

Your Place or Mine? Locating Digital Art

All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.' When the French social theorist Guy Debord made this observation in 1967, he was thinking about the ways in which media-saturated cultures reduced social relations to an incessant flow of images, the unfolding of 'a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation'. In other words, within advanced capitalist economies lived experience had become a spectacle¹. Within this 'société du spectacle', human beings were situated as viewers of a visual language of appearances that effectively separated them from any sense of first-hand experience. Debord's spectacle immediately brings to mind Eco's hyperreality, Baudrillard's simulacrum and, more distantly, Plato's phantasm. But it also sounds very much like what we now refer to as virtuality. People living in spectacular society don't observe the mediation of their world. On the contrary, they are totally immersed within a visual environment that is not real, but that appears to be real. Three decades after its inception, the phenomenon of the spectacle finds resonance in the emerging social formation known as virtual culture. The metaphysics of virtual culture have already passed into the realm of received ideas, a bricolage of neo-Platonist idealism, Cartesian dualism and Leibnizian monadology. Its fetish is the disembodied sensorium, liberated from the materiality of the body; its totem is the Web, representing the decentred network of pure information. Debord's 'separation within human beings' anticipates this culture based on disembodiment, and his notion of a 'world beyond'² is suggestive of the abstract, artificial reality of computer-generated environments that make it possible. More specifically, Debord's postulation that people are simultaneously immersed in, and are spectators of, apparent experience prompts consideration of the aesthetics of virtual artifice, particularly the question of its locality.

Like fractal geometry, digital art is endemic to the computer. While such a statement runs the risk of tautology, it serves to indicate that digital art is unthinkable without the material apparatus of the computer (a CPU and monitor) and its physical proximity to the user: while it is computer-based it is also computer-bound. Even in the case of work that is remote (and accessed via the Internet), an assemblage of technology is required for any interaction that will ultimately allow the user to regard a screen that is sitting on his/her lap or desk. Drawing on Brenda Laurel's metaphor for the current state of interface design, the aesthetic experience of computer-based digital art is like watching a play performed on a proscenium stage³-something is perceived that only occupies a partial place in the spectator's overall sensory environment. This exclusive *mise en scène* is reinforced by peripheral vision and other perceptual reminders of extra-diegetic experience. While there is agency in the form of interaction, it is limited by the degree to which we can forget that our involvement is still an analogue procedure. Just as in a theatre, where willing suspension of disbelief constitutes a type of immersion, our experience of computer-based digital art works by analogous identification with a *mise en scène* that is out of the realm of our sensory apprehension. I can watch the antics of Troy Innocent's *Shaolin Wooden Men*, but I can't appropriate them (as much as I would like to-that Special Go-Man really moves!). As compelling as such experience can be, it hardly places the spectator in Plato's cave, for as with other art forms such as literature and film, identification can only go so far. Following the logic of virtual or apparent reality outlined above, the spectacle and the spectator are as clearly and non-problematically distinct in digital art as in other forms.

Mike Leggett's successful *Burning the Interface* exhibition was the first major survey of

international CD-ROM art. It declared, through the very fact of its occurrence, that digital art is still in the process of finding its place both in the literal and the cultural sense. The fact that this is digital Art (with a capital 'a') does not a priori determine that interactives should be placed within the traditional gallery or museum context. Given the cyberpunk poetics, and indeed politics, of much digital art (the work of Linda Dement or the Cyberdada group, for instance), the 'street' seems a more likely arena, in keeping with cyberculture's disavowal of privacy, institutional hegemony and diminution of public space (it would be a strange day, indeed, if Survival Research Laboratories were to stage *A Carnival of Misplaced Devotion* in the Museum of Modern Art, or the Tate Gallery). The relationship between digital art and the museum is a problematic one: it is clear that the very nature of digital art as an interactive, rather than contemplative, form doesn't sit well in the institution of the gallery. The time required to become involved with and navigate interactives means that the public, competitive context is not the best situation in which to attempt to experience them. The experience of having one's time with an interactive compromised by the fact that a crowd of potential users/usurpers is hovering in the background is the definitive essay on this topic. Exhibitions such as *Burning the Interface*, or, to a lesser degree, *Cyberzone* (currently on show at Scienceworks in Melbourne), ultimately raise the question of the appropriate location of digital art, mainly because the intermediate technology required for its display does not actually need the specialised context of the gallery. Not everyone can have a Brett Whiteley in their own home, but anyone interested in the work of Troy Innocent can, potentially, explore *Idea-On>!* in the uncompromised, domestic privacy of their own space (providing they have a capable Mac and have gained access to the work through the recent issue of *Mediamatic*).

As *Burning the Interface* attests, digital art is at the moment dependent upon the museum context to reach and create an audience, even though the nature of the work itself is often at odds with that context (on a purely practical level, a work such as David Blair's *Waxweb* is so labyrinthine and encyclopaedic that even assuming one could hog a terminal long enough to attempt to fully explore it, multiple visits to the gallery would be necessary to do so). In this it revisits the complexities surrounding early electronic art of the 1950s such as the multi-media performances of Merce Cunningham and John Cage, or the work of Nam June Paik, as well as the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, represented by the minimalist sculptor Carl André. Paik's television and video installations immediately brought the domestic context into collision with the institutional ambience of canonical art. At the same time, however, his 'prepared televisions' generated meanings that were conceptual, and only had meaning within the context of the gallery, since they totally disrupted television's normal function and its iconic understanding as a diversionary, everyday object. In a similar reflexive vein, André's assemblages of bricks de-aestheticised the artwork by confusing artspace with streetscape, disclosing the polemical insight that aesthetic value and meaning is something that is bestowed upon everyday objects, quite often by their mere location within the gallery. Likewise, the collaborations between Merce Cunningham and John Cage brought to the foreground the role of the aleatoric in art, which they interpreted as something that 'happens' anywhere, rather than something that is orchestrated and requires a special auditorium. Cage's poetics of chance operations meant that the artistic event was entirely unpredictable, and showed no respect for the traditional protocols of dedicated performance spaces. The work of Cunningham and Cage has not been given the credit it is due as the first form of electronic, multimedia art. They introduced, for example, the practice of triggering light and sound by the movements of a dancer through a spatial environment criss-crossed by sensors. The legacy of this practice can be seen in the work of the British multimedia artist Chris Hales, as well as in the Mandala system of 'unencumbered

virtual reality', currently on display at the *Cyberzone* exhibition. This system evidences Debord's conception of the spectacle as something that the spectator is not only in, but is watching him/herself in. In this system, the spectator performs actions (without the need for data-gloves and HMD) that locate him/her within the screen space in front. The spectator becomes part of the spectacle, passing beyond the screen into the virtual representation. The dialectic of inside/outside, still entrenched in computer-bound art, has started to implode.

The question of where digital art should take place inevitably invites consideration of the experience of place that such art generates. The most likely and desirable outcome of the trajectory of digital art from the desktop to immersive, virtual spaces is the creation of something that resembles the Holodeck on Star Trek or, even better, the programmable, holographic nursery in Ray Bradbury's story *The Veldt*. In both cases the emphasis on unencumbered movement through a compellingly realistic environment evidences the principle of spectacular society that apparent reality is all around us, its ruptures difficult to identify (the nursery in the Bradbury story is complete with 'odorophonics', and the simulated sun creates authentic perspiration). Of course, unlike Debord's subjects of false-consciousness, inhabitants of simulated, virtual worlds don't want to find the seams that betray the virtuality of the world they are in. Case's experience of 'simstim' in *Neuromancer* also suggests the exhilaration offered by inhabiting that 'other space', and in particular the idea of freedom of movement within it.

Complete immersion of the sensorium is still a long way off. Interactive installation art, though, offers some interesting versions of a different kind of experience of identification from computer-bound work. Graham Harwood's *Rehearsal of Memory*, for instance, focuses attention onto a projected image that is remote, liberated from the small scale of the screen. With this work one becomes highly conscious of interacting with space; with something that is architectural, more expansive, than the totality of the computer apparatus. Interactivity, in this respect, is more inclusive, adding a sense of depth to the experience that is hard to achieve when the screen is only centimetres away. Similarly, sculptural, prehensile interfaces, such as Agnes Hegedüs' *Handsight*, take inclusiveness a step further by requiring that the user physically becomes part of the interface. In *Handsight*, the user mobilises a hand-held 'eye-ball' in a transparent sphere, which in turn projects a journey onto a screen. This fantastic, probe-like journey through a world of 3D objects contained in a Hungarian religious bottle is an example of virtual installation art in miniature. The other advantage of *Handsight* (which seems contrary to its name!) is that one can walk around it, manoeuvring oneself to get the best angle of attack to explore the work's hidden secrets more closely.

Perambulation is undoubtedly an important aesthetic criterion of the virtual experience. Feeling as if one is actually chasing the White Rabbit into Wonderland without worrying about tripping over wires is a tantalising notion. The idea of walking through and interacting within virtual spaces is central to the conceptual work of architects such as Marcos Novak, whose 'liquid architecture' suggests a space through which things, including users, can flow. However, this idea has a much older lineage in the classical *ars memoria*, a practice of artificial memory designed to enable rhetoricians to recite long speeches or narratives with flawless accuracy. The elaborate memory places or loci designed within the mind of the orator were fabulous buildings, usually in the period style of the speaker, adorned with myriad images and objects which signified a particular piece of information to be drawn on in its correct context within the performance. The orator recited while simultaneously 'walking' through this eidetic,

inner place: the spectacle within. We tend to forget that digital art is all about creating what Ted Nelson has called 'magic place(s) of literary memory'⁴.

The idea of 'the walk' through a fantastic place of memory is very much in evidence in the most recent exhibition of Jon McCormack's seminal work *Turbulence*. I have seen this great work many times, but its current installation at *Cyberzone* is undoubtedly the most innovative, in that it extends the potential of the work to accommodate a stronger sense of the virtual experience into which one enters. This is literally suggested by the narrow entry-way, through which one walks into the darkened space that is defined by *Turbulence*. Through this atmospheric entrance, which resembles a portal to a kind of oddities display (complete with illuminated canisters exhibiting preserved specimens of what look like organic life), the viewer is highly conscious of leaving one world behind and delving into another. The parallel here, of course, is with sideshows and ghost-train rides, early forms of immersive simulation (at the opening of *Cyberzone* I saw a film crew ingeniously gliding its cameraman into *Turbulence* on a wheelchair, adding another dimension to the concept of the virtual as a space of mobility). The modest graphic user interface of *Turbulence* heightens the sensation of being in an unencumbered experience, and its impact is such that one doesn't necessarily have to be in command of it to feel a part of the 'place' that is created within the installation space.

On the basis of this most recent presentation of *Turbulence* it is easy to imagine a disappearing interface, the creation of a genuinely 'invocational' space (to use Chris Chesher's term) that can be activated, called into being by those 'present' within it⁵. *Turbulence* is very persuasive in its evocation of a virtual place that allows one to temporarily forget that there is a world beyond. However, even *Turbulence* requires a meta-place, a location for this evocation to 'take place', just as earlier perambulatory spaces, such as Myron Krueger's *Video Place*, did. At the moment, like most computer-bound digital art, it is very much a touring exhibit that finds temporary residence in university galleries, occasional exhibitions, conferences devoted to digital art (such as the AFC's Narrative and Interactivity last year in Melbourne), and major state exhibitions aimed at introducing cyberculture to the general public (*Cyberzone*). The issue of monumentality is highly contentious within cyber circles, and it remains to be seen whether or not virtual artifice will find a home in the permanent collections of mainstream art galleries. The very ambiguity of digital art's relationship to the gallery crystallises the original question of where it is best located. On the basis of the analogy with Debord's spectacle, it is clear that such art should be all around us, should be everywhere we look (this is, of course, the goal of immersive experience). As an art form dependent upon high technology, though, digital art will have to struggle, as previous avant-garde art has done, with the problematic issue of its location, even its 'locatability'. This problematic is as interesting as the work itself, and promises to be a spectacle to keep at least both eyes on.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Debord, G., *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, New York, 1995, p.12.

2. *ibid*, p.18.
3. Laurel, B., *Computers As Theatre*, Addison-Wesley, Menlo Park, 1993, p. 205.
4. Nelson, T., *Literary Machines*, Mindful Press, Sausalito, 1993, pp. 1/30.
5. Chesher, C., 'Aesthetics and Politics of Invocational Media', paper presented at the New Media Forum, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 22 October, 1995, p.3.