LCVA’s Artificial/Life Exhibition Invites You to Explore Perceptions of Reality

Artificial/Life: On the Road & Electric Sheep, a pair of exhibitions born of digital art experimentation, invites viewers to explore concepts of authentic experience and what it means to be “alive” as technology becomes more deeply integrated in our daily human existence.

On the Road features three interrelated photography and video projects by Jon Horvath and Hans Gindlesberger, both artists and educators who explore questions of place, storytelling, and perceptions of “authentic” experience. The exhibition includes works created both independently and collaboratively using GPS mapping, immersive travel simulators such as Google Street View, and references to popular culture.

Horvath’s Passages, a series of landscape drawings and photographs inspired by literary excerpts from Jack Kerouac’s On the Road, reflects the artist’s interest in performance and systems-based practices—rituals, essentially. After selecting a phrase from among the better known passages in Kerouac’s novel, Horvath himself set out on the highways of Wisconsin (which are identified alphabetically rather than numerically) to “drive it out” with GPS mapping his path. Horvath’s Fifteen Strange Seconds, for example, references a passage in Chapter 3 of On the Road, in which the main character, Sal Paradise, experiences an epiphany:

I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn’t know who I was—I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I’d never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn’t know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds [emphasis added]. I wasn’t scared, I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that’s why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon.

To create Fifteen Strange Seconds, Horvath began by driving Highway F to Highway I, and then on to Highway F to Highway T, and so on, until he concluded the phrase on Highway S. The GPS track that documents his journey constitutes the “drawing,” and the title includes the drive time and distance involved in each piece—in the case of Fifteen Strange Seconds, 205 miles covered in slightly more than four hours and thirty-three minutes. The artist created new work for this exhibition, which is his most ambitious to date. The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the Sky required the roughly 1,500 miles needed to drive the passage be divided into thirteen separate drives.
The Passages drawings are complemented by 26 photographs of the Wisconsin highways Horvath traveled during this project, and a 100-foot-long paper scroll of GPS data that mimics the continuous paper scroll that upon which Jack Kerouac typed On the Road during a three-week period in April 1951.

Hans Gindlesberger’s video Westering also documents an epic cross-country journey. This mythical westward journey, however, is rendered entirely through images from Google Street View. The artist has edited the photographic imagery to remove specific details, resulting in never-ending forward movement through an unremarkable, placeless landscape. Westering is projected onto the street level facade windows at LCVA, visually transcending the boundaries of the museum walls. While the film can be experienced simultaneously both on the street and in the museum, the direction of the movement is entirely dependent on the viewer’s perspective.

Collaboratively, Horvath and Gindlesberger appropriate and synthesize touchstones of photographic and cinematic history with imagery culled from internet mapping applications such as Google Street View and Bing Streetside. Dramatic, emotionally charged scenes are overlaid with the more mundane internet-derived “reality” of the site of the famed image. The resulting series, Street Scene, consists of multi-layered images that are visually arresting, somewhat jarring, and subtly humorous.

While the Street Scene series is anchored in recognizable imagery, the artists have emphasized the underlying nature of the images by leaving a strong digital signature that is distinctly evident in each. In describing their process, Gindlesberger says, “We glitch the photographs using relevant contextual material—from the films, photographs, or landscapes. Essentially, we’re corrupting the image by writing additional narrative into the document’s data. So, while the images may look ‘wrong,’ it’s intentional content that we added to the work.”

Electric Sheep is a form of artificial life. The purely abstract, generative, digital art work is based on the theory of natural selection. A collaborative work originally coded by software artist Scott Draves, Electric Sheep now involves more than half-a-million crowd-sourced computers and their users. It has been reproducing, evolving, and never repeating itself since 1999. Draves modeled the project on biological processes of organic life. Since the fractal imagery code never repeats itself, no visitor’s experience will be the same as another’s throughout the course of the exhibition—or even during a single visit.

The name, drawn from Philip K. Dick’s 1968 classic science fiction novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (adapted for film in 1982 as Bladerunner), is a direct reference to how the art work is created. Anyone can download the software code—a fractal flame algorithm written by Draves in 1992 (the year in which Dick’s story was originally set before being changed to 2021 in later editions) – to their computer or tablet as a screensaver. When the user’s computer (the android) goes into its sleep mode, the code activates to contribute to the collective computing power required to create the successive generations of art work known as “sheep.” At LCVA, Electric Sheep is presented in a projected immersive environment where visitors can be fully enveloped by the ever evolving imagery.

The exhibition is on view February 7–March 28, 2015, with an opening reception with Hans Gindlesberger and Jon Hovarth on February 6th from 5–7 p.m. Scott Draves is expected to be in conversation at LCVA at a later date during the exhibition.

Artificial/Life: On the Road & Electric Sheep is made possible in part by Longwood University’s Department of Information Technology Services.

When you visit:

Artificial/Life also includes a focus gallery curated by Emily Grabiec, LCVA’s curator of education, an area where visitors of all ages can explore the ideas that inspired the exhibition. Complementary programs, such as a screening and discussion of Bladerunner, artist talks, and digital art workshops, are scheduled through March 28, 2015.

About LCVA:
The Longwood Center for the Visual Arts presents a rotating program of inspiring and conversation-starting exhibitions. Admission to LCVA and its programs is—and always has been—free for all. It is located at the intersection of Main and Third Streets (129 North Main Street) in Farmville, Virginia. For additional information on these exhibitions or other programs and events, contact LCVA at lcvainfo@longwood.edu or 434.395.2206.

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Images/Credit lines:

SCOTT DRAVES
Immersive installation at Lexus Hybrid Art / Moscow / 2010
Image courtesy of Electric Sheep.org

HANS GINDLESBERGER
Westering, 2009
Digital video projection
Courtesy of the artist

JON HORVATH
Desirous of Everything at the Same Time, 2014
Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist

JON HORVATH
County Highway B, 2014
Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist

JON HORVATH
County Highway O, 2014
Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist

HORVATH AND GINDLESBERGER
Lost in Translation (+35°41'21.69", +139°31'49.55"), 2013-2014
Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artists

HORVATH AND GINDLESBERGER
The Accident at the Gare Montparnasse (+48°50'31.11", +2°19'13.14"), 2013-2014
Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artists

HORVATH AND GINDLESBERGER
Leap into the Void (+48°78'68.83", +2°29'23.72"), 2013-2014
Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artists
Additional images available upon request.