

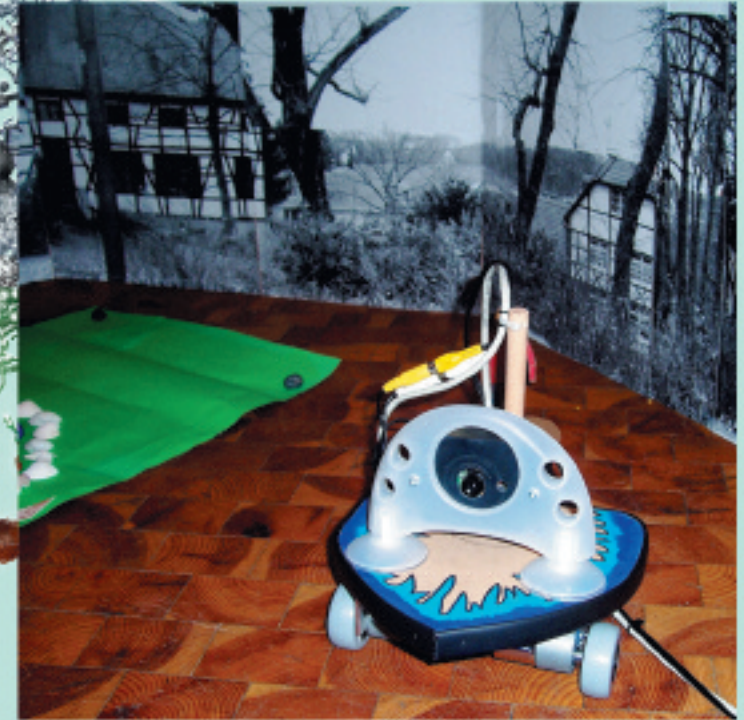
Second Life, Third Space

[Art Projects by Graham Smith, Workspace Unlimited,
Exonemo and Marnix de Nijs]



Graham Smith, MOBI (2006)

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Graham Smith, Morphing Machinery (2007)

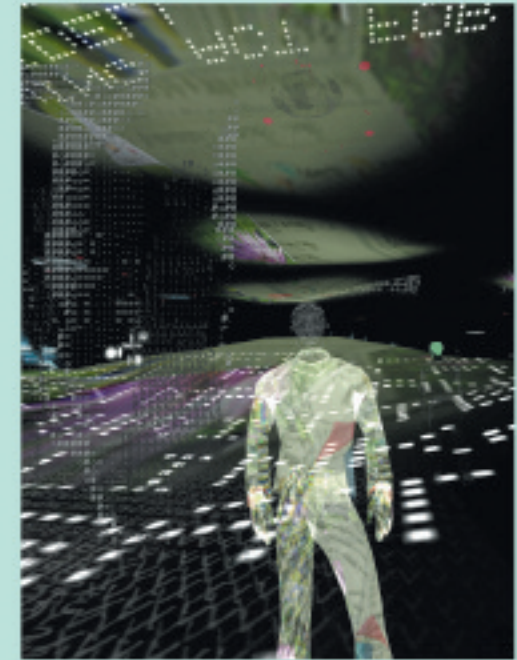
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MOBIs are mobile robots that can look, listen and speak – that is, when controlled by a user who is located elsewhere. MOBI stands for Mobile Operating Bidirectional Interface. Each MOBI is equipped with a camera, speakers and a microphone and allows the user to create a presence in another place. MOBIs are made by the Canadian artist **Graham Smith**, who has been conducting artistic research into telepresence since 1993. Of course we have long been able to make our presence felt in other places – in real time, even, ever since the invention of the telephone. Webcams are an everyday phenomenon, and lectures held via videoconferencing do not surprise us. But telephones, webcams and videoconferencing do not create a bodily presence in another space. MOBIs, meanwhile, enable tangible physical presence elsewhere. You can use a MOBI to visit the DEAF exhibition without getting out of your chair, and even to talk to other visitors. (Interacting with the art, though, will be a problem – for one thing, MOBIs lack flexible arms or fingers). MOBIs have a theatrical aspect in that the user becomes a performer

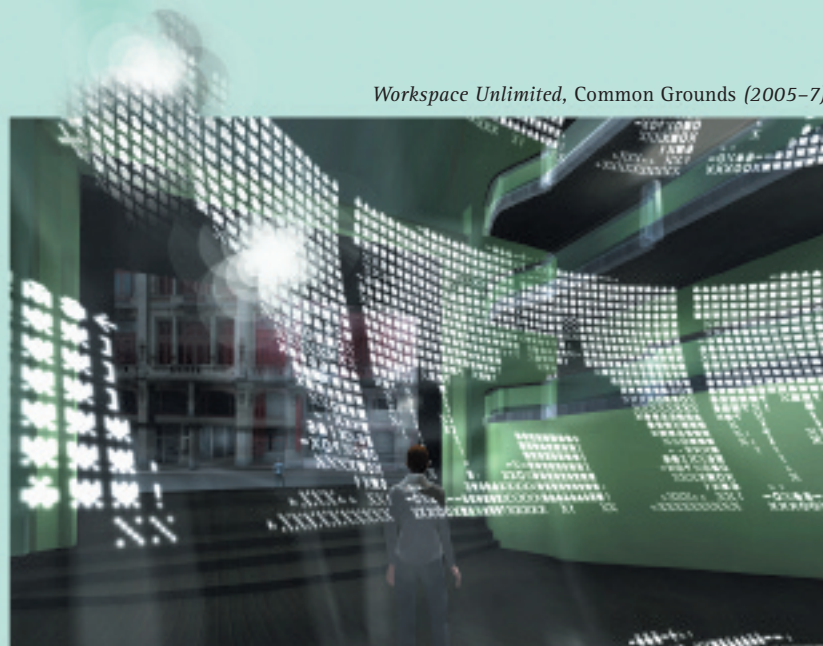
before an audience of exhibition visitors. In another of Smith's projects, *Morphing Machinery*, much smaller robots equipped with webcams navigate through models of imaginary cities. They are controlled by users who see the image from the robocam enlarged on a screen, as if they are walking through the "city" themselves.

E14, *Object B* and *Common Grounds* are three different approaches to the tension between virtual and physical space manifest in contemporary media culture (think of *Second Life*). All three tie in with game culture and operate from the perspective of a player who immerses himself in a virtual space.

Common Grounds is a project of **Workspace Unlimited** (Thomas Soetens and Kora van Bulcke), who investigate the relationship between real space and virtual space. What happens when a body is present in "first life" but also as an avatar in a virtual space visible on a screen? What kind of relationship do these spaces – ontologically separate but linked by communication – enter into? What happens when different real spaces are connected in virtual space? Workspace Unlimited's installations seek to bring the two closer together and, as they put it, create a kind of intermediate space: a third space in which a new perspective on the relationship between the real and virtual can arise. In Workspace Unlimited's installations, various virtual



Workspace Unlimited, *Common Grounds* (2005–7)



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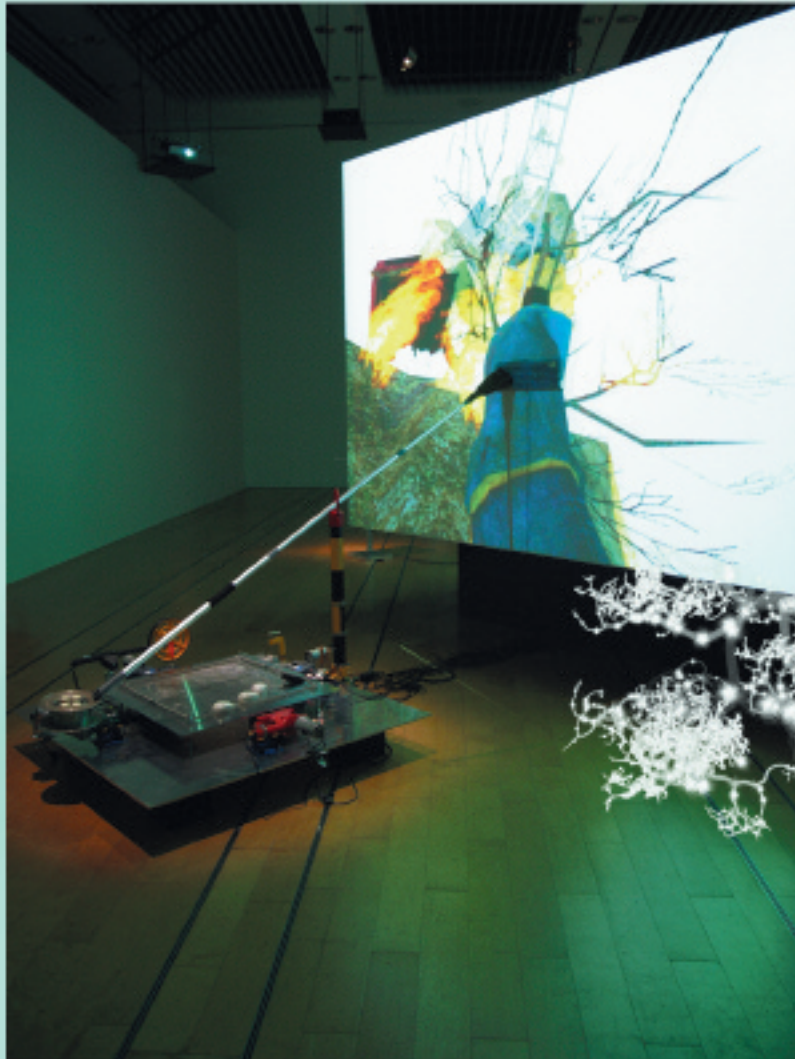
worlds in the *Common Grounds* network are linked together. The viewer is confronted with an experience that makes him think about presence (including his own), representation, and identity in media culture.

Object B, by the Japanese artist duo **Exonemo** (Kensuke Sembo and Yae Akaiwa), is an installation in which a modified version of a first-person shooter (*Half-Life*) is shown on the four walls surrounding the visitor. The projection gives the virtual world an intensely three-dimensional presence. Objects visible in the game – computer parts, electrical equipment, household appliances – are also physically present in the installation. Everything that moves in the game also moves in real life: the player controls the characters by means of the machines' vibrations and movements. This creates a game environment that refuses the strict conventions of first-person shooters. With creativity and humor, Exonemo shows us that technology (in this case, *Half-Life*) is much more than a finished package – it is something that is made and can be dismantled, changed and remade. The "B" in the title is



a reference to a single's B-side. The A-side, for Exonemo, is consumer society, which tries to reach a mass audience through marketing. The B-side is an alternative world which is open to different influences and can thereby develop social qualities. It is the world of open source, hacking, free software, copyleft, recycling and information sharing. Consumer society has a preference for slickly packaged technology equipped with a smooth user interface. The circuit-benders and hackers of Exonemo, by contrast, use their often humorous projects to break open technology and celebrate its creative aspects.

Exonemo, Object B (2006)



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The interactive works of Marnix de Nijs are extremely physical, not only because of their tangible presence in space but also because of what they do to the viewer. His installations make you run until you are out of breath, and even throw you off the treadmill if you overestimate your ability (*Run Motherfucker Run*, which was seen at DEAF04). De Nijs' work is not about subtle interaction in which human and machine link up in a barely perceptible way, but a "dynamic clash" that makes the body aware of itself. *EI4 (Exercise in Immersion 4)*, too, developed in collaboration with V2_, puts the visitor's body to the test. It provokes a clash between the virtual game world and physical space, a clash which is felt in the body of the viewer/player. He or she hears the game sounds through headphones and sees the game world through a VR headset. In a sensory sense, the player is located "between" these two worlds, because the body and its sense of touch provide feedback from the physical surroundings. The objects in the game and the installation correspond to each other. When the visitor walks up a ladder in the game, he carries out this activity for real in the installation. If there is a wall in the game, there is a real wall. Gradually, though, the virtual environment shifts in relation to the physical one. As long as the player moves slowly, he maintains the feeling of being in a coherent environment. But the faster he moves, the more the game world shifts in relation to the physical world, and he loses his sense of control. This leads to a surreal, increasingly disorienting experience – the senses no longer correspond. The piece thus becomes a practical exercise in immersion. The question is, can our bodies adapt to this sort of situation?

Arie Altena

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