Other mind-edness

THE
EMERGENCE
OF
NETWORK
CULTURE

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and intensify the flickering nature of screen images . . . [and play] with the idea that light represents that which escapes verbal artic-ulation—and yet it is the verbal articulations surrounding the images that make this idea clear" (1997).

Whether in light or life the seen surroundings form the drama of the ordinary. Among the most interesting electronic narratives I have seen in recent years are the environmental "intelligent mul-timedia systems" of Monika Fleischmann. To call what are essen-tially interactive video installations narratives (or, for that matter, cinema) is perhaps polemical, especially since I have seen Fleisch-mann's work only in demo tapes. Yet to the extent that the demo, as Peter Lunenfeld suggests on the maillist <nettime>, "has become the defining moment of the artist's practice at the turn of the millennium," it is always an exposition in time of a series of events. That is, the demo is a narrative. Fleischmann's self-con-sciously literary titles for these works, that is, *Liquid Views: Virtual Mirror of Narcissus* and *Rigid Waves: Narcissus and Echo,* reinforce their narrative bent. More importantly, however, not only is our experience of the tapes a narrative experience but also those whose experience is presented on the taped demos themselves seem to take on parts in consciously formed narratives.

In *Rigid Waves* viewers approach a framed video screen in which their own images seem to lapse and lag into creatures with their own will. "The visitor meets himself as an image in the image," Fleischmann says.

He himself is the interface he is acting with. The approaching visitor will notice that he is changing the picture. The scene becomes photorealistic. This getting closer to real things is inverted due to the too-small distance existing when the spec-tator is leaving. The image trembles and becomes unclear. As in dreams, the images begin to speak through phase shift and extension. Shadows are produced, and finally the gestures become distorted. Movements get confused. Sequences of events are no longer near in time. The pictures seem to be oddly assorted. (1997b, n.p.)

What is most striking to the viewer of the demo tape is the variety of emotions and events with which these viewers greet

what Fleischmann calls the "traces of . . . interactive dialog [that] remain visible in the picture." A woman in dark clothing greets her past self as if a sister or lover, they move together in complicitous rhythm and with evident laughter. An impish, heavy-set man attempts to trick the self he was instants before by the swift vaudeville movements of the Marx Brothers' mirror routine, familiar to film buffs. A professorial type in tweed seems unamused by his own history and cracks it into shards. This metafiction that I relate here, the stories of the woman in dark clothes, the vaudeville imp, and the fragmented man in tweed are, of course, tales that the external viewer produces. In fact, as I first wrote these comments, not having viewed the demo tape in some time, I was aware I might have been confusing the actors and the scenes. It does not matter. The interactions, as I have argued previously about the work of Grahame Weinbren and Jeffrey Shaw, present themselves to participants and spectators alike in layers of narrative. These simultaneous streams of private and public meaning are not unlike our common experience of space in ordinary life, whether over a kitchen table or a table in a cafe near the Vitava.

As Lunenfeld suggests of the demo, this common experience of the ordinary

> contains a multitude of contradictions. It portends to be about technology but demands the presence of the body. It speaks the language of progress but brings about an odd return of the cult value of the art object. It is both sales pitch and magic show. It is, in the words of advertising, the way we live now. (1998, n.p.)

Rigid Waves confronts the interactive participant with the way she lives now in company of the image of who she was however briefly before (and therefore at least partially still is as she and we now see her). Now is before the screen and then is on it. The succession of nextnesses is interrupted for viewer and participant alike by how each act.

Another work of Fleischmann's, _Liquid Views_, however, takes this interruption still further, erasing the gap, inserting it and us again into the present moment, interrupting the present with the present, interrupting the insistence of next with a liquid now.

Unlike *Rigid Waves*, in *Liquid Views* there is no split between now and then, off the screen and on. The present image is the present life and the present story is their confluence. It is almost a cliché of the new media industry that the future of com will consist of so-called story worlds, where audiences will share some sort of construction kits that provide setting, interactive charac- ters, and the like that will spawn what in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* Janet Murray has called "procedural fictions." Almost alone among interactive artists Fleischmann has succeeded in such an enterprise, however briefly wresting lit from com, by providing a construction kit in which the story world is the one the visitor and viewer bring to it and the procedural fiction redeems that term from computation. The fiction is how we proceed in the face of what we see.

Liquid Views consists of a monitor mounted flat into the sur- face of a pedestal like a well and a large screen behind it and where what the visitor sees as she looks down we see behind her. Fleischmann's description is as simple as the work itself is haunting:

> The visitor approaches and sees his image reflected in the water—embedded in a fluid sphere of digital imagery. He tries to intervene, to touch the water surface and generates new rip- ples. Increasing the water movement too much, overstepping his limits, the viewer distorts his telematic reflection. The more he intervenes, the more his liquid view dissolves. After a time, while not touched, the water movement becomes calm again and returns to a liquid mirror. (1997a, n.p.)

On the demo tape the first visitor is a she and the simplicity and grace of her gestures untie the knot of what feminist film crit- ics have called the gaze. We are not watching an objectified image but it is watching us, or seems to be doing so, with love and gen- tleness and a kind of seduction that is less cinematic than oneiric, the gaze of dreams. We slowly realize she is seeing herself and thus including us within both her gaze and her self alike. If pornography, as Susan Sontag suggested long ago, is a death pur- suit, an obsessional nextness, which seeks to fill every opening

until there are no more, then Liquid Waves is antiporn, the antithesis of pornography's inexorable computation. Stillness (a word that in English contains a sense of persistence and continuity, the opposite of nextness) opens present spaces in us.

Later in the *Liquid Views* demo a group of merry pranksters, not unlike Puck and company in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, appear. In public talks Fleischmann has identified them as Dutch filmmakers who had come to do a documentary about the work and instead (or at least also) appeared in one. These fellows are aware of the mortal comedy within any toolbox and how in this one time moves on through rubber rollers within the tape machine, spooling from edge to edge of the dark box wherein our light appears. They make a little comedy of their reflections, something with a rise and fall and a sense of how, to paraphrase Chaucer, we fall together by chance, pilgrims all.

Pilgrims all, the way we live now is ordinary fiction, demo life, a multitude of contradictions, a new realism, one that truly takes into account the contingency, multiplicity, unfinishedness, and transience of our lives as we experience them. In ordinary life words are another toolbox, through which our lives spool. In *Krapp's Last Tape* Beckett's character coos our passing and his own in an unwinding word:

> Box three, spool five. (*He bends over the machine, looks up. With relish.*) Spooool! (*Happy smile. He bends, loads spool on machine, rubs his hands.*) Ah! (*He peers at ledger, reads entry at foot of page.*) Mother at rest at last. (1960, 13)

The oneiric qualities of visual images (always important for the son of a photographer as I am) are more and more intense for all of us whose memories are formed and embodied by Kodacolor and Photoshop and whose dreams are influenced, even infused, by what we see on all sorts of screens. Yet our lives do not lodge in technology. Krapp's mothering spool of the reel-to-reel tape recorder has given way to cassette and CD and to Real Audio spooled across the network. We can seal our memories into photos or DVD but they will never stay still. Images, to the extent they are the present and not the past, show the way for the future