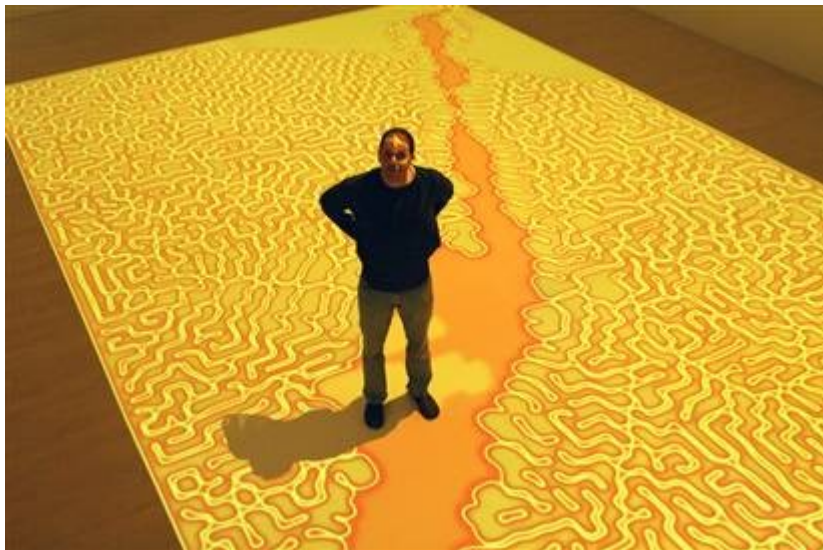


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Art exhibit takes interactivity to new level

Milwaukee show allows viewers to use new ways to help create art
Carrie Antfingher



Artist Brian Knep stands in his "Healing Pool," which is part of "Act/React: Interactive Installation Art" in Milwaukee. It could be called the exhibition's signature piece and is on much of the museum's advertising.

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MILWAUKEE - Move your hands atop the worn table in the darkened room and it responds with jumbled sounds: a man and woman talking, knives being sharpened, tires screeching, breathing, music.

Walk on the 30-foot-by-20-foot floor piece and its glowing orange, yellow and red shapes that resemble microscopic organisms form "scars" in response to movements. Stand before what seems to be a large abstract painting on the wall, and projected single and multiple lines are mysteriously drawn where you stand or move.

These are works in the "Act/React: Interactive Installation Art," making its world premiere at the Milwaukee Art Museum through Jan. 11, 2009.

Guest Curator George Fifield said previous interactive pieces asked viewers to use a mouse or keyboard, but this is the first exhibition that just allows viewers to move through the space to help create art.

Calling this his dream exhibition, Fifield said it's one of the biggest of its kind, with six artists creating 10 works.

"Previously, art has always had to be passive," said Fifield, a Milwaukee native who was in town from Boston supervising the installations. "You look at a painting, you listen to music, you read a book and you experience it but ... you're merely receiving it, and with interactive art you are actually doing it. You are changing the path you are traveling through and in many ways, as you can see here, you are changing the artwork itself."

Interactive art is still trying to gain the widespread respect of the art world, with some arguing true art is completely controlled and written by the artist, said Fifield, who is the founder and director of Boston Cyberarts Inc., which produces the Boston Cyberarts Festival.

Fifield described the exhibition artists as pioneers, much like Edouard Manet, who helped the movement of realism to impressionism in painting. "Every time you make a change in the rules in how you make art, there are people who will claim this is not art," he said.

Museums have only recently featured exhibits solely on interactive art, instead of just including pieces as parts of other shows, he said; it's being increasingly accepted with a generation that grew up with computers and computer games.

What could be called the exhibition's signature piece — on much of the museum's advertising — is "Healing Pool," by Brian Knep. Knep won two Academy Awards in 1997 —for technical achievement, and scientific and engineering — for his work on the film "Jurassic Park," before he became a full-time artist.

The piece — with its orange, red and yellow shapes transforming in the wake of visitors — is a reincarnation of some of his other pieces and makes its world premiere at the museum.

"Healing Pool" is about scarring that happens through the healing of a wound, as well as aging and growing through change. At any point, the floor will reflect everyone who has walked across it, Knep said.

Knep, who studied computer science and math at Brown University, said it's exciting to try to make technology less soulless and isolating. His goal is to put a part of himself in the art and for people to be aware that his energy flowed through the piece.

"In a way, I use technology to try to make it softer, to make it more human and it's a hard thing to do but that is my challenge," he said.

Knep's work is done with projectors, cameras, computer code and algorithms, but both Fifield and Knep say the pieces aren't about the technology.

People will be forced to interact with the art, with few benches as possible, Fifield said.

Other pieces:

- Janet Cardiff's "To Touch" is the piece that incorporates audio and touch with the table and 16 speakers in the darkened room.
- Liz Phillips' "Echo Evolution" uses ultrasonic scanners to find people moving, creating the sounds of things spinning — such as quarters or a wine glass — with the changing of neon lights, which confuses the senses.
- Daniel Rozin's "Peg Mirror" consists of 650 circular wooden pieces that mimic viewer movements, and a digital snow fall in "Snow Mirror."
- Scott Snibbe's "Boundary Functions," is a 15-foot-by-15-foot retroreflective floor piece that requires at least two people to create lined boundaries to signify the dividing lines between people. His "Deep Walls" is a grid that consists of 16 shadowed silhouettes from shadows of the last 16 people who interacted with it.
- Camille Utterback, "External Measures 2003" "Untitled 5" and "Untitled 6" all react to people's motions with painterly imagery, but differently in each of the wall works — lines, brush strokes or three-dimensional cloud-like shapes. They signify the continual flow of unique and fleeting moments.

The museum plans to sell pin art, and heat and light reactive T-shirts with the show, said museum spokesman John Eding.

Sheldon Brown is the director for the Center for Research in Computing and the Arts at the University of California, San Diego, but has built interactive art for 25 years.

He said interactive art isn't new, with artists working with electromechanical systems before computers. In recent years, Europe and Asia more easily embraced interactive art and the mainstream U.S. art world has responded more ambivalently.

"I think that interactive artwork continues to become even more and more relevant and more necessary for us to engage the kind of questions that we utilize art to engage in," he said.

The challenge of interactive art is to engage the audience on multiple cognitive levels, Brown said.

"There are different kinds of cognitive spaces that you're in when your interacting versus when you're able to kind of step back and be kind of analytical and considered about what the experience is," he said.

"I don't think the work is successful just because it's active. The work is successful if it's insightful in some way."

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