

# Soft, Fluffy & Virtual

by Lynne Cooney

CINDY LUDLAM is a Boston area-based, cross-disciplinary artist who integrates sculpture, technology and performance to create uncomfortable yet subtly humorous installations. Ludlam's recent endeavor, *Soft, Fluffy & Virtual*, is an immersive, multi-sensory experience that layers textural objects, sound and hundreds of knitted and virtual kittens. Encompassing three inter-related spaces—a physical sculpture, a virtual environment and a real-time participatory Internet event—

*Soft, Fluffy & Virtual* explores the physical and technological boundaries of interactivity.

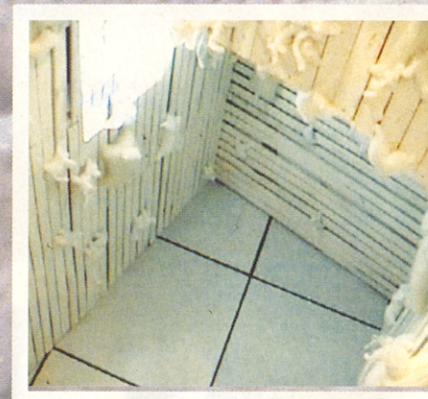
Multitudes of white, wool knitted cats and kittens infest Ludlam's environments and serve as the conduit for viewer participation. Through physical touch and virtual navigation viewers are enticed to directly engage with the knitted cats and kittens, eliciting a range of programmed responses. However, Ludlam revels in subversion and her knitted creations—a bizarre cross

between a child's stuffed animal and a cat toy—are far from cuddly, predictable domesticated pets. It is no surprise that the artist cites a childhood memory of finding a photograph picturing a two-headed kitten as partial inspiration for the piece. It is the recollection of this unfortunate anomaly fueled by Ludlam's fascination with advances in cloning research (think Korea's Snuppy) that form the underlying premise of *Soft, Fluffy & Virtual*. From the feral sounds and mutated appearances of the kittens and cats—in many respects themselves “cloned” by the artist and her team of knitters—to the intentionally clinical aesthetic of the spaces' interiors, Ludlam's work feels like a medical experiment gone awry.

In the physical sculpture, the former painter abandoned color over form. Ludlam constructed a purposely unsophisticated barn-like structure fabricated out of unfinished plywood and draped with loose wires, computer cords and assorted electronic components, a hard-wire clue as to what may lay wait inside. In contrast to the organic simplicity of the exterior, the structure's interior is painted a bright and sterile white, its walls, ceiling and floor chaotically overrun with knitted felines. Rhythmic sounds of purring pervade the space as a silent video of a young girl handling a small kitten is projected onto a section of the wall. Viewers are invited to touch, stroke or pet the kittens triggering guttural and somewhat menacing cat sounds. The psycho-sexual associations

are explicit and Ludlam relishes and intentionally exploits the awkward nature of this interaction.

As the tactile opposite of the sculpture, the virtual component—developed on Boston University's Immersa Desk, a large stereo display that allows one to explore a virtual environment—presents a computer generated, three-dimensional space inhabited by a large, white knitted cat. The virtual



perimeters are wallpapered with smaller knitted kittens likening the space to a padded room in a psychiatric facility. Wearing special glasses and handling a navigation tool in a darkened room, viewers become completely immersed in an environment with animated cats and cat sounds. When prompted by the navigation device, clusters of small kittens harbored by the large Trojan-like cat

emit startling sounds and movements. The responses, such as that of a two-headed kitten snarling at its twin appendage or an innocent looking kitten releasing a snarl of a cat seemingly ten times its size, are perversely humorous.

As an investigation in expanded participation, Ludlam connected the sculpture and virtual environments through a real-time participatory event. Held in conjunction with the Boston CyberArts Festival via Boston University's Access Grid—a rich video conferencing utility for remote group to group collaboration over the Internet—this live “performance” enabled remote viewers and on-site participants to interact simultaneously with both the physical enclosure and the virtual environment, blurring and overlapping the origin of sounds and actions.

The collaborative aspect of *Soft, Fluffy & Virtual* is integral to Ludlam's process, in both the creation and in the viewing of her work. Ludlam worked with Boston University's Scientific Computing and Visualization Lab as well as crafts people to realize her complex and knitted vision. For Ludlam, collaboration is the essential final layer that relates divergent means—craft and technology, physical and virtual, tactility and insubstantiality.



Images courtesy of Cindy Ludlam