

*Interact
or
Die!*

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and
artists' projects

Interaction is a defining characteristic of every living being. Bodies and objects build connections, form networks, and then, through interaction, achieve organization, structure, memory and heredity. The only selection criterion for interaction is whether it works, that is, whether it is operational.

Interactivity is on the one hand a method of bringing something into being – a form, a structure, an organization, a body, an institute, a work of art – and on the other hand a way of dealing with it.

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Interactive Automata

[Art Projects by Garnett Hertz, Code31, Antoine Schmitt,
Donna Conlon, 5VOLT CORE, Zachary Lieberman and
Übermorgen with Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio]

102

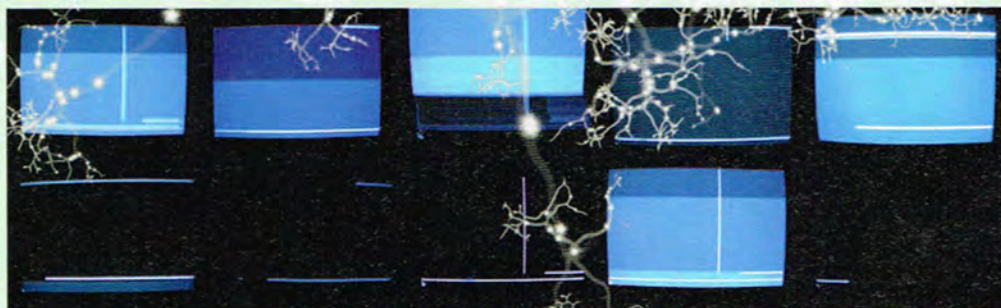


*Garnett Hertz, Experiments
in Galvanism (2003-4)*

The Italian physicist Luigi Galvani lent his name to the phenomenon we call galvanism: the generation of an electric current by means of a chemical reaction. In 1786, Galvani made a dead frog's muscles contract by touching them with a piece of metal. The public display of scientific tests and experiments that occurred in the 18th century can be regarded as a precursor of electronic art. The American artist Garnett Hertz explicitly relates his work to this idea and performed an update of Galvani's experiments called *Experiments in Galvanism*. Hertz implanted a minute web server in the body of a dead frog immersed in a liquid under glass. The web server was connected to the Internet by an ethernet cable. When the web server registered a hit, the frog's left or right leg would contract. More than just serving as tangible evidence that we can act from a distance (*Experiments in Galvanism's* interactive component is limited), this work is about connecting biological systems to technological ones: frog to Internet, nerves and muscles to electricity and cables. It shows us that the gap between wetware and hardware is not unbridgeable. More than that, it reminds us that electricity is a natural phenomenon – Galvani saw it as the fluid of life – and that the history of its discovery began in experiments with organic tissue.

Lately many artists (and hobbyists) have been discovering the potential of old electronics and cheap consumer appliances. They're rediscovering the possibilities offered by simple resources – electricity, resistors, cheap PCBs. Playing with the discarded mountain of obsolete computers sparks their imaginations and yields ideas and artistic concepts. The Belgian group Code31 recently got its hands on a bunch of discarded Mac SE30s. Out of these they built the installation *SE/30*, based on the principle of cellular automata. Each computer functions as a cell in a network. Every cell generates images (black-and-white) and sound (MIDI) on the basis of local laws (those of the individual cell). Each cell interacts with the adjacent ones and

103



Code31, SE/30 (2006)

changes on the basis of this interaction. Constantly changing patterns thus arise. Their course is unpredictable and chaotic. Faithful to the starting assumptions of media art, which takes an interest in obsolete technology and circuit-bending, Code31 considers all errors and glitches that arise to be necessities that characterize the aesthetic of the piece. "The tool [not the medium] is the message," as Kim Cascone wrote in *The Aesthetics of Failure*.

World Wide Ensemble, by the French software artist Antoine Schmitt, is an abstract, programmed landscape of visual elements and sound. The visual elements, white, and gray on a black background) move quickly up and down or back and forth or make continual quarter turns against a black background. They are a kind of small automata, each with its own simple behavior. Sometimes they seem to join together to form a motor, an electrical diagram, or a rudimentary blueprint for a machine. They move past slowly as the viewer watches through a hole in the wall, as if looking out on the universe through the porthole of a spaceship. The only interaction between the viewer and the work takes place by means of a trackball he or she can use to navigate and investigate other parts of the landscape. Because the relationship between image and sound is not completely synchronous, and the consequences of the interaction are not processed immediately, a certain tension arises, allowing the user to form thoughts on the generative aspects of the work. We can read its elements as actors that make up a world and move together against their endless black background.

104

Antoine Schmitt, *World Wide Ensemble* (2006)

