Aurora Festival: Social Networks & Campfire Stories - Richard Wright

APEngine talks to Richard Wright, who'll be discussing networks at this year's Aurora Festivalin Norwich. Also taking part are Gareth Evans, Jem Cohen, Jamie King and Andrew Kötting.

In the 90s you were making films - for festivals and broadcast - and installation work - and started making 'media art': your Bank of Time screensaver, where plants grew on the nourishment of idle computer time. The idea of what the 'moving image' has changed radically in that time - it used to be film/video art. Do you see a kind of arc there for your own practice?

In the 90s, the computer animated films I was making were part of media art. Then computer animation got sidelined by digital media art, when the internet started to dominate the field. At the same time, computer animation came to be genre dominated, mainly by 3D character animation or music driven motion graphics. So there was a squeeze from both ends. I saw 'new media art' as allowing me to continue to pursue themes I was interested in, but in a different form.

The Bank of Time project started in 1999, originally as a film that updated frame by frame over the internet, instead of 25 frames per second. So I always though thought of it as an animation. It's a screensaver that grows plants on your desktop by downloading timelapse images. As you accumulate more idle time the plants grow more - they consume your inactivity. There's also a web site with a league table of users' idle time so everyone can see who has been wasting the most time.

For me it is about a way of experiencing the time that passes in a modern computerised environment, where every single moment becomes a valuable ‘resource’ that must be accounted for. The life cycle of plants was a way of introducing other forms of time - while we work, life goes on.

It became very popular with a general audience but gradually I realised that the ‘new media art’ community wasn't particularly sympathetic to this more ‘time based’ approach. One person told me they thought the plant images were unnecessary. I think the central principle of ‘new media art’ is a certain understanding of the network - which is more of a static conceptual structure. You just connect everything together, as Nicolas Negroponte said. The main form of temporality that is recognised is latency - such as the dead time in which you wait for something to happen, to download, to travel between the connections. It's hard for people to imagine a Google search as an animation. So after nearly ten years I feel I am returning to the ‘moving image’ but hopefully with a wider perspective of what that means. I'd describe my current practice as ‘animated media’ - trying to animate Google.

And you're also now taking Google and the internet as your subject, literally - taking images and re-presenting them. Is there an absurdity there too - an impossible abstraction or distillation of something that is actually everything? you're playing at attempting to make order of something that can't be contained?

You're right that it can't be contained. I think the internet is, in a sense, ‘everything’, due to its very scale and the fact that so much unpredictable stuff is immediately available, so that it functions as ‘the world’. Yet if you use Google to do a lot of research you also realise how much is missing. You realise that the internet only contains what people have had in mind over the last 15 years. Very soon, I find myself having to go to libraries and look up things in old dusty books and card indexes. And so much of the internet is simply repeating links to the same information, so there’s a huge amount of redundancy.

In the past I made some work that would now be referred to as ‘generative art’ or abstract algorithmic animations and I tried to find a wider historical context for that kind of work (such as in Heliocentrum, made with Jason White). With the work I’m doing now I am trying to ask what the algorithms are that are significant in digital society today - and that can be used to make film. Years ago, artists concentrated

on synthetic imagery, trying to make new visual forms that were not possible before. Now it is easy to ‘generate’ an image. You can't help it. We have billions of them sloshing around, either through digital cameras, phones or mixed together in iMovie or Photoshop or some fractal generator. Now the issue is how to deal with all these images, how to make sense of them, search them, own them.

The algorithms that are being developed to deal with these problems, whether in a commercial, scientific or security context use new kinds of logic that the traditional categories of word or picture are not entirely relevant to. It's a new stage in visual language. How to Talk to Images was a project I started in 2006 that presented two search engines, a complex one that searched by visual similarity and the simplest possible one that just stepped through every image one by one - complete opposites (www.mimeticon.net and www.internetspeaks.net).

For that project I made a big database of random images and afterwards I was wondering what else I could do with them - whether I could make a film out of them. There are lots of media projects that take random material from the internet and reorganise it according to some complicated scheme, but I felt a random encounter with an image could be enough in itself. So I made 10,000 Copyrighted Images, which just took exactly 10,000 of these images and recorded them randomly, one per frame. The result is a flicker film in which the viewer is faced with a maximum of visual information over about six and a half minutes. The images tend to pulse at you in quite a hypnotic fashion and some images jump right out at you and stick in your mind. And of course, you are watching copyrighted images. This aspect of it being so easy to take someone else's content is something that has only arrived with networked media, so I referred to the film as "crime at the limits of human perception"!

I’ve recently been looking at Austrian Metric filmmakers of the 60s like Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka. I find their work more relevant now, especially where they try to remove all elements of human decision making and culture so that the films are like automated compilations of visual data, like computer controlled surveillance cameras. It also connects with a certain strand of Constructivism like the English Systems Artists, Kenneth and Mary Martin and Jeffrey Steele who tried to ‘program’ themselves to make paintings. Programming before computers. There's lots of work like this, but paradoxically it's been obscured since the rise of the computer itself. It's become a popular cliché to think of our behaviour as being ‘programmed’ by upbringing and environment, but this is not the same as the programming that runs a digital computer. I think the challenge is to find programming logics that computers and humans can both take part in.

Right now I am using technologies such as image recognition software to re-edit well known films, trying to find ways that these technologies could restructure the time flow. So far I have a film that has nearly 100,000 edits and I can't render it! In fact, I don't think you can really call a process of this scale ‘editing’ any longer. It's more of a ‘re-ordering’ or ‘re-sorting’ of a film. And there's another film planned about the After Effects animation software which I may call After All Effects.

And what about the ways in which the audience can now encounter work? You’re currently negotiating the new territory well - you, as an artist, making the work, but acknowledging that there isn't the traditional give/receive relationship. There’s this shared confusion or trauma, even, about the weight of information?

The question of how the audience should encounter moving image work, especially within the context of a film as a medium for huge amounts of visual information, I think has unnecessarily undermined the practice of ‘time-based media’. The demand for more information is something that has pushed us towards the spatialisation of media and media art. Interactivity doesn't really help us here because it is usually about navigating a huge spatial organisation of content and not about forms of rhythm and pacing. Unless it's a computer game, although that brings other problems with it.

The abundance of information has always been a problem with documentary film of course, having to edit down 40 hours into a 40 minute programme. But the solution you are starting to see - of making all the footage available and allowing people to search it - I don't see as extending ‘film’. Especially since the artists have little control over the form of the technology that allows for searching - it's just powered by Google again, entering those keywords.

An obvious alternative would be to edit 40 hours of footage into a 40 hour film and then really take advantage of how internet streaming can extend time-based media, quite literally in this case. Bloggers already do this with written language, writing thousands of words and showing just how facile is this idea that we have to make our work ‘bite-sized’ if it's to survive in modern media.

So that's what I'd like to do, to use animation to bring time back into digital media.