

Watch Yourself Timothy Binkley



Watch Yourself, 1991



Watch Yourself creates an environment in which participants interact with computer-processed video images of themselves that are integrated with well-known paintings from the history of art. After putting themselves into these revered cultural icons, the users can print out the results in the form of a postcard. This interactive installation employs a simple virtual-reality technology which requires no special training. The user interaction is easy and immediately satisfying. Typical sessions last from 1-5 minutes. As the participant approaches a video monitor, his or her own image appears there. A small icon extracted from one of the available paintings begins falling from above. As the user catches this icon with his or her own image, the computer grabs the person's picture and immediately displays it in part of the painting from which the icon was taken. If the printer is not busy, the user may choose which painting to work with. Once the participant is happy with the way he or she looks inserted into the artwork, a simple gesture activates the printer, which produces a postcard of what appears on the screen. The installation works automatically and does not require an operator or attendant, except perhaps to collect the fee for a printout. However, it is often useful to have someone present who can coach users into getting what they want more quickly. A second video display is mounted nearby in the exhibition space to draw the interest of potential users.

One of the main motivations of this installation is to play the active involvement of a computer against the passive role assumed by traditional works of art. Another aim is to enhance personal involvement with impersonal cultural paradigms. It makes iconoclasm palpable by allowing users to "vandalize" these hallowed pictures with their own visages. Unlike iconoclasts of the past who were often merely lobbying for replacement icons, its purpose is rather to highlight the radically different cultural possibilities opened up by

computerized virtual realities that attenuate and diversify the imposing authority of tradition. Two specific themes have to do with the presentation of gender in art and the elusiveness of pictorial space.