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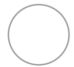
ART & EXHIBITS

AI meets Emily Dickinson in Mary Flanagan exhibit

Artificial intelligence is the primary material for all of the works in her first Houston show.



Molly Glentzer | June 20, 2022 Updated: June 20, 2022, 11:16 am

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The Mirror Book Emily 1 at Nancy Littlejohn Fine Art
Photo: Anthony Rathbun

Words migrate across time and white space in Mary Flanagan's "[the Mirror Book: Emily 1]," a mesmerizing "computational collaboration" with Emily Dickinson; or, rather, with poems penned by Dickinson from 1858 to 1865.

Flanagan also writes poetry, but she primarily writes and programs artificial intelligence software, the geeky "material'" required to build works like "[the Mirror Book]." AI is a primary material for all of the works in her first Houston show, which runs through July 9 at Nancy Littlejohn Fine Art.

"[the Mirror Book]" is the second piece in a series that involves projecting text onto the pages of a large, blank, custom-made book, juxtaposing Flanagan's poetry with verses by another woman who is no longer alive. (For the first one in 2018, Flanagan used

poems by the late Dora Maar, the photographer, painter and poet who was one of Picasso's late muses.)

The new version "mirrors" 10 poems by the reclusive and eccentric Dickinson with ten by Flanagan. The letters of the flying words resemble flocks of geese as they lift from their lines, arch gracefully across the spine and fill gaps where other words once stood.

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An essay about the show advises viewers to "pay attention to position, momentum, a trading of context and consciousness." You have no choice, really. The paired verses begin swapping words before you can fully absorb the original lines. This hints that it's less about the poetry than the revisionist digital magic that creates surprising flashes of language. Human poets deliberate for hours to find nouns, verbs and adjectives that might sing for eternity. Flanagan's exercise reminds us that words also can be fragile and ephemeral.

The changes are subtle but stark. For example, Dickinson's "Hope is the thing with feathers/That perches in the soul" becomes "Hope is the lot with feathers/that perches in the corner." Opposite it, lines of Flanagan's poem "Parking Lot at Whole Foods" transform from "Through the shiny black lot in rain/Dark corner painted darker" into "Through the shiny black soul in rain/Dark tune painted darker."

Another slippery nuance also comes into play. The Dickinson poems date from 1858 to 1865 (they're all from her third posthumously-published book). It's no wonder Dickinson shut herself up in her room; during those years her country was a moshpit of fractured national identity, what with the Civil War, fitful Emancipation and hyperinflation. Sound familiar? Flanagan's own poems date from 2006 to the present.

Colorful cloud photographs printed on aluminum fill the walls of Littlejohn's main gallery, looking deceptively simple, even when they're grouped into grids. You think, okay, a bunch of pretty clouds. So what? Hint: Process is as important as aesthetics here.

These works are from the "Daydream" series of Flanagan's long-running research-based work made with technology she calls [Grace:AI]. For nerdier readers out there, it's a Deep Convolutional General Adversarial Network, or G.A.N.— that uses a "deep learning model" to generate new data from "training data" that can be directed by the artist or scraped from the internet.

[Grace: AI] grew out of Flanagan's frustration with trying to find images of paintings by women artists in global archives. When she learned that museums prioritized paintings by men for digitalization, worked with historical archives to create a new smart machine intentionally biased toward women.

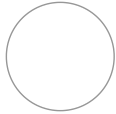
With the current "[Grace:AI]" series, she lets the machine daydream—an idea that occurred to her during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when sometimes the only way to feel truly free was to stare at the sky. (You can see the machine at work in a back gallery.)

The show's other work, the continuously evolving computational drawing "[Colors of Remembrance]," is a more solemn pandemic response presented as a grid of lined geometries. It's presented as a large projection that consumes a good chunk of wall -- bigger than anything else in the room but easy to miss during the daytime, in the brightly lit gallery.

Each drawing represents one day, and its uniquely colored lines represent that day's deaths from the virus, all built from public data. The first drawing was generated on February 29, 2020. "[Colors of Remembrance]" is still going, and its potential looks sadly endless: The lines are created from 2,161 Pantone colors that, with their different saturations and values, add up to more than 16 million potential colors.

You could ponder this piece all day, but watching poetry fly or gazing at clouds would probably be more fun.

Molly Glentzer is a Houston-based writer.



Molly Glentzer

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Molly Glentzer, a staff arts critic since 1998, writes mostly about dance and visual arts but can go anywhere a good story leads. Through covering public art in parks, she developed a beat focused on Houston's emergence as one of the nation's leading "green renaissance" cities.

During about 30 years as a journalist Molly has also written for periodicals, including Texas Monthly, Saveur, Food & Wine, Dance Magazine and Dance International. She collaborated with her husband, photographer Don Glentzer, to create "Pink Ladies & Crimson Gents: Portraits and Legends of 50 Roses" (2008, Clarkson Potter), a book about the human culture behind rose horticulture. This explains the occasional gardening story byline and her broken fingernails.

A Texas native, Molly grew up in Houston and has lived not too far away in the bucolic town of Brenham since 2012.

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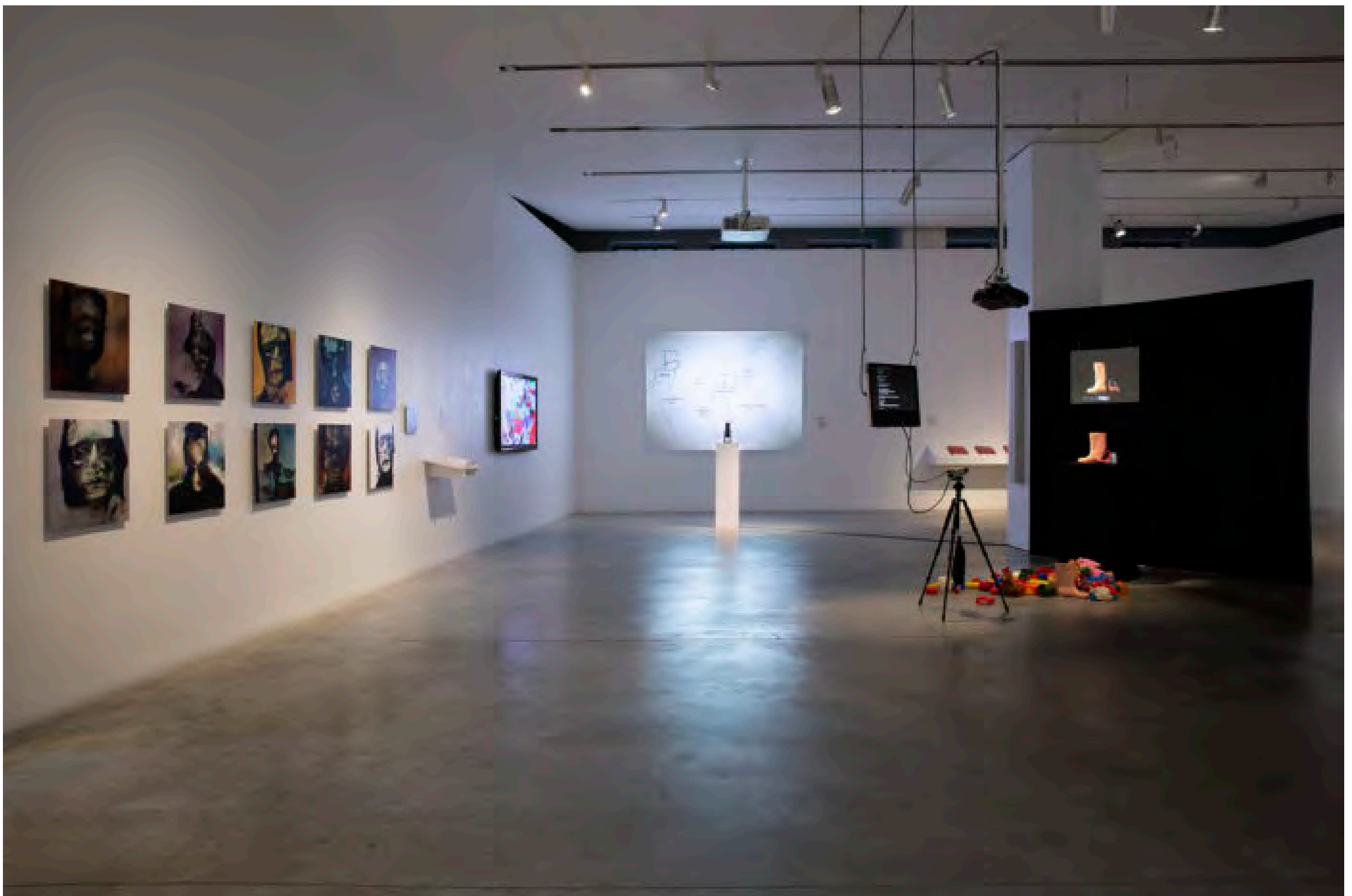
"The Question of Intelligence — AI and the Future of Humanity" Interview with Curator Christiane Paul

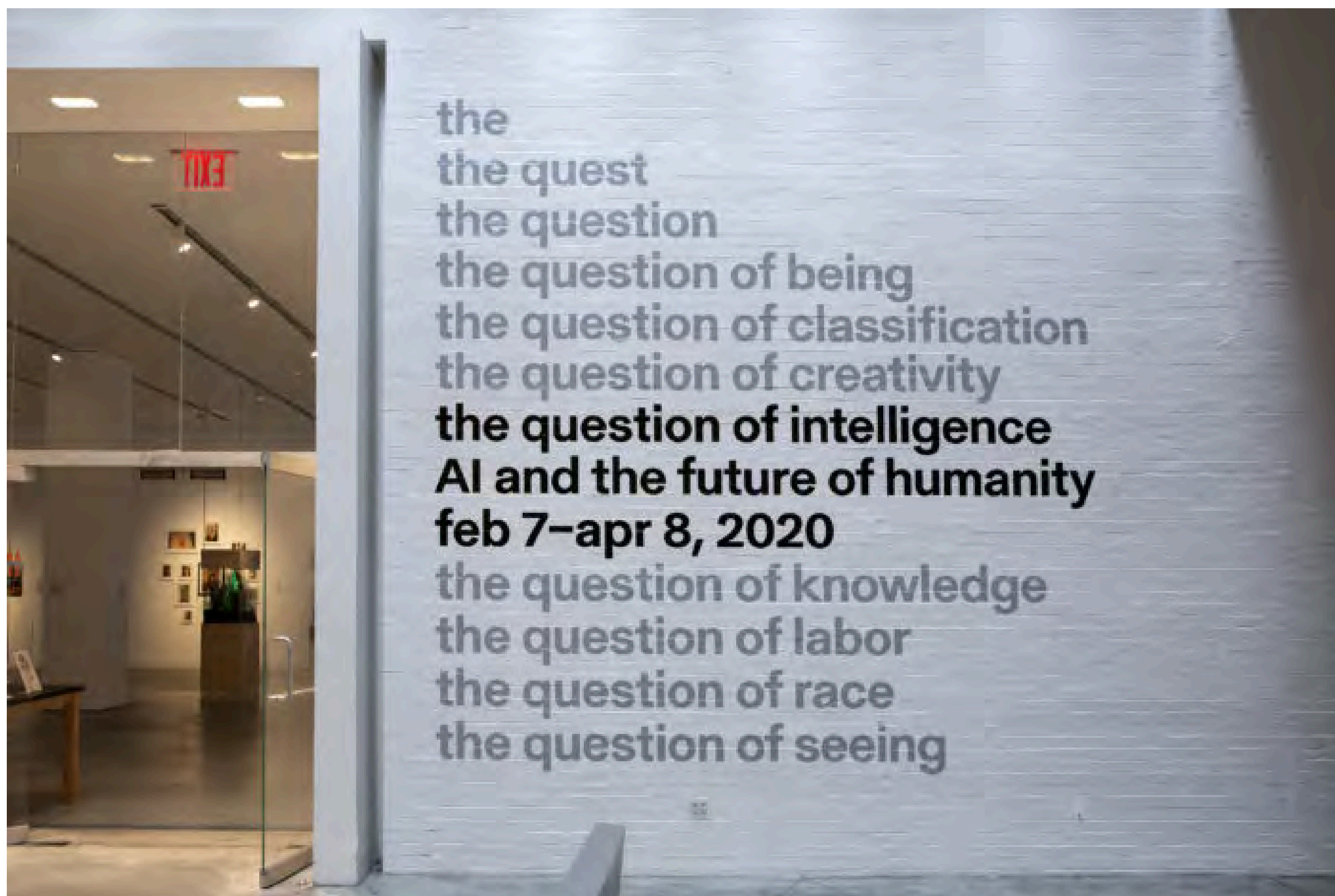
05/27/2020 *by* TANSY XIAO (HTTPS://ARTEFUSE.COM/AUTHOR/TANSY-XIAO/)



Installation view. The Question of Intelligence (Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, The New School). From left to right: Mary Flanagan, [Grace:AI], 2019 (11 dye sublimation prints on aluminum, 20 x 20 in. / 10 x 10 in., Electric Philosophy [Grace:AI], artist book, 8 x 8 in.); Harold Cohen, AARON, 1973– (Artificial intelligence software); Baoyang Chen, Zhije Qiu, Ruixue Liu, Xiaoyu Guo, Yan Dai, Meng Chen, Xiadong He, AI Mappa Mundi: An Interactive Artistic Mind Map Generator with Artificial Imagination, 2018–19 (AI painting system, interactive installation, dimensions variable);

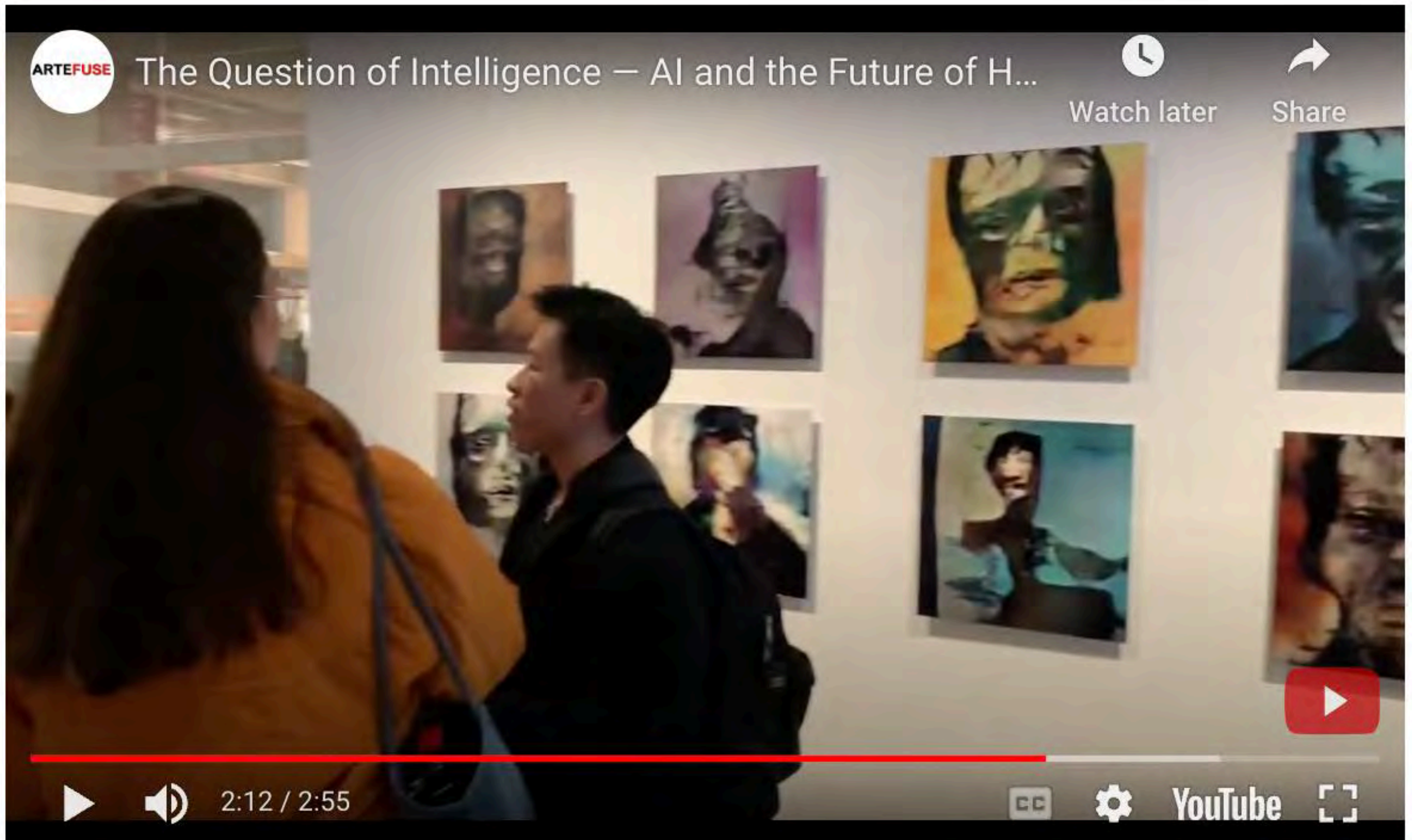
Tansy Xiao: I've noticed that the way you designed the title of the show "The Question of Intelligence — AI and the Future of Humanity" was to list it equally among a series, "the question of being, the question of classification, the question of labor, of race, of seeing" etc. Please share some insights on that idea.

Christiane Paul: The cluster of questions that surrounds the title "The Question of Intelligence" in the exhibition signage brings together crucial issues that are explored by works in the exhibition. Projects by Mimi Onuoha and Stephanie Dinkins address race; Brett Wallace and LarbitsSisters investigate the impact of AI on labor; and Memo Akten, Lior Zalmanson, David Rokeby, and Mimi Onuoha investigate AI as it affects vision, the process of seeing. All of these ancillary questions are also crucial to assessing intelligence: what does the automation of the senses, such as vision and speech, and of the tasks we perform as part of a job mean for the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills? What biases are datasets introducing and perpetuating when it comes to racial and ethnic representation and cultural context? At the core of all of these issues lies "the question of being," how we define ourselves as humans in the face of rising machine intelligence.



Title wall of The Question of Intelligence – AI and the Future of Humanity, curated by Christiane Paul (Sheila C.

Johnson Design Center, The New School, February 7 – April 8, 2020). Photo by Marc Tatti



Video: Opening night for "The Question of Intelligence – AI and the Future of Humanity"

TX: Over the years the art world had been relying on varying techniques to withdraw from subjectivity: the vulnerable, almost flawed nature of being human. David Rokeby's *The Giver of Names* pointed out in a very playful way the absurd randomness of rulemaking, while Mary Flanagan's *[Grace:AI]* has attempted to not necessarily achieve the ultimate neutrality but to utilize such tendencies as a vessel to address the existing bias in artificial intelligence. Could you talk a bit about her approach? In observing the process of machine learning, do we look back and introspect the structure of our own history, who was writing it, and in what system?

CP: Your question makes a very important point. We indeed need to take a close look at the structure of our technological and cultural history and ask ourselves who has been in control of its language and is "writing" this history. Not coincidentally, the book that is part of Mary Flanagan's project *[Grace:AI]* includes definitions of intelligence over the centuries and highlights that most of them have been written by men. For creating *[Grace:AI]*, Mary Flanagan used a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) trained only on works by female painters, which is a perspective that no human and only an algorithm exposed to a particular slice of art history could have. A GAN uses generative algorithms trained on a specific data set to produce new original images with the same characteristics as the original set.

They are then evaluated by discriminative algorithms that, based on their own training, judge whether the newly produced data looks authentic. After having been trained on the history of women painters, *[Grace:AI]* was tasked with painting a portrait of Frankenstein's monster, an implicit critique of the artist's role in conceiving a machinic entity. The use of GANs in creating artwork has recently emerged as a trend, which even led to the coining of the term GANism. Many of these GAN-based projects use a training data set to make an AI that paints like a Renaissance artist or abstract expressionist or you name it. *[Grace:AI]* intentionally stays away from a seemingly 'neutral' perspective by presenting a deliberately feminist take on machine creativity.

I would also argue that David Rokeby's *Giver of Names* is not random in its rule sets, but rather provides both a very logical and a subjective reading of the world it perceives. After performing contour and image analysis of the objects presented to the system, it links this analysis to ideas and words in its database, which is populated with a lot of older novels that are in the public domain. *The Giver of Names* has a specific understanding of the world that is very much informed by 19th century novels, so it presents an AI's quite subjective state of mind.

Installation view. Tega Brain, Deep Swamp, 2018 (Installation. Glass tanks, wetland plant species, gravel, sand, acrylic pipes, electronics, misters, lighting, custom software, three-channel sound). Photo by Marc Tatti

TX: Both Tega Brain's Deep Swamp and Ken Goldberg team's AlphaGarden have explored the possibilities of guiding if not intervening in the development of natural environments with AI. Are any of these techniques used in agricultural or ecological practice, or are they more of a utopian vision?

CP: Autonomous robots are increasingly used on farms and The New York Times recently devoted an article (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/science/farm-agriculture-robots.html) to this development. The TerraSentia robot, for example, has been designed to generate a detailed portrait of a cornfield, measuring the size and health of the plants and the number and quality of ears each corn plant will produce by the end of the season, in order to assist agronomists to breed better crops. In different ways, *Deep Swamp* and *AlphaGarden* explore the questions surrounding the automated optimization of our environment. *Deep Swamp* — a triptych of wetlands that are governed by three artificially intelligent software agents with different programmatic goals — playfully asks questions about optimization at a time when ecological calamity meets environmental engineering. *AlphaGarden* explores the potentials and limitations of artificial intelligence in the context of 21st-century ecology, diversity, and sustainability by making deep AI policies learn from simulation and human demonstrations in order to control a three-axis robot that tends a garden that is a polyculture environment including invasive species.

Installation view. LarbitsSisters, BitSoil Popup Tax & Hack Campaign, 2018 (Networked installation, four server racks, various components). Photo by Marc Tatti

TX: LarbitsSisters' work utilized the data on Twitter to influence the outcome of their AI. That's almost a model of the reality that we live in, as we have both the government and the dissidents actively expressing their opinions and affecting the public views on social media. Democracy or not-mob mentality has always been a part of politics. Could you talk about the potentials of data collected from social media, the ethics, and the purposes?

CP: There are many layers to this discussion. As you mention social media are a platform for democratic engagement and activism, as well as social manipulation and propaganda. We need both higher standards and technological mechanisms for truth filtering and fact-checking. Another layer of this conversation are data collection and mining through social media sites for commercial purposes, and we are still only at the beginning of developing requirements for protecting people's privacy and creating ethical frameworks for commerce. Social media corporations make money of user-generated content, and *BitSoil Popup Tax & Hack Campaign* by the Belgian duo LarbitsSisters playfully develops a model for a fairer digital economy. The project understands user-generated data as "bitsoil," the new oil of the digital economy, and an army of tax collector bots — trained by IBM's AI-Watson Natural Language Classifier — to detect, collect, and mine bitsoils on the data produced by users on Twitter. The online platform of the campaign invites participants to mine bitsoils, or to generate their own tax collector bots equipped with a set of actions to perform. During the campaign, each of their actions on Twitter randomly assigns a micro amount of bitsoils to a virtual wallet of a campaign participant. While the project isn't a functioning economic model, it effectively invites us to think about frameworks for a digital economy in which users would be compensated for the data they produce.

TX: It looks like you collaborated with several academic institutions for this show. Is it true that AI art is primarily a subject explored within academia, science, or art, or do you see such a medium practiced in a broader part of the visual art world as well?

CP: *The Question of Intelligence* took place at The New School's Sheila C. Johnson Design Center which is devoted to generating an active dialogue on the role of innovative art and design in responding to the environmental and social challenges of our contemporary world. We didn't collaborate with other institutions in the organization of the exhibition per se, but a couple of the projects in the show are located at or generated from within academic institutions. The actual *AlphaGarden* is in the greenhouse of the University of California at Berkeley, and the *AI Mappa Mundi* project was developed by a team of artists and researchers (Baoyang Chen, Zhije Qiu, Ruixue Liu,

Xiaoyu Guo, Yan Dai, Meng Chen, Xiadong He) at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. There is no doubt that academia has played a crucial role in nurturing the environment of digital art by providing technological support through labs and enabling research, as well as discussion. Many of the most established artists in the field of digital artwork at universities. There definitely have been more digital art exhibitions at university galleries and science museums than in the traditional art world. That being said, AI-focused exhibitions seem to be a little bit of an exception since this topic has entered mainstream discourse and therefore more easily gained a presence in museums. There have been exhibitions such as AI: More than Human (https://www.google.com/url?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.barbican.org.uk%2Fwhats-on%2F2019%2Fevent%2Fai-more-than-human&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNGeqWeUOIyoNAkmUVVxhw19UuW8PQ) at the Barbican in London (May 16 – Aug 26, 2019); Uncanny Values. Artificial Intelligence & You (http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fmoussemagazine.it%2Fmarlies-wirth-chiara-moioli-uncanny-values-artificial-intelligence-and-you-mak-vienna-biennale-for-change-2019%2F&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNECwEbv-89KUA72CL0UvKjtYQaw3Q) at the MAK-Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna (May 29 – October 6, 2019); and Uncanny Valley: Being Human in the Age of AI (https://www.google.com/url?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.famsf.org%2Fpress-room%2Funcanny-valley-being-human-age-ai&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNE6xHIy-gAtj0N8OjudA3J_Tg545w) at the de Young museum in San Francisco (February 22 – October 25, 2020).

Participating Artists: Memo Akten, Tega Brain, Baoyang Chen, Zhije Qiu, Ruixue Liu, Xiaoyu Guo, Yan Dai, Meng Chen, Xiadong, Harold Cohen, Stephanie Dinkins, Mary Flanagan, Ken Goldberg, the AlphaGarden Collective, University of California at Berkeley, Lynn Hershman Leeson, LarbitsSisters, Mimi Onuoha, David Rokeby, Brett Wallace, and Lior Zalmanson

The Question of Intelligence — AI and the Future of Humanity

At the Sheila C Johnson Design Center

February 7 – April 8 (was suspended due to the COVID-19 Virus)

2018
CyberArts

ARS ELECTRONICA

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PRIX ARS ELECTRONICA 2018

PRIXARS

INTERACTIVE ART +

Navigating Shifting Ecologies with Empathy

Minoru Hatanaka, Maša Jazbec, Karin Ohlenschläger, Lubi Thomas, Victoria Vesna

Interactive Art was introduced to Prix Ars Electronica as a key category in 1990. In 2016, in response to a growing diversity of artistic works and methods, the "+" was added, making it Interactive Art +.

Interactivity is present everywhere and our idea of what it means to engage with technology has shifted from solely human–machine interfaces to a broader experience that goes beyond the anthropocentric point of view. We are learning to accept machines as other entities we share our lives with while our relationship with the biological world is intensified by the urgency of environmental disasters and climate change that some still deny. Media artists are asking questions and staging interventions to raise awareness about the urgency of these issues and the need to take action NOW. The + sign encompasses questions of how we interact with the established news media—the online community has opened doors for the public to engage, question, and interact with current events. This year the jury perceived how the + sign symbolized the interconnectivity of humans, animals, bacteria, machines and everything else—the ecology of the collective mind.

Applications are invited for this category every two years and this year we received more than 1,000, which resulted in a highly competitive and diverse short list of applicants. The jury took a contextual approach to this vast landscape of artistic practices and conceptual focuses by identifying hubs of discourse and practice methodologies/areas. These included Robotics, AI and computation, environmental sensing, memory, knowledge and human connection, materials and tools, methodologies in creative practice, new economies and socio-political concerns. The mood of the community is as diverse as the works, yet an underlying echoing discourse—pertaining to the anthropogenic and converse *Life* seen through prismatic lenses of environmental, human and artificial forms—was present in this year's applications. AI and computation, the contextual hub of robotics, were represented by a range of works that, rather than engaging in the manipulation of life on a biological level, are developing the essence of life as an artificial entity. A common trend in the submissions from the field of robotics projects was how to create a spark of being in an artificial body—with works transmitting the last words of farewell and prayers of a dying person into the robot software; seeking life-likeness—computational self, and environmental awareness; autonomous, social, and unpredictable physical movement; through to the raising of a robot as one's own child. This is just a small sample of the artificial 'life sparks' in this year's category. Interacting with such artificial entities draws us into both a practical and ethical dialogue about the future of robotics, advances in this field, and their role in our lives and society.

At the same time, many powerful works that deal with social issues were submitted. The jury felt that even if ALife, AI, and robotics seem separate to some, it is important to show how they are connected. Freedom of speech, labor, and our environment are all deeply influenced by the machine algorithms and pretty soon we will stop being able to tell the difference between them. This raises a lot of issues for the shifting landscape of the global economies. Social networks have entered the establishment and are being manipulated by various interest groups. Personal data and value is used in ways that threaten the basic ethics of shared public spaces, potentially creating a two-tier society. Empathy for the Other—whether we're talking about gender, nationality, or economies has to be the central quality that informs interactions between humans, animals, machines, and robots.

Golden Nica

BitSoil Popup Tax & Hack Campaign

LarbitsSisters

While the government institutions are still immersed in a complex process of regulation and legislation of the global economy, the Belgian duo LarbitsSisters has taken a step forward with their interactive project *BitSoil Popup Tax & Hack Campaign.* The jury agreed that this initiative deserves the Golden Nica as it highlights and addresses the indiscriminate profit that the main tech corporations and Internet service providers make with the personal data of the users. The jury has assessed, on the one hand, the conceptual relevance of the project. It consists in the development of a critical tool that demands the restoration of a new equilibrium in the digital economy through a tax collector-bot system which controls

the use of the data of each citizen by global companies. On the other hand, the jury has considered the originality and solvency of the materialization of the installation in its off-line and on-line version. It has been developed as the sum of a process of interdisciplinary scientific research, philosophical reflection, and artistic practices, setting up a device of VPN connections, AI and tax collector bots at the service of a global system of economic and social welfare.

Awards of Distinction

Alter · Kohei Ogawa, Itsuki Doi, Takashi Ikegami, and Hiroshi Ishiguro

Alter was developed in a cooperation between android researcher Hiroshi Ishiguro and artificial life researcher Takashi Ikegami. Although this robot has a very mechanical appearance, its movements give the impression of aliveness. *Alter's* movements are not determined beforehand. Audience responses are perceived by *Alter's* sensors and simultaneously reflected in *Alter's* movements. Autonomous algorithm generators and artificial neural networks spontaneously fire and send signals to each other which makes it possible for *Alter* to constantly evolve and develop its own personality. The jury recognizes a novel interaction between a human and the robot and between the environment and the robot. We don't know how the *Alter* personality will evolve, nor can we know how this kind of symbiosis between humans and machines will change humanity. In this regard the jury states that *Alter* represents a step forward in android science projects.

[help me know the truth] · Mary Flanagan

The perception of the other is often altered by experiences, beliefs, prejudices, and other factors that belong to our individual and collective unconscious or our social and cultural context. Even more so when it comes to reproducing this cognitive system in a computer program, which has been developed in a neuroscientific research context and can be applied in surveillance and security devices. Mary Flanagan´s *[help me know the truth]* is an interactive installation that uses cognitive neuroscience algorithms to show the fragility and instability of our perceptual systems, be they of an organic or artificial nature. In this installation, the jury valued the use of neuroscientific software that allows the users to experience, through the interaction with the system, the weak plot of diffuse values that are barely sustainable to help us know the truth.

Honorary Mentions

AI DJ Project
A dialog between human and AI through music
Nao Tokui, Shoya Dozono / Qosmo

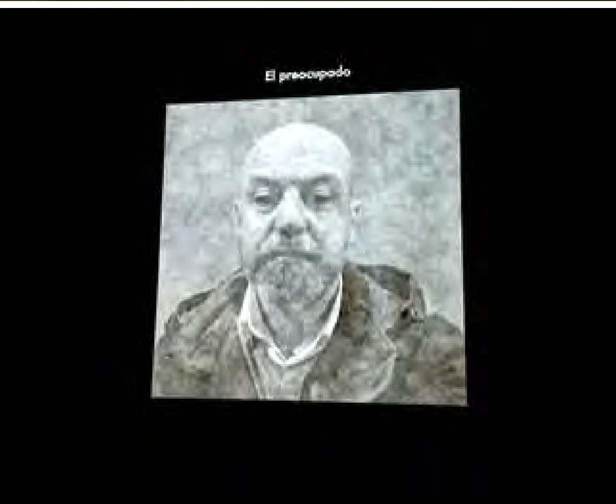
AI DJ Project—a dialog between an Artificial Intelligence and a human DJ is a live performance in which the AI is not a replacement for the human DJ but instead a partner that can think and play together with the human. This approach was acknowledged by the jury. To achieve this the creators trained several different neural networks and used a reinforcement learning system to teach the AI model how to speed up/down, nudge/pull the turntable, and align beats through trials and errors. With a camera system, the AI can also sense how much the audience dance to the music being played and uses this information in further music selection. The jury felt that this unpredictability brings a provocative tension to the AI–DJ performance and challenges the audience to wonder what the AI system will do next.

Conspiracy: Conjoining the Virtual
Kristin McWharter

Virtual Reality tends to isolate users from their social context by transplanting their vision into an alternate reality and in a gallery. These user experiences capture audiences in a state where they feel alone—despite their bodies existing in public or semi-public space. The jury felt that this work uses participatory interaction in ways that effectively amplify the tension between competition and intimacy in social spaces. Individual subjectivity within collective decision is enacted publicly as five people interact through a sculptural object, each directing their own VR experience. The sculptural form that brings these players physically together cultivates a tension between collaboration and competition that questions individual agency. Restricted movement limits their sense of agency and also brings awareness to their body and to the other bodies that are simultaneously participating in the physical / virtual and public space.

Digital Shaman Project · Etsuko Ichihara

The *Digital Shaman Project* proposes a new model of grieving through the robotics platform. A full-scale 3D printed mask of the deceased's face is placed on a humanoid robot with a specially designed program that can mimic the physical characteristics and the personality of that individual. For the time of mourning, the mimesis of the humanoid robot allows it to serve as a host of the deceased person.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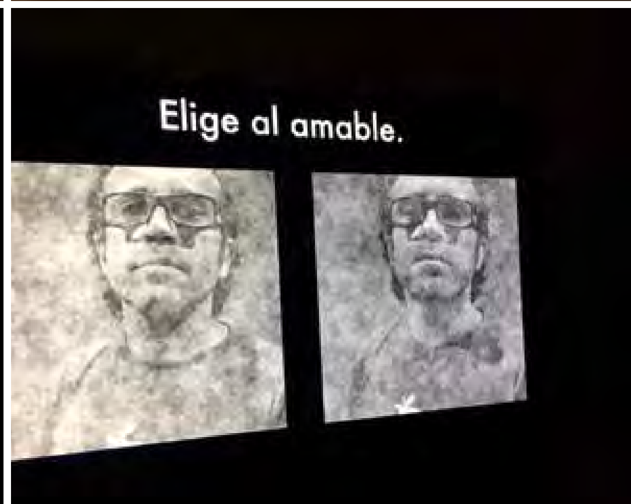
Elige al amable.

[help me know the truth]

Mary Flanagan

[help me know the truth] is a software-driven participatory artwork in which visitors first snap a digital self-portrait (or "selfie") at the gallery. The image is then sent around the gallery's network and appears on digital stations located around the gallery. Using the tools of cognitive neuroscience, the faces are manipulated with noise patterns to literally, through time and user input, "construct" the perfect stereotype.

On digital stations in the gallery, visitors are asked to choose between two slightly altered portraits to match the text label shown. By selecting slight variations of the images over time, differing facial features emerge from what are otherwise random patterns that reveal unconscious beliefs about facial features or tendencies related to culture and identity. *[help me know the truth]* utilizes Reverse Correlation to investigate how psychological responses to people's faces might uncover both positive and negative reactions to those who visit the gallery. The viewer/participant chooses between two identical selfies, where different computational noise has been applied. The faces appear somewhat blurry, so the viewer/participant chooses one blurry image over another that might match criteria given. The list of prompts for visitors to the gallery ranges from the politically-charged to the taboo: "Choose the victim;" falls after "Indicate the leader" but might lead to the timely, "Select the terrorist." Other judgements passed by visitors include identifying which face is the most angelic, kind, criminal, etc. Through choosing faces manipulated by particular noise patterns, facial features emerge that reveal larger thoughts and beliefs about how we fundamentally see each other.

Why do people—even internationally—tend to gravitate towards similar stereotypes? Bias against "the other" is a dangerous impediment to a just Twenty-First Century society, in part encouraged by our own neurological structures that have not caught up with our lived realities. Hyper-scale image-based categorization is being deployed in government and surveillance programs worldwide. These processes demand our critical attention. Where do we find the "truth" about each other this way?

[help me know the truth] raises awareness about the unconscious stereotypes we all carry in our minds, and how these beliefs become embedded in myriad software systems including computer vision programs. My intent is to both utilize and question how computational techniques can uncover the categorizing systems of the mind, and how software itself is therefore subject to socially constructed fears and values. *[help me know the truth]* provokes discussion about the types of biases that surround us: that we are under global technological surveillance is troubling; that the humans involved in crafting these systems, the systems themselves, and the people brought in to make final calls on various warnings, alerts, and arrests are all products of unconscious biases, is troubling. Perhaps software systems do not help us know the truth at all.

Thanks to Jared Segal, Kristin Walker, Danielle Taylor; open source RC software by Dr. Ron Dotsch.
Supported by: The Leslie Center for the Humanities, Dartmouth College

Mary Flanagan (US) plays with the anxious and profound relationship between technological systems and human experience. Her artwork ranges from game-based installations to computer viruses, embodied interfaces to interactive texts. In her experimental interactive writing, she's interested in how chance operations bring new texts into being. Flanagan's work has been exhibited internationally at venues including The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Guggenheim, Tate Britain, Postmasters, Steirischer Herbst, Ars Electronica, Artist's Space, LABoral, the Telfair Museum, ZKM Medienmuseum, and museums in New Zealand, South Korea, and Australia. She was awarded an honoris causa in design in 2016, was a fellow in 2017 at the Getty Museum, and in 2018 she was a cultural leader at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

[help me know the truth]
http://maryflanagan.com/work/help-me-know-the-truth

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Mary Flanagan

[help me know the truth]

How did you get into gaming? How did you make the shift from someone who played games to someone who designed them?

Well I've played games my whole life from board games and card games with my family to playing early computer games. I would borrow from friends and go to friends' houses and eventually I got my own Atari 2600 computer console. So I played games my whole life but when I went to university I created films and did a lot of computer animation and films. And I was really interested in feminist experimental making. When the opportunity came to get a job, I went with the interactive media company because I had learned to program interactive stuff like HyperCAD, SuperCAD, and other formats that were coming out at the time. So I became someone obsessed with integrating technology into my practice and working with animation. Basically animating made me a game designer. But I had to bring those two things together. There were no games and programs at that time. It was really pretty interesting.

I recently heard a talk by you where you spoke about how your early experience of gaming was as a largely inclusive space, but that you felt the tone of the industry shifted over time. What happened?

I won't go so far as to say the gaming space was inclusive, but gaming wasn't a hyper-masculine space by any means, early on. Consoles had to be marketed to families. Families were on the covers of console boxes and featured in TV advertising. And it's interesting to see how, what I called the "dark ages of gaming" - the first person shooters - has affected us even now. No offense to the makers, but I do think that Doom and Quake and first person shooters changed the landscape of games dramatically and what we understand as games. And we're still seeing it play out culturally.

I'm somebody who believes that games are a way that we practice problem solving. And if we're always practicing problem solving by shooting things, we're going to have a culture that perhaps results with those tools. I'm hoping the next generation of gamers and game designers will come up with new ways of problem-solving that have cooperative potential and are potentially nonviolent. That's not to say those games aren't fun. They really are. But I feel like we need a range of things to be defined as games; we have 6000 years of human history to work from when it comes to games.
Has Gamer-gate made you question your relationship to your work? Do you feel it's more significant now?

I don't talk much about that because it was kind of something that had been happening to a lot of people for a while subtly, and I don't want to give power to groups that harass and diminish the importance of women by constantly referring to them. Many women have suffered for their love of games and I hope we are coming to an end of that.
I don't think they've made my work more significant. Weirdly, even though there are more women in gaming, the big names are still men ... not much has changed. And the theorists cited academically? Men. I can't tell you how many masters and PhD thesis folks have contacted me to tell me my work has been "crucial" or "influential" yet when I read the work, they don't cite my writing. Women in games, women in academia, it's the same. Our work goes unseen, or if seen, appropriated, sometimes unconsciously.

Your work focuses in part on using games as a mechanism to challenge norms and dominant epistemologies. How are games methods for conversations or for changing our thoughts and behaviour?

Games are very interesting because they allow players to make decisions and feel at least that they have a sense of agency. That's interesting for an art form. I think that if games challenge norms and dominant epistemologies we have to really look at what players are able to do by challenging those things. Consciousness-raising is one thing. But we have a lot of consciousness-raising with protests, with marches, with Facebook - with lots of different avenues. How do I get people to act, to change their thoughts orbehaviors - how do I change the conversation? That's really interesting to me and yes games can do that provided they are really well crafted and take human psychology into account.

I was really intrigued by your project with Ruth Catlow 'Play your Place', using games and play as a mechanism for communities to imagine and have a stake in the future identity of a place. Was the project a success? What were some of the outcomes of the project?

'Play your Place' was really interesting. We set out to make a community building platform game and ended up making a large public art project with people from various locations mostly around London. We were drawing, talking and discussing. What started out as a kind of game project was really a community-organizing project. It was also a conversation project; it was very interesting to see how much we had to put into the connections with people in order to get the games made. And that was cool because the conversations perhaps are more important than the games.

On the one hand we can think of a game as something that's light and un-instructive – something that's 'just for fun' – but on the other hand we have artists and designers using the structure of the game as an apparatus to challenge social norms and conventions and to suggest or imagine others. How do you, as a designer and an artist, negotiate the playful, non-instrumental aspects of the game with the desire to change someone's feelings, thoughts or behaviours through play?

I have to say I'm blessed with great collaborators like Ruth Catlow who have a deep understanding of the history of playful intervention. And I try to communicate that whenever I can. Artists have been using games to talk about difficult things for a long, long time. And humans have been able to use games to deal with really difficult issues such as resource management and warfare. We've always been engaged with serious issues; it's just that we're not used to taking a contemporary serious issue and obstructing it and making it dynamic. People associate the word 'game' with fun, and that's not true all the time. What's 'fun' is very subjective and typically can be substituted for the word 'engagement.' People have to feel free to play. Play is a voluntary act – getting people to engage voluntarily with serious issues is no mean feat, but it's one we really have to pursue, especially in this day and age.

Alongside your game design work and artistic practice, you're also an academic and the editor of Reload: Rethinking Feminism + Cyber-culture (MIT Press, 2002). In your contribution you mention the potential of both digital art projects and women's cyberpunk fiction for offering an alternative to the representations of women in more mainstream gaming experiences. What are two of your favourite projects? Has your perspective changed much since this book was published?

Reload was published during a euphoric time. Feminists were flocking to Cyber and online spaces and hoping that these would be these new spaces where new rules would be written. That didn't really happen, and we see the results of it, but it's important to be an idealist. I think Reload, the first of my books, was a great conversation starter. It actually has more relevance now than it did even in the time it was published. And that's very interesting to me and also means that everybody should read it!

I agree! I also think your recent work on how values are embodied in digital games (Values at Play in Digital Games, MIT Press, 2016) could be really invaluable for helping us to think about ethical frameworks for algorithms and AI. Do you agree or do you think they're entirely different spaces?

I'm often appalled by the way that technology is misconstrued as a value free space. Much work needs to be done and quickly to critique the algorithms that surround us and to critique the massive sea changes we are about to undergo as a global society and as a global civilization in our understanding of work, of leisure, and of each other. I think that values are at play in AI every single day. It's of dire importance.

Your works deal with a wide range of themes: Cities and space; poetry and language; and women. Are these very distinct strands in your practice or do they overlap?

Some artists really stick to one theme their entire career, and some artists move around. I'm very interested in how we understand the world around us, how we recognize cities and space, how we construct understanding and knowledge and language and of course what that means from the standpoint of epistemology, so these things are constant in my fascination with the world around me. One theme I think that comes across in all of my work is this kind of questioning of the status quo. In my early digital art I questioned operating systems and the logic behind them and I questioned cyberpunk narratives, which were largely male. I do a lot of questioning and I try to reinvent systems that may offer a different kind of universe, or a different kind of value system and different kind of place. And in this way they overlap but if you first look at them they might seem bizarrely different games. But for me they're always getting at the same thing.

Do you draw a hard distinction between your artistic practice and the more commercial games you develop?

For a long time I've thought of my commercial games as an intervention practice. What if we could get social interventions and have people actually pay for them and like them? So my commercial games are constantly in dialogue with my critical artistic self. And I think that's a really fruitful and challenging and difficult relationship. It's a lot of investment and business plans and logistics and contracts... But ultimately I think that the interventions have scale when utilizing a commercial framework that they just don't have if I were sticking to my world — the art world.

Your piece Help me know the Truth was awarded the Prix Ars Electronica 2018. To what extent was this work inspired by recent discussions about fake news and a post-truth era? Does it have a particular political message?

Help Me Know The Truth is a piece about questioning how we perceive each other....and how we quantify perception. I was inspired to move outside of the common acceptance of something like facial recognition - why don't we believe what we see, or why do we? Can we recognize bad vs. good? What are other ways we can be recognized? Who is empowered to recognize us in the first place, and how is this used? I can guarantee we're not being scouted for our intellectual prowess or our empathetic capacities via our media surveillance, for example. Is the price of sacrifice - freedom, privacy, individuality - really worth the cost? It's a question people aren't really asking deeply in the United States. I ask it every day.

What are you working on at the moment?

I'm actually working on two novels!! It's interesting to think about the role of linear narrative when you are used to ones that are interactive. I'm coming to terms with its power and potential for disruption. I'm also working on a new artwork and some digital poems that take the form of topographical landscapes and maps.

Anything you'd like to tell us about that I haven't included?

I guess in thinking about my work and seeing the range of it I'd like to just remind people that many, many artists of the 20th century worked across disciplines: they wrote, they published books and pamphlets and critical essays and had conferences and painted and collaged and did all different kinds of mixed media things. When you happen to be white and male for the most part that's accepted and seen as exciting. I think we need to allow artists to move in these directions and to go to places where they can transform not only themselves but also the world around them. The art market has commodified the way we think about art and places strictures around how we interpret it. I would love to see that opened up a bit more.

Flanagan is an artist, designer and writer with five scholarly books and fifty articles to her credit; her book Critical Play is standard-issue reading about games and art. In 2016, Flanagan was awarded an honorary degree in Design in 2016, the Prix Ars Elecronica Award of Distinction in 2018, and the Vanguard award from Games for Change in 2016. Recently she spoke at the World Economic Forum at Davos.
www.maryflanagan.com

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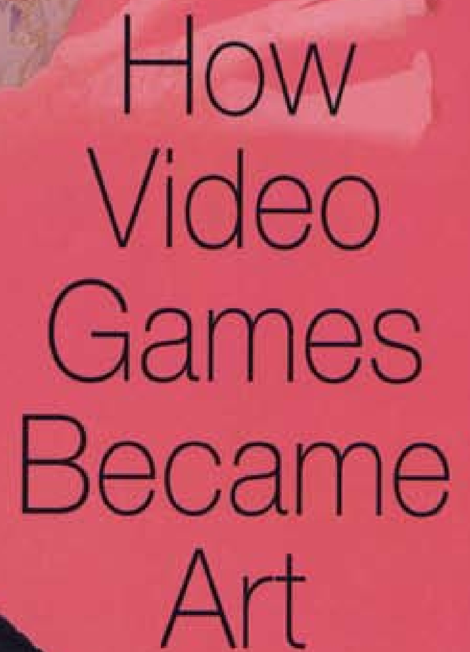

How Video Games Became Art

When Is a Warhol a Warhol?

Glenn Ligon: The Writing on the Wall

Hemingway & Miró: Betting 'The Farm'

MATTHEW SEPTIMUS

Let the Games Begin

Artists are designing or adapting video games to comment on politics, art, and games themselves

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

At PS1 in New York, Feng Mengbo's *Long March: Restart*, 2008, was displayed on two screens facing each other, so that players had to turn around when moving to the next level.

It's a rainy Sunday afternoon and I'm desperately trying to fend off a squirming space octopus armed with a ray gun. My ammunition stores are low. I can't get enough elevation to leap over him. The long reach of his tentacles puts me in mortal danger any time I approach. A second's hesitation costs me dearly. The monster gets me in his clutches. And before I know what's happened, I'm prostrate, marinating in a pool of my own blood.

Okay, so I'm not really getting my guts ripped out by a colossal alien cephalopod. I'm inside a first-floor gallery at MoMA PS1 in New York City, playing *Long March: Restart* (2008), a video game designed by Chinese artist Feng Mengbo. Visually it is a paean to classic games of the 1980s such as *Super Mario Bros.* and *Street Fighter*, but its narrative is largely focused on 20th-century Chinese history, specifically the Long March, the Communist Army's grueling 6,000-mile retreat from the more powerful Nationalist Army in the mid-1930s. In Mengbo's game, the player guides an avatar, a blue-suited member of Mao Zedong's Red Guard, through the various stages of the Long March—all while pelting an array of intergalactic enemy villains with cans of Coca-Cola.

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Clever culture jamming aside, what sets *Long March: Restart* apart from the average video game is its scale. On view at PS1 through April 4, the game is projected on two screens facing each other, each of which is 53 feet wide and 10 feet tall. As I proceed from one level of the game to the next (there are a total of 14), I have to spin 180 degrees to continue on the wall behind me. This forces me to dance around a gathering crowd of museum visitors while shaking off a determined five-year-old demanding the controller. (Sorry kid, not until I destroy a battalion of scaly extraterrestrials with my arsenal of soft drinks.) A few levels into the game, I'm feeling as frenetic as my bouncing avatar on screen. "You go inside this video game," says Mengbo. "You don't sit passively and play it."

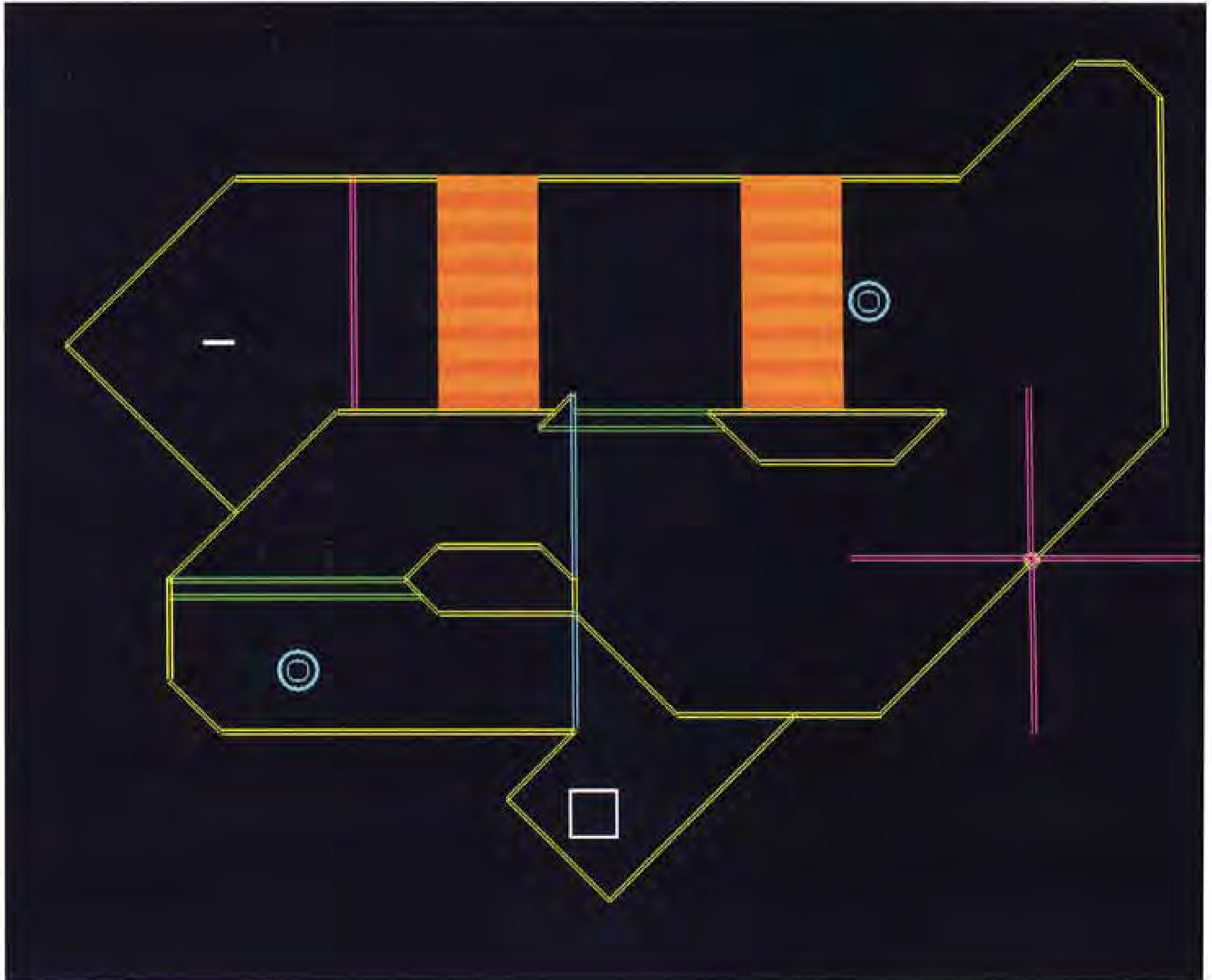
The first video game was invented exactly 50 years ago at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It was called *Spacewar I* and ran on a computer the size of a refrigerator. Since then, video games have become a global economic staple (to the tune of $20 billion a year) and a well-mined source for cultural output, inspiring movies, music, books, and, increasingly, all manner of visual art. In fact, the last decade or so has seen a boom in game-related exhibitions, from San Jose State University's pioneering "Cracking the Maze," in 1999, to PaceWildenstein Gallery's 2006 group show "Breaking and Entering" to the inclusion of video-game art in broad surveys, such as the New Museum's debut triennial in 2009. That show featured programmer Mark Essen's infernally difficult

In *Long March: Restart*, the player's avatar, a blue-suited member of the Red Army, visits historic sites such as Tiananmen Square (top) and kills aliens with an arsenal of coke cans (below).

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CHAMBERS FINE ART, NEW YORK, BEIJING

Flywrench (2007), in which a player pilots a two-dimensional ship through various deceptively simple obstacles.

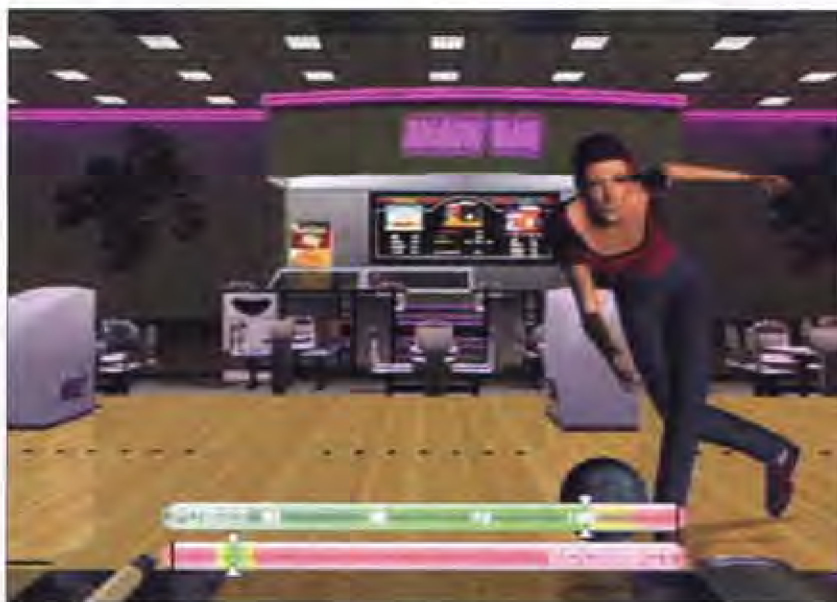
Early this year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York announced the acquisition of Harun Farocki's *Serious Games* (2009–10), a series of four videos that examines the ways in which video-game technology is used by the military. In February, artist and programmer Eddo Stern displayed gamer-inspired animations at Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston. In late May, Cory Arcangel, an artist-hacker who has long worked with video games, will be the subject of a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York. And, currently, curators at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., are busy prepping an expansive show devoted to the history of game design, simply titled "The Art of Video Games" and set to open in March 2012. "New-media art is still very far from being fully integrated into the art world," says Christiane Paul, the adjunct curator overseeing the upcoming Arcangel show at the Whitney. "But within that segment of art, I would say that game art has fared the best."



A still from Mark Essen's *Flywrench*, 2007.

AT A TIME when participatory happenings have become an increasingly popular staple for institutions, video games represent a compelling interactive platform already familiar to visitors. "There is no threshold," says PS1 director and MoMA chief curator-at-large Klaus Biesenbach, who first encountered Mengbo's

work at Documenta, in Germany, in 2002. "People don't feel like they have to step back. It's a very direct engagement of the viewer. In



For his "Beat the Champ" exhibition at London's Barbican Art Gallery, Cory Arcangel hacked 14 bowling games so that they show perpetual loops of players failing to score.

Ubermorgen.com's *Clickistan*, 2010, features all manner of clickable objects, from '90s-style Internet graphics to elements from early arcade games such as *Space Invaders*.

fact, the viewer becomes a participant/author."

The ways in which artists are using games to create these experiences are myriad. One of the most popular approaches is the "mod"—gamer shorthand for "modification"—in which existing game software is reconfigured into something new. Some of Mengbo's work falls into this category. In 2002, he produced a mod called *Q4U*, based on the online game *Quake*. In Mengbo's version, which was shown at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, every character in the kill-or-be-killed classic is programmed to look like the artist (complete with eyeglasses). The game offers the curious experience of watching the artist get blown to bits in slow motion, a sensation he describes as "very weird."

One of the more prominent figures working within this arena is the Brooklyn-based Arcangel, an artist who manipulates all manner of digital ephemera. He has used the home recording software Auto-Tune to redo Jimi Hendrix's rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and employed Photoshop to create oversize color-field works. In 2002 he produced a video game called *I Shot Andy Warhol*—based on the '80s arcade game *Hogan's Alley*—in which the goal was to blast a cardboard cutout of Warhol. Arcangel has also modified games to create pieces that go beyond the traditional game vernacular. In one of his best-known works, also from 2002, the artist hacked into the immensely popular *Super Mario Bros.*, stripping away every element except for the sky and an endless loop of horizontally scrolling clouds. "Cory gets immersed on the level of code and sees that as an artistic medium," says Paul. "He rewrites games in funny and intelligent ways." The piece, which was shown at the 2004 Whitney Biennial and is now part of the museum's permanent collection, has achieved renown within gamer circles.

There is also the more labor-intensive work of designing games from scratch. Many of these programs subvert the notion of what a video game is all about, either by eliminating traditional ideas of play (nobody "wins") or creating challenges that are Sisyphean in nature. Last year, Paul organized an online game called *Clickistan* for the Whitney's annual fund drive. Created by a two-person team that goes by the nom de 'net Ubermorgen.com (consisting of the artists Lizvlx and Hans Bernhard), *Clickistan* undermines the competitive nature of most video

TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST, LISSON GALLERY, LONDON, TEAM GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC, PARIS, SALZBURG; BOTTOM: COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

games. There is no real play or scoring—just various levels of interactivity in which a player clicks away on empty boxes, gyrating fields of color, and an array of roaming Hello Kitty heads.

Likewise, in a mind-bending game called *[rootings]*, which premiered online in 2001, artist Mary Flanagan created an experience in which the traditional game hierarchy has been completely stripped away. The player doesn't progress from one level to the next. Instead, one round of play (involving such tasks as catching groceries with a paper bag or shooting words at moving blobs) might loop right back around to the same experience. "I like to play with conventions and expectations," says Flanagan, a professor of film and new media at Dartmouth College, whose game-inspired works have been shown at the Guggenheim and other museums. "Games are not generally machines for personal storytelling, but in *[rootings]* I ended up using a lot of material from encounters with my grandmother, who belongs to a generation that was left out of the digital revolution and therefore not well represented in virtual spaces."

OTHER ARTISTS have used elements of video-game technology to create pieces that reference broader aspects of culture. The New York–based artist Brody Condon has employed game engines (a game's software system) to create animated tributes to Flemish paintings. In Spain, the art collective Derivart (the trio of Daniel Beunza, Mar Canet, and Jesús Rodriguez) uses games to create elaborate visualizations of financial statistics. The group's work has been exhibited at the art-meets-tech space LABoral in Gijón, Spain, a museum known for its early and thorough attention to video-game art. In their piece *El Burbujómetro* (2007), players obliterate real-time real-estate prices with an infrared gun. In 2009, they hacked a hand-held Nintendo Game Boy, inserting code that allows players to "destroy" oil commodities and dot-com bubbles.

Why use video games when PowerPoint could just as easily convey all that data? "What happens in video games is that they are lived experiences—and nothing is more profound than a lived experience," says Beunza, whose day job is teaching at the London School of Economics, and who, as a child, was transfixed by Atari's *Empire Strikes Back*. "In this way, video games are very close to life."

Given the visceral nature of these encounters—a player often fights off some force to the death—it is no wonder that video games can inspire a practically religious devotion

For the 2007 video *Baby in Christ vs. His Father*, Eddo Stern explored the dilemmas faced by a teenager from a deeply Christian family who plays *World of Warcraft*.

In *[borders]*, 2010, Mary Flanagan documents virtual walks she took within the realms of online multi-user worlds.

among players. The online multiplayer game *World of Warcraft*, in which participants log on to do battle as warlocks, orcs, and elves, has a mind-boggling 12 million participants around the globe. For artists such as the Los Angeles–based Stern, it is the communities that spring up around these games and the interactions among the players that are worth exploring.

In 2007, he turned an online argument related to another popular role-playing game into an animated work called *Best... Flame War... Ever*. The piece shows two talking masks engaged in highly charged one-upsmanship about "armor class mitigation" and "shadowknights." Stern says he is continuously fascinated by the ways in which ordinary life seeps into these fantastical virtual worlds. "There is this layer of elves and dwarves which is childish and facile," he explains. "But it's mostly adults playing these things—and they're going through these intense emotional experiences."

Game theorist Ian Bogost conceived of *A Slow Year*, 2010, with four parts, based on the seasons, as a collection of "game poems" that require "sedate observation."

Despite the art world's decade-long embrace of the format, the discussion about the crossover between video games and art can become fraught, especially on the gamer side of the divide. Among some game theorists, there is a feeling that the contemporary-art world sees the video game as something to be deconstructed rather than an art form worth exploring in its own right. "Works by artists like Cory Arcangel are very deliberately designed for the art world," says Ian Bogost, a theorist and game designer at the Georgia Institute of Technology, who says that many of Arcangel's pieces more closely resemble installation video than they do games. This was an idea explored at length in a conference titled "The Art History of Games," held at the High Museum in Atlanta last year. One video-game theorist in attendance decried the fact that "for games to be embraced by museums, they have to give up their gameness"—namely, the key aspect of play.

Interestingly, "gameness" is something that is receiving plenty of investigation from countless independent game designers whose creations are pushing the boundaries of what a game can be—offering abstract experiences that are often stripped of traditional notions such as winning and scoring. These designers operate both outside the professional world of corporate development and also beneath the curatorial radar of much of the art world, making their games available for download online or in pop-up arcades organized by indie game organizations such as Babycastles, based in New York City. (Since last summer, the group has hosted a pop-up arcade at an arts space on 42nd Street, near Times Square, in collaboration with the alternative arts publication *Showpaper*.) Many of these games can appear esthetically crude, with environments rendered in chunky globs of pixels. But the play experiences they provide can be otherworldly. Bogost points to some of the games produced

COURTESY THE ARTIST (2)

by the independent Swedish programmer Jonatan Söderström (who goes by the nickname "Cactus"). "He's created a game called *Tuning* that does all of these crazy perceptual distortions," says Bogost. "It makes you realize that there are bounds to your normal perceptual experience."

THE IMPRESSION OF video games as cheap, mass-market product—as well as the reality that new media can be expensive and difficult to show—may be part of the reason that the art world has chosen to focus on certain types of gaming art and overlook others. "There are issues that new-media art brings about for the market in terms of display and preservation and what is being collected," says Paul. Some artists, such as Arcangel, have found some degree of economic success. (He is represented by Team Gallery in New York, Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris, Lisson in London, and Guy Bartschi in Geneva, and his broad range of pieces sell for between $8,000 and $34,000.) Flanagan, however, though critically acclaimed and widely exhibited, remains unrepresented. Others, like Beunza and Stern, have gallery representation, but work primarily in academia. "It's not on the level with traditional media in terms of collectability," says Magdalena Sawon, director at Postmasters Gallery in New York, which represents Stern. "There is still an enormous amount of education that needs to go on."

There is also the tricky issue of display. Paul says that, on average, a museum patron won't spend more than a few minutes looking at a video. Playing a game, however, demands far more time and involvement. "New-media art is highly performative," says Paul. "The visitor is an active participant in the construction of the work." For institutions and galleries, this represents a challenge. Showcasing shorter games in eye-catching ways might be part of the solution—but this leaves longer, thoughtful play experiences out of the public eye. "This is where the problem of physicality rears its head," says Bogost. "How do you then have a meaningful experience with a video game? Well, usually you take it home with you."

As more museums stage exhibits that incorporate video games, however, visitor expectations will change. It's certainly fertile territory. As part of the research for this article, I played experimental games that involved racing to my death, bending time, blowing up throbbing fields of color, and waiting for a leaf to fall from a tree (the latter, *A Slow Year*, was designed by Bogost). Some of these were deeply contemplative experiences, others provided ecstatic sensory overloads.

ARTISTS ON THE WEB

Many video-game artists make their works available online. If you're ready to play, here is a worthwhile selection:

The Intruder
by Natalie Bookchin
http://bookchin.net/intruder/index.html
First shown at San Jose State University's groundbreaking "Cracking the Maze" show, in 1999, this wrenching game reimagines a tragic short story by Jorge Luis Borges.

[rootings]
by Mary Flanagan
http://turbulence.org/Works/rootings
The author of *Critical Play*, a book on how games can be a form of creative expression and conceptual thinking, produced this original game, which eschews levels in favor of looping back and forth in time.

Deluxx Fluxx
by Faile with BAST
http://deluxxfluxx.com
This group of New York City street artists, known for their graphic collages, created a pop-up arcade in downtown Manhattan that featured original, nonsensical games that can also be played online.

Flywrench
by Mark Essen
http://messhof.com/flywrench
Players pilot a tiny, two-dimensional ship through a variety of geometric obstacles in this brutally difficult game, created by one of the field's most respected independent designers.

Trigger Happy
by Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead
http://www.triggerhappy.org
Inspired by the 1978 game *Space Invaders*, players get to blow apart a text by Michel Foucault.

Art Assault
by Paul Steen
http://www.paulsteen.se/aa.html
A mod on the game *Assault Cube*, this first-person shoot-'em-up allows players to blast famous artists within the confines of well-known art spaces, such as Tate Modern.

"People always ask me, 'If video games are an art, where is your *Great Gatsby*?'" says Chris Melissinos, a devoted gamer and former Sun Microsystems executive who is now serving as guest curator for the Smithsonian's historical exhibit. "I like to remind them that it was almost 50 years after it was published before *Gatsby* was hailed as a classic." In the world of art and video games, the game has hardly begun. ■

PRESSPACK -------------- MARYFLANAGAN ------------------- HTTP://WWW.MARYFLANAGAN.COM ---------- 32

HOLLAND COTTER

Never Mind the Art Police, These Six Matter

MANY of the artists in the 2002 Whitney Biennial (through May 26) are young and new to New York, but the rituals surrounding the show, including its fraught critical reception, are old and familiar. The reviews have been good, middling and bad, some of the last replete with end-of-civilization-as-we-know-it prognostications.

The biennial is always, at some level, as much about art-world politics as it is about art. The 2002 curators assembled a show that barely acknowledges the New York art establishment; predictably, whistle-blowers sprang into action. But, in fact, the art world's center of gravity is constantly changing, as work emerges in new forms, in different places, for different audiences. To an older generation, digital technology is foreign, suspect terrain, just as video was 30 years ago; for many young artists it is a rich and ductile aesthetic medium.

Art's geographic coordinates are in flux internationally; and in New York some eyes are looking to the Lower East Side for the next un-Chelsea, post-Brooklyn situation. Models for showing art are growing flexible, as they periodically do. Galleries with odd hours keep turning up in odd places (apartments, hotel lobbies, churches). Some artists work collectively, like rock bands. Those collaborating on Web-based art often never actually meet, and the art they're producing can be sampled, and even added to, by anyone, anywhere.

The notion of an art world run by a command central is arrière-garde by now. And anyway — bottom line — after all the biennial words are in, it's artists who matter and have the answers, and there are some good ones at the Whitney.

Whitney Museum of American Art (above); Irit Batsry (below)

IRIT BATSRY *A first film is a layered look at foreignness.*

THIS year's show has a particularly strong film program. And one of its participants, Irit Batsry — born in Israel in 1957, now based in New York — has been given the biennial's Bucksbaum Award of $100,000. Her contribution, a gorgeous, digitally edited 80-minute film — her first — titled "These Are Not My Images (Neither There Nor Here)," begins as a kind of travelogue by train and foot through Southern India, a world seemingly made of impressionistic, jewellike colors filtered through a hazy light.

Gradually, though, a story emerges, set in the future and told through the disembodied voices of three characters. One, played by Ms. Batsry, is a Western visitor sent by the government of some unnamed country to make a film about "the East." Another is her elderly, half-blind Indian guide: much of the film may be imagined as seen through his failing eyes. A third character is an Indian filmmaker torn between the culture he is part of and the unsettling lure of the modern West.

All three are, in different ways, adrift; but by the end of the film, each has had an experience of altered consciousness — suggested in bursts of explosive color and in an auditory hallucination of a soundtrack by Stuart Jones — which lets them reconcile fantasy and reality in their lives. Cultural displacement was a central theme of the "identity" art of the late 1990's; Ms. Batsry gives some sense of where that theme, with its didactic kinks now worked out, may be heading.

Whitney Museum of American Art

WILLIAM POPE.L *A 22-mile crawl through Manhattan.*

SITE-SPECIFIC performance is central to the art of William Pope.L, 47, whose endurance-test pieces draw equally from social ideas and personal biography. For his Whitney performance, titled "The Great White Way," he plans to crawl 22 miles through Manhattan — from the foot of the Statue of Liberty, up Broadway to West 207th Street, and across the University Heights bridge to the Bronx, where his mother lives.

Mr. Pope.L has already initiated the piece, which he has described as a symbolic gesture referring to immigrant history, the courage of the homeless and "the privilege of being a vertical person." He plans to complete it in increments over five years. The first segment, last December, took him from Liberty Island via ferry to the Custom House at Bowling Green; the second, in March, entailed an arduous uphill climb from Bowling Green to the corner of Wall Street and Broadway.

On that occasion, he was the subject of solicitous attention from surprised bystanders. Some asked him what the problem was; others offered him water; still others wanted to talk about what the performance meant. All the reactions were examples of what this utopian conceptualist calls "the generosity of the city." And surely more of that generosity will be extended to him during the third segment of his journey today, beginning at 11 a.m. Wearing a Superman costume and with an emergency skateboard strapped to his back, he will crawl up Broadway from Wall Street, past ground zero, to City Hall.

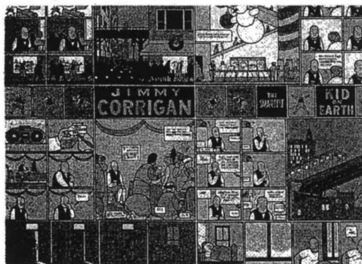
Whitney Museum of American Art

OMER FAST *Pop culture finds a meticulous craftsman.*

AT 30, the Israeli-born Omer Fast is the youngest artist of the six included here. And in his multitasking work, video, sound, performance, meticulous craftsmanship and popular culture come together.

At the biennial he is represented by a video piece titled "Glendive Foley," installed on two monitors. One carries images of bungalow-style homes in the small, remote town of Glendive, Mont. On the other are shots of the artist, who moved to the United States as a teenager, sitting at a microphone and orally creating a stream of sounds — the whoosh of rushing cars, the twittering of birds, the barking of dogs — to accompany his images of an all-American place.

Mr. Fast — who, like several artists in the biennial, has yet to have a one-person show in New York (his solo debut will take place in Paris this June) — is producing increasingly intricate work combining video technology, language and performance. In the recently completed "CNN Concatenated," a genuine tour de force, he articulates metaphysical questions by piecing together thousands of seconds-long clips from the taped performances of television newscasters. And in "Berlin-Hura," also done this year, he links the history of Germany (where he now lives) with that of Israel, through the memory of an elderly woman in Tel Aviv, in a story of forced-movement displacement. As Ms. Batsry has been doing for some time, he is making a formally virtuosic art of increasingly expansive ideas.



Whitney Museum of American Art (above); Marnie Ware (below)

CHRIS WARE *The comic book as a surreal epic novel.*

CHRIS WARE collects and recycles vast amounts of cultural and personal data and mixes them together for immaculate hand-drawn comic strips. Mr. Ware, who was born in Nebraska in 1967 and studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he now lives, publishes most of his work serially in a self-produced periodical called the Acme Novelty Library.

Inspired by American comics from "Krazy Kat" and "Little Nemo" to "Superman," he developed a polished graphic style and an idiosyncratic, quasi-autobiographical content, exemplified in his extraordinary visual novel "Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth." Nearly 400 pages long, the book tells the story of a child growing up, repressed and clueless, in a dysfunctional family. As we watch him change from an aged-looking 8-year-old to a middle-aged nerd to an old man isolated in a nursing home, the book shifts surrealistically back and forth among several generations of Corrigan men, suggesting that the same history of embarrassments and disappointments has repeated itself, detail for detail, in different eras.

Visually, Mr. Ware's minutely rendered jigsawlike compositions suggest abstract paintings from a distance; up close they read like excruciating self-revelations. Like many artists in this biennial, he slips among genres. He is a cartoonist who is also an epic artist-writer in the line of Henry Darger, for whom images and words were inseparable and who turned nostalgia into deeply scary emotion.

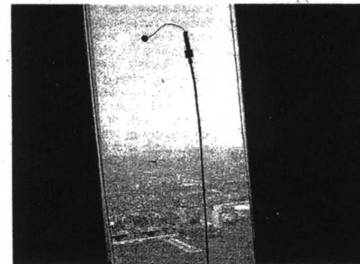
Whitney Museum of American Art (above); Franklin Miller (below)

MARY FLANAGAN *A digital revolution, on the Web only.*

MARY FLANAGAN, born in Milwaukee in 1969, is one of several digital artists in the biennial whose work is entirely independent of an institutional setting; her piece, "[Collection]," is available online at www.maryflanagan.com/collection.htm to anyone with PC access to the Web. Once you've signed onto her site, a program begins to scour your hard drive, randomly harvesting bits of data from e-mail, text files and images, just as it has done from the drives of all the users who have signed on before you.

This raw digital material is transformed into a three-dimensional holographic collage, constantly in motion. The artist describes the result as a "visible, virtual, networked collective unconscious." But it can also be seen as an anonymous, collaborative version of concrete poetry in which, in Schwitteresque fashion, language and images are given an equally mesmerizing and abstract presence.

Ms. Flanagan, an associate professor of multimedia design in the art department of the University of Oregon, has done some fascinating writing on how women relate to the new technology, and she has created a Web-based adventure game for girls, "The Adventures of Josie True." Like other digital artists in the show, including Margot Lovejoy, Josh On & Futurefarmers and Lisa Jevbratt/C5, she clearly understands not only the visual potential of a medium still in its infancy, but also its political implications: revolutions can begin, remotely, here.


Whitney Museum of American Art (above); Paul Court (below)

STEPHEN VITIELLO *Sounds of the World Trade Center.*

THE 2002 biennial gives extraordinary attention to the medium of sound work, which in its "pure" form is independent of visual components. Some pieces involve the use of spoken words; others are based on music; still others are wrought from ambient or fabricated sound.

Stephen Vitiello is among the most versatile younger artists in the medium. Born in New York in 1964, he started playing in punk and noise bands in the 1970's, then collaborated on projects with the multimedia artist Tony Oursler. In 1991, when he organized a concert with the video artist Nam June Paik and the Bad Brains, an African-American postpunk band, he was introduced to antic antimaterialist Fluxus performance. In the late 1990's, he began to operate as a solo artist and composer of site-specific work, in which sound was produced by, and occupied, physical space.

His piece in the biennial, "World Trade Center Recordings: Winds After Hurricane Floyd," derives from a 1999 artist residency on the 91st floor of Tower One, where for months he recorded sounds inside and outside the building, including its structural movements during a storm. Although by art-world standards the sources of Mr. Vitiello's work are unorthodox — he cites one of them as "being 14 and almost inside the speakers at the Palladium during the Clash's first U.S. tour" — he is an integral part of a contemporary lineage that includes, in addition to Fluxus, figures like Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci.

Games, Art, and Critical Play
An Interview with Mary Flanagan

Mary Flanagan, the Sherman Fairchild Distinguished Professor of Digital Humanities at Dartmouth College, creates artworks, situations, and games that seek transformative social encounters. Her work has been featured in the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Fine Art in Houston, and the Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany. She is the recipient of an American Council of Learned Societies Digital Innovation Fellowship and commissions from the British Arts Council, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the National Academy of Sciences. For twenty years, Flanagan has directed the social impact design laboratory Tiltfactor, creating and studying games from web-based games to virtual reality escape rooms, from board games to role-playing sports. Flanagan has spoken about biases and stereotypes in the digital arts in diverse communities from the Museum of Modern Art to the Tate Museum in London, from the Sorbonne to Oxford University, from the World Economic Forum to K–12 teachers' groups. **Key words**: art; board games; colonialism; critical play; Dada; Fluxus; game design; Grow-a-Game; Tiltfactor; video games

American Journal of Play: How did you play as a child?

Mary Flanagan: I played a lot on my own, with many animal figurines, LEGO blocks, tiny plants from the yard—I always crafted combinations of miniature items to make worlds. My family also played board and card games on weekends and at almost every family gathering. From dominos to the popular card game 500, we had a lot of intergenerational game time. So, I spent my free time in both structured and unstructured play. As I was a sickly child, I could not pursue sports or clubs or scouting, so imaginative world building was very important to my sense of optimism and possibility.

AJP: How have these early play experiences influenced your work as an artist, writer, and game designer?

Flanagan: What brings my interdisciplinary interests together is a foundation

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Contact Mary Flanagan at mary@maryflanagan.com

in values-based speculation about the possible. I think my creative work reflects a balance of structured and unstructured play and conceptualism. I create games for a public audience through my research laboratory at Dartmouth, Tiltfactor, and Resonym, my game company, with mechanics and outcomes goals and win states. Yet I also make imaginative, open play systems and unwinnable games, which tend to fall more on the artistic side of things rather than on the design side. I'm also someone who asks a lot of questions about why things are the way they are, and this incessant curiosity ends up being the basis of my motivation for writing critical essays and books. I am never content to study, describe, and possibly critique without also trying to make things on my own.

AJP: How did you start studying and making games?

Flanagan: Games have always fascinated me. You suddenly adopt the rules of another world and must find out how to succeed in that world. In addition to analog games, I played a lot of Atari games growing up and would replay them for hours—if you could do a speed run on a slow-loading adventure game cartridge, that was me as a kid.

When I was in graduate school, I was working on an MFA in film and media, but I was fascinated with the new ideas and the new notions of interactivity that emerged around computer games. Major video and performance artists began making interactive CD-ROMs, and I became hooked—they are often game-like but subvert some ludic norms that have become standardized, like winning, scores, and so on. Then I learned about Fluxus—a mix of nondigital artists, composers, designers, and poets in the 1960s and 1970s whose experimental works emphasized the design process over the completed work of art. In graduate school, I was hired for a project to digitize a collection of Fluxus works and make them able to be handled again, because years later these little Fluxus kits—pieces of paper and objects, meant to be interacted with—were too precious as art objects to be touched. Fluxus artists were playful, and they basically broke games by making provocative, nonsensical, and unwinnable games. After that project, I was committed to be a practitioner and a thinker. I studied film as an undergraduate and was attracted to avant-garde cinema, so it was natural to link the critical practices of avant-garde art with play. I made the first interactive portfolio as an artist at the University of Iowa and ended up right after school in the burgeoning games and dot-com town of Austin, Texas, in the 1990s. There, I was a designer and game producer making

games that had educational aspects. So, my involvement with games is really a long-term evolution.

The genesis of game development is interesting if you're working in both art and games contexts, because they involve very different trajectories and ideas of authorship. With ancient games, anonymous authorship is a given. Just who exactly invented chess? Although strains of evidence can be unearthed about the origins of some games, it's nearly impossible to divine the genesis for most ancient games. Games from the print era—we're talking seventeenth- and eighteenth-century games now—were often produced with news-related broad sheets for entertainment and sometimes, education. These authors, often printers and map makers, typically used two or three common game models and just changed the title and content depicted on the board. Over the past few decades, contemporary games have begun like art and books to be more associated with their authors.

AJP: In your 2009 book *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, you explore alternative games and avant-garde game design. What does it mean to play critically?

Flanagan: In the book, I noted that "critical play means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life. . . . Criticality in play can be fostered in order to question an aspect of a game's 'content,' or an aspect of a play scenario's function that might otherwise be considered 'a given' or necessary." So by that, if you are playing critically, you're asking questions, and you might be intentionally tackling something difficult.

Often play and games are described as escapes, which connotes a kind of mindless engagement. While that is a fine role for play, it can be so much more than that. Play allows us to understand aspects of our identities, to empathize with others, or to test the rules and find new solutions. I suggest that through critical play such engagement can be mindful and aware, capable of playfulness and also of seriousness. Critical play is simultaneously about full engagement and full awareness. It takes practice.

AJP: You suggest artists more than a hundred years ago used games as a medium to subvert and disrupt. Are there any particularly important examples of this?

Flanagan: I'm particularly drawn to history for new insights on the present and future. In terms of games as a platform for subversion and disruption, I can think of no better twentieth-century example than sculptor Alberto

Giacometti's No More Play series, in which Giacometti creates provocative works of art that are also game boards. A few are unwinnable puzzle-type game boards crafted out of wood. Another seems to be a board game with holes and pieces across the board until you realize that this is a war zone, and the objects are people whose graves are nearby. Today, these works are as shown as art masterpieces, but they are also provocative conversation starters because they imply player agency quite astutely. I've mentioned Fluxus art as well, which, across performances, scores, and more traditional objects, consistently invoked play and the use of play to bring about absurd, conceptual, and provocative situations. But before all of these, there was Dada, the playful but absurd eruption of the avant-garde in the early part of the twentieth century. These are important exemplars, but there are many. I'm sure new examples will emerge as our knowledge of global art and game practices continues to be enhanced by international scholarship.

AJP: Why does the Dada art movement loom so large in this history?

Flanagan: Dada questioned everything, and this was essential for art to "modernize" outside of the landscape painting and the portrait. Earlier art movements and particular artists contributed to the eventual upheaval that was Dada. For example, Cezanne was an innovator who built form out of color. But the context of a totalizing war like World War I made "aesthetic" art irrelevant, or so Dada artists proposed. Instead, it was a time for mockery of materialism, for critiques of capitalism and nationalism, which many say caused the war in the first place. Play and ridiculous performances, bizarre situations, odd assemblages, and experimental texts show artists' expansive play in the era. In Tristan Tzara's "Dada Manifesto" from 1918, he rants that Dada is about freedom, the recognition of human's grotesque inconsistencies, and the need to abolish prophets, and he encourages all to protest logic with disgust. Tzara and the other Dada artists hit a breaking point at the intersection of art, culture, and everyday life. In its insistence on senselessness, Dada was an art movement screaming into the void about the terrible acts happening in the world, all of human making. It's powerful when truth is spoken to power collectively, and that's what they were doing.

Although it was unfortunately primarily a White, male-dominated artistic movement, Dada was among the first European art movements in which women were occasionally recognized for their roles. This recognition is important because so many female-identifying artists have been effaced

from history. The performance artist and poet Elsa Von Freitag-Loringhoven; the founder of *The Little Review*, Margaret Anderson; writer Mina Loy; and artists Hannah Höch, Clara Tice, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp—these were vital influencers on twentieth-century thought.

AJP: Your research concerning artist's games helped you develop a critical-play game design model. How does this approach differ from previous methods?

Flanagan: The critical-play model for game design advocates subversion, such as unplaying games or reskinning them. As game design is taught now, most game development methods look a lot like design thinking methods, but there is an art-game contingency going strong, with lone artists or collectives making unique "works of game," as my colleague John Sharp might say. Critical play focuses on this manner of artistic practice, with its contemporary emphasis on concept and criticality thrown into the mix.

AJP: What is Tiltfactor and how has your research informed its work?

Flanagan: Tiltfactor is the game research laboratory I founded back in 2003, when I first joined Hunter College, and then I moved it to Dartmouth College in 2008. In the lab, we research ideas about games and invent and study games that, through the playing of, take on pressing social issues. We've made games to educate people about pandemics, to support public health reform, and to understand health care quality better. We've invented games that work to change negative biases and stereotypes and games that help make science disciplines welcoming to female students. Each of these projects is backed by an evidence-based approach, and we conduct research studies, often using social psychology methods, to determine if the design is doing what we intend it to do. It's essential that we use transdisciplinary methods to understand play, from humanistic inquiry to the social sciences. No one discipline is right or wrong when exploring a problem; each sheds light on a problem in its own way. The foundation of interdisciplinary research in the social sciences and design works well with the humanities- and arts-based notions embodied in critical play.

It's important to advocate for funding sources to study games rigorously. They are a key part of everyday culture, and we know very little about how they impact us, both short term and long term. Given what I have learned over the years, I believe that we're only at the beginning stages of this.

AJP: What is Grow-a-Game?

Flanagan: Grow-a-Game is a speculative game design tool—a card deck to help both new and experienced designers make games with a central focus on

human values. All games embody values, whether designers intend them to or not. The deck is fundamentally a brainstorming tool that incorporates possible values as lofty human aspirations, such as equity, democracy, inclusion, fairness, sustainability. Designers can use the cards to invent new games or reflect on design decisions. There are other cards in the deck that encourage the designer to summon an existing game to modify or verb cards to help invent new game mechanics. A lot of university design programs as well as after-school programs for kids use the cards to foster speculation about game design. They were developed as part of the Values at Play project I pursued with Helen Nissenbaum and a great group of advisors. Details appear in our 2014 book *Values at Play in Digital Games* published by MIT Press.

AJP: Could you tell us more about some of your artwork such as *giantJoystick* and Mapscotch that intersect with play and games?

Flanagan: A sense of surprise pervades my art practice—I like to encounter new ideas in the process of creating and throughout the life of a work. I use various technologies to help create these unstable conditions, but I also employ playful scenarios and game paradigms to bring out emergent discoveries. These situations and games often instigate transformative social encounters, but they can also provoke a sense of wonder or introspection. I use playful methodologies to make the familiar aspects of our social world strange—deconstructing what is assumed and posing exploratory solutions. To make these ideas concrete: the *giantJoystick* of 2006 turns everyday classic Atari gameplay into something monumental and collaborative through (literally) a ten-foot tall functioning joystick. An object originally designed for solitary play (or two players at most) becomes, in my iteration, a grand site for collaboration. The game interface is so large that it requires collaboration and new kinds of embodiment when approaching classic games, so the work makes the relationship with others, and with the body, something altogether new. This is similar to Mapscotch works, which are a series of utopian, critical, or conceptual little rules for the player to use in creating a hopscotch. These are small instructions that serve as provocations.

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I realized that I have been making the Mapscotch pieces for twenty years, so I collected them in a handbook, *Mapscotch*. Here's an example, entitled "Linescotch."

Draw a line.

Stand on one side.

Hop over the line.
Draw another line.
Invite someone to follow you.

Linescotch instructs participants to draw, but it's fundamentally about action, space, and engaging with other people. So, you will make a friend, if only for a brief moment! Some of the mapscotches are rather dreamy, but others take on difficult subjects. Bombscotch, for example, asks players to document U.S. wartime atrocities and hop on them.

Because they are enacted, not just viewed, these little poetic instructions transform into experiences. In certain art circles, this approach could be called "relational aesthetics" or "social sculpture" because games are systems capable of social engagement; they can create relationships. Both Mapscotch and giant*Joystick* use the generous capacity of play to create an experience for the player that is, I hope, thought provoking and moving in some small way.

AJP: How did your 2023 book, coauthored with Mikael Jakobsson, *Playing Oppression: The Legacy of Conquest and Empire in Colonialist Board Games* come about?

Flanagan: I've been studying and making games for social impact since I launched my research laboratory Tiltfactor in 2003. For me, the book project started with an awareness—and concern—about the problematic models in contemporary European-style board games. I attend many board game conventions because I make commercial board games, and the number of exotic locales and colonial themes in such games troubled me. In my practice too, it started to become clear that particular assumptions in Euro games such as "unlimited resources" and "worker placement" mechanics felt problematic to use without some rationale as to why these exist in a given game without sneaky ties to problematic thinking. In 2017 I was doing research as a museum scholar at the Getty Museum, and in the special collections of the Getty Research Institute, I found a collection of older games with colonial themes. After keynoting and presenting some ideas on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French and Mexican board games as tools for enculturation at the 2017 Board Game Studies conference, I was chatting with my colleague Mikke Jakobsson. We found that we had both been thinking about, even obsessing over, the plethora of colonial tropes and assumptions in board games. We felt strongly we had to say something, and to say something worthwhile to the wide range of both scholars and

players who love games. We had to do the research. It was an emotionally grueling project, too, because each new finding seemed more disgusting than the last. In the book, we were able to cover only a fraction of what we actually found. It's hard to document so much negative bias, disrespect, and, really, hatred that's been formalized into what many think of as an art form, as an entertainment platform, as a plaything.

AJP: What is the 4X model of board games and where does it come from?

Flanagan: The 4X genre of board games and video games dates from the 1970s. The four *X*s stand for explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate. These continue to be popular: 2015's Empires: Age of Discovery and 2017's Twilight Imperium are more recent examples of empire building and colonial thinking. The 1975 game Stellar Conquest is one of the first 4X games, and it has had strong influence on the genre. It's a Milky Way galaxy colonizing game played on an outer space map of hexagonal spaces—a war game genre standard game board. It's a big game, in which players have forty-four turns to explore, conduct technological research, expand their industrial capacity, move their population, and engage in combat. The goal is for players to explore different stars on the map, set up industry, and grow their colonies' population to get 'colony' points (victory points). To do this, players look for useful planets, whether rich in minerals or habitable environments. If other players have already entered a particular star system, players can choose to exterminate the other group. These 4X games are typically grand in scale: a population counter in Stellar Conquest, for example, marks a million inhabitants, and distances are measured in light-years. As an "engine-building" strategy game, it plants the seeds for several Eurogame conventions.

There is no intelligent life on the Stellar Conquest planets, so technically there is no extermination of existing civilizations (one of the Xs), but like other war games, the strongest win and war is inevitable. Games inspired by Stellar Conquest do feature alien enemies, though, and assume the colonial ideas that outer space is there for the taking, with or without inhabitants. In our book, we show that this notion of outer space empires, particularly generated by United States sci-fi, extend frontier myths and create a "space cowboy" trope. In the end, colonial mentalities, space exploration—all the fantasies around *terra nullis*—fed into what was to become contemporary games.

AJP: Why is it important that scholars and players understand the histories and legacies of colonialist board games?

Flanagan: The purpose of our book is to move board gaming in a positive direction, to show how colonial thinking has dominated games in a surprising and lasting way, and to help designers resist taking these design patterns and assumptions that developed over hundreds of years as neutral. Many people—even historians—looking critically at board games stop the search at the game theme. In our book, we dig deeper and look at game mechanisms themselves and their interplay with theme, place, and culture. In the end, we wanted to communicate two essential observations. First, the logic of colonialism has seeped its way into contemporary games in small and grandiose ways. Second, we wanted to show that these designs matter to players and player experience. Gaming can benefit greatly from this history as a disruptive force for more justice and fairness that cultures, peoples, and societies around the world deserve. Frantz Fanon wrote about the way colonialism's grip involved not just lands and territories, but also the mind. He pointed out how colonialism distorts and destroys people's pasts. Once readers are aware of the sheer reach of these colonial narratives woven into games, they might change their thinking and question if games are relatively neutral systems open for everyone to play.

Ultimately, we can create new possibilities through inventive design, but only if we really see existing tropes for what they are. Our plan for the book was to share this history and offer a different framing from other typically apolitical and noncritical board game histories.

AJP: How have game designers pushed back against these colonial and imperial legacies?

Flanagan: Luckily, we're seeing a few things starting to change. The board game industry is diversifying (albeit too slowly), and designers are emerging who strive to change colonial themes and mechanics. There are amazing new examples, however, so for those readers who might not know about them, I want to mention a few titles. Probably the best-known game is 2019's Wingspan, in which players take on the role of bird-watching fans building the most welcoming wildlife preserve. Shifting points of view and shifting perspectives are part of the solution to create new models. Shifting scale is, too. Instead of a game that charts out the global tea trade and encourages players to think of world dominance, 2019's Chai, by Dan and Connie Kazmaier, positions players in the role of tea brewers running a teashop. In 2017's Spirit Island, by R. Eric Reuss, players play the part of deities who fight on behalf of the indigenous population to protect

their lands and culture. Abandon All Artichokes is a deck-building game created by Emma Larkins in 2020. Typically, the genre of deck-building games is a preferred mechanical format for combat-based games, but Larkins reverses this battle narrative in favor of gardening. That same year MonsDRAWsity, by Eric Slauson, has players drawing the monster they saw based on descriptions from unreliable witnesses, subtly linking fantasy game mechanics to the history of African Americans falsely identified in police lineups in the United States. And the tabletop, role-playing game (TTRPG) community is moving fast to develop and distribute anticolonial games. Coyote & Crow, is a speculative TTRPG in which Europeans never colonized the Americas, created in 2022 by a team of Native Americans and led by Connor Alexander, a GWY/Cherokee board game designer. We're in an exciting new chapter in game creation!

I also hope to see more interesting intersections between art, experience, and games. There is a lot of room in this space.

AJP: What advice do you have for game developers who are interested in creating games that have social impact?

Flanagan: Oh gosh, there is a lot to say on this topic. I'd suggest getting to know the archives and ongoing games selected by the Games for Change organization and its festival, the unique games emerging from the IndieCade festivals, and reading articles documenting any studies on games—research studies in the social sciences and education are important places to start. Learning about what works and what doesn't is vital for the designer, and the approaches that get results aren't always intuitive. My lab Tiltfactor has published quite a bit on gender bias, for example, and games for health, while other research groups and labs have other specialties. Jump in—some of the methods and language in social science papers might not be familiar, but it is not too challenging to get the hang of it.

AJP: What are you working on now?

Flanagan: As usual I'm working in a transdisciplinary way across art-focused projects, research projects, and writing. Games to me are not so much a medium but part of a larger system of art and representation, along the lines of music or narrative. Perhaps games are also like a technology—not like a computer per say but an invention that nonetheless shapes the world around us. As Bruno Latour noted, "Technology is society made durable." In this view, then, the systems I work with could become durable, integrated, and omnipresent, with transformative power, woven into the

complex web that links materials, environments, communication, sustainability, people, and culture. I aim to collaborate across these zones to reduce biases, discover new knowledge, and craft transformative experiences for a better planet. Practically speaking, that looks like making and thinking. I'm currently working on a commission for the Baltimore Museum of Art involving monumental architecture, urban configurations, and rewilding in the form of giant play space. I just took a fantastic research trip to Turkey with a bunch of board game scholars and archaeologists, and I'm interested in the trajectory of game play and ritual in prehistory, which is not the easiest topic to find data on, but is a line of inquiry that is inspiring me. I'm also interested in analog games and their use in protest, defiance, and critique. I'm also following up on the UNESCO sponsored "Sharing Desired Futures" conference and the "Practices of Futurecasting" retreat in Linz, where I advanced the use of games as speculative futures frameworks. Like many of us, I feel called to action in the face of drastic climate instability and the destructive results of the Anthropocene, and I wish to act by using the transformative potential of games. Games can make abstract issues tangible. Games are particularly good for trialing and mediating our being in the world. I will keep working on the world's pressing issues by bridging the gaps among games, speculative design, and art.

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Baltimore Museum of Art opens expanded education center after $2.5 million renovation

Above: Baltimore Museum of Art Director Asma Naeem, center, interacts with Ardyn Redmon, 8, right, and Lotus Johnson, 9, at the BMA. **Top:** Greenmount West Community Center Cultural Director Kwame Huddleston, right, and intern Taeveon Carter, 17, interact with "Topophilia [Tunnel]" by artist Mary Flanagan. Philanthropists Mark Joseph and wife Patricia donated $2.6 million to renovate the BMA's education center into an interactive facility. KENNETH K. LAM/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTOS

By Mary Carole McCauley

Eight-year-old Aiden Tull tumbled into the Baltimore Museum of Art on Monday and couldn't wait to put his great, big, sticky fingers all over the works of art.

Neither could 8-year-old Kennedy Ladd nor 9-year-old Lotus Johnson nor even 8-year-old Ardyn Redmon, even if what Ardyn most wanted to do was to curl up in one of the colorful bean bag chairs known as "dew drops" and take a quick nap.

The other three shouted to one another as they ran between the stainless steel bars of Mary Flanagan's nearly floor-to-ceiling sculpture titled "Topophilia," occasionally stopping to pluck the bars like a harp or to press their hands through the gaps between the metal, wriggling their fingers like trapped fish.

And the museum staff couldn't have been more thrilled.

"Folks come into the museum, and they've got their stroller and their young children, and there's an immediate: 'Don't touch. We look with our eyes, not with our hands,'" said Verónica Betancourt, the museum's interim chief education officer. "The Joseph Center is a space that turns that on its head. It is designed for kids first."

Aiden and his friends were part of a group from the Greenmount

Turn to BMA, Page 8

SUN INVESTIGATES

Since '88, Md. gave $700M to Orioles

Now, the ballclub could get $600M after signing lease, and it's asking for more

By Hayes Gardner and Sam Janesch

Thirty-five years after the Orioles announced their arrival in Baltimore, then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer introduced a "distinguished visitor" to mark the end of a meeting that would redefine the MLB team's relationship with the state of Maryland.

The Oriole Bird came into the conference room and rallied the elected officials and bureaucrats with a chant of "O-R-I-O-L-E-S."

The occasion — final approval of a state-of-the-art, taxpayer-funded stadium in exchange for the Orioles' long-term commitment to Baltimore — came on the heels of the painful departure a few years earlier of the NFL's Colts. The baseball club's 1988 deal promised a "no-escape" lease and years of economic benefits in exchange for significant financial investment from the state.

Another 35 years have passed and Maryland officials are again on the verge of devoting valuable state resources to lock the team in for another three decades. Negotiations are ongoing for a new Orioles lease for Oriole Park at Camden Yards before the current one expires at the end of December.

Just by signing a lease, the Orioles would unlock a promised $600 million of new state funds for improvements at the ballpark, but the club wants even more, including a new state fund to help it with upkeep and development rights to key parcels around the complex.

The state already has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the ballpark for the privately owned club, according to state records, including $450 million on construction and financing and

Turn to Orioles, Page 2

INSIDE

Mervo football wins its 2nd state championship

Mervo upset North Point on Saturday, 14-7, to capture the 4A/3A football state championship at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium in Annapolis. Sports

FROM PAGE ONE

BMA

from Page 1

Lotus Johnson, 9, left, and other children from Greenmount West Community Center play in a new art installation at the BMA. KENNETH K. LAM/BALTIMORE SUN

West Community Center giving a test run to the newly expanded and re-imagined Joseph Education Center, which opens to the public Sunday.

A 5,000-square-foot center initially debuted in 2015, funded by a $3 million gift from Baltimore philanthropists Mark and Patricia Joseph. The center was a great success. It frequently was jammed on weekend afternoons with more than 200 kids and adults.

But after eight years, the Josephs could see that improvements were needed.

The entrance for school groups was poorly organized, with kids dumping their coats and backpacks into laundry hampers. The sinks in the makers' studio were too high for the pint-size patrons to reach. And the digital revolution had mostly passed the education center by. The couple decided to donate an additional $2.5 million to modernize and expand the center by 625 square feet.

'The kids certainly are having fun': The Josephs have a long history of supporting educational efforts, particularly those aimed at benefiting Baltimore Public Schools students.

Mark Joseph was president of the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners from 1975 to 1980. Patricia Joseph is a former dean at Stevenson University, and the couple helped found the Baltimore School for the Arts.

The museum hired the architectural firm of Quinn Evans to design the renovation, and the Whiting-Turner Contracting Co. to build it.

But, while the renovated center focuses on educational opportunities for kids, it also is designed to appeal to adults. It wasn't just Aiden who was drawn to Mary Flanagan's stainless steel sculpture, which takes the shape of the Baltimore Harbor Tunnel; donor Mark Joseph also had a hard time keeping his hands off it.

"The kids certainly are having fun," said Joseph, as Kennedy held two stained-glass squares to her eyes in the section of the education center exploring artistic materials. "This is exactly what we wanted."

It's not unusual for museums to have spaces set aside for education. But Museum Director Asma Naeem said that few have devoted as many resources as the BMA to engaging young visitors.

"When I was a young mother with three kids under the age of 5, I was constantly racking my head of what to do with these kids on the weekends, especially when the weather wasn't nice," she said.

"I would frequently go to museums. But most museums are not geared toward families with young kids. They most likely put you into one small room. Maybe they have a spot in a gallery that says 'Kids, you can touch this.'"

A rare exception was Washington's National Building Museum, which has set aside a large space devoted to engaging children with the foundational concepts of art, architecture and history.

That's the spirit that the Joseph Center is attempting to emulate by sneaking in learning opportunities about artists and the materials they use behind the bright primary colors and the multiple opportunities to get messy.

'The artist says you can make up your own rules': Visitors enter the center through the Experience Gallery, where they are greeted by three interactive installations created by artists: Flanagan's "Topophilia"; Derrick Adams' "Dew Drop Inn," a playroom with bright colors and bean bag chairs adorned with oversized arms, hair and other creature features; and Pablo Helguera's "Flower of Ancient Games," with five petal-shaped wooden tables that have game boards from different cultures integrated into the tabletops, from mancala (Africa) to backgammon (Iran) and chess (India).

"The artist says you can make up your own rules," Betancourt said, "but everyone at the table has to agree what the rules are."

The education center has two studios for making art: a dry studio where visitors can sketch and draw and a wet studio equipped with watercolors, charcoal and glue guns. There is classroom space that can accommodate up to 50 students, and a wall of interactive, pullout Discovery Drawers. Half are dedicated to showing kids how a particular artist works, from the 20th-century painter Henri Matisse to the 21st stained glass artist Raúl de Nieves, and half to materials as different as sawdust and ink.

Betancourt has a doctorate in art education, and each of the three artists selected to create the permanent installations have backgrounds as educators.

"We really wanted to create multiple points of entry for kids of different ages," Betancourt said.

For instance, Adams' "Dew Drop Inn" exudes a playful sense of humor that will appeal to the museum's youngest visitors. But teens and adults can play a card game similar to "Go Fish." Instead of sea horses and sharks, players match pairs of 20 artworks from the BMA's collection that were created by Black artists such as Zoe Charlton, Jonathan Lyndon Chase and Valerie Maynard.

And then there's the "Wall of Wonders," two walls of video screens situated directly above the Discovery Drawers. Each screen displays a running loop of high-resolution close-ups of artworks in the BMA's collection.

Kwame Huddleston, 24, the community center's cultural director, and intern Taeveon Carter, 17 came over to help the kids sort through the drawers. But their attention was quickly caught by Jack Whitten's monumental painting, "9.11.01,? which filled one screen, and Amy Sherald's "Planes, rockets and the spaces in between" on another.

Huddleston wanted to know whether the art on the screens was part of the museum's African collection, and was told that these and other works by Black artists were on view throughout the museum.

"Can we see them?" he asked.

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Feminist Activist Art, a Roundtable Forum, August 24–31, 2005

Forum Participants

Mary Flanagan is a game designer, artist, and media theorist based in New York City who leads the Tiltfactor research group at Hunter College. Flanagan's artwork has been shown internationally at venues including the Whitney Museum of American Art, ACM SIGGRAPH (Association for Computing Machinery's Special Interest Group on Graphics and Interactive Techniques), Ars Electronica, the Moving Image Centre in Auckland, ARCO Madrid, and the Guggenheim. She is author or co-editor of three books, including a book on the popular Sims™ game.

Jennifer González teaches in the History of Art and Visual Culture Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, with courses on museums and the politics of display, feminist theory and art production, semiotics and visual culture, activist art since 1960, the camera and the body, surrealism to postmodernism, environments, installations, and sites. Selected publications include "The Appended Subject" in *Race in Cyberspace* (2000), "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research" in *The Cyborg Handbook* (1995), and "Autotopographies" in *Prosthetic Territories: Politics and Hypertechnologies* (1995).

The Guerrilla Girls (www.guerrillagirls.com) use provocative text, visuals, and humor in the service of feminism and social change. They create projects about the art world, film, politics, and pop culture, including their large-scale installation for the 2005 Venice Biennale, anti-Hollywood billboard and sticker campaigns, and their books *Bitches, Bimbos and Ballbreakers: The Guerrilla Girls' Illustrated Guide to Female Stereotypes* (2003) and *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (1998). They travel the world talking about their experiences as feminist masked avengers and reinventing the "F" word into the twenty-first century.

Margo Machida is an Hawaiian-born scholar, independent curator, and cultural critic who specializes in contemporary Asian American art and visual culture. She is a faculty member in Art and Art History and Asian American Studies at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. Most recently, she co-edited an anthology of critical writing, *Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (2003).

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Marsha Meskimmon is Reader in Art History and Theory at Loughborough University (UK). She has published numerous books and articles on women's art and feminist theory, including *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (1996), *We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (1999), and *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics* (2003). Current work includes a new volume on contemporary transnational art and the concept of "home," as well as a number of book, film, and exhibition projects in collaboration with artists.

Martha Rosler works in several forms, as well as writing about art and culture. Her work centers on everyday life and the public sphere, often with an eye to women's experience. Many works center on the geopolitics of entitlement and dispossession. The series of shows and forums she organized in 1989, "If You Lived Here," addressed urban planning and architecture, from housing to homelessness. Her writing and photography on roads, transport, and urban undergrounds (metros) further these concerns. Her photomontage series joining images of war and domesticity, first made in relation to Vietnam, has been reprised in relation to Iraq.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities and Director of the Center for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. Her books are *Myself Must I Remake* (1974), *In Other Worlds* (1987), *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1988), *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993), *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), and *Death of a Discipline* (2003). *Red Thread* and *Other Asias* are in press. She has translated Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976) and Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps* (1994), *Breast Stories* (1997), *Old Women* (1999), and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2002).

subRosa (http://www.cyberfeminism.net/) is a reproducible cyberfeminist cell of cultural researchers committed to combining art, activism, and politics to explore and critique the effects of the intersections of the new information and biotechnologies on women's bodies, lives, and work. subRosa produces artworks, activist campaigns and projects, publications, media interventions, and public forums that make visible the effects of the interconnections of technology, gender, and difference; feminism and global capital; new bio and medical technologies and women's health; and the changed conditions of labor and reproduction for women in the integrated circuit. subRosa's name honors feminist pioneers in art, activism, labor, science, and politics: Rosa Bonheur, Rosa Luxemburg, Rosie the Riveter, Rosa Parks, and Rosie Franklin.

Forum Respondent

Amelia Jones is Professor and Pilkington Chair in Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Manchester, UK. She has written numerous articles in anthologies and journals and has organized exhibitions with accompanying catalogues, including *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (1996). Jones co-edited the anthology *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* with Andrew Stephenson (1999), edited the volume *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (2003), and has published the books *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (1993), *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998), and *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (2004). Her edited anthology *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* includes 25 original essays (2006). Jones has received ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies), NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities), and Guggenheim fellowships.

Question (1): *It has been argued that activist art of the past decade has moved away from visually representing politics or public policy toward forms of tactical intervention in the public sphere. Has feminist activist art experienced the same shift?*

Meskimmon: The question of representation and politics in art has a much longer history than the past decade; for example, quite a lot of the debate in the inter-war period in Europe centered on the question of "tendentious" art practices and whether it was possible to define or even discern political "content" in artwork at the level of visual representation. This longer frame (and, arguably, even earlier, in debates on political art at the time of the French Revolution) suggests to me a broader debate concerning both what we mean by the use of the term "representation" when it is engaged at the nexus of political activism and art-making and whether there are forms of aesthetics, visual, or material modes, which may defy conventional "representation" and yet have political impact.

I think both of these questions have become increasingly important to feminist activist art and theory and are key to thinking about contemporary work. On one hand, we have artist/theorists like Trinh T. Minh-ha exploring strategies for articulation of female subjectivity and political agency *without* deploying representational frameworks—neither in the sense of "representing" the women whose voices she wants us to hear nor in the narrative/visual sense of "representing" their bodies, their stories, as if granting us unmediated access to their histories and "selves." Hence, the struggle for political effect is intimately tied to the politics of affect in these works and both call into question the concept of representation.

subRosa: Feminist activist art has always involved tactical intervention. The current "tactical media/tactical intervention" art world trope has borrowed much from feminist, gay, and civil rights activists and artists, not the other way around. It has been appropriated to such an extent that the historical link is sometimes forgotten, and women and people of color are often invited to contribute to tactical media cultural gatherings as an afterthought, which is a kind of cultural imperialism.

If anything, there's a shift back to visual representation (of politics and policy), as museums, galleries, and conferences feature "tactical intervention." The great thing about these shows is that they have a lively, oppositional energy and can introduce a museum-visiting public to new perspectives and modes of communication.

The limitation is that it is very hard to actually intervene (in the activist sense of intervention) into the space and audience of a museum or conference, perhaps even harder than it is to intervene into an American shopping mall. So, invited artists often display documentation or ephemera from work they originally deployed elsewhere. In other words, they represent activism and interventions, rather than deploying them in the space of the museum or conference. This allows the audience to distance itself without being directly confronted with its own role in producing culture.

Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1965) at New York's Carnegie Hall is one example of work that incorporates both interventionist tactics and representation. Other examples would be Valie Export's *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968); Tanja Ostojic's *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* (2000) and *Strategies for Success* (2003); William Pope.L's *The Black Factory* (2002); and various works by Adrian Piper and Martha Rosler over the past 30 years.

Guerrilla Girls: We have always been interested in affecting change by transforming the opinions of viewers, and we are always trying to find more effective ways to break through people's preconceived notions and prejudices. We don't do posters and actions that simply point to something and say, "This is bad," as does a lot of political art. We present provocative images and statements, backed up by information, that give the audience a chance to think about an issue and come to a conclusion, hopefully on the side of feminism and social change. We believe that some discrimination is conscious and some is unconscious and that we can embarrass some of the perpetrators into changing their ways. This has proved true in the art world: things are better now than they ever have been for women and artists of color, and we have helped effect that change. (We are still condemning the art world for its lack of ethics, tokenism, and other bad behavior. It has become a place where billionaires play poker to see who can pick the art that will produce the best profit. We think that's a terrible way to validate art.)

Are we really intervening? Maybe that's not for us to judge . . . it's hard enough just getting the work done. But consider just two of our hundreds

of actions: first, our billboards in Hollywood, right down the street from the Oscar ceremony, telling the sordid truth about the low, low numbers of women and people of color behind the scenes in the film industry; and second, our large-scale installation at the Venice Biennale examining discrimination at the exhibition itself. Both those interventions engendered a public dialogue about issues that might have been absent otherwise.

González: Activist art has always engaged in tactical interventions in the public sphere, whether in the form of performances and demonstrations in art venues, or as the visual component of social movements, labor movements, and peace movements. The impression that activist art has moved away from representing politics to a more active engagement with the public sphere may derive less from an actual shift in artistic practice than from the restrictive conditions of history, particularly the culture wars in the United States during the Reagan administration that had a chilling effect on forms of activist art that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Any art exhibition can constitute its own public sphere, as Rosalyn Deutsche has argued, and clear-cut distinctions between public and non-public forms of representation are difficult to maintain. Rather than a move away from representation, we might consider recent forms of activist art that take place in the street—or on the internet, or in the mass media—as a "return" to once-familiar strategies of address. For feminist artists this return now incorporates, rather than leaves behind, two decades of work on the politics of representation, the politics of corporeality, and the politics of the gaze. The most sophisticated and successful work being done by feminist activist artists can probably be found at the intersection of these modes of address, where the tactical intervention relies upon a savvy use of visual representation.

Flanagan: I would say that feminist art *precipitated* this shift. Feminist artists of the 1970s had a great impact on contemporary art practices, and especially relevant are those women artists who either used technology in their own projects or who critiqued technology amidst larger cultural analyses in their work. Feminist artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s faced a hostile and male-centered art world. These artists turned to non-traditional media (posters, video, performance) to work against art steeped in the traditions and themes of masculine-focused modernism.

A number of women artists were simultaneously involved in the political changes of the time as well as exploring their voices through various media. Artist Jenny Holzer, for example, with her pro-feminist, political poster brigades, stickers, and electronic LED messaging displays, is a noteworthy example of an early feminist artist using various forms of technology to confront the passers-by. The feminist art practices of Jenny Holzer, Mary Kelly, the Guerrilla Girls, Valie Export, and Martha

Rosler are merely a few of the many examples of women artists working against dominant norms using subversive tactics; Holzer's work subverts contemporary information systems and advertising to shift the readers of her performative texts into social awareness and possible activism. Kelly uses surprising yet banal household objects and seemingly banal events; Rosler's pieces create game show-like spectacles in which the artist subverts television conventions and pushes on both the playful and serious ramifications of the work. The Guerrilla Girls literally re-skin themselves as jungle creatures to desexualize and complicate female identities. So it is no wonder that now women artists continue this tradition in light of the social and political turmoil of late capitalism and globalization; groups like VNS [pronounced Venus] Matrix, subRosa, and others use new technologies as well as physical spaces as sites for intervention.

Machida: The question of how to effectively bridge cultural and aesthetic politics and "real world" politics remains difficult to answer. Although art can exert a powerful influence on the social imaginary and public consciousness by projecting the images and aspirations of marginalized individuals and groups, it is important not to conflate these areas. While often interrelated, they nevertheless function as distinctly different spheres of social and cultural engagement. As such, one needs to be critically aware of overly inflated and uninflected claims about the effect that art has on the public sphere.

I would say that art-based tactical interventions (i.e., those oriented toward the art world and its audiences) generally have a limited impact beyond the art world and the academy. This does not mean that they are unimportant but rather that they should be understood and considered in relation to the context in which they operate. Indeed artists who opt to directly intervene in public policy generally do so by securing employment in government agencies or private foundations that allow them to advocate for and distribute resources to the constituencies they support—not primarily through their practices as artists. Moreover, as I have frequently observed, it is exceedingly difficult for activists to succeed at both being artists and functioning in an institutional position simultaneously, as each requires considerable psychic and emotional commitment.

Rosler: Feminist activism has often used the tactics of street theater, which has remained useful since the 1960s or early 1970s. Even Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina, who stood in silent protest for years holding up photographs of their "disappeared" children during the country's dirty war, qualify as feminist activists, though their goals were not directly in relationship to women's rights as a class but human rights and directly personal family concerns. Women in Black, in several

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countries around the world, and Code Pink, in the United States, have antiwar and other political interests but often from a specifically feminist perspective, which may or may not be made explicit. Clearly, when women decide to get together in a group in a public space, it is intended as a show of force by women, not just activists, and thus is rightly seen as speaking up *for* women, as well, through a form of representation.

Right now [Rosler's remarks were written during the summer of 2005], in Crawford, Texas, the antiwar protest led by Cindy Sheehan is a symbolic action in which specifically women's concerns—the mothers of soldiers protesting the death of their sons (though they might be joined by those protesting the loss of daughters)—are meant to address the "human" costs of war but provoke questions about the political meaning and social costs of a specific war.

Amelia Jones: I agree with what I view to be the underlying impulse of these perspectives: to note in one way or another how the whole understanding and experience of the public sphere, and thus of activism, has been transformed over the past decades. The transformation of the public sphere parallels and is implicated in the transformation of how representation functions—and how we relate to images, texts, objects, bodies, and spaces. The burgeoning of internet culture is only one example of the way in which representation has come to mean something entirely different from what it meant twenty years ago. If we can no longer imagine that representation and the real are diametrically opposed (or, in a Platonic sense, that the representation is an inferior reflection of something real and truthful that preexists it) then the idea of tactical activism might not seem opposed to visual representation.

The practice of the Guerrilla Girls is perhaps the best exemplar, within feminist practice and beyond, of how representation *is* tactical activism, and involves the body as well as social space: their interventions take place via pictures and words, put forth in the context of their performative guerrilla actions. Their bodies in the public sphere are crucial activators of the text/image posters that explicitly call for action.

There is, then, no opposition between tactical intervention in the public sphere and visual representation. A more useful model for feminism, I think, might be to think of the situational specificity of how particular acts, images, texts, structures, and body movements function. A return to a vaguely Marxian conception of how these relate to the structures that control bodies and images in our culture (say, Fox Television; or the Museum of Modern Art with its twenty- dollar entrance fee, phalanx of guards, and regimented trajectories prescribing how bodies are to look at pictures) would be politically advantageous for feminism and other rights movement-based discourses.

Question (2): *Some have proposed that in an art world with renewed interest in formal issues and "beauty" and an audience indifferent or inured to critique, the belief in the transformative potential of activist art has diminished considerably. Do you agree with this perspective? If so, please elaborate on why you feel this is the case. If not, which practitioners of feminist activist art would you identify as having found an audience receptive to critique and feminist approaches that demonstrate the transformative possibilities of the deployment of art as activist?*

Meskimmon: I am wondering whether this question is posed so as to suggest that an interest in "beauty" or formal concerns necessarily spells the end of activism. If so, I would simply disagree; I am always ill at ease with such binary divisions of knowledge and practice and find them unhelpful.

If, however, the question has a more nuanced implication—namely, what the relationship might be between conventional aesthetic concerns and activist art, then I think there are a host of potentially exciting answers. For example, the work of indigenous Australian artists such as Fiona Foley and Judy Watson examines materiality and the formal qualities of space and abstract composition as a mode of feminist activist practice. Both Foley and Watson have re-worked archival resources to reveal the deep ambiguities of ostensibly neutral scientific knowledge of indigenous women and the practices of collecting images, artifacts, and specimens common to colonial regimes. In this way, the formal qualities and activist intervention are inseparable in this work.

This links their work to what I think has been one of the most highly charged areas of feminist theory and practice over the past decade: namely the materiality of knowledge and the corollary explorations of new forms of writing, making, and undertaking research. This work has radical implications for political activism, suggesting as it does that there may well be territories of understanding, which had been impervious to interrogation in their own terms before, but which are now able to be reconceived precisely through shifting the "formal," aesthetic, or material terms of the debate.

subRosa: As noted in our answer to the first question, there are serious limitations to the potential for activist work to be transformative in the space of the gallery, museum, or conference. Fortunately, these spaces are not the only venues for cultural production or activism.

The feminist activist art movement is increasingly necessary, especially where such movements advocate human rights and self-determination for all people, regardless of gender. In the United States, the Patriot Act was just renewed, and some parts made permanent. The wars on Afghanistan and Iraq are draining the U.S. economy and spirit and are infinitely more

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devastating for the residents of those countries. State by state, so-called "Academic Freedom" bills are being passed, which give students new legal power over professors who introduce "irrelevant, controversial" material in classes: for example, evolutionary theory or female reproductive autonomy. As societies become more restrictive and oppressive, the transformative potential of activism (including activist art) increases.

However, transformative potential does not equal audience desire in a climate of fear and restrictive legal actions. There are historical examples of the interest in formal issues and beauty being linked to fascist tendencies in a culture. Of course this is not always the case, but it is certainly worth considering during "Operation Enduring Freedom."

subRosa has had good experiences using multi-modal and nontraditional means/venues to engage audiences with critical material. For example, many people are comfortable asking demanding questions if they are in a role (customer) and venue (point of purchase) where they feel they have power. We have had several successful performance interventions in campus student activity centers, where students discover and discuss cultural values and scientific methods of Assisted Reproductive Technologies and genetic modification of the food supply. Egg donors are heavily recruited on college campuses, so this makes a great platform for discussing eugenic rhetoric and global economies of female flesh.

Guerrilla Girls: Luckily, the art world never clings to any one notion for very long. This critical elevation of work that deals with beauty and formal issues will soon give way to something else. The art world loves to hate political art, but they can't kill it.

We know—from the thousands of letters we've received from people all over the world—that our work has had some effect. As to how political art can be more effective, that's a more difficult question. How can we avoid preaching to the converted? How can we be as transformative as possible? We ask ourselves those questions every day. Stay tuned.

González: The renewed interest in art schools for "beauty" or the dominance of formal over conceptual and political issues seems to follow a predictable swing of the ideological pendulum and the capitalist art market. The socially conservative audiences that are inured to activist art today are probably the same audiences that have always been somewhat oblivious, if not hostile, to social critique in the past. What seems to have shifted in the last few years—although this is again a "return" in the academic tradition—is the degree to which art *students* are actively discouraged from engaging in larger social and political questions in order to better promote the sales of their work to those who economically support both the gallery system and, in some cases, the art schools themselves. "Beauty" has become a euphemism for the rejection or even censoring of social, historical, or political content

in art. It also frequently subsumes the very concept of aesthetics to its own, narrow rubric. Despite this climate of unreflective production and consumption, however, I do not think the "transformative potential" of activist art has diminished; the transformative potential is there; it is simply no longer welcome in the academy. What this means for feminist artists is that they must be willing, as in the past, to forego the framework of the academy to produce effective forms of cultural critique. Groups like Code Pink or Women in Black appear to have taken this path with some success because they are inclusive and do not restrict participation to artists.

Flanagan: To me, the emphasis on formalism and "beauty" are very much a response to the feeling of disempowerment overall that many people, including art patrons, have in relation to the state of the world. Our systems and technologies are too far developed for the individual to understand or control. Yet I still remain positive about the transformative social and political aspects of art. For me, the potential for the possibilities of activist art, specifically, for feminist activist art, lies in the area of interactive artwork and artists' games. While not inherently an area open to wild critique, some "game art" represents significant political and controversial cultural challenges in a time when computer games in popular culture now occupy more time in the household than does television, and represent a ten-billion-dollar industry. Artists working amidst the ubiquity of computer gaming repeatedly take on the role of interpreters and interventionists in the practice of exhibiting their work in both traditional (gallery) and native (networked, screen-based) spaces.

The approach that women digital artists such as Natalie Bookchin, Anne Marie Schleiner, and myself (among others) are utilizing in these new games offers an essential counterpoint to trends in digital culture. The "anxious digital artifacts" produced by these artists are not only helpful for us to understand the role that technology plays in contemporary culture and power relations within them, for women's games differ both from commercial games and independent male artists' games in their incorporation of personal stakes, changing play patterns, and alternative game goals. For example, in some games women makers focus on the sensitive balance between competition and cooperation (my own work [six. circles], and the work of artists such as UK-based sculptor Ruth Catlow, who made a three-player online chess game in which one player takes the role of the pawns and tries to stop the fighting).

Women's art-games counter the hegemonic representation offered by commercial computer games and popular technoculture where women are monsters or oversexed heroines; second, they explore the construction of "sociality" in such a setting; third, they challenge game goals linked to larger systems of power; and fourth, they introduce tactics to celebrate notions of movement, chance, and play for self-discovery. Women's games

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question the cohesive narratives and the "speed rush" offered by commercial game culture and the examples of work by Bookchin and Grossberger-Morales demonstrate the significance of their approach to popular culture. Their games represent a new way of thinking about gaming, technoculture, and digital art.

Machida: It remains an open question about whether activist art (feminist or otherwise) is actually capable of catalyzing change at the meta-societal level. Whereas currents in modernism espoused a belief in the transformative power of art (alongside notions of progress), postmodernist critiques have contributed significantly to destabilizing these convictions. While visuality retains a strong role in shaping public consciousness and vernacular culture, visual art must compete for attention with film, video, and television—mass media that provide far more powerful and accessible sources of visual information for the vast majority in today's world. In addition, since understanding "high" art requires a grounding in the ideas and traditions behind it, its primary audiences remain limited to elite art-going publics.

Further, what is meant by "transformative" depends on the standards one applies to measure art's success in enabling change. For some, anything less than achieving a utopian goal may be deemed insufficient. Activists holding long-term views may conceive of such interventions in more strategic terms, viewing cultural work as an ongoing process requiring continual negotiation, compromise, and adaptation to specific contexts and historical moments. Certainly, in a complex and mutable political culture like the United States, all activist movements (including feminism) contain the seeds of their own contestation. As witnessed in the backlash against multiculturalism in the "culture wars" of the 1980s, art can indeed serve to bring into public debate the most fundamental notions of who we are and yet ultimately be rejected by many both in and outside of the art world.

Rosler: The decline of the utopian dimension of modernity—progress toward social betterment and perhaps total social transformation—includes a retreat to formalism and more properly, aestheticism. It is reversing cause and effect to ascribe a loss in the belief of the transformative power of art to the rise of aestheticism. The overheated art market also has played its part in seducing young artists—students, often—toward commodification as their goal. Yet in between the cracks, many young women artists are interested in feminist themes in their work, especially in Europe, where market pressures on the one hand may not be so pressing and political disenchantment on the other may not be so prominent. It would be a mistake to overlook women working in so-called net art, which often they do precisely to avoid market pressures and museum and

gallery strictures and to reposition the arena of competition with male producers, as well as to establish a claim toward a community of interests of women in diverse world locales, despite phenomenal differences in their life situations. This is also true in the so-called developing countries outside Europe, particularly in Asia.

Amelia Jones: González is right to note that beauty discourse (epitomized in the work of Dave Hickey but also deployed by influential critics such as Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker*) has had insidious ideological effects that ultimately replicate some of the oppressive closures of modernism. There has been a false opposition set up in the art world by writers such as Hickey between "beautiful" art (images that can ostensibly be appreciated in an unmediated fashion for their aesthetic perfection) and "political" art (art that is "bad" because it insists on attempting to convey an explicit political message)—and it is precisely this kind of opposition that should be refused and refuted. It is this kind of logic that supports the deification of figures such as Matthew Barney as, in the words of Schjeldahl in his *New Yorker* profile of Barney, moving us beyond the clumsy urgency of political art to offer pure aesthetic appreciation in its place (2002).

Obviously, such models serve very predictable power structures and should be rejected. I agree with Flanagan that they are largely motivated by anxiety about the loss of former belief systems that sustained the power of middle-class or wealthy white, usually straight, men in controlling art institutions and aesthetic value systems.

At the same time, of course, as Meskimmon suggests, it would be spurious to suggest that anything that is political can't be beautiful—beauty is in the eye of the beholder, after all. In the eye of the beholder, and the desiring fibers of her body—if she's a black lesbian video maker, she might find Barney's work hideous but the radical and overtly politicized text/image work of Carrie Mae Weems visually luscious. Or she might loathe the very sight of Weems's work and adore the bizarre and aggressive imagery in Barney's films.

Question (3): *Have particular feminist artists working in an activist mode in different locations around the world found effective ways to address the impact of globalization on women in their locales? If you feel this has not happened, or there are significant difficulties that have been experienced by feminist artists attempting this kind of practice, please elaborate. If you feel there are examples, please identify which artists you feel have been most effective and where they are located as well as problems, issues, and difficulties they have faced in developing work and models of practice in this arena.*

Meskimmon: Two artists come to mind immediately—Yin Xiuzhen and Monica Nador. With Yin Xiuzhen, I am thinking mainly of the *Washing River* piece, where she froze blocks of the contaminated Yellow River and built a small structure on the street with these, asking passersby to use fresh water to cleanse the brick building, thereby washing the river of the poisons being dumped by transnational corporations. By contrast, Monica Nador's recent work has been in small Latin American communities where, seeking work in global industries, rural people have been displaced to makeshift houses at the edges of company borders. Nador works with members of these communities to find decorative motifs derived from their rural traditions and to begin the process of painting their new homes with these designs. The process is simple but has transformed many of the participants, giving them a political stake in their new communities and a sense of voice and empowerment.

The one note of caution I would sound about seeking art that confronts the problems of globalization is that it might tend to cast every facet of globalization as negative when this is not the case. Globalization itself is simply an occurrence, neither positive nor negative—like modernity, its valences are particular and its effects specific. Where one community might benefit, another might suffer; ameliorating as much of the suffering as possible by righting the inequities is imperative, but it is not a general task. It needs to be done with detailed knowledge.

subRosa: It is important to point out that our exposure to international feminist artists is limited by the same filters that women encounter everywhere. Many conferences, festivals, and media documenting art and activism often limit us to a special subsection. We are able to witness or discuss works by making our own formal and informal networks and research or through the privilege of travel or working with international students. The filters are even greater for women working outside of the United States, Europe, and Canada. Greater resources for translation, documentation, and travel would help. We must do better than wait while curators wring their hands at the seeming lack of relevant work.

We have given some examples in answer to the first question, of women working primarily alone. Feminist activist artists are often most effective when they are able to work in solidarity with others and feel free to cross the boundaries of what is considered art.

Some of the most effective activist work by women holds no particular stake in being considered art, although it may rely heavily on visual communication skills or be effective because of the way it makes female bodies and the female gaze visible. Some examples include Israel's Machsom Watch (www.machsomwatch.org), Mexico's Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (www.mujeresdejuarez.org), and Women in Black (www.womeninblack.net).In some places, such as Singapore, where there are restrictions

on gatherings and public activities, it is a transgressive act to do a performance piece. Nevertheless, Amanda Heng has done activist feminist work there in public since the 1970s. And Sanya Ivekovic in Zagreb has had a long career in groundbreaking political feminist performance art and film. Both these artists are virtually unknown even in academia in the United States. Mónica Mayer recently wrote *Rosa Chillante,* chronicling 30 plus years of women's performance art in Mexico.

González: Globalization is still an ill-defined term. For the sake of this question, I will take it to mean the spread of liberal capitalism worldwide and the subsequent impact in economic and material conditions for the laboring classes. My answer to the first part of the question is yes, feminist artists have found effective ways to address its transformative impact locally and internationally. One particularly pointed work concerning the conditions of global capital is Coco Fusco's 2001–2002 net broadcast video performance *Dolores from 10h To 22h* in which the artist plays a woman who has been accused of making trouble at an industrial factory in the north of Mexico. Her boss tries to intimidate her into resigning from her job through verbal abuse and incarceration without food or water in a factory office. Fusco re-enacts the event, drawing upon the tradition of endurance in performance art, in this case for twelve hours, but from the perspective of those who are forced into real endurance conditions under global capital. Seen from the perspective of surveillance cameras, the video image of the artist's entrapped body appears under the watchful gaze of the audience, who are placed in a position of voyeurism. Fusco works from the privileged economic position of the United States and does not necessarily face the resource constraints of feminist artists in Mexico or other nations. Her work nevertheless addresses precisely this unequal position of women in different parts of the world, as well as within the United States, and reminds her viewers of struggles and contested territories that otherwise remain invisible.

Flanagan: I think new feminist art practices are emerging across the globe—perhaps in ways which can emerge as extraordinarily powerful because they represent the kinds of radical change we saw in 1970s feminist art in the United States and Europe, but in some cases emerging from far more conservative social situations or religious belief systems. A friend of mine living in London, for example, just returned from showing her work in the first lesbian art exhibition in Seoul, Korea. Due to the nature of Korean social norms, the artists all decided to show their work by means of concealed identities. However, the art show did indeed transpire and signaled a great change in voice and empowerment for those involved. So for many parts of the world, feminist actions in the Western conception are still a radical gesture. The concern we all have is how to sustain

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radicality and action, how to continue to raise awareness and instigate change ten, twenty, thirty years after such radical shifts.

Machida: In my observation, it is extremely challenging to integrate artmaking and an interest in working toward social change, even among Asian diasporic women artists who demonstrate a strong interest in doing so. One example can be found in the Mumbai (formerly Bombay) -born feminist artist/activist Priti Darooka, who came to the United States in 1989 to study art. Living outside of India, her concerns increasingly turned to intercommunal religious violence and abuse against women (including the controversial practice of bride burning) in her homeland. Her growing interest in these issues would eventually impel her to pursue a degree in Women's Studies. Later she returned to India where she now works in New Delhi for the Programme on Women's Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (PWESCR), an international agency focused on advocating for women's rights.

In a recent email, Darooka reflects on the "disconnect" she finds between the elite art world in the United States and the larger global issues and constituencies she seeks to address. She writes, "Human rights to me felt [like a] very real and useful tool for empowerment, advocacy and social change. . . . What was the purpose of all that [art] work . . . with the Iraq War going on, global poverty at an all time high, and people suffering for basic survival all around the world? Can any 'art' contribute toward addressing any of the global/local problems today? I still do very strongly believe it can—but, good models for it are very few." It is exactly these types of tensions that any serious investigation of art activism, feminist or otherwise, needs to address.

Amelia Jones: Again, I don't tend to think of art as "activist" or "not activist," so my response here will challenge that opposition. It seems to me that the respondents have come up with interesting examples of artists working explicitly for political change, which is certainly a different beast from artists making work solely for the market.

But there is a continuum, and I tend to be the most interested in work that works across boundaries (including gender and nation) to propose new kinds of subjects that thwart old regimes of power. Suzanne Lacy, Valie Export, Mierle Ukeles, Faith Wilding, Lynn Hershman, Coco Fusco, and Nao Bustamente, among many other feminist artists, have been working for years on issues of labor and the female body within the context of national and global relations of social and economic power.

A range of authors in the special issue of *Signs* I have just co-edited with Jennifer Doyle on "New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture" (2006), explore different international artists and cultural practitioners working with different tools (from queer feminist Japanese Manga to Black

feminist art activists in the United States to the Toxic Titties, working with queer feminist performance in Los Angeles, to street demonstrations by the "Saturday Mothers" in Istanbul) to intervene in normative power structures. The contents of this journal issue exemplify my point about activism versus representation being a false opposition.

But other kinds of work, while less obviously activist or feminist, I think are equally important in addressing the power relations circulating around the twenty-first century gendered/sexed subject: for example, London-based Franco B., L.A.-based Vaginal Davis and Ron Athey, and San Francisco-based Guillermo Gómez-Peña (working with La Pocha Nostra), who are not anatomically female (as is evident on viewing their displayed bodies), work effectively to transform concepts of subjectivity in ways that are ultimately feminist in that they overturn normative conceptions of the gendered and sexed body and wield the queer/feminine as radical aspects of contemporary subjectivity. A young, straight, white male artist working in Denver (in the middle of the middle of the United States, of all things!), Matt Jenkins, who collaborates with Adriana Nieto in some cases, is doing spectacular projects addressing gender and race oppression across the world. In *Cartographies of Struggle,* he performs himself in urban space using surveillance technologies to comment on the murder of the women of Juarez, Mexico—this kind of project is especially promising in that it exemplifies the way in which feminist and anti-racist and queer work might be done collaboratively across borders (either national or internal) and might not emanate from bodies normally associated with such critiques.

Question (4): *In a recent issue of the international feminist art journal* n.paradoxa*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains her withdrawal of support for the phrase "strategic essentialism" because of the way it has been reduced to a form of "identitarianism." By identitarianism she has explained that she means "those who take identity as the main agenda for political and cultural survival" (2005, 7). Do you believe feminist activist art can, on the whole, be described as "identitarian" in the sense Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses this term? If not, please elaborate. If so, what examples would you point to, and do you think it is time for feminist activist art to move away from "identitarianism." If so, how is this to be done?*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: The longer withdrawal of the phrase "strategic essentialism" was published in 1993 in a conversation with Ellen Rooney, which was in the lead piece in my book *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. You might ask your readers to take a look at this interview and come to some decision themselves.

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My reason for withdrawing the phrase was that further theoretical considerations made me realize that we were always essentialists of one sort or another. It is not possible to continue to live and think without the founding error of essences. The point was to be careful about how essentialism was used, rather than add to its use on another level of activity, and call it "strategic."

And looking at the way in which this phrase was used, I found that the word "strategy" was not seriously taken up. Strategy is something that is situation-specific. Most of the so-called "strategic uses of essentialism" seemed to want to take this up as a lasting practice, rather than something that was called forth by some situation or other. It therefore seemed to me to be a way of engaging an unexamined essentialism and insisting that it was theoretically correct, since it was only a strategy.

Recently, I have begun to indicate that the first use of the term, which I think was in "Deconstructing Historiography," was because I had wanted to say, in my essay on the Subaltern Studies group, that, although they were speaking of subaltern consciousness, they were not essentialists (1985). I think this was tinged with bad faith. Indeed, the subalternists did not need this endorsement, and I should simply have acknowledged my difference from them, even as I declared all my admiration for their work.

You say that in the later interview I relate the practice to "identitarianism." I think my use of the word is much more tied to "identity politics." I think what I meant was that the essence that was usually used strategically, was an essence that described a cultural or ethnic collective identity. I think that this can also extend to identity as a "woman." I do think that we are put together by whatever you might want to call culture and certainly by ideologies of sexual difference. However, if we embrace these determinants as identities, I believe we compromise the profound obligation for an ethical sameness. This is not a polarization, of course. I just meant that if one emphasized group identity, one claimed the place of the other too easily and was ready to abdicate the general ethical obligation. I also felt that it could compromise parliamentary democracy by finally leading to voting blocs—complicating the demands for civil and political rights in murky ways.

How much this relates to art practice, I cannot say. I am not myself a theorist or practitioner of art as such. I find myself writing on art from time to time, always with apologies for my crude approach. I should also say that this kind of identity politics is questioned today in a city like New York by a genuine mingling of ethnic groups and of course by the general indeterminacy of sexual difference. On the other hand, one should not think of these things as battles won and lost. I think one must be careful here.

I do want to say, however, that the connection with identity was not, I believe, established quite so strongly in the earlier interview.

Meskimmon: I am surprised by this withdrawal—I need to re-read the text. I am mainly surprised by the loss of the sense of "strategic" in the original formulation. There was always the problem that essentialism might become a reductive "identity politic" forcing a rather crude sense of alignment based on fixed and definable identities. However, by introducing a notion of strategy, some of the first theorists to speak of strategic essentialism (like Teresa de Lauretis) were removing the oversimplified fixity of the alignments; that is, they were suggesting that there were good political reasons for grouping together as "women," in the full knowledge that "women" is not a universal or essential category. Moreover, they were acknowledging that individuals might group together as "women" for one purpose and then as, say, "factory workers" for another and so on, developing mobile, strategic plays of identity. In either case, that still seems very productive to me in many instances and so, as long as identity alliances are strategic and not prescriptive or definitional, I have no qualms about them.

subRosa: Well, that would depend on how you are identifying feminist activist art and its practitioners. It is also not possible for some to move away from their identity and still survive politically or culturally (Palestinians, for example, or intersex people advocating against coerced/forced genital surgery or unionized sex workers in Cambodia).

For those who are able, there may be benefits to some kinds of disassociation with aspects of identity. There is also much to be gained where identity-based groups can forge solidarity in a larger call for human rights.

subRosa collaborated with the artist James Tsang to produce a performance and text called "Yes Species" in which we explore some of these ideas and raise the possibilities of Useless Gender/Resistant Bodies. Documentation and texts can be found at http://refugia.net/yes/.

We are committed to feminist affiliation across categories of embodiment as a tool for change. We favor affirming tactics of anti-discipline over strategies for coping with inequities, whenever possible.

It is impossible to give a thoughtful critique of "identity essentialism" in 200 words or less. We admire Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's strategic ethics and the way her important work responds to changing conditions of feminisms.

Guerrilla Girls: Are we "identitarian?" Well, we still find the feminist perspective a really good place from which to criticize politics and culture. But we don't like to get caught in wars that pit one feminist thinker against another. What works for one time and place might not work for another. We believe there are lots of different feminists, and feminisms, and we support most of them!

González: I understand feminist activist art to have as its long-term goal the critique and dismantling of patriarchal systems of power. The more progressive forms of feminism recognize that this goal necessarily includes a critique of the racism and class dominance through which patriarchy frequently operates. For this reason, I do not believe that feminist activist art can or should be described as an "identitarian" cultural practice that is simply focused, for example, on the category of "women" or the concept of "gender." Instead, it should be recognized as a set of critical engagements with systems of power that are oppressive for a wide variety of people. Anyone can be a feminist artist if her or his efforts are effectively and consciously anti-patriarchal. Of course, some feminist artists have chosen to take up the idea of "identity" as a rallying point for the shaping of political movements and a feeling of solidarity. This is a distinctly separate issue, although one can see how the two—identifying as a feminist and producing feminist art—might be easily conflated. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe has written intelligently about the importance of identification in the production and maintenance of political blocs, whether hegemonic or counterhegemonic. As long as people continue to be defined socially and culturally by identifying "traits" such as gender or ethnicity, it will probably be efficient to organize politically around these traits to produce social change but unproductive to define or delimit radical art practice according to the same criteria.

Machida: Rather than becoming enmeshed in exactly the type of circular analysis that Spivak identifies as "identitarianism" in which "you are always thinking of the essence of your own group," I think we need to shift the terms of discussion. I would argue that to accept some form of collective identification—whether based on gender, ethnic specificity, or culture—is *not* automatically to be an essentialist or to support static, hegemonic notions of identity. In fact, there has always been a great deal of diversity within groups, however defined, and a critical recognition of internal differences can potentially yield multiple relational understandings of the ways we are positioned as social subjects. Indeed, it could equally be said that arguments positing identity as a monolithic and disciplinary construct simply create other essences, or to put it another way, they tend to essentialize identity as an ontological and epistemological category.

Rosler: If what Gayatri is referring to is the need to reassert highly inclusive social goals—a return of forms of universalism, as in universal rights, and of rationalism in demands for social betterment, toward governments driven by constitution laws rather than tribalism or traditionally repressive religions—then I certainly agree. The effort to reimpose mystification and patriarchalism in combating the rule of technocratic elites in

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countries such as India is very much at issue. Vandana Shiva and Arundhati Roy have pointed to the problem. Although it seems to fly in the face of reason simply to claim *tout court* that the world would be different if run by women, some women still claim this; but we have the history of the past 30 years in which women like Margaret Thatcher and numberless female politicians in the United States, from Jean Kirkpatrick to Condi Rice, have shown the inadequacy of this argument—not to mention the participation in torture, on whatever scale, by women soldiers in Iraq.

While it may yet be true that if women's concerns were paramount, the world would be less strife-driven, it is certainly a contentious position to take and one that has actually even been co-opted by the right, which is always on the verge of taking back motherhood and the family for religio-patriarchal domination. Thus, the assertion of a female subject position has to be made strategically and in symbolically powerful ways, which brings me back to my earlier remarks about the efficacy of the symbolic use of women acting out and acting up in public spaces and public spheres (including on the internet).

Amelia Jones: I couldn't agree more with Spivak's insistence on acknowledging the way in which we will continue to make arguments and assumptions based on perceived or imagined identities, which in the end will devolve down to "essential" attributes—feminism is based on such a conundrum, in that it pivots around the rights of people we assume to be women. The notion of strategic is also key—the problem being the tendency in feminism (as elsewhere in other politically based movements) to extrapolate from strategies that seem to work and begin to apply them systematically, or to propose ways of making political interventions that then become prescriptive (this in particular has haunted feminism as one of its core contradictions).

I think Machida has the right idea to point to the complexities of any identity-based group—which claims solidarity on the basis of one aspect of their identity (say, gender) while splintering along other lines (infinite differences of individual and social type, including personal preferences as well as race, class).

Expanding on Machida's points, I would argue strongly, and in fact plan to write a book about this topic (called *Identity and the Visual*), that we are definitively not "beyond" identity (how anyone could argue that at a time when an innocent man can be gunned down in the London tube because he happened to have brown skin is beyond me) but that the way in which we experience and theorize how identity functions has changed massively since the rise of identity politics in the 1950s and following. The way in which we understand the effects of gendered/sexed identity (from a feminist point of view)—that is, the particular models we bring to analyzing and theorizing gendered/sexed identity and its effects—is crucial. Most

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important is a recognition that gender and sex are inextricably bound up in class, race, ethnic, national, faith-based, and other aspects of identity—black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw calls this the "intersectionality" of identity and examines its effects from a legal point of view.

Clearly, given the events unfolding daily in Iraq, the London tube, and so on, identity still matters (though perhaps not in its earlier forms, stemming from identity politics). Feminism still matters too, especially when it acknowledges these complexities and opens itself to nonprescriptive (strategic, in Spivak's terms) modes of theorizing what can be done in particular instances.

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LORI EMERSON

My Digital Dickinson

Partly a contradiction of its title, partly a productive misreading of Emily Dickinson, this essay rewrites and writes through Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* to demonstrate a particular reading methodology in reference to Dickinson and contemporary digital poets.[1] Of course it is absurd to say that Dickinson was a digital poet, as we understand that term today—poetry that is both created using a digital computer and self-conscious or self-reflexive about its digital medium of creation and representation. It is equally absurd, because of its inbuilt technological determinism, to say that the variants in Dickinson's work show that she was attempting to write digital/hypertext poems with the restrictions of pen and paper—absurd, that is, to claim that if Dickinson could have written hypertext poems she surely would have done so. But what if the approach were reframed slightly? In addition to reading Dickinson into the present moment and examining her relation to poetry today, such as that by Mary Flanagan and Judd Morrissey/Lori Talley, we can foreground the ways in which the digital now permeates our reading/writing habits and the ways in which our current cultural moment may be a productive frame for reading Dickinson.[2] That our reading should move both from the present into the past and the past into the present is underscored by the fact that writing technologies in general and digital writing media in particular cognitively change us as readers and writers; further, we are constantly being remediated, in Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's sense of the term, or intermediated, as Katherine Hayles puts it, into other writing media.[3] Through a reading of Dickinson alongside Flanagan and Morrissey/Talley, I argue that we irremediably see, or even reconfigure, the book through the lens of the digital and that the technology of the book finds its way into the digital as well. In other words, this essay is a case-study in reading bookbound and digital poetry—for if we are to acknowledge fully and accurately the state of literature of the present

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moment, we must infuse our investigations into the present with a sense of historical groundedness and acknowledge the ways in which our reading of bookbound poets is already framed by the digital.

Digital poetry, one genre among many underneath the umbrella-term *electronic literature*, is transforming the limits and possibilities of poetry and poetics. For instance, how do we, as literary critics and scholars, begin to account for a work such as Mary Flanagan's "[theHouse]"? It is an open-ended question, for this work is engaged with representing what I helplessly call "a poem" as an emergent and explorable object—a three- and four-dimensional place that is simultaneously a material and dematerialized place, one that is capable of visually reacting to the user's interactive struggle with the text. Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley's *The Jew's Daughter* is similarly elusive as it invites readers to click on links embedded in the narrative text, links which do not lead anywhere so much as they unpredictably change some portion of the text before our eyes.[4] Insofar as these (nearly but never quite tangible) texts are constantly changing, moving, generating, and emerging, they seem to defy most conventions of literary texts (for even the most radical Language poem by, say, Bruce Andrews or Ron Silliman is consistently the same text and can be returned to over and over again). Certainly, there appears to be an unbridgeable gulf separating what I call "bookbound" poems from these digital poems, one that can lead us to ask whether digital poems are poems or even if they are of the literary.

While there are abundant critical studies on digital film, digital archives, new media art, databases, hypertext fiction, artificial intelligence, and artificial life, the only book-length studies on digital poetry to date are Loss Pequeño Glazier's *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*, published in 2001, and Chris Funkhouser's *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archeology of Forms*, published in 2007. While foundational, neither work extends its examination of the historical roots of digital poetry to the nineteenth century, and both implicitly read digital poetry precursors into twentieth-century poetry and for the most part do not attend to the ways in which the current cultural moment enriches our reading of these same digital poetry precursors. Both Glazier's and Funkhouser's works position digital poetry in a lineage of avant-garde, modernist, and experimental writing traditions (ranging from Dada to Oulipo to Language Writing) to argue for the literariness, or the legitimacy, of digital poetry. Funkhouser declares that "digital poets conceived of these works with the same poetic and theoretical practices used by artists who worked with nothing more than paper and ink" and that the "aesthetics of digital poetry are an extension of modernist techniques" (3). For

Funkhouser, then, Williams and Pound are precursors to digital poetry in their use of juxtaposition as are other "postatomic" writers who "use fragmentation to legitimize fragmentation and challenge the stability of language as a point of meaning" (12).

Williams and Pound may well be crucial digital poetry precursors, but as long as we trace their influence according to broad formal and thematic techniques such as juxtaposition and fragmentation, we can easily call almost any poet who uses these techniques a digital poetry precursor. On the one hand, at this early stage of defining the field of digital poetry, any historicizing is much needed; on the other hand, to see literary precedents everywhere we look is to gloss over the defining effects of different writing media on the reading/writing experience. Digital poets may have conceived of their works "with the same poetic and theoretical practices used by artists who worked with nothing more than paper and ink," as Funkhouser claims, but they also conceived of their works on and for the fundamentally different medium of the computer/screen. Nonetheless, the difference between digital and bookbound poetry is not wholly unbridgeable or untranslatable.

Thus, if we can trace specific formal and thematic qualities of digital poetry back to modernism, then we most certainly can cross the divide separating the twentieth from the nineteenth century and trace these qualities back to Emily Dickinson or beyond. Further, reading the digital into and out of a poet such as Dickinson may enrich our understanding of her work. The terminology and theoretical framing of the present moment is so steeped in the digital that, often without our knowing, it saturates our language and habits of thought. Surely a self-consciousness about, and strategic exploitation of, the ideologies built into our everyday digital computing will reinvigorate the terminology and theoretical framework we use to understand, for example, Dickinson's variants.[5] For instance, Sharon Cameron's highly influential descriptions of the variants, which in *Choosing Not Choosing* are infused with the language of identity and heteroglossia, can be augmented with a sense of variants as multi-dimensional, spatio-temporal linkages. Further, this mode of reading that uses the present to read the past also makes possible the observation that we have only recently come to see Dickinson not only as a writer who pins together scraps, creates collages of sorts from fragments written at angles to each other, and disperses meaning through variants and multiple versions, but also as one who is acutely aware of pen and paper as a technology, as writing media. As Martha Nell Smith—the Executive Editor of the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*—stated in 2002, "new media challenge us to

consider what can be gained by amplifying our critical commentary into more media and how our critical-theoretical tools can be shaped to exploit multimedia most effectively" (845). Given the relative paucity of critical writing on Dickinson in relation to the digital, this essay is an attempt to take up the challenge of reading digital theory and literature alongside Dickinson's poetry as a case-study—one that I hope will help overcome the assumed otherness of digital poetry through historicization and through exploiting the ways in which twentieth- and twenty-first century readings of her work may already be unavoidably enmeshed in the digital.

An archeological excavation of the roots of digital poetry—excavation that could, again, involve Dickinson as much as Williams, Pound, or other modernists—will certainly enrich our understanding of digital poetry as well, demonstrating that these works are not merely examples of "techniques whereby letters and words can move around the screen, break up, and reassemble, or whereby the reader/viewer can decide by a mere click to reformat the electronic text or which part of it to access," as Marjorie Perloff puts it in a recent essay on digital poetry (162). While these digital works do indeed "become merely tedious unless the poetry in question is, in Ezra Pound's words, 'charged with meaning,'" perhaps we need to learn to become more perceptive readers of digital poetry (Perloff 162); in other words, while we know what "charged with meaning" looks like in a poem by Dickinson, Williams, or Pound, it is not a given what "charged with meaning" looks like in the digital. Dickinson could be "the mother of them all," or, in less dramatic terms, she could very well be a key early example of the kind of innovation we see in the contemporary digital-poem-as-self-conscious-literary-object.

1.0 The Digital/Dickinson Poem as Antidote to the "Interface-Free"

One of the most important aspects of Emily Dickinson's writing that has emerged in the digital age is that it reminds us that there is no such thing as writing that is "interface-free"; all writing comes to us through an interface, and the precise ways in which the interface, whether it is pencil/pen/paper or the keyboard-screen-mouse (KSM), frames such writing requires definition.[6] After all, what else is a fascicle, a pinned poem, or a bookbound poem that has been put into conventional type but a form of writing interface? It is not possible to have access to a pure reading of Dickinson's poems, one that is unmediated by either twentieth- or twenty-first-century interfaces or by our own thinking habits similarly enmeshed in reading/writing interfaces.[7] The cost of ignoring what Dickinson teaches us

about writing interfaces has been abundantly illustrated by Susan Howe's and others' work on the limitations of relying solely on edited versions of Dickinson's work that exclude Dickinson's writing interfaces and reframe her work with the interface of the printed book and the conventions of typography. While Howe, along with scholars such as Marta Werner, Jerome McGann, and Martha Nell Smith, have not discussed interfaces *per se* in arguing that Dickinson's manuscript poems cannot be accurately reproduced in book-format, digital interfaces bring to light the fact that these discussions *could* be framed as such. As R. W. Franklin more mildly puts it in the Introduction to his facsimile edition of the fascicles, "The variorum edition . . . edited by Thomas H. Johnson, translated the mechanics of the poems into conventional type and, in presenting them chronologically, obscured the fascicle structure. Such an edition, though essential, does not serve the same purposes as a facsimile of the fascicles" (ix).

To turn to the recent enthusiasm for the so-called interface-free and the pressing need for us to continue to read writing interfaces, in February 2006 New York University research scientist Jeff Han unveiled to attendees at the O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference his affordable version of what he called an interface-free, touch-driven computer screen. Shaped like a 36-inch wide drafting table, the screen allows the user to perform almost any computer-driven operation through "multi-touch sensing" that is, as Han describes it, "completely intuitive . . . there's no instruction manual, *the interface just sort of disappears*" (emphasis added). The phrases "completely intuitive" and "sort of" (it "sort of disappears") prompt the question of just whose intuition is driving this interface-free interface. The interface-free system Han proposes is elegant, beautiful, and compelling—like walking into a gleaming white and chrome Mac store—but after the initial pangs of longing pass for this newest of the new, why continue to long for this sort of false transparency? Why would we lure ourselves into believing that these interfaces somehow offer us the ability to transcend the interface itself rather than offer us an ever-more difficult to pin-down, perhaps even insidious, form of control on our creative expression? As Lev Manovich reminds us, "the interface shapes how the computer user conceives of the computer itself. It also determines how users think of any media object accessed via a computer" (64).

Another contemporary example of insidious interface, directly related to literary studies, is Amazon.com's release of Kindle, which Jeff Bezos, Amazon founder and CEO, describes as a "wireless, portable reading device with instant access to more than 90, 000 books, blogs, magazines and newspapers" ("Amazon Kindle"). The aim of Kindle is to improve, if not supplant, the book. However,

reading the fine-print of the "License Agreement and Terms of Use," you discover that "You may not sell, rent, lease, distribute, broadcast, sublicense or otherwise assign any rights to the Digital Content or any portion of it to any third party, and you may not remove any proprietary notices or labels on the Digital Content." The program also warns against "Reverse Engineering, Decompilation, Disassembly or Circumvention" and notes that all reading and annotation will be monitored by Amazon: "The Device Software will provide Amazon with data about your Device and its interaction with the Service (such as available memory, up-time, log files and signal strength) and information related to the content on your Device and your use of it (such as automatic bookmarking of the last page read and content deletions from the Device)." Consequently, while Bezos proposes that readers "get lost in their reading and not in the technology," he is in fact asking readers to see through the interface, as if it were a neutral medium instead of a medium that prevents sharing, lending, or reselling these e-books; it disallows an engagement with the e-book as an art object and it imbeds a layer of surveillance into private moments of reading.

Howe, Werner, McGann, and Smith, among others, already have argued that Emily Dickinson is exemplary in her keen awareness of the limits and possibilities of the writing interfaces of her time: pen/pencil/paper.[8] This facet of her work long preceded Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum that "the medium is the message" and the emergence of the term "interface" in the 1960s to refer to the interaction between two systems. Dickinson was acutely aware of the limits and possibilities of the triad so that "Shapes and letters pun on and play with each other. Messages are delivered by marks" (Howe, "Some Notes"). Nowhere is this understanding of the writing interface more evident than in her pinned poems, especially those she created after she turned away from the book-inspired form of the fascicle in 1864.

In a note at the end of the second volume of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, Franklin claims that Dickinson's practice of pinning was one of several methods she used when she needed to add extra lines. He writes that "[e]arly in 1862 she pinned slips to accommodate overflow when she reached the end of a sheet, but she came to favor another way: a separate sheet carrying only the additional lines. . . . When ED ceased binding fascicle sheets, about 1864, she reverted to pinning slips to sheets to maintain the proper association" (1413). But Dickinson's pinning on an extra sheet did more than establish a relationship between the content of the two pieces of paper. The manuscript version of a poem such as "We met as Sparks - Diverging Flints" (MB II 1052) can be read as an instance of Dickinson's desire to draw attention (if only her own attention) to

the mediating effects of pen and paper, and therefore to denaturalize the writing media by experimenting with ways to disrupt a tendency to see through the writing surface. First dated 1864 by Franklin and then later changed to 1865, this poem appears on the verso of Set 5, designated A 92-14; two additional metrical lines are pinned to the bottom of the poem so that the final lines of the poem "proper" are covered. Or, perhaps there are three lines, depending on how one regards Dickinson's line breaks. Not surprisingly, however, the version of "We met as Sparks - " in Franklin's 1998 variorum edition has stripped the poem of its riveting physicality and of this self-conscious discourse on writing *through* writing media. In the case of this particular poem, Franklin's translation seems not to be the same poem at all.

First, the manuscript version of the poem shows us a writer who has a precise understanding of the dimensions of the page—in fact, given that she writes a consistent distance from *both* the left and the right edges of the page, it appears not only as though she has a painter's sense of the shape and size of her letters and words, the size and shape of the page as a canvas, but also as though her line-breaks were intentional (see Fig. 1).[9] No typeface or typographical spacing can adequately translate the handwritten word—it certainly cannot express the particular visual and aural resonances in the shape of the letter *S*, for example, that are echoed across the page to associate "Sparks" with "Sent," "scattered," "Subsisting," and finally "Spark"; note too the lowercase *s* of "scattered" which is a sort of literal representation of scattering. Print, however, only transcribes. Below, the version of the poem without the pinning is on the left; the version with the pinning that covers, rewrites, or writes over the final lines of the poem is on the right:

We met as Sparks -	We met as Sparks -
Diverging Flints	Diverging Flints
Sent various - scattered	Sent various - scattered
ways -	ways -
We parted as the	We parted as the
Central Flint	Central Flint
Were cloven with an	Were cloven with an
Adze -	Adze -
Subsisting on the Light	Subsisting on the Light
We bore	We bore
Before We felt the	Before We felt the
Dark -	Dark -

We met as Sparks -
Diverging Flints
Sent various - scattered
ways -
We parted as the
Central Flint
Were cloven with an
Adze -
Subsisting on the Light
We bore
Before We felt the
Dark -
We knew by change
between itself
And that etherial
Spark.

pinned to 92 - 14 verso

A Flint unto this Day,
perhaps -
But for that single Spark.

Fig. 1: A 92-14a, with pinning. "We met as Sparks - Diverging Flints." Facsimile. Reprinted by permission of the Trustees of Amherst College. Poetry text by permission of the President and Fellows of Harvard College, from R. W. Franklin, ed., *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard UP) © 1981.

We knew by change between itself And that etherial Spark	A Flint unto this Day - perhaps - But for that single Spark

Here we are presented with a situation where everything seems to contribute to our understanding of the poem as a complex, multifaceted object. At the beginning of "We met as Sparks - " both the line break, which creates a small space of blankness, and the dash serve to dramatize the sudden movement of an ignited fleck into the air. In fact, meeting as sparks while "Diverging [as] Flints" (and then "cloven with an / Adze - ") expresses the tension Dickinson explores throughout the poem: any coming-together involves simultaneously a merging, a loss of singularity as well as a sense of separateness that can never be overcome. The "we" of the poem is both the catalyst (the flint) and the thing catalyzed (the spark). Note too that there is only a "we" and never an "I."

Dickinson uses techniques of enjambment and merges the literal and the metaphorical with the physical dimensions of words throughout the poem. The line break separating "Sent various - scattered" from "ways - ," for example, enacts a scattering since the eye must move from one side of the page and down to the other. It also seems meaningful that the version of the poem with the pinning replaces or *changes* the lines underneath. The pinning creates a sense of uncertainty or of thinking poised between two conflicting positions. This uncertainty is expressed in the word "perhaps," which is placed on a line by itself, as well as in the reference to a singular spark, which in this case does not appear on a line by itself. The poem is simultaneously the version on the left and the version on the right as well as being the version on the left or the version on the right. It is about (the tension inherent to) singleness and doubleness even as it physically manifests itself as both single and double.

There is also a temporariness to the pinning in the same way that clothing is pinned either as a form of temporary stitching or as a way to mark where fabric may later be sewn; the slip of paper has been pinned, not sewn, to the sheet of paper and so it is simultaneously bound and unbound.[10] Further, Marta Werner points out the distinctiveness of pinning, for "[u]nlike binding, which is premeditated, permanent, and serial, pinning is instantaneous, temporary, random" (308).[11] As such, the pinning in "We met as Sparks - " is more than an instance of Dickinson writing "the alternative on a slip of paper" as a way to "complete the poem"; the pinning makes impossible any reading of the poem as complete (Franklin, *Poems* 848).

Similarly, Dickinson's handwriting in this poem, her use of the space of the page, is a formal and thematic element of the poem and so is untranslatable into any other medium, in much the same way that it is untranslatable across time; readers of the twenty-first century cannot help but bring a different set of reading habits and assumptions to Dickinson's writing. The poem is self-conscious of its writing medium, and thus encourages us to resist the notion of the "interface-free." It implicitly argues against claims such as those made by Jaishree Odin who, in writing about the digital poet Stephanie Strickland, declares that "Unlike the print medium where content is the same as the interface, the database produced by the writer for the digital medium needs an interface to make it accessible to the user. For the first time we have a distinction between the content of the work and the interface to access it." For Odin, "content is the same as the interface" in the print medium; for Dickinson, this is not the case. For example, the typographical version of "We met as Sparks - " in Franklin's variorum edition is a neater, tidier poem than Dickinson's handwritten one; with "We met as Sparks - Diverging Flints" and "Sent various - scattered ways - " printed as one line rather than two, all the lines are the same length. Breaking the second line at "ways" rather than "scattered"—that is, at the metrical rather than the visual unit—adds a more orderly dimension to the poem: scattering refers to random or chaotic movement whereas "ways" can refer to predetermined (albeit multiple) directions. Further, in Franklin's version, lines one and three end in "Flint" and therefore make the repetition more obvious, as are the end-rhymes "Dark" and "Spark" in lines six and eight. In this version, however, the sense of the poem as a material artifact that is simultaneously single and double has been occluded, making at least the representation of "We met as Sparks - " flat and hierarchical: Franklin provides a primary text supported by a secondary set of alternative lines and an even less important (indicated by the small font-size) list of the line breaks as they appear in the manuscript.[12] And even this hierarchy of primary text, alternate lines, and line-breaks is excluded from the more affordable, and so more commonly used, reading edition of Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

2.0 The Digital/Dickinson Poem as Thinkertoy

To read the present moment into Dickinson and to read Dickinson into the contemporary, we should see her pinnings and her variants not so much as bookbound examples of what is called chunk-style hypertext but more as "thinkertoys." To clarify, chunk-style hypertext consists of links that allow the reader/user to move from one page to another—the type of hypertext that

is almost entirely responsible for the current structure of the Internet. Calling Dickinson's pinnings or variants hypertext does draw attention to the *physical* separateness of, and connection to, each word or chunk of text, but it is unlike the hypertext we use on the Internet, which is directional and linear. Links on the Internet move us through the text or a series of texts in ways predetermined by the writer/programmer and so quite unlike the way the pinning functions in "We met as Sparks - "; here the pinning makes the poem both two-texts-as-one-text and two separate texts. This simultaneously single and double nature of her work cannot be replicated online, but an Internet-based translation of "We met as Sparks - " could be created by linking together scanned images of the sheet and the pinning, layering one over the other. Given the entirely different reading experience that is fostered by the KSM interface and the book, such a translation would have to be approached as a "thinkertoy."

This term was coined by Theodor Nelson in his 1987 "Computer Lib/Dream Machines."[13] He writes: "By 'Thinkertoy' I mean, first of all, a system to help people think. . . . I define it as a computer display system that *helps you envision complex alternatives*. . . . [T]he written word is nothing less than the tracks left by the mind" (330). Following Nelson, instead of emphasizing the production of new editions, versions, or translations of Dickinson's manuscript poems, we could emphasize the ways in which either a given reading/writing interface or a set of conceptual terms belonging to an era of a reading/writing interface allow us to think expansively about the work at hand—to map the multi-layered intricacies of a given poem. Hypertext or any other digital mode of representation becomes less a "radically new information technology" (Landow 3), which disrupts our notions of reader/writer/text, and more another technology by which to re-position ourselves in relation to the reader/writer/text. To read hypertext or any other digital writing media in relation to Dickinson links her work with digital writing such as Mary Flanagan's "[theHouse]" and Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley's *The Jew's Daughter*. Digital writing is no longer only an instance of a foreign, textual object of fascination—such digital writing also becomes a textual instantiation of a shared ongoing poetic exploration of the specific limits and possibilities of the space/time of writing and of language as an elusive and yet multi-dimensional dwelling space. Like "We met as Sparks - ," Flanagan's and Morrissey and Talley's works are ineluctably both this and that—they are readable and unreadable, intimate and other, variable and static. To read and think through Dickinson's work, then, is to be prepared for other stubborn, uncomfortable works that are simultaneously single and double material artifacts.

Mary Flanagan's "[theHouse]" is a digital poem-environment that consists of strings of transparent, three-dimensional, occasionally intersecting, shifting boxes that are accompanied by paired lines, which in turn are re-combined as the piece progresses; we may watch them as they move across the screen, grow larger or smaller or rotate so that we read them in reverse—as if we could walk to the back of our language. Or, should we want to determine the shape and direction of

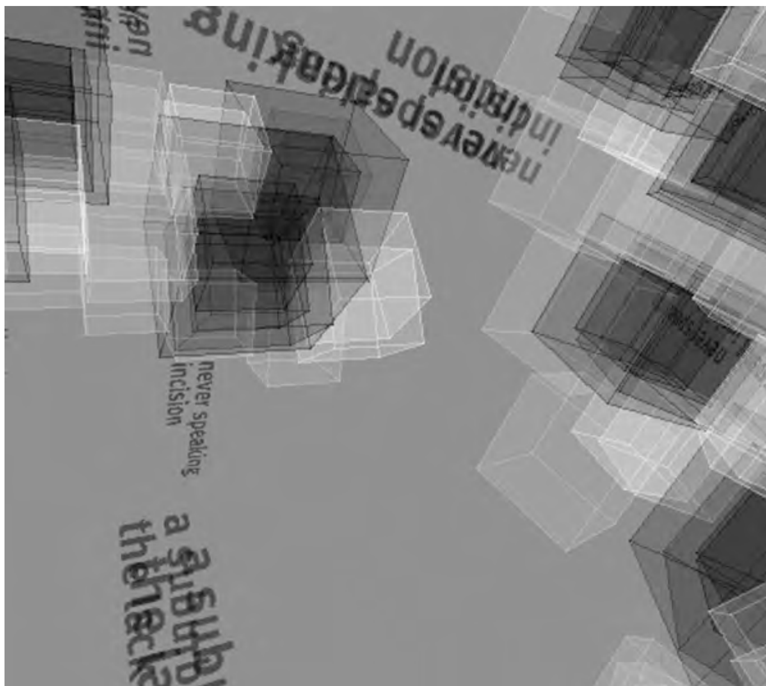


Fig. 2: "[theHouse]" (2008) by Mary Flanagan. Screenshot. Reprinted by permission of Mary Flanagan.

the text/boxes, we can try to interact with the text/boxes through the mouse. Since Flanagan writes that "[a]s in much of electronic literature, the experience of the work as an intimate, interactive, screen-based piece is essential to understanding and appreciating it," the experience of interacting with this text-environment is primarily one of struggle or difficulty since there is no way to gain control over the text—no way to determine the direction in which the piece shifts. Pulling right on the mouse does not guarantee that the text will also shift right or rotate clockwise; moving the mouse up does not necessarily allow us to venture deep inside the

boxes or the text—we may have just flipped the boxes/text or moved to a bird's eye view of this strange computer-text-organism. Thus, despite my interactions with the text, despite the fact that I can "read" most of the lines, in its difficulty "[theHouse]" is at least in part *about* the mediating effects of an interface that, despite Flanagan's claim above, offers intimacy while also declining it. This work embodies the complexity that defines Nelson's thinkertoy.

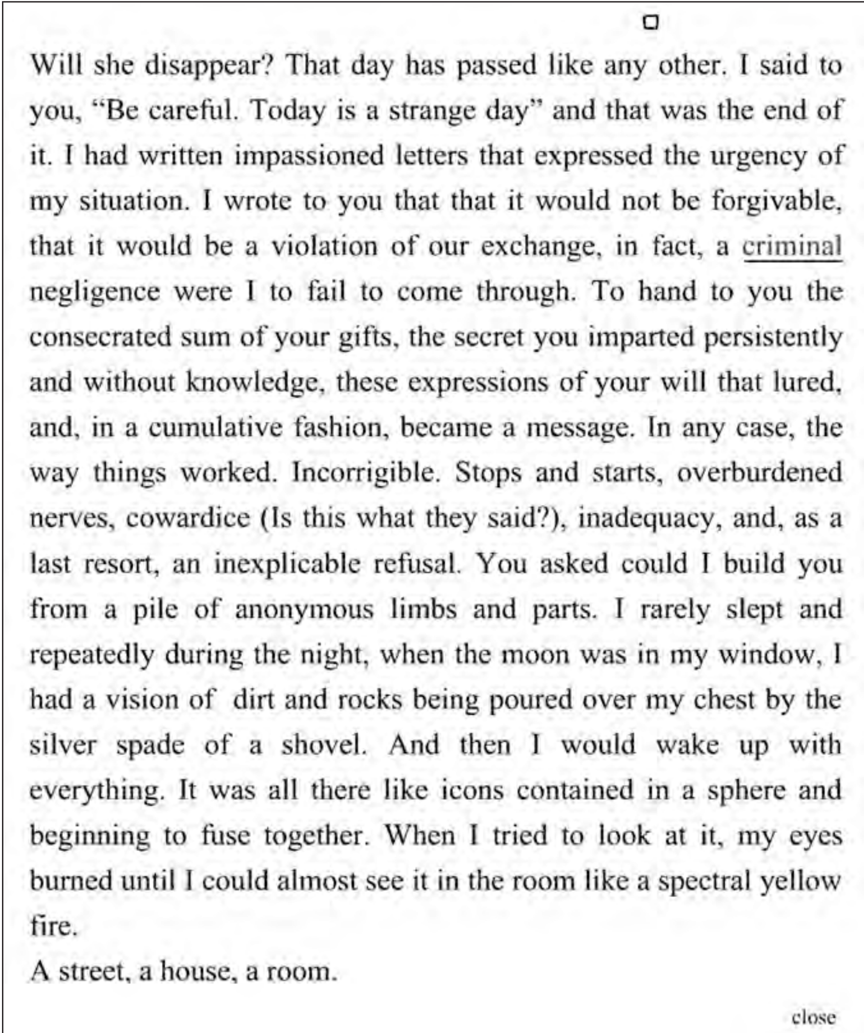
To further extend the reading of Dickinson into and out of Flanagan, Dickinson's "We met as Sparks - " has an inbuilt aspect of instability because of the pinning; each time I read it I have the impression of returning to the same object, the same text—the same words—over and over again. However, the multiplicity of "[theHouse]" teaches us that there are at least six different versions of "We met as Sparks - ": the first version would include the recto and the verso; the second version would include the recto, the verso, and the pinning as an alternative ending; the third would include the recto, the verso, and the pinning as an additional ending and so on. Should we decide to take into account the individual reading experiences we bring to the poem and depending on whether we rely on a facsimile version or not, there may be many more versions. Thus, "We met as Sparks - " denies closure and stability just as "[theHouse]" does—it is just that the conventions of the book lull us into believing that a bookbound text is stable.

Reading "We met as Sparks - " alongside "[theHouse]" brings to light the ways in which the interface of each poem bears with it a different set of standards for reading. For example, while there are sound and visual patterns in Dickinson's poem, there is no aural element in Flanagan's work, and the visual structure is not down or across a page or a sheet of paper—it is a rotation in and around a virtual three-dimensional space. Further, despite the variability of Dickinson's poem, one can indeed quote from it. In contrast, while one *can* quote some of the different and recombined lines from Flanagan's poem—for example, "giving emptiness / letters have their sharpness" or "the study almost finished / mouth to tell me"—what would be the point, especially when we cannot read the whole text or know where the text begins and ends? In fact, this text may be many, many texts that ought to be differentiated from each other in terms of time rather than space. Thus, rather than ask ourselves whether a poem on one side of the page is separate from the poem on the opposite side, we should ask whether or not the text we see at five seconds into the poem-viewing is separate from the text we see after two minutes of viewing. If we interact with the text, as Flanagan encourages us to do, we then have a nearly limitless number of texts and reading experiences.

Moreover, the fact that we cannot read Flanagan's poem in the same way that we do Dickinson's, or any other bookbound poem, means that both demand that we find the point in the text where our reading practices fail us. It is at that point of failure that we begin attending to the particularities of the event of each poem—the original event of the physical writing of the poem that took place through a particular interface, the event of our readings of the poem that take place through yet other particular interfaces—and begin taking account of what is gained and lost through each mediation.

Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley's collaborative *The Jew's Daughter* reads and reworks both the bookbound page through the digital and the digital through the bookbound page, a self-conscious doubleness that reads its own writing interface in much the same way that Dickinson's pinned poems do. Morrissey and Talley describe *The Jew's Daughter* as "an interactive, non-linear, multivalent narrative, a storyspace that is unstable but nonetheless remains organically intact, progressively weaving itself together by way of subtle transformations on a single virtual page." It consists of roughly 608 pages of recombinant chunks of texts and, indeed, "page" is more than a skeuomorph here as each screen of text—a white rectangle with mostly black text—has been made to emulate a page in a book. It is possible to read the text on each page/screen from beginning to end, left to right, as one would a page in a book—but this is "reading" in the limited terms set by the book. Moreover, because each page of *The Jew's Daughter* includes one blue-highlighted word, letter, or alphabetic character, much like a standard hypertext link, the only way to read the text on a given page from beginning to end is by refusing to touch or interact with it. The hyperlinks we are accustomed to using on the Internet take us to a new page, one whose subject-matter is clearly related (at least in the mind of the coder) to the original page. Morrissey and Talley's "links," however, are not clickable, nor do they take us to a new page, leaving the old page behind still intact. They are, instead, like *temporal* linkages; running your mouse over the blue word activates the flash programming and results in the disappearance or replacement of random chunk(s) of text. From one page to the next, the reader can never predict how, where, or why the text has changed. Thus, as Katherine Hayles points out, reading here becomes an act of memorization as you need to be able to visualize or remember the content of the first page in order to know what has changed or in order to read the text in the manner we are accustomed to.

Morrissey and Talley have created a temporally based palimpsest in that chunks of texts are layered on top of each other in the reader's mind as the text is unfolded over time; from one page to the next, some text stays the same and


Will she disappear? That day has passed like any other. I said to you, "Be careful. Today is a strange day" and that was the end of it. I had written impassioned letters that expressed the urgency of my situation. I wrote to you that that it would not be forgivable, that it would be a violation of our exchange, in fact, a criminal negligence were I to fail to come through. To hand to you the consecrated sum of your gifts, the secret you imparted persistently and without knowledge, these expressions of your will that lured, and, in a cumulative fashion, became a message. In any case, the way things worked. Incorrigible. Stops and starts, overburdened nerves, cowardice (Is this what they said?), inadequacy, and, as a last resort, an inexplicable refusal. You asked could I build you from a pile of anonymous limbs and parts. I rarely slept and repeatedly during the night, when the moon was in my window, I had a vision of dirt and rocks being poured over my chest by the silver spade of a shovel. And then I would wake up with everything. It was all there like icons contained in a sphere and beginning to fuse together. When I tried to look at it, my eyes burned until I could almost see it in the room like a spectral yellow fire.

A street, a house, a room.

close

Fig. 3: *The Jew's Daughter* (2008) by Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley. Screenshot of page 1. Underlined text appeared in blue in the original. Reprinted by permission of Judd Morrissey/Lori Talley.

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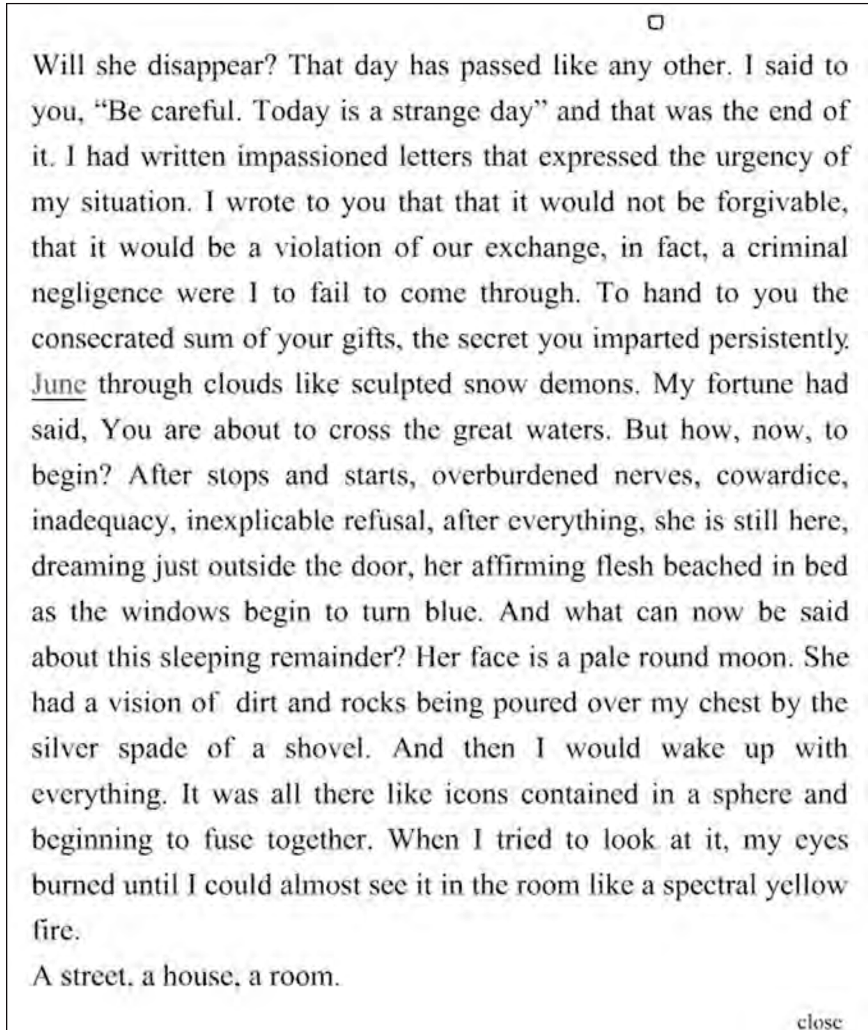
Will she disappear? That day has passed like any other. I said to you, "Be careful. Today is a strange day" and that was the end of it. I had written impassioned letters that expressed the urgency of my situation. I wrote to you that that it would not be forgivable, that it would be a violation of our exchange, in fact, a criminal negligence were I to fail to come through. To hand to you the consecrated sum of your gifts, the secret you imparted persistently. June through clouds like sculpted snow demons. My fortune had said, You are about to cross the great waters. But how, now, to begin? After stops and starts, overburdened nerves, cowardice, inadequacy, inexplicable refusal, after everything, she is still here, dreaming just outside the door, her affirming flesh beached in bed as the windows begin to turn blue. And what can now be said about this sleeping remainder? Her face is a pale round moon. She had a vision of dirt and rocks being poured over my chest by the silver spade of a shovel. And then I would wake up with everything. It was all there like icons contained in a sphere and beginning to fuse together. When I tried to look at it, my eyes burned until I could almost see it in the room like a spectral yellow fire.

A street, a house, a room.

close

Fig. 4: *The Jew's Daughter* (2008) by Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley. Screenshot of page 2. Underlined text appeared in blue in the original. Reprinted by permission of Judd Morrissey/Lori Talley.

in a sense remains legible while other chunks of text are replaced, reworking both the meaning of the text that stays behind in the reader's memory and the text that is still visible. It is conceivable, then, that *The Jew's Daughter* is not 608 individual combinations of text chunks but rather a piece of conceptual writing that challenges the reader to assemble mentally all 608 pages into a single text whose meaning does not reside on any one page. For example, in the screenshot of the first page (Fig. 3), one can see that the references to the activities of "she," "I," and "you" result in an indeterminate text that is not particularly about anything. Or rather, the text could be about a "she," "I," and "you," but these pronouns also could be read as stand-ins for a commentary on the text itself—for the reader must wonder, "Will she [or it] disappear?" Likewise, the following sentence could be read to confirm that *The Jew's Daughter* is a palimpsestic text which can only be read or understood cumulatively, over time: "To hand to you the consecrated sum of your gifts, the secret you imparted persistently and without knowledge, these expressions of your will that lured and, in a cumulative fashion became a message." Given the way the text doubles as a meta-commentary on both the book and the digital—it comments on the book to comment on the digital to comment on the book—it is fitting that the "you" could be both reader and writer. If the text is indeed indeterminate, the writer in effect hands to the reader the gift of reading the text in his or her own way; or, if the text is only limitedly indeterminate, the passage could be read as saying that the reader's reading of the text makes legible the writer's secrets, expressions of the writer's will that are only legible through the reader's work over time.

The same interpretative technique is applicable to individual sentences. In "You asked could I build you from a pile of anonymous limbs and parts," the reader might ask whether it is the writer writing about the act of compiling a coherent text from a "heap of language" (to invoke Robert Smithson) or whether, with some pronoun slippage, it is the reader who must build the text from the writer's 608 pages of scraps of text. The way in which *The Jew's Daughter* doubles itself to comment on the reader/writer/text triad from as many perspectives as possible is frequently reinforced. After running the mouse over "criminal" on the first page and then reading the second page in relation to the first, the reader discovers that the sentence beginning "To hand to you the consecrated sum of your gifts" has been replaced with three sentences: "June through clouds like sculpted snow demons. My fortune had said, You are about to cross the great waters. But how, now, to begin?" (Fig. 4) And the sentence from the first page that previously read "I had a vision of dirt and rocks being poured over my chest" has

been changed to "She had a vision of dirt and rocks being poured over my chest." I should note, however, that there is a degree of stability to the text: each page consistently changes in the same way.

Should the reader too quickly dismiss the work as yet another example of a random text-generator or on the basis of its apparently arbitrary structure or unreadibility, it is important to note that the piece always begins on the first page and proceeds methodically from one page to the next. With only one mouse-over on each page, the text can only change in one pre-determined manner at a time. While procedural works such as Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes* give the impression of bearing only arbitrarily constructed meaning(s), this work allows for readerly intervention at the same time that it foregrounds its constructedness; it was in fact written to be read in a particular manner. Also, the order of the text only becomes random when the reader clicks on the small square at the top right of the screen and is then taken to whatever page number has been typed into the box. Ironically, then, it is only when the reader uses the computer-simulated "page turner" that the text becomes nonlinear and unstable, although linearity and stability are commonly ascribed to the book and nonlinearity and instability are ascribed to text mediated by the digital computer. Not surprisingly, "pages" from *The Jew's Daughter* are resolutely of the digital medium; they can neither be printed out nor can they be cut and pasted to facilitate immobilization of the text for scrutiny or to bring to bear techniques of close-reading that apply only to the bookbound. Since we cannot print it out, this 608-page text will never be read in its entirety, thereby further setting itself apart from bookbound conventions.

Like Dickinson's manuscript poems, which digital technology helps us to see as simultaneously exploring the limits and the possibilities of the paper/pen interface and the doubleness of meaning, *The Jew's Daughter* builds on a Dickinsonian critique; its mediation through the digital computer simultaneously works against easy assumptions about the linearity/nonlinearity of the page—even as it emulates the page—and against the increasing transparency of the structure of hyperlinks, even as it emulates the conventional appearance of the link. It gestures to markers of familiarity while undoing these same markers. As Morrissey tellingly puts it in an interview with Matthew Mirapaul, "Because it takes the paradigm of the page, you can see that it's not a page" (Mirapaul). Surely we could say the same of a hand-written manuscript poem by Dickinson?

Notes

1. That my approach is so inflected by Susan Howe is most certainly due to her powerful influence on me as a graduate student at the University at Buffalo; one of the first seminars I took with her was on Emily Dickinson, a course both terrifying in its intensity and thrilling in the sense of intellectual adventurousness Howe brought to class every week.

2. In *Techné: James Joyce, Hypertext & Technology,* Louis Armand takes up a similar approach to argue not so much that "Joyce was necessarily in some way cognisant of a future possibility of hypertext" but that "Joyce's text can be said to *solicit* hypertext . . . the extent to which Joyce's text can be said to both *call for* and *motivate* a hypertextuality irreducible to a stable field" (xi). Armand and I differ, however, in that he is not interested in looking retrospectively at Joyce "from the position of current computing technologies" (xi). Retrospectively viewing earlier authors through the lens of current cultural practices is simply unavoidable; "current computing technologies" saturate our every thought, our very language, and this fact should be acknowledged openly rather than sidestepped.

3. In Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's foundational book *Remediation*, they argue that the representation of one medium in another is a constitutive feature of new media. In a 2007 article by Katherine Hayles, "Intermediation: The Pursuit of a Vision," she reworks Bolter and Grusin's "remediation" to invoke "intermediation," or the process "whereby a first-level emergent pattern is captured in another medium and re-represented with the primitives of the new medium, which leads to an emergent result captured in turn by yet another medium, and so forth. The result is what researchers in artificial life call a dynamic hierarchy, a multitiered system in which feedback and feedforward loops tie the system together through continuing interactions circulating through the hierarchy" (100). Hayles writes:

   > In electronic literature, this dynamic [of intermediation] is evoked when the text performs actions that appear to bind together author and program, player and computer, into a complex system characterized by intermediating dynamics . . . the performance is designed to elicit emergent complexity in the player, who possesses much more powerful and flexible cognitive powers than the computer. If this is indeed the result, then the program's effects are no longer simply metaphoric, for it has literally changed the human's perceptions and, to the extent that perceptions provide the scaffolding for cognition, cognitive processes as well. (105)

4. All the digital writing in this essay can been found in the *Electronic Literature Collection*. Described by Adalaide Morris as a "harbinger of a revolution in thought," the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1* (or ELC1) is the first and currently the only anthology of electronic literature; it is published on the Internet and freely distributed on CD-ROM.

5. This practice of self-reflexive scholarship in the age of the digital is nicely paralleled by Martha Nell Smith's work with the *Dickinson Electronic Archives,* which is informed by what she calls a "technology of self-consciousness":

   > Self-consciousness is a technology with which humanists are familiar. . . . But I am interested in the ways that this technology unsettles us and in ways that this unsettling can be effectively exploited . . . the technology of self-consciousness required by computer encoding of texts produces a healthy self-consciousness about what Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar describe in *Laboratory Life* as 'black-boxing'—which occurs when one 'renders items of knowledge distinct from the circumstances of their creation'. . . . Maintaining

> relentless self-consciousness about how critical 'facts' have been produced, about how items of knowledge are part of the circumstances of their creation, is crucial for responsibly providing the provisionality that characterizes the best kind of science of chaos. (851-852)

6. Even the meaning of the expression "the mother of them all" has been transformed by digital computing. Those working in the IT industry use the phrase to refer to Douglas Engelbart's groundbreaking demonstration from 1968 in which he presented his invention of the keyboard-screen-mouse (KSM) interface and introduced teleconferencing, videoconferencing, email, and hypertext. Now, the KSM is so seamlessly a part of our everyday work and leisure—mediating and defining most acts of writing, reading, and thinking—that we no longer notice it as an interface at all. Steven Johnson wrote in his 1997 popular manifesto *Interface Culture* that we need to start developing criteria by which to judge our interfaces, that "if the interface medium is indeed headed toward the breadth and complexity of genuine art, then we are going to need a new language to describe it, a new critical vocabulary" (18). I doubt he could have envisioned that ten years later we would, as a culture, remain largely oblivious to the way interfaces work on us and that we would be poised to begin an era of the "interface free."
7. Henry Petroski, the author of *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstances*, points out that understanding the development of such writing interfaces as the pencil (or the pen) " helps us to understand also the development of even so sophisticated a product of modern high technology as the electronic computer" (334).
8. In fact, it is almost becoming commonplace for critics to now assume that any reproduction of a Dickinson poem constitutes a translation and that her poems are, in many different senses, handwritten poems. However, Dickinson critics are far from agreeing on the extent to which manuscripts register above all other versions of her work. Walter Benn Michaels, for instance, points out in his 2006 *The Shape of the Signifier* that once we treat everything in a Dickinson poem as meaningful (including the shape of her handwriting, the type and size of paper she used) then nothing is meaningful. Similarly, David Porter, Peter Campbell, and Domhnall Mitchell are skeptical of the extent to which we can determine what Dickinson's intentions were with respect to the physical properties of her manuscript poems. In particular, in his 2000 work *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception* and then again in his 2005 *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts*, Mitchell is concerned to point out that while he sees Smith, Howe, McGann and Werner's work as invaluable, he has "misgivings about the kinds of positivistic assumptions that underpin such a project [of returning to Dickinson's manuscript poems to establish a reliable body of work], or, more accurately, misgivings about the lack of published attempts to measure the accuracy of claims being made on behalf of Dickinson's manuscript practices" (*Emily Dickinson* 200).
9. In contrast, Christina Pugh has convincingly written about how recent criticism emphasizes the visual and experimental nature of Dickinson's writing at the cost of attending to her innovative, even, as Pugh puts it, transgressive use of meter.
10. As Marta Werner writes of another pinned poem, "Clogged only with Music, like the Wheels of Birds - " (A 821): "The pin complicates the play among past, present, and future. . . . For here, the expectations of closure or *parousia* . . . may be endlessly postponed, or reversed, with the drop of a pin" (307).
11. The reader may also find it useful to consult Marta Werner's essay "'A Woe of Ecstasy': On the Electronic Editing of Emily Dickinson's Late Fragments" in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 16.2; here Werner further reflects on representing Dickinson's work via different reading/writing media.

12. While I do not discuss this aspect of "As One does Sickness over," the poem that is on the recto of the manuscript version of "We met as Sparks - ," it should also be attended to because it informs our reading: the poem on each side of the sheet meets and departs from the other. For instance, even though the slip of paper is pinned to the verso, we can also see the pin and the piercing made by the pin on the recto, which happens to be beside the two variants "Habit" and "handle." Clearly, no edited version of this poem has so far been able to replicate this additional doubleness of "We met as Sparks - ."
13. Nelson is better known for coining the terms "hypertext," "hyperfilm," and "hypermedia" in his 1965 article "A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate."

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The Cybernetics of Performance and New Media Art

PATRICK LICHTY

Abstract

The emergence of many new media art genres calls into question qualitative issues in regards to performance in virtual and electronic spaces. What constitutes performance in technological art, and how can we form a critique of new media performance by analyzing these aesthetic spaces? This essay forms an analysis of technological performance, and of the "performative" in new media through the use of cybernetics as a critical tool.

The emergence of new media art in the form of Internet-based video, Web projects, electronic communication, and electronic installations calls into question qualitative issues in regards to performance in virtual and electronic spaces. The creation of hybrid virtual/physical theatrical events, Internet-based "performance art" installations, and "cybrid" live events that utilize artificial intelligence question the boundaries between art, theater, and technology. What constitutes performance in technological art, and how can we form a critique of new media performance by analyzing these aesthetic spaces? This discussion will examine the issues related to the performative aspects of new media art through an analysis of Weinerian cybernetics to plumb the relationship between technology, practitioner, and audience in these dissimilar spaces.

In Sue Ellen Case's article "Performing Lesbian in the Space of Technology" [1], she posits that the process of writing on the computer screen is a *performative* act, complete with its own set of protocols and rituals. The writer enters this space of performance through such actions as typing and mouse clicking, and so performs a script of sorts as prescribed by the program and the computer's operating system.

This metaphor of the performative act could be expanded upon. The creation of a Web site, although different from interacting with a word processor, also entails certain predefined actions. Data must be compiled, placed on Web space that will hold one's work, and configured so that the information will display properly on the Web. In Case's model, the production and display of digitally based creative forms, such as word processing and interactive art, serves performative functions in electronic space.

The next performative step in many electronic media is that of the interaction of the end user, who accesses the information from the Internet or various electronic media such as CD-ROM. The user follows such basic rituals as pointing and clicking with the mouse as well as performing simple tasks such as text entry. Following the line of thought sketched out previously, both the creator of electronic media and the reader/interactor with those media "perform" the experiences that the creation and consumption of those media entail. However, there is a subtle difference between the performative function of new media art and new media performance, which can be illustrated by examining the basic precepts of cybernetic theory.

"Cybernetics," as defined by Norbert Wiener [2], refers to any self-regulating system that is set up by a stimulus and response

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through continuous feedback. Since then, this principle has been adapted to represent aspects of the body, the global environment, and even managerial systems. Performance is a cybernetic system in that it creates a self-regulating system of cognitive exchange between the performers' actions and audience response [3].

In live theater, performance functions as a closed-loop feedback system, the process of stimulus and response typically regulates itself within the theater space. One could argue that the audiences are performers in their own right and that various reactions of persons on stage provide feedback to the audience. One could also argue that the audience and stage personae are simultaneously performers and audience, creating a heterotopic space in which layers of stimulus and response feed back upon themselves continuously or in "real time." Except for a few cases, theater and performance hold to this concept of response and feedback, which are acted upon by the cognitive filters of the participants. Can we then posit that interactive art is performative in nature? Is it performance? In order to answer this question, one can consider the cybernetic model of performance just discussed in light of Case's theory of digital performativity.

The difference between conventional performance and the performative in new media art is quite subtle. In the generation of/interaction with new media installations, participants perform the acts of media creation and experience the interaction with the work. But in the cases of new media installations, there is a temporal disconnection between performers, breaking the real-time or "live" process of interaction between participants. The author may perform the writing of the work; the "reader" may perform the experience of interacting with the work, but there is no feedback process of live intercommunication, thus suppressing what Mary Flanagan calls "the surprise of the live" [4].

This absence of live interaction between participants results in a simulacrum of performance. The creation of, and interaction with, new media art creates a mimesis of the live, but does not equal the real-time continuous cognitive interaction present in live performance. New media "performance" pieces, then, most closely resemble interactive cinema, as they frequently present the viewer with a tree consisting of options and their resultant presentation of media. However, even these borders can be blurred, as the Recombinant History Apparatus's *Terminal Time* project will illustrate later in this discussion.

Fig. 1. From *Holo-X*, by courtesy of Mark Amerika.

Fig. 2. From *The Perpetual Bed*, by courtesy of Mary Flanagan.

Fig. 3. From *Terminal Time*, by courtesy of terminaltime.com.

The breaking of the continuous feedback loop of live human interaction in the digital artwork defines a specific range of experience for the viewer's connection with the work/event; this is the result of a preordained set of choices outlined by the author. In contrast, live performance may have a set script, but there is a qualitative uncertainty to the interplay between the participants. This uncertainty imbues the event with a slight sense of chaos, creating an "unfixed" quality to the performance that has yet to be duplicated in interactive art.

To illustrate some of these principles, four instances of new media performance and online installation will be considered. In examining these events, perhaps some pattern of performance/performative spaces that is emerging within the technological arts can be ascertained. The first of these is a work by Mark Amerika entitled *Holo-X* (Fig. 1) [5].

In *Holo-X*, the online visitor is taken to a virtual reality space of sexual fantasy in which we are greeted by S.L.U.T., a virtual human of questionable sexual preference, who beckons us into her room. As the visitor interacts with S.L.U.T, she attempts to titillate the user with erotic stories of her experiences in her TRON-like digital world within the Net. She also invites visitors to spend time with her, to "walk" around her room, play with her stereo and guitar, and read the many journals that are strewn around. But S.L.U.T. attempts to place a sexual tension upon the viewer by alluding to her promiscuity and her sexual desire and then seeming to keep herself at mouse's reach, possibly making

T.E.A.S.E. a more appropriate acronym.

In repeated visits to *Holo-X*, visitors to S.L.U.T.'s boudoir are presented with a nonlinear literary space in which they may peruse journals and "chat" with her to create a representation of *Holo-X*'s virtual literary space. This is quite in keeping with other works by Amerika, which seek to use the multiple aspects of representation possible on the Internet to construct multimedia literary spaces. However, in *Holo-X*, the range of interaction possible with S.L.U.T. is limited, and there does not seem to be much potential for free association on S.L.U.T.'s part. While S.L.U.T is a simulated construct of a human being, *Holo-X* itself is a form of interactive literature that simulates performance art hinting at the style of Annie Sprinkle or Karen Finley.

In examining spaces that include both the body and virtual aspects in performance events, the relationship of the body and self to the aesthetic space of technological art is brought into question. Australian performance artist Stelarc seeks to bridge the gap between new media and performance. In many of his works, the body is augmented and duplicated through technological means such as prosthetic third arms, physically linked robotic equipment run in the performance space, remote-control Internet installations, and virtual representations of his body. The performance space is further bifurcated as events are frequently viewed through the Internet, where during the performance of works such as *Third Arm* [6], participants are able to manipulate the artist's body through remote control. Onlookers are thus able to see ramifications of their actions in real time, regardless of whether they are in the gallery or online.

In these works, the key cybernetic principle of the feedback loop appears on a number of levels: the performer-artist relationship, the artist-machine interplay, and the self-regulation of the machines themselves. In addition to the real-time manipulation of the living body in performance, Stelarc is also augmenting his performances with additional levels of stimulus and feedback through his technological prostheses, both physical and virtual.

Thus a cyborg performance is created. The performer is in real time, even if only telepresent, and responds with defined yet unpredictable actions. In addition, he is confronting his device's controls, creating additional levels of meaning. Stelarc bridges the gap between performative media art and performance with his hybridization of the performance space. Although the events also blur the border between performer and audience, Stelarc's performances on occasion breaks the link between himself and his observers by disconnecting the possibility of real-time, personal interaction between himself and his audience. This effect problematizes the distinction between that which is performance and that which is performative in nature. Such an effect has also been noted in certain instances of Mary Flanagan's *Perpetual Bed* (Fig. 2) [7].

The Perpetual Bed is a virtual reality–based performance consisting of projections of a computer-generated space with which Flanagan interacts onstage through her laptop computer console. She maneuvers through a free-floating virtual space of her memories, many from her childhood and family. These memories are reduced to two-dimensional scrims, which float in midair as short cinematic loops or as still images rendered in sepia or black and white. Such representation implies a sense of historicity, as if one were sitting down to examine a box of old daguerreotype photographs.

A second aspect of note relating to these "memories" is how they interact as sound objects. As Flanagan passes by these familiar memories in the virtual world, their associated sounds become more distinct, providing a metaphor for the way we call on memory. In addition, several semiautonomous scrim "entities" pass through the virtual world, reminding one of stray thoughts in the recollection of a story. In other performances, online visitors can interact textually during the performance through VRML "windows" in the virtual world. Thus *The Perpetual Bed* creates a hybrid world of the artist's reflections and memory where we visit with her, if only for a little while.

In this work Flanagan is operating as performer, maneuvering through the space from her laptop console, narrating verbally and textually as she recounts her mnemonic world. This juxtaposition of live stage performance and online installation restores the interaction between audience and performer. Instances in which she has opened up the space to allow Internet onlookers to interact with her further blur the boundaries between virtual and physical. The roles played by Flanagan, her memories, the semi-intelligent scrims, and the outside audience must be considered as they come together to create the stage presentation of the *Bed*.

Nevertheless two events in the various performances of *The Perpetual Bed* have raised the question of the need for live, cognitive interaction and feedback between audience and performer [8]. For a 1998 intercontinental performance in France, an Internet link was established between the space where Flanagan would execute the piece in New York and the theater where the event would be held. A video link was established, and the audiovisual imagery was transmitted through an Internet link.

Although the material was transmitted to the auditorium live and in real time, what was peculiar to this performance was that Flanagan had no way of receiving feedback from her audience. Even though this interaction could have been established to some extent through an Internet video camera and microphone, the exchange was one-sided. Thus Flanagan was completely disconnected from the reactions of the audience, giving her no ability to interact with or adjust to her onlookers. This caused her to see a need for the presence of the performer in the audience's location and for continuous feedback during the performance.

These issues became evident once again in a 1998 performance in Norway, where she was in the same location as the audience. The evening transpired quite normally, with Flanagan presenting the piece on stage at the console. What was unique was that several audience members were aware of the potential problems that her absence would present. These onlookers remarked that although they understood she had performed the piece remotely in other performances, the belief was that the artist's presence was necessary to create the atmosphere of performance. Both events, from Flanagan's perspective as well as from that of the Norwegian observers, would tend to underscore the importance of locating performance and audience in the same space. This suggests the viability of a Weinerian cybernetic model of performance and its

requirement of live, real-time interaction between on-stage persons and audience members.

Even though the concept of performance cybernetics provides a robust model for the study of theater participants' interactions, there are events that blur the boundaries between performance and the performative. One such work is Recombinant History Apparatus's audience-based interactive video *Terminal Time* (Fig. 3) [9]. During the piece, the audience is presented with a series of questions at three separate junctures, and the piece registers the response through the volume of applause. Using these responses, the Upper Cyc Ontology–based "ideologues" [10] of the piece select clips of historical imagery and narration in real time to create a history of the world that reflects the audience's biases.

What is unique to *Terminal Time*, however, is the fact that it utilizes a system in which several internal expert systems select the imagery by "consensus." They will not necessarily return identical historical narratives for repeated showings, even when the audience's response is the same. This uncertainty hints at the beginnings of free association and feedback while staying within certain parameters typical of live performance. As in live theater, this work exhibits traits of the exchange of stimulus and feedback, but it only does so at three predetermined times in the execution of the installation, whereas in human-based events, the feedback loop of social interaction works continually throughout. On the other hand, the uncertainty of outcome, even when the system is presented with identical selections, alludes to the possibility of technologically mediated cybernetic performances that call into question issues of human/computer interaction and the cognitive aspects of technological art.

There has been much excellent work that takes its impetus from cybernetics as a method of critical analysis [11]. The analysis presented here creates only one of a myriad of possible interpretations of performance in technological spaces. A cybernetic analysis of technological performance is useful in allowing the creation of epistemological metaphors for examining new media art and technologically based performance. However, there are challenges in trying to create a new language for events like the ones discussed here, and there is a danger of reinscribing old discursive boundaries with new taxonomies.

The genre of performance-based technological art will continue to proliferate as artists and performers learn (or choose) to explore the creative potentials of technological media. As Douglas Kellner has suggested [12], the emergence of a new media culture will call upon its constituents to create new creative spaces to construct metaphors expressing experiences within that society. Perhaps by analyzing electronic and theatrical spaces like those discussed here, the issues of representation and interaction these genres make visible can be brought into sharper focus.

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9. http://www.terminaltime.com. For an account of *Terminal Time* by its creators, see pp. 445–46 of this issue.

10. For more information on the Upper Cyc Ontology, see Cycorp at http://www.cyc.com.

11. See, for example, N. Katerine Hailes' *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999). However, a broader discussion falls outside the scope of this essay.

12. Douglas Kellner, presentation before the Electronic Culture & Communication Section of the Popular Culture Association, San Diego, CA (March 1999).

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