

HDID and Aesthetic Practice

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Until the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, a primary source of national identity was provided by the collision of West and East. This key lighting overwhelmed fill generated by local cultural sources, so that in the rendering of international perspective, cultures were either lit or in shadow; east or west; friend or foe.

The world is now expressing an explosive and often terrifying retribalization; with people reflexively attacking people in actions which assume tribal distinctions of self, friend and other. These are not wars of philosophy, but of something much more potent: wars of cultural definition. Many of these peoples have been unable to gradually adapt their own cultures to the technological stimuli of the 20th century due to their forced and extended political submission. When, with the withdrawal of domination, they reach into their pockets for what is left of their cultural identities, they are left with dusty social institutions innocent of most of this century, except for a history of oppression and sudden access to modern technologies.

What is the identity of a person who has been jailed since birth? And what shape is it in?

It's a hard question for those of us in the West to answer. Our histories, and those of our parents, have been shaped by an ever widening scope of travel and information dissemination. We have moved from radio and ground transportation to telecommuting and daily air shuttles. With the blanketing of the earth with the myriad forms of communications technologies, we have seen our own and others' images reflected and refracted through the windows, mirrors, and fists of innumerable media. The history of the second half of our century has been filled with the often desperate adaptation of our weathered selves to their increasing bombardment with media-correct identity fixes. As difficult as it is for us, it is all the more numbing for societies suddenly subjected to such a media immolation. The result of this acceleration of media proliferation I call HDID, or High-Definition Identity. It should not be confused with a philosophical perspective; I think of it more like an overactive thyroid condition than a conscious behavioral choice. Neither would I like it confused with Christopher Lasch's Culture of Narcissism, as Lasch viewed a predilection to focus on one's identity as a kind of moral sin, while I see it as what it has always been for the artist: a desperate attempt to make sense of what the media make clear.

When it comes to media, computers are a new bird. A computer is not a medium, it is an open-ended set of technologies, any of which can be extended, transformed, substituted, and programmed into entirely new media. With the wide

distribution of a technology that is so easily and quickly transformed, the number of electronic media now in the environment have multiplied astronomically. The mythical, media-generated self images have multiplied in turn astrologically. The media exist as if in a solution, with each separate medium giving form to some aspect of a person's identity, each floating in unspecified relation to the others. I am suggesting here that the artist's role with any new medium is to twist it until it breaks; to force out of it whatever essential syntax it brings to the party, in order to discover how it has redefined the artist's self. Now, this isn't always a pretty sight. But the artist advances on exactly those aspects of a medium that are the most fascinating, the most beautiful, the most striking, and then plays with them to see how they work.

Let's differentiate a bit here; this is not always the strategy of the illustrator, or the animator, or the videographer, or the composer, or the woodworker. It is not always the strategy of the craftsman. But it is the strategy of the artist in this century, as we drop into the next.

Every new medium exudes new metaphors, which can be liked or disliked, depending on one's predilection. These metaphors may be in direct conflict with one's sense of self. When a society is infected with a new source of metaphors, it reacts. Today's media artists cluster around new media like maddened white blood cells. This act is an important detoxifying agent in our culture. Its existence does a great deal to protect the world from blind American aggression, in that it has lead America to a polytheistic tolerance. The generation and quick unpacking of new media forces Americans through so many identity changes in such short periods of time that generational distinctions are far less relevant to personal identities than are a person's media trails. In addition, all who have explored more than one medium in depth come to see the stages of media toxification on their own emotional apparatus, and become all the more aware of how deeply rooted convictions and emotions may be the result of local conditions and aesthetic immaturity.

Again: HDID is not a philosophy. Artists may not be aware of the role that they play in detoxifying the media. And many may not be themselves aware that what they are doing is art.

Today's computer artists are at once caught in the net like a butterfly, and walking the web like a spider. Like any net traveler, each is overwhelmed by the number of individuals contributing to the cacophony which is served up daily; as well as charmed by their immediate projection into that community.

Local bulletin boards form their own cadre of participants, who use the boards to share work, tools, data and discussions. I don't know anyone who frequents just one board; everyone bounces around among them: local and distant; single system and network gateways; narrowly focused and general in nature; personal and commercial.

Unlike most mass media; the nets don't just offer the output of professional writing and editing staffs. This is person to person, so you often don't know the status of the person whose text you are reading; you are forced to judge most texts on the basis of the argument you perceive at that moment. As you revisit a board over time, you develop a sense for the people, and reevaluate your previous judgments.

You don't always know the sex of the people with whom you're communicating, nor their age, their income, nor even what country they are from or in. In its current state the net, more than the gun, is the great equalizer.

The flip side of equalization is homogenization. If I do not think to question someone's nationality, they are probably writing in English. In the short term, cultural nationalism will enforce itself implicitly and explicitly through this language domain, with boards and networks dedicated to local languages. In the long term, software guides will help through realtime translation of texts. This will give students of literature recurrent ulcers, but will also act to internationalize these media--even as it domesticates them!

The net is also a perfect example of the computer as a collection of technologies, rather than a fixed medium. To change the nature of the net, just up the bandwidth, or settle on a standard protocol, or establish a single multimedia platform for all nodes. As each of these evolve, it changes the medium, and the artist's work is recast.

This net, that has no center, that changes its nature continually, that overwhelms and is often itself overwhelmed; that is in its infancy; that adapts to its environment; that is more an architecture than a philosophy; that is a shifting, plastic metaphor; that offers its essence to our selves.