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By Pauline van Mourik Broekman

Review of Deaf96, Rotterdam

Included in DEAF96 was an ambitious programme of seminars, workshops and artists' demonstrations. The overarching theme of the event was 'Digital Territories' and the programme included many different elements dealing with the subject. Among them was an exhibition, held partly at the Dutch Photo Institute (NFI), partly at other locations around the city. Technology and the city are oft coupled objects of analysis and it is difficult not to take well trodden paths of thought on the subject. Routinely, this means interpreting the spheres of concrete and virtual worlds as existing at opposite ends of the physiological and social spectrum and talking, mainly, of a problematic integration of the two. The underlying aim of most events in 'Digital Territories' was a re-examination of this assumed dualism: a re-examination of the virtualising tendencies in the concrete world (in this case of the city) and problems of 'urbanisation' and population of virtual space (i.e. beyond the literal building of digital cities, the consolidations of power that electronic networks are producing, the way in which processes of socialisation occur, networks' role in new erotics, in the creation of and influence on economies etc.)

Thank God, architecture and buildings weren't just referred to in name only. In fact, one of the central and most interesting contributions of DEAF was that made by NOX, a Dutch architecture company. NOX (Maurice Nio & Lars Spuybroek) created a mutable city for DEAF ('SoftSite'). Depending on how much and via which routes users looked at the information on the site, 'softscrapers' rose or didn't. With each node corresponding to either a subject, participant's or project's name, the slow accumulation of information about their usage could be transformed into a city-like mutant growth, whose roots varied from the narrow and sinewy to the blocky and bulbous. (Apart from generating the SoftSite, this usage also affected the structure and workings of the site itself, selectively re-organising which choices of subjects users were given depending on their past preferences). NOX aim to make an architecture which is as mutable as the paradigms of its age, one which acknowledges the artificiality and uncertainty of the habitat we have created for ourselves - a soft architecture of intermediary states that replaces the historical monuments of cultural heroism that are now defunct odes to a belief in knowable and objective truths.

Elsewhere, in the Photo Institute's toilets, Julia Meltzer's and Amanda Ramos' project *Chatlandia* delved into net-sex. By naming the installation 'Chatlandia' they drew attention to the way that the erotic - text - communication of IRC channels is one of the strongest and most clearly successful ways of creating 'place' virtually. More than anywhere else, 'chat' entails imagining the body and space into the written word. As Sandy Stone memorably described it, phone sex is a high-level form of data compression (at the speaker's end) and expansion (at the listener's end). So too with IRC. So much so, in fact, that the intensity of the situation requires a whole new set of textual signs and commands. In *Chatlandia* voice-synthesised versions of these written come-ons, exchanges and encounters were being relayed over a loudspeaker, and you could stick your nose in further by reading one of the hundreds of print-outs on the walls. It wasn't really clear though whether *Chatlandia* was intended to question the ultimate privacy of IRC or to snub prudery and hold up a mirror to the lurking habits of a typical gallery-going public (who may live in the illusion they have more elevated reasons for reading these texts than plain sexual - and voyeuristic - curiosity).

If teledildonics is a continent of the 'digital territory', I could imagine *Chatlandia* lying somewhere near its shore, a kind of gentle text introduction, the sand dunes on the way inland. *sense:less*, a Virtual Reality project by artists' collective CORTEX (Knut Mork, Kate Pendry, Stahl Senslie and Marius Waltz) would be closer to its heartland, maybe even the mountains only few can climb. Yet though the technologies it uses are more like the ones we imagine for a fully-rigged cyber SM session, its subject is actually not overtly sexual at all. It is more about emotional engagement and the development of relationships within virtual spaces (including those between human and non-human agencies). And it successfully introduces these issues in a knowing, but playful way. Only one person can enter the installation at a time, but because the 'egg' that is effectively *sense:less* stage is transparent, many others can watch their movements aswell. The abstract shapes that hover round the egg's inside walls are seen more clearly in the player's stereoscopic glasses. These beings, Jean-Claude, Amanda, Harold, Autista and 'the sisters' can 'touch' the player via sixteen sensors placed on the inside of his/her Virtual Reality suit. All are manifestations of character types, based on real people, and created with a wink in the direction of psychoanalysis. In a sense, each being represents 'elements' that the player can respond to. Together they made *sense:less* seem like a kind of otherworldly and theatrical contribution to debates on AI, realised in the public space of the exhibition fairground rather than the privacy of the medical establishment.

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For more on the Digital Territories exhibition including Masaki Fujihata's *Global Interior Project*, Luc Courchesne's *Salon des Ombres*, Jill Scott's *Frontiers of Utopia*, Daniele Buetti's photographs (see illustration) and more, see the extensive DEAF96 site at [<http://www.v2.nl/DEAF/96>]

(We have also included two articles connected to the DEAF seminars elsewhere in this issue - Marina Grzanic's text on media art in ex-Yugoslavia and a series of interviews about online publishing prompted by a discussion on the same theme - rhizome - telepolis - nettime).