

Art Issues Review

admin

Carmine Iannaccons – January / February 1994

David Daizell at DETROIT, 12 November-18 December

Michael Oliveri at SHERRY FRUMKIN, 23 October-27 November

Tourism can be degrading. It breaks civilization down into attractions and the environment into points of interest, eviscerating both and repackaging them as predigested products. David Dalzell fashions this process of cultural cannibalism into a model for our more general relationship to the idea of place.

The artist presents several maps of Los Angeles which offer different versions of the city as mental landscape: the webbing of roadways on a freeway map; the precise Euclidean space of a geological survey; and the collection of reference points on an aviator's navigational chart. A tiny circuit board and liquid-crystal display positioned over each map play a video loop shot at a variety of tourist traps and other landmarks which the maps designate. With healthy doses of the roadways in-between, the camera restlessly scans views of such places as the La Brea Tar Pits, Farmer's Market, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and City Hall. Always in motion, it prowls hungrily as if trying to hunt down the site within these sights.

Despite the malevolent tone set by all its exposed electronic hardware and the darkened room it requires, this quest for orientation never takes on the existential weight or conviction it seems to promise. Strait-jacketed by its compare-and-contrast modality, the exhibition remains generic. The abstract precision of the maps plays off the generality and confusion of the video images, just as the fixity of the maps plays off the flux of the video. But the juxtaposition sends up no sparks and never threatens the boundaries which separate its two factors. Even as it points to the arbitrary nature of all schematic systems and the lapsed expectations they create, the proposition is smothered by the installation's neutrality. Unfortunately, the sleek allure of the sophisticated technology at hand readily fills the gap, and the work finally succumbs to its own high-tech infatuation.

This may be a built-in risk for artists working with technological media. If so, Michael Oliveri comes up with a humorous solution that verges on the satiric: degrade the content even further and direct all the focus into the apparatus which transmits it. Dalzell's use of technology comes off as complacent because it stays within the scope of what the hardware was meant to do. Oliveri achieves critical mass simply by the way he tweaks that technology and makes it perform a unique version of the absurd.

Seven microphones are planted at discreet locations around the city. The ambient sounds they pick up are transmitted through telephone lines to the gallery. There, the exposed phone lines lead to a set of speakers, each connected to an ancient stereo tuner and an old rotary dial telephone, stripped open to expose its internal circuitry. These jerry-built units amplify the different environments, which are then broadcast live.

The spark that animates this project is its ticklish degree of immediacy. The unfiltered present tense in which it operates is compelling, perhaps because it opens onto more sinister possibilities of electronic surveillance, wiretapping, and eavesdropping. Though these criminal options are all repressed, "Soundscapes" still reincarnates the perennial glee of subverting authority, its hardware, and its rules of usage. Like Dalzell, Oliveri also begins with a set of maps. Each conscientiously details where the various microphones are located. From that point forward, all order breaks down in an antic cacophony of weed-eaters, screaming children, chirping birds, yoga instructions, and canned music.

This play on chance and randomness pays homage to John Cage, formalized by one of the transmission mikes that was to be located at the Museum of Contemporary Art during the run of Cage's "Rolywholyover A Circus." As the receiving unit's disconnected cord attests, however, the proposal was never realized. But the sensibility of Oliveri's installation really goes beyond Cage's highly esoteric and formal preoccupations, drawing more heartily from the raw energies of Dada or early Fluxus artists like Yoko Ono and George Brecht, with their keen appreciation for chaos and their warfare against conventional ways of seeing and standards of knowing. Like them, Oliveri submits technology to exquisitely nonproductive and inconclusive ends.