

# Art Has Always Been Virtual

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Although I have briefly visited the Being on Time exhibition, I will not refer to it directly. Many of the pieces make use of digital tools and what interests me is how the digital is becoming an important part of the work of artists in all disciplines. Computers are allowing us to enter a new relationship with images and are helping to redefine the relationship between representation and reality. In addition, the melding of digital and analog modes of expression is, in my opinion, creating one of the foundations for virtual reality. What I want to try and talk about are a number of metaphors that might trigger in you some sense of why the virtual has become the real, and in fact why it always has been crucial to our culture's efforts to define and explain reality.

Our culture has been exploring the virtual by trying to move thought and creativity from the self into objects, or in the case of architecture and the Internet, into space. One of the impulses that governs this movement of self to another place, or the transportation in time of the self into another context, has been a strong desire to break down the relationship between art, expression, representation and lived reality. That is in part what this exhibit is about—to take the seams that divide art from the everyday and break them down and make of the artwork something that is both virtual and living. Throughout the history of art and the history of images, the struggle with the virtual has been a crucial characteristic of the communicative process. Communication always involves some relationship to the real, whether it is as a result of communicating with an audience or the reality of the artist as a creator trying to bridge the gaps between expression and understanding. This is quite different from thinking about art as just a canvas on a wall, or an image on a screen. The effort is to break down the tissue that separates what is created from the audiences who experience works of art in all mediums (remembering all of the time that the artist is always standing in for the audience when he or she creates a work).

Why is this argument important? Why do we care so much about the relationship between our lives and the art that artists create? Moreover, what does this have to do with virtuality? It seems to me that images, icons and most forms of symbolic expression are involved in the generation of virtual spaces and artifacts that try to break down the separation between representation and experience. It is for that reason that I do not consider the move to virtuality in art and society as something new. I am of course fascinated with the cultural assumptions of newness and with

the ways in which that translates into artistic activity. Take an artist like Jackson Pollock, for example. He is obviously viewed as a non-figurative artist and was considered a revolutionary during his life. Yet, with time it becomes clear that he understood and anticipated the advent of postmodernism both with respect to the way he painted and the paintings themselves. He captured something about the fluidity of the movement between time and space, between subject and perception that represents the networked spaces that our culture is creating. He also painted during a crucial period when television was effectively rewriting the rules for mass media and when radio was becoming central to the everyday life of North Americans. Are these connections important? I believe that they are.

So, while Jackson Pollock saw his historical period through paintings which celebrated change and the dynamics of form, photography as a medium was, for the first time, becoming an important fixture of everyday life. Photography immediately breaks down the relationship between expression, representation and understanding. Are you the person in your passport photo? Isn't that photograph the virtual 'you' generated for a system of surveillance that has accepted the conventions of portraiture established in the nineteenth century? Here, artifice and artificiality come together through both desire and social convention.

I would argue part of what is so interesting and exciting right now in the digital and media world that we are building is that we are swimming in this bath of simulations. Finally, we are realizing that we have always been swimming in a bath of simulations. Except now, more people can swim, and actually many more people might be able to create the pools that we need. And so, there's this very intelligent process developing here which I think will ultimately reconstruct the very premises of artistic activity and introduce a whole new sense of what it means to engage with simulated spaces. The difficulty is that the boundary between art and reality is actually so elastic. The boundary between the real and simulation is equally elastic, and some of this comes down to language and discourse, to the terms we use to define art and culture for ourselves. How does one engage a simulation? How does one engage with the issues that relate to the boundaries between simulation and reality? What position are you in to make a distinction between what is simulated and what is not, what is real and what isn't? From which vantage point can one actually make the analysis? Are you standing outside of it? Are you inside of it? Are you reacting to it? Are you creating it? Where are you in relation to the processes of cultural reconstruction? To me, these are crucial questions for all artists.

They are also ontological questions. This debate becomes ontological because we now can create computer programs that produce autonomous forms of 'computerized' life. The artificial life and the artificial intelligence movement have existed in theoretical and practical forms for many years, but artists have actually begun incorporating it into their work in a dramatic fashion. An exhibit in Los Angeles recently was quite marvelous. Colonies of fish were reproduced through programming (programming being understood as deliberate and determinate). Most computer programs are actually quite autonomous. They take on a life of their own. They allow things to happen that are unpredictable. What happened was the colony of fish inside the computer reproduced themselves at a rate far greater than the computer programming conditions had actually suggested. When there were too many on the screen, the screen ceased to be a screen anymore and was obliterated. The result was the dissolution of individual objects as more layers were added. Suddenly there were more and more fish, starfish and flowers, and the whole thing dissolved into a big, wonderful soup!

Nevertheless, what interested me about the exhibit was, here is this space, inside the screen inside the computer. It was created by someone who wants to talk about this autonomous world through the artificial fish present in it. Then it begins to mimic (albeit in a minor fashion) a little bit of that autonomy of imagination and fantasy that constitutes so much of what we describe as subjectivity. If the first phase of virtuality was the struggle to break down the tissue between artifice and lived reality, so the next stage of this is the beginning of the breakdown between machine and human.

The breakdown between machine and human—the best examples of this can be found at the Playdium. If you go into the Playdium and watch and occasionally participate as I do, you will see people boxing with an image (or doing karate, or skiing, or snowboarding) and they are sweating. Well, what is happening? What happens when you box with an image? You are really boxing with yourself. You against you—and so your sweat represents this extraordinary effort to overcome an 'other'—an other that is you. To me, it is a quintessential example of a temporal shift. It is kind of Star Trekkian because we fight with ourselves all the time to varying degrees, and we encounter our own subjectivity in a variety of situations. But here, a conscious choice has been made to engage in a fight with the self because as we know, there's nothing there. The other is not there.

Time breaks apart at the Playdium. How can one interpret the games? How can one articulate the experience? Is the Playdium one of the key aspects of a new landscape for human experience?

Let me mention another example here. I am also very interested in where genetics is taking us as our culture explores the human genome. The notion is that you can decode the body—and it may be possible somewhat—but the further notion that you can code and decode consciousness just is not possible. The mind is too wonderfully complex and the information that we possess is too distributed, there is too much going on, too many connections. What I am interested in is the choice, the underlying metaphors that govern this approach and the ways in which artists are taking on those metaphors. There are many artists in North America now making what they describe as genetic art. What is genetic art? Genetic art is increasingly similar to the simulated art that I described—it is art that produces autonomous life within programmed environments. The fact that this is art that produces and reproduces itself (sometimes autonomously) is what is actually exciting to many creators and audiences. And, because most of it takes place inside computer programs and on computer screens, it seems to be a feasible if not realistic. To program a number of shifts and changes and to create algorithms that produce an image of autonomy and an image of evolution—well, that is the equivalent of taking control of very sophisticated coding, but it is not about the creation of life. So, we have a metaphor here that portrays the illusory control artists have over the production of simulated forms and has this not been the dilemma of all art for centuries? What are these metaphors about? I think they represent what culturally we've always been doing all along, which is the construction of an artwork that attempts to some degree to create an autonomous space that has a life of its own. But here, that life could be more present than past, a life evolving in front of your eyes as opposed to simply having been created in a studio or by using a camera.

I want to mention one other example. One of the more fascinating cultural phenomena that I am sure you are all aware of is the tendency to talk about how much memory our computers have. Quite an amazing example of the transposition of the lived into the machine, because no machine can have memory. But it is such a powerful metaphor that now the memory of machines becomes a way of judging human memory. Even though I haven't the faintest idea—and I do a fair amount of research on this—how human memories are constructed, sustained and maintained in the brain, the term has been transposed into machines with great ease. Why would one put so much into machines and does this lead to a redefinition of what it means to be human? I would suggest that this final example shows us the degree to which our culture has moved beyond the initial boundaries of reality and simulation into the wonderful phantasmagoria that is virtuality.

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