

David Rokeby, *Oakville Galleries*, Oakville, Ontario, 25 June to 17 October 2004

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David Rokeby
Machine for Taking Time
 Installation View
 2001



David Rokeby

Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario
 25 June to 17 October 2004

David Rokeby is perhaps one of Canada's most important figures in the art world – certainly in the electronic art world. He has received the Prix Ars Electronica Golden Nica, presented at the Venice Biennale, and the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2002. It is no wonder that new-media students around the world study his work and writings and that institutions offer workshops on software that he has been developing since the early 1980s. Indeed, Rokeby works precisely on the fine line between art and science, but, unlike most artist-scientists, he considers fully the importance of aesthetics and technological reliability, and for this reason alone he is revered as a leader in the media-art community.

Rokeby's recent retrospective at Oakville Galleries, curated by Su Ditta, was a smorgasbord of enchanting installations that confirm his place at the forefront of emerging art forms. Most of today's interactive art retains the same properties as the first active-participatory electronic works created thirty years ago – namely, that after a period of continuous interaction with the artwork, visitors can decipher the program behind the interactivity.

Action A = Response A; Action B = Response B.

Just as photographers at the beginning of the twentieth century experimented with processes that moved their art form away from mere portrayal of nature, electronic artists are finally beginning to delve beyond the initial fascination with interaction into areas of experimentation that cannot yet be defined. David Rokeby, however, is a step ahead of the game.

What Rokeby does best is meld visual art forms with theories of virtuality and humanity. One of his earlier works, exhibited as part of the Oakville Galleries retrospective, *The Giver of Names* (1991–), is an installation in which visitors select one or a few objects from a pile on the floor and place it or them on top of a white pedestal. A camera trained on the top of the pedestal provides footage for real-time projection on a far wall within the room. Within the system, a computer processes a number of variables within the image and generates sentences in English that are spoken aloud. This piece is part art, part science, and, to some visitors, part poetry. Rokeby's work often explores human functions, such as how we see, interpret, and communicate our surroundings. And like humans, *The Giver of Names* is able to convey its observations based only on an associative database of known words, objects, and ideas.

Similarly, *n-cha(n)t* (2001) is an installation that communicates its perception of its surroundings, though sonically rather than visually. This piece was installed at Centennial Square (Oakville Galleries' second space) and comprises seven computers, seven monitors, seven microphones, seven sets of speakers, and voice-recognition software. The monitors are suspended from the ceiling in a lopsided grid, resembling positions of a small choral group. The computers are networked together so that they communicate internally, and in their "resting" state they chant in unison. Images of ears on the monitors entice visitors to speak. When one of the computers picks up external audio, it attempts to

understand what was spoken, causing that particular computer to fall out of sync with the others and the chant to break up into individual voices. After a while, the flow of ideas within the internal network is remastered and the single chant begins again. Our exact effect on the piece is not easily understood – do we in fact expand the piece's knowledge base? Or is our oral presence a mere instance in passing?

This exploration in interaction is perhaps best investigated through Rokeby's most influential work, *Very Nervous System* (1982–2004). One of his earliest works, it is also a groundbreaking piece that challenges our commonest notions of computer art as mechanical, raw, and cold. Instead of working toward artificial life and organic technology, Rokeby works to enhance our humanity.

His work with *Very Nervous System* has resulted in the creation of open-source software called SoftVNS, which many electronic artists endeavour to learn, modify, and utilize in creating interactive installations and performances. The piece itself appears as an empty room. There are video cameras located above an invisible grid in the room, which tracks movement within the space and interprets it into sound and music. The program and system were developed by Rokeby in the early 1980s, when computer processing and existing software were too slow for the 1/30 second required for the work. An interesting tip for people interacting with the piece is that smaller movements result in more elaborate audio. Rokeby intends to emphasize his definition of interaction with this piece – mutual influence is required, rather than once side taking control of the work. *Very Nervous System* also reminds us that all technological equipment is essentially the same in that it requires both electronic parts and some sort of code, and that its marketed functions are not necessarily all that it can be used for.

However, the most fascinating and relevant concept behind Rokeby's more recent works is one in which video cameras are used for the purposes of recording and playing back live, visual observation. *Machine for Taken Time* (2001–) was commissioned by Oakville Galleries and installed in Gairloch Gardens (the main gallery space). The camera captures 1,080 still images per day from precise pan and tilt positions. These stills are then "knit" together and presented as a seamless journey through the database of images, with seasons changing every few minutes and the occasional fleeting appearance of people walking through the gardens. This temporal conflation is not new to media art, yet Rokeby has created a piece that is memorable because of its transparent process and pleasing visuals.

Three installations within the retrospective, *Watch*, *Seen*, and *Taken*, explore the notion of surveillance and the processes that, although more artistic in the context of Rokeby's work, could potentially serve to identify and associate each figure that passes through the camera's frame. *Watch* (1995, 2003) was a camera directed at an intersection outside of Centennial Square. A single monitor located inside the library showed live footage from the camera, but with a program that divided the footage into movement and stillness. The video that visitors observed in the library switched from showing moving objects in the intersection to still objects. In one instant, visitors saw a nearby tree; in the next instant, the tree disappeared and the falling rain became apparent. After the first few minutes, *Watch* seems, more than anything, merely to demonstrate Rokeby's flair for programming within a closed-circuit-video environment, but its greater implications become apparent after viewing the other two visually similar works.

Rokeby's entry in the 8th International Architecture Exhibition at the 2002 Venice Biennale was *Seen* (2002), an installation in which the camera was situated at Piazza San Marco, the busiest pedestrian square on the island. The piece's greatest aesthetic strength, albeit unknown to Rokeby himself when he created the work, was the significant number of pigeons that passed through the piazza, forming trails of movement and tracing a history of their inhabitation of spaces that humans could never reach naturally. *Seen* adds to *Watch* in its processes of the video – the first displays movement only (similar to *Watch*), the second folds the first process onto itself in accumulating layers at a half-second delay, the third displays the trajectory of each moving object, and the fourth process reverses the first, showing objects that are still – again, similar to *Watch*.

The third surveillance-themed piece in the retrospective, *Taken* (2002), records the history of visitors within the gallery space. There are two projections – in the first, all the actions of all visitors are accumulated into a densely layered video loop, and in the second, individual visitors are tracked and their heads are captured and presented in a grid-like archive. Collectively, these three pieces make obvious our immediate social concerns.

David Rokeby has been working for over twenty years in an art world in which media art is only beginning to receive recognition as a form that has very specific theories and methods. It is an art form that is rooted within all others, and Rokeby continues to lead the way in developing ideas for a field whose materials and implications are still uncertain.

Jessica Fung

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de poses, d'expressions ou de regards. Nous sommes placés devant la possibilité d'actions simultanées qui ne convergent pas nécessairement. La scène demeure ainsi en suspens, elle ouvre sur quelque chose qui a lieu ailleurs, dans une sorte de hors-champ de l'image.

Dans *La ronde*, une des premières expérimentations vidéo de l'artiste, les « figurants » sont encore une fois pétrifiés, alors que l'image tourne éternellement sur elle-même. L'installation est composée de trois vidéos projetées simultanément de manière à produire un espace circulaire. Dans chaque scène, filmées à des moments et dans des lieux différents, les personnages tiennent la pose, ils retiennent leur souffle et demeurent immobiles sans même cligner des yeux pendant qu'une caméra suspendue au plafond pivote de façon régulière pour encercler l'espace d'un travelling de quelque 30 secondes avant de revenir à son point de départ. Les films sont ensuite montés en boucle et, grâce à la technologie numérique qui permet de construire une boucle parfaite, le raccord entre la première et la dernière image s'effectue sans faille, créant ainsi l'illusion d'un mouvement lisse et continu. D'un côté, la boucle permet d'optimiser la visualité, la présence de l'image y est plus flottante et le mouvement du temps, plus fluide; de l'autre, les personnages sont littéralement pétrifiés et les scènes se trouvent réduites à leur plus simple expression narrative. L'inactivité accentue donc le fait qu'il ne se passe presque rien en même temps qu'elle exacerbe les qualités fluides d'une image sans fin. Comme l'« éternel retour du même » dont parlait Nietzsche, les projections se répètent, repassent toujours au même endroit et forment une ronde ininterrompue.

Marie Fraser

Marie Fraser est historienne de l'art et commissaire indépendante.

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