ALEX DAVIES

THE BLACKFUX SESSIONS
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curriculum connections

This education resource has been designed by UTS Gallery for Alex Davies’ solo exhibition *The Black Box Sessions*, exhibited at UTS Gallery 31 May - 15 July 2011.

It has been designed for secondary visual arts students, particularly years 9 & 10 but can be adapted for other high school years and audiences. It is intended to give an insight into the development of computer based interactive art, the intentions and influences behind the artist in making the work, provide historical precursors to key themes and supply various easy to use live links for further internet research.

This resource is best used in conjunction with the workshops at UTS Gallery involving the artist and UTS. Many of the questions relate directly to Alex Davies’ work, which must be experienced to fully understand and respond to. However, elements of the guide including key themes, timeline and influences can also be used to assist with pre visit preparation or as a guide for further study. All terms in bold can be found in the glossary p.21.

The list of curriculum connections below have been taken from the NSW Board of Studies Visual Arts Years 9-10 Syllabus and are intended as guides and suggestions to be linked to classroom units of study.

**visual art**

- Artmaking - the Conceptual Framework and Frames
- Critical and Historical Studies - Conceptual Framework & Frames (postmodern).
- Contemporary Australian artist
- Use of 3D and 4D contemporary technologies
- How artists invent, adapt and develop strategies and procedures to investigate the world to make artworks
- How artists develop their intentions
- Time based and digital technologies
- Challenge more conventional and established modes of artistic practice
The Black Box Sessions is an augmented reality installation that was developed in Linz, Austria in conjunction with artist group ‘Time’s Up’ between August and September 2008.

The audience members wait in the waiting room. Near the entrance door to the performance area a light changes from green to red signalling to enter or wait. Noises can be heard from a separate room. The entertainers, who can be seen on a screen on the abandoned attendant’s desk, are in the green room preparing, chatting, testing their instruments.

When the green light flashes, the next individual audience member can enter the pitch black surrounds. To view the performance s/he finds a single illuminated peephole located in the wall of the space through which the viewer’s own back can be voyeuristically watched via CCTV. Finally we see the performer enter the space on the screen but looking around the pitch black environment we see nothing.

The performance begins.

Or so the advertising leads us to believe and there in lies the trick to the illusion of Alex Davies’ work in The Black Box Sessions. Alex Davies has used chroma key or green screen to pre-film his performers. In the performance space only the viewer exists, but on the screen, visible to us through a peephole, the performer and the viewer share a common space.

“The Black Box Sessions dispenses with the prop of the fourth wall, and literally places the performer and the viewer together into a single intimate and enclosed space….The viewer and the performer are trapped in a proximity that plays upon the voyeurism and vulnerability of the audience member who only wants to watch, but finds themselves suddenly outnumbered.” – exhibition guide, Adam Jasper 2011
Alex Davies is a Sydney born artist, who lives and works in both Sydney and Linz, Austria. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts with Honours from the College of Fine Arts (COFA), University of NSW in 2001 and is a PhD candidate in Media Arts, COFA.

Alex Davies’ practice uses a diverse range of media including film, photography, computer technologies, web based technology and interactive installations. His work questions and experiments with the possible relationship and interaction between an audience member and a virtual character in a mixed reality environment. Can an audience member actually follow directions from an avatar or engage in a manner similar to that of real human to human interaction? How does augmented audio affect our experience?

When Alex started at COFA he was interested in film and cinematography and he was influenced by the work of filmmaker Lars Von Triers and horror films. He enrolled in film studies, and through this course became interested in CD Roms and later interactive art, eventually switching his degree to fine arts focusing on interactive art as he liked “taking film outside the screen”.

Although he has “ironically returned to filmic devices” in his work, he continues to explore and experiment with interaction, technology, perception, mixed reality experience and illusion.

He has exhibited widely in Australia and internationally including drift, ISEA, Helsinki, Tallinn, & Stockholm, 2004; Swarm, 2004 Australian Culture Now, ACMI, Melbourne, 2004; Filter Feeder, Primavera, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2003; and Radiotopia, Network Event, Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, Austria, 2002. The Black Box Sessions has previously been exhibited in 2008 at HAIP Festival, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

*artist quotes
key themes

interactive art

Interactive art is an art form that is dependant on an audience member’s presence and participation to be realised. Often interactive art is electronic or computer based but this is not essential. Some people argue that all art is interactive, because without an audience member looking and perceiving the work of art, it is just another thing.

Contemporary interactive art often involves computers that are programmed to respond to visitor’s movements or other input. As the pioneering video artist Myron Kreuger, who coined the term ‘virtual reality’, says, the interactive artist thinks about how the audience will react and programs different responses for each alternative.

“Unlike a magic performance the installation inherently had less control over the actions of the audience. Similarly the ability of the computer to respond to audience interaction was vastly deficient compared to a conjurer’s capabilities on stage.” –Alex Davies comparing his work to a magician’s.

art historical context - interactive art:

Marcel Duchamp’s work The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even, 1923, is a large piece of painted glass that sits away from the wall in the middle of a room, like a sculpture. When an audience member looks at it, they see the image Duchamp painted, the figures and objects that are on the other side of the piece of glass and a reflection of themselves looking at the work. In this work Duchamp is trying to point out to us that art does not exist by itself, but as a part of a bigger system of signs and meanings that we are also a part of.

“a work is a machine for producing meanings….the picture depends on the spectator because only he can set in motion the apparatus of signs that comprises the whole work.”

-Octavia Pav, referring to Duchamp’s The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even,
key themes

the unfinished art work and chance:

The interactive artist has no definite finished work, but rather depends on the audience member’s participation to ‘finish’ the work. Often the end product can be assumed but sometimes the artist leaves the end result entirely up to chance.

Alex Davies’ installation The Black Box Sessions is interactive and therefore there is an element of chance built into the work, through the number of performers, the audience’s reactions, the length of time they stay in the work, how well they follow the ‘rules’ or not. All these factors will create different experiences for each viewer causing the end result of the work to constantly be in flux.

John Cage’s sound works reflect this open-ended approach to art making in his ‘Chance Compositions’. His most famous work 4’33”, 1952 consisted of musicians not playing their instruments for 4 mins and 33 secs causing the audience to instead listen to the sounds around them. The sound of the composition is up to chance; the other audience members, the location, the sound of musicians rustling pages at the end of each of the three movements or audience members leaving in outrage as they did in 1952!

Interview with John Cage talking about what sound and silence mean to him as part of documentary, Listen by Miroslav Sebestik:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcHnL7aS64Y&feature=related

Video of 1952 performance of 4’33”:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gN2zcLBr_VM&feature=related
**key themes**

**mixed reality environments**

A mixed reality environment is an environment that combines real and virtual elements. It is different to a virtual environment where the environment is constructed by technology, and space and time can be manipulated at will. It is also different to a real environment, constrained by the laws of physics.

In *The Black Box Sessions* the audience member is real but the performers only exist on screen as *simulacra*. We see them through the peephole on the screen and they seem real to us, as though they are performing solely for us. However in reality they are actually *avatars*. The question Alex Davies is asking is, does that make a difference? Do we feel comfortable with them? Can we react to them as though they were a real presence in the room, speaking to us, directing us?

> “Could the audience, believing the *avatars* are real and physically present in shared space, actually follow directions or engage in a manner similar to that of real human to human interaction?” - Alex Davies

**art historical context - mixed reality and tromp l’oeil**

Tromp l’oeil (French for deceive the eye) is a painting technique that creates the illusion of space, architecture, figures and objects in a hyperrealistic 3 dimensional form. It was originally used in Renaissance France and Italy and at this time it was so effective at spatial deception that many people walked into walls thinking they were rooms.

Andrea Pozzo, The Church of St Ignazio, Rome 1685–1694

> “Images of the natural world are merged with artificial images in “mixed realities,” where it is often impossible to distinguish between original and *simulacrum.”  - Oliver Grau, Virtual Art, From Immersion to Illusion
**computer technology**

**1834**- Charles Babbage invents the “Analytical Engine”, a hand cranked, mechanical general purpose ‘computer’.

_The ENIAC used 17,468 vacuum cleaner tubes. It is rumoured that when it was turned on it used so much power it caused the city of Philadelphia to experience black outs!_

**1946**- In post WW2 America weaponry systems are adapted for other uses. The electrical Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC) or “the Great Brain” was invented calculating at speeds 1000 times faster than _electromagnetic_ machines!

**1958**- NASA space program starts

**1960s**- There is a huge interest and progress in computer art. Scientists are often the producers of what we now call computer art as artists don’t have access to computers at this time.

**1968**- Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) London hosts the most influential exhibition of computer art to date involving artists often considered to be the first true _digital artists_ including Nam June Paik.

**art history**

**1952**- Artist Ben Laposky is the first artist to use technology in his art practice using _analogue_ wave forms to create digital images called ‘Oscillons’.

**1965**- The first two exhibitions of computer based images Computer Generated Images are held at Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart, Germany (February) and the Howard Wise Gallery New York (April)

_The first two exhibitions of computer generated images in 1965 did not contain the word ‘art’ in the title because the pictures were not yet considered to be art._

**1966**- Scientist and computer graphic pioneers Leon Harmon and Ken Knowlton create _Studies in Perception 1_. Using only mathematical and electronic symbols they reduced an image to its minimum amount of information while ensuring it is recognisable to the human eye.

**1968**- Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) London hosts the most influential exhibition of computer art to date involving artists often considered to be the first true _digital artists_ including Nam June Paik.
**timeline**

**computer technology**

*Spacewar! Was the size of three refrigerators with a typewriter attached*

**1968** - The invention of the mouse by Douglas Engelbart.

**1969** - The United States Department of Defence develops APRANET a localised version of the internet.

**1970** - General Electric produces ‘Genigrphics’ the first high-resolution colour graphics system. Originally intended for businesses, also used by artists to create high quality computer graphics.

**1977** - The first personal computer is created. The Commodore PET which sold for $666.66

**1980** - IBM releases its first personal computer (PC) offering artists a limited palette of colours and resolution with software such as Paintbrush now available.

**1982** - Adobe systems is founded

**1983** - The compact disc is introduced.

**1984** - Macintosh computer with desktop printing is introduced.

**1986** - Pixar is founded to develop 3D graphics.

**1970s** - Artists are still limited in their access to computer technology, the majority of work takes place in research centres.

**1974** - Myron Krueger develops Videoplace a ground breaking interactive artwork. Krueger coins the term ‘virtual reality’.

**1977** - Alex Davies born, Sydney, Australia

**1979** - Arts Electronica is established in Linz, Austria, an annual festival supporting and showcasing electronic arts.

**1984** - Macintosh computer with desktop printing is introduced.

**2001** - Alex Davies completes an Honours degree in Visual Arts, COFA, NSW

**2008** - *The Black Box Sessions* is first exhibited in Linz, Austria in association with Time’s Up

**Late 1980s** - First Masters of Computer Art is established at the School of Visual Arts in New York.
influences

The following images are stills from contemporary artists’ works that have influenced or impressed Alex Davies throughout his career. They are in no particular order of preference but instead are a series of aesthetic influences for you to enjoy and explore. Links to further information about each image are available on p. 19.

Christoph Büchel *Training Ground* 2007 (unfinished)

Granular Synthesis *Noisegate* 1998
Jean Michel Bruyère  *Si Poteris Narrare, Licet* 2002

Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller  *The Paradise Institute* 2001
Arthur Ganson Machine with Concrete 1992

Julian Oliver & Danja Vasiliev Newstweek 2011
Julius von Bismarck Image Fulgurator 2007/08

Jonas Dahlberg Safe Zones Series (Safe Zones No. 11) 2006
David Rokeby Very Nervous System 1986-1990

Julien Maire Diapositives 1995-1998
Experimental Interaction Unit LegalTender 1995

Time’s Up Body Spin 2000
The following list coincides with the order of the previous images. All images have been taken from the web and the websites links will give you more information about the work and the artist/s.

- **Christoph Büchel** *Training Ground* 2007 (unfinished)
  
  http://www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2007/10/21/dismantled/

- **Granular Synthesis** *Noisegate* 1998
  
  http://www.granularsynthesis.info/ns/?goto=noisegate

- **Jean Michel Bruyère** *Si Poteris Narrare, Licet* 2002
  
  http://www.epidemic.net/en/art/bruyere/proj/si_poteris_narrare_licet.html

- **Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller** *The Paradise Institute* 2001
  
  http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/inst/paradise_institute.html

- **Arthur Ganson** *Machine with Concrete* 1992
  
  http://www.arthurganson.com/pages/Sculptures.html

- **Julian Oliver & Danja Vasiliev** *Newstweek* 2011
  
  http://newstweek.com/overview

- **Julius von Bismarck** *Image Fulgurator* 2007/08
  
  http://www.juliusvonbismarck.com/fulgurator/idee.html

- **Jonas Dahlberg** *Safe Zones Series (Safe Zones No. 11)* 2006
  
  http://www.jonasdahlberg.com/02_works/14_SafeZones_no11/01_Safe_zones_no_11.htm

- **Chris Burden** *Samson* 1985
  

- **Tom Sachs** *Nutsy’s* 2003
  
  http://www.tomsachs.org/exhibition/nutsys

- **David Rokeby** *Very Nervous System* 1986-1990
  
  http://homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/vns.html

  
  http://julienmaire.ideenshop.net/project4.shtml

- **Experimental Interaction Unit** *Legal Tender* 1995
  
  http://www.eiu.org/experiments/legal_tender/

- **Time’s Up** *Body Spin* 2000
  
  http://www.timesup.org/content/body-spin
questions

With reference to Alex Davies’ The Black Box Sessions, Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev’s Newstweek p.13 and Chris Burden’s Samson p.15 discuss interaction and chance in these artists’ practice. (Use the hyperlinks on p. 18 to research the artists further.)

Consider your interaction with the performer/s in the installation. Describe your experience.

Consider the use of technology in the work. Discuss what challenges and constraints may arise in reproducing this work in the future.
questions

Consider Davies work through the postmodern frame. What is the role of the audience in the realisation of the work?

Consider the use of collaboration in *The Black Box Sessions*. How does Davies challenge more conventional and established conceptions of the artist as creator of unique and singular objects?
analogue technology information whose signal or frequency can be amplified or varied in order to add information to the signal. Broadcast and telephone transmission have conventionally used analog technology

apparatus of signs apparatus refers to the equipment needed for a particular activity or purpose, signs refer to the visual, symbolic language of art, also referred to as signifiers. Apparatus of signs is therefore a vocabulary of signifiers

augmented audio computer generated audio that is in addition to real world sounds

augmented reality installation a constructed artistic space that is real but has extra components created by computer generated graphics or audio

avatar originaly a religious term that referred to the earthly incarnation of a deity, in contemporary computer terminology an avatar is a graphic represenation of a person

chroma key technique for compositing two images together by removing a colour from one image and replacing it with a different image

CCTV closed circuit television, the use of video cameras to transmit a signal to a specific place, on a limited set of monitors, often used for surveillance

cinematography the technique of motion picture photography

digital technology information that is reduced to 1s and 0s. When information is in digital form it can be electronically manipulated, preserved and regenerated perfectly at high speed

digital artists artists that work with digital equipment such as computers

electromagnetic machines machines that use electric currents and circuit systems to function

electronic or computer based art art that makes use of computers and technology

flux constant or frequent change

fourth wall the space or a conceptual wall that separates a performer or performance from an audience

green screen the colour most commonly used for chroma key as it is the colour least close to skin colour

hyperreal evxaggerated reality

interactive art a form of art that requires the audience member to actively partake in producing meaning in the work

interactive installations constructed envaironments that necessitate the particpation of the audience in the production of the work

mixed reality environment environments that combine real life elemenets with computer generated additions

simulacrum (s) simulacra (p) slight, unreal, or vague semblance of something; superficial likeness

virtual not real, digitally produced

virtual reality an environment that replaces the real world with a computer generated simulated one

voyeurism the act of watching and observing that fulfils a fetish or desire
further research

Fantastic article by revolutionary electronic and interactive artist David Rokeby:
http://homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/mirrorsart.html

A timeline of the most important multimedia works from pre historic cave paintings to virtual reality with images and descriptions of each artist/artwork. Remember to close the advertisement at the top of the page for a clearer view
http://web.archive.org/web/20070927061519/www.artmuseum.net/w2vr/timeline/timeline.html

Good overall book with big glossy pictures.
Art of the Digital Age by Bruce Wands, Thames and Hudson 2007

All the links on the image information page will take you to artists’ websites and other sites. Read about the work and explore the bodies of works of these exciting contemporary artists.

Enjoy!
This resource has been written by Alice McAuliffe, Education and Outreach Coordinator, UTS Gallery.

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