

As a story: The Birth of an Exhibition

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The Rare and Tate are two of many new galleries opened in New York's meat packing district around 14th street. The galleries are aggressively promoting up-and-coming artists, and this area has the low rents and ample floor space they need. It was the Rare Gallery where the young artist Paul Johnson exhibited his video sculpture made of junked equipment. I stayed in New York for just a little over a week, but that was enough to feel the amazing energy of this city where art is always pushing the limits, whether at galleries in East Brooklyn, the Greater New York exhibition of young artists (the first ever collaboration between MoMA and the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center), or the spectacular Nam June Paik retrospective at the Guggenheim. We hope that this exhibition entitled *NEW MEDIA NEW FACE / NEW YORK* will give you some sense of the overflowing energy of New York's vibrant art scene.

It is one of the duties of a curator to explain how an exhibition was planned in its totality and what intentions informed its construction. The idea for this exhibition came from information about two artists provided by the independent curator Yoko Takahashi. They are Camille Utterback of the Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and Céleste Boursier-Mougenot who has exhibited his work at the Paula Cooper Gallery.

Information obtained from other people can often be unreliable. In this case, however, I was extremely interested in the following points concerning the works of these two artists.

They are interactive installations, like Utterback

and Romy Achituv's "Text Rain" exhibited here, and thus fit clearly within the genre of media art. At the same time, however, they are extremely elegant works replete with a feminine sensibility. Boursier-Mougenot's work is not only an extremely well executed sound installation but also has a grace that appeals to women as much as Utterback and Achituv's work.

This exhibition was partly inspired, then, by the idea of an admixture of feminine sensibility which had been lacking from previous media art exhibitions. It was also meant to feature New York as it related to these two artists.

Unfortunately, however, by the time this decision was made we had just over six months to put the entire exhibition together, which made for a very forbidding schedule. It was early December 1999, five months before the exhibition's opening, when we took our first information-gathering trip to New York.

Ms. Takahashi and I began by soliciting the support of NYU's ITP, where Utterback teaches, and requesting recommendations of digital artists from POSTMASTERS, an established gallery in media art which she knew. But we were unable to gather sufficient materials in advance and had to view works and choose the other artists all during our trip to New York.

We saw Utterback and Achituv's "Text Rain" at ITP and immediately judged it worthy of inclusion in our exhibition. Utterback herself was responsible for every aspect of the design and development of the program of this work. In it, a carefully chosen text appears on a white screen and gently falls on the image of a

person standing in front of the screen until it fills in the person's outlines. Both the movement and colors have an unparalleled elegance and refinement. The flowing letters cannot but entrance one as they cleave to the movements of the occasional passer-by. In addition, we have included in the exhibition a work that was still in the planning stages at the time of our visit, which she showed me on her computer monitor. This work, called "Composition," translates the intensity of light into letters and renders them visually.

ITP is located on the fourth floor of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. When I got out of the elevator there, one work jumped out in front of me. This was Daniel Rozin's "Wooden Mirror." With this work as well I knew at first glance that it was of sufficient quality to be included in our exhibition. It was a great coup to be able to put it in the exhibition, particularly since Ms. Takahashi had provided no information about it. The work uses 830 pieces of wood attached to servomotors to represent the figure of the person standing in front of it. The pieces of wood reflect more or less light depending on the angle and thus serve as pixels to represent the figure captured by a camera. It is, quite literally, a "wooden mirror."

Another of Rozin's works was even more interesting. When he took me to his room I noticed prints on the wall. Viewed from far away, the flat work looked like a hundred-dollar bill, but depending on the distance it became the face of Mickey Mouse. In another piece, Marilyn Monroe would appear as Bill Clinton from far away. These resembled one of Salvador Dalí's trompe-l'œil pieces—a work which exploits the mistaken perceptions of the human eye. It is an excellent piece for thinking

about the problem of vision in terms of cognitive science—both in terms of its content and its ability to catch the eye of visitors—but unfortunately it cannot be displayed now anywhere outside of NYU so we have not been able to include it here.

Rozin has entered a work called "Easel" in *Interaction '99*, held in Japan by IAMAS, and *Ars Electronica 99* in Linz, Austria. He is the only artist in this exhibition who can be said to have a career in media art.

It was a very brief visit to the ITP but it was clear that Camille Utterback and Daniel Rozin are two individuals capable of superb artistic work even within the ITP itself. Further, there is no doubt that this exhibition will be an opportunity for these two artists to become active in the international media art scene.

As for Céleste Boursier-Mougenot—the other artist about whom Ms. Takahashi had provided information—a number of problems arose and we had the most trouble paddling to the finish line with his work. When we found out that he was not living in New York as she had originally thought but was in fact a Frenchman living in France, I thought it would be best not to include him after all. I thought it would be inappropriate in an exhibition supposedly about New York. But seeing that he had participated in the International Residence Program at P.S.1, that he had created works in New York in the past, and moreover, that New York's ethnic diversity is a great source of its creative activity, it seemed absurd to exclude him simply because he was French. Above all, his work was fascinating and I had no intention of giving up on it because of anything short of physical impossibility.

In his work, porcelain and glass vessels float in a sky blue pool, rocked by currents and gently brushing and bumping against each other to create indescribably beautiful sounds. It was so beautiful that I wanted to make it the main melody of the exhibition space, or even the base note of the exhibition in its entirety.

Due to a number of glitches in the negotiations over the installation site the artist and the ICC staff with myself included were ready at one point to give up on putting it in the exhibition. But thanks to the gallery owner Paula Cooper's diligent mediation, it was finally decided to include it and I breathed an enormous sigh of relief.

I'm certain that those of you who visited the exhibition can still hear that pleasant sound as you read these words. This is thanks to a lot of work.

But can we call Boursier-Mougenot's work media art? The answer is a definitive no. And yet technology or its mediation is indispensable to his work. The form of this installation, including both the device which creates the current and the plastic pool, are dependent on late twentieth-century technology. For this reason we can assert that the work is an inevitable resolution of a specific historical process. It is an artistic expression of the current historical moment. Like the two artists discussed previously, Boursier-Mougenot is also scheduled to contribute works to exhibitions at several museums abroad and is sure to be the object of much continuing interest.

John Klima is a digital artist whose work comes the closest of any of the artists in the exhibition to the mainstream of media art. He

was chosen from among the artists recommended by Tamas Banovich of POSTMASTERS, one of the pioneers of digital art in New York. Klima's first project proposed to us through Banovich required an enormous projection and a large interface of a scale that would have been impossible for this exhibition. For this reason we had no choice but to politely reject this proposal.

The work chosen for this exhibition is an elegantly simple and easily understandable sound installation. It is the most digitalized of all the works in the exhibition. It involves changing the sounds emitted from a set of headphones by using a mouse to manipulate digitally animated three-dimensional objects projected onto a cylindrical interface. Moving objects with the click of a mouse and the sounds that it creates express the fine-tuned sensitivity to images and music of the computer game generation. This work is an exemplary instance of the kind of entertainment value the younger generation expects from art.

At POSTMASTERS Banovich gave us presentations on a total of more than ten artists and a few of them piqued our interest. Ultimately, though, only the simple work of Klima seemed likely to appeal to the feminine perspective common to the work of Utterback and Boursier-Mougenot.

We looked at several other galleries on the trip but had no other successes. In the end we just barely ended up with four artists.

There were, however, two artists who I wanted to have participate in this exhibition. One I found purely by chance on this trip to New

York and the other was someone living in New York whom I had known about for years and long wanted to include in one of my exhibitions. The first was Ted Victoria and the second Daisuke Nakayama.

Ted Victoria was showing a work in the exhibition called *TIME MIGRATION* at the Taipei Gallery in one corner of Rockefeller Center.

When I first saw his piece, which was shaped like a light box, I thought the image of a desktop clock projected there was a photograph. But then I noticed that its second hand was actually rotating. It was a real clock. But how was it possible to create a space with such depth in such a thin box? For a moment I felt bewildered. But after a moment I imagined there must be some kind of device in the box that collected the images of the objects inside the box projected with reflected light to make an image like a still life painting. Here was a kind of sensibility and humor that was quite startling. From that moment I was set on bringing his work to Japan.

The other staff members, however, were not as enthusiastic. A piece of his entitled "Is Anyone Home?" which used "Sea-Monkeys," did not have a very favorable reception among the female members of the staff, although the little creatures themselves did not stir up much discussion.

This rejection was even more of a problem given that one of the themes of the exhibition was the female perspective. But in fact from a very early point in our time in New York I was already thinking of slightly shifting the focus of this exhibition. I thought it would be interesting to include a critical perspective on previous

media art exhibitions. Nothing about this conflicted with the inclusion of a female sensibility or perspective when selecting the works. In fact these two themes share a common thread vis-a-vis the state of media art today.

It often happens that works categorized as media art are entirely dependent on the capacities and functions of the computers and other devices they use. These are more spectacles for amusement than art. Even a souped-up game might look like media art, as long as it uses computers and other complicated machinery, run by a complex program, connected with a tangle of cables, and instantaneously available all over the world through a network. But this is a mistake. Works of art cannot qualify as such unless they have something to say.

Victoria's work, for example is hardly high-tech. In fact it is low-tech. The small objects in the box (there's a fun drawer in his studio full of small items he has collected to use in his works) are simply combined with a mirror and a lens to create an image. It's a very simple mechanism. But it is a world full of imagination in which strange feelings bubble up and the viewer's fantasy is inspired.

It is not difficult to imagine that this simple mechanism is the result of much experimentation. If, even without citing Descartes or Leibniz, we can argue that "experimentation" is at the core of modern science, Victoria's work is square within the lineage of rational inquiry as the sublime spirit of art and science. In this sense it may well be closer to the essence of science than media art.

The last artist I asked to participate in this

exhibition was Daisuke Nakayama. He is certainly not a media artist and I am sure there are some people who would disagree with his work being exhibited at ICC. But the trend of his interests and works in recent years has been very much related to technology, including works in video and works created by outputting images created on the computer onto canvasses. I think it was around the end of 1995 that I visited him in the Studio Shokudo atelier in the dining hall of the abandoned Riccer sewing machine factory in Tachikawa. Studio Shokudo has recently disbanded but I have wanted to have his work in one of my exhibitions ever since then and now it has finally become possible.

"Under the Table" is a newly revised version of a piece originally exhibited at Jeffrey Deitch's gallery in New York, called Deitch Projects. Its theme is the mode of human communication, expressed as the memory of sounds made by two balls moving around underneath a table. There is nothing on the table except two cups of coffee, making the space one from which people seem just to have vanished, leaving only a hint of human presence. This work has attained a level of perfection impressive even among Nakayama's installations. It has never been exhibited in Japan before and this was a good opportunity to introduce it.

This piece may feel slightly different from Nakayama's previous works, but a careful examination of his works reveals that they all deal with the question of communication in some way or another.

In his video showing a man and a woman passing a sharp knife back and forth, the sharp edge of the knife's blade is a symbol of

the tension between the two. His work with boxing as the motif expresses a kind of fleshy communication based on the hardship and pain of the literal physical contact, of fighting.

It was not an easy task to create an entire exhibition out of the first stab at an information from Ms. Takahashi. It is difficult to realize an exhibition without a powerful intention and a concrete image of what one wants. The actual exhibition has to be squeezed into the image one has made for oneself down to the last detail. Perhaps this is what it means to create an exhibition.

But of course this kind of project can never be realized by one person alone. None of this could have happened without the unflagging efforts and determination of the ICC staff and others to make this exhibition a success. If it is indeed successful, it is thanks to them.

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