

Goldsmiths MA Computational Studio Arts :

Phil Jones : Personal Evaluation, 2011

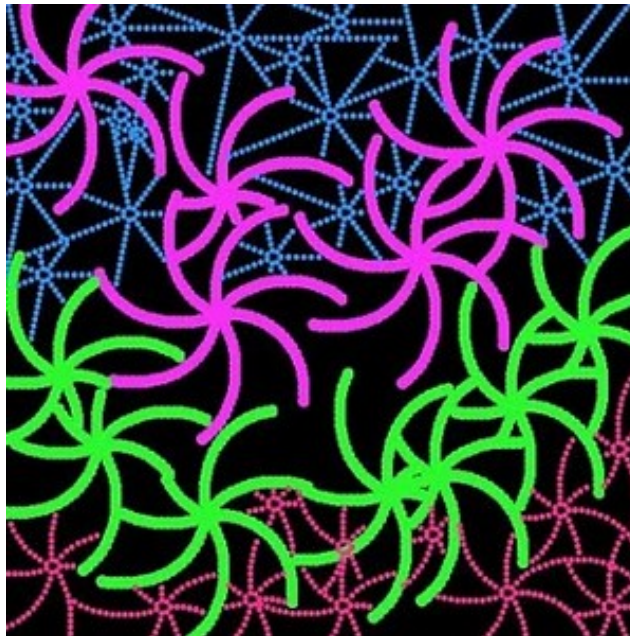
As I already have a technical background, my first year at Goldsmiths has been focused less on acquiring skills than in trying to understand what kind of artist I can and want to be. What are my motivations? What do I want to make? Who inspires me? That is not to say I didn't learn and value new materials and techniques such as physical computing, robotics, iPhone development, 3D printing and motion tracking.

Two ideas became increasingly prominent in my thinking : the sense of an art-life which is founded in “practice”, and a “craft ideal” which includes notions of deep immersion in practice, close physical engagement with a material, freedom of expression, and political autonomy. I wanted to both experience and play with these in my work during the year. Some of the ideas I have been thinking about are in my main essay : Programmer as Artist

Key Works

Flower Brush¹

A Processing sketch that allows the user to paint with a “swarm” of separately moving brushes on the screen.



This work especially illustrates an ideal I'd been developing before Goldsmiths. You can imagine a spectrum of art software. At one end is a generic tool like Photoshop that lets artists do more or less anything that they are capable of. At the other end is a purely algorithmic / generative piece where I, the programmer, specify constraints and the work unfolds without further human intervention.

I am interested in neither of these poles but in “sweet spots” somewhere between, where the programmer sets up “art systems”² within which the user / viewer has freedom enough to explore

1 Available : http://www.doc.gold.ac.uk/~ma001pj/flower_brush/index.html

2 Thanks to Andrew Shoben for suggesting this terminology to me.

and express something of her or his self while the algorithmic constraints still empower, simplify and give an overall *genre* to the work. Making a system somewhere in this zone was an explicit goal.

Evaluation

I successfully implemented the idea in Processing. And the program does occupy a comfortable space between inert drawing program and algorithmic art. I like some of the images produced ³.

But beyond the basic launching of the brushes, the program UI disappointed me. I want to say that the interactive principle “scaled badly”; it couldn't be extended and so I ended up supplementing it with awkward user interface tropes.

Untitled (Monster Stickers)⁴

My search for deep engagement in interactive art makes me suspicious of both gallery and computer screen. One solution I contemplated is to turn a computer work into a system to produce physical objects that you can take away, continuing the work into the rest of your life.

With Monster Stickers I tried to find an easy way of doing this, using a common ink-jet printer. Here the program creates a PDF file with pictures of monsters formatted to be printed on standard address labels.

Evaluation

As intended this piece took the final result away from the computer and made real-world *stuff* which excited me as a programmer more familiar with working only on screen. I also liked the way I'd identified “to hand” materials (everyday printers, cheap office stationary) rather than looked for something more exotic as a way of expressing this idea.

But the monsters themselves were crude, without detail and with random colours. It exposed the “sloppiness” of my not having cared much about the visual qualities of the work. I realised that I need to learn more about and evolve a visual literacy that I lacked.

The Hundertwasser Makeover Kit⁵

Combining set exercises in photomontage and imitating an existing artist's painting; and inspired by Friedensreich Hundertwasser's⁶ “Window Right” manifesto⁷, which demands that each person be free to reach out of their window and paint the surrounds to taste; I decided to have a swarm of “arms” painting Hundertwasseresque spirals on top of photos of modernist apartments.

3 One of the inspirations I discovered this year is William Morris and the images do also have something of the look of a Morris wallpaper.

4 Available : <http://www.doc.gold.ac.uk/~ma001pj/monsters/index.html>

5 Available : http://www.doc.gold.ac.uk/~ma001pj/window_rights/index.html

6 Restany, Pierre, 1997, Hundertwasser The Painter King with the Five Skins, Taschen

7 See http://www.hundertwasser.de/english/texts/philo_fensterdiktatur.php, retrieved 30 June, 2011



Evaluation

I think I produced an interesting reaction to my engagement with Hundertwasser. A recent insight I've had is that the Window Right *is* an example of an “art system” in that it creates a context and encouragement for participant / viewers to co-create. This has expanded my idea of what interactivity is and where I can find inspiration.

The experience with implementing the arms, even in pure software, was an interesting introduction to problems of kinematics and robotics.

But previous problems reappeared. Like Flower Brush, the UI was unsatisfactory. And as with the Monster Stickers, my reliance on random colours deprived the visual results of much sophistication.

More than previous works, this seems to be a sketch towards something else. A gallery piece? A projection on a real building? This was not the intention but there's something about the piece that feels particularly unfinished. That may be a good thing, indicating that this is a productive direction to follow in future. But it may also reveal a lack of commitment in my work.

Drawer the Explorer⁸

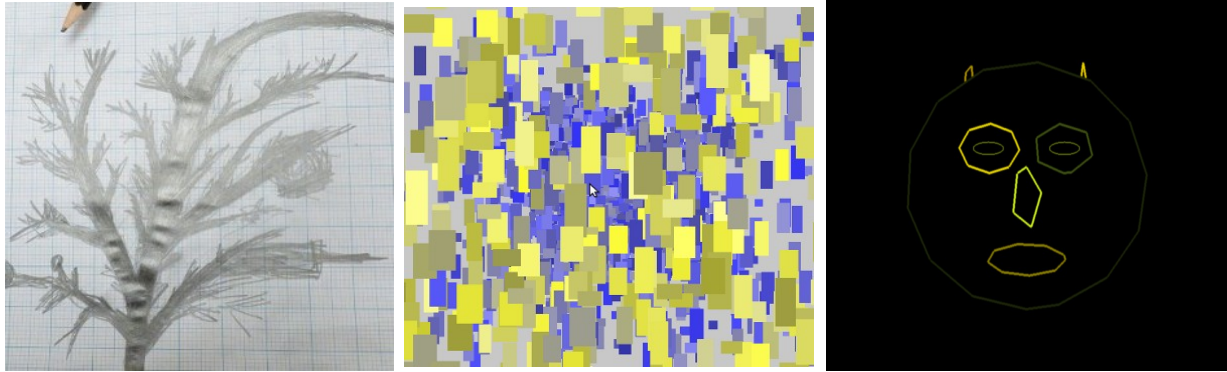
A work inspired by my interest in masks, reading about the explorer Percy Fawcett⁹, pencil drawings, experiment with physical computing UI, and continuing the strategy of an output that goes back to the real-world (in this case printed masks which could be cut out and worn).

Users “explore” by drawing “maps” using graphite on a piece of paper¹⁰. An Arduino measures the changes in resistance between the pencil and another connected terminal and turns this into a sequence of gestures that are sent up to the computer. This triggers an abstract display intended to convey forward movement through a dense space (perhaps a rainforest with sunlight dappling the leaves) and the gestures are decoded as parameters to a mask-drawing algorithm. When enough parameters have been decoded, the program tells the user that a new object has been “found” and creates a PDF file containing the mask image.

8 Available : <http://www.doc.gold.ac.uk/~ma001pj/drawer/index.html>

9 Gran, David, 2009, The Lost City of Z, Doubleday.

10 Raising questions about the relation between “exploring” and “creating” a territory.



Evaluation

I succeeded in creating an “arc” from interesting physical input device (pencil and paper) through the program, and out to a physical object which implied yet further uses and rituals (the mask).

Also, in part of this work, I made a more determined effort to look for an interesting and distinct visual style which I think was successful.

But as a whole it was a mess. I tried to integrate too many ideas and elements simply because I was interested in them at the same time; but without finding any thematic or formal unity. The actual pleasure / engagement of the piece was minimal, failing to achieve a “proportionality” between the complexity of the piece and the experience. There was no structure or community to engage with the resulting maskwork which might have given this piece some deeper meaning.

In short this was absurdly over-ambitious and unsuccessful.

Zewp!¹¹

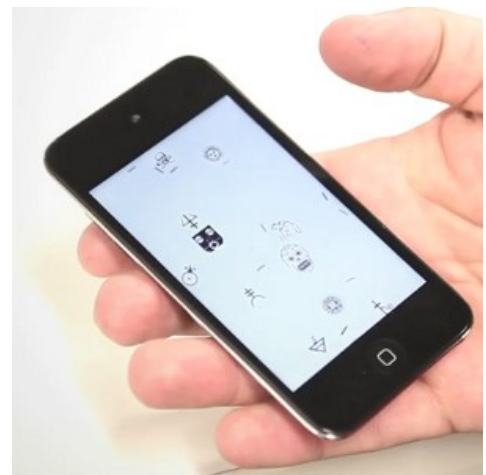
For our iPhone exercise I wanted to try some swarm-music ideas. A play area of esoteric symbols is inhabited by a swarm of swooping obstacle-avoiding agents that pick up tones from whatever they see in front of them. The player configures the space of symbols (by dragging them or tilting the phone) to compose the music.

Evaluation

I made the mistake of appropriating some copyright images¹² from the web for use within the program. I assume that this wouldn't be an issue in a fine art context, but it's incompatible with the conventions of commercial app. distribution and has prevented me from releasing Zewp! As the the AppStore is the natural home of the smart-phone app. this basically prevents the work being shown.

Feedback from some viewers suggested that the symbols were too arbitrary and diverse, and should have been restricted to a more closed, cohesive group.

In practice, the music isn't as compelling as I'd hoped.

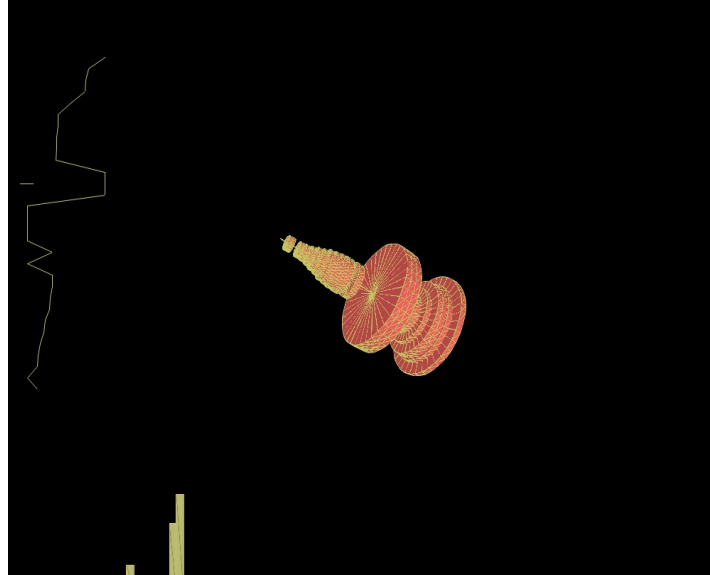


¹¹ See <http://www.doc.gold.ac.uk/~ma001pj/zewp/index.html> for more.

¹² All images used were ancient, culturally resonant symbols. None of these images *should* have been copyright, but I guess those who'd scanned / cleaned / maybe redrawn them for the web would claim that this made them a new work.

Pot Jockey¹³

Pot Jockey explores my growing interest in computer mediated “craft”¹⁴. It starts with a “visual pun” between the turntables used by disc jockeys and the wheel as used by potters¹⁵. A DJ controller is repurposed as a rotational tool for making objects. I had already been interested in the idea of 3D printing for a while and this seemed a good time to explore it. The end result was a work which used the DJ controller to design round “spindle-shaped” objects on the screen that could then be exported as stereolithography files suitable for a 3D printer.



Using a (fairly unreliable) 3D printer I was also able to print one object that had been designed this way. For the exhibition, the controller, the software running on laptop, and this printed object (mounted in a “fancy” jewellery box on mirrored turntable), were displayed.

Evaluation

Despite some hiccoughs I was very happy with this piece. It reprised ideas from previous works and, this time, got them right. There was the use of a novel external input device which was a comfortable and intuitive way to engage the piece. The arc from this input was completed through the software and back into the world in the form of a physical object, which was itself, beautiful. There was a coherence of themes and forms within the piece (craft, rotation, rotational symmetry) and a continuity with my other interests (digital craft, hand-eye co-ordination, work), it was an art system encouraging the participant to express themselves by making something. Finally, as my first gallery exhibit, it seemed to get a good reaction from people I showed it to.

13 See <http://www.doc.gold.ac.uk/~ma001pj/potter/index.html>

14 Malcolm McCullough points out that the introduction of direct manipulation in computer interfaces has opened up a space where hand-eye co-ordination skills regain importance; thus creating an opportunity to reintroduce craft values. See McCullough, Malcolm, 1996, *Abstracting Craft*, MIT Press

15 There's something quite pointed about this juxtaposition. While I like and admire the DJ's art, the turntable is also the ultimate fashion accessory, the symbol of vacuous wannabe banality. Whereas the potter's wheel, in the hands of, say, Shoji Hamada or Bernard Leach, reeks of humility and spiritual authenticity. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxpcUnquXJI> , retrieved June 17, 2011)

On The Other Hand

Cheap 3D printers are temperamental. My first object was flawed, some of my more complex objects proved unprintable and the printer broke before I could produce a second. Putting a printer in the gallery would have been ideal but was never a viable option.

More of an issue : although my exhibit consisted of a large DJ controller prominently displayed, accompanied by a book with the words “Instruction Manual” on the cover, none of the visitors picked up the manual or tried to touch the controller without prompting. Obviously gallery visitors are accustomed to an implicit “Do Not Touch” rule which I should have explicitly countermanded. As it was, I hovered by the work inviting people to engage with it. But it may be that the work fails if left without supervision.

A final issue was that many were amazed or too-impressed by the mere fact of 3D printing, and this may have overshadowed or confused the impact and message of the artwork in itself.

Other Activities

Outside of Goldsmiths I was involved in two projects.

With Fabi Borges and Camila Mello I co-organised, and created sound-software¹⁶ for, a “techno-shamanic” ritual¹⁷. Most interesting to me was the maskwork and improvised ritual which I want to learn from and return to.

I also worked with Aharon Amir on the Narcissus search engine, exploring “visibility” as a material.¹⁸

16 See http://www.doc.gold.ac.uk/~ma001pj/non_goldsmiths/shamanizer/index.html

17 See the derived “photo-novella” : <http://vimeo.com/25274823> (retrieved June 18, 2011)

18 See <http://searchnarcissus.net/>