

"SON ET LUMIERE"

MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER,
CAMBRIDGE, MA

By MICHELLE KUO

By now, sound and projected light commonly fill art galleries with a stroboscopic din and flash. It's rare, however, that an exhibition self-consciously interrogates the terms of these synesthetic experiences or the technological means by which they are achieved. Curator Bill Arning's "Son et Lumiere" deftly did so, tying the contemporary flood of multisensory environments to its kitsch parallel: the large-scale sound-and-light show traditionally employed at historic monuments. If colored laser narratives at Cheops or Versailles offer a certain psychedelic rush uncannily recycled for each incoming audience, the works in Arning's show explored the same curious combination of bodily thrill and its mechanical repetition. The exhibition conspicuously avoided video and DVD projection, returning instead to a variety of outmoded media. Every piece called attention to its retro-grade devices, including LED screens, 16 mm film, halogen lightbulbs, and 1940s movie-theater speakers. But the revelation of awkward machine undersides was far from demystifying. Rather, the works revived the technological and perceptual spectacle each apparatus must have sparked at the moment of its introduction.

Wonder was immediately generated at the show's entrance by Bruce Bemis's *Bipolar Radiance*, 2003. An arrhythmia of scratches and slices was loosely synced to a projection of found 16mm film footage featuring a lone skater at the 1951 Ice Capades and Follies. Two suspended, rotating mirrored globes reflected her sequined leaps and tricks in an acute distortion. Flashing like some alien disco inferno, the installation managed to provoke both critical reflection on the relation between sound and image and a wholesale delectation of all things shiny and spectral. It also staged a lament: The relentless looping of the skater's distended smile and noisy glide evoked the same sense of loss that we have at the replay of historical films, whether those of Zapruder or Ken Burns. The work deformed the spectatorial conventions of home movies and narrative cinema even as it roused their aesthetic and sentimental effects.

Call it anti-spectacular spectacle: These strange bedfellows were paired once again in Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin's *Listening Post*, 2002, a floor-to-ceiling array of 131 miniature LED monitors and a multichannel voice synthesizer. The artists culled random data in real time from online discussion forums and filtered them into a seventeen minute suite of linguistic and perceptual play. Installed in isolation last year at the Whitney, the piece gained new significance in "Son et Lumiere," where one recognized it as a continuously repeating cycle among others. Like Bemis's melancholy yet mechanized Ice Capader, *Listening Post* turned absurd bits of information ("U turn me on, dragon dove~-45!") into a sensory surround both affecting and ceaselessly renewed. Fragments of speech scrolled across the screens, manipulated by Mallarmean devices of chance, typography, and predetermined series. Yet rather than simply a dissection of materials akin to '60s structuralist film or a critique of public speech a la Jenny Holzer, *Listening Post* was a haunting polyphony of narratives. Language, looking, and listening were defamiliarized, yet pathos remained. Arning's brochure text alluded to the work's "testament to our common humanity," but the real heft of *Listening Post* was its ability to evoke this utopian ideal while displaying the routine and commercial intermediaries on which such myths are built.

Other works similarly heightened aesthetic and emotional experiences, only to undo their illusion. Ann Lislegaard's *Corner Piece-The Space Between Us* 1000-1003, comprised a reconstruction of a room's corner, perfectly echoing the actual corner behind it. Between these two layers, hidden halogen lamps flashed in time with a voice-over monologue. In a nourish narration, a woman conspiratorially described the clothes, motions, and thoughts of another woman in precisely the same environment as the installation. A kind of anti-cinema thus occurred on the blank "screen" of the artificial wall, as *Corner Piece* dismantled the conventional coherence of image and sound. One's perception hit a dead end, in a twist on the literal blockage of Robert Morris's *Untitled (Corner Piece)*, 1964.

Two installations were set apart from the exhibition's main galleries, and, perhaps accordingly, they were weaker than the rest. Michael Mittelman's *Hallway*, 2003-2004, confronted audiences with the delayed feedback of their own sounds and ghostly images (captured by hidden camera) in the claustrophobic mise-en-scene of a house corridor. In Mittelman's hands, the complexity of closed-circuit video devolved into banal fright-show tactics. Jessica Rylan's *The Voice of the Theatre*, 2003-2004, also used stage props - velvet curtains, a proscenium - in this case to house a forlorn 1940s movie-palace sound system and its faint twitters. But Rylan's technostalgia remained inert, fading to fully explore the implications of her archaic materials.

Nonetheless, all the works in "Son et Lumiere" functioned as microcosms for the show as a whole: a total environment that estranged the act of beholding yet sustained modes of narrative - ad infinitum, in a restless automatic drive. Arning is right to connect this set of paradoxes to the tourist entertainment shows at historical monuments. These events have their roots in a postwar World's Fair aesthetic that brought about a fascinating collusion between corporate spectacle and avant-garde experience. Consider Le Corbusier's Philips Pavilion, commissioned by the Dutch electronics company for the 1958 Brussels World's Fair, which housed a grand program of light, film, and sound compositions; or its neighbor, Disney's Circarama, a 360 degree projection theater that promised another totalizing assault on the senses. Both projects were invested in the power of kinesthetic experience, on the one hand, and its endless reproducibility on the other. At its best, "Son et Lumiere" replicated these blockbuster effects while exposing their structural underpinnings - technological forms based on eventual obsolescence and duplication.

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