Reed Music (variations for photosynthesizer)

Darren Tofts

At a time when virtual reality designers are seeking to remove the body from immersive experience, Garth Paine’s responsive, activated environments (Ghost in the Machine, Footfall, Map 1) make physical presence indispensable to the subtle invocations of the virtual.

His work explores the intimate, symbiotic relationships between presence and technology, the spectacle of the body in and impacting upon space. We’ve all heard the story of the butterfly and the storm, raising a skeptical eyebrow at the idea that fluttering here will create havoc elsewhere. Paine’s activated space installations are concerned with such relationships of indeterminate outcomes. More inventive than the average chaos theory text, they are persuasive in their dramatic performance of the idea that the observer does in fact modify the observed and that a footfall can erupt into alchemy.

Reeds is Garth Paine’s most elaborate development of this poetic, in which the organic and the technological synthesize into a hybrid ecology. Paine is interested in combining the organic and the digital in a conceptual as well as spatial sense.

The digital arts may not, as yet, have found their place, in an institutional or curatorial context. However Reeds eloquently demonstrates that digital aesthetics are equally at home in the garden as in the art gallery and interactivity has more to do with responsiveness than mice. The networked reed pods floating in the pond interact with the environment and at the same time trigger interactions that in turn contour our engagement with the space.

It is a happy accident that the maker of the reed pods, Christopher Langton, shares his name with the principal theorist of the science of Artificial Life. Deft assemblages of response and transmission, the pods manifest the dynamic processes of vitality that the other Langton identifies as the defining feature of life, or "aliveness", as he prefers to call it.

Paine’s activated, ecological space is in every way a living thing. Reeds is a complex feedback loop that integrates the rhythms of the natural world and the machinations of digital technology. It orchestrates the structures that control the random and unpredictable flows of information that sustain the ongoing polyphony we hear.

Responding to environmental information, such as light intensity, wind velocity and temperature fluctuations, the reed clusters play the environment like a musical instrument, a techno Aeolian harp or photosynthesizer, that amplifies the invisible and inaudible. Here is a music made of light as well as sound, of invisible and inaudible process. In listening to its performance, we hear the dynamo of ecology at work, humming, chirping and bleeping like so much wind in the reeds.

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