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The Final Frontier: Navigating from Material to Virtual

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ABSTRACT

Humankind's continual creation of and progression into virtual space is a hugely significant event on our evolutionary timeline, one that signifies a sort of imminent and already in-process departure. While the more popular notion of our species' eventual exodus is linked to outer space and planetary exploration, our existing conceptualization of cyberspace connotes an identical unknowable vastness and sense of discovery, with its depiction relying on nearly identical imagery. The projection of a virtually based human future is thereby left with an already carved out spot in the collective imagination. The lone floating astronaut locked into a suit unable to fully touch ground, let alone anything around her, is analogous to the inert body behind the screen, marveling at the visual expanse before her. In *Food of the Gods*, Terrence McKenna writes, "Our future lies in the mind: our weary planet's only hope of survival is that we find ourselves in the mind and make of it a friend that can reunite us with the earth while simultaneously taking us to the stars," (McKenna 135) pinpointing the crucial role that earth would continually play in this schema, as the floating planetary station granting us virtual access to space, made of the same material as our brains and our bodies.

SHAMANIC IDEAL

The starting point of my artistic inquiry is the place in our evolutionary trajectory that we currently occupy, taking seriously the idea of some form of an earth-conscious post-biological future. I employ and conflate my own symbolic extremes of the material and virtual in order to encourage an examination of the subtle departure into virtual space that is already taking place, and to bring forth the vulnerable materiality of our bodies and emotions as mediators of this process. British artist and art theorist Roy Ascott refers to our technological present as a moist space, as he states in his Moist Manifesto, "Moist Space is where dry pixels and wet molecules converge. Moist Art is digitally dry, biologically wet, and spiritually numinous..." (Ascott 3). Each of the three moist art characteristics listed is central to my work, the final component (spiritual) potentially arising from heightened awareness of our constant mediation between the first two (the digital and biological). The inter-world mediation is one that Ascott compares to that of shamanism and the dual-awareness that shamanic practices cultivate, that our ability to knowingly exist between multiple worlds can create the same type of richness or moisture as shamanic mediation between physical and spiritual. Ascott stresses the sublime aspect of being a biological being navigating through a technological abyss and back through earth again, each space beautifying and clarifying the other.

MIRRORS AND MINDFULNESS

As part of a generation of technological multi-taskers, humans are already experts at this type of inter-worldly mediation. What is lacking in the equation for spiritual consequence, however, is a sense of attentiveness to our constant shifting. This deficiency has much to do with the designing of technologies made to slip into our every day unnoticed, making usage of machines ever more present and awareness of this

usage ever more meek. In Bill Hill's essay, *Techno-Darwinism*, (regarding his identified phenomenon of artificial selection, the survival of those most adapted to technology), he explains, "There is an increased tendency with the graphical user interface design to be transparent; to aid in the human interaction with the computer; to coalesce human thought and digital function; for this interaction to feel more natural and ensure the control of the machine" (Hill 21). While this line of thinking may make our future with machines seem dire, it is more of an urge towards consciousness, proposing that in all our advancement through machines we might still maintain capacity for reflection on our relationship with technology. Hill continues, "Where evolution was once an interactive process between human beings and a natural, unmediated world, evolution is now an interaction between human beings and our own artifacts" (Hill 20), emphasizing both our potential for control and loss of control in this dynamic. Technology is now an extension of man rather than something used by him, and technology is now environment rather than something that acts upon it. It is part of our perceptive framework and therefore invisible, as Marshal Mcluhan states, "Today we live invested with an electric information environment that is quite as imperceptible to us as water is to a fish" (Mcluhan 25).

SENTIENT SUBJECT

The idea of a species-wide dangerous blind spot as we progressively evolve with technology is echoed by Ascott, who asserts, "The hypercortex, mind in the Net, needs shelter" (Ascott 5), and this identified desperation is the focal point of my work. I am most interested in the foregrounding of our embarrassing lack of protection as increasingly nervous and somewhat hypnotized material beings in the face of the vastness of the virtual, and subsequently in the face of the less distinguishable real. Both components of my thesis accordingly have an easily identifiable main sentient subject upon which this vulnerability of humanity falls: a fragile dirt monkey head hovering in

simulated virtual space, and a young woman buried up to her neck in the physical ground. These subjects are necessarily disembodied, yet in a way that evades a violent intimation, and instead suggests a naturally evolved floating nervous mind. In his book *Postmodern Media Culture*, media theorist Jonathan Bignell explains, "Utopian and dystopian discourses about cyberspace and virtual communication have both emphasized the capacity of these technologies to free us from what Michael Benedikt calls 'the ballast of materiality', because in cyberspace the body disappears into the weightlessness of cyberspace and time" (Bignell 213). My referencing of video game imagery encourages an automatic identification with this weightlessness, as the gamer in most people can instinctively fill in its evocation of speed, potential and play even onto not-actually-moving virtual space. The weary soil-monkey haphazardly mounted onto this space allows the pathetic quality of these instinctive associations to be brought forward, emphasized by the knowledge that monkeys have no place racing in virtual space since they have not evolved to think about the internet.
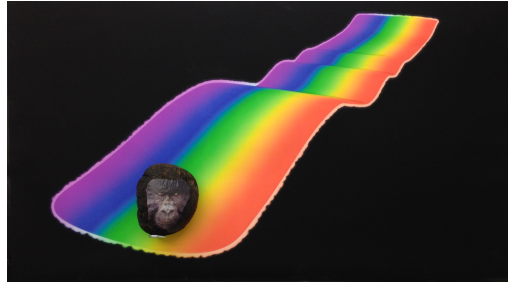

Fig. 1, Alexandra Neuman, Manhole
Fig. 2, Alexandra Neuman, Monkey Head II

VISION AND DISTINCTION

The events of World War II urged our species into sudden collective cognizance of the possibility for human-initiated and machine-enabled disaster. The post-war German art movement, ZERO, referencing the number as used in a space launch, provides an example of an optimistic trajectory of escape-related discovery resulting

from the increased and painful cognizance of the complex relationship between nature, technology, and humankind. Heinz Mack, one of ZERO's leading artists, employed themes of the space, nature, and human mediation in his work, getting inspiration from vast abyss-like natural landscapes and light. In his film, *Telemack* (1968), Mack walks around rolling dunes in a desert, his body as a living counterpoint to the blinding mirror sculptures that he has planted in the space into groupings which he terms artificial gardens. There is playfulness and potentiality about his work, a mirrored arrow pointing upwards calling forth a vague sense of elsewhere, and his own tiny body in the background, in a partly ironic silver suit, mediating and experimenting with the forces around him. The datedness of this work and perspective (as a comment on human and earth and technology) lies in its distinctness of categories, which can no longer exist in an all-encompassing mediascape. The utopian speculation of his piece relies on the notion of self-aware Human working with Machine upon the vastness of Nature, using mirrors, a technology for awareness, to mediate light, the basis of visual perception.

Fig. 3, Heinz Mack, Telemack
Fig. 4, Heinz Mack, Telemack

CONFLATION AS COUNTERBLAST

Contemporary artists engaging with the interplay of man, nature, and technology tend do so in both a more nuanced and belaboring manner, with less of the sublime and more of a self-deprecating ironic overlay. In the preface to Mcluhan's book, Counterblast, McLuhan explains, "The term COUNTERBLAST does not imply any

attempt to erode or explode BLAST. Rather it indicates the need for a counter-environment as a means of perceiving the dominant one" (5). This notion is a proposed strategy to counteract the lack of mirrors that Mcluhan identifies, reaffirming that technology is not inherently dangerous but that our awareness of it should be augmented, potentially by way of forced and intensified juxtaposition between similar parts. Polish artist Cezary Bodzianowsky engages in this type of exaggerated and blatant conflation, often working within the gap between the body as an image and the body as reality. In his piece, *Rainbow* (1995), Bodzianowsky emphasizes the bulkiness of his own body by painting it with the colors of the rainbow, which is in its natural form an intangible and ephemeral refraction, and arching his body over a mundane bathtub and toilet bowl. In a recent exhibition entitled, *This Place is Called the Hole* (2013*)*, he works more directly with technology, nature, and the body, putting them on an equal and confusing plane as representations. The use of television screens as containers for environments in this exhibition, to frame nature scenes or to imply a body on a chair, demonstrate Mcluhan's continued explanation: "At the beginning of his work, Pavlov found that the conditioning of his dogs depended on a previous conditioning. He placed one environment within another. Such is COUNTERBLAST" (Mcluhan 5). The stocky and confined sedentary man portrayed by Bodzianowsky is the updated version of Mack's optimistic man exploration of natural land. We can instead explore our screens from our armchairs and we are not ashamed of this alternative.

Fig. 5, Cezary Bodzianowsky, Rainbow
Fig. 6, Cezary Bodzianowsky, This Place is Called the Hole

Cuban artist Wilfredo Prieto engages in a similar type of ironic counterblasting with his piece *Paseo* (2000), in which he takes an artificial plant for a walk in a wheelbarrow for 40 kilometers. His physical human labor and forward motion are facilitated by the simple technology of the wheelbarrow, yet the action loses its distinctness of parts in the slight layer of artificial interruption. The piece still maintains an authentic quality through the distance covered on solid ground on a road that looks very genuinely road-like in documentation, an aspect that helps to enhance the conflation taking place, In another piece entitled, *Two Rocks and a Mirror* (2012), Prieto places a rock in front of a small glass mirror, the rock anthropomorphizing into a sentient being, transfixed in the facing of its reflection. The diversion from a rock's normal association with absolute lifelessness isolates and foregrounds the action of contemplating the self and projecting oneself into an image, as emphasized by the title, which definitively declares the reflection to be a second rock. Despite its absolute sedentary stance, the rock is actively projecting and imagining another rock into creation, conveying a mixture of power, awareness, self-consciousness and isolation.
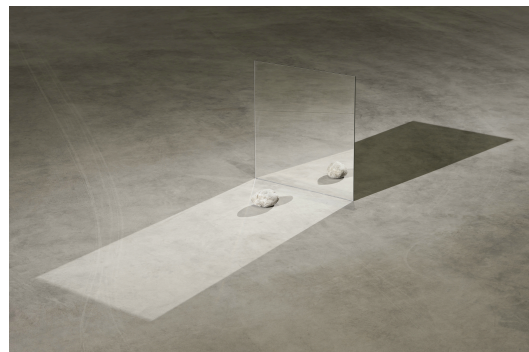

Fig. 7, Wilfredo Prieto, Paseo
Fig. 8, Wilfredo Prieto, Two Rocks and a Mirror

My thesis work engages in a similar type of conflation, using a layering system based on intuitive symbols for the extremes of material and virtual. My most instinctive visuals for a material extreme are rich and dense soil and monkeys (as closer to nature versions of humans). My most instinctive visuals for the virtual are the final level in Mario Kart called Rainbow Road, the one that is most visually and aurally pleasurable, as well as screens in general and disembodied self-sustaining heads. In *Monkey Heads*, the most obvious conflation is the dirt monkey on the rainbow road, which is further emphasized by the paper cut-out face of the monkey overlaying the dirt sphere, as well as the artificiality of a dirt sphere in itself, and then the intimation of a screen by the framing and thickness of the image, and the stillness of depicting the virtual off the screen. In *Manhole*, a similar layering occurs. The aliveness of the woman who is conscious and alert with no body has both a technological (talking head) and biological association. An added layer is the participant's view of nature for a sustained period of time, which the participants perceive and describe as cinematic from their spaces, despite their complete immersion. There is also the screen that contains the performance in installation, which is mounted on a grass-printed tablecloth bearing in itself an overt stamp of a virtual origin. The artificiality of the flattened grass then ends up somewhat activated and authenticated by the nature sounds emanating from the screen.

Fig. 9, Amazon.com, Grass Tablecover Party Accessory

CONCLUSION

        As we live increasingly through the virtual psychologically and comprehend it spatially, it bleeds progressively over into the material world, and the way the virtual exists in our minds is the way it exists in its totality. If humanity became extinct tomorrow, the internet would also disappear, because cyberspace only really exists as a collectively imagined location, but since we are still alive and intensively engaging with cyberspace, it is becoming as equally real and existent as the material world (especially since our perception of the material world is also largely subjective and imaginary, and since the relationships that ground us in the real world are increasingly being maintained in the virtual). The global process of creating and interacting within a collectively imagined location is a massively important event in the span of our existence as a species, just as the discovery of another inhabitable planet would be, but we haven't noticed the momentousness of our discovery because of our slow ongoing transition and our slow resulting adjustments in behavior and perception. With the optimism and discovery of Mack, and with the critical ironic entryway to critique of Bodzianowsky and Prieto, my work attempts to facilitate a minor counterblast into shamanic awareness of the moistness of our time and of our ongoing self-propelled evolution.

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Image Sources

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Fig. 2, Alexandra Neuman

Fig. 3, www.mack-kunst.com

Fig. 4, http://artblart.com/tag/heinz-mack-tele-mack/

Fig. 5, http://ameliagroom.com/?p=1789

Fig. 6, http://galleriazero.it/en/node/126

Fig. 7, http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/artistic-workshop-with-wilfredo-prieto/

Fig. 8, Wilfredo Prieto, Two

Fig. 9, Amazon.com, Grass Tablecover Party Accessory