

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Art That Puts You in the Picture, Like It or Not

By SARAH BOXER

CAMBRIDGE, Mass., April 26 — Interactive art is irritating. Let's count the ways at the 2005 Boston Cyberarts Festival, which opened over the weekend at the Art Interactive gallery, the Stata Center (the new Frank Gehry-designed building on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus), the Genzyme building and other places in and

around Boston and Cambridge.

Problem No. 1: potty-mouthed machines. "PS," by Gretchen Skogerson and Garth Zeglin at the Stata Center, is an oval mirror with a sign that bids you "lean in close." You do. A voice says, "I like to masturbate in public." Ack. Did anyone else hear that? Another voice pipes up, "Psst." You lean into the mirror again, trying not to look at your reflection. A voice says, "I have memories of places I've never been to." So what?

Luckily, the room's noise drowns out some of the dirty little secrets.

Problem No. 2: too much ritual, too little time. "1-Bit Love," by Noah Vawter, is a musical altar, a totem covered in foil and exuding a synthetic rhythm (a one-bit wave form). The pillar has red velvet knobs. People are supposed to lay hands on it and turn the knobs to modulate the sound. No one wants to be the first to paw the idol. And once you do, it's not clear what effect you are having.

Then there is "Janken" (Japanese for "hand game"), a game of rock, paper, scissors created by William Tremblay and Rob Gonsalves. Your opponent is a skeletal hand wiggling on a screen. You compete by sticking your own hand in front of a light sensor in the rock position (a fist), paper position (flat out) or scissors position (two fingers ready to snip).

It's creepy and awesome. But there are two hitches: the skeleton

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John Klima

John Klima's "Trains," at the DeCordova Museum School Gallery in Lincoln, Mass., is a model train set guided by a cellphone that is used to call a Game Boy.

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could get all three screens going at once? You can! Just run from mike to mike, clapping in front of all three. Now they're all going! Uh-oh. It's Hitler giving a speech. And there you are clapping like crazy, you idiot.

Is every piece of interactive art designed to make you feel like a fascist, a dupe, a cult member or someone cornered by a pervert at a party? No, of course not.

At the Art Interactive gallery in Cambridge is Scott Snibbe's "Shadow Play," a four-part installation of video projections linked to camera sensors. One part is a screen with a white rectangle that bends and moves when your shadow pushes it. A second screen shows a silhouette of a piano mover pulling a piano. Make your shadow cover the piano mover and he dissolves into a swarm of bugs (a tribute to Luis Buñuel's film "Un Chien Andalou").

The best part is a screen divided

Interactive art can be annoying. It can also be very frustrating.

into 16 squares. Walk in front of it and you'll see your shadow occupying a square, until it gets bumped from the lineup. People parade in front of the screen, doing their silly walks, conga lines and cartwheels. Hooray! Here's a machine that is not your enemy or your superior.

Alas, some cyberworks combine all the annoyances of interactive art (prurience, ritual, ungraciousness and moral superiority) to produce a mega-annoyance: total frustration. Case in point: John Klima's "Trains," at the DeCordova Museum School Gallery, in the Boston suburb

Lincoln, which is a model train set guided by cellphone.

Two trains run through a landscape of movie scenes lovingly crafted with tiny train-set figurines and props, including a nudist beach from "And God Created Woman," a riot from "The Bad Lieutenant" and a nightclub from "Sid and Nancy." It's the best part of the piece, and the least interactive. The passengers on the train are characters from these and other movies, and their dialogue is from the movies, too.

You "get on" the train (that is, you get to manipulate the passengers) by using a cellphone to call a Game Boy attached to one of the cars. Once on, you can push the star or pound sign (or shout "switch") to switch tracks, push 4 (or shout "discharge") to discharge passengers, and push zero (or shout "help!") to help.

Trouble is, you have to time the switch just right or it won't work.

You can peek at the passengers on the screen of the Game Boy only by chasing the train around the table. And to hear the conversations, you listen in on the phone, but if you can't hear you must read the dialogue projected on a nearby screen while you're jogging by and frantically pushing buttons on the phone. A good-natured assistant fiddles with the switches and offers sympathy.

Outside the DeCordova Museum, you'll see a parked 1936 Chrysler Air-Flow Sedan spray-painted silver. It is Nam June Paik's sculpture "Requiem for the 20th Century." From a good distance away you can hear Mozart's Requiem blasting from under the hood. All the windows on one side are video screens showing a visual history of the 20th century (or rather, a history of Mr. Paik's work since the 1960's): faces of presidents morphing into masks, soccer balls becoming maps, motorcycles and of-



Scott Snibbe

Scott Snibbe's "Shadow Play."

fice phones, spinning CD's, cities.

What a relief to just stand there and watch the apocalyptic montage! No interaction. No instruction. No in-sults. "Parking is the most serious problem confronting 20th-century man," Mr. Paik once said in an interview about the silver Chrysler. Now we've got more serious problems on our hands.