Education, Technology, Interactivity

An interview with Stephen Hurrel (Course Leader of Context & Media, Valand. Göteborg University).

How Valand works in terms of interactivity, technology and arts?

The Context & Media Course was created to provide artists with an environment in which to explore their ideas within the broad field of contemporary art whilst developing a critical understanding of the new media 'tools' that they use or that are available to them. An important aspect of the course is to question and critique how art can function within society and to understand how the context can inform the making and the reading of a work.
In terms of 'interactivity' this is an area that can be explored in many ways, and once again the important aspect is to develop a critical understanding of the relationship between the artwork and the user/viewer/audience.
I should also point out that within the course the idea of 'interactivity' can be explored without using any form of technology - as it could manifest itself through a direct action/interaction between artist and audience/public. It could be argued that this type of 'socially engaged' art is a response to the breaking down of barriers between art and viewer (that is also an outcome of a more technologically interactive world)… or it could also be argued that it is a kind of antidote to an overly technological and inhuman world.

Whatever the case, there has been a paradigm shift in the way that information is produced, transmitted, received, interpreted and disseminated and therefore the language of art and its relationship to audience has also changed. Any artist that uses interactivity should have thought about what interactivity will bring to the work and why they have chosen to use it or incorporate it.

The idea of the user. Who is the user in front of the spectator?

The 'spectator' mainly engages in a visual experience (in traditional fine-art situations) whereas a 'user' may have visual, aural and tactile s(t)imulation. The relationship is no longer the traditional 'sender-receiver' model but a more complex relationship whereby the 'user' is an active participant within the artwork. In many cases the artwork requires the 'user' to complete the work i.e. their presence or interaction is fundamental to the work.

Is interactivity and technology helping in the definition of a sort of community?

It is creating many different communities…its strength is its diversity and its freedom to evolve organically. In terms of the Internet, what we have are many 'communities of interest'…people brought together through a shared interest, passion, or belief. Whether it is gaming, origami or political activism the important point is that it is possible to 'meet' with 'like minds'…i.e. the body is no longer important in this type of space and neither is geographical location – it is communication between minds that is the dominant aspect.

A question could be raised as to whether this type of interaction and communication creates more or less 'real space' interaction / more or less 'presence'. Or is it the case that ideas of the 'social' and 'the nature of public space' are being reconfigured?

How difficult is it to work with these issues? Problems, misunderstandings….

I think these are all interesting issues to deal with. It is the artists choice as to how they negotiate through the issues inherent within art/technology/society/communication, to create a dialogue between their work and people. I think this is where art can function best…as it can 'work between' people, technologies, specialisms, etc. – it does not have top be restricted by boundaries that restrict other professions.

Internet as a communication space, or as a creativity arena

I think this has changed as the technology and its potential has developed. In the early days systems were not very 'user friendly' and were mainly based on text and code.

With the rapid development of faster processors and larger bandwidths it is now possible to transmit and receive much larger amounts of information and higher quality material and interfaces are much more user friendly.
However, like the mobile phone boom, it was the simple act of communicating that got most people introduced to the Internet – in the form of emailing. I think in general terms, for the large majority of people, the Internet is a space for communicating, interacting and for research work. In terms of a 'creative arena' I think it has proven to be a space for this also... but this area is so diverse and large that it is difficult to talk about it in general terms. I would say though, that it has allowed a lot more people to express themselves and communicate their ideas. And these people may not have regarded themselves as artistic or creative before working with computers. (even though a lot of this may be of no interest to other people, the fact that it can happen at all is important).So the idea of what has 'artistic value' will also have changed.

At the other extreme there are artists/creative individuals/groups who have made a conscious decision to work with the Internet and to explore this as a creative space, within an art world context. These works are gradually being recognized as an important contribution to contemporary art. However I think the downside of this is that once a few artists have been identified by the art world institutions as examples of 'internet art' then they become assimilated into its history and structures …and so, what was once fluid and anarchic could become stagnant.

In more general terms I think what is interesting is that the internet has opened up new ways of seeing and understanding what is going on in the world and that 'creative thinkers' can tap into an incredible amount of raw information as well as to other creative thinkers and this provides the potential to actually do something positive.

Redefinition of roles in the art context after technology

I think the 'role of art' is constantly changing and being redefined. I don't think that this can be related to only one thing i.e. 'technology' (and are we really 'after technology'…will technology not just continue?)…the recent technologies (media, digital, etc.) have been with us for such a small amount of time in relation to the history of civilization that I don't think we've actually understood the impact yet…and perhaps the real impact is still to come. Art, in the traditional sense, can reflect our relationship to technology/society/the world etc. and help us to perceive where we are in relation to these. However I think the more interesting development, or shift, that's taken place is that artists are now engaging more directly with the world…with issues, people, places, technologies, politics, other specialists, etc. (the post-modern approach) and through this the idea

of what role art/artists play is also being redefined and questioned.

The line between what is creativity/who is an artist is being blurred. Creativity can exist in many ways now…'socially engaged art' in a sense shares the same goals as social-economic projects or local political activism…there is a closer link between the language of art and the language of social programs such as environmentalism, political-activism, social work, education, etc. and all these use strategies, language and technologies in some way to communicate their ideas and issues.

Interactivity as the new democracy

There are a lot of aspects to interactivity that could be termed 'democratic'…the internet being one area. However interactivity in itself does not necessarily lead to a new democracy. Most aspects of interactivity are basically a set of choices…you are free to move around within a predefined arena…at some point someone else has programmed the conditions in which you navigate. Also, whoever has control of information and knowledge may also close down options, for example, I believe Microsoft were buying up copyrights of artworks in as many National Collections as they could. The danger with too much information/knowledge being owned by a corporation is that they could begin to make 'toll charges' to access certain areas…in effect creating an us/them, connected/disconnected society.

What defines art as an interactive action?

Art could be defined as always being interactive – an artist makes a mark and the viewer tries to interpret it and understand it, therefore the viewer is interacting with the material substance of the work as placed within a space and also with the ideas/mind of the artist.
With the move away from modernist ideas of truth, centrality, etc. then the way that art is placed within a space, the types of materials used, and the position of the viewer has also changed…therefore the viewer interacts in various different ways….and that interaction might not involve any technology at all. I think the best art always tries to engage the viewer/user in a dialogue, and artists throughout history have always used or adopted new technologies and scientific developments within their work, so in a sense the idea of interactivity is not that new, it's just the tools that have changed.
It is perhaps also worth asking 'What defines an interactive action as art?'