RANDOM INTERNATIONAL: ART & TECHNOLOGY'S MAGICAL REALISTS

BY JOEL KUENNEN

Random International is an arts collective founded by Florian Ortkrass, Hannes Koch, and Stuart Wood currently based in London. They exploded onto the international art stage in 2012 with their extremely popular *Rain Room,* a work that was supremely Instagrammable, but also illucidated the magical realism that the marriage of art and technology can produce. After extremely successful installations at the Barbican in London and MoMA PS1, *Rain Room* is set to occupy LACMA in November 2015. We got the chance to chat with Random International this Spring after a lecture they gave at Le Laboratoire in Boston about their recent residency with Harvard roboticists and their upcoming plans for their new work.

"Rain Room" is coming to @lacma after having been to New York and London! Great to see that Los Angeles is rising up in the global art scene! #lacma #art #artist #la #museum #contemporaryart #moma #urban #city #water #rain #rainroom #leadinginla #instagramhub @themuseumofmodernart @museumlondon

A photo posted by FutureOfCities (@futureofcities) on Jul 8, 2015 at 5:52pm P…

Joel Kuennen: Random International is perhaps best known for its *Rain Room* installation at the Barbican and MoMA/ MoMA PS1. This year you will be bringing the exhibition to Shanghai and LACMA. As much of your work finds completion in the addition of the audience, what have you noticed in the differences between how art-goers interact with the work in these varying contexts? What types of challenges have you faced with installing these ambitious projects in varying art and cultural contexts?

Random International: We had an unbelievable reception from the public in London, with so many people giving up their time to see the piece. After the exhibition at Barbican, we did not expect a similar reception at MoMA—given the caricature of the notoriously impatient New Yorker. Once *Rain Room* opened there, as part of MoMA PS1's *Expo 1: New York*, and did draw a sizable crowd, it was another genuine surprise and very humbling. And then, perhaps the "if it's not on Facebook, it didn't happen" approach was a little more prevalent in the US; the audience at MoMA instagrammed every last drop out of the rain. It has all been a strange, yet somewhat luxurious experience for the studio; clearly, the spectacle and the photo opportunity were not why we made the work in the first place. We made it because we needed to see it—to experience the extremes of a

nature-like machine that offers both control and total lack thereof. Taking the known, and subverting it, that brings this surreal quality that can make you feel or think differently.

And now, with the piece realized and having been shown in differing contexts, we are working with some incredible collections and art foundations all over the world, who have created permanent homes for *Rain Room*. The Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art and RH Contemporary Art have set the bar very high in that respect, then subsequent editions were acquired by two art foundations. In taking the decision to collect the work, they have all committed to significant large-scale architectural projects, and it's thrilling to be a part of that wider process.

Rain Room at the Barbican, 2012 from Random International

JK: Tell me about the collaboration experience you've had recently with Harvard roboticists through Le Laboratoire.

RI: The artist residency program that David [Edwards] and Le Laboratoire have created for us at Harvard and Le Lab is bliss; they've hit precisely the right tone in offering us undirected exploration. In preparation, we had reiterated some deeper questions about servo motors and the perception of life and... we never looked back. We've been to Cambridge, MA, twice and are already planning our next trip as well as offering a reciprocal residency to one of their post-doc students at our studio this summer.

JK: From your recent experience, have you noticed any fundamental differences in how artists and scientists approach technology?

RI: In our practice, ideas always come first; we allow ourselves the luxury of experimentation until we arrive at some point of conceptual resolution. Extending this approach to the residency, we are developing our own position in relation to the man-machine relationship through learning, as well as hopefully offering a different point of view to the scientists that we're working with there.

JK: What did this experience generate for you?

RI: The whole experience has led us to developing an entirely new body of thinking (and, subsequently, work), emphasizing different questions surrounding our role in an increasingly computerized and mechanized environment. We plan to first exhibit the new pieces in 2016.

Swarm Study VI / Small Swarm, 2014. LEDs, brass rods, custom electronics, Corian, sound / motion sensors, 192 x 372 x 623 mm, Edition of 8 + 2 AP,

Carpenters Workshop Gallery. Courtesy of Random International.

JK: Why is it important to you as artists to insert aesthetic and artful considerations into the advancement of technology?

RI: Some areas of science and technology have a somewhat fetishistic focus on commercially quantifiable outcomes, performance and results, which can be both limited and limiting. Operating outside of this sphere, we can try to contribute an emotionally authentic commentary on the idea of "progress"—especially as it relates to humankind's rapidly developing cohabitation with machines.

JK: Aside from design and user experience, what can artists contribute to the advancement and incorporation of technology into the everyday?

RI: It's important to keep questioning the necessity of specific innovations; advance just for advance's sake can be detrimental, even prohibitive or destructive.

But our society does seem to have a perceived need for, and expectation of, progression. This concept tends to induce parallel feelings of jubilance and discomfort—even for people like Elon Musk and Stephen Hawking. In examining the surreal nature of the man-machine relationship—the weirdness—through our work, we offer a different perspective from which to interpret, cope with, and retain control over people's individual relationships with their increasingly automated environments.
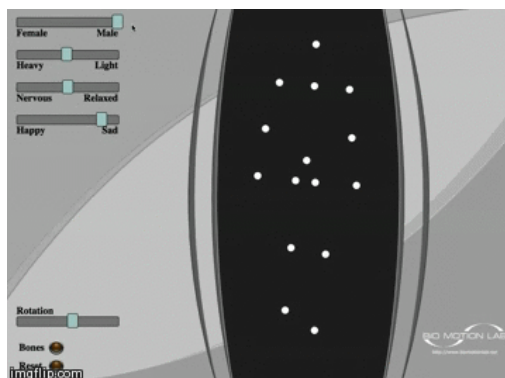
Bio Motion Lab's WebGL Walker demo illustrates the ability for people to recognize a variety of characteristics and assumptions from minimal motion.

This demo has provided the inspiration for Random International's current point study.

JK: The point study you unveiled earlier this year at Le Laboratoire seems to mark a bit of a departure for Random International. The majority of your past work centered on tech acquiescing to the presence of the individual and created a bit of a magical

situation where the environment was explicitly anthropocentric. In a sense, it reified the individual subject. The point study on the other hand seems to be stand alone, indifferent to the viewing subject aside from the act of perceiving the gate of an individual in the light points. How are you thinking about this difference? Was this a conscious shift in your practice?

RI: It's more a broadening of our focus... Given the minimalist nature of the point study, the recognition of the human form in 15 points is so immediate and surprising that is has the power to stand alone; it might not need to convey the recognition of the "self" on top of that.

Perhaps it is our interest in the consequences that has shifted; where the early was work more direct and instant, the point study returns to a more traditional separation between audience and artwork and we're only just beginning to re-familiarize ourselves with this physical disconnect between viewer and object.

What we do not want to lose here is the emotional connection, and that's where it gets interesting: when there is a connection between man and machine or viewer and object. A connection that generates mutual "understanding" on the most subconscious level. At the studio, we are constantly looking to manoeuvre this sweet-spot.

—Joel Kuennen

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Posted by Joel Kuennen on 14/07/15

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