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ON-LINE AND ON-SITE ON EQUAL TERMS

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Conference report

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Information technology has proven itself to be of value. But what is the relationship between art, culture and technology? How do networks, connectivity and new instruments influence artistic work and artistic processes? How is IT research influenced by collaborative interdisciplinary work with computer scientists, artists and cultural theorists? Artists, researchers and curators gathered at the Memoria Futura symposium in Sankt Augustin, Germany last December to look at these questions. They were joined by a group of invited experts who participated in the discussion via the Internet, as part of an experiment on integrating different media at cultural events for a broad public.

This experiment was made possible by a system of interactive Internet television (i2TV). Live audio and video from the symposium were streamed to Internet participants (who were were able to take part in the symposium by means of text), while at the same time the Internet view was projected into the actual space of the symposium. As a result on-line and on-site participants were visible to each other all the time.

The i2TV prototype got positive feedback from both the audience, the symposium speakers and the on-line participants, and aroused great interest among people from diverse backgrounds — science, technology, arts and culture. This confirms that the approach is suitable and relevant for research into new forms of communication for a broad audience. After the event there were several inquiries about and proposals for collaboration on further work of this kind. So the kind of media integration we tried out at Memoria Futura points to new forms of public events.

The experience itself and the comments we got brought up the following issues and directions for further work. The most difficult part is the creation of a meaningful relationship between on-line participation and the on-site situation. The continuous visibility of the on-line discussion on a screen next to the speakers worked well as a visual marker of the presence of on-line participants. The on-line moderator selected the most important questions from the on-line participants and displayed them on the fly in large letters. The questions also appeared in the browser window of the on-line participants, and this was accepted as welcome feedback. But visual feedback for on-line

participants is something that needs more attention. The development of a suitable spatial design for integrating on-line and on-site visual feedback is a central issue in this respect.

We found that splitting the on-line debate into a public part visible on the screen at the actual event, and a "chat-only" part visible only on-line, helped to separate out those elements that contributed to the social dynamics of the on-line situation (like saying hello, making jokes and personal remarks, and so on) but were redundant to people not participating on-line.

We also found that it is important for the symposium moderator to get an easy grasp of the on-line discussion and the selections and suggestions made by the on-line moderator, much work remains to be done on simplifying the editorial input device for that purpose.

The challenge is to create a set-up in which on-line and on-site participants are more equal partners in the debate, while retaining the specificity of both situations (online, on-site); and to involve the on-site audience more actively in debate. Further exploration of the formats of mixed-reality performance and mixed-reality stage could help to address these issues.

The i2TV system is a prototype of a virtual platform which supports user visibility, collaborative web browsing, textual communication channels and the integration of Internet participants into events taking place at real physical locations. It builds on top of publicly available MOO-WWW technology of enCore Xpress. See /lingua.utdallas.edu

The i2TV interactive internet broadcast event was part of the i3net eRENA project (www.nada.kth.se/erena/) The system will be developed further as a part of the "virtual community platform" for a Communication, Art & Technology Network – CAT. See imk.gmd.de/mars/cat

Memoria Futura web page: imk.gmd.de/mars/cat/memoria