

# New exhibit 'engaging' the imagination

BY SHAWN KEHOE

I'm no art critic. I wouldn't know the difference between a modernist or an impressionist painting if my life depended on it. But I know what I like. I like computers. I like lasers and physics. And I definitely like "Engaging the Virtual."

"Engaging the Virtual" is the newest exhibit at the Dalhousie Art Gallery, a weird mixture of technology and expression drawn from talent from across the country. Curator Doug Porter spent two years researching and gathering works for the exhibition, which runs from March 9 to April 23.

Some of the works, like Norman White's "The Helpless Robot" took nine years to develop. David Rokeby's "The Giver of Names" has been in development since 1991, and is a work in progress.

Catherine Richards' "Charged Hearts" consists of two glass models of human hearts, each in a glass case that can be lifted by the visitor. Between the two hearts lies another glass structure, encasing a device similar to a cathode ray tube. When the heart is lifted, an array of

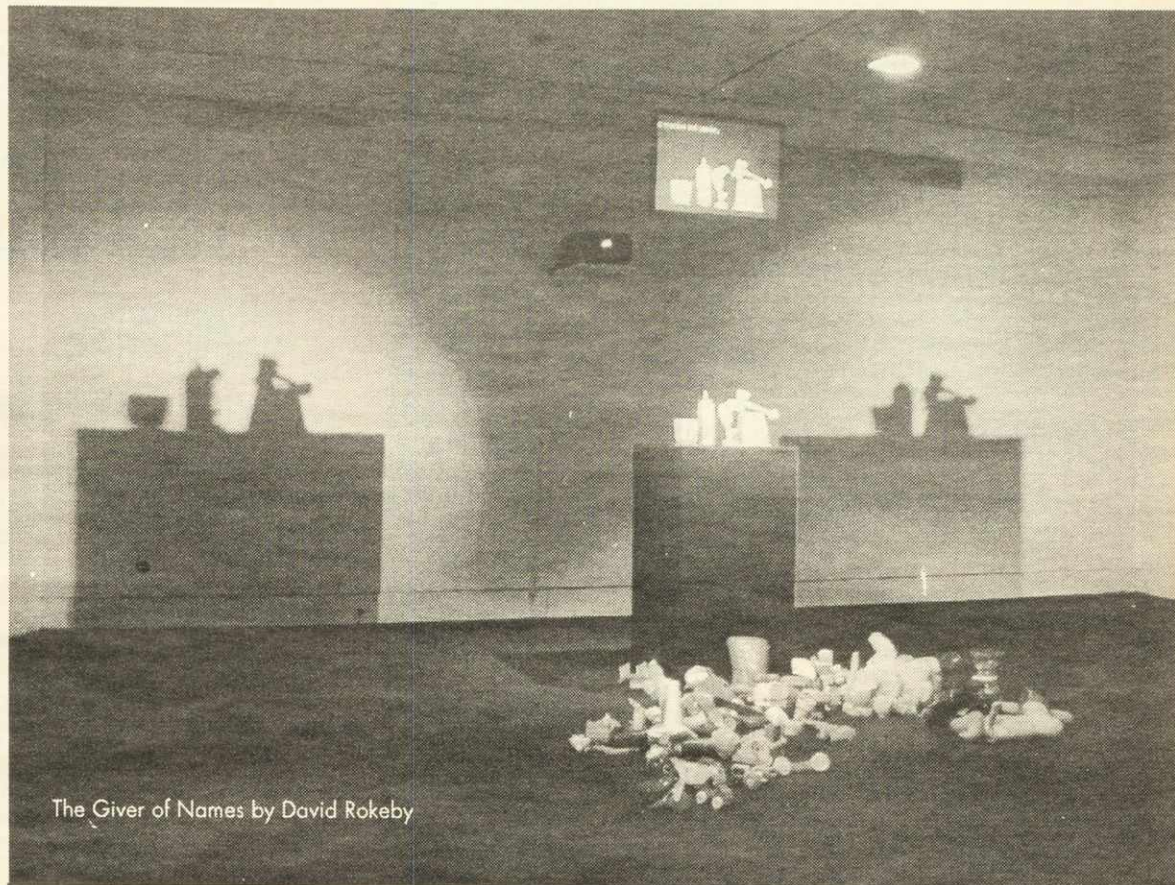
electronics causes pulses of light to pass through the tube, mimicking the beat of a human heart.

"It's about our connection with the electromagnetic...how we plug our bodies into machines," said Richards about her creation, which took three years to design and four months to construct.

"Charged Hearts" demonstrates the multiple levels of this exhibit; it appeals not only on an abstract artistic level, but also on a purely technical one, as a marvel of construction and applied physics.

Artificial intelligence also plays a large role in the exhibit. Norman White's "The Helpless Robot" consists of a visually unimpressive structure that rotates like a round-about. The robot pleads with the visitor to rotate him to a specific point, scratching his robotic 'itch.' If the visitor complies, the robot will continue to ask for such favours, becoming increasingly abusive in its demands. Once it has driven the visitors away, it begins to revert to its polite persona, utilising its impressive repertoire of 256 pre-recorded quotes.

"It's a comment on human



The Giver of Names by David Rokeby

nature. We treat strangers more kindly than we do our friends," noted White, who worked on the project from 1987 and 1996. The age of the project shows in the technology used; "The Helpless Robot" runs on an 'obsolete' 386 computer. White notes that a gallery isn't the best place for such a creation; he feels it more suited to shopping malls.

Perhaps the most ambitious project from a technological point of

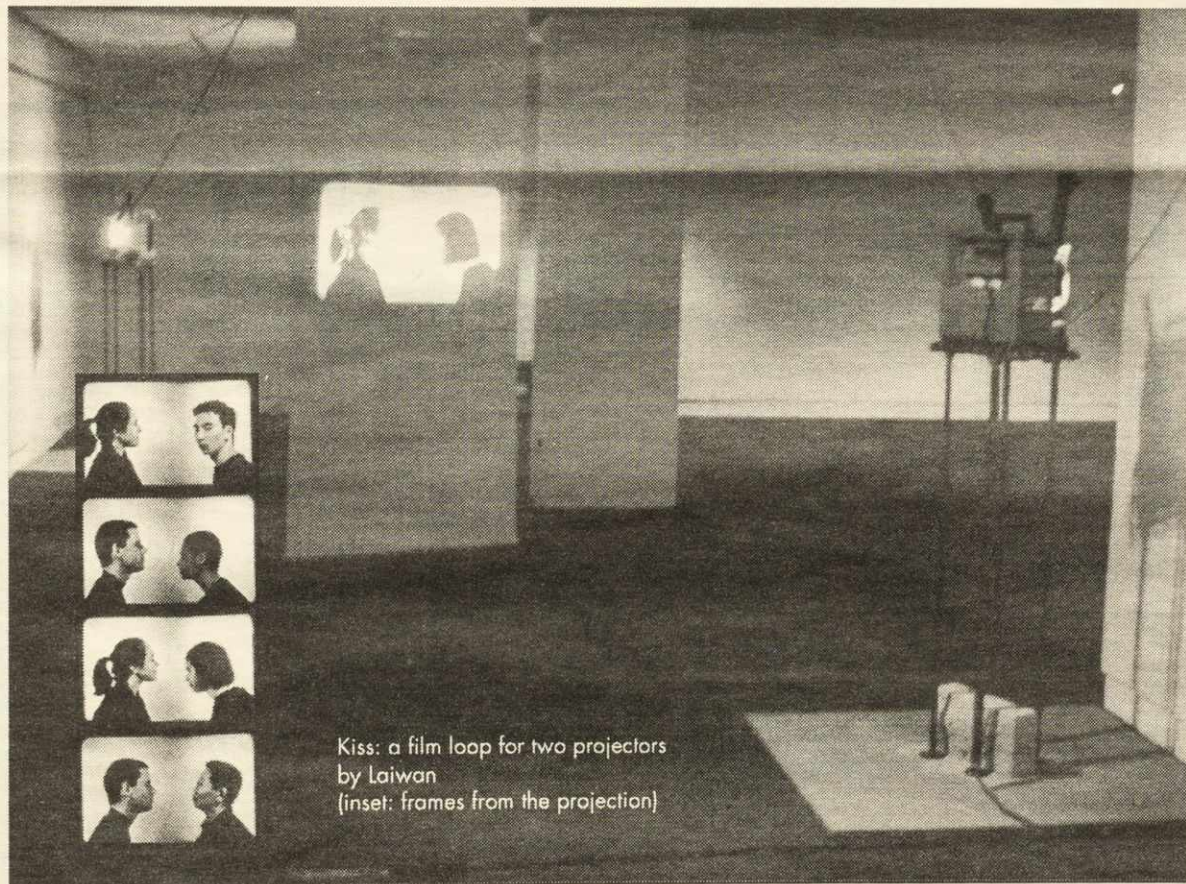
view is David Rokeby's "The Giver of Names." The work consists of two pedestals, one empty and one supporting a computer. When an object is placed on the empty pedestal, a video camera interacts with custom-designed software to analyse the object in several ways, including colour, shape and texture. Using a vocabulary of 150,000 words and a word association program, "The Giver of Names" goes about its task, creating a sentence based on its observations, then creating further sentences using word associations from the previous sentence.

The sentences are grammatically correct, albeit strange. One such sentence was "Lemons, more eyeless than other beady sectors, would pardon no optical drops." While watch-

ing the giver in action, I was reminded of the old joke about 1000 monkeys on 1000 typewriters reproducing the works of Shakespeare. We may be getting close to that day.

In the end, "Engaging the Visual" has something for everyone. If you appreciate the deeper symbolism of artistic expression, you'll find it there. If you admire fine work in construction and technological innovation, there's something for you. And if you just like lasers, physics and talking robots, stop by the Dalhousie Art Gallery in the next four weeks. You don't need to be an art critic. This is an exhibit anyone can enjoy, be they an arts, engineering, commerce or science student.

And there was peace in our time.



Kiss: a film loop for two projectors by Laiwan (inset: frames from the projection)

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