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GALLERIES

The viewer becomes the art

Mathieu Briand's "Ubiq" invites the spectator to nab a bit of fame.

By Cynthia Dea, Times Staff Writer

Los ANGELES is perhaps the most fitting of places for the U.S. premiere of Mathieu Briand's solo exhibition "Ubiq: A Mental Odyssey." While in town installing his show at the REDCAT gallery, Briand was disoriented by the many television and movie crews filming along the streets of downtown. He found himself curiously among the phenomena that his work aims to investigate: authenticity and perception.

"Coming from Marseilles, it's strange for me to see people shooting a movie. It's like going in and outside of what's real," Briand said. "You always have to be careful what goes through a camera, because with reality shows, we have this idea of reality-fiction. A lot of people feel like they need to be viewed from a camera to be alive, to give meaning to their lives. I think what Warhol said was right."

The reference to Warhol's statement that everyone will have their 15 minutes of fame is a conceit that feeds the artist's work in "Ubiq." By allowing viewers a chance to interact with his installation of helmet-mounted cameras, turntables and video, Briand strives to let the audience be part of the spectacle.

Stepping into the 34-year-old artist's exhibition space is like walking into a life-size black-and-white drawing. The walls of the gallery are antiseptically white except for stenciled black borders along the corners of the room. Black columns frame the room, while dark storage cases form concentric circles around a DJ booth. Given its DJ-set-meets-mod-space-station ambience, it's no surprise that the title takes cues from science-fiction narratives, particularly Philip K. Dick's 1969 novel, "Ubik," and Stanley Kubrick's film "2001: A Space Odyssey."

However, it isn't so much the genre of Kubrick's and Dick's works that interest Briand but rather the themes within that put his installation into context.

"It's about schizophrenia and trying to have different perceptions," Briand explained. "It's like being in a hallway — the 'in between' and opening new spaces in the mind."

While movies, television and other forms of media can be inundating, they are passive. In contrast, Briand's work allows the viewer to control perceptions and manipulate one's experiences with the click of a button and the drop of a record needle.

Visitors move in and out of the role of audience and performer. Four helmets are mounted with cameras that record in real time. When fitted over the head, and with the press of the button, the view from the helmet switches to the point of view of whoever is wearing the other helmets.

"You don't look at the work; you participate in the work. I try to put the public in the center instead of putting the public in front of the work," Briand said.

The set of turntables is another element of the show. Visitors can manipulate looping beats and electronic sounds to record tracks on a vinyl-cutting machine. The person who

cuts the record becomes the main attraction, while people can observe the entire process from the seats that form a ring-like area called "The Spiral."

The work is never static. As an ongoing project for the last 10 years, the installation has expanded with new forms of media that Briand adds while continuing his investigation of perception and presence.

The work has traveled, in one form or another, around the world, including exhibitions at the Istanbul Biennale in Turkey, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon in France and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan. After the REDCAT installation, Briand will go back to France for a group exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris and afterward present his work in Mexico City.

"I'm really excited that people in Spain used materials that people in China used only a few months ago," he said. "You have a work that people use naturally, not at the same time, not physically but mentally."

Yet another component of the show is a video projection simulating the Earth's rotation that suggests a window looking down on a global community. The view of the Earth is computer-generated, but the clouds are connected via a website that reflects the actual current conditions.

"You have a mix between real and fake, and for me it's exactly what's contemporary today," the artist said.

On the evening of the gallery opening last Wednesday, he collaborated with Paris-based dancer and choreographer Prue Lang. While Briand worked behind the DJ booth creating random beats, Lang moved to the music like a displaced space explorer within "The Spiral." The music and the dance performance were spontaneous.

"I don't know how dance relates to the exhibition," Briand said before the performance. "It will either be great or [it won't]. But you have to take risks sometimes."

Briand often mentions the word "risk." He feels that contemporary audiences are reluctant to lose control, and allowing oneself to open up to the new and unexpected is the essence of Briand's work.

"When I brought the helmets to Japan, [the curators] controlled the entire process and I asked them, 'Why don't you want me to control it?' They said, 'Yeah, because if we don't know how it works and you die tomorrow, what are we going to do?' " Briand said with a laugh.

"You have to know how the technology works, but what's important is the experience that you give to people."

Mathieu Briand: "Ubiq: A Mental Odyssey"

Where: The Gallery at REDCAT, 631 W. 2nd St., L.A.

When: Noon to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays, and before theater performances

Ends: June 18

Price: Free

Info: (213) 237-2800, www.redcat.org