A COMMON THREAD

Digital Media and the Creative Process

Wake Forest University Fine Arts Gallery

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February 13 - March 29, 1998

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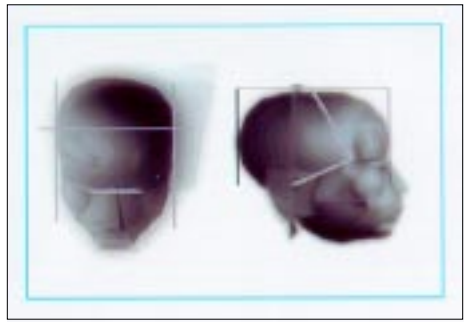
Kevin Daniel
Mark Depman
Andrew Deutsch
Flash Light
Chuck Genco
Jennifer McCoy
Kevin McCoy
Scott Townsend

In the fall of 1997, digital media took its place beside painting, sculpture, printmaking and drawing in studio art education at Wake Forest University. John Pickel was hired as an assistant professor of art in spring of 1997, arrived on campus mid-summer, and immediately joined in the whirlwind of activity that quickly expanded the art department's physical, technological and educational boundaries.

A Common Thread is the Art Gallery's contribution to this transition. Each exhibiting artist utilized digital media in a variety of ways during the creative process. In some pieces the digital signal represents the whole body of the work; in others it served as a creative tool. But in all cases, it was a necessary element in the realization of the works of art selected for this exhibition.

Victor Faccinto
Director, Fine Arts Gallery



From: *Portrait*, Scott Townsend

P.O. Box 7232, Winston-Salem, NC 27109
Director's phone: (336) 758-5795
e-mail: faccinto@wfu.edu

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Rear cover image: from *Portrait*, Scott Townsend

Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love The *Computer*

John Pickel, Assistant Professor
Digital Art and Photography

"It is impossible to simultaneously measure the position and the momentum of atomic particles with an arbitrary degree of accuracy".
The Uncertainty Principle, Werner Heisenberg

"…the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.
"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin

Although Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle describes our inability to know the exact nature of atomic particles, it is also a good metaphor for the current state of digital art and the so-called digital revolution in general. It is impossible to measure where we are in the digital age and where we might be going, "with any arbitrary degree of accuracy." Without making any pretense to having more than an armchair understanding of Quantum Mechanics, the Uncertainty Principle states, "Not knowing the present position and the present velocity of an electron with absolute precision, one can calculate only a range of possibilities for the position and velocity of the electron at any future time…"[1] Since it is also impossible to know the position and velocity of digital art with much precision, I will use this introduction to suggest possibilities.

Walter Benjamin's, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", originally published in Germany, 1936, is a Marxist critique of the state of art, "…useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art."[2] Benjamin, a contemporary of Heisenberg, concedes that a work of art has always been reproducible manually, but argues that mechanical reproduction of art, especially photographic reproduction, photography and film as art forms, changes the work of art from its traditionally meaningful use to one that is political. He explains that the process occurs through the decay of the "aura" of the work of art. Benjamin continues, "To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object…"[3] If the masses perceive all "things" as universally equal, the prevailing economic system that produces these "things" determines the form of social organization and the political history of that time.

Using ideas from semiotics to apply Benjamin's theory will extend this argument to the work of art in the age of digital (re)production. The ubiquity of any reproduced work of art removes it as a signifier from its referent. I read, "pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura," as destroying its referent or at least damaging it beyond recognition. This leaves us in a culture of floating signifiers available to all, with little reference to tradition, history or cultural meaning. The situation is amplified when considering digital art in general and especially the work produced for cyberspace, that is work produced on the computer with the computer as the means of access. The amplification occurs in a twofold manner. Firstly, accepting context as a major determinant of meaning, the context of cyberspace is no-context. For instance, no matter how hard we attempt to describe this work in the tradition of familiar disciplines, a web page is not a printed page. Although it contains familiar techniques such as photography and typography, it is wholly immaterial and exists in an "atopic" environment with its meaning continually shifting. Secondly, digital techniques have reached a level of sophistication where images are created that appear photographic (with all the implications of an indexical sign), but have no material referent. In other words, the experience of the destruction of the aura or referent is doubled. The photo-

graphic appearance of the image promises indexical signification through the lens and the eyes of the photographer, while the digital fabrication denies the existence of a material referent at all. Again we are left in a web of floating signifiers. [4]

Since we cannot, or should not reasonably desire to return to the mythical "good old days" before mechanical/digital reproduction when auras were intact and signification was less uncertain, is there a possible path we can use to move forward, a path that includes a recursive use of the technology? A work in this exhibition by Chuck Genco, "Pascal's Coin Box", suggests a direction. The wall-mounted sculpture is 38"x12"x2" and has a slot at the top where a penny is dropped**.** Since Blaise Pascal formulated the mathematical theory of probability and invented the first mechanical adding machine, the irony moves quickly to satire. Feed the sculpture a penny and watch it move down through the box in "left/right decision points" while the calculation is tallied on a screen on one side. Here, signification in the theory of probability and statistics is being turned inside out. The signs of an adding machine refer to wealth, removed from the means of production and input into the adding machine as numerals, but in this case you are holding the referent in your hand, all be it a penny. A second level of signification occurs, since the penny is also a sign. Benjamin wrote, "Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception."[5] In other words, the farther we are removed from the reality of capital, from currency and the adding machine, to virtual banking, the easier our perception of capital is changed. With "Pascal's Coin Box", Genco then moves from satire to humor. As the box is filled with coins, a door on the bottom opens and the coins spill to the floor, and the process starts over again. I will never see an adding machine or calculator in the same way.

There is a dichotomy in our culture between those who fear digital technology and those who are members of the cult of technology and embrace all new technology without question. I see a metaphor in the personae of Benjamin and Heisenberg. Although it is debatable how much of a contribution he made, Heisenberg remained in Germany during the Nazi era and worked on the atomic bomb. Benjamin on the other hand, being a Marxist and a Jew, fled Germany only to commit suicide in 1940 after being driven from Paris ahead of the Nazi invasion. Can we find another path, one that lies between the positivism of Heisenberg and the despair of Benjamin? Can we use the "either-or", binary thinking of computers in a manner that changes this binary process, and allows a path in between?

In Stanley Kubrick's satirical, black comedy, "Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love The Bomb" (1963), a disturbed U.S. general orders the nuclear bombing of the Soviet Union. The Russian ambassador informs the President, Peter Sellers, that the USSR has a doomsday device that will destroy the world, if his country is attacked. The President consults with the U.S. weapons strategist, Dr. Strangelove, also played by Peter Sellers. Dr. Strangelove, a German nuclear scientist, explains that based on the findings of a study by the Bland Corporation, which he commissioned, the U.S. abandoned its own plans for a Doomsday mechanism: "My conclusion was that this idea was not a practical deterrent, for reasons which, at this moment, must be all too obvious." Binary thinking works well for machines, but we should expect more from human beings.

[1] David C. Cassidy, *Uncertainty, The Life and Science of Werner Heisenberg*, New York, 1992, pp. 228-229
[2] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations, Essays and Reflections*, New York, 1968, pp. 218
[3] ibid., p. 223
[4] This argument works most readily when applied to the indexical sign as opposed to the iconic or symbolic. I am using indexical in the sense that the signifier and its referent are physically connected, as a footprint is to a foot or photograph to the object(s) photographed. For a lucid explanation of the three see, "Semeiotics Structuralism and Television", Ellen Seiter in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, edited by Robert Allen.
[5] ibid., p. 223

KEVIN DANIEL

Brooklyn, NY

My work is about the abstraction that occurs as ideas pass through electronic media. It is about the systems of symbols, structures, and agreements that form language. It is about exploring the boundaries where those systems break down and become nothing.

Vessel is both the beginning of a new line of creative investigation for me and the continuance of my interest in manipulating the structures associated with language. It is new in that I have become interested in the idea of how to confine something that has no physicality, in this case information. The information I am containing in the vessel are the texts from over 500 documents I have written as part of my academic duties, converted to digital images and projected as video. The projector has been modified so that, as much as possible, the projection fills the entire cavity of the canoe mold and does not spill out into the surrounding environment.

Kevin Daniel

Kevin Daniel received his BS from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY in 1988, and his MFA in Art and Technology from the Chicago Art Institute in 1990. He was an Assistant Professor of Art at the University of Florida, Gainesville between 1994 and 1997. He presently lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

Vessel, 1996
fiberglass and video projector
22′ x 3′ x 3′

MARK DEPMAN

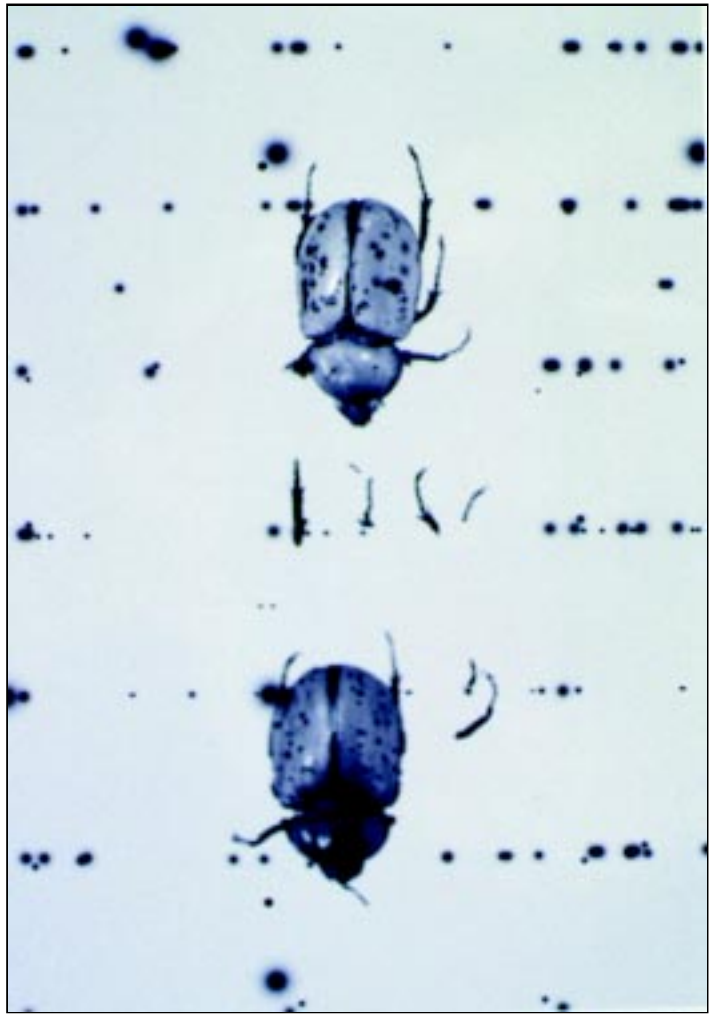
Guilford, Connecticut

The impulse to collect, arrange, and order objects has long been based in scientific curiosity, aesthetic nuance, and psychological obsession and compulsion. The insects, nuts, eggs, and body parts in this series of prints were collected in the course of the artist's everyday life (in nearby back-yards, woods, seashores, and parking lots.) The act of "capture", however, was completed with a video camera, like many things are "captured" today. The objects then leave the "real" world to enter a new domain. They are digitally extracted from the video frame and placed into a computer-generated background that the artist "sees" as the background of his visual consciousness. There they float in a not-quite black & white world.

Technically, these are direct digital prints from computer to Fujix Pictography printer to Fuji photographic paper.

Mark Depman

Mark Depman was educated at Harvard College and Cornell University Medical College and was a Knox Fellow at Balliol College and John Ruskin School of Drawing and Painting, Oxford, England. Works for this exhibition were loaned by Nancy Hoffman Gallery, NYC.



D Tityus 4.0, 1994
digital print
11 1/4" x 8 1/2"

ANDREW DEUTSCH

Alfred, N.Y.

My video work involves the use of technology in an intuitive and improvisational context. Working with a variety of digital and analog tools, I have generated a body of work which extends the practice of "real-time" video image processing. To work in "real-time" means to work live, processing the video image as it moves. Doing this I have developed a relationship with technology where thinking merges with interface. I consider the intelligence of machines to be an active and very real force in my work and believe that there are aspects of the world that can only be revealed through the apparatus of video.

Empty Words was produced utilizing naturally occurring phenomena (plants blowing in the wind) in combination with "automatic" camera systems such as auto gain control and auto focus. This natural footage was slowly hand wound through a Sony vtr and combined with raster manipulated footage of John Cage performing his piece *Empty Words*. In this tape, Cage's score is directly translated in visual form through the use of a self-constructed video processing tool called a wobbulator, a device that allows sound to directly influence the video signal (modeled after the same type developed by Nam June Paik). With its use, I follow up on Cage's desire to make an art which "mimics nature in her manner of operation". The tape, like nature, is not beautiful because it changes beautifully, but is beautiful simply because it changes.

Andrew Deutsch

Andrew Deutsch received has BFA in Printmaking and Video Art from NY State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in 1990, and his MFA in Electronic Art from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY in 1994. He is presently an Assistant Professor of Video Art, Electronic Music and Performance Art at the School of Art and Design, Alfred University, New York.

Video stills from:
Empty Words (1996, 30 mins.)
Sound composed and performed by John Cage
Yivar Mikhashof (piano)
Video realization: Andrew Deutsch.

FLASHLIGHT

New York, N.Y.

Unlike most video games which encourage killing and destruction, "Lumia Man," encourages performance art by associating visual scales with musical scales. Each musical note is represented as an image. Thus by playing a series of notes the player animates a series of images, causing for example, the Lumia Man to dance to the melody being played.

Flashlight

www.flash.net/~lightart

Flashlight received his BA in 1968 from Washington Square College, New York University, where he worked with Martin Scorsese. In 1970, he shared the Academy Award for Best Documentary as a cinematographer on "Woodstock". He has created works in a wide variety of media, including film, video, performance and electronic sculpture. He began working with digital computer art in 1984. Flashlight is a member of the board of directors of Art and Science Collaborations (ASCI).

Lumia Man, 1993
wood & metal sculpture with monitor & C-64 computer running "Photasm" software

CHUCK GENCO

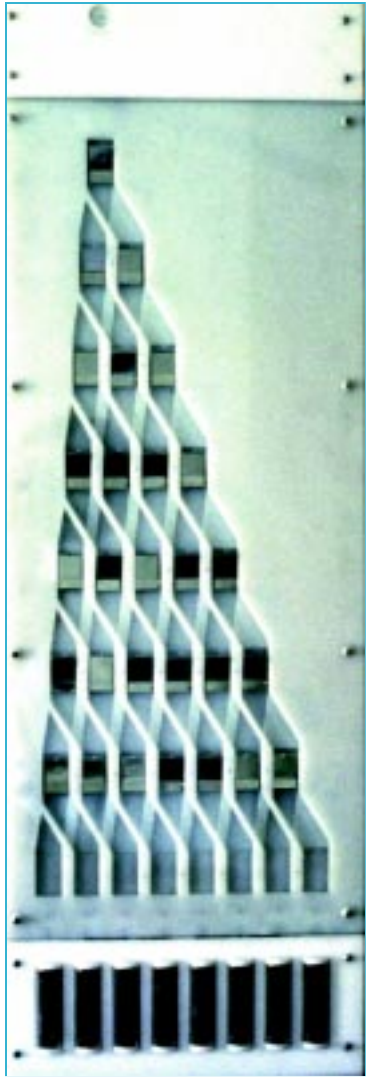
New York, N.Y.

In the early 1980's I purchased an Apple II+. Using both off the shelf software as well as my own software, I began to use this new tool to make things possible that might not be otherwise. For my *Pascal's Coin Box* (1983) I wrote several programs to aid in producing the piece. The piece relates to Blaise Pascal and his interest in probability theory and the way choices can be made. The viewer inserts a penny and it moves through a series of left/right decision points until they are collected at the bottom in a small distribution of coins. On the right side of the sculpture both the actual and recorded outcomes were recorded. To produce the expected outcomes I wrote a program to print out a six foot long template that indicated just what the predicted paths were. I then used this to produce a punched belt that would increment one position each time and output the predicted result to the side counters. The piece has since been updated to include two small computers controlling the counters, making it more reliable.

Chuck Genco

www.interport.net/~cgandmr/

Chuck Genco received his BA in Art History in 1978 and his BFA in Sculpture in 1979 from State University of New York at Buffalo, and his MFA in sculpture from the City University of New York at Hunter College in 1983. He is a member of the board of directors of Art and Science Collaborations (ASCI).



Pascal's Coin Box, 1983
plastic, glass, metal, electrical and mechanical parts, 38" x 12" x 2"

JENNIFER & KEVIN McCOY

Brooklyn, N.Y.

from: **Replay**, 1998, interactive digital media installation

Replay begins with the body in action — the performative body. It looks at the fact that much of today's media technology both envelops the body from outside and extends its reach from within. This is seen most clearly in the world of televised professional sports. On the one hand, the athlete submits to an endless amount of scans, photographs, statistics, measurements, psychological profiles and motivational speeches. These are all techniques that attempt to capture and transmit the athlete's performance; to visually depict and functionally predict the abilities and actions of the body. On the other hand, developments in sports equipment strive to free the athlete's body from all constraint. By blurring the line where equipment ends and appendage begins, the athlete is propelled into a state of disobedience towards the laws of gravity, energy and momentum. Here is the heart of the contradiction: the total quantification of the body through media, medicine, and statistics, and the ultimate liberation of the body-in-action through those same tools. In **Replay**, this impossible situation offers a compelling metaphor for the cultural values present in many areas of the contemporary world.

Jennifer and Kevin McCoy have been artistic collaborators since 1990. Together they have created a wide range of film, video, installation and performance works that have been exhibited nationally and in Europe. Both artists completed their MFA in Electronic Art in 1994 at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY.

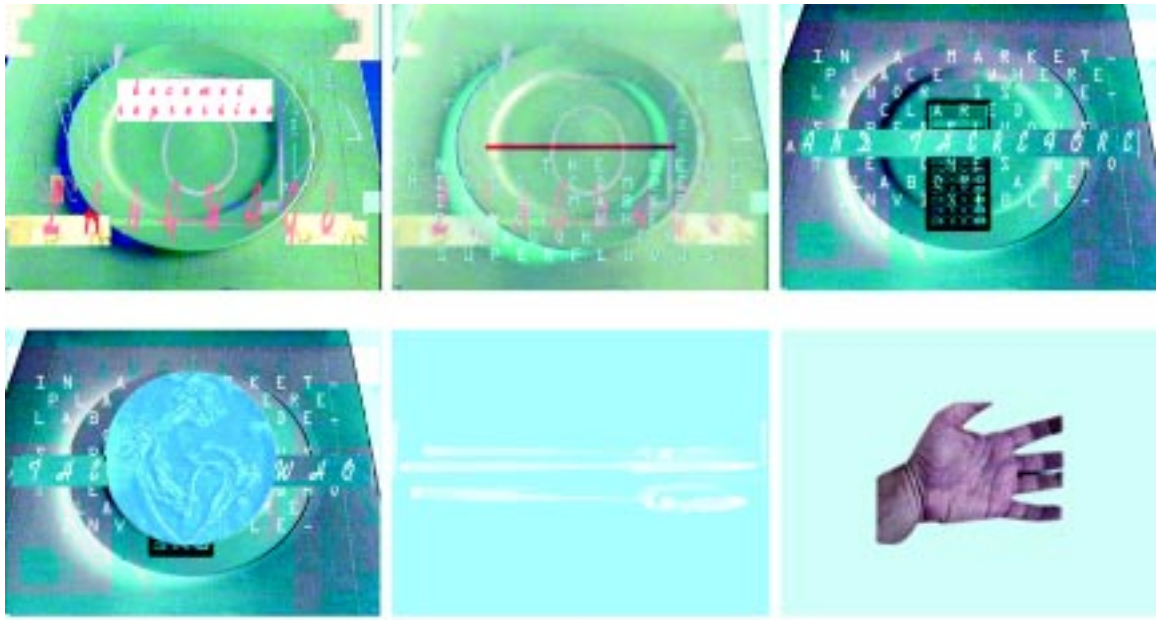
Jennifer & Kevin McCoy
www.earthlink.net/~mccoy

"Maintenance/**Web**"
(a narrative web project)
www.thing.net/~m/

SCOTT TOWNSEND

Raleigh, N.C.

Scott Townsend received his MFA in 1987 from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Since 1993 he has been on the faculty at N.C. State University School of Design where he teaches photography and digital media.



from: **Portrait,** 1997-98
digital interactive media

My recent work expands on the condition of the photograph as memory, or more specifically, the mass of photographic and video fragments that have begun to replace traditional physical monuments of events and history or other forms of representation that fall under the rubric of 'identity'. The pastiche of images embedded in our electronic environment replaces the book, the memorial, and the portrait. Yet, cultural identity still occurs through other means.

What was once the photographic portrait as a locus for fantasization by the viewer, (a missing family member, a portrait of a pop-culture star, a provocative image of sexual seduction in advertising or in pornography) is now multiplied in electronic and digital media, where we are 'social' through the depiction that we choose to display or portray in the web-page. Our projections onto others has even greater impact on what we call reality: on our sense of the world, our politics, and how we actively create our identity through what we intuitively understand is the new global economics of the image.

Scott Townsend