We all remember the days of interactive art. Days that started somewhere in the early sixties of the 20th century, when Yoko Ono put herself on stage in a simple black dress, armed with a pair of scissors, and asked visitors to come up and cut off a piece of her garment. This was the moment when *visitors* started to *matter*. Their presence was not merely tolerable, or desirable, but actually *necessary*. The work of art now needed the active participation of the visitor in order to realize itself. Art was something one needed to be *involved* with, in the literal sense.

Those were the days! – not only for art, but for society more generally. Our presence and participation became more than merely tolerated, or desirable – it became *necessary*, for society to function. Those were the days of democratization, participation and involvement with all kinds of institutions in social life. For instance in education, as the universities became radically democratized. Also in mental health, where the relation between patients and therapists was even more radically democratized, to the point that there was no hierarchical distinction left, and many lived mixed together in so-called therapeutic communities. Politics itself, of course, became democratized. In Holland, a new party was founded – it still exists – that was simply called D66, "Democrats 66", symbolizing that from now on politics was mainly and merely about democracy, or democratization. And last but not least, private life became emancipated, through the impact of feminism, challenging the previously self-evident conception of the 'head of the household', the man who knew best (a conception by the way we may still find in the much-celebrated 1971 classic in political philosophy, *A Theory of Justice* by philosopher John Rawls, who uses it to regulate, or discipline, the impact of his redistributive theory on our personal relations).

Those were the days, but they no longer are; or at least, our interactive days are numbered. There's a new kid on the block, or more appropriately, there's a new cultural condition upon us that challenges the paradigm of interactivity. This challenger is called *interpassivity*. And, like interactivity, it was first spotted in the domain of the arts.

The concept of interpassivity was coined by the Austrian philosopher of art Robert Pfaller in 1996, and developed further in collaboration with Slavoj Žižek and others, to come to terms with a new development in the domain of the arts. They pointed to phenomena like "canned laughter" (tv show in which the audience laughs 'on our behalf'), VCR recording (where the VCR watches on our behalf), and Tibetan prayer mill (that prays on our behalf). What happens here? For Pfaller and Žižek, these are examples of situations in which enjoyable experiences are not actually experienced, but delegated or *outsourced* to someone or something else – to the television set, to the VCR, or to the prayer mill. These objects enjoy on our behalf.

[Pfaller describes this phenomenon as follows: 'While interactive art media are characterized by the fact that the spectators actively intervene and take over part of the artistic effort or performance [*Leistung*], (...) there are also media that *take away* the performance or effort from the onlookers. It releases them from the obligation to receptively intervene.']

Interpassivity points to some sort of *transfer* in which some other entity takes over some activity, or passivity, from us – it is active, or passive, in our place, on our behalf. In more philosophical language, part of our subjectivity is transferred to some outside agency.

[We may view this as an extension of a traditional Hegelian theme. For Hegel, such transference constitutes the basis of *institutions*. Part of what it means to become a subject is that we externalize our subjective existence, or self-consciousness, so that both the outside world is subjected, or subjectified, and we objectify ourselves in the outside world. Interpassivity is an *extension*, and not just a reformulation, of this idea, for at least three reasons.]

Two important consequences follow.

First, interpassivity implies some sort of *transfer* from human to nonhuman entities. Activities, or responsibilities, or 'ethicalities' (or passivities) now become the province of nonhuman beings. In other words, institutions, processes, media or other 'insourcing' entities enjoy some form of autonomy; they somehow set their own goals and develop their own strategies.

Second, in line with this first point, such institutions, entities or objects appear to exercise some sort of *custody* over us. They take *care* of something that we, apparently, cannot or do not want to take care of ourselves. Or cannot, or do not want to do so, anymore. They compensate for some lack, or inability, on our side.

This may be the place to briefly note, for those conversant with Pfaller's and Žižek's accounts, how my view differs from theirs. Their view is lacanian, while mine is not; and my view is historical, while theirs is not.

Pfaller and Žižek typically qualify the examples of interpassivity they provide as 'strange', 'unusual', 'peculiar', &c. But they also claim that interpassivity should count as a universal dimension of human subjectivity. This is as unlikely as it is unsatisfactory. How can any phenomenon be uncommon and common at the same time? Or, more precisely, pathological and universal at the same time?

This feature is what brings out the lacanian streak in Pfaller and Žižek: human subjectivity is necessarily and irreparably *skewed*, 'out of joint', to speak with Hamlet. In a characteristic claim by Žižek, 'there is no freedom outside the traumatic encounter with the opacity of the Other's desire'. In my view, interpassivity is indeed an unusual – and perhaps more importantly, a new – phenomenon, but we can better explain its unusual, or even pathological, features through reference to recent changes in our culture.

Secondly, Pfaller and Žižek both imply, or argue explicitly, that interpassivity is *transhistorical*. They follow Jacques Lacan in proposing that already the choir in classical tragedy, for instance in the *Antigone*, should be regarded as an interpassive medium, an institution that in a way 'laments on our behalf'. In my view, the phenomenon of interpassivity is neither universal nor transhistorical. Although it is true that subjectivity has always to some extent been externalized in social or cultural institutions – or in media, or other people, or in other things more generally – it has not always been *outsourced* to them. As the example of interpassive artworks suggests quite clearly, interpassive outsourcing is a very recent development that was produced by the also quite recent phenomenon of interactive art. Just as modern culture developed into interactive culture, under the influence of the emancipatory and democratic currents of the 1960s and 1970s, we now see interactive culture transforming into interpassive

culture. Or at least, we see forms of interpassive culture develop next to the existing forms of interactive culture.

To sum up. Traditionally, that is to say before the sixties, works of art, and in a more general sense institutions, did not need input from visitors, users, clients, or citizens to 'realize' themselves. *Interactive* institutions differ in the sense that they do need active participation of visitors, users, etcetera. *Interpassive* works, finally, do us one better and release us from active participation by taking this task upon themselves. They do not need us any more in order to be interactive; our work is pro-actively taken over by them, 'on our behalf'.

My socio-historical perspective enables us to conceive of interpassivity as part of the *dialectic of Enlightenment*. Or in other, perhaps less familiar terms, we can characterize interpassivity as the *tragedy of successful emancipation*.

The main idea here is that the intense interactivity characterizing modern life in general has literally become 'too much of a good thing' for us. We suffer from unforeseen and unintended effects of having become thoroughly emancipated.

As we have become interactively complicit in the constitution of many of the norms that govern modern social life, we have become emancipated: we no longer need to live according to 'alien' norms, norms that we did not scrutinize and (co)validate ourselves. This bestowed upon us the *blessing of emancipation*, the freedom to live only under self-chosen norms, or at least under norms that in principle derive their validity from our own interactive commitment. We are now all, in many ways, engaged in reflexive, 'self-responsive' life planning.

This emancipatory movement started to shape in the late 1960s, when traditional authority was challenged by both individuals and groups demanding institutional reform, through democratization and participation in decision-making. Social duties and obligations were being challenged, releasing individuals from traditional bonds in the family, civil society, and the state. On the level of the state, for instance, civil disobedience became a prominent issue – especially in the United States, where it was prompted by resistance to the Vietnam war. John Rawls' widely read *Theory of Justice* indeed empowers the individual to evaluate and criticize institutional arrangements and governmental decisions. Whether these are just can be judged by anyone, regardless of expertise, education, or status.

Furthermore, family relations were transformed by the claim, or even the right, to choose for oneself: when and whom to marry, whether and when to get children, and more generally how to live one's life. How one should live one's life was no longer simply and clearly laid out, and authorized, by established external authorities, such as religion, tradition, class, gender, or even convention. Such supposed authority now appeared as repressive, restraining, paternalistic, and otherwise unjustified, in the light of the kantian injunction 'Dare to think for yourself!' – an injunction that after almost two centuries was becoming a reality.

Instead of external authority, *interactivity* became the norm for relations in both family and civil society. The Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan has argued that both family and civil society became subject to a transformation from a 'command household' to a 'negotiation household', in which norms are accepted as valid only when one has had a say in their establishment and validation – or at least has had the opportunity to do so.

In the seventies, these principles rapidly became accepted and institutionalized. Traditional hierarchies were being dismantled; 'patients' became 'clients', subordinates

became partners, labourers became co-workers. Democratic reforms were realised in areas such as (mental) health care, (university) education, social work, imprisonment, housing, politics, and even the army. Increasingly, it was understood that institutional norms should reflect the views and convictions of all those who are affected by, or have a 'stake' in, institutional functioning and decision-making. We can summarize this development in the notion of *interactivity*: both institutions and individuals can fulfil or realise themselves only through interaction. Interactivity has provided the means to give personal and institutional expression to the principle of *emancipation* – probably the most important principle to be realized in the sixties and seventies.

The principles of emancipated, interactive life have thus been realized in social life for about a whole generation now. Everyone is confronted ever more intensely with the expectation of being responsible for the organization of one's own life as a whole, as a direct corollary of one's continuous involvement with the formation and evaluation of the norms articulated by institutions. Our life history now ineluctably appears as a manifestation of our own self-realisation, guided by our free decisions, on the one hand, and our status as interactive subjects and citizens on the other hand.

It is important to see here that we need not *actually* be occupied all the time with making decisions, evaluating lifeplans, and participating in institutional decisionmaking. Indeed for most people this is not true – they are to busy with other things, or they simply watch television. The point is that we may at all times decide to be so involved, or to reflect upon our life. Indeed, we are often invited to do so, and if we fail to respond, this may well be held against us at some later time ('you *did* have the opportunity to make your voice heard...'). Ironically, our emancipation as free subjects who need not conform to any norm that we have not ourselves agreed to, or at least have had a chance to criticize, now demands our unrelenting adherence to the norm of interactivity, whether actual or 'virtual'.

My thesis is thus that the *blessing* of emancipation is now increasingly also being experienced as a *burden*. Even worse, it is experienced as a *self-imposed* burden. This pressure we put on ourselves caused by the success of the project of emancipation is starting to get at us. We do not always manage anymore to live up to our own interactive expectations. We start to suffer from what I like to call *interactive metal fatigue:* the almost continuous emancipatory 'stress' on our lives leads to cases of 'interactive fall-out'. Increasingly, we fail to act on our own norms. We are aware of the norms, we want to act on them, but we simply cannot bring ourselves to do so, in all spheres of life, all the time – even though, or rather exactly because, all these spheres have been thoroughly affected by emancipatory processes. Emancipation is literally becoming "too much of a good thing" for us.

The failure to act on one's own norms constitutes, in my view, the normative import of interpassivity, and the closely related phenomenon of interactive metal fatigue. Where *interactive metal fatigue* stands for the psycho-somatically expressed phenomena produced by emancipatory or interactive exhaustion, of breaking down as a consequence of own unrelenting efforts at living a fully emancipatory and interactively engaged life, *interpassivity* refers to the normative consequences for action. We cannot bring ourselves anymore to act according to our own norms, at least not all the time. We feel like we want to take what in German is nicely called *Ferien vom Ich*, a 'time out' from ourselves. As this is not actually possible, a practical solution is to *outsource* our actions, or our responsibility to act, to others – to institutions, supervisory agencies, or to government. We expect others to act, or to take responsibility, in our name, on our behalf.

Note, again, that this is *not* because we are ignorant of the norms under which action should take place, or because we refuse to accept these norms, as conservative critics are prone to argue. It is precisely because we are fully aware of them, and – interactively - subscribe to them, that we fail to act on them. This is what makes it so hard to admit to being interpassive, and what makes me describe it in terms of a 'tragedy of successful emancipation'. Here I agree with what Robert Pfaller says about the ambiguity of the interpassive experience, that we cannot fully enjoy the outsourcing of our enjoyment – or rather, the radically ambiguous kind of enjoyment lacanians call *jouissance*. On the one hand we are glad that we can 'outsource' our emancipatory or interactive burden to others, but on the other hand we feel uncomfortable about this detachment. We do not really manage to disavow our interactive or emancipatory mission. We crack and squeak under its burden, and we would gladly have it lifted, just for a bit, but we simultaneously feel like we betray ourselves if we do so. So we are, mostly, *in denial.*

Like interactivity, interpassivity manifests itself in many domains of contemporary life. It plays a role in politics and democracy. In public life, it is closely tied up with concerns for, or obsessions with, safety and security. In private life, we may see it as the successor to *narcissism*.

Let me just say a few words about this interesting development in private life. Remember that Christopher Lasch and Richard Sennett outlined narcissism as the conviction– born in the early seventies, and therefore in the early days of interactivity – that social power structures violates the inner self of individuals. We suffer from the unjust organisation of institutions. These should therefore be responsive to my personal feelings of discontent and dissatisfaction. Now that institutions have indeed become responsive, through our interactive involvement, we might expect narcissism to have disappeared. And in a way it has – but only to be succeeded by a new condition, related to interpassivity. Indeed institutions have become emancipated, and therefore basically just and fair. But in an ironic twist, this has now turned into a new source of suffering. It is precisely the realization of emancipation that is now placing a burden upon us, and that makes us complain.

But primarily I would like to share some thoughts with you tonight on the impact of interpassivity on *art*. Or perhaps more appropriately put, on *artefacts*. Or more to the point still, on the relation between people and the *built environment*. That is to say, the environment they build by and for themselves.

Let me first take you back some fifty-odd years, to late fifties of the 20th century, to an avant-garde movement that is enjoying something of a revival nowadays: *situationism*. We might see situationism as a thoroughly modernist critique of the modernist attempt to create both a new world, and a new kind of people to live in it. Modernist architects like Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe created a radically new architecture, that not only *facilitated* new ways of living, but was actually intended to *produce* and *enforce* these. In this sense they are not that different from Bentham's *Panopticon*; they merely have more advanced building materials at their disposal – concrete, steel and glass – that are eminently suited for the creation of transparency, and thus for inducing Enlightened, emancipated behavior.

Perhaps surprisingly, we might say basically the same thing about situationism – although it was of course aimed *against* directive powers such as capitalism, the state, and unforgiving modernist architecture. Seemingly, situationism constitutes an alternative for these directive powers, a strategy for evading and eluding them, a way to

live and behave that does not conform to the restrictive and conformist demands of ruling powers. We might even be tempted to call situationism an anarchist movement. And in its time, it sort of was. It was even so anarchic that when the Dutch situationist artist Constant proposed his megaproject New Babylon, a futuristic concept of a totally artificial building structure that would make a completely free, spontaneous, and self-directed lifestyle possible, and thus indeed 'make real' at least some of the aims of situationism, Guy Debord excommunicated him from the situationist movement. The anarchic principles – a contradiction in terms, of course – were so 'pure', that any attempt to convert them into material practice, like New Babylon, was a form of treason.

Now it seems to me that Constant was excommunicated not because his New Babylon project *betrayed* situationism, but rather because it showed its *truth*, albeit unwittingly. New Babylon, as you will remember, was a limitless world, a kind of architecturally sculptured continuous *dérive*, where purpose and direction were anathema, and roaming and wandering the norm. It was conceived as a constellation of corridors, rooms, hallways and spaces not unlike a modern mega-airport or shopping mall, infinitely adjustable by its users to suit theirs needs, moods, and projects. There were no homes, because inhabitants would be at home everywhere, or could create home everywhere, although their nomadic, artificial bohemianism scarcely required a home anyhow. New Babylon was, in a way, one vast *playground*. It was a world fully designed and equipped to enable and facilitate the completely free and unhampered self-development of its inhabitants.

In fact, the design of the complex did not only *invite* such free and creative self-realization, it virtually made this *compulsory*. Anything one could possible do, initiate, construct, or experience in New Babylon was inevitably instrumental to one's self-realization. Any action was automatically transformed into a form of playing, or acting. Any discussion one could entertain with other inhabitants, or 'fluxus-existentialists' as Peter Sloterdijk called them, forcibly takes place in public space and thus necessarily contributes to the process of emancipation. If Corbusier's houses were 'machines for living', as the French architect famously proclaimed, Constant's New Babylon was meant to be a machine for self-realization. As the playful equivalent of a command household, it *prescribed* and *enforced* a 'creative', spontaneous, detached, individualistic lifestyle – just as strictly as e.g. the German Democratic Republic, Albania or North-Korea enforced a communist lifestyle.

Both situationism and New Babylon dissolved quite suddenly in the early 1970s, not by coincidence at a time when interactivity started to hold sway in both public and private life. People were no longer content with roaming spaces, and more generally institutions, that were conceived, designed, and realized by external authorities – be they Corbusier or Constant. They now wanted to have a say in the conception, the design and the execution of such spaces and institutions. We see this graphically witnessed in the rise of squatting, in many large cities in Western Europe, and in the rise of 'interactive spatial planning', in the 1970s and 1980s. In other words, the built environment also became part of the 'negotiation household', or of the culture of interactivity. Quite suddenly, the 'neighborhood' became a political actor to reckon with; spatial planning now self-evidently required an elaborate interactive process of information, consultation, and evaluation between local residents, government, and real estate developers.

Simultaneously, as I mentioned already, the principle of interactivity took hold in other domains, such as art. In both art and spatial planning, people learn to become

interactively involved with their environment, more especially with its material shaping, with the objects that constitute this environment. The principle of interactivity is applied both to the relation between human beings, and to the relation between human beings and objects. In interactive art, we saw how a transaction of something – activity, passivity, interactivity, perhaps even responsibility – is taking place between visitor and work of art. It is a new way in which environment or object and human being learn to interact.

We may also call this the early days of *ecology*, understood as the realization that the concept of emancipation, even if extended from the public to the private life, is still incomplete if we do not also include objects, in some form or manner. Ecology, in the seventies, stood for the insight that what human beings do *can*, and *does*, adversely affect material nature, and that objects or nature cannot take an unlimited amount of such abuse. Here also, a command household had to make way for a household of negotiation, in which human beings would be more 'horizontally' involved with the objects that provide the material 'setting' for their precious process of emancipation and self-realization.

The transition to interpassivity marks a new phase in the relation between people and things, or if you like, in the principles of ecology. We might express this by saying that *objects*, as well, become *emancipated.* They already became part of our lives when we entered into interactive relations with them. But they now take upon themselves something that was previously shared between us, as human beings, and them, as objects. Now, in the interpassive condition, they become active on our behalf – as was already expressed in Pfaller's and Zizek's early examples of the sitcom, the VCR and the Tibetan prayer mill. Less bizarre, more mundane examples from daily life include the sleeping policeman and the roundabout. The sleeping policeman reminds of us something that we, as emancipated human beings, already know, and have interactively subscribed to, namely the speed limit. We know it, we agree with it, but we don't act on it. This is where the sleeping policeman comes to our assistance. He is not a tyrant; he merely incites us to act according to a norm we have interactively agreed with.

The same goes for a roundabout, although this particular object harbors a more subtle educational agenda. It forces us to slow down, like the sleeping policeman. But also, through the design of its curve that regulates both vehicle speed and vehicle distance, it incites, or invites, us to establish eye contact with other drivers that cross our path. Even if only momentarily, such eye contact establishes an understanding concerning the situation, a momentarily 'shared practice' so to speak, in which we can regain our interactive abilities to act in an emancipated fashion.

These are only two examples of a more general principle that obtains in our present condition of interpassivity, regarding our relation to objects. As we have outsourced interactive capacities and responsibilities to them, they are now in a way able to act *on a par* with us human beings. The inter*active* condition already implied a new 'understanding' between human beings and objects. The former is no longer just a contemplator of the latter. The process of human emancipation requires that the human contemplator takes on a more active role vis-à-vis the formation and the realization of the work of art. And for the work of art, this also implies a – modest – kind of emancipation: it can now engage in a process of self-realization of its own, albeit still guided by the human hand – the same human hand that, of course, also originally created it.

The inter*passive* condition, in turn, implies a further emancipation of the work of art, or more generally of the object. The objects, or works of art, now acquire a

responsibility of their own vis-à-vis us human beings. It becomes their mission to remind us of our emancipatory capacity to act in accordance with the norms that we ourselves, in our condition of Enlightened rational beings, have established and have validated through interactive, democratic discussion and involvement. Where we become 'tired' of our interactively established obligations to act in an emancipated fashion, objects are wide awake, ready & willing to assist us in our emancipatory mission. In most cases, of course, their 'reminder' to us will be physical and passive. The object can usually do not much more than literally stand in our way, and thereby correct our behavior – as sleeping policemen, roundabouts, and for instance revolving doors indeed manage to do.

Although their reminders and corrections are thus quite basic and physical, this is, so to speak, just what the doctor ordered. For what we need is not a 'discursive' reminder of the norm; that is to say, we do not need to be told again what the norm is. We know this full well, and even more, we have positively *affirmed* the norm – or at least, we have had ample occasion to participate and make our views heard in the process of validation and affirmation, which is the maximum that can be achieved in norms regulating behavior in democratically organized communities. (This is the point that theories of deliberative democracy remind us of.) What we need is not new views, better arguments, or a fuller understanding. We have all that, already. What we need is *physical assistance* – we need to be literally pushed, tripped, cajoled, or shoved into action. Or in the modern market-related jargon of governmentality, we need to be *nudged* – we need that one little push to overcome our interactive metal fatigue, and start to *act*.

Thus from my point of view, our new 'alliance' with things, our new relation with them, is ecological but not quite horizontal. Although things become actors, this does not quite establish what Bruno Latour calls a *symmetrical anthropology*. Objects become important to us not because of their intrinsic value, but because we *need* them. We need them to assist us in maintaining our emancipated way of life. In that sense, we treat them as a means, not as an end, to use Immanuel Kant's ethical vocabulary. But on the other hand, the interpassive relation that we entertain with them *does* confer on the objects a certain autonomy, a responsibility to act and intervene on our behalf, in our emancipatory interest.

So, we just have to let them. We have to accept their help, and accept that we need help. Similarly, in the interactive era, we accepted that we needed help with our interactive condition, help that was provided to us by therapists, who are the experts in mending and mediating interactive relations. Now, in the interpassive era, therapists can no longer help us, but objects can. This is something new and unprecedented. It is ironic and perhaps even painful for us, Enlightened human beings, that the result of the long and slow process of our emancipation should be that we require assistance from *objects*, in order to retain our emancipatory abilities. But then again, the objects do not become alien masters over us. They are merely our partners in emancipation. They enable us to remain what we have proudly made ourselves into: emancipated beings.