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1964 words

Claudia Hart, The Pelican, 2006, 3D model integrated into photograph

On the Geek as Humanist
By Claudia Hart

1.

A plump nude inspired by the countless *odalisques* rattling around in my head moves sensuously but also mechanically from pose to pose. Nine sequences cycle, made to evoke not just erotic sleeping but also clockwork. She is called *Machina* (2005) and is a 3d animation I made using *Maya* 3d animation software and the *Mental Ray* global illumination renderer.

In *The Swing* (2006), *Machina* becomes Rococo fleshy decadence. In this animation, she swings on a seat suspended from the sky, in super Mannerist slow time. Her wooded

surroundings ebb and flow at another rate, imitating stop-motion photography. Digital trees grow, die and sway in response to *Machina'*s swinging, but hyper-compressed and speeded-up, years passing in a matter of moments. For the trees, I used *xFrog*, special-effects software made to create realistic plant forms, using growth algorithms to simulate biology.

<div align="center">2.</div>

I use only 3d animation and digital effects software to produce these art works. My work expresses some of the same concerns found the type of work typically shown in the New-media art context: the morphing of the machine with the organic, the compression of linear time, the desire to produce an apparently living simulation in the form of an avatar. Yet, in the past 8 years, since I left a career in the Contemporary art world to study high-end digital animation, I have always felt ambivalent about New-media art, a separate sub-sector of Contemporary art with its own exhibition circuit, one that has dramatically burgeoned in the past five years. While Contemporary art has its own gallery system and museum circuit, New-media found a niche within a largely European festival circuit and American academia.

My sense of disengagement from New-media art extends to my experiences teaching 3d animation and character design at the Pratt Department of Digital Art, a production oriented school. What I find there is that my art orientation, learned from showing for years in the Contemporary context, and my training in art and architectural history at New York University and the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture gave me a different point of view.

<div align="center">3.</div>

Marcia Tanner is a curator who emerged from the Contemporary context. She recently organized *Brides of Frankenstein*, an exhibition at the San Jose Museum of Art (July-Oct 2005) in which she grappled with issues of technology and feminism. For the New Media Caucus open call, which solicited panel ideas for the College Art Association Conference in 2007, she proposed, "Can Geeks be Humanists?" Her proposal apparently elicited "heated bicoastal discussion" and was selected. I am one of the artists she invited to answer the question. The others are Andrea Ackerman, Erwin Redl, – who replaced Jim Campbell - Sabrina Raaf, and Gail Wight. I was only familiar with the work of Erwin Redl and Jim Cambell, two artists who already crossed over from the New-media context into the Contemporary context. I knew that this question would give me an opportunity to clarify for myself my ambivalence, and indirectly had something to do with a difference in values held by two distinct art worlds.

<div align="center">4.</div>

What I believe is implied by Tanner's question and its positioning of the *geek* and the *Humanistic* as opposite is the following:

1. A *Geek* is one who values technology above all. The obsessional embrace of technology by *geeks* is a technocratic embrace, derived from an adulation of the power of technology for its own sake. By positing it as something against the human, Tanner reminds us that today, technology emerges radically from the contemporary bureaucratic military-industrial state and corporatized consumerism. These *geeks* must therefore be against the human, perhaps therefore "post-human", and by implication, *Post Modern* in the theoretical sense.
2. *Humanism,* as posited by Tanner, is geekdom's inverse. It must therefore be outside of and in contradiction to the recent technology boom and therefore somewhat old fashioned, outmoded and perhaps even *Romantic* - the ideal of culture adopted in the 19th and first part of the 20th century. *Humanism* in this context would fall on the side of (traditional) artistic practice and implies placing the individual artistic voice at the center of its value system.

After considering this, I came to the understanding that I reject both terms and would therefore like to propose a different dialectic, one implementing two other terms BOTH of which are associated with theoretical discussions: the one social and the other ontological. I think of this social discourse as emerging from the Marxist and politically motivated sociological theory of the Frankfurt School, and connected to design theory and the discussion of everyday objects. I believe this socially oriented discourse is related to New-media art. On the other hand I associate the ontological approach of the French school of Deconstruction, influenced by Freud and Derrida, with Contemporary art. These philosophies are two different offshoots of secular humanism, BOTH "post human" and *Post Modern* but in different ways, different enough to indicate the diverging approaches of two distinct communities.

5.

I am a lurker on the *iDC* list. Every day I receive several e-mails; it is very active. Its contributors include many well-known New-media theorists, curators and artists including Jon Ippolito, Brian Homes, Amanda McDonald Crowley and Lev Manovich, all respected practitioners in the New-media community. *iDC* is "the Institute for Distributed Creativity," and focuses on collaboration in media art, technology, and theory. Its prime mover is Trebor Scholz, a media artist and professor at SUNY Buffalo, and the *iDC* is obviously a significant part of his practice. Last month, Scholz posted a position paper, *The Participatory Challenge* (http://mailman.thing.net/pipermail/idc/2006-July/000495.html) that elicited active response.

6.

"Today, people do not merely browse the web. Instead they give away information, expertise, and advice without monetary compensation…Thousands voluntarily participate in open encyclopedias, social bookmarking sites, friend-of-a-friend networks, media art projects and blogs or wikis…(which) exemplifies the growing interest in technologies of cooperation...(This) is the precondition for the emerging paradigm of the artist as cultural

context provider, who is not chiefly concerned with contributing content to her own projects. Instead, she establishes configurations into which she invites others. She blurs the lines between the artist, theorist, and curator…(and can) create visibility for discourses and artworks that would otherwise be overlooked…(such) gift communities, or extreme sharing networks, have the potential to inscribe discourses in collective memory, inspire and to some degree shape people lives."

<div align="right">Trebor Scholz, The Participatory Challenge</div>

<div align="center">7.</div>

Scholz's pragmatic approach, his view of theorizing as a form of political activism and his belief that a new technology can provide a better, more democratic life evokes Lewis Mumford and his writings on technology, architecture and urban design.

In his 1934 *Technics and Civilization* (NY: Harcourt) Mumford describes *technics* as dialectic between social and technological innovation. He criticized American techno-culture as being *Monotechnic* - an embrace of technology for its own sake - and makes a plea for the *Polytechnic*, in which an adaptive multi-platform technology and design culture is capable of solving urban and social problems, improving life and enhancing democracy. Later Mumford was less utopian. In the *The Myth of the Machine: technics and human development* (NY: Harcourt, 1967), he criticized a post-War technological development based on unrestricted growth and built-in obsolescence, necessarily precluding good, adaptive design. Mumford called this development *megatechnics*, in opposition to his ideal, an organic model of technology that he calls *biotechnics*.

Biotechnics lead me to Victor Margolin, product-design historian and heir to Mumford. In collected essays, he identifies design broadly as the conception and planning of the artificial (*The Politics of the Artificial*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Margolin sites the American Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey as a conceptual resource and draws on the language of eco-activism, calling for a design of *sustainability* that he posits in opposition to present-day *expansion*, meaning untrammeled consumer hyper-development. He views *sustainable* design as more than the mere semantic shaping of seductive commodities but rather as instrumentation: a vehicle for planning and ordering the world. Like Scholz, Margolin refers to the engineer R. Buckminster Fuller as a paradigmatic practitioner of sustainability.

All of these humanistic design writers are theoretically grounded by Jurgen Habermas, the sociologist and philosopher who dominated the later Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. Habermas found a way of making technocratic "reason," acceptable. With *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Trans. McCarthy, Thomas, Heinemann, London, 1981) he proposed a pragmatic philosophical model, what he called *communicative action*, in which "reason" is directed not merely towards success or failure but towards cultivating understanding between people. Habermas explained technocratic modernity in terms of the invasion of instrumental rationality into the social realm and responded by banishing technical reasoning from human exchange, though still identifying technology and

science as the only way to deal with nature. His ethical and evaluative system paves the way for the approach of Scholz and his colleagues, who view technology art as a tool to be purposefully instrumentalized. By synthesizing these positions, I was able to clarify my own, particularly after reading a new history of digital art.

8.

As I said, I am a lurker on the iDC site and I must admit I'm sometimes tempted to contribute but something holds me back. Recently I read a posting by Charlie Gere that resonated, so I read his book. *Art, Time and Technology* (Oxford: Berg, 2006) which claims to be the first to contextualize art using real-time computing technologies within the broader history of the visual arts. It is organized around the idea that modern art can be read as a response to the increasing speed and accelerating evolution of technology. To Gere, "if art is to have a role or meaning at all in the age of real-time technologies, it is to keep our human relation with time open in light of its potential foreclosure by (them)."(*Op. Cit.*, 13) Gere grounds his history in Jacques Derrida and many philosophers associated with French Deconstructivism.

I identify Gere's idea with my own clockwork animations in which the organic and the human collapse into mechanistic temporal rotations paradoxical to their being. They exist in an environment where time is fluid. They are a representation of this, they are not *literally* it, as they are not pieces of software set to mutate over time, but pre-rendered and looped. I might also add here that I believe in the power of "the signifier," as French Post- structuralist philosophers liked to call representations. I think of art works as metaphors. I would like my animations to invoke "the immense questions of artificial memory and of modern modalities of archivation…this prodigious mutation not only heightens the stature, the quantitative economy of so-called artificial memory, but also its qualitative structure – and in doing so it obliges us to rethink what relates this artificial memory to man's so-called physical and interior memory, to truth, to the simulacrum and simulation of truth, etc" (Derrida quoted by Gere: Jacques Derrida, *Memories: For Paul de Man*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989)

If Deconstruction is an attempt to open a text to several meanings and interpretations to show the relativity of meaning, then the only constant within such fluidity would be the contemplative process of deconstruction itself. The function of a work of art then, including my own, is one of contemplation. This approach is different from the pragmatic orientation shared by much New-media art and by other forms of activist art and also by the design community. Contemplative art is not a thing meant to be instrumentalized but a thing to be interpreted. It is not a gift of service but rather one that, the more it resonates, the more it offers itself for a moment of interiorized reflection, which on a personal and therefore humanist level, works as a radical resistance to and antidote for the violent speed of untrammeled commercial *megatechnic* expansion.