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Painter and Computer Artist

COOL HEAVEN BLUES, AND SQUARES

Summary

An unsuccessful attempt to mount a major art/computer exhibition in London, the musings of a digital painter, and what this has to do with malls and tourists.

This talk is about my unsuccessful attempt to curate a major show of computer connected art in London. As a painter using computers, I sometimes feel caught up in a family squabble about who's doing the real art, who's living in fantasy land. So it's been useful for me to meditate about art and its functions. This past year I've been photographing tourists - electronically of course - and I realise now that I identify with their hesitant curiosity, uncertain where they're heading. I wanted to call that show Cool Heaven, conjuring up both the spiritual and the offbeat, the unattainable ideal of a pure and immaterial art. I wanted to maintain a critical perspective, the sense that dreaming about a promised land didn't mean there wouldn't be trouble along the way.

Russell Square is near the British Museum. Initially I was after

a certain shape - a backpacker with a map - to insert into a large painting as a vertical accent. This happens to be the informal but standard dress of the the modern pilgrim. I like the sensation of being a bit lost, everything vivid and strange. These back-packers stop at the same point each day to look at their maps or hesitate over a menu. What many of them are seeking is the best way to the museum, which is actually right there in front of them. On one occasion I found another photographer at work, with a plate camera, but he was photographing the hotel.

Lingering in my murky semi-consciousness is the idea of electronic media as the gateway to the promised land of art. New technology will of itself improve art, at least the way we experience art, or the way we make art - that's the bare theory. It's a lovely idea, especially if you don't put it to the test. But as many of us secretly know, electronic art so often falls short of the promise that canny theorists explain the discrepancy away by saying we need a different set of measurements, and maybe a different set of judges. Then it'll be clear that, indeed, through the intervention of IBM, Macintosh, SGI, art does become an enhanced product. There are gaps in the logic: does a truly mediocre painter take wing as soon as he or she converts to cyberspace? Or does the mediocrity just get to us faster? What happens to all the practitioners who persist with physical art, installation, video, etc...sooner or later it will converge, surely... or are they expected to retire from the scene gracefully? So, maybe we shouldn't march off at a tangent just yet and hope everyone else follows. Well, some of us like the isolation and the self-delusion... something close to the heart of the art of painting I suppose, fictions with light. But what if the PR of the new electronic art is taken too literally? What if the ordinary visitor pays to see an exhibition of virtual reality art? Can we supply the magic in the right quantities? Is this what we should be doing? And if a cut-down version of interactive art becomes the norm for the provincial art centre, what becomes of non-interactive art? Will that seem a contradiction in terms? Just something dusty and boring that grandad used to do? Painting, or non-interactive art, certainly won't be the cool thing to do.

Last year out of the blue I was asked to propose an exhibition of computer art for a suburban arts centre in London. I went along thinking this meant a few prints in a library foyer. The arts complex, the Croydon Clocktower, was more ambitious - their first exhibition was Picasso. Luckily I already had an exhibition planned in outline. A small gallery - again close to the British Museum - had suggested something a few months earlier and I'd assembled slides, mostly from ISEA exhibitors. The trouble was this gallery couldn't really stomach the mix of computers and art they talked of rag paper, and couldn't see their regular clientele paying for something reducible to binary code. The people at Croydon had different priorities. Market research revealed that computer art - if only as an idea - had an appeal to the shoppers in the malls nearby. Paper quality, artworld kudos, artistic integrity didn't really come into the equation, and I found that refreshing. The more they heard and saw of the interactive and the virtual the more they liked it... especially the rides. When I spoke of the excellent spread of catalogue essays I'd lined up, or of the sheer beauty of some non-interactive piece, I could sense their eyes glazing over.

Once the new kind of art centre, already excited by interactive guides and web sites, gets a whiff of user-friendly art there is no going back. This was, and is my dilemma. London has not seen a major exhibition of electronic art since Cybernetic Serendipity of 1968. Art schools have largely ignored the field. Galleries won't touch it. And much of what is done as 'electronic' art is embarrassing, and adds to the impression of pretentious trivia. So I was all too eager to make a splash by showing a good range of the best of what's been going on,

and that meant mostly from overseas. I become a cyberspace salesman. I didn't spot the catch. It was like getting a part in a TV drama and finding it was a game show. And like the game show ratings meant a lot more than artistic substance. Once you book in a few interactive installations, video projections, and VR set-ups, you find the non-interactive silent stuff consigned to the corridor by the toilets.

To be fair, the job of an arts centre is to deliver something accessible to the tired shopper. I'm fascinated by malls, the ones with food halls of supposedly international cuisine, i.e. different brands of fried food. It's an ambience so hygienic and artificial that highbrow art would have to scream to break into the catatonic stare. And then it would be just another promotion. I think of it more as a subject for art, or at least for observation, than as a place for art. And as if to confirm how hostile its fixed smile really is I found myself repeatedly ejected by Security for taking photos - this was in Georgia this year. Art, culture, heritage, tourism, shopping are all shading into each other in the market economy. And this gives me something to work on

'One of my favourite sections of the British Museum is the less visited basement of Roman sculpture, and whilst at a glance it looks unpromisingly remote - the polar opposite of user-friendly, interactive, multimedia immersive electronic art - with acquaintance it's rich with wicked detail. Among the bull's tormentors is a scorpion stinging his testicles. On a tomb a widow caresses the portrait of her young husband. This room is full of drama, comedy and soap opera. It tells me that life hasn't moved on that much in two thousand years. I work both in physical and electronic paint - you can call that ambivalence. And it probably makes me an unsuitable advocate of pure electronic art. It's not that I doubt the intense beauty of Kawaguchi or Abe or Verostko's images, the mesmeric hold of Sommerer and Mignonneau's creatures, or Stelarc, Bar-Min-Ski, Innocent, Jamie Sheridan, Weintraub's Realms, etc. But I don't want to sever the connection with ordinary things. I don't feel any of this determinism that says pop art, minimal art, conceptual art, and then, wow...immaterial cyberspace art. No. I like that Roman variety, life being more interesting than worrying about where art's going. The art centre, gallery, museum world has become acclimated to hype, and correspondingly it sometimes seems there's a preference for sensational, noisy, headline-seeking exhibits - visual sound-bites - or for the antithesis, the over-designed empty spaces of a minimalist aesthetic, which I've always found a caricature of the meditative life ... not much to do with emotion recollected in tranquillity. The title, Cool Heaven, arrived by accident, and was better than the preferred 'Cyberlight' I thought. A friend, originally French, mispronounced the name of a computer store called Callhaven. I have to be careful being glib about the spiritual. Web searches reveal groups in the US who have used Isaiah to compute the position - to the side of the moon - and temperature of heaven. I actually dislike the disembodied, not-there feel, and don't identify with the X-File mentality that floats in, but if you're a conscientious curator, or a commentator you have to reflect what is out there ... and the need for the sacred, the mythic, the transcendental is certainly finding expression in cyber world. Time for another square: Leicester Square is the cinema centre of London. Tourists come in their thousands every day. Families argue about Pizza Hut or Burger King. People also walk to work, mill about, carry bags, check watches, and complain about the shoes they've just bought. Part of the routine of being there is to take a snapshot - so here I fit in with the scenery - but what fills the viewfinder is mostly other tourists. And while families wait in line for the movie, or for the interactive rock museum, they are in a kind of non-time, minds absent, waiting for something more real to begin. Maybe they'll meet someone. Or maybe not. The entertainment industry is also keen on the interactive and the immersive, in

persuading people that a really involving experience is something as isolating as dental treatment, and likewise has to be technologically engineered and paid for.

And this is the crunch. In our enthusiasm for high performance art vehicles we cut loose from our roots in the physical dimension. That's fine. The freedom is exhilarating. But if you want to re-enter the milieu of mainstream art - and believe me, if you stood in line for hours to see the Cezanne show you know this too has some momentum - then you may not be let in as an artist. You'll be seen as a kind of DIY entertainer, the home-made theme park. I've seen quite fetching balls of light float round me in a VR piece - presented as revelatory art - but I've seen the same device in a Power Rangers movie, also presented as revelatory experience. Caught up in the world of organising a digital art show that has to draw in a new public - with an internet cafe of course - it's easy to lose your bearings. Computer shows have to justify the hardware, and in this case publicity was a third of the budget. So no time for subtlety, complexity - what does an artist want but attention? A week or two ago I found myself in a black leather chair discussing internet art on cable TV, and again there's this game you can play... where it's all simple stuff, new medium equals new art equals heaven round the corner, equals good thing. There's no hesitancy, doubt, enigma... the programme is called style cafe... and is as good as it probably could be, but what kind of vacuous idea are we all selling?... That art is such a weak ingredient in our lives that it can be slipped into the internet like special flavouring? On occasion ISEA conferences address the static work of art as if it were an out-of-date format, the obsolete precursor of the multimedia and the interactive. And I like the idea of being wrapped inside a bubble of delights, and I've enjoyed my interactive and VR trips. But a whole sequence of dark rooms, cyber strobing, rotating rave forms, ambient muzak, is like handing over your brain to be massaged...your attention gets diffused, generalised, and submissive. Despite the jargon it doesn't have the feel of a two-way interaction. Paradoxically, I find still images more interactive, the eyes that look back, the immobility of form that gets you speculating...the sense of time stopped. One effect painting can engineer is to reflect thoughts back at you, give a sense of wholeness, of completion, resolution. Hollywood, Disneyland, theme parks are big on immersion and interaction too, but with spine-chilling thrills and spills. If it's dinosaurs it's in the name of education, bringing the past back to life. Some arts centres feel they should compete - mistakenly perhaps - but low attendance figures spell closure. An administrator may reasonably ask - and did in this case - why a VR exhibition needs to be about art rather than about kitchens. It sounds smart to say that 'art' isn't a mystery ingredient, but just means something done superbly and with a lot of flair; that the internet in its totality is just a huge spiritual artwork; that we shouldn't give the 'artist's' page any more attention than the iguana site; that, yes, virtual worlds are just interesting, regardless of what's in there. But that way you talk yourself out of the picture.

When they pulled the plug on the show this February I felt the usual frustration of dealing with institutions - no discussion, just phony pretexts, officious memos. But I also felt some relief. Trying to get the show to happen somewhere else triggered the same kind of response. Computer art wasn't something to take seriously. It was art on acid, art as interactive play-time, art as background styling in the internet cafe. Not a priority, said the museums. There's still this sniffiness about supposedly difficult art that hasn't been endorsed by the cognoscenti's art mag, so you slot it in somewhere else, unable to distinguish the original from the rip-off. It's all effects - the same mentality that gave Schoenberg and Lutyens their break into the film world, but only as composers of horror film music. Part of me says forget it. Just carry on with your work, follow your nose, get by somehow. All that matters is to do

the work. Hope that sooner or later people will notice that some of this stuff asks tough questions. And part of me says it's just wrong that what's really become quite an art movement, and an international and variegated one at that, should be fed to the public in such trivialised form. It would be wrong to keep quiet.