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Touch Me

Patrons must be more than observers in Wood Street projects

REPLAY: INTERACTIVE ART
Wood Street Galleries, Downtown
Through January 3
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By Alice Winn

Art, from classical to contemporary, has consistently been interactive. Spectators move their eyes to take in composition in painting and cinema. They need to shift their whole bodies to experience sculpture and architecture. A viewer has always been required to fill in missing information, from blank spots in visual narration to absent parts of objects in modernist works. Today's technology-based pieces require further physical and mental interaction between a user and an artwork. A gallery visitor is no longer limited to mere observation, and may choose instead to be an active participant in aesthetic and conceptual environments. At Wood Street Galleries, four artists and one art collective have consciously planned projects in which the audience is an integral part of pieces and even plays an important role in their development.

The London-based collective Blast Theory understands that new generations who grew up with games and interactivity expect novel approaches to interaction from artworks. Questions of power, identity, the body and the environment are raised at interactive interfaces within responsive installations.

As the group's creative projects using technology got more elaborate, the need to work with others became strong. Sometimes a remote collaboration between strangers is set up simultaneously in real locations and virtual places, connecting people in the street with identities in cyberspace. Blast Theory has invented ways of allowing those who participate in their projects to communicate with each other, while creating communal spaces on the Web. In the galleries, an enigmatic video piece set in lonesome urban nightscapes runs alongside scenes and interactive archives from the group's recent wireless city projects. The latter works present intriguing games of chance that happened simultaneously on London streets and online.

The galleries feature an access pod to Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Amodal Suspension* from which users had been able to send short text messages over the Internet during the course of November. Words from the worldwide e-mails had been shot onto the side of a giant building while their signals were converted into patterns of flashing searchlights in the sky over the Japanese city of Yamaguchi. These displays of signs and messages seem to represent communication media's power to destroy personal and cultural barriers, perimeters that were literally seen disappearing into the vast screen of night.

Masaki Fujihata presents the concept of a book and a reader and their combined abilities to make things happen. By letting viewers interact with

literature to alter the content, Fujihata lets his piece's processes evoke the workings of the mind. Upon entering Fujihata's installation *Beyond Pages 1995/97*, a softly illuminated room, one sits down at a table to encounter a video-projected primer. A light pen allows illusionary pages to be turned and their illustrations of common objects animated, accompanied by acoustic signals. Japanese words may even be choreographed into movement, drawing printed text into the realm of performance and giving it the immediacy of speech. The installation demonstrates that when an interface presents a world of action rather than a language of description, manipulating a representation can have the same effects and feel as manipulating the thing being represented.

Golan Levins turns visitors into instant abstract expressionists and avant-garde musicians through his reactive drawing system that allows for organic interpretations of form, motion and interactivity. In *Floccus 1999/2001* a set of software tools lets users generate shapes and sounds simultaneously. People may place a group of points on the screen, which sweep into dynamic lines that convey a vivid sense of physicality. Ductile filaments drawn by the user swirl around a shifting imaginary drain centered at the user's cursor. Torn by conflicting desires to preserve their length yet also move towards or away from the user's cursor, the filaments find a balance by impersonating audibly protesting gnarly hairballs. These startling beasts are tamed to ghostly white tangles that screech and moan within a deep blue void.

This piece, along with the others in the galleries, sets creativity in motion within the framework of indeterminacy, building new forms and new discoveries. The viewer is seduced into becoming complicit in the show's intent, interactively adding to the proposition and force that each artwork carries. The show lets users conduct experiments to test, verify and expand their understanding, thereby experiencing the essence of experimental science and art simultaneously.