

"Les CD-ROM Presence : The Ephemeral in Focus"

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Maria Isabel Meirelles is an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design in the Department of Visual Arts of Northeastern University. She has been at Northeastern University since 2003. Her primary research interest is twofold: the examination of visual complexities in computational media and the fundamentals underlying how information is structured, visualized and perceived. A common theme is the investigation of the processes of learning and applying visual principles of visual communication design in different media.

introduction

The presentation examines the CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus*, designed and produced in collaboration with Fenya Su in 2002. The CD was published in conjunction with the exhibition *Presence* at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, USA.

It begins with a brief analysis of CD-ROMs in general, the constraints imposed by the technology and the possibilities offered by the medium. Also discussed are the challenges facing the presentation and distribution of artworks produced in the physical realm and the ways in which the interface design and the forms of interaction enhance and affect the viewer's experience of the works.

The central investigation is on the main concepts underlying the user interface design, how data is organized and structured, and the potential ways the viewer can experience Ackroyd's and Harvey's artwork in *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus*.

The presentation is intentionally specific about the CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus* which is scrutinized from the designer's point of view. The aim is to suggest visual strategies for the design of interfaces. The forms of interactions, links and connections between the data are not just a technical tool for the new media designer. Rather, they are the means to immerse the viewer in the experience of aesthetic phenomena.



the medium: CD-ROM

The medium discussed in this presentation is the CD-ROM. It is relevant to mention, though, that the CD-ROM shares constraints and possibilities with other computational products discussed in other sections of this Conference.

CD-ROMs are data carriers with limited storage capabilities. The technology allows for the creation of multimedia communication products accessed by means of personal computers. Interactions between the viewer and the computer happens through the user interface and the use of external devices for the input (mouse and keyboard) and the output (the monitor screen) of data. These characteristics set the limitations and constraints of the medium.

Other relevant features are its portability and the potential to expand and extend the presentation, publication and consumption of artworks beyond the spatial and temporal physical constraints of the museum.

The latter features could as well be used to describe the art catalogue. The catalogue has evolved along time, but, in general, it is a record of the works in a show —the reproduction of images— at the same time that it contextualizes and broadens the understanding of the artwork through additional historical and critical essays.

It could be argued that the differences between the art catalogue and the art CD-ROM don't lie solely in the specificities of the medium and the technology, rather, on how the viewer's experience is designed (and desired).



Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus showing new window with extra information (from top to bottom): the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; the artists Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey; the collaboration between the artists and scientists in Great Britain.

It seems clear that the art CD-ROM should not be a replication or an adaptation of the well-established and successful format of art catalogues. Nor should it be a mere addition of multimedia components to the presentation of static images. Rather, the focus should be on the role of the viewer and on media integration.

It is relevant at this point to make a distinction between artists working in the physical realm and those already generating time-based media or virtual environments. It is unquestioned that, for example, a video artist would gain enormously in having the work reproduced in a dynamic media product rather than in the static medium of a printed publication. The discussion that follows is centered on the first group.

here are two major challenges facing the design of art CD-ROMs reproducing physical artworks. One is to reconcile the absence of the physical reality and sensory nature of the works with the mediated and interactive environment of the electronic medium. The other is to transform a medium that has limited storage capacity into unlimited ways of exploring the artwork.

The first challenge draws attention to the artificialities involved in the process of reception of artworks in computer environments. A flat, rectangular luminous surface displays digital images (static or dynamic) of the works with limited resolution. The viewer's interaction is mediated by electronic devices, such as the mouse. At stake are the relationships between the viewer and the image, between the space of the viewer and the space of representation, between the body of the viewer and the devices used on the interaction.¹ Differently, for example, from virtual reality immersive spaces, in the computer environment the viewer is aware of the monitor screen and the limited ways offered by the mouse interaction. In other words, the medium is always already present and recognizable. The technology calls for new modes of visual sensitivity and conceptualization, as well as new modes of perception of visual forms.

The second challenge is related to how content is structured and accessed, and the ways in which the viewer's experience is designed. Most computational media products —whether CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMs, or web sites— are organized as database structures, resulting in indexical ways of searching and retrieving the data. Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media* shows his dissatisfaction with the sole role of the database form:

Given the dominance of the database in computer software and the key role it plays in the computer-based design process, perhaps we can arrive at new kinds of narrative by focusing our attention on how narrative and database can work together. How can a narrative take into account the fact that its elements are organized in a database? *How can our new abilities to store vast amounts of data, to automatically classify, index, link, search, and instantly retrieve it, lead to new kinds of narratives?*²

Similarly, Peter Weibel in the essay *The Post-Gutenberg Book: The CD-ROM between Index and Narration* invites new media designers and artists to search for new forms of narratives:

Index and narration represent two opposing information systems. Most current CD-ROM products are characterized by the indexical structure, but the future of the CD-ROM lies in narration based on data, cross-references and jumps, on networking and links that go beyond the indexical structure.³

The CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus* was designed with these two challenges in mind. In the attempt to integrate the viewer with the image and to enhance the viewer's interactive experience of the artwork, strategies of immersion⁴ and participation were used as the conceptual framework for the interface design. The goal was to reduce the sensory and psychological distance created by the mediated presentation of images and to activate the viewer's own memories and associations, changing an objective presentation of the data into a subjective exploration of the artwork.

the museum and the artists

The CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus* was commissioned by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (ISGM) in Boston, USA, with the purpose of documenting the exhibition *Presence*.

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is a private collection and was first opened to the public in 1903. Since the founder's death in 1924 it has remained mostly unchanged. Inspired by Mrs. Gardner's patronage of living artists, the Artist-in-Residence Program was initiated in 1992 in the search for renovation. The program is coordinated by Pieranna Cavalchini, Curator for Contemporary Art, who invites artists to explore and respond creatively to the collection.

In 2001 the British collaborative artists Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey were invited by Cavalchini to the Artist-in-Residence Program at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. While at the ISGM Ackroyd and Harvey produced a series of works that resulted in three projects: the exhibition *Presence* (Oct 2001-Jan 2002), the CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus* (2003), and a video (2004).

Ackroyd and Harvey have been collaborating since 1990 when they became partners in work and in life. They gained international recognition for the use of grass on works that span public art, installation, photography, and landscape design. From growing skins of seeds on abandoned sites to using the photosynthesis process to record large photographic images, the seedling grass is used as a means to explore themes of transformation, of transience, of growth and decay.

In the pursuit of slowing the degrading process of the grass, the artists have been collaborating since 1997 with scientists in the Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research (IGER), in Aberystwyth, Wales. The "stay-green" grass developed by Professor Howard Thomas and Dr. Helen Ougham delays the process of chlorophyll loss in the life-cycle of the grass. This plant variant has allowed Ackroyd and Harvey to preserve the green pigment, and thus the image on the artwork for longer periods of time.

the exhibition

In March 2001, Ackroyd and Harvey spent time in the museum collection and archives, studying and photographing objects. During the four weeks of September of the same year, the artists transformed the Special Exhibition gallery at the ISGM into their studio, germinating and growing seven organic photographs, the same space where later they exhibited to the public.

The *Presence* exhibition, Ackroyd's and Harvey's first solo exhibition in the USA, showed artwork inspired by a 15th-century manuscript of Dante's *Divine Comedy* as well as architectural and sculptural pieces from the ISGM collection. For Cavalchini "observing the images of the *Presence* exhibition may help us understand and accept how change is inexorably woven into the very fabric of our existence."⁵

For the artwork produced at ISGM, the artists used a sophisticated process of projecting images on prepared canvas with "stay-green" grass seeds. The process fixates the image into the living grass through the controlled production of chlorophyll. Where the light is absent the blade grows yellow; where it is cast, the green pigment is activated. To preserve it for longer periods the work is rapidly dried and exhibited in low light. The image is a transient one, with time and light it will fade away. The light that activates the dormant seed and makes the imprinting possible is also responsible for corrupting it.

Cavalchini's original way of communicating Ackroyd's and Harvey's residency was through a video production. She invited film-maker Mark Lipman to make a documentary about the exhibition that would include the process and production of the pieces on show as well as an interview between the artists and the curator.

It was not until almost the end of the exhibition that the idea of developing a CD-ROM came about. The concept proposed by Cavalchini was that of an artist book in the CD-ROM format as a means to capture and present the ephemeral nature of Ackroyd's and Harvey's artwork.

the CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus*

In the discussions with the artists and the curator it became apparent that there was an opportunity to broaden the content beyond the works produced at the ISGM towards a more thorough representation of their oeuvre. It was decided to produce a CD containing a total of 35 works (7 from the *Presence* exhibition and 28 early pieces) and that it would somehow include edited footage documenting the artists' process and an interview, both filmed by Lipman during their residency at the ISGM.

It is worth mentioning that we were a collaborating team of designers (Fenya and I) creating a product for the artwork of a collaborating team of artists (Heather and Dan). The ways in which the collaborative process (working well together) informs and affects the work being produced, appealed to us all.

We conceived of a product that would parallel Ackroyd's and Harvey's artistic process in dealing with germination, growth and decay. The idea was to design an interface in which each work would become the locus of the viewer's experience. And the associations and memories raised by the works would become the



Screen shots of CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus*. At the top, new window with extra information for the *Presence* exhibition. The other two images show the work *The Script*.

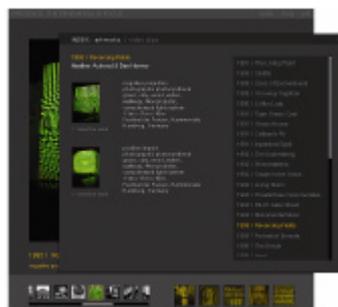
connectors to personal narratives threaded together by the choices made.

As stated earlier, we faced a twofold challenge: to overcome the distance created by the mediated medium and to affect the viewer's sensory impressions by means of engaging him/her in subjective explorations.

The interface design centered on two major concepts. One was to immerse the viewer in the artists' work and to enrich that aesthetical experience with related and supplemental multimedia material. In order to achieve that, all information was structured around individual works. Video was edited into 34 clips specifically connected to the works, totalling 55 minutes. The solution was the design of a nonexistent, noninvasive space; the sense of place is provided by the work itself.

The other was to enhance the viewer's choices in the exploration of Ackroyd's and Harvey's artworld. Content is organized in a non-hierarchical data-structure and is accessed by means of a non-linear double navigational system.

The starting point of the CD is the *Presence* exhibition. The viewer is positioned at the center of the exhibition room and has multiple choices of works to explore. After choosing a particular work the viewer arrives in the main interface where he/she has several options. One is to look at the piece in more detail, to juxtapose it with the artists' personal stories, or to watch the image-making process. Another is to choose to view any other work in the CD. Yet another is to learn more about the artists or the museum at large. Access to the artwork is provided by a non-linear navigation.



Screen shots of CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus*. From top to bottom: the work *Mother and Child*; the starting point of the CD, the *Presence* exhibition; new window with index for artwork.

Artwork is organized chronologically and in two main groups: early works (1981-2001) and the *Presence* exhibition (2001). Even though mapped along time and structured visually as a linear sequence, the viewer has the option to view works in any order and a-chronologically. The idea is to make the works accessible anytime and at the distance of a mouse click and, at the same time, it is designed so as to not interfere with the viewer's experience of the pieces. The solution is an array of pictorial buttons showing subdued details of each work. Images appear somewhat mysterious, triggering curiosity in the viewer's mind, while offering a hint of the various possible entryways to Ackroyd's and Harvey's artistic world.

Information that broadens the context of the artwork appears in a new window. The viewer is offered two sets of options. One is a non-linear access to general data about the artists, the exhibition, the museum and the artists' collaboration with scientists in Great Britain. The other gives access to a media-specific index of the database (artwork or videos) in which the viewer can search for content, read more detailed information on works, or decide on what to see next.

For artists Ackroyd and Harvey the CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus* "is a very good detailed communication of our work, centring on the exhibition at the ISGM, but also giving a lot of further information and visuals about earlier work and approach. [...] We love the *Presence* CD - only problem is we do not have enough of them! We tend to keep the ones we now have to give to select organizations and individuals. [...] The response has always been very complimentary. The navigation is fluid and there is a very good ease of access." ⁶

Ultimately, the CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus* invites an almost infinite variety of readings, of sights, of experiences. It encourages the viewer to explore Ackroyd's and Harvey's oeuvre through personal narratives shaped by the viewer's own choices —what is viewed, perceived, watched, heard. To paraphrase Cavalchini, "it teaches people to look." ⁷

Notes

1. see Manovich (2001), pp. 94-115.
2. Manovich (2001), p. 237, italics in original.
3. Peter Weibel, "The Post-Gutenberg Book: The CD-ROM between Index and Narration," in ZKM (2002), vol. 3, pp. 133-142, see p.136.
4. Olivier Grau offers a good summary on immersion:
Obviously, there is not a simple relationship of "either-or" between critical distance and immersion; the relations are multifaceted, closely intertwined, dialectical, in part contradictory, and certainly highly dependent on the disposition of the observer. Immersion can be an intellectually stimulating process; however, in the present as in the past, in most cases immersion is mentally absorbing and a process, a change, a passage from one mental state to another. It is characterized by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening." (Grau, 2003, p. 13)
5. Pieranna Cavalchini, "exhibition," in CD-ROM *Presence: The Ephemeral in Focus* (2002).
6. Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey in a recent email (2004).
7. Pieranna Cavalchini in a recent conversation (2004).

References

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