Audience as Content
by Duncan Speakman

Interactive media is continually faced with accusations of relating to the lack of authorship. What makes a digital interactive work where users control the content any different from Photoshop? In this situation, intention must count for something. Photoshop is designed to let the user input, manipulate and output material of their choosing (the software's influence on how we manipulate that media is another debate). In the work presented during Formality the emphasis has been placed on making the actual process of interaction, and thus the users themselves, the content of the work. The reaction and judgements made on the software's manipulation of input complete the work. If interactive work like this is to be critiqued then we must find ways to adequately describe and locate the work performed by the artist.

Of the three installations, Document proved to be the hardest in terms of locating exactly where the work exists. Rather than actually creating anything, a system was put into place. This system made spectators either aware or oblivious participants in the creation of the content, fluctuating between roles of producer and consumer.

It is suggested that in contemporary communication text preceeds enunciation due to the saturation of culture by the written word. The system in Document reverses this mode and reinstates the spoken word as the generator of ideas to be transcribed. As the words moved from lips to hidden microphones, through computers and finally to the printer, a channel of communication was established.

The end of the channel occurs once participants read the printed output, it is only then that the work comes fully into existence. It is arguable that this process occurs with any artform. We can say a sculpture is only complete when we see it and have a personal response.

A key difference is the fact that not all participants are aware of their contribution. If people were aware that computers were transcribing their voices before they read the print out, their value judgment of the text would be pre-empted.

Marks left by the artist in this kind of work are somewhat ethereal, and rest in the structure of the communiction chain. The fact that the work requires physical activity by unaware performers (speaking) choreographed with judgements made by spectators (reading) pushes it into the realms of theatre. This choreography puts the artist in the role of a director, shaping and guiding the actions of the participants, forcing them to see through the process to the intentions behind it.

If the audience is not aware of their role otherwise the impact of the piece is at risk of disappearing beneath the novelty factor of the technology.