Re: Artifacts of the Presence Era

Discarded candy wrappers, mugs ringed with brown and even a shapely depression left in a favorite chair comprise artifacts of the presence era. Perhaps these are remnants of an all-nighter, perhaps they were discarded over a week’s time. Washroom stalls are a somewhat less attractive example. As demonstrated by handprints in concrete or names carved into trees, people have an innate desire to be remembered. Artifacts takes this individual desire and expands it to encompass the community defined by the physical space of the ICA.

Individuals tend to be remembered for single significant events; Reagan with his wall and the Emperor without his clothes, for example. While these events are interesting in themselves, they are limited in that they can only depict a moment in time. Reagan’s later disintegration and the Iran-Contra situation lend meaningful insight into his character that is lost in a zenith-type portrayal. Artifacts addresses this by displaying changes in presence over time using a geological metaphor. While the analogy is not exact - Artifacts applies to a community - important events are highlighted without loss of context.

Patterns are still discernible from the compacted layers, and the accompanying dot-date display provides additional temporal context. Additionally, this focus increases the amount of feedback to people choosing to interact with the exhibit. Combined with the Present Machine, the emphasis on the present presence builds a connection that draws the audience in. This is exemplified by the frequent occurrence of posing and playing in front of the camera.

While aesthetically pleasing, use of the shape of an audio curve to represent a layer is not terribly meaningful. Though it may fit with the metaphor, at its core it suffers from an attempt to combine incompatible dimensions. The audio is a fifteen point curve formed by samples taken over a period of five minutes. The image fit to the slice, however, represents one moment in time. This incongruity likely promotes the confusion observed by the authors. That visitors were able to discern presence as the focus of the exhibit probably has more to do with the prominent display of the Present Machine.

Re: Painterly Rendering

In general, geniuses tend to be somewhat different. That is, many of the people known today as great artists are also known to have been mentally unbalanced. Think of Poe, Churchill, Hemmingway and Dickinson. Virginia Woolf took a stroll to the bottom of a river with stones in her pockets. Yet these are some of the most creative minds in history.

Painterly rendering attempts to reproduce this creativity in an orderly fashion. Artists like Michaelangelo measure proportions and shade their works very carefully – this linear style of painting more closely approximates a mechanistic approach to art. Using multiple passes to refine a drawing, the authors' system attempts to mimic the free-form nature of painterly style artists. That is, paint the general idea first with broad strokes and then refine it with smaller strokes. This is not unlike the process of sculpting, and is certainly more intuitive than attempts to approximate creativity in one go. Any process designed to produce more 'human' output would involve mercury (think Newton) or alcohol of some sort. That probably doesn't work too well on computers, though.

A key idea behind this process is that both human and simulated artists use some sort of reference image to start. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine such a process without one. Yet some of the most creative human art is not of a landscape, but of the mish-mash of random thoughts and ideas that flow through the human mind. This sort of art would be a great subject for AI research.