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By Christian Nold

Christian Nold visits Jodi's solo show at FACT, Computing 101B, and considers their shift from PC to gallery installation

I was expecting something rather special when I went to visit the Jodi exhibition at the FACT Centre in Liverpool. Net.art duo Jodi (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans) had been very influential for me when I was at art college in the late '90s and first started exploring the internet. I was deeply impressed by their online work which seemed to invade my home computer with intimidating streams of green computer code which cast harsh shadows onto my bedroom walls. This being their first UK solo show, I was curious to see how they would deal with the physical gallery space.

The show, entitled Computing 101B, consists of two large installations that explore the opposition between the use of the computer for work and play. In addition, these pieces are contextualised by a number of information booths that Jodi have added to display their own personal and satirical take on the history of computing from the invention of the mouse through to the modern incarnation of the Macintosh.

The piece in the lower gallery, My %Desktop (2002) consists of four simultaneous wall projections showing recordings of the Mac Classic operating system used by an unseen operator. Instead of voyeuristically watching somebody at work, we see an orgiastic display of digital disorder. Stacks of new folders are rapidly spawned and disorganised. Tool tips appear and disappear senselessly while the system sounds, click and quack in a cacophony across the four screens. Standing in front of the projection the experience is one of both familiarity and profound absurdity. It is as if the invisible user has abandoned work and created their own strange game within the constraints of the desktop.

The upper gallery contains a brand new ten-screen video piece called Max Payne Cheats-Only Gallery. The title refers to the first person shooter game, which on its release in 2001 was praised for its realistic violent graphics and atmospheric film noir plot. 'Maximum pain - teenagers love it so do we', Jodi comment, which is why they've constructed the videos using the game's built-in cheat mode.

Entering the gallery the visitor is immediately assaulted by loud grunts, alarms and gun shots resonating through the space. The gallery has been transformed into a series of twisty 90 degree walkways reminiscent of many first person shooter games. Peep holes inserted into the walls which, when gazed through, afford small glimpses of the screens showing the game.

Through one peep hole, Max, the protagonist spins around senselessly firing into the ground until the recoil from his bullet comically drops him off the top of the stairway. Other holes reveal bizarre camera angles as the result of the games' cheat mode. The camera is suddenly inside Max's body and we see through his gun into the endless stream of shell casings falling into an exquisite black void. Approaching another hole we hear someone being relentlessly beaten with a lead pipe, but upon looking we see Max is alone, persistently beating the floor.

The psychological drama that has been built up through the use of the peepholes and sounds is thwarted once we gaze through the holes. We expect gore and instead see aestheticised repetition. It is as if the teenager playing the game has distractedly kept their finger on the trigger while picking up the phone to talk to a friend. Like in My %Desktop, the invisible user has rejected the plot and created their own casual 'play'.

Both these pieces represent quite a departure for Jodi from the intricately programmed websites and game modifications that had made their name. Jodi explained: 'There is nothing to expose, no tricks added – then it's just the emotional attachment of the user ... We don't want to stick with our aesthetic. We don't want to be endlessly called desktop abusers or game modifiers. We wanted to do something that was non-aesthetically ours. No scary black blobs on jumping white backgrounds, but trying to achieve the impossible – an abstraction within the aesthetic of a game which is already set.'

By adding so little to the source material they have indeed set themselves a difficult task. The spatial rearrangement of the gallery in the Max Payne piece is very effective but this, in turn, shows up the timidity of My %Desktop which doesn't go far enough in transforming the iconic familiarity of the Mac desktop. In particular what seems to be missing is the implied danger and invasiveness of Jodi's previous work. As they have said themselves 'You are very close to a person when you are on his desktop.' It is this level of intimacy which is lost with the large scale projections.

The looping of the My %Desktop videos lacks the drama of a clear beginning and end. This was quickly remedied at the exhibition's launch with the first ever Jodi live performance, Desktop Improvisations. The audience seated in a dark cinema, watch Dirk theatrically walk up to the lonely laptop placed in a spot light, where he positions himself carefully.

A butler serves him with a variety of different mice arranged on a silver platter. He begins by repeatedly trying to drag the hard disk into the wastebasket and vice versa emitting an audible rhythm of errors. The performance then passes through a series of almost orchestral movements as he probes the functions of the desktop in turn – folder creation and deletion, stickies, tool tips, text to sound.

What emerges brilliantly is what Jodi describe as the 'circus of the interface'. Suddenly we can see an anthropomorphic psychodrama in the minutia of the computer. The most powerful moment occurs when the screen is at its fullest and the ancient laptop slows with the load of spawning all the folders. As the delay between each window opening gradually increases, so does the sound which accompanies this action.

Dirk is in total control, tinkering and even toying with the materiality of the computer. What we see is an incredibly skilful display of human/computer coordination. The generic, invisible user of the installations has become exposed as a virtuoso performer.

Watching this routine I am strongly reminded of Vertov's 1914 film Man with the Movie Camera. Both seem to push and expose the formal possibilities and constraints of their medium in order to create a mechanical but emotional truth. Like Vertov's 'desire for kinship with the machine', Jodi similarly seem to aim for a cyborgian union. Yet unlike Vertov, Jodi's Kino-Eye does not produce clarity or 'introduce creative joy into mechanical labour'. Jodi reject the fantasy of techno utility and refuse to follow the established script for both work and play. For Jodi real play is anarchic and should not be scripted or constrained. 'Ridiculing something is a form of politics. Clowns can make fun of power situations. Sometimes you don't even know it yourself but a mask falls.'

There is, however, something slightly nostalgic about this idea. Jodi's choice of two separate galleries, one representing work and the other play, strengthen the impression that the two are still distinct. In contrast, Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media* talks about the insidious way in which we now use the same interfaces for work and pleasure. Play has ceased to be delineated from labour.

The impression that Jodi are choosing slightly outdated targets is reinforced by their use of Engelbart's research as part of their educational booths. In 1969, Engelbart's research team flashed up a series of random objects on a screen and timed how long it took users to click on them with a variety of input devices. This methodology of timing the reactions of the user became a central tool of the Human Computer Interaction (HCI) field. In Jodi's exhibition they gently mock these approaches by juxtaposing the primitiveness of these methods with their grand, cyborg aspirations of 'augmenting and expanding the human intellect'. Seen in conjunction with their gentle critique of the Mac Classic GUI, Jodi do seem to be aiming at a rather outdated straw man of computing's future.

Today, the HCI community has moved onto the new buzzwords of 'Physical Computing' and 'Experience Design'. The vision is that designers no longer create products but redesign daily experience. There is a strong marketing focus bent on manipulating the user's emotional attachment to their environment. Physical computing on the other hand tries to hide the technology in the background while making our interactions with information tangible through symbolic stand-ins.

I would love to see Jodi shift their critical and mischievous gaze onto these new soft reincarnations of the cyborg dream. How intimidating might a virus or hacker intrusion really be when our seating – a physical computing favourite – starts to misbehave and we are literally forced to feel the uncanny other.

After showing at FACT, Liverpool, 16 July – 5 September 2004, Computing 101B tours to SPACEX Gallery in Exeter from 4 December – 19 February 2005

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