



sponge • m3

sponge is a group of people engaged in the construction of public conversations and experiments in phenomenology, perception and desire. **sponge** aims to dislodge us from an information-centric vision of the world to a pliant and topological vision of the world. The informatic vision is one oriented toward solving problems, using discrete representations and following rules. The topological vision is oriented toward continuous action, fluidic expression, and the formation of experience and subjectivity out of the flow of media and matter.

m3, **sponge**'s current research project, focuses on three questions which we make tangible respectively in three environments: how do we play, socially, freely or bound by rules? how do we experience the world? and how do we shape the world? **m3** seeks to infuse the digital with pliability, and to immerse the digital in ordinary life. Pursuing such questions we make imaginable the unimagined -- we make possible imagining other than what actually exists. And moreover, we will find the means to fashion these other imaginaries.

While the first version of **m3** is designed for a controlled gallery/performance space like those provided by art or performance institutions, **sponge**'s further aim is to construct events and environments that work as critically-inflected experiences immersed in everyday urban life. These hybrid environments could include public spaces such as parks, gardens and alleys, made of fusions of digital media and physical material -- spaces in which the visitor can replenish his or her spirit.

m3 rooms

1: Puzzle

The puzzle is a room-sized maze materializing our concern with how problem-solving and information-processing shape experience. Visitors are brought into the puzzle space and are given a simple task: solve the puzzle within a fixed time limit. Solving the puzzle requires navigating through the maze-like space and making a number of simple but combinatorial choices. Each visitor must push screens aside in order to pass through the maze, changing the geometry of the room for the other competing visitors. *Play* emerges on two levels: at the level of individual problem-solving and at the level of systemic competition among multiple players.

The puzzle is a dynamic media experience for the visitors, with its sound and light textures moving between extremes: from moments of dense, information-filled chaos of a street corner or a telephone exchange, to moments of stillness, silence and darkness. While people deal with the challenge of navigating the real space, simultaneously, in a digital simulation running on the web, software agents also attempt to solve the puzzle. This digital simulation receives input not only from an online audience who can change the puzzle's configuration but also from the visitors who are navigating the physical puzzle. As the software agents thread through the simulated puzzle, their motions determine how media are projected into the physical puzzle space. Thus, the size and activity of the audience at a distance indirectly interferes with the experience of the visitors in the real room and introduces unpredictability from the open world into the puzzle's closed one.

2: Sauna

In the media sauna, the visitors are helped to lie down on soft, inflated beds. The chamber hums with frequencies hovering on the threshold of hearing. When all of the visitors have entered, the chamber activates. Barely perceptible UV light begins to enter the chamber from outside, its speed and intensity controlled by breath sensors which monitor the sum of the visitors breathing patterns. Projected faintly onto the walls of the chamber in a narrow strip are images of acceleration: high speed motion through darkness, water, snow. These images are perceivable only from the visitors peripheral vision, giving a sense of extreme speed though their bodies are still. In time, faint images begin to appear on the ceiling

of the sauna as well. At first fuzzy and indistinguishable, the visitors come to recognize themselves in the projections, relayed from a live camera. Slowly, the images of the visitors begin to transform, by means of real time graphics processing, moving from fixed bodies to pliant and liquid forms.

3: T(opological) Garden

After the visitors emerge from the sauna, they enter into a transitional space, in which they choose from array of sumptuous clothing. The clothing, made of richly woven fabrics, is embedded with wireless sensors which track their locations. The visitors then enter a circular room which is alive with sounds and images. Polymorphous video textures hinting at the motions of fish, coral forms, elemental transitions between liquid and crystalline states cover the cyc-like screen walls and the floor. These textures appear breathe and shift according to the sound patterns in the room. As the visitors pass near each other in this garden, their clothes will howl and squeal with interference and patterns of sound and image will appear to bleed from one person's body to another. As the visitors move about, their locations and groupings thicken or lighten the density of the visual environment, varying also melodic and rhythmic contours of the sound space. Performers also inhabiting the room control the basic sound structures as they move about, creating the "cantus firmus" under the dense polyphony of the visitors' sounds. So the room's media is stirred not by explicit speech and command, but by the half-noticed gestures and the flows of fabric and currents of air that halo the people's conscious activity.

Visitors leave traces and "converse" with each other in these aural and visual phrases as they weave through the room. The traditional roles of actor and spectator dissolve into a field of performance as gesture immanent in ordinary life. Social play can emerge without explicit rules or instruction. Performers and visitors thus can shape the garden's world together without necessarily uttering a word.

sponge.org
29.12.99

sponge resume

Born in San Francisco in 1997, **sponge** is an emerging complex of three people. Not so much a collective or “company” but rather a fluid conversation, **sponge** creates problems dealing with contemporary experience. To this end, it makes thought and reflection tangible -- bringing ideas to earth as events, performances, installations and media artifacts.

The conversation began during a seminar on interaction and media at Stanford University, when Laura Farabough and Chris Salter posed to Sha Xin Wei this question: “If the forms of the avant-garde have been exhausted, what modes of performance can still move people?” This led to investigations in the preconditions for performance, for situated action and the phenomenological substrates of experience.

As **sponge** formed, it absorbed the multivalent experiences of its 3 constituents: differential geometry, computer-generated music and sound design, theater/performance direction, video performance, information architecture and interaction design, organizational dynamics, multimedia production, critical studies of technoscience, scientific modeling and human-computer systems architecture.

In its first year, **sponge** conducted an experiment in threshold performance (**m1**, Stanford University, April 3-May 29, 1997), testing how people and actors jointly negotiated the surface between intentional and unintentional gesture. In this study, **sponge** embedded an artificial series of events into everyday situations (a crowded public eating space at a major university), examining the fold between the visible and the invisible performance.

After a year of conceptual work, **sponge** built an installation/performance/concert (**m2**, THE LAB, San Francisco, California, May 10-May 31, 1998) which was an elaborate series of 5 navigable spaces involving projected video, sound, heat and architecture and experimenting with systems of gaze, data and control, with revelation and the stability of matter in the presence of unstable media.

In spring of 1999, **sponge** released a package of two CDROM's: an interactive digital documentation/work constructed out of the media artifacts from **m2** (sound and digital video) and a video presentation bearing seed themes for its current research -- **m3** .