UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

# Populist Expression in Web Based Art

by

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A PAPER

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ART

CALGARY, ALBERTA

AUGUST, 2003

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have viewed and read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, respectively, a Thesis Exhibition and a supporting paper entitled "Populist Expression in Web Based Art": an accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition, submitted by Jason William Hunter in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Sept 12, 2003

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**Abstract**

Fine art is only interesting as a point of departure from which to engage in a discussion of theory. The art objects and personal/ethereal themes of fine artists are based on phantasmal justifications, fabricated to perpetuate the profession. Traditional fine art no longer creates visual meaning in our culture. Mass imagery, the information revolution, and widespread advances in telecommunications have usurped this role. Communication and distraction have replaced contemplation and genius. This work pays homage to the popular, digital art that is consumed and produced by a mass public, rather than fine art, which is alienated within a rather narrow cultural niche. Nevertheless, there is in this work a humorous quality of collusion with fine art since fine artists, by definition, must create fine art. The tension between a body of work that is based on popularized themes/media and this artistic/theoretical defense is the chief aesthetic of this project.

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## INTRODUCTION

Baseball legend Yogi Berra is credited as having said, "In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is." (cited in Rosenberg & Saraf, 2003). This cliché is actually a profound observation that I invoke as a stark declaration of the relationship between postmodern theory and practice in my work. Postmodern theory is groundbreaking and exciting, but postmodern practice is either convoluted and unintelligible or else it is commonplace and banal. Postmodern practice in art usually takes the convoluted and unintelligible route. However, art is not alone in this transgression; people working in all human endeavors have a tendency to take simple, commonly understood concepts and try to make them complicated—in their grasp for the elusive quality of genius. But much of the world seems content to live without such scholarly pretensions. These are the people who are, ironically, living out postmodernism; they can attest to the fact that postmodern life is actually rather mundane.

I leave the convoluted artistic statements and sublime pretensions for someone else; instead, I elect to take the low road in my artistic journey. In other words, my art will remain bland and commonplace. This is not a critique of postmodern life but rather a glorification of it. When one is confronted with my work, there will be very little to say, but plenty to do. It is about communication and distraction, not contemplation and genius. Discussion of its hidden meanings is fruitless. There are no hidden meanings in my work. There is no profound secret to be unlocked by he or she who possesses the right blend of cunning and persistence. In the spirit of my chosen media, the Internet, my work reads like an open book—or rather a hypertext. It is no better nor worse than the host of other web sites that provide their authors with the means to be producers of meaning, in cyberspace.

In stark contrast to my playful and entertaining work is this document, which is the theoretical justification of its existence. This written document is an intricable part of the meaning (and the art) of my work. It is with excited anticipation that now I embark on this textual journey to provide the intense theoretical grounding which is required in order to underscore the relevance of the commonplace. Indeed, what could be more

commonplace and more postmodern than the World Wide Web? There is an old adage that says, "The devil is in the details"; and in this case, that is certainly true. In order to make a case for my work as a simple, playful, and humorous tribute to the commonplace *home page,* I will need to draw on a variety of disparate scholarly materials.

I begin by setting the historical precedents for my work. This includes a survey of the use of humor in art history. Following that, I set the precedents for digital art and Net Art. These sections establish the needed foundation for an understanding of my major theme (humor) as well as my choice of media and the effects this has had on my art and theory. The next sections detail how my art uses technology to handle postmodern conceptions of identity and culture. I discuss the nature of digital media itself in order to show the ways in which my art uses and is used by the media. I also discuss issues pertaining to the creation of art in an image-laden culture and to the role of consumerism in cultural production. Then I embellish upon the way my art functions as part of a massive apparatus of distraction. Subsequently, I tackle the need to create populist art. Play has been a subject of my work for a long time, and it continues to be an important facet for understanding what I do. I also discuss the ways in which computer interfaces affect my production—allowing me to use opacity to function as a digital trickster. This has a lot to do with conceptions of artificial intelligence and the post-human, concepts that have helped people come to terms with technology in new ways and thus opened up additional possibilities for digital production. Of course, no justification of Web Art would be complete without some understanding of how space, time, and distance function within the medium of cyberspace. Finally, I conclude by illustrating how the nature of simulations functions to provide a complex, forked interpretation of my work within the context of a traditional institution of art.

This theoretical document erects a complex tapestry around my art practice. In a certain sense, the theory is an integral part of the art itself. My art speaks through my theory. The art is able to be broadly entertaining partially because (on its own) it is devoid of intense, convoluted, intellectual meanings. On the other hand, my theory has a relatively low entertainment value for most people, although it contains exciting content relating to my work. Thus, in theory there is no difference between my theory and my

practice. However, since most viewers of my work will not read this theory, in practice there is a difference between the two.

## HUMOROUS ART

Much of my work is clearly intended to be amusing. Pointing out the instances and circumstances under which one should get a laugh out of my art would defeat the purpose. After all, a joke is not very funny if one needs to explain it. The purpose behind the creation of humor in my art is to make it more accessible to people who may not be fully immersed in the culture of fine art. A major theme of my work is a repudiation of fine art elitism, embodied in the overly exaggerated convolution found in much contemporary art. Digital media is the perfect venue for such a statement since the web, in particular, has become a powerful tool for sharing ideas and molding our culture. As we shall see, web artists often rebel against the conventions of fine art, believing their mandate is to bring art to the average person. However, web artists are not the first group of people to create art intended to poke fun at art institutions, nor are they the first to use humor as a tool for artistic expression. According to Johan Huizinga (1962), comedy is closely related to play. They both resist being subjected to practical ends. Play, in the form of humor, is a phenomenon that we find across cultures and historical contexts. It has an ontological function. Humor helps to mediate communications, and play is the method by which we learn. This aspect of play and humor also relates to my work, which is often satirically educational in nature. Before going any further, I will establish a rich precedent in art history for this major theme of my own work: humor and play.

Play, in the form of wit, satire, parody, and caricature, has been prevalent throughout the history of art. This is certainly not an attempt to claim that all art is humorous. However, it is a mistake to ignore, as trivial, the humorous trends in art. The humor of art can be seen across time as well as cultures (see appendix A). In some cases, artists have had overtly comedic intentions for their work. In other cases, the wit was cleverly disguised within a seemingly serious image. Furthermore, some artists made images that are funny and amusing despite their intentions. It is an accident of our history and culture that we have a hard time looking at art history with an eye towards being amused. Strangely enough, while the art of the twentieth century is clearly, in some cases, meant to be funny, we still look at the art of the past in much the same way that we read classical drama and history.

Sir Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001), a respected art historian and author of several influential books, notes that art history, as a discipline, has tried to build prestige by postulating profound meanings and motives for the art of the past. "Fun" is not a popular notion for historians because it is often equated with the things in life that we consider frivolous rather than crucial. Fortunately for proponents of humorous art, humor and playfulness have come into their own in twentieth century art. Twentieth century humorous art includes the satire of George Grosz, the irreverence and peculiarity of Magritte, the ludicrous foolishness of Dada, the humor of the Fluxists, and the work of many other humorous artists (Gombrich, 1979). Of course, from our historical perspective, it is easier for us to understand the comedy involved in this work. However, we must consider that in centuries past, much of the art may have been equally funny to those who lived the experiences being depicted in their images and sculptures.

## THE FORGOTTEN HUMOR OF RENAISSANCE ART

Renaissance art is often analyzed in terms of its relation to Renaissance literature, which was Neoplatonic and/or theological in nature. However, there was also a comedic tradition in the literature of the Renaissance, which may provide some insight as to what was meant to be funny in Renaissance art. It is important to note that the further removed we are from a culture in terms of time and place, the harder it may be for us to understand what it was that they found funny. Paul Barolsky (1978) finds examples of humor, wit, satire, and caricature in Renaissance art. Topics of humor in the Renaissance included gods and goddesses, love and sex (particularly voyeurism, frustration, cuckolds, and spurned individuals), fools and buffoons, clergy, and dirty old men. We can even find some instances of comic mockery of courtly devices such as the concept of color symbolism in garments. However, some Renaissance humor may be considered to be in very bad taste today, such as the depiction of deformities, physical handicaps, and cruelty. Whereas we find a practical joke funny if it leads to frustration, confusion, and possibly embarrassment, a Renaissance practical joke was funny if it led to an undeserved flogging! We might snicker at Mr. Magoo, but in the Renaissance tormenting and even physically abusing blind people was funny, so long as it was done in a clever way. While we would abhor such humor now, it is important to remember that these are different times. Only by accepting this difference in sense of humor (in a time when hardship, injury, and cruelty were much more commonplace) can we hope to fully decipher the humor in Renaissance art.

Acceptance of the Renaissance sense of humor allows us to recognize that some well-known Renaissance art, such as Giotto's sculpture of *Folly* (c. 1305) in the Scrovengi Chapel, may have been meant to be comical (the ugly, oafish figures). On the other hand, Giuseppe Arcimboldo's *Water* (1566), which is a caricature of a man composed entirely out of fish, is still somewhat funny today. One can imagine how funny this would have been to contemporaries who would have recognized the man being caricaturized. Similarly, we can still appreciate the humor of an optical illusion such as Carlo Crivelli's *Madonna and Child* (c. 1480), which includes an illusion of a fly perched on the canvas. Such trickery would have been funnier back then when it had not already

been seen in hundreds of other paintings. However, some humor seems almost timeless, such as sculpted fountains that urinate water on unsuspecting passers-by (Barolsky, 1978).

In the fifteenth century, ambiguity, gesture, facial expression, and figural juxtaposition all played a role in humorous art. This can be easily seen in Andrea Mantegna's *Triumph of Silenus* (c.1460), which is meant to poke fun at the obese. An even more humorous image can be seen in his *Battle of the Sea Gods* (c.1460) in which the combative deities beat one another with handfuls of fish (Barolsky, 1978). It is noteworthy that the court painter held a position not dissimilar to the dwarf or jester. Mantegna himself was often called upon to amuse his patron. Considering this function of artists at the time, it should not be surprising to find that their work contains further evidence of their sense of humor (Welsford, 1961).

Sandro Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* (c. 1483) is an example of an artwork that eluded its humorous interpretation for a long time. It has long been described as depicting Venus's lordship over Mars, or her having vanquished him with her beauty. However, contemporaneous poetic interpretations of this scene clearly suggest that Mars and Venus engage in physical acts that go well beyond merely "vanquishing with beauty" (Barolsky, 1978). Thus, it is clear that this image is not about divine magic but rather a far more commonplace, mortal activity and the humor of the male response to such. This is not an isolated example—scenes of mythological revelry often had a distinct playfulness to them. The monstrosities, ludicrous characters, and sexual innuendo were all meant to amuse.

Even the somber Michelangelo was known to use wit. His *Bacchus* (1496–97) reminds us that drunkenness has often been a humorous motif in art (for example, Rabelais's giants and Bruegel's peasants), and it continues to be used for similar purposes in today's movies and television. Some humorous incidents can be discovered in Michelangelo's *Bacchanal of Children*; for example, a little putto is secretly urinating into a cup that is simultaneously being filled with wine for someone to drink. In general, Michelangelo mixed seriousness, play, and self-parody in his art. In his poetry, Michelangelo often joked about pain. This sheds new light on his *Last Judgment* (1534–

41) which mixes a very serious topic with his own unique sense of humor as it depicts the damnation of his critics as well as his own suffering. Perhaps this is why Raphael's double reference to Michelangelo as Heraclitus in *The School of Athens* (1510–11) would have also provoked some smiles (Barolsky, 1978).

Agnolo Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* (1540–1545) has been rationalized as a moralizing tale. A gesture in the image that is, on occasion, overlooked is the fact that Venus is stealing one of cupid's arrows while he simultaneously tries to steal her crown. The image may really be about devilish trickery, human gullibility, and duplicity rather than incest and sin. It is similar to Quentin Metsys' *The Ill-Matched Lovers* (1520–25) which depicts a lecherous old man fondling a woman. He appears to be the aggressor with all of the power; but on closer examination, she is actually robbing him. In *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time,* both of the characters are lecherous and both are robbing one another. The assertion that Renaissance culture found this sort of imagery funny is supported by the figure above the couple that is understood to be an allegory of play (Barolsky, 1978).

There are many more examples. Giulio Romano's frescos showed the subtlety of artistic humor in a playful, illusionistic, *trompe loeil.* His gigantic oafs mock Michelangelo's nudes. Jacapo Carucci da Pontormo illustrated soccer players who may make us laugh if we notice the tantrum of the player who has just missed his shot. In another of Pontormo's images, *The Three Graces* (1535), we can smile at the awkwardness of the dancers who appear to just be learning their craft. Francesco Parmigianino depicted a practical joke of the gods who tricked the virgin Diana into witnessing the copulation of Mars and Venus. In a similar vein, he depicts an old lady shocked as she intrudes upon two lovers. Giovanni da Bologna created a similar scene in which lecherous, voyeuristic satyrs are ogling Venus. Perhaps one of the funniest sculptures from the Renaissance is Vincenzo de' Rossi's *Hercules and Diomedes* (c.1535). Hercules is about to throw Diomedes who, at the last minute, has grabbed the mighty god by his phallus. Aside from the humor of the sculpture itself, there is a satirical element as well. A duke who was an enemy of Florence, where Hercules was the patron, commissioned the sculpture; thus, the grouping depicts the castration of a political rival.

On a similar theme, Valerio Cioli sculpted an obese naked dwarf whose phallus is juxtaposed precariously with the mouth of the turtle upon which he is riding (Barolsky, 1978).

The literature of the Venetians suggests that neoplatonism was often applied satirically, or tongue in cheek. Tintoretto's images often depicted old lechers absurdly ogling younger women. An example is his *Venus and Vulcan* (c.1550) in which the elderly buffoon-like god Vulcan can be seen removing the blankets from his promiscuous wife Venus so as to look at her; meanwhile, her lover Mars hides ridiculously under the bed. This sort of scene is still used to provoke laughter on television. Titian's parody of the *Laocoön* is a direct mocking of the famous artifact. It substituted monkeys for the original figures. It was so humorous that woodcut prints after his original circulated widely. Not only was Titian parodying the statue, but also his peers who constantly "aped" its style. In Veronese's *Mars and Venus* (c.1570), the gods are interrupted by Cupid, who is bringing a ridiculously feminine horse down an awkward set of stairs to peer into the bedroom. The resulting scene is laughable. Another hilarious animal scene by Veronese is his *Rape of Europa* (c. 1580). In this image all of the action is concentrated on the dressing of Europa. Meanwhile, the Olympian god, in the guise of a bull, plants a ludicrous bovine kiss on her foot (Barolsky, 1978).

In Northern Italy, Dosso Dossi, Pellegrino Tibaldi, Annibale Carracci, and Caravaggio delighted in mock heroic images. Dossi's *Bambocciata* (1535) depicts Hercules at a gathering wearing a dress and being mocked. The concept of men dressing up as women is still considered funny by many elements of modern society. Tibaldi's exaggerated figure groupings, which twist in unimaginable ways, can be interpreted as parodies of Michelangelo's overly serious, overly heroic figures. Tibaldi exaggerated so much that his figures make their mythological themes seem farcical. Carracci also transformed the heroic figures of Michelangelo's *Sacrifice of Noah* (1506–12). In Carracci's version, the figures are lowered to the status of a bunch of ugly guys working in a butcher's shop. Caravaggio also parodied the art of the high Renaissance. His figures are so over exaggerated in their postures that they can be considered parodies of the idealized classical pose (Barolsky, 1978).

The laughter and play in Renaissance work was meant to uplift viewers, make them feel good, and, in general, contribute to recreation, enjoyment, and fun (Barolsky, 1978). Over time, we have given these works an overall significance and seriousness that makes it difficult for us to appreciate their humorous possibilities. This is an accident of history brought on by our tendency to idealize images in our search for meaning.

## PLAYFUL SECULAR ART IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

During this turbulent century of religious reformation, art took on a Calvinist moralizing quality (or, alternatively, counter-reformation morality, depending on time and place). Much of the scholarly work on Dutch art has been done in this spirit—using iconography to read the art as a pictorial sermon. This is not surprising since at the time art was, on occasion, used to censor entertainment and to moralize. Certainly, this is not an era in which one would expect to find a great deal of humorous art. Nevertheless, many of the images convey the artist's delight in the gaiety of the subject without being overly preachy (Sutton, 1999).

Calvin, an iconoclast of sorts, believed art must be kept out of the church. As a result, art in the Netherlands was secular in nature and used for the purpose of decoration, commemoration, and teaching. However, this genre art was not meant to be seen as merely straightforward depictions of social interactions. The humorous qualities of this art can be seen in Jacob Duck's *Musical Ensemble with Cockatoo* (c. 1660). This picture was not created to teach its buyer a lesson; art connoisseurs of the seventeenth century were well aware of the social norms and values of their society. Rather, images in this genre merely confirmed in a decorative and playful manner what patrons already knew. This purpose is proven by the presence of two silly little dogs that mimic the ludicrous behavior of the humans as they playfully tease one another (Westermann, 1999).

Another example of humor can be found in Nicholas Maes' *The Account Keeper* (1656). This picture depicts a woman at work with ledgers who has dozed off from the sheer boredom of her task. While one can read this as an admonishment to those who do not work hard, there is also clearly something funny about the picture. After all, most people can sympathize with the sheer boredom of this kind of job. The stories that people commonly tell about falling asleep at work (or in class) are often meant to be funny. To make this reading of the painting more plausible, a humorous detail has been added in the bust of Juno, the ancient goddess of commerce, who looks down on the sleeping accountant with a disapproving gaze (Westermann, 1999).

## ECCENTRICITY AND SATIRE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Perhaps one of the funniest centuries in recent history was the eighteenth century, prolific as it was with intrigues, diplomacy, and the rise of a mobile and very social upper class. On the other hand, revolutions (American and French), the Enlightenment, urbanization, and virtually constant warfare by sea-born empires provided a great deal of content for satirical artists. Unfortunately, eighteenth century artists and historians tended to ignore the humorous content in the Renaissance art which they idealized. Thus, it is in some of the less artistically enfranchised countries such as England and the German states (as opposed to France) that the humor of the eighteenth century is played out in visual art.

Franz Xavier Messerschmidt was an eccentric Austrian sculptor in the mid eighteenth century. His series of self-portraits, *The Egyptian Heads* (c. 1771–81), are remarkable—and perhaps humorous in terms of their origin. These sculptures were conceived as a result of a spiritual battle that the artist claimed to have had with several malicious phantoms who routinely caused him pain in his stomach and thigh. He managed to defeat these ghosts through knowledge of proportion. He created the sculptures by pinching himself to recreate the pain caused by the spirits and then studying his facial reaction. Furthermore, in all of the sculptures, the mouths are tightly shut. This is because Messerschmidt believed that men should never show the red of their lips since animals never did this. A contemporary claimed that Messerschmidt's demons were no more than his own digestive problems (Eitner, 1971; Kris, 1932). While Messerschmidt was not trying to be funny, *The Egyptian Heads* look comical at times and his method of creation was certainly amusing (and disturbing) to his contemporaries.

One of the most conscientiously humorous artists of the eighteenth century was William Hogarth whose work deserves a more in-depth treatment due to its conspicuously humorous qualities. His own description of his career was as that of a comic history painter. His work was appealing to his contemporaries and continues to be appealing to present-day audiences. It has been the subject of contradictory interpretations since artists who make humorous work may be difficult to define because their revelry allows a play of contradictory ideas in the mind of the viewer. Contradiction

is part of what makes something funny. It should not be surprising to find humorous artists, like comedians, often fail to provide us with a clear, easy to define *persona*. To do so would decrease their comedic potential. Some of Hogarth's critics acknowledged his value as a satirist in a tradition similar to the comic writers of the eighteenth century (Bindman, 1997). For example, Henry Fielding (1742) actually described Hogarth in the preface to *Joseph Andrews*.

Today we tend to see Hogarth as part of the eighteenth century "paper culture" of urban, middle class city dwellers. In one series, *A Rake's Progress* (1733–35), he attempted to short-circuit the makers of forgeries by officially allowing some copies of his prints to be made by other printers, for a price. This had the effect of drastically increasing his audience and fame in all social classes. He seemed to have some difficulty with this, and in future prints he attempted to target only the more learned strata of society; but luckily for him, he was unable to erase his own fame among the common people of England (Bindman, 1997). The fact that Hogarth's work was so prized among the common people is evidence of its humor. While it requires some knowledge to appreciate all of the humor in his work, it is funny on so many levels that those who are not familiar with the more elusive content are not excluded. Whereas an uninitiated viewer is often unable to read a classical allegory, a picture with humorous looking characters, humorous expressions, and outrageous situations is more easily appreciated.

Hogarth did not satirize individuals; instead, he attempted to bring to light human folly in general for the purpose of amusing others. Hogarth's work exploited the lack of a clear boundary between classical Roman satire in comparison to the "grub street" poets of London. In this way his work remained both timeless and classless by appealing to the more universal or even transcendent ideas embodied in the humor itself. (Bindman, 1997). Hogarth's approach can be demonstrated in *A Rake's Progress*. The miserly father and rakish son illustrate extremes. Similarly, in *A Harlot's Progress,* the prudes and harlots are extremes. All are condemned and ridiculed. This leaves the correct path, the one not represented, somewhere in the middle. We also see that it is a growing London, with all of its social problems, that is under attack. The figures are humorous stereotypes, like lawyers who pinch coins and doctors who argue while a patient dies.

The depictions of London show it as a majestic place and emphasize its connection with the great civilizations of the past, as well as allude to its progress and power. This makes the ridiculousness of the human interactions appear to be a commentary on the ridiculousness of what it is to be human (Bindman, 1997).

One of his most mature and humorous series was *Marriage A-la-Mode* (1745). Hogarth's wit in this series is penetrating to the point of being savage. The series is overtly a condemnation of poor morality, and it is in this sense that the average person would have most appreciated it. However, a secondary object of his mockery in *Marriage A-la-Mode* is everything foreign, especially the French art that he reproduces on the walls behind his characters (Egerton, 1997). Understanding this humorous aspect requires some contextual information, and it is likely that this aspect has some of the quality of an inside joke—one that needs to be explained to be fully appreciated. *The Marriage Settlement* is the first image of the series. In this image we are meant to laugh at the extravagance of the upper class who, while living far beyond their means, are concerned mainly with trying to document lineage and social class. However, we also laugh at the foolish middle class who aspire to join this ridiculous group. The lawyers who facilitate the marriage transaction in this picture are also ridiculed, as a profession, since neither of them is actually doing his job. In the background of the picture, Hogarth takes a good jab at the ludicrous style of French heroic portraiture (Egerton, 1997).

The second picture in the series is *The Tête-à-Tête,* in which the sheer boredom of a marriage without communication is a humorous indictment of an entire society that was obsessed with rank (Von Blum, 1976). This scene is rife with the evidence of the infidelities of the newly married couple, who obviously should never have married. For example, the drunken young husband slouches stupidly in a chair unaware that he is still sporting mementos of his dalliances while his amused and equally unfaithful wife covertly signals her lover with a mirror to let him know that he should make his way out. The steward makes a ridiculous expression of disgust as he leaves the room; he is portrayed as holier-than-thou to a comedic degree. This room also pokes fun at the practice of collecting foreign art objects—a horrifying display of bogus *chinoiseries* clutters the flat surfaces of the house (Egerton, 1997).

*The Inspection* is the third image in the sequence. It depicts four people at a doctor's office who are presumably arguing over the effectiveness of the doctor's treatment, for a venereal disease. Ironically, everyone in the room, including the doctor, the young husband, the very young prostitute, and her mother, have venereal diseases. Along with society's general vice, doctors in particular are being criticized for their poor education, predatory practices, and ineffective medication. This doctor's room contains a bizarre collection of weird and disgusting oddities—but no books. (Egerton, 1997).

The fourth scene in the series is *The Toilette.* Here the young wife engages in an obnoxious practice. She entertains a group of hangers-on while her hair is being done. This upper class habit was conceived out of a belief that important noble women are so popular that they need to make use of every possible spare moment of the day if they are going to be able to satisfactorily fulfill their social obligations. The entire scene ridicules the practice of aping French and Italian fashion. (Egerton, 1997).

The fifth image of the series is *The Bagnio.* This scene depicts the tragic/comedic moment when the unfaithful young couple unfortunately arrives at the same bagnio (brothel) to conduct their debaucheries. As mentioned earlier, this is a comic theme still depicted in popular humorous entertainment—the stumbling upon an unfaithful partner. However, this instance ends with the death of the husband, an element of tragedy that lends a Shakespearean seriousness to the otherwise playful story. This serves to remind us that aside from the obvious wit intended for our amusement, it is also a satire and therefore contains a serious message for contemplation. The husband strikes an overly theatrical dying pose reminiscent of a descent from the cross, showing that Hogarth was capable of irreverence in the name of comedy (Egerton, 1997).

The final painting in the series is *The Lady's Death.* Here, the young wife has just taken her own life. The only humane adult in this image is the nanny who lifts the dying woman's baby to give her mother a kiss. In the most heartless scene of all (since even *The Bagnio* was somewhat comic), the dying mother cannot return the embrace of her baby because her father is busy removing the rings from her hand. (Egerton, 1997). Thus ends Hogarth's criticism of social class, immorality, and the institution of the arranged marriage. This sort of lighthearted comedy that changes into intense tragedy

and serious satire was the hallmark of this unique artist. For Hogarth, humor was a double-edged sword. On one hand, he used it to amuse and entertain; while on the other, he made biting social commentary.

Another humorous artist whose work began towards the end of the eighteenth century was the painter and illustrator Henri Fuseli. With the eclipse of the Enlightenment, it became more common for distinguished ladies to form social clubs dedicated to the occult. Fuseli responded by creating images of fairies and witches that he dressed as fashionable ladies. The irony here is that his patrons were the very people he intended to humorously criticize. Fuseli advocated that throughout history, cultures have imagined their gods in their own image. Thus, his satirical pictures are meant to suggest that spirits of the occult were nothing more than figments of the imagination of a misguided upper class (Schiff, 1975). While much of his work has a dark, intense feeling, some of it was also intended to be funny. In *The Daughters of Pandareus* (c. 1795), the goddesses are rendered so as to parody mythology itself. They behave in ludicrous ways that contradict the classic rendition of the myth. (Schiff, 1975). This contradictory attitude can also be seen in his illustrations for literature. Fuseli often managed to create illustrations with themes that seemed to be directly opposed to the text's actual mood. For example, Fuseli's pictorial interpretations for William Cowper's bigoted, anti-urban texts manage to convey Fuseli's tolerance, even approval, of everything that the author clearly despised. Cowper's cliché parable of youth torn between vice and virtue is illustrated by Fuseli so as to evoke a sense of boredom, coquetry, phony humor, and forced melancholy. In other cases, Fuseli undermined the texts he was illustrating, even when he actually agreed with the sentiment of the given text (Schiff, 1975). Clearly there is something humorous, if passive-aggressive, about Fuseli's agenda for book illustrations.

The portraits of his wife depict his deteriorating relationship with her. In one case she is seated in front of a counter-portrait of a Medusa. In some of his most embittered pictures he depicts her in the form of tyrannical mythological creatures that destroy mankind (Schiff, 1975). On one hand, these images may seem evidence of an individual suffering from some emotional problems. Nevertheless, the way he used his artwork to

portray his attitudes towards his wife can be seen as mean-spirited humor of the same kind that he used in his book illustrations to subvert the text. Fusili himself is the subject of *The Henpecked Husband* (1757–59). This topic has been considered amusing across many cultures. Therefore, we laugh with Fuseli as he lambastes his wife with portraiture, while at the same time we are amused by his unfortunate situation and bizarre coping mechanisms.

Fuseli was also interested in creating humorous illustrations of lunatics. The picture *Mad Kate* (1806–07) is illustrated with expressions that seem somewhat funny. It may be unfortunate, but the insane are still the subject of comedy today. *The Mad House* (1772) depicts a man in a hospital fleeing from the monks who he thinks will kill him by giving him his last rites. The humor here is the man's confusion over cause and effect. However, we are also left with an uneasy view of the monks because, on a certain level, we understand the lunatic's point of view! (Schiff, 1975)

Fuseli, like Hogarth, also liked to make fun of art connoisseurs and their peculiar tastes. In *Two Men Smoking a Picture* (1774), he ridicules the practice of buying old pictures just for their age. In *Caricature of the Artist Leaving Italy* (1778), a nude artist/hero befouls a map of Europe. The comedy of this bizarre image is increased by the presence of mice on the part of the map corresponding to England. Fuseli claimed these represented his peers—the painters in England at that time (Schiff, 1975).

## CARICATURE AND CRITICISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The nineteenth century with its political rebellion, oppression, industrialization, colonization, religious turmoil, socialism, and conservative backlash was not an era in which we would expect to find a great deal of humor. Nevertheless, included among the artists of the nineteenth century were numerous individuals whose art seems, on some level, to be humorous. For example, William Blake created images that were inspired by mental journeys and clairvoyant imaginations, which he often took very seriously (Eisenman, 1994). However, in an account by John Varley (1828), Blake described some of these visions in terms that seem quite humorous. For example, on one occasion he became rather animated about a picture that he had created of a ghost of a flea! One gets the feeling that Blake did not always take himself seriously. While Blake was known on occasion to reprimand those whose tastes centered on enjoyment of the caricature, such people often were his potential patrons since his work shared the bizarre playful fantasy of the caricaturist (Eisenman, 1994).

The realism and ferment of the nineteenth century has been preserved for us not only in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, but also in the caricatures of men like James Gillray, Honoré Daumier, and Gérard Grandville. For this reason it is worthwhile to examine caricature. While it is often not considered fine art, caricature was usually created by trained artists. This means that the humor in caricature is likely to be similar to the humor found in contemporaneous fine art.

While Blake was sometimes called a lunatic, Gillray actually was one. In *Phaeton Alarm'd* (1808) he depicted the Tory spokesman as the new Phaeton who cruised though a complex and ridiculous heaven (and above a war-torn earth surmounted by Napoleon). There are astrological versions of his Whig opponents, who despite their monstrous and ludicrous physiology are entirely readable as portraits of real people. At the same time, Gillray's appropriation of myth and allegorical figures was an overt attack at the pretense and hyperbole that was present in the grand style of history painting. In his depictions of the political life of England, he frequently lampooned the classical high art of the French courts, showing that the grand style could be lowered to the level of the street print mass audience (Eisenman, 1994).

Gérard Grandville used anachronisms to satirize his disturbed era making fun of the modern man's pretense at heroism. This can be seen in a depiction of Romans in a contemporary café ordering an *Apple of the Hesperides and Rum Ice* (1844). In another café scene, a waiter who strikes a surly version of the classical contraposto is serving a group of fashionable people who are wearing Roman sandals. (Eisenman, 1994). The nineteenth century continued the eighteenth century tradition of using humorous art to make serious commentary; however, in the nineteenth century the emphasis was on criticizing art itself, which had been only a secondary interest of earlier satirists.

The life of Honoré Duamier was filled with political instability, which he used as ammunition for his satirical commentary. One of Duamier's first biting satires, *Gargantua* (1831), depicts a gigantic version of "citizen-king" Louis Philippe. The oversized king sits on a toilet and ingests tax tribute in the form of a gaggle of miserable workers who obediently walk up a long ramp and into the king's mouth. He then excretes this tribute transformed into rewards for his wealthy supporters who gather at the doors of a building that forms the base of the king's toilet/throne. This image is clearly both funny and critical. In *The Legislative Belly* (1834), the greed and slovenliness of the members of the government comes through in their fat caricatures, lazy postures, and greedy or disinterested expressions. In *You are Free to Speak* (1835), Daumier ironically depicts the trial of a gagged man while an execution takes place in the background. This was not only a use of humor but also a political indictment of the judicial system that had just conducted a mass trial of dissidents at which the defendants were not even allowed to choose their own counsel. Towards the middle of his career, harsh laws designed to control the people of France began to restrict Daumier's ability to directly mock the government. As a result, he turned his ire on the upper classes as well as certain professions. In particular, it was lawyers whom he satirized since he believed that they abused their verbal skills and substituted cleverness for fairness. These images are still considered very funny today—ironically, especially among the legal profession. One can find Daumier prints in legal firms across the world (Von Blum, 1976). Like many artists who also practiced caricature, his paintings and sculptures are not as funny. Nevertheless, taken in the context of his over four thousand humorous drawings, scenes

like *The Third Class Carriage* (1862) somehow transform the mundane subjects "...from simple illustration to scenes of pathos or high comedy." (Arnason, 1970, p.28)

Humor in the art of the nineteenth century also existed outside of the realm of cartoons. The manifesto of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as well as their journal certainly made a number of humorous and startling claims and assertions. Their artwork itself also contains some humorous elements. John Millais's image entitled *Christ in the Home of His Parents* (1850) reinvents the concept of Christ's upbringing by placing him within the context of a contemporary wood shop, complete with clutter, wood shavings, sweat, and simple clothes. The Christ figure strikes an out-of-context classical pose that seems quite funny in the midst of his hard working, realistic family who continue working without Christ's help (Eisenman, 1994). Ford Madox Brown sometimes made the bourgeoisie and upper classes appear laughable. He criticized the developing "cash culture" and valorized the workingman and his socialist-thinker leaders. In *Work* (1852–65), the crowded and complex scene of workers is interrupted by a parade of outrageously dressed upper class women handing out temperance pamphlets to the workers. They seem much like a parade of circus clowns in their given context. (Eisenman, 1994).

German art in the nineteenth century is another good source of humorous images. According to Rudolf Bisanz (1980, p.15) the "...remarkable thematic range and blend of folksiness, wit, irony and convivial spirit..." are what have given this art its place in history. The Germans even had a category of art called "Spitzweg" which meant humoresque. Johann Peter Hasenclever depicted the busy city streets and rowdy public houses, imagery common to German art of the nineteenth century. Many of the depictions of peasants are rendered with a humorous caricature-like approach. Often the figures engage in activities that, on some level, seem humorous—at least in choice of subject. Pictures that take as their topic the subjects of monks being shaven or hunters propositioning peasant girls must have been intended to amuse their audience. Of course, some of the work of German artists of the nineteenth century is more overtly humorous in conception. An example in this vein can be seen in Paul Meyerheim's *A Darwinian Prehistoric Social Party (The Unevolved Club Man of the Period)* painted in 1865. The

title alone foretells its humorous content. It depicts a gathering of monkeys at a banquet. If not for the monkeys, the painting may well have been a tribute to the many similar scenes painted by Veronese and other Renaissance artists. Certainly, monkeys still have a place in the popular comedy of today and occasionally in the visual arts as well (The Gorilla Girls....). Another humorous image can be seen in Heinrich Schlitt's *Gnomes Transporting Frogs* (1917), a subject that cannot help but be playful (Bisanz, 1980). However, this case, which could have simply been an illustration of folklore, has been made even more ludicrous because of the silly looking gnomes and their bizarre use of a giant glass jar as the conveyance for their amphibian livestock. The image is made even funnier as a result of the odd little frog in the foreground that has caught the attention of the gnomes, who are apparently so greedy when it comes to frog transporting that they do not notice that the frogs that they have already captured are escaping.

Gustave Courbet's controversial art broke with the serious artistic conventions of the nineteenth century and, in the process, helped set the stage for the humorous art of the twentieth century (see appendix B). *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life* (1855) defied all attempts to uncover its meaning for over one hundred years. The painting contains a humorously odd assortment of figures including a nude model, a ragged little boy, a fat cat, a rabbi, a clown, a beggar woman, an elegant couple, a famous poet, and the artist himself dressed in ridiculous horizontally striped trousers. The pants alone are worth a laugh and became an obsession for some twentieth century artists, including Pablo Picasso. Traditional readings have viewed the figures on the right side as portraits of Courbet's progressive friends and supporters (which they clearly were). However, the ones on the left were seen as depictions of social stereotypes. In 1977, the real identities of the figures on the left were discovered. These figures are subtly hidden depictions of political personages of the time satirized in the guise of humorously juxtaposed stereotypes. For example, the figure of "the Jew" was actually a cleverly hidden portrait of a well-known statesman and financier. The other figures were also powerful men, all represented as the poor and downtrodden. The painting is like a giant political cartoon painted in the grand historic style. Only the artist, and perhaps a few close friends, would have understood the joke since at this time

cartoons of Napoleon's statesmen were strictly forbidden. The *coup de grace* was in the depiction of the Emperor himself, disguised behind a false mustachio and beard (Nochlin, 1988). Apparently, drawing facial hair onto pictures of famous people was also funny in the nineteenth century.

Courbet often depicted events from his life; but at other times, he put himself in odd positions with props or costumes meant to establish himself as an artist. Many of his self-portraits are amusing. It appears that he enjoyed his reputation as a narcissist and used it to create playful images of himself. This can best be illustrated in the scene *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet* (1854) in which his meek patron meets the superior-looking artist while on a walk in the county. It is difficult to imagine that the artist really imagined himself to be as important as he depicts himself in this image (Nochlin, 1988).

Unlike Courbet, who was probably sane, Romako is yet another example of an eccentric whose art mystified people during the later nineteenth century. His portraits were an odd mix of flattery and caricature. Romako left out nothing from his images that could shock and annoy his viewer. He was clever to the point of perversity. It is difficult to decide if his images were intended as either fantasy or reality. In his history painting, Romako took the bizarre qualities of his figures even further by placing them in bizarre grounds with abnormal postures. The art of his final years clearly showed his reactionary stance, compared to the naturalism of his times. He was at odds with his society because it failed to validate his individual notion of the meaning of art (Eitner, 1971). As a result, he produced work that is amusing due to its lack of an appropriate contextual grounding.

Edward Manet's art was considered rebellious during his lifetime and throughout the twentieth century. Despite his deep artistic convictions, which were out of step with the established art conventions, on a personal level he did not wish to rebel. By the same token, he may not have wished his work to be humorous. Nevertheless, his unconventional coloration, direct appropriation, occasionally bizarre use of space, and preoccupation with directly engaging the viewer with the presence of his nude models combined to make him a sophisticated satirist. The nineteenth century elite possessed a common culture that it delighted in expressing in shorthand so as to set itself apart from the mob (making them no different, some would argue, from today's fine art patrons...).

Painting imitations that were partly the same as, and partly different from, the original provided amusement for this class who delighted in their ability to read the clues and were often entertained by cleverly planned differences. However, while Manet claimed that he imitated constructively, it may be that he actually did so destructively. His playful allusions to the great history of art may have been his way of creating a witty double vision and thereby taking a side in the artistic debate of his day. According to Peter Gay (1976, p.62), "The artist exercises wit by inventing surprises—by playing with probability, manufacturing illogicalities, awakening reminiscences, and parodying cultural monuments." Manet's playful art criticized the art of his generation through the use of the art of previous generations. This strategy is clearly evident in *Olympia* (1863). This painting was based on classical images of Venus. It was permissible to enjoy classical versions of the female nude since their erotic content had been eroded over the centuries and because they depicted something unreal. But *Olympia* rendered a real person—a prostitute that was no doubt familiar to many of the salon patrons. Manet does not moralize with *Olympia*; but instead, he rather slyly comments on modern life. He combines a depiction of contemporary vice with an unveiling of the farcically concealed eroticism present in the grand tradition of painting. This is not preachy commentary because Manet was complicit in his acceptance of the female nude as a subject. On the other hand, he had no desire to fool himself about the content of such work. Thus in *Olympia* we are presented with an image of pointed wit that cleverly introduced the art world to the foolishness of some of its common beliefs (Gay, 1974).

Over the past five hundred years there has been extensive use of humor in both art and literature. However, until the twentieth century, work which was supposed to be humorous has been overlooked and often considered inferior, compared to work with supposedly serious content (Barolsky, 1978). Nevertheless, it is clear that humor and play have had an important impact on the history of art. It may not always be easy to appreciate humor in the art of the past. In some cases, the comedic intentions of the work are now too far out of context. On the other hand, the playfulness and wit of some images seems timeless. To comprehend this, we must go beyond traditional methods of art history, which are based on relating images to the serious texts and philosophies of the

past. In this way, perhaps, the art of the past can take back one of its ancient functions: to entertain and amuse us all.

## DIGITAL ART

Most of my work is created with digital media. While the use of the term *digital* can be problematic (this is discussed later), the common usage will be accepted here for purposes of simplicity. Digital art has suffered the same fate as every other new media in art—that is, marginalization by more established forms. Printmaking, photography, and video art each went through the same process of rejection and eventual acceptance by the fine art community. Nevertheless, digital art has lately come into its own such that it may soon outgrow the popular label of "new media." Perhaps the greatest criticism that can be leveled at those working in a field that is as new (relative to painting, drawing, etc.) as digital art is the charge that it is merely a fad, or worse yet, that digital artists (like myself) are merely "hopping on the bandwagon." Therefore, it is prudent to establish a place for digital art as a media which, while of contemporary relevance, is neither all that new nor particularly modish.

Just as the camera created major changes that contributed to Modernism, the computer is creating major changes that have contributed to Postmodernism. Walter Benjamin (1969) showed how the camera completely changed art and society. It also changed the way people saw the art of the past and present. Now electronic machines provide us with possibilities for unprecedented human development. Our senses are mediated through technology—the eye through the camera, the ear through the speaker, and the brain through the computer. The computer has changed the way we experience time, space, and motion. It has removed the hand/skill aspects of art, forcing artists to concentrate on the creative/theoretical aspects rather than simply craftsmanship. (Lovejoy, 1989)

Lovejoy (1989) believes that a fear of technology (on the part of many artists) has contributed to a duality between art and science, which sees art as spontaneous, uncontrolled, and driven by the unconscious. This false dichotomy may be what has caused many artists to emphasize time-honored methods and denounce the technological world as threatening to what is truly human. However, other artists embrace digital technology since it allows them to express fresh new ideas, respond to the complexities of their time, and explore new subjects.

Computers have been used for approximately 35 years to create art. Nevertheless, in the first two decades of computer art, the limits of cost, size, and technical knowledge delegated the creation of computer art to the computer scientist rather than the artist. Thus, if the idea of using a computer to create art seems new to some artists, this is only because artists have come to computer art relatively late in its evolution. It was not until the late 1980s, when computer power increased and costs decreased, that some artists began to make use of computers. The first computer art tended to fall ideologically into the modernist style. This was to be expected as it often takes some time before we are able to see the best uses for new technology. The kind of interactive work that has come to be associated with digital media was originally inspired by video games in the early 1980s. Such work often incorporated video. It was often created and hosted by science centers rather than museums. For example, one such institution hosted a project that allowed visitors to play with the concepts of identity and desire by manipulating their self-portraits—well before Orlan's similar work in the late 1990s. (Lovejoy, 1989)

Jenny Holzer was one of the first artists to make use of the technology in a way that radically departed from traditional imagery. Her electronic LED bulletin boards (early1980s) brought her text-based messages to a mass audience. They provoked thought and demonstrated that with electronic art, it is the message that is the medium! Holzer's work was meant to question notions of power within the institutions of art. (Lovejoy, 1989). In this sense it was, in some ways, like my own.

Jean-Francois Lyotard collaborated in one of the first important technological art exhibitions in 1985. *Les Immateriaux* was held at the Pompidou Center in Paris, and it showcased art that did not conform to the standard subject-object relationship because the object only had locally limited viability. This is taken as a metaphor for the body-identity shift, which suggests that identity itself is contextual (Baumgärtel, 2001). It is apparent that identity and the concept of limited viability (simulation, cyberspace, and fiction) have played a role in digital art long before the advent of the World Wide Web. As I shall show later, these concepts are also at play within my work.

My work also demonstrates the culturally inter-textual nature of new media. Computers allow multimedia explorations that can be used to deconstruct traditional TV

culture. A precedent for this can be seen in the work of Gretchen Bender who used computers to bring control to the torrent of information absorbed and spewed out through television. She separated information from its medium for examination by the viewer. (Lovejoy, 1989)

My inter-textual work tends to focus more on the phenomena of advertising. While my advertisements take advantage of (now readily available) 3D animation and video editing technology, something similar can be seen in the work of Les Levine. He used computers to create professional looking advertising messages that combined his images and text. By using the computer to create a seamless advertisement, he was able to more effectively reach a multitude of people and present them with information in the ways that they have become accustomed to receiving it. (Lovejoy, 1989)

The computer's capabilities in multimedia image processing and simulation bring a new agenda to art. As a digital artist, I often note that I may be more like a cyborg, co-authoring the work from a database of possibilities. This can be clearly seen in my *Internet Drawing Machine* where I abdicated important artistic decisions to the network. The results thus go beyond my imagination as well as that of the viewer. Harold Cohen, one of the pioneers in computer art, first did this kind of work. He programmed some rules of drawing into the computer and then let it create the work. He was not in control of the final work but rather shared control with the machine (Lovejoy, 1989). Similarly, Jacob and Hushlack (2002) created *SwarmArt* in which A-Life (artificial life) bugs create designs by moving in swarms that respond to motions detected by a CaML server. The designs thus evolve from a combination of the viewer's interaction and the swarming rules programmed into the A-Life bugs.

*Streaming Performance Art* delves into the nature of broadcast video communications over the World Wide Web. Douglas Davis was one of the telecommunications art forerunners. In 1977, with the aid of a satellite hookup, he participated in a televised teleconference link that ended with his attempt to break through the screen. Until the Internet came, Davis viewed his work as being about trying to communicate over distances, which he did not think was really possible. Up until the advent of the Internet, he used various technologies to pioneer collaborative works that

attempted to point-cast at a mass audience rather than broadcast at them. (Baumgärtel, 2001)

Many other artists participated in satellite sculptures as well (c. 1977). They set up direct visual communications between people in different parts of the world, merged broadcasts to create virtual scenes, etc. Some of these artists included General Idea, Jean-Marc Phillippe, Pierre Comte, Ingo Gunther, Peter Fend, Dennis Oppenheim, Paul Shartis, and Wolfgang Staehle. (Baumgärtel, 2001)

## NET ART

With the exception of *Jason Hunter's Inclusive MFA Show*, most of my work is not only digital, but also net-based. Such art is alternatively referred to as either Net Art or Web Art. The term Net Art is more holistic because it includes the art using the World Wide Web as well as other telecommunications networks which are available online. The defining characteristic of Net Art is participation. While some Net Art may be more or less participative, comparatively—participation is always a consideration (though certainly not the only consideration...). Therefore, it should not be surprising that my net art also includes varying levels of participation, depending on the project.

However, telecommunications technology is not singularly responsible for the evolution of participative art. A broad-based access to that technology has developed alongside changes in the way people think about communication. A model for these changes can be seen in the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) whose polyphonic language can be interpreted as the precursor to hypertext. However, we can trace much web art back even further to the philosophical, structural, and aesthetic traditions of the medieval carnival. It is here that we can construct a useful model with which to understand recent developments in communications aesthetics and how they apply to artists working with web art. (Giannetti, 2001)

The carnival had the effect of leveling social rights and status, just like the Internet. This is because in both cases one is not sure of the real world status of the people with whom one interacts. The carnival also involved multi-sensory communication that was non-linear in form, similar to the asynchronous nature of much online communication. Anyone could take part in the carnival; and if they conformed to the criteria and rituals, they would be incorporated into the event; this is similar to the way people create identities for themselves online. Furthermore, at the carnival everyone was both a consumer and actor in the spectacle—just as online, where networks are both used and created by the same people. (Giannetti, 2001)

There was no precise stage or spatial restriction to the medieval carnival, perhaps similar to cyberspace and simulation, which also negate spatial limits. Within both spaces, the boundaries of traditional sequential logic (based on centrality and reality)

cease to operate. The carnival and cyberspace substitute a society of spectacle for reality. Carnivals operated in ways that created a deliberate opposition to the logic of everyday reality—an escape. Just like the electronic network, the carnival created a plurality of realities. (Giannetti, 2001)

The carnival mask also serves as a strong metaphor for Internet identity. It obfuscates our traditional identity and allows us to replace it with others. Yet there is always an integration of these identities. The choice of masks will reflect upon elements of identity that go beyond the carnivalesque/telematic experience. Masks illustrate the relativity of existence that we experience in these two phenomena. (Giannetti, 2001)

Since some of the structures and concepts embodied in online phenomena can be seen dating back hundreds of years, it is not surprising to find artistic precedents for Net Art which predate the 1994 formation of the World Wide Web. For Example, Helio Oiticica, in a series of pieces called *Parangole* (1964), illustrated the complex environment/identity relationships now at work in Net Art. In these performances the spectator took up elements of costume and used them to relate to the environment in ways that expressed a new transmuted identity. The identity was shared since spectators would exchange the costumes or periodically be replaced over time and multiple performances. He was trying to create large-scale communication in ways that gave people new control over the ways they generated identity, experimented, and communicated with one another. (Giannetti, 2001)

Internet art also had some precedents in Fluxus artists such as Emmett Williams, Arthur Koepke, and George Brecht who engaged in the practice of mail art. They exchanged post card size works that they reworked and passed on. Just like Internet art, this was expected to democratize art. However, it tended to remain accessed only by a circular community or closed group. However, Postal Art did make it possible for a few people outside of the dominant art culture to participate. Net Art has taken this mandate even further. In both cases, the communication was/is the art; that means there was/is a lack of concrete objects to be marketed and sold—leading to the characterization of this work as mere hobby art. (Baumgärtel, 2001)

The first computer-based telecommunications projects took place after 1978 when a number of artists met at the *Artist's Use of Telecommunications* conference. These artists collaborated with expensive computers to make text-based art. Telephone concerts also resulted from these collaborations. By the late 1980s there were a number of fax performances as well. Such well-known artists as Andy Warhol and David Hockney created art with the telecopier. However, these early telecommunications art events eluded status as art because they did not leave any tangible record (Baumgärtel, 2001). Even from the beginning, many artists believed that telecommunications technologies convert space into time (Giannetti, 2002). In the late 70s and early 80s the first telecommunications art explored this concept with attempts to turn the discursive media of television into a participative media. Some of the artists who worked in this vein included Nam June Paik (*Nine Minutes Live,* 1977, and *Good Morning Mr. Orwell,* 1984), Carl Loeffler et. al. (*Two-Way Demo*, 1977), Roy Ascott (*Terminal Consciousness,* 1980), and Kit Galloway & Sherri Rabinowitz (*Electronic Café*, 1984).

*Electronic Café* (set up by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, 1984) and *Bionic* (set up by Rena Tangens and Padeluun, 1990) were the first online galleries. They used electronic spaces to allow those with access to exchange images as well as text. Carl Loeffler began ACEN (Art Com Electronic Network) in 1986, which had a focus of sounding out new implications for electronic media and art. As such, it was a direct precursor of much current Internet art. ACEN even created a virtual mall with a function that allowed one to shoplift (programmed by Normal Art Group). This project was hosted by the *Well* mailbox, which also included projects such as Judy Malloy's *Bad Information Database* that allowed users to submit lies and deceptions for cataloguing. Normal Art Group had a virtual museum in this mailbox with descriptions of museum art. There was also a version of the surrealist game called *Exquisite Corpse* where users collaborated on a line of ASCII symbols. Yet most of this (and other) work did not make the transition into the word wide web, and so it is now gone. (Baumgärtel, 2001)

Online, identity is multiplied. One can clone one's own multiple identities and transport them to other environments. Artists like Stelarc (Stelarc and Collaborators, 1997) attempt to expand on the mind/body relationships and limits supposed by reality by

illustrating ways the Internet can be used for transduction of action rather than just transmission of information. This moves the Internet one step closer to fulfilling the cyber-punk prediction (Gibson, 1984) that the body will become part of a corporate whole in which the self transgresses the supposed natural limits of the body and allows for telematic cyber-performances by multiple identities through multiple host bodies. (Giannetti, 2001)

On the other hand, Marc Lafia's (2001) *Vanndemar Memex* involved users in a complex plot using cyberspace, to extend the self. It consisted of a series of events and episodes to immerse users in a world of surveillance, AI constructs, remote droids, and collective prosthesis. The project explored the ways in which we project or operationalize alternative conceptions of the fictionalized self through the Internet and, in the process, form electronic collectives. It is about forms of computer interfacing and virtual agency. The self is extended in such ways that boundaries are dissolved. This is partly because one user's passage though the world becomes the next user's point of entry. The work questions, to a certain extent, our desire for the network to transform us as well as its mythic purpose as a place for collective action.

Some artists have attempted to play on this symbiotic relationship between people and machines. Markus Huemer (2001) created an installation where the viewer interacts with the work by standing in a specific place in front of a projection on a wall. When in this spot, a light shines around the gallery and the screen. Then words culled from news groups focused on left wing socio-political content appear on the screen. In this way, the web contents are interacting with the user in a very different way, to the point where it becomes clearly restrictive in terms of movement and stimulus.

Some Internet artists have attempted to use conceptions related to Artificial Life to create electronic artworks. Sommerer and Mignonneau (2001) created the *Verbarium* where visitors were allowed to submit text to the web site. The site used the verbs in the text to generate images. The text served like a genetic code for the organic images that were created. Furthermore, all of the images created by text submissions were reconstituted into a larger, more complex image. Visitors to the site could click on parts of this larger, more complex image to see the verbs that had generated it.

Some artistic experiments with Gopher and MOOs took place, but with the release of Mosaic (the first web browser), the World Wide Web was born. The fact that it could integrate sound, text, and images on a mouse-clickable surface made it an excellent medium for artists. In the mid 1990s, many artists heralded the Internet as a place where they could escape the structures of a problematic art culture. The information consumer could finally act as an information producer. New ideas were expected to arise through social exchange. Much of this early euphoria was based on the fact that it was a space free of censorship. Works like Antonio Muntadas' *Fileroom* (1994) was a place to collect and directly publish unpublishable work (Baumgärtel, 2001). Similarly, Douglas Davis authored *The World's First Collaborative Sentence.* This project allows visitors to submit any text to a huge online sentence (so long as there are no periods). The sentence was supposed to end Jan 15th, 1995 but when the date came, the artist announced that he did not have the right to end such a sentence and stop people from writing; therefore, he would leave this up to fate, evolution, and the divine providence of the web. (Davis, 2001)

However, attitudes changed by the end of the decade as the Internet transformed from a free and open space to an overcrowded, clogged, dumping ground, which seems to adequately stand as a metaphor for our post modern perception. Mark Napier's *The Digital Landfill* (1998) stood in stark comparison to the work of Muntadas. His virtual space serves as a dumping ground for mass quantities of indigestible data. Certainly this is what has also become of *The World's First Collaborative Sentence.* Joachim Blank and Karl Heinz Jeron tried to eliminate or recycle this information smog. They made projects that allow people to recycle their worn out home pages or redirect boring email to someone else for answering. Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmanns created a web site that was filled with deliberate errors in their HTML code. They tried to determine how bad the page could be while remaining usable and tolerable. Another work in this vein is *Webstalker,* designed by a British group called I/O/D. This is a browser that shows web pages in a very different way compared to the book-like presentation of Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Explorer. Lisa Jevbrats *1:1* project uses the IP numbers of Internet addresses to create a constantly changing picture and allows people access into

some "secret" Internet servers. Nevertheless, it was not until 1997 (with *Documenta X*, the first official recognition of net art by the art scene) that the art community began to become aware of the art that was available on line. This ranged from simple web page designs to telerobotic sculptures manipulated by web surfers over a distance. Art on the Internet is a massive collection of information just like everything else on the Internet. (Baumgärtel, 2001) Some Net Artists characterize it as incomprehensible, but I do not. For reasons I will discuss later, I do not create web pages designed to frustrate the participant by ignoring best practice and deliberately undermining simple, widely understood, web-creation protocols.

For example, Antoni Abad (2001) created a web site that was inhabited by a fly. The fly stands still, rubs its legs, walks and flies around, and makes a buzzing sound. It does not just stay in the main frame of the browser but occupies the entire window. The fly will run or fly away if the surfer tries to touch it with the mouse pointer. It is symbolic of the lack of control and context that some experience on the Internet. The project does not try to communicate; rather, it forces us to realize the limits of Internet communication. The fly is just as impossible to catch and control as the Internet itself. However, experienced surfers understand that nobody controls the Internet, but one can control ones use of it—to many constructive and deliberate purposes.

Another example in this vein is Goldberg and Farzin's (2001) *Dislocation of Intimacy*. In this Net Art project, a plain sealed black box was accessible from the Internet. Online viewers could select one of five lights to turn on and they would receive a strange black and white shadow image. There was no real explanation or content provided. Therefore, the piece functioned to question the nature of representation, specifically representation over a distance. All that media can deliver is representations of things that we (in our minds) code, categorize, and define as the things themselves. However, this weakness is equally true of all media.

In a similar vein, Gisel Beiguelman (2001) created a visual display of hypertext and animation that brings to light the passivity of traditional readers (and literature) compared to the online participatory reader. She points out that the Internet is, in essence, just a massive text—a magazine, peer edited journal, novel, diary, newspaper,

graffiti, and catalogue all rolled into one. This is a startling phenomenon in the context of the history of literature, which has been extremely stable since the invention of the printing press. Whereas in hard copy books one is on stable ground, online the ground is shifting like Borges' enigmatic book. One may take turns that bring unexpected results. One may not end up reading what one thought he/she would. This helps to explain why many Net Artists are obsessed with the concept of text and, in particular, hypertext.

Some artworks on the net could be called *net works* in that they are self-contained virtual spaces intended to stand on their own as art. Others are *networks* in that they require the use of the WWW communication and collaboration potential in order to make the art. An example of the latter can be seen in the work organized by the 7-11 Mail List called *Desktop*, which uses screen shots of the list members' desktops to create a work of art. Some of the screen shots seem candid; in others, the artist has clearly attempted to construct an identity through the arrangement of his/her desktop (Baumgärtel, 2001). In the *Collaboration* section of *Jason Hunter's Home Page*, I have a similar project. However, rather than use the desktop screen shots to make a collaborative work, I simply hijack them (by signing them with my stylus and emailing them back), effectively appropriating the contributor's identity and reconstituting it as my art.

Another example of an artwork that makes use of the collaboration of others as well as the confusion and overcrowding of the Internet is Alexej Shulgin's piece called *Refresh.* In this project he convinced users to use a relatively unknown aspect of the refresh command that sends the browser to a different page. He was able to create a chain of home pages of people who did not know each other personally and whose interaction was linked only to the refresh command. Such experiments are ephemeral, and barely comprehensible, but possibly represent the most important art on the web today. (Baumgärtel, 2001)

Cohen, Frank, and Ippolito (2001) created a web site that plotted an argument that they had. The plotting showed where they agreed and disagreed. It thus gave visual form to the breakdowns of communication that occur on a regular basis on the Internet (flaming). The project was also interactive since visitors to the web site can control the amount of details given as well as the pace of the argument. Another project on their web

site is the archiving of the *Ada'web* site. However, rather than simply archive it and fix it in time, they altered it and made it more interactive, thus questioning the concept of archiving art that exists within the fluid and changing landscape of the Internet. In the *Collaboration* section of *Jason Hunter's Home Page* I have archived the web site of a large online organization in a similar fashion. In this case, I am also questioning the ownership of electronic data.

One of the most interesting possibilities of the Internet is its ability to reconstitute digital information and turn it towards other uses. This phenomenon can be seen in my *Internet Drawing Machine* and, to a certain extent, in *Jason Hunter's Inclusive MFA Show.* A precedent can be found in Shane Cooper's *Anchorman,* which collects real time news broadcasts sent to the Internet. The data is re-conceptualized in terms of poetry. The same sort of thing can be done with other data. (Shaw, 2001)

Ken Feingold's *Séance Box Nr.1* creates a place for exchange in which the limits of each participant's role can only be transcended with an alternate conception or reconstruction of identity. The project necessitates that participants come to a new understanding of the nature of communication in a digital environment. In this work, a digital screen has been projected onto the wall. It depicts a realistic floating head which is a computer agent (artificial intelligence). Also in the room is a telerobotic puppet that is controlled with interfaces located in a different room (but they could be anywhere in the world). The movers of the robot can also see the room it is in (with the agent) and speak through its mouth. Thus, a tele-present, real person communicated (through a robotic avatar) with a locally present virtual person. The gallery visitor was in many cases unable to tell which of the two conversationalists was more human. The work, in its final iteration, will use actors to run the telerobotic sculpture that will read what is more or less a script—one that activates the agents' most realistic responses. (Feingold, 2001)

Perhaps one of the starkest illustrations of the way in which digital information can be reconstituted can be seen in the work of Sei Makoto Watanabe (2001). He created *Fiber Wave III,* which collected information on wind patterns in various cities and then displayed them online as the rustling of virtual objects. Wind is (in reality) invisible and

is only seen in terms of its effects on the body and other objects. The site then went further by showing the effects of solar winds on the objects. Finally, unrelated phenomena, like the world's economic situation, could be translated into digital data and then reconstituted as wind. The web was effectively being used to make invisible phenomena visible.

My *Streaming Performance Art* is an illustration of how the Internet has democratized and transformed the surveillance camera into the web cam. The web cam provides us with a delicate network of posted visions. It allows the mass voyeur to dislocate space. Data has dissolved geography. This can also be seen in Masaki Fujihata's *Impressing Velocity*, which allows the viewer to navigate a remote web cam that has been attached to a model train. (Shaw, 2001)

A variation of the instantaneity of the web cam can be seen in Jeffrey Shaw's Televirtual Chit Chat that allowed two players in remote galleries to view what one another was projecting onto the gallery wall as well as work collaboratively to create word sculptures. Similarly, in Agnes Hegedus' *Televirtual Fruit Machine*, two players in distant galleries were able to collaborate to put together a puzzle that was being projected onto the gallery wall. (Shaw, 2001) Not only do these two projects show examples of the use of synchronous online communication, but they also, like many other Net Art projects (including my own), place a premium on collaboration.

But not all Net Art is focused on communications and the World Wide Web. Olia Lialina (2001) keeps only her last will-n-testament on her WWW page. This is because she believes that the WWW is like the asphalt of the Internet in that it covers all of the information with a uniform and relatively predictable surface. On the other hand, FTP allows one to more deeply experience the journey of the network by breaking through the ridged surface appearances of the WWW. However, it must be remembered that none of the projects above come even close to rivaling the collaborative ventures that have been created in the video game industry.

*Jason Hunter's Home Page* also includes a number of interactive games. Of course, the games created by artists are often abstracted and convoluted in the ways we have come to expect from fine art. A precedent can be seen in the work of Chihiro

Minato (2001) who created an online video game of sorts. The player makes six choices, which appear on the screen in the cracks of a turtle shell (like those used in divination-the subject of the artwork/game). The player is searching for a hidden key which, when found, allows him/her to navigate through the chosen images. The aim is to reproduce the experience of the process of divination—through interactive technology.

Lev Manovich's (2001) work is also extremely concerned with the concepts of games and computer space. He created the Freud Lisssitzky Navigator, a prototype for a computer game, which treats cyberspace in a new way. It is also an exhibition, a narrative, and even a way to navigate through the history of the 20th century. It is an experiment bent on investigating and analyzing new media. It uses the forms of software interfaces and computer games as both the subject and method of investigation.

Not all net art is as interactive as these games. Some elements of my work are only a little more interactive than traditional imaging. The number of online galleries of electronic art appears countless. Aside from those obvious examples is Motohiko Odani (2001) who created a web project that portrayed an abstracted view of a beach in which the waves roll in and then roll out again. The waves may not even be recognized for what they are. The work created the same kind of tension we experience when we consider how a waterfall, through constant motion, appears to be frozen in time—or when we imagine how a teardrop in space would remain suspended rather than drop to the ground. The result is meditative. The only interaction is with the content of the work. All other interactivity has been excluded despite the fact that it is Net Art.

Our technology always seems to provide only a figment of past ambitions and a hint of future possibilities. Therefore, "The history of net.art is a history of work both constituted and debilitated by the particularities of its momentary technological conditions." (Shaw, 2001, p. 172) This can be seen in all aspects of Net Art. However, one of the greatest limits is in its ability to be displayed in a gallery. Shaw and Weil (2001) created a project that was an attempt to integrate the physical museum space with the display of information space on the World Wide Web (and the accompanying conception of interactivity). A flat screen was mounted on the museum wall, and a number of Net Art web sites curated by Shaw and Weil were described along a trench

that ran along the wall. Using a wireless keyboard, one could move the screen along the track over the descriptions of the web sites where they could then be viewed, navigated, etc. In this way the museum visitor was allowed an interactive experience with virtual space at the same time that he/she had a real experience interacting in a real museum space. This was a solution (albeit expensive) to the problem faced by all net artists who find themselves showing in a gallery. The necessity for such interventions depends on the art in question. Art that is designed for and accessed by the World Wide Web (Web Art) is to be seen on the computer screen. The use of projectors, alternate host structures, and non-traditional interfaces for this work may be necessitated by circumstances, but it should be remembered that this is not the natural environment for such art. On the other hand, Net Art that is not reliant on the World Wide Web is more likely to respond to such interventions.

Of course, there are many different opinions about what constitutes a good use of the Internet in art. To resolve some of these issues, Randall Packer (2001) created a *Telematic Manifesto*, which was a call for dialogue over a list serve by telematic artists. A web site accompanied and guided the conversations, which were then edited and archived so as to form the manifesto of an art style—consistent with the art manifestos of the past. Telematic art synthesizes art, culture, and telecommunications on a global scale. It promises to change and renew art through an inter-connectivity that catalyzes aesthetic, technical, and social transformations. The *telematic Manifesto* reflects directly back on the manifestos of all earlier art movements that had as their goal the same sweeping ambitions to affect change, but all of which went unfulfilled in their ambitions, predictions, and promises.

The attempt to integrate and uplift society through collective computer-based action is not unique to telematic artists—scientists have had some of the same goals in the past; for example, Weiner's theory on cybernetics, Licklider's man-computer symbiosis, and Engelbart's networked information space (which would supposedly boost the collective human IQ). These scientists created the theoretical impetus for many of the experiments with telematics that have taken place. The *Telematic Manifesto* therefore, of necessity, is a cross-disciplinary and integrative document. Some of the themes of

telematic art include transformation, aesthetics, virtuality, spatial collapse, temporal boundaries, and rapid change. (Packer, 2001)

My work is (for the most part) Net Art and, therefore, it does not attempt to distribute messages to an audience that is outside of the creative process. I am not attempting to give meaning to a work of art, after the fact, for others to consume. The net artist creates a system of communication and/or manufacture that constitutes a cooperative enterprise to transform the observer into a participant in the creation of meaning through collective action/research. (Packer, 2001). Shulgin and Bookchin (2001) claim that Net Art is self-defining—based on the malfunctioning nature of the Internet (its original function was not to promote art...).

It is in this, the camp of the Net Artist, that I situate my practice. Net artists use the Internet to attempt to breakdown the disciplines of art that they consider outmoded. They try to maintain independence, reach a substantial audience, emphasize communication, create dialogue, have fun, defy entrenched theories, create temporary art, and work autonomously. For net artists, realization is more important than theorization. They reach the elusive goal of narrowing the gap between everyday life and art. They practice the death of the author by elevating the artist to the status of the art institution. In other words, the web site itself is more important than its author is. Net artists form inclusive cross-cultural communities, invest in their work without material goals, collaborate without regard to appropriation, and emphasize communication rather than representation. Their work emphasizes immediacy, immateriality, temporarily, processes, and play. The movement of Net Art has been from the initial overcrowded zone of the World Wide Web into real world networks and structures. This movement uses parasitism as a strategy for the promotion of Net Art, and Net Art as the strategy for removing the boundaries between private and public spheres. This is because the Internet becomes the all-inclusive medium for production, publication, distribution, promotion, dialogue, consumption, and critique. Therefore, the artist is also the curator, pen-pal, audience, gallery, theorist, art collector, and museum. (Shulgin and Bookchin, 2001)

There are several different modes of Net Art active today. These include content based, formal, ironic, poetic, and activist. Furthermore, there are some identifiable

genres such as subversion, net-as-object, interaction, streaming, travel log, tele-present collaboration, search engine, storytelling, pranks, fake identity construction, interface production/deconstruction, ASCII art, browser (or other online software) art, form art, multi-user interface environments, CUSeeMe, and email (list, IRC, ICQ etc.). (Shulgin and Bookchin, 2001). My Net Art is content based (with ironic and activist tendencies) and it relies primarily on the themes of subversion, pranks, and fake identity construction.

Institutional recognition is now beginning to transform Net Art into its own discipline with all of the usual accouterments (theorists, curators, historians, etc.). This means there is a movement from impermanence to materialization as Net Art finds its ways into galleries and is being archived. Therefore, the relationship of Net Art to institutions is fragmenting and multiplying. Net Art has taken the following stances with regards to institutions: distancing, adversarial, challenging, subverting, mimicking, attracting, rethinking, and cooperating. Net Art has relations to corporate culture since artists need to constantly follow in the footsteps of corporate production in order to keep themselves current, both technically and culturally. On the other hand, corporations also use the approaches and messages of net artists in order to promote their products. (Shulgin and Bookchin, 2001)

There are a number of promotional techniques that net artists employ while avoiding traditional forms of publicity and self-aggrandizement. I use all of these techniques, including avoiding affiliation, creating my own mythology, contradicting myself periodically, being sincere, attempting to shock, subverting myself, subverting others, and maintaining consistency in my work and image. The image of the net artist is basically a construction, and is itself part of the art. (Shulgin and Bookchin, 2001) Net Art emphasizes the individual's contribution as a result of the way Net Art is distributed horizontally, which negates the dominance of one viewpoint. It also promotes the return of the artist as artisan because organizations of artists are formed without the use of actual names, and because institutions of art are bypassed. Instead, these artisans aim their messages at products, media, and ideologies in ways that are not expected or invited. The artisans' work does not need to be legitimized by the label of "art" or

"politics." The Internet is the place for such artisans who believe in the urgency for constant communication. (Shulgin and Bookchin, 2001)

**IDENTITY**

Much of my work is about a postmodern conception of identity as multiple and changing rather than singular and fixed. It is also about the ways in which computers have played a major role in defining and disseminating these kinds of postmodern ideas. Some people have suggested that computers may be similar to drugs in many ways. Both can be addictive and can alter one's perceptions. In fact, the people who make use of computers and/or drugs are simply called users. But drugs are external to the user whereas the computer seems far more internal. When one participates in web art, one experiences the cybernetic state of mind. This altered reality is different from the psychedelic state of mind because of the lack of a body. Virtuality is an out-of-body experience. In this sense, the analogy should be seen in terms of seduction. We are engrossed in computers not because they give us something false, but because we are drawn to what we are missing. People are drawn to computers for different reasons; but, in short, it has to do with the fact that the computer contains both the fragments of someone else's mind as well as projections of our own. It resolves two seemingly opposite fears—the fear of intimacy and the fear of being alone. People use computers in ways that reflect upon their thinking and personal style. We use computers to construct our self-image (Turkle, 1995). As a result, computers have brought major changes to the social fabric, including changes in fine art.

Distributed and emergent models of Artificial Intelligence (discussed below) have supported Lacan's view that the self is a place of discourse with non-permanent structures. The Internet has also contributed to this view because people build the self online by cycling through multiple selves. This can be seen in Multi User Domains (MUDs), which are a fusion of the role-playing game culture with the video game culture. They originated as text-based worlds where players play at constructing their worlds, identities, stories, drama, etc. The worlds have objects and spaces described by players and written in code. MUDs bring difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation to identity. "MUDs thus become objects-to-think-with for thinking about postmodern selves." (Turkle, 1995, p.185) Other postmodern aspects of MUDs include

parallel narratives, displacement of the body, distribution of the solitary author, and multiple de-centered selves without limits.

In MUDs, play can be used in psychologically constructive or damaging ways. Players can discard characters that are ruined, flawed, or useless, and they can have fresh starts. Characters often embody attributes desired by the player. Some people get stuck in the MUDs and never learn to integrate their virtual selves into their real life identity. However, slippage and convolution of the identities is much more common than not as one cycles through various identities. MUDs are parallel lives where players' real lives are anonymous, allowing them to work on underdeveloped parts of their personality. In other words, one's play becomes one's identity. (Turkle, 1995)

Nowadays, it seems that fragmentation has supplanted alienation (Turkle, 1995). Alienation requires something central from which to be alienated. Since the self is not central and whole, alienation is replaced by identity crisis. Computers allow us to investigate this crisis in concrete ways through simulations that allow us to explore fragmentation and multiplicity. The crisis of the signifier has been eclipsed by a new kind of understanding that emanates from play in virtual space. Play with fragmentized identity is central to many of my pieces. On *Jason Hunter's Home Page* there is a BBS that includes postings from no less than six individuals, all of whom are fictional/alternate iterations of my own identity. These characters engage in a convoluted, schizophrenic conversation over a period of two months. The fact that other "real" people also post is evidence that online identity can be very misleading. These characters were first developed as the artists in the past exhibits section of my fictional gallery, *Studio 690.* Even then, they were all actually representations of myself because the examples of their art were all non-representative pieces from my portfolio (i.e., images that no longer seem to reflect my style or taste as a result of the changes and fragmentation in my own identity and art practice over the years). Even when the art or writing on my web site appears to be more honest, it should be noted that far from depicting the "real" Jason Hunter, the work is actually carefully constructed to present a construction of one possible Jason Hunter.

*Jason Hunter's Home Page* along with *Steaming Performance Art* are two of the most narcissistic projects I have ever created. The web site is akin to a complex self-portrait, and the performance art is an invasive surveillance of my in-office activities over an extended period of time. Home pages and web cams are used to acquire membership status in the network. One must exchange (sell) the self in order to gain admittance to this particular club. This is why it is difficult to find any warmth, pathos, or truth of the subject in these works—compared to what we imagine to discover in the self-portraits of the past. The postmodern is characterized by texts that do not contain simple subject/object relations. This is referred to as the breakdown of the signifier. Meaning can be found somewhere outside of the object. The meaning of my web projects does not lie within some real conception of my identity because they do not deal with the anxiety of the subject. "This shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject." (Jameson, 1984, p.63) This brings an end to the centered self, i.e., ego, pathos, personal style, and feeling. This is not to say that things like feelings do not exist in my work; rather, they become free floating since they do not reside within us and are examples of kinds of euphoria (intensities).

According to Lacan (1968) the unconscious is a falsehood because the truth can be found elsewhere in the body, memories, and semantic evolution. What we think of as the unconscious is really history—that which has happened and, as a result, has left some imprint on us. According to Lacan "...the unconsciousness is the discourse of the other...." (p.27) Our desires find their meaning in the desires of the other. This is not because the other holds the key to our desire, but because our desire is simply to be recognized by the other. Words do not exist without responses of some kind. Words must be heard. They convey the meanings of all of the individual functions of the subject. In short, Lacan describes how for people, the world of words is the world of things. "Man speaks therefore, but it is because the symbol has made him man." (p.39)

In the past, stability was important; but now flexibility (in business, health, government, family life, etc.) is important. Now our "saturated selves" contain many different kinds of identities that are wholly our own. People adopt bits and pieces of

others' identities to construct new ones, thus helping to form a shared identity. "People form their identities through the mass culture, more than through the local culture and family, and in the process of doing this, people tend to adopt the prefabricated identities that are marketed through the mass media and advertising." (Josephson, 1996, p.173). *World Wide Web Photo Booth* illustrates how identity becomes convoluted by digital technology. People desire not only to find others on the web but also to find themselves. However, the network is too vast to represent everyone equally; it is more likely to edit the surfer's identity than to reflect or archive it.

Mass media is used to navigate an external mental space because the media packages and supplies us much of what we know about the world. Our identities are, in many cases, mediated through technology. Direct experience is becoming less and less common. While television acts as a shared perception, computers act as a shared expression. Television and computers work together to shape an externalized group consciousness that is highly textured by technology (Josephson, 1996). All of this multiplicity and collectivism can be debilitating if one is unable to control the various selves in any common purpose. Technology helps us to achieve this integration of selves. Creating a home page is one way to integrate one's various facets and interests. According to Turkle, (1990, p.261) "Today, people are being helped to develop ideas about identity as multiplicity by a new experience of identity as multiplicity in online life." This leads us to respect all of our personality facets as well as those of others. The breakthroughs that have been discussed above have occurred as a result of simple online text-based virtual reality. As computer power increases, we can expect even greater changes. The industrial age depended on exterior conformity for the purpose of forming economies of scale, but the information age requires interior conformity for the smooth flow of information. The self must be able to "plug into" the network psychologically—this entails a change in identity. Furthermore, with interactions taking place anonymously and at a distance, everyone is to be considered the consumer, criminal, and competitor (depending on the interactions). My *World Wide Web Photo Booth* illustrates how everyone and everything needs to be normalized—to ensure the smooth flow of information. (Nirre, 2001)

## CULTURE

We may have once thought of culture as an inherited body of knowledge, a dimension of theoretical reflection, and a symbolic system. But now culture is generated through the medium of culture itself (media like advertising). This is because all significations have become cyclical. What we now have is a Lowest Common Culture (like the lowest common denominator). This is a set of correct answers that all cultural consumers should know. The ultimate form of this is displayed on TV quiz shows where the object is to select the correct option on the basis of cultural programming (not on the basis of thought, which requires time and is penalized). For example, all good citizens are supposed to know that Andy Warhol is the answer to questions about Pop Art, just as Steven King is the answer to questions about horror films. It doesn't matter if one has seen a Steven King film or knows what Pop Art is. Understanding is extraneous to the consumption of culture in the same way it is to the choice of the correct brand name. What we now call culture is more like life insurance. It is a fail-safe to remove some of the complexities that arise from experiencing the real phenomena. (Baudrillard, 1998) The disintegration and modularization into subcultures results from the revolution of well-educated minds faced with the monotony of a mass-culture and the toxicity of market economics. But the economy reacts by throwing off its production/distribution concerns and focusing on the research/marketing aspects needed to keep up with the proliferating subcultures. (Nirre, 2001)

The reason we now have a Lowest Common Culture is because we live in an age where we must constantly navigate through an over abundance of information. Creating deep meanings that require complex levels of understanding may be a misuse of resources. My art works from the notion that the way to produce real (applied rather than theoretical) meanings is to reduce them to catch phrases that are easily consumable and repeatable. Profound thought is of use to a very limited number of people. I acknowledge that, "Computers would not be the culturally powerful objects they are turning out to be if people were not falling in love with their machines and the ideas their machines carry." (Turkle, 1995, p.49) This works similarly to the way Freud's concepts (that dreams and

slips of the tongue were evidence of an unconscious) disseminated themselves. Freud's popular, consumable ideas carried him into everyone's lives, even to people who had never been psychoanalyzed or read his work. Similarly, people buy computers for their utility; but along with it, they may learn new ways of interacting and end up questioning and changing their ways of knowing. They may get Internet service to enhance their ability to retrieve information and communicate; but they could also end up exploring new and multiple roles for the self, thus questioning and changing their entire identity and culture.

Ideas periodically sweep through our culture, affecting changes in all areas of human endeavors and leaving previous theories disintegrating at the backs of our minds. However, often the theories are applied in ways and to situations where they don't really belong. The theories are evoked as pseudo explanations in the popular lexicon—explanations that communicate something real but also border on the ethereal. (Smith, 1996) For example, the computopian theory sees the Internet as the cure to all of our problems, the beneficial bomb that explodes and releases us from the evils of the world into a paradise where we can all enjoy ourselves as we see fit. But such a theory depends on the equal access to the technology—a goal that is far from being attained. Until such a goal is reached, only members of certain cultures and social strata will be able to live in the utopian Global Village (Giannetti, 2001). Therefore, my work is not computopian. I use digital technologies to point out that that there are no solutions to life's complex problems—this is the tragedy of the seriously minded. The bored, postmodern eye uses technology to search out an escape route. I use technology to provide one.

There are many reasons why my work does not overly stress the utopian dogma of web art. Technology is a tool that can be put to many uses. In fact, much of what is done with the Internet is not very positive at all. Furthermore, in the past there have been unforeseen consequences of every technological/social innovation. Only limited attempts have been made to rectify the problems which cyberspace may cause. Albert Einstein prophesied that an electronic bomb would follow the nuclear bomb, and this bomb would use time and information rather than radiation and energy as its destructive principles. Perhaps we can see the beginning of this bomb in the de-localization of industry,

unemployment, computer viruses, etc. It's hard to predict what kind of accident this bomb will unleash because it will be a never-before-seen kind of accident. But there will surely be an accident, just as there has been for every other major innovation (boats sinking, trains crashing, reactors melting down, cities burning, mines exploding, etc.). The size of the accident is comparable to the size of the phenomena. Perhaps a solution can be found if we remain mindful of the ways technology is being used (as narcotic) and caricatured (as global freedom). (Virilo, 1995)

The computopian theory is also embodied in the oft-used term: *information revolution*. In the last half of this century, it has become apparent that knowledge in any form can be reduced to mathematical data. This information can then be manipulated in different ways and reconstituted in different forms. *Jason Hunter's Inclusive MFA Show* illustrates these phenomena. The highly charged and personal artworks created by my peers are reduced to digital information, altered slightly and then used for my own devices. The world appears to consist of nothing but information. We have retooled our institutions and even our selves to adapt to this new conceptualization of reality. The information revolution has already changed the vocational landscape: most people work with information rather than in manufacturing (or agriculture—that revolution has long since passed). The difference between my work and that of my peers is that while I am working with information (like most people nowadays), they are engaged in a process of manufacture. The digitization and appropriation of their work is my way of subsuming them to the information revolution. The act of forming the theory leads to its acceptance. That is why the information revolution will eventually achieve dominance over all other theories of culture—perhaps at the expense of obscuring some of the social problems that have arisen from new technology. (Smith, 1996).

Today's cybernetic subculture may merely be a market preparation for as yet unknown technologies. This is analogous to the variety of experiments that were taking place just before the development of movies. How could the inventor of the Rotoscope have known what the TV entertainment of the 1990s would bring? Therefore, to be computopian is a mistake. Market forces are controlling the evolution of computer use towards the post human. In the current chaos, uncertainty is the rule (Smith, 1996). The

fact that matters have gotten so complex and confusing has led to the multiple attempts to define our postmodern culture.

Jameson (1984) believes that postmodernism is a cultural dominant which includes a range of coexistent subordinate features, in contrast to modernism which created homogenates that obfuscate difference. Postmodernisms are characterized by populism manifested through our information revolution that has a strong relationship to today's multinational/global capitalism. Capitalism requires an image culture for two reasons. Images provide a spectacle for the masses in the form of entertainment that both stimulates buying and provides distraction from social inequities and injuries. In *New Improved Communism* I have created a commercial which shows how strange it is to see the same devices being used in the service of Capitalism's rival theory, Communism. Susan Sontag (1983) notes that, "Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself. The narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumption requires the unlimited production and consumption of images." (p.366) Images also provide surveillance for the power structure. This is used to obtain the information needed to keep order, exploit resources, and wage war. *Pervasive Government Surveillance* pokes fun at the way in which power structures use images and their attempts to justify these practices.

Postmodernism seems tame compared to modernism, which was called ugly and subversive. However, the post-modern movement is accepted despite the fact that its defiance, psychological squalor, obscurity, and explicit material are far more extreme than any modernist revolution. Jameson (1984) believes that this is because in the information age, aesthetics have been linked to commodity and thus the traditional notion of aesthetics has become obsolete. The need for fresh, new, novel goods places a premium on chaos and experiment and provides institutional support for the postmodern. As a result, loaded images proliferate in our culture to the extent of information overload. Most of the digital images I have created could be described in these terms. They contain extremely exaggerated messages, some of which are experimental to the point where the image itself becomes deliberately awkward (e.g., *Work in Progress*). In many cases text has been used to make the images even more loaded.

The creation of loaded work with an exaggerated kitsch-like quality is one way in which my work fits into to our postmodern mythology. Mythic culture in the West was supplanted by science. However, people have always created myths because they create a common culture for exchanging and understanding values. For example, Josephson (1996) suggests that many people have refused to accept evolution because the story of Adam and Eve satisfies their need to feel different from other animals and plants so that they can feel moral about exploiting the natural word. While this claim is certainly open to debate, it does illustrate a possible way in which we might have used myths to support our culture's values and needs.

Mass media reintroduces the myth in a way that does not compete with science. Science remains responsible for scientific fact, but mass imagery reintroduces myths as carriers for values and ideas. We can now experience myths as collective, lived experience through the media. However, the most enduring myths are not so easy to identify. They are pieced together out of the fragments of records of experience. Grand schemes are being compiled from the visual fragments of videotaped, filmed, and digitally generated experiences. The computer completes this process through the drive towards interactivity and artificial intelligence. Both of these phenomena can be seen as attempts to project intelligence onto the shared external mind that we are creating. Mass communication and digital technology are already changing the ways people think. This trend will no doubt continue as technology advances. At some point we may even look at the way we think now as being less than conscious since interactive technologies may allow us to live in each other's consciousness. (Josephson, 1996)

The technology of Modernism spoke to people of their place and identity, but today's technology does not. The TV and computer resist interpretation as objects. They carry the image rather than become it. Digital technology allows me to focus on my message rather than my media. Paintings will always be, in some way, painted—digital art is made of information and so the possibilities are far less limited. My work is not about production but rather reproduction or even the process of reproduction. My work reproduces my ideas, which I acknowledge as the sum product of our media culture as it has been digested by my mind and then regurgitated into my web space. The fact that I

use digital media is, in this case, besides the point because "...our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism." (Jameson, 1984, p.79)

Artists could use the Internet as a tool for change, but much of that change would only be virtual, existing in the networks. It would be inaccessible to many people and only be of use to Internet users (some of whom have actually given up on their real lives). Proponents tout computers as solutions to many equity problems, but the technology remains elitist. Underprivileged classes tend to be excluded due to lack of education and capital. We are only at the beginning of the age where people will use these communications tools to facilitate real change (for example, *The Hunger Site*, located in the links section of *Jason Hunter's Home Page*). Perhaps in the future, people will use their online lives in more culturally constructive ways (Turkle, 1995). However, this doesn't seem possible given the sheer enormity of the information age. My work suggests that using technology in playful ways—for personal amusement and escape may actually be the best use to which we can put it. This is because people with financial/political interests control the most powerful technologies. Those who wish to use technology will need to liberate it from such concerns. However, such forays have always tended to be marginalized by the highly edited messages that are now perceived as truth. (Lovejoy, 1989)

## DIGITAL MEDIA

Any media choice will have profound effects on an artist's work. This is equally true for digital media. My work, which uses this media, has become bound up in issues relating to the production/reception of knowledge, agency, appropriation, and innovation. There are many false perceptions regarding the nature of electronic media. Such media are far from being cold, scientific, rational tools. Many artists (including myself) find digital media exciting, possibly because we believe they provide us with new and diverse options for artistic creation.

It can be difficult to distinguish between the producer of information and the recipient of information when dealing with digital media. That's because our roles can change as a result of the supply of, and demand for, information. But this is not a classical system of exchange because what is being exchanged are entrenched signs and symbols that have become more or less unchallenged in terms of their meaning/lack of meaning and/or their value/lack of value. Producers (who choose what to produce) project these signs outwardly based on their experience as members of a mass-receiving culture. Receivers (including those who have a role in production) project these mass media signs inwardly as a result of being caught in a ceaseless flow of communication—inward projection of cultural signs is the survival mechanism for functioning as a member of a complex abstracted mass/society. (Lischka, 2001)

Digital technology and the Internet are tools through which people can assert their agency in a mass-media culture. An example of this agency can be seen in the many file sharing networks which people use to trade and exchange their digital possessions (which often don't actually belong to them, i.e. piracy). Even more obvious is Ebay. This online phenomena bands individuals together to create a giant virtual mall which is seriously cutting into the commerce of "real" malls. All this is possible through the power of mass agency.

However, the belief that the information revolution will provide us agency through mere access to information is not accurate. As Foucault (1977) has pointed out, a lack of access is not the limiting factor when it comes to human behavior. Forceful restrictions and prohibitions are not the mode of control used in our society. People

exercise control of themselves through self-surveillance. They do this as a result of social pressures that they come to terms with through discourse. The Bentham's Panopticon analogy applies equally well to online behavior because of the awareness of possible surveillance. Our image culture turns "...what is done with cameras in private to narcissistic uses—that is, to self-surveillance." (Sontag, 1983, p.256) There are enough cameras in many cities and homes to completely capture the events of some people's lives. *Streaming Performance Art* provides me with the agency needed to broadcast a constant steam of information that I have created/edited. This is not a criticism or critique of the over abundant self-surveillance in our culture—it is a testament to the need many people have to assert agency through technology. Oddly enough, through such a lens our actions seem almost perverse and criminal yet at the same time extraordinarily banal. This is because we accept that images go beyond mere representation. The surveillance camera actually changes our behavior: rather than making our lives appear as exciting as professionally edited lives, surveillance causes people to "dumb down" the script of their daily lives. (Smith, 1996)

The individual is not abstract; he/she is concrete and must strive to be more than a mere figment of mass society. Therefore, individuals strive to become involved in the molding and forming of society in accordance with their own agenda. The presence of so many personal web cams, like my *Streaming Performance Art*, is testament to the need we have to be producers rather than just receivers of our culture. While we can't communicate with the entire mass-culture, we can become involved in exchanges that, nonetheless, help to further the cultural discourse. The individual thus becomes a mediator of cultural logic. She/he not only projects received messages inward but also reflects them outward, possibly reshaped and reordered in accordance with her/his own priorities. Individuals become mediators who help to connect receivers and producers in their own way and, in the process, create new intermediate representations of knowledge. (Lischka, 2001)

The postmodern mediator uses the monitor/screen as the vehicle through which to absorb a vast quantity of messages and images. He/she is driven to do this by her/his curiosity and the pure joy of absorbing information. In the process some of us can

become adept at decoding the complex layered images that we experience. We learn the complex languages that are needed to decode the images and distinguish between their layers of meaning. The individual can see through the calculated meanings of images and appearances. We are trapped between two extremes. On one hand, we can accept images and messages at face value, free from deconstruction and criticism. This allows them to exist in their best possible light but thrusts us into a cult-like state. On the other hand, we can pull apart the signs using new media that involve us in a total immersion in the hyper-real world of images, texts, and messages. This leads to an endless deconstruction and a state of madness. Neither of these options is particularly appealing so we adopt a compromise. By becoming mediators of information, we are able to exist in-between the two extremes. We absorb information, partially decode it, reassemble it according to our own personal understanding, and send it back into the stream of communication. This is the activity that is taking place in all of my artwork. (Lischka, 2001).

The dual nature of producers/receivers in contemporary culture may be one of the reasons that traditional fine art is sometimes unappealing to mass audiences. Artists are aware of the image reading power of our mass media educated populace. I believe that artists are forced to create ever more complex and confusing messages in order to set their work apart from the common rabble of images and predictable understandings of visual meaning. The unfortunate aspect here is that while these messages appear confusing, they are actually just convoluted expressions of traditional cultural fare. Why?—because the fine artist is also a receiver /producer of media messages. For example, if we siphon through the abstraction and convolution of transgressive art, we find that it contains the same messages present in the pop subculture Gothic. Unfortunately, esoteric fine artists often do not reveal that they are also receivers of a common mass culture, but rather suggest they are the sole producers of an elite language. For example, I have noticed that artists sometimes blame their failure to reach an audience on the audience's lack of understanding. This denies postmodern individuals of their agency by not allowing them to be mediators of the artist's message. My work allows the receiver to survive within the pervasive flow of logic that engulfs us. It is

accessible and entertaining rather than inaccessible, with false pretenses of being profound.

Because it is digital, entertaining, and aimed at a general populace, much of my work is, in a sense, striving to be *cool*. The popular definition of *cool* apparently indicates that it can be everything and nothing at the same time. It is wrapped up in images of digital production as well as rebellion. Certainly a number of my images contain themes of rebellious nature directed at the University of Calgary (*My Blue Period* and *My Summer Vacation*). Cool also seems to be associated with consumer culture at the same time as individuality. Consumers seek out an understanding of cool as well as a way to purchase it. The concept of cool seems to be ever changing because popular culture is constantly in the process of trying to name who, or what, has this elusive quality. There is a listing quality to cool that can clearly be seen on the Internet (and, by extension, on *Jason Hunter's Home Page*) in terms of the many lists of links to "cool sites." Nevertheless, it appears that cool may, in essence, be nothing more than a prop and a tool for American corporate capitalism. (Rice, 2002)

It has been established that digital technology is cool (even if some of its users may not be). Marshall McLuhan (1964) advocated a (now famous) difference between hot and cool media. Hot media are low in user participation but high in information, thus requiring the user to concentrate intensely on a relatively restricted signal. Cool media are those media that have low levels of definition (in terms of exactly what the user is supposed to do with the media) and, thus, they require a great deal of participation. Participation is an important theme in most of my digital work and, for that matter, was also a theme of my painting. Baudrillard (1993) suggests that cool is embodied in the notion of the electronic discourse (as seen in web pages, email, bulletin board systems) that supplants signification with commutation. In digital communication, signs become commutable because they loose their dependence on referents. Indeterminacy thus becomes the norm at the expense of the production of determinant "real" meanings. It is this pure play of values-related discourse that Baudrillard links to the concept of cool.

Therefore, it is not really that the items which pop culture lists are cool, but rather that the listing of items itself is cool. The items on the list could be easily exchanged for

others. This is the practice of commutating or sampling which is particularly at work in *Jason Hunter's Inclusive Digital MFA Show*. Digital technology has a major role in cool because of the ease with which it can cut and paste excerpts and samples. These samples are not cool in and of themselves, but when taken and used in an attempt to be cool, they are. Again, it is the listing, pointing out and appropriation by commutation that is cool. These phenomena can be clearly seen in pop music as well as the Internet culture. Cuts and breaks are important in this process; they sever the attachments of the sampled item with its alternate associations so it can be recontextualized in the cool list. The sample is not a referent to the original. This is part of existing in a copy culture. This phenomenon can also be seen in the creation of mixed tapes. The tape is more about the person who created it, their identity, and their expression of cool than it is about the artist whose music is commutated from its original location to the tape maker's list. That was, of course, the 1980s version of this practice. Now this is done by downloading music from the Internet and burning it to CD. This is an even more advanced version of the practice since to do it requires very little investment financially or mentally on the part of the list maker. The list maker need not even know the name of the band in order to add it to the list. He/she may have simply heard an excerpt of the song in a movie sound track, commercial, etc. and realized it could be used in the creation of a cool list (Rice, 2002). My appropriation of the work of my peers clearly shows this aspect of being cool. An understanding of, and fidelity to, the meaning of their work is not required in order for me to use it in the creation of a cool list.

The lists of pop culture magazines do not fully achieve the status of cool because they do not mix the referent sufficiently. When mixing fails to take place, the objects on the list are more easily linked to their referents—this is when cool is in the service of capitalism. Being overtly capitalist is not cool because it is anti-rebellious. Therefore, capitalism has not been cool since the days of Adam Smith. Of course, we all know that mixing itself forms a new product to be sold—the difference lies in appearances, not intentions. Incidentally, much critical theory attempts to be cool by being cross-disciplinary and using a proactive discourse which cuts and breaks across intellectual boundaries (Rice, 2002). In other words, critical theory is cool when the writing

references a cool list of ideas and people (e.g., Marshal McLuhan, Walter Benjamin, William Gibson, Sun Tsu, Chaos Theory, Post-Humanism, Pop Culture, Geography, Geology, The Philosophy of Cool, etc.).

Up to this point I have used the term "digital" to refer to a variety of high tech media. However, to come to a deeper understanding of how I work requires a closer look at the meaning of this word. Digital computers originally had to compete with analog computers. Analog used continuous motion and worked with quantities (e.g., how much exposure to light and the resultant amount of chemical reaction in photography). At first, analog was much more powerful. But in the end, the digital computer proved to be better. They have greater precision because they do not measure quantities like an analogue computer—instead, they count values. They also proved to be more versatile because they store data and offer a greater ability to issue commands to a large memory. (Chesher, 2002)

Digital representations operate on discrete values whereas analogue representations work on continued variation. However, text is an example of a digital system that, when made complex, looses much of its precision and becomes analog in terms of a reliance on variation and thus interpretation—i.e., the often-discussed problems with signification. This slippage into the realm of analogue is present in all digital endeavors—especially my art. Similarly, even an analogue system (like my paintings) may contain some digital elements, such as a title or text within the image. In any instance, a representation may function to varying degrees through either recognition/resemblance (analogue) or by subscription to a code (digital). These two modes are never in complete opposition and tend to be homogenous in many ways, despite the privilege which contemporary society bestows to the abstract precision and malleability of the digital. This has created a popular fetish with the word "digital' itself—an obsession which serves only to increase the confusion about how modern machines work, in functional terms, as media-delivery agents (Chesher, 2002). My art is actually highly analogue, and I am a firm believer in something I call the "analogue revolution" even as I continue to use the term "digital" in order to capitalize on the fetish and be sure my work is as accessible as possible.

Nevertheless, "digital" is essentially a misuse of a technical term in a philosophical environment. When people look at a digital image, they can't really tell the difference between it and an analogue image except for the fact that it may be appearing on a computer screen. What is worse, this engenders levels of confusion about how these digital images are created and the differences between them (e.g., raster, vector, scanning, modeling, computer generated, 2D, 3D, rendering, etc.). Digital representations, while different in construction to analogue ones, are not different in consumption. The technical property of digitalism means nothing to the consumer—it is the power to call up representations at will that consumes his/her obsession (Chesher, 2002). The *Internet Drawing Machine* explores this concept. The code at work means nothing to the web surfer as he or she embarks on a virtual journey that is in many ways an analogue experience. It thus seems fitting that such a journey could easily produce an analogue rather than a digital record of the experience.

Even the name "computer" is itself anachronistic. It was a suitable title for the people who originally performed such tasks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was also a suitable name for early computers that were used to calculate bomb trajectories and insurance risks. But computing is not a very good explanation of what people now use these machines for (word processing, image generation, sound sampling, viewing media, retrieving information, etc.). (Chesher, 2002)

The fascination with computing is a vestige of the modernist attempt to cleanse the world with science by collecting information and using it to make computations to support a host of theories that proffered a number of (now) suspect universal truths. This was the artificial quest to promote a certain form of rationality, heavily based on western science, above all other human thought processes. But at the turn of the millennia, we can see that non-computational ways of knowing have refused to disappear and, in fact, have infused themselves into our high-tech culture. The use of terms like "wizards" and "demons" suggests that some of the functions of our computers are related to some ancient black magic, rather than the cold rationality of the modern vision. Perhaps computers are more like invocation machines that we use to invoke whatever it is we desire. But like all spirits, they do not always function in the way we had hoped they

would. (Chesher, 2002) It has been my experience as a developer of web pages and digital art that the processes at work always seem much more complicated than they actually are—that is, up to a certain point, where they suddenly become incomprehensible to almost everyone. The computer artist (programmer, developer, technician, etc.) is like a shaman in that he or she is using simple tricks and gimmicks to appear wise—all the while he/she fears the unknowable aspects of the craft.

The invocation occurs between the CPU and the domains to which it has access. While these invocations take place at a binary level, they are only observable at a secondary order. For example, clicking a hyperlink causes the operating system to pass on a request to the local network, which goes on through a series of TCP-IP networks until it reaches the addressed server. The server responds to the request and sends the information back through a series of routers, lines, and intermediary computers—all in a matter of seconds. For the user, he/she clicked a mouse button and evoked a representation. (Chesher, 2002)

Opening web pages, playing a first person shooter video game, and word processing are not computing (word processing is also not processing, but that is a different story). While these activities may operate digitally on an engineering level, they are not digital for the user or developer: they are dealing with color, sound, and tactile information—an analogue experience. Computers are different from other media not simply because they are digital, but because of what they can do in terms of non-linearity, access to information, interactivity, simulation, and virtuality. These concepts relate to invocation, not computation (Chesher, 2002). It is the total misunderstanding of this that causes some artists to resent technology.

Invocational media make the real world behave as if it were language. The significance is transferred away from how the media works and towards what it reveals. A lever is not significant because of the mathematical formulae that explain it in hard sciences—it is significant because of its load bearing properties. It is significant when a real person uses it to do something real. Similarly, a light bulb is insignificant in and of itself. But we can evoke it to illuminate a room and give significance to everything therein. These simple devices pale compared to modern electronic media that can

perform incredibly complex invocations in rapid succession to the point where the sum total of the activity is hyper-complex. (Chesher, 2002)

Invocation has its dangers. Even though we use computers at a top level, they actually function at a lower, more complex level. To control them requires an ever-increasing knowledge of complex and obscure information—of limited use for most people. Thus, we are forced to use the programs and applications of other people for our invocations; but in so doing, we must conform to their vision of what a user is, and does, as well as how he/she goes about being and doing. Computer applications open up wide possibilities for us at the same time that they homogenize us and obscure certain possibilities through their lack of representation of those conceptions, procedures, and modes. Projects like my *Internet Drawing Machine* and *World Wide Web Photo Booth* are examples of works that strive to break free from the constraints imposed on a developer as a result of the need to use other people's tools and programs. The media as much uses and constrains the subject as it allows her/him to be expressed—just like language. Therefore, computers are inter-subjective technologies of the self, and computer art is based on a new kind of techno-semiotic theory that tries to do more with technology than to simply describe things. My computer art is performative, just like language, because technology (and language) is primarily a tool to get something, and only secondarily a way to understand (Chesher, 2002). This phenomena can be illustrated by the fact that understanding is simply something which you can use technology (and language) to acquire.

Invocations can also operate on a level beyond the first order (the technical aspects) and the second order (the way in which the computer operates in functional terms to get things done). The third order of invocation involves the way they draw upon our cultural assumptions, ideologies, and discourses. Even in the case of electronic mail we can see this functioning. Email draws upon our understanding of the postal system (addresses, in boxes), business communication (carbon copies) etc. Graphics software draws upon terminology from color theory, photographic processes, and even the printing press. My video game, *Red or Orange,* attempts to bring to fore the difference between the common conception of color as opposed to the technological conception. Invocation

causes alarm when it extends into such domains as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and artificial life. My *Twenty Questions* game serves to illustrate the baseless nature of such fears. This aspect of technology is not so troubling if we accept the death of the computer and its replacement with an invocation machine. Invoked space, behavior, and evolution are not nearly so disturbing. It is the misconception that the computer carries with it that final modernist precision, the unquestionable solution, and the right answer that made these things unpalatable. With the myth of the computer's power behind us, we are free to entertain the real possibilities that they bring as powerful invocation machines. We no longer entertain the possibility that we are being given truth or accurate representations when we deal with invocation. (Chesher, 2002)

## IMAGES

Digital artists create work that is image loaded. The sheer number of images that are created for a web site can be staggering. This goes well beyond those that are exhibited as "art." I am reluctant to print these images since doing so gives them a superfluous three-dimensional life that deteriorates their meaning. They belong on the screen; that is their natural context—especially in the case of Web Art. In remaining on screen, the images I have created become part of a vast movement in our image-based culture—a movement away from the graven image and towards the simulacra. Of course, images are printed and displayed all around us. However, to do so in the context of art runs the risk of transforming my images into high tech paintings. The strength of Net Art is its ability to refute such associations. Images are so pervasive now that they no longer simply reflect reality, but rather affect it. This further reduces the need to make images real. That is the reason why I prefer to make and view my images in their most natural and unreal state—the screen.

In all codified systems it is the norm for the new code to repress the older. The digital image thus represses previous forms of imagery. According to Kroker (2002),

> The digital code speaks the sanitary language of culture cleansing, of photography itself at a distance, of the archive by remote control, of the deep-freeze preservation of the image from the 'contamination' of time and history and memory and skin and smells and touch. Photography in a bubble. Memory in cold storage. Images fast-frozen. Perfectly preserved, perfectly coded. Always retrievable, always inaccessible. A psychoanalytics of digital repression.

This sort of spectacle signifies our culture—i.e., where the graven image becomes coded and finally supplanted by the digital. The digital simulacrum makes photographic images superfluous not because it supplants a chemically produced product with an imitation generated by numbers and represented by light, but rather because the digital age makes the image into a new kind of reality. The images of the past copied reality, but in the digital age images are reality. There is no conquest or nefarious strategy at work here. The prolific, omnipresent image simply signifies and constitutes our culture. To rebel against this reality then is to be an anarchist. The digital fetishist, on the other hand, is the one who is civilized. (Kroker, 2002)

According to Kroker (2002) the self desperately needs images to construct its identity. This includes not only those external images of the world seen on the screen but also a host of other image matrices including CT scans, MRI, satellite photography, thermographs, eye scans, and surveillance cameras. The media even precedes our science as we can create simulations and images of things before we can see the actual things themselves, including genomes and subatomic particles. Western society seems obsessed with creating, distributing, and archiving images.

But is the archiving of mass images a question of saving them for the future or of saving the future for the images? The Internet allows us to archive and share all of our imagery. *Jason Hunter's Home Page* contains, buried deep within its structure, almost all of the work I have done in the last few years. Nothing need be thrown out. It is all safely stored, along with many samples of the painted images I used to make. The archiving of the world's images presents the questions of why and for whom. Is this to be the utopian democratic access to imagery or will this be merely another way to control access to imagery for the purpose of maintaining a status quo (profit, control of information, entertainment, and subduing of the middle/working classes)? The digital image must entomb its predecessor in a shrine to imagery itself since the digital image is quickly disintegrating into virtuality. The image is no longer something external to reality because it is both the goal and precondition of existence. Contemporary society is driven by the goal to make images. The image is the precondition as well because individuals in our digital culture are possessed by a desire to be the image—to live up to its impossible expectations (plastic surgery, fashion, etc.) (Kroker, 2002). For example as a painter I had no interest in self-portraiture; but as a digital artist, it is the theme of much of what I make.

Images can be despotic in the way that they seem to demand our attention, but they fail to get it from the bored postmodern eye that characterizes our culture. The bored eye is dissatisfied with reality (the body and the self) and so it strives to ride the currents of the global electronic eye—the image matrix. By making my images interactive, they become more appealing to the postmodern eye because it does not want to just observe the image, it wants to be the image. We don't wish to be the spectators

but rather the actors in images. This is why we can safely archive and bury the images of the past—because they do not allow us this freedom. The bored eye is both the consumer and author of the image matrix. According to Kroker (2002), this is the age of the bored eye, and it is characterized by:

> ...the eye which flits from situation to situation, from scene to scene, from image to image, from ad to ad, with a restlessness and high-pitched consumptive appetite that can never really ever be fully satisfied. The bored eye is a natural nihilist. It knows only the pleasure of the boredom of creation as well as the boredom of abandonment. It never remains still. It is in perpetual motion. It demands novelty. It loves junk images. It turns recombinant when fed straight narratives. It has ocular appetites that demand satisfaction. But it can never be fully sated because the bored eye is the empty eye. That is its secret passion, and the source of its endless seduction.

My images are both narcissistic and depersonalizing. Exotic things are made familiar, and the familiar is made to seem more exotic. When I deal with my own personal issues in my art, I am aware that they will be normalized by the viewer since we no longer consider the experience of events from a personal point of view. Nothing is inevitable or normal because image consumption makes us immune to experiential possibilities. The feeling that we are exempt from the real experiences depicted in images is what stimulates our interest in looking at outrageous and explicit materials. The images themselves further reinforce our feeling of exemptedness, thus alienating us from reality. Things will happen in the real world, but we don't know what or where. To try and live in anticipation of reality is much more difficult than to experience it through images, which are much more stable. Furthermore, in reality, one is the director of one's own observations. In the mass media, the emotion is often heightened due to the passive role to which the viewer is relegated. We have no role to play except to fulfill the screen's obligation that we look and absorb the entirety of a situation in a condensed and often over-stimulating format. (Sontag, 1983). Therefore, we prefer to experience our culture though images. Net Art is morphing all of our modes of perception and concepts of reality into a shared and distributed virtual environment. In these spaces, art is not merely an add-on or a decoration but rather it becomes a defining factor in virtual space altering the very structure and function of the digital environment. (Shaw, 2001)

The last century saw an increase in the legitimacy of images that has prepared us for the changes that are being wrought by digital technology. Images once strove to present reality. However, the more we have looked at images, the more we have begun to see through them. We began to understand that tricks and gimmicks have always been used to augment reality. Now we see this augmentation as our prerogative. We can see through the surfaces of the images, and we can adjust the surface to our own will. Fantasy can eclipse reality as the mode of representation (Smith, 1996). The creation of fiction is thus more of an inevitability than an option within my work.

The modern age was partially defined by the fact that images became a reasonable substitute for first hand experiences. This is partly because photographs purported to directly copy reality. Thus, if we had an almost illegible photo of Shakespeare, it would be taken for the truth of his appearance over any paintings and drawings of the poet. Paradoxically, our increased dependence on representations of reality has coincided with an increased metaphysical separation from them. We considered the image to be co-substantial with its subject and the means by which we can potentially obtain it. My art is educational because it allows the participant to acquire experience in information form. The evolution of images goes far beyond the daguerreotype. Now images can be made of previously invisible things. By including film and video in the category of the image, we can see the extent to which we rely on images for information and experience. Imaging technologies provide a level of control over their subject and allow us to decipher, predict, and interfere with behavior. They provide a record of something with a realism that causes us to believe that it is the real object that has the qualities of the image. Thus, reality itself can be altered because it is composed of a set of endless images. (Sontag, 1983)

One of the reasons why we now tend to prefer images to reality is a change in how we see reality. At one point, reality was thought of as an unchanging universal phenomenon and images were merely its copies. The images could change, but reality would not. However, we now see reality as constructed, contextual, and individual. Both reality and images can and do change. In fact, they often influence changes in one another. Rather than images reflecting reality, it is reality that begins to seem like its own

images. For example, people who experience shock, violence, or tragedy often describe the situation as having been similar to watching a movie. Images translate into experience (Sontag, 1983). When one views a photograph, it becomes the memory since the memory itself has long since faded into the matrix of the mind. Images imprison reality for us and give us ownership of it. The real itself can never be possessed because it exists in the present. The present is too fleeting for us to take purchase of it in any way. On the other hand, the past can be owned in terms of one's identity, memories, and experiences. Even material possessions are really only owned in terms of our culturally defined, imminently historical experience of possessing them. The future is also not purchasable since it is unpredictable. However, to possess the past through images has the effect of alienating us from the real (present), which begins to seem distant and remote.

Rather than thinking of the past in terms of a series of events, we now experience it in terms of reinvention. History is repackaged for the market as images. We crave images of the past that we consume in the form of glossy pastiche (an eternal version of a time period). Postmodern culture is inter-textual in that it contains some self-awareness that the image (art, film, etc.) is one of many versions that refer to each other. When we turn this nostalgic representative function toward our own times, we are left with the problem of creating pastiche of pastiche and images of images. We can no longer believe it possible to represent the reality of the past because we can only understand it in terms of our own ideas and stereotypes. Therefore, the only way we can understand our own times is by "...slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek history by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history..." (Jameson, 1984, p71)

## CONSUMERISM

I have already noted the narcissistic, self-portraiture aspects of my work. Thus, in many cases the advertising themes in my work are tantamount to self-promotion. This relates back to the idea that online we can create new identities for ourselves. The online image I portray and advertise is that of the self-serving egomaniac. I try to overdo this (*Dancing Jason*, my web site banner, etc.) to the point where it becomes humorous. I believe that all people (artists being in no way an exception) suffer from a healthy dose of self-righteousness. This is often seen in terms of our beliefs in the importance of our occupation, contribution to society, etc. By using myself as an example, I hope to show the ludicrous nature of self-important attitudes. At the same time, consumerism and advertising are natural themes in my work for a number of reasons. My interest in creating accessible art naturally leads me to make images and videos of this nature. Furthermore, humor is an important tool of advertisers. Finally, I am drawing attention to the importance of advertising as a form of communication and as a mode of production of western culture. This topic is clearly relevant to web art considering the massive quantity of pop-up ads, spam, and banners that now proliferate the Internet—including my corner of it.

It has been empirically demonstrated that advertising images can actually alter the consciously stated memories of one's life experiences. We approach images in a passive mode. We allow them to enter our minds to be stored there, undifferentiated from what was previously there. Carefully constructed images are designed to make people believe that they have already been to a place, used a product, etc. Mass media advertisements should be seen as combinatory in that they function as a group, on a group. They repeat themes designed to reinforce one another as well as a certain mindset (Josephson, 1996). By creating advertisements for unlikely products (such as communism and government surveillance), my work steps outside of the realm of traditional advertising and can thus provide a momentary glimpse of the importance of advertising in the shaping of our collective beliefs.

New digital technology has played a major role in the development of our image-based consumer culture. Products now fall into the category of the gadget—an item that

is fundamentally useless except as sign. This is not to say that gadget objects can't be used—clearly, some of them can. However, the use is superfluous to the gadget's value as a cultural sign. To understand this, one must only think about the usefulness of the modern furnace as opposed to the post-modern Palm Pilot. The proliferation of gadgetry casts the shadow of artificiality over all objects and, by extension, the entire realm of human interactions. The fascination with newness is what is at its heart. We consume gadgets out of mere curiosity in order to play with their potentialities, combinations, and elements. This consumption is an investment in cultural capital. (Baudrillard, 1998)

New technology also proliferates kitsch, which refers to the abundance of trashy objects that are characterized by mass production and an over abundance of signs. My art is laden with kitsch because of its reliance on copies, imitations, stereotypes, and simulations. The signs are taken from all categories and vulgarized at the level of the object. Kitsch results from our disorganized, over-accumulation of ready-made signs. Kitsch becomes abundant in eras of social mobility; this can be seen in the past as people climbed the social ladder and wished to purchase the trappings of their new status. In an image culture, the illusion of mass movement up the social ladder appears continual and cyclic. In the art I create, kitsch is used to replace an aesthetic of beauty with the aesthetic of acculturation. It functions to translate the social class affiliated with fine art connoisseurship to the artistically disenfranchised. This kind of art causes the elite members of the fine art community to try to reassert their self-importance by trying to set themselves apart from any popularized (kitsch) version of their undertaking. However, all objects can be reduced to their signs and reinvented in kitsch form, leading to an endless upward cycle of social mobility (and a recycling of culture) through advertising and kitsch. (Baudrillard, 1998)

Web art is naturally consumer oriented because it is flexible—in other words, it can be changed and updated so that it constantly remains current in terms of our mass media culture's obsession with recycling itself to conserve energy and carefully manage difference. For example, retraining is a form of recycling that is arbitrary, transient, and cyclical. Technique and skill give way to appearance, self-promotion, and career path. Nature is also recycled. It is preserved in the latest up-to-the-minute packages in parks,

naturalization projects, preserves, and landscaping. Simulations of nature are neatly packaged and periodically updated for the urban populace—as if nature is something that needs to be updated. Nature was never glorified so much as now when it lies in ruin. Some things are consumed, and some are consummated. Our media glorifies precisely those things that are gone or going. As the traditional family structure disintegrates, we pay homage to the family. As children loose their quality of youth, we celebrate the sacred aspects of childhood. (Baudrillard, 1998)

Net Art is conceived as democratizing the once privileged discourse of art. While I work with this audacious goal, I acknowledge that, in reality, such statements are little more than the Net Artist's declaration of his/her own self-importance. Democratizing art is not possible because privilege is part of the discourse. The net effect of Net Art is only to slightly expand the cultural market by providing a fine art pseudo niche that is psychologically accessible to some but not to others. Since membership in an elite is part of the culture of art, the culture has not been properly disseminated when everyone is a member. Consumerism works such that at the same time that we reject elitism, we aspire to join the now disseminated elite class. We do this by marking our allegiance to the order through the consumption of the mass produced art, ideas, or what have you. People become devotees of a "middle brow" culture. We consume it in the same way that other objects are consumed (certain cars, electronics devices, etc.). In fact, cultural purchases are ideologically interchangeable with material purchases. Culture is thus sold to us because it, like all other objects, is subject to a competitive demand for signs and is produced to supply that demand. This is why all culture is part of the same cyclic fluctuations as fashion. This phenomenon applies to all areas of culture—not just art (take, for example, subscribers to Popular Science magazine...). I choose to work within this middlebrow art culture because the point of all of this cultural recycling is to socially integrate people. I would rather naively try to promote functionality in human relations than to delude myself into believing I am a profound thinker—set above the ignorant masses. In my art, I revel in my culture's hyper-functional consumption of all objects and endless self-procreation. (Baudrillard, 1998)

My art is, in many ways, analogous to the prolific image production/consumption that many people engage in on a regular basis in the west. We acknowledge our role in marketing this mass culture through images. For example, in western cultures, when being photographed by a stranger (at a discreet distance), we are expected to neither refuse the picture nor to pose for it. Rather, we are to be accomplices in the documentation of an image reality. In cultures less inoculated with images, the people are likely to get upset with candid photos. They want the photos to depict them in a posed and prepared way—a way removed from reality. They resist the image's dismemberment of reality. We accept that images can and should have an important role in generating meaning for our culture. In fact, we believe that images from all over the world are comparable, which tends to obscure the real differences between cultures. Our culture relies on images/advertising because of our collective belief that there is nothing that should not be seen or recorded/consumed. (Sontag, 1983)

Advertising during the news illustrates how we consume world events through images. The news itself is presented flatly and without emotion. In contrast, the advertisements are directed, exciting, and emotional. Together they create a flow in which the advertisements form the consumption backdrop against which we can mediate and accept the complexities of the word, in edited form. We can consume the news because its charged content has been made bland and mixed in with the insignificant content of the advertisements that have been made appealing. We consume the combination of signs and spectacles. The messages change, but the theme and tempo of the package obscure this. (Baudrillard, 1998)

The medium constrains messages to a format that we accept and crave. The more events are presented as real (reality TV), the harder it becomes for them to actually seem real. We become even more aware that each message actually relates to some other message, not reality. Advertising performs a conditioning effect that insures the incorrect recognition of other mass media messages. The real message of the media is the imposition of ways of thought. This becomes the totalitarian effect of the consumer society that substitutes multiple potentialities and an inter-textual universe of possibilities for a single, lived experience. This distances us from any concept of the real because it is

a move from a signifier/signified relationship to one based solely on the signifier. Mass advertising does not, therefore, simply aim at selling the consumer one product; rather, it aims at selling all products and all messages about products. The act of decoding the message implicates the consumer in the subscription to the code. With meaning abducted by the message, it becomes possible for me to create advertisements that alter the components of the message to create any meaning (promoting my outlandish ideas, as opposed to some celebrity or product). Incidentally, this strategy explains how "...a neo-reality has everywhere been substituted for reality, a neo-reality entirely produced by combining elements of code." (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 126)

Advertisers turn objects into neo-events, and journalists do the same thing with history. In both cases it is a form of myth making that has lead to false accusations of blame. Fiction saturates my art because truth and falsehood are no longer credible issues in mass communication, just as usefulness and ugliness are not critical features of mass consumption. The makers of mass media messages, like other magicians and myth-makers, are engaged in the process of the self-fulfilling prophecy. The mass media makes things true by saying that they are. Take, for example, political polls. Do they merely simulate and forecast an election, or do they determine the outcome of the election? Reality becomes nothing more than the model speaking for itself when we inevitably confirm the veracity of the myth with our consumerism. This myth is confirmed in terms of all cultural ideas, not simply material products. (Baudrillard, 1998) The mass media and the computer are returning us to a mythic culture because they open our mental space for a variety of possible discourses. However, they tend to focus those discourses into the same predictable themes and through the same predictable language. Then, when we are exposed to the same messages from a variety of sources, certain ideas and events take on a sense of inevitability, or myth. A myth needs to have some level of confirmation in reality—otherwise it would be classified as a fairy tale (Josephson, 1996). And that, in essence, explains the use of consumerism in my work—it is how I strive to create my own reality.

## DISTRACTION

I have established that I use technology for the purposes of entertainment and play. However, the creation of humorous videos, video games, collaborative products, and performances also serves the purpose of providing distraction for the spectators and participants in my art. Distraction is about both escaping and about capturing. Thus, simulation, disappearance, and removal are the tools of distraction. Digital technologies are today's form of distraction, but there is no reason to assume that they are more or less distracting than TV, print, or even more ancient ways in which various cultures have distracted the masses. But distraction is not really a sociological event. It's the material infrastructure that is important in distraction, not the subject. The subject doesn't so much engage in being distracted as he/she is subtracted from his/her environment by the apparatus of distraction. This is not to say that there is no biological importance to distraction since, even on a primitive level, it is clearly used by animals in their attempts to eat or avoid being eaten. (Bogard, 2000)

Distraction is practiced and avoided at the same time by the same apparatus. For example, television is a distraction from one's home. But mass media producers attempt to structure it in a way that avoids other distractions (thus attempting to keep one's focus on the media rather than letting it wander to some other apparatus.). Similarly, the church, state, and work place can be distractions even while each, in turn, considers elements outside of its prerogative as the true distraction. The desire of the subject for escape is the power of distraction. A distractive apparatus maintains control by constructing an illusionary route out from its own distractive force. Thus, the way out of the work place is to make more money. The way to avoid divine retribution is through prayer; the way to avoid the power of the state is through prestige. The chance to escape is the greatest bait for capture. Thus, power both uses and fears distraction. It is like a weapon in that it is a tool that can be put to many uses and for many purposes. It is also a tool that can work against the apparatus that tries to use it. Take, for example, the parents who use television as a distraction for their children, to gain some control over them, only to later find that they have lost control to the medium of television. (Bogard, 2000)

According to Bogard (2000), distraction is a self-organizing mechanistic process. It sorts materials into more or less consistent groupings, or layers, much like the geological process of sedimentation. While it may not seem to make sense to compare distraction to geological processes, there are certain similarities if viewed in terms of abstract mechanistic process. For example, the process of sedimentation (in the flow of a river taking different sizes of rocks down stream) acts to capture certain rocks and channel others in an apparent escape—until they reach the sedimentary point at which they in turn are captured. This process is clearly analogous to the process for distraction I have outlined. Chaos theory affirms that such systems are non-linear, non-symmetrical, and self-regulated. While this is a subject for debate, some theorists believe that the workings of chaos theory, while developed for math and hard sciences, can be seen on a sociological level as well. (Bogard, 2000) If this is true then I can assert that the process of distraction may help to explain how some participants are attracted to my art.

The concept of speed is important for distraction if it is to be seen as a matter of escape or capture. This can be seen in terms of Foucault's (1977) analysis of the effect of architecture on social behavior. Much of what he describes can be seen in terms of speed and capture just as in the process of sedimentation. Related to speed is the concept of stealth. Stealth is often a matter of moving faster (the pickpocket) or slower (hiding) than expected. Stealth, as such, is related to the disappearance and invisibility aspects of distraction. In Foucault's prison it is clear that stealth is a major method of control. Distraction generates and coordinates a flow of social energies and elements by capturing and offering ways to escape and by regulating the speed of conceptual movement and the visibility of phenomena. This process deposits the material of our recliner culture because it is a crucial aspect of our social, self-organizing processes. (Bogard, 2000)

Distraction reveals its subject at the same time that it hides the source of the distraction. This is the military aspect of distraction which was clearly developed by Sun Tsu (1963 trans.). These aspects are also clear in Foucault's (1977) model. Distraction is not about essences (being, etc.) or purities of any kind and therefore it does not explain our human qualities in any real way. It operates when there are heterogeneous mixtures and is, therefore, too complex (i.e., subject to the processes of chaos) to explain things to

us. It can postulate certain effects; nevertheless, it is useless to postulate a totality of distraction. It can be good and bad—even at the same time. Finally, rather than view distraction as a unifying and external theory (the modernist trap), it is better to use it to explain specific instances and concrete examples of how it may have functioned. (Bogard, 2000)

The first theorist to note the effects of distraction was Walter Benjamin (1969). Benjamin questioned the difference between the way traditional art demanded individual contemplation and mass art (film) caused mass distraction. The Internet, including the Net Art I create, functions as a major source of distraction. In fact, in the museum setting my work endeavors to distract the patron from engaging in the kind of contemplation which is traditionally expected of fine art. They are encouraged to play with the art, and interact with it. It will remove some of them from the gallery space and into the virtual space. It will sort them, according to their susceptibility to the media and themes. Some may browse quickly through the work refusing to be caught up in it and removed from the museum space. Others may sit down and loose themselves in the network. A few may even go home and add my web site to the list of favorites on their home computer. Since Benjamin's time, it has been common to blame the mass media for the moral failings of the masses as a result of distraction. Benjamin further outlined the concept of distraction in his discussion of habits in the architectural realm. He suggested that most people experience architecture habitually rather than contemplatively. According to Bogard (2000), habits are related to distraction because, "They involve the initiation of repetitive flows, the construction and placement of material blocks, obstacles, corrective devices; the partitioning of space; the functionalization of time, and the normalization of specific behavioral trajectories."

Digital media can also be seen as a habit-forming architecture. Benjamin (1969) showed how film changed the way in which people saw images. They lost their unique and fixed quality (their aura) because cameras allowed a more intense investigation, a sorting of possible views of the subject. Testing became more important than contemplating (testing views, speeds, compilations, trajectories, etc.). The mass consumer developed an ever-increasing appetite for this new vision of imagery—an

endless inspection/examination. Clearly, this is the development of the hyperreal which proposes to reduce everything to this testing—that is, to its signs. But that everything can be reduced to signs is beside the point. What is important is what those signs tell us. Distraction is an important concept here because it is both a signifying and an anti-signifying power. Distraction makes it impossible to control the meaning that patrons acquire from Net Art because it both reveals and hides meaning. It is a sorting machine that obeys no master. It both weakens and strengthens. (Bogard, 2000)

A post modern view of distraction must go beyond the mechanical reproduction, which still postulates an original, to the simulation, which implies a lack of a need for an original. Reproduction only challenges the value of the original, but simulation challenges the need for its existence. My work suggests that online, everything can become art at the same time that art ceases to exist. But simulations are not tests of imagery (ideas, etc.) in the sense that reproductions were—rather, they are a pretest. They eliminate the need for a test. For example, a military simulation eliminates the need to test a battle plan. It tells the results ahead of time. What is the purpose of this?—capture and escape. It is clearly a use of distraction (read: sedimentation) for the sorting of human ideas and behaviors (Bogard, 2000). The military has recently released a first-person-shooter video game, along with an ad campaign, designed for this sorting purpose. It sorts those people with a susceptibility to military ideas and fantasies from the rest of the population so they can be targeted for recruitment. Web Art placed in a museum similarly sorts those people who are susceptible to accepting non-traditional notions of art. At the same time, it removes the power of, and need for, criticism (a much more primitive sorting mechanism) since distraction ensures that no two people will be able to understand the work in the same way. They will each be deposited at different points along the river.

In approaching digital technology, the television culture of the past deluded itself into believing it was uncovering the greatest escape yet but found that digital technology has actually tied us even closer to the flow of information and mass media; it threatens to restructure us at an even deeper level. The Internet, as a method of escape from broadcast media, was a distraction and a trap. Now more powerful networks and virtual

reality are seen as the escape route, and it remains to be seen how distraction will function to use those lanes of escape to maintain its control over us. (Bogard, 2000)

**POPULISM**

I have made several references to the populist notion of my art; that is, the intention that it be accessible to many people who may not be patrons of fine art. There are many good reasons why I have adopted this stance. Far from wishing to envision myself as the outdated individual genius of modern art, I would rather think of myself as a researcher in an entire culture of art.

Piet Mondrian envisioned a world saturated with art. In a sense, his vision has been realized—although not by fine art. While fine art seems to be receding in importance in our culture, visual arts have become of unprecedented importance. We live in a world filled with images and designs. Art can be roughly categorized into two categories. Fine art (as a category) tends to consist of one-of-a-kind objects or experiences that are produced for an intellectual elite. In contrast, popular art aims directly at the cultural demands of the population. Popular art includes mass-consumed images, entertainment, folk art, design art, and advertising. (Josephson, 1996)

Originally, a cultural elite created art for contemplation. However, photography deconstructed the art world. Film and video furthered this process, and computers are the latest evolution of art media. Digital technology makes it possible to create art that does not require any physical form whatsoever and thus I believe we must conclude that art is about communication (as opposed to contemplation of objects). The idea that art is communication proposes radical shifts in the concepts of patronage and social function. Modern art tried to create an aesthetic that deliberately excluded the communication capabilities of technology. It was anti-realism, anti-populist, and anti-reproduction; it was obsessed with individuality. Modernism created this aesthetic through a series of revolutions that essentially eroded its own social and cultural functions (Josephson, 1996). This led to the birth of postmodernism, which brings fine art back into the fold of other visual arts as part of a general cultural production. The position of postmodernism is greatly enhanced by the development of electronic technologies that are too pervasive and too powerful to succumb to any reactionary discourse (Lovejoy, 1989). However, we may yet find that these powerful technologies (the World Wide Web in particular) are not simply part of the postmodern movement. Instead they may actually be leading to a new

(not yet fully defined) age, filled with its own unique concerns (like the post human, cyberspace, and information overload). Ironically, history may write that it was the Internet that put an end to postmodernism.

I accept my place as a researcher of the possibilities of visual art and communication. That's why I try to work partially outside of the mainstream fields of both popular art and fine art; most researchers work partially outside of the demands of the market system and contemporary life, hoping that some of their ideas may find their way into the mass culture. To suggest that popular art follows fine art is misleading. In fact, popular art may more rightly be called the *avant garde* since it is actually moving culture. Popular art receives the most cultural energy, economic support, and critical attention. It shapes our everyday lives. In art, as in science, there is a move away from the pure form and toward the applied form in postmodern culture. Popular art is mass-produced for a large audience in order to satisfy market demands; therefore, it has to appeal to the sentiments and values of the greatest number of people—the lowest common culture. It is the culture's tastes that are projected back in the form of popular art, rather than the tastes of the artist. (Josephson, 1996)

The first postmodern fine art movement, Pop Art, illustrated the problem that fine artists have in remaining in the *avant garde* position. Pop Art occupied a strange middle ground, functioning as a simple part of the cultural exchange while at the same time being about that exchange. Pop Art images came directly from the mythology of the consumption culture. The Americana in Pop Art was merely part and parcel with the American nature of global consumerism. But pop artists sometimes spoke of themselves as revealing the nature of consumer society through their creative inspiration; this worked against their goal to simply depict the world of products as art. This is why I have been clear to point out that my art is neither a criticism, nor a glorification of any of the subjects or media I depict (e.g., advertising). Pop artists, on the other hand, did not so much claim the banal as they did elevate it to the status of the sublime. The problem of art becomes clear. By making something art, the artist gives it a uniqueness that defies its ability to be read as simply an object or event because signs are highly contextual. Artists often delude themselves into thinking there is an essence to the banal that they can

capture in art. Even if they use mass production or appropriation, artists run up against the status of art in sociological terms—a status they are powerless to change. The pop artists tried to adapt art to this new state of affairs by doing what art had traditionally done: illustrating the cultural values of its time. But this is not possible in postmodern culture where values are based on the mass market and mass culture and do not lend themselves to an art practice that simply cannot use objects without changing their meaning. However, Pop Art (and by extension my work) does have a place in the gallery: it becomes about the play of signs taken out of their context to be thought about and studied. In such an environment, it is in many ways not related to pop culture at all—but it does possess a humorous quality of collusion with the pop culture whose signs it takes and alienates in the world of art. (Baudrillard, 1998)

Jameson (1984) echoed these sentiments when he observed that postmodernism sees models of depth as replaced by models of multiple surfaces. I do not wish to engage in critical discourse over expression in my art since expression is associated with individual baggage rather than with social discourse. Jameson illustrated the depthless nature of postmodern art (Pop Art at the time) through an analysis of two paintings of shoes, one by van Gogh and one by Warhol. The first lends itself to a hermeneutic analysis regarding the meaning of the shoes. The second confronts us with the shoes in terms of consumption, fetish, and debased advertising—yet with an exaggerated surface treatment (glitter) that blocks analysis rather than invites it (as van Gogh's vivid oil painted objects do). To say Warhol's shoes have no meaning would not be accurate. The meaning simply resides outside of the image itself. This helps to explain my assertion that the meaning of my work rests somewhere in this text and not within the work itself.

I am not alone in creating work that is intended to critique fine art. In fact, this was a common theme in art long before the pop art movement (above). Cindy Sherman is another example of a contemporary artist whose work critiques fine art. She has turned the camera on to herself, not to create self-portraits, but rather to critique society and art. For example, in her untitled film stills she is an actor playing out the part of some archetype or cliché. She further depersonalized the images by numbering them and giving them "untitled" titles. Similarly, she uses herself as a model in her history

portraits that are intended to reproduce famous paintings. Sherman also used her own body as a stand-in to make her point. She tried to raise herself above the art for which she posed. Interestingly enough, she created these works by referencing images that she found in books—she doesn't like going to museums. (Brain-Juice, 2002)

Jameson (1984) suggested that postmodern art has to engage in a process of cognitive mapping that will respect the enormous complexities of postmodernism. Such art will not call for a return to greater transparency; rather, it will accept opacity. It should achieve breakthroughs that will allow us to position ourselves as subjects and return to us our agency when it becomes neutralized by our social and spatial confusion. In many ways, it is electronic art that has taken up this challenge.

## PLAY

My work is playful. I have always had an interest in play. In my earlier work this interest manifested itself in paintings that were based on games. However, such work may have been about playing, but often it was not itself playful. My current work, on the other hand, is only sometimes about playing (my video games), but it is always intended to be playful. When my work deals with games now, it deals with them directly. Rather than depict games, I create them. Games (which, incidentally, are simulations) teach people to think in active ways about complicated things and to manipulate systems that they do not understand (and that may be based on erroneous information). They encourage the abdication of authority to the game/simulation as well as the acceptance of opacity by the players. This is just like life, which is also composed of opaque models that may be based on erroneous information. One can take an active stance that demands more from games/simulations in order to take advantage of the ability to challenge the built-in assumptions of all models, especially the ones used to make important decisions. Understanding how to play with simulations is a key element of power. Our games imitate life, and our life imitates games. We can use cyberspace to navigate life by coming to understand what the simulation includes and excludes, what it reveals and hides, and what it acknowledges and obfuscates. (Turkle, 1995)

While games and play have always been important to humanity, recent socio-cultural events have tended to make them even more so. Three decades ago there began a shift that altered personal perception. Identity transformed and disintegrated; it reformed in multiple heterogeneous domains that were cut off from our conscious existence. This has lead to greater diversity in our understanding and our ability to accept multiple aspects of truth (Lovejoy, 1989). The search for a single truth is impractical since the more one answers, the more questions one has. This leads to the belief that subjects have infinite interpretations. However, to refuse to interpret is to accept objectivism and a single truth of the subject. Therefore, one must continue to search for meaning in an environment where it is futile to do so. The self becomes a schizophrenic compilation of text. The moment one pins down a meaning, it disintegrates into nothingness. We realize that without context, meanings are nonsensical. Chaos proliferates because

meaning cannot rest—to do so admits an impossible objectivity. In the mind of the subject, meanings hover on the verge of disintegration leaving the subject yearning for the impossible. (Bebergal, 2000)

This madness does not have to be tragic if we accept the value of play without profit. My art is an attempt to illustrate that we can remain in control of our existence if we do not strive to objectively pin it down and accept that play becomes the subject's purpose as he/she delights in the superficiality of surface appearances. According to Bebergal (2000), this play is the only thing that prevents the world from deteriorating into madness. The self keeps meanings alive through interpretation. Since everything must exist within the self, being becomes sacred. This is why my current body of work refuses serious contemplation and the postulation of intense meanings. Rather, it encourages distraction and play; it encourages the acceptance of being without meaning.

My work has evolved to this state partially as a result of my switch from painting to electronic media. According to Turkle, (1995) technology increases the subject's ability to play. She believes that computers give a competitive advantage to those who are willing to experiment, arrange, and play. Because computers allow one to play with ideas and manipulate virtual objects, people are developing new intellectual and emotional associations with their computers. Machines confront us with an interactivity and complexity that blurs distinctions and opacity that frustrates attempts at codification, control, and reduction. Turkle also points out that the physical object (the inside/outside of the computer) is not interesting, so we relate to the electronic object, in psychological terms. Computers are interactive and opaque—just like human minds. Thus, one can play with them in ways one can't play with a paintbrush, printing press, camera, or video recorder.

Artists are certainly not the only people who use computers to be more playful. In fact, many artists resist this use of technology, possibly because their need for play is fulfilled by their artistic production. But for the rest of the population (who often neither enjoy, nor approve of postmodern art-play), computers have become a major source of postmodern play. While early computer games encouraged a modernist deciphering of the logic of the program, they also encouraged a submersion in the simulation. Leaving

the real world behind was needed to gain mastery over the program. By the mid 1990s, new kinds of games emerged. These games were pleasurable simply as a result of inhabiting the simulation. There are no rules, only information and a chance to play and explore! Many of these games (e.g., *The Sims*) are a lot like life. The earliest developments of this phenomenon can be seen starting with the way people play in MUDs. Some people use MUDs to experiment in situations where the consequences are not so high. Technology thus gives adults the chance to experiment in the ways as adolescents. Those who become self-critical and damaged by their addictions to MUDs usually were not stable to begin with. To benefit from relationships on the Internet, one has to bring a self that is healthy enough to do so—just like in real life. The Internet simply affords one access to tools that make it a little easier for some people to form relationships. The persistence of a record of actions for one's online personae allows one to look back over interactions and pick out strengths and weaknesses, etc. Awareness of this aspect also affects interactions and relationships. Online relationships often benefit from a sense that they are limited in commitment, just like adolescent relationships. Online, people tend to project what they want onto others in ways that are difficult in real life because of nonverbal cues and intonations. This leads to exaggerations, idealizations, and demonizations. The chat log often contains none of the feeling that was somehow imagined in the course of its construction. (Turkle, 1995)

Experiments with new virtual genders are common, possibly because some people are obsessed with trying out social interactions from another perspective. The confusion and play around this serves to show our attachment to our gender roles. This process can lead to a great deal of self-discovery. MUDs help us think about socially constructed gender roles. People find that some ways of behaving do not work when they take on a different gender; this may lead to increased empathy. For example, men who try out female roles can learn how insulting constant offers of help are. Some people find switching genders can help them improve their communication style. Playing a different gender can allow one to develop competencies that can be beneficial in real life by providing a greater emotional range. Gender is constructed for both sexes; presentation

of oneself as a less than "ideal" man or woman also leads to self-knowledge. (Turkle, 1995)

Another effect that technology has had on our culture is in the area of sexual experimentation. It becomes easy to have affairs and experiment sexually online because people will try things that they would not in real life. Some people consider online affairs infidelity, and others consider them more like collaborations on an erotic book. Some are bothered by their partners' cross-gender dalliances whereas others are not. Teens are using the Internet to experiment intimately with one another. This is adding a new element to the ways in which they learn about sexuality; it is also adding a new element to parenting. Sometimes cyberspace relationships outrage their participants into feeling cheated, conned, or abused—this is especially true when they spill into real life. Technology is forcing us to reexamine some basic questions about who we are, what we are allowed to do, what constitutes a relationship, and what are our responsibilities. These questions are all framed as a result of our relationships between our real and virtual bodies. Being virtual brings questions of community, governance, equity, and value to which there is no quick fix. But operating from a virtual stance may provide us with some insight into our cultural situation (Turkle, 1995). The play that people are conducting with computer networks is extremely intriguing to artists, like me, who are interested in play. Examples of it can be seen in my bulletin board system.

**INTERFACE**

The computer occupies a space somewhere between the self and the other (the non-self). It is also the ultimate tool of narcissism since it allows people to fall in love with artificial words and artificial versions of themselves that they have created (or have been created for them). *Jason Hunter's Home Page* illustrates an exaggerated version of this narcissism and my *World Wide Web Photo Booth* uses the participant's narcissism as a tool for play. In the early days of computers, their seduction had to do with programming. This was related to modernist fascination with control, investigation, and rational understanding. However, now the seduction is in the interface because "...it is quite common for people to project themselves into the simulations that play on their screens..." (Turkle, 1995, p.31)

People used to have to know command lines, scripts, and tags to do even the simplest things with computers. The interface reinforced the mechanistic qualities of the computer. Now the experience is very different. People are encouraged to interact with technology the same ways they interact with other people because the computer has the same level of complexity. We no longer analyze people or computers—we negotiate with them. My digital art uses exploration as the route to understanding, rather than memorization or analysis. The participant need not be bogged down with technical or aesthetic confusion. He/she is presented with an opaque yet intelligible space in which to play. There was a great debate over which aesthetic (graphic interface vs. command line) was superior. IBM users insisted that it was better to understand and control the workings of their machine (like an old car) where as Macintosh users preferred the simulation that made understanding of the opaque workings obsolete. In the end, the graphic interface came to supremacy because it carries with it the culturally understood post-modern assertion that a search for depth and meaning is futile. It is better to play on the surface, exploring shifting and incomplete meanings, than to embark on an irrelevant and impossible search for origins and structures. The debate was about simulation vs. calculation. The triumph of the Graphic User Interface (GUI) is part of a change in society's conception of what it is to be transparent. In a modernist culture, transparency meant one could see how something works. In a postmodern culture, transparency means

that something can be easily made to function without needing to know the technical processes at work. Therefore, a paradoxical combination of opacity and complexity of mechanisms ironically enables transparency. (Turkle, 1995)

My work is transparent through opacity and complexity in the postmodern sense. I (unlike some web artists) am not interested in making a statement about the convoluted and unintelligible nature of the web. This is because I neither experience the web in this way nor condone the deliberate sabotage of web space for the purpose of making a now outdated claim: that the Internet is unintelligible. I agree that the Internet is far too large to know or understand, but advances in web design, search engines, and network connections make using the web increasingly effective. As a web developer and instructional designer (by trade), I cannot in good conscience deliberately create a bad web page (in terms of information architecture). It simply does not make sense to subvert the effectiveness of the Graphical User Interface (GUI) and return computers to a now outdated state of complexity.

The GUI helped us think through postmodernism. Computers have become the objects that allow our culture to appropriate ideas that had previously been the domain of the intellectuals. Computers have made changes in the ways of knowing with which people are comfortable. Those who are not comfortable with this are now in the awkward position of having to espouse increasingly antiquarian philosophies. Those who still yearn for the command line approach to existence may believe that if we can take something apart and see how it works, then we can put it back together better. They lament the coming of an age where things that are broken are thrown out. They want us to analyze society and fix it, not throw it out. But post-modernists believe that society, like a computer, is too difficult to be understood through the application of a system or theory. In so doing, all we really can do is gain an understanding of the system of analysis itself (deconstruction). Computers have taught us that if we accept opacity, we can learn to navigate it better. (Turkle.1995)

Graphic interfaces encourage us to experience computers at the surface level. We deal with representation alone. We are provided with "... a scintillating surface on which to float, skim, and play." (Turkle, 1995, p.30) We can see the cultural impact of

computers in the debate between advocates of structured programming and soft style programming. For a long time, computers represented the ultimate in formal thinking because they allowed concrete access to their abstracted formal systems. In the 70s and 80s, the hegemony of structured programming functioned as an "epistemological elite" narrowing possibilities and eliminating personal style and difference. This can be seen in terms of the traditional western duality of abstract vs. concrete thinking that consistently argued for the supremacy of abstraction (pure math, pure science). While Piaget (1952) rediscovered concrete ways of learning and thinking, he relegated them to inferior status (childish). This duality functioned negatively towards people who thought in concrete ways valuing negotiation, relationships, and attachment over analysis, discipline, and structure. Advances in computer power and availability have helped to change this paradigm. Now the soft approach and concrete, object-oriented thinking are coming into vogue. Our image-culture encourages the use of an intuition developed through visualization and play. Object-oriented thinking involves a desire to work closer to the project, and it is widely used in our culture, even in scientific settings (Turkle, 1995). Therefore, the refutation of complexity in my work is in line with recent developments in both technology and society.

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Some of my computer games deal directly with the issue of artificial intelligence (AI). Furthermore, there is the prospect that a computer intelligence of some sort exists under the surface of much of my work. The rejection of early experiments (1970s and 80s) with computer psychoanalysis suggested that people believed that computers could never truly understand people because computers had no self. However, enthusiasts suggested that the computer did have a self—the self of the programmer. This is the suggestion being made by my use of AI in *20 Questions*. Furthermore, computers can operate with less bias, intimidation, personal fault, etc. Thus, their proponents suggested that it was psychoanalysis that should change because of the human imperfection within the craft. This is precisely what happened as therapy moved towards behavioral and cognitive approaches. The promise of better computers only served to increase optimism. Scientific reports showing the value of computer therapy emerged and attitudes changed. People treated therapeutic software seriously. They often related to the computer in the same ways they would relate to a human therapist. People are now more comfortable with the idea of computer intelligence because it is compatible with the de-centered minds and multiple subjectives of the postmodern self. (Turkle, 1995)

The creations of artificial intelligence researchers can be seen as mirrors of human identity. The rule-driven theories of the 1950s and 1960s suggested a kinship between the computer and the mind as information processors. While publicly rejected, such ideas did free psychology from behaviorism by suggesting that there was something beyond mere surface appearances. The cognitive sciences developed since people were willing to admit some similarities between human minds and computers. Attempts to distinguish between human minds and computers began to emerge. Searl's "Chinese Room" concept seemed to put an end to the dispute by illustrating that understanding is what distinguishes humans from machines. This opened the door for an emergent concept of AI that suggests that no part of the computer or brain understands by itself. Understanding takes place through the synthesis of multiple fragments of mind. This concept undermined our resistance to machine intelligence and promoted similarities between machine and human minds. Emergent AI feels right to many people because it

reflects our feeling of fragmentation. Without understanding the way the computer works, or the way the mind works, emergent AI may seem acceptable because it challenges the notion that we are predictable, rational, and whole. Advances in psychopharmacology have also led us to be unsure of the boundary between humans and machines. Since drugs can seriously alter our moods and personalities, the integrity of the human mind seems increasingly questionable (Turkle, 1995).

Freud claimed that the self contains a central force or drive (superego). In contrast, object-oriented psychologists (following Lacan) believe in a de-centered system in which processor and process are indistinct. The histories of psychology and AI have followed remarkably similar paths. Emergent AI has served as a powerful metaphor for psychology. The ego is now seen as a distributed system, and consciousness is the device by which this system represents its own actions to itself. (Turkle, 1995) This is done through language, which does not so much inform us as evoke concepts within us. We seek the responses of others; and what we seek from them is the answer to what it is that constitutes our self as a subject. "I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object." (Lacan, 1968, p. 63) If we must loose ourselves in language *like an object* in order to identify ourselves, then it seems credible to believe that computers, as objects, can also identify themselves through immersion in language.

The presence of artificial intelligence online has served to show how far some attempts at AI have gone. But more importantly, they bring to peoples' minds questions about how they should treat a machine. The crucial task of AI creation is the fabrication of the illusion of intelligence so that people will suspend their disbelief and interact with the machine. This is how I use AI and, for that matter, all other technological components in my art. I create illusions of functionality and complexity that are accepted by the participant because nowadays he/she has learned to simply assume that phenomenally complex operations are taking place behind the opaque surface. In many ways the workings of web artists are like the workings of AI developers. We use subtle tricks and gimmicks (like magicians) that play on the average person's acceptance of new ideas about what technology can do (regardless of whether or not it can actually do such things). While traditional AI tried to create all-encompassing programs, emergent

methods focus on the basics. In some cases, this has to do with creating robots that respond to local conditions rather than global goals. In others, the AI is virtual, such as the agents that compile information about tasks and train themselves (through an evolution of sorts) to help people search a database, organize a calendar, or sort documents. (Turkle, 1995)

**POST HUMAN**

As opacity and simulation have facilitated our relationship with the computer, we have begun to accept the idea of the post human. Again, it is our willingness to suspend our disbelief and alter our perceptions of reality that makes the post human possible. We may accept that computers could be, in many ways, human because we imagine that in the future, they most certainly will be. We use a comparison of today's computers with those of the past to extrapolate what the future will bring. This makes it seem less ridiculous to give current technology the benefit of the doubt, i.e., rating it on what it can do rather than speculating philosophically about its so-called "true" nature. When people are willing to give technology the benefit of the doubt, it becomes possible for the web artists to use technology to seemingly do the impossible. Here we see that "Postmodern theory is dramatic; lived postmodernism is banal, domestic." (Turkle, 1995, p.104)

Turkle (1995) explains how emergent AI (characterized above) was modeled after the biology of the brain; it linked together many new ideas including postmodern depthlessness, post-positivist subjectivity, and constructivist experientialism (situated learning). She notes that since computers seem so similar to people (thought, reason, speech—similarities that many other animals can't even boast), we traditionally erected defense mechanisms that pointed towards our affective behaviors as our indefinable spark. However, Turkle found that the latest generation of people attribute both intelligence and consciousness to machines, but not life. She thus claims the machine is a fitting companion and conversational partner despite its lack of life. Turkle also notes that new medical technology questions our uniqueness and even the idea that we are not programmed. We may be live machines while computers are psychological objects, thus making the distinctions fewer and fewer. Many people accept that computers may only appear intelligent and yet they may continue in practice to accept the intelligence of the machine in their interactions with it. Our coming to terms with the intelligent machine shows a pattern of resistance and accommodation similar to the way we dealt with other earth shattering scientific developments that questioned our uniqueness, power, and mastery. The Julia effect (named for an online robot) partially explains our weakening resistance to the humanity of machines (Turkle, 1995). Simply put, it becomes tiresome

in our language to constantly try to explain or differentiate what the machine is doing from what it appears to be doing. It is easier to just accept appearances and move on, so we do. The Eliza effect (named for an early psychotherapy program) also helped (Turkle, 1995). This effect simply refers to our tendency to impart a great deal of our own complexity to anything that appears even somewhat interactive—possibly due to our desire to communicate with ourselves. The interactive components of my work and the Julia effect contribute to the ability of my work to distract the participant from his/her environment. This is why I have referred to the gallery patrons and web surfers who encounter my work as participants rather than viewers. A viewer does not treat the work of art as a psychological object, but a participant does.

The complexity and uncertainly escalates as we try to break the latest boundary and create artificial life (A-life), which is characterized by natural selection, genetic programming, complexity, and self-organization. People are not overly threatened by A-life because it appears harmless (e.g., amoebas on screen), but A-Life researchers believe it will lead to the creation of true artificial intelligence. The language of molecular biology changed how we saw life (DNA). A-Life is no different. We can call it life because that is how it has been defined and we choose to accept it. A-Life is redefining what we mean when we say something is alive. (Turkle, 1995)

A-Life, like most paradigm shifts, occurred at the margin of science. In computer science this was facilitated by the development of personal computers that made it possible for hackers with marginal ideas to work. Better yet, their creations could be viewed by anyone else with a personal computer. In this way, their ideas were easily disseminated and began changing the ways people think. A-Life has made some people feel like gods. It seems possible to create life and intelligence by simply defining what is wanted and setting the computer to become it. This can also give the feeling that the computer itself is the god, creating its own programs while we watch with the same amazement and lack of understanding with which we watch other life forms. All of these simulations of life do not show how life actually works, but they do question some of our preconceptions about such things as mutation and intention. They suggest that global behavior emerges from local rules. This has created the idea that what matters is not

what life is made of, but the organizational processes behind it. Decentralized systems allow us to know the rules but not to predict what will happen. We can understand the actors as individuals but when combined, their total process is incomprehensible. In a way, this is related to chaos theory. (Turkle, 1995)

The *Sim* games allow one to play with the concepts of AI and A-life. Kids who play consider their creations to be like life. They even refer back to the old criteria that if it is life, it can move. But for today's kids, moving means hiding in their disks or leaving their computer via the modem and going to another computer. Movement for their virtual life occurs in virtual space.

We still insist that our biology separates our life from a robot (even if it had a consciousness and intentions). While we resist post human ideas, at the same time we emphasize the importance of DNA as the carrier of our biological intentions—DNA is information of a kind not dissimilar from the A-life creations. Philosophically, we are in a complex predicament. We seem to be constantly shifting our answer to the question "Is it alive?" Essentially, we are becoming comfortable with the idea that there is more than one answer to this question. The answer is not simple, it is not unitary, and this doesn't seem to bother us any more. This kind of thinking and acceptance of parallelism can be seen in our view of our own identities as being defined by chemistry (drugs, hormones), history, or DNA. This is not a mix or a continuum; rather, it is one view at one moment, and another the next. All told, it is clear that it is people who (as a culture) are changing (Turkle, 1995). Web Artists and other users of digital media are capitalizing on these changes in perception to relate to the participants in their art in whole new ways. While these relations may be difficult to define at times, they are no less important. It is clear that the way people are beginning to relate to electronic devices has a major impact on electronic art.

## CYBERSPACE

All web art exists in cyberspace, which is to say it does not exist at all because cyberspace is not space in the traditional sense. Only the meaning exists—the object is inconsequential. Nevertheless, to avoid being overly wordy I will refer to cyberspace as a kind of space. To set a precedent for what it means to work in none existent space, we can find examples of it predating web art. Postmodern cyberspace in architecture attempts to create a simulacrum of the city, town, or world. It frames and captures the real world in its own terms (revolving restaurants and massive mirrors). All told, it is thoroughly pastiche. For Jameson (1984) these spaces also serve to bewilder the individual and transcend the ability to locate oneself in the real world. This, he claims, is analogous to our inability to position ourselves as individual subjects in relation to the postmodern world. The postmodern, through its pervasive reproduction, multiplicity, and omnipresent surfaces, acts to colonize all reality including the pre-capitalist aspects of the self (imagination, creativity, etc.). This extraordinary new virtual space is written in the language of concealment and disguise (distraction). The postmodern sublime is simply the momentary realization or glimpse of the magnitude and complexity of the system in which we are normally simply immersed. This sublime is in stepping into, or out of, the simulation.

Even the once pervasive reality of the community has fallen victim to cyberspace fantasy. Now we create simulations that suggest such community attachment, like franchises that look like neighborhood pubs and malls that look like Main Street. But increasingly our access to communities is mediated by our culture of simulations—we are citizen consumers rather than simply citizens. We retreat further and further into our own homes, piping in entertainment or, at best, traveling somewhere far from our estranged community to find it. Now people hold virtual communities to be the solution to this alienation and lack of contact. This may be because computers find acceptance in many sub-cultures and groups. Attempts to understand relationships between people and computers go beyond the mere desire to understand the object. They suggest our desire to understand the social world. (Turkle, 1995)

In the postmodern world we solve the temporal dilemma by living in new kinds of space rather than throughout categories of time—time was a modernist obsession (Jameson, 1984). We now experience time travel by inhabiting alternate spaces. In postmodern space, parody becomes useless and is replaced by pastiche. This can be seen in *The Karma Series*, which used digitally manipulated photos of bird droppings to create a pastiche of abstract expressionism. There is no one left to parody since the style-based movements of modernism have lost their relevance. Pastiche is like parody, but it is less critical—blank parody. We now imitate the styles of the past not to ridicule them but rather simply because they are there. These dead languages are the only styles we have left and are seen as socially constructed styles now rather than as the products of individual genius. (Jameson, 1984)

The *Internet Drawing Machine* is an exploration of the relationship of cyberspace to real space as well as the concepts of distance and time. This project is intended to show the way in which cyberspace has collapsed distance and time. In cyberspace one does not travel anywhere; rather, one invokes other places instantly. In other words the travel is of a place, in opaque, information form to the web surfer. The traveler is sedentary and the location is locomotive. In the space below I will further outline how travel though cyberspace differs from traditional travel. These differences are the subject of the *Internet Drawing Machine.*

When William Gibson (1984) first conceptualized cyberspace it was not as a media form or a communal space. It was a method in which one could interact with information. But even in this original iteration of the idea there appears this myth that all of the complexity of the world of information can be reduced into three-dimensional terms. This seems a gross simplification of our future when we can already see that information is far more complex than any three dimensional reality. Online virtuality now belies this myth. It uses the concepts of space not as real space but to devour and regurgitate pastiche for our greedy consumption. It allows us to play sports we are not inclined to in real life, revisit cliché visions of the past (medieval cities, WWII etc), mime intimacy, and most often repeat (over and over again) exaggerated acts of violence. Real space remains rather removed from these places. (Nirre, 2001)

Furthermore, there is no real other to be found on the web. There are subjects and objects but no other. Whereas television is a communal activity, the web surfer is alone and locked in his/her own private feedback loop. Real distance uses time to extract its price (the longer the distance, the more time it takes to traverse). However, time is not a factor of travel on the web precisely because there is no distance. Time becomes an access issue online that distinguishes the *haves* from the *have-nots* of Internet culture (speed of connection...). (Nirre, 2001)

The novel *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984) brought light to our postmodern desire to inhabit electronic space along side the computer. Gibson called the computer networks which his futuristic hacker/hero inhabited "cyberspace." Cyberspace cannot be reduced to mere lines of code (despite the fact that this is what it is made of). It embodies something much more important than that because people created it. It contains imprints of individual and collective consciousness. The start of cyberspace can be seen in the Internet. It is a system that generates itself spontaneously and without direction. Its existence is far too complex to have ever been planned. It, therefore, defies attempts to reduce it to mere code. Code implies control and understanding where there is none. (Turkle, 1995)

This is a world with no reality, composed only of the residue of the real, which has been systematically supplanted by information. The world can be transformed into digital information, but we cannot because of our physical bodies. Therefore, we become like living peripherals in a vast machine where our purpose is to provide human intelligence to sustain the network. Whereas in the industrial system we acted as cogs in machines, we are now nodes in the network. But in both cases, the apparatus increasingly develops beyond its need for us. The machine became more and more capable of operating without human guidance (cottage industry > division of labor > factory system > assembly line > automation). Similarly the network, through artificial intelligence, is increasingly becoming self-sufficient, and our role in its maintenance and functioning will continue to decrease (Nirre, 2001). This is especially true since our continued participation in the network (e.g. WWW) tends to homogenize our thinking making us more predictable and easier to simulate and replace. The World Wide Web of

1996 was actually far more complicated, hard to understand, and difficult to navigate then the World Wide Web of 2003.

Perhaps we are nearing the fulfillment of the science fiction dream of entering a digital environment that has haunted and thrilled our collective psyche for several decades (Nirre, 2001). Nirre suggests that the dream of being digital is the final fulfillment of humanity's progressive war against all of our basic animal functions, embodied in a long history of technological and social innovations. Nirre also notes that this would be the ultimate escape from debased flesh and a corrupt and disappointing world. However, we have learned this dream is not possible due to the incongruence of real and digital bodies. Real bodies need real space and distance and they cannot exist in virtual space. The dreams of the past seem quaint and charming now that we are learning that to become digital entails shifts in identity, conceptualization and consciousness, not in physicality. According to Nirre (2001):

> This is an ontological shift of fundamental significance. It marks a vast range of stresses, distortions, disjunctions and transitions across all aspects of the human form. Mentally, it involves converting from a visual to a linguistic modality, from spatial to symbolic orderings, from fixed to fluid viewpoints, and from a centered to a fragmentary model of self. Physically, it involves reconstituting the body not functionally but within the domain of sign systems as a pure symbol, a screen across which difference can play. Culturally, it corresponds to the elevation of differentiation and categorization as central principles. In the realm of knowledge it manifests as a sensitivity to issues of contextualization.

Cyberspace promises the invention of telecontact (touch at a distance) as opposed to the television (sight at a distance) or telephone (sound at a distance). It is a new kind of space with an instantaneous global information flow. It does not so much replace common sense reality as it duplicates it over and over. With more than one reality, one is encouraged to focus on the here and now. This makes sense because disruptions in time, which are caused by cyberspace, can be very disorienting for people. Why disorienting? They change the relationship the self has with the other, with the whole world in fact. (Virilo, 1995)

Cyberspace is changing real space. For example, the instantaneity with which the population can register its opinions has caused major changes in the operation of

government. Some people refer to this kind of instant communication and interactivity on a mass scale as *globalization*. However, this is a somewhat problematic term, if taken literally. Globalization implies an expansion of the concept of *space* when, in fact, that is not what is at hand. It would better be called *temporization* because we are not moving to a one-system space (there are still many different spaces—more now that we add cyberspace) but rather to a one-system time. This is a change in history that is occurring. Previously, events happened in multiple, geo-spatially segregated temporal regions. Now all events happen simultaneously in one massive spatial region—cyberspace. This may be the end of the historical epoch. Thus, in the future it may become increasingly difficult to separate our lived experience into neatly defined units based on spans of time and geography. If so, this would justify of the already applied term, "postmodernism." (Virilo, 1995)

The concepts of distance and time are related. Thus, given double the distance one would expect it would take double the time to cross it. However, in geography there are conceptual limitations to this imposed by physical features such as mountains (slowing travel) and rivers (speeding it, but in one direction). People use spatial transformations to further erode the space/time relationship. These transformations can be divided into three categories: area, linear, and point. Area transformations are the most primitive (riding a horse or burning a forest increases speed throughout the entire area). Linear transformations are more complex (building roads or canals). Point transformations are the most complex (perhaps air travel—which takes one simply from one point to another and no place in between). But this system can also be applied to messages that may also travel through distance and time but without the need for physical presence. At the present stage, we have developed an intricate network of point-to-point communications that branch out all over the world, thanks to the widespread adoption of personal computers and the WWW. (Nirre, 2001)

Cyberspace does not really lend itself to our understanding of space. It is a space in no physical or conceptual terms. There are places on the web, but there is nothing in between them. There are no exteriors to these spaces, only insides consisting of ultra-dense information, which floats, in a non-corporeal plane. Perhaps some day cyberspace

will be an all-encompassing environment within which one immerses oneself. Contemplating this allows us to examine what space is really like when there is no distance. (Nirre, 2001)

Distance provides order to the physical world. One can move among objects, changing one's relationship to them, but their relationship to each other does not necessarily change. Distance makes things visible. By surveying a distance we can see what it contains or could theoretically contain. Distance provides a space between subjects that allows them a neutral zone within which to engage in unmediated interactions. On the web there is no distance; so order, visibility, and interactions are drastically changed. Brand names take on the function of creating order on the web. Advertising and affiliating oneself achieves visibility. Interactions are created within the surfer's mind. But only the adept users of cyberspace understand these things. As Nirre (2001) points out:

> To the novice user it's all terribly disorienting. S/he wanders the menu options offered by the portal, hops to a few big-name sites s/he's heard of and finally, seizing a search engine, boldly slashes a cross-section through the tangled growth and plunges in. But without being able to ascertain where s/he's been, how much of what s/he's seen, what else is out there or where anyone else is, the suspicion soon arises that while s/he's lost in the boonies running in circles, suffering plug-in deficiencies, and battling jack-in-the-box porn windows, somewhere out there the real Internet party is seriously going down.

On the web, messages suffer from a collapse of the traditional time-related functions of communication. While some have criticized this, net users thrive on this dissipation of time. They use the disjointed time to seek out answers and engage in multiple interactions (using a variety of disparate online profiles). In the BBS on *Jason Hunter's Home Page*, asynchronous time has clearly allowed some of the participants to do some major research before responding to the postings of others—allowing them to manufacture illusions about their own identities by making use of readily available information on the Internet. But the increasing advent of simultaneous point-to-point communication also changes the ways in which people relate to one another. They must learn to rely on their subjective judgments to a higher extent so that they can filter out the

communicative advances of fellow surfers who may pose a communication problem. (Tanzi, 2000)

*Streaming Performance Art* uses one way point-to-point communication. It is not a broadcast because it does not go to every computer—rather the surfer must go to the web site and invoke the performance. This also allows participants the ability to interact with the performance piece to the degree that they feel comfortable in doing so—this is a key point. In the comfort of cyberspace participants can browse and view the files in any way they wish—skipping to areas that seem interesting to them by simply clicking on the different files and adjusting the slider of their media player. They can instantaneously bend the real time performance to their own will. Many people are more comfortable interacting with media online than they are in a gallery or other "real life" performance venue. It has been my experience the art patrons almost never spend more then a minute interacting with an art video. This is because it is difficult for artists to compete with media companies in the area of synchronous one-way communication. My streaming performance art is also available in the gallery like a typical art film (but on a computer screen). I have responded to this by creating a volume of video that is so immense and of such varying entertainment value that the sheer prospect of any person watching the entire thing is clearly ludicrous. However, it is no more ludicrous then expecting a gallery visitor to watch even two minutes of a highly finished 20-minute art film! My streaming video is made more palatable then typical art videos by the constant presence of my video in cyberspace, the clear implication that one is not actually expected to view it entirely, and its direct relationship to the web cam phenomena.

Omission, repetition, dilution, and deferral have always been elements of communication and, as such, they occur within my web art. This is because Internet communication is much like written communication. When one writes, one can never be sure what will happen with one's message after it is sent on. In exercising my subjectivity in cyberspace, I do not look at its similarities and differences to real space as negative or inappropriate in some way. Rather, I use these similarities and differences to construct new identities and messages that are revealed through my dreamt-up, multimedia actions. A lack of fixed content, immaterial identities, and paucity of

univocal conversations characterizes communication in cyberspace. Furthermore, time moves from the metaphor of a flowing river to a more liquid conception. Time fluctuates allowing different architectures and relationships to develop. This allows for the building of collective consciousness, which according to Tanzi (2000), is "...composed of a combination of personalities engaged in a task of mutual metabolization; they all meet in an auto-centered and multiversal space, where their psychic expressions are led to modify their existential coordinates in continuation." In other words, the immaterial structures of cyberspace lead communication away from linearity. Time compounds and warps communications, creating complexity and temporal distortions of various (and somewhat unpredictable) kinds. (Tanzi, 2000)

The rules of conversation are changing to a negotiation model rather than a declarative one. My web art makes an effort to negotiate its meaning with the web surfer. She/he is even invited to contribute and participate in the art making. However, one can never be sure how partial, and fictitious, any given identity may be. I cannot assume a direct relationship between the given online identities that may participate in my BBS, photo booth, or other collaborative art and some real aspect of the other. However, we can assume that some aspects of any given fictitious or partial personality will relate in some way to the other. Every interlocutor must use his/her own strategies to negotiate with my web art through the medium of cyberspace. The parameters of these negotiations are highly variable and subject to contextual limitations. In fact, the unreliability of time itself is also a factor in these negotiations. Time is a protocol that must be actively established. But experienced surfers have established common and effective protocols for communication and they carry it out confident that they will be able to deal with the complexity, uncertainty, and multiplicity by modifying the pace and time of communications. Inattention and waiting are common techniques for filtering the confusion of the Internet. Inexperienced surfers will have much more difficulty relating to my art because they do not understand how to modify the time and space of their interaction—to analyze and investigate in ways one could not in real life, but must on the net, in order to survive. The tendency of experienced web surfers not to commit to an online communication in the same way that we do in real life may seem frustrating to

some, but it is a requirement of digital communications. My work does not demand serious contemplation or postulate profound and convoluted meanings because in cyberspace,

> ...indefiniteness forces individual awareness to direct the processes of temporal reasoning through non-coercive, predictive logic. This means that, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, certain conclusions may be reached, but the possibility of retracting remains, should contrasting evidence be produced. (Tanzi, 2000)

Kerckhove (1999) suggests that throughout history, western cultures have experienced the world as observers who are confronted by an external reality. Therefore, our minds and imaginations are separate from reality. Cyberspace is making it increasingly possible for us to externalize the reality that we experience inside our mind. Our thoughts can become tangible, making us active participants in the world of our own consciousness. Moreover, consciousness can be shared with others in increasingly concrete ways. For example, the data glove will expand our imagination's horizon beyond pictorial terms. We will begin to think in terms of the mind's hand rather than the mind's eye. This will likely have radical effects on our touch-sensitive culture. (Kerckhove, 1999)

Cognition is the use of a given mental object's contextual clues to play with the meaning of the object in terms of the self. Cyberspace presents us with the first alternative to the objectivity of the physical world. Whereas the domain of the individual mind has hampered traditional cognition, cyberspace is increasingly allowing us to process cognitive material in collective terms. Over the last century our frontal media has greatly enhanced our ability to gain meaning from abstract, secondhand experience. However, to be fully immersed in an experience has greater impact on us as a result of the totality of the experience. Virtual reality (perhaps the ultimate form of cyberspace) will not only allow us greater access to full immersion in a variety of experiences (such as imaginary, literary, and mythological worlds), but also it will also allow us to experience situations from the point of view of another. The old adage "to walk a mile in another's shoes" will have come into its own. All this is possible already with expensive machines. However, what we have now is parallel cognition—that is, more than one

person's ideas being generated in the same external space. It is possible to envision that in the future, as the technological interface gets closer to the mind and body, we will have a sort of simultaneous cognition in which multiple people could work with the same VR objects and at the same time. In this case, we would be coming close to a computer-generated telepathy. (Kerckhove, 1999)

Some day people may well create virtual reality on the Internet. This may help to make things visible and tangible, but it will not likely create a community or any real distance. Therefore, I would consider it to be little different from the web of today (that is, in conceptual terms). For example, a virtual reality cyberspace may create an artifice of distance, but it would be subject to the code of the program, not to the code of reality. Instantaneous travel and transmutation of the space would be possible, proving that the distance was only a minor illusion. This would be contravened only if the distance was built in to correspond exactly with reality—with no difference whatsoever. This is the nightmare implied by movies such as *The Matrix* where the difference between the virtual and the real appear to no longer exist. It is the lack of distance that sets cyberspace apart from real space, and this is a conceptual difference, not a technological one. (Nirre, 2001)

The subject of identity becomes complex in cyberspace. Perceptions of reality are distorted by the fact that the real body has drastically changed its relation to its environment. One can imagine environments that even alter the relationship of senses to one another. We can imagine environments that are reflexive to the viewer and dominate the senses in ways not currently possible. There are psychedelic and, possibly, psychotic implications here. Perhaps this is why we are already developing a sense of a flexible self that expands to be inclusive, environmental, collaborative, and conscious rather than exclusive, frontal, confrontational, and ignorant of the possibilities for the rebirth of identity though technology (Kerckhove, 1999).

The matrix-like time on the net causes us to adapt to new cognitive approaches that value the short-term memory since it is wise to not take permanence for granted online. The connections on the net are not definite; rather, they are ever changing. The impermanence of seemingly foundational information and space forms a striking contrast

to the permanence that some relatively minor interactions may sometimes appear to achieve. For example, a single off-the-cuff response may remain posted online and turn up in searches for months or years...whereas important web sites with researched ideas and articles may vanish in a way that a print article could not. Bewilderment, conflict, and involuntary displacement have become stylistic innovations used in the context of artistic communication in cyberspace. People need to come to terms with the new modes of socialization and behavioral patterns that are being promoted by digital communication before they can appreciate web art. To accept my thesis, one need not mutate or ablate the ego, but rather accept its voluntary division or separation. A divided ego naturally avoids the sequential, profound, contemplation of fine art in real space and is attracted to the impermanent, playful art of cyberspace. (Tanzi, 2000)

In my work, real time has usurped real space. In the above section I have outlined some of the implications of this. The fact that my work is online twenty-four hours a day, everyday, is a major departure from the spatially and temporally limited practice of gallery showings in real space. Virilo (1995) believes that web art should be seen in terms of a much larger history of transforming space and time—perhaps beginning with the invention of perspective in the 1400s by Italian artists. This was revolutionary in terms of its impact on western conceptions of space. The concept of space in art has undergone many changes since then, but there still exists one major obstacle to the reinvention of space—that is the speed of light. However, this barrier can't be broken; it can only be crashed into. When we finally reach it, we will have completely destroyed the notions of space that ground us to existence itself. New conceptions of space are helping us to approach this barrier; we can already see small signs of the eclipse of space in the workings of cyberspace. (Virilo, 1995)

## SIMULATION

The Internet is a simulation; therefore, so is all of my web art. Simulation has been mentioned several times throughout this text, and for that reason alone it deserves to be elaborated upon. I am self conscious about the fact that my work exists only as simulacra. I am adamant that it remain true to form in this regard since enjoyment of the simulation is in experiencing the opaque—it has already been demonstrated that this is exactly how my art is intended to distract, amuse, and occupy the participant. Surfing the web constitutes the joy of immersion in something we cannot understand. My work celebrates the postmodern victory of surface, play, and simulation over depth, seriousness, and reality. The object is composed out of information; it exists on the screen and in our minds (Turkle, 1995). One of the reasons computers are changing art and culture is because they can easily create artificially processed versions of the real. The fictions I create illuminate the fact that "seeing is not believing" and, therefore, even the "objective truth" is misleading. (Lovejoy, 1989)

Electronic objects are the ultimate simulations because they are copies of originals that do not exist. The copy itself is the original in every sense, and it can be reproduced infinitely—each one being as original as the first. The hard copy of this paper will actually be the debased version of the object. For this reason, I have avoided printing images of my work except to further a fiction of some kind, or to advertise. To exhibit them as debased copies is to remove the power of their potential energy. In electronic form they exist in a permanent state of potential reproduction. This is part of their aesthetic. In the 1980s even those who could appreciate the computational power of the computer were divided on the issue of simulation. On one hand, some things can only be experienced through simulation. On the other, direct experience of reality need not be simulated—and yet it is. (Turkle, 1995)

In some cases, our simulations may actually be more interesting than reality. Reality can be boring, but simulations are designed to capture our attention. In addition, some things in reality are inaccessible to us. Nevertheless, some real experiences carry with them some value that the simulation doesn't and, thus, we should protect such experiences. Simulations skew our concept of reality for many reasons. They tend to

make us believe that rather contrived situations are very real. Furthermore, simulations may seem more interesting than direct experience because they are clear-cut and exciting; this may spoil reality for us. Finally, simulations sometimes are so compelling that they can trick us into thinking we have experienced more than we really have. For example, experiments as another gender online can cause enlightenment, but it is no substitute for actually living life as a different gender, or even cross-dressing in real life. For many simulation users, their simulated life is closer to what they consider correct than their real life. This is not much different from the patient who feels normal when on Prozac. Simulacra, thus, destabilize our conception of where our real identity lies. (Turkle, 1995) Far from being figments or shadows, simulacra have a reality of their own. As technology increases their power and multiplies their effects, it may well be reality that is a mere shadow on the cave's wall (Sontag, 1983). For example, advances in computer technology have already helped to uncover the way some objects in the actual world are constructed. Fractal Geometry can describe a number of natural objects in ways that absolutely describe them. (Lovejoy, 1989)

Throughout modernism, new technological advancements always seemed to be portrayed as the culmination or the ultimate advancement (for example, the nuclear bomb). But advancement did not end, and now we see things as never ending (for example, most people strongly suspect that weapons more dangerous than the nuclear bomb will someday be invented). Similarly, cinema seemed to be the solution to represent the world and to change the way culture functioned and people thought. But such analog media were essentially copies of the world. Digital illusions provide the promise that we can go far beyond copies and develop new ways of representing and interacting with the world. Digital media can transport the illusion as real experience rather than mere imprint. Analog events had to be recorded precisely, and then they suffered degradation after multiple copying. But digital information is an exact copy; it can be fixed if copied wrong. It can be made better or different. Digital information can be copied limitlessly, and copied limitlessly from each copy. Digital information can last forever. What is more, it may be able to completely simulate reality, even to the point of artificial intelligence. And finally, digital information has the ability to be generated

without any model whatsoever. When recombined into virtual reality, digital information allows us to experience a mix of virtuality and interactivity that almost makes the body seem obsolete. (Smith, 1996) The world imagined by Baudrillard is maturing into its advanced stage because of digital technology. However, rather than fear simulations and the hyperreal, many people welcome them as a relief from what came before.

The death of the real (an event which itself is only a figment of our imagination) was recently likened to the events surrounding the Bettmann archive. The Bettmann archive is a selection of photographs that was taken out of Germany by Otto Bettmann in 1935. Bill Gate's private company (Corbis) owns the collection. Gates is having it buried 220 feet underground in a limestone cavern where it will be safe from the ravages of time. In its place, historians now only have access to the digital versions of the pictures (Boxer, 2001). This can be seen as the triumph of the digital simulacra supplanting its original; the original is now not only sacred but also inaccessible and unnecessary except as a treasure for posterity. The simulacrum is the usable reality and the real has been buried.

In the past, simulacra referred to copies of the real, but now it is more likely that a simulation is a model that has no real equivalent. "It is a generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." (Baudrillard, 2001, p.169) Now it is the simulation that is aped by reality. The charm of traditional representations fade as the difference between the real and the simulation narrows to the point where "The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models – and with these it can be reproduced an infinite number of times." (Baudrillard, 2001, p.170) My work exists for the copying (e.g., everything on *Jason Hunter's Home Page*); and as a cultural worker, I exist to copy (e.g. *Jason Hunter's Inclusive MFA Show*). Simulacra have caused existence to become purely operational since referentials have been liquefied by our system of signs, a language of the hyperreal that makes both the real and the concept of the simulation obsolete. We need neither since the hyperreal itself will satisfy all need for discourse including the generation of simulated difference, illusions, and simulation. For example, a person who is faking illness could actually produce some of the symptoms. This is true even in the case of someone who is

attempting to appear mentally ill (by use of hallucinogens, hypnotism, mental will, etc.). Since our medicine works on operational conditions, there is no difference between the "real" patient and the one who is "faking it"; they must be treated the same. Similarly there is no difference between my appropriation of the work of my colleagues and their original work. I can instantaneously acquire it, allowing me to expand my portfolio in operational terms—which are the only terms that matter since all others are subject to the chaos of interpretation.

The history of simulation can be traced through religion. Religions typically substitute representations for a great depth of meaning. People unable to appreciate the meaning itself are content to accept the sign (the word, the song, the image, and the artifact) that purports to carry the meaning. Baudrillard (2001) proposes that iconoclasm developed precisely because authorities began to doubt there was a God. If images simply mask a platonic truth, then they are no threat. If they mask a lie, then they are a threat. To insist their faith was not false, religious practitioners had to destroy images and simulations. But Baudrillard suggests that those who craved the simulations were willing to go on exchanging their images for the depth of meaning, even if there was none. In this case God also is a simulacrum—a system which functions and produces real meaning without reference to anything real. This example proves the power of the simulation—for atheists. Baudrillard (2001, p.173) outlines the stages of the image that have led us to our postmodern state:

1. It is a reflection of a basic reality (sacrament)
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality (malfeasance)
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality (sorcery)
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: It is its own pure simulacrum. (hyperreal)

The first three stages all pre-suppose a system of signs that simulate or dissimulate *something*. The fourth stage (postmodernism) involves signs that simulate or dissimulating *nothing*. This stage leads to a fevered production of the real as a strategy to deter us from contemplating its lack of existence.

The World Wide Web is in some ways a third order simulation. The third order simulation saves this reality principle. The web is deceptive because its pageantry and gadgetry suggest its own falseness in order to make the outside world, which is heavily saturated with simulation, appear real. Furthermore, the web directly mirrors and obviously supports the values and mythology that exist in the surrounding world. Thus, the World Wide Web provides the pedagogical equivalent of a "remedial course" in western global culture. But the Web is not the only example of the third order simulation (Disneyland, Las Vegas, West Edmonton Mall, etc.). When approached by the fully acculturated adult, these institutions appear childish—no more than the basic expression of simple truths. Such institutions are becoming increasingly common because we feed off of them to maintain a sense of difference between the simulated real and the simulated simulation. (Baudrillard, 2001)

Another example of the work of simulacra can be seen in political scandals. This explains, and sheds light upon, my interest in capitalism and politics (tertiary themes in my work—mostly the commercials). Baudrillard (2001) believes that all uses of capital are immoral and unscrupulous because capital itself is the cause of suffering, greed, hardship, inequality, subservience, corruption, violence, suppression, etc. These phenomena can often be attributed to capital because its use (as a system) requires that people have access to differing quantities/qualities of goods and services. Therefore, capital must operate behind a moral mask. This mask is created through the supposed incidents of unscrupulous behaviors. What is important here is that the decrying of scandals is the method by which a false morality of capital is generated. We need these scandals to conceal the fact that there are actually no scandals at all since all uses of capital are scandalous. The moral code is generative and it gains existence only by pointing out selected instances where it appears not to be intact—it is generated through its absence. Even the socialist position, which repudiates class-based injustices, simply hides the fact that capital is only an illusion that is generated from social relations. It is but a figment of our monstrous and phantasmal undertakings. (Baudrillard, 2001)

Because my art exists in a system of simulation, logic becomes permeable. Facts exist only as parts of the models that wield them, depending on the nature of the

simulation. Truths become multiple as differing models appropriate them. Multiple truths are combined against one another (and themselves) to eliminate truth altogether, leaving us with only the negative instance of truth or the acceptance of simulated hypothetical truths (which is more comforting). There is an endless twisting of meaning that results from the lack of depth to truth. It exists only on the surface of the changing simulation. As the facts mingle, discourse becomes circular. But in this system of confusion, "It is always a question of proving the real by the imaginary; proving the truth by scandal; proving the law by transgression..." (Baudrillard, 2001, p.179). Everything must transform into its opposite in order to perpetuate itself by its own denial. Therefore, my work, which is not intended to be fine art, must be shown to actually be fine art (in certain specific ways) in order to proffer the myth that it is not. Crisis is needed to create the alibi for every institution's fundamental lack of existence. This is why it has been observed that my art functions as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is overtly witty and playful while, on the other hand, there exists the sense of a deep pessimism, resulting from my genuine personal belief that there is no *real* justification for most of what I do (or, for that matter, what anyone does). This is why the most effective way to justify anything has always been to point to the lack of justification for everything else.

However, fine art, like most systems, clings to its reality. This is why it becomes impossible to stage a simulation. In a fanatical preservation of the truth principle, all things are operationalized. For example, if someone was to stage a phony bank hold up, they would be drawn into the simulated world of reality. This world would act as though it were a real hold up. Bystanders would really scream, the police would fire real weapons, and someone might really die. Even at the conclusion of the simulation, when the illusion was unmasked, the real world would continue to act as if the hold up was real. The courts would find the perpetrators guilty of a crime and they would go to a real prison. In fact, this crime would outrage the society worse than a real crime. A real crime protests the distribution of the real, but a simulated one protests the real itself. This would be seen as even more irresponsible. Thus, it is increasingly impossible to isolate the simulation from the real (Baudrillard, 2001). My work runs up against this same phenomenon. It displays a conspicuous lack of traditional fine art signs and meanings in

its failed attempt to be popular art. The attempt to create popular art fails automatically, by design, because it is conceived and executed within a traditional institution of art. The institution operates on it in operational terms finding (quite rightly) that it is an art lacking contemplative meanings. The work is thus an affront to the institution. It is much more of an affront than bad art. Bad art fails to achieve a level of *avant garde* genius and thus discredits the institution by suggesting it has failed in its educational mandate. My art is more problematic because it suggests that there is no such thing as *avant garde* genius—questioning the need for the institution all together.

The challenge posed by simulations is not receivable by real institutions, which must operationalize everything. Because power operationalizes the simulation, it becomes impossible to isolate the way in which the simulation works. For example, a CD is not a simulation; it is real music simply because it is, in all operational terms. It is a production of music, not a reproduction. In fact the songs are often so heavily edited that in many cases they can not actually be played (to sound like they do on the CD) by the artists that created them. But the inertia of this force of immersion also makes the opposite equally true. Therefore, the real is equally subsumed within the simulation. Since the two can no longer be dissociated, it becomes impossible to prove the real. To take the "hold-up" example further, all crimes could merely be the simulations of crime that we recognize through the appropriate signs and decoding; these are set up in advance and anticipated in the mode of the crime and its consequences. (Baudrillard, 2001)

In the past, reality used simulation to manufacture signs (religion, capital, etc.) to disintegrate contradictions and maintain itself. Now the simulation threatens reality, which slips into the play of signs it created for its own defense. Reality is no longer a structure, strategy, or a force-relationship as we imagine it used to be; it is merely the fulfillment of a social demand. Therefore, the real in our society functions according to the law of supply and demand. Like religion in the absence of God, reality continues to provide its signs and social exchanges despite the fact that it has no actual existence outside of those exchanges. This is the source of my belief in the futility of creating art and for that matter doing almost anything else. For example, virtually all work is an illusion. Machines carry out most of the real work of our society. People occupy virtual,

work-like positions (like artist, teacher, web developer, instructional designer—and a host of other occupations I have had). We work longer and longer hours, obtain ever-higher levels of qualifications, continue to strike, and engage in social revolutions to try to help counter the reality of the hyperreal. And this is where I return to an allusion made near the beginning of this paper: that I am not an artist so much as I am the court jester. The reverse edge of my playful humor condemns all of us (not least myself) for our need to convince ourselves (for psychological reasons) of the value of what we do. That narcissistic need is what forces us to accept as reality all of our ethereal social and economic undertakings. "Thus the hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real's striking resemblance to itself." (Baudrillard, 2001, p.183)

## CONCLUSION

Jameson (1984), characterized postmodernism as containing "...a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary theory and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum..." (p.57). He believes this depthlessness weakens our relationship to our public institutions (history, community, etc.), creates increased belief in "schizophrenic" structures of the self, and causes one to relate to art in terms of syntax. Jameson also acknowledges the role of technology in postmodernism when he points to "...the deep constitutive relationships of all this to a whole new technology, which is itself a figure for a whole new economic world system." (p.57)

It is not only on the web that we see the ideas of the emergent self, multiplicity, distraction, artificial intelligence, fragmentation, distance, play, consumerism, negotiation, construction, simulation, and interpretation. These concepts are evocative of a large general movement in society. For example, the cyborg mythology plays throughout our culture in novels, video games, movies, and even actual AI experiments. According to Turkle, (1995) we live on the threshold of the boundary of the virtual and real. Like all social changes, this one engenders controversy and tension. But unlike past periods of change, this one is not likely to settle down, due to its fragmented nature. We may not be able to resolve the contradictions of postmodernism and will simply have to learn to live with them. This entails the development of new social discourses based on the self–knowledge that comes from an experience of multiplicity, play, and virtuality.

These discourses are not (for the most part) being developed in response to the activities of fine artists or other researchers. The community at large is changing in response to new technology. Postmodern ideas are becoming popularized in the activities, thoughts, and beliefs of western culture. Fine art may occasionally contribute to our culture, but it no longer has a monopoly in this regard. Now, everyone can endeavor to be a producer of meaning through Web Art. Designation by authority is the method by which one person's production is considered fine art and another's is not. If we remove this flimsy barrier to the *avant garde*, we would find that online, many people are creating post-modern art.

I stand by the value of my work since, for many participants, it is amusing,

entertaining, and humorous. Thus, it fits within a long tradition of humorous artwork. I assert that as play, it has an educational, ontological, and communicative function. I believe the theoretical concepts, which I have used to further expand upon the meanings in my work illuminate the way it functions within a postmodern context. However, if my theory is correct, then much of what I have said about my own work (in an attempt to explain and defend it) could also be said about almost anything on the Internet. Therefore, the Web truly is a medium for populist art expression. In my Web Art and its theoretical defense, I have reveled in the opportunity to co-author this giant collaborative artwork.

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## APPENDIX A

### Humor in the Art of the Far East

A brief look at some of the art produced outside of the basic geographic and temporal constraints of this paper will help establish the prevalence of play, fun, and humor as topics for works of fine art. For example, during the Ch'in and Han dynasties (starting in 221 BCE) a popular game called Liu-po was widely played. This game was so popular that its board became the subject for serious works of art. In fact, the game also became the subject of playful artworks that depicted people having outrageous fun in the course of playing it (Sullivan, 1984). The more dramatic elements of play and humor in Chinese art can be illustrated by the Yipin mode of painting (the "untrammeled" mode). Wang Mo and Zhang Zhihe were two of the inventors of this mid-eighteenth century movement. Unfortunately, there are no works left from this group, but nevertheless, the literary accounts of their practices are shocking. A group of painters would invite spectators to watch them as they consumed alcohol, and then, when they were in the right frame of mind, they would laugh sing and dance while painting with ink on large spread-out bolts of silk. They would even sit on top of the ink and allow themselves to be pulled around the silk—a form of body painting. However, in general, Chinese art was burdened by an official court style; its seriousness contrasted with the more humorous folk art. China was looked to as the source of serious culture in the Far East; this left other eastern countries, like Japan, in a situation where it was easier to create playful art. In the absence of stringent expectations about what constitutes art, it is easier to be more overtly playful and humorous (Tsuji, 1986).

It is possible to pinpoint examples of clearly humorous artwork in Japan as early as the Edo period. An early form of Japanese parody can be seen in a pornographic version of a much-revered artwork *The Tale of Genji Scroll,* (1435). This tradition continued in the work of Iwasa Matebei (c.1600) who created satirical portraits of the time-honored poets Hitomaro and Tsurayuki. He rendered them as beggars with comical looks on their faces. Hinaya Ryuho, a purveyor of toys and dolls, also made artwork that parodied the poets of the past. In 1798 he constructed an image in which a famous Japanese poet rides foolishly about on his Koto as if it were a hobbyhorse. In the same

image, another poet blows soap bubbles and a third paints with his brush in his mouth. The "Nehanzu" style was dedicated to the creation of parodies of scenes of the parinirvana. One of the most playful in this mode, by Ito Jakuchu, was an image that replaced the usual screaming, grief stricken figures with a wide selection of fruits and vegetables. The artist was not only a devout Buddhist, but also a serious vegetarian who operated a vegetable shop (Tsuji, 1986).

There are many parallels between the humorous art of Japan and that of England as a result of their relationships to the predominant (but foreign) styles of art and culture in their respective regions. In Japan, the art of the Chinese was used as a subject for ridicule although, at the same time, it was revered for its sophistication. It was the foreign-seeming elements that were mocked. Soga Shohaku was one of the most respected artists of this genre. His unrefined pictures were produced for the masses. They humorously adopted Chinese themes with his caricature-like translation. Surrealist metamorphosis and illusionist tricks were also common in the art of Japan. This often meant hiding faces in natural forms or deliberately transforming animals by placing them in odd predicaments, mutating them, or intentionally giving them unusual behaviors (Tsuji, 1986).

## APPENDIX B

### Gustave Courbet:
### Paving the Way for Humorous, Populist, Unconventional and Narcissistic Art

One of the nineteenth century's most notable figures was Gustave Courbet. While accounts of this revolutionary artist have tended to focus on his realism as the defining feature of his work, there is, nonetheless, a humorous quality to it (although this requires some investigation to understand). Courbet's work has been difficult to conceptualize in formalist terms. Now, with modernism on the decline and a greater emphasis on diverse methods of understanding artwork, it is actually much easier to understand what Courbet did.

His work was designed to achieve a singular goal: an expression of what he as an artist considered himself and his world to be. In the context of the grand tradition with its classification of art by subject matter, it was, of course, an inconceivable notion that the artist's personal experience of the world could possibly be the motive for painting (although now this is widely held as a common reason for creation). Thus, even his supporters did not seem to understand him; instead, they attempted to view his work in terms of social and political rebellion, which was easy to do in nineteenth century France with it class-based upheavals. Certainly, Courbet disdained the academy and was arrogantly proud of his social class as a rural bourgeoisie. However, his highly criticized narcissism may have been more related to his sense of humor than his ego. His art was deliberately about himself (Faunce, 1988). A willingness to break from tradition and be concerned with one's own ideas is necessary for any painter who hopes to make playful or humorous art. This was especially true within the context of the serious-minded nineteenth century French salon-controlled art world.

Courbet's painting "...transgressed by breaking the code of aesthetic perception." (Faunce, 1988, p.15). It was the refusal to idealize the figures of peasants as either noble archetypes or adorable buffoons that brought ridicule upon Courbet. He insisted on painting them as they really looked. In fact, they were often people he knew, rendered with no idealization or caricature. Thus, his work refused to fit into a code of sentiment,

feeling, and charm demanded from genre paintings. It had none of the usual rhetoric nor the classical compositional maneuvers, yet was painted well. He seemed not to have failed to create meaning, but rather refused to do so in the eyes of his peers. The lack of readable signs that would give the appropriate mood to his subject made them seem disturbing to the point of immorality to his critics. In *A Burial at Ornans* (1849–50), the funeral cannot be read with the traditional language of painting and so appears uncaring. Courbet also broke the rules by painting these scenes very large, which was a direct challenge to the supremacy of "history painting" (Faunce, 1988). By refusing tradition, his work points out how ludicrous the traditions were. It is the work of Courbet that makes images like Jacques-Louis David's *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784) seem humorous. Courbet transgressed so many boundaries that he made the rest of the art world appear ridiculous—that is why he was so hated by his peers.

Courbet broke ground for humorous artwork by freeing the art world from its adherence to a restrictive classical model of painting that was decidedly not funny. His heirs would be able to express their identity as a legitimate subject for art. Since artists, like many others, have humor and play as part of their identity, the steps taken by Courbet (and subsequently others) would lead into the definitely playful (at times) art of the twentieth century. Furthermore, Courbet himself, as a result of his challenging, arrogant attitude, provoked some humorous artistic commentary in his life. The work of many nineteenth century caricaturists was centered on the art of Courbet. Daumier's *Combat des Ecoles* (1855) in which a clumsy, rustic peasant battles a lithe, naked academic with paint brushes is one of the few examples which did not take a stance in opposition to Courbet. Félix Nadar created a satirical magazine lithograph of Courbet that shows his head as a classical Assyrian, a reference to Courbet's conceit and pride (in his looks) and a parody of one of Courbet's self portraits. Monreal drew *Courbet Toppling All the Columns of Paris* (1971), which showed the old artist as a comic buffoon giant knocking over an outhouse. It was in reference to Courbet's alleged link to the destruction of an important monument and symbol of Napoleonic power. While the accusation was not merited, the incident eventually lead to Courbet's imprisonment and exile. Painters also responded to Courbet with satirical rebuttals. Thomas Couture

painted *The Realist* (1865), which depicted an artist sitting on a classical bust and painting in a room full of low objects such as a pig's head (Faunce, 1988).

The fact that Courbet was heavily political in his time can been seen from the many caricatures of him and his work. Many of the criticisms seemed to come from his presumed mission to martyr himself for the good of art. While not always articulate about what he was trying to do, he was outspoken in his intent to change the way people looked at art. Nevertheless, despite this redeemer role, he also became something of a charlatan or iconoclast. The fact that he signed *A Burial at Ornans* in large red letters was considered an outrage and a destructive act against art. It is likely that he was amused by his own rebelliousness in committing acts like this. He must have been amused by the reactions of the critics or he would not have kept provoking them (Gabriel, 1991).

Part of Courbet's iconoclast/charlatan role was an attempt to supplant the "true, good, and beautiful" with what his critics described as his own "school of ugliness." The conservative audience wished to be pictured as beautiful and they wished their art to reflect this ideal world view. Courbet's images mocked them by implying their actual ugliness and the ugliness of their social conventions. Courbet did not try to create an ugly state of affairs, but rather to reveal it. This was too much for his time. Daumier's caricature *Great Admirers of Gustave Courbet's Pictures* (1853) points out the humor of the situation: "While people deplore the ugliness of Courbet's art, they conveniently overlook their own ugliness." (Gabriel, 1991, p.6)

Courbet also had an obvious interest in the erotic, specifically in images of sleeping women as well as in lesbian relationships. Clearly, this can been seen in terms of his opposition to the norms of the art world. In one image he painted a dead woman being dressed for her funeral and then changed the title to suggest that she was a bride. This gives us some insight into his transgressive persona. Certainly, he made some images with frightening appearances. Some of them contain expressions that seem almost too intense for the period. Theorists have linked these works to possible experimentation with mind-altering drugs. On the other hand, drugs don't just create intense and scary pictures – they also can lead to comedic inventions.

In *The Wrestlers* (1853), Courbet used his critical attitude to mock and irritate the conservative socialites of his time. He depicted the wrestlers in an overgrown field recognizable as a place that was actually used to stage many sporting events. This and other details sweep aside anything fashionable from the setting. Courbet liked to be the savage among the civilized. Here he criticized the pageantry and self-importance displayed by urban spectators of sporting events by relegating the crowd to an insignificant distant event. The fight is the subject, not the elegant "wine and cheesers" in the background (Gabriel, 1991). Courbet shows his genius for hidden satire in this image. His pictures often insulted the victims of his humor in a way that left them grasping ineffectively at what it was about the image that really bothered them.

*The Wrestlers* initiated a great deal of humorous caricatures from opponents of Courbet. The art world tried to poke fun at Courbet over the way he depicted the world. However, their mocking seems to turn back upon themselves. The things they poke fun at Courbet for (like hiding the Arc de Triumph or showing the wrestlers as strong, coarse and real) highlighted the ridiculousness of the imagery they were actually trying to defend with its unrealistic, contrived, idealistic, and absurd world view. When they made fun of his pretense to make art accessible to the masses, they actually showed their own fears that their semi-public life would soon disintegrate in favor of a public one. While Courbet intended his work for both the lower and upper classes the caricaturists tried mainly to poke fun at him for the benefit of the upper echelons, who feared in the lower class the makings of another revolution. The caricaturists tried to make Courbet's work look laughable by exaggerating it and claiming it was a caricature in itself. Unbeknownst to them, they were right, but the caricature was of their values. In the process of exaggerating his art to make fun of it, they unwittingly served Courbet's purpose by emphasizing the very points they wished he had not made (Gabriel, 1991).