
THE ART SCENE

A BYTE OF ART

What do “Doryphoros” by Polykleitos and “Decoy” by Aparna Rao have in common?

BY CYNTHIA HORAN



I recently visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. About midway through, I stumbled upon a work called “The Refusal of Time” by William Kentridge. It took up an entire darkened room, with five different videos playing simultaneously. People and chairs were scattered across the floor, and in the middle was a large, moving sculpture, which Kentridge called “the breathing machine”, which perpetually pumped up and down and back and forth.

Noises came at me from every direction, a cacophony of honking, whirring, ticking, and singing, as well as haunting voices speaking occasionally. Images of calculations related to Einstein’s theory of relativity and quotes about the passage of time were featured on the video screens. At one point, metronomes appeared on all five projections, ticking back and forth like a second hand on a clock, except all were slightly off—some seconds

were longer than other seconds. I was completely engulfed and overwhelmed.

Although I didn’t realize it at the time, “The Refusal of Time” is a type of New Media Art. It is a multimedia work, combining video, sculpture, and sound. Many artists began experimenting with new mediums like film, photography, and technology in the late 20th century. Andy Warhol made a five hour and twenty minute long video of his friend sleeping. Robert Rauschenberg helped found a group in 1966 called Experiments in Arts and Technology, which encouraged collaboration between artists and engineers. As technology became more sophisticated, artists continued to explore mediums involved with the television, Internet, or other digital methods of expression.

There are several words to describe art that is related to technology: Digital Art, New Media Art, Computer Art, Net Art, and others. Although each differs slightly in meaning (I will use Digital Art and New Media Art interchangeably to describe the genre overall, and use Net Art as a more specific type of Digital Art), all of them have the same general idea, which is that technology is used in the process of making art in order to enhance it. Christiane Paul, adjunct curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art and author of *Digital Art*, notes, “We need to distinguish between digital technologies as a tool and as a medium in discussing Digital or New Media Art.” The way digital technology is used to make art is often in different ways than how it is used for other purposes, and this is important to determining what Digital Art is. There are several other key qualities of Digital Art, including accessibility and interactivity, which make it compelling and exciting to audiences.

One term used to describe a specific type of Digital Art is Net Art. Net Art is any type of art that is related to or somehow uses the Internet. According to Susan Orlean, a journalist and contributor to the *New Yorker*, Net Art is a valid art movement with ties to Performance Art as well as to “the

Dadaism of the early twentieth century.” Orlean claims that Net Art has changed the boundaries of the traditional art—it’s not “singular, it doesn’t require the artist’s hand, it isn’t necessarily visible, it’s often intangible, and, because it is usually distributed free, it’s hard to collect and monetize.” Orlean specifically describes Jacob Bakkila and Thomas Bender, a duo who began several Net Art projects. Bakkila, a Princeton graduate who also studied journalism at the University of Southern California, and Bender memorably began a Twitter account called @Horse_ebooks and created a series of Youtube videos called Pronunciation Books. The connecting theme between these two projects was that uncertainty of whether they were run by machines or people. Twitter users were unsure whether @Horse_ebooks was an automated machine spewing random combinations of words, or whether there was a man behind the curtain. In “Man and Machine,” Orlean argues that the projects of Bakkila and Bender capture the essence of Net Art—they are available to the public free of cost and depend on social media, like Twitter. Orlean states “technology...has made it simple for net artists to make their work accessible to millions of people almost instantaneously.” According to Orlean, this accessibility is part of the

REMBRANDT'S SELFIES



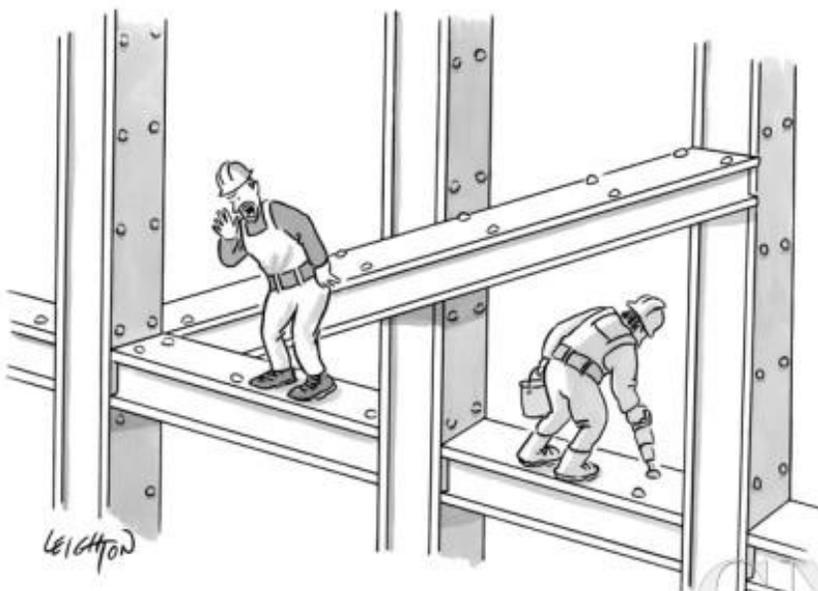
R. Ors

beauty of Net Art.

I agree with Orlean that the accessibility of Net Art is one of its best qualities. Jori Finkel, who has studied at Columbia and Stanford and is a contributing editor to *The New York Times*, describes KCHUNG radio, a forum for artists in Los Angeles, in “Painting on a Radio Canvas.” Painters, sculptors, and performance artists alike use KCHUNG radio to express their ideas. Although through a different medium, KCHUNG radio achieves many of the key qualities of Net Art that Orlean identifies. Participants in KCHUNG radio have no financial incentive, and as Paul states, “I doubt a net artist could make a living right now making art.” Furthermore, and possibly

more importantly, both KCHUNG radio and Net Art are accessible and free.

Accessibility is an important quality of art. The more accessible a work of art is, the more people are exposed to it. For example, I remember visiting the iconic “LOVE” statue in Philadelphia. Everywhere people were taking photos with the famous landmark. Although it’s often used commercially, the LOVE statue is actually a work of art made by Robert Indiana, who was an important figure in the Pop Art movement and recently had an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art called “Beyond Love”. What makes a work like the LOVE statue popular is not that a famous artist made it, but the statue’s accessibility. LOVE statues exist in urban centers across the United States, from Kansas to New York to Maine, as well as in foreign cities, making it accessible nationwide and even internationally. In Philadelphia, it’s out in the open, ready to be posed next to, viewed, and occasionally climbed on by the public. If the LOVE statue sat inside a museum, its reception would be much different. It wouldn’t belong to the public in the way it does now. Although the LOVE statue is actually owned by the city of Philadelphia, it seems that since it is out in the open it belongs to all of us. More importantly, it wouldn’t be as accessible to the public. If the LOVE statue were displayed in a museum, then nobody would propose in front of it and the man who’s late for work wouldn’t



“Escher! Get your ass up here.”

GN COLLECTION

smile as he sprints by. The public's easy access to the LOVE statue is one of its defining qualities which make it special. Put the statue anywhere else, and it would be a different work of art.

If you entered a room in a museum featuring *Imperial Monochromes*, you would glimpse a group of rectangular panels, messily scattered across the wall. As you approached the painting, the panels would quickly "snap to attention" and be in strict symmetry. If you stayed in the room for a while, the panels would return to their former state of disorder, becoming lax, until more movement was sensed and then they would again be in absolute order. This would be one of many interactive experiences you could have while viewing Aparna Rao's artwork. Rao, who has attended the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India and the Interaction Design Institute in Italy, uses technology to create art based on viewer interaction.

Another work of Rao's is *Decoy*, an object with a rounded body, two arms with Mickey Mouse glove hands, and an antenna protruding from the top of its body. As a viewer enters the room, the object will rock back and forth and wave its arms to frantically get the attention of the viewer; however, once the viewer turns to look at *Decoy*, the object will stop moving as if it is no longer interested in their attention, and will instead try to get the attention of the next viewer. This interaction with the viewer makes Rao's art compelling and exciting, and it would not be possible without technology. Rao uses mechanized

structures to make works like *Imperial Monochromes* and *Decoy*.

Interaction with audiences is a common quality of Digital Art. As Elena Abrudan, Romanian professor, literary critic, and essayist, describes, "Reading a visual text that represents a Digital Art work involves interactivity because it means to interpret and build a significance of the text, but also to comment." Collaboration with the viewer is increasingly important in New Media Art. What makes Rao's artwork interesting? It's that the viewer's reaction or presence spurs the next movement of the artwork, creating a conversation between the viewer and works like *Imperial Monochromes* or *Decoy*. Communication, even if it's nonverbal, as with Rao's work, between the viewer and the artist or between the viewer and a work of art makes Digital Art a memorable experience for the viewer. Viewers aren't really viewers at all; they are not observers and onlookers, but instead participants and partakers.

Some may say that it is easier to make art with technology. Anyone can take a picture with their iPhone, and you don't need an art degree to use Photoshop. While this may allow Digital Art to be an equalizer, some object that there is less personal artistic style, and that not everything created on digital medias is art. Abrudan claims that, "Not every image processed in Photoshop is called Digital Art, but only those which involve imagination, aesthetic sense, complex and creative spirit. Digital Art products involve ingenuity and originality, when images not only provide a copy of reality, but be filled with a message challenging the receiver." Abrudan also recognizes that people may criticize the lack of a "handmade" aspect, meaning that "physical artist intervention" is not as much a part of Digital Art. But, Abrudan claims that the difference is simply between "handling brush, chisel, knife and handling mouse."

Nascent artists like Rao, Bakkila and Bender are all part of the digital art movement and some of the most important qualities of digital art are engendered in their work. A divide between Rao's mechanized works and the net art of Bakkila and Bender does



"I don't get it."

CN
COLLECTIO

The Poetry of
Parmigianino's
Schiava Turca

Through July 20

The Frick
Collection

1 East 70th Street, NYC 212-288-0700 frick.org

The exhibition is sponsored by The Frick Collection with the
Foundation for Italian Art & Culture (FIAC).
Participation: \$1000. Advance: \$1000. (2010-11-10)

GATSBY TO GARP

MODERN MASTERPIECES FROM THE CARTER BURDEN COLLECTION

NOW THROUGH SEPT 7

The GREAT GATSBY



The Morgan Library & Museum

A short walk from Grand Central and Penn Station

Madison Ave. at 36th St.
themorgan.org

IN PRIVATE COLLECTIONS



THE YAWN



THE POUT



THE SIGH

exist—while Rao uses technology to make sculptures and paintings interactive, Bakkila and Bender have helped develop an entirely new form of art. However, the use of technology to challenge and collaborate with their audiences connects their work.

Accessibility and interactivity are not just qualities of Digital Art; they are qualities of a digital age. With the Internet, we have the world at our fingertips. Any piece of information can be instantly accessed, whether it's in-depth research on psychology or simply cat videos. Furthermore, we interact with technology as well as with each other through technology. We can converse with Siri, play Angry Birds to our hearts' delight, and Skype with long-distance friends.

Often art is affected by when and where it was made. Cave paintings made 15,000 years ago featured pictures of bison, deer, horses, and cattle—the animals that were the basis of early human life. Greek ideals of individualism and celebration of the human figure were reflected in sculptures like *Doryphoros* by Polykleitos, which aimed to create a mathematically perfect representation of man. In the Renaissance, the invention of linear perspective and its use in paintings demonstrated the “rebirth” of culture and spirit of learning that distinguished that period.

As Dr. Andrea Wolter-Abele, art historian, gallerist, and curator, discusses in her essay “How Science and Technology Changed Art”, many technological inventions have affected art movements throughout history. For example, Wolter-Abele analyzes how the photograph was viewed by artists, and how it helped shape the Impressionistic movement, stating, “Inspired by technological progress in optics, photography, and electricity, artists in the second half of the nineteenth century and in particular the Impressionists, became convinced that the truth of an object could not be recognized in photographic reproductions.” Wolter-Abele claims that mechanization and industrialization had a profound effect on art in the twentieth century. She concludes, “...technological developments such as photography, film and mechanization, as well as the scientific study of light, had brought about radical changes in the artistic vocabulary... A new concept of art came into being.”

The accessibility and interactivity of digital art make it compelling, but they also do more than that. They provide a glimpse of today's culture. Trading in paintbrush for mouse and camera obscura for video recorders, contemporary artists reflect in their work a shift towards technology in society. ♦