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High-tech art show worth a virtual visit

By NIALL MCKAY

Last Christmas, I saw Lily Tomlin in the Broadway play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*. In the play, one character, a New York bag lady named Trudy, leads the audience around the Big Apple as she gives an imaginary alien a tour of the planet. She holds up a tin of Campbell's soup and a picture of Andy Warhol's painting of a tin of Campbell's soup and says "This is soup and this is art" The alien just looks confused.

Indeed, most people are confused by modern art and it doesn't get any clearer when you introduce technology into the equation. This month, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SF MOMA) is exhibiting *010101: Art in Technological Times*. The show features 35 artists exhibiting everything from virtual reality to miniature statues of people who have been scanned in 3D.

It also features an Internet art show that can only be seen online at www.sfmoma.org.

The "010101" refers to software code as well as the date of the turn of the millennium - January 1st, 2001 - which incidentally is when the show's Internet Art Show opened on the museum's website.

The museum director David Ross describes the exhibition as a show about how technology impacts on our lives rather than a technology show. The fact that the show is being held at SF MOMA is significant insofar as it is an indication that digital art, multimedia, robotics and technological installations are becoming part of the artistic mainstream.

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When you enter the building you're catapulted into the exhibition with a piece called Things Fall Apart from artist Sarah Sze. It comprises an exploded Jeep dangling from the ceiling with a microcosm of tiny worlds in its interior, like a visualisation of shattered dreams following a car crash.

Walk to the top of the stairs and you are confronted with two installation art exhibits, the first from U2 and Talking Heads music producer and renaissance man Brian Eno. The piece features Eno's music and comprises five towers of Christmas tree lights in a darkened room. The whole thing makes you feel you have stumbled into some futuristic Buddhist temple.

The second, from virtual reality artist Char Davies, was undoubtedly the highlight of the show, along with a piece from Canadian video artist Janet Cardiff. Perhaps these were just the crowd pleasers, that is, art that is more accessible to digital philistines like myself, but they seem to have been the most talked about pieces in the exhibition.

Davies work entails an immersive virtual reality that I can only describe as scuba diving through cyberspace. Punters can become part of the art by donning a pair of VR goggles and a harness behind a backlit screen and viewers can sit in a darkened room and see them and the images they are seeing through the headset.

The goggle wearer is forced to move his or her body to move through the virtual reality world. To move forward, they lean forward, to go back, lean back, crouch to move faster, stand to move slower and so on. Janet Cardiff's interactive video installation was also very interesting. The piece uses a video camera screen, and headphones to give instructions to the viewer.

Watching the tiny screen and listening through headphones, I was expecting a guided tour of the museum. What I got was a video filmed in the gallery at an earlier date. The artist tells the subject to line up certain video images with locations in the museum and plays an audio sound track of people, such as bits of earlier conversations.

The piece has the effect of creating a collage of experience and kind of tricks you into believing that you have taken a journey.

But that was the good stuff. As always during these exhibitions there were lots of pieces that leave you scratching your head and wondering what the hell it's all about. For example, one piece used a computer to track

the movements of the artist's eye as he read the paper, and printed out the result. It looked like a child's scrawlings. Very clever, but is it art?

Another used a computer to squirt random heaps of paint. These leave you wishing that you could get rich and famous by producing such mindless pap. No doubt Trudy, the bag lady, would say that it's an exhibition of both soup and art.

Niall McKay is a writer living in Silicon Valley eating soup and thinking about art. He can be reached at www.niall.org

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