

June 11, 2012

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Break out the popcorn

Manuel Chantre takes a curious look at the world's favourite cereal grain

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7/06/2012 1:02 AM | [Comments: 0](#)



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Manuel Chantre's Dispergere Maiz

Corn is fascinating. No, really.

Among the most economically significant crops worldwide, corn and its by-products have, in more and less obvious ways, found their way into nearly every aspect of daily life. Though an important staple food, most corn ends up as livestock feed or ethanol, and it's used to produce everything from plastic to penicillin to perhaps our most cherished nutritional bugaboo: delicious, pearl-clutchingly ubiquitous high-fructose corn syrup.

The plant's long shadow would be striking in any case, but it's all the more remarkable given its improbable origins. What we call "corn" (and what the rest of the world calls "maize") is in fact the product of as many as 12,000 years of intensive bioengineering. We don't yet fully understand the process by which the first peoples of what is now Mexico derived a cornerstone of today's world economy from the tiny, relatively useless seeds of corn's nearly unrecognizable relatives, but modern maize is, if nothing else, an object lesson in human persistence.

Considering its long history and far-reaching cultural implications, corn is maybe not as strange a subject for a multi-channel video installation as it might first seem. Montreal video artist and musician Manuel Chantre's *Dispergere Maiz*, a Video Pool presentation that concludes its one-week run at Negative Space today, manages to be strange anyway.

The quadruple projection, spanning a labyrinthine arrangement of free-hanging screens, comprises strobe-like collages of overlapping footage showing corn in various contexts: the field, the processing plant, the market and supermarket, the laboratory, the movie theater popcorn-popper and so on. The effect is kaleidoscopic, both enthralling and disorienting. Motion sensors track the movement of gallery visitors, tweaking the sequence of imagery in ways that, while not entirely clear, ensure that no two viewers experience exactly the same work.

This impression of being implicated in an unknowable system, influencing it in obscure ways, makes abundant sense as a reflection of our individual participation in something like, say, global agribusiness. The intrusion of viewers' cast

as a reflection of our individual participation in something like, say, global agribusiness. The intrusion of flowers' cast shadows into the projections (becoming "part of the work") further reinforces the premise, especially during the most effective video passages, which create dizzying illusions of endless flickering cornfields and supermarket shelves.

It's the soundtrack that threw me.

The installation is propelled (even overwhelmed) by one of Chantre's compositions, a menacing piece of what I think you'd call "ambient techno" (I really don't know — it's all Sandstorm to my ear) played very, very loud. Sounding like something out of a futuristic action movie, it builds to a percussive, chase-scene clip as the video settles on, among other things, latex-gloved lab technicians using long syringes to squirt ears of corn with viscous, blackish goo.

The music clearly evokes suspense, even panic, which, fine: Monsanto, diabetes, whatever, I get it. It's not exactly subtle, and the programmatic function of the music seems to me at odds with Chantre's stated desire to create an open-ended experience subject to individual interpretation, but those are issues I can deal with.

And the work is engrossing; its subject is interesting and its message is surprisingly coherent. Still, between the rapid-fire projections and the mood music, I just couldn't shake the feeling that I'd wandered into some louche, agricultural-themed nightclub. What does one ever wear to a corn rave?

Steven Leyden Cochrane is an emerging artist, writer and educator from Tampa, Fla.

*Manuel Chantre: Dispergere Maiz
Presented by Video Pool Media Arts Centre
June 1 – 7, Negative Space (253 Princess St.)*

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