

## THE OUTSIDE INSIDE OF TECHNO ART

James Faure Walker

The LA Convention Centre is vast, white and serene. This August it was home to the Siggraph community of 35,000. The air-conditioning is fine. Except... a patrol car (pump-action shotgun clipped to the dashboard) screeches to a halt. There's a problem. Security called them in. There's this Italian artist touching up his interactive piece with an aerosol spray. CFC? Like on local TV there are priorities and they're big on unwelcome chemicals. A couple's polluted swimming pool is a human tragedy and Bosnia is just sad and somewhere else. Outside, the relentless LA sunshine: a huge jet-black Silicon Graphics truck sparkles in the car park. Inside the exhibition hall Silicon Graphics dominates just as it dominates the animation and effects market. The streets are deserted. The graffiti can be nice, but they announce gang precincts. The 3 am killings are real. The OJ Simpson trial is a mile away.

Cool, Catalytic, say the stylish Siggraph banners. There's Interactive Communities and there's Interactive Entertainment, the section with all the VR harnesses. This is where the Art Show private view is held. "And this is what I mean," says my friend looking round, "it's dark and unappealing and no-one is interacting". Like me he has kept faith with the unplugged art object. He's wearing his Pioneer badge, twenty years of electronic art. One advantage of doing something that just hangs on the wall is you can take it in with half an eye as you chat and grab peanuts. With installations and VR you surrender. You can't socialize when you are strapped up. You feel isolated, processed. 3D Virtual Theatre puts you in a headset alongside a dozen others for a 3-minute "wild simulation experience". You all get the same "virtual thrill" - ski ride, alien invasion - because the rationale of the Straylight Corporation is throughput. They can do 300 "participants" in an hour.

I am fascinated by the doublethink. Calling the sensory transplant of VR interactive is just weird. The same goes for 'communities', the Net and so on. Using your Mac to chat across town makes a lop-sided kind of sense. It might strike some societies as pretty perverse to hide out in the suburbs, to create

virtual spaces when the real spaces are just left vacant for scavengers, but that's LA. The real networking at Siggraph is offline, all about finding the best party. The best VR is real-time and wrap-round 3-D: a ride in the glass lifts of the Bonaventure hotel - you're on the outside but you're also inside and safe. Word was out that an ad agency had booked open access for Siggraph people at Universal Studios, but only after midnight. It was a half-truth. The rides were closed. But the themed streets of the malls were still bustling with shoppers, interacting with the Pizza Huts, a community of short-range pedestrians, mostly overweight, and exclusively car drivers - no druggies or Mexican homeless. A Brazilian friend nodded towards the vacant faces ascending the escalator, temporary citizens of a make-believe Western - "these are our rulers". If LA is the future and our social life is virtual, then goodbye public parks and cafe society. The shopping mall is halfway virtual already.

That's an overstatement. Nothing works that perfectly. What I enjoy about VR and interactive exhibits is the human factor that screws up. It's dark and they're fiddling with the cables and the trackers, but on screen nothing is happening. There's a curtain that hides the operations team. Tempers are fraying. Or there's a flashy advert about Global Communication Inc's net project, but of course it's...well... not working. To communicate this essential fact they use biro and paper. The queues pad slowly forward, sullen looking, for their dose of virtual excitement. There's the interactive art, or even CDs, that are so self-evidently not interacting that they need their creators to spend all their time explaining the interface. It's like amateur dramatics, full of bits that you're not supposed to think about. There's a university in England that spent quite a bit on five SGI Indies that hum away unused. Part of the idea was to videoconference in the same room. Beautiful.

The Art Show is something of a diversion in the trade show / technical conference, a breathing space away from the selling. Thousands see it, and though many are experts at the forefront of computer graphics I would guess most tend towards the conservative in art. But they do sometimes bring a freshness that makes the mainstream art world seem one-dimensional and slow on the uptake - especially its inability to see beyond 'media'. A high-tech

audience takes the digital for granted and can be more attuned to the 'art' of art than an art world preoccupied with collectors and big ideas like the Goldsmiths pedigree. Droning voice-overs and video projectors in dark rooms won't hold their 'new media' mystique for ever - two or three installations at the Tate and the novelty fades. So Siggraph is a good forum for testing ideas and seeing what others are up to. My own contribution here, two pieces in the show and a paper on "still video and the painterly poem", was a tentative step towards getting more of the normal and everyday into the language. I found I was far from alone in feeling this way - deadpan 'artificial' realism was a clear trend in animation, and many others were looking in the same direction. Call us the cyber-sceptics. But I'm not above technology for technology's sake. The most extraordinary wall exhibit I saw in the novelty category was in the commercial show: Dimensional Media (a SGI subsidiary) had a 3-D animation playing on a monitor two feet out from the wall, except that there wasn't a screen there, and it didn't seem to be a hologram either. Spielberg's team was looking round, and it's a strange awakening to find that what makes life difficult for the loner - lack of money and resources - still gives you something out of reach of the big outfits: ideas and independence.

However I don't think we've got as far as we might with this freedom. My sense is that we are too apologetic and need to burst out of the 'electronic art' ghetto with bolder work. 2-D work is cramped on the one side by the monopoly of the Institution of Painting (in my case, indifference to 'computer' work has been the stimulus to show abroad) and on the other by the race to get into the fastest real-time media. Some people won't give a non-interactive genre more than a shrug - "it's just a painting". Until things settle down all the TV on 'electronic' art will be on the techno-tricks, especially when they're wrapped up in special effects and instant gratification. Of course 'inactive' art comes a poor second. What does it do? Just tries to be attractive I suppose. Maybe it is on the way out. Yet it's the instability of ideas and definitions that make the electronic arts such a hot area to be working in, wherever you stand. Nobody knows the answers. Each strand has a powerful idea: what some call 'algo art' (i.e. the artist cooks up the generating program and lets the forms breed) prods away at the idea of artificial intelligence and creativity; there's

the work (not only in VR) which proposes a new 'art interface', of playing on our senses, our orientation, our wonder; there are the 'cross-over' forms, that open out the acoustic, the physical with electronic extensions; there's the web... CDs, video games, robots...

The best-developed form of electronic art is animation - creating the illusion of the animate. The Electronic Theatre is the highpoint of Siggraph, and here it was held in the appropriately glorious Shrine Auditorium. My favourites (and the audience's) were Fluffy (Doug Aberle), the cubist dog taken short, and The End (Chris Landreth), a bizarre and very knowing existential comedy - I love his Story of K. Simplicity, timing, structure, rationing the FX, contrasting the credible with the incredible. Both these were just plain intelligent, and conspired with the audience - quite a trick for a non-live and non-interactive and totally synthetic medium. The nearest I got to immersive ecstasy was the terrifying Volcano Mine ride. I'd also taken in a bucketful in the Animation Festival and had begun listing the clichés: male and female silhouettes on road sign or toilet door mean romance and 3-D ballet to the Blue Danube; whales morph to babies to ethnic muzak; acorns speed up into fractal branching; robots, megazords, tyrannosauruses, insects patrol swivelling 3-D as the ready-mades, the defaults of animation. You can admire technique, enjoy the colour, giggle at the in-jokes, and still feel something is missing. I've read a couple of good commentaries recently - Being Digital by Nicholas Negroponte and Silicon Snake Oil by Clifford Stoll - and they are roughly pro and anti digital-lifestyle books. It's interesting how much of the critique comes from the inside, how the best animation directors - Leseter's imminent Toy Story- - retain a folksy look, an everyman sensibility, go against the grain of Project Cyber Future.

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"For the record," began Chea Prince, "I don't do cyber-sex." He preferred the traditional way. This September's ISEA 95 took place in Montreal and wasn't short of cyber-sceptics. ISEA stands for the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts, and this was the sixth symposium (the sequence began in '88 in Utrecht,

then Groningen, Sydney, Minneapolis, Helsinki, and next year Rotterdam). These conferences and exhibitions are smaller than Siggraph - 1000 attended ISEA Montreal - but more intense because of their focus on art, music, science and philosophy. Each event has its flashpoint as the debate turns a corner. Two years ago in Minneapolis Jan Hoet of Documenta set things alight by rubbishing the 'art' on show. He didn't make much effort to come to terms with the 'electronic' perspective, but his views set the tone - and he had a point. Chea Prince is part of Public Domain, an Atlanta collective of artists who recycle hardware discards back into the community. Preferring the traditional to the virtual might have been heresy a while back, but this year we were trying realism, coming to terms with the offline world - what one cyberspace lexicon lists as "the Big Room".

Geert Lovink, Data-Dandy and veteran of Amsterdam's Digital City, showed underground film from Belgrade, and questioned our IKEA culture of comfort, ideals without ideas, our techno-ambience, mountain bikes, cool T-shirts, bright-colour backpacks, sloppy sports clothes. At the Ars Electronica festival in Linz this year, the conflict in Bosnia hadn't even been mentioned. He was making a stab at a connection. Derrick de Kerckhove, of the Toronto McLuhan Program, spoke of electronic art moving from the homeopathic to the mainstream. No need to circle the wagons. Time to think about where we're heading. David Rothenberg, composer and Wired contributor, demonstrated the Korg Ethnic Sound Card, a medley of ready-to-wear World Music. He listened with a beatific smile and wondered about the ethics of that. Lev Manovich observed how rendering in virtual reality is quantifiable, realism measurable in dollars, wire-frame for the poor. Henry See, one of the ISEA95 team, mused that painting uses cheap tools to make objects of value, state-of-the-art computing uses expensive tools to make...

We weren't all talking hardheaded realism. Mark Pesce, one of the inventors of Virtual Reality Modelling Language, gave an impassioned talk on the web as the collective evolution of consciousness, as the noosphere, as the gateway to the Sacred Time. There's a new category emerging, a mix of San Francisco research labs and New Age. Watch out for shows called 'Sacred Art'. I sat through a flawless dance piece by Montanaro Dance with nice interactive

effects. But something in me just doesn't respond when I'm asked to drink deep at the Well of Being. It's like another multimedia card: Stonehenge morphing to Parthenon, Gregorian chant to bamboo flute, Canterbury Cathedral to Taj Mahal, Ellis Island to Holocaust. Birth, life, death, the universe, all in one package, and no laughs. Spiritual revelation or spiritual tourism, what a relief to peer in at the gyrating dancers at a live TV disco down the road.

The most technically advanced piece on show was Char Davies' Osmose at the contemporary museum, a heavily booked VR show - 20 minutes of immersion. It is the product of years of research at Softimage in Montreal, where she is Director of Visual Research. Navigation was modelled on diving, so if you breathed in you floated up, and if you breathed out you dropped down - you could also tilt this way and that. You begin in a gridded 'Cartesian' space and descend to a gossamer woodland scene: a tree, roots, oak leaves, puffs of light tracking past; sinking down through the roots you reach the marching text of program code - the best part - and falling through that you find you're once again above the woodland glade. The spectators watching your 'experience' through red/green glasses actually get a better view, but viewing several explorations doesn't build much on the initial impression. Like cruder installations with their incense and smoke machines, their virtual aquariums, bacteria, forests, birdsong, their Marienbad scores, there's a Green romanticism wafting through, a yearning for the innocence of the great outdoors. It's more mood music than symphonic rapture.

Liszt was into the transcendental, and spoke of his music as casting a lance into the future, and as a fan of his I don't want to say you can't orchestrate a spiritual experience. The developmental drive of VR leads to the Disney idea that you make the imaginary so 'real' that you don't need to imagine it, you just walk through it. Up to now art has done this job best when it has avoided the literal - hi-res (the later Pre-Raphaelites) gave the spiritual too much detail. It's a tough question, what you do with the illusionism of VR, and perhaps 'visionary space' is again the default metaphor. Osmose was a decent pioneering effort. I'd also like to see what an animator with a much zanier imagination - Beriou, say, of Table d'amour - could do in the genre. For Mark

Pesce Osmose meant the Real Thing, the healing of the human/nature dichotomy. He was in tune with the credo. I wasn't. Seeing the VR scenario explained so fancifully after the experience rather undid things. There's a presumption that our souls are out of joint and a dip into VR puts them back in shape - well exclude children, those who can't pay the admission, and the bearded woodsmen. Would VR become the substitute walk in the muggy-less park, high mass in Notre Dame? Again the issue was about turning away from the 'outer' world. As Pesce's talk rounded off in the cyber-ether, Simon Penny (who makes precarious robots and edits critical texts) leapt to his feet: "that pop techno-spiritualism may fly in San Francisco, but come on!" How could being tethered to a machine be described as liberating? It was more like bondage.

That was the flashpoint this year. Pesce and others could be on the right track, but it might mean a convergence between corporation and techno-church. Daniel Langlois, founder of Softimage, argued that his alliance with Microsoft opened the prospect for making next year's Digital Studio software much more accessible, i.e. on PCs and not just SGIs. He also spoke of research cul de sacs. The main exhibition was in the Ecole Cherrier, a vacant school. These shows are juried but not curated, and that means they tend to be untidy - but that again is part of the point. Who knows the cul de sacs? A half-formed work by a student could say more about the way things are going than a professionalised installation. The tour de force in that category was the Vorn/Demers` Frenchman Lake, a room of grunting, smoking, flashing interacting 'robots' thrusting up and down in oil drums. More restrained and economical was Bosch/Simons` Krachtgever, 28 wooden crates in 4 rows linked by springs, programmed to shake around in ever-changing permutations. The simplicity of this worked well, so it was hard to believe there wasn't some will - or spirit - behind the changes of mood. Altogether there were fifty exhibits here\*, most of them being dark rooms with some kind of 'interaction'.

Watching the public go round illustrated two things: first the difficulty of making the point of the interaction clear. People scour about but just find an opaque artist's statement, and move things about to experiment whether

they're supposed to or not. For most projected videos the mix and match devices - mouse or touch screen - are really gimmicks, and the videos would run just as well without the baffled spectators messing them up. Just as with most books you start at the beginning, and work through, flitting from page to page gets frustrating after a while. Spectators prefer to be rewarded. In Bruce Evans Flora Floor a dark glassy surface on the floor only comes to life when you take off your shoes and walk over the rocks and plants that appear below you - a hologram. The second point is just a note of concern. It's simply that there's now an appetite for art that 'does things' - sculptures that answer back, things that follow you around - as though at last this Sunday audience can stop pretending to enjoy art and can really have 'fun'. There's the highbrow debate at ISEA about opening up the art interface to 'emerging' senses. Fine. But I don't think people have thought through the consequences of galleries as - slightly pretentious - fairgrounds. It's great to see the laughter and enjoyment when the Krachtgever starts getting angry. With another longer running exhibition, Images du Futur, l'art interactif, attached to a cyber-cafe I'm not so sure. Prompting the exhibits to do their thing in the twilight may have as much to do with 'art experience' as the internet salad (actually on a menu) has to do with modems. Perhaps that doesn't matter. This February I saw an Arts Council 'cutting edge' painting show in Newcastle that was just unbelievable - recycled grey on grey minimalism, the theorising as dumb as the visuals. If art is about clichés and playing the game, then maybe it's time to switch experiences.

The great strength of ISEA is that it provides a home for the experimental. It's not a trade show like Siggraph, and it's not an art world event. No cash prizes, pavilions, pampered egos. It all runs on the energy of artists, theorists, volunteers. Bruce Sterling, author of *The Hacker Crackdown*, announced his Dead Media project, a catalogue of extinct inventions. He loved his 'Powerbook', but with the pressure to upgrade, it had the life-span of a hamster. ISEA provides open house to the offbeat. Where else could you come across an outdoor interactive installation by a practising psychiatrist; a composer and a geneticist converting the DNA code of liver cells, botulism and the common cold into tone poems; haute cuisine recipes compiled by

artificial intelligence; an artist - the incomparable Stelarc - giving a talk with his arm twirled round by programmed muscle stimulators?

\*It's interesting how relatively prominent Australia and Canada are in this field. If you average out ISEA shows over the past three years (that excludes Sydney 1992) the proportions of exhibitors work out as USA 39%, Canada and Australia each 14%, Germany 7%, Japan 6%, UK 4%.