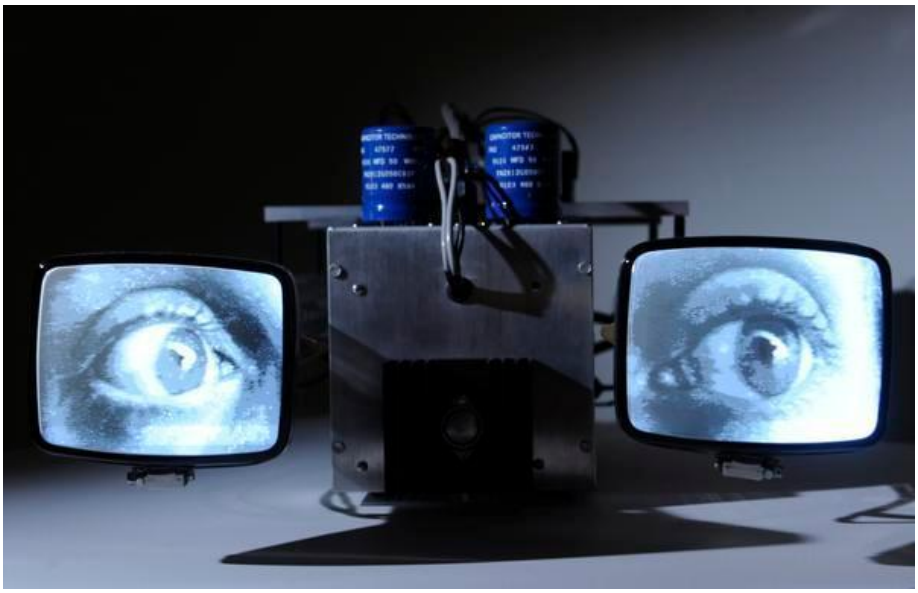
"Blink!" a charged body of work

Kyle MacMillian July 26, 2016 at 4:39 p.m.



Alan Rath's "Looker II," 1990-91, incorporates parts from old TVs and electronic parts; Denver Art Museum, Funds from the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation.

To be considered for the latest exhibition at the Denver Art Museum, potential selections had to meet just one criterion: Be electrified in one way or another.

Oh, and be artistically significant, of course.

"Blink! Light, Sound and the Moving Image," which opens Sunday, March 13 and runs through May 1, is wide-ranging, perhaps overly so. With more than 50 works spanning three decades, it encompasses virtually anything that might fall under the amorphous heading of electronic art.

It takes in installation art, video art, light art, performance art and minimalist art, to name just the most obvious categories, as well as works by artists such as Bruce Nauman, who is not exactly an electronic artist but also includes such media among the many he explores in his work.

"Institutions are on the fence, and everyone has a different way of approaching this," said Jill Desmond, the show's curator. "Electronic art is

this extremely broad way of basically saying ‘everything that’s plugged in.’ It’s very general.”

It’s all a little confusing, even for art historians. And this show makes little attempt to clarify matters. Visitors should not anticipate finding a comprehensive overview of the field, or some new art-historical or philosophical take on this work.

The goal for this exhibition, the museum’s first large-scale look at electronic art, is much simpler: to offer a basic introduction to this kind of work. And on those terms, it is a useful and exciting offering that should prove popular.

But it has its potential downsides, as well. Given the flashing lights, moving screens and clashing sounds that visitors encounter at every turn, a tour through “Blink!” will no doubt add up to an assaultive, cacophonous experience for some.

Even admirers of this work are likely to come away with a sense that the show is a bit overpacked. Despite the museum’s efforts to partition and curtain off certain sections, many of the pieces still seem crowded; some of the quieter works, like Susie J. Lee’s meditative video projection, “Consummation” (2006), become almost lost.

Published concurrently with the show is a 108-page publication that doubles as a catalog for “Blink,” as well as a handbook of the museum’s electronic-art holdings.

In his introduction, museum director Christoph Heinrich, who continues to serve as curator of modern and contemporary art, writes that it is impossible to think of contemporary art without paying due attention to electronic art.

“Though artists have been working with the medium since the 1960s,

they attracted few collectors to their electrically activated, attention-demanding work until several decades later,” he writes.

“Today, an art museum intent on exploring what’s happening now must devote considerable resources to researching, exhibiting and collecting objects in this rapidly evolving field.”

Heinrich notes that the Denver Art Museum — like most other institutions conditioned to interpreting centuries of painting and sculpture — “cautiously” began collecting electronic art in 1982 under former curator of modern and contemporary art Dianne Vanderlip.

If the museum did not jump in with both feet, it nonetheless made some significant early purchases, such as Jenny Holzer’s “Selections from Truisms” (1983), created less than a decade after she began her now-iconic LED signboards, and Nam June Paik’s “Electronic Fish” (1986).

Its holdings in this realm have been significantly aided by Mark Addison of Boulder, a smart, forward-looking collector, who along with his wife, Polly, has made electronic art a central part of his acquisitions.

Sixteen of the museum’s works in this show were gifts of the Addisons, or purchases at least partially funded by them, and the couple lent an additional eight pieces, including Spencer Finch’s spellbinding fluorescent work “Moonlight (Luna County, New Mexico, July 13, 2003).”

One of the most intriguing aspects of “Blink!” are the collisions of past and present technology, sometimes in the same work, and the accompanying sense of the accelerating speed at which things become obsolete.

Christian Marclay’s “Telephones” is a fast-edit video montage of dozens of scenes from movies and televisions featuring characters picking up, talking on and hanging up phones. Even though the work is only 16 years

old, it seems oddly antique because so few people use traditional telephones anymore.

In some cases, artists make a point of using older technology. For his video installation “Still Men Out There” (2003), Berlin artist Bjorn Melhus incorporated 18 refurbished cathode-ray-tube monitors because he prefers the curvature of the old screens.

The obsolescence of technology also causes considerable problems in terms of conserving electronic works because videos and DVDs degrade over time, and many electronic parts are no longer available or are extremely rare.

In Paik’s “Electronic Fish” (1986), a piece encased in a 1948 Philco TV cabinet, the accompanying whale sounds originally were provided by a now-aging, nearly worn-out internal cassette recorder. The recording has been transferred, or “migrated,” to a digital system, with all the original equipment kept in storage for future scholars.

Even though “Blink!” was not intended to be comprehensive, it encompasses a broad range of themes and approaches, from Lorna Simpson’s potent exploration of racial identity in “Easy to Remember” (2001) to Golan Levin’s playful “Interstitial Fragment Processor” (2007).

It includes representative pieces by many key figures in the field, including Paik, Alan Rath and Tony Oursler. Bill Viola is represented but, unfortunately, only by a small wall piece that provides little sense of the immersive, room-size installations that made him famous.

Of course, there are inevitable gaps. Among the most striking is a paucity of interactive works, especially historical ones like Dan Graham’s “Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay” (197 4/1993) in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Such shortcomings aside, "Blink" is a welcome, overdue nod to what has been an essential facet of contemporary art for a half-century and will likely remain so long into the future.

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"BLINK! LIGHT, SOUND, AND THE MOVING IMAGE."

Art. Denver Art Museum, West 13th Avenue between Broadway and Bannock Street. The museum presents its first large- scale exhibition devoted to electronic art. It features more than 50 works, most from the museum's holdings and the collection of Polly and Mark Addison of Boulder. Sunday, March 13 through May 1. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Fridays. Free with regular admission. 720-865-5000 or denverartmuseum .org. Videos of some of the artworks can be seen at: youtube.com/denverartmuseum.

Tune your senses to these

Five Highlights of "Blink!"

Bjorn Melhus, "Still Men Out There" (2003). Audio clips of war movies unfold in this 10-minute work, as abstract images, synchronized with the dialogue and music, flicker across 18 screens arrayed on the floor. Though it's not exactly clear why this combination of sight and sound works, this piece achieves a suprisingly powerful emotional impact.

Tony Oursler, "Zero" (1996). Oursler's psychologically charged videos of talking faces projected onto dolls, spheres and other objects have become a haunting mainstay of contemporary art. These make-believe personages seem imprisoned in their sculptural realms, like the suitcase holding the stuffed doll in this piece.

Alan Rath, “Looker II” (1990-91) — top left. Using the guts of old televisions and other scavenged electronic parts, Rath creates works that have as much to do with the elements of sculpture as technology. This vaguely anthropomorphic, deliberately awkward work, suggests a pair of eyeglasses, with videos of eyes looking everywhere but at the viewer.

William Jude Rumley, “Recognition” (1990) — bottom left. This playful yet pointed interactive work consists of a chair connected to two speakers. A visitor sitting on the chair activates neon backlighting and a soundtrack with applause and a voice thanking the participant. “Without you, none of this would be necessary,” it says.

Charles Sandison, “Chamber” (2009). One advantage of video technology is its ability to thrust viewers into immersive environments of light, color and motion. In this piece, which was a highlight of “Embrace!” a 2009-10 exhibition at the museum, floor projectors emanate flowing swirls of hundreds of numbers, words and symbols across the wall and ceiling.