

# REVIEWS

## ART AS NETWORK PARTICIPATION

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Very soon, Propaganda Films will be releasing an up-market video game for grown ups, an interactive “whodunnit” that mixes compelling perspective traveling with the banal unfolding of a murder plot, open to the user’s imagination, who can perform the variations he fancies on the narrative mainline. Video art has been a closed circuit and limited circulation art product, trailing some of the fine-art aura still surrounding painting. Yet, it hasn’t or can’t infiltrate home life like a video game, and thus continues the separatism of the exhibited objet. A game like *Voyeur*, such as this adult movie is called, leads us to the video screen as a generator of new visual status, and to a dimension of use and leisure that determine a powerful popular culture element; curiously, as perspective and space-penetration through moving/semi-static image, voyeur touches upon western perception, to which it is intricately related. It both borders and trepasses the terrain of art, in terms of a distance that has culturally remained “immobile” for centuries.

Through elegant spatial manipulation, this standard product explodes the staticity of enclosed distance, such as it was formulated in Hellenistic and Roman culture, when, as Riegl singled out, illusion entered art through the connecting space and line of the painted image, providing the narrative threads

that enabled man to dwell in pictorial space. At the beginning of the game, a powerful lens aimed at a mansion across the street incites voyeurism into unknown, sealed intimacy. As a story, as literature, the whole thing is inert, and dead. Plot and drama have become cheap probability fodder for an exciting visual trip. Thus, this crime script revolves in a lifeless orbit, trapped in electronic image-brilliance. The bad story is visual void.

However, the composition of its telematic reality, is far from simple. The actors we behold are real men and women, filmed and then digitized into image; they move in backdrops of neat computer aesthetics. The perceptual complexities that such high-flying technology involves, aren’t the stuff of film companies, who merely tailor and package the goods. From present exercises in interactivity to the consensual hallucination of cyberspace

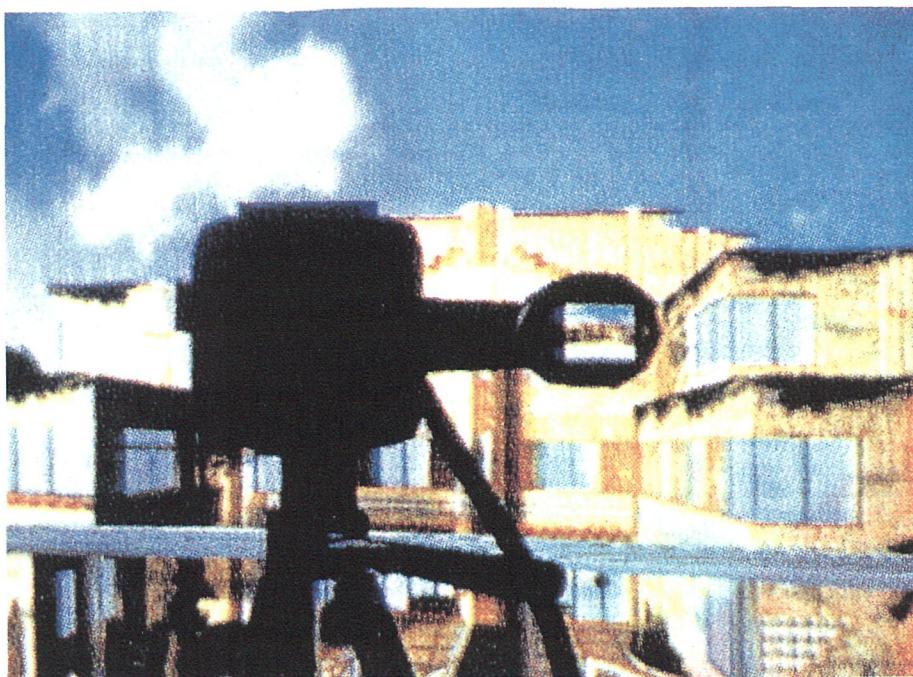
there’s no apparent wonderful progress made, but even so the visual psychology of games such as *Voyeur* are still largely uncharted. The perceptual maze of Hollywood/Silicon Valley is at the moment the autonomous prerogative of the machine, the deterministic market pressure that will perfect the most gripping, sensually all-enveloping trip, substituting the good old gratification of the big and little screen with the ecstasies of incipient simulating, virtual experience.

Many centuries ago, patricians looking into the gentle, virgilian scenes of their frescoes in Pompei, where trying, in their minds, to do what a game like *Voyeur* does with speed of light ease. Video-games, especially those created with “artistic” considerations, or showing some degree of aesthetic sensibility, usurp the impenetrable sanctity of Great Art’s perspective, (though history has frequently punched holes into its integrity), that locus of humanism, faith in beauty and through beauty as truth that dimly we continue to hold in memory. The Renaissance’s rediscovery of classical proportion led to the visual intensification of represented depth in the medium of painting, which since then has never abandoned western art, surfacing in Romanticism, seventeenth and eighteenth century Mannerism and Surrealism, just to pick easy examples. When we gaze into the



marine ruins of Claude le Lorrain, or try to work out De Chirico's spatial flights, or follow Caspar Friedrich's eye into the smooth, eerie vastness of the Baltic, we are performing virtual games that remain essentially static, animated only by the peculiar time-space of the imagination, which moves through associative rhythms. Through an invisible *close-circuit*, it takes us to the emotion and symbol implied in distance as constructed by art, and so, directly to ourselves. Distance is the initiatory trip that guarantees integration of the self.

Video games and video movies dismiss the profound implications of art's short cut to this positive wiring of the self.



They jerk into motion the compositional elements in perspective and depth, which otherwise are only props in painting, and have to stay put; meanwhile, the body is frozen into tense concentration, as it space travels feeling

no physical exertion. The spirit is missing in this scenario, because it is primarily aimed at sense-participation. The immobile frame of the video screen, however, continues to relate the experience to classical notions of perception, but now turned into end-all and be-all, promoting sensorial participation to unimaginable heights. *Depth travelling in Voyeur is mere perspective game*, and this pruning and exclusion of symbol in distance as spiritual stimulation is what distinguishes it absolutely from art.

Possible forms of telematic art, spanning continents, are still theoretical constructs. Some, like Roy Ascott, have

suggested what some network "art-related" activities might be. A technoartist designs a matrix, a content-structure that will enable users to modify form and shape. Creation of a purely synthetic art-object will be like

the reception of a chain-letter triggering off spontaneous inspiration, (or destruction). Passive users will embroider the visual, inert tapestry of image; "elective affinities" will meet in nanoseconds and devote fragments of immeasurably small time to the image-object. This virtual art work, curiously still feeds off classical perspective, as it deals in thought within the boundaries of depth-penetration. It sounds to me as good science fiction, part of cyberspatial fascination, this no-man's hologram, shooting across global network, a prisoner of neutral and luminous void that has no matter.

At the heart of a debate as to the feasibility of such a new art-form, lies the banal argument of solid content, of sheer materiality. Matter is a large part of our love of art, it is a nuclear, fundamental requisite. We are used to the idea of the transforming capacity of individuality over matter as paradigm of art in western culture, or as the art-work being the product of coordinated and distributed effort. Hierarchy and locality *inform the reality of objects in art*. Vattimo's decentralizing revolt, where intersection and contamination engender an open continuum for creativity, could be the theoretical basis for such illusion powered conspiracies that aim at dematerializing art. Yet enclosure, communication with the visually stable object, location and materiality are still a determining part of our anthropological relation to art.