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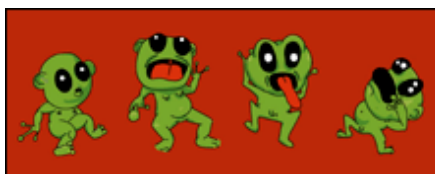
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Learning to love HAL

'Engaging Characters' at Art Interactive; art-speak at the SMFA

BY RANDI HOPKINS

Lots of us talk back to our TVs, have pet names for our cars, rant at our microwaves, and otherwise invest emotional currency in the technology we live with, but we don't expect our stuff to be listening to us, and we certainly don't expect it to answer back. A new show at Art



Marina Zurkow and Julian Bleecker, Pussy Weevil

Interactive in Cambridge, aptly titled "Engaging Characters," explores our relationship with digitally derived characters. This smart and, yes, engaging exhibition goes beyond the technological to look into the very nature of character: how an invented figure becomes imbued with personality traits; how those characteristics are visually and aurally manifested. It also explores the interaction between digital characters and analog viewers (that's us). The show, organized by New York based curator Kathy Brew, has been up since the end of July, but Art Interactive is open to visitors only on Saturdays and Sundays, from noon to 6 p.m., so you may have missed it. Well, lucky for you, AI is throwing a big closing reception next Friday, October 3, from 6 to 9 p.m., before the show's last weekend. Come by and meet the cyber cast.

It's a bit noisy when you walk into the show, but bear with it. Soon you will know each of the works intimately; you'll even be calling them by name. My favorite is Pussy Weevil, an animated green blobby guy created by Marina Zurkow and Julian Bleecker. This squawking character is kind of cute, even as he (she? it?) bellows menacingly, stamps his feet, and gives a lively animated version of mooning you from his little square of video monitor. Come too close and Pussy Weevil will disappear altogether, waiting for you to step out of worrisome proximity. But walk away and the animated alien will relax, pace, and eventually lie down for a rest, his round green bum sticking up like a napping baby's.

"If you would trim your nose hair, maybe you'd get a promotion," snarls the hard-bitten female character to her pot-bellied companion in Janine Cirincione & Michael Ferraro's RL (Real Life), an installation centered on a richly animated scene on a 2D screen. Set in a crummy living room, with a crowded fly strip hanging from the ceiling and the remains of a big box of KFC on the floor, RL evokes images of family from American Gothic to Archie and Edith. The banter between the two characters is deeply mundane and very funny, and they actually are improvising, in a digital sort of way, responding to the people who are watching them.



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Intriguing work by new media artists Julie Heyward, Toni Dove, Claudia Hart, and Larry Berkow, and Chico MacMurtrie of Amorphic Robot Works is also on view (so to speak). And there will be a related panel discussion at MIT's Bartos Theater next Thursday moderated by curator Brew, with MIT Media Lab professors Bruce Blumberg and Joe Paradiso and artists Julia Heyward and Toni Dove.

Also coming up: the **School of the Museum of Fine Arts** has a great fall series of lectures by visiting artists and critics, including a talk this Tuesday by artist Michelle Segre, whose big sculpture of familiar stuff like a mushroom or a half-eaten piece of white bread (complete with crumbs) plays with Pop imagery and nature, and a talk on October 6 by *Village Voice* critic Jerry Saltz, who opines with humor and insight on just about everything "art."

"Engaging Characters" is at *Art Interactive*, 130 Bishop Allen Drive in Cambridge, Saturday and Sunday through October 5, with a closing reception next Friday, October 3, from 6 to 9 p.m.; call (617) 818-0162. *"Engaging Characters: Between the Virtual and the Real"* will take place at Bartos Theater in the MIT Media Lab, 20 Ames Street in Cambridge, next Thursday, October 2, at 7:30 p.m., following a reception at 7 p.m. Admission is free. Michelle Segre speaks at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, 230 the Fenway, this Tuesday, September 30, at 6 p.m.; Jerry Saltz speaks there on Monday October 6 at 6 p.m. Call (617) 369-3718 for further information about Museum School events.



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ART REVIEW

'Characters' takes viewers on an unsettling virtual trip

The Boston Globe

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent, 8/22/2003

CAMBRIDGE -- "Interactive" art suggests a degree of fun not available in your standard art gallery. In "Engaging Characters," the new show at Art Interactive, an experimental space that specializes in work like this, the strongest works suggest that while that first step into interactivity may be fun, it can also lead you down a disturbing path.

The show, put together by New York curator Kathryn Brew, focuses on narrative-based art: Each piece invites the viewer into a dialogue with a character or into the thick of a story. It's like a conversation with a slightly demented stranger. The talk could turn in any direction at any time.

I always go into Art Interactive, which opened last year, with high expectations of whiz-bang wizardry. Then I have to tone the expectations down: As sophisticated as some of the work is, contemporary technology hasn't yet reached the level of the Holodeck on the Starship Enterprise. Snafus and glitches often arise.

Even so, most of the works in this show succeed. The film-based pieces are dizzyingly provocative. Julia Heyward's "Miracles in Reverse," an interactive DVD-ROM, lets the viewer navigate through wildly looping and intersecting filmic stories. Drag and click the mouse, and you can change the story line, or the camera angle, or the speed at which you view the piece.

Heyward calls "Miracles in Reverse" autobiographical. It begins with the format of the game show "To Tell the Truth," and the viewer can click on one of three figures: a stereotypical '50s-era mother, an alien, or Jesus. Each plunges the viewer into a different story line, which variously explores themes such as religious zealotry and child sexual abuse. The film works like memory, obsessively looping back to painful moments, fading out here and ramping up there. This must be what it's like inside Heyward's head. It's a dark, harrowing piece, and the technology works in its favor.

"Sally, or the Bubble Burst," by Toni Dove, requires the most sophisticated interaction: You can use keystrokes, the mouse, or your own voice. Sally, the main character, is a blond bombshell dancer from the 1930s, portrayed by movement artist Helen Pickett. In one of a handful of programs, she appears in a projection and, using voice recognition software, she engages you in conversation.

There are a few problems: She didn't understand half of what I said. But I still found myself laughing with Sally as if I were chatting with a real person. You can also feed her lines by typing them in, and in another program she will dance to the sound of your singing. While the interactivity here is less than smooth and often frustrating, Dove has created a vivid character and a lush, inviting, and bittersweet world.

On a lighter note, there's Marina Zurkow's and Julian Bleecker's "Pussy Weevil," an animated goblin on a monitor who responds to a motion detector. Approach the little fellow, and he gets spooked and runs. If you stand a decent distance away, he'll reappear and start gesticulating mockingly at you. It's one-note but clever and part of a long lineage of abrasive animation that includes Wil E. Coyote and Ren and Stimpy.

Most of the interaction in "Engaging Characters" is with animated or live-action virtual figures. The only real-space work here is "Yo Yo Berimbau," two sound-activated robots by Chico MacMurtrie. Crafted from scraps of metal and plastic tubing and springs, Yo Yo looks as if he's risen from the junkyard. He leans over a makeshift, one-stringed cello, which he plays in response to rhythms the viewer pounds on the floor. Berimbau dances at the viewer's rhythmic command. Cutting loose and dancing with a robot is a great antidote to the brain strain of virtual living.

Claudia Hart and Larry Bercow offer photographs no more interactive than an Ansel Adams print, although their source is digital technology. Hart created E, a Barbie-shaped figure who changes costume according to her environment. She is a metaphor for all women, faceless in a world that celebrates fashion and physique. Bercow photographed settings, and Hart placed E in them -- on a New York street, where she becomes black, or in a terminal hallway at an airport, where she looks pert and sassy in a Thierry Mugler apron dress. E looks like any computer-animated babe (think of Lara Croft before she hit the big screen). While Hart strives to make a political statement, you wouldn't know that without being told. She could just as easily be manipulating the buxom E to more commercial ends.

Every time I've gone to Art Interactive, at least one piece has been on the fritz. It's par for the course with the sometimes delicate or untried new technologies here. This time, "RL (Real Life)," an animated piece by Janine Cirincione and Michael Ferraro, wasn't working. It features a couple sitting in front of a TV, drinking and talking. The conversation is supposed to change in response to a motion sensor, so the viewer can affect what's said.

All told, "Engaging Characters" isn't always engaging, but when it is, it can suck you in like your own nightmares.

ENGAGING CHARACTERS

At: Art Interactive, 130 Bishop Allen Drive, Cambridge, through Oct. 5. 617-498-0100; www.artinteractive.org.

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