
| LEONARDO DIGITAL REVIEWS |
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Everyone in the electronic art community was waiting for this year's International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA) in Montreal. ISEA Montreal was promising and it kept its promises. Montreal showed, both in the conference and in the exhibition, a real maturation of our field. It is impossible to recall all that happened, but three works, very different in shape, technical treatment and subject emerged for me and are the clear demonstration of this evolution. All three are in close relationship to the ISEA theme "Emerging Senses".

The first work is "Osmose", a virtual environment by Char Davies; the second is "Rehearsal of Memory" an interactive art work to be put on CD-ROM by Graham Harwood; and the third one is "Communion", a multi media performance by the dancer Isabelle Choiniere. "Osmose" is the first "real" virtual environment I have experienced, something that takes you in another reality, in another space, in another mind. "Osmose" is composed of five elements: a tree standing in the middle of a clearing, a forest, water on a lower level, the computer code in another lower level and the text (poetry, philosophical texts, etc.) on the upper level. All those elements are not separated in different rooms as usual in VR but belongs to the same global structure that you travel through like in a loop. The navigation is based on physiological movements: you bend forward, backward, left and right for the horizontal axis and you exhale or inhale for the vertical one. The interface, together with the smooth colors, is probably one of the major keys of the achievement of "Osmose". For the first time you move in a virtual space like you would do in the physical one, forgetting even the weight of the helmet. The graphics, on the other end, are in a total rupture with the crude, bright-colored computer graphics we are accustomed to. Being not on the realistic side of computer graphics trends, "Osmose" is therefore more real and alien, creating the feeling of floating in space like in weightlessness. With "Osmose" we are within the work but, more powerfully, the work is within ourselves. As we exhale with our breath, intimacy, interpenetration of the work and the I rely on the spectator's body,

whose essential movements (breath and equilibrium) are the very conditions for the understanding of the work itself. This belonging to the work is emphasized by the display itself - the spectActor is behind a translucent screen, seen by the audience watching the results of his/her action, like a puppet in a shadow theatre.

Another interesting thing in this work is that, although I am not totally seduced by the art of Char Davies both on a philosophical and aesthetical level, I could have stayed in "Osmose" forever and it has been a unique experience. In this piece, Char Davies by-passes the technology, uses it at its best so that you forget it to focus on this proposed world and your own reactions to it. Beside that, before entering "Osmose", you sign a paper which exonerates the artist and the company from any injury or medical problem which might happen to you while in the VR piece. This is of a tremendous importance because it puts, for the first time, art at the same level as life. "Osmose" is soft and dreamlike. On the opposite,

"Rehearsal of Memory" by Graham Harwood is hard and violent. For this piece, Harwood worked within a psychiatric hospital, in cooperation with patients who have mental troubles and committed serious assaults. This hospital is also a prison under the jurisdiction of the Home Secretary. Using the different stories and bodies of the patients, Harwood created a kind of composite person. A body is projected onto a large screen and serves as the interface for the exploration of the important moments in the life of those people. In front of it, our own "free" body is trapped into the mirror of the other's body, showed by fragments on the screen, squeezed by the frame. The traces (tattoos, scars, words) on this body are the only access to the story. Activated by triggering a joystick, they reveal texts, press clips, interviews, etc. The marked body is the reflection of the psyche. Those legible traces on the body act as mental scars. "Rehearsal of Memory" refers to our normality but also to our voyeurism. Our travels through the work are as many intrusions in the other's life, in his being: we click on the flesh (with the joystick, the point is an arrow on the screen) as if we were doing an injection. But this is the condition of the understanding, an intrusion in our own skin, in our self. It is not an innocent trip and you can't escape from the work; the "out" button is inactivated, as if you can't escape from this hospital. Like with "Osmose", the interface is embedded into the work and, also like with Char Davies, this piece achieves the fusion of a technology, a content and an aesthetic proposition. It by-passes and enhances the technology, it is a work of our time about our world, human and technology together.

These remarks can also apply to "Communion" by Isabelle Choiniere. "Communion" is a multi-media ballet, where the body of the dancer triggers the images and the sounds to some extent. With a very minimal aesthetics (no big machinery seen on stage), Isabelle Choiniere deals with the actual and the virtual body in an electronic life ritual. Choiniere raises in a 30-minute performance the issues of the limits of the skin, of the self, of the internal and external. If Stelarc connects the body to the machine - organic and silicon parts trapped into cables, putting the internal body to the outside - Choiniere frees the cyborg and proposes an expanded and extended body, hollow and dense, a feminine principle to the new world.
