FROM CONCEPTION TO EXHIBITION: THE 'INTERFACES' COMPETITION

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http://labs.artes.ucp.pt/ftp/csa*

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iNTERFACES

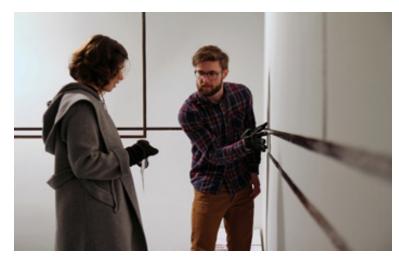## Concurso de Arte Interativa | Interactive Art Competition

1 | INTRODUCTION

This spring the Research Center for Science and Technology of the Arts (CITAR) hosted iNTERFACES' competition (http://artes.ucp.pt/interfaces/interfaces-EN.html) first edition. This competition was created to foment the development of digital and interactive art, by valuing contemporary artistic practice.

I had the opportunity of following the development process and the privilege of being a jury member of iNTERFACES. In this article I'll review the process of creating this first edition, from its genesis to the final exhibition, placing special emphasis on the submitted pieces, and, of course, on the winners.

It all started with a challenge from the direction of CITAR to the group working in the *Digital Arts* line of action that read somewhat like this: "How can we foment the development of Digital and Interactive Arts and at the same time give these practices more visibility in our school and community?"

The answer came in the shape of a competition that would result in an exhibition of the winning pieces. Simultaneously, the submitted pieces would be included in a digital repository that would be assembled with the purpose of giving a general

FIRST PRIZE | "Sonophore" by Oliver Wilshen and Niall Quinn from England.

HONOURABLE MENTION | "Feather Tales II" by O'Nascimento Ricardo from Brazil, and Ebru Kurbak from Turkey.

view of the works created by artists from all over the world.

2 | GENESIS AND EXPECTATIONS

In the Fall of 2012, the competition gained structure and form. Carlos Sena Caires coordinated the process, and once the theme and title for the competition were decided upon, everybody in the group was welcome to collaborate in the conception of it.

The theme/title — interfaces — is of extreme openness, allowing different interpretations and therefore having the power to captivate diverse interests and artists, so we hoped, so it happened. The concept of interface can be applied to both main purposes of this competition: on one hand it is a central concept to digital and interactive art — therefore an inspiration to the development of these practices; and on the other hand, this competition intends to be an interface between Digital Art practices and the School's community.

From the beginning it was clear that this would have to be a *low-cost* competition, so operational issues such as the submission and evaluation process had to be simplified, which in fact resulted in something positive, since all the regulations were very clear and functional.

The exhibition was set to happen between the 22nd and the 25th May, during the Black & White Audiovisual Festival (10th edition — http://www.artes.ucp.pt/b&w) at the School of the Arts of the Portuguese Catholic University. This decision was strategic in terms of audience, since during those four days our students are involved in the festival, we have a lot of visitors from our external community and the school gains a certain atmosphere. Under these conditions we expected the interactive pieces to have a dignified and a dignifying presence within the festival's context.

3 | CALLING AND ANSWERING

The call for projects was set out during the winter of 2013.

3.1 WE CALLED

In the call the emphasis was put on the need to divulge interactive art in its various forms. It was made clear that the winners would exhibit their pieces during the festival and that the participants would have their work included in a digital repository. The concept of interface was taken in its broader sense (a system or device through which unrelated entities can interact) so that all the artistic interpretations on the theme could be integrated. In our first edition we had to make sure we could reach different artistic concerns and sensitivities, it was the moment to hear the artists' community and to welcome their perspectives.

We also adopted a broadband approach towards the type of works accepted. From our point of view, interactive and digital art can come in different forms, can resort to different processes and can result in different objects (material or immaterial, explicit or parameterized). Therefore we welcomed participations in diverse areas such as: Interactive Audiovisual Installation; Interactive Sound Installation, Web Art; Interactive Dance or Performance; Interactive Film or Video; Virtual and Augmented Reality.

3.2 WHO ANSWERED

The first edition of the Interactive Art Competition iNTERFACES received 59 submissions of works from 24 different countries around the world. That's only geographically speaking. More interesting, though, was the diversity of pieces we received regarding the type of work, themes chosen, and process approaches. In terms of final object or *expression's delivery system* the works were as

diverse as performances, interactive videos, interactive narratives, mobile apps, installations, videogames, software art, virtual reality, data visualizations and sonification, among others.

In terms of interactivity the participations also covered very different levels, from exploratory to manipulative to contributive. Also in terms of mode of interactivity we had systems that relied on action-reaction, others that appealed to involuntary action, and others that used external data and even generative pieces.

In terms of artistic practice we also noted diverse approaches to arts role in society, to the artists level of control in the final piece, to the themes developed and the artistic concerns presented. We received some pieces that were social or politically engaged, others that were ludic or relational, and others still that were purely experimental or explorative in terms of sensibility or medium. The themes covered were as different as vigilance, the question of the body, digital culture, the environment, art and technology, human relationships, to name but a few.
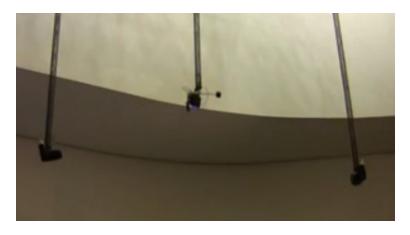
These are the reasons why I considered it a privilege to be a member of this jury. I had access to so many different, solid proposals to rethink our interface with the world, to reconsider our modes of relational existence, that I felt truly inspired.

4 | AWARDING

Eighteen members, from eight different institutions, composed the jury. Each and everyone saw and evaluated the pieces, in the end it was decided that there would be one winner and four honourable mentions.

HONOURABLE MENTION | "Juxtaposition" by Volker Kuchelmeister from Germany.

HONOURABLE MENTION | "Wilberforces" by Peter Bosch and Simone Simons from Netherlands.

HONOURABLE MENTION | "Quotidian Record" by Brian House from United States.

4.1 THE WINNER

The winning work in this first edition of iNTERFACES is "Sonophore", by Oliver Wilshen e Niall Quinn (UK). Sonophore (latin: sound-carrier) is an interactive sound installation that explores the magnetic tapes physical capacity to hold and transmit sonic information. The participants wear a tangible user interface, a glove, to interact with strips of audiocassette placed on the walls of a space, surrounding the participant and the audience. The glove contains *tape heads* embedded in the fingers which allow the participant to play back the sound content of the tape, while tactilely exploring the surfaces of the space. The participant is also able to manipulate the sound through her hand movements over the tape, since speed and direction influence the sonic result.

One important conceptual aspect of this piece is that it is site specific, not only because of the spatial disposition of the strips, but also because the soundtrack is conceived for each exhibition space. I will return to this subject while describing the iNTERFACES' exhibition.

4.2 HONORABLE MENTIONS

The jury also decided to award four honorable mentions to works that stood out for their artistic merit: "Feather Tales II" by Ricardo O'Nascimento (Brazil) and Ebru Kurbak (Turkey), is a responsive environment in which the space surfaces are covered with feathers and become hypersensitive to waves emitted by mobile devices. It is a 'goose bump' interface, in many different ways (www.onascimento. com/feathertalesii.html).

"Juxtaposition" by Volker Kuchelmeister (Germany), this stereoscopic 3D giga-pixel panorama montage explores place and representation, by interconnecting two seemingly radically different environments: Tasmanian wilderness and Hong Kong urbanism (http://kuchelmeister.net/prj_ juxtaposition.html).

"Wilberforces" by Peter Bosch and Simone Simons (Netherlands), refers to the Wilberforce pendulum, so the authors call this piece "part physics experiment and part new-media installation". It consists of three six-meter long metal springs that oscillate from the ceiling. Below one of them hangs a video camera and a microphone, below the other two hang loudspeakers, and these generate the audio and video of the project. The space becomes a playful but monitored area.

"Quotidian Record" by Brian House (United States), is a vinyl recording that features the author's location during one year. Every place the author has visited was mapped to a harmonic relationship. One day is one rotation; the whole piece is approximately eleven minutes long. The sound suggests that our routines have inherent musical qualities and might form an emergent portrait of an individual. (http://brianhouse.net/works/ quotidian_record/).

5 | EXHIBITING

The winning piece, "Sonophore", was installed, as predicted, in the context of the Black&White Festival. The most important decision was related with the definition of the installation's space. Being site-specific both visually and sonically, some conditions had to be met. One of them was the need for a silent space, but simultaneously it had to be close to "where it happens" so the audience of the festival could have easy access to it.

It was decided to install the piece in a corridor that is close to the bar and has the particularity of having

one wall made of glass. Visibility was guaranteed, along with a new visual challenge (the piece had never been exhibited on glass walls), and technically it turned out to be a good solution, since the audiocassette strips revealed good sensitivity on glass.

The authors decided that the sonic part of the work, what people hear while interacting, should be based on a text about technology. I personally think it was very appropriate to the space it occupied, regarding our research center (in science and technology of the arts).

The piece had a good reception from the audience, with much participation. This was not obvious for us, we were a bit concerned that the obligation to wear a tangible interface, to wait for your turn to act and the fact that the piece was not self-explanatory (the author's did a nice job in enthusiastically explaining the mode of interaction to the audience) would restrain people from participating. Fortunately it didn't happen, it all had a good dynamic.

6 | INTERFACES 2.0

This process of reviewing the first edition of iNTERFACES reinforced my intuition regarding its success. The competition accomplished its major purposes. It even exceeded our expectations in terms of participation, in number and quality of works submitted. This goes to show the importance these practices have within the contemporary arts, the vastness of the field, and of course, the generosity of this artist community in sharing their works with all of us. For all these reasons I'm looking forward to iNTERFACES' second edition. See you there.