The Big Black Box of Digital Art

(from *El Pa's,* 5th February 2005)

First, it was *ARCO Electr—nico,* followed by *Net.Space@ARCO,* and then, timidly, galleries started to show interactive installations and net art pieces. This year, with *The Black Box@ARCO,* installed in a big black canvas box at the back of Hall 9, digital art conquers one of the most prestigious curated invitationals

by Roberta Bosco

The evolution of new media artÑin the widest sense of the term, especially as it involves the use of digital mediaÑhas been just as rapid as the introduction of new technologies into every aspect of daily life. This is reflected by the history of this area of contemporary creativity within ARCO, to the point that it is now a major presence. Over the past five years, digital art (including the most radical and immaterial forms, such as net art, created to exist exclusively on the internet) has entered into art galleries and, albeit timidly, has begun to form part of public and private collections. Although a major innovation at the last edition of the art fair was the presence of Bitforms, the first gallery devoted exclusively to digital art, the big news this year is the creation of an entire curated invitational, *The Black Box@ARCO,* aimed at bringing together a series of projects which until now had only an isolated, token participation. Thus, ARCO is responding to the ever-higher profile within the art market of works using technological and scientific resources and processes, which are ideal for reflecting the contradictions of a highly technologised society. As its name indicates, *The Black Box* is a cube of black canvas, situated at the back of Hall 9, comprising 16 containers arranged on two storeys, each belonging to a different gallery, selected by a team of six curators. Their projects offer a wide spectrum of the expressive possibilities to new technologies and their different trends, ranging from audiovisuals created with digital techniques to complex interactive installations. A highlight, at the Austrian gallery Gima, is *Life Spacies II,* by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, an interactive artificial-life environment, where visitors can create their own creatures by writing brief texts, whose characters are transformed into the genetic code of the species. Metropolitana, a Barcelona-based gallery which was among the first to present electronic art projects at ARCO, is opting to show the New York collective Fakeshop, whose works explore the transformation of the body through digital technologies. Its installation *Multiplexer* presents simultaneously, on the one hand, a life performance, and on the other, the video that it generates, so

that the audience can choose to follow one or the other. Metropolitana was selected by Mark Tribe, one of the top new-media art experts. Tribe also selected two New York galleries: Gigantic Art Space, with an interactive environment by Mary Flanagan based on a video-game aesthetic, and Bitforms, with *Glorias de la contabilidad* (Glories of Accounting), by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, based on a computerised surveillance system which detects visitorsÕ position in the stand. More proof of the normalisation of these media is the presence, the Project Rooms invitational, of an interactive installation by Dora Garc'a, *La Esfinge* (The Sphinx), presented by Juana de Aizpuru. *La Esfinge,* which also exists as an online game (www.doragarcia.net), challenges the visitor to answer a series of questionsÑranging from ÔDoes God exist?Õ to ÔAre you thirsty?ÕÑcorrectly; in other words, coinciding with the artistÕs own answers. Thus, the only ones able to get to the end of the piece are those who are either completely in synch with the artistÕs personality, or those who lie.

Among the pioneering institutions in presenting digital projects when they were considered unsellable and galleries had yet to take the plunge, stand-outs are the Fundaci—n Telef—nica, which is showing the winner of its *Vida* competition for projects created with artificial life techniques and concepts, and the Museo de Arte Contempor‡neo de Badajoz, with its *Museo Inmaterial* (Immaterial Museum), a project curated by the Portuguese Antonio Cerveira, which includes a collection of well-known net art projects. Digital drawing and photographs are also becoming more common, and the attentive visitor to ARCO will discover the large number of artists who use digital tools in their work. This is the case of the animations by Kirsten Geisler, from the Amsterdam gallery Ackincy, where the visitor will be able to interact with the objects, and of the abstract landscapes that Gregory Kucera is showing at New YorkÕs I-20 Gallery, printed on Ultrachrome and Plexiglas, which the artist modified with a specially designed computer program.

The digital revolution is, undoubtedly, one of the most genuine characteristics of our times. This can be seen even in works that have nothing to do with this medium, such as a life-size drawing by Robert Waters, at TorontoÕs P/M Gallery, depicting a naked man sitting in front of a computer, a symbol of the increasingly intimate relationship between man and machine.

Hurricane Rafael

The career of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (Mexico City, 1967) is one of the most interesting on the digital and interactive art scene. He first showed at ARCO back in 1995, with a piece in the Fundaci—n Telef—nica stand, *El Rastro.* At last yearÕs edition of the art fair, his work at the Mexican gallery OMR was received with high praise, but 2005 is undoubtedly the year when he will score a big success in Madrid. Besides his project with Bitforms at *The Black Box@ARCO* invitational*,* in the galleryÕs own stand he will be showing *Basado en hechos reales* (Based on True Events), images from Mexico City taken with surveillance cameras, reflecting his interest in the connections between public and virtual space. In the Mexican pavilion, OMR is presenting a piece that was already sold at the Basel art fair: *Caguamas Sin‡pticas, subescultura 4* (Synaptic Caguamas, Subsculpture 4), a table from a Mexican cantina with 30 one-litre bottles of beer (the Caguama brand), whose movements are generated by altorithms that simulate the brainÕs neuronal connections.   Another piece of his is *Tensi—n superficial* (Superficial Tension), an interactive module formed by a human eye that gazes at the public from a plasma screen. Lozano has also been selected by Pr'amo Lozada for the Mexican electronic art show *Dataspace,* at the Conde Duque cultural centre, where

he will be showing a brand-new piece, *Pœblico subtitulado* (Subtitled Audience). The installation detects viewers with a surveillance system, and pursues them by projecting onto their bodies thousands of verbs conjugated in the third person. This is no longer the voluntary or even playful kind of interactivity found in his early work, such as *Alzado vectorial* (Vectorial Blueprint), which enabled the public to create gigantic sculptures of light in the sky via the internet. Now, his work visually attacks the spectator, in a forced reflection on the arbitrariness and dangerousness of automatic facial trait classification programs, whose use is being rapidly disseminated in our cities.