

THE DIGITAL BODY:

HOW TIMELESS, SPACELESS ART IS CHALLENGING VISUAL DISCOURSE.

The final artistic avante-garde of the twentieth century was a technological one. Starting with photography and proceeding to cinema, video, and digital art, artistic practice became intertwined with the mechanical revolution that swept over every element of society and culture. In the words of Timothy Druckrey, '...it is no longer possible to represent or experience the world without the mediation of technology.' Just as at the end of the nineteenth century when stylistic evolution (Classicism, Romanticism) no longer served as useful descriptions of art making, so, too, at this present turning point, any description of art making that does not make room for the technological, is lacking. The sometimes uneasy alliance between art and technology has come of age: the inexorable march of the world toward a digitized (or computerized) culture has included art in its step. As writer and curator, George Fifield, expresses it: 'The artist's ability to effortlessly reposition and combine images, filters, and colors, within the friction-less and gravity-free memory space of the computer, endows them with an image-making freedom never before imagined.'

Many of our critical colleagues feel that digital art, especially that of the computer and worldwide web, is of so low a quality that it can't be taken seriously. While I do not agree with this sentiment, I understand it. A great deal of computer-based art is, indeed, primitive. But this is beside the point. This way of thinking is merely an excuse to avoid engaging an inevitable shift in art toward the timeless, spaceless domain of the digital world. We are engaged in a time when our experience and understanding of reality itself is undergoing a sea change.

Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, written in 1936, remains an essential reference in any attempt to develop a language that addresses issues of art in the age of technology. Alas, Benjamin, too, now belongs to the past. For Benjamin, technology, especially that of the still and moving camera, raised issues of authorship and the very uniqueness of the art object whose 'aura' is lost in reproduction. If an image can be reproduced easily, wherein lies the art? Benjamin notwithstanding, the issue of 'reproducing' images via moving or still cameras has little to do with the radically new capabilities now of creating work that has no referent in a non-digital world; indeed, that has no referent in the three-dimensional world as we know it. 'Reproduction' is to the digital world, what the hot air balloon is to aviation. Using digital technology artists are now able to introduce new forms of 'production,' not 'reproduction.' 'Virtual Reality,' for example, one of the more mystifying outgrowths of digital technology, is not a mere translating of data into life-size images that mimic reality. It is its own reality. According to architect and critic Paul Virilio, 'We are entering a world where there won't be one, but two realities: the

actual and the virtual. There is no simulation, but substitution.'

Benjamin's issues with reproducibility, prescient when he wrote them in the late 1930s, still relate to representations of space through the use of the laws of perspective, a preoccupation of artists since the fifteenth century. 'Perspective,' and 'reproducibility' are, for Benjamin, concepts related to representation of the real. Now, however, there are no longer agreed-upon notions of 'the real.' The digital world, which goes beyond the mere nonlinearity introduced into art by Cubism, is becoming a new reality for which a new critical and aesthetic language must yet be developed.

Identity, or, better, identities, are central to the new digitized world. Millions of people, artists and non-artists alike, are assuming different identities daily in chat rooms worldwide. A seventeen year old girl in Argentina, assuming the guise of a thirty-year old sophisticate, is communicating with a fifty year fishmonger in Brighton, who himself is posing as a debonair film director. Even more to the point, a twenty year old male lawyer in New York, posing as a woman and using the name 'Eudora,' is swapping intimacies with a forty year female university professor in Hong Kong disguised as an eighteen year old boy in a totally fantasized waltz of make believe homosexual desire! The possibilities are, of course, endless. As these identities become more fixed in the personalities of the people who use them they take on a reality of their own that can become as 'real' as the supposed given personalities that the people have in what is now called 'earth time,' as opposed to 'cyber time.' Nations may still be fighting over borders, but in the cyber world boundaries have long since disappeared. Distinctions based on race, gender, age, body type, and so on are not important in this world. Art emerging from these interactions (and it will come, I assure you) will reflect this supreme malleability of intention and perception. Will our theoretical frameworks be ready for this art?

Already I can hear rumblings from the art-crit-psychoanalysts who are chafing at the bit to wrap their ever-ready diagnoses around these sorry cyber creatures. 'Split personalities!', they cry. 'Dissociative states, schizophreniform disorders! That's what they are!' Not so fast, I'm afraid. Perfectly 'normal,' highly functioning citizens, even some in this very room, are performing these personality poses. They become parallel realities which, the more they are practiced, exist on a par with the so-called 'real' personalities. As hard as it may be to fathom now, the 'virtual' (as in these 'virtual personalities' or 'virtual realities') will also become an outmoded concept, suggesting a distinction from the 'real' that will no longer exist.

For the moment, everything one sees on a computer is part of the 'virtual' universe. The term 'Virtual Reality' has taken on a life of its own, however, and refers to a three-dimensional immersive experience in which a 'user' (we can no longer use the simple phrases viewer, visitor, or even viewer/participant), with the help of head-mounted displays, data gloves, or body suits (containing fiber-optic cabling), experiences a world of ultimate simulation. Currently, the experience is based on pre-recorded video images powered by very strong computers, but in the future, virtual interactions will take place in real time as people, raised with a familiarity with virtual space, engage their virtual reality 'tools' with the ease with which we now turn on our television sets or use our telephones.

Art, even now, is becoming increasingly interactive. Walk-through video installations demand responses, if only in passing. Doug Aitken's prize-winning entry at the recent Venice Biennale, *Electric Earth*, could only be experienced by committed attention to multiple screens arranged in large, interlocking cubicles.

'Interactive art,' ranging from immersive environments to user-created computer images, is already

widely practiced by artists around the globe, including Perry Hoberman, Jeffrey Shaw, Karl Sims, Masaki Fujihata, Bernd Litterman, Paul Sermon, and the performance collective Hypertext Players.

With the advancements in art and technology begun in the last century the Duchampian revolution, pervasive in all forms of contemporary art, receives some historical closure. The advent of digital art, an art so beyond materiality that discussions of the 'object,' much less the canvas, seem hopelessly dated, inaugurates a new era in which traditional art historical terms, even Duchampian ones, and methods of evaluation no longer apply. Spaceless, timeless, imageless experiences and content have entered the domain of art. Interactivity, though still primitive and dependent on photo-based media, might generate art for which no vocabulary yet exists. Current immersive artistic environments, let alone whatever lies beyond such virtual realities, are dictating a new discourse.

In *Beyond Looking*, John Berger asked, 'What served in place of the photograph, before the camera's invention? The expected answer is the engraving, the drawing, the painting. The more revealing answer might be: memory. What photographs do out there in space was previously done with reflection.' What, we might now ask, will be the content of memory if we can no longer distinguish simulated events and experiences from 'real' ones. What will be left to say of 'the body' when it, like words and dreams (and e-mails), drifts forever into an eternal ether?

POSTSCRIPT:

After preparing this paper I received this e-mail from two artists:

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- > For the show at Apex Art, we engaged a private person
- > in Seattle, known to us
- > through a 3D-chat environment. Her name is Tanya
- > Murphy, chatname
- > Tallredhead. She has built a virtual house (in a
- > world called "Twiglet
- > Zone") replicating in every detail, her real
- > physical home in Seattle.
- > We chose to reconstruct the living room of her
- > virtual house in the
- > exhibition space. Using the aesthetic of a set
- > design, an open interior, we

- > invite the audience to step inside.
- > The room with its furniture is built of foamcore, as
- > a blown up life size
- > architectural model, with the original patterns from
- > Tanyas virtual house
- > applied to it.
- > We also asked Tanya to record a guided tour in her
- > real home in Seattle.
- > This video is shown unedited on a TV set, which is
- > part of the interior.
- > A live feed during the opening enable Tanyas
- > presence and establish two
- > directional communication in the gallery.
- > People , known to eachother only as avatars, are
- > invited to the
- > reconstructed living room.
- > Community letters, the on-line newspaper and
- > billboards located in the main
- > teleport areas, advertise the event. Those who can
- > not attend the exhibition
- > have the possibility to meet up simultaneously in
- > Tanyas virtual home.
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- > The dimentions of the piece are 13.36 x 14 feet .