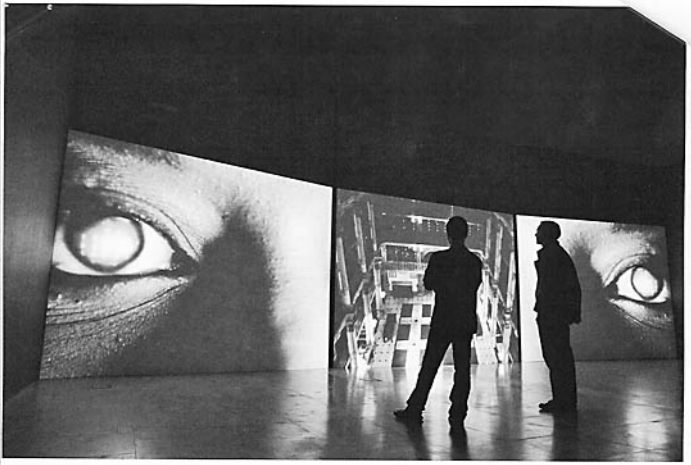
FACT Finding

Beryl Graham finds Liverpool's new purpose-built technology centre to be both art- and user-friendly

The outside says 'techno' but the inside has the more graceful curves of an art gallery, which is probably just about right for Britain's first purpose-built centre for film, art and creative technology. The new venue for the Foundation for Art & Creative Technology (FACT) nestles in the narrow streets of Liverpool's nightclub quarter and, despite the shiny exterior, it has a surprisingly domestic feel as opposed to the chilly 'out of town art hypermarket' alternative. It has plenty of social areas, and is loving attention to detail which relates strongly to the incursion of a lead artist (Clive Gillman) in the planning team.



Isaac Julien
Baltimore 2003
video installation

The result is a flexible building with a set of different spaces to cover the range of embodiments that new media are heir to, from art object to performance. There are two galleries, plus a Media Lounge, and The Box – a space with comfy sofas, suitable for medium-sized projections, audio or social events. This has resulted in some good curatorial ensemble playing rather than a monolithic approach, which is best articulated by the opening programme itself.

Walking into 'Vinyl Video' in Gallery Two, the installation is carefully intended to look like a 'fashion shop', and accurately echoes the relentlessly designerish furniture shops on the street outside. The attendant, however, is friendly and knowledgeable, and encourages you to pick your own vinyl disc to play. The record goes around and around, and pictures as well as sound come out of an old domestic TV. Black and white, grooved, fuzzy and richly textured, but movies nontheless. The interface is simple – you wander around and pick some of the 15 vinyl LPs commissioned from different artists and play them on the deck. There are knobs and dials to twiddle and you can mess with it to convince yourself that this is not some postmodern electronic fakery. Altogether, it is rather delightfully tactile, even if you have no idea how it works.

Curator Cecelia Andersson wanted to acknowledge a history of media invention, and several of the artists exploit the retro aesthetic. Andrea Gergely & Oliver Hangl look like a 60s couple in a dream-like road movie, and Olia Lialana (better known for her internet art) does faintly disturbing things with sound and text that are reminiscent of 80s Space Invaders. Cecile Babiole's dancing child-sized skeleton animations could come from contemporary techno club culture, but become slightly German Expressionist on the darkly flickering screen.

Of the two new commissioned picture discs, Julia Scher's is perhaps the most successful. Her past work has involved surveillance cameras, and this artwork shows forgotten corners of urban landscapes, with fuzzy flags (stars and stripes?) flying mournfully, and slogans of 50s-style bravado and power-talk. The flip side shows a group of German people in an office watching live footage of September 11, and fiddling with video tapes. Their reactions are muted, mixed and utterly mediated. The low-res vinyl video style here cleverly plays with references to home movies, surveillance footage, historical document and global villages. Perry Hoberman is perhaps better known for his interactive new media installations with inventive and ironic interfaces (such as throwing small objects at keyboards). His picture disc features clips from mad scientist horror movies and is witty enough, but his skills at sociable interaction seem to have been a little wasted in the move to linear video narrative.

Isaac Julien's *Baltimore*, 2003, in Gallery One has no such problems with the medium, and forms a solid commissioned centre for the opening programme. As an artist working in film who has successfully spanned documentary, feature film and installation, Julien has a light but firm touch with

his material. Continuing his interest in Blaxploitation movies, Julien cleverly places famous figures from The Great Blacks in Wax Museum, Baltimore, in amongst the history paintings of an art museum. A mysterious young woman stalks through buildings redolent of money and power, as well as through the dramatically lower-budget space devoted to black history. The three screens use symbolism meaningfully and stylishly, and the end result is pacey and watchable – it manages wittily to avoid the portentous plod that some big video art is prone to.

As a straightforward three-screen film installation, *Baltimore* doesn't shout technology but nevertheless manages to touch on relevant themes. The black astronauts in the wax museum sit in a touchingly home-made set with hand-painted planets. Whitey may have been on the moon, but when Melvin Van Peebles comes face-to-face with his own waxwork, the simple medium of film does more than any high-tech virtual reality is likely to be capable of. The heroine's unreal leap conjures up references to contemporary films such as *The Matrix*, with all its ambivalence towards race and technology. Just as 'art' and 'technology' mean very different things in Baltimore and San Francisco, the words also mean different things in Swindon and Liverpool.

'The Media Lounge' is 'a curated space for computer-based and video art' and strongly acknowledges that lens-media do not, of course, form the only history for new media art. The *Kingdom of Piracy*, 2001-03, web project covers a range of media including sound streaming, hypertext and social software, which owe more to a history of conceptual, cybernetic or community art than to concepts of narrative or montage. *KOP* is a selection of 14 works (including texts) and four new projects, curated by Shu Lea Chang, Armin Medosch and Yukiko Shikata. Importantly, it is described as an 'online workspace exploring the free sharing of digital files' rather than an exhibition. It examines a key area of difference for digital media – the ability quickly to copy, sample, share and manipulate any medium – a feature that fills some artists with joy and some intellectual property wonks with horror.

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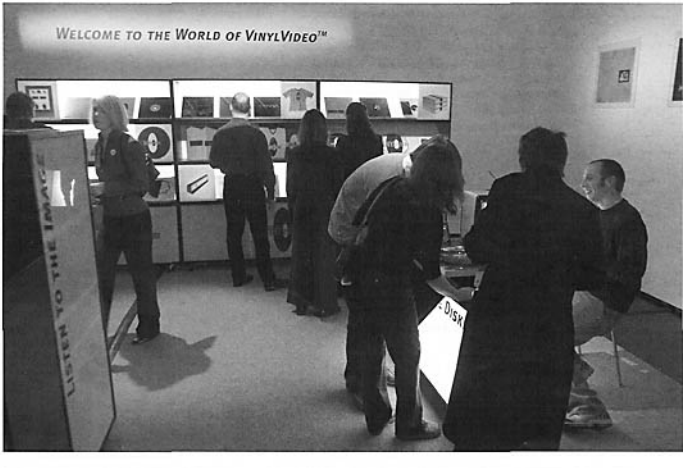
Sometimes, these artists are not showing you things but offering you tools: Mongrel/Graham Harwood's *NINE(9)*, 2003, is a 'social software' project that enables users simply to group images, texts or other files from an archive together into a grid pattern of nine. It is reasonably simple to use, and had been used by community groups in the Netherlands with some success, but is in practice a strongly located software to aid rather than replace human contact and exchange. *Last.FM*, 2001-03, by Felix Miller, Martin Stiksel, Michael Breidenbruecker and Thomas Willomitzer is a web music station that learns what you like to listen to and tells you who else has similar tastes. Unfortunately, the need for



Gallery Two
Vinyl Video installation

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broadband excludes many home listeners, but hopefully much institutional bandwidth is being pirated for the on-line equivalent of sitting in bedrooms swapping music. The subverting of technologies more usually exploited to sell us things is an important part of the context for these artworks.

Sometimes on the internet, less is more – the low-tech quick kick of *Stealth Waltz*, 2002, by Manu Luksch & Mukul Patel satirically demands that you only listen to 2/2 time music without lyrics. Unfortunately, this feeling of being excluded from the network is repeated unintentionally by several other works that present pages and pages of dense download instructions, or tell you that your home computers (or perhaps yourself) are sadly inadequate. The concepts sound interesting, but it is frustratingly difficult to get at the art – a strangely conceptual art experience.

The danger of users sinking without trace in this dense network, and the issues for showing net art in galleries, have been acknowledged by the Media Lounge curator, Michael Connor. The Lounge is often the first point of contact for visitors to FACT, and his impression is that it attracts audiences who are 'inquisitive in nature, rather than necessarily in love with objects'. The human interface is therefore an important part of the media lounge – a well-trained attendant is always there to help if needed. Live events formed an important part of *KOP*, including the BURN party where the public could burn their own free CD of public-domain MP3 music files.

The FACT building is, above all, an inhabited one. The café windows are etched with Graham Parker's artwork of words used during the FACT design process, and the Singh Twins' miniature illuminated portraits put human faces to those involved. Grey-world's sound installations ensure that the most unexpected places echo to the subtle tweedle and chirrup of sociable technology.

Unlike many big new-build art venues, the FACT centre is merely the latest home for an organisation that has been evolving since around 1985 – it comes with pragmatic experience rather than utopian vapour theory, and this really shines out. Its communities and technical workshops have been painstakingly developed, including the Collaborations Programme with its recent project *tenantspin*, 2001 ongoing, – community web broadcasting from a towerblock near you.

As an early UK 'creative technology' centre, FACT bears the burden of comparisons with other such venues around the world, but it is not intended to rival the behemoth ZKM in Karlsruhe (which is museum, production and research), nor the forthcoming Eyebeam in New York. It is not, perhaps, as specialist and inward-looking as the late Lux Centre, but more media-specialist than the DCA in Dundee. Eddie Berg, executive director, points out that although the venue is a 'national centre' with an international relevance, it is also firmly located, 'modestly sized', and hopefully 'not too grown-up for the odd adolescent flourish' to meet the fluidity of new media. Berg himself compares the building more to 80s media centres like Watershed in Bristol, or Cornerhouse in Manchester, and it is notable that FACT does also include a cinema – programmed separately but sympathetically. On the evidence of the opening programme, FACT shows the kind of sturdy character that likewise stands a decent chance of still being inhabited and of evolving, 20 years hence. ■

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