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Kit and Robert Saucier, *Infrasense*, Fonderie Darling, Montréal

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Montreal

Infrasense : Stories from the Horse's Mouth.

A project by KIT and Robert Saucier

Kit and Robert Saucier, Infrasense, Fonderie Darling, Montréal.

Infrasense, a first-time collaboration between artists KIT and Robert Saucier, is a touring exhibition that is showing in eleven galleries across Canada, U.S.A., U.K. and Belgium. Walking into the gallery space at the Darling Foundry in Montreal, *Infrasense* is akin to stepping inside a video game, a digital simulation of a horse race. Nine horses, designed by the artists as an amalgamation of hundreds of 3-D and 2-D representations of the mythical Trojan horse throughout history, move in a slow, linear fashion across the gallery. They do so in such a way that the non-linear fashion and fractured sounds the horses emit become an instantly juxtaposing and jarring dynamic for the audience. These mechanical horses are sensor-based robots that react either to the wall that has been constructed around them or to the other robotic components of the installation. Each horse has a backpack made from the plastic of dead computers. In each pack are speakers emit the murmuring sounds of the local population's voices, a different voice coming from each box, all being amplified, albeit quietly.

Accompanying the horses are three robotic 'bugs,' which appear insect-like in their shape and through their busy vexing motions around the horses. The name *bug*, such as that of the Trojan Horse, is an obvious reference to a viral entity of the Internet variety. The viewers are encouraged to pick up a remote control and control one of the bugs. When a bug comes near a horse, the horse stops briefly, allowing the volume of its voice to rise so that the viewer can hear segments of its story. What these mechanical horses are uttering are different stories about viruses; personal accounts of bodily or computer-based viral experiences. Airing these viral stories leads KIT and Saucier to look at our current information age and the way paranoia and fear fuel the rapidity of those narrative flows. One of the bugs in the *Infrasense* installation can also be controlled via the internet by logging onto the project's website (www.infrasense.net). With the camera that has been installed in the gallery space, users of *Infrasense* have the opportunity to type in commands, which will make the bug move right, left or forward in the actual space. As a result, users in different cities and countries can direct one of the bugs and move it to locations, which will then trigger the horses to speak, subsequently affecting the audience in the gallery. This component of the installation raises questions of what telerobots bring to contemporary culture and questions about the sense of responsibility users of this technology assume, or in fact, do not assume.

Since the 1990s, there has been a drastic shift in the way Western society and larger urban cities of developing nations have been accessing information. Although discussion about telepistemology, the study of knowledge acquired from a distance, started with the introduction of telegraphy and television, the Internet has created a massive shift in the amount of information transmitted between individuals,

Media. Fonderie Darling (Quartier Éphémère, Montreal) in March/April 2005. Photo : Çinga Su. URL : www.infrasense.net

KIT & Robert Saucier, *Infrasense*, 2004. Robotic sound installation interacted with in the gallery or via the Internet. Neutral Ground (Canada) in June/July 2005. Mixed Media. Photo : KIT. URL : www.infrasense.net

companies and countries. Ultimately this has led to acts of learning and interaction becoming more remote then ever before. As Albert Borgman argues in his book, *Information and Reality at the Turn of the Millennium*, the Internet has made people lose the attentiveness necessary to obtain knowledge.[1] So, while there is all this information ready to be accessed, and although we have not lost interest in doing so, the fact that the information is so abundant and easily accessible has created a loss of patience to fully grasp the ideas, as we want to move on to the next idea, page or site without fully understanding the depth of what we have traversed. Telerobots, robots controlled from a distance, have also become widely used and are an important constituent that adds to distant learning. The use of telerobots dates back to the 1940s when they were used to handle radioactive materials.[2] They are currently used extensively by the U.S. military in acts of war for purposes such as bomb disposal and by NASA scientists for exploring Mars, using 'Sojourner'. Recently in England, two robotic medics have been introduced into a hospital's telemedicine test. These telemedical robots do not physically examine patients but glide from one bed to another, interacting with patients that have just been through surgery. Cameras are placed in different locations of the hospital room, making it possible for the doctor who is controlling the robot via a joystick to see where it is going and who it is interacting with.[3]

Like many artists, Ken Goldberg has been exploring telepistemology by questioning knowledge and perception gained from a distance. One of his more recent works, *Telegarden*, a robotic-based Internet project, allowed users to control a robot situated in the Ars Electronica Museum in Austria. The users were able to plant seeds and water a real garden via the internet. *The Robot In the Garden : Telerobotics and Telepistemology in the Age of the Internet*, a book edited by Goldberg includes several essays that look

KIT & Robert Saucier, *Infrasense*, 2004. Robotic sound installation interacted with in the gallery or via the Internet. Mixed Media. Fonderie Darling [Quartier Éphémère, Montreal] in March/April 2005. Photo : Çinga Su. URL : www.infrasense.net

dormant waiting to be activated by entering a new system or network. Both types of viruses infect, self-replicate and spread.

The bug and the Trojan horse are only two of many metaphors used to name viruses on the Internet. KIT and Saucier have taken these metaphors from the virtual space domain – due and have physically rendered them into moving elements. Through the *Infrasense* website, we see these corporeal viruses being sent back to the virtual world. For the user of the website, the thought and threat of catching something through the virtual domain – due to involvement and interaction with viral culture – changes the dynamics of using the Internet, creating a sense of paranoia. This element of the exhibition critiques constant feelings of unrest, of being at risk and notions of trust that have formed new dynamics of interaction within our daily lives. The artists suggest that, through interacting with the web component of the project, the users will risk transmission. However, for the users in the actual space, the dynamic of the installation is somewhat different. The wall constructed around the robots creates a confined space where the two viral components, the Trojan Horse and the bug, interact. Juxtaposing this to the contemporary cultural paradigm of a virus is captivating, given the paranoia of being 'infected' by the 'other'. As the viewers are on the other side of the wall, they feel safe because no physical interaction with these viral elements is possible. The wall creates a sense of reassurance analogous to the way an antivirus software or an immunization shot would for an individual.

Historically, the original Trojan Horse was deceptive in its intent; the hidden warriors released through a veiled door, levelling Troy. Understanding the misleading act of a Trojan Horse on the Internet, one can only suspect that the stories being uttered from the back of KIT and Saucier's aluminium and plastic horses are somehow also deceptive in their intent. It creates disquiet in the viewer, a certain anxiety similar to when we interact with those who have infectious bodily diseases. Given that the stories are always collected from local people, the installation becomes more intimate in this simulated environment creating conflicting senses of trust, transmission and safety.

As a virus is nomadic in nature and can easily traverse through hosts of the computer or somatic variety, the show acts in a metaphorically similar way. As *Infrasense* travels from venue to venue, it traverses many host bodies, collecting data and mutating its content as it goes. In this way, the form – the horses and the bugs – stays the same, but the voices, collected each time the artists install at a new venue, change. The site-specific nature of the work reflects the ability of the virus to mutate and adapt to new surroundings and host dynamics. Since these viral

at Internet art, telepistemology, telesthesia and the *real* in our current virtual-communication age.[4]

The Global Positioning System (GPS), like the Internet, was invented by the U.S. Department of Defence for military communications and operations. Using GPS, the military can locate submarines, buildings and calculate any geographical position accurately. *Greylands*, a web-based telerobotic project developed by KIT in 1999, also used GPS technology. For this project, the KIT collaboration chose contaminated sites in or around cities and created virtual architectural plans on them. The users would go online to the *Greylands* website where they were invited to draw a blueprint of a building they thought would work in the polluted environment. The blueprint would then be sent to the robot, which was in the actual location, controlled by GPS technology. The robot would then draw the blueprint onto the site using a three-inch line of lime that it would drop onto the ground, much like a football pitch marker. This project was the beginning of KIT's research into telerobotics.

Infrasense is the first time Saucier has utilised telerobots as part of a project, although robots and sound have been a core component in many of his earlier works. His 1999 exhibition, *Still Can't Fly*, was created in response to the overwhelming paranoia the millennium had brought about. Close to the end of 1999, many IT specialists thought computer and communication systems would crash, bringing the world to a halt. For this exhibition, Saucier gathered the headlines of stories from the first Saturday issue of each month from the newspaper *Le Devoir* since 1951 and fed them into a robot. The robot read these headlines to the audience as it manoeuvred around a pole, until it got stuck and had to unwind itself. The difference and similarities in the headlines could be listened to and compared as many headlines from the '60s were similar to those from the 1990s. The notions of comparison and paranoia are also core to the interests vested around the *Infrasense* project.

The mid-'80s are when both computer viruses and the AIDS epidemic were at the forefront of global media attention. In 1983; E.L. Leiss dated an awareness of computer viruses in the general public; the same year Edward Brandt announced AIDS as the No.1 health priority.[5] Many computer analysts and antivirus writers look to biology and the immune system to gain further ideas for more effective ways of protecting computers and securing technological systems and networks. In 1991, IBM's antivirus Research Centre published *Directed – Graph Epidemiological Models of Computer Viruses*, the first paper that adapted mathematical processes used in understanding infectious diseases to better understand the problem of computer viruses.[6] A central theme of *Infrasense* looks at the crossroads of these two different viral tracks and the paranoia that the term virus elicits in contemporary societies. The stories that have been collected by the artists from each city the project travels to are tales about cancer, STDs, Trojan Horses, worms and email hoaxes. It is not surprising to hear accounts of both biological and computer-based viruses, given that our contemporary culture has already linguistically crossbred the two. In much the same way that a bodily virus waits to replicate itself by entering a new host, a computer virus is a piece of code that lies

dynamics are infecting many areas of our lives, from the body, to the computer, to marketing strategies, it opens up a wide field of research for KIT and Saucier to delve into. Their new project, currently under construction, deals with the shaping of communication systems through fear and the will to make connections in what Eugene Thacker calls the 'Living Dead Networks.'[7]
End of Transmission.

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NOTES

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[2] Ken Goldberg, *The Unique Phenomenon of a Distance, The Robot in The Garden: Telerobotics and Telepistemology in the Age of the Internet*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2000.
[3] Adam David, *The Doctor's Not Here- But He'll See You Now*, The Guardian, UK, May 19, 2005.
[4] Ken Goldberg, *The Unique Phenomenon of a Distance, The Robot in The Garden: Telerobotics and Telepistemology in the Age of the Internet*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2000.
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