Adrift in a Sea of Senses

An encounter with the ongoing net performance/installation, Adrift, can be imagined as lying in a therapeutic floatation tank surrounded by projected images and light. There is often a desire to experience cinema as a total experience in this way-hence the great effect and success of Imax theater, and the scintillating promise of true VR. However, Adrift, works somewhere between theater, cinema, and 'drifting' or 'surfing' the web. The platform for the work is a ferry ride across a harbor, deconstructed to the sounds, images and actual feeling of being in transit, afloat as in a ship, rather than being aloft as in a plane. The deconstruction creates a simulated computerized environment where the geometry of objects such as pier pilings, overhead sea charts, the ferry deck itself become new abstracted environments the viewer drifts through. A powerful, ebbing and rising sound piece supports a subtle feeling of synesthesia-where one sense such as hearing, is experienced as taste or sight. This seems only possible because the work is a collaborative effort between media artists who are designers, sound technicians, and programmers.

As a net performance. Adrift consists of three streamed channels of media across the internet originating from different physical and virtual locations into the New Museum's Media Z Lounge. The three channels of media are projected onto a curved screen that envelopes three rows of plastic ferry chairs. Despite different origins, the media converges to create a total viewing experience, especially as the sound comes from above, behind, and seemingly, from below-as if the ferry engines were rumbling below deck. On screen, the perspective is that of floating over a digital sea of images, and then, as a passenger moving through the ferry deck, and later, as some kind of miniature explorer of the imagined interior landscape of a VR world. The effect, when the viewer briefly lets go of the physical reality of being in the gallery, is to feel adrift in light and sound, including text and computer code. Often, instructions for programming a virtual environment, web addresses, and error messages seem to float up to the surface of the projections. The words seem to remind us of the artificial and constructed nature of the environment, that it is somehow creating itself before our very eyes, that this is indeed a performance (even if as an installation it is more a residue). Also at times, the voice of the ferry operator can be heard providing instructions on our safety, along with other snatches of words and narrative. Because each element of sound, audio, video, computerized image, refracting shape, light, text is always rising and receding into the viewer's awareness, the result is a fragmented memory of the work. Even in remembering, one has to shift their perspective across their own senses to recall a moment-from sight to sound.

Organizer Michele Thursz suggests that the work recalls the Cineorama of the World's Fair in France in 1900-where cinema presented on a curvilinear screen created the first immersive environment. In some sense, it can only just be a suggestion. At the beginnings of cinema, the viewer often suspected the artificiality of film and certainly did not experience any type of recorded sound or audio. The immersive technologies of today are more than mere picture-the sense of surrounding sound is a crucial element in Adrift. A more subtle point of connection with early Cineorama, is the fact that live performance was often, but not necessarily accompaniment, and in the net performance of Adrift, the live inputs streaming across the internet both augment but don't necessarily complete the work. The artists leave it to the viewer to close the loop and complete the circuit of immersion.

The work is now on view at the Media Z Lounge, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art thru Dec. 30, as part of the group exhibit, CIN-O-MATIC: Memory and Cinematic Perception. Adrift was realized by Helen Thorington, Marek Walczak, and Jesse Gilbert, with Martin Wattenberg and Hal Eager.

links | artists mentioned
http://www.turbulence.org/adrift
http://www.newmuseum.org

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