

Observatoire 4 *Vacancy kit*

Kathryn Mockler

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[See table of contents](#)

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Vacancy Kit

You walk into a dimly lit room from where an unusual but familiar sound is coming. You approach what appears to be a vacant lot: a pentagon of rubble with a concrete block at each point. In one block is a computer screen which can be activated using the plastic "credit cards" scattered among the rubble. You try to make sense of the images appearing before you on the screen: ear, breast, hip, testes, hand... and before you know it you are captivated by the technological world in front of you.

This is *Vacancy Kit*, an interactive installation by two British artists known as Kit, shown in a recent exhibition at Observatoire 4 in Montreal.

Why do they call themselves Kit? "We wanted a name that wasn't specifically male or female", and Kit fit the bill. Gender neutrality is a theme which is consistent throughout the *Vacancy Kit* installation. The prosthetic body at the beginning of the computer program has testes and it has a breast; "it's a model of replacement and a model of androgyny which purports to the operation of a kit."

The name also has to do with a kit being about the construction of something. The work is constructed by an amalgam of different personalities which bring to light the various contradictions within the installation. None of Kit's work is intended to be a coherent message coming from one view point. This installation is full of contradictions. What you see isn't necessarily what you get.

This is true of the five concrete blocks. The wheels on the blocks contradict physical

evidence. The blocks look solid and heavy but at the same time the wheels contradict this and make the blocks look light. Kit see the idea of being true to materials as an "art cliché" and this is what they are trying to undo. The blocks are also meant to be the sacrificial element of the program. Sacrificial in terms of giving up one ideology for another, the natural body being sacrificed for or supplemented by technology.

The pentagon of rubble represents points of power, according to Kit, but as with the blocks there are contradictions here as well. It refers to the pentacle, the idea of sacrifice being a part of witchcraft, the loss of body within the paranormal, how we perceive the ambiguous body in paranormal, and how we perceive our own body. But the pentagon also pertains to symbols of power such as the American Pentagon, the military's use of technology, and the "subsequent effects of manipulation and monitoring on the public body".

Although Kit may refer to the military and the paranormal, the former being an official source of power and the latter an alternative source of power, they try not to focus on opposites, but direct their attention instead to the space between the opposites. They are trying to undo or deconstruct dualism. This reiterates once again the idea behind the collaboration, which is to find a place between the dichotomy of male and female.

Kit describe the use of the "credit cards" as a non-exclusive experience because they can be found scattered in the rubble.



Originally Kit wanted the audience to use their own credit cards but soon realized that in doing this they would fall into the same trap that the technology does, namely that only people having enough money to have a credit card could activate the computer program. Consequently, Kit included the "credit cards" as part of the installation.

Each plastic card reads *Bordering a Smooth Lacuna Your 5 Characters Speak of a Body They Have Fabricated*. Kit explain that this relates to the five blocks. There were five figures who fabricated a body and essentially disappeared from the blocks and went into the computer program. This symbolizes the fact that the physical installation and the actual program are very much a part of the same conceptual system, that the work is integrated, although it may not appear so at first glance.

The significance of the number five in both the physical and technological components

of the installation is also indicative of this interconnectedness. In one part of the computer program a pair of hands press into concrete, the concrete breaks apart and then forms a pentagon. The pentagon on the screen corresponds to the pentagon of rubble the same way the five characters correspond to the five concrete blocks.

Kit describe the computer program in terms of a schizophrenic video game. The five characters are associated with "multiple identities". Video games are structured, you know who you are, what you look like, your qualities, your strengths and weaknesses, and who your enemies are. But in the *Vacancy Kit* program you don't know any of this so it's like "you're trying to play a game of identity within a video game".

At the bottom of the screen is a box where you can receive communications. These communications are written in the language of horoscope and

Vacancy Kit, 1994. Rubble, wood, concrete, wheels, computer, credit cards. Interactive installation. Galerie Observatoire 4, Montréal.

psychology and explore how character is prescribed to people. "It's a mish-mash of voices from positions of supposed authority designating who you are or what your childhood was or what your future holds. The communications are trying to dislocate the position of character while you're playing the program."

Kit explain that most people who are used to any kind of computer expect things to happen quickly. But they won't find that here. This program is slow. It contradicts the correlation between speed and technology. Kit feel that "people don't seem to be willing to experiment or allow technology to be other than speed and image and high resolution". They are hoping that people will begin to look at the different ways technology can be used, deconstructed, or abused.

What about the sound? "It's from a video arcade", Kit explain. "We walked around an arcade with a microphone, the cacophony of noises makes it sound distorted." But some of the noises are quite clear like the cars and motorcycles which come from driving games. The sound, like the blocks, the pentagon, and the five characters, is linked to both the technological world and the physical world. It is simultaneously the computer game and the vacant lot. It also refers to the way we slip between computer space and physical space and how it's so interwoven that sometimes it's difficult to distinguish



what we do in each space.

Interactivity is an important aspect of this installation. Kit see their work as art for an audience rather than an art which exists for itself. An audience must interact with this installation in order for it to reach its full potential. But Kit also realize that the idea of interactivity is very questionable. How interactive is something if it comes from a list that someone else has compiled? Kit site the future five-hundred channel universe as an example. The demographic programs that are being introduced into culture are almost scary, according to Kit. "You feed into it by statistics — your age group, your race, your gender, your interests. It takes from the programs that you watch, decides what kind of person you are, and then has advertising specific to your demographic group. It's a controlled experiment which

channels your identity into a constructed group character."

The *Vacancy Kit* installation may raise some serious questions about the rate at which we are progressing technologically, our increasing dependence on computers and machines, and how the individual will fit into it all. But Kit prefer not to talk about our relationship to technology in terms of positive and negative, "it's not as easy as that... it's a mixture of things which can be good for some people and not for other people".

Kit see video games as relevant to the art world in that they make the viewer think in terms of image rather than mathematics or language. "It may be possible that kids who learn to play video games are learning in spatial-visual terms. Maybe people will become more visually literate as a result." ■

Kathryn Mockler

Vacancy Kit, 1994. Detail. Interactive installation. Galene Observatoire 4, Montréal.