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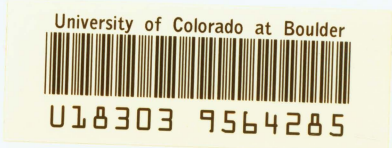
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REPRESENTATIONS OF SIMULATION

By

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B.A., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2001

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Colorado in partial fulfillment

of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

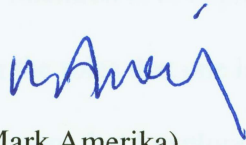
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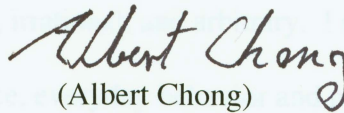
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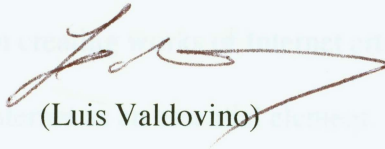
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Representations of Simulation

Thesis directed by Professor Mark Amerika

In creating my MFA exhibition, my intention is to explore the uneasy feelings that I have had most of my life concerning the roles that one is expected to take on in the process of entering adulthood. The more that I explore these stereotypical behaviors, the more they seem unnatural, irrational, and arbitrary. I am attempting to mix the worlds of on and off-line space, everyday behavior and performative actions, real and simulated environments. I am creating works of Internet art as well as electronic installations that include the Internet as an essential element. I am interested in plays on perception and expectations. It is my wish to ultimately loosen up some of the expected behavioral roles of adulthood and possibly relieve some of my own feelings of alienation by encouraging a more rational environment.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In creating my MFA exhibition, my intention was to explore the uneasy feelings that I have had most of my life concerning the roles that one is expected to take on in the process of entering adulthood. The more that I explore these stereotypical behaviors, the more they seem unnatural, irrational, and arbitrary. Yet in resisting these roles, trying to change them, break them, shake them up, I have found myself to be more and more alienated from my peers, relatives, colleges, etc. This alienation widens the gap even further and so expected behaviors seem even less natural.

In operating from this viewpoint, my work naturally takes on a political concern as the behaviors of large groups of people (countries and governments) are the ultimate in stereotypical and irrational behavior. For example, most every single person that I've talked to in my life has been opposed to the idea of murdering someone and yet the governments of most (all?) countries succeed in ordering people to kill others everyday in the name of defense, and this is considered perfectly normal. This example is, of course, nothing new and people shake their heads and say that it is simply the way things are. Certainly it is, but I want to explore where this comes from and what common behaviors that we exhibit everyday lead to this kind of extreme.

The work presented in my MFA exhibition is not only a representation of this exploration, but it is also an attempt to initiate the same exploration in those that

view and interact with my work. My motivation for creating this body of work is not only to act as a cathartic exorcism of my own uneasiness, but to hopefully have some effect on my environment, thus making it easier to live in.

The methods which I have employed in the creation of this work draw from performance techniques, writing, photography, motion pictures, audio design, computer programming, and the practice of researching and mixing found bits of data. Although the final medium on which this work is displayed is heavily dependant on computer technology, the artistic content is not about the technology itself. Perhaps commenting at times on the ways in which modern technology influences our understanding, the work is mainly focused on perceptions, behaviors, and beliefs. These elements that I have chosen to explore have been in existence since the time that technology meant no more than the use of stick and stones as tools and weapons.

CHAPTER II

INFLUENCE

My influences and motivations have come from many sources, perhaps starting with my grandparents who were killed in a German concentration camp along with so many millions of other grandparents, parents, children etc. Since I was a child I have been fascinated with how a country could be convinced that this kind of large scale mass murder of ones own countrymen could be considered normal and rational behavior. It becomes especially troubling as historical record now defines this behavior to be astonishingly irrational and countless books have been written to try to explain how this could happen. I started to wonder if the things that people were doing around me at that (or this) very moment would later be defined by historians as astonishingly irrational (such as the behavior of American forces during the Viet-Nam war, and now present-day conflicts with Afghanistan and Iraq).

When I turned eighteen, I was forced to register for the draft and realized that I might be forced to participate in some kind of adult (ir)rational behavior. Some of my friends joined the military and I became fascinated with the role that one plays as a soldier. I became acutely aware of the roles that I was playing in order to be considered 'cool' in various groups of people and I related this to my

perception of soldiers in the field. Over time it began to occur to me how much of my own behavior is learned, constructed and entirely artificial.

My undergraduate degree was in creative writing and I became exposed to the usual assortment of theorists and was especially influenced by ideas such as decentralization, deconstruction, and Grammatology as explained by Jacques Derrida.

‘...the signified always already functions as a signifier. The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general, affects them always already, the moment they enter the game.’¹

Language, truth, meaning, and the very foundation of all that I believed, (as well as the intellectual structural apparatuses that I employed to believe in anything) was reduced to nothing more than a game. The search for a metaphysical truth was rendered moot. All search for true meaning turns out to be only mental representation, signifiers with nothing signified, a simulation of a simulation. These thoughts, rather than causing despair, served as a liberation from the confinements of standard logic and behavior.

Another person that influenced the way in which I studied and viewed information was Julia Kristeva.

If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (and intertextuality), one then understand that its ‘place’ of enunciation and its denoted ‘object’ are never single, complete and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated.²

¹ Jacques Derrida , *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1976

² Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), pp. 59-60

Simultaneous multiplicity of viewpoints and meanings does more than merely create different ways of seeing, but creates new intellectual objects; objects given shape and form by thought alone. As a way in which to visualize these objects, the data-driven space of computers and computer networks seem the natural medium. The image and text displayed a computer monitor, forever liquid, is the perfect representational device for the plurality of the concrete.

I became especially impressed with not only the power of the word for causing extreme change of thought and action (especially within myself), but also the ultimate meaninglessness of words as they can only be defined by other words with no fixed or solid referent. My thoughts started to seem very liquid at this point.

About four years ago, Professor Mark Amerika introduced me to the idea of using computers to create art on the Internet and the naturally inherent liquidity of this medium appeared to be a perfect mirror of my own thoughts. This intellectual space, which is at once solid because it can be shown to someone else on a screen, but is also liquid because it is changed with the simple push of a button appealed to me and seemed not only to be a melding of different mediums, but a useful medium in which to express ideas. Behavior and beliefs also have these inherent flowing characteristics as ones beliefs can lead to the usage of something as solid as a gun but can also be changed as fluidly as information flows. Furthermore, I have witnessed how much of our behavior and beliefs are influenced by information delivery systems such as the internet and television, and how much we are acting to match the movements of these mediums.

I have chosen to work with the electronic medium in an attempt to turn it upon itself, to expose it for what it is by way of reflexivity, and to expose ourselves as its ultimate mirror. The images presented on a computer screen are a simulation, but our culturally expected perceptions are also a simulation. On one level, our internal methods of logic and thought create simulation in representing reality, but on another level, there are those that purposely try to distort reality further to promote a specific agenda. This agenda might be as simple as pushing a particular commercial product, or as insidious as driving a nation to brutality and war. It is a layer of distortion placed over a simulation, but with the former preying upon the later. The strength that lays in those who choose to twist and distort our perceptions for selfish reasons, is really the weakness created by an unfixed and liquid human perception of reality. With artistic assertions, I wish to exaggerate these distortions of perception to such a degree as to make them seem ridiculous, negating our perceptual filters altogether.

By this method, I wish to liquefy the concrete. It is, in fact already liquid, but the feeling that reality is solid and concrete still persists, and it is this persistence that I wish to erode. If reality is nothing more than simulation, then the constant realization of this brings us closer to acting more rationally, as our acts are driven by our belief in reality.

CHAPTER III

BIOMETRICS

In my work *Biometrics*, I present the viewer with a touch-screen, so that what is seen may be changed by touching the image itself. The images are video loops of various gestural movements of hands and feet. About half of the video loops were taped directly (my own and my wife's hands and feet), and the other half were created in a three-dimensional modeling program. The distorted visual forms that I created with the computer program are influenced in part by the work of Hans Bellmer. His dolls and photographs, presenting discombobulated female body parts do more than present to human body in a horrific and alien manner, they present new possibilities for the human body itself.

...to construct an artificial girl with anatomical possibilities...capable of re-creating the heights of passion even to inventing new desires.³

Perhaps 'inventing new desires' is a way to stir emotions as to what it really means to have a body created in the imagination, with only imaginary constraints of movement and action. Beyond this intellectual possibility, Bellmer's distorted bodies instill a visceral feeling. It is my intention that my own work *Biometrics*, will also invoke visceral feelings in those that view it.

³ Hans Bellmer, quoted in Peter Webb and Robert Short, *Hans Bellmer* (New York, 1985), p. 29.

In *Biometrics*, I intended it to be fairly obvious as to which appendages were real and which were generated, but hopefully this would become somewhat confusing over time. The computer generated hands and feet move in ways that are impossible for their real counterparts and so present the new gestures of the virtual body. The virtual body that I am referring to is the presence that we project by our electronic proxies such as our websites, emails, telephone voices, messages left on answering machines, professional personas recorded and transmitted, etc. Our movements and presence in the virtual space of the Internet and electronic media has generated a prosthetic body, or virtual appendages that move and control things in a telekinetic fashion. It is not only action-at-a-distance, but these actions and gestures are new and different, with new possibilities and parameters. As the viewer sees their own hands touching the screen, acting upon the visionary hands, I hope to blur the relationship between what happens on-screen and off-screen.

Biometrics refers to the automatic identification of a person based on his/her physiological or behavioral characteristics. A biometric system is essentially a pattern recognition system which makes a personal identification by determining the authenticity of a specific physiological or behavioral characteristic possessed by the user.⁴

With this artwork I attempt to exemplify our new biometrics, or our identification of the virtual characteristics performed and created by our electronic appendages. Perhaps it is equally important to expand the thought parameters that restrict and control the movements of our new appendages. The origins of these new appendages might be attributed to the creations of the telegraph, telephone,

⁴ Found on the World Wide Web at: <http://biometrics.cse.msu.edu/info.html>

television, or the remote control. Although these devices may have introduced extended action, intellectually they were still add-ons to actions performed in the physical world. The Internet presents a new environment in which to act with new appendages, a new body. In this environment one can assume a slightly altered identity, an edited identity, a perfected identity, or a different identity altogether. The nature of the on-line environment is in fact one that opens up the parameters of identity and in doing so constructs a new body that is only loosely based on the form of the physical body. A person's net-presence is undeniably a different form of body in its liquid potential, and it is a body that those that participate on-line possess.

The work *Biometrics* attempts to emphasize the virtual body and explore its relationship to the physical body.

CHAPTER IV

URBAN SKIN

In my work *Urban Skin*, I perhaps took a backwards path in its conceptual design: I created the form before deciding on the content. For about fifteen years now I have been fascinated with the idea of being teleported into an imaginary environment by means of sound and vision. I remember looking at Viewmaster (stereoscopic) images when I was a child and feeling like I could almost walk into the simulated scenario because of the three dimensional effect. I wondered what it would be like to see a moving image in true 3D (without the clumsy simulation effect of red/blue or polarized glasses).

I thought about shooting movies with the dual-lens perspective of the human eye and presenting them in a way as to fill the entire field of vision and to enhance the effect with stereo sound. Although I am sure that there must be other artists and technicians who have created apparatuses that might use a similar arrangement, I have still not seen any that satisfied the vision that I have had in mind. I wanted to create an experience something like the fictional ‘Simstim’ device created by novelist William Gibson. As consumer technology got more advanced over the years, I began to think of new ways that it might be possible to create this kind of experience.

I began to experiment with lenses and mirrors, finally buying a pair of right-angle prisms to see if I could achieve the effect that I was looking for. The prisms worked but they were too small to fill the full field of human vision. I noticed that my roommate's fish tank acted as a prism and I came up with the idea of building my own prisms to suit my needs. After some experimentation, I built two large right-angle fish tanks in the same proportional ratios as the glass prisms that I had bought previously. The next step was to create a tripod mount for two identical video cameras so that the lenses were 21/2 inches apart (the average separation of adult human eyes). Finally, I had to create a way to combine and synchronize the videos and to place them correctly in front of the two large water-prisms that I had built. After experimenting for months to solve all of these equations, I began to think about what artistic content would absolutely require such an apparatus to get its meaning across.

I had been thinking a lot about how cities are like a movie sets presenting us, the actors, with a faux front, or an exterior skin covering. I had also been thinking about how our personality fronts and our bodies also create a faux covering, as well as a literal skin. I wanted to explore the relationship between the city and the citizen, the actor and the stage.

In this exploration I realized that there are multiple levels, or dimensions, between foreground and background of these objects and ideas. The actor, although acting upon a stage, is simultaneously a moving stage, foregrounding a mobile front (the body). The city, although similar to a movie set, is also a skin for the people that it represents (the inhabitants). In representing these ideas and

relationships, I decided to mix two-dimensional and three-dimensional visuals, using the added 3D depth dimension to create another direction for the eye to move besides foreground and background. The moving images in this piece fade between human skin presented in two dimensions (identical images for each eye), and an industrial landscape presented in three dimensions (offset images for each eye). Yet the industrial images also present views of people and the skin images also have some architectural shape (limbs, belly-button, etc.). In this way, the conceptual elements of covering and covered continually intertwine yet remain distinct, mirroring my interpretation of how these components function.

The simultaneity of these dimensional and intellectual viewpoints is like breathing, in and out, first one point of view and then another. The breathing sounds of the audio track of this piece are timed perfectly and synchronized with the fading between the two image streams. It is also mixed with authentic background sounds from the various shot locations.

My final presentation of this piece was very much influenced by the video installation work of Bill Viola. His use of time manipulation close-shot image detail played a part in influencing the basic aesthetic structure of this work.

Viola carefully chooses and edits images he has recorded with his camera in order to draw out particular meanings, avoiding the overt use of special effects and computer graphics. He intends his work to be a means of transformation for himself, and for spectators, through a deepened experience of the world and the self.⁵

⁵ Found on the World Wide Web at:
<http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/viola/artist.html>

I wanted to keep the elements of this work simple, so that the viewer would not be too caught up in technological eye-candy, but instead get a feeling for the experience that the piece sets forth. My intention is that a viewer might 'hang out' with the piece for a little while, experiencing their own breath and points of view, perhaps contemplating on the interplay between the physical and mental surfaces of their own bodies. It is not my intention that the viewer should necessarily watch the nine minute video in its entirety in order to derive its meaning. Although it is a video with a time element, I intended it to read more like an installation, an experience in time for the viewer. I find that much of Viola's work also creates an installation experience and not simply a time-based narrative tied to the beginning and end of a video movie.

Although I would have liked to have created this piece on a much larger scale (ten foot high prisms in front of large-scale screen projections) and have had the construction details finished a little bit cleaner, it is for the most part true to my original vision. In the future I plan to create more works of art using video as an installation element to create an overall perceptual experience.

CHAPTER V

SIMULACRA

My third piece, *Simulacra*, is really the centerpiece of this body of work. Using a combination of about fifteen different computer programs, I created an immersive virtual environment to illustrate the illusionary nature of the ‘real’ environment that we are immersed in. The voice-over, in a very direct way speaks about the feelings I have had concerning the common activities I find myself engaged in. Influenced by artists such as Salvador Dali, Andre Breton, and Alfred Jarry, my intention was to create surrealistic virtual reality to illustrate the surrealistic nature of our present cultural behavioral realities.

I created a series of different virtual spaces, each narrated by myself in a performative voice, and strung together like a movie. If left alone, this piece runs a bit like a movie but with the potential added dimension of the viewer being able to move around in the various spaces, exploring them further, gathering added information, and experiencing different points of view.

In the final space (there are a total of fourteen), the viewer finds themselves in a simulation of the gallery itself, with their own image presented on the virtual display screen via a live camera. In this final gesture I am attempting to mix virtual and physical reality in a feedback loop, negating the virtues, or true-

ness, of all of it. The viewers find themselves in a simulation of a simulation, with no actual referent, similar to the way I perceive and understand physical space.

In deciding to name this piece ‘Simulacra’, I am referring to conventional definitions as well as expanding upon this idea:

Simulacrum:

n. (pl. simulacra)

an image of something.

a. a shadowy likeness; a deceptive substitute.

b. mere pretence⁶

Although the work is in itself representative of simulated environments, it is really the conceptual simulations of perceived reality that I am referring to. For example, the space in this piece in which the viewer finds themselves in a diner with all of the surfaces as well as the patron made of money, refers to the transaction that occurs when a service is bought. Given enough money, I could likely pay someone to perform any act I so wished. I would essentially be controlling them with paper. It is more than that paper is a merely substitute for work-value, it is a deceptive substitute for something else; perhaps related to liberty and free-will. There are those that live and die for money, who trade their happiness for money, who kill for money. Money somehow represents more than just the ability to acquire objects or experiences, but something else, something deep within our psyches, and that is what I wish to call into question and explore with this particular section of the installation.

More highly charged might be the section that references the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. I believe that there is an element of

⁶ Concise Oxford Dictionary, Oxford University Press (1992)

simulation in the feelings that have been dictated to us concerning this event. The U.S. government and the press have been primarily concerned with blaming, rooting out the perceived enemies, and so preventing this type of event from happening again. Within these actions is the simulation that we are doing all that is reasonable and rational in reaction to this terrorist act. The very act of calling an enemy 'terrorist' is in fact deceptive (likely each side considers the other to be the evil party). This group response, these status-quo feelings, I believe create a false sense of well-being and security. I fear that these feelings of external blame, lacking in introspection, may only result in the escalation of this sort of violence. The government and media immediately dictated the 'proper' response to this violence, creating a substitution for the feelings people may have developed on their own.

In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard writes:

Are the mass media on the side of power in the manipulation of the masses, or are they on the side of the masses in the liquidation of meaning, in the violence perpetrated on meaning, and in fascination? Is it the media that induce fascination in the masses, or is it the masses that direct the media into the spectacle? Mogadishu-Stammheim: the media make themselves into the vehicle of the moral condemnation of terrorism and of the exploitation of fear for political ends, but simultaneously, in the most complete ambiguity, they propagate the brutal charm of the terrorist act, they are themselves terrorists, insofar as they themselves march to the tune of seduction.⁷

The media is after all, us. The media and the masses are interchangeable, seduced by the spectacle, the simulation, in a continuous Mobius strip that leaves meaning as its casualty. The media is the communicative tool of this culture. It is

⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), page 84.

reporting and dictating all at once. This cycle, I feel, propagates an extra layer of simulation, promotes an overall environment of simulacra, and it is this that I wish to explore. I feel that behavior is dictated by cultural inertia, not reason. With a simulated environment, I wish to expose the simulated feelings that I find myself participating in. I wish to create a simulation of a simulation, a tribute to what I find myself immersed in.

Although the version of this piece in the gallery is a stand-alone installation, it also exists on-line as a work of Internet art. Participants can see each other as avatars (constructed forms) and might meet each other momentarily as they cycle through the spaces. This further complicates the piece, as multiple participants become part of the work itself, adding a chaotic element (simultaneously mirroring and being effected by the chaotic elements in life). I wish to add the interactive elements involved with this piece as an added dimension of meaning and representation, not simply added involvement of the viewer. Interactivity may be the single most important element that digital art adds to its inherent combining of past mediums, and I feel that the exploitation of this element is still in its infancy. I wish to explore how interactivity might one day become as an important element to digital art as visual perspective was to painting.

Some of the viewers that have seen other works of my virtual installation spaces have commented that they are reminiscent of video-game environments such as Counterstrike, Castle Wolfenstein, Doom, etc. I suspect that this is only a momentary perception because of the nature of present-day gaming environments. Had this work been presented fifteen years ago, it might have connoted simply

‘virtual reality’, or movies such as Walt Disney’s *Tron*. In the future, as the look and feel of game-space continues to evolve, the connotations associated with this type of work will likely change again. It is of course, perfectly all right if this installation connotes a game-like feel as ‘playing the game’ is the way we often navigate through constructed realities that we find ourselves involved in (such as the act of writing this paper in order to defend why I should receive an MFA degree and become an authority in regards to art).

CHAPTER VI

THE FUTURE

The direction that I am attempting to move toward with this MFA exhibition and future bodies of work is to further mix the worlds of on and off-line space, everyday behavior and performative actions, real and simulated environments. I wish to continue to further develop works of Internet art as well as electronic installations that might include the Internet as an essential element. I am interested in plays on perception and expectations. It is my wish to ultimately loosen up some of the expected behavioral roles of adulthood and possibly relieve some of my own feelings of alienation by encouraging a more rational environment. Such goals are lofty, but why make art if one can't strive for something impossible?

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