

David Cotterrell: The Debating Society

Date: 1st November 2007

Dimensions(m):1.5, 6.0, 6.0

Materials:

Granite, Apple Computers, Linux OS, custom software and audio equipment

Proposed installation of a sitting area in the Scottish Gorbals, of five computers in a continuously generated discussion

When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes art. Sol Le Witt, Paragraphs on Conceptual Art, Artforum, 1967

The Debating Society, due for installation in a section of the redeveloped Gorbals area of Glasgow in the spring of 2007, will consist of a circular seating area into which headrests relaying an audio soundtrack are placed. Building on the Eliza programme developed at MIT in the 60s, Cotterrell has created a bespoke programme which can learn to converse in a spoken Scottish dialect. Aided by data from the Centre for Speech Technology Research at Edinburgh University, he has developed The Debating Society, a continuous five-way conversation carried out by five computers all speaking in the distinctive Gorbals accent. These computers are not, however, simply regurgitating lines of text: Cotterrells programme allows them to freely develop conversation according to the dictates of their own set of characteristics. Each of the computers has a well-developed personality and will respond to different situations accordingly. While one may express an interest in Darwins Origin of Species, another may prefer the Biblical story of creation. As well, each has the ability to develop, altering its ideas as it encounters new stimuli. All personalities will take as their starting points people who live in the area: Cotterrell is working with Gorbals Art Project to locate people willing to have their speech (and ideas) logged on a lexicon. This lexicon will serve the dual purposes of creating a base for the art work as well as an historical document of this accent and dialect in the early 21st century. The Gorbals has a history of regeneration: the Victorian tenements of the area were replaced in the 50s with Basil Spences vertical villages, which are currently being substituted with low-level housing. The area has a rich oral tradition which, whatever type of structure residents find themselves occupying, has not been destroyed. The windae hingers have not ceased to chat through the decades of architectural change imposed upon them by external forces.



Granite Structure Credit: David Cotterrell (2006)



Granite Structure Credit: David Cotterrell (2007)



St Francis Centre Credit: David Cotterrell (2006)



New Development Credit: David Cotterrell (2006)