

On Kamau Amu Patton: Oscillating Between Parallel Realms

by Devon Bella

Implicit in the concept of Alternate Realities is a self-contained, separate reality that coexists with our own. By working within this framework, artist Kamau Amu Patton sequences a set of materials into a series of events that appear in two parallel realms, the virtual and the actual. The premise of Alternate Realities as described by these two realms is an exploration into the primary ways we construct meaning and an investment into the patterns of experiences as they occur in relation to one another. His proposal for Alternate Realities, entitled *Potential Reality Construct*, consists of both a web-based model on the website and a stage-based model for the one-night event at New Langton Arts.

As the user encounters the web-based model, moving through the links at the end of each page, their pathway activates and cycles through the sound and image files embedded within the proposal. During this process an interference of the sound files are generated as the pages visited remain open on the screen, building into a crescendo of noise. Patton is keenly aware of the systematic use of the artistic process in digital media. The proposal includes a collection of digital pictures that endure a loss of pixels, signal interruptions, and various digital dropouts. In fact, his practice comments on the perceptual conditions—pixilation, static, feedback, looping—that accompany all systems capable of transmitting voice, facsimile, data, radio, or television signals.

Concurrent to this mode of art experience and his additive chain of intensifying content, Patton's site also consists of a specific set of impossible actions for a performance in the actual world. However, because of their obvious unlikeliness (e.g. a performance by The Living Theatre, a 1960s experimental theatre group that disbanded decades ago or Ai Wei Wei's infamous dropping of the Han Dynasty urn), Patton's proposal is a testament to the generative force of non-action. As Patton's proposal became increasingly driven by proposing such uncanny and unfeasible acts, the artist was able to explore how physical manifestations or conceptual demonstrations might impact, or even restrict the development of ideas.

Further, at the heart of this new work is an investigation of the performer-audience relationship as it was demonstrated by the installation and performance at the New Langton Arts event. Filtered and distorted by technology of the camera and the computer, a stage was set for audience members to double as both performers and viewers. The concept of the set was meant to employ the conditions of theatrical staging, conveying that a single, definitive performance does not exist while also presupposing the audience as the subject of the actions put forth by the stage. This idea can be understood by the omni-directional microphone that allowed visitors to listen to reflections of their surroundings and themselves. A viewer could speak directly into the microphone by reading the script Patton had prepared, creating a kind of self-conscious awareness of their voice as it was converted into electrical signals and then amplified into the room. Rather than viewing the work in a state of completion, we begin to understand that *Potential Reality Construct* thrives because it is active and entirely dependent on the audience's behavior as they interact with the set of objects embodied by the technology.

Because of the two iterations of the proposal and their dependence of the user's interaction to fulfill their function, the artist calls attention to the speculative force of participation. In addition, Patton's coupling of both the virtual and actual realms and subsequent pairing of both models, arouses the boundaries between both spaces and the greater utilisation of technology in both theatre and performance. As a result, Patton's designs for *Potential Reality Construct* emphasize the notion that Alternate Realities are irregular, exist in a state of flux and are constantly resolving themselves from one realm to the next.