

Global Art Atelier

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My follow-up visit to Lisbon started almost immediately after my arrival with a Global Art performance around 22.30 in the Pantheon. This formed part of, and actually ended, the Performance event which had been running for several days with many international performers. So I was just in time to participate.

I wanted to put a point of closure on the ideas that I was working with in November – the forward/backward control of video via external stimuli. During my time away from Lisbon I'd reworked the same video material into a smaller format, in order to compose multiscreen compositions as shown here, the idea being to manipulate four videos simultaneously:



Two projectors were again set up, with one pointing at a white screen directly under the organ at one end of the Pantheon's central hall, and the other projecting over the Freedom Shelter. Since on this occasion I had only one laptop, the images projected on the Freedom Shelter were those coming directly from my video camera. The main projection was that coming from my laptop, again positioned on top of the huge marble table/altar. This film was again controlled by noise picked up in the microphone, the difference being that all four videos simultaneously play forward or backward according to the level of noise. The videos were grouped so that they would form "portraits" of

various people, places or events. In other words, four videos of Carlos would be followed by four videos of myself, then Graca, Nuno etc. The system also recorded live images from the video camera, of which a couple of samples recorded at the event are shown here:



At the time of my screening the Pantheon had several visitors and performers present who clustered around the area of my performance: it was not announced or made clear to them how the video material was being manipulated. Again, Carlos played the organ and Nuno made vocal sounds and used some toys that made interesting sounds. The “live grab” functioned only sporadically, although since the visitors didn’t know what to expect, this did not spoil their perception of the event.

After fifteen minutes or so, I showed a second, new variation of the ‘reactive portraits’. This was somewhat of a logical conclusion that took the project full circle: to control the forward and backward movement of the prerecorded

video material (not in the 2 x 2, but back in the single screen format) by actual realtime movement (of a person, performer etc.) in front of the video camera. It is important to stress that the system did not detect gestures, only the amount of 'change' detected from one grabbed frame to another, but nevertheless one could make gestures in real life (in front of the camera) that echoed and changed the the gestures happening in the projected videos.

The film was only partially successful in my eyes, for two reasons. One simple reason was that the ambient light levels in the Pantheon were very low, and even with the "nightshot" setting, it was necessary to make exaggerated movements (zooms and pans) of the camera to cause sufficient changes in the live video that would subsequently change the prerecorded video. The second reason was that no rehearsal or prearranged choreography had been decided upon...it relied on spontaneous movement from myself or Nuno to make changes in the projected video imagery. Again, how much of this was understandable to the audience is open to question: after about 15 minutes I declared the show to be over.

It occurred to me that the live video might interestingly be obtained in a variety of ways, for example:

- The video camera points at a choreographed/improvising performer(s).
- The camera points at a wind-up clockwork toy...or the flame of a candle being gently blown...etc.
- The camera points at traffic or passers-by in the street.

In fact the list is endless, the only requirement being that movement occurs. Clearly in the case of the performer, he/she would have conscious control over how the projected (prerecorded) video changes, whereas in the latter cases the changes would be unpredictable.

Just a few days after the performance in the Pantheon, the Perve Gallery was back in action setting up an exhibition of "cadavres exquis" drawings that had been made over the years by a variety of contributors. Here is an example, the image came from <http://www.perve.org.pt/Surrealistas/Index1.html>



Could I add an interactive element to the exhibition? This had been discussed with Carlos back in November, so now came the time to put ideas into practice.

The bare bones of the concept would be to use a webcam to record short (in the end it was six seconds) video scenes of visitors and to juxtapose these with other recordings of other visitors and/or prerecorded material. Obviously the most literal translation of the original concept would be a spatial montage of video scenes, in some kind of splitscreen format: something

which, in fact, I've explored in several of my interactive films. I doubted, however, whether this would offer any meaning other than total randomness.



Spatial montage in my “The Twelve Loveliest Things I Know”

During my time away from Lisbon, I'd watched the double-DVD compilation of Stan Brakhage's films, of which one of the most well-known is “Dog Star Man”. Many of Brakhage's films exhibit a layered form of montage, and it struck me that my interactive ‘cadavres exquis’ could be made by layering the videos rather than copying the original side-by-side layout. This would add a new interpretation to the original concept. Audio could also be recorded, such that the combined layers of audio would add a further new dimension.



Scene from Brakhage's ‘Dog Star Man’

The difficulty, certainly when working with Director, is that it displays Quicktime videos optimally in what is known as ‘Direct to Stage’ mode, and this does not allow for overlaying videos with varying opacities. Newer programs such as Quartz Composer are more optimised for realtime manipulation of video data. The solution in Director was always to opt out of the ‘Direct to Stage’ mode, but this invariably would play the Quicktime(s) at a drastically reduced frame rate.

Given that I only had the use of an old-style iMac – but a decent one - for the Cadavres Exquis exhibition, I ran some tests to see at which size I could still display layered videos in Director at an acceptable frame rate. Three layers of video, at 360x288, seemed acceptable so I created the entire project around these technical limits: in future more layers at a larger frame size could be implemented on a higher spec Mac.

After an intensive session with Director, and some experimentation to get the right blend values for the layers, a version 1.0 was set up in the Pantheon in front of the panel displaying the drawings:



When a visitor chooses to click on the “RECORD” button on screen, six seconds of video, with audio, are recorded from an inexpensive USB webcam. The video is then played back - but visible through it are two other videos. One of them is randomly selected from a database of 109 scenes of prerecorded material shot by me in November and January in Lisbon (some of this was repurposed from the earlier projects, whereas some of it – such as graffiti on Alfama’s walls – was filmed specially for this project). Just about visible, as the bottom layer, is the sequence most previously recorded in the system from a visitor: the audio of this sequence is faint but audible. All the videos are set to “loop”, so that the most recent composition is displayed until a visitor chooses to “RECORD” something new. Throughout the displayed work, the faint sound of ‘silent movie’ piano music can be heard.

The results proved very successful, partly because although a visitor could perform any action during the recording, the random selection of the middle

layer made the final representation unpredictable, often aesthetically pleasing, and serendipitous. The photo below gives the basic idea of the kind of results obtained:



After some constructive comments from Carlos and Nuno, I subsequently updated the program so that a visitor can choose to 'VIEW the CADAVERES', which randomly plays compositions that have already been recorded until such a time as a visitor records something new.

There was also discussion to connect together two iMacs with an ethernet cable, so that videos recorded by a visitor at one of the iMacs are displayed on the other iMac. After recording, a visitor would have to walk to the other iMac to see the result – and vice versa. I made some tests and the concept is quite feasible and relatively easy to implement, but time ran out and we did not have two functioning iMacs available.

Yes. Time ran out. The two weeks vanished and it was time to leave. And soon after my departure, the second Global Art encounter would be over. At the time of writing, my project with the 'neverending stairs' remains incomplete although most of the work on it has been carried out. This film will be completed soon...it won't be 'neverending'...
