

Chapter 5

Exploring the Liminal between the Virtual and the Real

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ABSTRACT

The creative application of digital technologies is accelerating as artists, designers and technologists continue to experiment and explore ways to create new aesthetic fields, semantically enhanced communication and innovative relations between people and machines. Our virtual worlds meet the real material world through the interdisciplinary research of computer scientists, digital media technologists, artists, designers and culture theorists. This chapter explores ways of bringing the virtual to the real through a range of differing conceptual positions and research approaches while demonstrating the creative interplay of variable media and online platforms for producing liminal works which cross the boundary between the analogue and the digital. The intent is to provide insights and examples of creative practice employing new technologies in innovative and unusual ways to generate exciting new work and offer new pathways for digital media research and development. The chapter presents relevant theoretical frameworks and examples of current practice in the area of digitally enabled transitional spaces for artists, theorists and curators, as well as researchers working both in the field and beyond to those working with new technologies, social media platforms, and digital/ material culture.

INTRODUCTION

In considering the dialogue between the virtual (digital) realm and the real world as a semantic space for creative exploration, there are many different approaches from researchers in adjacent fields concerned with new technologies and virtual platforms. I have been investigating this interstice between two worlds as a liminal space of transition and transformation for over 5 years now, and have convened 4 panels of specialists to present at ISEA – Inter-Society of the Electronic Arts (2 panels in Belfast UK and Istanbul, Turkey), CAA – US College Art Association, New York and in October 2014 at the UAAC – Universities Art Associations of Canada, Toronto. Papers from those panels were then published in edited volumes with IGI Global (Harrison, 2013), the most recent of these being ‘The Handbook of Research in Digital Media and Creative Technology’ due for publication in February 2015.

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The seven artist perspectives are given here as a series of synopses, they have been selected from those panelists and authors from the events mentioned above in that their work examples the broad range of activities currently underway in exploring the liminal. Beginning with Barbara Rauch and her e:Motion lab where she morphs animal and human facial expressions to explore recognition and our sense of self. Lorna Moore then follows with her work facilitating the deep engagement with ourselves by momentarily experiencing our 'other' now afforded by new technologies. Another artist, Alistair Payne, approaches an understanding of the Virtual through Deleuze which has expanded his practice as a painter into a multi-medial and interdisciplinary position. Where Payne's work has extended to include aspects of virtuality through incorporating digital video with his paintings in material installations. Ian Gwilt is exploring the transformation of digital code into material objects through 3D printing and rapid prototyping. Suzette Worden is interested in the microscopic unseen material world of 'meaningless matter' made visible by artists through nanotechnology and digital virtuality when engaging with the earth sciences. Maggie Parker works with the imaginary landscapes and virtual worlds of game scenarios, her work proposes that such environments should enhance their unreality by keeping an abstract aesthetic that does not simulate familiar earth landscapes and cities. The paper ends with a solely theoretical investigation of virtual and real spaces by digital artist Garfield Benjamin, who bravely navigates between Deleuze and Zizek (Lacan) to situate the subject/self.

7 SYNOPSES

Dr Barbara Rauch

Dr Rauch - runs the e_Motion research project which integrates 3D visualization, haptic technology and rapid prototyping as a window into the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) mind. Through the groundbreaking researchers such as Simon Baron-Cohen (Baron-Cohen, 1985) we have learned that ASD falls along a broad spectrum, and high-functioning autistics like Temple Grandin have taught us that they are handicapped not by their ASD, but by the fact that they learn in different ways from 'neurotypicals'. It is now well known that many ASD people are visual thinkers and learners, and this project utilizes state-of-the-art but 'approachable' digital technologies that will allow the autistic person to speak with distinct and enhanced visual voices. This differs from art therapy in that it will lead to a better understanding of how ASD individuals think and feel, through visualization.

Dr. Rauch joins collaborators Dr. Stuart Shanker and Prof. Jason Nolan, to work on studies in ASD, emotion, education and communication. The project is still in its early stages of production, however it has initiated the outlines and hypothesis of a promising cross-disciplinary study that also introduces a PLAY method for emotion rehearsals. On using the interface a productive buffer zone will be created to test out approaches, responses, anxieties and reflections in the difficult task of reading emotions in another person's face. Using Paul Ekman's understanding of universal emotions, (Ekman, 2013) expressions of the face can be read across cultures. His classification of basic emotions into a list of six distinct expressions (anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise) was later extended to include guilt, contempt, shame and others. Rauch added contempt to the original six basic expressions and to select distinct facial images of the human face that demonstrated happy, sad, disgusted, afraid etc. Furthermore being interested in the evolutionary aspect of emotions, not unlike Darwin's interrogation of expressions of emotions in animal and man, a fox's neural expression was included in the image database for morph-

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