

Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction

Photo-Shopping the Real

Taiwan is a country that lives in a schizo reality when it comes to art. The latest digital new media technologies sit happily or unhappily together with ancient analogue means of production and ways of seeing. Notions of what “calligraphy” might be in the age of digital reproduction (see the work of Hsun Yuan) are emblematic of a cultural change that is absorbing the visions of the past without losing the value of its lessons for the future. The fear is that digital technology is a fleeting medium only interested in the present as information rather than as objects. I see that Taiwan is well placed to show the world that art is information plus object. Art is event plus record. What has changed forever however is the value and significance of the analogue image and our ways of perceiving the world in the face of digital technology.

The photograph is dead

The photograph is dead, long live the image. With the invention of photography in the middle of the 19th Century painting was released from the burden of representing the real as a faithful objective record. Now photography itself has been released from the same curse. Digital images have broken the illusion of such a thing as a faithful record of objective reality. The invention of the cool screen-based pixels overturned the hot magic of silver halide photographic grain. Once the measure of legal proof, the photograph has lost its grip on the myth of “the photo never lies” even though photographic realities were manipulated from the first days of the Dagureotype in the 1840s. With the arrival of computer software such PhotoShop in the 1980s all images are now rightly seen as fictions in the business of seduction, public relations and advertising. Even scientific and medical photographs have been released from the bondage of fact and truth. The heavy-weight of objectivity, if it now exists at all, is being carried by DNA, magnetic imaging and other non-visual technologies of measuring and reading reality. Art in general is now free to play with the fiction of objectivity and subjectivity alike.

Digital painting

What is “digital painting” in the age of simulation, fractals and generative “new media”? What do we call those images produced by the popular software applications such as Corels’ Painter? Are they paintings, maps or fields? The professional category “digital painter” certainly exists according to the leading industry magazine MacWorld, who advertises that: “...*Painter* is a must-have package for digital painters, special-effects artists, and multimedia creators who need a wide variety of high-quality digital-painting tools.” (<http://www.corel.com>)

Corel promotes its product as a means to “authentically reproduces the look and feel of handcrafted art” by a process of “emulation” and “transformation”. In short the creative process of being a digital artist is seen in the same light as the alchemist of the middle ages who engaged in a transcendental process of turning base photos into golden masterpieces. As Walter Benjamin noted in the 1930s the “magician and the surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.” (Benjamin, 235) The painter-magician-transformer and cameraman-surgeon-manipulator equation has now collapsed under the weight of digitality. In our digital age both painting and photography is caught up in the deep web of a reality that is both actual and virtual at the same time.

Whereas the photograph is a mode of serial production (potential for multiple copies of the original), the digital image is everywhere at once. A digital image can be streamed from a single server to anywhere on the net at the same time. The term “image” here should be understood as similitude rather than as counterpart, reflection or representation. A digital image exists not as an object but as pure abstract information. Every monitor translates the code slightly differently to the interface in terms of colours, resolution, luminescence and contrast.

Digital Still Life of Apples

To paint an apple today with oils and brushes is to engage in an organic world with nostalgic or perhaps materially re-imagined connotations. An oil painting of an apple today is very different from say Vermeer’s hyper immaculate apples of the 1660s or even Cezanne’s overtly non-photographic apples of the 1880s. Just as Cezanne’s apples were a conscious effort to mark out the idea of an apple as an experience of colour and form in the light of photography’s realism, today’s digital apple sits on a virtual table inside a chat room on the internet. Every new technology of representation from painting to holograms has changed the way we see and think about objects. Virtual reality changes not only the nature of things but also the significance of things and how we experiences them – as signs, values, symbols, objects and images. To many people, the virtual apple may indeed be more real than the painted apple, and the digital image more seductive than the photograph. The old traditional photographic image was painting with chemical reactions set off by light. Digital images are pure electronic light and colour of the screen diode rather than film emulsion.

The term “digital painting” is a term used by artists and designers to describe the process of constructing virtual art that acts out the analogue performance of traditional media. An almost infinite box and palette of virtual tools and special effects can be used to simulate the fluid nature of paint over the texture of canvas, or the smudges of charcoal and pastels on the finest papers.

“Digital painting” is a bit like talking about trains as “iron horses” during the early days of steam power. Pure light and pixels can never be coloured mud and oil, burnt wood or flowing water. Yet within the world of digital appearances – of reproduction, simulation and generation – the image of brush loaded with coloured paint is convincing to the eye, if not materially (or haptically). “Digital painting”

like the steam train is a disruptive technology. That is, the old means of doing things is overturned by a new technology before reality or understanding can catch up. The new digital technology starts out as a parody of the old analogue (from the Gk *parados* meaning a dark passage connecting) modes of representation. In time digital technology will acquire its own terms, and realities of imaging within culture.

The term “painting” will never be the same again now that it has been infected by the virus of the hyper real – a world of code, bits and bytes, genes and molecules. Every painting as object is caught between sculpture, performance art, interior design, photography and virtuality.

Digital simulation offers an opportunity to create images that play with the possibilities of non-linear time and polymorphic spaces that are impossible or very difficult to perform in a traditional analogue studio.

Ironically perhaps, traditional painting has experienced a revival of interest since the arrival of digital technology. Painting now refers not to any allusion to an objective reality or even to some gateway into expressionist ideals but to a performance of effects no less true or false than any other imaginings. The technological dexterity involved in painting (the materiality of surface textures etc) is now valued in a world of remotely mechanised and affected products. That is why we see a revival under the umbrella of nostalgic postmodernism of so called bad painting, naive art and art brut strategies or effects. On another more perverse flight path can be found iconic (beaux-arts) academy painting that pastiches or parodies the counterfeit world of art before or in spite of photographic production.

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The aim of digital painting within a virtual gallery space may ideally be to “move away from linear pieces into a more non linear and interactive experience giving the audience more control over the work” (www.rhizome.org/print.rhiz?2297). The viewer is also a user, the consumer is also a producer – here the direct involvement of the audience changes the aesthetic outcomes or biomorphic notion of on-line painting.

The resulting blurred boundaries between production and reproduction have imploded, playing havoc with our expectations. In the end it doesn’t really seem to matter as long as the experience is believable or enjoyable.

Large file sizes coupled with narrow bandwidth, slow download times, increasing traffic problems and the corporatisation of the web, have favoured the condensation of information. The use of bitmap software that enables complex tonal shifts as found in photographs and paintings has resided with multimedia developers and artists working with images that demand subtle translations of form. The rapid rise of vector-based animation software for the web like Flash have promoted a flat graphic aesthetic that works within the continuing limitations of web technology. The overriding movement is towards an iconology of short grabs, sequences, slogans, brandnames and logos.

As Internet bandwidth and download rates improve, the frequency of translational bitmapped images and analogue sound may not necessarily increase. Instead an i-reality made up of flat vector samples and audio bytes may produce a new language in parallel to a bitmapped world.

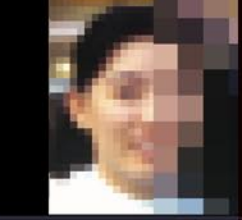
Our New e-Selves

The virtual reality of the internet, computer games, flight simulators and multimedia artworks, all construct environments that seek to immerse (embed) and suture (stich) the viewer into a scenario. In our post-information age geography is where our bodies exist only in part. The geographical world is where we take holidays. Virtual reality is increasingly where we actually live – where our selves grow, transform and evolve from our analogue selves into *e-selves*. Our e-selves inhabit realities that are more than reconstructed actual worlds, events, places, narratives and experiences. Virtual Taiwan, digital Taiwan and e-Taiwan are all planes of information within a rapidly evolving *e-world* that takes in the sights and sounds of the web, the net, media machines, entertainment games, smart houses, cars, mobile phones, KTV etc. Almost nothing in our lives is left on the outside of the digital divide in a perverse twist, the analogue world is now becoming a nostalgic theme park. The actual world is the latest tourist destination. We log off from the hectic virtual reality of bits to chill-out in the old world of atoms. When we leave the comfort zone of our blogs and chat rooms we need a guide to help us find our way around the mad paranoid world of the everyday.

It is no surprise that as Taiwan evolves into a hyper-e/country the fascination with analogue traditions and sites (parks, villages, handcrafts, lonely mountain views etc) grows in proportion. These are the digital images of choice now for background desktop screen saver images – somewhere to hang your folders and files off. This shift does not lessen the importance or devalue the analogue world. In fact it raises the analogue to a new *ecosophical* and ecological value in line with disappearing wild Asian Tigers, naturally dyed and woven textiles and indigenous languages. To ride on a motorbike down a city street with the wind in your hair is a weighty experience in both cost to environment, 'life and limb' and pleasure rush of taking the risky path to ecstasy – 'getting wrecked'. Of course the aim of the virtual is to raise the risk of pain and rewards of pleasure simulators. The last haptic wild west (East) frontier of "being there while still here" is emotional or psychological rather than perceptual.

The Haptic Zone

The digital image is only one important part of the theatre play of becoming digital or becoming virtual. Much work is to be done on the other sensorial productions of simulating and digitally translating and relaying *haptic* information and affects. For some time now games technology has built vibrating sensors into controller units. Work is being done on helping blind and deaf people experience sensual realities via simulational technologies. The sense of smell is one of the hardest to faithfully reproduce and curiously it is one of the strongest prompters when we remember being in a foreign place. The pungent smell of 'stinky tofu' in those night market food stalls can all too easily be uploaded to my mental 'biocomputer'.



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As our physical bodies have become increasingly elusive and illusive to us, our e-selves will take over the role of real sites of identity. The body is a mystery-bag of DNA code and steam engine organs, bells and whistles that drives us down the rails of planned obsolescence and biological entropy. Our evolution into cyborgs is progressing in small ways via medical implants, extreme "beauty" makeovers, transsexual operations, cloning, wearable computers, security screening technologies to name but a few. Every second comic character out of Japan and Hollywood hero is a cyborg, transformer or biotech alien mutation of our analogue selves.

The artists and designers are now refocusing our attention towards the imagination of light as pure image and matter as interactive agent. The reality of virtual art and digital images generally has sharpened our respect for the fragility of material things and biological life upon which all technological advances depend.