Technology inspires Canadian video artist

Nelson Henricks exhibits his video works in BA and talks about art and messages

In our screen-permeated world of computers, cell phones, tablets and flat screens, and where texting, skyping and talking into speakers can seem to take away the human touch in communicating, it is easy to get cynical. But Canadian video artist Nelson Henricks sees possibility in the world of technology, and this is one of the themes he artfully tackles in his video works.

In BA to present a series of his videos at the Alliance Française for their Thursday night Cycle de videosarte, the Herald sat down with the artist for a talk about art, technology, and how the two can work together.

In person, it is impossible to ignore Henricks’ more-than-positi- vive vibe about technology not only in terms of what it can do for art, but what it can do for humanity. With social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter taking up so much of so many people’s time, Henricks notes that it is easy to be critical about all these things.

“It’s really easy with everything almost to gravitate toward a position of cynicism,” said Henricks. “And I think that that kind of cynicism gives the impression of crit- ical engagement.”

But Henricks says that cynicism does not equal critical engagement. Instead, he is interested in engaging spectators with technology in order to understand how it works.

“I guess what I try to do through the work is to try to make people conscious of how to be critical, how to engage critically with this culture of screens. You know, we live it, we are surrounded by it, but we don’t have to be passive about it. We can engage with it, we can engage with that culture from a position of knowledge rather than one of kind of being a victim of it. We can respond to it in a proactive manner rather than being completely steamrollered by it.”

With his video works, Henricks tries to make viewers conscious of how the technology works, “how the medium – this is very McLuhan – forms the message and sort of massages the message.” (Remem-}

ber Marshall McLuhan, the Cana- dian philosopher and scholar known for his famous dictum, “The medium is the message?”)

Thursday’s event at the Alliance Française involved several screenings of Henricks’ videos, including Conspiracy of Lies, a 1982 work based on a bunch of texts Henricks found in the garbage.

The texts, which belong to an anonymous person, include lists of things to do and buy, pages from a diary, budgets and a telephone number.

The video records Henricks and other narrators reading the found text while the camera pans stores, items to buy, personal possessions, and someone writing. In it, Henricks explores the themes of alienation of minorities, consumer culture, urban isolation and the fine balance between mental order and chaos.

It is true that the spectator is made very aware of the camera in this video, but it doesn’t take away from other messages that come out, like subtle suggestion of writ- ing as a way to foster identity.

Writing is a theme that appears regularly in Henricks’ work. The artist in fact started out as a writer. He was working with text, as well as story-telling and audio, before he began making video art in the mid 80s.

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