art

Of Mice and Men:
Interactive Domains

A new generation
of viewers is targeted
through computer-
generated art

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TRIBUNE-REVIEW ART CRITIC

Most days, the most interactive I get is in front of the MAC machine, or on the telephone, navigating some robotic voice that is determined to inform me of unwanted options. Mention technology with interactivity, and a small black cloud forms over my head and stays there. Let's face it, some people are interactive and some are not. I'm not, particularly.

Over the past few years, interactive art using machines has made its way into Pittsburgh art spaces, at recent annual exhibitions of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh, at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts and in some of the university galleries. The work in question presupposes some under-standing of the operation of the "mouse" and computer technology in general. It doesn't take long to grasp the rudiments at the latest interactive show at the Wood Street Galleries, "Interactive Domains," although it might take longer than the organizers think. Curator Murray Horne has his eye on the new generation of art lovers, who are likely to take to this type of art as do ducks to water. He notes that children have grown up with video games "in which they control, in real time, their performance in illusory and virtual worlds."

Three of the four works in this exhibition have similar characteristics to video enter-tainments/games; the other is of a much more serious nature.

Eduardo Kac's "Genesis" is preoccupied with the important issues relating to genetic engineering. In the gallery, a Petrie dish containing a bacterium is subjected to special lighting which causes mutations in the bacterium itself. You, the visitor, and anyone on the Internet who finds the site, can control the lighting by clicking on the mouse. Kac parallels this with modifications to a significant text, in this case, a verse from the book of Genesis, which he succes-sively translates (or transmutes) into Morse code and then into DNA base pairs. By linking these two elements, mutation and translation, Kac presents a precarious analogy in which the visitor becomes a

'Interactive Domains'

▶ Works by Eduardo Kac, Luc Courchesen, Camille Utterback, Romy Achituv and Claudia Hart.
▶ Wood Street Galleries, Downtown.
▶ (412) 471-5605.
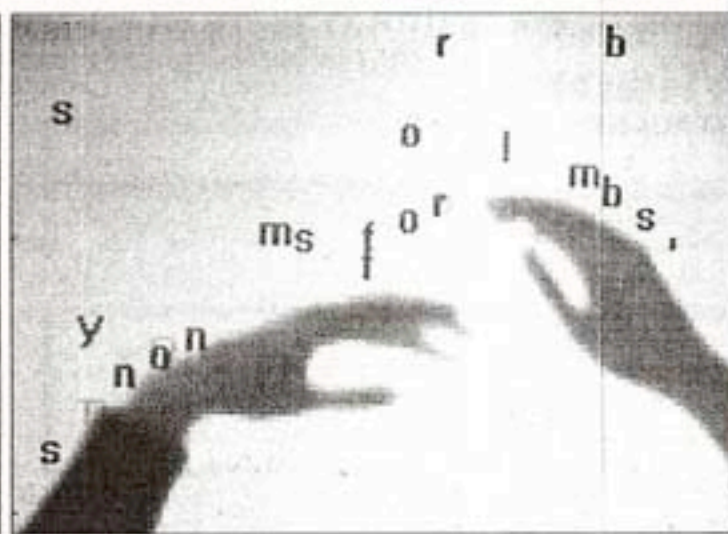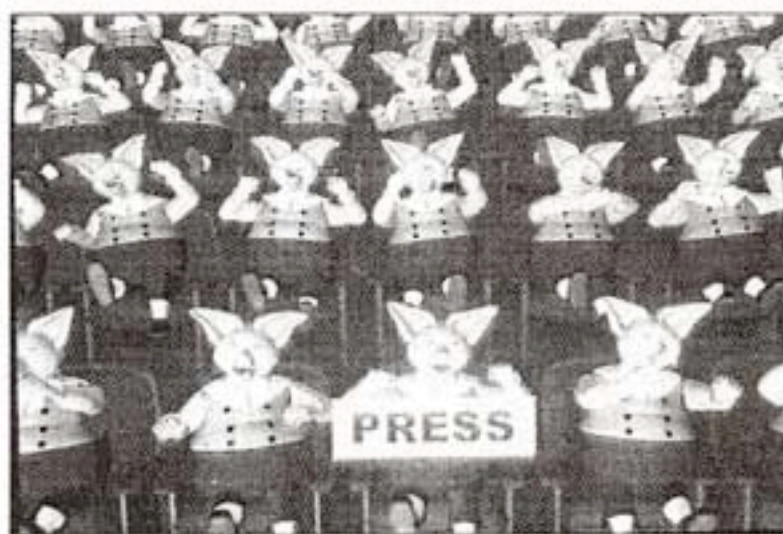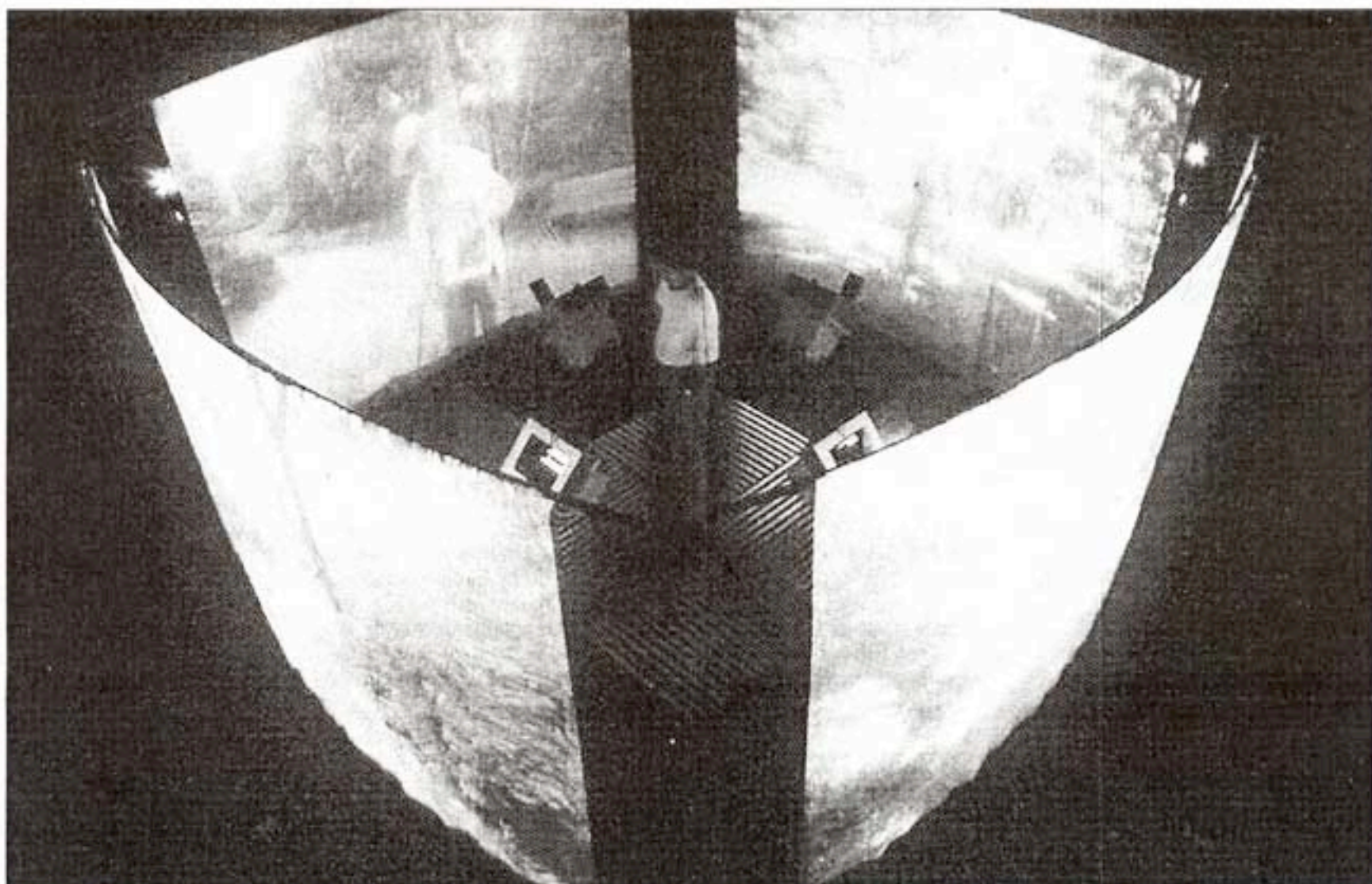
Above: Luc Courchesne's installation involving screens of a park in Montreal.

Bottom left: Claudia Hart's "Playworld.02."

Bottom right: Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv's interactive installation.

helpless participant.

Luc Courchesne's substantial installation creates in a darkened room the virtual reality of a public park in Montreal. The visitor can enter this space and there encounter virtual visitors wandering in the park. Clicking on the mouse facilitates some kind of engagement with these apparitions, who can take you on little trips through the park. The illusion of reality, if not totally convincing, is certainly disturbing. This kind of tension between reality and fiction, which was one of the themes in the last Carnegie International, asks us to consider the nature of communication, a major problem in contemporary life.

Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv invite you to walk into a space and view a large screen over the surface of which letters of the alphabet fall like raindrops. By entering the space, the visitor finds him- or herself projected on to the screen itself. The "rain" is interrupted and seems to form frag-ments of words or sentences. As the visitor moves about the room, the text seems to change. Words are affected not by the brain but by movement. The experience is certainly magical and hypnotic and effects another strange engagement, and over time, a sense of disembodiment.

Claudia Hart's "Playworld.02" is by far the most disturbing of the installations. A screen presents serried ranks of laughing pigs, a surreal audience that invites you to laugh with them. (You do — at first.) But if you press a button, conspicuously located on the

screen, another aural element undermines the laughter. It is the sound of a crying woman that creeps up from behind. The laughter of the piggy audience is under-mined; humor becomes menacing. Well, you pressed the button. I can't imagine anybody remaining in this compelling installation for more than a few minutes.

With video games, the participant can reasonably get lost in the experience (it's only a game). But at Wood Street, the chal-lenge is the opposite — the artist and the viewer need to sustain their own identities. The experience can be both stimulating and exhausting.

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