Sensor certificate

TONY AHOLA/WELD

Sensors and sensibility *Seitl and Lundahl (inset) are planning an audio-guided walk through Bangalore; (above) a performance still from their work* Symphony of a Missing Room *at the Stockholm National Museum of Fine Arts*

A duo from London is pushing the boundaries of art into virtual reality, says **Jaideep Sen.**

To the uninitiated, the interactive performances of Martina Seitl and Christer Lundahl may appear to have emerged straight out of a science fiction saga. To state it in their words, the London-based Swedish artists work towards "manipulating multi-sensory inputs" on the human body. "We, as artists, evoke illusions, and are searching for the blind spots of perception," said Lundahl, a few days into their residency at 1, Shanthi Road. "Knowing that we can easily trick our bodies makes us question the potentially fragile interface to reality."

To be certain, Lundahl, with a background in fine art, and Seitl, who studied choreography, both in their early 30s, are pioneers in the domain of experimental art, especially in terms of extending its boundaries into the realm of virtual reality. As people become sophisticated users of technology and with the prevalent profusion of "mediated experiences" like film, computer games and internet video, it was only fitting to "research the history of perception, and its evolution", Lundahl pointed out. As for their primary interest in creating art, it "was not so much in art as finite objects to be collected in a museum," he said, but rather in "rendering 'the work' immaterial – where concepts such as experience, knowledge, time, space and place, are put into action."

While their work might seem tricky to grasp at first, it helps to get an overview of one of their performances, titled *Symphony of a Missing Room*, which has been commissioned to be held across various museums and gallery spaces in Europe until 2012. In the piece the duo – who go by the name Lundahl & Seitl – put their theories to practice. Imagine yourself as a visitor at, say, the Stockholm National Museum of Fine Arts. As you enter, along with a clutch of pamphlets and a polite wave in, you're also given a set of headphones and a pair of white-out goggles (as opposed to dark shades).

As you amble past the Goyas, Rembrandts and Renoirs in the museum's halls, a voice in your ear offers suggestions about which collections you could move to next, and how best you could explore the interiors. Meanwhile, unknown to you, a treachery of spying personnel – each deemed "avatars" of the *Symphony* project, strategically positioned in the hallways and equipped with concealed miniature cameras and headsets, watch over your every move, transmitting the audio and visual information that you receive.

The purpose of the piece wasn't to rob visitors of a real museum-going experience, but "to comprehend the existence of a virtual self, mediated by technology", said Lundahl. The idea was to "disrupt the social space of the gallery or museum," he said, "giving them [the visitors] new sets of rules for interaction."

"Our method, and what also counts as our artistic medium, is the precise choreography of visitors' experiences of duration and spatial surroundings, through sensory stimulation and multi-sensory deprivation," continued Lundahl. (The sensory deprivation involves sight, for one, which is what the glasses are for, blinding out sections as you linger over the art on display, while the avatars play "hidden conductors".) In effect, their attempt was "not only to activate the external layers of the body, such as the skin, but also to activate and extend the awareness beyond the body," said Lundahl.

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As a result, expectedly, visitors often spent entire evenings "without knowing that any 're-wiring' of the space" had taken place, admitted Lundahl. However, he added, a few visitors did "remember the evening to be unsettling, and of having a sense of being observed", almost as if they'd been shaken up in the midst of a simulated world akin to the one in Tarkovsky's *Solaris*.

For their residency in Bangalore, the duo plan to take their experiments out into the streets in the form of an audio-guided tour, accompanied by video recordings played on head-mounted devices worn by the viewer. They will also use what Lundahl described as "head-tracking" technology to follow viewer's movements in response to the video. "Interestingly enough," he explained, "people move their head in the direction where the camera points."

He added that the videos may well end up being abstract, "in order to give more space to the visitor's imagination". The walk will involve other sensory inputs, such as pre-recorded street sounds, while the duo are scouting the city "for passages, doors, windows, holes in the ground", which they could include in their plans.

Working on such a project outside the confines of a museum space was bound to be a bit disorienting, admitted Lundahl. "It becomes difficult to be selective, as this is the first time we are experiencing India – what may capture our eyes may not be of interest to the regular Bangalore habitant," he said.

Even while such a manner of controlling and inducing perceptions did seem "to defy linear time" (somewhat like in Christopher Nolan's wildly inventive *Inception*), Lundahl observed that theories of cognitive neurology did in some way tie in with ancient beliefs – such as of the Mayan world view, which posits that "reality is an illusion". The art that they created, meanwhile, had a lot to do with raising questions about freedom, and of free will, he suggested, and despite all the sensory inputs, it was essential to make room for individual responses, and for the duo to gauge the imagination of every person's psychological and bodily experience. At the end of a tour or "journey", as he described it, the effect felt by participants would frequently be like that of "waking from a dream".

See Exhibitions.