Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Writtle College
Unit of Assessment: UoA 34: Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory
Title of case study: Scenes of Provincial Life – An Online Video Sequence (2009 – the present)
Summary of the impact 'Scenes of Provincial Life' exemplifies the practice based research of M. Szpakowski. It was ground breaking in its presentation of "art" video on the world wide web, and involved both conceptual and technical experimentation/research/ development which fed into other activities and outcomes offline, which then fed back into the work itself. The sequence generated offline presentations including 78 screenings of works from the sequence in the period Sept 2009 – Dec 13 at film festivals and galleries on 5 continents, fed into a substantial body of applied work with school students (2 DVDs and a CD ROM, screenings at the BFI and the Shortwave Cinema) and informed Szpakowski's approach as editor in chief, co-curator and writer on the pioneering online curated video resource DVblog (2005 – the present). This research has also fed into writing on short form and online video for the journal MIRAJ and for Furtherfield, the leading UK digital arts platform. It is important to note that, although this document covers the period 2009 -13 the project began in 2002/3, assuming its current format in 2006.

2. Underpinning research

Questions:
- A live question in 2002/3: can video be in any sense idiomatic to the web? This had been disputed on grounds of bandwidth and because of a general prejudice amongst artists engaged with the web (prior to YouTube, Vimeo and Web 2.0) in favour of computationally driven, interactive or generative work.
- How does one needs to alter one's approach to video making to take account of the nature of the web as a mode of archive and delivery? – subsidiary considerations include the qualitative difference of watching work in a small window in front of a personal computer as opposed to on a large screen with others; the nature of dialogue about such work especially online; the particular appositeness of a kind of diaristic approach exemplified (and vindicated) by the explosive rise of the blog format.
- Is the era of the early web in any way comparable to the early days of film, TV or indeed video art?
- What does it mean as an artist to be able to show one's work without curatorial gatekeeping? Does presenting work side by side with amateurs, hobbyists or "outsider" artists affect the value of the work or the way it is produced, read and consumed?
- Questions of copyright/intellectual property arising from the ease of download of work on web pages.
- Questions of remix and collaboration arising from same.
- Do the above considerations mean that we can talk of a specific aesthetic arising out of

video on the web and has this had impacts beyond the internet? Furthermore, with the increasing speed of connections and the convergence of devices such as computers, phones and computers is this now an era that is finished?

In addition there are some non-web-specific questions arising out of the ease of use of digital technology. A further area to explore has been the relation of image and sound. Experiments with the same images and different sounds and vice versa and made a whole sub-sequence of works which eschew sound altogether.

'Scenes of Provincial Life' interrogates these questions through practice. The work within it hence embodies many of the following issues: technical, conceptual and aesthetic.

Technical issues: different methodologies for creating image material – straightforward videography, videography on portable or pocket devices, the expressive and communicative use/problems of image and sound compression, animation of various kinds, found/appropriated content and remix, scripting interactivity or generativity within video software such as QuickTime, live streaming from external sources such as traffic cams.

Conceptual/Aesthetic: "ownership" of image content, collaboration (including collaboration with non-artists and children), treatment of text, the loop and palindrome loop as web idiomatic modes of presentation, glitch/compression issues as expressive devices, the specific character of the computer resident image.

The key research insights that underpinned the impact are hard to encapsulate in text insights that are essentially practical in nature. It might be better to say that the questions listed above presented themselves as new problems to be solved in the making of effective web resident work. The fact of having successfully found solutions then informs a number of other things, a process succinctly encapsulated in the notion of praxis. It was insights and techniques gleaned from the Scenes of Provincial Life sequence that enabled Szpakowski to work in successful partnership with young people in a way that used the digital to provide an extraordinarily level playing field for collaboration. Digitisation of data, drawings, text, sounds enables young peoples' work to be "set" within artist generated framings and backgrounds which as in the setting of a jewel or the framing of a picture shows the work off to its best advantage and maximum clarity. Digitisation also enables the placing side by side of work by both young people and the artist in a uniform and approachable setting.

The final form of each of the 450 or so pieces in the sequence was determined by Szpakowski and they are available at http://somedancersandmusicians.com/vlog/ScenesOfProvincialLife.cgi. In most cases he originates both sound and image; occasionally material is either collaborative or appropriated. The nature of the research as a series of practical responses to questions arising from a new constellation of technical, social and artistic factors is described above.

3. References to the research

#1 Author/creator: Michael Szpakowski
Title: Scenes of Provincial Life, available at:
http://somedancersandmusicians.com/vlog/ScenesOfProvincialLife.cgi

#2 Author/creator: Michael Szpakowski
Title: 12 remixes, available at: http://www.michaelszpakowski.org/mickiewicz/

4. Details of the impact

Underpinning of impact:
The set of discoveries, technical and aesthetic, arising out of being a pioneer in the project of using the naturally diaristic possibilities of the Internet to create and distribute a coherent yet diverse sequence of moving image works.
An increasing facility with digital techniques and equipment used for this and the experience of the use of a wide range of soft and hardware including pocket devices.

Extent of the impact:
- Parts of the sequence have been shown offline in a wide variety of contexts, both galleries and screenings, at venues including the Hong Kong Contemporary Art Fair, as part of the UK Cultural Olympiad and at film festivals including the Festival Internacional de Videoarte in Argentina, the Madatac festival in Madrid, the Cologne Conference and several Berlin *Director's Lounge* events in Germany (see REF2).
- Work on the sequence has "seeded" other projects, both personal/artistic and "applied". In particular the "applied" projects include a number of Arts Council/Creative Partnerships/A New Direction funded projects in London schools. The outcomes include – the use of short videos as part of a series of maths centred computer games made together with young people, a documentary, made in collaboration with a single class of primary school children, and following their science education over the course of a year and an adaptation of an Icelandic Saga to make a film using the very grown up methods of Straub/Huillet to work with two classes of 8/9 year olds. Approximately 250 children, 25 members of staff and 500 parents were directly involved in either the activities or viewing their outcomes, a figure multiplied by the distribution of the pieces on DVD and CD ROM. Copies of the DVDs of these outcomes are available on request.
- Particular *educational* (outside of HE) outcomes of the application of these techniques and experience have been that the technology has proved to make inclusiveness easier. The work has also impacted upon fully comprehensive groups i.e. children with leaning and/or behaviour difficulties, children with little or no command of English have always been fully engaged. The bulk of this work has been in London schools but Szpakowski has also conducted moving image based work at the 20-21 visual arts centre in Scunthorpe working with various groups from families to young offenders. Feedback collected from young participants from Primary Schools has been very positive and they have stated that their participation in the work has aided them to improve their learning.
- The work has fed into "applied" video work for Tell Tale Hearts Childrens' Theatre Company both in the use of video *within* performance and in creating video pieces that both document and extend footage *of* performances, to be used by the company for archiving and publicity purposes. The touring piece 'Beneath the Waves' used video projection within the performance in quite complex ways including interaction of the performers with pre-recorded video. Being able to conceive and troubleshoot this sort of work was made a great deal easier by the wide palette and experience arising from the Scenes of Provincial Life. Particularly , the piece 'Beneath the Waves' toured to an audience of approximately 2,200 on the pilot (Yorkshire) tour and 7,200 on the subsequent national tour
- In terms of personal/artistic work the "Scenes of Provincial Life" have in turn fed into the

video component of another of Szpakowsi's project *"12 remixes"* (see REF2) and has inspired Szpakowski's journalistic work as co-curator and editor of the online resource DVblog: http://dvblog.org/?author=2 (60 more pages follow by using "prev" link). Since late 2006 to the date of writing (7th November 2013) there have been over 32,000,000 successful page requests on DVblog and a summary of the long-term report for the site from December 2006 is as follows (figures in parentheses refer to the 7-day period ending Nov 06 2013 at 2:46 AM):

- Successful requests: 32,073,396 (44,801)
- Average successful requests per day: 12,663 (6,400)
- Successful requests for pages: 23,763,929 (35,938)
- Average successful requests for pages per day: 9,382 (5,133)
- Failed requests: 5,892,040 (374)
- Redirected requests: 269,479 (201)
- Requests with informational status code: 1 (0)
- Data transferred: 7.88 terabytes (15.81 gigabytes)
- Average data transferred per day: 3.19 gigabytes (2.26 gigabytes)

It's important to emphasise that the success of DVblog has depended *directly* upon informed commentary on new work by those (Szpakowski and co-curator, Israeli artist Doron Golan) themselves involved at the cutting edge of making related work. In Szpakowski case the discoveries from "Scenes of Provincial Life" have created a conceptual and terminological framework for a new area of critical activity.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

#1 Literacy co-ordinator, Southwark Park Primary School.

#2 Administrator & Exhibitions Co-ordinator, Furtherfield Gallery

#3 Area Head & Associate Professor, Peck School of the Arts, University of Wisconsin.

#4 Director of Media Arts, Givon Art Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel.

#5 Research Fellow, British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection Central Saint Martin's College of Arts and Design

#6 Reader in Fine Art. Slade School of Fine Art, University College London

#7 20-21 Visual Arts Centre, Scunthorpe, UK

#8.C.E.O., A New Direction, UK

#9 Award Leader, MA Curatorial Practice, Falmouth University

#10 Director, Tell Tale Hearts Children's Theatre Company.