Senior Projects Spring 2014

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2014

End User

Rufus Alexander Paisley
Bard College, rp6844@bard.edu

Recommended Citation

Bard

END USER

an installation exploring the ephemerality of electronic media and the

interface between man and machine

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of the Arts

of Bard College

by

Rufus Paisley

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

2014

Rufus Paisley
Artist Statement

END USER

Growing up in the personal computing age has caused me to reflect and grapple with the interface between man and machine. I didn't grow up with television at my own house, but nonetheless, and perhaps even because of that, I was always extremely curious and fascinated by the world of video imagery as a young boy. Later in life this curiosity translated into a kind of obsession with audio-visual technology. It all sort of got lumped into one big ball of mystery that I became determined to understand and insert myself into. I think it is *this* deep seeded desire that has inspired my senior project and inspires my artwork in general.

My VHS tape collection was the most fully formed, most united, and largest mass of material I had to work with, so naturally it became a starting point for me in this project.   I would find them in thrift stores everywhere I went. Plenty of them came from the Hudson Valley. A few from as far as Idaho or Oregon. They all seem to have this quality of being dead, but calling out for life. Looking over them, I can tell from their worn shells that they have been played over and over, or at least been handled by human hands for years. I can't help but think of the life they had before they found their way to me. Who watched these tapes? Were they bought, or were they given as gifts? Many of them have names scrawled on them denoting ownership at one time.

And all of them have embedded in them an awareness, a kind of consciousness about where they were meant to be watched, and by *who* they were meant to be watched. Among them were CAT TV: a video to play for your cat while you are at work; Brainy Baby: a video to let your infant watch to become smarter, and Crackling Fireplace: a 3 hour video meant to transform your living room into a warm hearth without the hassle of installing a chimney!

I became fascinated with the relationship between viewer and material that these objects contained within them, and I began to wonder what new ways that relationship could be expressed. The collection of VHS tapes became my data pool from which I constructed the hypothesis for my experiments. Simply watching the brainy baby tape and not *being* a baby was strange enough. It felt like this machine was just talking to no one. But in spite of its robotic behavior and apparatus, there was something so beautiful and so expressive and human in this videotape's misguided effort to speak to me. This feeling reverberates through all my experiments with technology and art. While learning the language of machines and computers, I found myself identifying ways in which I myself and other human beings around me carried out actions that a computer might. I tried to find points of common ground in human and computer behavior and employ those techniques to my art making. Setting up a color coded array of my data (my VHS tapes) became a very algorithmic process, and

so experiencing the enjoyment, the awe, or the "art value" of a piece of work like this immediately makes me reflect on how a computer might react to the same thing. I took the same approach with the wall of television sets. At first I just knew I wanted to collect as many as I could. Then I analyzed what I had, and tried to arrange it according to the patterns that presented themselves to me.

I read once that understanding is essentially a process of identifying patterns. I think this is the same for man and machine alike. I still don't know if a computer or a machine can really "understand", but I enjoy finding more and more ways to present the question. In particular: can computers make art? What role does the artist's "hand" play in this new age of mechanized art making?

I think that is perhaps why I am so interested in making interactive work. It's a kind of "hack" that allows me to multiply the levels and ways in which my own art operates. Leaving an element of an artwork up to chance means that the possibilities of experiences that one can have with it are infinite. Seriously, that's a mathematical fact! The fascination I have about this kind of work comes back to a condition I've identified in myself that dictates a lot of how I think and learn: I don't spend a lot of time with things that I understand. I am more attracted to the mystery, to the questions rather than the answers. Though I take extreme pleasure in understanding how machines

work, I am not content with *just* understanding. Understanding only allows me to see more possibilities, and that new knowledge encourages me to explore those possibilities.

I think every artist tries to make art that produces questions. But I don't want my viewers to stop there. My art almost always asks the viewer to become a part of it, to become a part of the experiment. In some cases, the art doesn't ask at all, it just *does* this. Activating the viewer in this way has the effect of dismantling the relationship between art and audience, making the viewer a bit more like a *user* instead, and hopefully causing them to rethink their relationship to machines and to art at the same time.