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Canned Personalities

Motivation
Canned Personalities began with a desire to rejuvenate old games that may have lost their appeal in an era of new technologies. I wondered how simple games that children played in the past might be improved by adding the electronic sounds, movements, and other technological bells and whistles that attract today's gamers. I was intrigued by the addition of LEDs to tennis shoes, speech to Battleship, and lasers to Tag, and I wanted to know how the application of technology would change the appeal of a game such as Kick the Can, which is played with a discarded can on a vacant street. I assumed that adding complex technologies would make simpler games more fun. I discovered that the technology could actually take away the fun. For Kick the Can, I prototyped the game using a quart paint can which contained a motor that caused the can to move by itself. The movement did not improve the game, and the wiring and motor would break if kicked. Ironically, the fun action of the game was reduced to passive observation. My version of the game stood (or shook) as a reminder of the misapplication of technology.

Permutations
However, in prototyping various cans for Kick the Can, I discovered a new direction. I found that the movement of each prototype can was compelling in its own way. The prototype cans were the same on the outside, but they were different on the inside. Different configurations of the motor produced different movements that gave each can a distinctive personality. The first can shook in place, moving only slightly and making very little noise; the second can made loud noises, moved erratically, and bumped into objects. One could be described as timid; the other as aggressive. The cans had personalities, and I began thinking about human behavior, the categories we sometimes use, and the whole notion of personality types, "canned personalities," and all that the metaphor might evoke. I am now working on a third and fourth can. One can will simply roll slowly and aimlessly in one direction until it encounters an object and stops. Another will spin in a circle.

Interactivity
To push the idea that the cans have human qualities and to encourage interaction, I plan to add "Hello my name is" stickers to each of the cans. When they are released to mingle with visitors in a gallery, they will invite people to approach and introduce themselves. I hope that interaction with the cans will come from people's curiosity and confidence that it is safe to pick up an object that has approached them in a gallery, or from a desire to rescue a can that is stuck against a wall. Additional prototype cans will be designed to shut themselves off when placed on end (with the exception of a defiant can I plan on designing). This will allow viewers the chance to give the cans a rest, or to punish cans for being obnoxious. The cans prompt interaction. They require the viewer's imagination to impose a personality, and they invite attention by movement. Viewers are compelled to interact with the cans, for they must decide if they can touch and move the can, if the can needs help, or if it can be ignored.

Wishes
With future cans I would like to explore creating personality through sound and light. I would like to create an obsessive-compulsive can that counts the number of people that walk by or pick it up

and displays the number on an LCD. I also envision a can that is able to show its feelings by changing color like a mood ring, glowing red when touched and blue when left alone. I am not sure if this would work best with a pressure sensor or a temperature sensor. Using the RF sender and receiver I would like to create a codependent can that cannot live without its partner and complains or whines when the two are separated.

Weaknesses

One weakness in the interactivity of the cans is that the viewer must assume that the cans may be touched and moved. Gallery space is generally designed to encourage looking and to discourage touching; people assume that they cannot touch the works displayed. I hope that letting the cans roam about on the floor of the gallery will help reduce this fear. I also worry that the can may still be too fragile. If kicked, they may break. Ironically, this was an aspect of their earlier design.

Relationships

Portraiture attempts to represent character and personality, and to a degree, so does Canned Personalities. The cans are personifications. They are characters with personalities, and they evoke responses to their character. But personality is a social construct, and reading personality is largely subjective, especially in the abstract. The abstracts of the Rorschach inkblot test invite discussion of inner thoughts, and they reveal something about personality. Canned Personalities invites viewers to reflect on personality types and categories, which seem at times to be canned. The work invites reflection about what is inside and how it got inside, and how to respond to the behaviors encountered. Do I touch the can? Move the can? Ignore the can? Help the can? How do I respond to a particular can?

The use of a found object or taking a common object and giving it life in art is found in Duchamp's readymades and in Warhol's Brillo boxes and prints of Campbell's Soup cans. These works pushed the ideas of what art is and caused people to reflect on the meaning of objects. I am trying to do the same with cans, but I am working to shift the viewer's relationship to the object from a static observer to an engaged, empathetic participant in the work.