

1 et de u c c h t n i o o n

The Cooper Union

Foundation Building

Seventh Street at Third Avenue

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An exhibition
of multimedia installation work
by forty artists

The Cooper Union

for the Advancement of Science & Art

School of Art

with the College Art Association

techno.seduction

curated by

Robert Rindler

and

Deborah Willis

including work selected by

Holly Block, Deborah Bright, and David Deitcher

Resource Room curated by

Berta M. Sichel

The Techno-Seduction of the Artist

Deborah J. Haynes

I am of the intermediate generation. Between the book and the screen. Between the actual phenomenological world and virtual worlds. Between the sense that the future is secure and the sense that there will not be a future. To be of this intermediate generation means that certain questions weigh heavily on me; these questions form the basis of my reflections here.

We are in the midst of a revolution in the technologies that mediate our experience of ourselves and of the world. But this revolution is also a game of seduction and betrayal, for the immediate gains of new technologies are often followed by long-term liabilities; automobiles, medicine, and nuclear computer technologies come to mind. Of course, I simplify in order to dramatize the point, but I am convinced that the technoseduction of the artist is potentially dangerous.

In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley articulated a dystopian vision of social control, not through repression, but through pleasure. In our world, as in Huxley's, the addiction to drugs is certainly pervasive, but electronic and virtual technologies also seduce and control us through creating pleasurable and entertaining experiences. They provide us with the ability to alter our identity or to create multiple identities to satisfy our yearnings for connection and community without having to engage in the hard work of direct contact and confrontations with others. These are alluring possibilities.

What kinds of artistic responses could possibly be adequate to such challenges? What does it mean to be an artist right now, at the turn of the century and the end of the (Christian-based) millennium? I do not want to prescribe or proscribe a particular kind of art or artist; neither unmitigated resistance nor blind loyalty to various technologies is appropriate. To this end, I would identify three axes from which artists might (re)view their work. The horizontal axis is epistemological; the vertical axis, ontological; the diagonal axis, ideological. As

artists and as persons, we desperately need (at least) such a three-part analysis of the ways in which our lives are changing. Here I can provide only a few pointers about the direction such an analysis might take.

First, the epistemological axis. What does it mean to know? What are the differences between information or data, knowledge, and wisdom? Information is the factual data that surround us, available from a variety of sources and able to be easily manipulated using computers. Our society depends upon the collection and consumption of enormous stores of information for its own sake or for entertainment. Ideas are more complex than data. They evolve through the intricate interplay of direct experience, memory, insight, and engagement with the ideas of others. Ideas help us investigate what things, events, and experiences mean. Such ideas—whether about ultimacy or intimacy, about the divine or the ethics of interpersonal behavior—are not based on information or data. Knowledge and wisdom evolve as we grapple imaginatively with ideas. Is it possible that the saturation of the senses with information and data actually *cauterizes* the imagination? If so, artists must pay attention to the dangers of data overload and the pleasures of electronic data manipulation.

Second, the ontological axis. This axis might be viewed from two sides, one related to the world, the other to the self: (a) What is real? What is the relationship of nature to virtual reality? (b) What is the self and what is it becoming in the era of bionics and VR? How are new technologies reshaping individual and communal identity? A major issue, pervasive in the literature about art and technology, concerns what happens to actual phenomenological reality—what some of us still call “nature”—when greater value, resources, and emphasis are placed on virtual life in virtual worlds. Does the depletion of resources, the pollution of the air, the breakdown of urban

centers, the extinction of species *really matter* if we're looking at a future in air-conditioned rooms, where all of our interactions are conducted through a screen? Of course, this is partly a rhetorical question; what we value as "the real" has tremendous implications for the quality and sustainability of life.

And the self? Electronic media support a model of the self that doesn't just play roles or have different personae, but is itself decentered, existing in various worlds and playing different roles simultaneously. These media play with our desires for self-regeneration and self-replacement, which are part of the basic quest for human identity. Still as I suggested earlier, the danger is that they may satisfy our urge toward connection without requiring the hard work of direct confrontation and action with, or on behalf of, others.

Third, the ideological axis. What are the key elements of the emerging world view? What are the dominant moral values defined by electronic media? In many ways these are the most complex questions of all, for ideologies are notoriously slippery. We often are more comfortable calling another person's views "ideological" than we are at understanding how each of us inhabits an ideologically informed world view and ethos.

An ideological analysis of the present must include consideration of the following: *Patriarchy* describes the hierarchy of privilege that operates all over the planet. While there is a widespread rhetoric of appreciation for diversity, in actuality oppressions based on race, gender, class, and other differences still prevail in our social and cultural institutions. *Industrialism* is the ethos or value system that drives development, endangers existence on the planet. *Industrial capitalism* is an economy that degrades the earth; it is opposed to ecological and sustainable

economies built on conservation, stability, self-sufficiency, and cooperation. *Anthropocentrism* is the ruling principle evident in monotheism and humanism, and is opposed to biocentrism and a wider spiritual identification with all of life. *Globalism* and *militarism* define the economic and military strategy that is opposed to localism, local empowerment, and efforts to establish and maintain peace.

I realize that few of us feel intellectually prepared for the challenges of such analysis; education in the arts does not usually foster this level of reflection. It is not, however, impossible or impractical for artists to become active public intellectuals. Perhaps, in the end, what I am suggesting here is utopian: that artists must engage in epistemological, ontological, and ideological reflections that would then inform their work with new electronic media. But I believe that to do less than this is to fail to meet the challenges of our time. ■

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