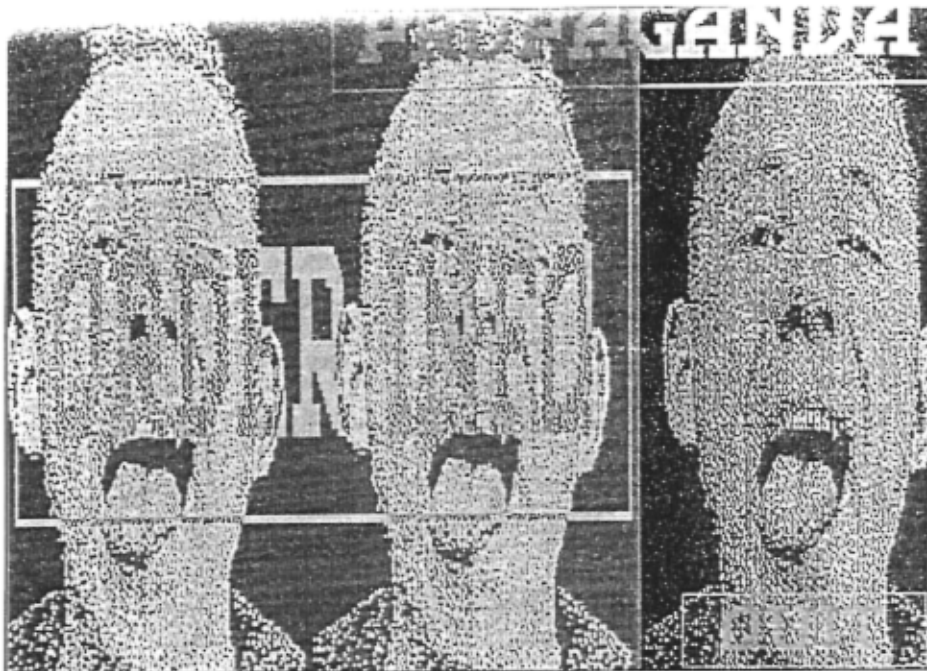


MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Media CAPITAL Q - XTRA

Date APRIL 5, 1996



From Neuro Enema Amalgamated's *Blam! 1* CD-ROM

CD-ROMs: *doing art*

Burning the Interface
-International artists' CD-ROM-
At the Museum of Contemporary
Art until 14 July

ART

by Paul Andrew

Picture this. A young mother enters an art gallery with her girlfriend and their two children. The gallery attendant tells the children they can't touch the art on the lower floors but they can touch the art on the upper levels as much as they like. No prizes for guessing which floor the kids want to race to. This anecdote is an everyday experience for frazzled MCA gallery attendants.

Burning the Interface is the Museum of Contemporary Art's latest extraordinary offering, ideal for kids and kids at heart. Like it or not, there is a lot riding on the wave of multimedia. For some it is being touted as the linguistic coup that magically changes art from noun to verb, hands-on and user-friendly, interactive and self-governing. For others it is a new media that, like film and video, has become a linear recording art for all other art-forms or a new groovy frontier for advertising.

Burning the Interface is a survey of recent CD-ROM work from artists around the world who were solicited via the Internet. The result is a miasma of screens, mice and CD-ROM covers that has already attracted crowds eager to get their hands in the

muck of technology and to navigate some of the many concepts developed by artists who are exploring the territories and imaginations of digital artists.

This reviewer had to visit the exhibition several times to get near the art, and even after several attempts could only engage with the work vicariously. So much for interactivity.

So what does CD-ROM art offer that other art can't? Well, apart from a mouse and mouse pad, many of the artists have included random programs which allow users to create their own images at the click of a button. These images are still from the artists' repertoire, and it is the assemblage of these images or the process which has become interactive.

Australian artists are represented including Brad Miller's beautiful *A Digital Rhizome*, John Collette's *30 Words for the City* and Linda Dement's macabre *Cyberflesh Girlmonster*. Like any survey, whether it's CD-ROM exhibitions or queer films or installation art, institutions are never quite happy to provide an entire exhibition of Australian work. Surveys like this are still predicated by the exotic, a concern for outmoded geographic territories rather than information based territories.

This is not to dismiss the fascinating range of works from overseas, especially the work of Luc Couchesne and Nino Rodriguez or the complementary array of mediamatic publications and CD-ROM zines and compilations. John Collette, who

was recently interviewed on the *7.30 Report*, put it succinctly when he said new technologies, unlike film and other art-forms, were developing "like a grass fire" on a number of fronts all at once. Clearly, it is one of the most interesting aspects of information technology.

Perhaps another reason this exhibition is causing a stir is that it is not unlike the dawn of cinema, fraught with wonder, magic and dread by its earliest audiences. Like CD-ROM technology, it was a new media that challenges notions of representation, reality and belief.

Of course, one of the big differences is the tactility of new technologies. Soon technology will be more sophisticated with voice- and thought-activated interfaces. But for the moment, the consumer market is all systems go for getting art back into the fingertips.

Burning the Interface is an extraordinary exhibition because it also questions the loss of innocence. It invites kids at heart to get back into the swing. This is arguably not something it has set out to do, but the idea of collapsing the schism between art and wannabes seems very attractive to a lot of people who were very happily interacting while others of us interacted vicariously. In fact, the exhibition seems to suggest that what is lost is not so much innocence but performance. *Burning the Interface* reminds us that art is a verb, and this exhibition is already well onto its way to retrieving performance from the clutches of apathy and indifference. ■

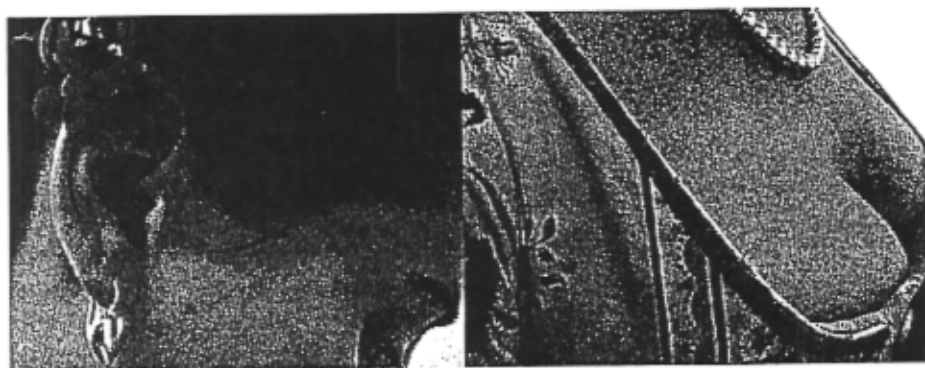
Burning the Interface
<International Artists' CD-ROM>
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney,
27 March–14 July 1996

making strange making strange

darren_{tofts}

Burning the Interface is a most welcome and timely event, for it responds to the hottest question on the artistic CD-ROM FAQ: where can I see this stuff? The art of CD-ROM, or 'interactives' (the term coined to suggest its distinctive poetics), is still in the craft stage of its development, and as such is a rarefied practice, more often heard of than actually encountered. With the exception of a few independent pressings and limited issue titles published by magazines such as *Mediamatic* and *artintact*, the majority of interactives to be performed in this exhibition are one-offs, genuine experiments or prototypes of artistic composition in a new medium. Given that such work requires the intermediate technology of the computer, and usually a high-powered type at that, it is hardly surprising that interactives have acquired a considerable mystique within the popular imagination. Indeed, this exotic aura is one of the first things to be reinforced on entering the exhibition: 'Take your time—these are not computer games'.

Curator Mike Leggett has done an admirable job in amassing such an eclectic range of work from what is still too early to be called the 'field'. The exhibition brings together recent and ongoing work, as well as some of the acknowledged, pioneering forays into interactive virtual spaces, such as David Blair's monumental *Waxweb* (1991–1996) and Troy Innocent's techno-surreal *Idea_ON>!* (1992–1994). The work of over 100 Australian and international artists is represented on 30 CDs, astutely networked to maintain a strong sense of space within the gallery: the curators have limited the number of computers to small clusters, randomly placed like little islands throughout the three main rooms (the only exception is *Mnemonic*



Madame Basile Turin, 1728

Jean-Louis Boissier, *Flora Petruscularis*, 1993, (from *artintact 1* pub. by ZKM, Karlsruhe), still from interactive CD-ROM

Notations V, by Phillip George and Ralph Wayment, which occupies a single installation space of its own). The exhibition provides the opportunity for the general public, emerging CD-ROM practitioners and students of new media arts to have a good look at what all the fuss is about. For this reason alone it deserves the success it is having (within 15 minutes of opening on the day I saw it the place was buzzing with the curious).

The overall installation and design of the exhibition is subtly conducive to a meandering experience, suggestive of the art itself—one wall note advises that like the artists, we should be prepared to take risks. In an artform still in its infancy, it is preposterous to talk of 'purists'. However there are

many critics and artists alike who would argue that taking the plunge into a-linearity is the only way to experience this art. In a survey exhibition of an emerging art form, seen by many of its patrons for the first time, and designed to increase public access to interactives, it would be silly to court alienation and disorientation, especially when these qualities are potential features of the medium itself. Mike Leggett and MCA curator Linda Michael have sensibly catered for the wary and the inexperienced by providing 'user's guide' sheets, containing handy navigational tips for each individual work (more experienced interactive nomads can get on and make their own maps). In this cybernetic world the human element was reassuringly present, with helpful assistants on hand to get you out of, or into, an interfaced situation. Scanning the screen of Dorian Dowse's impressionistic fractal study *Omtiji* (1994–1996), I was politely informed that 'this one's not interactive. It just goes on and on'.

Burning the Interface is timely in another sense, for it provides the opportunity for some solid, critical thinking about the current status of the 'art' of

interactives. The overall quality of the work is uneven, which is reasonably to be expected. Some works were hard to leave, and the experience of immersion was vivid and compelling. Others, however, were banal and offered little to captivate, and became tedious in their routine demand to be pointed at and clicked ('earth-shattering' was one of many ambient sarcasms I heard).

The vocabulary of multimedia composition is at this stage very limited, and is largely software driven. Most interactives declare the tell-tale traces of Director, Photoshop, and Illustrator, as well as the techniques of cut and paste/drag and drop.

The best conceal their technological genesis, however, and do not distract the explorer with the "boredom of their conveyance" (to use Francis Bacon's phrase). Similarly, the range of navigable spaces seems to be developing into a limited regime of generic types: the abstract, mutating field (George and Wayment, *Mnemonic Notations V*, 1992-1996), the archival database (George Legrady, *An Annotated Archive from the Cold War*, 1993-1994), the cryptic narrative (ScruTiny Associates, *ScruTiny in the Great Round*, 1993-1995), the labyrinthine world (Brad Miller, *A Digital Rhizome*, 1993-1994), and quirky, anarchic metaspaces, preoccupied with the poetics of the interface (SASS, *Anti-rom*, 1995).

Within this typology certain works clearly stand out by virtue of their sophistication, invention, and overall imaginative integrity, as well as combine more than one if not all of these generic features:

two CDs distributed by *Medianatic* magazine (Gerald Van Der Kaap, *Blindrom*, version 9, 1993, V.O.L.V.O / Airbag, Paul Groot and Jans Possel, 1995), Brad Miller's Deleuze inspired *A Digital Rhizome*, and SASS' *Anti-rom* are good examples. They bring to the fore the distinctive pleasures and identifications of interactive multimedia, and show up the more pedestrian attempts that do little more than go through the motions of doing the multimedia thing (such as Gary Danner's and Elisa Rose's self-promotional, *Station Rose—Icons, Morphs and Samples*, 1994-1995). The worst aspect of interactives is the reduction of artistic expression to an inventory of effects, of shallow spectacles of morphing, 3-D texturing, and hot-spot mapping. These effects might evoke a kind of tepid charm, but usually betray a paucity of genuine creativity. Charm will always be overwhelmed by the one quality to which all interactive art must aspire—strangeness. In a new medium that draws on extant media, recombines them, and blends them into the alternative world of virtual image-making, interactives need to embrace peculiarity and otherness. The work of Linda Dement (*Cyberflesh Girlmonster*, 1994-1995), and more particularly Troy Innocent, is representative of the engaged strangeness that distinguishes interactives from other artforms. These works

Tamás Waliczky, *The Forest*, 1995. (from *artintact2*, pub. by ZKM, Karlsruhe), still from interactive CD-ROM





Michael Buckley, *The Swear Club*, 1994.
still from interactive CD-ROM

invite us into a disorienting world that is immediately compelling, and keep us there through the gravity of energised curiosity, the sensation of not knowing what will happen next, nor what you are getting yourself into.

A notable stylistic innovation involves the disappearance of the computer's hardware, as in *Mnemonic Notations V*. As with Graham Harwood's *Rehearsal of Memory* or Jon McCormack's inspirational *Turbulence* (neither is exhibited here), the minimalism of the interface and its virtual representation on a large screen directly in front of the user heightens the sense of individual agency, of encounter with(in) a simulated space. Together with Agnes Hegedüs' extraordinary *Handsight* (1992) (featured in the MCA's concurrent *Phantasmagoria: Pre-Cinema to Virtuality* exhibition), these works perhaps anticipate the near future of CD-ROM interactives, where the interface is not only getting more subliminal but, as in the case of *Handsight*, involves more of the body in an active, physical way (in *Handsight* the user navigates a virtual world by means of an eye-ball-shaped interface which is moved around a transparent sphere).

Experimentation was also evident in some clever re-thinking about the point and click mode of navigation. A number of works implemented horizontal and vertical scrolling, which offered a more flexible, intuitive means of moving around and through a virtual space. Similarly, Jean-Louis Boissier's elegant *Flora Petriuscularis* (1993) exploited the cinematic properties of a split screen interface, in which images change as the cursor slides across the screen.

Mike Leggett's canny, expedient use of the gallery to reach, and perhaps create, a public for this work invites consideration of the important issue of the place of interactive art. Is the gallery the best, or even appropriate situation for it? The spectacle of queues of people peering over each others' shoulders suggests a new shared, public art experience. However, for the person doing the interacting, the pressure to move on and do things to satisfy impatient voyeurs detracts from the patient exploration much of this work demands. While this will be an ongoing discussion, which will only become meaningful once more people are familiar with the diversity of work being produced, *Burning the Interface* has gone a long way to initiate the debate.

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MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Media THE AUSTRALIAN

Date APRIL 12, 1996

SYDNEY ART

BURNING THE INTERFACE, PHANTASMAGORIA, TWISTED

Burning the Interface, Phantasmagoria, Museum of Contemporary Art, Twisted: Art for Children, Dinostore, Newtown.

JOANNA MENDELSSOHN

THE exhibitions of CD-ROM art and other interactive works at the MCA focus the mind on a major problem with these works. The intimate relationship between a mouse and its user depends on having enough computers to go around. In these exhibitions this was not the case, and as some of the computers kept on crashing it was simply not possible to see everything.

In addition, most of the works are so engrossing that once a viewer gains access to a machine they will play it for a very long time.

It is hard to find the language to describe these pieces. As one of my more conservative friends says: "I know it's fun, but is it art?" That is an echo of questions down through the centuries as new forms of art have been explored. It was a question raised in the early years of illustrated books when printers started to make woodcut illustrations. Fortunately for the status of fine prints, Albrecht Dürer was a truly renaissance man, experimenting with the new technology, making even the most reactionary viewer understand that the quality of art depends on how it looks, not on the way it is made.

The relationship between technology and art is a question raised more recently with photography, but this, too, is now recognised as being visually creative.

Computer-generated art relies on more than a single sensation. It can use sound and movement, but unlike cinema, the art can change with the response of the viewer. Viewers therefore can immerse themselves in the art in a way that is simply not possible with single images frozen in time.

The title *Burning the Interface* comes from the technique of making CD-ROMs, of recording the artists' works for posterity on plastic. CD-ROMs appear to have emerged as standard reproductive technology for at least this decade. Their relative stability is a change from earlier computer art, where the technology moved so fast that the continuation of the piece was dependent on the continued existence of particular machines.

Some of the works on view here, including Bill Seaman's *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers*, have an earlier incarnation using slightly older techniques. It is to be hoped that the combination of relatively stable technology and the ever-expanding World Wide Web will free artists from the burden of constantly learning new technology so they can fully explore the possibilities of multimedia.

These experimental works are a necessary prelude to possible great art of the future. *Burning the Interface* ignores the fashionable computer games and follows the other tradition of creating changing images, from the poetic to the confrontational, from the spiritual to the materialist. There is the grainy endless journey of Tamas Walsky's *The Forest*, all in restrained black and white; the throbbing music and images of Gary Danner and Eliza Rose's *Stadium Rose*, and the curiously hand-drawn images of George Legrady's *An anecdotal archive from the Cold War*.

The most engrossing of all is Philip George and Ralph Wayment's *Mnemonic Notations V*. Click an image and the pattern changes, medieval figures emerge, disappear, shrink or are enlarged, Gregorian chants are heard and then vanish. It is curiously hard to write about the seduction of this piece, except to say that because it was school holidays I had my eight-year-old twins with me, and we took it in turns to play this one work for a full half hour. And even then we had hardly started to explore its possibilities.

Because the exhibition is so user-friendly, it seems quite strange that the catalogue is written in deliberately obscure jargon. Somebody should tell the supporters of multimedia art that there is no necessary connection between dense prose and quality.

The continuing debate on the links between mass culture and high art take a slightly different twist in *Phantasmagoria*. The works range from the archaic fantasy of Georges Méliès's hand-drawn images for the 1902 movie, *A Voyage to the Moon*, to Tony Ousder's bizarre floating eyes and faces in *Five Worlds (for Georges)*.

The curators, Peter Callas and David Watson, argue that Méliès's background in magic both created his fantastic visual approach and led to a particular tradition of independent cinema, free from the constraints of the mass market place. Steven Spielberg would probably dispute this, but the exhibition is in itself so engrossing that there seems no point in carping criticism.

Méliès's stills are worth a long look, and the films live again in both videos and screenings. Of the artists whose work is used to support the debate, Toshio Iwai has the most whimsical sense of fun and beauty as he sets up his game of intersecting colours, images, insects and music. This was another one that I was not allowed to leave in a hurry.

School holidays also led me to Newtown's *Dinostore*, which continues an older tradition of handmade art. *Twisted* creates a fantasy children's bedroom with photo montages by Anne Zahalka as well as curious faces by Hugo Weaving, paintings by Max Cullen, ukeleles by Helen Eager as well as other artists. There is a bizarre curly bed by Macgregor Ross and a funky fish tank by Bernie Leishman, but the full benefit of this show of many small oddities is the way it gives a fresh insight into the complex workings of an inner-city culture where the worlds of visual and performing artists meet in a happy collision.

IN BRIEF

● Rosemary Madigan at Itay Hughes Gallery combines her classical restraint with pieces of wooden scrap, dissected wooden spoons and other odds and ends to make the most enticing pastel-scrubbed still-life sculptures. There are also tiny coloured paper cut-outs made into collage on the same theme. Unlike her colleague Robert Kilppel, who uses accident to turn assorted material into his monumental works, Madigan uses similar materials to make her continuing purpose.

● Sydney's Royal Easter Show is over, but Hyde Park Barracks continues with *Going to the Show?* Images and memories of the Show. As well as the memorabilia, freeze-dried fruit, and the wonderfully evocative posters, there is another argument. Ever since 1822, when the Agricultural Society was founded, its aim was to upgrade stock, to encourage farmers to breed from quality animals and to grow the highest yielding seed. There are certificates and photographs, showbags and woudchoppers, celebrating the country's annual reminder to the city that after they are Babe, most pigs turn to bacon.

Burning the Interface <International Artists' CD-ROM>

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney,
27 March–14 July 1996

squatting the media

linda wallace

A characteristic of the virtual class is that it is autistic. It's an absolute meltdown of human beings into these autistic, historically irresponsible positions, with a sexuality of juvenile boys being happy with machines. Shutting down the mental horizon while communicating at a global level and preaching disappearance. And why not, because you've already disappeared yourself... But as the guide at Xerox Parc said, "Who needs the Self anyway?" Privacy for these people has always been imposed on human beings by corporations, it's not something they claim they wanted. The Xerox Parc of the future is not about copying paper anymore, but copying bodies into image processing machines. And who needs privacy in such a situation? They are not employees anymore but missionaries. Think about the various stages of repression, from primitive capitalism, to the limitation of social choices. None of those limitations apply to the virtual class. Their form of domination is psychological repression. They don't have a clear class consciousness. They truly believe that technology equals human freedom.¹

A quick scan around most CD-ROM titles does not give an overwhelming impression of technology equalling human freedom. There are only a few titles which actively try to engage the viewer in a different way, and by doing so, critique the notion of the 'virtual class'. The CD-ROM titles showing as part of the *Burning the Interface* exhibition at the MCA, curated by Mike Leggett and Linda Michael, all do this, albeit in a variety of ways.

It is unlikely that any of the titles in *Burning the Interface* ever made any money back, let alone enough to cover the vast amount of work which has clearly gone into every one of them. To produce works such as these, a new level of technical literacy is demanded of artists, and a new kind of humility. For the CD-ROM of today is extremely



Linda Demerit, *Chlorophyll Generator*, 1993, still from interactive CD-ROM (detail)

limited in what it can technically do—it can only carry around 650 mb of information, so movies are reduced to postage stamp size; it is dependent upon good hardware, so if you view the CD-ROM on anything less than, say, a double or triple speed drive, you are likely to grow irritated with the time it takes for a new image to resolve itself.

All the artists featured in *Burning the Interface* are working within the bounds of a technology, which, in its current form, is no doubt soon to be rendered redundant. It is a (near) dead technology. Either new data compression algorithms or new ways of putting down (burning) information will be developed. In fact, this is on its way with the Digital Video Disc. So what we have here is a slice of technological history—yet these artists have managed to take this soon-to-be-archaic technology, and entwine its surface with informational intricacies with which to amuse themselves and those eager to become dangling flesh from one of the

many Apple Mac terminals by the waterfront at the MCA.

I have been to see this show a few times and every time the terminals are crowded, with those waiting a turn perched like vultures in anticipation of a viewer growing

tired of the assortment of ROMs on any given machine. Often the older passers-by in the museum seem to prefer to watch from afar, foregoing their chance for ROM fascination. Maybe it takes a particular mindset to see these works as interesting, although some are more interesting than others.

There are many ways to begin to critique the works: one can consider the conception of the interface, the navigation tricks and labyrinths, the

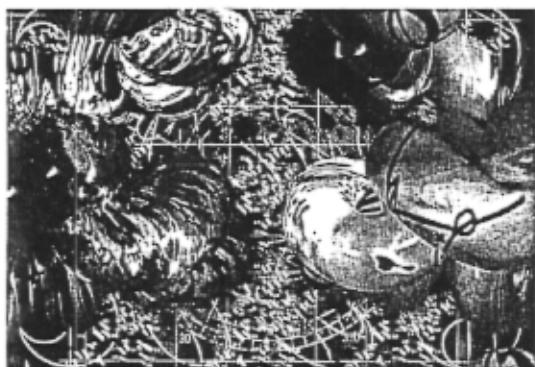
use of time, the use of sound as narrative structuring. In retrospect I like to consider where the various works allowed you to go—that is, to go liminal inside your own RAM brain.

SeruTiny in the Great Round is a pleasurable work. The CD-ROM began as an artist's book in 1992, and grew into a collaborative effort between Tennessee Rice Dixon, Jim Gasperini and Charlie Morrow (USA). It has a medieval sensibility of rich and fecund images on which are superimposed brambles and decay; mythical animals transforming into other equally evocative creatures. This work has an opiated dreamzone feel about it; ironic, given its production was made possible by the sophisticated artefacts of late 20th century rationalism.

Passengen by Graeme Ellard and Stephen Johnstone (England) takes as its starting point Walter Benjamin's use of the metaphor of panoramic vision and the labyrinth in his unfinished text *The Arcades Project* (*Passengen-Werk*). Starting on the tourist platform of, say, the Eiffel Tower, with its ecstasy of aerial vision, the work asks the viewer to follow a series of slowly unwinding threads which end in the depths of the city, usually in the underground railway system.

John Colette's work *30 Words for the City* is another which shares this sense of unfolding intimacy. One of the first CD-ROM artworks produced in Australia, it presents a menu of 'words' through which the viewer can navigate into the experience of life in the subtle body of the hard/soft cities of Tokyo or someplace. It is a poetic and singular piece, almost lonely: as the individual body moves through space, stories unfold as poetic images, text and sound.

The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers by Bill Seaman evokes a similar dreamlike quality. Made up of a menu of 330 words, during the interactive process a viewer can construct word/image/sound 'sentences'. An installation version of this work was exhibited at the Art Gallery of NSW, as part of the 9th Biennale of Sydney in 1992/93. To see it in the small intimate space of the computer is an altogether different experience—the viewer is in control, which is probably the point of many of these



Brad Miller, *A Digital Rhizome*, 1994, still from interactive CD-ROM

works. They are small and personal, the dialogue is immediate and intimate.

It may be a cliché, but it is clear that Australian artists are at the forefront of international electronic arts. Revisiting the Kroker text, perhaps we—global leaders in our rate of take up of new technologies—are also at the forefront of the development of the so-called 'virtual class'.

Some Australian artists maintain a position of 'honoured collaborators' with technology, a kind of technological evolution, while others, like Brad Miller, Linda Dement, SASS, Gerald Van Der Kaap and De-Lux'o seem to reject this notion to take a more non-compromising position—one more akin to the notion of 'Squatting the Media'. As Kroker contends:

when Karl Jaspers wrote Man and the Modern Condition he said that the fundamental act of political rebellion today is the human being who refuses, who says no. It marks the end of any hegemonic ideological position and the beginning of politics again. "Squatting the Media" represents a refusal, and marks a return of morality into politics. It would be important to take practical examples of subversive intentions that operate deeply in cybernetic language itself, not outside of the media-net but inside it.²

It could be argued that Linda Dement's work does this. *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* is a relatively small file size packed with power. Dement scanned in a range of women's body parts during the 1994 Adelaide Festival Artists' Week. Conglomerate bodies were made using the scanned images. These 'monsters' were then animated and made interactive. When a viewer clicks on a body part, the words attached to it could be heard or seen, a video may play, a story may appear or medical information about that particular story may be displayed. Dement says "the user moves blindly between these. There is no menu system or clear controllable interface".

It seems that *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* burned through the interface of public decency. The work had to go before the federal government's Office of

Film and Literature Classification and although not technically classified 'R', it received the equivalent of this rating. The MCA had to 'lock off' the work: anyone who wanted to

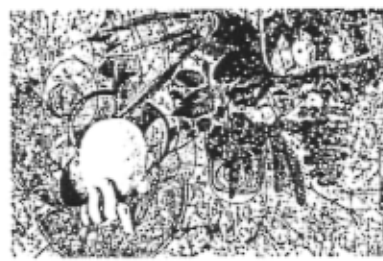
view it had to ask an attendant and keeper of the password to open it for them. To prevent anyone 'impressionable' from seeing the work, the computer shuts down automatically if it hasn't been interacted with for a few minutes.

Since this is a work which invites the viewer to read and linger over information for some time without necessarily interacting, this regime radically interrupted the user's relation to *Cyberflesh Girlmonster*—an intervention in the interactive process completely at odds with the artist's intentions. *Cyberflesh* was shown at last year's Perspecta at the AGNSW with none of this censoring. It seems that the censors have suddenly realised that new media exist, and want their two cents' worth. This problematises the status of the art work: new media works are censored in a popular cultural context, yet exhibited openly in a more rarefied 'art' context. It is also curious that many female artists who work with technology produce work which is a bit too hot for mainstream galleries or exhibition spaces to handle. Without doubt the female interface will generate lots of heat in days to come.

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notes

- 1 Geert Lovink, interview with Arthur Kroker, 'The Theory of the Virtual Class', on-line in CTHEORY. CTHEORY is available, free, by email; send a message to <ctheory-request@concordia.ca> with the word "subscribe" in the body of the message. You can contact CTHEORY through <ctheory@vax2.concordia.ca>
- 2 *ibid.*



Scrutiny Associates, *Scrutiny in the Great Round*, 1995, still from interactive CD-ROM

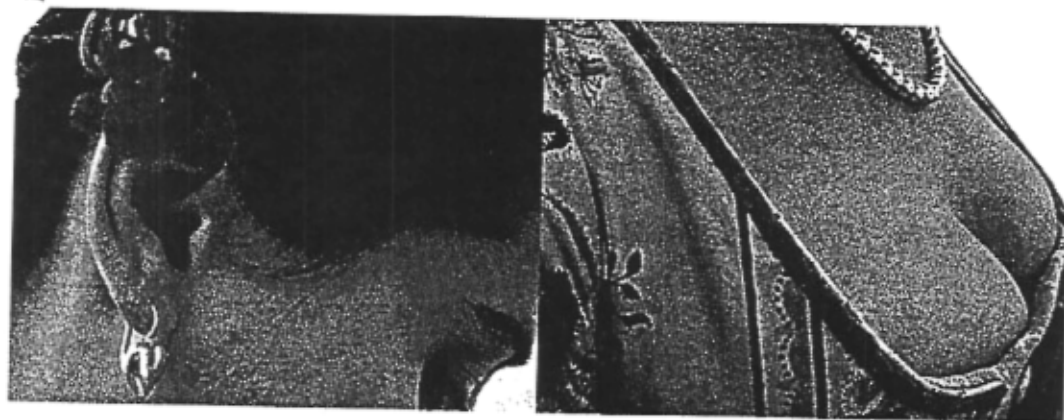
LANDMARK EXHIBITION

Burning the Interface - International Artists CD-Rom
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

Reviewed by Lyn Tune

Flora petrinsult

4



Madame Basile Turin, 1728

This page

Jean-Louis Boissier *Flora Petrinsult*,
interactive multimedia work, 1993, available on
CD-Rom *artintact 1*, published by ZKM
Karlsruhe.

Opposite page:

Left: Nino Rodriguez *Boy*, interactive
multimedia work, prime collaborator John
James Long.

Top right: Luc Courchesne *Portrait One*,
interactive multimedia work, available on CD-
Rom *artintact 2*, published by ZKM Karlsruhe.

Bottom right: Bill Seaman *The Exquisite
Mechanism of Shivers* interactive multimedia
work, 1991-94, available on CD-Rom *artintact 1*,
published by ZKM Karlsruhe.

All pictures this article courtesy Museum of
Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Using the computer as a tool for creation has since its first tentative steps resulted in questions as to the validity of the works as "art". Rather than enter into this discussion I would like to start from the premise that the work is art and that perhaps there is a larger question related to the categorisation of the artist in the shift of work practice fuelled by technological changes.

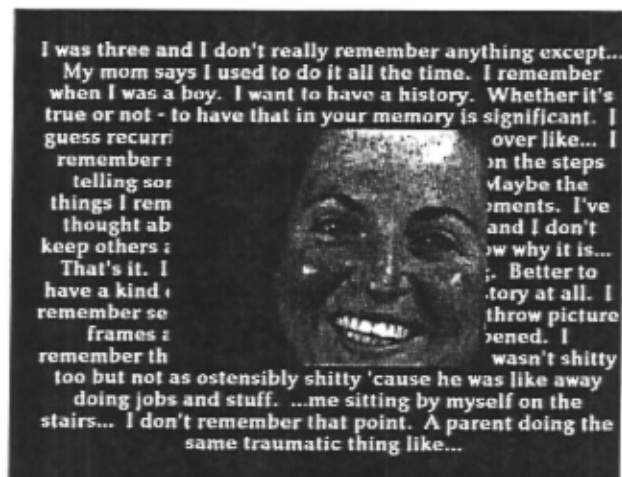
Burning the Interface represents a landmark in the evolution of the discipline. The range of work shown gives us a window to the width of possibilities as the medium is explored and developed. Here is a medium that allows for words, images and sound to be incorporated into an environment where the concept is all important and the involvement of the user a pre-requisite. How does the artist explore this and find a new language to go beyond the conventional static presentation for the viewer? This exhibition showcases a range of working solutions.

Transferring the recent gallery art genre is one solution. The coupling of evocative words and images to evoke a mood in the

viewer has been much explored in static art and here we see it in works such as those by Brad Miller in *A Digital Rhizome* and John Colette in *30 Words for the City*. The result allows the viewer to choose between vignettes, somewhat like walking to the next work in a gallery.

The computer as a movie maker is explored in *Reflections, Abstractions and Memory Structures* by Peter De Lorenzo, the computer's particular texture, pace and transitions from one image to another forming the basis of a click and play solution. Philip George and Ralph Wayment also explore the computer's image processing in *Mnemonic Notations V*, taking it further and coupling it with interaction in a richly woven work of engaging imagery, satisfying in the level of skill and understanding of the medium which allow for focus on the experience not the process of manufacture.

Involvement of the user in an experience not possible through other media brings to the fore the challenges of the maker with the medium, a new challenge in art and in



fact in communication. The making of the work involves the planning of the paths and where they lead, in fact seeing the final vision with sound and narrative in different computations, a bit like a film and a book with user choose endings. You have to plan it from the beginning.

Troy Innocent takes the unique ability of the computer to play games and uses this to toy with, delight and entrance the user. His delight in the medium and its ability to mould 3D shapes, mutating creatures in a world of their own, results in a freer use of interactivity, the feeling more sensual than cerebral.

Linda Dement also looks at the flesh, exploring a personal perspective, challenging but detailed and sumptuous, the presentation of philosophy. Her use of imagery in relation to self carries through to a touch rather than click interaction. The components for the creatures involved friends in producing the work and carries on the community culture of artists such as Vivienne Binns.

The games you can play with cyberspace involve programming, telling the computer what it must do. Very few of the artists in this exhibition incorporated programming beyond "go to's", when I click here you must go to this image or movie. Some added "roll overs" others went further such as *Station Rose* which give us a glimpse of a place and a time where techno ruled. The interface design and layout of their work are close to rock video and have a fluid feel during navigation.

Cyberspace navigation has been explored by some artists in work such as *Lovers Leap* by Mirosław Rogala. The fish-eye lens on the world can be explored by setting the position and direction to expand our view, I looked for more but enjoyed their viewpoint. Graham Ellard in *Passagen*

also explores navigation and achieves the extension of the interface to involve the user. The embracing of the user so that they feel they become part of the narrative is an achievement of *Passagen*, a gentle and evocative trip through three cities. Another use of navigation and narrative can be seen in the work of George Legrady in a *Personal History of the*

Cold War where personal history becomes public history. The chance to explore another time and situation in almost a voyeuristic fashion is involving and educational and gives a breadth which could not be achieved in a static medium, as we browse the shopfronts and look at the bullet holes in a war torn city.

The discussion surrounding the computer as a tool and the ramifications of new communication is incorporated into art theory in works such as *Doors of Perception* a report from a conference, but treated in an entertaining way, where the tool shapes the content. The presentation suggests haiku, the interface a sphere where the many questions surrounding the medium are laid out as discussion topics. There are so many as to defy one answer. My own questions are to do with the possibilities, somewhat akin to science fiction.

Will communication changes result in the decentralisation of the planet's population with less transport requirements as we can communicate from a distance?

Can a government or multinational rule communications or will a new trade freedom arise from anarchy on the internet?



What happens to education?

Will we concentrate on saving the planet and does this tool help?

Does the communications revolution offer a renaissance for artists?

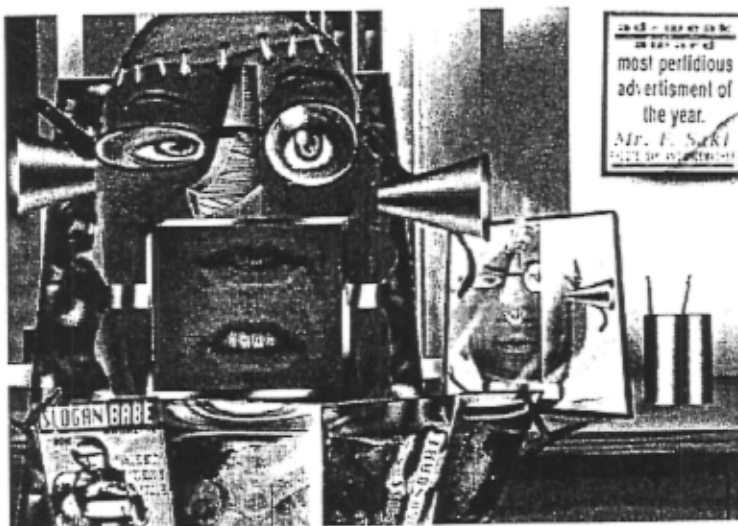
In my work we look for artists on computer to become part of our team; there are very few although many that are learning. I hope also the desire to work commercially grows and involves an attitudinal shift in the academic arts area allowing artists to engage in wider community issues. Marginalisation of the arts due to economic and philosophical differences with the commercial sector has led to the impoverishment of both. I am hopeful that new technology offers a gateway for both to work together. Collaboration of disciplines is part of making new media and perhaps this will lead to crossovers in both sectors.

There are many possibilities for the future and this exhibition is a signpost suggesting directions. Congratulations go to Mike Leggett for overcoming the difficulties in presenting the work and giving the wider community an opportunity to experience the journey. □

■ MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART ■

Media Art v Text

Date Vol 54, 1996



LEWIN ET AL., *BURNING THE INTERFACE*, 1994, SCREEN GRAB FROM CD-ROM.

"BURNING THE INTERFACE"

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SYDNEY
MARCH 27 - JULY 14, 1996

"Burning the Interface," organized by digital artist Mike Leggett and in-house curator Linda Michaels, is the first major international exhibition of CD-ROM art to take place in Australia. A companion show to the more modest interactive installation "Phantasmagoria" on the same floor of the MCA, it is a significant but telling report on how visual artists everywhere are using new technology for personal and professional reasons. State-of-the-art CD-ROMs such as Brad Miller's *A Digital Rhizome*, Michael Buckley's *The Swear Club*, Tamas Waliczky's *The Forest* and Jean-Louis Boisser's *Flora Petriularis*—to mention only five of the 110 exhibits in the show—provide a rollercoaster ride through the highs and lows that currently beset audiovisual fare.

Representing the Czech Republic, Germany, Switzerland, England, The Netherlands, Canada, the U.S. and Australia, most of the exhibits are only three to four years old and reveal the critical and economic limitations imposed within a medium still to be commercially "refined." The curators' decision to select CD-ROMs dis-

playing an experimental emphasis rather than choosing more established or documentary works is therefore an especially brave gesture. By situating a complex and rich array of various interactive and navigational options for the museumgoer to explore, "Burning the Interface" provides a useful but provocative aesthetic experience.

Not all works on display are completely successful. Artists who wish to contribute to the expanding electronic syntax of new media need more than ever to question their own artistic and cultural assumptions. In recent times, the indefatigable Peter Weibel and German media theorist Friedrich Kittler have argued for the necessity of questioning the unchecked spread of commercial software in this area, with the result that some media artists are now employing personal code crunchers to write their own programs. To avoid the hyperbolic sales pitch that usually accompanies new technology is precisely why exhibitions such as these should maintain a wary distance from the vagaries of the market place. Let us pray that the electronic carpetbaggers also get the message.

JOHN CONOMOS

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Media Time Magazine

Date June 3, 1996

A R T

Spirit in the Machines

A Sydney exhibition brings international computer art on CD-ROM to startling, touchable life

By MICHAEL FITZGERALD

EACH MORNING THE TOP FLOOR of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art resounds like a high-tech zoo as 15 computers are turned on for another day of *Burning the Interface* <International artists' CD-ROM>. Some chime, others bleep or warble like strange electronic birds. Even guest curator Mike Leggett sometimes has trouble keeping this rowdy house in order as the machines crash, freeze, or simply defy logic. "It's a space where things happen," he says of the computer interface, where gallery patrons commune with the art. "It's not a space of control."

Indeed, much of the art on display seems to have a life of its own. Queuing behind the school groups that often monopolize the lily pad clusters of Power Macs, there's a sense of subversive machines at play with willing, sometimes hapless participants. When you get to a screen, click a mouse and anything—or nothing—might happen: from the frenzy of *Antirrom*, a randomly selected music video by English group SASS over which you have little or no control, to the stillness of Australian artist Dorian Dowse's *OmTipi*, where a painted outback teepee plays out for 14 hours of fractal ambience. The world's first major retrospective of computer art on CD-ROM (Compact Disc-Read Only Memory), the exhibition, which runs through to June 30, bravely explores a new frontier.

Using software programs such as Photoshop and Director, 100 artists on 30 discs mix picture, text, animation and sound to create a cacophony of multimedia that blurs the border between art and beholder. As this art relies on the viewer's interaction, every experience is unique. "The art object has not talked back in quite this way before," notes curator Margaret Trail, whose current National Gallery of Victoria exhibition,

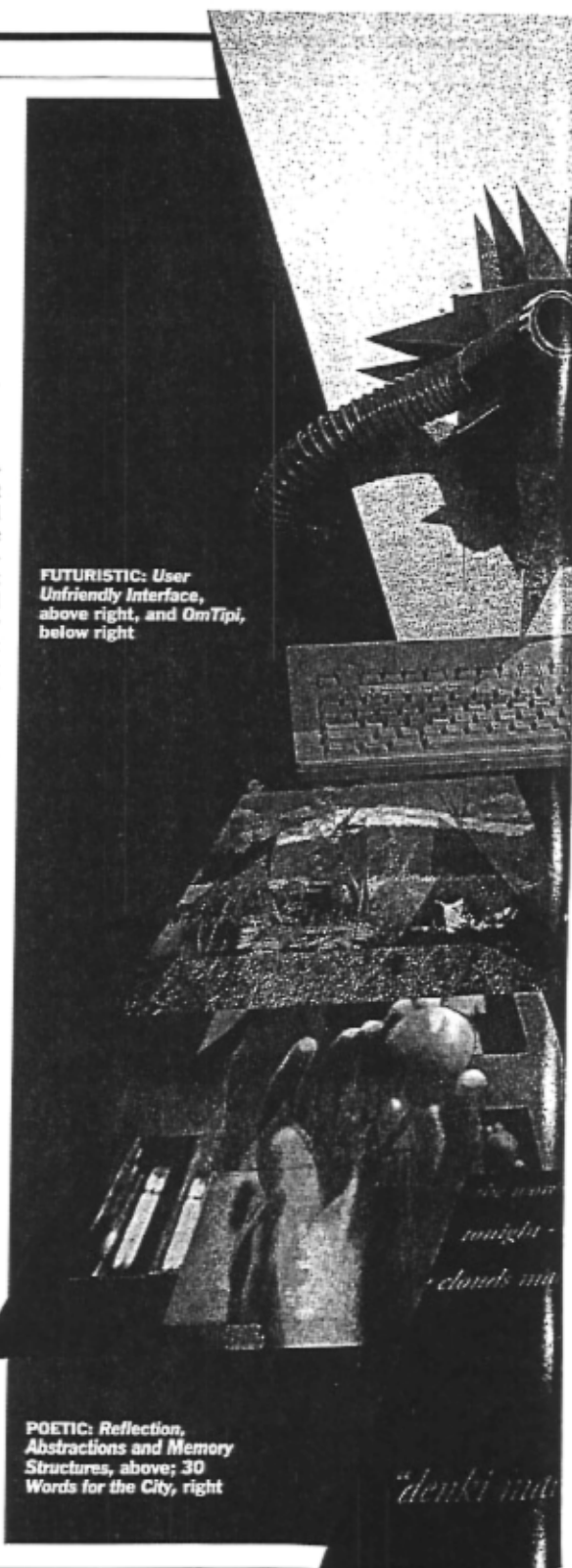
Perception and Perspective, includes computer art in a broader look at art and technology. "A new artistic aesthetic language is emerging," Trail says, "but not only is it very new, and therefore artists are only beginning to work with it in fairly clunky ways, but also audiences don't know how to read it yet either."

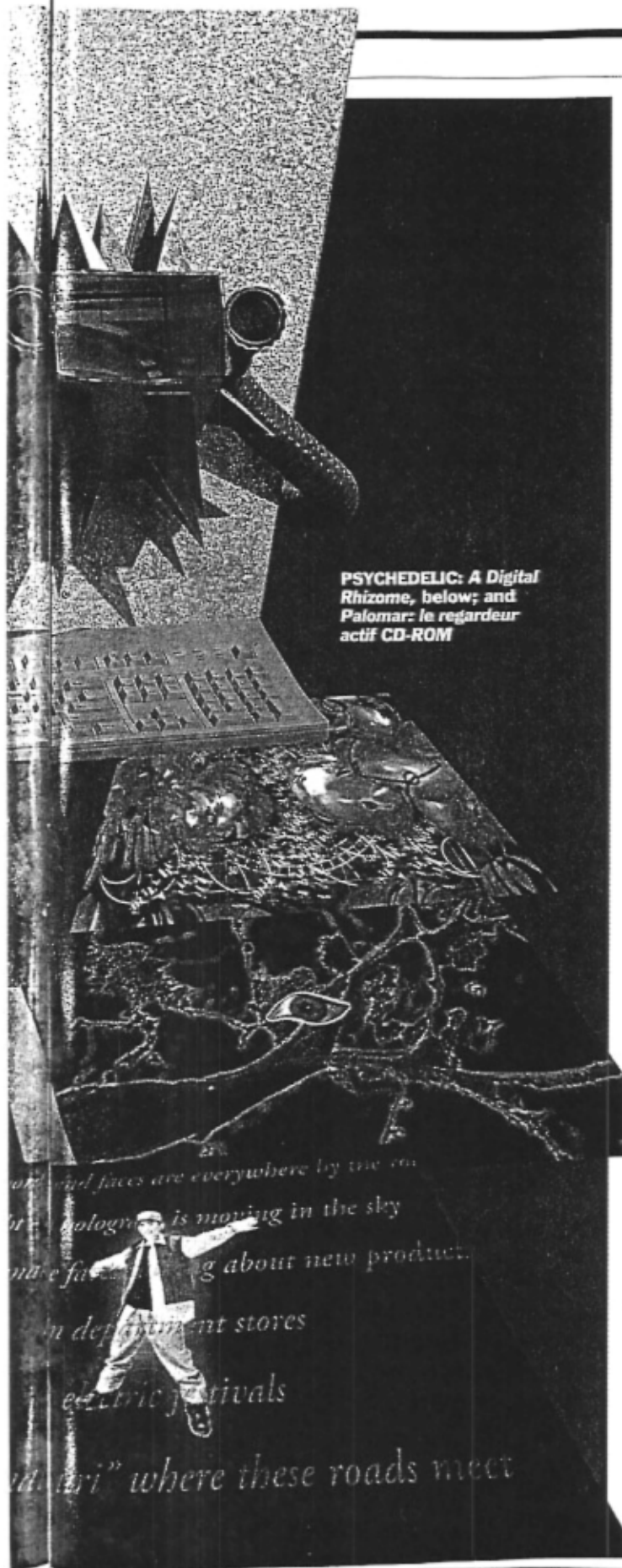
Art has rarely been as talkative as that of *Burning the Interface*. "The next man to touch me dies," growls Linda Dement's *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* when you click on one of the Sydney artist's scanned and animated female body parts. With *Portrait One*, by Canada's Luc Courchesne, you have a virtual conversation with "Marie", a filmed actress who stares out from a black background. "May I ask you something?" she politely inquires. Yes, you click. "Are you staring at me?" she asks. Yes. "I'm looking at your eyes, your mouth, the curve there of your neck. Am I embarrassing you?" Not at all, you insist. "You must be a Virgo with a Pisces ascendant." Much of the work has a peep-show mentality (the American work *BLAM!* makes fun of so-called cyberporn), but when it speaks simply and directly—as Courchesne's does—it is like being in communion with the artist himself.

There is a visceral pleasure in navigating through

FUTURISTIC: User Unfriendly Interface, above right, and OmTipi, below right

POETIC: Reflection, Abstractions and Memory Structures, above; 30 Words for the City, right





PSYCHEDELIC: A Digital Rhizome, below; and Palomar: le regardeur actif CD-ROM

slowly unraveling, web-like worlds. "It's almost an erotic thing where you touch it and it responds, you touch it and it responds," says Dement. Good art takes you on a journey, and on CD-ROM the journey is everything. With the coolly elegant English photographic work *Passagen*, you begin at airliner level in the clouds, choose a destination from London, Paris or Berlin, then slowly descend to the bowels of the city. "You feel torn between the desire to enjoy the city in the distance and to be amongst the angels," says the narrator. In *Haiku Dada*, Melbourne artist Felix Hude wittily charts Japanese modern mores through comic book-style animation. There are few boundaries or inhibitions in cyberspace. "The fact that you're involved somehow, even peripherally, in moving through it makes it feel like a stronger experience somehow," says Leon Cmielewski, whose *User Unfriendly Interface* with Josephine Starrs is a feature of the Melbourne show. Still, the slightly sinister question remains: Just who is in control of the experience here? Sydney digital artist John Colette, who recently established a multimedia department at the Australian Film Television & Radio School, believes interactivity is something of a misnomer. "In reality, the content is pre-determined by the person who produces it, who is ceding navigational control to the user as opposed to some more collaborative, constructive role." For curator Leggett, such art brings the viewer and creator together in an almost psychic union. The result is "something that's in motion, something that's in flux between you as the viewer and what's

happening on the screen and how you are envisaging what is happening in the artist's head."

For some artists, it's the only medium for their message. With *Cyberflesh Girl-monster*—"a kind of Frankenstein thing, but digital," says the artist—Dement combines animated body parts with computer scrolls of splatter-pulp fiction to explore ideas to do with voyeurism and sexual violence. "If I can put all of that madness and messiness and difficult stuff into this nice clean, sleek, beige box, it's much easier to deal with," she explains. In the case of *30 Words for the City*, a computer and mouse seem the perfect medium for John Colette's poetic exploration of alienation and existential disconnection.

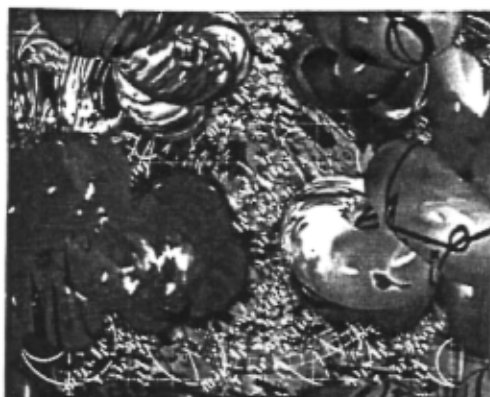
For others, the medium is the message. CD-ROM was designed as an information storage and distribution system, and some artists go overboard with the amount of special effects and labyrinthine detail they cram on disc. It's the technology here that holds your attention, not the art. As *Anti-rom* puts it: "multimedia is endless, restless and useless." But then so is life, some artists might argue, in our virtual-reality age.

It's early days yet, with the medium still defining itself and exploring its possibilities. "I guess it's like if you went back to the early days of cinema, where people just filmed a train going into a station and everyone went 'Wow!'" says Dement. Leggett sees the work on CD-ROM as experiments for an interactive art that will eventually cross over to the Internet. Even he wonders whether a gallery is its rightful home. "I regard this space as a kind of bookshop in which you browse the work and identify the pieces that seem to be of interest," he says.

Perhaps the art's biggest obstacle is a public ambivalent to new technology. Artists Cmielewski and Starrs play up on that mix of fear and fun in *User Unfriendly Interface*. Satirizing the idea that computers are friendly, the pair dress up their installation in a prickly, spiky head-dress. Viewers are then forced to crouch down at a keyboard and peer through a pointy viewfinder. The art is just as uncomfortable, asking the viewer to share their PIN or sexual fantasy and spitting out reams of abuse. "I've got a love-hate relationship with technology," says Starrs. "I'm scared of it and I mistrust it and it makes me paranoid, but I'm a bit sucked in. I do spend a lot of time at the computer." These days that relationship is morphing into a high-tech art that simultaneously talks and sings, confounds and delights. At the MCA, the newcomer risks capture in its bittersweet embrace. ■



NECRO ENEMA AMALGAMATED: *Blam! 1*, 1995



BRAD MILLER: *A Digital Rhizome*, 1993-94



SASS: *Anti-rom*, 1994-95

Reviewing "Burning the Interface" is like trying to turn a Thomas Pynchon novel into three lines of Lorine Neidecker: no lay-off/from this/condensery. It's not just the breadth, there's the depth to consider – 30 discs, over 100 artists, drawn from 14 countries – and the experience, unsettling in other ways. For instance, when I read Douglas Kahn's catalogue essay, I came across a description of the work I'd encountered first – British group SASS's *Anti-rom* – and simply didn't recognize it. On a basic level of content, I mean. It was as if I'd viewed a different work entirely, or made some terrible blunder and gotten it all wrong. But the assumption of shared experience, a common ground from which "we" can wonder, is also interrogated by much interface navigation, with its dual processes of interaction (action via the mouse) and immersion (reflection). Multiple options for beginning engender the necessity of a blind choice, as a way into the maze of possibilities.

My choice to begin with *Anti-rom* wasn't exactly blind, though. Like Kahn, I'm dubious of the importance attached to interactivity – which derives from "the perceived inevitability of technological progress" – and the way it is used to distinguish multimedia from the assumed "inactivity of other cultural forms." So I was immediately drawn to a title upping the ante. Indeed, a big strength of this exhibition was the artists' awareness that despite the use of the multiple artistic forms for which the CD-ROM provides a site – text, images, movies, sound... – its limitations give some pause to democratic hype.

Anti-rom has no narrative as such, certainly no linear one, and there's no clicking on icons or buttons. Rather, a subtle roaming of the mouse over the screen activates "a paradigm of ambient acti-

Burning the Interface: International Artists' CD-ROM Exhibition

CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY
MELBOURNE, NOVEMBER 8-23, 1996

vity," as Andy Cameron puts it – a collage of music, voices, representations, both playful and open-ended. I felt like an aural voyeur, listening in on samples of phone calls, conversations, confessions and bodily emissions, while the red balls shrank to my touch or grew to spell the word WOW. Later, trying to exit, I clicked the top-left corner of the screen, the standard escape from all works, and heard a series of pained or ecstatic expressions – like a joke on the fact that "the extensive dimensions of the whole are never revealed to the viewer." Even if I had world enough and time....

Other works were promising to begin with, like *Blam!* a CD-ROM magazine by Necro Enema Amalgamated. Described as an extension of punk-rave-techno culture in New York, it has a lengthy noisy title sequence, then quizzes the user on things like sexual orientation and age before the "appro-

priate" contents appear. I opted for *N to Interactivity*, then wished I hadn't. It's an awfully long, boring imitation of William S. Burroughs in rhyming couplets. How do I get out of it?

Or, how do I get it to do something in response to repetition. What of the experience of "wait!" when something won't. In *Luc C. Portrait One*, for example. Overtly, this is a work that asks the user to have an intimate conversation with a virtual being (Marie) in a choice of three ages. A series of questions prompts a response, and her series of answers prompts another question, illustrating the service of the interface as a computer function: input-process-output. Of course, the artist has specified (programmed) questions, answers, topics and view options, defining the limits of interaction. Nevertheless, writer Kevin Murray, the "inner ambient trait *One* is its ability to "evoke the storehouse of emotions normally reserved for actions". Hmm. I can't agree. Am I embarrassing you? No, but you might, if we saw each other's body gestures and facial expressions. If I had more than a short moment to decide what to do next, I might have time to participate, being endlessly returned to "excuse me".

Bill Seaman's *The Exquisite Mechanical Shivers* is more satisfying, combining associated sequences of video, music and text. On the black screen, the user finds a series of 10 parts, and above it, 10 small corresponding image frames. By scrolling up or down the screen, one changes the sentence, which can be played with a new set of enlarged video sequences. Playback is relatively slow, at the user's pace, with several clicks for engaging the 330-word poetic menu.



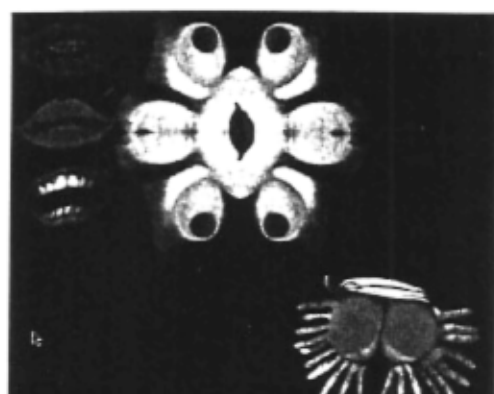
DE-LUXO: *Bar-Min-Skit: Consumer Product*, 1995



LEGRADY: *Anecdoted Archive from the Cold War*



MICHAEL BUCKLEY: *The Swear Club*, 1994



LINDA DEMENT: *Cyberflesh Girlmonster*, 1994-95

it was all the more disappointing when my suddenly flat. The curse of familiarity fell on me, thanks to the insistently stable syntax of poetic sentence, the arrangement, the projected architecture, every noun and adjective in its right place, no matter what "random" or "free" operations occur. Inner ambience, of a depressive sort.

Usually, though, the work of navigation serves the user's instinct, as Leggett argues in his recent essay. "The promise of more to see (the aesthetic drive) and more to follow (the narrative) both propel the interacting navigator forward. Or, like multi-channel television, they simply encourage the easy option of finding something else...." Once our motivation is sparked by the work, the obstacles we encounter may add to the pleasure of engagement. It mustn't be too much thought, when stuck in Linda Dement's *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* with a weird ear that kept popping out furry globules. Besides, I was already hooked to the photomontage of a cunt held by male hands, moving animation like a soft-jaw; I'd found "The Next Man To Touch Me" and activated the desire for revenge in hacking into male parts, sounds and narratives of social realities." So I kept trying, and voilà. In Legrady's *Anecdoted Archive from the Cold War* combines artistic forms to produce a near narrative of the author's family history during their "escape" from Communist Hungary in the 1950s to Montreal. The material (home movies, video footage, family photos, drawings, articles, sound recordings...) is arranged artistically in a floor plan based on an obsolete map of the city. If William Carlos Williams were alive today, and a multimedia artist, he'd make

something like this; various kinds of evidence, texts, voices filtered through the exploring mind. There's an intimate candor in Legrady's use of direct address – "a scene you remember about the escape journey" – which brings up multiple drawings, each the "memory" of an individual, no two the same.

Freshness is also Troy Innocent's, in two works – *Shaolin Wooden Men*, appropriately located in the ToyBox disc, and the more ambitious *Idea On*, with its stage-like totemic, industrial and organic spaces, populated by mutating creatures, sound and zappy text. As the ToyBox artists remind us, to play is to explore and experience, for adults and kids alike. My five-year-old, who knows

her way around the interface as around the school playground, was drawn to the humorous graphics and object icons of Felix Hude's *Haiku Dada: Having Fun with Japanese Culture*. It isn't a *Broderbund*, but she navigated swiftly, hyperlinking, rejecting what didn't interest her, finding what did.

The most celebrated, extensive and ongoing hyperlinked project in the show is David Blair's narrative project *Waxweb*. Like Brad Miller's *A Digital Rhizome*, it makes extensive use of the moving image in relation to text, and mapping their topographies is serious and rewarding business. These worlds within worlds, they're like *Narnias*, which makes me Lucy rather than Dr Who, though I am a time and space traveler. Mr Turnus' onion metaphor seems apt – "yes... except that as you go in and in, each circle is larger than the last." Or is it round and round we go? I came down from the aerial panorama of Berlin to the underground U-Bahn of Ellard and Johnstone's *Passagen*, armchair travel in a labyrinth without end. Except for my own exhaustion.

But as I walked back to the real city, I felt a lightness of being that comes from intense creative work – less a measure of the power of technology than of the skills of the artists in developing the complex transitional medium of CD-ROM in aesthetic directions. If Stephen Holtzman's question – "what means of expression are idiomatic to computers?" – is yet to be answered, "Burning the Interface" takes up the challenge, providing a wealth of options for users, who are essential to it. Thus I reciprocate curator Mike Leggett's vision, his commitment to "interactors," and the open-ended process gains momentum....

AMANDA WILSON

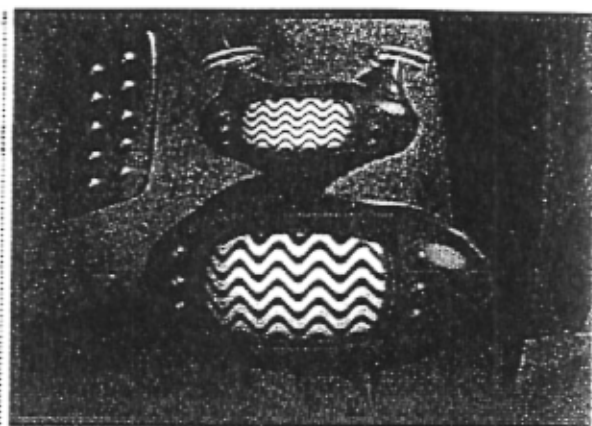


FELIX HUDE: *Haiku Dada: Having Fun With Japanese Culture*, 1993

Experimenta

Electronic arts festival

Emma Miller catches a glimpse of the future, where cutting-edge technology gets a twist from avant garde artists.



Ian Haig

The Experimenta Media Arts Festival has kept Melbourne's lovers of mindbending experimental film, video and multimedia arts busy over the past couple of weeks.

In the post-industrial shell of the Lonsdale Street power station technoheads and technophobes alike weaved their way through a maze of technological creations.

Every nook and cranny of the building was used for ten days of continuous film screenings, interactive and multiple media installations, performances, concerts and link-ups with galleries around the world.

The 'Prince of Sleaze', New York's underground filmmaker and photographer, Richard Kern, wowed viewers at a film and video screening on 14 November.

Film buffs were also rewarded with retrospectives of the work of avant garde American filmmaker Stan Brakhage and Canadian director Guy Maddin.

The festival aims to give audiences a chance to experience cutting-edge innovations and, perhaps, get a glimpse of the future.

The festival's many and varied satellite exhibitions, open until early December, offer hi-tech food for thought.

The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art is exhibiting a range of work produced over 22 years by international media artist Jill Scott.

The exhibition, *The Body Remembers*, combines video, animation and digital manipulation with documentation of her performances. Scott's work dissects the relationships between the body, time, memory and the mass media, and confronts technology with an empowered female viewer.

One piece, 'Frontier of Utopia', allows the viewer to experience bits of women's lives from the 1900s, 1930s, 1960s and 1990s through personal diaries and photos via a touch screen.

Another exhibition, *Somatic Disturbances*, hones in on the notion of 'home' and explores domestic memory fragments and emotion through technology.

Curator Shiralee Saul initially decided to investigate the realms of domesticity because she wanted an issue that was not related to the hi-tech world. 'I thought the home was about as far away from it as you could get but then I realised that the home was packed with digital technology—the video, VCR, microwave, dishwasher, phone, fax, computer,' she said.

The intimacy of existence and the perceived impersonal nature of technology are themes the show explores with works including Sarah Waterson's 'Mapping E-motion'—nine latex robotic breasts which respond to the viewer's interest.

Other pieces include Martine Crompton's interactive work, 'The

Cute Machines', Ruth Frost's exploration of non-existent childhood memories called 'Safe House', and Alison Main's 'Prodigal', which teams 19th century-style pictures with perverse narratives.

'I think all of us have a kind of cosy stereotypical definition of home buried deep inside our brains and this exhibition gives artists' personal takes on it,' Ms Saul says. 'Some are funny, some are challenging and some will really offend people.'

When Ms Saul set out to choose pieces for *Domestic Disturbances* she found that the 'most appropriate' works were by women artists. 'What surprised me was how few men who worked in digital media were dealing with these kinds of very intimate yet universal themes,' she said.

'The women all use computers and it is intrinsic to their art, but none of them talked about RAM and the workings of the technology in the way that men talked about it—they talked about their ideas.'

'It's not an activist show, it's not a social issue show, but social issues are raised and I think people will go away thinking differently and questioning things.'

But *Domestic Disturbances* has no feminist agenda. According to Saul, 'It's not an activist show, it's not a social issue show, but social issues are raised and I think people will go away thinking differently and questioning things.'

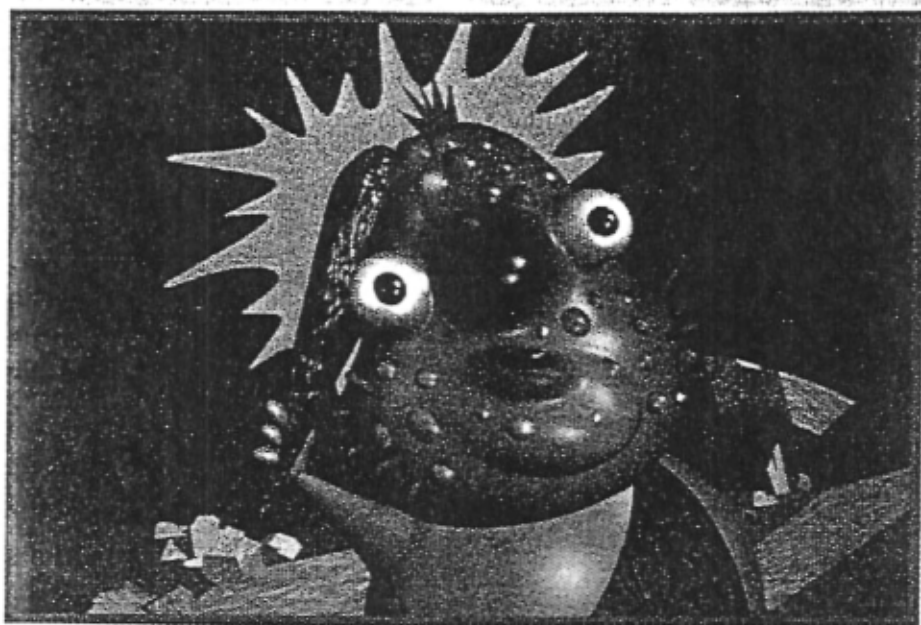
Ms Saul said the concept of 'home' was in constant flux although it was often synonymous with a haven, somewhere safe and comforting.

'But home can be the most dangerous place to be because things like rape, emotional and physical abuse and industrial accidents happen most commonly in the home.'

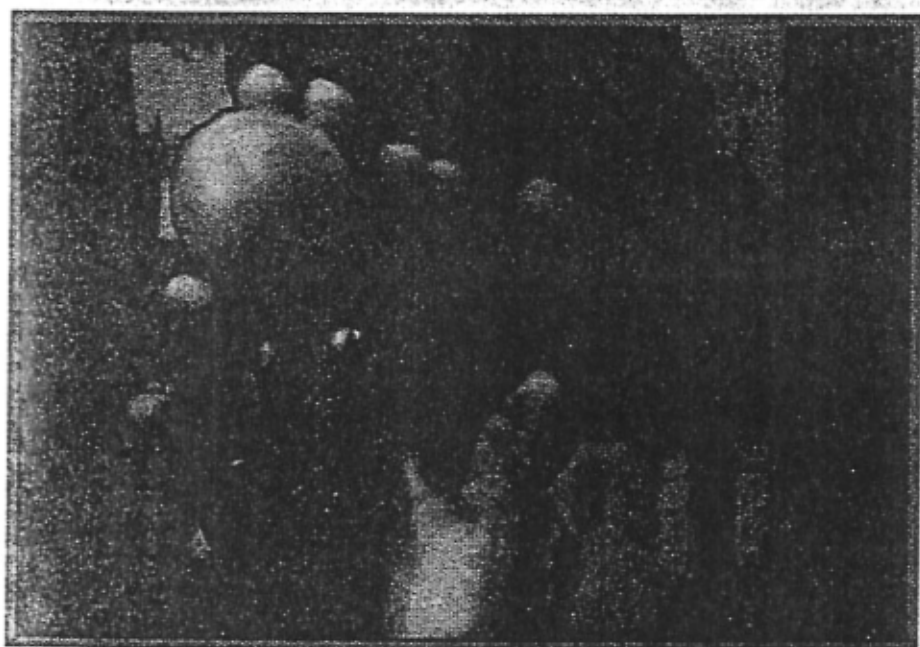
Burning the Interface is the first international exhibition of CD Rom art in Australia. Despite claims by the new breed of Web site artists that the medium is obsolete, curator Mike Leggett insists CD-Rom is not dead. 'The Internet is useful for letting people know about things but it's really quite limited,' he said.

'CD-Rom has lots of mileage left because it is a medium which can deliver rich images and sound.'

The show features overseas and Australian artists including Michael Buckley, Linda Dement, and Troy Innocent—the comput



Astroturf, Ian Haig



Reflections, Abstractions and Memory Structures...RAMs, Peter DeLorenzo

er graphic artist behind many of the Psy Harmonics label's videos and CD sleeves.

Burning and Interface has work from 100 artists from 145 countries and almost every installation requires viewer interaction.

Mr Leggett said the Experimenta works encouraged people to explore and find different ways of interacting, as well as think about the interface between people and computers.

'Computers are becoming ubiquitous and people are now more open and relaxed about what appears on the screen and can appreciate it as artistic—even if it's not in a gilt frame on a wall,' he said.

Mr Leggett said art was 'not always about high art but also about funky places' and that's what made a CD-Rom exhibition both special and necessary.

He said he wanted to explore but also demystify the notion of the 'information superhighway' thrown around in the media but rarely explained.

And he wanted to give CD-Rom artists, who typically spend two to three years on a project, a forum to exhibit and share ideas.

Also part of Experimenta is an exhibition of winners and finalists' work in the ATOM Australian International Multimedia Awards.

Viewers can play on twelve computers and chat to the program designers of the best of the 300 entries to the competition.

Works range from leading designers on corporate projects to primary, secondary and tertiary student winners.

ATOM chairperson George Ciotti said the show includes Australian and international education, interactive entertainment and information multimedia products.

'We were mainly looking for things which led by example, which pushed boundaries and used the technology to tell a narrative,' he said.

'They had to be fully-fledged multimedia products and we were looking at the use of animation, dramatics and entertainment value.'

Mr Ciotti said computers were bringing people and professions together and it was important that children were initiated into the area early.

'It provides access to so many opportunities and is important to professional development,' he said.

'I just hope as technology continues to expand that we don't get a demarcation between rich and poor, with the poor unable to access the opportunities new technology brings.' ▲

The Body Remembers is on exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra, until 1 December.

Domestic Disturbances is at the VicHealth Access Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria, until 8 December.

Burning the Interface is at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, 205 Johnston Street, Fitzroy, until 23 November.

ATOM is at Linden Gallery, St Kilda, until 1 December.

Burning the Interface

International Artists' CD-Rom

An interview with co-curator Mike Leggett conducted by Tony Davies

Mike Leggett is co-curator with Linda Michael of *Burning the Interface*, an international survey of art on CD-Rom recently exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

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 Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) can make that claim for 'electronic art', but we feel confident it is the first major survey in the world (let's not be too parochial about this): that is, of work made for distribution on CD-Rom. But I think that probably the exhibition celebrates the maturing of many aspects of the contemporary media arts.

One of the motivating factors for putting the exhibition together was 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 media. This is not out of some sense of vanity, but for some sense of response to guide the development of ideas.

I began to pick up some of the software tools a few years ago and found out what they could do, sensing that my work over the past 30 years in film, video and photography could usefully develop in this direction.

After a year spent developing a basic comprehension of the potential of multimedia, the directions I could then develop in my own work seemed immense. I needed to see what artists who had been working in the area for awhile were doing - I wanted to save myself precious time! In conversation, a friend at the MCA, David Watson, who is co-ordinating the development

of the cinémathèque, 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?

The MCA was pleasantly surprised at the quality of the work and raised their initial 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



In early 1994 I prepared a description of what an exhibition of artists' CD-Roms might entail and, with the support of the Museum, approached the Australian Film Commission for a modest grant to research the area. This gave me the time to initiate a Call for Proposals and then follow up the considerable response that followed, mostly via the Internet. There were between 500-600 enquiries which produced 130 pieces of work from which a short list of about 50 was selected

catalogue, and work with the 20 discs in the final selection. We had pretty broad agreement about issues as they came up, and other specialists - like the exhibitions manager Louise Pyther and the designer - became involved in the project as momentum picked up. Working with the marketing and sponsorship specialists was particularly new to me and proved to require very little compromise, contrary to most expectations. In fact, the way in

the kind of qualities visual artists demand. And, it will increasingly become more expensive and more controlled.

Butting 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 'analogous' 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, *Butting the Interface* is 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 readjust is that which attempts to distance the fine arts from the popular arts. I feel the MCA 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 I am with a collection of books - different experiences for different moods. David Blair's *Way on Up* 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.

Anybody, by the SASS group of collaborators is 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.

Paul's *Translators* would probably be the most sublime piece, linking interactive touch to visual gesture and incident. Such Gallic style too, like Luc Conchesne's *Portrait*.

It's difficult to be more specific. I think by now I have probably re-purposed the entire exhibition into my mind!

Butting the Interface: International Artists' CD-Rom, an exhibition curated by Mike Leggett and Linda Michael for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, will tour Australia, with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission, during 1996/97. Dates so far confirmed:

Apaparte CMC Adelaide: September 12 - October 5, 1996.

Experimenta CCP Gallery Melbourne: November 7 - 21, 1996.

Perth International Festival PCA Perth February 12 - March 6, 1997.

Brisbane City Hall Art Galleries and Museum March 27 - May 1, 1997.

Other Australian and international venues to be announced.

Further information:

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

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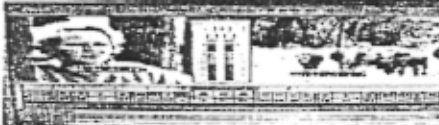
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which the whole MCA operation works is very impressive, given that they have to run things on a commercial basis. You could say I was 'pleasantly surprised' and found the whole period very rewarding.

Burning the Interface has attracted a huge amount of media attention, including mainstream media. Did you expect this level of interest?

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 television or at a trade show, maybe some crappy reference discs at work, is probably the extent of most people's experience. I felt, and still do, that what artists are doing with these tools is where a more widely accepted use of multimedia will be in five or ten years time.

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

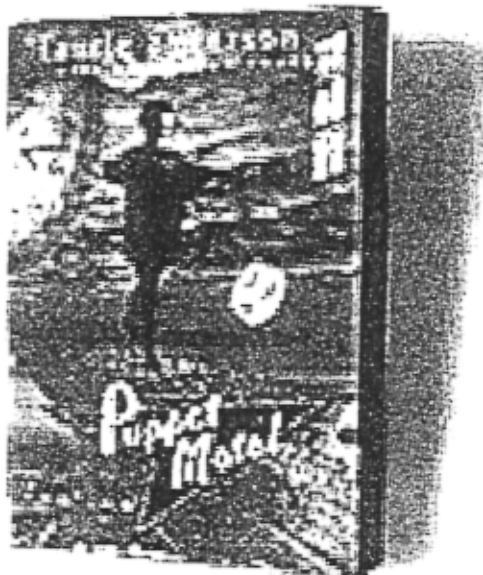
I think the media attention reflected the range of interests that interactive multimedia appeals to: not only the art audience, but the computer industry audience, the nascent multimedia production industry, the education industry, as well as the genuine curiosity people have for social phenomena they hear about but don't see, let alone experience.

Individual reactions have been very broad but I haven't encountered 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 of 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 people would choose to interact and immerse – any more than you would choose to read a book in a bookshop. The function of the exhibition is 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 at how few of the discs in the show are able to be put on a shelf. But on the other hand, several of the artists are clearly delighted at the correspondence and enquiries the exposure has 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 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 are currently 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, both materially and psychologically. Though I discuss the 'material immutability' of the CD-Rom in the catalogue essay, when it came to registering the discs in the museum system there was an immediate problem of whether these are original artworks. Well, yes, to the exhibition they are originals and they function for the visitor as originals, in fact, very much so since you are actually sitting the same distance from the screen and looking at precisely the same image as had the artist at the moment of making the work! But no, they are not unique and could be easily replaced from the original files held by the artist or publisher.

What future exhibition plans do you have? Burning the Interface is now going to tour nationally. Are there intentions to put together another exhibition, perhaps a sequel to the first exhibition?

The MCA is keen to collaborate on another project and I'll 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, that really depends on what 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 for some time to come, if ever.