

Global Art

by **Chris Hales** – October 2008

Interactivity, an essential element present in all my own artistic practice, offers to an audience the possibility of actively participating in the control of an artwork or representation at the moment that it is experienced. The possibility of interaction empowers the user to act (in the physical sense of making an action) and thereby to create a personal reading of the work out of many available interpretations. The shift of emphasis from author to reader was described (without specific reference to interactivity) as the *death of the author* by Barthes, and Umberto Eco described the type of work that allows this as an *open work*. In the realm of artistic creation, one might therefore rightfully describe as 'Global Art' these artefacts in which all potential viewers are able to contribute in some measure to create their own personal version/vision of the work.

Outside of the art world, interactivity is certainly becoming a ubiquitous, if not necessarily global, phenomenon. Mobile phones, websites and iPods (amongst others, of course) can require quite complex interactions from their users in order to carry out a variety of functions. Interaction is widely understood globally, yet those members of the artistic community who have been actively creating interactive works for decades find that their works are not widely exhibited outside of a small number of specialist festivals and events: the art world seems surprisingly shy of so-called 'interactive art'. Carlos Cabral Nunes explains in his curatorial text for the ITCA 2008 his desire "to bring interactive multimedia into the contemporary art field, where it has always been underground. The fear, or even fright expressed by the most important art critics and commissioners all over the world towards this discipline, technical they'd say, is revealing of the incomprehension its authors have been through".

Combine interactivity with the universal presence of moving imagery (think television, cinema...) and one might imagine that so-called 'interactive film' - the specific area of my own artistic creation - might have a much wider appeal than it actually has. Back in 1967 Raduz Cincera's 'Kinoautomat', the first substantial instance of the genre, was widely publicised and highly acclaimed during the six months that it was staged as part of the Expo'67 in Montreal. Yet since that time, the creative possibilities of the interactive moving image have not in my opinion been explored to any significant level. Although Bill Viola once complained (*Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, 1995) that video *technology is far in advance of those using it* - arguing that not enough time was spent exploring the potential that each technological step offered to creative videomaking - developments in technologies have genuinely eased the process of creating and displaying an interactive film.

As a visual artist experimenting with the use of computers, I had never created a single-channel video when I picked up a camcorder in 1994-95 to create my first interactive movie 'The Twelve Loveliest Things I Know'. This poetic documentary enabled me to develop a visual language that supported the potential interaction in a playful way, a technique that I began to call 'movie as interface' and developed further in numerous subsequent works. There seemed (and still seems) so much potential in going beyond the 'linear edit' that I have concentrated

my creative energy in exploring the interactive interactive moving image, both by making and exhibiting a series of my own interactive films and by teaching about a hundred workshops to inspire others also to do so.

Although the possibility to affect an interactive artwork could be considered a global quality, the possibility of creating such a work is not. Although I once read that a prototypic example of interactive art is considered to be a piece by Marcel Duchamp which was exhibited alongside an axe with the written instruction "to be used to comment on the work", more often than not it requires expensive or complex equipment (computers, video cameras, software etc.) and the skill to use it to achieve the desired aim of creating (let alone exhibiting) an interactive artwork. I have developed a way of working that uses relatively modest resources - a mini-DVD video camera, a desktop computer, an easily obtainable software - and a way of working that should be understandable to all. In this way, as well as being quite prolific in my own production, hundreds of interesting interactive films have been made by others in the workshops that I have held in a variety of locations in Europe.

The addition of interactivity is the key quality here. The change in representation that it usually brings about enables the artist to experiment with non-linear narrative in a way that relates closely to historical practices of avant-garde film and 'film art' - practices that developed as a counterpoint to the all-pervasive notion of narrative cinema. The poetic film, which arranges the images in poetic structures using metaphoric relationships based on associations and semantic links (as for example formulated by Dulac or Deren), is particularly suitable to the interactive format, as are those films which experiment with the visual language of representation such as the creative use of the multiscreen format. Interactive films also fit neatly into the category of 'installation art' and are regularly exhibited in this format.

In fact, there are now numerous ways in which interactive films can be presented to their audiences. In the days of 'Kinoautomat', conventional film projection had to be ingeniously adapted to allow a non-linear delivery of the film sequences. It was not until the early 90s that desktop computers were routinely used to control interactive film playout - although at that time unsatisfactory technologies such as CDROM and 'Laserdisc' were still in use. When I first became involved in making interactive films the whole process was a struggle and there was even the feeling that the genre was unlikely to progress. But now, with video images omnipresent in our lives, the technology and devices to enable us all to interact with them are also proliferating. As mentioned earlier, examples include websites, iPods, mobile phones, interactive television, gallery installations, and games consoles. The possibilities to experience an interactive film grow greater and greater, and if we combine this increased access with a greater audience perception of what interaction can do (and add into the mix the Web 2.0 philosophy of mutual construction and collaboration), one might argue that the interactive moving image is indeed becoming a global phenomenon...although perhaps the art establishment hasn't quite realised it yet!