

CRITICAL FRICTION

IN YOUR FACE, REAL SPACE

By Doug Back

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Artists have always used new technologies... the first person that blew paint through a hollow stick to reproduce an image of their hand on a cave wall was using technology. As Jean Piché has said "a flute is a machine and a piano is a very complex machine".

I was looking at a Windsor Newton painting products catalog recently and the photographs in it show hands mixing paint with a mortar and pestal, no where in it is any hint of a production line or the large powerful computers this company must own, certainly much more powerful than anything I could afford. The painting crowd is still in denial.

The arguments about whether artists should engage with computer technology or not, are dead. Affordable computer technology has been in the hands of the general public and artists for fifteen years. Computers are old tech.

The discussion about whether artists should engage with high technologies or not are now in the hands of those artists dealing with bio/medical art, Orlan, Joe Davis and Stelarc.

The only determining factor on the popularity of electronic art is whether electronic technology is in current public moral favour, and the coverage of the gulf war certainly has put computer technology in a favourable light in the west.

Now that our field has aged significantly and we are secure in our place in art history we can look forwards to openly discussing the factions within electronic art, the In Your face artists and... I guess we would have to call them the In Your Machine artists, the political artists and the apolitical artists.

One thing that this field has sorely lacked is critical friction and critical friction is what will make or break technologically based art works.

The other is a bit of perspective in relation to art, in the holistic sense.

I have brought with me slides of the works of two artists which influenced me tremendously as a young art student..., way back in the late 70's. As a matter of fact they started me in electronic art. One could be labeled as In Your Face, the other as In A Machine artist.

We will start with Bruegel's "Hunters in the Snow" also known as "Return of the Hunters" circa 1565, because it is my favourite interactive audio installation work. I have a special affinity for this piece probably because I was born in rural/suburban Canada.

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This painting is made specifically to trigger auditory memory responses in the brain through visual clues. Auditory memories seem to be rather good at retrieving bodily experiences.

The triggers, for me, often start with the sound of the creaking sign by the bonfire, because I have experienced and have very fond memories being around bon fires when it is very cold out. It reminds me of the feeling of freezing on one side and being toasty on the other, the feeling of turning around to keep the warmth moving through the body.

Or I may enter the piece off in the distance with the sound, very familiar to me, of people skating on a pond.

The next time I enter the painting I may begin with the group of hunters and that special sound that your feet make trudging through snow, in the woods, at minus 10 degrees. I may hang around with the hunters because I have done that, and I like remembering the sound dogs make when they are travelling in a group. I have also really enjoyed the sound of crows as you disturb their territory. I have also laboured carrying heavy objects over ice.

As an interactive piece it is truly seamless. Problems with data access are only limited by my own internal retrieval speeds. But then again any truly good piece of art is truly interactive.

As I pondered Bruegel as a young art student it occurred to me that it doesn't matter which medium you use to make art, all you are really doing is pulling up memories in the viewers brain. This is the only media available to you as an artist.

I found this thought very liberating because at the time I was a painter.

Before you think I am a total, romantic flake, I would like to introduce you to the other artist which has had profound effects on me. Paulo Uccello was more of the ilk of a tool or system builder/user. If this was done on a VAX in the 70's this piece would be even more of a historical landmark.

My favourite Uccello painting is his "Battle of San Romano" executed in 1455, Uccello was trained as a Gothic artist and was kind of born again when he got into the new technology of perspective. What I admire about his paintings is his obvious utter failure to marry gothic art and perspective. It is the friction of these two incompatible belief systems that make his paintings work.

I do not, however, engage in the content of this painting like I do that of Bruegel. Uccello's work is very different investigation than Bruegel's, as different as hardware and software.

Uccello, I think, would have been a VR artist were he alive today. Working on building tools and systems. The content of the work voyeuristic and a show piece for the technology.

Uccello taught me that art and science or technology can and should co-exist in one place. That part of the reason that

our world is in such a mess is that we educate scientists and artists as two separate cultures and don't provide them with a common language or meeting ground.

In my piece entitled "Dummer Weather" which duplicates the weather conditions at my home in a remote location via a modem and a large servo-motor controlled fan, I was working in the vein of Uccello.

When my body temperature is recorded and played back through the seat of a chair as in "Brain Bag" I am working in the vein of Bruegel. I play both sides of the street.

I started when this field was pretty much unclaimed territory, at the third wave of modern techno-art that came with the introduction of the microprocessor.

I wire-wrapped my own computer, have learned several languages, and gone through several operating systems in that time. Each and every one of these changes came with the requisite 5:00 in the morning hack sessions. At the end of each session a new gizmo or language would come out. I would panic at falling behind and losing the respect our culture has for the technical wizard. It certainly seems that curators of techno-art want those artists that deal with the leading edge. The Uccellos of the twentieth century.

But there comes a time when an artist just has to dig in their heels, things get in the way like relationships, children etc. The appeal of staying up till 5 in the morning night after night learning a new language when you have not exhausted the potential of an older language seems to dissipate with age.

I no longer learn tech for the glory of the edge, just enough to be familiar with the materials I use. I don't build art through technicians or electronic kits because for me I would be losing the ability make my materials do something beyond the constraints of the manufacturer. It takes 5 -10 years to become a proficient writer, dancer, painter or interactive artist and there is no application software out there to make you one any faster.

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