Bill Seaman BY KLAUS OTTMANN

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Bill Seaman's interactive video installation, Exchange Fields, was originally commissioned in 2000 for the "Vision Ruhr" exhibition in Dortmund, Germany. Seaman, an artist, musician and composer who is professor of Digital Media at the Rhode Island School of Design, collaborated with Dutch dancer Regina van Berkel in creating this ambitious work.

Exchange Fields combines slow-motion video footage of industrial sites, Seaman's sound compositions and lyrics, and van Berkel's dance sequences, into a multi-sensory environment that also features furniture-like wooden objects that Seaman litters throughout the space. The sculptural objects are designed to elicit the viewer's participation. Each is designated by shape and inscription to be acted upon by the viewer, using a specific part or combinations of parts of the body, like a foot, hand, or elbow. Each object is embedded with a sensor that will trigger up to four instantaneous, prerecorded dance movements by van Berkel appearing on the screens in response to the viewer's actions.

Beginning in the early 1970s artists working with video became increasingly interested in the participatory potential of this then-new and unexplored medium, inspired in part by their interest in improvisational and performative works from the 1960s by Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, and other members of the Judson Dance Theater. When viewing Exchange Field, the simple live-feed video installations of Keith Sonnier and Peter Campus from the early 1970s, which pioneered the exploration of the relationships of viewer and audience as both performer and observer, immediately come to mind. In her 1963 essay "Some Thoughts on Improvisation" Yvonne Rainer wrote, "Improvisation ... demands a constant connection with some thing-object, action, and/or mood-in a situation. The more connections are established the easier it is to proceed. The idea of 'more' or 'fewer' connections is related to one's degree of awareness of the total situation. including audience."

Rainer's observation points to an inherent problem of interactive art: the more complex it becomes, the more it removes the connections to the viewer/audience. Seaman's installation demands a high degree of physical connection with his subjects, which are rewarded with pre-recorded responses that, rather than empowering, leave one with a feeling of being only a minor player in the whole process.

In his infamous "Chinese Room Argument," the philosopher John R. Searle argues against the possibility of "strong" artificial intelligence, one that could act "intelligently" without human control. He argues that strong AI has to have intrinsic intentionality in contrast to merely derived intentionality of inscriptions and other linguistic signs. The trouble with interactive art is that it, too, lacks intrinsic intentionality, and puts the viewer in the position of the audience at the puppet show. As Heinrich von Kleist wrote in his essay on the marionette theater, "Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god." Thus is Seaman's installation as graceful as it lacks consciousness.









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