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Selfies and Auto Dialing as Art in Miami

Miami's new Institute of Contemporary Art highlights experimental web art

An artist is about to attempt a giant phony phone call to America.

On Friday, when a show of Web-based artwork opens at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, Daniel J. Wilson will present the debut of "America Says Hello," a piece that uses custom software to dial random phone numbers one by one around the country.

A website will play each person's voice as he or she answers the call in real time before the program ghost-dials the next number. As people speak into the silence of the automated call, the nuances of their voices and the noises around them become part of the artwork.

The distance and intimacy the Internet creates are among the issues artists are exploring in "Open Call: Web Based Art," an exhibit featuring work by 10 artists chosen by a jury from more than 270 submissions world-wide. The ICA will select one work from the show to acquire for its permanent collection.

The museum, which plans to host open-call shows with different themes every year, started with the web given the amount of innovation in digital art, said ICA deputy director and chief curator Alex Gartenfeld. "It's a very forward-thinking medium," he said.

Art veterans are watching the ICA's early moves. The institution was founded last year after months of public battles between the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA) and its landlord, the city of North Miami. Former MOCA board members started the ICA.

The newly opened museum is already generating attention: Last month, Mr. Gartenfeld, 28, a former MOCA curator who previously worked as a senior editor for Art in America and Interview magazines, was selected to co-curate the 2018 New Museum triennial in New York. The ICA plans to break ground on a splashy new building in Miami's design district in the coming months.

The ICA exhibit highlights experimental work such as Dionysia Mylonaki's "Voice Booth," featuring a voice-analysis machine the 28-year-old London artist built with help from a voice coach and engineer. In a video component of the work, Ms. Mylonaki asks actual medical students to pretend to report that a patient has died while the machine measures their voices for empathy. The speakers descend into a low monotone as they try to move a dot on a screen to a bull's-eye marked "sympathetic."

Other works in the show include "Selffeed," a 2014 piece by Jillian Mayer, Tyler Madsen and Erik Carter that flashes any Instagram photograph tagged "selfie" the moment it goes online. The site, selffeed.com, is a live stream of photographs of people, food, pets and anything else the public deems a

self-portrait (or labels as such so others will see it with the millions of posts tagged “selfie” on Instagram). The piece raised an existential question for its creators, said Ms. Mayer, who asked: “Will there ever be a last selfie posted, and then will the website be stuck on that photo?”

Much of the show’s art exists online for anyone to find. “In a lot of cases, people come across web art without realizing it’s art at all—that’s sort of an interesting thing, said artist Damon Zucconi, whose work, “Slow Verb,” appears in the exhibit. His piece generates new verses for hypnotic vocal-trance songs using a database with 36,000 lines of lyrics. Mr. Zucconi called it “a single infinite and indeterminate song.”

Virtual happiness is at the center of AdrienneRose Gionta’s “My Big Fat Summer as a Skinny Hot Chick in Second Life,” a blog chronicling 58 days the artist spent in an interactive virtual fantasy world. The 2013 work, which she treated as both a performance and an online travel journal, explored the opportunities that come with being thin. Ms. Gionta found that her online romances were better than those in her real life. “I’m generally interested in trying to create the perfect life for myself virtually and hoping to manifest it physically—like if you build it, it will happen,” said the south Florida artist, who plans to put a large woman into the same virtual scenarios to see how the experience differs.

In the auto-dialing piece, the hope is to call nearly every phone number in the U.S. Mr. Wilson said the software is designed to keep dialing numbers until it has run through all possible combinations with most active area codes and exchanges, a process he said could take more than 1,000 years. The site goes live on Friday.

In the work, each call ends either after 30 seconds or when the call recipient hangs up, whichever comes first. Out-of-service numbers and voice mail are represented as silences. The software does not currently dial the handful of states that require two-party consent for phone recording.

Mr. Wilson, who once had a baseball hat made with his telephone number on it to encourage connections with strangers, was drawn to the idea of reaching any other person in the country with just 10 keystrokes. “It’s just a single call, which happens to everyone once in a while,” the New York-based Canadian artist, who created the work with help from a computer programmer. “There’s something a little bit intimate about these wrong-number calls.”