

Kathy McTavish: Chance Encounters

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“Artists have adopted techniques of artificial life – that is, computational processes that emulate or model aspects of biological processes such as evolution and population genetics – to create works that exhibit self-organization, evolution, and various forms of agency and interaction.”¹

Kathy McTavish is a trans/media artist, who combines live performance, gallery installation, improvisational sound, as well as online and digital text and imagery to create multisensory environments that seek to explore a real and virtual bodily experience. McTavish draws from her background as a cellist and composer, as well as studies in music theory, mathematics, ecology, and software development, each of which informs her unique approach to narrative and an interest in telling stories. Her work is often characterized by expressions of highly theoretical forms that communicate themes of humanity and social justice.

Chance, presented by McTavish in the Tweed Museum’s Sax Gallery, is a multimedia installation that combines digital coding, sound, environment, and the human mark to allow the viewer to have an embodied experience of a highly digitized installation, breaking down traditional media-based boundaries and viewer expectations of how we engage with and encounter various modes of perceptual and virtual art.

Chance is a layered encounter. The walls are streaked with abstract-expressionist-like paint strokes that recall 1950s and 60s paintings of artists like Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, and even Jackson Pollock, wide ellipses that suggest McTavish’s own expansive wingspan in a gesture that simultaneously occupies as wide a stance as possible, almost embraces the wall, and marks the space with the artist’s presence in an assertive way that challenges the masculinist and patriarchal narrative of Abstract Expressionism and its canonical status in Western Modernism.

McTavish’s gestures speak to her own presence within this space; they suggest her female, queer, resistant body, embodying Harold Rosenberg’s now iconic axiom that the American gestural canvas was not a surface of Greenbergian medium purity and flatness, but “an arena in which to act.” These gestures also (literally) create the backdrop of textured experiences that characterize *Chance* and repeatedly center the embodied presence of the viewer.

From the randomized formal patterns that populate the monitors and project over the walls to the symphony of orchestrated sounds that pull the viewers’ attention and body from one corner of the gallery to the next, *Chance* leads the viewer physically into and through the space, engaging them both in body and in mind. Searching for patterns and repeats in the forms on the monitors and walls, similarly in the layered sounds, can be as an intense (and futile) exercise as deciphering words in the scribbled marks that cover the walls. Regardless, they are there are systems of information, like the coding, that communicate to the viewer along varied spectrums of legibility.

What *Chance* ultimately communicates, through its many channels, across its many media, is the multitude of ways that we, as humans, find ways to connect, through channels of touch, atmosphere, and even virtual understanding. Surrounding the viewer, Kathy McTavish constantly strives to construct environments that challenge the ways that humanity and technology inflect upon one another to construct contemporary experiences. *Chance* is no exception.

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¹ Fernández, María. “‘Life-like’: Historicizing Process and Responsiveness in Digital Art,” in *A Companion to Contemporary to Contemporary Art since 1945*, edited by Amelia Jones (London: Blackwell, 2006), 558.