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look and “listen”

MIT installation offers glimpse
of Internet life

By MARY JO PALUMBO

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to eavesdrop on all the chatter buzzing around on the Internet at any given moment? Two -artists have found an ingenious way to do it. "Listening Post," a hypnotic installation on display through April 4 at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, allows viewers to see and hear dozens of anonymous conversations taking place at that moment in public Internet forums. Viewers walk into a dark room where hundreds of small, rectangular computer screens hang from the ceiling like a massive beaded curtain. A robotic synthesized voice reads words as they flash across the massive grid of screens - the kind used by cashiers in supermarket checkouts. Words and fragments of conversation weave through the curtain of computers like a neon green thread as the synthesized voice relays the anonymous ambiguous messages. Cyber-chatter is captured in real time from a computer that searches Internet forums, chat rooms and bulletin boards. "The exhibit picks up the collective buzz," said artist Ben Rubin, a Boston native who runs a multimedia design firm in New York City. "It reflects what people are thinking about in the world. You'll find people talking about Bush's military service, or having a needlepoint discussion." Rubin created the installation with Marb, Hansen, a statistician and professor at the University of California at Los Angeles. "Listening Post" is one of six exhibits in "Son et Lumiere" (Sound and Light) at MIT's List Visual Arts Center. Artists use film projections, hidden cameras, LED screens, antiquated speakers and dramatic lighting to create contemplative or provoking experiences for viewers. In "Listening Post," the artists have programmed the computer to pull words or sentences according to predefined parameters. One programmed algorithm searches Internet chat rooms for sentences that start with 'I love.' The lulling, synthesize voice reads the sentences as they weave across the screens: "I love my hair... I love my coffee.... love my cats." The artists have chosen to keep other programming parameters secret, as the computer displays mysterious, intriguing snippets of conversation: "Lay off the glue.... It's all about stamina You are extremely sick.... I'm afraid if I hit it, it will hurt my hand...." In all of the exhibits, a space filled with moving lights, sounds or images is at first disorienting as the viewer tries to figure out what's going on. In "Hallway," Boston artist Michael Mittelman has replicated a corridor from suburban home complete with hardwood floor, windows, a door and pictures hanging on the wall. As visitors stand in the space, shadowy figures begin to move behind the darkened window. After a few moments, the viewer is likely to realize that the figures behind the glass are actually images of the people standing in the exhibit space, distorted by a camera that mixes the image and a time delay. The eerie, floating figures and the strange sounds that accompany them are generated by the movement and voices of the visitors. "A lot of my work is about haunting memories," said Mittelman. "After a while you understand that the thing haunting the space is you. It's our own ideas and actions that keep us up at night." In "Bipolar Radiance" Gloucester artist Bruce Bemis has taken salvaged home movie footage of the 1951 Ice Capades and created a shimmering, incandescent distortion. Bemis projects the film onto two mirrored globes, which then reflect on the wall. As a skater clad in a purple sequined outfit performs her fastest twirl, the image loses coherence and the skater seems to break apart into a sparkling, plum-colored whirl. The artist's work speaks to the fragility of memory and our painstaking efforts to preserve it. "Each of these installations leave room for the imagination," said MIT curator Bill Arning, who organized the show. "Each piece takes time. There are no quick reads here. You need to go in with an attitude of curiosity and exploration. The show is about the deep listening, which is sometimes about listening to yourself"

"Son et Lumiere" at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, 20Amers St., Cambridge,through
April 4. Call 617-253-4400or go to web.mit.edu/lvac.