On Reflection...

Artwork as Interface

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Abstract

Artworks are highly coded power objects. At best, they serve as windows onto profound and unspeakable experience; at worst, they're simply "wall obstructions." In this paper, two issues will be addressed: (1) What do artists, in their role as extremely subtle information designers, have to teach us about how deep knowledge is conveyed? What do their visual strategies teach us about interface? And (2) how can a digital program be designed that respects the properties inherent in each artwork, and yet harnesses the power of multimedia to make connections across space and time?

I.

First, let's look at some artworks—that's always the most fun. (It's why many of us got involved in this field in the first place). On a trip to Spain a couple of years back, I found myself floored by the two rooms - one short, and one long - of Goya's 'Black Paintings' at the Prado. I was completely unprepared for the impact of these works. In fact, apart from one or two, they are very little reproduced in the United States, where our image of Goya is largely determined by his painted portraits of royals and aristocrats on the one hand, and his etched sets of *Capriccios* and *Disasters of War*, on the other. But these paintings are stunning: brutal, enormous, superb, difficult to take, they seemed to me the first modernist tableaux. They are the private work of an otherwise very public artist, made for display in his own home. They overtake you by their long horizontal dimensions, by the freedom of their brushwork when viewed from close up, and by the way their textures and surfaces resolve into alarming and encompassing narratives as you move further away. (In a way, I was looking at Goya through the eyes of one who has seen and admired the works of Anselm Kiefer). Here was a contemporary of Beethoven (and by all reports, equally deaf) who had seen the excesses and foibles of aristocracy, the rape and massacres of civil war - the defeat of the Age of Reason, in a word - and who used the virtuosity of his later years to paint what he saw but could not hear: a world governed by sick demi-urges and demons, a far cry from the noble and frolicking gods of the Greeks and Romans. Goya's pantheon is a brutish crew, and Man's Fate is to be a victim of their sick caprice. It's as if a bunch of louts had taken to the sky—not too high, just a little above the terrestrial swamp - with sling shots and stones, and the hypnotic power to focus human desire on activities that will lead inexorably to our demise.

What can we learn from this work? The power of history painting to conjure a narrative, be it grand or macabre, through its scale and drama - its capacity to engage our physical bodies in real space, and our mind and emotions through an identifiable subject, no matter how grim. And the power of a profoundly sober, even misanthropic artist to galvanize us through the creation of a new mythic vision.

Things don't always have to be that grim to be effective. Take Mark Tansey's updated history painting, *The Triumph of the New York School.* In this sepia-toned post-battle scene, the camps are divided, surrender is at hand, and only the title gives the clue to the faces and meanings at play. On the left stand the French - painters, that is - in their World War I garb, while on the right the Americans sport their World War II khakis. Not surprisingly, the critics and manifesto-writers take care of the paperwork: American Clement Greenberg awaits a signed surrender from Surrealist André Breton (seen from behind), while the compact, fur-coated, bullet-eyed Picasso stands to the left. Tough Jackson Pollock and his more amiable American friends look on from the right. Marcel Duchamp is appropriately situated in the no-man's land between the two camps, sporting a Gallist cap but wryly amused. The painter Tansey has presented us with an interface that is an index-key to the canonical history of Western art in the first half of the twentieth century.

Similarly, Frida Kahlo offers us an indexical representation of the codes of Mexican and European representation in her double portrait, *Frieda and Diego Rivera*, painted on the occasion of her first wedding to Diego Rivera and her first trip to San Francisco. We can read this painting like a book: Frieda is tiny; Diego is huge - witness their feet. Diego is the painter: witness the palette and brushes he has in place of his right hand. Frieda, on the other hand, is defined by her relationship to Diego, her status as his new wife: he is her attribute. And yet she already knows he is not

someone whom one can hold onto too tightly; look at how lightly their hands touch in an air clasp. Diego is the EuroMan, the Marxist worker in his blue denim and suit, a force larger than life; Frieda the feminine avatar of *mexicanidad* in her Tehuantepec peasant costume. The entire painting is cast in the style of a *retablo*, a testimonial of divine intervention, as a bird bears a banderole recounting the circumstances of its production, and pays homage to the patron that commissioned it. If all paintings were this lucid, we wouldn't need docents. If all multimedia programs were this subtle, we wouldn't need buttons!

Other figurative artworks, though equally legible at first glance, end up revealing different kinds of hidden meanings. Take, for example, Yasumasa Morimura's *Red Marilyn*, a photograph in which the artist himself re-enacts a famous pose of the late American sex goddess. That which starts out as a carefully constructed mimicry of our cultural surfaces turns into a clever subterfuge, at once a putting on - or *maquillage* - and an erasure by a foreign man of an American woman - the very woman who was imposed as an icon of glamour all over the world, in defiance of local canons of beauty.

In a sense, the Tansey and Morimura works both depict the triumph of postwar American cultural and economic forces (read: imperialism) by adapting and subverting pictorial devices well understood in our culture. Kahlo, for her part, draws equally on Mexican culture's inherited forms.

So what happens when the references are less well known or widely understood? Here's a work from 1953, apparently blank and devoid of meaning. And yet its meanings are formed by the confluence of the forces depicted in the Tansey and Morimura works. Its making was co-synchronous with the heyday of that triumphant New York school, and its maker, the young Robert Rauschenberg, took the work of one of that school's heroic masters as its point of departure as surely as Morimura took Marilyn Monroe. (In fact, Willem de Kooning made a painting called *Marilyn Monroe* right around this time). What Rauschenberg did with the de Kooning drawing he started with was quite outrageous: he erased it ... or by an additive process of drawing on it with a variety of rubbers subtracted it from the page. The visible result is quite different, but the principle is like *Red Marilyn:* the erasure of a heterosexually charged woman by a gay man.[1]

But even a so-called blank, or white canvas, paper, or other surface can have multiple meanings, depending on its context. The question is just how those signs are conveyed; how the cues are indicated to the audience, and whether those viewers are receptive. In the case of Robert Ryman, meanings - or what passes for such - are endowed by brushwork, by the center-staging of hardware, by the reflection of light on a burnished metal plate, by shadow, or by waxed paper. In the case of Jim Campbell's *Typing Paper*, it's sound that re-endows the blank white surface with a cultural reference. The sound of old-fashioned typing, generated by a computer chip housed in the steel box below and connected by two thin wires. The words

Martin Luther King's I Have a Dream

7,344 characters

are inscribed on top of the box. Reading these words, the apparently random typing sounds emitted by the piece are suddenly organized into a meaningful pattern. The artwork acts as a trigger to memory, to a shared cultural reference. It becomes an expression of deep-seated ideals, an evocation of a person now lost, whose hands once typed the specific words of that now famous speech - words which do not need to be visible or audible to ring in our minds as we hear the clattering typewriter noise.

II.

One of the problems with modern and contemporary art is that, unlike the Catholic Church or Madison Avenue, it doesn't benefit from a vast multi-billion dollar cultural infrastructure dedicated to inculcating the public with, and then perpetuating, its particular symbol systems. We tend to forget that our accepted symbol systems, be they from the established religions, the fashion industry, or television, magazines, and Hollywood movies, work not only because they tap into well established archetypes, but because they are endlessly repeated to us from the age of nill onwards, until they seem as natural as the water we drink and the air we breathe. An artist given half the budget The Gap spent on creating Khaki-Consciousness would surely have a fair chance of reaching new publics, too. And artists can hardly be blamed for being hermetic if they choose to develop their own symbol systems outside of the mainstream media; after all, consensus reality is not their gig. Providing alternatives to it more often is.[2]

With that in mind, how can new technologies be used to provide a bridge, a cocoon, a chrysalis

from which art with new meanings can body forth? How do we create a multimedia program that honors the diversity and specificity of individual works even as it follows repeatable guidelines for interface and programming? Are there interfaces that could extend beyond what we are used to, that can evoke some of the qualities of scale, texture, approach and retreat that we use in experiencing artworks like the Goya in real time and space? How do we reproduce, or parallel, these experiences? Or do we simply provide some keys to context? So those who never heard the *I Have a Dream* speech can gain a better sense of the Jim Campbell piece, which otherwise looks so helplessly abstract. So those who have never seen a Willem de Kooning drawing can get a better sense of what Rauschenberg went through, erasers in hand.

Meanings are gleaned through relationship - through insertion in a network of references. Often they are not immediately apparent, but come over time as people begin to notice patterns and relationships. They accrue through physical characteristics that assert similarity and difference - whence the distinct approaches and meanings of those apparently similar white paintings by Rauschenberg, Ryman and Campbell. Obviously one primary way of helping artworks root in viewers' consciousness is by association: at the very least, with texts - that's the principle of the wall label - and preferably with images, video clips, animations, and other artworks as well. Each of these kinds of association has already been conventionalized in the brief history of cultural multimedia practice. New technologies enable us to establish relationships, contextual references beyond what is visible in the gallery, and potentially richer than what is written in a book. They enable us to transcend the gallery's limitations of space and time - even as they rob us of our direct one-on-one bodily confrontation with the original work of art.

But within the realm of associative media, some screens and programs are more fixed, and others more surprising, arising almost spontaneously out of the intelligence built into the program. Examples of the latter include the Thinkmap applet, which has been demonstrated at these conferences in the past, and the recombinant relationships spawned by dragging different artworks to the center of the screen in Index+'s excellent CD-ROM on the Impressionists. Similar functionality is also being built into the drag-and-drop relationships we are embedding in the timeline of our new version of *Making Sense of Modern Art* at SFMOMA. Let the viewers select the artworks, and encourage the artworks to talk with each other - at least figuratively speaking!

How else can artworks act as a multimedia interface? And what else can they teach us about the subtleties of communications design? Well, we can imitate the to and fro, the forward and back of a visitor's gallery experience with a combined zoom and pan tool, but the artwork represented will almost always appear smaller than it is in real life. And we can isolate telling details in a composition, and point out iconographic references, or formal devices. But the biggest challenges are of online experience quality, and those hurdles remain.

The artist Bill Viola has thought a lot about the way artworks communicate. For him, the experience of meaning is inherently 3-dimensional. He says:

> The deepest z-axis you can ever imagine is in every artwork.[3]

Or at least every artwork that seduces you: that you can enter, dialogue with, and that holds you in its thrall. Viola continues:

> There's one material that I work with: experience ... To make the invisible visible through material things—and still allow it to be invisible.

And finally:

> I'm trying to convey less and less information in more and more time[4]

It is this slowing down, this seduction by a work and re-entry into body time, that we have yet to enable in our reproductions of artworks on the Web. Given bandwidth and palette constraints, we are more likely to replace this primary experience with a shroud of informational noise, hoping our viewer-users will get to experience the actual artwork someday in the flesh in our galleries. But what are we afraid of? Radio silence?

This is perhaps the hardest thing to get people in the point-and-click instant gratification environment to do: slow down. As Eulàlia Bosch writes:

> Seduced via our senses, we begin to enjoy the pleasure of unhurried contemplation; our apprehension of the work meanders among well-known words, and we discover the voids that this particular

> moment has generated among them. (Bosch)

Once we've mastered the artwork's socio-historical and intellectual milieu, and the elements of its formal and iconographic construction, this challenge will remain: to convey the power of the direct experience of the artwork itself, informed by, but in the final analysis, above and beyond, the rational constructs that surround it. It is a far cry from the 216 browser-safe colors of standard web display to the nuanced perception needed to enjoy a white monochrome Robert Ryman painting. So this is one major component of the challenge that confronts us: to give a sensory-rich surrogate experience of a real object that exists elsewhere - a digital experience compelling enough to stop people in their tracks, like those Goya paintings stopped me.

(We don't have a set answer yet for how to achieve this, but we're experimenting, and we're interested in other people's responses. Some ideas we're playing with beyond normal pan-and-zoom tools include a life-size detail of an artwork, scaled to the size of the monitor display, and shot with enough raking light to see and feel the surface texture. Others include a new audio tour that matches 20th-century music to works in the collection, with or without supplementary commentary. We find this encourages people to stay and look longer, and differently, then they would were they only guided by words).

III.

When people are stopped in their tracks by an artwork - in that pause, they might find a thread in that void between the words, a germ of a new idea that they want to pursue. That is where artwork acts as interface in yet a third manner: between people sharing a common experience. It happens in our galleries every day. In that space between the commonly perceived and the divergently felt, another set of relationships arises: those between our visitors. We're used to it happening on-site; we're just beginning to make a place for it on our web sites, where with a few notable exceptions like *The Shock of the View*, it's still more of a goal than a reality.

In his book *Interactive Excellence*, Edwin Schlossberg describes the nightlong presentation of Balinese shadow puppet theater. Unlike theater in the West, with its rigid proscenium division between audience and stage spaces, in Balinese theater the audience is free to sit or stand, even to walk around behind the scrim and watch the puppeteers in action, and to discuss the drama and its enactment in low voices while it is in progress.

This is something that we are used to doing in museums. We circulate with friends, or exchange enthusiastic, bemused, or bewildered commentaries with strangers, for that matter! So how can we create a space that encourages communicating this way on the Net?

Schlossberg writes:

> The issue is that communication must focus not only on the work, but on the development of a relationship between the work and the audience.... The diversity of interest and experience is a resource if it can be channeled within a context that adds to each of our individual experiences and to the total range of our cultural experience. Institutions, especially museums, are uniquely positioned to provide the context where this communication can happen. (Schlossberg 1998).

And here is where a difficulty turns into an opportunity. Unlike the museum's galleries, where artworks most often exist in officially restrained silence, on our web sites they are embedded in discourse from the get-go. Even as digital media fall far short of providing an optimal direct physical encounter with artworks, the ease with which we wrap these works in contextual information on the Web can serve as a catalyst to further online conversation and debate. Eventually, we will arrive at a suitable balance: more interpretive media in the galleries, as visitors experience the artworks in person, and a higher quality representation of those same artworks on the Web– an art experience you'd want to come back for, because of the image quality and its social, educational nature.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have looked at artworks as interfaces in three different ways:

First, as extremely sophisticated, holistic information-sharing devices that alternately encompass and overpower us or ask us to supply more than half the meaning from our side. In each of these cases, extremely subtle indicators key us into meanings their creators have intended.

On a second front, we have asked what we could learn from such artworks as we design computer

interfaces for their exploration, and museum computer interfaces in general.

And finally, we have asked whether the telematic experience of works of art on a computer screen can give rise to the same quality of human exchange as the bodily experience of artworks often triggers in our galleries. What conditions would foster such a growing dialogue, or as SFMOMA director David Ross calls it, "the contest of ideas?"

More questions than answers. But for me at least, they help set the agenda: by the inspiration the artworks offer in the experiencing, the challenge they present for interpretation and re-presentation, and the opportunity they offer for human communication and exchange.

Notes

1. This is, of course, only one of the many levels on which this work can be read. But to pursue it a bit further, the difference between these two artists' approaches is quite revealing: while Morimura replaces and impersonates an image of Marilyn-and in other works, representations of many other glamorous female figures-with his own body, Rauschenberg, in what could be read as a closeted gesture, removes the gendered markings of de Kooning's vigorous drawing style, which were considered the epitome of virility at the time, and replaces them with the blankness of the page, leaving only a ghost of their former image. The more outspoken approach of the contemporary artist speaks worlds of the change in attitude and the progress of gay identity politics in the intervening decades.

2. There is, of course a significant financial infrastructure to the art world as well, and it has been compared to a church. (For all we know, we may be its deacons!) But it is smaller by many orders of magnitude, and deals with much more diverse and recalcitrant material, than the symbol-generating enterprises mentioned above.

3. Viola quotes are from conversations with the artist at SFMOMA, June-July 1999.

4. Viola contrasts this to television, which attempts to convey more and more information in less and less time.

References

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