Kieran McBride, a theater student from Dublin, keeps pointing at the monitor in front of him and laughing so hard you can see saliva bubbles collect around the stud in his pierced tongue. He can't stop giggling. By moving the computer mouse with his other hand, he is causing an onscreen body to flap around and collapse, limbs akimbo.

McBride is playing with an exhibit that is part of the digital media art show at the American Museum of the Moving Image. "Everyone should have one of these," he says, referring to the software program. "When you're annoyed, it could be like virtual voodoo."

The piece is called "PuppetTool," and it lets you make animated people and animals. (You can try it out for yourself by visiting the Web site listed in the accompanying story).

"It's not realism we're after ... but the offset quality of things," says "PuppetTool" creator Frederic Durieu. "The goal of the software application is to produce wonderment, like that of a child on discovering a new toy." If McBride's reaction is any indication, Durieu is right on target.

POPPING ANDY WARHOL

The playful nature of interactive art is what makes it so accessible. Does abstract art mystify you? Does Rembrandt make you think of toothpaste? No matter. You can enjoy digital work, even if you don't get the concept each piece symbolizes.

In the William Fox Gallery, there are no hushed corridors, no precious paintings hung behind velvet ropes with centered overhead lights. This exhibit, which explores the digital moving image and software-based art, is purely a hands-on affair.

Women in tailored suits, animators who deride anyone who lives north of 14th St., middle-aged couples and tourists are lining up to virtually shoot Andy Warhol. The work is called "I Shot Andy Warhol," by Cory Arcangel, who reprogrammed a 1980s Nintendo video game and populated it with pop icons. Viewers aim a plastic gun at the characters on the wall-mounted screen, as if playing an arcade game on the midway.

Another big draw is the video installation "Liquid Time" by Camille Utterback. "A participant's movement is tracked by an overhead video camera and the physical motion fragments time in a stored video clip," says Utterback. "As the participants move closer to the projec-

> The playful nature of interactive art is what makes it so accessible.

tion screen, they push deeper into time — but only in the area of the screen directly in front of them. As they move away, the fragmented image heals in their wake — like a pond returning to stillness."

To an outsider, it seems like digital media is a computer-

Be a PART OF ART

A new exhibit lets you in on the show BY MICHELLE MEGNA

generated carnival. But digital art does have a serious side. It can be inspired by philosophy. It can be made by people who could be scientists or engineers. It always has a message. Utterback says, "In the Liquid Time installation, one's body — which can only exist in one place, at one time — is the means to create a space in which multiple times and perspectives coexist. The resulting imagery can be described as video cubism." But to many viewers, it's just "cool."

One of Utterback's collaborators, Adam Chapman, comes bounding into the gallery with a much-sought-after power strip raised triumphantly in the air. Chapman and Utterback are still setting up their work "Potent Objects." They say the installations use motion sensors and video cameras to gauge a person's actions and react accordingly.

The Potent Objects collection parallels research in "affective computing," in which the capability of sensing and conveying emotion is built into computing devices. "Shaken," for example, is a snow globe embedded with a minicamera that shows an increasingly frenetic video as you shake it. The artists say "Potent Objects" suggests that, though people are building machines that seem to be taking on more human characteristics, it could be that humans are starting to act more like machines. "Who is mimicking whom?" Utterback asks.

Explaining a piece called "Nothing (without you)," Chapman says, "This idea came from a thought I had while reading [German philosopher Martin] Heidegger. What a thing actually is. What would it be like to make an invisible thing?"

"Nothing (without you)" is a copper and frosted-glass cube. When a viewer touches the glass, it turns transparent and reveals an object that symbolizes flesh and hair, a "trembling self."

Except the box that is supposed to be "Nothing" is not working on this night. Utterback and Chapman's creations are prototypes. As curator Carl Goodman says, "Being digital means never having to say you're finished. In the 'Ocean' piece [a dynamic 3-D simulation of the ocean], the artist just added the moon last week."

WE ARE WHAT WE THROW OUT

Digital art has existed since the 1960s. Back then, Goodman says, computers were used to create art, but the resulting work would still be hung on a wall. "Now we've arrived at a true form of digital art," he says. "We're using the same tool to both create and experience. The software is used to make a piece and now it's used to present it in real time."

Consider the piece called "Trash Mirror." Daniel Rozin took 500 pieces of trash — a coffee-cup lid, a canceled check, a business card — and flattened them out. He positioned them in a large square, giving the work the appearance of a puzzle or mosaic. But each piece is attached to a flat piece of plastic that is connected to a tiny motor. When you stand in front of the Trash Mirror and move about, it ripples to "reflect" your shape and gyrations. The message here is that we are what we throw out. This is accomplished with simple stuff: a computer and sensors.

Chapman says he also likes to take a low-tech approach to his work. "I like to make pieces that are emotionally rewarding, as opposed to just shows of technical wizardry. If someone plays with it, maybe they'll think about it later."

McBride won't be contemplating Heidegger anytime soon, but he is having a good time anyway. "I don't intellectualize it. I just think it's fun," he says. ◆

HANDS ON A visitor with Camille Utterback's "Balance"