BARCELONA PRODUCCIÓ 2022–23

ENRIQUE RADIGALES | EN

THE WILD USER EXPERIENCE

EXHIBITION 24.01 – 26.02.2023

The wild user experience is a project by Enrique Radigales in the Digital Environments modality of Barcelona Producció 2022-2023 whose public presentation has led to an exhibition format for the Espai Vestíbul at La Capella. The project aims to revive the multifarious multimedia sphere in CDROM format shown between 1999 and 2001 in Barcelona as part of the fiftyfifty initiative, a cultural agitator and distributor founded by Pedro Soler and Enrique Radigales.

The purpose is to reclaim/measure/question that first experience in front of the screen at a time of transition full of epiphanies. To focus our attention on that blurred space that flowed through us back then and arose when we brought together the realms of analogue knowledge and the first digital awakening. In order to do this, the artist has generated a physical device – a small, intimate, solitary room – that occupies the gallery, opening and closing in a way that resembles the room of a house.

Exploring these interfaces nowadays is almost an anthropological exercise. The interaction between work and user exudes a wild freedom far removed from the concepts of usability that were later applied.

A WILD, INNOCENT EXPERIENCE

To talk about online user experience today means to use terms such as 'usability', 'usefulness' and 'efficiency'. Ease of use over aesthetic experience and especially design efficiency for the sake of an ultimate goal: that the user performs certain processes and remains on the webpage. Peak satisfaction for users and companies is achieving proper browsing flow. The information architecture must be digestible, the interfaces structured, the interactivity planned in advance, and the paths to and from the website must be well laid out. Above all, there must be a sense of constant control over meandering through this welter of information, a bit like living in the well-defined, fenced-off plots of land in a detached house. But that sense of control is a simulacrum that has been designed to ensure proper browsing flow according to commercial, market criteria.

LSUX focuses on user experience occurring in artistic production immediately prior to household online access, combining archaeological recovery, historical memory in aesthetic-technological terrains and activist reflection. Experimental practices that took place in the era of technological innocence between the latter half of the 1990s and the early 2000s are reappraised by recovering the fiftyfifty archive. When Manuel Castells spoke back then of the four cultural layers of the Internet (university, hacker culture, counterculture and business), the impression we got was that these four layers overlapped without excessive predominance. The feeling we have now a quarter of a century later (which in Internet years is like several geological eras) is that the business layer has monopolised the social sphere and imaginary of both the Internet and its access technologies.

Recovering the artistic practices produced on CDROM is a journey back into that wild territory whose countryside had yet to be discovered, ploughed or monitored. The user experience proposed to us from that past is the freedom to become aimlessly lost, the pleasure of discovery without a

roadmap, of horizontality, of true control over the number of screens and images you want to consume and produce, and from where you want to do this. Nostalgia understood as an emancipatory tool from which perhaps we can garner clues to exercise greater autonomy in the present in how we inhabit and travel information paths. And to talk more about Richard Stallman or Linus Torvalds and less about Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk.

The history of CDROM (compact disc read-only memory) is truly fleeting. Introduced by Philips in 1979 to store and play audio in the early 1980s, the medium expanded its capabilities to store digital information. The CDROM was replaced by its successor, the DVD, at the turn of the new millennium, but the DVD could only replace it as a storage device, not as a medium for interactive experiences – which can only occur if there is a user activating and interacting with them.

These interactive experiences are transferred online, and their language, which is not exactly verbal, becomes part of the language of the Internet. In this language, users (the human part of the equation) speak at the click of a mouse and occasionally by typing. This is when movements such as the click, double-click, mouseover and scroll were born (or consolidated), and where swipe and the other gestures we use in our daily contact with screen interfaces began to be imagined.

The CDR, or recordable CD, was introduced in the early 1990s, transforming the music and film industries, and the CDR appeared as a system for cultural and especially countercultural dissemination. Burned CDs passed from hand to hand, containing folders of music, images, PDFs, video clips and warez (pirated software). Among the most popular warez were software authoring tools (such as Macromedia Director or Flash) that helped to create the interactive experiences contained in CDROMs and web pages.

The history of fiftyfifty, founded in 1999 by the artists Enrique Radigales and Pedro Soler, is as fleeting as that of self-published CDROMs. Pedro and Enrique met in the mid-1990s. Pedro collected CDROMs and Enrique had been working with them for some time, but it was not until a few years later that Pedro suggested to Enrique the idea of setting up fiftyfifty. Fascinated by CDROMs and the experience of interactivity that could not be found in any other format, in three months they had managed to set up the structure that helped them to present themselves in society and stage shows of their catalogue. It was quite an epic moment of promise and discovery revolving around all that was digital. Digital was progress; it had no pejorative charge; everything had yet to be done on the road to digital literacy.

This 'distributor of authored multimedia products and cultural agitator' not only circulated interactive art, music and video, but also connected Barcelona's digital community by staging parties, presentations, workshops and other activities. Real time became increasingly more important with the addition of Mia Makela, and then Once11, and they were among the first to do streaming, with DJs and VJs, predicting the future in real time as bandwidth, hard disk capacity and processor speed increased. In fact, if we take the two initials of the words that form fiftyfifty (FF) we get the acronym for Fast Forward, in other words, moving forward in time at high speed. But that is another story of

the many that fiftyfifty treasured during its brief existence between the late 20th century and early new millennium, bringing together local and international artists and enthusiasts of the then emerging digital scene.

Two decades later, as a selected proposal in Barcelona Producció 2022-2023, the history and catalogue of fiftyfifty is being recovered. A selection of the works that have been successfully ripped is available at a consultation station set up in La Capella with a computer from the period. The installation represents a room at the end of a corridor. The partitions in the room shield the user from the 'outside noise' of the exhibition gallery in order to concentrate on the screen of a G3 from the year 2000. This partition is constructed with several abstract paintings inspired by a data visualisation technique known as 'heat mapping', which tracks a user's path across the screen as he or she navigates the interfaces of these CDROMs.

Antònia Folguera / Pilar Cruz

LSUX (THE WILD USER EXPERIENCE)

At the end of the twentieth century, many computer users combined writing code with design. The technical limitations of the digital medium left little space for visual design, and very few designers and artists had the technical knowledge required to graphically organize the screen. Interface design was highly specialized, so these first digital artists needed training in both the arts and programming or to have sufficient perseverance to make pacts with a programmer.

A scene emerged from these heroic feats of pacts and burnt-out retinas around the format of the CDROM which, together with the software company Macromedia (Authorware, Director, Shockwave), gave birth to baroque multimedia that would forever change our experience of the screen. These CDROMs, with a resolution of 800 × 600 pixels and a capacity of 700 MB, permitted the distribution of 24-bit color images, 8-bit sound, animated graphics, and even video. Play, the intimate dynamics of the user and fluid action-reaction, in the formal and physical context of the CDROM encompassed a diverse biotope that attempted to break with former rules of language and aesthetics for the benefit of the user experience and sensory ecstasy as a vehicle for thought.

Today, exploring these interfaces is almost an anthropological endeavor. Interaction in these works enjoys a wild freedom which has nothing to do with the concepts of useability that would later be applied, above all through the democratization of Internet and Web usability principles (Jakob Nielsen). A New Economy, associated with the rise of dotcom companies, began to capitalize on knowledge. Drifting and playing around in interfaces was no longer a good business strategy.

LSUX aims to recover and examine those early experiences of a moment of transition full of epiphanies in front of the screen. To focus our attention on the blurry space that was ours then and which emerged when the spheres of analogue knowledge and the first digital awakening met. A transitory territory. A territory which plays at avoiding us like an analogue mountain.

Enrique Radigales

A LABYRINTH OF FOLDERS

In her novel *The Volcano Lover* (which, in my opinion, completely conceals an essay on collecting), Susan Sontag says "The collector's world bespeaks the crushingly large existence of other worlds, energies, realms, eras than the one he lives in. The collection annihilates the collector's little slice of historic existence." This phrase comes perhaps the closest to describing my experience working with the fiftyfifty project. Not from the point of view of a collector, for that is not my case, but rather from that of a film archivist who, for the first time, is confronted with a collection of this type, which is very different from film.

As I began to work with the fiftyfifty collection, my technological past and my vision of audiovisual works became fragmented. Not in a radical or extreme sense, but rather that my vision simply widened, letting me see for the first time the audiovisual and aesthetic history of a format which, although not as old as celluloid, was already obsolete and unusable when it reached me. Discovering the contents of this collection not only changed my way of thinking about the format but also led me to reflect on contemporary Web aesthetics.

In my experience, the relationship with the medium changes since a CDROM is not like a photograph that can be seen against the light. A CDROM requires obsolete technology to be read and one has to hope that the disk is still readable.

This experience, similar to when I studied magnetic media like VHS, Betacam or U-matic, has kindled in me a new relationship with this medium with regard to both how it is handled and how the contents are organized within it.

The folders within other folders and the drop-down and labyrinthine menus are part of the radical aesthetics that many artists embraced through these machines and their possibilities.

This artistic world has made such a deep impact on me that my work has almost become an ideological undertaking aimed at resurrecting these contents and giving them the opportunity to be studied and experienced today.

Martha Helga

A SHORT CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE CDROM

The first company to develop the potential of the CDROM as a medium with an artistic or creative aim was the Voyager company in San Francisco. Their slogan was "Bring your Brain" and they were an important first step in bringing "serious" culture and technology together at a time when computers still had very little creative use. The famous Mexican photographer Pedro Meyer published *I Photograph to Remember* with the company in 1991, and during these years other established artists also began to experiment with the new platform, like Tadanori Yokoo in Japan, who produced a wonderfully strange piece called *Angel Love* in 1992, seduced by the possibility of bringing his collages and designs to life, or the explorations of *Elfin Light* by Katsuo Tetsui in 1995.

In Germany between 1994 and 1999, the ZKM Center for Art and Media published the Artintact series, featuring high-end artists, and situated media-art practice firmly within contemporary art. At the time, the ZKM was the only major institution that took media art – and its possibilities – seriously. Meanwhile, in Tokyo, Digitalogue (a small space in Tokyo somewhere between an art gallery, independent publisher, and a design studio) was publishing John Maeda's extraordinary Reactive Book series (1993 to 1999). Although explicitly – perhaps ironically – quoting the book form, they made no pretense at traditional narrative or communicating large amounts of complex information. On the contrary they were pared-down and formally perfect explorations of what the medium could mean on its own terms.

Tokyo was central to the new digital sensibility that was emerging, deeply connected to electronic music and other forms of digital cultures, more influenced by design and fashion than fine arts, irreverent, experimental and ambitious, and nothing encapsulated this spirit better than the Gasbook series, a CDROM compilation that ran from 1995 to well into the 2000s, constantly shifting its format, resolutely multimedia, digital/analogue, stickers, booklets, CDs, and bits and pieces, and managed to bring together some of the most interesting creatives of international 90s pop and digital culture.

Among them was the mysterious artist JODI who, in 1997, released their CDROM *OSS* with Mediamatic magazine in Amsterdam (also publishers of various other interesting CDs during the decade). This was a landmark work in the emancipation from the book and the formulation of a language specific to the digital environment, breaking free from the previous technologies that had framed it, always as a tool to some other end. But in OSS there was no other end: the playful movement through codespaces was the point and it was a point that could not be made in any other medium.

In Barcelona, Miquel Jordà published *The Motionless Journey* in 1996 and Toni Serra *Welcome to the Interzona* the same year. The IUA-UPF, under the direction of Xavier Berenguer, played an important role in supporting these experiments and providing training for the emerging role of artist-programmer. Then, at the end of the nineties, fiftyfifty briefly and gloriously emerged, participating in the worldwide digital movement in Barcelona and publishing their own CDROM compilation, *FFMIX01*, of local artists and creators like Area3, Glaznost and SOLU. The *Karoushi* compilation did the same for the Vienna scene with wonderful artists like Lia and Dextro. By the early 2000s, broadband internet had become widely available and the CDROM slipped into history.

Pedro Soler