



Digital Reflections: The Dialogue of Art and Technology

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Digital Reflections

The Dialogue of Art and Technology

Johanna Drucker

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The dialogue between art and technology has acquired a high profile in the last decade. The ready availability of digital manipulation in a wide variety of media—from image making to performance, video editing to network production, among others—has put the tools of electronic art within reach of an ever growing number of artists (even if there is not the universal accessibility promoted by such current clichés as that of “a liberatory democratic medium” “making a virtual community” “without regard to gender, class, or ethnicity”). The personal computer, a novelty fifteen years ago, is now a standard item (fulfilling the marketing dream of the techno-whiz kids of the now megacorporate computer industry) in art schools, professional studios, and, increasingly, galleries and museums. The legitimization of electronically produced work within the arena of exhibition and critical consideration has provided a strong basis for acceptance—even though habits of viewing are slower to change, and the gallery goer accustomed to static media still struggles, visibly, with time-based installations. The hype industry has in many ways outstripped the aesthetic—artists still grappling to discover what the formal and conceptual parameters of new tools will permit in the way of approaches to making works of art find their contemporaries making claims for the “non-linear,” the “interactive,” “the virtual,” and “hypermedia,” which correspond only partially to the reality of electronic art. We still encounter the aesthetic experience (as every other experience) in a moment-by-moment linearity, can easily refute the claims to interactivity as mere choices in a programmed whole, and can demonstrate that print media offer the same possibilities of recombinant reading as do CD-ROMs and websites. In addition, we still have bodies, still have to function in the world, and, above all, still have to deal on a regular basis with equipment glitches, malfunctions, and the limits of our own human imagination.

Ultimately the problem of art making remains the same no matter what the medium—that of having something worth saying, bringing forth, making, or putting into the world. The age-old functions of art—to provide communication, experience, insight, or entertaining distraction—remain what they have always been: a matter of human beings working individually or collectively to create something that did not exist previously and is the product of imagination meeting material (even the “immaterial” of electronic means) to be made manifest as process or form. In a field that

changes with the speed of software upgrades, website maintenance, and product design, artists straddle a tricky position between front-line consumerism and cutting-edge artistic innovation.

One of the fundamental paradoxes one faces in using print media to represent digital technology is that many of the time-based aspects of the experience of new media are collapsed into either verbal description or the flat space of a single printed image. In his artist's pages, Brad Freeman, an offset-book artist, demonstrates the interconnections of the spatial and temporal dimensions of a printed page sequence produced using a combination of traditional and digital technology. The time-based aspects of a book's form, like those of many conventional artistic media, have become more obvious in the current discussion about interactivity, hypermedia, and electronic formats—all of which have sensitized us as viewers to the potential of traditional forms as precedents for various aspects of new media.

In this issue I have tried to bring together artists and writers for whom the current dialogue is *between* art and technology, not simply about art *as* or *in* a technological mode. Every writer who has also worked as an artist in electronic or digital formats is featured in a brief profile about his or her creative endeavors. It is symptomatic of the current condition—which itself extends from a long-standing precedent—that those who are making are also critiquing, writing, thinking, trying to figure out the shape of these new media and approaches through any number of means. To my knowledge, those with the most hands-on experience tend to be the most realistic—often that means the most skeptical—and yet the most engaged. Everyone here writes from within the individual encounter with these new media, not only from a critical stance. Each participates in posing the fundamental question of whether new tools are the source of new ideas, new social forms, new ways of making and dealing with the world—or if the tools find their place because the world—and we—have already changed.

This issue benefited from the input of Jim Petrillo, associate professor of new media and electronic arts at Hayward State University, California, at several crucial moments in its development. My thanks to him and to the contributors whose work make this issue what it is.

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