

## **THE DIGITAL ARTS: 2007**

*FROM THE BOOK OF ALTERNATIVE PHOTOGRAPHIC PROCESSES: 2ND EDITION*

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### **A 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition Editorial**

The digital arts may always be a weird sort of “waiting-room” where the thrills and options of the new tools are not enough, or perhaps all too much, for the work to be respected as a legitimate art. The reality of everyone needing to have the latest and greatest upgrades, every 18 months creates a difficult environment. That, plus the fact that the medium becomes more and more homogenized, is in part responsible for the current “mushy democracy” of digital imaging. Setting that aside for the moment, I continue to see three separate and evolving digital art forms.

### **The Print: Graham Nash, Mac Holbert & Epson**

First, much credit for the very concept that ink jet syntax could be considered as an archival and unique system of making art goes to Graham Nash and Mac Holbert of Nash Editions. In the late 1980's Nash and Holbert wrote image management software and applied it to the creation of large-scale digital images using an Iris 3074 printer and archival rag papers. This was the beginning of the mind-set that began to let photographers think about the concept of the dry darkroom.

Of all the printer manufacturers, one jumped into the concept without looking back... Epson. Epson cannot be given enough credit for their commitment to the photographic arts, and for utilizing the resource of grateful artists and photographers in the development of its product line. Epson has also shown an amazing ability to consistently improve on its printers, profiles, and pigment-based ink sets while maintaining a business model geared to professionals and students alike. Although Hewlett-Packard and Canon have joined the parade, Epson continues to lead it.

Images produced as prints are generated from original film, or digital files, and manipulated digitally to become printed, 2-D images. The latest home-based Epson 2400 (or whatever Epson version is newest by the time you read this), in concert with their Ultrachrome K3 ink sets, has set a standard for excellence that may continue to separate it from the competition. Included in this digital stew are the individual pioneers whose ways of modifying and working with digital printing technology have, in a very real way, induced such larger entities as Epson and Hewlett-Packard to put so much effort into mass-market technology. These pioneers include such landmark figures in the digital evolution revolution, as Gary Rogers, Jon Cone, John Paul Caponigro, Stephen Johnson, Graham Nash, Mac Holbert, Pedro Meyer, George DeWolfe, Dan Burkholder, and Mark Nelson.

Photographic prints made with pigment-based, lightfast, water-resistant inks on rag papers can accurately be described as “archival”, with a life span of well beyond our own, depending upon the support and the conditions that the print exists in. This form of realized, and printed, digital artistry is most similar to photography and printmaking. As a result of the almost unbelievable improvements in the physical materials, very few practitioners, museums, critics, or collectors harbor reservations about this form of printmaking.

## **THE SIGNAL: INFORMATION & PERFORMANCE**

The second form to be considered in the digital arts is the *signal*... the free transmission of electronic information and the World Wide Web itself. In this new cosmos, the artist works independently as a solo act or forms a collaborative creative relationship with others (who might not be aware of the collaboration) to express and influence thought and perception. I see this genre as being broken into two separate parts; the signal itself and the influence of the communication via that signal.

### **The Signal: Information**

On a basic level, it is the signal that carries the information that is critical to the expression. This transmission got its start in the mid-1800's through the inspiration of

Alexander Bain's crude facsimile machine that was improved upon in 1860 by Giovanni Casselli, an Italian priest, who invented a working machine he called the Pantelegraph.

To use a Pantelegraph, the operator would draw, or write, with fatty ink on a sheet of tin. The sheet was then placed on a plate that was charged with electric current and, in contact with a transmitter, connected to a telegraph wire. A stylus would pass over the ink and the electric current, unable to penetrate to the charged electronic plate through the fatty ink drawing areas, *would transmit what could not be transmitted* (the fatty ink) to the other end of the telegraph line where the image was received on a chemically treated paper... thus making an electronic picture of the thing itself.

Perhaps the first artist to think about rendering a photographic image using electronic code was William Larson. He reasoned that the FAX machine, using the Fax machine's ability to translate images from sounds over a telephone line, produced images in values of gray. More importantly, according to William, *"it transformed the image into a mediated electronic state where it was compatible with other electronically encoded information."*

When Larson began this work he considered how photography might be used within an electronic system able to translate everything it was given into a FAX code... from a song to a picture in a family album... and how visually this was, in essence, a montage of signals re-constructed as a whole. By using the FAX technology of 1969, Larson may have made the first electronically montaged photographs intended to be seen, and considered, in the same way as a traditional photograph.

### **The Signal: Performance**

The second aspect of the signal is, I believe, the most vital force of today's efforts in the digital arts. Within the last decade, digital performance has evolved into a major artistic movement, not dissimilar to the Happening movement of the late '60s and early '70s. A wonderful example would be James Downey's 2001 Internet campaign to have as many people as possible direct their personal red laser pointers at the moon at the same

moment... in order to change the color of the moon. No, it didn't work, but was in the same event category as New York City radio host Jean Shepherd's 1965 box kite flying event in Central Park in conjunction with the transmission of pictures from Mars.

Another work in this genre would be Mike Parr's performance, *Malevich*, at Artspace (University of Western Sydney) in 2001. Regarded as one of Australia's most important artists, Parr nailed his arm to a wall, had his eyes taped over, deprived himself of food (except for water) and featured all the suffering and humiliation that one would expect from seeing a person nailed to a wall for an extended period of time. The performance was broadcast over the Internet with more than a quarter million hits in the first 24 hours. Parr performed another work the following year titled *Close the Concentration Camps (Australia)* where he had his lips sewn together in solidarity with the prisoners being held in Australia's detention centers. These performances bring to mind Chris Burden who, in 1971, performed the piece *Shoot* in F Space (Santa Ana, California) where he had himself shot in the arm by an assistant. This event became famous via word of mouth. Given the power of the Internet to create a world stage in an instant, or a theater as in the case of YouTube, it is mind boggling to consider the impact of Burden's performances had he had the web to work with. As one of my artist friends said of these examples, "Some people would chew off their leg to "make it" in the art world." In other words, don't try anything like this at home as the "buzz" is brief and the art marginal.

Digital performances require the strengths, and the limitations, of the medium's transmissions to be effective, seen, and appreciated. Sometimes it's really funny. Sometimes its sole intention is to promote social and political change and to disturb cultural lethargy. Sometimes it is just publicity. In almost every case that I am aware of, the piece is created for the art of the performance and the power of the idea that is communicated. Financial gain and reward often has nothing to do with it and that's what makes this part of the genre so alive and powerful... and democratic.

## **The Eye of the Monitor**

The third digital art form is the advent of the unblinking monitor as the piece itself. In this case, the monitor is both the equipment needed (the tool) and the display (the art), and the making of the image on the computer screen, or screens (as in a modular construction), requires the computer's optical and programmable nature to be used in the translation of the work of art.

This idea got its spark decades ago with the Fluxus (*meaning flow*) movement in the early 60's. Fluxus, an international collaborative network of important artists, including Nam June Paik, John Cage, Alan Kaprow, Charlotte Moorman, and George Maciunas, was highly regarded for its dedication to the integration and blending of all disciplines. One of the principles of Fluxus was that a performance required an audience to complete the piece and the late Nam June Paik may be considered the "godfather" of what is presently active in this room of the digital arts mansion. Some examples ...

In one of my favorite Nam June Paik works, *TV Buddha*, a statue of Buddha contemplates a TV with an image of Buddha contemplating the TV... permitting the audience to make the connection of this perfect "oneness." In another piece, Paik incorporated the projection of a clear film leader with the 10-9-8-7, etc. sequence of numbers that you used to see just prior to the beginning of a film. When the film leader got to # 1... it simply began again, forcing the audience to re-new their anticipation for the film that would never begin.

In 1969, Paik collaborated with classical cellist, Charlotte Moorman, in a work titled *V Bra for Living Sculpture, 1969*, that featured miniature TV monitors in Moorman's bra, broadcasting the sights and sounds of Moorman playing her cello. Earlier, in 1967, they had collaborated on a piece called *Opera Sextronique* in which Moorman had played her cello topless... which resulted in her arrest for indecent exposure. In these pieces, and in Paik's other major works, the monitor functions as the visual source, the narrator, one of the actors, and the director of the event.

Today, the monitor plays the role similar to the one that flew over the nighttime city in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. The monitor is a force field of digital information, designed to direct, influence, coerce and seduce. Consider JumboTrons in football stadiums, Times Square in Manhattan, and the Ginza shopping district in Tokyo. In recent years, these large digital screens have been used to bring digital art to the public and galleries in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Lumen Eclipse) and Toronto, Canada are leading this movement. Then there is the concept of what the "screen" is and what it suggests about the image, or artist, or mass that is projected upon it. An example would be Doug Aitken's 8-channel video piece projected onto the side of the new Museum of Modern Art in February 2007. Did projecting it on MOMA instantly make it art rather than information? All of these are simple references to the power of the screen and what will eventually, in my mind, replace static public advertising, propaganda, and public art display.

## **DIGITAL CRITICISM**

### **The Art**

As has been the case for a while now, the primary dilemma for critics (and presumably a huge relief to the rest of the art world) is that there is no great mass of formal academic and critical evaluation for determining the merits of any of this new digital work ... or, more importantly, of the process or actual systems that render it. There is a growing tendency to apply post-modernistic theory and dialogue to digitally generated, expression but I've yet to hear anyone do it successfully in public without eyes rolling up to the heavens. In the genre of the digital arts, it should be difficult to fully comprehend, appreciate, and evaluate the art without a discussion of that art's syntax... the technological components and processes that facilitate the delivery of that art. Think of it as the critique of a jockey absent discussion of the merits of the horse. Digital syntax clearly exceeds the issue of what type of brush a painter uses to render a stroke of paint, as the technology is a true collaborator in the art making.

Clearly, it is not polite to digital artists to apply traditional, critical, and conceptual theory to the various forms of digital expression. What is, after all, the

criterion? Where is the traditional atelier, as in painting, that the confused digital artist can return to for re-evaluation, guidance, and mentoring, in order to return to the roots of the process? Where will this work fit in the history of human expression and when will the machine be as relevant as the artist using it is... as, say, in horse or stock car racing? These are a few of the questions now evolving from the marriage of digital imaging and artistic expression and ones which will find, trust me, their own perfect and unique answers as time passes. One thing is certain... as in every new form of creative expression, there are people who will determine the marketplace and there will be people who find they can make a living by becoming an arbiter of what is, and is not, art in that genre.

The primary hurdle to forming a legitimate critical base is more obvious now than it was five years ago. The sheer speed of the changes in the digital arts makes the formation of a "new" theoretical or critical structure very difficult. As the technology surges ahead, the speed of the processor jousts with the possible speed of the human mind. It will be interesting to see how to place the old square pegs of classical art criticism into the round holes that are being rapidly drilled by the digital arts.

Here's a decent example. In April 2002, Matthew Mirapaul wrote a piece for the New York Times about New York Artist, Mark Napier, who was attempting to carve out new territory for himself and his art. Mr. Napier, an accomplished digital artist whose work had been shown in both the Whitney and Guggenheim Museums, decided that the Internet was not a gallery and that he still had to make a living. The article went on to describe Mr. Napier's solution to the problem, and the fact that he had succeeded in selling three, \$1,000 "shares" in his new work, called The Waiting Room. It turned out that The Waiting Room was an interactive, animated, painting installed in a private chat-room gallery in a secret place on the Internet. If you wanted to play with or look at, the work... you had to invest and sure enough... as in the fable of the "emperor's new clothes," and the zeitgeist-shaping, performance work of the 70's, some people actually did.

For their money, "the investors" received the chance to play with Mr. Napier's software that generated swirling sights and sounds against a very arty black background... with each shape and form linked to a specific hum, beep, or chirp.

Mathew Mirapaul wrote, "*Mr. Napier hopes to sell as many as 50 shares in The Waiting Room, an approach that emphasizes the work's participatory nature. When multiple owners (investors) view it online at the same time, they can produce shapes that complement – or obliterate – those made by others (apparently the other two investors). The work is the visual equivalent of an Internet chat room with "conversations" occurring in geometric shapes instead of words.*"

The article continued by stating that the key investment points were that the shareholders could visit "their" art anytime they were on line, that they would be receiving a real Certificate of Authenticity and a CD-ROM that contained the software... sort of like going to the theater and getting a T-Shirt for "Cats." The work's value, says the author, "*resides not in its keepsakes but in the experience it provides for the viewer.*"

Says Mr. Napier, "*Once you forget that there's a computer mediating this, it is just as physically there in the space as a canvas. It's just a question of shifting an art culture that for centuries has been immersed in the collectible object.*"

This reminds me of another good anecdote from the Manhattan art scene. There was this artist (who shall go unnamed) in New York who announced to a number of important collectors that he was going to be producing a very important work and that all they had to do to own and collect this important work was to write him a large check. Of course they did, whereupon the artist endorsed the checks and cashed them. Later, when one of the collectors inquired as to when he might be receiving his important work of art the artist asked if the bank had returned to the collector the signed, and cancelled, check... which was, of course, the work of art.

Another good example might be the ability of the computer to challenge a sacrosanct discipline... such as sculpture. A few years ago, I saw an example of an artist who had her body scanned by an extraordinary laser device that was able to record every nuance, tiny hair, and goose bump of her physical self. The scanner then relayed this information to a computer-controlled casting machine that proceeded to scale, proportion, carve, and duplicate her body in Lucite. Most would agree that evaluating her sculpture from a traditional perspective would be impossible without recognizing the role of the machine in its creation. In truth, the present forms of digitally based aesthetic are experiencing philosophical growing pains not very different from those that photography suffered at its inception.

An illustration of this parallel might be made still more apparent if we consider a few sentiments from the perpetually cranky 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet and critic, Charles Baudelaire. In fairness to the argument, I'll point out that Baudelaire was a man of deep moods and unrelenting despair, whose poetry centered on the inseparable connection between beauty and the inevitable corruption of that beauty.

In any event, when Baudelaire described his first impressions of photography he wrote about it in less than glowing terms, implying that society was squalid and narcissistic in its rush to gaze on trivial images of itself rendered on scraps of metal. He also wrote, in a critique of an exhibition in 1859, "*If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether...*" This is a disposition that has its twin in statements now uttered by many traditional artists and critics speaking about the brave new world of the digital arts. However, unlike a few years ago, these voices become fainter with each passing year. As the beauty of the "science" becomes obvious, and as the digital foundation becomes more a part of our everyday lives, the skeptics are finding it easier to become converts.