Kurt Hentschlaeger: KARMA / cell

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Karma / cell is a powerful representation of what appears to be the erotic, convulsive agonies of dying. It is both Baroque and Wagnerian. A herd of humanoid clones are engulfed in a sublime flickering light and a murky Turner-esque fog, bound together, twitching and convulsing, in what appears to be an infinite free fall.

The installation comes alive using procedural techniques, in particular real time synthesis of sound and 3D animation.

To create Karma / cell, Kurt Hentschlager customized the game engine from Unreal Tournament, a multi-player on-line game in which players take on 3-d avatars vaguely reminiscent of Roman gladiators, here articulated as a variety of futuristic but dystopian robots, to battle each other to inevitable death. Hentschlager uses the software only, otherwise creating his very own aesthetic. At this point, in order to portray Karma / cell, it is useful to take a brief excursion into the history of the shooter computer game.

Unreal Tournament employs the kind of real-time 3D graphics and virtual reality technology first developed thirty years ago by the U.S. military for flight simulators to use for strategic, and more significantly, psychologically engaging enactments for military training. In fact, early commercial game developers often received their first training in the military to later become entrepreneurs of the businesses that both sell and develop these new technologies. From the late nineties, following the end of the Cold War, US government policy shifted to reorient research spending to serve not only national defense but also to cull from and therefore stimulate the development occurring in the commercial sector. At this time, the video-game industry exploded, and the military lost some of its domination. Commercial games became pioneers of a style of action called "first-person or ego shooter" because players viewed the action from an individual combatant's perspective, necessarily enforcing a subjective, and therefore emotional narrative easily accessible to a wide audience. As a result of this historical trajectory, a contemporary "military-entertainment complex" has evolved, producing games like Unreal Tournament

Unreal Tournament is a byproduct of the symbiotic relationship that cultivates not just technology but also the social ideology underlying game culture and its function as a less overt but equally influential form of political propaganda.

In Karma / cell, Kurt Hentschlager harnesses this technology to create a work

that is both elegiac and somewhat horrifying. However, in so doing, he does not allow his audience to deny the culture of the technology used to create it.

Karma / cell features representations of primitive undifferentiated figures, both emaciated and faceless, projected on a large screen at cinematic scale. These are animated in the Karma physics engine, the procedural part of the software, producing animations that are not key-framed but rather unfold in "real" time. The engine dynamically simulates gravity, giving weight and density to those faceless, drone-like characters that float in midair, drop, bounce, and multiply. They seem to twitch in either agony or ecstasy to evoke "la petite mort," the little death - the literal translation of orgasm from the French.

Hentschlager uses this physics simulation as a "death" engine to produce emotionally charged imagery, so that ethical judgment cannot be exorcised from it. He has seized upon Karma as a metaphor and a commentary, becoming one of the few artists to produce Machinima – the term used for animations made by adapting commercial game engines – who have not divorced technological form from its political and social content.

Further elaborating on the expressive possibilities of real-time animation, Hentschlager has also turned it into the driver of a custom musical instrument made to his own design. In Karma / cell, the virtual bodies are tracked within the 3D space they inhabit and feed their motions into external software synthesizers, producing musical tones and drones evoking the clang of funereal bells. The moving limbs of his spasming characters thus compose the sound of the piece. The infinite combinations of motions result in an infinitely complex soundscape. The imagery feels religious evoking not just Baroque paintings of the Assumption but also the entry portal of a Gothic cathedral carved in high relief: identically a descent into hell and an ascent to a cloudy ambivalent heaven. The resulting impression is synesthetic, with sound and visuals apparently creating one another.

Karma/cell manages to be both a moral allegory, and at the same time, a supremely esthetic experience.