

Projected Others

Kathy Cleland

Catalogue Essay for *Mirror States* exhibition
www.mirrorstates.com

In *Mirror States* we enter a magical and responsive exhibition environment where art works don't just sit passively in the gallery waiting to be looked at, they actively engage the audience, interacting with us in real time, talking to us and positioning us as interactive partners not just mere observers.

Moving through the exhibition we interact with an intriguing series of digital 'others' in the form of simulated personas and intelligent computer systems. As human-computer interface designers strive to make our computers more 'user-friendly,' increasingly we are seeing the computer take on a human face in the form of simulated personas and virtual characters. Over the last 10 years we have seen a wide range of virtual humanoid characters appearing in our media- and cyber-spheres offering new and seductive possibilities for encounters between humans and digital others.

Hye Rim Lee's digital character TOKI is a seductive vision of artificial beauty and allure. Inspired by Asian anime heroines, she is the ultimate virtual female fantasy figure, a classic anime beauty with petite mouth and nose, and large expressive eyes. She primps and preens in the mirror-like portals of Powder Room and comes over the virtual femme fatale in the giant projection of Lash. She coos and sighs at us, fluttering her eyelashes seductively but behind her surface beauty and seductiveness is a hint of hidden depths and dangers. Just who is this alien digital beauty and what does she want with us? Why won't she speak to us?

TOKI may not speak to us, but the digital personas in Anna Davis and Jason Gee's *Biohead Actualized* do nothing but talk. The bioheads—digitally animated images of ventriloquist doll heads—call out to audience members telling them their psychological problems and giving random unsolicited advice. Even though the bioheads are not truly interactive—their comments are pre-programmed—the audience is caught up in an engaging and humorous interaction with these uncanny and quirky personas.

With TOKI and the bioheads we see digital 'life' breathed into the digital other through a combination of computer graphics and animation techniques. Other art works in *Mirror States* take this process a step further by using sensing technologies and automated 'intelligent' programming to enable digital entities to more fully engage and interact with audience members.

As the digital other becomes animated, autonomous and responsive, it becomes a true digital subject capable of acting as a partner to its human interlocutors. The use of vision, motion and other sensing technologies to trigger autonomous actions and behaviours means that art works can interact with audiences in lively and unpredictable ways. These lively new digital entities don't necessarily have to look human, as long as they act and respond in life-like or human ways we will

anthropomorphise them, projecting human-like meanings, motivations and emotions into their computer-generated outputs and behaviours. The digital other can also be embodied in the gallery space through physical objects and self-moving robotic devices.

The ‘fish’ and ‘bird’ characters in Mari Velonaki’s *Fish-Bird: Circle C – Movement B* are artificially intelligent computer entities embodied in the form of robotic wheelchairs so they can move about in the gallery space interacting with each other and with audience members. At times shy and at times curious, they move around the gallery space communicating via poetic texts which are printed out and left strewn on the gallery floor. In another room ‘fish’ and ‘bird’ are reincarnated in Circle D: Fragile Balances as stationary interactive boxes relying on audience members to pick them up and move them about. The boxes have four luminous screens where their text messages are dynamically displayed, wrapping around from screen to screen as the viewer moves them around.

The endearing human-like characteristics of ‘fish’ and ‘bird’ provide a strong counterpoint to the alien non-human intelligence of David Rokeby’s *The Giver of Names*. Here we see the ‘mind’ of the computer system in action as it looks at a series of objects placed on a pedestal in front of it and decides what names to give them. The computer system sees the objects through a video camera and this image is projected onto a screen so we can see what the computer sees and watch the methodical machine-like way it analyses the object’s colour, shape and texture and component parts before ‘naming’ and describing it. The names and descriptions are drawn from a poetic database of known objects, ideas and sensations that are also displayed for us to see so we can witness the computer’s decision-making process. Watching this painstaking process of analysis, interpretation and naming, it’s impossible not to reflect on the difference between the holistic process of human vision and recognition—we see an object and know and name it automatically—and the alien ‘machinic’ thought processes of the digital other of the computer system.

In Sean Kerr’s work *Klunk, Clomp, Aaugh! - Friends Reunited* computer systems generate a series of playful interactions between the audience and art work. The cheeky agency of the computer system positions it as an ‘intelligent’ and sentient entity luring the audience members into humorous and unexpected encounters. The computer system senses our presence and movements and ‘watches’ us via a pair of giant cartoon-like eyes that follow us as we move around the gallery, makes rude sounds and inflates a giant plastic finger to ‘give us the finger.’

As well as these interactions with simulated personas and intelligent digital entities, in *Mirror States* we also see ourselves become ‘others’ as our images are digitally processed and transformed before our eyes. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes this uncanny splitting and doubling of the self as “the cunning advent of myself as other” (1). As the self is captured and projected we become part of the art work, our transformed images externalised in the gallery space for us to interrogate and interact with.

In Janine Randerson’s *albedo of clouds* our images are reflected back to us amidst shifting cloudscapes projected in perspex domes. With David Rokeby’s *Very Nervous System* we play and interact with our sonic doppelgängers and in *The Heart Library*

George Khut uses biofeedback to trigger rippling audio-visual transformations in our captured images. Across the gallery in John Tonkin's *time and motion study* the captured images of our bodies are projected as a series of still frames which are dynamically animated as a luminous sequence we can drag around and fly through. In these works we come face to face with our audiovisual doppelgängers projecting our identity into these transformed and defamiliarised others. In another room, we peer through the portals of Alex Davies' *Dislocation* to see our video images merged in real-time with a series of pre-recorded video 'phantoms' creating uncanny mergers of the real and the virtual.

Both engaging and challenging, the art works we see in *Mirror States* show us a variety of different types of audience interaction with projected digital selves and digital others. The new digital 'others' we see in *Mirror States* are animated and responsive, sharing the characteristics and behaviours we associated with real living beings and starting to display signs of emergent life and subjectivity. Whether these new digital others are cute and friendly or truly alien, their lively and responsive behaviours position them as true interactive partners for the human cohorts pointing to a shared future terrain where our digital selves and digital others will interact in ever more intimate ways.

(1) Barthes, R. (1993). *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*. London: Vintage.

© 2008 Kathy Cleland