



## Award Interaction

This category covers artistic productions focusing on human interaction with and through digital media. Interactive systems consist of several components which combine to create an artwork that can be experienced individually or collectively and whose outcome is relatively open and dependent on the recipient's participation. These can be locally based systems like installations or performances, as well as open, networked or activist processes. The evaluation of these works hinges on their reflection of current social and cultural conditions and on the choice of adequate media and components which articulate the intention of the project.

### Jury Statement:

Statement of the Jury in Interaction - Interactive Systems  
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On the first weekend in October 2001 we convened in Berlin to review the many entries to the Transmediale festival's Interaction Category.

Jury participation is an opportunity to be exposed to a snapshot of the current state of the art and spirit of the times. Before we discuss the small handful of entries that we nominated, we thought it might be interesting to share a quick view of this snapshot, as we were able to observe a number of trends across the wide and unfiltered assortment of artworks we reviewed. Indeed, some of these trends might not otherwise be evident in the highly filtered and curated worlds of the Transmediale and other popular festivals.

We observed, for example, a proliferation of multiuser visual creation tools for online communities. Some artists explored how these "shared canvases" could become battlegrounds for political expression, while others explored the visual and design issues involved in collaborative image-spaces. Another trend we observed was an undirected enthusiasm for the sheer magnitude of information available on the Internet. This phenomenon appears to take a prominent role in many works in a sometimes rather uncritical fashion; many artworks re-present or reify it in an additive or documentary way, rather than using it (for example) as a metaphor, or extracting novel observations from it. Finally, we also observed that speech synthesis as a component in interactive installations is enjoying a notably increased popularity.

These are the trends of the moment; other trends are persistent enough to be considered permanent features of the territory. From the documents in our libraries and our own experiences, it is fair to say that artistic practice in technology-based art has for decades been imperiled by an uncritical adoption of the many technological possibilities at hand. In reviewing this year's crop, we note that this risk has not diminished. Whether they formed the impulse behind the creative process or served as the crutch in front of it, extra technological components were too often used to make up for a lack of strong ideas.

Fortunately, there are always a few artists who find a way around the perils, follow their own trends, and produce exemplary, innovative, and interesting work. In order to better identify these works, and to better understand their applicability to our category Interactive Art (in contradistinction to the Transmediale's Software Art and Image categories), we drew up a set of evaluation criteria. Our interest in doing so was more practical than academic; we simply had a large number of submissions to evaluate and felt it would be helpful to have a short checklist of criteria to keep us focused. Without attempting to be comprehensive, we reckoned ourselves to care most about the following:

- The quality of interaction. What is the depth and character of the feedback loop between a system and its user? We chose to value tightness of cybernetic feedback, and the quality of the dialogue established by a system between its interactants and its medium.
- The use of interaction as a cultural gesture in a given society. We asked: how and to what extent are the acts performed by the user, through interaction with the system, socially significant?
- The aesthetic quality. To what extent are the form and content of the work mutually essential in effecting its communication? What epistemological gain does the work provide? We sought works which demonstrated an inseparability and mutual consequence of their means and their message, in the service of their chosen communication.
- The quality of craft and execution. We sought works which demonstrated a mastery of their medium, and a rigorous approach to their conceptualization and implementation.

We chose to nominate five pieces which satisfied our criteria: Affective Cinema, ...seine hohle Form, Hello Mr. President, TraceNoizer, and Telephone Etude #1 - Shakespeare Cuisinart. In the next sections we offer our praise and critiques for these projects, as well as some of our own thoughts on the interesting contrasts between them.

Affective Cinema is an installation whose narrative is guided by feedback from the user's physiological reactions to the video material it presents. It uses our emotional reactions to media images, captured through galvanic skin sensors, as the motor for its character-based interaction. Affective Cinema's sensing interface is unique, its visuals are crisply executed, and their combined effects are viscerally felt and emotionally believable. At the same time, its combination of the familiar 'branching narrative' paradigm for interactive cinema with a coarsely divided clip

library reflects a less considered exploration of the state of the art in available technologies. The artists have missed the important possibility that pre-recorded audiovisual materials, when used in sufficiently fine segments and in large enough quantities, can approach the flexibility and responsiveness of pure synthesis. We would like to see Affective Cinema more closely approach its own logical extension, therefore, with a more instantaneously responsive feedback system.

Palindrome's ...seine hohle Form is a performance in which expert interactants, through dance, produce their own soundtrack in real-time. We noted the highly developed cybernetic relationship which the piece presents: through an especially tight connection between the dancer's body and the computer technology (in parts of the performance), an intense aesthetic experience is created for the viewer. At the same time, we recognize that Palindrome's interactive artwork contributes more to the augmentation of a pre-existing form – namely, modern or postmodern dance – than it does open wholly new vistas in either modes of communication, fields of activity for cultural production, or social actions and gestures in the information environment.

As a new kind of demonstration, by contrast, Johannes Gees's Hello Mr. President is above all an important social act. The artwork, a mountainside laser projection situated at the G8 meeting in Davos, Switzerland, displayed text messages sent to it from individuals on the web and via SMS. Though the content of these messages might be charged, the action of the artist is ostensibly neutral: Gees has merely provided a communications conduit, which can potentially be a vehicle for intelligent political statements as well as for banal juvenilia. Gees' documentation reports, however, that an editorial team filtered out nearly half of the messages sent to the system. Thus it remains unclear to its audience as to whether and which messages have been filtered out according to the artist's tastes, or according to those of the authorities that allowed the piece to be installed. Thus we feel that, although the statement made by Hello Mr. President – that communication should be possible – was not followed to its ultimate conclusion nor even especially novel, the artwork was without question impeccably executed and situated at the right place and at the right time with the right means for the right audience.

TraceNoizer is a software tool for protecting one's online identity. The artwork accomplishes this by obfuscating one's online traces, through the algorithmic generation of 'clone' homepages. The need for such a tool is conceivably quite real, given how much confidential information about each person is readily available online. TraceNoizer gives people the possibility of agency within this environment: It multiplies one's data information and makes it impossible for web crawlers to make a distinction between 'true' and 'fake' information – producing, according to the authors, 'Disinformation on Demand'. Our critique is that TraceNoizer does not fully explore the possibilities of sustained and detailed interactions with (and defensive monitoring of) the clones it creates. Instead, its use seems generally limited to a one-way, one-time interaction, admittedly after which one's altered online identity continues to interact with the world.

Part of our skepticism about Hello Mr. President is explained by our reaction to TraceNoizer. We wonder whether it may be more politically effective to create garbage noise to obscure one's own signal, than to communicate directly to the eight most powerful men in the world. TraceNoizer's creators locate all power in technology and machines, and action within the territory of the machine; their challenge of the technological mechanisms becomes not only a cultural gesture, but also shifts at least some power away from the control mechanisms back to the private user. Hello Mr. President, on the other hand, upholds the possibly mythical hope that people are still in power, and that those in power will listen to their constituents. To whatever extent this hope is indeed mythical, we put down our skepticism and applaud Hello Mr. President for its optimistic and possibly deliberate naiveté.

Jason Freeman's Telephone Etude #1 - Shakespeare Cuisinart uses the widely accessible and humble telephone as the vehicle for its artistic interaction. Most convincing is that it opens the artistic possibility of using this ubiquitous bi-directional tool, which more people have access to than any other communications format. It engages people into an interaction with almost no barrier to entry: they need only know how to place a phone call. Freeman has discovered an opportunity, moreover, to offer a stimulating interactive activity during one of the most annoying situations in which we find ourselves hostage: being put ON HOLD. Finally, Freeman implements some nice touches: the results of the user's interaction can be subsequently retrieved from the project's website, and then shared with others online. We wish only that its results would have greater depth and variety.

We recognize that many of our selections are difficult or impossible to show in a festival exhibition. Some, such as Hello Mr. President, are only meaningful at a certain time and place, while others, such as the Telephone Etude, are wholly virtual works, for which a physical representation in an exhibition space cannot truly represent the essence of the piece. We also acknowledge that there were many fine installations, which could be enormously fun to experience in a festival context, but which did not meet our criteria as well or as completely as our final selections.

The conclusions we present above are the product of our three continuous days of consideration, during which we viewed and experienced many dozens of projects, and debated their merits at great length. We wish to state that our results were arrived at unanimously, and were not the product of votes or compromises, but of mutual agreement.