

The Bairdboard Bombardment: a decade of engagement

Mike Leggett

This paper will position aspects of computer-based arts practice a decade ago together with manifestations and directions being taken on the contemporary scene. In the light of recent events foreshadowed by the disbanding of the New Media Fund of the Australia Council, the question is: have artists failed to aspire to the dynamic potential of the earlier period of development, or has arts practice moved into a more mature relationship with audiences through the broadening of creative agendas?

in the heliotropical noughtime following a fade of transformed tuff and, pending its viseversion, a metenergetic reglow of beaming batt, the bairdboard bombardment screen, if tastefully taut geranium satin, tends to teleframe and step up to the charge of a light barricade. down the photoslope in syncopanc pulses, with the bitts bugtwug their teffs, the misseledthropes, glitteraglatteaglutt, borne to their carnier walve. Finnegans Wake, James Joyce

Following a period of research commenced in the early 1970s, that by the early 1990s was focusing on the personal computer, I noted: engaging the audience in a productive relationship is the Interface we are currently seeking to imagine and create - how might the concept be useful to my practice as an artist? What uses was the interface being put by other artists?

1. Introduction

This paper will position aspects of computer-based arts practice a decade ago together with manifestations and directions being taken on the contemporary scene. In the light of recent events foreshadowed by the disbanding of the New Media Fund of the Australia Council, the question is: have artists failed to aspire to the dynamic potential of the earlier period of development? Or has arts practice moved into a more mature engagement with audiences through the broadening of creative agendas and the redefinition of public spaces?

The Samuel Beckett and James Joyce scholar and early commentator on developments in media technologies, Darren Tofts, in referring to Finnegans Wake observed:

Joyce's hypermnesiac machine is a timely reminder that transformations of language are ultimately fulfilments of the desire to extend the possibilities of communication. The invention of writing was a technological revolution, the consequences of which are still being felt today. Writing promised the artificial extension of memory; hypertext offers "intelligent augmentation", the sensation of being everywhere in the information space. Writing introduced telecommunications; telepresence is one of the great attractions of the Internet, and indeed, the defining principle of cyberspace – the illusory sensation of being where you are not.' (Darren Tofts, 1995)

In the decade since Tofts presciently identified the Web as the technology that would extend the human mind and its ability to receive information within a non-physical experiential space, other augmentations have introduced fresh vistas to the proximity of physical spaces of the street and the gallery. Mobile devices, such as cell-phones and portable video players, have lessened a need for the dissemination of interactive art into public spaces such as museums and galleries. Arts practice and practice-based research have encouraged a broader social activity, value-adding the social infrastructure in the areas of knowledge development, knowledge delivery and knowledge effect.

2. Grounding

Since the 1940s visual artists and designers had used the computer as a tool to perform more quickly the often mundane task of making something visible. Designers and architects were early adopters with computer-aided-design (CAD) software capable of producing drawings that could incorporate design changes and thus save hours of repetitive re-drawing. The publishing, printing and pre-press industries were central to developing the word-processing, desktop publishing and photo-manipulation software. Artists from different backgrounds adapted applications such as these, originally designed for commercial and business purposes. Ingenious workarounds and occasionally, augmented coding entered the production processes and outcomes of a variety of artforms (Candy & Edmonds, 2002).

The ability of the computing apparatus to respond flexibly and rapidly to changes in a project, was as a result of the intuitions of artists and

designers skilled in the use of tools, combining with the computer scientists' knowledge and resources in the development of tools. Artists led with a tacit approach to practice-based research, moving beyond the metaphor of the well-ordered desktop. Practitioners advanced towards extending the possibilities of what others were turning into the discipline of Human Computer Interaction (HCI).

In 1994 Simon Penny observed:

Making art that has relevance to contemporary technological contexts is an exercise fraught with obstacles, not the least being the pace of technological change itself. In order to produce an artwork with any (kind of) technology, the technology must be considered in its cultural context, in the way it functions in human culture, and the type of relationship that it can have with an artist and with a creative process. These things take time. (Penny, 1995)

The creative process was not only about the invention of new images but also creating the conditions for the emergence of behaviours 'with the shape' of images. Emergent behaviours from these newer media technologies included the three 'i's – interaction, interface and immersion. They became the triangulation of the new media experience through which the artist and the interacting subject negotiated a pathway. The process was also about responding to conditions that emerged from new technologies for exhibition, (discussed in Part Four).

3. Navigating Levels of Meaning

In 1994 A Digital Rhizome (Miller, 1995) Miller, was the interactive computer piece about which I made extensive notes in order to gather a sense of the three 'i's (Leggett, 1996). This was the era of the desktop computer and a mouse – projectors and projected images were rarely seen, non-visible sensing devices to enable interaction even less. The notes I made remain good today as a general strategy for realising many other works that placed emphasis on interaction rather than immersion.

The first screen of the interactive work, in common with many at the time, presented multiple options for beginning the interactive process. Often no clue is given as to the consequence of making one choice or another. A first level of meaning is thus quickly established - whilst sequence will have significance, a specified order will not be indicated. Hence the narrative encountered will be unique as an outcome of the individual subject interacting with the work. Clicking on images or words is quickly learnt to influence progress, but is recognised as not being a process of 'control'. This becomes the second level of meaning. Now a process commences whereby the interacting subject attempts to

delineate the furthest extent of each section of the work, clicking outwards in a conceptual circle, attempting to plot 'landmark' images along the way, before returning through the maze to the starting point, to then set out to test the path again before beginning again from another point. With so little to go on, the 'mazing' process itself offers the third level of meaning, as the motivational drive changes into a pleasurable era of reflexivity. Without knowing the consequences of taking options (as opposed to making choices), the form of the exploration is accepted as being purely aleatoric - a result of chance not choice. But the interacting subject's memory of images, text clusters, buttons, graphics, etc., is severely stretched in an effort to map the topography. The work may suddenly subvert a viewer's intentions. As mazing continues, 'control' is not wrested by the interacting subject but is at best shared. A fourth level of meaning is realized as the subject invokes one of two familiar diffusers of subversive strategies - interpretation and/or analysis.

On what basis were these images/sounds/texts selected, created and combined? Does the interaction create space in the mind of the viewer to interrogate the images? What is the relationship between the structure of the work and its overt content?

The interactive process enables us to comprehend the narrative process to which the media often subjects us. Constant repetition can render words and images meaningless, but to be in a position to determine for oneself the number of repetitions returns the formation of meaning to the interacting subject.

Burning the Interface <International Artists' CD-ROM>, an exhibition I curated for the MCA in 1996, questioned the established protocols of screen culture to greater and lesser degree through interactive multimedia work whether delivered by CD-ROM or over the Web. The appeal in much of the work was 'there is always more to see', (the scopophilic drive), and more to pursue (the narrative drive), propelling the interactive navigator forward. For some the novelty of interactivity encouraged the obsessive searching for 'something else' - 'clickoritis' as one observer memorably described it. A positive emergence was the possibility of 'pulling the art apart' without damaging it. This was evidenced in Die Veteranan (1995), which encouraged us to recompose their offerings as artists, and even to make images and mix sounds using the tools they provided on the CD-ROM.

This work encapsulated the dilemma of making work for distribution on CD-ROM. Though many artists tried supplying a perceived market as an extension of production, the Veteranan artists' collective had the artwork professionally handled by an international distributor. While this solved the order 'fulfilment' problem of supply, promotion fell between the adrenalin rich games market and the few art collectors aware of this new

format for 'limited editions' or 'multiples'. Investors, dubious of the collectable potential of a technology-based artform and feeling that, in the words of a Sydney-based newspaper commentator, 'peering at a monitor is an impoverished aesthetic experience', encouraged artists to work into public spaces, either through gallery curators or, as Venetian Deer (1997) demonstrated, by activating a website. The website functioned, for a while anyway, as a way of updating the artwork, in particular its extensive audio and image content (a precursor of the Flickr phenomena). In Venetian Deer, work made by people using the tools on the CD-ROM, saved as a file and with a suitable internet connection, could then be added to the virtual gallery the artists had established on the internet at a site in Germany (Veteranen, 1995).

Several successful projects to distribute 'art on CD-ROM' combined the artefact-as-disc with a book series (artintact-ZKM, 1994-2000) or periodical (Mediamatic). A publication as an item of cultural consumption was a familiar form with which interaction occurred but as Tofts has pointed out:

The Notion of art being interactive, rather than contemplative or participatory, heightened the basic challenges associated with the very concept of an art audience. To encourage audiences to be interactive is a potentially confronting gesture, since it disrupts the philosophical comfort zone that has traditionally assigned well-demarcated roles for audience and art work alike. (Darren Tofts, 2005)

Engagement with an interactive artwork meant decisions had to be made. To be told a story, or to become an investigator? Some artists determined that levels of engagement become more focussed.

Mari Soppela in the interactive CD-ROM Family Files published by the periodical Mediamatic (Soppola, 1997), takes fragments of home movie films. The shaky, blurry and often scratched images on film, like 'happy snaps' on paper, become the space and time of separation between the shared experiences represented and the context into which they are received. For those who shared the making of the images, revelations and forgotten links, the pleasurable memory and the discomfort. For those outside the moments recorded, lacking the narrative that created them, the encounter could leave the document as dry and dusty as parchment, without meaning, without empathy.

Interactive multimedia makes it possible for the observer to enter these spaces of time, place and memory, (or for the subject to re-enter them), and manipulate, contemplate and make tractable, (on the screen and in the mind), the images and moments represented. Family Files uses Quicktime movie loops and creates a matrix of nine frames on the screen. The process of working with these images enables the viewer to juxtaposition moments from the personal diary by starting and stopping

the fragments at different points in their cycle. The interacting subject is made part of the process of meaning-making by 'agreement' with the artist. The understanding is that whilst the mechanics of discrete units are subject to manipulation, the accumulative effect of this is through active engagement with the material construction rather than a passive observation of the overall effect. Linda Dement has observed of her own work, (Dement, 1995, 1997), the importance of the physical act of using a Mouse to move over an image. This is a tactile gesture connecting the interacting subject to the virtual objects experienced through the computer.

Touch is trumped by vision though, as there is nothing more engaging than the sight of the viewing subject's own face. In *Personal Eugenics*, (Tonkin, 2000), the subject is invited to combine an image of their face captured as they are seated at the installation (Fig. 1) with some words describing options of 'the type of person you would like to become.' The process of selecting frames from the output of a morphing algorithm, repeated until the subject is satisfied, is followed by the system delivering a print combining all of the data, words and image. The subject can then determine to display the printout as a part of the installation, thus moving the concept of artefact as a collaborative act, out of the computer into the dual spaces of the studio/gallery and the website, (to which each of the sessions are also dispatched).

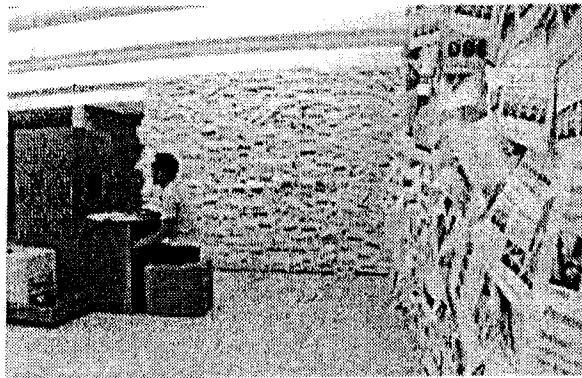


Fig 1. *Personal Eugenics* installation at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra in the exhibition *Memory in the Mirror* (2000).

In *Swarm* (Davies, 2003) the computer is not in evidence at all, the data projector being the only visible technology, (by this point in time, a more viable option with which artists could work), the system unrolling across a wide screen format (6:1) a series of vertical frames mixing

images of figures with images of space, a representation of the space in which you stand. You see yourself, your companions, replaced again, in different frames, by strangers, whose images were probably captured and stored on some earlier visit. The visual rhythms are heard and change in pitch and volume as the grey tone densities vary to the pulse of the picture as it sweeps across the wall from left to right. You, the visitor, move towards and away from the spectres on the wall, looking as you do, for the precise location of the tiny lens poking through the screen. This camera can form images where light is scarce, such as in the darkened space of this provisional cinema. They trade your image for your inclusion in the mystic writing pad of the palimpsest into which you have entered. The data space is constantly provisional, always in flux, your presence now absent, a previous presence now present.

Engagement with the three 'i's by the mid-200s has relocated attention away from the 'content' of an interactive artefact like the CD-ROM, to a real-time phenomena where the situated action of an installation delivered a sense of place together with concept, amplifying the encounter with the local as well as the remote. As a recent scoping study for the Australia Council for the Arts noted:

In recent years, media arts has become less screen-based, less reliant on mouse or keyboard-initiated interaction, and more about an embodied experience of the work. Hardware has retreated from visibility, so the art is less obviously about technology. (Donovan et al., 2006)

Anna Munster in commenting on the under-representation of new media art at global art festivals cited Shilpa Gupta's work, seen recently at the Biennale of Sydney 2006:

Untitled (2005) Installation is a welcome respite and its lack of glaring technical gadgetry in the simple touch-screen interface design allows it to seamlessly sit amid the video works Gupta's Installation also develops a strategy of 'inversion' so that the computer monitor no longer safely offers us a voyeuristic 'window' to another place. Instead, positioning as if located on the exterior of a house, the monitor transmits from Kashmiri political and natural landscapes, zones that most Sydney audiences would never have encountered. Gupta deploys visual and tactile strategies of seduction by luring us with the beauty of the Kashmiri landscape and architecture and the appeal of haptic interaction. (Munster, 2006)

4. Zones of Contact

Trevor Smith, in 1998 the Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, observed that there was a gap between art of the past, audience expectations and artists' production and process:

Many galleries in Australia continue to treat photography, let alone video, or today's version of new media, with a great deal of suspicion, in part because of this recognition gap...

and in part because media arts imply that the galleries and museums would need to change the paradigms and priorities within which they work.

It has become increasingly obvious to me that especially when younger people are in the gallery, the video and photography for example, captures their imagination in a very different way to the traditional media. Now this does not mean that painting has ceased to be a significant arena for production, it is simply that as Arthur Danto has recently put it: "Painting is no longer the engine of art history". (Smith, 1998)

Curators are often described as gatekeepers, with the implication that they are responsible for allowing certain artists through the gate whilst excluding others. But this is only part of the selection process that occurs. Preparing the exhibition *Burning the Interface <International Artists' CD-ROM>* for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney between 1994 and 1996 was a good example of how, I subsequently realised, there are often several selection processes going-on as part of the team enterprise that comprises developing a significantly resourced exhibition to a significant national museum. In a sense, the curator passes backwards and forwards through the gate many times, leaving many bookmarks on either side:

- There are the marks placed on a whole range of artworks.
- There are marks on the different art worlds who will encounter the work.
- There are also the marks placed on the various ways in which the work could be presented or installed and introduced to the different art worlds.

For the artist or curator seeking engagement outside the immediate coterie, the list of different art worlds is lengthening. There is:

- the art world of the museum or 'arts professionals' of directors, registrars, curators, administrators, conservators;
- the art world of the schools and tertiary courses;
- the art world of 'commercialisation', which whilst steadfastly resisting the ideas and issues that artists wish to raise, cannot resist the possibility that some upstart has actually pointed the way to the next "killer app";
- the world of art as understood by the computer hardware and audio-visual industries;
- the world of art as imagined by the artist, who often regards the whole process of mounting an exhibition as 'a piece of

- cake';
- the art in the world as fantasised by the media and its commentators;
- the heartfelt world of the politicians, arts on sleeve, eager to support or condemn, depending on which way the polls are blowing;
- the artful world of the polities instrumentalities, the personal and policy advisers, the various government departments, each running with their own agendas, all eager to receive proposals to add to their statistical counts and key performance indicators, and who, as a bonus to the proposer, might be able to deliver part of the budget requested. (Leggett, 1999)

The accumulation of marks against these various art worlds - and there are more - created whole nebulae of negotiations for the Burning the Interface development team. This was multi-functional gate keeping, an unusual range of responsibilities, but not uncommon these days I suggest, when social infrastructure, the stuff we call 'a culture', is subordinated to social efficiency, as expressed by the bottom line of the current account.

Ascott's 'multiplicity of interactions' may well only successfully occur, as he suggests, solely in electronic spaces, (Ascott, 1999) not subject to the agendas of institutions, the tyranny of interlocutors and the constraints of architecture.

As Aurora Lovelock (aka Sarah Thompson) observed in 1998:

The problematic of cyber space versus museum space is surely the confusion of their inherent topologies within the specific topography of 'site'. Why should these spatial topologies currently, if ever, 'mix well'? ... Traditionally, the museum has been a designated place where classification and curation have been practised to create a sense of cultural invariance and continuity within a site-specific architecture and with 'discontinuous' art objects. The preservation and analysis of artefacts gives the illusion of permanence as well as an underlying order of value. Paradoxically, in the digital context, the invariance and continuity which is provided by the underlying logic of the digital computer does not automatically give rise to a sense of permanence and value. (Lovelock, 1998)

The design of knowledge delivery and method of access is crucial to understanding the distinction between museum topology, which sets out to propose a rational connection between objects and history, essentially a project of methodology. Museum revelation through the act of provision can be positioned to give access to the more dynamic and speculative project of contemporary media art, that seek a multiplicity of

interactions, and is a part of the wider process of knowledge development.

In 1998 I suggested that there is clearly much to be developed in public spaces and the institutions which create public spaces, in relation to the new media that artists will begin to work with almost as soon as the technology appears. This is no surprise. The development of tools and techniques and the development of ideas is the flux in which artists move. Projects like the Museum of Sydney (MoS) and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) initiated with imaginative agendas to respond and nurture this potential, too rapidly fell short, reverting to well established agendas. It is left to tenuously funded research groups in universities to initiate new spaces as part of the enthusiasm for engaging a wider audience. However, the subsequent separations ensuing between research disciplines in the academy has significantly reduced opportunities for imaginative collaboration between experts. At the point when the Australia Council for the Arts prescient Synapse project and related programs demonstrate the benefits of blurred boundaries, with little chance for reflection, the concrete silos of directed research objectives are put back in place. (Leggett, 2005)

6. Conclusion

In this time of speed, what needs to be questioned is the structures that place the conservative nature of the arts administrators, research managers and museum professionals in the space between the audience and the opportunities to engage with the rapidly changing domain of the media artist. The dissemination of interactive art into public spaces including museums and galleries is a responsibility that cannot be taken solely by institutions and curators. It is a broader social responsibility that value-adds the social infrastructure in the areas of knowledge development, knowledge delivery and knowledge effect.

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