ARTS

In cyberart, technology trumps imagination

By Sebastian Smee
GLOBE STAFF

Sometimes being an art critic has an undeniably comic dimension. Take, for example, last week. Dutifully, but with high hopes, I spent three full days taking in the visual arts components of the 10th annual Boston Cyberarts Festival.

I tried to approach this extravaganza, billed as "the first and largest collaboration of artists working in new technologies in all media in North America," as an ordinary member of the public. This meant spending a good hour each morning planning my route in the weirdly reassuring cyber-company of Google Maps, followed by six or seven hours of frustration, disorientation, and exasperation as my real feet hit the real pavements of Boston and Cambridge.

I came to the conclusion that, in the minds of the people who organized this event, no such thing as an "ordinary member of the public" even exists. Instead, the planners could only have had a cyber audience in mind.

What *is* cyberart?

You too, huh? Well, I had my ideas. But I thought the best place to find out for sure might be CyberArtCentral, the festival's headquarters on Boylston Street, near Fenway Park. So I made it my first stop on the opening day of the festival.

Arriving a little before noon, I found the place in a state of congenial disarray. My fault: It wasn't due to open until noon. And yet, to be frank, dear reader, none of the artworks advertised looked even remotely close to being set up.

And true enough, on this, the festival's opening day, I was welcomed warmly and told: "Come back tomorrow, and we might have this thing up and running." Thus, one possible definition of "cyberart": Art that needs armies of tech-heads to set up, and still may not function or be ready on time.

There are amazing things in this year's Cyberarts Festival — among them a virtual re-creation of a section of the Berlin Wall that you can "virtually" circumambulate, and an interactive animated landscape where the weather changes according to the fluctuations of that day's stock market and news head-

Exhibits at the Boston Cyberarts Festival include "Virtuelle Mauer/ReConstructing the Wall" (above), allowing visitors to virtually navigate around a re-creation of the Berlin Wall; and "Children of Arcadia" (below), an ecosystem tied to news of the day.

ART REVIEW

BOSTON CYBERARTS FESTIVAL
At: various locations, through May 10. 617 524 8495, www.bostoncyberarts.org

lines. (More on both in a moment.)

But almost none of them engendered anything like a grown-up emotion or chewable idea. Most gave off an air of being tremendously impressed by their own technical cleverness, and insouciantly pleased that someone in the world had seen fit to make that cleverness available (or almost available) to the public. Wearyingly long wall texts ruled the day. The art itself was *thin*.

Of course, after three days, there were still dozens of things I missed, so it could be that I was
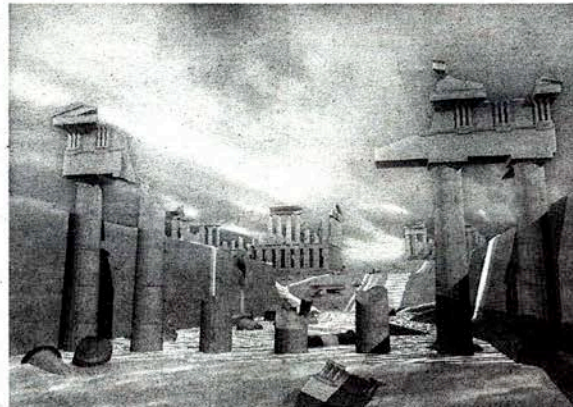
just unlucky. But I can tell you that the Berlin Wall piece, called "Virtuelle Mauer/ReConstructing the Wall," was the only work I would consider returning to see.

A collaborative effort of the artist duo Tamiko Thiel, from

America, and Germany's Teresa Reuter (known as T+T), it is a sophisticated interactive animation projected onto a big screen in a darkened room. You stand a few feet back and, with the help of a joystick, you can move

around a virtual re-creation of one section of the wall and its immediate surrounds, the section that stretches "from the former border crossing at Heinrich-Heine-Strasse to the Engelbecken Park."

The graphics, showing wall graffiti, a children's farm, checkpoints, and the facades of adjacent buildings, are excellent — although unremarkable, perhaps, to those familiar with the rapidly advancing world of gaming. The historical details are the impressive thing; they are clearly the result of a great deal of research.

Navigating T+T's reconstruction, you get a sense of the tension, the arbitrariness, and the sheer weirdness of using a wall to divide a city in two. Most of what we see is the wall as it was in the mid-1980s, but at certain points in the journey we can travel back and forth in time,

seeing what the wall was like in the 1960s, or what it is like today.

There is something haunting about it all. And yet part of that haunting derives from the ultimate emptiness of the experience, from the sheer inability of the virtual world to re-create *credibly* what it might have been like.

Yes, clever computer graphics can conjure the rudiments of space as it is constructed by architecture. But it cannot capture much in the way of texture, atmosphere, or emotion. In fact, something unavoidably sterile and artificial about these virtual simulations works against the possibility of the kind of deeper imaginative empathy aroused by older forms such as novels, memoirs, films, or photographs.

The other major work in the festival, "Children of Arcadia," was also stupendously sophisticated, and yet, in effect, strangely infantile. Two artists, Mark Skwarek and Joseph Hocking, working with a wider team including Felix Lu, Damon Baker, and Arthur Peters, have created what they call a "real-time virtual ecosystem" and projected the results onto a big screen in the Cambridge Arts Council building.

We see a landscape combining elements of Manhattan's financial district with a virtual arcadia of hills, running water, and ancient ruins (vaguely suggestive of a landscape by Poussin). As in the Berlin Wall project, we can navigate our way around using a joystick.

What's unique about the scenario is that, thanks to some mightily complicated programming, the conditions on the screen shift from arcadian to apocalyptic in response to real-time fluctuations on the New York Stock Exchange and to the day's news — good or bad — as aggregated by Google. Something like that, anyway.

![ANIMATED LANDSCAPE icon] **ANIMATED LANDSCAPE**
See a video about "Children of Arcadia" at www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts

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The visuals on the day of my visit seemed pretty relentlessly bad (heavy rain, smoking ruins, people walking about like zombies), so I asked one of the artists if things were likely ever to get better. He generously fiddled with the programming, and — voila! — we saw a break in the clouds and some rays of sunshine.

Like I said: impressive. But can someone tell me the point of it all? Isn't it all a little, dare I say it, geeky?

The best curated group show I saw as part of the festival was "Syntax" at the Photographic Resource Center at Boston University (reviewed in the Globe by Mark Feeney, April 8). The worst was probably "Nourishment" at the Art Institute of Boston (reviewed in the Globe's Galleries column by Cate McQuaid, April 22), which features the artists Jeff Warmouth and Ellen Wetmore.

A couple of shows can be seen at the MIT Museum, including one called "Loops: Digitally Enhanced Performance" that is part of an ongoing project relating to a digital portrait of Merce Cunningham. Its manifestation here is disappointingly slight, and, even with the help of wall texts, almost impossible to comprehend. But if you see it on one of the days when it is accompanied by a dance performance, it might make more sense.

Is the solution to this year's Boston Cyberarts Festival to stay at home and navigate it all online? I have been trying that out, in between banging out these deflating paragraphs, and am sorry to say that I can't recommend it. There is no doubt that new technologies will transform art in the future, just as they have in the past. But there are qualities that make a work "art," and worthy of an audience, rather than just a curious, self-involved experiment. Many practitioners of cyberart, I fear, have yet to work out what those qualities are.

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