



SEVEN SEGMENT DISPLAY
Robert Twomey

INTRODUCTION

Visual, textual, and bodily gestures offer competing values as methods of communication and modes of performance. My work stages investigations into the powers and limits of language, technology, and experience within these spaces of activity. A fractured computer program is an instrument for catharsis in processing a loved-one's deteriorating mental state in *Megahal Grandmommy*. An imaginary daughter anchors explorations of male, parental desire in *Father-Daughter Art Show*. And a self-compromising performance of bonding and object-love is shown in *One Way To Form A Bond*.

The current work, *Seven Segment Display*, amplifies the experience of text to the limits of legibility, becoming physical/sensual experience. The viewer's manipulation of their body is instrumental in determining their relationship to the texts. Outputting language within the form of an early digital read-out, *Seven Segment Display* develops an analogy between the written voice and the output of an opaque information-processing system. Tracing a path to my current project, I will discuss the threads of the technological, linguistic, and corporeal as they are developed in *Megahal Grandmommy*, the *Father-Daughter Art Show*, and *One Way to Form a Bond*.



MEGAHAL GRANDMOMMY

Megahal Grandmommy is a chatbot program I have trained as a surrogate for my grandmother who was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's. I have carried on a series of conversations with this program over the course of a number of months—discussing developing events in my life, unpacking thoughts and concerns for her situation, and finding moments of catharsis in our exchange. The chatbot technology was chosen specifically for this project because of its dysfunction—the fractured, disjointed conversation which it produces is analogous to the degraded communication I expect with my grandmother as her condition deteriorates.

Given its character as a private performance which occurs in the space of my personal computer, and based extensively in my biography, how does this piece function for an audience? In a number of cases, *Megahal Grandmommy* has been installed for the public in much the same manner as it exists in private—as a text program running on a computer terminal, waiting for user input. Entry into the piece requires active investigation on the part of an attentive, curious viewer. While some clues to context are given in the text of the program's replies (such as the use of the words 'grandmother', 'Alzheimer's', 'nurse', etc)—the program itself does not offer any explicit statement of a narrative situation. This throws the viewer into a mode of fact-finding and active interpretation, where they develop an understanding of the narrative through their interaction with the piece.

The content of the program consists entirely of language absorbed from me during my interaction with the program. When presented in the gallery setting, the program is switched to a mode where it does not learn new language from use—thus the system remains entirely determined by my input, not the viewer's. This piece is a portrait of my imagination of my grandmother and of my interaction with some linguistic representation of that imagination—resulting in a functional portrait which can then be experienced by a viewer.

A close reading of the transcripts of our conversation offers a complete story of the project, from initial attempts to persuade an unmodified chatbot program that it was my grandmother, to later cultivation and nurturing of a modified chatbot as the actual grandmother surrogate. The text transcript describes the degree of my psychological and temporal investment in the piece in ways that are not communicated to the viewer in any of their momentary interaction with the chatbot software. The creation of this textual transcript from the

program/performer exchange is what shifts this piece into a type of self-consciously performative, technologically-assisted story-writing.

Megahal Grandmommy serves as a description and a historical record, and in some sense an attempt to remain close to a loved one by proxy. At the very least my time in conversation with the program provided a way to dwell in the space of emotion and thought which my grandmother's diagnosis creates for me. The clear futility of the attempt to create a surrogate for a family member from such inadequate means is one key facet of the communication of the piece—an existential complaint against my inability to effect anything more than passing change in her situation.

RIGHT: *Megahal Grandmommy*.
Desktop computer and chatbot
software.

PREVIOUS AND FOLLOWING:
*Three Views of My Grand-
mother's House*. Digital prints.

There you refuse to reply while he is back.
> No, but lets not talk about that. I want to ask you about the project.
> I am preparing for this art show.
> I hope you have been in Iraq for the month of contemporary art show.
> Yes, the contemporary art show. I am having trouble figuring out how to put you
on. Do you have any ideas?
> I don't really know what to propose.
> Maybe you can give me advice on my ideas. How to break the topic to the
in existing project.
> How I have been some kind of a fall day. In the late afternoon. Although I
don't still know my ideas?
> I want to build something sculptural. That occupies a large space. The one
is sixteen by eight feet tall, with a very natural presence.
> Yeah. I hope that you had such of a fall day. In
the late afternoon. Although I don't still know my ideas.
> I want this object to be both as strong into the other things that are happening
in the piece. It is the outside side.
> Our voices are going here. The things that are happening in the piece.
> It is the outside side.
> Yes.







FATHER-DAUGHTER ART SHOW

The *Father-Daughter Art Show* is a body of work produced out of the concept of an imaginary daughter. I was motivated to create a project which would implicate my identity essentially in the fabric of the work. Occupying a fictional persona disconcertingly close to my actual self (twenty-seven year-old, male, middle-class artist), I produced a series of artifacts which in turn prompted the viewer to contemplate the boundary and interrelationship between male fantasy and parental fantasy. By exposing my own fascination with parenthood and my fantasies of a young daughter, I placed the viewer in an equivalent position of unsettling intimacy.

The individual pieces of this project elaborate facets of the central fantasy, suggesting fragments of possible narratives, but none contain enough exposition to establish an over-arching story for the show. Untethered to any specific master narrative, the pieces remain free to connect and reconnect in multiple readings, and most potently oscillate between affective tones of sweetness and creepiness. The difficulty of reading one dominant narrative in this project is key to the experience it provides the viewer and demonstrates a general strategy in my work. Rather than creating clear, resolvable statements, I am interested in creating conflicting, contradictory situations—pointing towards multiple possible statements, and destabilizing fixed readings of the artist's intent.

Entry into the show is most easily accomplished in one of two ways—either through the baby carriage video piece, *Peek-A-Boo*, or through an examination of the collection of notes and sketches on paper. These gateways operate in very different ways. The notes offer a prismatic expansion of possible avenues of development of the concept, communicating intimately with the viewer via the proximity they offer to my hand and mind—but they require attentive reading and an imaginative willingness to complete the ideas they suggest. *Peek-A-Boo*, on the other hand, sets my image on the gallery wall peering down at a baby carriage, establishing my physical/bodily presence in the room. The recognizable gestures of the peek-a-boo game I play with the camera, and my smiling, active concentration in the video establish me as doting father and her as absent child in a manner which is instantly graspable. All other pieces in the show exist at one level of remove from my actual presence, artifacts left over from conceptual or craft processes but never directly locating me in the piece. Both of these entry points—the more textual and the more performative/immediate—serve to send the viewer further into the other parts of this project.

While the grandmother piece was largely immaterial, a text and computer interface rather than craft object, that project and this are related as explorations staged in the space of the family. One interesting difference between them is the strong assertion of the body as it appears throughout the imaginary daughter show—my body is left as a remnant of scent in the quilted shirts I used to wear, and it is pressed and traced against drawings and canvases in the anatomical works. Rather than remaining contained in disembodied text, the thought and labor in the daughter piece is entirely wrapped in crafted objects—drawings, sculptures, and canvasses—invested with my labor and touch. An additional layer of meaning in this piece is that of a meta-narrative addressing the artist as artist (not father), and my relation to these craft objects. Rather than doting father, *Peek-A-Boo* can be understood to present me as proud artist doting on the products of my hand.

RIGHT: Father-Daughter Show
(installation view), His and Her
Boots. 2 pairs of boots.





LEFT: *Reservoir* (installation view). Mixed media. 9 x 15'.

RIGHT: *Moment of Conception* (detail). Ink on paper. 12x16".

FOLLOWING: *Reservoir* (detail). Mixed media. 9 x 15'.



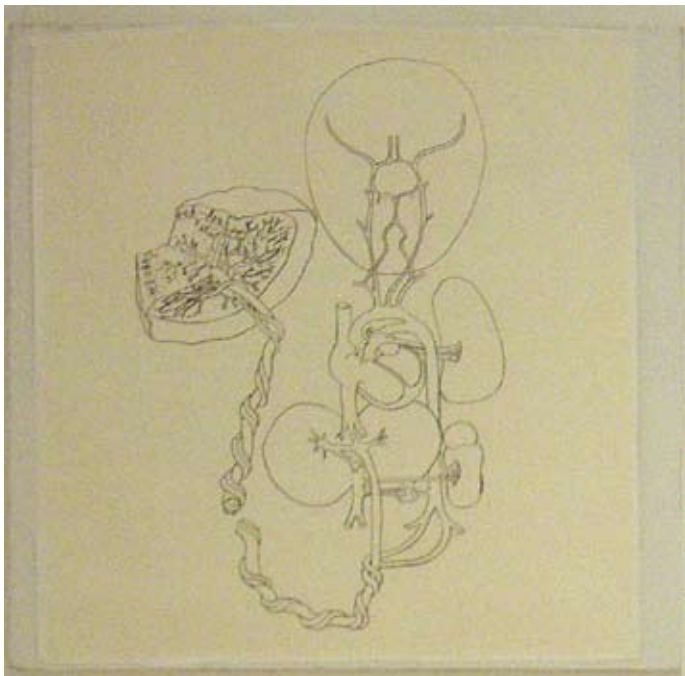




ABOVE: *10 California Girls, Up For Adoption Now!* (installation view) Graphite and oil on canvas, 24 x 24".







LEFT: *Warm Bed*. Graphite on paper, toddler bed.
30 x 30 x 54".

ABOVE:

Fetal Circulation Diagram. Pencil on paper 42 x 48".

Male Umbilical. Pencil and semen on paper. 18 x 24".

Paint Umbilical. Acrylic paint and pencil on paper.
18 x 24".



RIGHT: *Installation view*.



ABOVE: *Infant Portrait*. Pencil on paper. 9 x 9".
RIGHT: *Installation view*.







FROM LEFT:

My Girl. Oil on canvas. 48 x 48".

Painting to Nurse On. Acrylic on canvas. 48 x 48".

Quilt. Artist's shirts and stretch-er bars. 56 x 60".







PREVIOUS PAGES:

Father-Daughter Art Show (installation view)

Peek-A-Boo (detail).

LEFT: *Peek-A-Boo*. Baby carriage and video projection. 5 minute loop.



ONE WAY TO FORM A BOND

The bonding performance in *One Way To Form A Bond* grew from an investigation of my persistent and naive fascination with weaponry. This investigation was undertaken with an extremely self-conscious appreciation of the absurdity of such an interest in guns given my lack of direct experience of military service or gun usage. Particularly, I was interested in the bond which purportedly exists between a man and their weapon, and in the sexualized, hetero-masculinist culture which flourishes around guns. ('This is my weapon, This is my gun, This is for shooting, this is for fun') My goal in *One Way To Form A Bond* was to stage a complicated and compromised version of bonding with a weapon which would express an awareness of my position in relation to the weapon while creating some critical agitation of the issues it references. I staged the soldier bonding with his weapon in an inverse, sexualized manner—as a public make-out session.

The performance began inside of a tent on the grounds of the event (a colloquial reference to getting an erection—'pitching a tent'). At the time scheduled for the start of the performance, I left the tent with rifle in hand and moved to the middle of the gathered crowd. Kneeling in the midst of the audience, cradling the rifle in my arms, I worked through an escalating series of caresses—kissing and rubbing the weapon, sustaining my physical involvement for as long as I was able—until finally I broke and returned to the tent to conclude the performance. Rather than using possession and mastery of the weapon as a way to establish power over the gathered crowd, this physical, sensual performance was intended to compromise my status as man with a weapon, and to leave me exposed in front of the audience.

One Way To Form A Bond is my most direct use of a physical gesture as the engine of a piece. The points of my actual physical contact with the weapon—my hands rubbing the butt and barrel of the gun, and my tongue and mouth working over the firing mechanisms—became the focal points of audience attention which carried the piece forward. In the course of developing this work I progressively stripped the performance down to the simplest action which would establish the relationship that I wanted between performer, audience, and weapon. My display of physical desire and attempted gratification described a relationship between the weapon and myself immediately—and my public performance of those typically private gestures violated social bounds and placed the audience in a position of uncomfortable spectatorship.



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California Gun
8182 Parkway Dr. La Mesa, CA 91942
(619) 460-3838

DATE 04/11/06 TIME 16:51:57 CLK # 25

8489 YUGO SKS ISS 1T
L 101000 5#2-699961 249.95
14 DOJ 0T 25.00
18 PROCESSING F 0T 3.50
76190336861 DAC CABLE LO 1T 9.99

SUBTOTAL 288.44
SALESTAX 20.15
TOTAL PURCHASE 308.59

MS/US \$ 308.59
LAYWAY BALANCE \$ 0.00

CHANGE \$ 8.00
TRAN# 23 STR# 002 REG# 001

...if declined.
Cancellation Policy
1-30 days = \$15.00
31-60 days = \$60.00
61-90 days = \$80.00
+DOJ Registration fee
+15% restocking on special order items.
Articles left over 30 days are subject to \$25.00/mo. Storage fee
*Pickup date 04/22/06
*DROS # 419-00669
*Salesman Matt
*Last Name Twomey
*Signature Robert Twomey

San Diego Police Department RECEIPT FOR WEAPONS/CURRENCY

Date 12/1/06	Location 7500 Gilman Dr 0084	Beat/Service Area 115	Case No. 9-16-79
Property Taken From Name: Robert D. Twomey (CUL 0535090)		DOB: 9-16-79	
Reason Taken/Charges DRO not want any longer			
CASH TAKEN		FIREARMS TAKEN	
100 X	Type	Serial Number	Manufacturer
50 X	Rifle	762X39	YUGO 5466
20 X			
10 X			
5 X			
2 X			
1 X			
Change		Other Items (Description, i.e. ammo, foreign currency, etc.)	
Total \$		with plastic case	
Signature of Person Property Taken From Attesting to List Above:			
Officer Name: <i>Robert Twomey</i>		ID No. 4604	Assignment Northern front counter
Date: 12-1-06			
For information regarding property release see reverse. This receipt does not constitute recognition of legal title to the above property.			

Distribution: White - Property Room with Impound

Bue - Officer-Report

Pink - Person Property Taken From











ABOVE: *On and off demonstration of seven segment display. Fluorescent shoplights and custom control circuitry. 5'6" x 11'.*

SEVEN SEGMENT DISPLAY

A large scale text device in the shape of the seven segment LED, the Seven Segment Display investigates the relationship between bodily experience and linguistic perception. This proto-digital display is assembled from four-foot fluorescent light fixtures, is fully programmable, and can be sent any variety of textual content. It is created as a surrogate electronic voice, delivering textual utterances in a format which simultaneously is self-aggrandizing (referencing corporate signage), suggestive of large technological infrastructure (such as mainframe computers and server farms), and rendered partially incomprehensible by the limits of its form. The piece creates a seductive sensory experience and sets the viewer to work deciphering coded messages.

Typically the seven segment device is used as a numeric display (on the face of bedside alarm clocks and microwave ovens) and has very limited capability to form letters. Because of this, the device is severely handicapped as a text display. I am interested in this type of a limited form because of the demands it makes on the flexibility of perception of both viewer and artist. Communication through the Seven Segment Display requires understood conventions of abbreviation in the same manner as SMS messaging and the visual morphology of 1337 speak. Compounding this difficulty, the large scale of the piece makes perception an issue of physical perspective—up close the sculpture is more readily understood as sensory/perceptual experience than read as legible text. The viewer's positioning of their body becomes instrumental in their interpretation of the piece.

The Seven Segment Display is an output device for a class of textual material isolated in archiving and data processing activities over the past year. These activities are an orchestrated collision between habitual practices of collecting and developing ideas and interests in information processing and computer programming. Starting with varied, treasured art materials, I worked through a process of indexing, naming, and consolidation with the non-preferential detachment of a machine—reducing once-interesting materials to flat, computable text. The primary output of these processes are archives in various forms (books, computer folders, collections of drawings), and text lists of names and pointers to the rest of the material—but include a set which points to nothing outside of itself. This text seemed content to remain as text—a mix of personal musings, snippets of dialog, and pronouncements for the viewer. This 'text in search of a home' simply needed

an output modality—and the Seven Segment Display is such a home. While previously I have communicated with text at the intimate scale of the hand-drawn sketch, the Seven Segment Display functions at the opposite pole of experience, rendering textual utterances in a large, overwhelmingly physical/sensual form.

The identity of the Seven Segment Display as a digital form pushes an analogy between the hidden internal workings of a calculator or machine and my own conceptual, procedural machinations. This leads to a three part show concerned with databasing, archives, and the relationship of computational processes to creative thought. Having previously employed computer technologies in work, and having developed an idiosyncratic data flow in studio practice, I push a collision of computational and studio process in this current project.

Throughout my work, narrative frames are used to create contexts for performance and to provide hooks for viewer engagement, but I construct them to defy easy interpretation. I privilege the plural and irreducible in forms over the simple and singular, and develop tensions between the potential and actual forms things may take to force an equivalence between these states. I take on an essential openness in methods, to employ any approach which works, and gravitate towards the total and the complex: but I see the failure of attempts at totalizing forms. Finished work is complex, but must be bounded to be comprehensible. My most effective efforts, as they meet the audience, are specific in their framing (such as the imaginary daughter project) and rely on that specificity to function for the viewer. The clearly defined boundaries of a project establish the space in which content is developed, and from which the work expands to establish connections with a larger world.

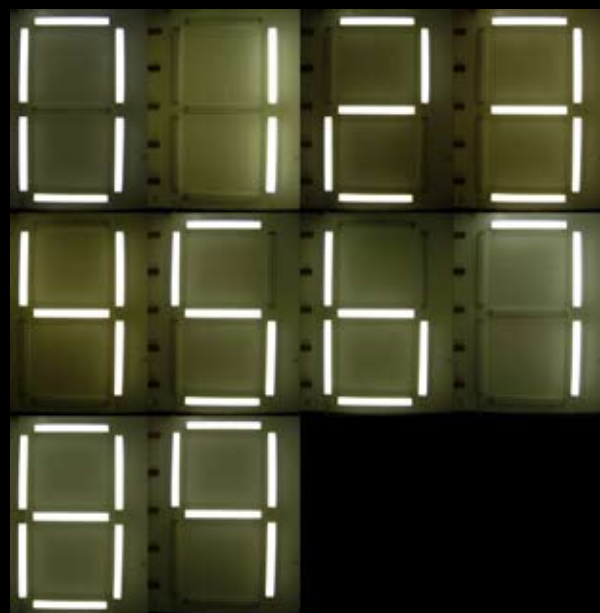
RIGHT: *Seven Segment Display, control terminal.*

LOVE 4 ALL





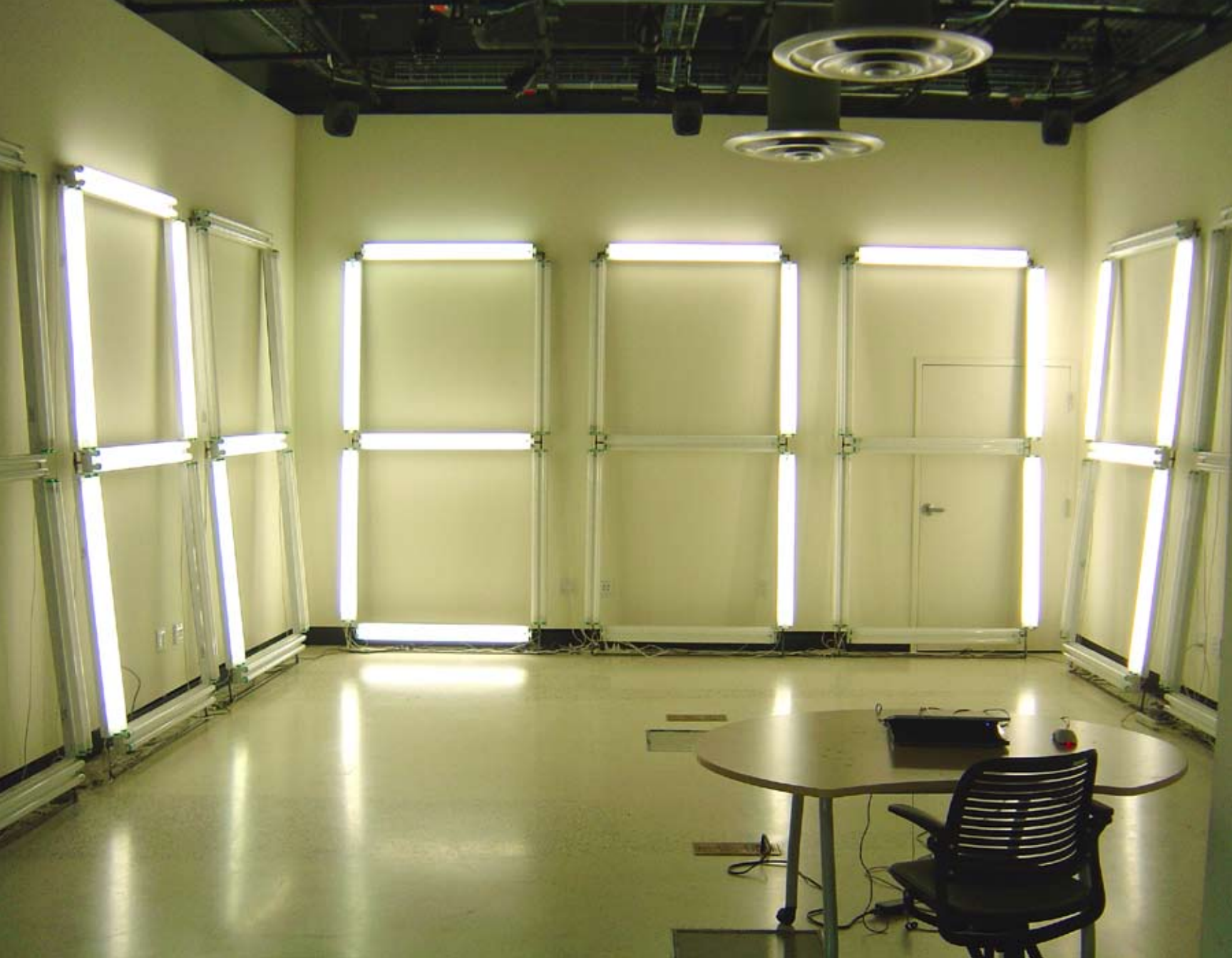
ABOVE: *Seven Segment Display, font.*
FOLLOWING PAGES: *Seven Segment Display (installation views).*











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EXHIBITIONS

Cocked! The Possessed Male: Object of Desire / Art and the Masculine Evolution, Luis De Jesus Seminal Projects, San Diego, CA, 2008.

Natural Love, Sixteen:One Gallery, Santa Monica, CA, 2008.

MFA @ The Egyptian, University Art Gallery, University of California, San Diego, 2007.

Seven Segment Display, California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technologies Gallery (CallT2), La Jolla, CA, 2007.

Compass 2007: New Art from the University of California's MFA Programs, Sweeney Art Gallery and California Museum of Photography, Riverside, CA, 2007.

Origin is the Goal, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles, CA, 2007.

Smash & Tickle, Sixteen:One Gallery, Santa Monica, CA, 2007.

How Stuff Is Made, (with Natalie Jeremijenko), International Society of Electronic Art, San Jose, CA, 2006.

Father-Daughter Art Show, Marcuse Gallery, University of California, San Diego, 2006.

Where: Sun Down Salon, Sun Down Salon, 2006.

Fresh, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2005.

AxS: At the Intersection of Art and Technology, Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, CA, 2005.

Que Traes, Estacion Tijuana, Tijuana, BC, Mexico, 2005.

AWARDS, GRANTS & RESIDENCIES

Humanities Center Grant, University of California, San Diego, 2007.

First Year Artist Prize, Visual Arts Department, University of California, San Diego, awarded by Osvaldo Sanchez (curator of inSite 05), 2005.

Artist Residency, Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, Vermont, 2004.

Artist Residency, Chautauqua Institute, Chataqua, New York, 2001.

Artist Grant, Sudler Fund for the Creative and Performing Arts, Yale University, 1999-00.

EDUCATION

University of California, San Diego, Masters of Fine Arts in Visual Art, Dec 2007.

Yale University, Bachelor of Science, majors in Biomedical Engineering and Art, May 2001.

