

Threading Time Machines

by Dominique Nahas

Threading Time, the title of the SIGGRAPH 2005 Art Gallery, invokes a vision in which the essence of lived reality, time, is measured and used through instrumentalization technology. The very subject of much of the technologically-based new media arts is time itself, its uncovering, its displacement, its loss, and its reiteration. The urgency for visual artists to explore the experience of time is pervasive. Indeed, what could be more contemporary than an exploration of the lived moment as a network of relations and responses that too often go unnoticed? The construction and imaging of visual languages through which time is not only expressed but enunciated and parsed by visual poets, have always and will always fascinate audiences. This instrumentalization is evoked and invoked through our language and the way we move, and through the very social relations between people. SIGGRAPH is both an actor in this play and an instigator; it serves as a barometer (giving us a sense of the pressures we face) and a thermometer, indicating the temperature of the body social and political.

The artists who have been invited to participate in Threading Time are offering us their speculations on the pleasures and fault lines of our post-information age. As artists are prone to do, they have offered us alternative visions and possibilities for us to see the present for what it is through the lens of imaginary futures which are always being projected outward by technology. Advanced visual artists in the SIGGRAPH fold, in many cases, allow us to infer how the market's tendency to create imaginary futures allows us to misunderstand the present. In some fashion, the best of these artworks point out in an understated way that the techno-freak's fetishizing of the machine becomes a diversionary tactic, an acceptable way of hiding (behind) capitalism's flaws. But this is only partly true, for the picture is a complex and often contradictory one. For on a certain level, the technological imperative fosters communication and alternative ways of distributing (that is, decentralizing) power networks through the development of a high-tech gift economy. On another level, techno-determinism has many handlers eager to concentrate power and limit the equitable distribution of resources through intense privatization. The result is multi-layered, certainly.

One of the inevitabilities of a cyber world (and several of the artists in this year's Art Gallery refer to these symptoms) has been described by sociologist Jacques Ellul in his somewhat hyperbolic yet pungent 1954 study *The Technological Society*. He described the incursion of "psychological collectivization" which inculcates "the transformation of culture into luxury," which, he argues, involves coercive "adaptive harmonization" on the part of society's individual members, which in turn reinforces dissasociative disorders between people. That there are positive compensatory factors generated by technology to offset the negative ones at play here, I have no doubt. I believe, however, the prescient Ellul has his finger on the pulse of a major artery of today.

The mandate of SIGGRAPH since its inception in 1973 has been to generate and disseminate information on computer graphics and interactive techniques. It has promoted the cause of artists who use the computer as part of their creative process while promoting discussion about art in relation to technology. SIGGRAPH 2005 is perhaps the most incisive annual conference yet, as it offers a platform

for the discussion of technology proper and its celebration as a symbol of high creative achievement and progress. It also allows the conversation to turn to the potential side effects, the unanticipated scenarios leading to conflicting social practices, which invariably accompany evolutionary technological development.

While the actual art works in Threading Time vary widely in scope and dimension, several overall themes emerge. These include questioning aspects of consumption as well as production; references to social interactions within social space such as architecture and travel milieus; reflections on the condition of loss through speculations on the body's embodiment and disembodiment through technological matrices; wry commentaries on surplus information and surfeit exchanges; visionary explorations of space and time through gaming technologies; metaphysical ruminations through references to natural or biological patterns found in nature and in the body; invocation of architecture as a mutable and transitory space for the dwelling of time; aspects of personal and psychological identity; references to handcraft, rituals, and tradition using cybernetic interfaces; reevaluation and re-identification of literary traditions; the "aura" of the hand-made object, particularly the art book, through application of algorithmic procedures; and, finally, critiques on consumption and waste (mis)management.

As good artists are wont to do anywhere, but particularly in Threading Time, they suss out the ghosts in our 21st-century machines, looking at the symptoms of societal pathologies that they tease out for us to consider and reflect upon, not without humor. Peripherally, the shadow issues of technology and time, which refer in the broadest sense to expenditure and its control and management, are brought to bear by many of these artists' works in this finely tuned exhibition. One might speculate that these digital artisans can be considered in part if not in whole as pioneers of a social democracy fit for the 21st century. They project a future-present based on lives modeled upon skilled, creative, and autonomous (well, nearly autonomous) labor. Paradoxically, these elite members of the virtual class point to the libertarian and utopian possibilities of a the high-tech gift economy, which allows for expression through sharing web sites or within online conferences.

The audience for technologically based media arts has shifted from viewers to users. It stands to reason that if the audience has been transformed by technology, the way that artists see their role has also altered drastically. Unlike traditional media, these artists' works suggest it is not just a spectacle for passive consumption (although there is, to be sure, plenty of that to go around), it also lays the groundwork for shared participatory activity. The creation and proliferation of hypermedia networks, for example, allow a discussion of the darker sides of overt and covert technological determinism. Issues relating to the organization, distribution, and control of labor are key topics that will very much shape the social and political contours of the future. Such discussions are at the heart of the tensions produced by competing interests for the privatization (that is, control) of resources, and equity, and groups fighting for de-privatization of those same resources. SIGGRAPH 2005 is poised to advance the next critical stage of discussion regarding time and management of imaginary and not-so-imaginary future scenarios as part of its cultural work. Threading Time is an important contribution to our understanding of how we may relate differently and in different terms to the present and, therefore, to our futures as well.

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Mapping Art's Escape from the Traps of Technology

by Jon Ippolito, Guggenheim Museum

The 2005 SIGGRAPH jury was more than a chance to survey the digital art scene with a roomful of passionate but collegial comrades. It was also an opportunity to reflect on the role, for better or worse, that technology is playing in the production and exhibition of digital artwork. More than any of my fellow jurors, I think I was particularly conscious of the stereotype that many artists, critics, and curators attach to exhibitions of art with a technological focus. According to this perception, the SIGGRAPH Art Gallery is less art exhibition than display showroom, where technicians show off the latest Maya or Illustrator special effect rather than pushing the boundaries of art.

As if to corroborate this prejudice, the jury saw literally hundreds of works that appeared to be inspired by some filter or toolbar icon from the latest release of a commercial graphics package. This preference for technology and technique over concept and creativity has led to a vast digital opus whose superficial dazzle is matched only by its aesthetic and political backwardness.

Yet the conservatism we see in juried art exhibitions may be attributed not just to the technology of production but also to the technology of presentation. In juried shows of any size, the quantity of submissions is difficult to handle except via a standardized review process that puts undue emphasis on individual images projected out of context on the wall. Focusing attention on such isolated "slides" enforces biases against any work created by an artist whose interest lies outside the now-weary exertions of the 20th century's picture plane. The process demands that artists who work outside the frame be twice as inventive as their peers; they must be creative with both the documentation and the work itself. For works that spilled outside the frame, the jury did its best to dig beyond the initial image; however, most of those artists hadn't supplied enough documentation to convey the work's intention and scope.

If the jury review process casts unconventional formats in the least favorable light, it can cast a misleadingly generous light on conventional formats. By erasing features like scale or texture, the projected or screen-based image, like the book illustration, encourages reviewers to presume these features are what is most appropriate for the imagery: thick impasto for a brushy composition, grandiose scale for a bold abstraction. (I know a graduate school that accepted an MFA applicant only to discover that each of the "vast" landscapes they saw in her slides turned out to be more postcard than panorama.)

In the case of the digital prints so prevalent in SIGGRAPH shows, the scale and texture seen in the projected image turn out to be especially illusory, since screen-based imagery has no inherent scale or texture, despite the fact that these aspects are critical to most art in the Euro-American tradition. The height of Velasquez' *Las Meninas* positions its viewer in the position of the reflected king and queen; the breadth of a Jackson Pollock immerses its viewer in its myriad skeins of dripped paint. Monet's *Nymphs* are painted with just the right-sized brush to create a hypnotic flip-flop between abstraction and representation. Yet when digital images become prints on a wall rather than pixels on a screen, their monotonously uniform glossy surfaces and preset sizes reflect the dictates of available printing technologies rather than marks or meaning conferred by their maker. The results can be disappointing, like an exhibition of Monet posters in place of paintings.

Bearing in mind the deceptive effect technology can have on production, selection, and exhibition of art, I tried to influence the jury to counter this technological "bait and switch." I had little patience for digital images that emulate atmospheric watercolors or brushy oil paintings, less because those are "outdated" styles than because using digital media to ape plastic media is the aesthetic equivalent of cubic zirconia. I often saw more integrity in digital photography and its manipulation, because photography is inherently devoid of surface (since Fox Talbot, anyway) and hence lends itself to screen-native manufacture and printing.

Medium aside, the exhibition's theme of mapping information in time and space didn't justify including technical exercises or polite abstractions. New media tend to enact rather than represent, so I argued for works that map events in the real world rather than simply connecting colored dots on an immaterial canvas: GPS data teleported from the street to the gallery wall; image colorization outsourced from China to the US; a private conversation spilling from a mobile phone into public space, made visible on a billboard; cash exchanged from the art world to Wal-Mart and back again. Today's global economy wouldn't exist without information transacted via digital media. I am delighted that some works in this SIGGRAPH Art Gallery break the stereotype by reflecting on the influence those processes increasingly have on all forms of digital production.