

Jeffrey Shaw's Golden Calf: Art Meets Virtual Reality and Religion

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by Edward Allen Shanken

Jeffrey Shaw (1) wryly offers the Golden Calf as a simulated pagan object of worship for a post-religious culture that ritually propagates its myths and desires through electronic media. With poetic irony the artist performs a reverse alchemy, turning gold into liquid crystal, icon into fashion, science into faith. A hand-held, color LCD monitor set on a simple white pedestal provides an elegant yet unassuming interface between the material world humans inhabit and the ephemeral world of the virtual bovine icon. While the environment is limited, and the wiring between the elements slightly obtrusive, the viewer experiences a different sense of freedom and control manipulating this system than compared with other artwork in this medium, where typically s/he is submerged in a dark installation cubicle or encumbered with bulky apparatus. As a result, the Golden Calf presents itself in a very different relationship to its audience: rather than the viewer being a diminished object of technology, s/he has the feeling of being an empowered subject in command of the virtual world. But is this control real or virtual?

Lifting the monitor from the pedestal, the calf comes into view, set upon a virtual pedestal that resembles the real one. Moving the display results in a changing perspective on the calf that corresponds precisely to the distance and angle of the monitor to the pedestal. In other words, the calf is relatively large when the display is held close to the pedestal; as the distance increases, the calf gets smaller, according the rules of traditional perspective. As the viewer circles the pedestal, the monitor pans 360 degrees around the calf. Dipping the monitor below the plane of the pedestal's entablature reveals the calf's underside; conversely, as the monitor rises above the plane, the calf's top comes into view. If the display enters the coordinates occupied by the virtual icon, a special property is revealed: an eerie, otherworldly void. If one were to look inside a hollow, clay model of a calf, one would see the interior surface fully articulated. But when the viewer penetrates the Golden Calf, there is no interior to see, only a faint outline suggesting the exterior articulation of its obverse extremities. In this sense, the Golden Calf is pure surface. Its interior emptiness transcends the natural laws of physical objects, and in this paradoxical unity of presence and absence the hot-wired heathen idol stakes its claim on virtual nirvana.

But this state of grace is interrupted by the haunting presence of the exterior outline, namely the teats, udder, and hooves. In fact, this is not a calf at all, but

rather, a fully grown cow. Shaw's cow is, moreover, derived from an objet trouvé, one of the many prefabricated and anonymous stock images that came included with the Silicon Graphics computer that Shaw and his Dutch software designer, Gideon May, used to create the work of art. A multitude of questions springs forth: Why call it a calf then? Does the arbitrary quality of this calf's origin suggest a critique of other religious icons, or do its commonness and immaculate conception suggest an affinity? Is there symbolic meaning in the voyeuristic penetration of the phantom object's mysterious interior? What is the relationship between the male creator, the viewer-consumer, and the female-procreator? And what does all this mean when it takes place in virtual reality via technology inspired by the military? Holy cow!

As in Shaw's diverse work since the sixties, the audience animates the art object, which, it is hoped, offers the viewer a transformative experience of uncommon phenomena and alternate realities. Exactly what this transformation might comprise and whether or not it is desirable remains an open question, as do many other provocative issues raised by the Golden Calf. Perhaps it is that very cryptic quality of an oracle that makes it such a fascinating catalyst for human conjecture. Be that as it may, moving around the pedestal to observe the Golden Calf the viewer performs a sort of ritual dance, a prayer to the disembodied cult object. Wittingly or not, s/he has been incorporated into the enactment of a quasi-religious ceremony. Ironically, at this moment, the emphasis shifts to the human element of this work, i.e. the viewer who bows up and down, genuflecting on the miraculous world of the mythic icon. There is a curious tension between the feeling of freedom and control and the performance of dutiful worship. The viewer can laugh at the playfulness of the work, the irony and absurdity of praying to an archaic idol resurrected in silicon and software. Alternately, the viewer can contemplate the more serious ramifications of human seduction by technology into a state of pre-programmed obedience. Thus, the Golden Calf can be seen as a system that constantly shifts and slides between the quantum world of microelectronic telepresence and the macro world of biological interactivity, poking fun at and questioning the sanctity of each.

The actual momentary interaction with the Golden Calf is only part of the experience. After returning the monitor to the pedestal and leaving the exhibition, memories of it remain and questions about the ontological status of those memories begin. What exactly is remembered? What is it like to remember something that exists only virtually? What is the quality of that memory? In a word, enigmatic. I remember experiencing a feeling of freedom and control while manipulating the virtual environment. Upon reflection, however, I became aware that my freedom was only partial, for I had become part of a system in the service of which my behavior had been subsumed. As for the experience of the virtual icon, my memory can be compared with how I remember the dialogue of a subtitled foreign film: I have no recollection of the written text; in my memory, the actors' own voices communicated to me in my mother tongue. Similarly, I remember the Golden Calf as a solid, three-dimensional object, unmediated by any apparatus. In

contrast, however, I also remember it as an ethereal, presence/nonpresence in cyberspace. My memory is thus rooted in the paradox between the real and the virtual. Shaw's work simultaneously combines and conflates these worlds, allowing the viewer to inhabit one while remaining anchored in the other - both during the experience and upon reflection.

Whereas the single, spiritual god of the Judeo-Christian religion replaced the polytheistic, material cult of animism, Shaw's techno-wizardry revitalizes an ancient relic which, by virtue of its silicon miracles, engages its viewers in a farcical religious transformation. Indeed, technology has become the god of information society. But blind faith in its beneficence must be carefully considered, for as Shaw intimates, it is empty inside, it has no spiritual core, no sense of responsibility or ethics. Though it demands reverence and provokes questions, the Golden Calf offers no salvation and admits of no answers. It should be remembered also, that gold is not just a precious material, but that it possesses outstanding conductivity, allowing the rapid transmission of electrical information with little resistance. Similarly, the Golden Calf is not just a precious ether, but possesses the remarkable ability to merge seemingly antithetical worlds. And perhaps the most prescient contribution of VR technology might be to create a bridge between the false dualities that define the western perceptual tradition: subject/object, real/simulated, good/evil. In this regard, the Golden Calf is a formidable achievement because it accomplishes and promotes the harmonious coexistence of divergent realities, offering hope of a new paradigm that transcends destructive dichotomies, constructing a polychotomous mode of perception, a cyberception(2), based on mutuality, simultaneity and consonance.

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Notes:

1 Australian artist Jeffrey Shaw is Director of the Institute for Image Media at the Center for Art and Media Technology (ZKM) Karlsruhe, where the author gratefully served a residency, summer, 1994.

2 See Roy Ascott, The Architecture of Cyberception, Leonardo Electronic Almanac, Volume 2, N° 8, MIT Press Journals, August 1994 (online publication.)