

References

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LIVELY OBJECTS: ENCHANTMENT AND DISRUPTION AT THE MUSEUM OF VANCOUVER

Curated by Caroline Seck Langill and Lizzie Muller, Museum of Vancouver, 16 August – 12 October 2015

Reviewed by Shauna Jean Doherty, Independent Critic

The Museum of Vancouver (MOV) is the city's central civic museum, housing artefacts and artworks that illustrate the evolution of the urban area from its founding in 1894 to the twenty-first century. Since its inception as a repository for curios and taxidermy, the Museum has taken on dynamic programming that engages its audience politically, socially and culturally. Demonstrative of the MOV's adventurous exhibition strategy was *Lively Objects: Enchantment and Disruption* curated by Caroline Seck Langill and Lizzie Muller.¹ *Lively Objects* inserted digital and electronic artworks into the Museum's permanent displays of objects, artefacts and historical tableaux. Presented as an exhibition within an exhibition, the works in *Lively Objects* were subtly labelled, producing a treasure-hunt experience for viewers. It has been widely observed by theorists since the late 1990s that electronic art (e.g. new media art) exists often on the margins of art institutions due in part to an incongruity (both practical and conceptual) between traditional art forms and highly technical works (see Graham and Cook 2010). In *Lively Objects* the curators challenged this peripheral condition through an integrative approach that sought a productive cross-pollination between media artworks and conventional objects.

This exhibition extended the curators' shared interest in the lively potential embedded within media artworks and the curatorial opportunities they pose. According to Seck Langill, media objects possess a unique animism that is linked directly to their electronic composition.² This distinct condition can be the source of nuanced relationships between media, objects and human users particularly within the context of a

1. *Lively Objects* was presented in conjunction with the International Symposium on Electronic Art, an annual gathering of the media arts community. In 2015 the symposium's 21st iteration was hosted in Vancouver, BC.
2. The aliveness of media artworks is explored in Seck Langill (2013). This phenomenon is variously described as techno-animism or 'the living effect', a phrase attributed to Norman White.

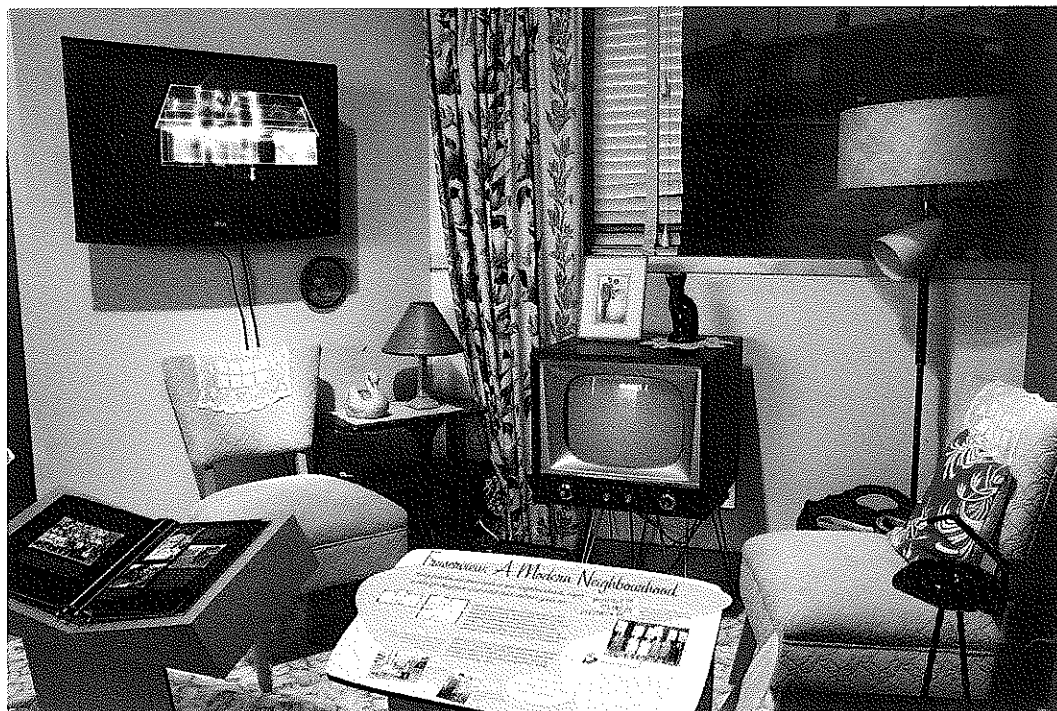
3. Seck Langill also explored the liveliness of media artworks in *thelivingeffect* (Ottawa Art Gallery, 2010).
4. I am indebted to Jillian Povarchook, Collections Associate at the Museum of Vancouver, for a thorough and informative gallery tour.

museum where a diversity of connections can be made.³ For this exhibition the curators were not only interested in presenting the vitality of media objects themselves, but how this aliveness could interact with all kinds of things (particularly objects that tell stories of local history, as at the MOV).

The exhibition began in the museum's lobby with Garnet Hertz's *Phone Safe 2* (2015).⁴ The lime green contraption invited visitors to deposit their cellphones into a metal container that held each device for twelve minutes, encouraging visitors to part with their electronics before entering the galleries. By abandoning their digital devices, viewers were prompted to consider the ubiquitous mediating effect of technology in daily life. The second work encountered was Germaine Koh's *Topographic Table* (2013), a lateral reproduction of Vancouver's mountainous landscape. The table responded to earthquakes detected within the Pacific Northwest via Internet-connected sensors for the duration of the exhibition. Based on this data, the table convulsed depending on the intensity of seismic activity. Koh's three-dimensional responsive display literalized the curators' exploration of aliveness, trembling without warning, inspiring both concern and delight. Koh's relief also visually mimicked a historical topographic map located in the gallery, adding an interpretive layer to an existing artefact on display.

The next gallery in the MOV is dedicated to the city's evolution during the 1920s–40s. Here the curators placed sculptural works by Wendy Coburn. Two ceramic babies, entitled *Fable for Tomorrow* (2008), were housed in a vitrine, their porcelain faces and pale-coloured rompers contrasting jarringly with a pattern of black bugs that covered their bodies. The title referenced the first chapter of *Silent Spring* (1962), a novel by American marine biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson that warned of the dangers of pesticide use. A collection of early-twentieth-century baby clothes were displayed in close proximity to Coburn's Victorian dolls, further adding to their minacious presence. Coburn took the name of Carson's prophetic book for the title of her second piece – a bronze cast of a pesticide sprayer engraved with the names of the artist's loved ones. Situated beside the facade of an idyllic clapboard house and a collection of garden tools of the time, Coburn's pieces asserted a latent menace among a picturesque backdrop. The pesticide sprayer was outfitted with an alluring handle, which implied that insidious possibilities lay dormant in the tool's potential animation. While not electronic, Coburn's sculptures commented on the destructive outcomes that can accompany an unquestioning embracement of advanced technologies, in this case pesticides.

In the mid-century gallery, a cosy tableau of a typical 1950s home-stead is furnished with a period television and didactics about the fiction of postwar home-making. Within this scene the curators replaced a landscape painting that typically adorns the set-like interior with Judith Doyle's digital video *Phantom House* (2010). A floor plan of the artist's family home, made in the virtual world of SecondLife, *Phantom House* simultaneously evoked her past childhood and imagined a home for the future. The placement of Doyle's ultra-contemporary computer work alongside a static scene of a mid-century interior contributed a dynamic



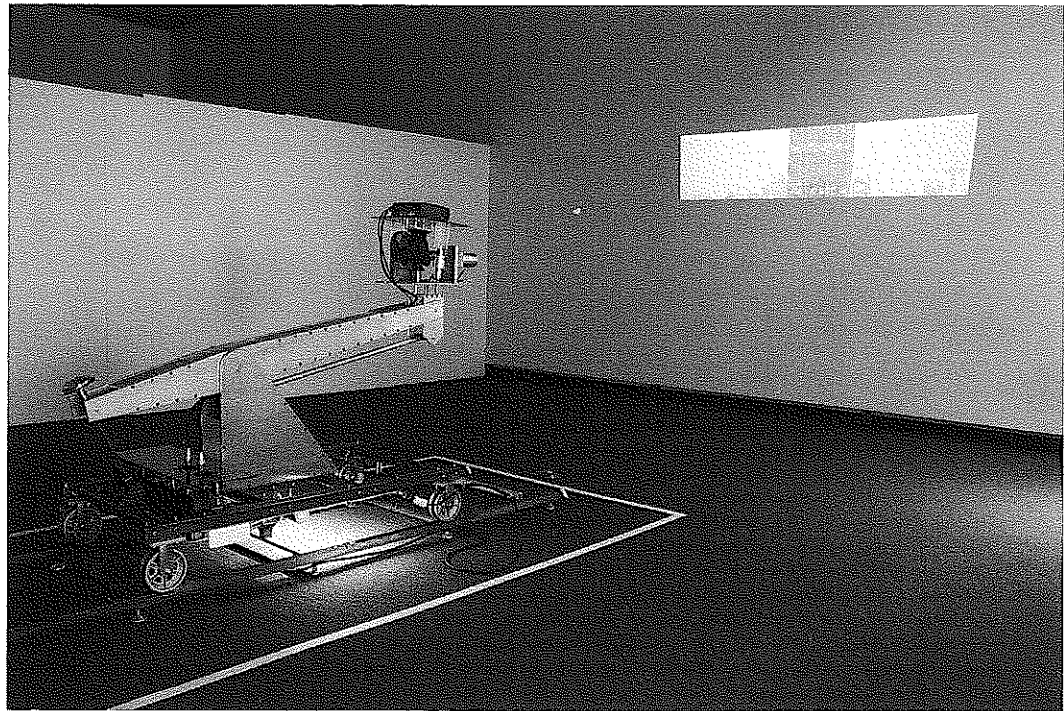
Judith Doyle, *Phantom House* (2010), digital video, installation view. Photo: courtesy of Caroline Seck Langill.

visual friction between old and new media and the continuing role of technology in promoting an ideal domesticity.

Through a beaded curtain and a backdrop of psychedelic music and macramé, visitors were next transported to a rec-room circa the 1960s. Within this retro environment the curators placed Norman White's *Splish Splash One* (1974) – a hexagonal, plastic object outfitted with tracks of lights that illuminate in a random sequence.⁵ Serving as a groovy coffee table, the attractive combination of circuit boards and luminescence is typical of White, a pioneer in electronic art.⁶ Adjacent to White's piece, and beside a dress-up closet filled with costumes of the era, lay Kate Hartman's *Go-Go Gloves* (2005). Based on images found in *McCall Needlework & Crafts* magazine, Hartman's installation featured two female figures on a small screen who performed a series of dance moves initiated by viewers putting on and animating a pair of gloves with built-in sensors. The vibrancy of *Splish Splash One* and the interactivity of *Go-Go Gloves* refreshed what may have been a stereotyped tableau and demonstrated the potential of furniture and popular culture to serve as artistic raw materials.

Two works rested on the periphery of the Museum's official exhibition space: Steve Daniels's *Device for the Elimination of Wonder* (2012–) and Simone Jones and Lance Winn's *End of Empire* (2011). Daniels's *Device* bore a sterile technicality – composed of a metal scaffold and bob suspended on an aluminum tightrope. The machine took measurements

5. *Splish Splash One* was originally a prototype for what would become a series of 74 for a large-scale installation titled *Splish Splash Two* (1975). Commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and displayed in the organization's Vancouver location's foyer, *Splish Splash Two* was arranged to evoke the vision of drops of water on a pond.
6. White's legacy extended beyond the aesthetic sensibility that resonated throughout this exhibition; he was also a teacher of many of the artists, thus serving as a pivotal influence upon several generations of Canadian media art practitioners.



Simone Jones and Lance Winn, *End of Empire* (2011), installation view. Photo: courtesy of Caroline Seck Langill.

between the bob and the base of the machine and then printed it on a single strip of paper that gathered below. Using an algorithm, the machine literally mapped out and inhabited its environment, translating motion into data while animating a part of the Museum that is typically left vacant. Finally, Jones and Winn's *End of Empire* (2011) occupied a room typically dedicated to school visits. Perhaps the most futuristic of all of the show's works, *End of Empire* involved a robotic camera dolly, outfitted with an automated lever, which moved up the gallery wall to project a video inspired by Andy Warhol's film *Empire* (1964). As the lever descended, the Empire State Building (the central feature of the image) was erased from the New York skyline, a comment on the fragility of progress, which the building once represented. Sitting in the corner was one of the MOV's most prized artefacts – a replica of an Egyptian mummy. Here the curators collapsed the expanse of human history by placing the ancient alongside the futuristic, neatly elucidating one of the exhibition's conceits to utilize media artworks in the narrativization of human experience.

An interventionist curatorial project generates its gravity through the deep consideration of a museum's context and existing displays. The interactive quality of many of the artworks in *Lively Objects* demonstrated this intimate awareness, and facilitated new connections between analogue and digital objects, artworks and artefacts, and inanimate and animate entities. In the ongoing development of curating new media artworks, *Lively Objects* is an achievement in crafting a new approach that

foregrounds technology while still paying homage to the histories and personal stories embedded in conventional objects.

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