

MACHINE WILDERNESS: RE-ENVISIONING ART, TECHNOLOGY AND NATURE

ALBUQUERQUE MUSEUM OF ART AND HISTORY
19TH AND MOUNTAIN NW, ALBUQUERQUE

MY JOURNEY THROUGH ONE SEGMENT

of the huge spread of projects that comprise ISEA2012 began on the terrace of the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History. That terrace would stamp my impression of *Machine Wilderness: Re-envisioning Art, Technology and Nature* with this reaction: the ridiculous in close proximity to the sublime. In the latter category was Mark Malmberg's motorized, computerized, solar-driven installation *Albireo*. His three audio-endowed creatures—positioned above our heads—were uber-robots swaying, chirping, and reaching for the sky. Although their mechanics were complicated, there was something quite endearing about these bird-like, plane-like beings always acting in relation to one another and to the sun, and always in touch with their “mother-board” in California, where Malmberg lives. The digital components embedded in each robot allow for both self- and other diagnostics as well as communication at a distance with Malmberg's computer. Although one of the *Albireo* triplets was non-functioning at the time of my visit—no amount of self-diagnosis and messages from afar could solve the problem—Malmberg's piece was nonetheless enchanting to listen to and to watch.

It turned out that both temporary and long-term non-functionality would be a condition that dogged the heels of approximately one-fifth of the works in this complex and provocative show. And maybe this was no surprise seeing the sensitive dependence on electronics and technology at

the heart of each installation. I was particularly sorry that Daniel Miller's on-site bat house failed to attract any bats; as a result, the main component of *Chiroptera-Domus*—an audio feed from bat headquarters out in one of the courtyards—was non-existent.

Normally I don't dwell on work that fails to engage my interest, but I have to say this about Meow Wolf's utterly dreadful pile of crap that also inhabited the same terrace as Malmberg's robots: Meow Wolf's utter mindlessness was in stark contrast to the devilishly clever *Albireo*. What on earth was Meow Wolf thinking? In the extremely sophisticated context of the projects presented in this show, *The Biotic Manifold* inserted its manifold failure into the mix all too flagrantly. Why the museum allowed it for even one nanosecond to spill its juvenile aura on the rest of this inspired and thoughtful work is the real question.

It took me a while to appreciate Colleen Ludwig's installation *Elemental Bodies: Shiver*. Rivulets of water flowed down three walls of Ludwig's alcove as a viewer entered the space and walked close to them. Triggered by the motion of our bodies, the tiny meandering vertical rivers hugged the walls and contracted slightly in their course, and these slight perturbations were meant to simulate a shiver. I never experienced that aspect of the piece, but the more I walked back and forth and studied the running water, the more I responded to its intimate dynamics and organic

associations. The walls had veins, but instead of blood flowing, there was this transparent crystalline liquid creating a kind of script that could be read like a form of visual poetry.

The concept behind Agnes Chavez and Alessandro Saccoia's *(X) Trees* was the presentation of algorithmic drawings of trees generated and morphed by tweets and text messages. The piece was certainly interesting enough but chilling, too, in its way—this idea of generalizing about nature several steps removed from direct knowledge of it. These stylized branches, leaves, and tree trunks suggested the manner in which nature will be experienced in some cyber-haunted future where circuit-laden culture is the main determinant of whatever remains in the landscapes around us.

Most of the *Machine Wilderness* exhibitions installed all over Albuquerque will be open through January 6, so if it's a truly thrilling magic carpet ride you want, François Quévillon's gorgeous and immersive *Dérive* is not to be missed. This work is an extraordinary layering of geography, architecture, streaming images, and environmental and atmospheric data. *Dérive*—which means drift—is that rare hybrid of art, science, and technology that performs seamlessly on all levels. The work is metaphorically rich, unbelievably rigorous and elegant in its conceptual underpinnings, and technologically brilliant. Viewers can sit at the back of the room and watch the projections like a movie, or they can walk around the space and literally level or tilt the playing fields of places such

as Manhattan, Montreal, Lyon, Albuquerque, or Golden, New Mexico. By moving back and forth, the viewer becomes part of the computer-generated, 3D modeling of these sites, and the data that undergoes a continual metamorphosis seem to fly right into our faces as tiny particles of light. When you leave that darkened room, you wonder why the surface of your skin has not been perforated with holes.

Dérive and its electronica blow art history apart and make it extremely porous and open-ended. The work provides a deep and prismatic experience that ranges beyond that of traditional art on several fronts as it cradles technology, nature, geography, and interactivity in its visionary reach. Quévillon's data have been programmed to reflect information about buildings, bridges, monuments, and mountains, for example, and the visual signifiers that result look like streaming particles from another dimension. In reality, however, mundane things like street grids, rivers, heat, light sources, and even falling rain have transformed the data. Each mapping of an area is superbly high-tech, yet infused with luminous and ghostly aftereffects, and everything has been organized into breathtaking and moving digital translations. The virtual and the actual, the organic and the computer-generated, all are united in a marriage blessed by the gods Techne and Eros.

—DIANE ARMITAGE

François Quévillon, *Dérive*, networked interactive installation, 2010-ongoing

