Hot Spots: Interactive Narrative Art

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Interactive Narrative Art

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Engaging Characters, a group show at Art Interactive, Cambridge, Massachusetts, July 26–October 5, 2003.

Through the constellation of interactive works it assembles, Art Interactive's current exhibition of *Engaging Characters* demonstrates that any media is new media to the extent that it poses fresh challenges to that oldest of media that is made up of gray matter, neural networks, flesh and skin. Curator Kathy Brew uses as the show's organizational theme the creation and development of character in works ranging from digital video and animation to photography and robotics, mobilizing traditional as well as radical approaches to charater and narrative. In the catalogue for the exhibition she explains, "When experiencing traditional media the position of the viewer is often physically passive or still. With a responsive interface, however, the viewer's body becomes activated and the experience is more intuitively and viscerally felt."

This strategy brings the *Engaging Characters* snapshot of the dynamic and shifting field of interactive art into an accessible cohesion. It also works as an ingenious hook for the spectator who is able to inhabit the invented worlds of these works through the process of being seduced, captivated, or indeed in some cases repulsed by the characters and character-effects which occupy them. Their diversity of styles and tools in response to the show's tight thematic focus encourages viewers to conceive of character as a fluid category and to consider the characters on view not as solid entities around which plots are constructed, but as fields of possibility generating fertile and provocative narratives that include them.

In this respect, far from entertaining the notion that the age of digital media spells the end of traditional, novelistic forms of narrative, *Engaging Characters* instead joins narrativity and interactivity in ways that disturb received notions of these concepts. Brew's curatorial framework successfully induces our participation in this process, encouraging our input as active agents in the construction and, in some cases, the deconstruction of the works themselves.

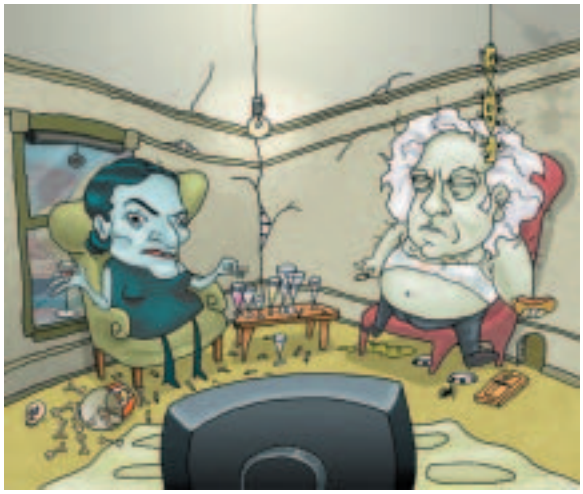
While in the languages of contemporary art and performance "interactivity"

often appears alongside discussions of cutting-edge technologies, this show is grounded in a view of interactivity that entails a more fundamental sort of engagement. It allows for the commingling of a work and its viewer/participant, a mutuality and a reciprocal influence or action upon one another. It suggests that far more interesting than definitions of interactivity are the ways in which it can be enacted: the nature of the interaction that an "interactive" work makes possible for the viewer/participant who engages with it; the varieties of experience that this enables; the reflections that it generates; and the new forms of practice that unfold as a result.

From its introductory screen, Julia Heyward's interactive surround-sound DVD projection *Miracles in Reverse* envelops us in a complex autobiographical fiction, a tripartite spiritual tale of incomplete redemption and deferred judgment. In a spectacle that dovetails perfectly with its Protestant mix of humor and pathos, the first screen presents a menu in which three life-sized ghostly figures—an alien, a housewife, and Jesus Christ (the latter two played by the artist, the first by the son of a friend)—revolve in place and await the mouse click that will commit us to one of three possible journeys. When we choose Christ and begin our voyage, the work's theological overtones give us the sense that there will be a way to ensure we're on the right track, that we'll see a sign or hear a voice that will point the direction either to salvation or damnation. This assumption is soon overcome by the dawning feeling that we are venturing through a world of infinitely proliferating detours, hitchhiking a ride along with a departed soul on its travels through purgatory.

The work's title, *Miracles in Reverse*, suggests that there is an architecture of the divine moment, a cosmic flowchart that can be read backwards as well as lived forwards. Here we travel backwards, at variable speeds and by means of any number of paths, through a fictive version of the artist's own life, just as we are told that we will one day watch our life flash in front of our own eyes at the moment of death. From dreamy sights and sounds of children sledding on a snowy hill to nightmare visions of demons trapped howling in their fiery infernos, *Miracles in Reverse* feeds on these existential tensions. It plays with them, and with us through them, as when we realize that the video fragment depicting the woman in the beard and tattered habit sliding across the ice is actually (Heyward dressed up as) Jesus, "walking on water," reliving his famous miracle performance in a way that is literally, but only half-assedly, miraculous.

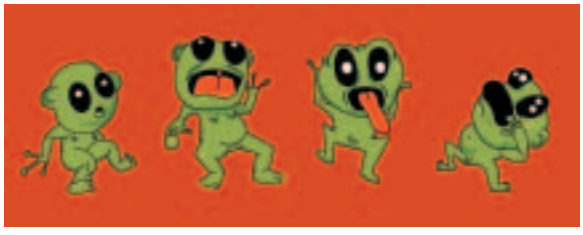
Ruminations on religion may be an oblique way to get there, but they are integral to the question of interactivity and what is at stake in speaking about it. Indeed, what probings can claim to be more spiritually profound and theologically consequential than those that ask and explore what precisely it is that constitutes the stirring, the quickening, the action, reaction, and the capacity for meaningful interaction that lets us call something "alive"? Is it a leap to suggest that a new form of life emerges when, in the encounter with the robotic "children" of Chico MacMurtrie's *Amorphic Robot Works*, a mechanized maestro makes increasingly intricate music in response to our sonic input, and with its metal limbs exuberantly tapping the concrete, proceeds to work our claps



Janine Ciricione and Michael Ferraro, *RL (Real Life),* 2001. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Toni Dove, *Sally, or The Bubble Burst*, 2003. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Julia Heyward, *Miracles In Reverse*, 2002. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Marina Zurkow and Julian Bleecker, *Pussy Weevil*, 2003. Photo: Courtesy of the artists.

Claudia Hart and Larry Bercow, *E.* Photography by Larry Bercow, 2003. Photomontage: E in Mugler Apron Dress, E in Mugler Robot Outfit, E in Paco Rabanne, E in Rei Kawakubo. Photo: Courtesy of the artists.

Chico MacMurtrie/Amorphic Robot Works, *A Horny Child* (from the Horny Children Series), 1994–95. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

and stomps into sophisticated rhythms that take flight as improvised riffs? Similarly, this humanoid-instrument unexpectedly incorporates the output from the soundboxes of the show's other interactive installations, turning the gallery's non-human as well as human inhabitants into its accompanists. The machines' ability to craft such nuanced music and intimate moments with its human counterpart arguably constitute more convincing examples of life than, say, the ability to methodically humiliate a human chess master.

While its conceptual premise is rather more simple and its implications less existentially weighty, Marina Zurkow and Julian Bleecker's *Pussy Weevil* stages a witty reflection upon desire and its pursuit. On a monitor set into the gallery wall, the main character, an animated green shape-shifting imp named *Pussy Weevil*, responds to human presence with movements and expressions designed to pique our interest. Backed by a monochromatic red ground, it tries everything to beckonus to come closer. Of course when we get near, *Pussy Weevil*—the name captures its mix of curiosity, ferocity, and cowardliness—runs away, leaving the screen an empty red expanse until we back off enough for the critter's safe return . . . which, like any object of desire, it always does.

Lest we imagine that this brave new world of human-machine interactivity is all high-stakes drama, aesthetic thrall and spiritual adventure, Janine Cirincione and Michael Ferraro's *RL (Real Life)* reminds us that every netherworld must have its underworld. Set to a spare soundtrack of John Cage music, *RL*'s computer-animated sequence, played on a wall-mounted monitor, provides a window into a timeless world of domestic imprisonment, a living portrait of a slowly dying couple who have obviously lived together a little too long. *RL* is programmed to read our presence in the room as input, and uses it to catalyze an incalculable number of dialogical encounters—mostly arguments, insults and complaints, spiced up with the occasional fond family memories and bits of gossip—between mom and pop.

The work itself is a startling mix of technological sophistication and low-brow appearance. There is a bucket of chickenbones scuttled across the floor, a motionless thick-bodied spider that has become a permanent fixture on the threadbare carpet; a perpetually changing dialogue that is a mix of rants and insults and instances of quiet desperation, punctuated by an equally endless repertoire of cocktail sipping and chain-smoking. While living in the skins of two ordinary slobs they manage to display a flexibility of response that threatens to outdo our own limited range of habituated responses to social intercourse.

In a world of Terminators and Frankensteins we are well accustomed to fear the machine, trained to be watchful for signs that it may overpower us. But how much more disturbing is it to be presented with the likelihood that the machine might be more interesting than we are, its life somehow richer than our own, that our interaction with it might leave us feeling overshadowed by its grace and elegance? Stark evidence of this possibility faces us in the work of Claudia Hart and Larry Berkow's series of large-scale digital photomontages, which track the travels of *E*, a computer-modeled anti-heroine. Dressed

always impeccably in revealing and expensive designer couture—underscored by titles like *E with metallic skin in Thierry Mugler Robot outfit* and *E without nose or mouth in Comme des Garçons Coat*—this shapeshifting hypermodel strikes poses in a series of urban hangouts, from train stations to boutique display windows. The nature of her ethereal and instantly iconic presence changes in order to fit chameleon-like into any situation, her manifestations serving as a cross between public appearances and visitations.

The implications of, in Brew's words, these collisions of "constructions of gender, constructions of the human, constructions of the robot," are grappled with in particularly intriguing ways by Toni Dove's *Sally, or The Bubble Burst*, a DVD and internet-delivery interactive narrative based on the life of a displaced 1930s starlet. Modeled after a human actress, Dove describes Sally as at once a female- and a human-impersonator. A wireless microphone and voice-recognition program enable us to talk with the projected image of Sally's beaming, stuttering face, to sing to her, and then, when we are ready, to change scenes and follow her through an unfolding filmic landscape in which enchanted curiosity-cabinet inhabitants communicate and miscommunicate with us. Clicking our way into one dark corner of this world, we can watch Sally dance in the background, holding aloft a luminous spheroid object. In the screen's foreground sit a few objects, from different places and times, including an old radio and another translucent sphere like the one in Sally's arms. When this sphere is chosen by the mouse, a spectral pair of lips appear, and then part, and this strange character begins a monologue in which she laments her own condition as a metaphor.

Describing her larger ongoing multimedia interactive project *Spectropia*, in which *Sally* is intermeshed, Dove calls it

> a time travel drama set in the future and in New York City 1931 after the stock market crash. It uses the metaphor of supernatural possession to explore new constructions of subjectivity and the disorders brought on by consumer culture and emerging technologies. Unlike traditional movies, the work is "performed" interactively (by trained performers and ordinary viewers) using a unique mix of motion sensors, speech recognition and synthesis, and vocal triggers. Players assisted by trained performer/tutors can spontaneously unfold dialogue between characters based on physical cooperation, speak to characters and have them respond, navigate through cinematic spaces, move a character's body, and alter and create the soundtrack
>
> (http://www.tonidove.com)

Creating mechanisms through the use of which audience members can enter and shape these unfolding narratives, *Sally, or The Bubble Burst* dissolves the boundary between performer and audience. Such an environment was imagined by Angela Carter in her 1972 novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. It tells the tale of Desiderio, the narrator, a civil servant in the Ministry of Determination, who is sent off to pursue the amoral genius

Doctor Hoffman. He must navigate the strange, beguiling mirages and alluring spectacles foisted upon him by the Doctor's desire machines, which have transformed the world into an interactive surreality whose only stable principle is that "if a thing were sufficiently artificial, it became absolutely equivalent to the genuine." The Doctor, we are told, "dreamed of fissile time —of exploding the diatonic scale with its two notes, past and present, into a chromatic fanfare of every conceivable tense and many tenses at present inconceivable because there is no language to describe them."

Such fictions may offer the most adequate set of tools for analyzing the kinds of transformations in seeing, thinking, and feeling that comprise *Engaging Characters*. This show takes a lead in mapping the emerging perceptual languages that will come to determine the nature of interactivity and the constitution of character, real and virtual, and in investigating just what is at work and at stake in these phenomena.

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