

trish adams

wave writer: vital forces #2

The Art Museum of Estonia

Exhibition Hall in Rotermann Salt Storage

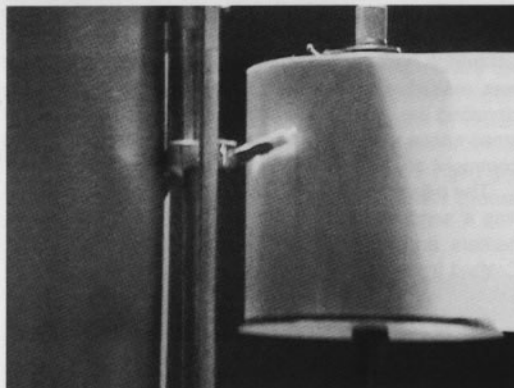
ISEA2004

Tallinn, Estonia

Trish Adams' *Wave Writer: Vital Forces #2* was recently presented as part of the ISEA2004 Tallinn program at The Art Museum of Estonia's Rotermann Salt Storage exhibition hall. It was an appropriate choice of venue for this installation for a number of reasons. Firstly, the structure was originally built for the storage and manufacture of salt, a substance extracted from the ocean. In addition, the location of the exhibition is only a couple of blocks from the port of Tallinn, on the Baltic Sea. Another feature of the building that resonates when considering this installation is its appearance of age—the architectural style belies the fact it was constructed in 1908. By looks alone, one would think that it was much older, an easy mistake to make in a location that boasts the best-preserved medieval architecture in Europe.

Metaphorical associations to the ocean and the history of architecture aside, these elements reinforce a range of issues inherent in *Wave Writer: Vital Forces #2*. At first glance, this installation appears to be a semblance of discarded bits of technology, a museum exhibit of dated hardware. However, initial perceptions can be deceiving. Although the work is constructed from, and uses a form of 'old technology', the way it works as an interactive and haptic device offers a sense of play and engagement for the user that is firmly situated in the here and now. By Adams' use of technology from the past to critique human/computer interaction, she is able to approach contemporary themes that are central to discussions in new media, particularly in relation to issues of accessibility and usability.

The work is activated by participants pumping a foot pedal, or logging on to the website, leaving a trace that is printed from a dot-matrix printer, effectively providing a documentation or acknowledgment of the experience. The printed output resembles the marks created on the Richter scale—some marks are wide and wavy, others intense and erratic, all constituting and verifying the users input. The foot pump interaction



left and right: **Trish Adams, *Wave Writer***. Courtesy the artist. Photographs: Jeff Sams.

creates the wavy line in real time and the dot matrix printer churns out the paper in response to online access to the project.

The sounds emitted from the device are multi-layered, at times eerie and mechanical, presenting an uncanny reminder of an industrial age long past. Additional sounds emanating from the work seem aquatic, like a ship's radar or a submarine, blipping and beeping responses from the audience.

These works were initially conceived some years ago, when Adams reclaimed a number of obsolete and discarded scientific machines called kymographs. This find sparked an interest into the mechanic and analogue functions of this early technology, triggering the artist to consider the 'translatory devices in early scientific attempts to locate, map and master the internal reactivity' of the body.

The online dictionary describes the kymograph as 'An instrument for measuring, and recording graphically, the pressure of the blood in any of the blood vessels of a living animal; called also kymographion'. Other definitions state that the kymograph was used to measure 'animal electricity', a term I find fascinating.

The history behind this early technology is intriguing. Carlo Matteucci originally invented the kymograph process in 1846. This technology was used initially by physiologists for recording blood pressure. Experimental psychologists then adopted the kymograph as an

instrument for recording a range of time-related events: these included response times, stimulus presentations, muscle exertion and tuning fork vibrations. Matteucci's experiments were later extended by Dr. Emil Du Bois-Reymond, who discovered the nerve impulse, which is the basic mechanism of information transfer in the nervous system.

The website component designed by Adams' collaborator Jeff Sams worked well as a supplement to the installation. There is a section on the website titled *Vital Forces #1*, which provides a good reference to the sound and imagery of an earlier manifestation of the *Wave Writer* installation.

In summary, Trish Adams work successfully engages the user because of its canny play on the nexus between art and science whilst reminding us that human/machine dialogue has been a concern for technological research for well over a century.

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references

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