



Students with umbrellas on opening night of the 20th International Symposium on Electronic Art in the UAE

Location, Location The 20th International Symposium on Electronic Art in the United Arab Emirates

by Sabrina DeTurk

The 20th International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA2014) was hosted in the Middle East for the first time in October/November 2014. ISEA2014 featured work by over 100 artists, exhibited in locations throughout Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, as well as an academic conference held at Zayed University. Various workshops and performances rounded out the offerings and provided a wide range of opportunities for visitors and UAE residents to engage with the Symposium. ISEA2014 adopted the theme of "location" as an organizing principle and the artists who participated in the Symposium interpreted the theme in dozens of ways, in media including video, interactive sculpture, painting, performance, sound art, computer generated graphics and more.

In W3FI, Christopher Coleman and

Laleh Mehran created an immersive, interactive space in which real-time feeds from social networking sites in the Middle East met photos of gallery visitors across an expansive silhouette of the skylines of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The work engaged questions of how our lives are increasingly mediated and defined by our online networks and social environments and how the specificity of place and time influence our presentation of ourselves in these digital environments.

Continuing the theme of user engagement, but in a less digitally mediated way, Ana Rewakowicz presented, *LSS (Life Support System)*, an installation featuring several hanging, plastic spheres in which various plants are cultivated. The plants require inputs of air, nutrients and Co₂; the first two are provided through regulated systems while the provision of the third, Co₂,

is reliant on "donations" from gallery visitors who are invited to breathe into the spheres. The plants' survival is thus dependent on the physical presence and participation of viewers, linking them to the places and times in which the work is exhibited. According to Rewakowicz, the work references not only contemporary and emerging practices of hydroponics, but also the ancient Hanging Gardens of Babylon, providing a further site-specific link to the exhibition of the work in a Middle Eastern context.

In *Engines of Difference*, artists Jackie Calderwood and Lynne Heller used geocaching – a participatory treasure hunt through the urban landscape of Dubai – to collect images, sounds and other content about the city. This content, gathered by Symposium attendees who found the caches throughout the city, was used to create both a Second Life environment and a comic book reflecting on the adventure of urban navigation and seeing environments anew. Location in this work is thus reflected in both the physical location of Dubai, the



Christopher Coleman and Laleh Mehran, W3FI, 2014, mixed media installation, variable dimensions

virtual space of Second Life and the ongoing movement of the comics and other artifacts of the work as they are exhibited in locations around the world.

Several artists reflected in their work on the UAE's role as a global transportation hub and a place of exchange for people, products and ideas. In Zina Kaye's installation Space

Folding LED lights dance and change colors as they receive data from the Dubai airport, with specific colors and patterns reflecting incoming and outgoing air traffic. The viewer enters the space of the installation through an opening in the lights shaped like a traditional Arabic door, reinforcing the local identification of the work and



Zina Kaye, Space Unfolding, 2014, LED light installation. Photo by Raja Abdul Jabbar, Zayed University



Ana Rewakowicz, LSS (Life Support System), 2014, interactive installation

connecting an older architectural style with Dubai's role as a contemporary global transit hub.

Complementing the exhibitions was the academic conference, which featured panel presentations as well as keynote addresses by leading artists and thinkers in the field of electronic art: Sally Jane Norman, Erkki Huhtamo, Janet Echelman and Theo Jansen. All four gave engaging and inspiring talks and Jansen's demonstration of his *Strandbeests* through videos and models had the audience rapt with attention. The inclusion of Jansen's talk in this iteration of ISEA was particularly timely as the *Strandbeests* were set to make landfall in the U.S. a month later at Art Basel Miami Beach in advance of Jansen's first major U.S. exhibition scheduled for later in 2015 at the Peabody Essex Museum.

The above represent only a fraction of the creative output showcased during ISEA2014. The range of work presented, the number of countries represented by the Symposium participants and the enthusiastic participation of UAE universities, students, galleries and arts and culture professionals contributed to a highly successful and thought-provoking 20th anniversary Symposium.