LEARNING THE THEORY

James Faure Walker

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Last time I was at Dillons I counted six new digital culture books. They were propped up like little slabs of minimal art, just round the corner from the cyber station. The internet has been good news for digital life-style publishing. A grey cover means cerebral, no illustrations. Orange-melting-to-green means 'cyber' in the title. Yes, I like the symbolism. I also get hooked on the strange tubing and teardrop sofas on the TV sets of Futurewatch, the Net, and Cyberspace. I like the simulated interactivity. It sets me thinking.

Conferences on electronic art, like the cyber chat shows, shift our thinking to the far horizon, a future purged of old buildings, old people, and traditional media. In line with 'tomorrow's technology today' some of us say we've already got the prototypes of the future art forms - immersive, telematic and so on. But there's virtual and virtual. Do we get actual art, or a mirage? Cut loose from the bother of having to make the fully functioning model, our theorists can dream up an art form injected into your alpha stream via ESP.

Projected video is no longer a novelty in installation art, and with the spread of cable and more and more artists getting the hang of Director, the delivery system may not be the main topic in future seminars. The electronic suffix could just wash away and leave us worrying more about the quality of the art. I can't see the logic of a separate 'electronic' Turner Prize. But for the present there is a lot cooking that hasn't found its niche, and it doesn't always need a gallery setting. There are the practicalities. Galleries full of darkened rooms give you headaches. And the art itself may have a shelf-life tied in with the hardware. Or take the case of internet art, sites made as art pieces. If you stumble on them by chance, how would you know they were 'art' and not just wacky? Well, one answer is they can be both. Cyclops Boy (http://www.cyclopsboy.com/) is a detective series from the makers of the Encyclopaedia of Clamps. Cyclops Boy, the one-eyed detective accepts

assignments via voice mail. Deluxo, the team behind it, have recently been garlanded with awards, both as cool site and as cool art.

So digital art has a good number of issues swimming about, and I'm on the lookout for a Unified Field theory, something as provocative as Negroponte's 'Being Digital', somewhere between CGI, Frieze and the Official Playstation Magazine. Mark Derry's 'Escape Velocity, cyberculture at the end of the century' takes up the trail of New Age and counter-cultures with some glee. It's informative and discriminating, but it`s a close-up view, more cult than culture. The Proceedings from ISEA96 Rotterdam (Inter Society on Electronic Arts), recently available, is a good resource, and while some papers are part of an academic conversation there are also gems from the real world of frustration. Here is Elizabeth O`Grady, manager of the Inter/@ccess outfit in Toronto: "we have a visually illiterate, impatient public which is largely ignorant of its cultural heritage, and which looks upon an art gallery visit chiefly as a shopping trip. Electronic art installations, which are slower than games and which offer nothing to buy, are considered even less relevant by the majority of people." Gallery directors, like vicars, look on the interactive genre as the answer to low attendance. But do they know what they're up against? At least one director I know of - who is putting on an interactive show - has never heard of the Playstation, price crash or no price crash.

Anne Morgan Spalter of Brown University, Rhode Island is writing a book on the aesthetic and technical concepts in computer art due out next year (published by Harcourt Brace). She tells me of the huge appetite for theory books on computer art: "It has been interesting to see how people want to read about the theory more than the actual process, as if the craft aspect, an understanding and mastery of the medium, were irrelevant to making good work. Virtual reality is a timely example. From reading theory about cyberspace and VR you'd think networked virtual worlds were a booming art form. In fact, virtual reality, even for a single user, is still terribly crude, expensive, and difficult-to-use. For the teacher it's a dilemma, balancing the art-theoretical context with the need to teach the craft. This dilemma can polarize the worlds of commercial vs. fine art computer work. The former are often slick and technically stunning but created in the service of selling

merchandise. The latter are often quite interesting, conceptually or theoretically, but more often than not exhibit an appallingly low level of craftsmanship."

I've been dipping into this anthology on my desk - 'Electronic Culture, technology and visual representation', edited by Timothy Druckrey, published by Aperture, best known for their photography books. Would this bring off the synthesis? The detail and the big picture? It contains essays by some brilliant ISEA speakers - Lev Manovich and Geert Lovink, whose litany about "padded solitude" runs through "Mountain Bike, T-shirt...compu games...sloppy casual wear, hair gel". There's a fascinating essay by Vannevar Bush who back in the forties predicted an automated office desk, and essays on the ideology of Disneyland, the social insulation of the Internet, the effects of mechanised perception, and a lot on "postphotography". Yet again we hear that digital photos can't be trusted because they can be manipulated - one college I taught at refused to accept my digital ID photo. Another view would be that digital photography is faster, more convenient, and cheaper unless you're a real pro.

This book is the ideal set text to quieten a bunch of know-it-alls who can't think beyond the next PhotoShop filter. It will teach them the protocol of new media theory. Our panel of experts doesn't get excited by a film, TV show, football, snapshot or joke. It's all "cultural production", something manufactured in the industrial park down the hill. Sometimes they wheel out the "critical apparatus" (siege machinery/chemistry set) for a bit of self-congratulation. History lessons are compressed - from cave painting, Alberti's perspective, radar, to VR. And the time-scale is geological. I read repeatedly of crises in representational modes, seismic shifts in consciousness, substantial slippages in the concept of text. Of course, out of my window nothing much changes, just the seasons and the odd bit of building work.