

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

PHOTOFILE : ISSUE 48

AUGUST 1996

Burning the Interface
<International Artists' CD-ROM>

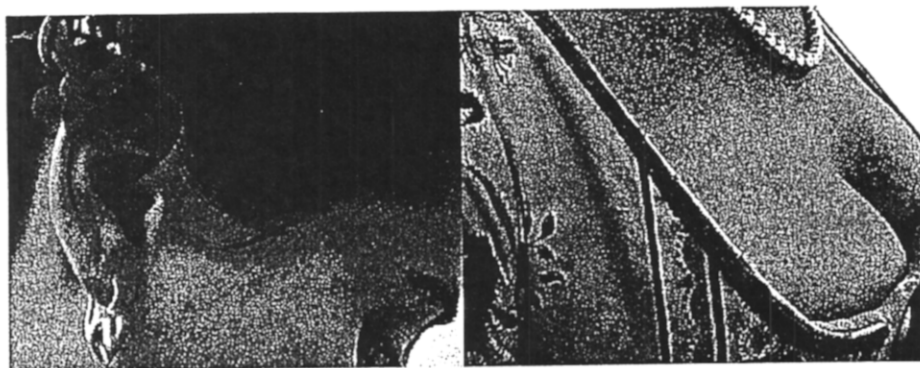
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney,
27 March–14 July 1996

making strange making strange

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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 *Omtipi* (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 *Mediamatic* 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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