Interactive walls | an experience catalyst project

Conceptual background:
In walls we can trust. Can we? Building walls is building stability. Is it? We confine our living environments with walls, we create and stabilize social constellations with walls, we are believing in walls as fundamentally bearing cultural infrastructures.
The wall seems to be the human answer on fugaciousness. Due to our tremendous capacity to forget the contingent character of walls we perceive them mainly as a materialised quasi-nature, emanating a flair of stability in mobilized lifestyles.
No house without walls. We are still inhabitants of a wall-based concept of home. Existence resides on fundamentally-secured dwellings. Tents are only foreseen in case of emergency or to satisfy romantic pulsations. Against this background, walls are much more than brig-assemblies. They are powerful elements of our symbolic order, representing the concept of the solid as such and standing for what remains and resists stormy living environments.
The function of walls is first of all orientation. Firm as a rock = firm as a wall. Walls meet the profoundly conservative desires of contemporary culture, however they actually show a rather ambivalent impact: walls block pulsations, walls block insight and look-out, walls inhibit passages, they still constitute the concept of prisons and frontiers, as well as safety and safety-terror (even if other elements such as the multifaceted digital control-apparatus takes the reins step by step).
But when walls are starting to move, become moving entities – what happens? What kind of crisis of the fundamental could be provoked when walls learn to migrate? To act? To flee or to attack, to dance or to die? When they start to become dynamic and creative factors instead of being our fixed stars and causeys that orient us and relief us from the impositions of self-orientation? In a nutshell: What if the concept of wall becomes a spirited concept of developing constellations of world-making – beyond theoretical games but concretely, as a reality?

Idea:
Moving walls is an experience catalyst project that aims for the creation of new types of constellations in the relation of humans and cultural infrastructures. Operating in the intersection of aesthetics and technological development, it is understood as proper artistic research in the concept of world-exploration and knowledge-production through art in combination with conceptual philosophical work. The underlying motivation is to develop strategies that enable us to experiment with new types of space perception. At the same time we want to analyse the transformation of those evidences behind the particular apparatus of sensibilities that direct our perception of cultural infrastructures and determine the ranges of our imagination and those actions related to it.

Research question:
The principal research question is: Can moving walls become dynamic actors that impacts on our established concepts of “being in the world”? Could they be perceived as critical mirrors, reflecting our desire to be governed by cements and brigs, by materialised placeholders of the old promise that existence is fostered by a stable fundamentally stabilized structure? Could they bring us into the position to develop new strategies of world-making and new concepts of thinking the modern condition?

Workflow:
**Development challenge:**
The creation of a room scale prototype will be realized through a system of stepper motors each connected to a brick which will act exactly as a pixel of a screen controlled by a series of external microcontrollers supported by an ad hoc electronics for the position feedback. The microcontrollers themselves will be guided through a pc via software so to react to the presence (and absence) of an observer/a moving person and configure the position of the bricks and the overall shape of the wall and of the room itself according to a chaotic algorithm which is by definition something not repeatable. This produces the conceptual impossibility to foresee the behaviour of the chaotic-bricks which can only be experienced in their always different configurations. The wall will be perceived as a quasi-autonomously reacting infrastructure.

**Process:**
a) A prototype of the moving wall will be developed in the SinLab (EPFL/La Manufacture – Lausanne). Part of this process is a collaboration with experts for space-exploration (dancers, actors) as well as the use of various additional sensorial stimuli such as sound and light. A series of experiments will be organised during the DEVELOPMENT of the prototype; thus artists will take part as professional space “users” and communicate their experiences that will then be taken into account in the further development of the devices.
b) The working prototype should be presented and the public invited to “experience” it; via observations of and interviews with the public, the various dimensions of the impact initiated by the experiences will be investigated using a concept of “grounded aesthetics”, combining elements of grounded theory and practice based philosophy.

**Results:**
The main result consists first of all in the moving wall itself that can be used and exposed in various settings (museums, public space etc.). A second type of results consists in the documentation of the the analytical process undertaken during the development of the wall and its experimental use.

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