

Shepherd

E X P R E S S

Art and Time

Art Review

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Were it not for memory and the visible onset of age, man might easily infer that he lives an infinite and unvarying existence. After all, isn't each day more or less indistinguishable from the last, bearing the fruit of yesterday and the seed of tomorrow? Perhaps, as Delacroix said, the role of art is to give value and substance to the passing of time, to interrupt the terrifying monotony of our days with glimmers of understanding. A new exhibit at Milwaukee Art Museum titled "Act/React" reveals the weightlessness that art engenders by erasing all memory of itself.

Using interactive digital technology that springs to life through motion or touch, each of the pieces included in the exhibit not only illustrates the manner in which we engage with space but actually affects how we occupy it. Scott Snibbe's *Boundary Functions* gauges man's territorial tendencies, while his *Deep Walls* prompts a frenetic posturing rarely found in the polite gallery setting. Janet Cardiff's *To Touch* shows how visual and aural stimulants inform our experience of a space. Daniel Rozin's mirrors subvert the narcissistic pleasure we derive from our reflection by offering us likenesses that are eerie and alien yet inescapably our own. Camille Utterback's painterly projections and Liz Phillips' light and sound laboratory explore the subtle threshold between a viewer's static and active involvement with art, and Brian Knep's *Healing #1* highlights both the solitary and social potential of art. These works, and the discipline of interactive art as a whole, render any discourse on vantage point irrelevant, as both the artwork and the viewer is in constant flux. It's what it says about art's relationship with time that makes interactive art so fascinating.

By periodically erasing their past, these pieces partly achieve what the Impressionists sought two centuries ago—siphoning out the past and recording only the immediate present.

In fact, they go much further, eventually erasing traces of their present and returning to a state of mute susceptibility. Snibbe's *Boundary Functions* becomes dim and featureless if less than two people occupy its surface. Rozin's *Peg Mirror* resumes its mask-like impenetrability when left undisturbed, and *Healing* morphs back into a fluorescent pool of yellow-green light. History has served as both a burden and a boon for artists through the ages, and each of these pieces almost manages to give history the slip. However, by the same token, they prove art can never be entirely ahistorical even when untethered to a specific time. The sounds and images may fade from the walls and from our memory, but the technology that enabled them will live long enough to become outdated.

The works exhibited in "Act/ React" place primacy on the active and ephemeral experience of art. In doing so they raise the question: How deeply can an ephemeral experience affect us if we have no tangible means of recalling it? For me it's the pieces that make familiar objects appear unfamiliar and new that offer the most charged emotional experience. Take away the motion sensors and the snatches of dialogue and Janet Cardiff's scuffed and spattered carpenter's table remains a potent symbol of utility dusted with shades of ominous meaning. With or without their technical sleight of hand, Rozin's mirrors, through the host of associations mirrors conjure up, hold their viewer in a state of perpetual wonderment.