



NEW MEDIA NOTES

Art & Technology in Ireland

1. Comment
2. Briefly
3. The Virtual and The Real: Karl O'Donoghue interviews Char Davies

Welcome to the March edition of **New Media Notes**, the only art & technology specific newsletter in Ireland.

This issue includes **The Virtual and The Real**, Karl O'Donoghues' exclusive interview with Char Davies, the pioneering Canadian artist and creator of the immersive projects **Osmose** and **Ephemere**. In this lengthy interview Char discusses some of the ideas behind her acclaimed projects and highlights some of the problems of working with such technology.

Elsewhere the New Media Notes website has been completely redesigned to reflect operational changes. While articles can no longer be read online, a near-complete database of issues back to December 1996 can now be downloaded from the website as PDF documents and perused leisurely offline.

The new site also includes details of **Remap** - an Irish art & technology e-mail discussion forum (see item below), a section for guides and tutorials and a soon-to-be extensive arts-related links (stay with me on this one).

Finally, I am trying to seriously extend the readership of New Media Notes - if you know somebody who would find this newsletter of interest please forward it to them. Subscription details are available at the New Media Notes website.

As ever, comments and suggestions on the site & newsletter are welcome.

Gary Crighton

Editor

<http://www.dmc.dit.ie/gary/nmn/>



Briefly...

REMAP: Irish Art & Technology Discussion Forum

<http://www.dmc.dit.ie/gary/nmn/remap.html>

Remap is an unmoderated discussion list for new media art in Ireland. Subscription to the list is free and open to all.

Topics for discussion may include:

- Project & website announcements
- Funding, opportunity & residency
- Announcements
- Project discussion
- Theoretical discourse
- Technical assistance
- Calls for collaboration
- The wider cultural effects of digital media
- Any other relevant discussion

Subscription / unsubscription via the New Media Notes website.

Res Artis - Residency Database

<http://www.resartis.org/>

An excellent online database of international residency opportunities for artists. From Australia to Venezuela, the database lists hundreds of residential arts centres with web & e-mail addresses where available.

Hell - A New Frontier?

<http://hell.com>

"HELL.COM was conceived as a conceptual art piece in early 1995 as an anti-web that sold and promoted nothing and was not accessible to the public. For almost three years HELL.COM, a site with no content, never listed in any directory or search engine nor linked anywhere averages in excess of a million hits per month from people typing the name in their browsers." HELL spokesperson, Ken Aronson. (**Source:** Rhizome).

One of the most talked about art sites for some time, HELL is a private collaborative space for members only. Turning the notion of the web as a public space on its head HELL categorically refuses access to all but the invited few - and even then only opens its doors occasionally. And when it does the view can be hair-raising - on first viewing I unplugged my PC in fright. When they do open the doors, stay with it - and try to remain calm. See also: Artists Open Door to Private Underworld (New York Times)

<http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/98/04/cyber/artsatlarge/23artsatlarge.html>

Artifact Database Commissioned for Northern Ireland

<http://www.arthouse.ie>

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) and Arthouse in Dublin are to produce an Artifact database for Northern Ireland. The project, which is supported by the Arts Council of Northern



Ireland National Lottery Fund, was officially launched at the Ormeau Baths Gallery in Belfast in February. A second open day will take place on 13th March 1999 in the Orchard Gallery in Derry.

Further details available from Arthouse.

Darklight Digital Film Festival - Call for Entries

<http://www.darklight-filmfestival.com>

The Darklight Digital Film Festival is an independent festival for filmmakers and artists with an active role in Digital Media. The festival, based in Dublin and the first of its kind in Ireland, will provide a platform for the convergence of art and technology, and offer the public a chance to see the exciting new developments being made in the digital arts.

The festival welcomes experimental and innovative work in digital video, professional non-commercial work, digital shorts, music videos and computer games. **Deadline** 31 March. Further details available at the website or from info@darklight-filmfestival.com.

The Darklight Digital Film Festival will run from Thursday 27 May to Sunday 30 May 1999.

New Media Encyclopedia

<http://www.newmedia-arts.org/>

The New Media Encyclopedia is the first trilingual English-French-German catalogue of its kind freely available on-line. It is intended as a source of information, a tool for documentary research, and a scholarly work, but also a locus of debate on artistic practices related to the new media.

For the first phase of the project, the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Museum Ludwig, and the Centre pour l'Image Contemporaine have pooled information on their respective holdings to provide a reference work bringing together three major European collections. The project is earmarked for completion in 2000 but already contains a good deal of useful information - including a glossary and an artists A-Z with QuickTime movies for performance and video-based works.

Preview

<http://homepage.tinet.ie/~nile2>

The popular listings brochure, Preview, is available online. The site also acts as a useful gateway to Irish and International galleries and Museums.

The UNESCO 1999 Web Prize

<http://www.unesco.org/webworld/webprize/1999/index.html>

The UNESCO Web Prize is a sub-category of the UNESCO Prize for the Promotion of the Arts and is awarded annually.

The prize (\$10,000) is awarded in recognition of outstanding achievements by artists, designers and programmers in creating websites in the fields of competence of the Organization. The Prize reflects the cultural and societal importance of the new information and communication technologies and their use in the promotion of the ideals of UNESCO. Students in the field of new information and communication technologies are particularly encouraged to participate. Further details and an online application form available at the



website.

Experimenta Media Arts - Call for Entries

<http://www.experimenta.org>

Experimenta Media Arts are seeking artists who have web-based projects which they would like exhibited through their online gallery. The work must not be previously exhibited elsewhere, and have a maximum size of 1Mb. A fee will be paid for the exhibition of the work.

Further details: experimenta@experimenta.org. The site is currently exhibiting Christopher Waller's 'Pool', which was part of their Viruses & Mutations Project in October 1998.

Creativity & Cognition 3 - Call for Participation

<http://bashful.lut.ac.uk/cc99/>

In October 1999, Creativity and Cognition 3, an ACM SIGCHI International Workshop, will take place at Burleigh Court, Loughborough University in Loughborough, England. Proposals for the presentation and demonstration of collaborative ventures between artists, composers, scientists and technologists are invited. The aim is to explore how the different viewpoints and languages of art, music and science have influenced or informed one another. Collaborative explorations which have, in some way, moved beyond the existing technology and led to new ways of working are especially welcome. **Deadline for submissions:** March 26th 1999.

Further details L.Candy@lboro.ac.uk

Roy Ascott - Strategies of Media Art

<http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-journals/LEA/CURRENT/current.html>

"What exactly is media art today? Is it a part of art or apart from art? If it is a part of art, some will say, where are its masterpieces, what is its market share? If it is apart from art where intellectually and culturally is it located? Can media art now be anything but interactive? In cyberspace, can the viewer now be anything less than actively involved in the creation of meaning and the fulfillment of personal experience? Is the computer just a new kind of tool, and the Net just a new kind of medium?" The complete text of **Roy Ascott's** explorative Strategies of Media Art address can be viewed at the Leonardo Online site.

Monet in the 21st Century

<http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/monet/>

An online tour and accompaniment to the Royal Academy exhibition courtesy of the Guardian. Includes Adrian Searles review of the show alongside 16 works with background information and a links page for Monet-related sites.



The Real and The Virtual

Karl O'Donoghue Interviews Char Davies

Formally a painter and filmmaker, **Char Davies** began working with 3D digital media in the mid-eighties. She was a founding director of Softimage Inc where she played various roles, including Vice-President 1988-1994 and Director of Visual Research 1994-1997. She left Softimage a year ago to found Immersence Inc., as a vehicle for pursuing her artistic research. Her sophisticated and experimental immersive projects **Osmose** and **Ephemere** have garnered international acclaim and remain unique in their practical and philosophical approach to technology-based artworks.

This interview by **Karl O'Donoghue** took place via e-mail in spring 1998 prior to the official launch of Davies' most recent immersive work, Ephemere. Revisions by the artist took place in March 1999.

Karl O'Donoghue: Descartes claimed to be able to use mathematical principles to construct a complete account of everything that occurs in nature. Excluding your own work, almost all three-dimensional computer graphics are based on Descartes mathematical principles, leading to the ubiquitous aesthetic of hard-edged objects in empty space. How important was Anti-Cartesianism to the creation of Osmose?

Char Davies: Rather than 'Anti-Cartesianism' I prefer to think in terms of seeking an 'alternative' to it. My entire approach to the work (i.e. visual aesthetic and the user interface) was intended to explore and evoke an alternative sensibility to the Cartesian worldview.

This desire goes back a long way, probably to the early eighties when I began to artistically investigate my own extreme myopic vision, by making paintings and drawings of the world around me without wearing corrective lenses. In this unmediated, unfocused mode of perception, I discovered an alternative (non-Cartesian) spatiality whereby "objects" had disappeared; where all semblance of solidity, surface, edges and distinctions between things - i.e. the usual perceptual cues by which we visually objectify the world - had dissolved. These were replaced by a sense of enveloping space in which there were no sharply defined objects in empty space, but rather an ambiguous intermingling of varying luminosities and hues, a totally enveloping and sensuous spatiality, very much like that felt by a body immersed in the sea.

In Osmose and Ephemere, this non-Cartesian sensibility of being in the world is conveyed through use of a visual aesthetic based on semi-transparency and ambiguity of spatial relationships. This is further developed by a user interface which relies on the intuitive body processes of breath and balance, rather than on the conventional manual devices, to evoke a state of mind in which receptivity and gentle contemplation are rewarded.

Karl: I would argue that the philosophical ideas in Osmose are similar to the ideas of the Deep Ecology movement, would you agree?

Char: Yes there are certain correspondences, including the desire to challenge our culture's anthropocentric interpretation of nature as a resource to be subjugated and exploited, and to emphasise our inherent connection with the living flowing world.



I have been reading environmental philosophy (including deep ecology) for many years. I have spent a lot of time alone in “nature” or, to be more specific, in the “non-manmade environment” - for me, nature is the life-flow and as such it is unfathomably mysterious. Almost all my work is based on nature as metaphor, as muse. Even as I spend my entire life seeking to intuitively understand its processes and in turn communicate these to an audience, what I seek will, I know, always remain beyond my reach, with each work being only a step towards some kind of understanding, toward some kind of reconciliation.

While biologically we are inseparable from the natural world, and the cultural boundaries between us and “it” are being dramatically redefined by new technologies, for the most part we still experience great estrangement and alienation, which of course is the side effect of old Descartes, and the western scientific patriarchal paradigm. My work is about all this: using this very much implicated technology of our time to create work in which differences between the virtual and the real, inside and out, self and world are confused. In which people, through their own bodily participation, might be able to temporarily step outside of that paradigm to see ifreshly - by directing their attention away from goal-oriented behaviour and the will to master, to the paradoxical sensations of simply being, with all the wonder that implies.

Karl: Do you feel that women have a closer relationship with nature than men?

Char: I would say that women’s close relation to their own body cycles tends to somewhat offset the enculturated alienation from the biophysical realm. But rather than place men on one side and women and nature on the other (an old tactic of the Cartesian worldview) I would rather say that we are all, in fact, embedded in nature. We, and every other living creature, are partaking of the earth around us, or as Henri Beston once wrote, we are all caught in the net of space and time, and are oh so quickly, so briefly, just passing through.

Karl: In my opinion Osmose has a feminine subjectivity, in both its interface and its visual aesthetic (i.e. it is challenging the conventional phallic pointing that is common in most computer human interfaces). Is that just my reading of the piece or would you agree?

Char: I would agree. How I experience space and time is very much shaped by my being embodied as female in this life - and this sensibility has no doubt shaped my approach to the technology.

The breath and balance user interface is an example of this, in that it shuns hand-held devices which I believe really do reinforce an instrumental and dominating stance toward the world (world as standing reserve for human use, to use a phrase of Heidegger’s). As for those joysticks, they are so obviously phallic that it is a joke, a bad one at that, though perhaps if you are a guy you wouldn’t question this. Which is the whole point, not questioning the origins and default values of all these methodologies, i.e. the worldview and values which, by default, they express. Unless designed to challenge its own conventions, the medium will continue to carry the values of the patriarchal paradigm from which it has sprung (i.e. Military and science).

Karl: How do you feel about the criticism outlined in the Wired magazine review of Osmose, about Osmose being created with the same technology that trains fighter pilots to blow nature up?

Char: I didn’t read that as a criticism for it is absolutely true. The entire work is based on subverting those conventions within the medium, to offset such uses, to demonstrate that the technology can be used to create environments that counter the techno-scientific worldview. As to whether my work will ultimately be co-opted, (e.g. leading to more beautiful military flight simulations and shoot-em-up computer games) only time will tell. I hope I have sent an alternate current upstream.



Karl: Laurie McRobert in her essay 'Immersive Art and the Essence of Technology'* talks about you being a sort of prophet, that one day all people will have left of nature is the images that computer artists like yourself make for them. Do you feel that there is any truth in a statement like this, or is it others peoples readings of the piece?

Char: The second part yes, I am very much afraid of that happening - as for being a prophet, I don't think it is up to the artist to comment on the prophetic aspects of their own work. However I do believe that many artists are able to sense things 'in the air' and that their work can reflect this. As an example, the British poet, John Clare wrote a poem called "Swordy Well" in which a field expresses its great sorrow over the increasing loss of its own hedge rows and wildlife - a lament really, about loss of diversity and life in the face of the coming industrial age.

In this sense, my own work is an expression of longing and loss. Osmose was, at least for me personally, very much about longing for reconciliation with nature, a longing for a "bringing together" of what man (and "god") has put asunder, to overcome the estrangement that seems to characterise our age. "Osmose" came from "Osmosis" which I interpreted to mean the transcendence of boundaries. "Ephemere", on the other hand, is about the ephemerality, the transience, of all life; it is a lament for the passing of nature-as-we-knew-it-in-our-childhood, and for the passing of our own lives.

I do believe that as industrialised human populations spread across the face of the planet compromising ecosystems of habitat and flora/fauna out of existence ñ as access to the "real" natural environment diminishes - people will seek psychological compensation where they can. In the developed world, this will include immersive virtual environments. And such artificial environments will only compound the problem by serving as distractions from dealing with the problem - they will become the "sand" where we bury our heads in the face of the coming storms

While Jaron Lanier said that immersion in virtual environments might increase appreciation for the real world, I tend to think that unless the values embedded within the medium (a la Descartes) are deliberately circumvented or subverted by the artists/designers, this medium will not only distract us from earthly responsibilities but will actually reinforce the dominant western worldview that has always approached nature as a resource to be exploited.

As an artist, I therefore have two choices: I can either unplug and never go near a computer again or I can choose to remain engaged, seeking to subvert the technology from within, using it to communicate an alternative worldview. Up until now that has been my approach. My strategy has been to explore how the medium/technology can be used to "de-automatize" perception (via use of semi-transparency, seemingly floating through things etc.) in order that participants may begin to question their own habitual perceptions and assumptions about being in the world, thus facilitating a mental state whereby Cartesian boundaries between mind and body, self and world begin to slip.

Rather than directly critiquing the technology and its conventional uses, I have sought to use it for alternative ends, hopefully demonstrating to others that this is indeed possible. While from an anthropocentric perspective, the new few decades into the new millennium may prove to be very exciting and possibly bright for certain segments of humanity. However, I feel very sad for the rest of the earth, all those other beings who live here too...

Karl: Would you be able to tell me how the new piece is different from Osmose?

Char: When we began this interview, Ephemere was not yet complete, and I was reluctant to discuss it before it was done. However since then the work has come out into the world. While Ephemere incorporated many of the techniques we developed for Osmose, such as semi-transparency and spatial ambiguity, and an interface based on breath and balance, as well as



exploring nature as metaphor, Ephemere went beyond Osmose in many ways, as another step towards my elusive goal.

In seeking to deal with the ephemerality of life, this work expands the spatiality of Osmose to encompass temporality. While Osmose was based on spatial organisation of various worlds, and stasis of most elements within, (except the flowing particles) Ephemere relies on the emergence and transformation of form, and the ebb and flow of visibility and audibility. Ephemere contains three horizontal levels: landscape, subterranean earth, and interior body. The landscape is constantly transforming through time.

The relationships between the various elements and the participant are more interactive or inter-responsive. In Osmose, interaction was limited to navigation and the resulting ambiguous perceptual readings of gestalt-like compositions were dependent on the changing participant location (with the exception of the fully-interactive sound). In Ephemere, gaze has been introduced as a means of interaction: rocks "open" when gazed upon, revealing landscapes which quickly fade, and in the earth, seeds sprout if approached slowly with a steady gaze, blooming, then fading back into the earth.

I introduced the interior fleshy body as the substratum in Ephemere (quite a change from the software code that formed the base of the Osmose world) as a means of reaffirming the poetic correspondence or co-equivalence between earth and body. This correspondence has been a presence in my work for the past ten years, a concept first explored through paintings, in the mid-eighties.

While about eight thousand people have been individually immersed in Osmose, anecdotal responses from some of the three thousand people who have experienced Ephemere (I am talking about those actually immersed rather than the many who have been in the public installation and witnessed immersive journeys by others) suggest that this second work feels much more interactive, and evokes a sensation of being swept up and away, without a secure unchanging place to return to (i.e. the clearing in Osmose), i.e. one has to surrender to the experience...

I am loaning my equipment and both works for six months to the Dream and Nightmare Research Laboratory at the world-renowned Sleep Institute in Montreal. I hope that, by tracking and studying the mental and bodily responses of some twenty test-subjects, the psychological and physiological effects of immersion in Osmose and Ephemere can be better understood. I hope this will lead to an understanding, or at least the beginnings of an understanding, into how our minds and bodies cope with such mixing of the virtual and the real...

*Immersive Art and the Essence of Technology, Laurie McRobert:

http://www.softimage.com/default.asp?url=/Projects/Osmose/osmose_art.htm

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Ephemere was exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada from June to Sept 1998. Planning for future exhibitions is underway and details will be posted on the Immersence website when available. Artist papers and additional information on Osmose and Ephemere can also be found on the site:

<http://www.immersence.com>



An extended feature on the work of Char Davies can be found in the UK journal New Scientist, February 6, 1999.

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New Media Notes is compiled and edited by Gary Crighton. Archives and additional resources are available online at:

<http://www.dmc.dit.ie/gary/nmn/>

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