

Image Con Text (1978 – 2003)

Film / Performance / Video / Digital

Mike Leggett

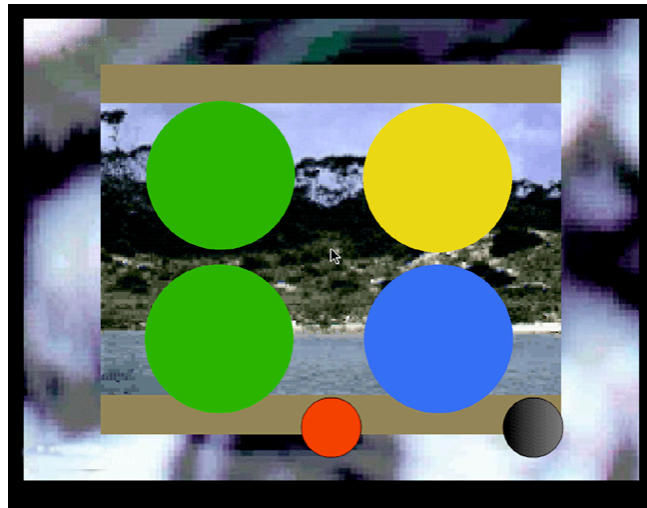


Fig 1 Frame grab from PathScape prototype interactive system (Leggett 2000)

Roy Ascott in the early 1990s described a culture developing in which its creators became part of a complex and widely distributed system. It involved both human and artificial cognition and perception and was 'an art that is emergent from a multiplicity of interactions in data space' (Ascott 2003, p. 261).

The data space in which we move daily and with which we are most familiar is the media flow within which we have been raised. It is an accumulation of signifiers - what Derrida termed the absent present :

Signs represent the present in its absence; they take the place of the present ... when the present does not present itself, then we signify, we go through the detour of signs. (Derrida 1973)

When these words were first published in English, the computer was an expensive device limited to rich corporations and specialist university departments. Computer networks were the domain of the military. Computer-based information technology was emerging but still distant for most people. Artists working with analogue information technology, including photography, sound, film and video, were engaged in various investigations. These were not only about how the tools in the factories of dissemination and entertainment, the institutions of cinema and television, could be redeployed, but about the codes and languages, the signs and symbols that needed to be reassessed and overhauled. It was the cusp of a move away from the analogue and linear modes of mediated social relations, towards the binary and relational, relying on network and distribution building for circulating ideas, whether these were expressed as text or objects. As Daniel Palmer has recently observed:

"...video art is part of a broader shift from the representational tradition of visual art to one engaged in the more presentational modes of the 'theatrical', incorporating the sense of the here

and now, of the viewer participating in the very space of the object, images and action.” (Palmer 2004)

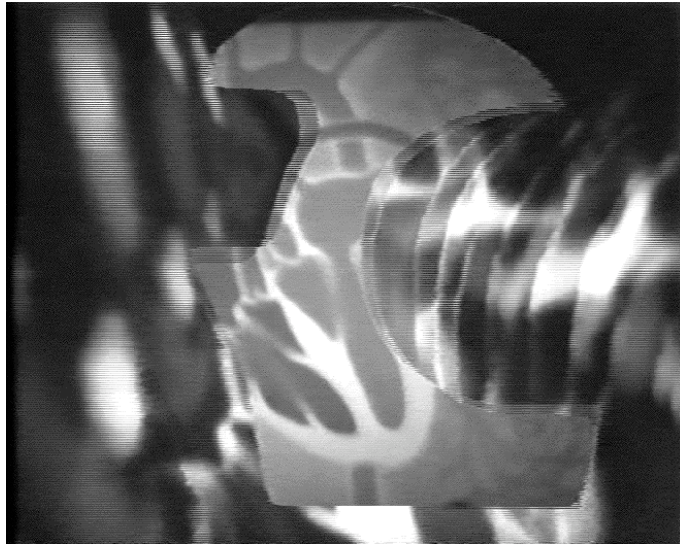


Fig 2 Frame from 'The Heart Cycle' (1972) video

Reconsideration of the work of the 70s, the methods and approaches used by artists, might reveal whether relational changes were anticipated and fulfilled, or whether the investigations, without an agreed program of work at the time, ('work on representation' would continue for ever), nonetheless encouraged a confidence amongst younger artists to embrace the 'multiplicity of interactions in data space' as the opportunity to do so emerged through the 80s and 90s.

This is not to say that some artists gained access to computer technology at an early stage. The Computer Arts Society was founded in London during 1968 and amongst the 'moving image' artists of the time, Malcolm Le Grice gained access to one of the largest computers in Europe in 1969. Grasping the basics of programming Pascal, over a period of nine months and after many bug fixes, he produced a graphical image, animated using a vector-based film plotter and incorporated as an 8-second loop into the film title, 'Your Lips' (1970). In an essay written in the same year, "Outline for a Theory of the Development of Television" (Le Grice 2001), he presciently anticipated the potential usage and affect of computers networked together to disseminate audio visual material.

Apart from Le Grice's inspired diversions, the work by him and other artists to make and distribute programs based on the outcomes of film experiment, to greater or lesser degree took cognisance of approaches to theory. Though not entirely strange to those with an art training, to those such as myself coming from an industry background, understanding the context for activity was quite new. Industry demands competency, not thought. In 1969 when the London Film-makers Co-op (LFMC) Workshop opened in a temporary space just off the Euston Road in London's West End, it provided access for the membership to full production facilities for 16mm film-making, including the normally industry-centred procedures of duplication and processing. From that point onwards, for the next ten years at least, the LFMC was a focus point and generator for the production and dissemination of not only films, but also the discourse, between film-maker artists and the audience of film-makers, visual artists, performers, writers

and critics. The pace was scorching at first, anticipation of new works palpable. It was not long before new audiences were left behind.

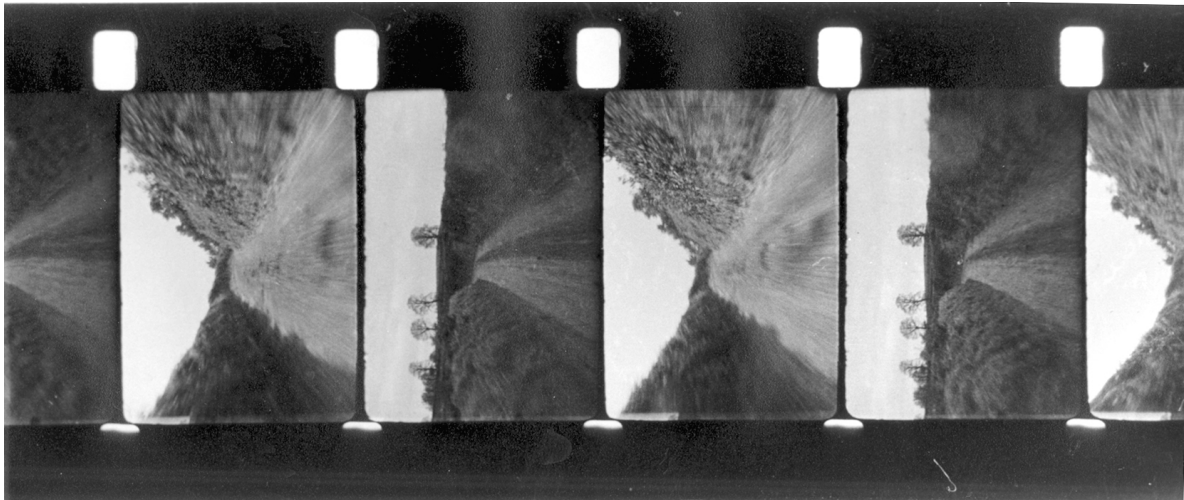


Fig 3 film strip from 'Film Lane' (1973), 16mm film.

Image Con Text Project

The Image Con Text project when it commenced in 1978 was about interaction of the analogue kind, between the artist and an audience gathered for a screening. It presented a multiplicity of information, or contextualising material as it was called then, to provide for 'new' audiences not only a way into the artworks but also access to the conditions and processes which gave them the form and the content they adopted. This practice-based research, as it is now called, being pursued or produced during that period was rigorous as well as vigorous, but for the most part unrecognised as such.

The pro-active, interventionist strategy pursued was partly in response to schemes that had been initiated by funders such as the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB)¹, to subsidise screening venues for the cost of transporting, accommodating and paying a screening fee to artists invited to show their work to a local audience. A condition for accepting the subsidy was that there would be no admission fee. This ruled out many commercial or semi-commercial venues with overhead costs to maintain. The majority of venues were those who already had these costs covered such as colleges of art, universities and public exhibition spaces and screens. Consequently, many of the audiences were younger people who had little knowledge of the work or its context.

The screenings I undertook in the mid-70s followed a pattern adopted by many visiting artists - a few introductory words and then at the end of the screening, opening-up responses from the (usually) youthful audience. The Image Con Text project provided a context for viewing the film and video works I would often be invited to screen - it wasn't exactly a history lesson, or about philosophy, or politics, or a tenuously connected series of anecdotes, but something of a mix of all these. It employed a format that combined different media forms, described variously as expanded cinema, film performance or simply, performance work. It was part of a process of convergence of media that had been occurring amongst practitioners throughout the 60s and 70s. It was not until later that 'media art' became the generally accepted term for this activity.

The Image Con Text project comprised three parts. The first, described some of the conditions that had been involved in giving the films the form they adopted. This took two distinct approaches as presentational performances - from the artists' viewpoint in 1978, then later in 1981 from the audience viewpoint, (the film-maker being a section of the audience too). The second aspect of the project was as on-going research, regular live presentations to audiences, the feedback from which could be fed into subsequent presentations. Thirdly, a videotape version not only archived the presentation performance but extended its meanings to later audiences. This process was later extended following transfer to DVD, introducing the possibility of interactive study utilising the dynamic linking of the format.

Image Con Text

Image Con Text (Image Con Text: One, as it was later known), set out to provide a context for the work from the point of view of the video or film-maker.

This live presentation, outlines rather than reports, material factors which affect many film-makers working independently of commercial film-making, at this point in time, Spring 1978.

It is not only about the artifacts that have been produced – these are simply the residue of a range of activities – the presentation is more to do with the conditions that have been involved in giving them the form they adopt. So it is not concerned with examining their peculiarities, their style, their minimalism, the formalism, their whatever, or any of those things which could be used to describe their uniqueness or originality or any description which would seek to separate them, to distinguish them, to express an essential difference between them and another person's work.

The emphasis will be rather the opposite. To examine these various activities and the relationship they have to the formulative process of arriving at a completed artifact, as a means of establishing points of similarity in methods of production, connections with other people and the way they are working at present, or the way they have worked in the past. (Leggett 1978)

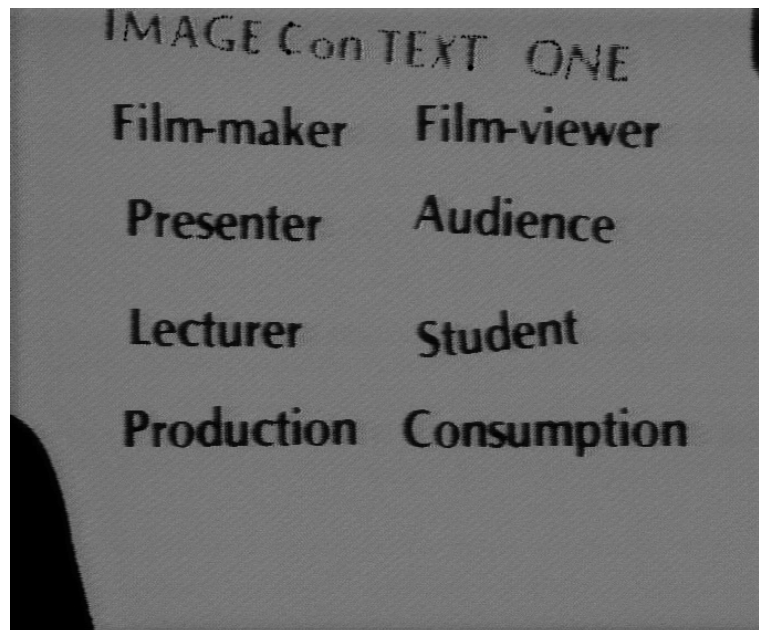


Fig 4: caption frame from 'Image Con Text:One' (1984) video [or words into body of text]

The form combines various mediums: projected slides; 8mm film with sound; 16mm film with and without sound; and sound played from a portable cassette recorder. The lecturer, besides addressing the audience directly, more often than not is also responsible for controlling these

machines. This element of live performance will extend at the end into a discussion about the presentation and its contents. (Leggett 1978, 1984)

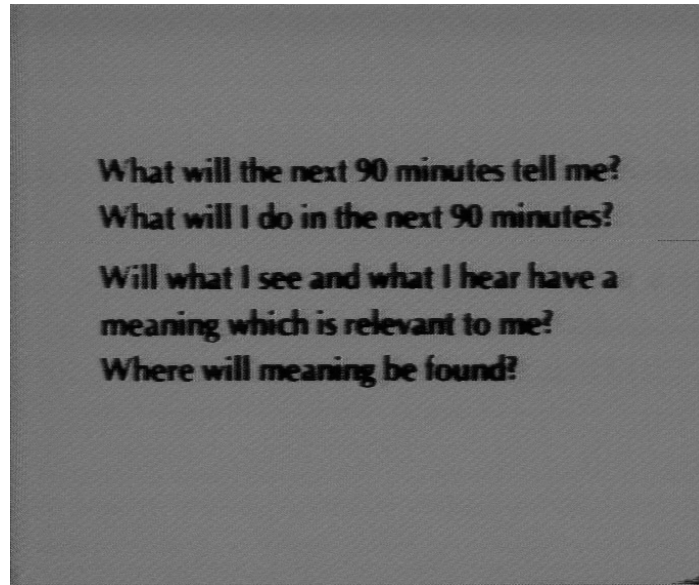


Fig 5: caption frame from 'Image Con Text:One' (1984) video [or words into body of text]

A diagram will be used as a guide for maintaining direction in the remaining 70 minutes and will propose a relationship between those who have worked in the past, History; and those of us who are working at present, Context; which determines more surely than a free-floating autonomous and 'creative' individual, what will be FORMulation in time, future. (Leggett 1978, 1984)

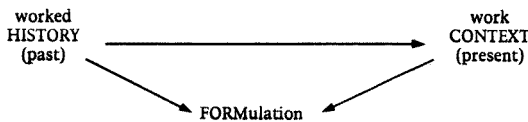


Fig 6: diagram from 'Image Con Text (: One)' (1978) (Illustration courtesy Screen)

The presentation began by proposing a triangle diagram linking these concepts. It reappeared as a titling or signposting device at the beginning of each section, seeking within the images and texts that followed, to provide a context for the range of activities and the resulting artefacts produced and the *"..conditions that have been involved in giving them the form they adopt"*. The title History was followed by the sub-sections, Personal and Social. The title Context with the sub-sections, Social, Economics, Political and Discourse. The title FORMulation by Discourse, Production and Personal.

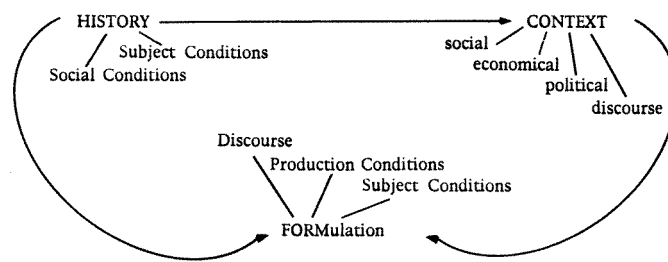


Fig 7: diagram frame from 'Image Con Text (: One)' (1978) (Illustration courtesy Screen)

Within each section, the form of address was sometimes first person, sometimes third. Using a bricolage of narrative forms, throughout the whole presentation it was necessary for the audience member to be alert as to who (or what) might be 'speaking'. Where the meaning lay in relation to preceding and following sections, (the methods of dialectic and proposition), lay in contrast to the abstract and material basis of the 'personal' sections, the two spaces for screening a film or videotape art work in its entirety.

Later, Rod Stoneman in an article on film related practice and the avant-garde paraphrased Foucault in relation to the Image Con Text presentation:

"A whole web of relations is woven between the text and context – they support and contradict one another, modify each other ... The presentation is a site for the intersection of discourses which differ in origin, form, organisation and function. In their variety and totality they do not constitute an exemplary text or a composite work but rather a truncated description of a contestation, a confrontation indicating a series of power relations that take place in and through discourse." (Stoneman 1979/80)

The format proved to be a success. The first time it was presented, there were so many issues and discussion flowing two hours after the 70-minute presentation, that the same class all returned the following week to continue for another 2 hours. I continued to use the presentation for 'new' audiences, screening two or three short films or videos at set points, varying the titles following discussion with the venue organizer. It also had the advantages of a live presentation, with the ability to vary and change the order or degree of delivery, to respond to the indicators received from the audience, and of course engage at a level of discourse appropriate to interaction with the audience, between one another and toward the speaker.

"Image Con Text attempts to reintroduce elements of ideological and political discourse to articulate some of the structures which determine the placement and function of avant-garde audio-visual practices at this time, producing an understanding of the processes by which films are financed and distributed. Posing a specific formulation of the present crisis in representation that attempts to break through the limits of contextual containment." (Stoneman 1979/80)

The 'crisis in representation' identified by the writer for Screen had developed from the vigorous debate between adherents and practitioners of several different, often competing, 'research' approaches, (though few amongst the artist film-makers would have described their work in such academic terms). The core of

the differences were identified in two articles appearing in the mid-70s; 'The Two Avant Gardes' (Wollen c1982) and 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film' (Gidal 1974). Gidal maintained that the semiological project instituted by Wollen in his book 'Signs and Meanings in the Cinema' (Wollen 1972) was too narrowly focussed, by recognising and analysing mediated images within the cinematic institution - the debate should really be a holistic embracing of the entire phenomena of the viewed cinematic experience and its apparatus. Wollen and others critiqued such an approach as "...seeking an ontology based on the essence of cinema..." and introduced into the debate further contributions from Derrida, on presence, which was regarded as central to Gidal's formulations on film's material substances and processes. (Le Grice 2001).

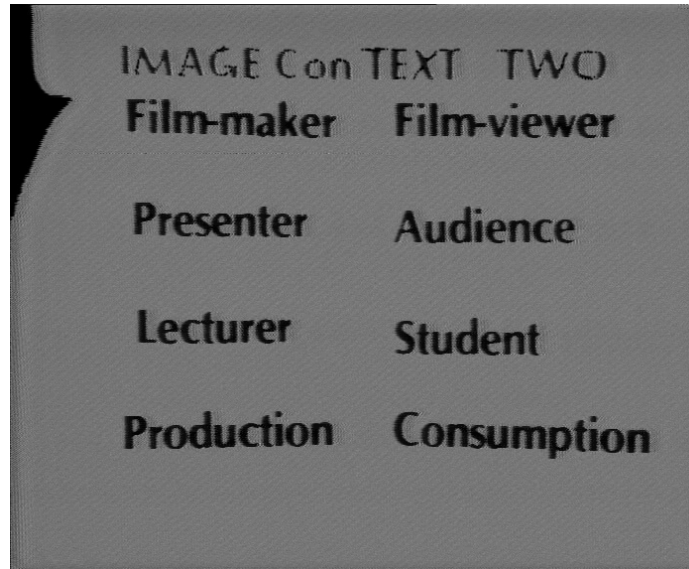


Fig 8: title frame from 'Image Con Text :Two' (1985) video

Image Con Text : Two

Arising from the discussions with audiences over a couple of years, in 1983, another approach was taken to Image Con Text using exactly the same presentational format, substituting texts, film and sound addressing issues affecting the presence and the formulation of the notion of Audience. The same triangle of related concepts was employed, the third part of the triangle being titled OBJECTive, the sub-section 'Production' being replaced with 'Transformation'.

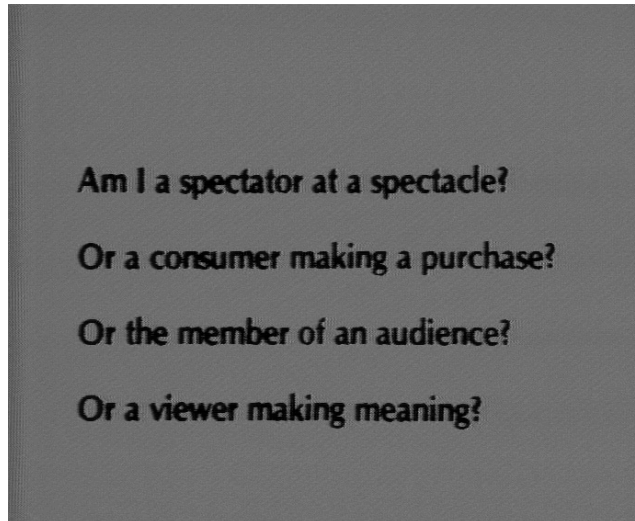


Fig 9: caption frame from 'Image Con Text : Two' (1985) video [or words into body of text]

This illustrated lecture presentation describes rather than reports a situation which is common to the film-maker and the audience – the situation, the event, where the film or videotape is viewed, being the point at which meaning is made or where apparent meaning is interrogated.

Such a critical approach to making meaning is consciously part of the process of production, the process which, for instance, enabled the films and tapes you will watch shortly, to be finalized by the film-maker. A critical approach also occurs during the process of consumption by the audience, though the making of meaning is perhaps on a less conscious and demanding level. But the situation in which we as film-viewers encounter the world is only in relation to material factors which cause the world to be represented audio-visually together with the knowledge each one of us brings to the viewing space.... Some of the factors affecting that space is what will be described. (Leggett 1985)

As in One, *Image Con Text : Two* examines a set of 14 photographs, (but a different set from One), most made in the early 1900s. The first time they were seen is silent, without comment. The three subsequent viewings were with a soundtrack commentary, read by different voices, each applying a different apparent interpretation. In contrast to One, the commentaries make extensive use of quotes in Two, from official reports, papers, journal articles, books and contemporary newspapers. It also introduced contemporary photographs to the 14 selected.



Fig 10: image frame from 'Image Con Text : Two' (1985) video

"...a 35mm negative exposed some eighty years later in the St Pauls district of Bristol on the night of the 2nd April 1980 during some disturbances. A main road is blocked with burning vehicles. Flames burst from a nearby building, a white mass devoid of detail, the light emitted much greater to that reflected from the objects around. The shutter halts the movement of a figure in the background walking towards the camera but the large aperture restricts sharp focus to the distant wall. Not included in the camera's field the old man in the foreground who gazes into the picture space into which we too are gazing. From behind, his hair and clothes, the shape of his head, resemble a portrait made some eighty years before.... (Leggett 1985)



Fig 11: image frame from 'Image Con Text : Two' (1985) video

....of another old man who by comparison bears an uncanny resemblance to the other. The two images could be referred to in motion picture editing terms as, 'matched images' making possible an action cut on the response of the subject to the scene he witnesses....."(Leggett 1985)

Video

Later, in 1984/5, the contextual material used was transferred to U-matic videotape - Image Con Text: One and Image Con Text: Two, as two separate titles, made available for hire along with film or video artworks.

The playback of this videotape is another manifestation of a series of work projects drawn together originally as an illustrated lecture presentation. This video version of Image Con Text shifts these elements into another form of address that normally prevents on television an active response from the Audience towards the lecturer, the film-maker, the program-maker.

It is assumed that the presentation of this videotape will provide a framework in which such a response can be accommodated.(Leggett 1984, 1985)

As video the project is placed into the domain of the audience member, viewing as an individual, or as part of a group. The work becomes a hermeneutic medium, like a book, aiding debate though not always debate with the maker of the work. Whilst the 'text' cannot now be changed, because it is a source of represented knowledge rather than direct experience, (occurring with the live presenter or with the film and video framed by the presentation), its true relationship to the artwork referred is tangential, never causal. This relational link is echoed by the tenuous links set-up between the elements within the performance (or video), both the materials of sound and image, their technology format of delivery, and the alignment of spoken or quoted sources within the overall order of the sections within the presentation.

The videotape proved in practice to become an archiving stage of the Image Con Text project as few hiring's of the video/film combination were recorded. Perhaps by the mid-80s, the time for analysing the contextual issues for artists' film and video had passed, as attention was taken by the promises of new audiences on the developing television and cable channels across Britain and Europe. Or perhaps the presence of the artist together with the audience experiencing the work was the event which individuals were seeking. In the words of the final caption in Two - Personal OBJECTive : 'the interactive programme' - proximity, dialogue, a kind of interactivity based on both familiar and unfamiliar encounters.

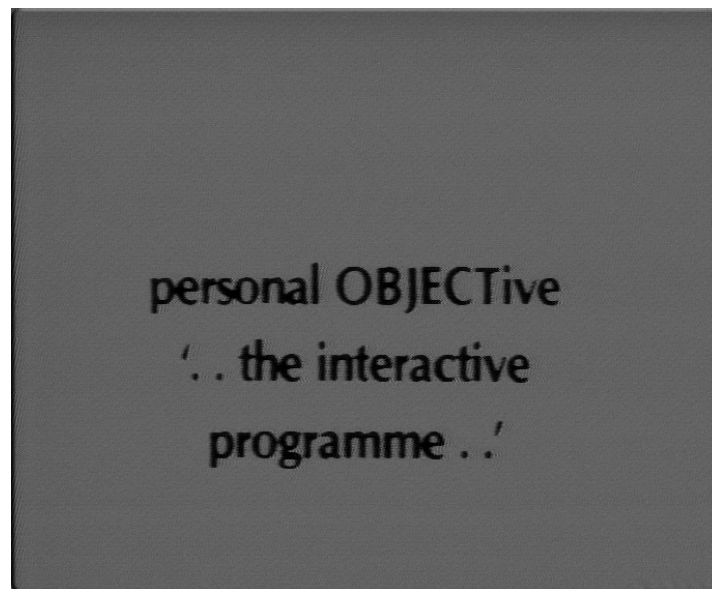


Fig 12: caption frame from 'Image Con Text : Two' (1985) video

Fast Forward

Revisiting these debates, (these texts, as material, as presence in performance), whilst focussing on the possibilities of contemporary media and their intimate nature, (the book and the computer screen have a comparable presence and are seen at about the same physical distance), and potential responsiveness to the viewer's presence, suggests some re-evaluation of the materiality of representation, some reconsideration of language, language forms and literacy.



Fig 13: Frame grab from PathScape prototype interactive system (Leggett 2000)

Signs go back to an earlier data space. Plato, at the cusp of the wider adoption of the technology of literacy, was concerned to protect the oral tradition of the School of Athens and developed an argument questioning the real value of the new media of the time, reading and writing. As an 'early adopter' of the technology, in the *Phaedrus* he lumps painting and the new technology of writing together, querying them with the observation:

..but if you question them, they maintain a solemn silence. (Plato 1956)

In an oral culture, the presence of the creator of the work is important, for presence allows the pursuit of verification, disputation and debate. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato used the new technology, writing, to preserve the old technology, oratory and *ars memoria*, by reproducing the dialogues of Socrates in a hybrid form, 'the book', a hermeneutic space where an interrogation of the text by the reader could occur. As with any new device, performing tests and trials, comparing the efficacy of its use with the familiarity and pervasiveness of the old methods was, as now, a part of a gradual adoption and continuing adaptation during the transition from the old to the new. As Greg Ulmer has observed, the new method of literacy remained suspect, as the interpretive space opening between sender and receiver of the text diminished the authority of the speaker, less through the polemicists physical absence but more because of the sharing of the text with others, (fellow readers), who were inhabiting a shared data space. (Ulmer 2002) Literacy, then as now, is as much about remote networking as about coding.

In the context of the data space of cyberculture, of telepresence, does the computer-mediated installation in the gallery space develop further opportunities for the expansion of dialogue between the artist/designer, the visitor and the artificial intelligence that lies potentially within the machine? Or is the

form of the contemporary hybrid artefact, multivalent? That is, where it can be found, who makes it and how it is experienced?

The rapid deployment of global computer networks, in particular the World Wide Web for the general community, suddenly gave presence another meaning. Few of us will forget the first time we linked to a server on the other side of the world, receiving the image of a webpage a few seconds later – the finger tips tingled, the sensation was palpable.

Though ostensibly dealing with the human-machine linkage, many researchers consider psychological and social factors when advancing into defining 'interaction' and the 'interface', or the space, part physical, part virtual, which the subject's presence affects. It is a curious echo of the debates of the 70s, seeking to reveal the processes of representation, the linkages between machines, artists, audiences and consciousness.

Two research psychologists, Mantovani and Riva, building on the work of among others, Heidegger and J. Gibson, propose an 'ecological approach', establishing a relational presence based on resources not being the *'properties of either object or subject, but of their relation'*. Gibson's image of a tree in the middle of a field on a summer's day being only an 'affordance' to those who seek its cool shade being an illustration of *'resources, which are only revealed to those who seek them'*. Mantovani & Riva go on to amplify this distinction with the argument that presence is a social construction "*mediated by both physical and conceptual tools which belong to a given culture*" in which there is "*the emphasis of ecological approach on the primacy of action on mere perception*" and that "*action is not undertaken by isolated individuals but by members of a community. Ultimately, there are only two elements which guarantee presence: a cultural framework and the possibility of negotiation of both actions and their meaning*". (Mantovani 1999)

A descriptive analysis of this kind enables empirical intervention and the measurement of response levels and they claim, the emotional component within presence perception. Interest in this area has initiated projects across a diversity of disciplines from psychology and physiology to ethology and ethnology. Much of the debate among interdisciplinary and associated research groups makes little reference 'across the fence' to parallel work that has been achieved in the humanities. But then, if the potential for developing machines – computer devices, rather than linear media – had not become as socially ubiquitous as today, would the enquiries by the artist, of the scientist, have ever advanced beyond the initial probing work of Le Grice?

Image With Text

The approach taken by the Image Con Text project in some ways foreshadowed aspects of science-based research into Human Computer Interaction (HCI). This sub-disciplinary area of information technology research recognised relatively late in the overall development of computer systems that computers could be more than substitute typewriters, adding machines and advanced calculators. Issues of functionality and usability become paramount as business began to fund the research. Sophisticated methodologies were invented to advance exhaustive evaluation with live subjects, so that painstaking and rigorous documentation and data gathering could prove some conclusions about interface design.

So now we confront the image of a printed page, the surface of a desktop, a piece of graph paper, a map, or specialist interfaces like that used for editing video and soundtrack. These two-dimensional spaces that have acquired the bevel edge, two, three and four pixels broad - embossed frames, windows, work areas,

palettes, icons, trash cans and so on, remain in a pre-renaissance era of quality of experience if not functionality. These contextual devices are more about achieving "the goals of performance" often associated with the interface and what can occur within the metaphor it sets out to establish. The interfaces that artists currently construct are about interventions, presences which are as tangible as that of the live performer and the live audience.

Later, in 2003, the archiving continued with the migration of Image Con Text from video to DVD, complete with the simple interactive components that the format offers, enabling the viewer to move from caption to caption at will. Like the video, but with greater speed and accuracy, interaction using a DVD moves the context of the presentation again. Instead of the presenter/performer being sensitive to the audiences members indicators, (of confusion, of boredom, of comprehension), and responding accordingly, it becomes the receiving individual or group's responsibility to adjust the flow of information – stopping to discuss with others, skipping back to play again, moving to another section instead of playing through in the order determined by the linear video.

It remains to be seen whether it will migrate into the next format. More than likely, if this is to happen, it will be in the form of a distributed network resource, accessible by the individual, or the electronic seminar room, in which, it is assumed, *'a framework will be provided to accommodate an active response from an Audience towards the lecturer, the film-maker and the video artist.'*(Leggett 1984, 1985)

Within a system of computer network distribution, the presence of the artist / presenter, becomes the presence of the audience. Indeed in a text-based environment of this kind, (a multi-user domain or chat room), any member of the group could assume the role of presenter or artist or author. Likewise, the primacy of the artwork as object is reduced. However, as with the films and videos of the 70s, focus is upon the initiation of reflexive feedback loops and engagement with the cognitive and perceptual faculties of the (computer-based) viewer, emphasizing response and interaction within a dynamic representational system. The artwork made for the public and collective space of the cinema becomes an anachronism within a context where the viewing space, the space in which the presence of the artwork meets the presence of the singular online viewer, becomes another space entirely, a data space, where 'a multiplicity of interactions' make authorship uncertain of either an initiating proposal or responding rejoinder.

What remains to be understood better, is whether the location of data space can be developed to equal the dynamic space of live presentation and performance tested within the Image Con Text project.

Notes

1 In 1994, the Arts Council of Great Britain was abolished, and its functions transferred to three new bodies: the Arts Council of England, the Arts Council of Wales and the Scottish Arts Council under a new Royal Charter. (ACE 2004)

Citations

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