

'Act/React' comes to Milwaukee

New interactive Art Museum exhibit dependent on observer

By Becky Simo

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Rarely are people allowed to visit a museum — especially an art museum — and touch and play with the exhibits. Even more rare is the opportunity to stroke, step on and dance through an exhibit, and almost never is this sort of behavior encouraged.



Interactive art allows audience to get involved.

This protocol has all but disappeared with the Milwaukee Art Museum's newest exhibit, "Act/React Interactive Art," which opened last weekend.

The exhibit features 10 interactive works of art by six artists, and the materials used are just as unique as the exhibit itself.

"In many ways, this is my dream," said the museum's guest curator George Fifield. Fifield, a curator, teacher, writer and artist, has been working on the ideas behind this exhibition for years.

Fifield is from Boston, where he founded and directs Boston Cyberarts Inc., a non-profit arts organization responsible for the yearly Boston Cyberarts Festival.

He has taught at the Rhode Island School of Design and the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and has lectured at Harvard University, Brandeis University, University of California Los Angeles and many others.

John Eding, media relations manager at the Milwaukee Art Museum, said "Act/React" is the "first major museum exhibition of interactive art without interface in the U.S." Fifield said this means that the interactive art relies only on its viewers to make it work.

"The only interface is your own body," Fifield said. "This is not about technology."

There are no keyboards to type on, no mice to click, no buttons to press. There are, however, projected pools of light that change and reform when stepped on. There are screens to dance in front of and tables that emit sounds when touched. Most importantly, everything in the exhibit is reliant upon visitors to make it work. Nothing is static, and viewers are "actually becoming a part of the art," Fifield said.

Upon walking into the exhibit, visitors are greeted by a wall of figures that are dancing, waving, making shadow puppets and turning cartwheels. These are not fictional figures - they are actually recent visitors to the exhibit.

Artist Scott Snibbe's 2003 piece "Deep Walls" captures a shadow image of viewers and then projects their images onto the screen. The four-by-four square grid allows for 16 captured images, and as a 17th person steps in, the piece automatically erases the oldest image.

Snibbe's piece is not the only one to capture an image of viewers, however. Daniel Rozin's 2006 piece "Snow Mirror" is a large screen filled with an image that looks like falling snow — or bad television reception. A ghostly reflection appears of anyone standing before the screen, and the longer someone stands there, the more solidified the "reflection" becomes.

Rozin's other contribution to the exhibit is a circular grouping of wooden pegs — called the "Peg Mirror" — that creates a silhouette of its viewer by turning minutely.

The exhibit is not limited to visuals. Artist Janet Cardiff offers a 1993 piece entitled "To Touch." Visitors walk into a darkened room. In the center stands only a well-worn wooden table, lit from above. The walls are lined with speakers, and what happens next may come as some surprise. Guests approach the table tentatively, curious of its purpose. The exhibit promotes touch, though, and at the brush of a palm on the table's surface, a series of sounds emerge from the speakers.

The disembodied voices, erratic instruments and other random sounds come as a surprise at first. But there is a certain amount of joy that comes from experimenting with the sounds the table can make.

Similarly, artist Liz Phillips offers a 1999 piece called "Echo Evolution," a room full of speakers, neon lights and sensors. Depending upon the number of people in the room and their locations, the sensors will trigger different light patterns and make different sounds.

"I wanted an evolution over time," said Phillips, who has been making interactive technologies into art for nearly 40 years.

The exhibit is the perfect combination of sophistication and interactivity, and while everything is fun to "play" with it's also serious art, most of it with serious technology behind it.

Everyone's experience with these pieces will be different, and that's the point. It's more about what the viewer can bring to the artwork than what the artwork can give to the viewer. The two are dependent upon each other - artwork and observer.

"Act/React" will be at the Milwaukee Art Museum, 700 N. Art Museum Dr., through Jan. 11. Admission is \$10 with a student ID, \$14 for adults.