

Technology inspires Canadian video artist

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



Shimmer (1995), a video installation by Nelson Henricks.

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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 *Ciclo de videoarte*, 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-positive 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 critical 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 Canadian 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 1992 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 writing 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 storytelling and audio, before he began making video art in the mid 80s.

"Video just seemed to be a way to bring all of those impulses togeth-



Unwriting (2010) by Canadian video artist Nelson Henricks.

er easily," said Henricks.

These days, the artist works with installation and sound, as well as continuing his work as a writer, a musician, a curator and a teacher. While in BA, he taught to classes on sound at the Universidad de Tres de Febrero (UNTREF).

Video art can sometimes be a bit difficult for spectators to connect to, but Henricks brings that same positivity he has while speaking about technology, to translating images, sound and words to his works.

Included in the works shown at Alliance Française were *Crush* (1997), a story about a man wanting to turn into a horse, *Time Passes* (1998), a film where where Henricks employed time-lapse photography to document the interior and exterior of his apartment, as well as *Failure* (2007), a film about what Henricks describes as "failed masculinity", and in which he shaves his legs. The event also included a screening of Henricks' work *Satellite* (2004), a visual feast that magically combines found footage with techno beats, questioning western society's obsession with science, technology and the future.

While all of his works shown that night are engaging, smart, and wit-



Handyman, from the Imagine Trilogy.

ty, *Satellite* really drove home some of the themes Henricks spoke about in our interview.

In it, the narrator says: "Connecting with people is the most painful thing we do. Connecting with people is the most important thing we do." Henricks isn't proposing that technology stands in the way of human connection, but actually provides a way to do that in new ways. He spoke about walking into a cafe in Montréal, where where everyone was on their laptops, skyping or texting, but nobody was talking to each other.

While at first he felt sad because no one appeared to be connecting with each other, he then questioned whether he would feel the same way if everyone was reading books.

Henricks also pointed out that some of this technology has provided ways for him to work with people he might not have been able to, like the deaf woman he worked with on a recent project, who he was able to communicate with through texting.

"We encounter... everyday... lots of really horrible cases of alienation and separation that technology produces, but then for every one of those you can also come up with a

really amazing way that these technologies can really link us and connect us in ways that were never before possible. So, I think it's that paradox that interests me," said Henricks.

Currently, Henricks is working on a sound installation that has two speakers communicating with each other.

I can imagine that the work will have that same balance of humour and humanity that his video works do.

Unfortunately, his works are no longer on display in BA, but you can see clips of them available on his web site at www.nelsonhenricks.com.

And in the mean time, Henricks' thoughts offer a positive alternative to only seeing the negative side of these urban-charged environments where people seemingly shut themselves off with headphones and iPhones or Blackberries.

"...it almost seems like for every negative thing that someone can say... we can also find its opposite, like for the positive corollary... there can be these amazing possibilities. So it isn't always these depressing pessimistic images of separation and isolation, but it can really be about... this ability to connect with people."



Canadian video artist Nelson Henricks at the Alliance Française.

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