The Experience of Interactive Art: A Curatorial Study

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Interactive art exists through the participation of its audience. There is an increasing awareness amongst artists, critics and curators that the audience's experience is of central importance to the understanding, creation and exhibition of interactive art. Because of its emphasis on experience and participation, as well as its engagement with science and technology, interactive art offers challenges and opportunities for curatorial practice in museums and galleries. The research reported in this thesis investigates the audience's experience of artworks in order to develop a critical framework for, and a curatorial approach to interactive art. It draws on insights, methods and techniques from the interdisciplinary field of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) for studying and working with people's experience of interactive technologies.

The research approach of the project is reflective curatorial practice, based on close collaborations with artists during the creation and exhibition of their work. The research centres on two case studies: *Cardiomorphologies*, by George Khut, a physiologically interactive artwork that creates real time visual and sonic representations of the participant's heart and breath; and *Contagion*, by Gina Czarnecki, a multi-user installation based on a complex interactive representation of the spread of disease within populations. Both of these artworks were publicly presented in *Beta_space* at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, a dedicated venue for "prototyping" interactive artworks developed as part of this doctoral project.

The first outcome of the research is an experiential approach to curating interactive art, which integrates the exhibition of prototype artworks with the creative process. The approach adapts techniques from HCI for use in artistic contexts.

The second outcome is a critical framework for the experience of interactive art, which draws on the work of pragmatist philosopher John Dewey and artist David Rokeby. An examination of the participants' experiences of the two case study artworks demonstrates how the framework can be used by curators, artists and researchers to understand the aesthetic impact of interactive artworks.

Together these two outcomes demonstrate how direct engagement with audience experience contributes to interactive art research and curation. The thesis concludes by exploring future directions for this experience-centred approach, including the impact on documentation and archival practice and the curation of group exhibitions.

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Foreword

The motivation for this research project grew from my experience as a curator exhibiting new media and interactive artworks between 1999 and 2004. Each time I organised an exhibition I was struck by the way the artworks came to life with the entrance of the audience. I was fascinated by people's reactions and behaviour, their unexpected uses, and creative mis-uses of the artworks, their preferences and curiosities, their questions and conversations. Meanwhile, I was increasingly aware of two problems which I perceived in the field of interactive art.

The first was the prevalence of disappointing interactive artworks. I had encountered enough rewarding and satisfying work to convince me that, used well, computer-based interactivity produced compelling aesthetic experiences. However I had also encountered numerous artworks where I felt the potential of the interactive situation was not being fully exploited.

The second problem was the way interactive art was written about in artists' documentation, in marketing materials, and in the growing body of critical literature. Descriptions of work seemed to focus largely on the technology and often implied, it seemed to me, that the more "cutting edge" the technology the better the artwork. The term "interactive" was used so generally that it was practically meaningless. There seemed to be a lack of adequate critical and descriptive language to talk about the nature and qualities of the different kinds of interaction offered by different artworks. I felt that these two problems could be addressed by a closer consideration of the audience's reactions to the works. Was it possible, I wondered, to develop my own interest in audiences into a more robust and methodical basis for my curatorial practice ? Was it possible to connect artists making interactive artwork to the rich and fascinating "resource" of the audience's encounter with the work? Was it possible to bring some of the liveliness of real audience experiences into the critical discourse surrounding interactive art?

In 2003 I initiated a project called the New Technology Arts Fellowship (NTAF) in partnership with the Crucible research network for interdisciplinary design led by Alan Blackwell. Blackwell brought me into contact for the first time with Human Computer Interaction (HCI), an interdisciplinary field that focuses on the encounter between people and computer systems. Our collaboration opened up new possibilities for developing my interest in audiences. The project brokered three partnerships between artists and technology researchers at Cambridge University in England, with the aim of stimulating the creation of new interactive artworks (Leach

2003). One aim of the project was to find ways to include audiences in the collaborations. Inspired by the HCI techniques of user-testing and prototyping which I had recently discovered, I organised a work in progress "exposition" with our partner gallery, Kettle's Yard. The artists and technologists found ways to show early versions of the ideas they were working on to the audience. We framed the overall event as a research experiment, in which audiences were invited to contribute to the ongoing development of the works. I was interested to find out how audiences would respond to this unusual use of the gallery. By talking to visitors and watching their behaviour I discovered that most audience members were very open to this experimental and process-based form of exhibition. They readily grasped the idea that the objects in the gallery were not finished works, and seemed keen to give feedback and discuss the research processes represented in the space. The experiment also proved valuable for the artists, who were interested to see how audiences reacted to their ideas and engaged with the things they had made. The success of this early experiment persuaded me that the field of HCI would reward closer attention, and became the motivating factor behind this research. In the thesis that follows I show how my engagement with HCI has generated new possibilities for curatorial practice, as well as new ways of understanding and talking about the aesthetic effects of computer-based interaction in art.