Touch and Go is published in collaboration with Watermans and Goldsmiths College in occasion of the Watermans’ International Festival of Digital Art, 2012, which coincides with the Olympics and Paralympics in London. The issue explores the impact of technology in art as well as the meaning, possibilities and issues around human interaction and engagement. Touch and Go investigates interactivity and participation, as well as light art and new media approaches to the public space as tools that foster engagement and shared forms of participation.
Watermans International Festival of Digital Art, 2012

Touch and Go is a title that I chose together with Irini Papadimitriou for this LEA special issue. On my part with this title I wanted to stress several aspects that characterize that branch of contemporary art in love with interaction, be it delivered by allowing the audience to touch the art object or by becoming part of a complex electronic sensory experience in which the artwork may somehow respond and touch back in return.

With the above statement, I wanted to deliberately avoid the terminology ‘interactive art’ in order to not fall in the trap of characterizing art that has an element of interaction as principally defined by the word interactive; as if this were the only way to describe contemporary art that elicits interactions and responses between the artist, the audience and the art objects.

I remember when I was at Central Saint Martins writing a paper on the sub-distinctions within contemporary media arts and tracing the debates that distinguished between electronic art, robotic art, new media art, digital art, computer art, computer based art, internet art object to re-gain entry within the field of fine art. Mine was a reaction to an hyper-fragmented and technical sensory experiences becomes an impossible task due to easy access to an unprecedented amount of media and an unprecedented multiplication of data, as Lev Manovich argues.

In Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds Timothy Murray writes that “the retrospective nature of repetition and digital coding—how initial images, forms, and narratives are refuged through their contemplative re-citation and re-presentation—consistently inscribes the new media in the memory and memorization of its antecedents, cinema and video.”

The difference between memorization and memorization may be one of the further aspects in which the interaction evolves – beyond the artwork but still linked to it. The memory of the event with its happening and performative elements, its traces and records both official and unofficial, the re-processing and mash-ups; all of these elements become part of and contribute to a collective narrative and pattern of engagement and interaction. These are issues and problems that the artists and writers of this LEA special issue have analyzed from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds, offering to the reader the opportunity of a glimpse into the complexity of today’s art interactions within the contemporary social and cultural media landscapes.

Touch and Go is one of those issues that are truly born from a collaborative effort and in which all editors have contributed and worked hard in order to deliver a documentation of contemporary art research, thought and aesthetic able to stand on the international scene. For this reason I wish to thank Prof. Janis Jefferies and Irini Papadimitriou together with Jonathan Munro and Ozden Şahin for their efforts. The design is by Deniz Cem Öndüygo who as LEA’s Art Director continues to deliver brilliantly designed issues.

1. “Nevertheless, there is this constant apparently inherent need to try and categorize and classify. In Beyond In- face: an exhibition I organized in 1998, I ‘determined’ ten categories: net.art, storytelling, socio-cultural, biographical, tools, performance, analog-hybrid, interactive art, interac- ers + artists. David Ross, in his lecture here at the CAD-RE Laboratory for New Media, suggested 21 characteristics of net art. Stephen Wilson, a pioneering practitioner, has a virtual – albeit well-ordered – jungle of categories. Rhizome has developed a list of dozens of keyword categories for its ArtBase. Lev Manovich, in his Computing Culture: Defining New Media Genres symposium focused on the categories of database, interface, spatialization, and navigation. To my mind, there is no question that such categorization is useful, especially in a distributed system like the Internet. But, in truth, to paraphrase Barnett Newman, “ornithology is for the birds what categorization is for the artist.” Perhaps especially at a time of rapid change and explosive growth of the underlying infrastructure and toolsets, it is critical that description follow practice and not vice versa.” Steve Dietz, Why Have There Been No Great Net Artists? Web Walker Daily 28, April 4, 2000, http://bit.ly/8Q9wiY (accessed July 1, 2012).

2. This link to a Google+ conversation is an example of this argument on massive data and multiple media engage- ments across diverse platforms: http://bit.ly/pGgDsS (accessed July 1, 2012).

Touch and Go: The Magic Touch of Contemporary Art

It is with some excitement that I write this preface to Watermans International Festival of Digital Art, 2012. It has been a monumental achievement by the curator Irini Papadimitriou to pull together 6 ground-breaking installations exploring interactivity, viewer participation, collaboration and the use or importance of new and emerging technologies in Media and Digital Art.

From an initial call in December 2010 over 500 submissions arrived in our inboxes in March 2011. It was rather an overwhelming and daunting task to review, look and encounter a diverse range of submissions that were additionally asked to reflect on the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Submissions came from all over the world, from Africa and Korea, Austria and Australia, China and the UK, Latvia and Canada and ranged from the spectacularly complicated to the imaginatively humorous. Of course each curator and the collaborative Hocus Pocus will be a 3-screen interactive artwork that uses illusory and performative aspects of magical tricks to explore human perception, senses and movement. As they have suggested, “Magic – like interactivity – relies on shifting the perceptual relations between vision and movement, focusing and diverting attention at key moments. Participants will become aware of this relation as their perception catches up with the audiovisual illusion(s)” (artists statement, February 2011). Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi and Emeka Ogboh are artists who also work collaboratively and working under name of One-Room Shack. Unity is built like a navigable labyrinth to reflect the idea of unity in diversity that the Games signify. In an increasingly globalized world they are interested in the ways in which the discourse of globalization opens up and closes off discursive space whereas Suguru Goto is a musician who creates real spaces that are both metaphysical and spiritual. Cymatics is a kinetic sculpture and sound installation. Wave patterns are created on liquid as a result of sound vibrations generated by visitors. Another sound work is Phoebe Hui’s Granular Graph, a sound instrument about musical gesture and its notation.

Some, like Gail Pearce’s Going with the Flow was made because rowing at the 2012 Olympics will be held near Egham and it was an opportunity to respond and create an installation offering the public a more interactive way of rowing, while remaining on dry land, not only watching but also participating and having an effect on the images by their actions. On the other hand, Michele Barker and Anna Munster’s collaborative Hocus Pocus will be a 3-screen interactive artwork that uses illusionistic and performative aspects of magical tricks to explore human perception, senses and movement. As they have suggested, “Magic – like interactivity – relies on shifting the perceptual relations between vision and movement, focusing and diverting attention at key moments. Participants will become aware of this relation as their perception catches up with the audiovisual illusion(s)” (artists statement, February 2011). Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi and Emeka Ogboh are artists who also work collaboratively and working under name of One-Room Shack. Unity is built like a navigable labyrinth to reflect the idea of unity in diversity that the Games signify. In an increasingly globalized world they are interested in the ways in which the discourse of globalization opens up and closes off discursive space whereas Suguru Goto is a musician who creates real spaces that are both metaphysical and spiritual. Cymatics is a kinetic sculpture and sound installation. Wave patterns are created on liquid as a result of sound vibrations generated by visitors. Another sound work is Phoebe Hui’s Granular Graph, a sound instrument about musical gesture and its notation.

Audiences are invited to become a living pendulum. The apparatus itself can create geometric images to represent harmonies and intervals in musical scales. Finally, Joseph Farbrook’s Strata-caster explores the topography of power, prestige, and position through an art installation, which exists in the virtual world of Second Life, a place populated by over 50,000 people at any given moment.

Goldsmiths, as the leading academic partner, has been working closely with Watermans in developing a series of seminars and events to coincide with the 2012 Festival. I am the artistic director of Goldsmiths Digital Studios (GDS), which is dedicated to multi-disciplinary research and practice across arts, technologies and cultural studies. GDS engages in a number of research projects and provides its own postgraduate teaching through the PhD in Arts and Computational Technology, the MFA in Computational Studio Arts and the MA in Computational Art. Irini is also an alumnus of the MFA in Curating (Goldsmiths, University of London) and it has been an exceptional pleasure working with her generating ideas and platforms that can form an artistic legacy long after the Games and the Festival have ended. The catalogue and detailed blogging/documentation and social networking will be one of our responsibilities but another of mine is to is to ensure that the next generation of practitioners test the conventions of the white cube gallery, reconsider and reevaluate artistic productions, their information structure and significance; engage in the museum sector whilst at the same time challenging the spaces for the reception of ‘public’ art. In addition those who wish to increase an audience’s interaction and enjoyment of their work have a firm grounding in artistic practice and computing skills.

Consequently, I am particularly excited that the 2012 Festival Watermans will introduce a mentoring scheme for students interested in participatory interactive digital / new media work. The mentoring scheme involves video interviews with the 6 selected artists and their work, briefly introduced earlier in this preface, and discussions initiated by the student. As so often debated in our seminars at Goldsmiths and elsewhere, what are the expectations of the audience, the viewer, the spectator, and the engager? How do exhibitions and festival celebrations revisit the traditional roles of performer/artist and audiences? Can they facilitate collaborative approaches to creativity? How do sound works get curated in exhibitions that include interactive objects, physical performances and screens? What are the issues around technical support? How are the ways of working online and off, including collaboration and social networking, affecting physical forms of display and publishing?

As I write this in Wollongong during the wettest New South Wales summer for 50 years, I want to end with a quote used by the Australia, Sydney based conjurers Michele Barker and Anna Munster: Illusions occur when the physical reality does not match the perception.

The world is upside down in so many alarming ways but perhaps 2012 at Watermans will offer some momentary ideas of unity in diversity that the Games signify and Unity proposes. Such anticipation and such promise!

Janis Jefferies
Professor of Visual Arts
Goldsmiths
University of London, UK

23rd Dec 2011, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia

Going with the Flow

GAIL PEARCE

in conversation with
Jonathan Munro
Department of Computing, Goldsmiths, University of London

Jonathan Munro: Your work includes a rowing boat that people can sit and row, what was the initial starting point for the project, had this come about directly because of the London Olympics coming here or does it have a longer history?

Gail Pearce: The idea for Going with the Flow came in a response to a call from the Cultural Olympiad in 2010. Royal Holloway is based in Egham, where the campus, as part of the University of London, is to be used as a residential center for the rowers of the Olympics. At the time I knew little about rowing, but a chance overhearing of part of a conversation with a colleague, Kishore Verma, gave me the idea that a rowing installation, immersive and interactive would be possible. I had made interactive installations in the past and enjoyed the direct action of the user on the art.

What where the challenges in getting the work made?

We began to plan a rowing machine that would self generate electricity and where users would see images that were powered from their actions. It was to be a connection between analogue and digital, quirky, amusing and of historical relevance. Going with the Flow almost became Push and Pull, then the analogue/digital compatibility became too problematic and the digital form took over. A form of Wii technology made it all possible. Filming on a boat upriver from Egham was one of the most pleasurable parts of the process, as was discovering weirs and low tide sections of the Thames. Finding a boat was surprisingly difficult as they are now sold at a profit to pubs and restaurants even if they are damaged. Other challenges would be to do with the size of the half rowing eight, 15 meters long, and not having transport long enough to move it, or the space to store it, as well as exhibiting it in enough darkness to make the projections visible.

The direct interaction with the work is a main element, why did you decided to make a piece of work which is responsive to the user?

As mentioned before, I had made successful interactive installations before. Mirror, Mirror (1996) was a dressing table, a two way mirror and projection, on the theme of murder and revenge after provocation, where participants could realize choices of vengeance. Using the theme of rowing, and never having rowed, I wanted to give the experience of quietly moving through water and experiencing nature. It also had its first appearance at an open day where there would be both children and adults, so I hoped to provide something all ages could engage with.

Do you find interaction as futile ground for exploration?

I want interaction to open up new worlds of art, thinking and experience. I find it less liberating that ideally I would want. As maker, I control the options that users can access. The technology colludes in this, the whole of my chosen world is not as available as I would like. Also, technology has a horrible habit of failing at crucial moments. The important part was to make sure users had the experience of affecting the images by their actions so the design had to be clear and the ensuing images also.

Going with the Flow, Gail Pearce, 2010, interactive installation.
Why did you choose to include woman rowers’ stories in the installation?
I wanted to address the existence of women rowers, as my impression up until then was that the sport was predominantly male. My ideas changed after I explored the archives of Bedford College, Royal Holloway’s past incarnation as a women’s college.

Looking at your previous projects the use of journey is prominent. In your project, Time Flies, you filmed a bus journey from the center of St Petersburg through the suburbs to the outskirts, what is it about taking a journey that interests you?
Any body of work develops themes. My interests lie in documentary and how to present ideas in a range of formats. I also enjoy collaborating. Time Flies was a collaboration with a Russian architect from St Petersburg, Irena Golovenok, who tempted me to explore the city and to refer to the architectural styles. It was the 300th anniversary of the founding of the city, so architectural change was particularly relevant. This work was shown reflected in a shop window of a watchmaking factory on the street, so the public engaged with it easily.

As well as journeys you also seem interested in the history of people, in Credit Crunch you filmed people’s purses and wallets, with the audio of the person talking about this particular item and what it reveals about them. Could you tell us some more about this?
I’m interested in people’s personal stories and how to reveal them. Credit Crunch was based on an exercise used in Gestalt therapy, where you describe an object from the first person, for example, “I am made of black leather, I am worn out and much handled, I am useful and sometimes I hold a lot of interesting information. I have never been lost…” If you are watching the person saying this, it immediately becomes personally revealing. And can feel quite nerve wracking as the person becomes more involved in telling the story of the object, not realizing it becomes their own story. Of course, each person describes the same object differently. I was interested in this experiment having seen it working in the past, and when the financial markets began their steady fall, I wanted to make the way people react personally to large events visible. I always thought of it as a documentary although it was often presented as an ‘art’ piece as well. I am interested in how small changes reflect larger ones. I wanted a restricted field of view so that what the people said would be really heard. In some ways the audio of Going with the Flow is the key part, the basis of it. The rowing stories are constant, unaffected by the images or the actions.

Finally going back to Going with the Flow, there are two different versions you will be offered on the installation, one is the sludge of the river and the other is a more tranquil scene of tropical fish. why did you include two different videos when people row?
There are in fact several different videos, aligned to what the user is doing in the boat. There is gushing water as the holding sequence when nobody does anything, footage of moving up the river as a response for the user moving the rower’s seat back and forth, the faster they move, the faster the journey up the river. And if two people ‘row’ the image changes to underwater sequences, there are two types, not just tropical fish, also destroyed shopping trolleys and other detritus. Now you know all the secrets, although there will probably be more choices in the future. It goes back to trying to give the user a clear experience where the user action is followed by a result.

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