

Interview with Jeffrey Shaw

by Josephine Bosma

Jeffrey Shaw is an artist, and is currently mostly connected to the ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medien) in Karlsruhe, Germany. His work consists of rather immersive installations usually.

JB: You said in the beginning of your talk that there seem to be two tendencies in media art. Now those tendencies seem to be taken from your -own- work, so that is: visuals/images/concentrated spectacle and from panoramic painting to virtual reality. Is that the way you see media art or do you see anything beyond it? Why did you make such a limited description of media art?

Jeffrey Shaw:

It is a very convenient way to identify what I think are the two main currents of media art. The first configures the audiovisual experience inside a bounding frame, setting up a detached relationship between the viewer and the fiction which is constructed inside that frame. Such a frame (be it the frame of a painting, or the proscenium arch of a theater, or the black boundary of a cinema screen, etc) delineates and separates the fictional space from the real space - it sets up a magic window which we gaze through into aesthetically contrived spaces.

The other tendency wants to get rid of frame - there is no magic window, there is just a sense in which the created space is a surrounding experience which is somehow embedded in the realworld. A term for this is 'augmented reality' (as distinct from virtual reality) - one builds fictional constructs that augment the real world, that are conjoined with the real world and its inhabitants.

JB: Would that mean that your 'picture' of virtual reality is not so much a picture then? You also seem to take mediated and digital space into it, which of course also incorporates sound performance and other performance, and also networked art. You see this as all one space, as part of the panoramic space?

JS: I do. One of the central characteristics of the evolution of these technologies is the notion of convergence. Too simplistically this is understood as the convergence between the computer and television, but really it means the convergence of all the modalities of presenting and networking sound and image. This is enabled by a shared technological platform that is evolving towards a condition where 'anything/everything is possible'. In other words, currently distinct formations such painting, sculpture, cinema, television, internet, DVD, etc. will all become permutations of one highly effectual and heterogeneous technological infrastructure. This a very new situation for artists - this technological convergence will allow them to exploit, hybridize and/or invent whatever formations are appropriate to their creative objectives. Already the reciprocal 'scaleability' of interconnected audio visual data between the cinema, television, CD-ROM and internet (as well as clothes, toys, food, architecture, etc.) is becoming a feature of our machine culture.

JB: When I was watching your video's I got a bit carsick, or seasick, from all the movements.

JS: It is only an effect of watching the documentation. These are works are are meant for you to be inside of - where you are outside looking in you may feel unsettled.

JB: I was just wondering whether your interest for dislocation of bodies and objects also has a bit of a personal fear to it.

JS: I am very interested in kinesthetic effects and an ambience which directly addresses the viewers' body. This is not an aggressive strategy - in fact it is usually a delicate lure. For example, as you know when you dance the waltz, you must keep looking at your partner when you turn - if you try to relate to the room you'll get terribly dizzy. In other words the waltz forces you to lose yourself in a concentration on your partner. My work PLACE - A USER's MANUAL' uses a similar strategy. By putting the viewer on rotating platform it forces them to abandon their bodily relation to the surrounding real space and kinesthetically enter the imaginary space that the work offers. This happens quite unconsciously - usually only after the viewer steps off this rotating platform do they realise they have to re-orientate and find themselves in the real space again. Of course this is why in general motion platform technology is so effective, both for simulation purposes and the growingly popular location based entertainment uses such as ride experiences. For the first time the artwork can address and engage not just the audio visual senses but the whole body of the 'participant' This effect can also be experienced looking at Francis Bacon's paintings. He wanted his works to be hung low - so that the figures were on eye level with the viewer and there would be an implied continuity between the real and fictional spaces. Looking at such paintings (as opposed to their reproduction in a book) becomes a whole body experience - your body in an equivocal proximity to his bodies. One history of painting is of painters attenuating and letting things come out of the frame so that there can be this tentative conjunction between the created space and the space which the viewer inhabits.

JB: Do you think what we used to understand as conceptual art is very different from media art?

JS: No, it is the same thing. I can't imagine that one can make media art without first taking a very exact conceptual position in relation to whatever one is doing. Every media art work is compelled to incorporate a conceptual strategy because of the idealogical nature of the media.

JB: How do you see the aesthetics of media art?

JS: Not the same as traditional aesthetics. Certainly beauty is not an issue (though it could be a subject. There are so many new components in media art that are unprecedented and therefore an aesthetics that go with these modalities has to be created afresh. For instance one could talk about an aesthetics of interactivity. And one can talk about an aesthetics of the social, in the sense that net.art works and multi-user distributed virtual environments construct social spaces.

Aesthetics for me is more like a toolset of qualitative discriminations to guide the choices I make in my work, and a conceptual challenge because it should identify the intrinsically new properties of media art.

JB: Well, the boundaries which Katharina Gsoellpointer mentioned in her lecture here, between pop culture and high culture being fluid is of course an interesting one, especially as it is getting more and more fluid, overlapping more and more.

JS: Yes, and I liked Stahl Stenslie's notion of hi-fi and lo-fi artworks. But this needs to be understood as an aesthetic distinction. The main ideological issue is the confrontation between high tech and low tech, whereas hi-fi and lo-fi are just permutations of the dominant high tech culture. So embodying a work in a lo-fi environment calls for an aesthetics of the lo-fi - and of course you would not make a qualitative judgement by measuring it against a hi-fi work. One needs to understand the difference because each has a different starting point and a different ambition.

JB: The last thing you mentioned was that your work can only be seen at two different places (because of the technology it requires) and therefore of course it is very hi-fi. My question is (and you might have been asked this many times before): don't you think this dependency of media art on electronic art institutions and the industry is a bit dangerous?

JS: No more dangerous than any dependency on the art market! Anyway, this is only a temporary condition - those currently 'high tech' technologies that are only accessible through institutions or industry will in a year or two be low cost mass market consumer goods. As Apple already points out - its consumer G4 was an institutional super computer a few years ago, while together with a DV camera it gives you a fully autonomous film production and post-production capability. It is above all the insatiable appetite of the computer gaming community that is now driving the development of extremely sophisticated yet ultra low cost hard and software products. Even environments as exotic, exclusive and expensive as the Cave (a 3D VR surround space of which there are only very few, and for which Jeffrey Shaw has made an artwork, JB) will soon become a domestic utility as the 'home cinema' evolves into a dedicated architecture of immersive multimedia experiences. So one can say that those resources that today are still in the technocratic domain will move more and more rapidly into the social domain, and the job of the artist (despite current circumstances) is provoke precedents, possibilities and models of things and situations which later will become distributed and ubiquitous.

JB: Wasn't the net art browser a bit too much out of your league?

JS: In what way?

JB: It is not immersive... it limits you to this little strip on the wall with work of other people...

JS: The net.art browser uses an interaction paradigm that I've been working on for many years and used in many works - in for instance The Virtual Museum, the Golden Calf, EVE, and PLACE - A USER'S MANUAL. It is a strategy of the

interactively mobile viewing window which embodies the viewers changing point of view, in contrariety to the static windows of painting, cinema and the monitor screen which binds the viewers point of view. Of course the net.art browser is not an art work in itself - it was just an idiosyncratic design strategy for presenting net art web sites in a new format in a museum context. When Peter Weibel and I were planning the NET CONDITION exhibition at the ZKM we discussed the incongruity of asking visitors to come to a museum location to look at monitor screens when these people could just as easily (and probably more comfortably) look at the net.art web sites on their screens at home. With the net.art browser I wanted to offer the visitor a new and engaging environment in which to explore these web sites - one that was scaled up to a larger audience, and one which hybridized the customary museum/gallery presentation of pictures on a wall with the notion of a linear wall mounted browser whose images came directly from the net. I also wanted a mechanism that embodied and expressed the functionality of a curatorially chosen set of web sites (in contrast to the ubiquitous computer monitor which is a portal into the universe of ALL web sites).

JB: Did you discuss it with the artists also?

JS: That was not my task. It was Benjamin Weil's, because he was person invited to be the curator of the works presented in this net.art browser. And indeed he found that some artists did not agree to present their work in this way. They took the position that net.artworks should only be embodied in the internet connected generic monitor/mouse/keyboard formats for which they were designed.

JB: The whole navigation set also...

JS: Yes - there is a restriction of navigation possibilities offered by my net.art browser - it restrains the open ended connectivities of the web to a linear arrangement of selected artist's web sites. But this was felt to be an appropriate (and interesting) strategy in a context of a curated presentation of a specific set of web sites in an exhibition space - and I should add that if the web sites themselves opened links to other sites, this functionality was still maintained. Of course there is some irony there in the net.art browser - the unlocated immateriality of net space is forced to linearly reside on a museum wall. But one could argue that computer screens and the commercial browsers are also places and devices (produced by technocrats) where cyberspace is contained and contaminated. So isn't it a special challenge to explore new artistically motivated strategies of visualisation and interaction for the net? I do feel that alternative presentation mechanism are viable, and even necessary for such special circumstances as public spaces. The net.art browser is simply one experimental approach to the question of how to locate net.art in a museum.

JB: That is a very strong curational focus though...

JS: This question opens a much broader issue - the role (if any) of the museum as an appropriate location for media art. And the nature of those new museums (like the ZKM) that set out to design themselves as such an appropriate location. Traditionally the museum is a space of museification, a space that while heralding and celebrating the new also signals its institutional absorption and reduction to commodity. But media art needs a public forum, and there is a special challenge

now from an architectural, scenographic and curatorial point of view, to find ways to exhibit, collect and conserve media art that does not museify and choke its radically experimental nature, but instead celebrates and stimulates its instability.

Net.art is a new and special case because for the first time there is an art practice that contains within itself a universal mechanism of presentation, dissemination and intercommunication. This makes the question of the desirability of a museological intervention even more pertinent - it would seem at first sight to just be a reduction of a much more precious freedom. But an exhibition like the ZKM's net.condition does something that domestic distribution cannot do - it creates a location of collected intensity of works and concentrated variety of experiences for a mass public - an alluring zone of social curiosity, excitement, consumption and reflection.

J.B: Aren't you too easily making a comparison between exhibiting media art and exhibiting this art for/to a mass audience? Should one not be in the first place concerned with exhibiting works as much in their original spirit? It seems to me that creating for a mass audience is a different thing all together, which easily corrupts subtle or sensitive details or spirits of artworks.

JS: The integrity of the original artwork is only fully intact in the imagination of its creator. Even its translation into the physical is a depreciation forced by the constraints of materiality, and exposure of the artwork to the social leads to the complete degradation/reconstruction of the 'original' by its interpreters and manipulators. On the other hand it is only in this social vector that the artwork becomes a cultural artifact and assumes a historical significance. The 'original spirit' must always dance on the edge of the volcano of the social, a destiny of both discriminating and mass consumption. Museums are built on this edge, they are locations of trans-actions between remaining glimmers of the 'original spirit' and the social. But media art has (at least) two unprecedented capabilities: it can create a virtual social that includes the social as a function of its 'original spirit', and it can build virtual museums that are themselves architectural incarnations of the 'original spirit'. So the 'Art of Life' now seems so proximate!