

Knep Trailblazes Blend of Biology and Art

Venturing into the crosscurrents of art and science, the Office for the Arts (OFA) and the Department of Systems Biology at the Harvard Medical School (DSB) have launched a public art residency by artist Brian Knep for 2005-2006.

"This first-time collaboration will significantly extend the residency's impact at Harvard," says Cathy McCormick, Director of Programs at the OFA. "In addition to developing a new temporary public artwork and visiting classes on the Cambridge campus, Brian is spending one day each week at the Medical School, meeting with students and faculty. We are also developing a series of roundtable discussions

exploring the intersection of art and science."

For this novel initiative, the Office of the Provost has awarded a grant from its Fund for Interfaculty Collaboration.

Knep's creations span the realms of visual imagination, technology, and science. "I've been trying to find what I think of as the 'soul' in technology," states Knep, "by creating works that show the complexity, in behavior and aesthetics, of natural objects—works that interact with people and encourage interaction among people, even strangers."

"Drift Grid (I)," a recent computer-generated work, consists of 16 dynamic panels (details shown on this page). When a viewer looks at a particular column of panels, the shapes on that column shift their movement—continuing to grow, but no longer drifting upwards—in reaction to the viewer's gaze. Driven by technology, "Drift Grid (I)" nevertheless evokes the basic elements of organic life and human experience—contact, growth, and change.

Marc Kirschner, Chair of DSB, notes that Knep's work demonstrates many of the concepts central to systems biology. "The behavior of the patterns is complex and 'feels' like life," says Kirschner, "changing in response to the environment, but overall retaining the same look and feel—

just as a living organism will be different in detailed structure and behavior depending on its environment, but will still be recognizable as a particular species." Underscoring the relevance of the artist's work to scientists, Kirschner points out that visualization is critical to understanding the mechanisms underlying biological complexity.

Knep, who lives in Boston, has exhibited his artwork internationally, from the Insa Art Center in Seoul and Haus der Musik in Vienna to the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park locally. He has collaborated on technology initiatives with organizations such as the MIT Media Lab and Mitsubishi Electric Research. Knep also previously developed effects and production software for feature films and has received two Academy Awards for his work with Industrial Light & Magic.

Commenting on the diverse inspirations for his work in a recent interview with the online magazine *Big RED & Shiny* ("Synthetic Art: Genesis," Karine Jouenne & Reese Inman, Issue #24), Knep observed, "I've been influenced by the body-based work of Myron Krueger and, more recently, Scott Snibbe. Work that directly engages the human body and

requires human interaction. I feel drawn to large-scale, atmospheric installations like Olafur Eliasson's 'Weather Project' at Tate Modern and great historic public spaces, such as the Duomo in Florence and the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. Places where people can share a transformative experience with others. To keep my work grounded I've looked to the work of potters, in particular the Japanese Mingei movement led by Shoji Hamad....I've also been heavily influenced by the work of mathematicians and biologists studying pattern growth."

Knep will share his work and wide-ranging interests with the Harvard community throughout the academic year.

For more information about the residency, contact Cathy McCormick or Teil Silverstein at 617.495.8676. ■

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Background: details from "Drift Grid/I," camera, computer, projector, custom software, 2005. A large wall piece, "Drift Grid/I" contains 16 dynamic panels. The shapes on each panel slowly drift upwards, changing their look and behavior as they cross the membrane between panels. When viewers look at a particular column of panels, the shapes on that column slow their movement.