

Projects 47 : Luc Courchesne : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 23-August 23, 1994

Author

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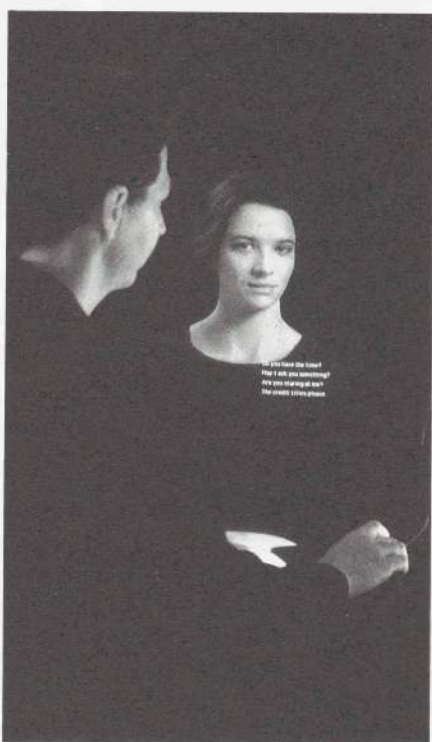
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47

luc courchesne

projects



The Museum of Modern Art
New York

June 23–August 23, 1994

Now that image, sound, and text can be easily combined and electronically disseminated, discussions about interactive media proliferate. Video, audio, and computer processes have merged and are readily accessible in the form of CD-ROM publications or video games which a user can explore in a non-linear fashion, following many different pathways. Talented individuals are pushing the artistic potentials of these evolving technologies, and their work can be seen in museums and galleries, and at festivals around the world, often as three-dimensional, room-sized, installation projects.

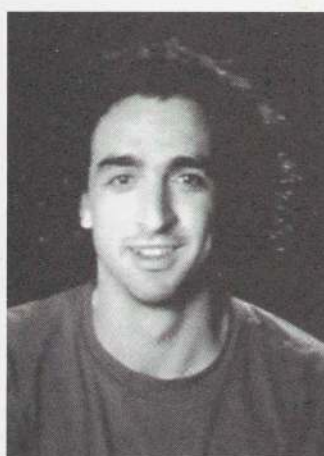


Montreal-based Luc Courchesne belongs to a new generation of international artists who work with sophisticated electronic tools that are smaller, less expensive, and more ubiquitous than ever before. The expressive possibilities of this equipment, which is increasingly relevant to current practices in all the arts, are helping both to elucidate the changes in perceptions caused by its very pervasiveness, and to redefine the meaning of creativity.

Over the last decade, Courchesne has created interactive installations combining standard video and computer equipment in what is popularly known as "hypermedia." While still a graduate student at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies, he co-authored the interactive video work *Elastic Movies* (1984).¹ Poly-linear, it was the first computer-controlled video piece created by artists, and which used a specially written computer program that gave editing power to its viewers. Dismayed by the surfeit of new technological tools and the over-abundance of visual images being created by artists in MIT's computer labs at the time, Courchesne produced a more conceptual master's thesis on how light affects

human behavior. Interested in the magical aspects of darkness, he expanded his graduate research materials to create a piece called *Encyclopedia Chiaroscuro* (1987), which relates the realism of sixteenth-century Italian chiaroscuro painting to the "virtual" nature of electronically reproduced pictures. *Encyclopedia Chiaroscuro* works by responding to the viewer's movement in front of the computer screen, and then determining the changing sequence of realistic video shots.

Courchesne's next challenge was to enhance the viewer's interaction with electronic media while at the same time



minimizing the apparatus necessary to do so. By adapting the ancient art of portraiture to his contemporary tools Courchesne is able to achieve this end. While traditional portrait painters and photographers work to render a likeness that embodies for all time the essence of their subject, the figures in Courchesne's portraits are transitory, implying the passage of time rather than duration. *Portrait One* (1990) is a spare work based upon a single fictional character, who appears lost in reverie before she engages in different conversations with the viewer. From this coy, carefully scripted persona, Courchesne moved on to "documentary" portraits, retaining the same working method. After planning and shooting one-on-one conversations with individuals, he meticulously edits and structures his analog video footage. He then presses the video material onto glass laser discs. Using the Macintosh computer software package called HyperCard,² among other commercially available software programs, he stores both a written text and a navigation strategy in the computer, used by the viewer to steer through the video material. Rolling a "trackball," viewers can proceed through the visual, audio, and written material by constructing their own path, and at their own pace.

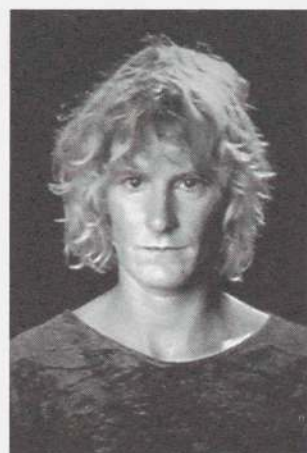
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Courchesne spent hours with the eight people depicted in *Family Portrait* (1993), all of whom live in Marseilles and belong to the same, loosely connected circle of friends. He uses video not only to reveal the physical and emotional characteristics of each person, but to provide a lively context in which the viewer — an active participant in the work — can meet the person.

For the exhibition, four simply designed pedestals have been installed in the Projects gallery. Above each one floats a wafer-thin image of a person — an image that is nonetheless animated, with great presence and immedi-

discovered if viewers become actively involved with and pose questions to them. In the process, what started out as a quiet portrait gallery becomes a lively space.

The materials with which Courchesne created *Family Portrait* have infiltrated most aspects of public and private life: television sets on kitchen counters bring the news to our homes; tiny, flat-screen TVs offer visual "muzak" on trains and in elevators; in Times Square, billboard-size video projections of soft-drink and clothing commercials seductively sell



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acy.³ The viewer can initiate a discussion with any one of the figures by selecting a question from a set on a small accompanying computer screen. When the portrait verbally answers, another series of questions or comments appears on the computer screen. With increasing involvement, a dialogue develops according to the viewer's inquisitiveness and the subject's mood. The personages talk to you: they discuss culinary preferences; they flirt. If uninterested in a particular question, they may turn away. The encounter may be cut short due to lack of interest on either side, or it may develop into a discussion of ideas and values, or personal experiences. The interaction is structured into levels of increasing intimacy: you have to get to know and trust one another before moving on to confidential matters.

While the viewer engages a single figure, all of the "portraits" seem to be uncannily aware of what the other members of the "family" are saying. For example, if otherwise unengaged, figures may eavesdrop, piping up to speak their minds in response to what is being said on the other side of the room — especially if it is to disagree with what is being said about themselves. Who these people are and what they have in common can only be

a desirable lifestyle. And now interactive television appears to be around the corner, as the frantic joint ventures between telephone, television, hardware, and publishing conglomerates suggest. Already, precocious users connect modems to their home computers via a phone line to access information of specific interest stored on mega-hard-drives located somewhere else. In addition, they can hold simultaneous written conversations with colleagues, using their computer mouse or keyboard. Although no one knows exactly how video and computers will consolidate further, pundits predict that within the next decade most North American homes will have modems inside their computers and a "black-box" channel switcher as part of their television set. Courchesne's exhibition title points out how conventional familial relations have changed and how notions of group have expanded. This is apropos now that home and office computers are joined in a global web called the Internet, wherein "virtual" relationships are as involving and important as face-to-face ones. In this regard, Courchesne's installation seems to anticipate what the future will bring.

In the same way that Aladdin could rub his magic lamp and be served by an accommodating genie, *Family Portrait* suggests how our environment containing invisible microprocessors already responds to our wishes and needs, and how our experience with hardware is more intuitive. As users we are captivated by the computer's responsive system. We are driven onward by a sense of predictability, by knowing, for example, that repeating a specific procedure always provides the same result. Such rational interaction is the opposite of — and perhaps a respite from — everyday life, where, although we make choices regarding our actions, we are not ultimately the masters of our fate. Courchesne's work utilizes the predictability offered by the computer. However, he augments the interchange with hardware — which he has minimized — with the appearance of an unpredictable exchange with human beings.

Like cinema's first practitioners, Courchesne is creatively charting new territory and creating precedents. Courchesne and his contemporaries stay abreast of the rapidly changing, non-standardized multimedia field by reading the business pages of their local newspapers and by attending informal gatherings and professional conferences where they share technical experiences and discoveries. Dogma and conclusive literature do not exist, and all applications of the formative tools are regarded "legitimate." Courchesne teaches Information Design at the University of Montreal. As alchemists of new technology and culture, his students experiment with new forms, keeping in sight the opportunities in the emerging "society of knowledge."⁴ With a critical eye he seeks feasible methods, in addition to meaningful content and liberating experience, before communications conglomerates put rigid systems in place. Today you must travel to the Museum to interact with *Family Portrait*, but soon you will be able to do so sitting at the dining table at home.

Barbara London
Associate Curator
Department of Film and Video

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¹ Other artists on the project included Benjamin Berjery, Bill Seaman, and Ellen Sebring. Another group at MIT was working simultaneously on the now famous "Aspen Movie Map," which offered viewers the possibility of walking down Aspen's major streets and entering many of the city's buildings.

² Software such as HyperCard allows non-programmers to enter the interactive field and concentrate on content rather than technical details. Previously, artists had to rely on computer programmers to custom design "software" for interactive video projects.

³ Each station is the site of two portraits. When a conversation with one person ends, the second appears.

⁴ From Vice President Al Gore to Bill Gates of Microsoft and artist Nam June Paik, people are talking about the limitless potential of the impending information superhighway. Consisting of fiber optic telephone and/or coaxial cable television lines, the popularly called "I-way" will give users two-way access to infinite amounts of data and other people.

Above: Norbert Corsino in *Family Portrait* (1993) with a visitor.

Cover: Paule Ducharme in *Portrait One* (1990) with the artist.

Inside: Excerpts from *Family Portrait* (1993), a multi-user, interactive video installation. Left to right: Simone Archiloque, Marianne Rubenstein, Thierry Discepolo, Norbert Corsino, Alain Archiloque, Blanche Baillargeon, Laurence Foucaut, and Sébastien Darbon.

biography

Luc Courchesne was born in 1952 in St. Léonard d'Aston, Québec. He studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax (Bachelor of Design in Communication, 1974), and MIT, Cambridge (Master of Science in Visual Studies, 1984). He is a Professor in the School of Industrial Design, University of Montreal.

interactive video installations

- 1994 *Portrait of Paula Dawson*
Ian Potter Gallery, Melbourne, 1994
- 1993 *Family Portrait*
Centre de la Vieille Charité, Marseille, 1993
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1993
Siggraph '93, Anaheim, 1993
- 1991 *Portrait of Claude Jutra*
PRIM, Montreal, 1991
- 1990 *Portrait One*
PRIM, Montreal, 1990
TED2, Monterey, 1990
Festival du cinéma québécois, Blois, 1991
Siggraph '91, Las Vegas, 1991
Third International Symposium on Electronic Arts, Sydney, 1992
Muu Media Festival, Helsinki, 1993
- 1987 *Encyclopedia Chiaroscuro*
Boston Film/Video Foundation, Boston, 1988
Grey Art Gallery, New York, 1988
PRIM, Montreal, 1989
- 1984 *Elastic Movies*
Media Lab, MIT, Cambridge, 1984
PRIM, Montreal, 1989

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Gagnon, Jean, ed. *Luc Courchesne: Interactive Portraits*. Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1993.

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