

Remixer: Fernando Orellana

interview: *DistributedDifference*

Therese Sweeney

Fernando Orellana's, 8520 S.W 27th Place, one of the works in the DistributedDifference: Cultures of Conflict exhibition at The Bank, Midland is described in Therese Sweeney's account of the work on this site: "Suburban promise: 8520 S.W 27th Place."

Has this work been exhibited anywhere else prior to this biennale? How has it been developed?

I had a working prototype that was introduced at my thesis show 3 months ago. This particular installation is brand new. I had been playing and fooling around with electronic toys and was really interested in this idea of remixing electronics like DJs remix music. So I was purposefully looking into remixing consumer grade electronics. I developed a working model which happened to coincide with the call for applications for BEAP so I applied and included some images of the prototype using this little camera I had just won from Texas Instruments for another project involving electronic toys. BEAP loved it.

I expanded on the version from my thesis show which allowed me to work out a lot of the technical bugs and then from June this year, started working exclusively on 8520 S.W. 27th Place making a colony of them.

What was the inspiration for the title of this work?

South West 27th Place was the address my parents moved to when we first migrated to Florida. I'm originally from El Salvador. That introduced me to the suburban American landscape and I thought it really appropriate that I name this piece in recognition of that experience. Interestingly enough one of the 6 pieces was knocked over on opening night, it was 8520, the house that I lived in—an eerie coincidence because my parents lost that house.

Specifically though, I named the work 8520 because it was my first introduction to the suburban landscape. But then I realised the suburban landscape is not specific to America: it is everywhere. They are all 'cookie cutter' replications. I've seen it in Australia a lot too.

So, you're drawing on your childhood memory?

Yes, It's the address I grew up in. Anyone you ask always remembers their first address. Do you remember your first address?

Yes.

Everyone remembers their phone number too because our parents drill it into us in case we get lost. I thought it was a nice personal touch to the piece, but the houses reflect multiple meanings.

If you look at them they have wheels, they are like cribs because we are born into this world and as soon as we are born we are put on wheels. In fact our mother is on a bed with wheels giving birth. We are taken from the hospital on wheels. Our lives are in this upper mobility, always moving on wheels. When we die our deathbeds are on wheels. I feel it an appropriate suggestion for the houses. Also the suburban dwelling is mobile: we move in then we move out. There is always motion. The wheels are very important in the piece and the houses themselves resemble incubators, cribs or hospital beds.

Some of the rodents had a small variety of green in the hues of the plastic. was that meaningful?

The materials for those rodents are created *en masse* somewhere in Asia, probably in China and that plastic is recycled plastic so each batch is going to be a different hue. In fact I don't even know why they put a green hue in, it doesn't make any sense to me. Most likely its from the chemicals to purify the plastic, so it's a by product of the manufacture. When I opened them that is what the colour was inside. They were dancing hamsters initially bought from the grocery store and they sing a little song.

So, the concept evolved from the dancing hamster. Is that when the creative evolution for the project commenced?

Yes, that's exactly right, I was at the grocery store and I saw this little dancing hamster and there were 100s there so I turned a lot of them on and thought it was brilliant. I brought a few, took them home and 'skinned' them. Inside where these little robotic units that were just perfectly made, of course, because engineers are paid to make them. So, that is where it all started with my electronic remixing. The new pieces that are being developed in my studio at the moment are on the same page, taking consumer grade toys and electronics and mixing them into other new content.

Can you take me through the anatomy of the rodents cranium, what does the flashing red light signify?

The lights signify the conscious activity within our minds. Each rodent has two heads, for me a metaphor or reference for how there are 2 decision processes happening in your mind—should I do this or should I do that? We weigh up the pros and cons and then make our conscious decision: it is not one made blindly. The 2 heads of each rodent reflect that discussion.

So, you are very much in the head?

Yes, completely, the red light represents specifically the conscious mind. So if you notice, it pulses and there is a hesitation before the rodent runs in one direction or the other—that is the postulated question. In the software the rodent is presented with a series of numbers that it has to interpret based on its identity. Each rodent has been programmed with an initialled numerical identity, someone suggested DNA but I don't want to use that word because it is not DNA. It uses its numerical identity to compare the new set of numbers and based on that interpretation it decides which way to go. During that interpretation there is this thought process that the audience can see through the red lights. Then it runs.

Are they all generically or individually programmed?

The identity is in the form of 8 numbers and each one of those has a different set of 8 numbers programmed into them. Each one is basically an individual at that point; each one moves completely differently to the others.

What influence has your original country of origin, El Salvador had on your creative work?

I was too young to understand the political structure at the time. I was 5 when we migrated to America. However, not really feeling like a citizen from either country, at least conceptually or personally, creates a strange scenario where I don't really feel like I'm an American but I'm also not an El Salvadorian. So I don't really have a country. It's a discussion a lot of immigrants will talk to you about especially if they were relocated when very young. In the privacy of the house in America my parents were passing on their own Hispanic culture yet outside the home I was being taught how to be an American.

Can you discuss your reference to consumerism?

It's an interesting question. I became fascinated once I started to

dissect the toys as to how well they were made and then I considered the quantity. I researched how many of these little suckers they're churning out. The numbers were monthly not yearly, something like 100,000 units produced a month. As soon as they are developed by an engineer they are sent to an Asian company and they just crank them out. They are being produced at a faster rate than we are being born. Imagine the implications of that! Piles of these things that eventually go out of favour. They are disposable—garbage.

These objects are plastic, they survive forever. I was just talking with Jeremy Blank curator of this exhibition and he pulled out this electronic sculptor that has been buried for years. It's a solar panel sculptor. As soon as he put it in the sun it started to work. It fascinates me that it has been hibernating. These robots, after they fall out of favour, aren't broken, they just need electricity so the consumer nature of electronic media is mind blowing. There is so much stuff out there.

You number the 6 'incubators.' Is this also a comment on consumerism?

Yes. Whilst a reference to a street address it's also a quantity. You can already imagine there might be 8,000 of these already in existence and continuing, maybe 10,000 of these house structures. These toys are metaphors for humanity. Its easy for us to believe the 'thing' has a spirit or some sort of a life. It's plastic!

In terms of DistributedDifference, what themes in your work tie in with this biennale?

I was discussing earlier that each rodent does have an identity. Each rodent does become distributed. They are presented with these questions since they have been individually programmed. For me that was the distributed difference. My work fits the overall theme of SameDifference in that the houses are all the same yet what is happening inside each house is very different.

This idea of free will is a problem that happens to all of us. It is a distributed problem to each one of us and *8520* suggests that we're all the same species yet we are all individual, we are same and different. We are all sharing the same mortal coil of free will.

Who has influenced your work?

I heard DJ Spooky give a lecture at Ohio State University on remixing music and information from the internet. It dawned on me that remixing was not just specific to music, it's been used

in the visual arts forever. DJ Spooky is from New York. When you talk to the guy he is completely refracted, he is remixed. [The French sculptor] Tinguely from the 1960s was an influence in my earlier work when I was into drawing machines, more generative art. I created a whole body of work on machines that made art on their own. This led me to ideas about artificial life and intelligence.

What new projects are you working on at the moment?

There are several pieces when I get back to my studio I will work on. *Matinal Noesis* (Morning Thought) is a continuation of my drawing machine series. I have made 2 mobile robots with LEDs embedded in them. The idea is that I am going to do a brainwave scanner. These are readily available and pretty cheap. The scanner maps out the different brainwaves that are in your mind including the alpha wave which is the most active when sleeping. I'm going to put this cap on at night and as soon as I fall asleep the robots will know and they will start drawing. Actually they will be exposing a piece of photographic paper—it will be a photograph of my dreams. The piece has been conceptualised from the fable of the elves and the shoemaker. I am the shoemaker and when I sleep the robots will come out and work for me.

*Fernando Orellana, 8520 S.W 27th Place,
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