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Virtual Meets Physical in Cummings Art Center: Two Perspectives on Biennial CAT Symposium “Revolution: Technology as Change”

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Six frantic men and a handful of visitors zigzagged their way through the lobby last Wednesday, preparing for the next day's Arts and Technology Symposium. In the center sat a static box of half-empty Munchkins on a bench, the only thing not toyed with or repositioned, and a lonely reminder that some things don't change. Maybe technology is upending our perception of art, of narrative, of beauty, of communication, but a house-shaped cardboard pink and orange container will always contain what we expect it to: chocolate glazed. Powdered sugar. Coconut. Jelly. The basic breakfast pleasure for a working crew.

The installations, performances, panels and lectures all seemed to focus on these questions: how much do we control technology, how much does it function independently, and how much does it control us? University of Wisconsin professor Dean Balladez explained in his talk "Embodiment and Mass Communication" that the Internet has created a global social commons. On social networking sites we construct new disembodied identities, or avatars, that represent us albeit disassociated with the physical space we embody. Is it possible to uphold these identities in cyberspace, textville, and real life? Is copresence between virtual and physical spheres weakening or strengthening our abilities? He concluded by asking yet another unanswerable question: whether and when the two will merge. "Will online avatars make it into our offline world?" Will there come a time when we can morph our identities in real space and real time?"

On Friday night, David Bithell and Ali Momenti performed "Paraguay," an interactive table-top performance loosely controlled by the artists and amplified by technology. Visually, they use lights and a video camera to project the miniaturized stage behind them. Audibly, they wired the stage's props, crude wooden and iron cutouts of trees, people, and shapes, with digital sensors to give them "pseudohuman" intelligence to produce their own arrhythmic beats. They manipulate this set in their performances to explore what Bithell called the "cognitive dissonance caused by the human relationship to technology"

The work evokes but doesn't direct a narrative. It plays with how much the audience acknowledges the artists as puppetmasters versus how much it forgets them in preference to the puppets. Momenti called it "analog madness" – experimenting with physical technology – amplifying sounds, gadgets that can play controlled, sophisticated things on their own.

In the lobby, Zack Settel and Mike Wozniowski sat surrounded by laptops and headphones to explain "Audio Graffiti", a virtual space installation that explored the role of sound in a three dimensional space. They virtually overtook the south wall of the Cummings lobby as their "sound wall" for the weekend, on which viewers could use a microphone-headphone set to stick sounds. Their project, much less abstract, works like this: a viewer puts on headphones, and the closer he stands to the wall, the more prominently he intersects with an individual sound. As he walks back, he can hear the big picture, a muddle of different tags that are locked into a consistent rhythm. Through the course of the weekend, the sounds consisted of everything from a student whispering, "I'm behind the wall" to ringing bells to clapping drumsticks.

The artists ideally want to bring this idea into an urban landscape, allowing people to tag their city using an iPhone application. Walls, tourist attractions and street signs could be tagged with any sound, from spoken reviews to guitar riffs. Settel and Wozniowski are in effect playing with the human response to the intangible sphere of pure audio, of hearing what you can't see. This work felt most obviously progressive and useful.

Jamie Jewett, Luke Dubois, and Tim Cryan created a multimedia piece called Persistence of Vision, a three-way collaboration between light, media and dance aimed to invert the idea of blinking. The piece encouraged viewers to perceive the blink not as moment you lose, but instead as a moment that provokes action. Every momentary action in the piece was based on the blink of a videotaped woman projected above the audience. Within these blinks, dancers moved under infrared motion tracking devices that followed their shapes on that same screen, the eyeball itself projected onto the floor and occasionally angled up to the audience on a giant circular screen. The whole piece moves based on the arrhythmic structure of this human action, a paradoxically more organic rhythm than any steady beat. It's meant to alter our perception of routine and structure by erratically exerting energy in movement, lighting, sound and projections to shock us out of passively watching.