

While the twenty-first century has been characterized by the global network, creating cyber communities throughout the world that allows us to “connect” with anyone anywhere, we seem even more isolated, desperate, and our suffering seems even more acute than in

In the late 80s, he developed a simple projection technology that became the focal point of his work. With this technology he created artworks that addressed the relationship between historical concepts and contemporary issues. He has exhibited large-



the past. We have increased in knowledge and information. But have we increased in wisdom? “Life” seems so much more comfortable, so much better today. But are the lives we live better than previous generations?

David Helm’s *Automated Dispositions* addresses this question and reveals a subtle ambivalence to our twenty-first century “advancements” which now serve as our new religion, or rather, sacred calf. About this installation, Helm observes:

Automated Dispositions maintains my ongoing interest in information. Its purpose is to explore the potential of technology as it takes over our home. As well as to admit to my personal fears and fascination with both computers and television.

Helm’s installation explores this ambivalence; twenty-first century communication technologies facilitate and hinder our relationships with other human beings.

David Helm received a B.A. in Anthropology from Ithaca College in 1981 and an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1983. He has held teaching positions at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Wake Forest University, and the University of Nebraska-Omaha, where he is current Associate Professor.

scale installations at museums and galleries in New York, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Chicago. Exploring projection and other forms of technology has played an important role in Helm’s pedagogy since the mid-1990s.

Helm’s understanding of art was nourished by conceptualism, which taught that art was not about “expressing emotions” but presenting ideas and raising problems. Although it still reflects this aesthetic, *Automated Dispositions* suggests a subtle change as he has matured as an artist. Increasing, Helm has subjected his own aesthetic tools—technology—to his critical gaze. Helm states, “My work is now more internal, more expressive, and more experimental.” It is possible that Helm’s own view of technology has changed, for the current work reflects a much more critical stance toward it than his previous work suggested.

Automated Dispositions consists of four installations, focusing particular attention on the role of technology in the home, that most intimate of places where human communication and interaction is most intense and on the surface, most direct. Helm’s installation presents a love seat, dining room, living room, and den. This more critical, and as Helm himself puts it, more “expressive” stance toward technology’s impact on human relationships is

demonstrated in the way he emphasizes “craft” as a means to assert the individuality of the human subject.

Helm’s furniture claims clear art historical precedence from the utopian modernist tradition, from Constantine Brancusi and the Bauhaus to Isamu Noguchi, which sought to affirm “primitive” humanity in the face of modern dehumanization. His furniture also suggests the “purity” of the Middle Ages, with its “primitive” gothic styles—styles much admired by the early moderns. Helm uses this modernist aesthetic tradition to construct intimate, “natural,” and “innocent” environments, premised on human individuality and interaction contrast sharply with the technology in these intimate sculptural environments.

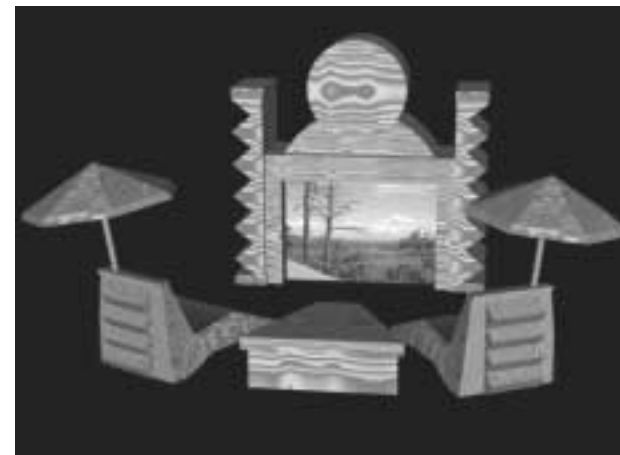
Helm’s *Love Seat* is an elaborate architectural structure that alludes to the High Gothic in its art historical pedigree. The elaborate throne structure function as “cockpits” for “lovers” to sit in and interact with one another. But this interaction does not take place in face-to-face conversation, but through telephones and video monitors. *Love Seat* focuses on the most intimate of family relationships.

Helm’s *Dining Room* features four high-backed chairs, with Latin crosses cut out of the backs at a large round table. The dining room table is the place where families communicate—where families are supposed to communicate. The table itself is then filled with monitors so that diners can “view” and “communicate” with each other via email and television monitors.

Living Room features the home’s social area where families entertain socially. Helm includes four tele-prompters that guide “partygoers” in their conversations.

Helm’s *Den* focuses on the place where families “relax.” Helm’s installation allows sitters to enjoy “nature” through video components and an audio component that enables them to recite prose.

Automated Dispositions focuses on how profoundly our human interactions are mediated through technology, whether through video, telephone, or the Internet. But Helm’s installation does not idealize the “purity” or the “innocence” of the domestic living arrangements that are his subjects. Helm’s elaborate, artistic structures, which connote “high art” idealistic aesthetic, also mediate communication and interaction as does the living quarters, such as the den and the family room, two domestic rooms that become part of suburban homes only after the second world war as the “family orientation” of the baby boomers transformed home construction.

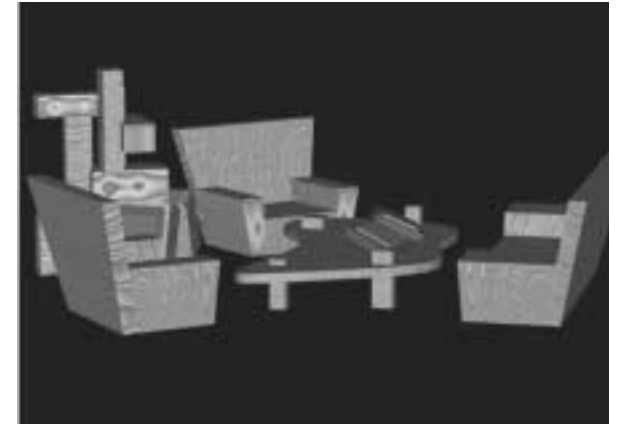


Helm’s installation of “private” domestic rooms in a “public” gallery space affirms not only the “public” or socially-constructed aspect of domesticity and privacy, but also reflects on the highly mediated status of the gallery space. Both spaces are socially constructed and

maintained through symbolic mediation, serving to constitute both “private” and “public” languages and communication. Ordinary, day-to-day conversation is just as thoroughly mediated as high art.

Helm does not critique mediation, per se, but the alienation that occurs when we become dominated by modernity’s “tools,” whether the internet, telephone, high art, or domestic dwellings. Unlike some artists and commentators, Helm’s art does not yearn for a “golden age” of expression and communication, for as a postmodern, he does not believe in such pure states. Nor, however, does Helm uncritically embrace the naïve progressivism of cyber-apologists, who see the internet as a literal and figurative fulfillment of some communicative utopia.

Personal and public expression, human relationships, and art, are necessary but difficult forms of communication, which require the nourishment of a self-critical consciousness to negotiate the difficult, but also rewarding, waters of communication. *Automated Dispositions* reveal Helm’s ambivalence through the stark contrasts



between “technology” and craft, between the public and the private, between mass communication and elite communication.

Although Helm’s aesthetic vocabulary remains conceptual and philosophical, *Automated Dispositions* reveals a more personal application and critical reflection on the technologies of communication that constitute Helm not only as an artist but as a human being.

Daniel A. Siedell



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-David Helm



Acknowledgements

I have known the work of David Helm for many years and I continue to be impressed by his ambition, courage, and great intelligence. It is with great pride that Gallery 210 presents his work to our community.

I want to thank Daniel Siedell for finding time in his busy schedule to take on the task of writing for this brochure. His fine essay brings clarity to the issues addressed in David's work. It has been a real pleasure to work with him on this project.

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On behalf of Gallery 210, I wish to thank the all individuals and organizations mentioned above for making this program possible.

Terry Suhre
Director
Gallery 210
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Automated Dispositions An Installation by David Helm



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