
Text Rain



Text Rain is a playful interactive installation that blurs the boundary between the familiar and the magical. Participants in the *Text Rain* installation use the familiar instrument of their bodies, to do what seems magical—to lift and play with falling letters that do not really exist. In the *Text Rain* installation, participants stand or move in front of a large projection screen. On the screen they see a mirrored video projection of themselves in black and white, combined with a color animation of falling text. Like rain or snow, the text appears to land on participants' heads and arms. The text responds to the participants'

motions and can be caught, lifted, and then dropped again. The falling text will “land” on anything darker than a certain threshold, and “fall” whenever that obstacle is removed. If participants accumulate enough letters along their outstretched arms, or along the silhouette of any dark object, they can sometimes catch an entire word, or even a phrase. The falling letters are not random, but lines of a poem about bodies and language. As letters from one line of the poem fall towards the ground they begin to fade, and differently colored letters from the next line replace them from above. “Reading” the poem in the *Text Rain* installation, if participants can do so at all, becomes a physical rather than cerebral endeavor.

Text Rain links the behavior of abstract virtual symbols to the physical movements of human bodies. In *Text Rain* the physical dialog that takes place is completely familiar. The falling letters respond to participants' movements following the natural rules of rain or snow. For some participants the sensations of this dialog are so familiar that these participants claim to actually “feel” the impact of virtual letters landing on their shoulders and arms.

It is intriguing how easily we accept this physical relationship even as it is stretched across the void and into the virtual. As it crosses into the virtual, the relationship between bodies and falling objects transforms from a purely physical dialog to a conversation between a real and an imaginary space. Conversations between real and imaginary spaces are actually nothing new. Language itself is a virtual world—a system of abstract sounds and symbols, with a visual representation called text. We manipulate the abstract symbolic space of language both physically—with our mouths and hands, and mentally—with our thoughts.

In *Text Rain* it is our intuitive mental manipulation of language that is frustrated. In order to read the falling text people must learn to use their bodies as well as their minds. Participants who want to read the falling text find their own personal way to do so. Some participants stand still, others move quickly. Some participants catch individual words, others cooperate to catch whole lines on scarves or clothes stretched between them. The falling text in the piece is lines from a poem about bodies, language, and conversation. The true “content” of the piece, however, is each user's personal process of discovery and play as they create their own conversation with the piece.