding screen. Nevertheless, that screen is a work in itself, filling the space or structuring it. It also forms the bridge to a piece that shows us rectangular space being morphed and folded outwards. One would be tempted to think of the pieces then as works that explore the neighbouring or sister arts of photography: discursive description as the neighbour of photography's ability to represent; the theatrical screen as the neighbour of photography's ability to let us look into a staged world; morphed space as the neighbour of photography's ability to manipulate images; an occasional house of cards as the neighbour of photography's being high art. Considering it like this, we would be asked then to consider how these works tell us more about photography itself as a dominant medium of representation. That would be a formal exercise, however, that is countered by the aesthetic powers and qualities of these work. We want to hear them again, to walk around them again, to touch them again, or consider them again because they affect us, fascinate us, and keep us spell bound.

The aesthetic quality of the pieces suggests that they should not be considered in relation to representation. They are following the logic of simulation instead. Simulation is a noun indicating a form of action that originally goes back to the Latin *simulare*: to imitate, to feign, to depict in a visual way. In the course of history it has become much more than that. Although representation is supposed to represent the real, or something that is the real origin of what is represented, the domain of this originally real has been hard to pin down, conceptually speaking. In this context simulation not only plays with the dynamic of representation, but opens up, in fact a new domain. No mistake: in trying to get as close as possible to something 'real', simulation partly functions as a stand-in. In this sense it represents. At the same time it is analogous to the real. Or to put this slightly differently: simulation is real itself. As a result, simulation confuses, and may ultimately even cross out, a whole set of oppositions that defined Western thinking on representation: essence or being versus appearance; real versus imaginary; true versus fake; veracity versus falsity; original versus copy or duplicate; real life versus model; report versus scenario; or, for that matter, seriousness versus joking. A house of cards is not meant to represent a house, especially not when it is made up of holiday cards whose function can hardly be defined in terms of representation. In a sense all such cards are coloured in, with water colours in previous times or digitally in our times. In this respect it is telling that the photograph on the on the folding screen almost appears to be 'washed', waiting to be coloured in.

So what do the pieces do, in following the logic of simulation?

Suppose we consider the descriptions provided by the audio piece as descriptions of photographs. Following the logic of representation we would have to start to search for these photographs, which would then show us what they represent. But the fact that these photographs exist is only suggested, or a consequence of the specific way in which the expression of form and content is used here. They *simulate* photographs and in simulating them, they work back on how we can deal with real photographs, namely not as things to look at, but to live with. Another way of putting this is that the logic of simulation is a matter of *adding*. Whereas we first had a landscape that we could move through we now also have a landscape that is able to travel with us, either in the shape of a photograph or in the shape of an audio piece. Likewise, whereas we could first have a photograph of some kind of tropical space that would tell us what this space is, we will now also have a sphere to carry with us in our heads or, if we would dare, to roll along in order to experience it from all sides. Whereas we would first have a photograph of some kind of lane in a wood, we now also have a screen to reorganize our lived space with. Or whereas we would first have a set of photographs depicting landscapes we now have a house of cards.

The work of Thomson is doing in terms of space, here, what Deleuze, in following Bergson, developed in relation to time. To them, time is not measured by considering or measuring how something moves through a space. Time is morphed and morphing space. Measuring time we are able to grasp it. Being in time as morphing space we are able to sense it, or to live it. Analogously, space in the work of Thomson is not meant to be understood or measured or grasped. It is meant to be sensed as fully as possible. Following the logic of simulation it allows us to *do* this, 'stacking' us in a world of images, enveloping us in a world of images, folding us in a world of images, or morphing us in a world of images. As a result we live in and with these images, instead of inhabiting a world of images we look at.

It is not something to be grasped easily.
It takes time.