

Mike Leggett Production

CONSULTANCY REPORT

to

**Ross Gibson
Cinemia Corporation,
Melbourne**

March 2001

**Exhibition Proposals
for the
Australian Centre for the Moving Image
Ground Floor and Screen Gallery**

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Introduction - Background to this Consultancy

In August 2000 nine exhibition proposals were submitted to Ross Gibson at Cinemedia, (*Platform 1.0: exhibit outline proposals*) outlining in about 200 words some exhibition ideas and formats. (Appendix A).

Cinemedia commissioned further research on some of these proposals as outlined in an email from Ross Gibson (14.9.00) and a *Consultancy Agreement* dated November 2000.

The governing principle for gathering this material and providing advice as to its presentation lies in the urgent need, for the benefit of audience and producer alike, for the work of Australian practitioners being presented in the context of the international scene. The exchange that would ensue will encourage more Australian work to be seen overseas.

The various individuals and groups who were contacted during the research period showed considerable interest in the Cinemedia project. Enthusiasm was expressed for a gallery designed for the special exhibition requirements of the newer technologies and their relationship with complementary media.

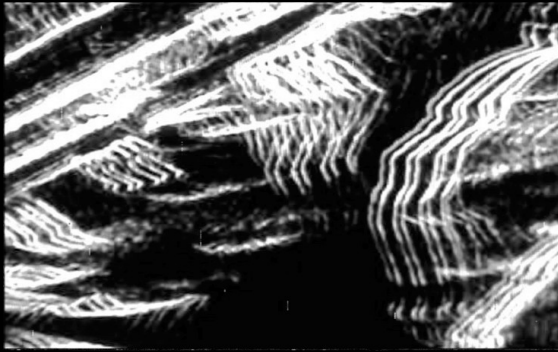
My experience as a practitioner (briefly described in Appendix B), straddles the period of the last thirty years during which time rapid changes to creative options have occurred and possibly explains my enthusiasm for utilising the cross-media options that the site at Federation Square will offer.

Working titles are used in this report and do not signify a marketing strategy, which is regarded as being outside the scope of this consultancy.

The artists, producers, writers and curators involved in this research, in spite of the period coinciding with seasonal holidays, were keen to contribute through this research to the initiative being shown by successive Victorian Governments in advancing such an imaginative project and thereby symbolically marking the start of the new millennium.

Proposal 1 : Retarded Eye

she visualised his trails in the databases



Sam Landels

Rick Mason

Cam Merton

Vikki Wilson

Retarded Eye are a group of younger media artists based in Perth whose work has been developing throughout the 1990s. It has begun to reach a level of maturity to make a rich contribution to the Gallery experience and provide ample opportunity for links into a screening series program in the Cinema and events and installations in the Streets of Melbourne.

"The group initially worked with painterly, photographic, film and electronic media infecting each other as a basis for their early practice. The sheer production power of the digital studio has moved Retarded Eye as individuals into productions that do not have the constraints experienced in their pre-digital area of fighting over access to cameras and edit decisions. Their interest in bringing the physical and material qualities of the media into the work has continued as has the tradition of loose collaboration and close interest in each others works."

Whilst guest editing in early 2000 Photofile #60 (pub. Australian Centre for Photography) I developed with the group an article about their work and the approach taken both as individual artists and as a group of friends and colleagues. Besides the range of media with which they work, the range of references in their work is likewise broad, from the lyric (*March Riever*) to the urban (*A throw of the dice*), from the transcendent (*The Physics of Leaving Space*), to the constructivist (*Rhythmus 99*).

(See accompanying videotape. Running order Appendix C together with photocopies selected from the Retarded Eye bibliography)

The variety of themes and images displayed would appeal to the non-specialist audience for its spectacle and its poetry, to the more specialist audience for roots and references - commissioned accompanying essays would explore some of these depths.

A Gallery exhibit would feature a selection made from their total output and would project film and video work as well as their most recent work with computer manipulated image and sound. The mixed mode of projected delivery, in a gently didactic way, would distinguish between the varieties of technologies employed throughout that relatively short career span. It is a period when photo/audio media as technologies for artists as well as industry and commerce have undergone rapid change to user and audience alike. Discrete wall text panels would allude to this and the design of the exhibit would be enhanced by ink-jet prints related to the work.

A screening program in the Cinema would complement a visit to the Gallery exhibit by siting the Group's work into a curated selection of film and video by Australian and international artists and film-makers. For instance, the urban environment examined in *Rhythmus 99* can be seen in relation to the work of:

- ≡ the Melbourne film-maker Nick Ostrovsky,
- ≡ the Sydney film-maker Paul Winkler,
- ≡ the New York film-maker Ernie Gehr,
- ≡ the London film-maker William Raban,
- ≡ and the 1920/30s film-maker to whom the title refers, Hans Richter.

The different concerns related to the realities of the urban setting in *A throw of the dice* could be contextualised in the Cinema with a different tack that could include Hitchcock, and films that examine the phenomena of urban paranoia.

A throw of the dice, along with several other works were first presented in yet another context, that of the Street. The 2000 Perth International Festival featured the exhibition '*Drive by*' involving seven new media/installation artists working collaboratively with practitioners from a diverse range of disciplines to produce seven new works specifically for projection onto screens in a number of shop front display windows located in the city.

Conclusion

An exhibit would present the many working practices and concerns pursued by Retarded Eye as a group of media artists with a consistent output. This could be presented in relation to other media production groupings in Australia and overseas and, though this is outside the scope of the current brief, could well evolve into several groups exhibiting with Retarded Eye.

(I have in mind here specifically the Japanese groupings of media artists who collaborate on commercial projects to pay for their artistic practice. Likewise the Anti-ROM and the nullpointer groups in Britain, and the Videotage group in Hong Kong.)

Proposal 2 : Social Software

The research for this proposal arose from articles I and Les Walkling authored for Photofile #60 in mid-2000, and arose from Les's comment when asked about Photoshop software, that as an artist/ photographer, he was "...sick of the thinking and the attitudes behind such software..." His article (*The Desensitisation of Photography – Appendix D* photocopy) went on to detail how the subtractive/ reductive mechanism of the software actually destroys the tonal substance of the image during its operation and thus distorts at worst and frustrates at best, the intentions of the artist.

In a related article (*Thinking Imaging Software – Appendix E* photocopy), I set out to track the factors involved in the development of the now defunct Live Picture imaging software, the characteristics of which ran contrary to the market dominant Photoshop. In a series of email interviews with engineers who had participated in the development of Live Picture in the early 90s, I probed the methods, motivations and design parameters for the software development.

The research for this proposal has revealed that there is a groundswell of concern amongst a minority of practitioners about factors that determined software design and the constraints this has on their practice as artists or indeed, as general computer users stuck with the metaphor of the desktop. Though artists and scientists working in a range of disciplines have always been designing and writing software, they are in the minority and usually, the process and nature of the tools they have made remain hidden behind the outcomes for which it was designed.

I think that developing software is a real double-edged sword. As you write new software, you become acutely aware that you will be continually restricting aspects of it's functionality, to suit your needs. You cannot help then but reflect on the way this process occurs in all the other software you use and even in the tools with which you write your own software. One of the few ways to counter this trend is the open source movement. Open source is not just about code either, it relates to a whole set of attitudes that can benefit the resulting software.

Tom Betts in conversation with Matthew Fuller, Feb 2001.

This invisibility was recognised and rewarded at Ars Electronica 1999 with the top award, the Golden Nica, going to the inaugurator or the Linux computer operating system, Linus Torvalds. Remarkable not only for its less arcane nature, Linux was 'marketed' by the very large number of users who helped develop it over the internet in a collective open source code project and thereby challenged corporate dominance and central command-style economy product planning. Currently Linux is used widely throughout the IT industry.

However notional and symbolic this award was within the context of an art prize, the event nonetheless formally recognised the important role software engineers have played in structuring the creative options open to application users, whether they be artists, scientists or office workers. In an exhibition setting, the intention will be to

identify the prescriptive technology and amplify the enlightened tools and the outcomes that have been produced.

The proposal at this stage of research has concentrated on artist's responses to software and its structuring affects, ways by which this has been subverted, examples that have side-stepped the issue and authored the tools necessary to complete a project. But the scope of such a show could extend with further research to include similar issues as they have been encountered and responded to by other categories of computer user, from office worker to scientist.

Australian artists who have produced memorable and distinctive large scale ink-jet and photographic prints using Live Picture include Les Walkling and Phillip George. Further research would identify their students who over the years have been trained in its use. Also the significant international following of mostly commercial and graphic artists who still use the tool, (though it has officially been withdrawn from circulation), and maintain support for it using a very active dedicated listserv forum.

Other Australians who program their work and are involved in producing software applications include:

- ≡ Jon McCormack, and his Artificial Life interface design which, operating through a graphical menu system, writes code to the non-skilled users specification to create a plant-like growth living within the users computer system.
 - ≡ Greg Giannis has devised a zoomable story-telling application (*AuthorWhere*) which enables the user to place media assets and link them in permutations which avoid the complex business of writing scripts or code a kind of 'n-dimensional' application.
- ≡ Dorian Dowse's random generation of scripts that drive image and sound environments as well as the more recent,
- ≡ 'questionnaire aesthetics' of John Tonkin and his adept use of Java, the closest thing to an open source, cross-platform tool,
- ≡ also used by Melinda Rackham in her '*Mutate*' installation/net art.

- ≡ *Linker* is the name of a piece of freeware developed in Britain (utilising Macromedia 'Director'), that has a similar intention but uses a virtual 'flat-space' within which to create the links. (Appendix F)
- ≡ Gideon May is a commercial programmer based in Amsterdam who works on a regular basis with artists (often in residence at ZKM), to write 'dirty code'. (Appendix G)
- ≡ John Simon, an American art history and software engineering graduate (Appendix H).

The notion of socially responsive software has been part of the development of the IT industry. Through diversity, innovation and close cooperation between code-cutters and users, socially vigorous practitioners have (often unaware), informed and guided corporate interests. From Don Rittner's ecolinking work of the early 90s through to the recent Free Software Foundation Europe.

In a series of presentations during February 2001 at *transmediale.01* media arts festival in Berlin, the theme was Do It Yourself!

To what degree does software determine the structures and potentials of technically based communities? What will be the social design of future

political processes? Will political representation become as virtual as online voting? How can software be used not only to support, but also to catalyse social processes? How do social standards of commitment and responsibility work in an environment where anonymity and fluid identities are a given?

The topics raised by these questions were addressed through presentation and panels involving some 16 speakers and included the consideration of six websites submitted for the Artistic Software award. (Appendix J)

Australian adherents of this movement include:

- ≡ Danny Yee, an advocate of the free software movement, (*"free speech, not free beer"*) working with Community Aid Abroad developing websites and software;
- ≡ Con Zymaris who posits in the Linux forum that *the open source/freeware software development and distribution paradigm, will eventually become dominant...[and]... this will occur as an inevitable process, slowly at first, then with almost critical-mass motion.*

≡
And overseas:

- ≡ Matt Fuller, in Britain, Florian Cramer and Friedrich Kittler in Germany, and the Dutch-driven desk.org net cultural production site, (WikiWorks software).

Conclusion

This is a complex topic, not fully covered in this short report, requiring more research and more thought about how the 'dry' subject of software as an extension of our urban environment can be made engaging. An exhibit would have to focus on the way software design affects the way users experience application options, interface layout and the outcomes achieved (or frustrated). These are now commonplace contemporary activities not only in the urban environment but anywhere on the planet where a telephone can connect to a computer.

Exhibition design and layout could itself mirror the issues affecting design processes in general such that interaction with the exhibit is integrated with the exposition about interaction with the computer. Associated seminars and possibly a conference would focus on these aspects of design and examine how the internet environment is and can be used for the sharing of open source code projects, such as the engineering of software by artists and scientists. It is clear from this initial foray that there are more protagonists out there who are 'on the case' than the Photofile articles anticipated.

It would be an opportunity to exhibit a visual myriad of work in various forms - print, (both fine and publishing), tape and Web - and assess how the work of the software engineers and marketing people who have released their tools to the users have impacted upon the results seen on wall or screen.

Proposal 3 : Illuminations – Integrated Media

Illuminations (<http://www.illumin.co.uk>) is a London-based company of filmmakers and artists at the very forefront of the integration of cinema, television and on-line program making. With a 20-year history of award-winning production in the music and arts television sector, the group was commissioned by the BBC in 1994 to develop and testbed live-to-air the first television programs to link with the audience over the internet. This level of innovation has continued into the range of projects currently being developed.

An initial email received the following response by return post in November 2000:

Mike,

Thanks for this - really interesting proposal, and I'm happy to work on the first stage - more detailed response will follow.

John

My initial request to them was based upon extracts from a paper by John Wyver, *Moving the image: Visual Culture and the New Millennium*, given to the Sixteenth Annual Conference of Chart, Courtauld Institute of Art, September 1 2000.

My company Illuminations has been working with the University of Nottingham, BT [British Telecom] and others over the past four years researching Inhabited Television, which in essence combines traditional broadcasting and networked 3D shared virtual worlds... from The Mirror in early 1997 to the recent experiment Avatar Farm. And I want to speculate on how this form might be used in education and in museums and on television to achieve that idea of 'You Are There' in relation to history and art, in our new research project Pompeii.

One particularly powerful advantage of Inhabited Television and other such new media forms at the conjunction of broadcasting and online is the centrality of participation, offering the potential for collective learning and communal creation with audiences.

.....

Pompeii is conceived initially as a four-part television series recreating – with strikingly detailed computer graphics – everyday life in the Roman town. In the television films, these graphics are combined with evocative film images of Pompeii today, of its ruins and frescoes, and of the fragments of everyday existence – a bowl of eggs, a plate of walnuts, a calcified bread roll – preserved amongst the volcanic ash.

The aim would be to provide the most detailed imaginative recreation that television has attempted of daily life during the Roman Empire.

.....

For Pompeii of course is conceived with Inhabited Television as integral, so that alongside the television films either the Web or a local area network could allow viewers themselves individually to explore the streets and homes of the city, to meet and converse with the central characters of the series and to take part in their day-to-day activities. This parallel application of Pompeii could run at home with a DVD player and on the web, and it could also be the focus of a location-based attraction, in for example a museum.

In the context of the debates about the future of media in Australia this seemed pretty exciting stuff.

The material in Appendix K describes Illuminations in their own words and pictures and comprises:

Two brochures – one about the Illuminations Group, the other about eRENA, the ECC funded long term research group of which Illuminations is a joint partner;

VHS videotape, with four sections, each about 6 – 7 minutes.

Conclusion

The development of this proposal with the CEO of the Illuminations Group has been much delayed due to pressures at their end. At the time of printing, (the latest state of discussion with Illuminations), my recommendation to ACMI would be to embrace the considerable amount of IP and cutting-edge research that their associated projects have engendered.

Though the Illuminations Group and their corporate presentation approach does not (possibly) leave an immediately attractive impression, it has enabled them to have survived for nearly 20 years by selling programs and films, whilst avoiding becoming just another one of the many media production companies now operating in Britain. The multi-faceted aspect of their enterprise will be attractive to the media and computing industry in general in Victoria and, given Illuminations extensive use of the internet, enable the development of a significant on-line presence for the exhibit.

The Gallery exhibit would show aspects of their output in relation to the more experimental and testbed work that genuinely sets out to involve as wide an audience as possible in the potentials for the newer information and entertainment technologies. The focus of the exhibit would therefore be on the 'inhabited television' work, but could be contextualised with related interactive projects and screenings of the linear output both film and television. This could be presented within the genres they distinguish: about contemporary culture, general documentaries and feature length films, (which could include the extraordinary work of the Czech animator, Jan Svankmayer).

John Wyver has indicated that Illuminations are discussing an exhibition proposal with ZKM, who are also one of the eRENA partners. This would be for 2002/3 and investigating ways in which

the two exhibitions could be linked, (financially, logistically, virtually!), he has suggested should be explored together with ACMI.

Proposal 4 : PathScape

PathScape - pathways through an Australian landscape is an interactive multimedia work which explores images and sounds from a part of the coastal plain of SE Australia, the location of belief and identity for both the indigenous and non-indigenous people who live there. Through a dynamic and interactive process of presentation, intersections are made with interpretations and mediations about The Land, its many appearances, and its many histories.

The project has been in production for eighteen months in two phases: first prototype (SonteL) and amended prototype (PathScape Phase 1), being completed in July 2000 with a proposal for completion funding to the AFC. The production crew of Mike Leggett, Brad Miller, Adam Hinshaw, Bruno Koenig, Kathryn Wells and Alex Davies heard in January 2001 that the AFC do not wish to invest further in the project, in spite of personal complements about the prototype. This decision is currently the subject of an appeal.

Currently in deliverable in CD-ROM format, the project has been designed and programmed so that the completed project can have several modes and kinds of delivery. The second phase of development re-designed the underlying structure and employed .xml protocols to enable on-going content amendment as well as enable multi-platform delivery including the Web.

The final phase of completion for which funding is being sought will complete all navigational options, extend from the sea horizon to the ranges and expand the number of narratives from 30 to approximately 100. This version is intended for large-screen projection and surround sound.

(See more in the completion proposal document, Appendix L – a demonstration of the prototype can be arranged).

The Web version that was proposed (also rejected by the AFC in February 2001) would develop the option for users to deposit written, sound and visual material as part of the site. (See Appendix M)

The programmer and I are also looking at ways in which the software engine could be utilised by other collections of multimedia material to provide access based upon the time/space paradigm employed in PathScape.

Other Proposals – some Notes

Biosphere – hearing that ACMI has already undertaken advanced research on the *E-co-systems* exhibit, I have not undertaken any further research of my own. Based upon my visit to *Ars Electronica - LifeScience* in 1999, I would be very happy to comment on and possibly add to your own research.

Videotage – in spite of making approaches, I have heard nothing further from this Hong Kong group, though I do know that they have been very busy with several local and international events which have to be managed by an extremely small staff of less than 2 people operating from temporary premises. They are currently developing links with other Asia Pacific nations including Japan and Mexico – quite possibly an exhibit concerned with artists in the Pacific Basin would be a more realistic and viable approach to take? (See Retarded Eye conclusions.)

Digital Migrants – again, you have research underway in this area. I would like you to consider (as part of a group show / screening?) the following artists, details about whom I can provide:

Malcolm Legrice (GB): senior artist (now Professor at Central St Martins, London Institute), who jointly established the London Film-makers Co-op from which workshop flowed a cornucopia of artists' films between the late 60s and early 90s. Legrice was also a member of the London Computer Arts Society in the late 60s incorporating digital output into the films. More recently he has continued experimenting with digital editing systems. Also author of *Abstract Film and Beyond* (1976)

Takahiko Imura (JP): probably the best known of this group, winning prizes for experimental film in the early '60s and '70s, having his video pieces widely exhibited and collected into the '90s, and more recently, producing two widely seen CD-ROMs: *Observer/Observed* was made alongside, 'Interactive: AIUEONN Six Features'. (I reviewed these in Leonardo LDR – Appendix N – CD-ROM available.)

Michael Snow (CN) has been working on some digital things - the stretching sequence in *Presents* about 20 years ago apparently gave him some ideas which he thought technology has got the tools to handle now.

Peter d'Agostino (US) has worked extensively across the mediums of film, video, digital and installation since the early 70s. More recently his work has responded specifically to the technologies which have extended our media and telecommunication environment in relation to the messages and images which they deliver for mass consumption. (Retrospective catalogue available)

Dirk de Bruyn (AU), Michael Buckley (AU), Michael Hoolboom (CN) and Michael Maziere (GB) are mid-career film and video artists who are increasingly utilising digital technology in their work.

I have not really spent a lot of time on this proposal as you informed that work was already in progress on this area. But I would be happy to contribute further to your research in this area if the exhibit is to materialise.

Film & Video Umbrella are a London-based group acting as 'animateurs' within the exhibition and screening of artists' time-based projects sector. The emphasis of their operation is the commissioning, installation and promotion of work by British media artists, (including the expat Australian, Professor Simon Biggs), throughout the British Isles and more recently, around Europe. Current projects include web-based work as well as those employing CD-ROM, digital video, film and video.

Of the artists who exhibited as a result of their work during 2000, the following would be worthy of further research for the Gallery:

Simon Robertshaw - Robertshaw's installation works over the last ten years have been informed by the history of medicine, psychiatry and genetics, and have frequently incorporated historical records and documents and other 'found' sculptural/object elements in combination with video and digital material. What has become increasingly important in Robertshaw's recent practice (TRACE ELEMENTS) is the significance of the object in relation to the artwork, with video operating on a spatial/sculptural level rather than on a theatrical one.

Alan Currall ENCYCLOPAEDIA is a droll and disarming artists' CD ROM work in which a series of sound-bite entries on various specialist subjects are provided, not by recognised pundits, but by a number of non-experts whose knowledge and opinions have influenced the artist in some way.

Others include:

- Michael Curran and Imogen Stidworthy - CLOSING/CLOSE BY
 - Isaac Julien & Javier De Frutos - CINERAMA
 - Matthew Cornford & David Cross - CHILDHOOD'S END
 - Jayne Parker - FOXFIRE EINS
-

Canadian Interventions would cover the extraordinary developments in Canadian government support for screen and visual art culture over the past 50 years and the rich set of outcomes for a population, not unlike Australia, spread across a large continent - parallels have of course been drawn between the Canada Council and the Australia Council. Canadian policies have spawned or created a climate for the growth of a wide variety of institutions, from the Canadian Film Board, the Banff Centre, ex-Centris, the Inuit network, ISEA-SAT, etc, to Western Front and A-Space. Mature artists such as Michael Snow, David Rokerby and Robert Lepage have used media in extraordinary ways that have gone on to be widely exhibited though rarely seen in Australia.

The exhibit, highlighting work made for the gallery and that made for the cinema, would seek to place the work in the context of public support for experimental forms - of art and of organisation.

Lesser-known artists include Mark Lewis whose PEEPING TOM could fit interestingly into a criminality theme. It is a large-scale projection work that extends Lewis' investigation into what he terms the 'parts' or 'bits' of cinema. Lewis has used the full apparatus of commercial cinema to make, literally, 'bits' of films: title sequences, endings, intermissions, inserts into existing films and so on. PEEPING TOM continues this preoccupation through the creation of a short five-minute work that takes its title and its inspiration from Michael Powell's seminal 1959 psychological thriller, 'Peeping Tom'.

Powell's 'Peeping Tom' is the story of a young film-maker called Mark Lewis who, in pursuit of the ultimate image of fear, films the death of the young women he murders with his specially modified camera and tripod. These filmed images of death are part of a larger 'documentary' that Mark Lewis is making: a documentary that also includes footage of the discovery of the bodies, the police investigation and pursuit of the killer, and the filming of Mark's own death/suicide.
