

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

A Museum That Lets Its Visitors Become Part of the Art

With 'Round,' a Sound Artist Creates an Audio Program for the Aldrich That Solicits Many Opinions



ON TOUR An audio device used for "Round," a project at the Aldrich.

Although I have always worried that audio devices in museums distract from the art, they are also pregnant with possibility. Halsey Burgund's exhibition "Round," at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, takes on this subject, offering up a museum audio tour that solicits contributions from viewers and gives them equal voice in the discussion of art. It is what you might call a democratic approach to art interpretation.

ART REVIEW

BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

The project has its inspiration in today's online world, where information is available, diffuse and participatory, engaging Web surfers in a process of dialogue and collaboration. Writing in the exhibition catalog, Nina Carlson, education director at the Aldrich, asks readers, "Why should experiencing art be any different?"

Mr. Burgund is a musician and sound artist who lives outside Boston. His installations and musical performances have often incorporated spoken voice recordings as improvisational elements, alongside traditional instruments.

The Aldrich, which contacted him two years ago about developing a new kind of audio tour, figured that, as a sound artist, he would have some interesting ideas. It turns out he did.

"Round" operates much like a standard audio guide, with recordings for key works in two of the museum's current shows: "Charlotte Schulz: An Insufficiency in Our Screens" and "Painting the Glass House: Artists Revisit Modern Architecture." These works are marked with wall labels and accessed via a small hand-held tablet computer with a touch screen. But unlike a traditional guide, it allows visitors to select from a wide range of voices sharing their views and perspectives — including those of curators, educators, artists and other visitors — and to add their own responses, which can, in turn, be retrieved by others. Mr. Burgund also created a similar guide to the museum itself, with information about its history, building, staff and ongoing exhibits.

The title refers to a musical round, in which two or more voices sing the same melody offset from one another. It is relevant insofar as the comments of visitors participating in the audio installation are collected remotely in a database of recordings, filed by category,

"Halsey Burgund: Round," Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, through July 27. Information: (203) 438-4519 or www.aldrichart.org.



LOOK AND LISTEN Visitors at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, top, using an audio device that gives information about an exhibition as part of "Round," a sound art project created by Halsey Burgund. Mr. Burgund, right, explaining the project to Rachel Hyatt and Kyle McGran. Guests can learn to use the devices at a demonstration panel, above.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANET DURRANS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

then mixed together with other responses by computer algorithm and played back randomly in snippets, overlaid with other voices and electronic instrumental music.

Mr. Burgund's ambition here was to create what he refers to in the exhibition catalog as "an equality of opinion," in which no single viewpoint or perspective is privileged over any other. That is a noble sentiment, but how does it work as an educational tool? The truth is that while the audio guide is interesting as sound art, it is immensely frustrating for anyone seriously interested in using the device to get information about a

work or an artist showing at the museum.

With voices stomping on each other, it is hard to learn anything at all — at least that was my experience with the guide created for the exhibition of charcoal-on-paper drawings by Charlotte Schulz. On one occasion, while I was listening to the guide, the sound of the artist speaking about the process of making her works was violently interrupted by a child listing the things she sees in a drawing in the show. Opinion is subjective, sure, but some opinions matter more than others. (Of course, as a critic, I may be slightly biased.)

Perhaps the question here is: Do knowledge and expertise matter in the interpretation of artwork in a way that they do not in the online assessment of, say, cars and cameras? Is not art defined precisely by its nonutilitarian purpose, deriving meaning not from efficiency of function, but from context, both historical and contemporary?

Of course, Mr. Burgund is an artist, not an educator, and this needs to be borne in mind. For him, the main point here is not so much to provide information about the artworks, but to create an experience that can enhance somebody's time in the museum. To take

pleasure in this oddball installation, you have to countenance such a motivation and get past all expectation that you will learn something from the audio guide.

As an artwork, Mr. Burgund's installation is stimulating, presenting an intensified, encapsulated version of everyday life in the Internet age, in which blogs and sites like YouTube seek to actively involve their browsers. There are about 400 recorded responses to the Aldrich exhibitions, validating the artist's faith in the participatory, democratic nature of new media. Maybe experiencing art is no different after all.