



Interactivity

Grab a hold of the flesh-colored blob in front of the video projection of a woman, created by Montreal artists Lynn Hughes and Simon Laroche, and you'll notice something. At first, the woman, who has her back toward you, will turn around. Then she may or may not appear as if walking toward you. That, of course, is up to you. That is, if you remain calm and relaxed.

You see, the virtual woman is wired to respond to you. More specifically, she's responding to your body as read through that strange-looking blob – actually a biofeedback handset, Hughes says.

"It's very simple technology," she says. "It's actually one of the things used for lie detectors. It's reading off of what's called the galvanic skin response, which is just a very microscopic level of sweat on your hand that varies with your muscle tension."

In essence, the more relaxed you are, the closer the woman will come to you.

"The idea is that your body, on this very deep, unconscious level, is controlling a virtual person," Hughes says. "It's a much more complex, ambiguous type of interactivity, but it's very real interactivity."

Interactivity with machines, or more specifically, computers or computer-assisted devices, is the theme of the exhibition, "Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?" at Wood Street Galleries, Downtown.

Hughes and Laroche's piece is just one of 10 high-tech type artworks in the exhibit that explores the dynamic nature of technology as a means to slip between reality and virtuality, or more specifically between emotion and simulation.

"Computers in our culture, as it stands now, have this magical aura," says Claudia Hart, the show's curator.

An artist herself, as well as a professor who teaches 3-D animation and character design at three colleges in New York and New Jersey, Hart contends that computers have become something like a second self.

"We all feel a special relationship with our computers," she says. "In many ways we feel like they are pets or beings that we relate to because they mirror ourselves. That's what makes them resonate."

Realizing this herself some time ago, Hart began her inquiry of "Can we fall in love with a machine?" by posing the question to 10 artists and 10 critics. The responses by the artists – on display at Wood Street Galleries – are creations of virtual beings capable not only of reflecting one's amorous desires but also of potentially emoting them in return.

The second set of responses will shape a panel discussion, sponsored by Artspace, the Australian organization dedicated to cultivating media theory, as part of the 94th Annual College of Art Association Conference in Boston Feb. 22-25.

Not exactly a virtual being in the truest sense, Montreal artist Jean Dubois' interactive piece "Syntonie" is one of the earliest works in the show. Dating to 2001, it is already considered rather archaic in context considering it utilizes touch-screen technology, which has been available in commercial applications for some time.

But nevertheless, the piece proves to be endlessly fascinating, as it was last weekend to a large crowd at the exhibition's opening reception who couldn't stop touching it. The screen itself displays the artist's own self portrait, but as one touches it, Dubois' hand will come up to meet yours and a flash will occur that is accompanied by a searing electronic sound.

Again, pretty basic stuff as far as high tech goes, but endlessly entertaining. But if it's something more cutting-edge you're looking for, this show won't disappoint.

For example, on one floor two wheelchairs equipped with motion-sensing equipment whirl around each other. One blue, the other pink, they look like lovers entangled in strange dance. Every once in a while each will spit out a ticker tape with a phrase on it saying something innocent enough, yet something to make one realize there is a conversation going on.

A collaborative effort between Australian artist Mari Velonaki and robotocists David Rye, Steve Scheduling and Stefan

Williams, of the Australian Centre for Field Robotics at the University of Sydney, this interactive robotic installation titled "Fish-Bird Circle B -- movement C" is by far the most high-tech installation in the show, the closest thing to artificial intelligence on display.

That's not to say the remaining works are any less interactive. Sit in front of Parisian artists Catherine Ikam and Louis Fleri's interactive real time portrait "Oscar" and you'll no doubt be amazed as it responds to your presence, moving its head side to side or up and down just as you do. Basically a 3-D modeled head of a boy in picture frame, it responds to the movements of your own head thanks to small camera mounted on top of the frame.

Other interactive works include an avatar you can talk with named DiNA and a singing computer that talk-sings the lyrics to a Jimi Hendrix song while you sing along.

Not all of the works are interactive, however. For example, Hart's own piece "Sleeping Beauty," an animated video of a sleeping nude basically does just that -- sleeps. Though she occasionally opens her eyes, Hart says, she was supposed to open her eyes when a visitor came near her, but she and her collaborator, programmer Michael Ferraro, failed to complete that component of the piece successfully before the show opened.

Regardless, Hart says, "This show is about posing a question and seeing the answer. The idea that some of it doesn't quite work or may never work, and that the artists have to ask themselves why, is part of the exhibition. That's why the name of the show is a question." Additional Information:

Details

'Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?'

What: An exhibit exploring the dynamic nature of technology as a means to slip between reality and virtuality, emotion and simulation.

When: Through April 1. Hours: noon to 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays; noon to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

Where: Wood Street Galleries, 601 Wood St. -- above the Wood Street 'T' Station, Downtown

Admission: Free

Details: 412-471-5605 or www.woodstreetgalleries.org