Mike Leggett Notes

Art Gallery of Western Australia: Friday Feb 14th 1997
Chair: Gary Dufour, Director Curatorial Practices
Speakers: Catherine de Zegher: 6.30
MGL: 7.30

ISSUES of INTERFACE : Artists' Interactive Multimedia on CD-ROM

BtI : idling screen
The interface paradigm is at the core of current work by artists in the area of 'interactive multimedia'. All the works in the exhibition Burning the Interface<International Artists' CD-ROM> approach the issues of interface design and interaction with the 'audience' or 'user' or 'interactor' using a range of strategies which both utilise or make problematic, aesthetic principles inherited from the component mediums abbreviated by the term 'multimedia':- film, video, sound, photography, graphics and typography. For those of you who haven't yet seen the exhibition I'll just run through some images from it to show that it's not just about media but employs a whole range of visual approaches.

JPEGViewer slide show: final image:
I/O
The interface is the conventional and pragmatic shorthand description that most users have inherited from computer scientists and the computer trade to describe the organisation of the screen, keyboard and mouse to enable the user to control the functioning of the computer - I/O to use the jargon, Input/Output, or more completely, input, process, output. When it comes to artists employing the tools that technologists invent, it is the process of response from the viewer, the audience, the interacting subject with which they engage, whether that tool is a Typewriter, a Urinal or a Piano.

I quote from the article by Darren Tofts that appeared in 21C #2 in 1995: "Down the photoslope in syncopanc pulses: Thinking Electronically". "What, or more specifically when, is an interface? (The assumption is) that it only exists in the cybernetic domain, when someone sits in front of a pc and clicks a mouse. An interface, on the contrary, is any act of conjunction which results in a new or unexpected event. A door-handle, as Brenda Laurel reminds us, is an interface. So too, (quoting Lautremont), is the "chance encounter, on an operating table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella." James Joyce didn't write books. Marcel Duchamp didn't create works of art. John Cage didn't compose music. They created interfaces, instances into which someone, (you), intervened to make choices and judgements that they were not willing to make. ... You are empowered, you are in control. Cough during a John Cage recital and you are part of the performance. That's an interface."

Black slide
The terms 'interactive' and 'immersive', describe the primary activities present during a progression through the interface of the multimedia CD-ROM. Immersion within an artwork follows a tradition within art history of contemplation - exploring the work through a reflective and cerebral process, based on the personality of the perceiver, in response to the actions of the artist. Interaction with a multimedia work often follows innate responses more closely related to the hunter's instinct or, in less primitive terms, the existential experience, where reflection is subordinated to action. Multimedia as an artform, delivered on CD-ROM and via the World Wide Web is currently exploring the dynamics of these active and reflective states. The place where this is occurring is the new and intimate that exists between the computer screen and the user. However, this space is no

more the terra nullius some have claimed it to be, than these lands were two hundred years ago. Artists working with film and video over the last 30 years have already encountered the problems that are now being encountered by multimedia artists in addressing audiences saturated with the conventions of representational systems utilised by the print media, cinema, television and the sound cultures of music and speech. Specifically and more recently, artists as well as audiences have some experience of responding to arcade and computer games and commercial CD-ROM titles designed around the "shoot-'em-up" or "look-it-up" principles. Conventions have been rapidly adopted by the market-place, for instance from the interface design traditional in board games and books, and even the fun-fair, again creating a context which prepares the expectations for an exhibition like Burning the Interface, encouraging assumptions which may not be appropriate to the kind of explorations that some of the artists are making. One of the aspects of the mediascape of television, magazines and newspapers that we could bear in mind here is the part they play in making us aware of the existence of art, and in particular uses to which multimedia are being put. Consider this promotional tape -

MCA BtI promotional video
I began developing Burning the Interface with the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney three years ago and later in that process this videotape was commissioned by the MCA from a commercial company well-versed in the construction of marketing messages. Marketing is a term I remember first emerging in earnest when I was in Britain at about the time Prime Minister Thatcher came to power. It was a term which we came to associate with a society run by bean-counters, who measured human endeavour by its economic viability. It was therefore a term which came to be despised, particularly as it was promoted, so to speak, by conservative and self-avowed 19th Century values, values which had so much to do with the subjugation of the peoples of the Australian continent; and many others for that matter.

However, in working with the team at the MCA where curation is but one of the activities, I came to realise that marketing had a slightly different purpose. It was essentially a signalling process, something akin to Anton Artaud's description of the role of the actor being like the behaviour of a person 'signalling through the flames' to an observer. The flames in the context of marketing being the frenzy of information presented to us throughout our urban waking day. The promotional tape was one of the strategies employed to, quite correctly, use the popular channels of information dissemination, (newspapers, magazines and TV), to provide the public with a sense of what made this exhibition distinctive from other exhibitions. As a public gallery, requiring a fee paying public to enter its doors in order for it to survive, what other way is open to the MCA if artists' products and their ideas are to be encountered? This question will have to be left for the moment - who sets the agenda for those of us engaged by the visual arts? Artists? Curators? Or the marketing managers? We can return to it tomorrow at the curators' forum.

BtI idling screen
What other aspects are to be considered within the context of an encounter with the multimedia computer? Well, we still haven't got to the screen and the mouse yet. There is the room to consider. Is this a familiar space - a lounge-room? a workroom? an office? Or is this the slightly forbidding, self-conscious space of the gallery, the bookshop, the airport lounge? Public and private spaces permit different responses, different behaviour. We wished to reassure the technophobic visitor, or even those who had not encountered a computer before - yes, in spite of what the media would have us believe, there are plenty of people who have not sat in front of a computer.

BtI Menu screen
By clearing all the stuff on the screen and replacing it with a series of options leading to the works

themselves, and providing a way to easily exit the work, we felt would place the emphasis on the work rather than the technology - boxes and keyboards were similarly also hidden away leaving just the screen and a mouse. Like the experiments being pursued by artists, galleries, museums and other means, are likewise experimenting and trialing the most appropriate means for making their work available and again we will raise these issues during the Forum tomorrow at PICA.

In the exhibition most artists have challenged received notions of what an interactive multimedia encounter might or can be; others have opted for 'bricolage as content' and the juxtapositioning of potent sound and picture images using a production format that places the dynamics conveniently into a computer space less than an arms length away. I'm not referring here to the dynamic possibilities of flat screen space and the audio component but the active space existing between these elements and the interacting subject. Comparisons could be made here with the dynamic space that exists between the painter and a canvas, the sculptor and the object, the artist making the work in the same relative space within which the work is subsequently viewed or received.

Slide for "30 Words..."
Encountering a work's interface for the first time involves establishing a modus operandi : first, find the way in; then determine a system for movement through the work, (if indeed the work is intended for interaction - some require only that you select then watch a series of movie clips); finally, become aware of the way out, (although the exhibition interface was designed to effect instant quitting from a piece as a meta option!) In his disc '30 Words for the City', John Colette begins with three different options for exploring the same data on the CD-ROM: a random selection plays a loop of the entire work; the entire work plays in a sequential loop; or the work acts, in Colette's words as "a book format of the piece." The clues provided in Colette's 'book' as to 'content', are not found through a contents or index page but simply through combining the two processes of interaction and immersion sequentially. You select from one of the twenty button images, then from a 'story', a 'movie' or an 'about' labelled button. You watch the poetic flow of images, texts and sounds until the 1-2 minute sequence ends; you decide what to watch next. Having selected an item, hyperlinking, takes the 'reader' straight to the content without pages to thumb. (Hyperlinking is the linking feature particular to interactive multimedia computer work. By clicking on an image, a word, a delineated zone, a button, etc created by the artist, a 'jump' to another element of the work, or indeed in the case of work developed on the World Wide Web, to any other computer's hard disc connected to the Internet anywhere in the world). In 30 Words, whilst options are presented for movement through the 'text' to the user, no clues are given as to content. The user encounters the artist's construction as a series of self-contained statements related to Colette's travels in Asia and through the modern cities of Sydney and Tokyo as 'time-based media' experiences.

run CD-ROM of "30 Words..."
Change to RAMs
Peter de Lorenzo's 'Reflections, Abstractions and Memory Structures RAMs' , uses interaction to simply start-stop-start the entirely linear image progression. De Lorenzo says of the 12-minute piece; "The image and sound fragments are layered and blended to produce a seamless work which seeks to be painterly and evocative." The option to interact with the work by freeze-framing it instantly switches viewing the rapid flow of sequential frames, (as if this were a film or videotape), to the fixed frame of the computer screen surrounding the 'painter's' static subject. 'Moments' are accumulated as each individual's 'discourse' with the work develops.

Run + freeze demos
Because the computer is able to deliver individual frame components as 'painted', (unlike the flicker and buzz of the videotape 'pause' image), a space is created for this dialogue. The system of

representation which delivers on each click of the mouse button a uniquely computed 'frame' component, foregrounds the relationship between the pixel on the screen surface, the groupings of pixels glittering within each frame, and the photo-image fragment(s) which these groups construct. (A pixel is the just visible component on the phosphor surface of the computer's screen, the equivalent of the dot in the off-set printing process.) The 'painterly' qualities ascribed might be related to the similar physical distance between the artist, the spectator and the surface of the image, an aspect that the multimedia computer shares with the surface of a painting, or the page of a book.

Change to Rhizome

The question of motivation remains - why should I want to interact? Reflection is often assumed to be the traditional response of the art viewer, reposing before the 'mirror of the soul'. Confronted with much of the art produced during this century the response however, is more often reflexive - what the historian and commentator Simon Schama has observed as being: "...the increasingly precious and reflexive variations on the venerable modernist theme of the uncoupling of painterly process and its ostensible objects, the endless pirouettes around the holy of holies: representation theory". 1 In spite of Schama's concerns these variations are undergoing further development - with a grand jetee so to speak - whereby a succession of reflexes are elicited as part of a process currently being described as interactive. Much recent multimedia work by artists explores this potential, essentially by navigating through the various 'screen spaces' that make up the virtual whole. In tracing the points of reflex through this process and the kind of meanings or conclusions that can be established, I refer by example to 'A Digital Rhizome', by the Sydney artist Brad Miller, in which sections from Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus, are quoted as the theoretical backdrop for the piece. As an early example of one-on-one interactive multimedia art, the piece successfully illustrates and explores, in the artist's words; "a computer-based screen-and-mouse interactive that mediates a metaphor - that of the 'rhizome'. This botanical metaphor is appropriate to figuring the current convergence of so many mediums into the one space of the computer screen. Utilising software (another medium in its own right), designed for use by non-programmers which enables links and connections to be made across previously distinct aesthetic and material boundaries, the mediation proposed by Miller is pre-disposed by these convergences. (The actual design of user-friendly software by programmers for non-programmers, and the process by which it averages the users needs, is the subject of separate analysis but in this context my feeling is that for mature or advanced users such as the majority of artists in Burning the Interface, the design of software is not a significant factor in determining an artworks function and appearance - consider the third-party interventions between the base material and artist in all artforms.)

A Digital Rhizome' was the first interactive computer piece I encountered three and a half years ago and the notes I made then I feel apply as a general strategy for many other works which place the emphasis initially on interaction rather than immersion, and use the mouse click intensively - on Buttons, labelled or unlabelled, and Zones, concealed, or indicated with an image. By contrast there is the anti "labelled button" approach struck by the early Gerald van der Kaap 'Blind Rom' (1992), and the British SASS group interactive, 'Anti-ROM', (1995) who entertainingly explore a thousand-and-one-things-to-do with a Mouse of which clicking is but one.

Select - Rhizomes and plateaus

The title screen for 'A Digital Rhizome' presents eight options including Exit - no clue is given as to the consequence of making one choice or another - a first level of meaning is thus quickly established. The proposition is that whilst sequence will have significance, a specified order will not, hence the narrative encountered will be unique to an individual's interaction with the piece.

Select - Radicle - Chaosmos
A collage of images is deployed across the area of the screen superimposed on a textured backdrop. As selected buttons lead on to successive screens a pattern begins to emerge about the organisation of the screen space. The process of interacting by clicking on images or words is quickly learnt to influence progress, but is recognised as not being "control". A second level of meaning is thereby soon attained.

Select - His Machines is Desire
Soon the interacting subject starts trying to delineate the furthest extent of each sector of the work, clicking outwards in a conceptual circle, attempting to plot 'landmark' images along the way, before returning through the maze to the starting point, to then set-out to test the path again before beginning again from another point - this can be a lengthy and time-consuming process.

Search text for - "..not a beginning or an end; it is always in the middle .."
With so little to go on (or in the words of Deleuze and Guattari: "..not a beginning or an end; it is always in the middle .."), the "mazing" process itself offers the third level of meaning as the motivational drive changes into a more pleasurable phase. Without knowledge of the consequences of taking options, (rather than making choices), the form of the exploration is accepted as being purely aleatoric - chance not choice. This shades into more determined and goal orientated gameplay as confidence is gained in recognising patterns of image-routes.

Select - Into a World
But the interacting subject's memory of images, text clusters, button slogans etc, is severely stretched in an effort to map the topography - the gameplan so assiduously devised is easily subverted. As mazing continues "control" is not wrested but at best shared. A fourth level of meaning is now available to defuse such subversive strategies, interpretation, the process which puts form on the margin, analyses content and separates each of these works through difference in the signified.

Select - Nano Fissures
It seems from an initial encounter with 'A Digital Rhizome' that the element in the piece, the base unit, is the moving image, heightened in its effect by being set into static, "wallpaper" backdrop, the imagery of which covers the full range of post-modernist excess. On what basis were these images selected? Does the interactive construction allow the viewer to acknowledge the received image (from TV, from print) as problematic? Does an image become tractable in meaning through the viewer's collaborative responses using the mouse? Most of the short movies in Rhizome reference technology and the technology of war in particular - our innate hunter's eye is appropriately served. The mind reels under the weight of mass disseminated paranoia - the brutality of the Age of Print; the callousness of the computer-imaged Gulf War. Does the ability to participate through this interaction, in 'choosing' to repeat previous options and view again the image of Iraqi squaddies running from their vehicles as a missile homes-in, make the event any more meaningful in the wider context? Or does it simply reflect, through the computer technology in front of which we sit, the ability to image what previously could only be imagined? The technology with which we interact after all, is separated but by degree from that which brought death and destruction. Through juxtaposition with images that could only be created by the artist on a computer, is there a dialectic space created to enable us to see a way through the terror of war and the tools that both expedited and recorded it?

Load - 'Cyberflesh Girlmonster'
Linda Dement's 'Cyberflesh Girlmonster' challenges the stereotyped image of the fragmented

female body and we, the 'users', help re-assemble it to be presented with new images which are both humorous and horrific. These are underpinned by forensic texts describing the pathology of brutal social realities - substance addiction, sexual assault, child abuse - the full gamut of personal violence against the person and the self. About 30 women scanned directly parts of their bodies into Dement's computer, where she manipulated the images using the full range of multimedia tools. Over a twelve-month period she created a menagerie of animated 'monsters' which are both image and, through interaction, links to other images, texts and sounds. Dement explains: "The user moves relatively blindly between these; there is no menu system or clear controllable interface". The user moves through a spatial rather than temporal terrain, gathering its potent feel. By operating the mouse, the sense of touch becomes an element of this experience. Dement feels that controlling a 'new technology' with the sense of touch ameliorates technophobia. Repulsion and fascination are the responses that are in play here, continuing a line pursued visually by Bosch, Goya, Bellmer et al and in literature by deSade and Bataille. In one section castration, (as a rapid sequence of graphic images), is the anxiety teased by Dement in response to the male violence which she describes. The hysteria from sections of the Media who defend such tyranny by implication, is equally the subject of Dement's scrutiny.

Quit

In conclusion, these issues of interface are in a stage of development which, I would suggest, are not far removed from the stage that cinema was in when experiments were commenced with techniques of montage or editing, some 15 years after the first public screening of a film. Though somewhat eclipsed by the current fashion for things on the World Wide Web, the Compact Disc's material immutability remains a major advantage as a storage device. In an essay in the catalogue for the exhibition Burning the Interface, I observe that the ephemeral and fugitive nature of much computer-based work has restricted its exhibition potential to one-off installations, or playout through video/film recording etc. The archival specifications of CD-ROM, which I have compared to cast bronze in its ability to preserve the delicate and fugitive medium used for modelling the artwork, can more or less guarantee that a completed work as "art-on-disc" cannot be:
  – erased, tampered with or altered;
  – duplicated, with the correct safeguards in place, thus preventing the unauthorised copying of artists work and its illicit commercial exploitation.
CD-ROM also has very good physical properties and archival specifications and therefore good prospects for financial return to artists through:
-purchase by collections both private and public, of limited editions of a work;
-the editioning of multiple runs for wider distribution by niche publishers;
-the licensing of titles to networks via servers or linked CD-ROM players.

The potential for the distribution of artwork in this convenient form enables its exhibition in the home or the workplace as well as the gallery. This means of distribution also maintains a degree of independence from an Internet rapidly coming under centralised corporate and government control. At this stage of the expansion of recreational computer networks, where the capacity to transfer from the Web the amounts of data needed to operate fully interactive multimedia is strictly limited, the CD-ROM enables artists to concentrate on the development of the kind of sophisticated interface which is appropriate for their needs. There is a level of innovative problem-solving in the work of the Australian artists mentioned here which is distinctive within the international field. I feel that such work represents a way forward for the nascent multimedia industry, but it is an aspect of research and development that commerce rarely or at least formally, recognises. In spite of initiatives taken by government bodies to encourage the development of interactive multimedia, the financial support from the public and business community to enable this means of art making to flourish in the specialist, as well as the wider social context, however, has yet to be assured.

(Total words 3863)

Landscape and memory: Simon Schama: pub Harper Collins 1995.