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HOLINESS AND DREAD: POETICS IN ELECTRONIC ART

Summary

This paper discusses the structure and aim of poetry, and suggests that the electronic arts are uniquely suited to duplicate the poetic experience. It reviews an argument that our species developed the computer as a new frontier to be colonized by the expanding human brain. It discusses specific electronic art works that, by generating new forms of poetic experience, reinforce this view of new media as virgin space into which human imagination is growing. It mourns the schism between science and art, and between the mind and the soul, and entreats artists working with electronic media to work toward mending, rather than expanding, the rift.

I took the title of this address from the final lines of *Kubla Khan*, where Samuel Coleridge offers an ecstatic description of the poetic experience. (Coleridge claimed he composed 200-300 hundred lines of *Kubla Khan* in an opium-induced sleep, but upon awakening could only recall and write down 54 lines before he was called away from his task by-if you can believe it-an appointment!) The poem fragment describes a "pleasure dome" built in a *Xanadu*, near a sacred river flowing through icy caverns to the sea. In the fragment's final stanza, the narrator fantasizes about the lavish constructions he could build in his mind if only he could hear a certain piece of music.

A damsel with dulcimer In a vision once I saw: It was an Abyssinian maid, And on her dulcimer she played, Singing of Mount Abora. Could I revive with me Her symphony and song, To such a deep delight 'twould win me, That with music loud and long I would built that dome in air, That sunny dome! Those caves of ice! And all who heard should see them there, And all should cry, Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair! Weave a circle round him thrice, And close your eyes with holy dread, for he on honey-dew hath fed, And drunk the milk of Paradise.

I love this image: that an artistic expression-here the Abyssinian maid's "symphony and song"-so powerfully affects its perceiver that he himself is transformed into an awe-inspiring vision, against which the reader is warned to "close your eyes with holy dread." These 18 lines of Coleridge's describe something I believe is worth striving for in all art, regardless of medium: the provocation of discovery. Why is discovery so important? As writer Annie Dillard wrote, musing about her life-long quest for illuminating knowledge and experience: What else are we here for?

Gravity, as you know, is said to have been discovered by Isaac

Newton. But I contend that each of us discovered gravity, along with everything else. I grew up in Alaska. Until I was seven years old, my family lived in Fairbanks. Winters were brutal. The temperature dropped as low as -60°F (-51°C), and for months it was dark almost around the clock. As a young child, though, I felt protected-by my family, by our apartment in an army barracks, and by a misunderstanding of my relationship to the earth's surface. I knew the earth was round, but I thought we lived inside it. I was in the kitchen one winter morning jabbering to my mother about this and that. She was getting me dressed to go outside-putting on my boots, snow-pants, parka, hat, scarf, mittens-and I was describing something to her from the point of view that we lived inside the earth. She corrected me in passing-while she zipped and snapped-as if I had made only a small grammatical error. Though I respond fast enough to practical information, I've always absorbed big news in silence. I didn't say anything else to her. I went outside and stood on the porch and stared at the vast snow field across the street. I gripped the handrail tightly. I was dizzy, sure I would be swept into space if I let go of the rail. I hung on for a long time, trying to remain calm, while thinking as hard as I could. I eventually convinced myself that something other than what I had envisioned must be in effect to keep me, and everyone and everything, from falling off the earth, and that whatever it was, it must be a constant force, and I could let go of the rail. That's how I discovered gravity.

Months later, at the end of the next summer, I discovered the link between art and technology. It was August, and I had received a box of crayons and a coloring book for my birthday. This particular crayon box was by Crayola and was new on the market. It held 64 crayons, a quantum leap from the 12- or 24-crayon boxes available before. The spectral range was staggering, and each of the colors had a distinct, evocative name: Goldenrod, Royal Purple, Wild Strawberry, Sky Blue, Thistle, Spring Green, Salmon, Orchid, Cerulean, Carnation Pink. It was a poem, this box of crayons, and reading name after name while looking at the individual colors put me in a trance-hypnotic and erotic. But that wasn't all. This box, beyond its record number of colors, had a built-in crayon sharpener. I recognized this as a profound technological break-through, a streamlined innovation. The crayon box was futuristic. It might as well have been made of titanium. I was thrilled with my possession, but I was uncomfortable about using it in my family's apartment. We lived in army barracks, as I said, and this was the '50s. Our furniture was heavy and graceless; we had ruffled curtains and flowered chintz upholstery. I hadn't paid attention to how domestic and old-fashioned my environment was until I got the space-age crayon box. While weather permitted, I took the crayons and coloring book out to the car-a green Plymouth sedan with a lot of chrome-high-tech enough for me at the time-and sat in the back seat and colored. This crayon box, full of variety and innovation, changed my perception of who and where I was, and opened me up to a larger world.

Looking back on these small events, I remember with most pleasure the moment of discovery-the shudder of excitement, the shiver of sudden knowing.

I admire the technological advancements and accouterments of electronic media, but my deeper interest is in its poetic capacity. "Poetic" as Aristotle defined it: able to approximate truth by imitating life. Imitation, Aristotle theorized, is natural to members of our species from early childhood. We like to do it, and we delight in viewing works of imitation. We appreciate and learn from vicarious experience just as we appreciate and learn from real experience. While a fair amount of visual art contains narrative prose, whole poems, or poem fragments, these elements don't automatically provide a poetic experience. They often intentionally serve a structural or propagandistic function, as in the work of Jenny Holzer. The poetic experien-

ce we derive from poetry itself—from an arrangement of words we read or hear—is about much more than the fact of the words themselves. Poetry comes to us in a bombardment of discrete units—sounds, syllables, words, with their individual and collective meanings, rhyme or lack of it, vocal rhythms, pauses. These discrete elements impinge upon our senses, they link up, in an almost-chromosomal fashion, with receptive strands in our consciousness. As we consume a poem, its wholeness disintegrates, it flies to us in pieces, and it is (or is not) reassembled in our bodies. The school of literary criticism called "reader-response" holds that the poem does not exist until it has generated a poetic experience in someone's consciousness. If the poem works, there is an ah-ha! moment, a moment when the reconstruction builds to a point that triggers a sudden transcendent experience. This impressionist flood of awareness frequently occurs before, and independent of, any understanding of the poem's concrete, word-by-word, meaning. If you accept this definition of a poem, then electronic media appears uniquely suited to duplicate the poetic experience. Our bodies absorb the media's disassembled, pixelated and/or pulsing emissions, and then internally reassembles the parts into a whole. Though television and film theoretically provide nothing but imitation and vicarious experience, it is rarely poetic. We make choices about whether or not to participate, and to so many of the experiences we are offered via this now-eternal animated effluvium, we say no. If we walk away with anything lodged in our brains, it is likely to be some annoying catch phrase or commercial jingle. It seems, in fact, that many people derive little experience, other than that of time passing, from popular media. We do derive information, but that's a different commodity. Maybe it is because we are forced to actively reject so much of what comes to us via electronic media that the field of electronic art, now well over thirty years old, remains marginalized. TV is a control freak, and we avoid this trait in media just as we avoid it in potential friends or lovers. Because the medium is the same for reruns of Dallas as for Bill Viola's *The Theater of Memory*, people jaded by the cloy manipulation of the former reflexively shy away from the latter. And the keepers of art history's flamescholars and academicians, those who must find work credible before admitting it into the canon—are, at least stereotypically, fearful of high technology, let alone simple innovation. It is ironic that so much of early video work was itself aimed at dissecting and critiquing the medium and the message of popular broadcasting.

However pervasive its presence in our lives, we tend-not so much as artists but as a species—to regard electronic media as a family of cold, inorganic inventions stumbled upon inadvertently. The astronomer Robert Jastrow suggests something quite different. In a 1981 book called *The Enchanted Loom: Mind in the Universe*, Jastrow traces the evolution of the human brain, and argues that we are currently colonizing computers in order to provide our brains with otherwise unachievable room for expansion. He points out that the human body has undergone little change in the last million years, and that the brain hasn't changed, at least in size, for the past 100,000 years. Organization may have improved, but the amount of information and circuitry that can fit in a cranium of fixed size is limited. Human head size is restricted by the size of the birth canal. Evolutionary forces promote survival of the animal as a physical entity, but they don't seem refined enough to respond to the advantage of increased intelligence by naturally selecting the broader female pelvis. And, of course, no one is sure that expanded brain function is beneficial to the survival of the human species. And even if this selection-for-intelligence were in operation, evolution is a slow process. Jastrow concludes, "The fact that the brain is no longer expanding, after a million years of explosive growth, suggests that the story of human evolution may be over." Then he suggests another possibility. that in computers we have created new frontiers for our brains to colonize—that computers are not a

distinct, discrete entity that the species can do with or without, but are instead a silicon-based sub-species that carbon-chemistry life invented in order to engulf.

We annexed the first computers to our quantitative memory: they help us count and keep track of things. We annexed another generation of computers to our eyes: aided by lasers, fiber-optical technology, and electron bombardment, micro-processors assemble images beyond the range of human visual capacity. Through this stage of development, computers were performing relatively linear tasks, they may have duplicated or improved on a human capability, but it was only on a single capability. The current exploration into virtual reality is looking into every aspect of the three-dimensional human experience. Suddenly, technology's range is expanding at warp speed, eliminating in the process any clear difference between the way we think and the way our machines think.

For the rest of my time here, I'd like to look at works of electronic art that bridge the distance between man and machine—that stimulate the viewer's visceral awareness in a manner very much like real experience.

In the 1950s, during one of his early crusades, the American televangelist Oral Roberts placed his hand, palm facing outward, in front of the studio camera and said to his nationwide television audience, "Put your hand on my hand." Roberts did not believe his touch could heal. He was, however, genuinely convinced that this "point of contact" (Roberts' term for the moment of physical connection) permitted his followers to release their own faith, which in turn opened them up to the healing power of God. Place Roberts' video-induced "performance work"—tens of thousands of viewers, all across America, with their hands on their television screens, feeling themselves flooded with health and well-being—in the context of the last several decades of video art, and it is hard to find another work that so thoroughly engages so many people at once. I have talked to a number of people at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma about their founder's prescient awareness of television's unique power to communicate and to connect. Someone I spoke to just a couple of weeks ago told me that Roberts stopped doing the "hand thing" on television when he felt it had become too much of a spectacle. But he continued to promote physical contact as a trigger to release spiritual belief. In the '70s, according to the person I spoke with, Roberts suggested to members of his television audience that they take the hand of someone else in the room, and in doing so, agree to believe in the Lord. If there was no other person in the room, but if there was a dog or a cat, he urged taking one of the pet's paws, and in that moment of contact with another living creature, agreeing to believe.

I first heard about Roberts' early television work from the American artist Doug Davis, who in his 1974 Austrian tapes did a series of performances works that suggested body contact with the interior of the video monitor. In one work, he, too, appears to be inside the monitor pressing his hands outward; in another he appears to be holding the monitor up in the air from the inside, in a third he appears to be standing on the inside of the monitor's face. Looking back, these are simple manipulations, but also quite sophisticated—they remind us simultaneously of the media's real and surreal qualities.

In 1980, when he was a Fellow at M.I.T.'s Center for Advanced Visual Studies, German artist Bernd Kracke, in collaboration with Aldo Tambellini, created the slow-scan media event called *transmitted sculpture*. The work was first transmitted from the M.I.T. media studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts to a studio in Atlanta, Georgia. The idea was to use pixel-by-pixel, slow-scan transmission to transmit and reconstruct the life-size image of nude model's body. I saw the reception of this work in the BMW headquarters in

Munich, during M.I.T.'s 1983 Sky Art Conference. It was mesmerizing to watch the nude body fill the eight video monitors as slowly as sifting sand. It was like watching new life form, except instead of a mitotic process, where a whole splits into parts, this was the child of alien genetic systems, something neither organic nor inorganic, yet beautiful and in its steady, dream-like, assembly-method of procreation-hopeful.

Tall Ships by video artist Gary Hill comes close to the sense of physical contact achieved by Oral Roberts. *Tall Ships* was exhibited at Documenta in 1992 and at the Whitney Biennial in 1993. Sensitive to the position of a viewer traveling down a narrow, completely dark corridor, electronic switches trigger the projection of an image on the wall immediately adjacent to the viewer. These images, which emerge one at a time in sequence as the viewer moves down the corridor's length, are black-and-white laserdisc "movies" of individuals of varying ethnic origin, age and gender, initially occupied with some activity—a man working under the hood of his pick-up truck, a woman washing dishes, a young girl on a swing. The people in these images look up with recognition when the viewer nears, stop what they are doing—the man puts down his wrench, the woman leaves her dishrag, the girl hops to the ground and walk toward the viewer as though toward an acquaintance. As they approach, the figures' dimensions increase until they are approximately life-size. The sophisticated technology used by Hill to produce this encounter is both literally and virtually invisible; it is as if the figures simply materialize in response to the viewer's presence. In startling contrast to the many variations on the theme of alienation that dominated the '93 Whitney show, *Tall Ships* offered a sympathetic encounter with almost-warm flesh and blood.

L.A. artist Brad Braverman died of AIDS in January 1996 at the age of 34. His final work, a 50-minute, four-vignette video called *Rawshock* (a play on the word "Rorschach"), confronted the majority of sexual taboos currently woven into the fabric of American culture. In a format of hardcore, homosexual pornography, the vignette "Dog Daze" refers lightly, poetically, and almost humorously to bestiality, "TV Violence" deconstructs to minute detail a rape scenario, "Ken Doll" makes a heart-wrenching allusion to pedophilia, and "The Last Kiss" presents necrophilia as a final and exquisitely passionate act of love. "Nudes have always been the focus of my work," Braverman said. "The shift from painting nudes with erotic overtones to creating what I regard to be genuinely erotic and artistic pornography was a natural one. I like pornography, it interests me, but my significant relation to it is as an artist, not as a consumer." Braverman's first two full-length productions—*Fetish* and *Disconnected*—were designed to be marketed within the pornographic industry. Lead-in text describes the works as "visual fantasy presented as one viable alternative to actual sexual contact with another person." (Here Braverman echoes Aristotle's argument for the value of mimesis, or imitation, in providing the perceiver with a useful and enlightening vicarious experience.) Braverman's work investigates a broad range of erotic stimuli, from, at one extreme, acts which are by strict legal definition obscene in most American communities (e.g., penetration with a gun or police nightstick), to, at the other extreme, the subtlest of gestures—lighting a cigarette, picking up a glass of water, unzipping jeans, stroking hair. It is in this latter territory—that of the sublime, supporting detail—that the uniqueness of Braverman's artistic approach is most easily apprehended. "There are a million details which make people sexy and intriguing. I'm interested in thoroughly eroticizing the actors, in making them more sexual, more powerfully potent." For every 5 minutes that made it into his final videos, Braverman shot an average of 60 minutes. This 12-to-1 ratio is in sharp contrast to the industry average of 2-to-1. He cited current research indicating that men fantasize to repetitive brief images—an erotic gesture looped by the mind to be

watched again and again and again—while women fantasize to a more linear, story-like progression of imagined events. The strobe-like flashing and looping of image in Braverman's early work was designed to parallel the fantasy patterns of men.

The combination of strobe and body produces an astonishing and thrilling effect in "Caught," a 1982 work by New York-based choreographer David Parsons. At the onset of the dance, the stage is lit by single overhead spot, and Parsons is moving from corner to corner. He is a tall man, with a powerful body. Enough time passes for the audience to become accustomed to his form and his sharply defined movements; then the overhead spot goes out, the stage is completely black, and Parsons begins to execute a series of high jumps from one part of the stage to another. He has a hand-held control for a strobe light; at the height of each of his leaps he triggers the strobe. The audience sees Parsons only when he is in the air; it is as if he is flying, and in one passage he appears to walk on air. At various points through the course of the piece, the overhead spot comes back on to reveal Parsons standing, quite relaxed, in the center of the stage. Then the light goes out and the indestructible illusion begins again.

Artists Yukio Fujimoto and Dale Eldred have used the strobe to imprint eerie after-images on the viewer's inner eye. Fujimoto's 1988 work *Printed Eye* looks disarmingly simple, like a toy. A slide scope with a flash attachment and a release cable is mounted above a small rectangle of perforated steel plate. The words PRINTED EYE are spelled out in blue and red plastic letters glued to the plate. The viewer is invited to look into the scope and push the release button. What you see in the scope is a black-and-white slide bearing the word GHOST. When you push the release, the light flash goes off in your eye, causing momentary blindness. For a long time after the experience, the ghost-like image of the word GHOST continues to float in front of your viewing eye. Eldred's *Color/Light/Memory II*, also exhibited for the first time in 1988, consisted of twelve conical piles of raw pigment—red, yellow, and blue—arranged on pedestals in a grid pattern in an otherwise empty gallery, and strobe lights mounted directly above each cone. The room was dark but for a strip of floor-mounted LEDs delineating the area where viewers were to stand. The strobe lights were timed to go off every 15 seconds. When they flashed, the vision of color was so instantaneous that it appeared to viewers to have occurred more in imagination than in real space and time. In the dark aftermath of the strobes' flash, the ghost image of whichever pigment cone the eyes had been focused on during the strobe remained in the viewer's mind's eye, floating up and away from the real form. Because the eye's pigment cones for the particular color—red, for instance—were saturated by intense exposure, the other two color cones were all that was available to fill the after-image. If you were staring at a red cone at the time the strobe went off, the after-image would be blue-green. If you were staring at the blue cone, the after-image was a muddy mix of green and red. Fujimoto's and Eldred's works induce a startling revelation: The body can register experience the mind knows nothing about. In neither Fujimoto's nor Eldred's work does the viewer's mind's eye "see" an event that violently stimulates the body's consciousness.

A former-writer-now-attorney friend of mine named David Shoup once described the physical environment as made up of "air, and all that which isn't air." Maybe we can talk similarly about "pragmatic consciousness, and all that which isn't pragmatic consciousness," with the latter being a state of mind available to art, and to the poetic construction. We know now so much more than 20-30 years ago about how people take in information. We know that some people's brains are more acutely receptive to the written word than to image, and others, vice versa. As I said earlier, the idea of electronic technology as a tool to further our species' collective intelligence

is not a popular one. Many believe television threatens, or has already destroyed, literacy. An understanding of the potential relationship between electronic media and literacy-not just the fact of "reading," but the phenomenon of "reading" (absorbing, comprehending, synthesizing)-is only just beginning. I've written recently about an artist in Kansas City named Michael Rees who says the forms in his work derive from his dreams. And dreams, he believes, are the human counterpart to computer-based virtual reality. Via the computer, we can explore the physical dimensions in our psyche, even going so far as to recreate and build the components of our imaginary and dream lives. Rees points out that the computer world is entirely based in text. Even 100% visual images are 100% language-based. "What we desire linguistically results in a three-dimensional, visual object. And what we desire visually, the computer must absorb linguistically. We are in a paradigm shift. This is the first time that image is as powerful in the language process as the language itself. Image now has the potential to be literate." Rees says, "As an artist with a computer, I feel a little like Alberti, the 15th century architect, who forced people to peer at the scene inside his 'miracle box' while he raved on about the newly-discovered principles of perspective. The computer allows a similar phase of artistic investigation. For me, it's like the Renaissance in a box."

The terms "image" and "text" distinguish two forms of information delivery. In the history of humans' manifesting consciousness and memory by means other than speech, image was first, then written language. Writing removes us, to differing degrees, from the experience of a moment. Legal language, for instance, attempts to achieve great distance from the moment, while poetry works to stay as close as possible. All writing has to be processed through the intellect before reaching the senses, but poetry attempts to run the circuit quickly, to strike sensory chords before the rational brain engages. Western civilization is clearly on a path away from the experience of the moment-our social, political and religious institutions encourage removal, disengagement, isolation. Electronic media can further this distancing, or it can be used by artists to create powerful poetic events that openly explore the finely-tuned workings of our own and others' inner lives. Electronic art, with its incorporation of motion and sequence, audio and video, has the capacity to bridge the long-standing schism between art and science and the ever-growing schism between the mind and the soul. When I think about my discovery of gravity, or of my passion for the high-tech crayon box, I know that the thrill came from comprehending something both physical and metaphysical, and that the comprehension was triggered by a ribbon of real experience, slowly unfurling.

These schisms-even the concept of "schism"-traces back in Western culture to the Garden of Eden, our myth of beginning. Eve was punished because she lusted for-physically craved-knowledge. Eve didn't want to count the apples on the Tree of Knowledge, she wanted to eat them. Because I've placed so much stress on poetry here, I'd like to end with a poem by Louise Glück that addresses the tragedy of the rift. It's from the collection *Wild Irises*.

THE GARDEN

I couldn't do it again, I can hardly bear to look at it-

in the garden, in light rain the young couple planting a row of peas, as though no one has ever done this before, the great difficulties have never as yet been faced and solved-

They cannot see themselves, in fresh dirt, starting up without perspective, the hills behind them pale green, clouded with

flowers-

She wants to stop; he wants to get to the end, to stay with the thing-

Look at her, touching his cheek to make a truce, her fingers cool with spring rain; in thin grass, bursts of purple crocus-

even here, even at the beginning of love, her hand leaving his face makes an image of departure

and they think they are free to overlook this sadness.