# Artists as Workers and Technology as Artists

Dr. Future

Critical Artists Devolve to Political Technologies

Critical Images II : DVolution!

The Lux Centre, 27th May, 2000

Apparently the artists at Andy Warhol's Factory spent most of their time doing celebrity portraits and promotional work just so they could pay the rent. At the end of the day Andy would assemble his staff around the table and say "Now, what are we going to do for Art? I can't think of anything today, does anyone have any ideas?" Artists that work with forms of mass media can be faced with the double edged sword of having to afford access to the relevant equipment and also the opportunity to pay for it by using their skills to accept commercial work. But balancing time spent working on paying jobs against time spent on "personal work" has led to unique conflicts in their roles as well as unique insights for media artists.
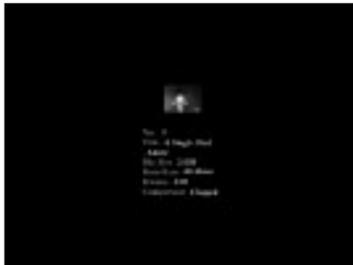
Critical Images II was a four day programme of events at the Lux Centre, London, culminating in a one day conference on strategies for moving image based arts in online and interactive contexts. Unlike the dismal performance of last year's Critical Images conference where panels of tasteful art house film makers and trendy 'Hoxtonite' multimedia designers engaged in an endless orgy of professional back slapping, the emphasis this time was on practitioners from further outside mainstream culture. In fact, nearly all the speakers present could have been described as "artists".

In the morning film maker Ana Kronschnabl showed examples of online movies from her Plugincinema site while artist Nick Crowe presented his web based movie *Discrete Packets* which showed how linear narratives could be stretched by using links to live real and fictional web sites. Then film maker Jon Jost moved the direction of the debate away from aesthetics as

Images:
Lev Manovich

such by talking about the problems artists had in gaining access to the expertise that would enable them to pursue these more technologically sophisticated forms of movie making. Nick Crowe made the crucial point that artists must avoid relying too much on technical experts because they always work with reference to received notions of "quality"—technicians are not trained to exploit "bugs", only to erase them, and in doing so new avenues of exploration are missed. If the art world pursues these technical standards blindly then it would lead to the situation that Jon Jost described where art galleries would become cineplexes that just made people want to see more Hollywood films.

In the afternoon Kate Rich from the Bureau of Inverse Technology (BIT) showed several projects which involved the placement of video cameras in spy planes flying over the high security bunkers of silicon valley companies or planted in childrens toys to create films of the consumer landscape from the point-of-view of the technologies that created it. Jim Fetterley and Rich Bott of Animal Charm recycle footage from industrial documentary and corporate videos. In picking out the bits

inbetween moments of dramatic significance they create an eerie world made up of figures distractedly waiting or standing around with looks of misplaced concern. These are the minute things the camera records when it is being least influenced by the desires of its human operators. Chris Wilcha talked about his documentary *The Target Shoots First* which was composed out of camcorder footage shot while he worked as a marketing manager for Columbia House records, exposing a corporate culture which erases distinctions between personal values and marketing strategies.

The writer Chris Darke chaired the final session called Culture Jamming in which he vigorously championed the featured work as encouraging examples of "art re-engaging with social conditions." Animal Charm and Chris Wilcha both pointed out that in the US public arts funding has practically disappeared and this has generated a peculiar feeling of freedom and urgency. The need for these artists to pursue day jobs has given them a keener sense of the divisive values and limited visions of the corporate world, their work acquiring a politically oppositional motivation. Lev Manovich stated that commercial culture is now more formally innovative than the arts, which also suggested that artists must direct their arguments towards the level of the quality of lived experience instead. Kate Rich said that when corporations found out about their work what they most objected to was not the technological ingenuity of concealed surveillance but concern that they were being made fun of and their beliefs questioned. These artists seemed to be using their proximity to commercial media to recover from its technologies the remnants of alternative futures, or ambivalent energies that ignite other desires whose promises are not yet patented.

But then an odd thing happened. In a comment from the floor, the conference organiser Rhidian Davis questioned whether the debaters had assumed an outdated romantic role for the artist as a social outsider fighting against an impersonal corporate world. This comment had the effect of misrepresenting the practitioners as criticising from an arbitrary subjective position, as though they were grumbling about a mainstream culture that they had elevated themselves above. As if on cue, each of the panellists then denied one by one that they had ever claimed they were artists. This may have been intended to distance themselves from the implication that they were old fashioned elitists but it effectively silenced the debate, seemingly robbing the panellists of any basis on which to continue their discussion. It was as though either an objective social critique were not possible from the position of the privileged subject with their disorderly emotions and interests, or in contrast because of their romantic isolation from the cut and thrust of daily life. But the fact that artists at this conference had been forced to support themselves by working commercially had led to the direct personal motivation behind their strongest work. Perhaps it is this very familiarity with the unpalatable realities of corporate politics that is limiting the debate in the art world to presentations of formal innovations couched in soothing poetic terms or somehow trying to leave the responsibility for critique to internal conflicts articulated by the technology itself. Devolution indeed.

The complexity of this relationship between artistic intentions and the language of the technology itself had been made plain when Lev

Manovich showed his *Little Movies* project. He had taken some footage from the early cinema of the 1880s of characters involved in simple, gestural actions like circus performers posing and progressively reduced them down to single pixels to create an alternative movie aesthetic that preceded Hollywoods technical standards. However, the LUX Centre's internet connection proved unable even to cope with this as the sluggish playback stuttered to a halt during the presentation. But was this a technical "problem" or a further "feature" of Manovichs digital "aesthetic"? Perhaps this means we should not discount human intention entirely and not leave everything to the unfolding of the technology (or perhaps some technologies make bad "artists" just as some people do?). Technicians pursue "quality" and artists seek "meaning"—either may imply technical standards as well as other agendas.

The general tendency of the work shown at this event was to allow the technology to suggest its own internal potential or structures of meaning. This strategy works for a while but breaks down at the point where it comes up against how the technology is already being deployed by other parties for their own interests. The best you can then do is to expand your field of reference to include the social and political dimensions. At the moment when you find yourself in a world where standards, protocols and channels of communication are already in place then a space for technological neutrality and objective experimentation no longer exists. We are now in that world.

Web links

Anna Kronschnabl
http://www.plugincinema.com

Nick Crowe
http://www.nickcrowe.net

Lev Manovich
http://visarts.ucsd.edu/~manovich
http://www.manovich.net/little-movies