

> *Burning the Interface*, Artlines 1/4, Art Law Centre of Australia, Sydney 1996

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> Burning the Interface is the first major exhibition in Australia > devoted to electronic art. What motivated you to put it together? >

I don't think the MCA can make that claim for 'electronic art', but we feel confident that it is the first major survey in the world, (let's not be too parochial about this!); work made for distribution on CD-ROM that is. But I think probably the exhibition celebrates the maturing of many aspects of the contemporary media arts. This was certainly one of the motivating factors for putting it together, to make all that concealed and unavailable artwork visible, knowing as an artist that access to an audience is one of the essential motivations for making work, particularly in these new computer-mediated areas. Not out of some sense of vanity but for some sense of response, to guide the development of further ideas.

I myself began to pick up some of the software tools a few years ago and find out what they could do, sensing that my work over the past thirty years in film, video and photography could usefully develop in this direction. After a year of developing a basic comprehension of the potential of multimedia, the directions that I could then develop in my own work seemed immense. I needed to see what artists who had been working in the area for a while were doing - I wanted to save myself precious time! In talking with a friend at the MCA, David Watson, who is coordinating the development of the cinemathèque, he suggested that the Museum might be interested in the outcomes of what I might discover. >

> Was it difficult to put Burning the Interface together? How long have

> you been planning the exhibition? >

So in early 1994 I prepared a description of what an exhibition of artists' CD-ROM might entail and with the support of the Museum I approached the AFC for a modest grant to research the area. This enabled me to buy the time to initiate the Call for Proposals and then follow-up the considerable response that followed, mostly via access to the Internet through the MFA I am pursuing at UNSW. There was between 5-600 enquiries which produced 130 pieces of work from which a short list of about 50 was selected. The MCA were "pleasantly surprised" at the quality of the work, allocated an opening date and raised their initial stated involvement from a single gallery space to three gallery spaces. From that point on I worked with Linda Michael, one of the MCA staff curators, to develop the show and the catalogue and work with the 29 discs in the final selection. We had pretty broad agreement about issues as they came up, and other specialists, like Louise Pether the exhibitions manager and Colin Rowan the designer, were introduced into the project as momentum picked up. Working with the marketing and sponsorship specialists was particularly new to me and proved to be a lot less to do with compromise, as is often assumed. In fact the way in which the whole MCA operation works was very impressive, given that they have to run things on a commercial basis. You could say I was "pleasantly surprised", and have found the whole period very rewarding.

> Burning the Interface has attracted a huge amount of media > attention, including mainstream media, did you expect there to be so > much interest?

Well, one of the lines I used in the draft marketing documents made reference to the fact that the media had been going on about 'interactive multimedia' and the 'information superhighway' ever since the Creative Nation statement. But very few people had actually encountered what this might actually mean. A few demos on TV or at a trade show, maybe some crappy reference discs at work, was probably the extent of most people's experience. I felt, and still do, that what it is that artists are doing with these tools is where it is a more widely accepted use of multimedia will be in five or ten years time. >

> How have the public reacted to the exhibition? What type of people > come to see it? >

I think therefore the media attention reflected the range of interests that interactive multimedia appeals to - not only the art audience, but the computer industry audience, the nascent multimedia production industry, the education industry, as well as the genuine curiosity that people have for a social phenomena that they hear about but don't see, let alone experience. Individual reactions have been very broad, but I haven't encountered as many negative responses as can often be the case, people have mostly been 'pleasantly surprised' it would seem! The MCA conducts surveys during exhibitions and I'm waiting for the outcomes for the CD-ROM show. I think it will indicate a wider range of opinion than usual because I think a wider range of visitors were drawn into the galleries - there will be a significant number who will record antipathy, certainly that's been the predictable response from the more exposed arts correspondents, but there are also those who genuinely feel they have had something revealed to them. >

>Which works are the most popular?

> Difficult to say. I think most visitors had a dip into all the works. It has to be said that for most of the work, a conventional gallery space is not the ideal place that people would choose to 'interact and immerse'. Anymore than you would choose to read a book in a bookshop. The function of the exhibition was not dissimilar, in allowing people to browse the work, and with a few titles, to make a purchase. The main problem at the moment for CD-Rom is its distribution - even many 'commercial' titles are difficult to find. Overseas publishers are not prepared to stock small retail outlets with whom they do not have an established business relationship. I was disappointed how few of the discs in the show were able to be put on a shelf. But on the other hand, several of the artists were clearly delighted at the correspondence and enquiries the exposure had created for them. >

>Most exhibitions are very much "look but do not touch" - the works

>are not really intended to "interact" with large numbers of people. >By contrast, some of the works in Burning the Interface encourage >interaction. Would you like to see more "audience participation" >in future exhibitions?

> Yes, this aspect clearly acted as a novelty for some people, particularly those who sat down and immediately started adjusting all the controls on the monitor. I think all exhibitions should have work that you can touch. Linda Dement observed in one of the talks she gave during the show that the Mouse and the sense of touch that it permits is an ameliorating factor for many technophobes encountering this technology for the first time. The No Touch principle tends to underline the unfortunate corner that museology has been forced into by a fascination with art objects which display wealth and as a corollary of that, an obsession with conservation. Heritage values currently are being bought at the expense of the development of a popular and creative contemporary culture. One of the things I like about computer-mediated art is that much of it is fugitive - materially, psychically. Though I discuss in the catalogue essay the 'material immutability' of the CD-ROM, when it came to registering the discs into the Museum system there was an immediate problem of whether these were 'original' artworks. Well yes, to the exhibition they were originals; and they functioned for the visitors as originals, in fact very much so, since you were actually sitting the same distance from the screen looking at precisely the same image as had the artist at the moment of making the work! But no, they were not unique and could be easily replaced from the 'original' files held by the artist or publisher.

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>What future exhibition plans do you have? Burning the Interface is >now going to tour nationally, do you intend to out together another >exhibition, perhaps a sequel to the first exhibition?

> The MCA is keen to collaborate on another project and I shall be proposing one that will develop a line that a few artists are pursuing. It involves the notion of interaction which includes a record of each individual interactive encounter as part of the piece. The Special Effects exhibit at the Powerhouse was an expensive and predictable spoof of what some artists have already introduced as a fresh development for public spaces. Museums and galleries are so typecast - public spaces

where you go to perform intensely introspective experiences! As for a sequel, well that really depends on what it is artists are going to be completing over the next couple of years. I think a lot of attention presently is unfortunately focussed on the Web, which I don't think will be able to deliver the kind of qualities that visual artists demand for some time to come, if ever. And increasingly it will become more expensive and more controlled.

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>Burning the Interface clearly has a distinct identity as an exhibition >of "digital artworks". Do you see digital works as a new artistic >genre, or will distinctions between digital and traditional >"analogue" artworks ultimately disappear?

The trend is always inclusive, nothing ever disappears - only fashions remain. But presenting ever more complex hybrid work will present more and more problems for the exhibition venues. In that sense, Burning the Interface was a relatively straightforward show to install, once the equipment had been found and the menu software had settled down! The distinction I would like to see re-adjust is that which attempts to distance the fine arts from the popular arts. The MCA I feel is successfully closing that gap. >

>Finally, which work in the exhibition is your favourite?

They are all so different. I've had some at home and am prompted in much the same way as with a collection of books - different experiences for different moods. David Blair's Waxweb appeals because of the scale of the project - its development across a period, in time, shifting in focus, changing continents, involving levels of 'anonymous' authorship and so on. It has many facets which keeps the idea of the work constantly alive, providing an element of surprise at each visit. AntiRom by the SASS group of collaborator's was a great favourite but just like those British sitcoms, doesn't quite last more than six viewings. But at least you have to find the gags first! There's a few bars of some sampled music in Brad's The Digital Rhizome, which sends a chill each time I hear it echoing through the galleries, and his extraordinary whirling renders. Boissier's Flora Petrinsularis would probably be the most sublime piece, linking interactive touch to visual gesture and incident. Such Gallic style too, like Luc Couchesne's Portrait. It's difficult to be more specific than that. I think by now I have probably re-purposed the entire exhibition into my mind!

>PS. Could you please provide tour dates and venues for the exhibition. >

Announcement

'Burning the Interface<International Artists' CD-ROM>' an exhibition curated by Mike Leggett and Linda Michael for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, will be touring Australia, with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission, during 1996/7. Dates so far confirmed are:

Njapartje CMC, Adelaide 12th September - 5th October 1996

Experimenta, CCP Gallery, Melbourne

7th - 23rd November 1996

Perth International Festival, PICA, Perth 12th February - 9th March 1997

Brisbane City Hall Art Gallery and Museum

27th March - 3rd May 1997

Other Australian and international venues to be announced. Further information:

<http://www.mca.com.au/> legart@ozemail.com.au (Mike Leggett)