

Babylon + on + on

By Mike Landry

<http://thingsofdesire.ca/2008/12/04/babylon-on-on/>

While Lee Henderson's new work "Babylon+on+on" can be found at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, that's not its home. At heart, the work exists in limbo, surrounded by gray areas.

The new media project is the third event in a series of interventions into the MacKenzie's permanent collection. Part curatorial, part work of art, Henderson has taken Harold Town's "The Tower of Babbling" and recontextualized Town's original commentary on the construction of the CBC building near his Toronto studio it into an interactive sound art piece.



“I’ve always found poles to oscillate between,” says Henderson, who has threads of Buddhism throughout his work. “I’ve made work about death, decay or disappearance but this is a piece that enacts that sense.”

Conceived as a way of painting with sound, Henderson [says he] naïvely thought his project would be simple. But he’s spent the past month or so creating computer patches for the 125 sound recordings that he’s created in response to the work.

The piece works by dividing Town’s original painting into a virtual grid with infrared light. Each sound recording exists in one of the grid squares. The viewer triggers the sound recordings with a “paintbrush,” made from a modified Nintendo Wii remote, that’s connected to a computer. Once triggered, the recording will repeat, decreasing in volume, about ten times.

The remote scans its location every quarter of a second. So, if you quickly brush across the canvas in a second, only four recordings will be triggered. But if you take a thick impasto-like stroke, you’ll get a dense multilayered track.

The sound clips vary anywhere between two seconds to two minutes. Some are ambient field recordings taken walking between Town’s old studio and the CBC in downtown Toronto. Many are clips taken from a lecture Henderson gave at the University of Regina on Town, as well as the students’ reaction to the lecture and Town’s work. Other clips are recitations of Town’s artist statements and letters.

Henderson approached the gallery to do an intervention, because he was familiar with the permanent collection as he was once a collections intern. He was also aware how the gallery has started to move towards collecting media work.

Like most museums that have been collecting paintings and sculptures for decades, it has been an odd transition.

“There’s so much institutional inertia built around painting and sculpture. I thought it would be interesting to find a way to trouble that idea of a painting or traditional art space. So, it’s not in one of the named gallery rooms. It’s at the top of the stairs at the intersection between all the galleries. It’s spatially occupying that weird middle ground.”

Pointing to the strange new world of new media collecting, Henderson isn’t sure what will come of “Babylon+on+on.” Technically the equipment belongs to the gallery, since the grant that paid for it was in the MacKenzie’s name. But Henderson isn’t sure what that means for the patches he’s created: will the gallery buy it, do they have intellectual control over it, do they assume the equipment will come with the patches? Henderson isn’t sure.

“The authorship of the thing is a gray area too. I have permission to use the clips from [Dr. Charity Marsh’s] students for this show, but what happens to them afterward? I’m being a little bit rhetorical, but I honestly just know.”

This confusion itself is a bit of a critique over museumology. The idea of collecting is a theme common to his work. It’s why he didn’t allow a record option for “Babylon+on+on.” But really, his concern lies in the recontextualization that occurs in the museum. And he’s aware this makes him a hypocrite.

“Town never intended for some kid to take a Wii-mote and hack it. I don’t know, maybe it’s a gesture to reclaiming something about the object, where an artist is creating a commentary on the object rather than a curator.”

Babylon+on+on will be on display from Sun December 7 - Sun January 25, 2009 at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina. Check back for a link to listen to live streaming of the work online.