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On the Need for Ethical Aesthetics

Or, Where I Stand between Neo-Luddites and Cyberians

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This essay is a three-part meditation on the role of the artist in the encounter with new electronic technologies. I begin with a personal rationale for my claim that we need ethical aesthetics. The core of the essay is organized around three models of cultural criticism—utopian, utilitarian, and apocalyptic—that Sherry Turkle described as especially useful for analyzing electronic media.¹ The end of the essay fulfills the promise of the implied question in the title.

Schopenhauer once wrote that thinking for oneself does not mean thinking in isolation. This statement contains an insight especially applicable to our context, where much visual art and writing consist of appropriation and pastiche. The ideas articulated here are the result of thinking for myself during periods of artistic work and scholarly research, and this is reflected in the essay's passionate, even didactic, style. If we are surrounded by dangers ranging from ecological catastrophe to extreme violence in communities all over the world, and if the arts themselves seem to be undergoing a process of rapid (de)materialization and (d)evolution, then does it not make sense to suggest rather strongly a perspective that might provide help?

Even if the arts remain a narrow zone of creative activity within our bureaucratized and technologized culture, we need visual art that is based on ethical aesthetics and informed by an apocalyptic sensibility. Related to this, I have been doing much thinking lately about the ways in which technology may be interpreted as a branch of moral philosophy. Here I am influenced by my intensive study of Mikhail Bakhtin's early work.² Thoroughly familiar with the Kantian framework, Bakhtin argued vehemently that aesthetics must be connected to ethics. By extension, one might argue that the Kantian separation of science from the spheres of ethics and aesthetics was a wrong move. Totally rationalized science and technology; ethics limited to narrow definitions of "family values" and the like; aestheticized arts unconnected to life: no wonder we are in the

midst of quarrelsome debates about nuclear energy/ weapons/waste, genetic engineering, and censorship. Ethical aesthetics does not hesitate to engage questions about technology; indeed, it seeks to reconnect the aesthetic to the scientific and ethical domains of culture.

As I argue this point of view, I discuss the diverse work of artists presently using electronic media: multimedia performances such as Rachel Rosenthal's *filename: FUTUR-FAX*; site-specific interactive installations, such as Bill Seaman's *Passage Sets/One Pulls Pivots at the Tip of the Tongue*; digitally processed images combining drawing, painting, collage or montage, and photography, such as Camilla Benolirao Griggers's *Alienations of the Mother Tongue*; CD-ROMs such as MANUAL's *Constructed Forest*; installations such as Bill Viola's *Heaven and Earth*, using computer, holographic, and laser technologies; and multimedia sculptures such as E. G. Crichton's *Broken Record*. How can I best demonstrate what an apocalyptic sensibility looks like?

A vision of life in the future has haunted me for years. A person lives alone, in one room. All the needs of that person are fulfilled by a machine: food, contact with others, work. Everything is filtered by a complex of dials, tubes, compartments, and screens that define the parameters of the room. People live underground or in a great dome, in recycled air and artificially lit spaces. From time to time, in musing about the source of this grim vision, I have asked friends if they were at all familiar with it.

More recently, I have grown increasingly concerned about the impact of the "broadcast," that broadly cast media net that defines consumer culture and transnational nonresponsive capitalism.³ Simultaneously, in considering the impact of electronic media in our lives, my reading has moved in everbroadening circles. Twice I encountered references to E. M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" that made me want to read it. There, in terse prose, was the description I had visualized for so long. Written in 1909, and published in 1928 in a collection of stories titled *The*



FIG. 1 Rachel Rosenthal, filename: FUTURFAX, 1992–96, performance. Photo courtesy Jordan Davis.

Eternal Moment, this was Forster's only attempt at science fiction. I must have read the story in my adolescence. Forster's vision of reality, of that future world, chills me.

In another room, a single spotlight shines on a fax machine that begins to hum. A disembodied God-like male voice intones anthropocentric doctrine: "Man" is the climax of evolution, the sine qua non, the *raison d'être* for the world, the rightful master of all that is. Soon, papers begin to drop to the floor from the fax machine. The light fades; now we see a room with chairs, a washbasin, a phone—meager accouterment of a life. Urgent, nearly hysterical voices replace the omnipresent speaker. A door slams; a woman enters the room, breathless. She locks the door, runs to peer carefully through an imaginary window. This room is her home; she is safe at last.

Rachel Rosenthal's performance, filename: *FUTURFAX*, takes place in 2012, after the "Great Calamity" (fig. 1). Water is scarce; animals and trees extinct or dead; food—when it is available at all after standing in long lines—is produced on government hydrofarms; total social anarchy makes life on the streets exceedingly dangerous, while global warming has made life everywhere very uncomfortable. Faced with life that is "dry from virtuality," the remaining population experiences keen boredom that causes uncontrollable seizures. Some people live in SSCs (self-sustaining communities), but human life is slowly fading. Due to a genetic aberration, no new males can be born; female "mules" carry on, but when those remaining die, it seems that no one will be left. Art has become superfluous; humans no longer carry a sense of its subversive potential. The technologies that promised so much function only intermittently when the electricity allows.

Rosenthal's text, with its references to the formative modern philosophies of Francis Bacon and John Locke, is a powerful indictment of anthropocentrism. In *New Atlantis*, published two years before his death in 1626,

Bacon described the technological mastery of nature in what might be called the first science-fiction utopia. For Bacon, the greatest human ambition was to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race over the entire universe. Locke shared Bacon's ambition. As Rosenthal characterized Locke's view: "The negation of nature is the road to happiness." And we, the inheritors of these ideas, have become convinced that we are entitled to everything—all of nature, all life forms, all the resources on the planet. Certain that everything should be used for personal gain and to fulfill the needs and desires of those with the most power, we ignore the fragility and finiteness of life. Such anthropocentric values lead nowhere, or *NowHere*, as the title of a recent book put it.⁴

In 1827 Hegel first articulated the idea of the end of art; since then, whenever new conditions and new technologies have challenged the old, some philosophers, theorists, and artists have responded with predictions of the death of art or the death of painting or the end of museums. Once again, the nature of art itself is changing, especially with the accessibility of new electronic media and other time-based genres such as installation, performance, and video art. The tools we use clearly affect what we see and thus the style, content, and philosophy of works of art.⁵ Just as modernist aesthetics can be linked to the invention and ramifications of photography on perception of the world (and to nineteenth-century processes of imperialism and colonialism), so postmodernist aesthetics can be linked to the evolution of television, video, and the computer (and to the wider process of decolonization and new opportunities to hear the voices of those on the margins). The dematerialization of the art object, begun with the evolution of diverse forms of conceptual art, continues in new guise.

We live in an "image world,"⁶ where the visual arts are increasingly integrated with the media, where the technical means of the media—television, film, photography,

billboards, and so forth—intersect the world of art. This world of the broadcast requires informed and trained designers, artists, and architects, for each of these persons brings a unique perspective to the task of interpreting and reshaping that world. As Barbara Stafford has argued so persuasively, in order not to be a “dumb watcher” of commercial images, in order to cultivate visual aptitudes and visual literacy, in order to learn to think critically rather than accept visual propaganda blindly, artists must develop a new range of analytical skills.⁷ Such skills are intrinsic to ethical aesthetics.

To analyze the utopian, utilitarian, or apocalyptic aspirations of art that uses electronic media not only provides a lens for interpreting them; these categories are also useful for thinking about how the artist functions within our cultural milieu. U-topia is, literally, no place: no place we know or have ever seen. It also makes us think of this chronotope, this particular timespace in which we live, work, and create. Through art we form ourselves, formulate questions about ourselves, and show how our objectives can be attained. In this sense all art and literature that have something to say about human existence and human aspirations are utopian. Yet there is no single utopian content, as this changes with social and cultural context.⁸ For instance, there are social utopias that express the longing for a better life, or technological utopias, or medical utopias focused on the elimination of death and pain. There is also a generalized utopian sensibility that longs for happiness, fulfillment, or freedom. Another way to describe this diversity of utopian forms and content, the plurality or multiplicity of postmodern views of utopia, is with the term *heterotopia*. Coined by Gianni Vattimo to name the changing relationship between art and everyday life since the 1960s, the term seems to me an especially fitting way to bring attention to the fact that the singularity, uniformity, and order of classical and modern utopian thinking are inadequate.⁹

An artist driven by utopian or heterotopian aspirations might articulate a general optimism about technology's role in our lives: the idea that we can solve our problems through the information revolution and the information highway. From this point of view, the Internet and World Wide Web are presently *the* place for the expansion of participatory democracy. They will transform education and opportunities for all of us, especially as issues of access are equitably worked out.

Artists working in this mode might be thought of as radical humanists.¹⁰ They might employ, or at least advocate the employment of, evolving technologies to build a new species or at least to extend the range of human perception; or they might lobby for biotechnology and bioengineering. Such artists are generally enthusiastic about those

advanced developments. Stelarc's recent experiments exemplify such an optimistic heterotopian vision.

From one perspective (perhaps a naïve one), we might claim exultantly that because of the new possibilities of interactivity and interactive media, we are in a unique historical moment for creating new heterotopian possibilities. CD-ROMs, however, offer minimal interactive choices that are analogous to reading from an anthology. Various forms of menu-driven hypermedia such as the World Wide Web offer more choices among links, but the viewer frequently remains a viewer, not a creator. At their best, interactive media present opportunities for the viewer/user to make choices that alter their experience with the material. A more compelling definition of interactivity would allow viewers and users to structure their own experiences and to create new meanings: it would be truly performative. If communication were enhanced through choice, control, and direct feedback, then interactivity would be more likely.

Bill Seaman's 1994–95 audiovisual installation, *Passage Sets/One Pulls Pivots at the Tip of the Tongue*, comes close to offering viewers opportunities to structure experience directly. In its 1996 Guggenheim SoHo installation, I walked into a large darkened room, lit by the imagery from three projected screens. Standing at a small illuminated stand, which had a mouse for traversing the piece, I felt like the captain of a virtual ship. On the center screen, I could select among 150 panoramic and close-up photographs of Australia. The detail photos were linked to text fragments that, when clicked on, would activate a menu of 800 words. The screen then would be covered with vertical columns and horizontal bars of moving text, poems created by my particular choices. Simultaneously, the left screen operated independently, producing new poems every four seconds using a limited word group. On the right screen, a series of slow-motion images of a man and woman were cued by choices on the center screen. Music, visual imagery (both photographs and video), and verbal text created a highly charged, even seductive, environment. Of all the pieces in the Guggenheim's *Mediascape* exhibition, I found Seaman's *Passage Sets* particularly compelling because of the way it allowed me to interact with(in) its wide parameters and to create my own meanings. For me, the primary theme was the fact that all of life is interconnected, spatially and temporally.

Regardless of the potential strengths of interactivity, however, we need to ask whether it actually offers the viewer true opportunities for participation in creative processes, or whether it is merely a new, highly touted, form of consumerism.¹¹ Television, while it is becoming mildly interactive, is also perhaps the most effective mode of managing attention that has yet been devised. The screen controls less through its visual content—although this is certainly significant—and more through the medium itself.

If television and computers have not yet become a mode of surveillance, they are already techniques of subjectification and subjection for the new docile body who lives his or her life behind and through the screen. Sedentary antinomic bodies are easier to control than peripatetic ones; as we sit in front of television and computer monitors, we risk losing our autonomy. Most of the time, we "interact" but do not actively engage.

As an ethical philosophy, utilitarianism is associated with the ideas of Jeremy Bentham. Morality, in this view, should be based on the premise that the rightness or wrongness of an action or idea is determined by its usefulness in promoting the most happiness and pleasure for those involved. From a strictly utilitarian perspective, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* was not a dystopian vision of social control but, rather, a carefully engineered social and economic system that provided maximal pleasure for everyone. Our world—characterized by engagement with highly seductive, entertaining, and pleasurable technologies such as television and the computer—is a utilitarian paradise.

A person driven by a utilitarian perspective would emphasize the practical side of this new way of life. So much information is available to us so much more easily than it used to be. Students and scholars can engage in new levels of research from their homes or offices. Artists can create their own communities through electronic links. Curators can create their own ideal museums online. Muriel Magenta's *World's Women On Line*, which makes accessible the work of hundreds of women artists from around the world, is an excellent example of that curatorial impulse. It can be viewed at (<http://wwol.inre.asu.edu/>).

Artists working in this mode might be thought of as radical technologists. The pragmatic radical technologist uses technology, "before it is used on you," as the cyberpunk dictum puts it.¹² Often marked by attitudes of resistance, radical technologists might combine acts of sabotage in the workplace with establishing alternative media institutions that work for democratic ideals. The 1996 *alt.youth.media* exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City, with its radio air time, zines, and numerous examples of video and computer production by young people, clearly documents acts of resistance and exemplifies a radical technologist ideal.

Camilla Benalirao Griggers's short 1995 video, *Alienations of the Mother Tongue*, visualizes the seductive power of technology while simultaneously criticizing its effects. A cultural theorist of Asian-American descent, Griggers articulates her critique of electronic media through video production. In *Alienations* she morphs fashion imagery (with its exaltation of certain models of white femininity) with war photography from Vietnam and a soundtrack consisting of personal and cultural narratives to create a dynamic juxtaposition.

While this piece is not narrowly utilitarian, it makes visible some of the destructive consequences of a world driven by pleasure principles.

From a utilitarian perspective, however, it is also important to recognize the positive contributions of electronic technologies. As Sherry Turkle has shown, not only is the nature of "reality" shifting, but new notions of selfhood and community are evolving.¹³ Computers have introduced the notion of "windows" as a metaphor for thinking of the self as a multiple system. The self does not have a center but exists in different worlds and plays different roles simultaneously. In some cases we could even say that self-boundaries are erased. MUDs (multi-user domains), MOOs (multi-object-oriented networks), and video/computer games also emphasize this plasticity and permeability, while the craze to create web homepages reflects the desire to redefine the self. Many of us stake out a new territory on the Internet. Turkle's use of the real-estate metaphor is apt, for it accurately names the way identity is constructed territorially and within a capitalist consumerist ethos.¹⁴ The self/homepage, like a house, has modern decor, different rooms, different styles, and links to other computers all over the world.

From the most optimistic perspective, this model of the flexible self, characterized by open lines of communication among its parts, leads to a growing respect for diversity within the larger cultural milieu. Whether this is actually true remains to be seen, as Camilla Griggers's *Alienations of the Mother Tongue* demonstrates. When identity is displaced and intergenerational memories are broken, and as long as race and class privilege determine opportunities and oppression, then facile models of the self that are made possible with electronic technologies must be carefully examined.

I do not mean to imply that selves exist only in isolation in Cyberia. Virtual communities may offer new avenues for understanding identity, where the truly flexible and multiple self is called to new forms of moral interaction. But cyberspace is also, paradoxically, about separation. Our minds are separated from our bodies; we are physically separated from one another; and we are separated from the nontechnological world.¹⁵ What, then, does it mean to be connected to others? What are the ground rules that apply to these new relationships? Interactions in virtual communities must be viewed as significant; their consequences are not simply meaningless diversion or escape.¹⁶ Unfortunately, they may also satisfy our urge for connection without requiring the hard work of direct confrontation and action with, or on behalf of, others. Commonality of interests may substitute for shared long term goals.

While it has elements of both heterotopian and utilitarian points of view, my own perspective is more apocalyptic, as I have already noted. Besides offering new

FIG. 2 MANUAL (Suzanne Bloom and Ed Hill), *The Constructed Forest*, 1993, installation view, Rochester, New York. Courtesy the artists.



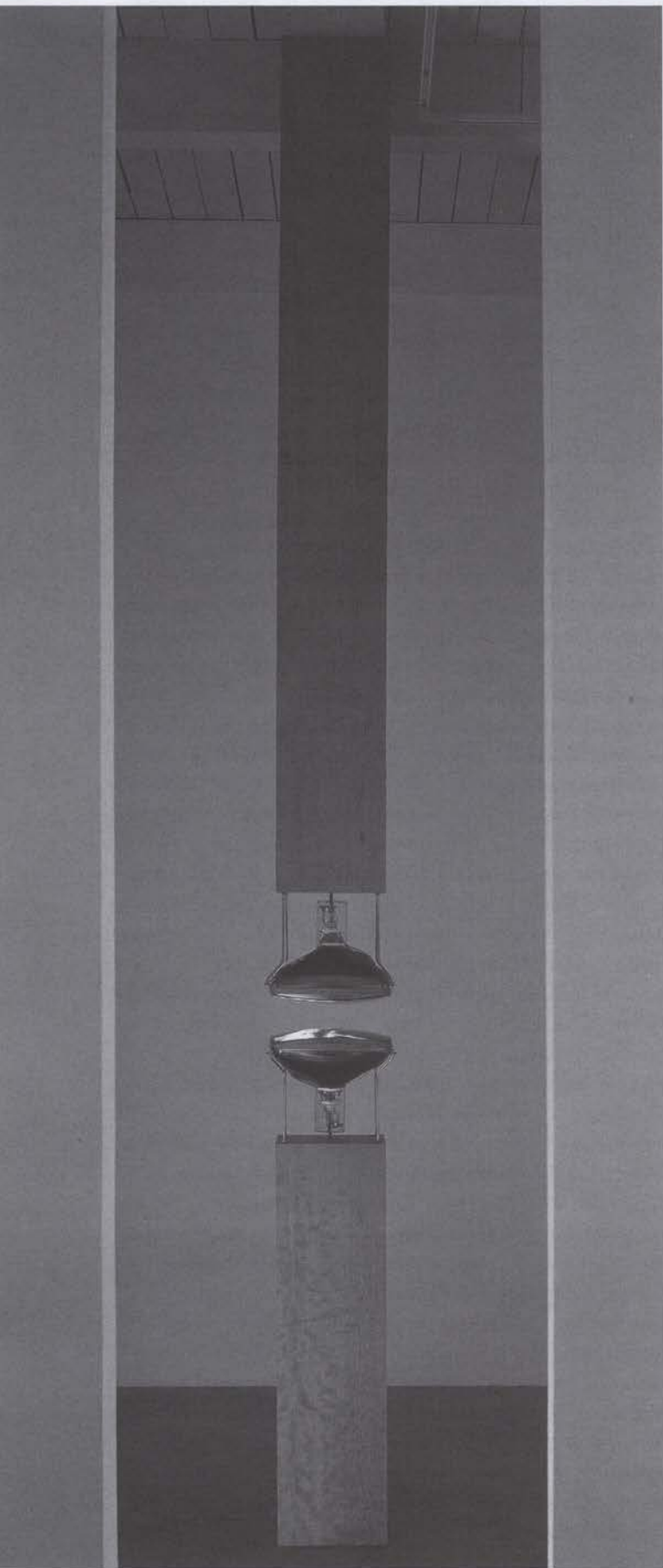
solutions to problems, technological revolutions are also games of seduction, and betrayal, for the immediate gains of new technologies are often followed by long-term liabilities.¹⁷ As Neo-Luddites have repeatedly pointed out, automobiles facilitate transportation, but they deplete the store of nonrenewable natural resources, pollute the air, and destroy urban integrity. Medicine cures many diseases, but leaves us with ever more resilient viruses, an upward-spiraling population explosion, and ethical dilemmas surrounding the beginning and end of life, abortion and euthanasia. Computers process enormous amounts of data, but destroy our privacy, concentrate commercial control of information in the hands of a few multinational corporations, and mesmerize us with a pervasive consumer ethic that effectively seduces and controls us through pleasurable entertainments. The latest technological breakthrough cannot and will not be a panacea for all or even some of the world's ills. Technology cannot fix what is already wrong, because it tends to create its own problems.¹⁸

What kinds of artistic responses could possibly be adequate to such challenges right now, at the turn of the century and the turn of the (Christian-based) millennium? The artist as radical ecologist may be both heterotopian (like the radical humanist) and pragmatic (like the radical technologist), but this artist has a decidedly more apocalyptic vision. To be a radical ecologist means paying attention to how all things and events are connected. It means asking how it is possible to modify individual and cultural consciousness. It does not necessarily mean articulating, as Rachel Rosenthal did in *filename: FUTURFAX*, that "We are all waiting to die with time on our hands."

Among artists who might be considered radical ecologists are Suzanne Bloom and Ed Hill (MANUAL), Bill Viola, and E. G. Crichton. MANUAL's collaborations combine Constructivist imagery, some of which is appropriated from Russian artists such as Kasimir Malevich and El Lis-

sitsky, with their own computer-generated and -enhanced photographs, as in *The Constructed Forest*, which is available on CD-ROM (fig. 2).¹⁹ The goal of this unusual pairing of types of imagery is to bring into focus some of the environmental paradoxes and perils we face. In particular, MANUAL is concerned with the ways in which the computer aids those who command it to shape virtual worlds. If the oceans are polluted and old-growth forests are being cut down, what stops those who live on the screen from simply creating simulations of what no longer exists in "real" space and time? "The danger is that while we sit mesmerized by the high-resolution wonders developing on our computer screen, thieves may be making off with all the goods."²⁰ Forests turn into forest "products"; the industrial world confronts the virtual world; and human beings, as well as other life forms, lose.

In appropriating mythic language and the medium of video, Bill Viola gives the viewer an unusual opportunity to confront ultimate questions concerning birth, life, death, and the future.²¹ For instance, in *Heaven and Earth*, two black-and-white video monitors face each other in a tall columnar structure that connects the ceiling and floor (figs. 3–4). A voice permeates the gallery, whispering, "Urge and urge and urge, always the procreant urge of the world." On one screen, a child is born. The voice continues: "All goes onward and outward . . . and nothing collapses. And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier. Has anyone supposed it lucky to be born? I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it." On the other screen, the face of an aged woman. She dies. In a powerful synthesis, made possible only because of the interaction of the two screens, the face of the one is reflected in the face of the other. This is an *axis mundi*. We stand in-between, in the Metaxy. Viola's work visualizes this Metaxy, which Plato described as the space between human beings and the divine, concretized in his-



tory and time. Here Viola's vision of the integration of all things in time and space is given concrete form. *Heaven and Earth* (1992) extends the visionary elements in Viola's earlier videos, especially *Anthem* (1983) and *Angel's Gate* (1989).

Where MANUAL's work calls into question social and cultural practices, and Viola's draws attention to the mythical and mystical dimensions of life and death, E. G. Crichton's *Broken Record* is at once personal and political. By interweaving a 1950s exercise recording with whispered erotic fantasies and quasi-scientific theories about the female body, Crichton has created a multimedia map of layered narratives. Because the piece is viewer-activated, the viewer is also appropriately implicated in complicated processes whereby female identity and sexuality have been defined and exploited within our patriarchal context.

Patriarchy describes the hierarchy of privilege that operates all over the planet. It refers not only to gender hierarchy, which many would say is the first and most pervasive form of domination/subordination, but also to the ways in which privilege and power are determined by race, class, ethnicity, and other differences. Patriarchy used to be a fighting term. Feminist historians and theorists of the 1970s and 1980s analyzed the origins of patriarchy, its enduring and pervasive power, and strategies for ending its stranglehold.

I am perplexed by the relative paucity of direct reference to any of these matters in the work of feminist postmodernists and cultural theorists in the 1990s. Have we simply stopped naming patriarchy because it seems imperious to change, or because it is so subtly interwoven into institutions from the family to the corporation? Patriarchy is a grid that underlies and structures all cultural institutions and many human relations; it has not disappeared. Within contemporary United States culture, patriarchal hierarchy and privilege are maintained through direct violence against women of all races and against men of color, through both subtle and overt reassertion of cultural, gender, and ethnic stereotypes, through backlash against affirmative-action initiatives and diversity efforts in many academic and other institutions. While there is a widespread rhetoric of appreciation for diversity, in actuality, oppressions based on difference still prevail in our social and cultural institutions. Increasing racism, conservatism, and religious fundamentalism in this decade make continuing analysis of patriarchal values all the more important now. Artists such as Griggers, MANUAL, and Crichton, while they may not use descriptive language about patriarchy, are analyzing patriarchal values and actively resisting their further development.

FIG. 3 Bill Viola, *Heaven and Earth*, 1992, video installation, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Courtesy the artist.

Clearly, artists' responses to technology differ widely, ranging from embracing the latest technological advances to refusing, in a variety of ways, to engage change.²² The benefits of working with newer technologies include the possibility of inventing new forms and exploring and clarifying cultural issues surrounding the complexities of the present. The risks or problems include lack of resources for expensive materials or lack of access, as well as the dominating character of the technologies themselves. Among artists who reject technology, some stalwartly believe in the importance of the handmade and traditional practices. Others turn away from the outer world toward private inner worlds. Still others ground their refusal to engage high technology in a politics that recognizes the way power operates to direct and control technology for some over against Others.²³ In both embracing and rejecting newer technologies, artists can deal with significant questions such as who owns and controls access to these technologies and how the development of technology itself is rooted in notions of social and economic progress.²⁴

Although I do not want to proscribe a particular kind of art—heterotopian, utilitarian, or apocalyptic—I am convinced that artists and their teachers, as well as others engaged with technology, must consider carefully the nature and impact of the electronic media they embrace. To analyze critically the simulated and virtual realities of postmodern culture and to develop a genealogy and critical language for interpreting the screen: these are goals of ethical aesthetics. Neither unmitigated resistance nor blind loyalty to various technologies is appropriate. For those who are resistant to or even unaware of the monumental technological changes currently under way, we must cultivate awareness and overcome resistance. For those who are already totally immersed in and loyal to the new media and our new world(s), we must encourage critical self-consciousness and creative resistance.²⁵

For many years now I have actively engaged issues surrounding the vocation or role of the artist—first as an artist struggling to understand my work, then as a scholar and critic working to articulate an interpretation of historical processes and cultural change.²⁶ Luckily, those of us living in the last few years of the twentieth century are not yet faced with the dire circumstances described in the apocalyptic narratives I described at the beginning of the essay. In the midst of a revolution in the electronic technologies that mediate our experience of ourselves and the world, we still hold an optimistic faith in their salvific power. Or, shall I say, some people still hold such an optimistic faith. I am skeptical.

My skepticism is a product of being born into the “intermediate generation.” I live in the interstice between the book and the screen, between “nature”—the actual

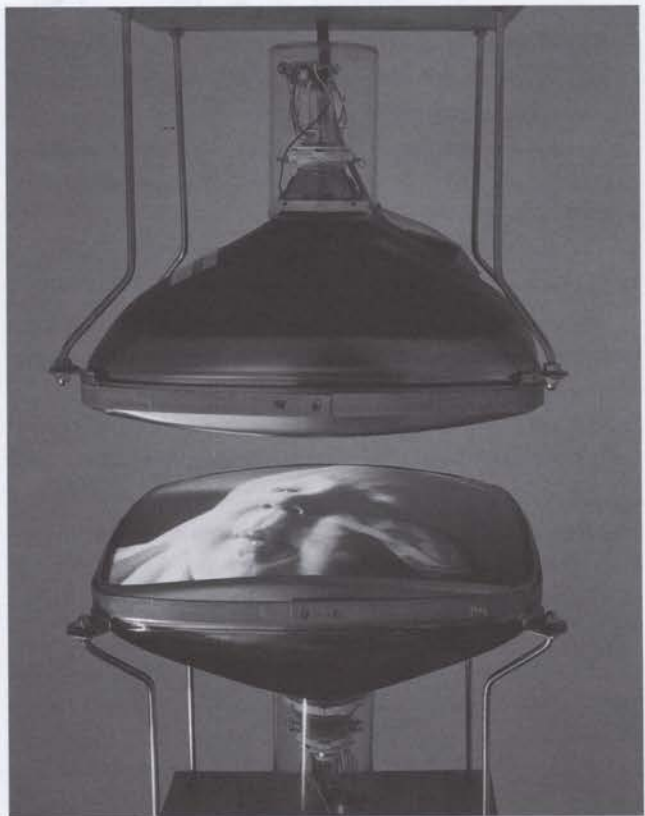


FIG. 4 Bill Viola, *Heaven and Earth*, 1992, detail of video installation, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Courtesy the artist.

phenomenological world—and virtual reality, the world of simulacra. Midsentence, I look up, out the window. A great blue heron stands in the snowy field adjoining the house. Quickly I reach for binoculars. The heron is stalking, lifting one foot delicately after another, neck arched, yellow eyes fixed on something. Then, so quickly I almost miss it, the heron strikes; its long beak now holds a struggling field mouse. Within moments, the mouse is gone, swallowed. Two mares and a filly trot into view. The heron lifts off. I feel what David Abram has called “the spell of the sensuous,”²⁷ yet I turn back to the screen.

I also live in the interstice between the sense that the future was secure and the sense that there will not be a future. I have a decidedly apocalyptic orientation. What this means has everything to do with when I was born and how I perceive the world. The primary image that has shaped my consciousness is the Bomb. I grew up in its shadow and under its threat. And this, for me, is the Damoclean sword that cut history in two: the modern and post-modern are two different worlds. The enormity of the human propensity for evil cannot be glossed over after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Combined with awareness of the Holocaust, it is difficult to maintain an optimistic perspective on the prospects for human co-evolution.

To be of this intermediate generation means that certain philosophical questions weigh heavily on me: What

does it mean to know? What is the "real," anyway? What does it mean to be a self in cyberspace? What values will define selfhood and community life in the technofuture? What is our moral responsibility to give artistic form to what we sense and see? Cyberia contains many possible virtual worlds. Will they be utopian? Dystopian? Finally, will we even survive as a species?

Clearly, no one can answer such questions definitively; few of us are intellectually prepared for the challenges of critically analyzing electronic media. Who has time even to think deeply about these challenges? It is not, however, impossible or impractical for artists to become active public intellectuals and media philosophers. Dealing with moral, religious, and metaphysical ideas; linking them to inherited knowledge and wisdom; reflecting about one's responsibility for perpetuating values; and especially, translating knowledge and values into practice: these are at least part of what it means to be an artist who practices ethical aesthetics.

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In the early 1970s I was persuaded that consciousness is evolutionary. This perspective, articulated by such philosophers as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Sri Aurobindo, and more recently by William Irwin Thompson, does not see humans as the teleological end of the evolutionary process. Consciousness, which is present in all forms of matter, will continue to evolve, taking new nonmaterial forms. Certainly there is a world-denying element in this philosophy, but it also offers a way of interpreting the evolutionary process on a grand scale. (The fact that it is a metanarrative to end all metanarratives has certainly not escaped my notice.) From my youth, I loved the ethereal qualities of music and the transitory qualities of performance. Artistically, I have always felt an affinity with conceptualism. Cyberia, from this standpoint, represents but the farthest outpost from which to undertake artistic exploration into the immaterial and virtual future. I am attracted toward this great unknown.

But even as I feel swayed in this direction, even as I see new worlds unfolding before me in the electronic glow, I hear Neo-Luddites stamping and shouting, breaking things. What they're saying resonates with my basic apocalyptic orientation. All resources will be wrested from the earth and the biosphere, all life will be annihilated, the world will die. The march to Cyberia may seem full of pleasurable entertainments at the moment, but it will end in imprisonment and death. Neo-Luddite critics of technology may well be this century's prophets; we would do well to heed their cries.

Electronic media are the latest (and certainly not the last) artistic frontier. What we will find there as we travel forward in time and space greatly depends upon our individual and collective wisdom. And wisdom, as we should know by now, is in short supply.

Notes

1. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1995), 231ff.
2. See my *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Paul Goodman, in *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative* (New York: Random House, 1970), 7, claimed that "technology is a branch of moral philosophy" but did not adequately substantiate his view.
3. I first heard this articulation of "the broadcast" in a talk given by Gene Youngblood, at the "Art/Technology/Culture Symposium," Washington State University, Pullman, September 1996.
4. Roger Friedland and Deirdre Boden, eds., *NowHere: Space, Time, and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
5. Margot Lovejoy, *Postmodern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 12, 31–34.
6. See Marvin Heiferman and Lisa Phillips, *Image World: Art and Media Culture*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989).
7. Barbara Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 471.
8. Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 4–5.
9. Gianni Vattimo, "From Utopia to Heterotopia," in *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 62–75. Also see Tobin Siebers, ed., *Heterotopia: Postmodern Utopia and the Body Politic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
10. Andrew Ross develops the idea of artists as radical humanists, radical technologists, and radical ecologists in his essay "The New Smartness," in Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey, eds., *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), 329–41.
11. This is a paraphrase of a comment by Jonathan Crary, at a Harvard University symposium, April 8, 1995. "Interactivity," he said, "is a new form of shopping." In *Postmodern Currents* Margot Lovejoy also examines many varieties of interactive art.
12. Ross, "The New Smartness," 335.
13. Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 14, 258–61. An extensive and diverse collection of essays about identity in the age of cyborgs can be found in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (New York: Routledge, 1995).
14. Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 259.
15. Greg Van Alstyne's "Cyberspace and the Lonely Crowd" is on the Web at (http://www.interport.net/~vanski/gva/lonely_crowd.html).
16. Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 267–69.
17. Theodore Roszak, *The Cult of Information: A Neo-Luddite Treatise on High-Tech, Artificial Intelligence, and the True Art of Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xlvii.
18. This is the point of departure for Paul Virilio's "Sanitary Ideology," in *Crash: Nostalgia for the Absence of Cyberspace*, ed. Robert Reynolds and Thomas Zimmer (New York: Thread Waxing Space, 1994), 98–101.
19. MANUAL's CD-ROM of *The Constructed Forest* is available on 3 Works: Stephen Axelrad, *MANUAL, Esther Parada* (Riverside: California Museum of Photography, 1996). Also see articles in Timothy Druckrey, ed., *Iterations: The New Image*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 114–19; Stephen Hobson, "Manual: Et in Arcadia Ego," *Perspektief Magazine* 47–48 (June 1994): 72–82; and Stephen Wicks, *Forest of Visions* (Knoxville, Tenn.: Knoxville Museum of Art, 1993), 36–39.
20. Wicks, *Forest of Visions*, 38.
21. A fine catalogue, *Bill Viola: Survey of a Decade*, exh. cat. (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1988), describes Viola's work up until 1988. His *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973–1994* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), brings his own published essays nearly up to date. Also see my "Ultimate Questions: Bill Viola at the Donald Young Gallery," *Artweek*, May 21, 1992, 5.
22. Lovejoy, *Postmodern Currents*, 3–11.
23. This last possibility was well articulated by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Author as Producer." See Lovejoy, *Postmodern Currents*, 251–52.
24. Druckrey, *Iterations*, 21.
25. Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen, "Cyborgs," in *Imagologies: Media Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.
26. For my personal and historical perspective, see *The Vocation of the Artist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
27. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996).

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