Mike LEGGETT
Proposal working title:

'BRIEF ENCOUNTERS'
Recent International Interactive Installation

Overview

This proposal seeks to bring the often separated spaces of production and exhibition back into a closer work-making relationship. The success of the project's outcomes will be measured not only by the innovative and productive spin-offs from a group of commissioned artists collaboratively developing new work but also their involvement in the currency and excellence of installations made for a specific exhibition and a venue.

Brief Encounters will also be about that moment of *frisson* which whilst signalling incorporation of the visitor's presence in proximity to an installation, often implies terms for extending that moment into an interaction which allows the balance of power between artist and visitor to be comprehended and negotiated if not reversed.

The Brief Encounters project will reinforce, in the context of contemporary practice in the studio and the gallery, the close relationship between the working space and the showing space, the private activity of making and looking, the public activity of installing and debating. It will be achieved in four phases: curatorial research, commissioning of artists, production residency / exhibition and a conference. The research phase is the subject of this proposal and will lead towards identifying the six artists who will be invited to a six-week residency in the Artspace studios, to work together on individual installations as part of a specific Artspace exhibition. A conference will conclude the project and event, though the installations will be de-mountable and will be offered for touring. A separate proposal from myself and Artspace in 2004 will address the post-research phase of the project.

Context

The computer-mediated interactive installation, its articulation within the medium to large scale physical public space and determinations of the coding and de-coding of the experience of encounter, ('a multiplicity of interactions': Ascott 1995), has been developing a steady level of acceptance amongst audiences and their various agencies:- the contemporary art gallery and the international Biennale, the pedagogic museum display and touch-screen guide, the recreational platform in home, club and arcade, all have enabled widespread personal interaction with electronic assemblages. These customised machines have employed the microchip in a myriad of ways and continue to blur the roles of artist and producer, visitor and performer and the nexus of creative activity at the core of these multifarious exchanges.

The discrete encounter with early interactive multimedia works running from CD-ROM on a desktop computer, (such as was exhibited in *Burning the Interface*[i] in 1996), while re-creating the intimate space between book and reader, and often mirroring the artist's working space for the visitor to

encounter, was a restraining experience for many accustomed to the physical 'performance space' of the gallery and museum. The Brief Encounters project finds another echo in a parallel event in 1996, arising from an Artspace hosted forum, *Touch*, that set out to critically examine and "...articulate a subtext of disturbance..." and the "...possibility of 'moving beyond' the world of material consequence...at the heart of this disturbance."[iii]

Addressing the issue of the embodiment of the visitor in the physical space and the mediated system, vulnerability and "the disruption of context"[iiii] through both tactile and non-tactile presence has continued to be a line of enquiry pursued by those artists working in the actual space of installational forms. Encompassing the visitor within the work has been central, their physical proximity causing change within the work and has often included the invasion of their physiognomy, the capturing of their appearance, the sampling of their presence, sometimes annexing the virtual space of the internet. Whilst for some visitors the outcomes of this process can disrupt in a threatening sense – confusion of senses, in particular the privilege of sight – others can utilise the disruption in a transforming sense, amplifying personal presence on affect, being sustained by the infection or mutation suggested, being 'allowed' in a sense, "to touch the picture" and thereby challenge the "specular economy"[iv].

Similarly but in a different sense, embodiment is something of an issue for artists and designers, their vulnerability being revealed for many by an over reliance on (barely) customised office equipment and software made by multinational corporations. For some the issue has been addressed, (like learning a foreign language), by acquiring the skills necessary through cross-disciplinary collaboration and the development of working relationships with colleagues willing to share or transfer their expertise in, for instance, patching, coding and chip stamping, drawn from disciplines such as electronic engineering, systems architecture, computer programming, etc.[v]

Directions

The focus for the six artists who will be commissioned to work in collaboration in the studios will be on those who have shifted, or begun to shift away from the computer as an essential component of system installations towards other microprocessor configurations as part of their exploration and reiteration of brief encounters with disrupted space.

Some have already contributed significantly to the design parameters and fabrication of such tools and devices, even where access to resources for production, exhibition and maintenance have been minimal. In the area of wearable technology for example, the rethinking of the function of the microprocessor has been most noticeable and the kind of redefining outcomes emerging have involved collaborative development across a wide range of individual contributors skills and expertises.

My project research will develop knowledge and the contacts I have established in this field and others over the last ten years, both throughout Australia and overseas. The aim will be to identify new work emerging from

a period of the sustained development of fresh directions taken by individual artists and designers. The opportunity to develop fresh contacts will be pursued in the fertile area of Japan and the lesser known but currently emerging countries of Central America. Initial steps on-line will identify tendencies amongst artists and designers making work that could be described, or might engage with the notion of, as 'embodied proximity'. This will then be followed by a period of requesting further information from practitioners - several Australians including Alex Davies, Keith Armstrong, Lalila, Adam Donovan, and Lynne Sanderson come to mind already, the work of Richard Brown in Australia/Britain, Chris Welsby[vi] in Canada. A travel component will target studio visits to a shortlist of Australian artists to determine a group of three to be invited into the project. A short list of overseas artists will become the subject of final research during the commissioning stage of the project.

Development

The initial survey will seek to identify recent installations which employ an economy of means to achieve for the visitor an interactive encounter which unsettles and disturbs as vividly as it may be brief. Interaction however, will not only be apparent within the exhibition space but also between the artists commissioned by the project. Living in the close proximity to one another of the Artspace studios, structured interaction with practitioners within the Metropolitan area will also be encouraged during the build process, both with those operating independently and those working through advanced research units such as the Creativity and Cognition Studio at UTS and iCinema at UNSW.

The six artists will be accommodated for a six-week period in 1995 which in the final week will include the exhibition installation. A 'wiki' website will be established at the inception of the commissioning process to begin the process of interaction between all participants, artists, curator and invited guests as a lead-in to the residency period when the hands-on work will begin, where face-to-face interaction between participants at the centre and at the edges of the project can occur. Collaborative working of this kind produces knowledge exchange between colleagues as well as tangible material outcomes which results in valuable skills transfer and expertise development, for artists, curators, arts administrators, for the field as a whole.

A two-day conference following the exhibition opening will include speakers from Australia and overseas addressing the issues raised by the exhibition, the process by which the exhibition was developed and the responses of the audience. It will contain workshops for the onward passage of related technical and logistical issues from the residents to those at the periphery of the immediate activity.

[i] 'Burning the Interface<International Artists' CD-ROM>, curated by Mike Leggett and Linda Michael, (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 1996)
[ii] 'Introduction', Abby Mellick (ed) in Touch Conference papers, (Artspace 1996)
[iii] 'Touch, Digital Technology and the Ticklish', Cathryn Vasseleu, ibid.
[iv] 'Coming into Contact, Sadie Plant, ibid
[v] 'Thinking Imaging Software', Mike Leggett, Photofile #68 (ACP 2003)
[vi] Exhibiting two new installations at Artspace in April 2004.