

THESES ON THE ART OF VIRTUAL WORLDS

Preliminary Theses

1. Since the Renaissance, Western art has freed itself from subordination to religious and magical practices and claimed autonomy on the basis of a focused concern with artistic technique.
2. With the Industrial Revolution art also becomes emancipated from traditional processes of making by hand (though this is anticipated by the invention of the printing press as well as lithography).
3. From that time on, the focus on artistic technique and concern with the aesthetic potentiality of new technological media become fused.
4. Photography is the first product of this fusion.
5. In exploring the aesthetic potentialities of a technological medium, there is an initial tendency to interpret the new medium on the model of a preceding one. Thus the earliest photographers shot historical and mythical scenes in studios in emulation of academic painting, and the first filmmakers kept their movie cameras stationary in accordance with the older photographic practices.
6. It takes time and considerable experimentation to discover the unique dimensions of art produced in a new technological medium.

7. The art of virtual worlds has followed this pattern, tending to fall back in its initial stages on earlier filmic, photographic, painterly, sculptural, and architectural models.

8. This initial phase is now coming to an end as virtual artists begin to explore the unique dimensions of their medium.

Definitive Theses

1. There are six aesthetic-technological dimensions that collectively distinguish the art of virtual worlds from earlier forms of art. They are immersion, interaction, ambiguity of identity, environmental fluidity, artificial agency, and networked collaboration.

2. Immersion is the experience of being enveloped by a surrounding environment, by what the Germans call an *Umwelt*. Without immersion there would be no virtual worldhood at all, but rather reception of an image external to the viewer.

3. Interaction is the experience of exerting influence on and being influenced by objects in the virtual world. Like immersion, interaction is a necessary condition of virtual worldhood, since, if we were unable to engage with virtual objects in this fashion, we could not be said to dwell along with them. But dwelling along with other things, and so sharing a common context, is part of what it means to inhabit a world.

4. Ambiguity of identity results from the fact that our bodily presence in the virtual world is mediated by a digital

representation. All dwelling within a world involves being present in a body that both constitutes our perspective on things and makes us present to other embodied experiencers. Though personal identity can be a very complex construction, its ultimate foundation is continuity of bodily presence. However digital bodies, and the names that uniquely identify them, can be altered, multiplied, discarded, or exchanged at the will of the user. Since bodily presence is open to such radical discontinuity, the identity of the virtual person is protean and ambiguous, including indicators of age, gender, race, and even biological species.

5. Environment fluidity is to the external virtual world what the protean character of identity is to the internal sphere. In Second Life, for example, the environment is constructed from graphical primitives and scripts that can be altered very rapidly. Constancy of environment is the exception rather than the norm. It is in the virtual world that Marx's famous observation about capitalist modernity first reaches fruition: All that is solid melts into air.

6. Artificial agency refers to the facility with which software agents can be embedded in virtual worlds. Because the virtual world is itself a complex program, it is relatively easy to introduce into it forms of artificial life and artificial intelligence as responsive and even evolving forms of aesthetic expression.

7. Because virtual worlds reside on servers connected to the Internet, they offer unprecedented opportunities for networked collaboration among artists as well as between artists and audiences. Such collaboration can involve formidable organizational and aesthetic problems, but never before has art been capable of

such globalized collectivity.

8. The six factors discussed above - immersion, interaction, ambiguity of identity, environmental fluidity, artificial agency, and networked collaboration - do not in themselves constitute specific genres or artistic practices, but rather the fundamental aesthetic-technical dimensions that genuinely virtual genres and practices set out to explore.

9. Such exploration is experimental in character. What makes virtual art so exciting at the present time is that no one knows precisely where it will lead. In this respect it demands the kind of open-minded practice willing to be surprised and guided further by its own results that characterized photography and film (as well as modernist painting) in their heydays.

10. We are now at the point in the development of the art of virtual worlds where we can conduct focused experiments into the nature of the six aesthetic-technological dimensions. This is the purpose of the projects that the Caerleon sims are in the process of conducting, including the Through the Virtual Looking Glass Exhibition at the Harbor Gallery at UMass Boston.

Gary Zabel