Viewers are part of the medium and the message

BY LESLIE HOFFMAN

Anybody can be a celebrity now. From the proliferation of reality television shows such as "Survivor," "American Idol" and "Blind Date" to the media coverage of the war in Iraq, the imaginary line separating viewers from the world of media and entertainment has been chipped away. This intersection between the "real" world and its representation has become more and more self-referential as members of the public become aware of the possibility that they, or people like them, might appear in the media.

The current exhibition at the Wood Street Galleries—organized by New York curator writer and editor Timothy Drusen—displays a collection of installations exploring this concept. "Critical conditions information atmospheres and event scenes exhibition" questions such issues via Internet-based art that relies on the intersection between the viewer and the art itself.

"Empire," by Wolfgang Staehele, exemplifies the dissolution of the separation between the events of daily life and the recording of those events. In the gallery, a live Web-camera image of the Empire State Building is projected onto a wall-sized area. On a clear afternoon, the image is rather boring; it's just the iconic image against a pale blue sky. But when the viewer looks into account the collection of images amassed over the period of time spent watching it, the change in the sky and the events surrounding the building become significant. "Empire" raises questions concerning the perception of "real time" as well as how we as observers interact with a seemingly static object.

Staehele's work was inspired by Andy Warhol's seminal 1964 film of the same title in which a camera pointed at the Empire State Building recorded it in slow motion for eight hours and five minutes. Staehele updated the medium and introduced, by its live feed, the possibility that anything can happen.

Like "Empire," each of the pieces in the exhibition is concerned with the representation of cinema. In order to understand this concept, it's helpful to look at the breakdown of the word "cinema." Don't think of the word as much as a story represented on screen, but rather think of its Greek roots that mean "moving picture."

The installation "Unmovie" by a group of seven collaborators is in keeping with this theme. Rather than letting the audience remain passive observers to a sequence of predictable events, "Unmovie" forces them to anticipate rather than merely consume. The installation consists of two projections spliced across the wall in a haphazard fashion. The corners of the room break up the image. A collection of lights, and occasionally unrelated sound, plays in the space, the lights changing as the viewers walk near them.

Raided Lion-Rienero's "Vectorial Elevation" originated as a performance relying entirely on audience participation. The artist set up lights around Mexico City and then allowed invited visitors to the project's Web site, www.muzio.com, to create their own configurations. The artist displayed the light sculptures as they came in over the Internet and each sculpture could be seen in a 16-mile radius.

The "Vectorial Elevation" display at the gallery is a documentation of this event and consists of six photographs of the images captured in the night sky, a video, a computer with a browser pointed to the project's Web site, as well as two walls filled of prints of the public's requests for the sculptures. The designer's comments and dedications accompany each print.
Whether the virus itself is actually art is debatable, but the manner in which the collective has handled its subsequent publicity is truly what's intriguing.

In this respect, "hermaphrodite," refers to the idea of groups and individuals inversing their own identity through their own means as well as through the weakening fees separating the media from the public, an idea that runs rampant throughout the exhibit as a whole.

Despite this breakdown, the fact that the exhibit is the exhibit plus what has become a very public medium, the Wood Street Courtyard exhibit "hermaphrodite" is not as accessible as could have been expected. Each piece is challenging and complex, but not in a difficult or unpleasant manner. The true interaction inherent in such pieces comes within the minds of the viewers themselves.

The exhibit "verbal, conditional" information accompanied by event tours exhibits "signs at Wood Street Galleries throughout May 17. The exhibit is at 65 Wood St, Downey, and is open 11 am. to 5 pm. Tuesday and Wednesday and 11 am. to 7 pm. Thursday through Saturday. For more information, call 432 471 5666.

Leslie Phipps is a freelance writer.