LANDMARK EXHIBITION

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

Reviewed by Lyn Tune

Flora petrinsula

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Madame Basile
Turin, 1728

This page
Jean-Louis Boissier *Flora Petrinsularis,* 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.
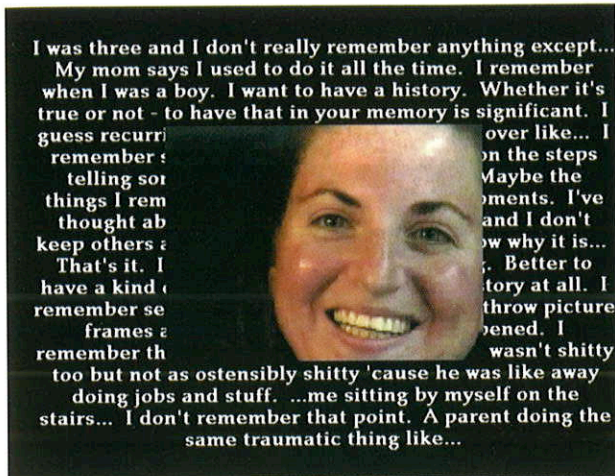
Burning the Interface represents a landmark in the evolution of the discipline. The range of work shown gives us a window to the width of possibilities as the medium is explored and developed. Here is a medium that allows for words, images and sound to be incorporated into an environment where the concept 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

I was three and I don't really remember anything except...
My mom says I used to do it all the time. I remember
when I was a boy. I want to have a history. Whether it's
true or not - to have that in your memory is significant. I
guess recurri   over like... I
remember :   on the steps
telling sor   Maybe the
things I rem   oments. I've
thought ab   and I don't
keep others :   w why it is...
That's it. I   . Better to
have a kind (tory at all. I
remember se   throw picture
frames a   ened. I
remember th   wasn't shitty
too but not as ostensibly shitty 'cause he was like away
doing jobs and stuff. ...me sitting by myself on the
stairs... I don't remember that point. A parent doing the
same traumatic thing like...

»Excusez-moi...«

»Excuse me...«

»Verzeihung...«

»Au revoir«

A veiled apparatus emulates
an indeterminate gesture to approach
the awkward make-up of a violent device

● play sentence
● random sentence
● sentence 1-33
○ exit

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 Miroslaw 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?
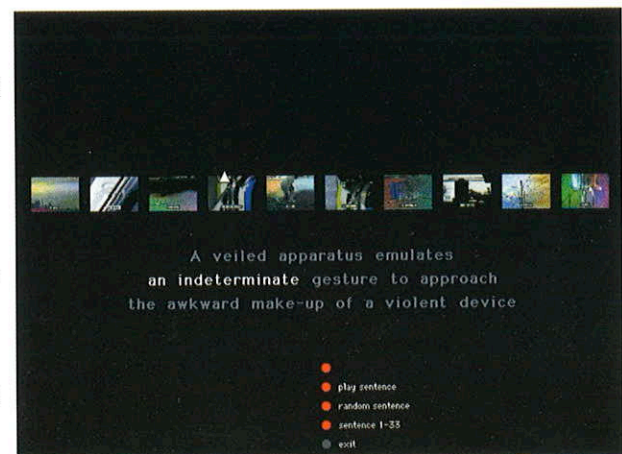
What happens to education?

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. ☐

Phantasmagoria: Pre-Cinema to Virtuality
Museum of Contemporary Art

MARCH – 30 JUNE 199

Reviewed by Sally Pryor

One hundred technology years later, it can be quite hard to see the significance of Georges Méliès' films - they can look quaint rather than ground-breaking. And yet Méliès was the first person to develop a technology and language of film special effects. Today we are accustomed to wildly improbable montages, morphs and mattes in ad breaks and blockbuster movies, the latest of which is *Twister*. It's hard for our TV-literate eye to see the conceptual leaps that Méliès made.

In *Phantasmagoria*, the curators, Peter Callas and David Watson, have approached this problem by using analogy. They have juxtaposed works from three equivalently modern video and computer artists, with separately curated screenings of Méliès' work and photographic installations of rare production stills.

The contemporary artists were chosen because their 'explorations share his spirit' - Toshio Iwai certainly seems like a kindred soul. His piece, *Music Insects*, is an interactive computer program, a tool for visual music. It's like a 2D Paint program in that you choose colours and tones from a palette and use the mouse to draw on the screen. The difference is that the screen also contains four mobile "insects" which act like walking musical instruments. As they travel through your image, they encounter your pixels and interpret them: colours become instructions to play musical notes and samples; shades of grey make the insects move in various directions. You can create soundscapes that are more than just a series of random notes by drawing closed shapes using these shades of grey, thus directing the insects' movements (and hence the order of playing sounds).

What a fantastic work! It is exhibited in a darkened room, with the computer screen projected on the wall and the instructions and mouse resting on a podium. Not only is it playful, pleasurable (aurally and visually) and fun to interact with, but it also contains metaphors on many levels. The "insects" have many meanings - mobile computer CPUs (endlessly fetching and executing a series of simple commands in order to create a more complex whole), artificial life-forms or interface agents, the latest concept for the Human-Computer Interface. Additionally your picture is itself also a piece of writing, the notation of a musical score (Derrida, with his request for a return to ideographic or "double-valued writing", would love this).

Iwai's second work, *Time Stratum II* features cut-out figures of the artist (with a huge eye where his head would be) mounted on a turntable. As the turntable rotates and a video-supplied stroboscopic light flashes, "persistence of vision" means that the figures appear to be moving. This beautiful piece helped me imagine the sense of wonder and the fantastic that the first moving images must have evoked, however I thought Iwai's first work was much more interesting.

Agnes Hegedüs' *Handsight* is also a powerful piece. You enter a darkened space containing two plinths and a blank screen. A small ball, painted as an eyeball and attached to a chord, rests on the first plinth. A large plexiglass sphere with a hole in it, rests on the second. The screen is blank. You pick up the "eye-mouse" and as you move it towards the sphere, the image of another eye appears on the screen. As you move the "eye-mouse" into the sphere, the screen shows that you are moving through the pupil of the eye and into a three dimensional space, filled with objects. It is quite

disorienting to navigate this VR space, with only your plexiglass-confined hand (rather than the whole body) providing the changes in viewpoint. I suppose over time you would need to re-map yourself so that you thought your hand was your neck!

The objects in the work refer to "the [Hungarian] folk art tradition of building miniature religious scenes inside glass bottles". Hegedüs is interested in the exploration of a non-real, mental space and connections made between the complex folk art iconography and computer graphics/virtual reality. However, for me, the interest was not so much in exploration of the objects' meanings (rendered real-time and hence somewhat limited aesthetically), but in the extremely powerful metaphor of the disembodied eye. The "eye-mouse" is the origin of your (linear perspective) point-of-view, echoing the disastrous Cartesian mind/body split that permeates Western culture and especially technological development.

Personally, I was less thrilled by Tony Oursler's video projection installation, *5 Worlds (for Georges)*, which was commissioned for this exhibition. It consisted of video pieces projected onto suspended spheres, giving them a fantastic, three dimensional quality. One video was an extreme close-up of woman's face as she groaned disturbingly- it was not clear whether it was agony or ecstasy but it felt like the former. Another video was a woman's body, rolling around endlessly. Others were less gendered - a closeup of a mouth and of an eye. I don't understand why the female was the object in these works, unless it was a reference to Méliès' use of the female body as a special effect. Perhaps I couldn't see beyond my discomfort at being surrounded by sounds of a woman in pain.

To return to Méliès, the title of this show means "a fantastic sequence of haphazardly associative imagery, as seen in dreams or fever". I thought that the contemporary works (with perhaps the exception of Oursler's) did not share this aspect of Méliès' work (important though it is) so much as they shared his conceptual advancements. Méliès began working with film in its earliest days and it seems that he was the first person to move away from the documentary style of filming everyday activities. There is a story that a jammed camera led to the image of a hearse being filmed one frame after the image of a bus. When the film was viewed, the transformation of a moving bus into a hearse had a powerful effect. Whether apocryphal or not, this story illustrates Méliès' realisation of the dramatic possibilities of moving away from a cinema of everyday reality and into a manipulated reality, a mise-en-scéne. Drawing on his background as a magician and developing techniques such as masking and re-exposure of film, Méliès began to stage events specifically for the camera, using elaborate settings, fantasy worlds and magical transformations.
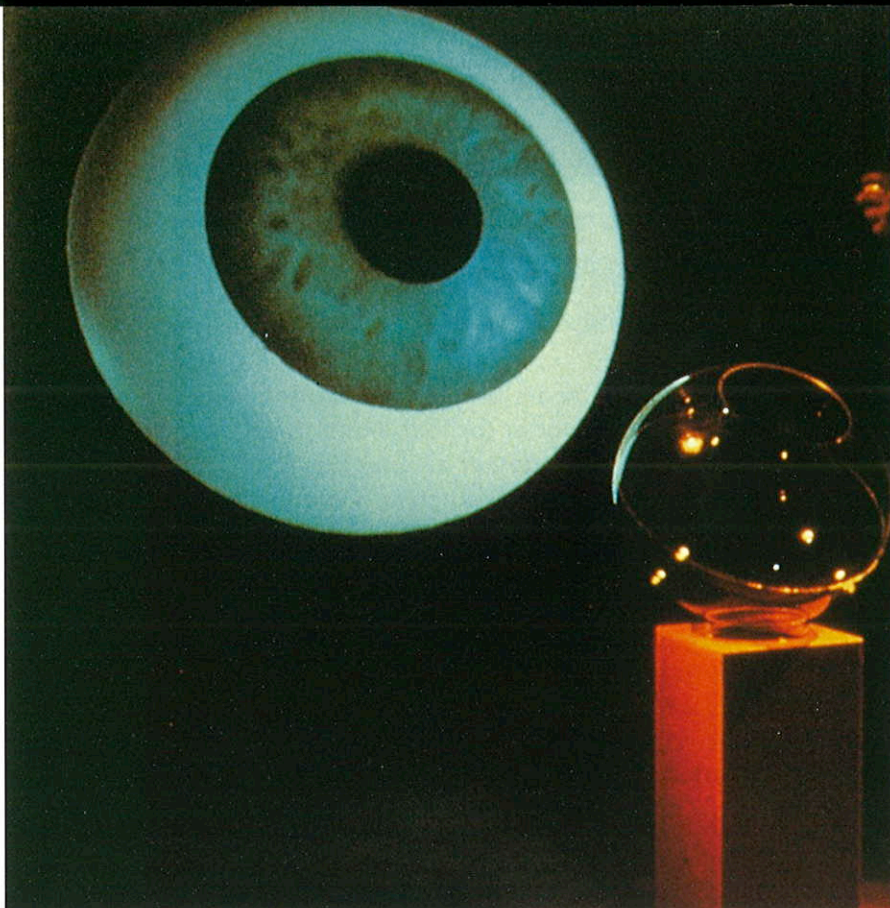
Above: **Agnes Hegedüs** *Handsight*, 1990 Germany.
Below: **Toshio Iwai**, *Music Insects*, (1992-1994), interactive CD Rom.
Left: **George Mélies** *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, 1902.

So what is the equivalent new conceptual area that *Phantasmagoria*'s artists indicate? I think that it is a movement away from the planar space of the video/computer screen, towards interactive, "intelligent", three dimensional spaces. Robert Romanyshyn reminds us that "technology is a *crisis* of the imagination...both a danger and an opportunity".[1] So are these new spaces dangerously reinscribing a linear, Cartesian, eye(I)-oriented model of the world, or are there other possibilities? *Phantasmagoria*, particularly *Music Insects*, suggests that there may be other possibilities, but that the traces of old values are deeply etched. □

1. **Robert Romanyshyn**, *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, Routledge, London 1989, p. 10
All other quotes are from exhibition catalogue.