

H.3 Statement of Concept

Inquiry Theatre: The Paradox of Immigrant Dreams
Interactive Voice Installation by Stephen Wilson, 1991

Inquiry Theatre is an interactive, multimedia installation that allows viewers to take a virtual walk along a section of Mission Street, a street in San Francisco that is typical of many in Europe and America. Historically this street has been a port of entry for new immigrants hoping to better their lives. The street epitomizes the dream/nightmare of the act of immigration. The dream is of opportunity, openness to many cultures, freedom, and reaping the fruits of hard work; the nightmare is of overstimulated desires, materialism, get-rich-quick morality, conflict between peoples, birth-places abandoned and hopes unrealized. The installation uses voice recognition to allow viewers to control their walk and to inquire further into what they see and hear.

Physically the installation consists of a large screen with a microphone in front. A street scene is displayed on the screen. When a visitor steps to the microphone, the computer asks the person a few short questions. The answers are used by the computer to train the voice recognizer to the unique sound parameters of the person's voice. The sounds are also digitized and stored to become part of the cumulating sound repertoire of the installation. These questions and their answers become the poetry of interaction; the rhythms of viewer speech serve the dual function of controlling the flow of the event and reinforcing the themes of the installation.

From then on, the visitor can navigate the image and sound space by speaking these phrases. Certain phrases cause the image to move left or right along the street (as though the viewer was walking on the street). Other phrases allow the visitor to search out more information related to their current virtual location. For example, speaking the inquiry phrases might bring forth blowups, details of the images, processed versions of the image designed to highlight particular thematic concerns, associated images from mass media or art history. Similarly, the viewer can call up sounds that reveal aspects of the paradox as related to the particular place on the street. The digitized multilingual phrases spoken by previous viewers are part of this sound information. Ironically, the speech recognizer does not care what language the viewer speaks.

Inquiry Theatre explores a dilemma we face in the age of information. Things are not necessarily as they appear on the surface and we must constantly inquire further. Computer graphic processing of images can both enhance and obscure information. The viewer's voice functions as the poetic gateway to further information. The voices of previous viewers are a valued resource. The street itself is the visual control panel for the inquiry. We are all immigrants in new media spaces. The constantly shifting balance between dream and nightmare is an especially appropriate topic for this investigation of the potentials of interactive hypermedia.

