comecloser

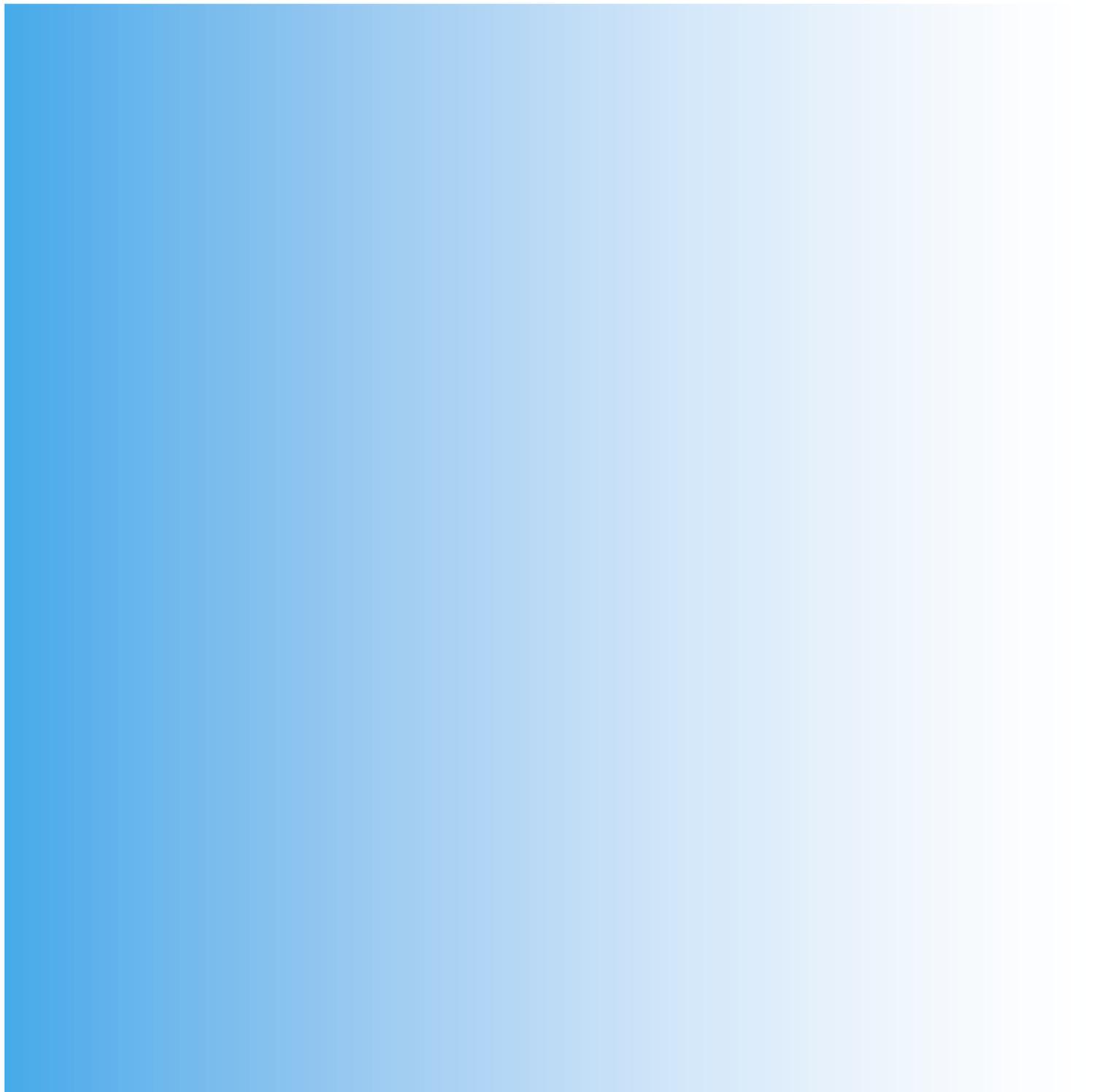**Bob Cotton /Jim Campbell + Squidsoup**

come closer
bob cotton /
jim campbell
+ squidsoup

come closer

The Come Closer exhibition consists of two interactive artworks: Come Closer and Ghosts.

Come Closer combines wearable technology and collaborative interaction in an immersive audiovisual experience. Essentially an exploration of the boundaries of personal space, the piece allows visitors to collaborate through their movement and relative position.

The nearer participants get to each other, the more acutely aware of each other's presence they become. This may be playful, comforting or disquieting. With more people in a room, complex relationships and harmonies can begin to form and disappear, allowing scope for cooperation and confrontation, intimacy and rejection.

As people discover these relationships, they begin to probe them, and question these boundaries. They begin to 'play the space', like an instrument, in collaborative and creative ways.

Ghosts explores text-based communication in the digital age. Initially conceived as a graveyard for dead thoughs and lost ideas, the piece plays with the notion of "instant messaging" (mobile text messages, emails and so on) and questions what happens when these messages are given a new context and longer-term existence – a new, virtual, lease of life.

Permanent virtual sculptures are created out of fragments of thought and throwaway comments, giving each message a new context and added meaning. And as the visuals are built out of the messages people leave, every message left will have an impact on all future viewers.

squidsoup come closer

The notions of 'abstracted virtual reflections', and of individual audience-participators 'playing the (gallery-installation) space', in Squidsoup's *Come Closer*, evoked an immediate and electrical response from me. Here, contemporary artists were revisiting some of the issues of profound interest to pioneers in cybernetic and conceptual art: the notions of authorship, and the conscious and unconscious generation of relationships between gallery visitors. I was immediately reminded of the work of two great pioneers: Gordon Speedie Pask's seminal piece '*A Colloquy of Mobiles*' at the ICA show *Cybernetic Serendipity* in 1968, and Imants Tillers' 'Conversations with the Bride' (1974-75).

Both these pieces engaged an audience of participators, who likewise became collaborators and even performers, as they wandered through the work. In Tillers' case, you caught glimpses of other 'performers' in the head-high mirrors, the reflections in which created a virtual network of light, linking participators in unexpected ways, occasionally creating eyeball contact with someone else in the virtual reciprocal network.

In Colloquy, participators were interacting with a set of 'mobiles' equipped with sensors, enabling these objects to react in different ways to the human participators. As UCL's Nick Rich points out:

"When faced with a work of art we naturally look for images we can latch onto in order to understand it and apply it to our experience. Gordon Pask's Colloquy of Mobiles for the 'Cybernetic Serendipity' exhibition (ICA 1968) took this insight and created a literal representation of it. He did this by building an interactive system in which the traditional observer of the work of art was brought into the creative process and became a creator him or herself (within the limits of the system). Rather than the interaction taking place purely by scanning the artwork with our eyes and perceiving it in our individual ways, a further interaction takes place where the artwork responds to the observer's movement (in this case observers were given flashlights and mirrors to interact with the mobiles). In the constant rearrangement of the artwork the observer has a new goal of trying to understand what the system is doing. The exploration is then likely to continue to try and find out what the systems limits are and what it's trying to achieve. Perhaps the most productive interaction is that which the machine makes possible in sharing the experience with others."

Nick Rich
UCL at http://www.lightmodulator.org/research-interaction.htm

But this is just my cognitive context – the things I brought with me, and were triggered by Come Closer. Because more importantly, the sensual reaction to Come Closer is much more interesting. The intellectual atmosphere is reminiscent of the early Sixties experiments in composition and performance that Al Hansen christened 'Happenings'. This form of programmed performance, often using aleatopic methods to generate compositional and performance tropes, also embraced interactivity, inviting and programming audiences to participate in and to help form the performed piece. The generated MIDI piano notes form interesting cadences of sound, provoking feelings similar to those evoked by Japanese classical music, as well as the experimental Happenings-related work of John Cage and David Tudor.

Like their work, the emotional atmosphere of Come Closer is very Eastern, with minimalist sounds inviting the listener to

collaborate in their cognitive closure. Similarly, the polygons that make up the visual units of Come Closer, while abstract, have the 'artificial life' dynamic I associate with the flocking algorithms devised first of all by Craig Reynolds. They flutter, grow and syncopate according to the patterns of audience movement data collected in real-time by the system.

Of course, it's the creation of the possibility for emergent user-behaviour that is the most fascinating aspect of this work. Emergent behaviour is behaviour that is un-predicted and un-predictable. It is the result of individuals interacting in a multiplicity of individual ways with the artwork, and with fellow users. Users become author-participators, helping to modulate and nuance Come Closer as they navigate and explore the gallery space, and learn how to interact with the technology, and with each other. Such emergent properties have been fascinating cyberneticists and systems thinkers since the early 1950's, when the science of cybernetics itself emerged from the questing geniuses of von Neuman, Norbert Winer, Jay Forrester, Herbert van Vorster, Stafford Beer, Gordon Pask and many other seminal thinkers of that time.

Come Closer illustrates perfectly one of the central tropes of interactive art: that the artist can make works that offer opportunities for closure through manifest audience responses and collaborative engagement.

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squidsoup in space

In a tantalizing way many individuals have experienced just enough of creative living to recognize that for most of their time they are living uncreatively, as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine.[1]

D.W. Winnicott

What do we want from new technology?
We are often disappointed by new media that fail to live up to the future predictions of our desires or those offered by fictional accounts. Indeed dreams and desires are commonly sanitized by expectations based on experiences that are less than magical. The technological revolution anticipated by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s is overshadowed by a rather more pragmatic 1950s 'ideal home' notion of the microprocessor as labour saving, soul-destroying device. And yet the aspirations of less cynical younger consumers and a more mature era of new media better equipped to deliver on its promises, may provide the key to realizing the *myth of interaction* posited by Lev Manovich as an oxymoron. It is the creative or interactive state, which the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott described as a facilitating environment, which is under investigation here by Squid Soup. This *facilitating environment* aspires not to provide an artifact of contemplation, in the manner of traditional narrative based art but an immediate and abstract experience more like engagement with music.

Sigmund Freud described the human race as the 'paranoid animal'; psychologically complex and frequently frustrated by our inability to translate what we feel and think into anything palpable, much less communicate it to another human being in anything but a superficial form. This can literally drive us mad. Recalling dreams to others in any detail always seems so futile because of the frustration involved in describing their intensity in words. Marshall McLuhan would no doubt put this down to the stifling effect of language, particularly the written word. This is a theme considered in the *Squidsoup* project *Ghosts*, which plays with the idea that text-based discussions (web chat, MSN, SMS, email, etc.) are conducted instantaneously – as Martin Heidegger would have said they are about 'being in the *now*'. This recognition of technological vitality, and also its limitations – Rowe describes *Ghosts* as 'a graveyard for dead thoughts' – is at the heart of *Squidsoup* work. The manner in which thoughts swirl around and compete for prominence in our mind is reflected here, but their communication is abstracted as soon as the moment passes. By situating them in a parabolic virtual sculpture *Ghosts* emphasizes the limited nature of written language. McLuhan would doubtless have approved wholeheartedly.

'Because of its action in extending our central nervous system, electric technology seems to favor the inclusive or participational spoken word over the specialist written word'[2]

Marshall McLuhan

Pioneers of Eugenics predicted that the human race would evolve in tandem with technology into a state that we could barely envisage 20 years ago in which language itself would radically change into a more immediate, less restricted and mediated interaction. And yet in the service of economic and social systems that govern our everyday lives technology is all too often boxed-in and hamstrung by the machinery of the past. It is made to serve the established order rather than seeing beyond it.

The difficulty of using new technologies in an unrestricted way is based on the seemingly paradoxical combination of

skills, knowledges, temperament and aspirations necessary to unlock the creative potential of new media. Culturally the dichotomy we face is described by the perceived gap between science and art, but the best art is often conceived and brought to fruition outside the official discourse, the best science so playful that it doesn't seem quite serious enough to warrant the term. In considering the work of *Squidsoup* we are looking at just such an unusual combination of discourses. Firstly the sophisticated use of interactive technology outside the usual profit motivated channels; secondly the contextualization of this information in a gallery environment; and thirdly, and most crucial to their unique form of address, the combination of sound, physical and virtual space employed to emphasize a psychological experience for the user.

Initially formed in 1997 by Anthony Rowe and James Lane, *Squidsoup* has always put a premium on collaborative work and at its most expansive involved up to 12 people. The original idea was to create educational and commercial installation work alongside experimental art and games but following the 'dot com bomb', in 2001 it began to focus much more on experimental art with Rowe and Gareth Bushell at its core. In many ways *Squid Soup* brings to mind the sentiments and activities of the *Situationist International* or anarchistic art movements of the 50s and 60s that were insistent on active participation and breaking down the boundary between maker and user. Projects such as *Come Closer* are designed so that the user can be in control of their own unique experience, not as reader but as author. In fact using such descriptions alluding to the one-way nature of the written word appear out of place here since the work tries to avoid the conventional narratives associated with earnest iconological art practice or indeed broader concepts such as the pressure of

'time' & 'success' described by Jean Francois Lyotard as *inhuman meta narrative*. Anthony Rowe, like the phenomenologist Henri Bergson, regards time as largely an abstract 'clockish' phenomenon and something of a prison that denies us any sense of tranquility. Time puts us under constant pressure. It is space and situation rather than time and memory that dominate the work of *Squid Soup*, both in a literal and virtual sense. It is for this reason that their work is rarely time-based and attempts to avoid conventional modes of fine art discourse – namely visual representation.

If only life had a soundtrack
One of the characters in E Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* bemoans the fact that there is no soundtrack to accompany everyday life: something to lift the soul from banality and drudgery. Of course many of us plug that gap by carrying around an iPod, and yet to be thoroughly liberated through music takes more than a 20GB hard drive. Music still has a fantastical and escapist connotation that only goes half way to fulfilling its creative potential for most people. Those who don't play music themselves can get closest to this kind of energy through dance – movement at any rate appears to be a key factor. *Squidsoup* is drawn to the use of sound as a communication channel, probably because our culture is so dominated by commercially motivated visual discourse, which is so all - powerful that the consumer inevitably adopts a position of passive sponge rather than active participant. Music can easily become mannered and dominated by this master discourse – MTV or the use of music in adverts is a good example. Like some of the work of Tacita Dean, such as *Foley Artist* and *Jukebox*, Squidsoup seeks to challenge the tyranny of image over sound by putting an emphasis on action within a space.

'Every single aspect of a piece of music can be represented by numbers. From the organization of movements in a whole symphony, down through the patterns of pitch and rhythm that make up the melodies and harmonies, the dynamics that shape the performance, all the way down to the timbres of the notes themselves...The things by which our emotions can be moved...can be described by the complex flow on numbers. That's not a reduction of it, that's the beauty of it. Ask Newton. Ask Einstein.' [3]

Douglas Adams

The novelist Douglas Adams once described a virtual environment, the inside of a giant computer, that had been recording everything that had ever happened on Earth and translating it into 'the music of life'. This space took the form of a fractal landscape that made your hair stand on end and changed as you moved through it. The absurd fantasy, combining mathematics, quantum theory and art, that Adams dreamed of in 1987 seems closer than we might imagine. Wikipedia will tell you that Fractal art is created by calculating fractal mathematical functions and transforming the results into still images, animations, music, or other art media. But the fact of fractal art only indicates at what it promises – the ultimate interactive scenario rather than a random and spurious record. Squidsoup's BAFTA nominated *Altzero* experiments, by employing technologies developed through gaming, offer the user the chance to navigate through soundscapes rather than listening passively to pre-recorded music at a fixed listening post, or by carrying it around. Initially navigating through a musical composition as if it were an abstract space and then by exploding a musical moment that is then deconstructed so that the user can explore the abstract numerical relationships involved,

Squidsoup is approaching the kind of fractal landscape envisaged by Adams. Later versions of the project – there are five to date – include inviting the user to make their own music which is then translated into a navigable digital form. Instead of the music itself being radical, it is the means of its consumption that engages the viewer and prevents the author dominating the process. It might not be the music of life, but it is certainly vital and is seen by Rowe as the beginnings of a user-generated environment. Like a technological carnival or the kind of *temporary autonomous zone*[4] that Hakim Bey described in the 1980s, *Squidsoup's* interactions are anarchistic in nature. At a time when the world wide web is becoming more and more restricted and the latest internet revolution is driven by content rather than the form of the network itself, Rowe continues his quest to find a more fulfilling use for new media through the discourse of fine art. Like Bruce Nauman's sound installation in the Turbine Hall at *Tate Modern* much of his work tries to make us think and imagine in a different way. Not led by the content but by the user him/herself. From a conventional perspective this is difficult since linear confrontations, like looking at a painting, are assumed. And yet participation in fine art, like music, is so much more engaging.

Squidsoup: All at Sea
Rowe's experiences have clearly fed into the overall ethos of Squidsoup significantly. In 1988 he sailed single-handed across the Altantic Ocean. Spending a month at sea, never still, never quite in control of his immediate destiny, gave him a sense of sublimity and freedom that he wishes to convey in his work. Indeed, tackling the vastness of the Atlantic seems entirely in keeping with the chaotic and anarchic principles that drive *Squidsoup*. Like the renowned round-the-world

yachtsman Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, Rowe values vitality of experience over measured closure. Knox-Johnston is currently taking part in the *Velux 5 Oceans* round-the-world yacht race for single-handers. The first time he took part was in 1968 when he became the first person ever to achieve the feat. Unlike 1968 he is using a couple of laptop computers to navigate and communicate but essentially the challenges are much the same. 'We are designed for stress. That's what our bodies are designed to do; I can't wait to get to sea.'[5] But the stress he describes here is the physical challenge not an ideological one. It is very clear that Sir Robin relishes the *situation* – he is unconcerned by the isolation, as long as he can respond to the variables at hand. To have something to work with and against sounds like a very masculine and somewhat traditional thing to do, but it's not. It is the essence of interaction and play. Knox-Johnston was the winner of the Golden Globe in 1969, taking 313 days to complete the 30,000 miles. True, he was and is engaged in a competition which measures success in speed, but like climbing or hill walking, the activity of sailing is essentially sensate, more to do with human experience of space than crossing a finishing line.

That same year a fellow competitor, Donald Crowhurst, after realising his inadequate preparations and limited seafaring experience, attempted to falsify his journey through the manipulation of communication equipment. It is an extreme but nonetheless appropriate example of technology being used in the service of well-established and stifling goals, anathema to the *Squidsoup* agenda. Crowhurst responded to the pressure of a meta-narrative, an abstract and imagined victory rather than dealing with a much more concrete foe, the sea. He developed what sailors call 'time madness'. Driven to psychological breakdown through an obsession with his chronometer, the

guilt of the deception and the threat of disgrace, he tragically committed suicide by jumping overboard with the clock that had driven him to despair. For Rowe, this story is a reminder of how easy it is for structure to become dominant and subsume every human experience. Time pollutes space and thus regimen conquers feeling. His answer is very often to slow things down, like investigating and deconstructing a piece of music in *Altzero*.

Territoriality is another meta-narrative which to Rowe appears assumptive and worth investigation at a macro level. *Come Closer*, for example, considers the nature of personal space and the pressure of contemporary living, drawing our attention to the manner in which we relate to each other and how life should not be dictated by an isolated and linear trajectory. In a culture that celebrates individuality in a competitive and insulating sense, *Come Closer*, through its use of wearable sensors which track movement through space, reacts only to the proximity of others. The project is partly inspired by Rowe's experience of living with nomadic tribes in Mongolia in order to try to understand the nature of rootlessness and its consequent impact on our sense of self and other. It is an experiment reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* or Manuel De Landa's *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History* in which the author discusses how a catalyst, in this case the gallery space, may enable a 'dynamical system' to develop between separate elements – the people in the space. There is a particular ideology behind this work that is dystopian in nature. It is certainly collaboration since *Come Closer* relies on the presence of more than one person, each wearing a sensor, to activate the software. But this is not necessarily harmonious in nature.

Interaction is determined by people's position in the space and represented through simple piano notes and deliberately minimal visual components through a simple graphic projection. *Squid Soup* seeks a subtle atmospheric and emotive experience from virtual space through maximising the playful potential of the environment. The importance of play cannot be underestimated here.

Playing and Reality: A Phenomenology of Interactive Media
The English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott suggested the possibility of an ideology that avoids the conventional measurements of experience. He asks:

'Can we isolate an intimate, concrete essence that would be a justification of the uncommon values of all our images of protected intimacy? This then is the main problem.'[7]

D.W. Winnicott

Play is Winnicott's '*intimate, concrete essence*' and the activity through which the individual finds his/her sense of self most potently felt and communicated. This might be a manifesto for much of *Squidsoup's* experiments. Rowe is at pains to pursue the 'emotive potential of virtual space', an invitation to unlock hitherto unconscious ideas. For Freud this would have been impossible in a constructed environment such as the one created here. But for Winnicott the individual ego was too much in debt to the social apparatus to be considered a single unit. Only through real-time collaborative play, and not through slippage or dreams, could we develop a clearer picture of a person's psychological state or indeed fuel their imagination. In this sense more may be revealed in a gallery setting by 'playing the space' in the company of friends, not because this is necessary to collaborate, but because inhibitions may be minimized. If a purpose built fully integrated site were developed, in which the players may be relaxed and not restricted by formal surroundings – which may well happen in the future – it is easy to see further development in open interaction.

In relation to the spatial nature of *Squidsoup's* corpus Winnicott's experiential, rather than structured conceptual creativity (Freud), is echoed by Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological approach to cultural behaviour. Bachelard, in his wonderfully titled and deliberately absurd *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, postulates that

'The axes of poetry and of science are opposed to one another from the outset. All that philosophy can hope to accomplish is to make poetry and science complementary, to unite them as two well-defined opposites.'[8]

Gaston Bachelard

We can see clearly in the work of *Squidsoup* that such a unity is being realized through activity rather than philosophy and is challenging the putative dichotomy identified by Bachelard

50 years ago. It is also addressing and attempting to rectify the frustration of uncreative living outlined by Winnicott, since the user does not feel 'caught up in the creativity of someone else' but is instead an active contributor to the 'play'. It is likely that the victories *Squidsoup* achieve over structured narrative will be in the manner of Hakim Bey's isolated islands of resistance, but they are crucial if new technology is to be used in order '*to escape the rigidity of mental habits formed by contact with familiar experiences.*'[9]

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January 2007

1 Winnicott, D. (2005) Playing and Reality London: Routledge
2 McLuhan, M. (1964) Understanding Media London: Routledge
3 Adams, D. (1987) Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency London: Heinemann
4 www.hermetic.com/bey/taz3.html (see 'Music as Organisational Principle')
5 Fisher B. The Observer 22.10.06 'Final Voyage for a Master Mariner:
   An Interview with Sir Robin Knox-Johnston.'
6 www.squidsoup.org/comecloser/qt/media.htm
7 opcit
8 Bachelard, G. (1987) The Psychoanalysis of Fire London: Beacon Press
9 ibid

squidsoup

Squidsoup's work combines sound, physical space and virtual worlds to produce immersive and emotive headspaces. They aim to allow participants to take active control of their experience. They explore the modes and effects of interactivity, looking to make digital experiences where meaningful and creative interaction can occur.
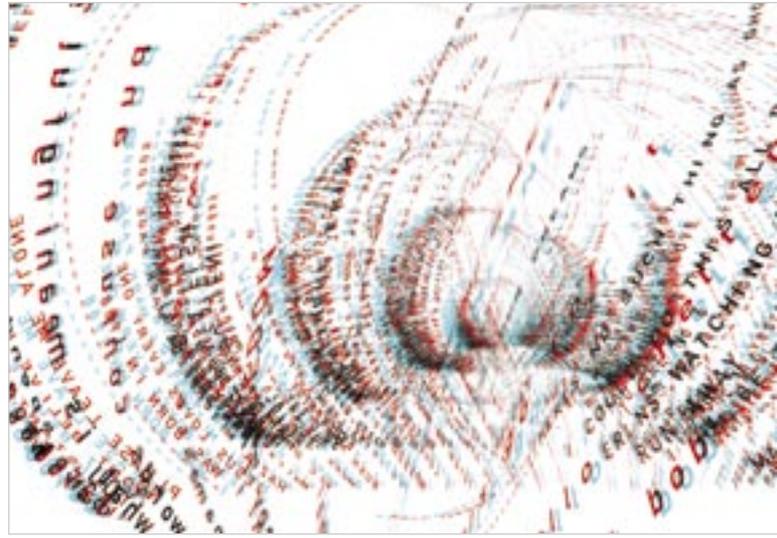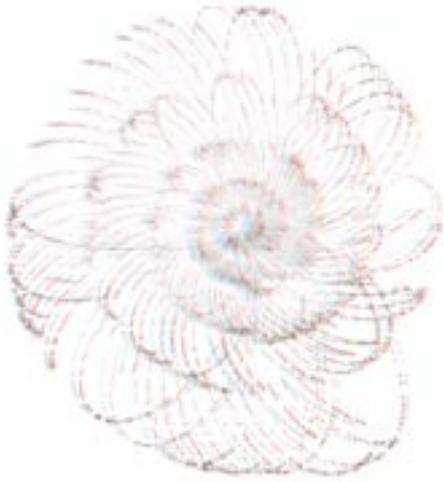
Their work has been shown at several dozen festivals, seminars and galleries around the world including Tate Britain (Late at Tate Britain, 2006/2007), Cybersonica (Dana Centre, 2006), Festival du Nouveau Cinema (Montreal 2004), Futuresonic (Manchester 2004), Lab3D (Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2003), ISEA (Nagoya, Japan, 2002), Sonar (Barcelona, 2001) and Siggraph (LA, 2001), as well as several online exhibitions. Recognition includes an International EMMA award (Best On-line Art 2000) and a BAFTA nomination (Interactive Arts 2002).

Grants and project commissions from (among others): Cybersonica (2006), The Arts Institute at Bournemouth (2006), Arts Council England (2005), NESTA Futurelab (2002-5), Folly (2004), Clark Digital Bursary (2002,4), Cornerhouse (2003), Watershed Media Centre (2002,4,5), Surrey Institute of Art and Design (2003), London Arts (2002).

Experience Squidsoup's work online at: www.squidsoup.org, and in shared spaces, physical and virtual installations, games and software tools. Come Closer is the subject of a research paper: "Encouraging Collaborative Behaviour in a Multimedia Environment", awarded Best Paper at VSMM 2006 (Xian, China, October 2006).

Please visit: http://www.aib.ac.uk/Default.aspx?page=339

NEVER SURRENDER

ACCES

THERE'S NO SUCH THING

GHOSTS

the project

www.squidsoup.org

bob cotton

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Bob has worked extensively with interactive media throughout his career. He is a new media designer and creative consultant as well as a research fellow and an information architect. He has designed and directed several major commercial CD-Roms and web-sites, including 3 CD-Roms for Manchester United, 2 training CD-Roms for the Training Agency, Halliwell's Interactive Film Guide CD-Rom, EMI's 'Sight and Sound' laserdisks, and a laserdisk-based emergency response system for BP Exploration. He designed the architecture for the ICA web and intranet, and creatively directed the site for the Isle of Wight Jazz Divas Festival. He has worked with AMX Studios on websites for the ICA, for Malibu Rum and a series of information system consoles for the Welcome Wing at the Science Museum, London.

Hhe has written several books on design and new media, including 'Understanding Hypermedia 2.000 (1998), The Cyberspace Lexicon (1994) and the ICA pamphlet 'You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet' (1999).

Bob is a past member of judging panels for interactive media at the D&AD, BAFTA and US I.D magazine annual awards and lectures part-time at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth. Bob has also supervised training sessions for the George Soros Open Society Institute, working in Prague, Croatia, and Azerbaijan. Recent lectures include Futures and Options World Exposition (Paris 2002), 'New Media New Commerce' (ICA London 2003),'New Media Designers' (at the Business Design Centre, London 2003).

jim campbell

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Since completing his MA in Visual Culture at Bath Spa University College in 2001 Jim has become increasingly interested in debates generated by the power of consumer society and the changing nature of cultural practices. He has published essays for magazines and journals such as Draft, Contemporary Visual Arts, Art Monthly and Image. He has curated a number of exhibitions including The Art & Craft of Photography at the AIB Gallery that featured the work of groundbreaking photographers such as Nick Knight and Wolfgang Tillmans.

In 2004 he delivered a paper entitled Flirting with Monsters at a Photoforum conference hosted by Brighton University which sought to challenge the manner in which professional practice is largely dismissed by fine art photographic discourse for being without critical merit. Essentially Jim's critical stance owes much to postmodern texts that stress the potential empowerment offered by cultural production and consumption.

As a continuation of this work he received AIB Research and Scholarship funding to organise a conference entitled Commercial Photography: A New Critical Dialogue at The Association of Photographers Gallery. The conference explored pragmatic elements of the photographic industry, focussing on the question of collaborative practice and how to retain creative input under intense pressure from commercial forces.

His most recent research revolves around how interactive media design and photography can be conceptualised beyond traditional discourses. He is currently working on a re-evaluation of the photographic archive in the 21st century.

text+work

The Gallery is a major resource for contemporary visual art at the Institute and has received regional and national recognition.

The concept of text+work underpinning the exhibition programme, promotes dialogue between innovative contemporary art and design practice and its theoretical context.

It provides a platform for practitioners, writers and curators who wish to examine and extend the boundaries between contemporary practice and critical discourse. There are text+work gallery events, critical texts, shared and networked exhibitions, and a text+work website.

A text (essay) is published by text+work to accompany each exhibition in the text+work programme.

For more information on the text+work programme and supporting events please log on to the website:

www.textandwork.org.uk

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth is one of the leading specialist education providers in Europe. It is one of the few higher education university sector institutions that focuses exclusively on contemporary arts, design and media.

The Institute is an academic community that embraces critical reflection derived from research and scholarship as an intrinsic aspect of professional practice.

Research and scholarship activity provides a positive contribution to curriculum currency and students' learning, and contributes to the local, regional, national and international standing of the Arts Institute.

The Institute is proud of the professional practice of the staff and the success of its alumni, which includes Wolfgang Tillmans, winner of the Turner Prize in 2000, Nick Knight, the leading fashion photographer and Simon Beaufoy, who wrote the script for The Full Monty.

acknowledgements