

Report from ISEA 2002

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By Jonah Brucker-Cohen

(jonah@coin-operated.com)

Held in the harbor city of Nagoya, Japan, ISEA (Inter-Society of Electronic Art) 2002 was a curious mixture of presentations, performances, workshops, and exhibited works. Topics ranged from the conference's theme of the Japanese word "Orai", translated as comings and goings, to emotional context in digital art practice, to synthetic renderings of natural environments, to musical and visual outputs for technological artistic expression. The video game like layouts of the warehouse spaces in Nagoyako Harbor (where most of the venues were situated) were the perfect inspiration for the works featured inside. Projections filled the weather-beaten concrete walls while sound echoed in cacophonous rhythms through the immense spaces.

Stepping inside warehouses No. 4 and No. 20 visitors were confronted with multiple interactive installations that focused on play as a theme for interactive narrative. Highlights included Kaoru Motomiya's "California lemon sings a song", a rocket shaped array of Sunkist lemons on the floor that served as the power supply for several small greeting card size musical devices. The project proved that nature still provides sustenance for digital devices. Sound installations ranged from Shawn Decker's "Scratch Studies #3: Moths", which used stepper motors to slowly turn metal arms that grated against steel supports, and Beatriz Da Costa's "Cello", a robotically controlled vintage acoustic cello that changes its movement and sound according to feedback from visitors to the space.

Visual narratives such as Takeshi Inomata and Tsutomu Yamamoto's "Talking Tree", uncovered experiential meaning in the simple interface of a stump where visitors placed their hands to change imagery and shake the virtual tree's projected shadow. Other highlights included Miyuki Shirakawa's "Safe Toturing Series-9", featuring haunting projections of visitors faces into kitchen blenders filled with floating Styrofoam, Tiffany Holmes' playful "Follow the Mouse" that replaced the computer mouse with a sleepy Japanese mouse in a cage, and Tomohiro Sato's "Floating Memories" providing a crank for visitors to power a bulb which provides the light for a camera to capture images and project them on a table as a moving filmstrip.

The paper, poster and panels sessions ranged from personal projects by artists to institutional presentations about academic programs focusing on art and technology. This year's ISEA theme was "Orai", meaning comings and goings and focusing on both social and individual cultural artistic constructs of digital art practice. Many presentations focused on this theme by positioning projects and ideas within the context of ephemeral landscapes, emotional resonance, and societal impact. On the linguistic and art history side, topics ranging from Karen McCann's "Programming Literacy for Artists" to Rachel Schreiber's "The (True) Death of the Avant-Garde" to Annet Dekker's "The Influence of New Technologies on

Language" asked questions pertaining to art as a means for social reactivism through theory and practice. What are artist's roles in social discourse? Is perpetuating social conscience through art a necessary or arbitrary construct?

On the practice side, Los Angeles based artist Angie Waller's "Data Mining the Amazon: American political parties and their CD recommendations", was a humorous take on Amazon.com's customer recommendation system by using the information available to discover the CDs associated with international political figures. In real space, Teri Rueb's "The Choreography of Everyday Movement" used GPS to track and combine people's daily movements in urban space to show contrasting relationships between transportation networks and habitual travels. Also Paul Sermon's telematic installation "There's no simulation like home", featuring video displacements in the bedroom, living room, and kitchen of a model home, and Kjell Petersen's "Mirrechophone & Smiles in Motion", two video connected chairs that come to life when inhabited, showed how connected spaces can create emotional contexts for interaction.

In the poster sessions, I gave a presentation on "Physical Web Interfaces" focusing on several of my projects including MouseMiles and SpeakerPhone that deal with adding a human and physical side to networked interfaces. The response was very positive and sparked an interesting debate on the future of emotional attachment to computer interfaces. Most people really liked the idea of manifesting individual experiences as shared interactions through networked devices on a distributed scale. My point was that by connecting our similar yet distributed activities in physical space on a global scale our methods of connection between ourselves and information become as important as the information contained within the transmission. My conclusion asked if digital information actually has meaning and pointed out that networks are not only for data, after which I got a few nervous looks.

Performances focused on sound and visuals as ambient narrative clips into each performers psyche. Chris Csikszentmihyi of the MIT Media Lab managed to find an art truck (webs.to/ART-TRUCK), a shiny beast of a truck that shimmered in polished steel with flashing lights to perform his "DJ I, Robot Sound System". Other highlights included Mark Amerika's "Filmtex 2.0", a foray into interactive cinematic experiences with projected sounds and urban narrative visuals. Guy Van Belle's "Society of Algorithm - translocal mutations" looked at real-time drawing systems in performance and how to augment spatial metaphors with responsive interactivity. Finally Montreal's Alain Thibault and Yan Breuleux's mesmerizing "Faustotechnology" was a visual and auditory romp into the abstraction of Faustian theory and synthetic forms of computer visualization.

Rounding out the event was the Electronic Theater which included a large portion dedicated to early works of video art from Japan. Highlights from the film exhibition included Patrick Lichty's "8 bits or less" a short film made from Casio's Wrist Camera, Brad Todd's "Screen", a telematic web-based project that allows visitors to control an interactive ecosystem inside Todd's studio in Montreal, and Takafumi Ohira's "In the Seaside", a clever look at the plight of increased urbanism as buildings and scenery grow and eventually topple each other as a giant concrete wave.

As art and technology conferences mature, greater expectations on simplistic input and output seem to be prevalent. Gone are the days when interactive or digital art can be justified with theory and art jargon if the interactive experience fails to be compelling. Especially when exhibited, audiences seem less inclined to spend time with digital projects if their own personal frustration with computers encroaches on the artistic intention. Maybe we don't want to be reminded that we are interacting with computers at all. By emphasizing natural and human-centered interfaces, many of the projects presented at ISEA 2002 were getting closer to the ubiquitous personal interactions we take for granted in everyday life.