

## ..... Digital Avantgarde

On the occasion of Ars Electronica's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a series of exhibitions took place in New York City from May 21 to July 18. Generously supported by SAP and hosted by Eyebeam, the exhibition „Digital Avantgarde“ curated by Benjamin Weil, Carl Goodman, and Gerfried Stocker focused on a selection of award-winning works from the Prix Ars Electronica Interactive Art category. These varied projects offer unprecedented insight into the development of interactive art as one of contemporary culture's central new forms. A selection of these works is shown during the Ars Electronica Festival in the Lentos Art Museum Linz.

The original software has been reconstructed for several of these projects.

In 1990 Ars Electronica and ORF introduced Interactive Art as a new category in their yearly Prix Ars Electronica. Since then, the notion of interactivity has been interpreted in many different fashions. The crucible of the Prix seems an interesting way to document 14 years of history in this field, which has recently gained recognition, as digital art is being increasingly presented in museums and exhibitions around the world.

At the conflation of visual art and performance the hybrid form of “interactive media” may indeed epitomize a state of culture in which participation is an important factor of inclusion or involvement. The eight works presented in this exhibition reflect not only each artist's interest in developing an interface that would facilitate the viewers' participation; each also suggests different concerns that drive the artists' interest in involving the viewer, and specifying the means they use in relation to the issues at stake in their installations. The installations featured are restaged as much as possible in their original form, thus reflecting the processes developed by the artists which are not necessarily just formal, or even technology-driven. These works will have to comply with the shifts that may occur in our ever-upgrading culture, hence revealing how they are not just the result of technical prowess: their continued cultural relevance attests to their historical importance, as well as to the fact that technology is only used to serve a purpose. Restaging the works also offers an opportunity to think about how they can be cared for and evolved in the future.

This selection of exemplary interfaces of involvement does not attempt to represent the history of interactive art: rather, it aims to represent specific moments in an ongoing investigation of ways to involve a viewer in the understanding of a thinking process. This exhibition also offers an opportunity to start evaluating the way artists and other cultural researchers have developed strategies to involve their audience, thus echoing a whole cultural movement that has sought to make the public aware of the importance of their interpretation in the process of creating a specific experience of art and culture.

Myron Krueger's *Videoplace* (1985–90) was awarded the first Golden Nica in the then-new category. This installation prefigures a whole area of investigation and posits the notion

of the transposed body, as the interface reacts to the bodily movements of visitors, and creates a dynamic graphic environment informed by the visitor's behavior. The same year, Jeffrey Shaw's *The Legible City* was awarded a distinction. Shaw's metaphor is one of the changing nature of the landscape, as information society starts to affect our everyday life. The interface deliberately draws upon that contrast, as a normal bicycle is used to navigate a text/landscape.

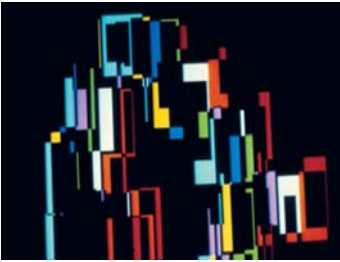
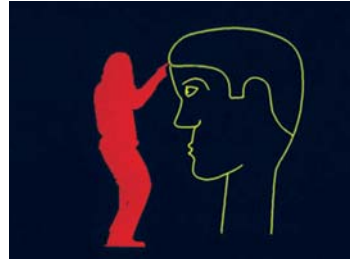
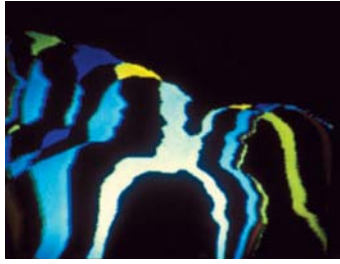
Navigating the maze of information, and its relationship to the landscape, is also at stake in Paul Sermon's *Think about People Now* (1991—Golden Nica that same year). The artist uses the map as a way to organize information related to a tragic event: a hypermedia structure offers dynamic access to video clips and other information. This interactive documentary questions the notion of objectivity: the viewer actively participates in the definition of meaning, her or his understanding of the facts.

*America's Finest* (1989–93, Honorary Mention 1995) by Lynn Hershman makes use of different sounds and mixing / selection techniques as well as a Targa Board, specially developed software programmed in C. The user aims at a specific spot or an object within the installation's space. With the specially prepared rifle, the user sees not only what he/she is aiming at but also himself / herself. In this project, the wars, weapons and media that have touched and burdened our lives blend into a unified whole. The rifle can pivot a full 360°, whereby built-in sensors recognize when a user picks it up and aims at a target.

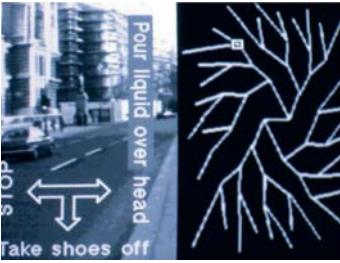
Christa Sommerer/Laurent Mignonneau won the 1994 Golden Nica with *Interactive Plant Growing* (1993), an installation in which visitors' interaction with real plants results in their growing a virtual garden, hence hinting at the notion of nature as a human construct, as well as at the ever-increasing blurring of boundaries between the real and the virtual.

Subjectivity is at the core of Katsuhiko Hachiya's *Interdiscommunication Machine* (1996—honorary mention that same year): the interface developed by the artist enables two participants to exchange their visual perspective and literally confront their different visions of the world, thus facilitating another kind of dialogue. Remapping communication is also the subject of *Landscape One* (1999—distinction that same year): Luc Courchesne immerses the visitor in a 360 degree rendering of a park in Montreal, inhabited by passersby with whom the visitor to the installation can engage in a fictional dialogue.

The most recent work featured in the exhibition in Eyebeam, David Rokeby's *n-cha(n)t* (2002—Golden Nica on the same year), features seven computers engaged in a "conversation." Here, interaction rhymes with disruption, as the visitor's input causes the computer to be out of sync with its "fellows". Only long after the visitor has left, does the computer eventually tune back into the "chant".



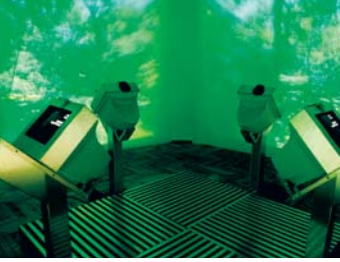
Videoplace  
Myron W. Krueger (USA)



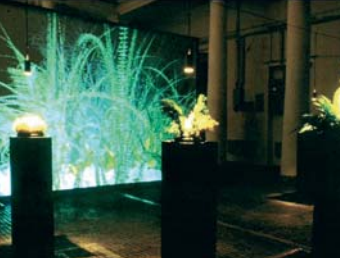
Think about the people now  
Paul Sermon



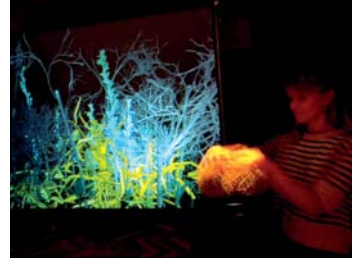
n-cha(n)t  
David Rokeby (CDN)



The Legible City  
Jeffrey Shaw (AUS)



Interactive Plant Growing  
Christa Sommerer (A), Laurent Mignonneau (F)



The Legible City  
Jeffrey Shaw (AUS)



Inter Dis-Communication Machine  
Kazuhiko Hachiya (J)



America's Finest  
Lynn Hershman (USA)