

Un Message, Evidemnt: Open Source Film

Robert Lawrence
University of South Florida
8610 Oleander Drive
Tampa, FL 33637
813 843 4921

lawrence@arts.usf.edu

ABSTRACT

Un Message Evidemnt is an ongoing performance and “open source” collaborative Internet-enabled film. UME completely rethinks the strategies and structures for filmmaking in light of internet technology, recasting film as a unique social practice.

Keywords

Open Source, collaboration, experimental film, digital film.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Un Message, Evidemnt” is an ongoing performance and “open source” film conceived by Robert Lawrence. The performance actions are built around the activity of making an interactive collaborative film.

The film is a story about communication.

The performance is a communication about story.

The film is partially shot.

The film has not been written.

The film will be written through mobile phone lines, voice messages, sms’s, email, conversations, random overheard snatches of dialogue and any other sounds produced by the participants and visitors at various festivals, seminars, workshops and by visitors to the web site: www.unmessage.com

UME is not “a film” but an infinite number of possible hybrid minimalist/structuralist/whammy films spawned through an open-source process at www.unmessage.com and at festivals, screenings, and workshops. All footage shot has been made available for download on the website and anyone can access the material and make their own films.

UME is not a film but rather a ‘Social Sculpture’ that uses film language and digital technology. I don’t make it. I don’t own it. I am just the instigator of an internet-facilitated media ecology that I hope will carry on just fine without me.

UME is not a film but an invitation.

2. BACKGROUND

Several years ago fellow filmmaker John Campbell and I met in Paris and decided that we would shoot and edit a film in the one week we were in Paris. We agreed to use a structure that I had just developed in which all the film’s shots would be extreme close-ups of people listening on cell phones. In the background of



Figure 1. Still images from Un Message Evidemnt.

every shot would be a dramatic action of the kind that might appear in a typical Hollywood action film. In post we would add the phone messages that were being listened to. In this way a narrative – or narratives - would be constructed from the intertextuality of the phone messages and the actions happening in each of the shots.

Using this strategy we shot in several locations in Paris. As we did not have time to edit before our week in Paris was over, we decided to extend the project and continued shooting in other cities in the Czech Republic, Austria, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the United States. At some point we decided that it would be interesting to put the material on the web and invite others to suggest stories and specific messages to be heard from the phones. When I realized that this was essentially asking other people to write our film, I revised this concept to invite anyone to download the images we had shot and use these to make their own films, thus creating what is essentially the first “open source” film... or films.

3. CURRENT STATUS

John Campbell has gone on to concentrate on other projects and is no longer involved with UME, but I have continued to direct the project, letting it evolve slowly as opportunities have arisen. A trailer for the project (www.unmessage.com/umeshort1.htm) has been screened at festivals including: Stratford Upon Avon Film Festival; Great Lakes Film Festival; and Beyond Panopticon New Media Festival in Bandung, Indonesia. The work-in-progress has been presented in other venues including University of California Santa Cruz Digital Arts and New Media Colloquium, CA; Carleton College Cinema Studies Department, Northfield, MN; VideoIn Studios, Vancouver, Canada; U.P.S.I, Malaysia; and the International Digital Media and Arts Annual Conference, San Diego, CA.

As the concept of the project has evolved the web site has grown to accommodate the work. Currently there is footage from 6 different countries available for download at several levels of resolution through a cross platform interface. These will be added to over time. As works using this footage are completed these will be added to the site with full credits to the creators, and/or links to their websites will be added.

As the process is completely open, I invite suggestions for changes or additions to the interface and approach. It is my hope that “Un Message, Evidemment” is only the first of a number of ‘open source film’ projects that use internet technology and the growing spirit of arts web community to evolve the ecology and meaning of filmmaking.

4. CRITICAL CONTEXT

As an introduction to a mode of filmmaking that is only now possible due to digital technology and the human networking dimensions of the Internet, UME is a unique project within contemporary artistic and filmmaking practice. Considered within contemporary arts practice its artistic value is best seen in the context created by the recent rise in a process-centered art making strategies that focus not on the object created but on the dynamics of its production and reception, and the blurring of these boundaries.

The critical parameters of this mode of working include, as fundamental to the aesthetic meaning of the work, the social interactions that the work facilitates. This mode of work is clearly addressed in Nicolas Bourriaud’s seminal *Relational Aesthetics*. When I claim that UME is not about the film(s) made but the process by which the whole project precedes, it is consistent with Bourriaud’s statement, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist.” [1]. More than a film or series of films, UME is a gesture of transformation with the goal of provoking transformation.

Acting as a powerful catalyst for the development of relational aesthetics in our time is the interactive technology of the web. It is actually quite reasonable to think of the emergence of web-based or web-enabled relational aesthetics artworks as merely a subset of the broader cultural explosion of ‘user provided content’ on the internet. Google’s purchase of YouTube for 1.6 billion dollars may or may not validate the Beuysian notion that ‘everyone is an artist’ [2], but it certainly stands as a testimony to the way technology can facilitate significant changes in cultural patterns about how moving images are produced, viewed and shared.

UME is not likely to be purchased by Google anytime soon, it is adamantly not for sale. It is however available for free to anyone who is interested. The product, the process and the structure are all gestures toward a model for moving image art that is assigned value in an interactive exchange between the viewers and producers – who in this case are very likely the same individuals or groups.

If art was going to be of any use, it was going to be of use not with reference to itself, but with reference to the people who used it.

-John Cage [3]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Mark Adler, Rachel Bishop, John Campbell, Shawn Cheatham, Adriana Iamitchi, Michael Koberstien, Chip Lord, Krisna Murti, John Schott, Isolde Setka, and to the many people who have contributed to this project through workshops, festivals, conversation and online.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bourriaud, Nicholas *Relational Aesthetics*, English edition translated by Simon Pleasane & Fronza Woods, France: Les Presses du Reel, 2002.
- [2] Beuys, Joseph “Introduction” (1979), in *Joseph Beuys in America: Energy Plan for the Western Man*, edited by Carin Kuoni, Four Walls Eight Windows, New York, 1990.
- [3] Cage, John, from *Conversing with Cage*, Richard Kostelannetz, Routledge, 2003.