

The Digital Divide / How we live and what we live for.

Earlier this spring while having a leisurely lunch enhanced by some splendid French wine with the American photographer Jerry Uelsmann I was given a glimpse of his sartorial wit. He offered up his best art theory joke, one that he was rightly proud of having created himself.

For some of us, the art theory joke genre has replaced the manic anecdotes about the rabbi, the priest, the minister and the existentialist all on the plunging airplane with only three available parachutes. In any case, the art theory joke is even more to the point, -- a well-turned narrative cutting through more bullshit than a spring plowing on an organic dairy farm.

Jerry is as funny and iconoclastic as they come these days—so his joke went like this:

Question: What do you get when you cross a used car salesman and a postmodern art theorist???

Answer: You get an offer you can't understand.

In that spirit, I propose to explore the postmodern dialogue concerning what I might identify as the binary blues or the digital divide of diminishing values and the concurrent, over hyped and much hailed explosion of nano technologies. I shall pursue this theme through a somewhat personal history as an art maker and aspiring social critic, thus leaving the theory based evaluation of digital phenomena to the more erudite and cerebrally adept among us.

Having spent a couple of hours at the enormous book fair attached to the recent College Art Association Conference in Boston, I can personally assure you that there is a vast ocean of titles out there gnawing away at the virtual digital hybrid empire of binary dogma. Acres of volumes chewing away on it's own dry bone of contention with bleeding gums and a fierce virtuosity and vehement resolve not seen since the construction of the pyramids. We're talking a small-scale industry my fiends, so my voice will not be missed . . .

So here is my stab at an offering you just might understand:

In the time before digital, when I was about ten years old, my stepfather handed down his big Zenith Trans-Oceanic Short Wave radio to me. I was thrilled, I was honored, I was as curious as a magpie in a car boot sale. Believe it or not, this multi vacuum tube, shaped plywood leather-veneered behemoth of buttons and glowing dials weighed in at over 35 pounds and was actually portable –not the way we conceive of portability a la IPOD

these days, but it concealed a compartment at the back that would have served for steerage quarters if the huge tuner had been an immigrant ship. This hold was fitted out with a dry cell battery that was about the size of a large loaf of soda bread.

But the real magic for this boy was the mysterious wash and waves of burbled sound the box emitted, those mesmerizing banshee tweaks and the squelchy staccato tap dance of alchemical rhythms that rolled out of the speakers with every tiny twist of the dial. It was the song of the ether and the chanting of space. It was a kind of anthem of trans oceanic grace, like some message lost then delivered in a million tiny bottles.

I would listen entranced well past any reasonable hour until I fell asleep at the dial. Although it was a singularly volatile and impermanent analogue phenomenon, it seems to be the place where the digital was born in my own consciousness. In the abundant potted histories about the binary or the digital world available on the Internet many insist on calling up the abacus as the Adam of computing. Who in my generation was ever serious about the abacus? There of course were the odd unfortunate souls with plastic pocket liners who knew what a slide rule was for, but that was seriously different. For me the abacus will always be that thing on the side of my playpen that consisted of colored wooden balls that slid back and forth for no recognizable purpose.

Many years after my midnight reveries with the Trans-Oceanic, as a 17 year old Marine radio trainee I would spend twelve long weeks in a Navy town called Norfolk on the Virginia coast, a city that sported signs on the High Street announcing *no dogs, sailors or Marines welcome* over the doors of many bars and restaurants. In dowdy Norfolk I spent my time learning the binary language of dots and dashes of international Morse code pecked out in little five packs of cryptic letters and numbers. If it wasn't a dot, then it better damn well be a dash because as a rudimentary binary system that was all there was to the task – on or off – open and shut – a classic example of the cosmological pairs of opposites. Good bad, up down, praise blame, and all the rest To graduate from radio school we were required to send and receive at what seemed a phenomenal rate of 35 words per minute. Soon the practice became long and very arduous, learning code managed to refine boredom to a spectacularly high art form. Like all good military endeavors, there was an inherent ratio of grandiose folly set smack in the epicenter of the entire mission. In this case, for all that immense effort, not a single solitary operator who trained with me or whom I subsequently met in the eternity of my four years of Marine Corps service ever once tapped out code to communicate a single word concerning the portentous announcements of battle logistics.

Not one discreet tiny pipsqueak digit, vowel or syllable -- Zero, Zilch, nada, negative, nein, nothing, no way, over and out.... Dit dit dit - dah dah dah – dit dit dit.....

Before I am trapped in a lie that will catch up to me in time as all good lies will, I had better come clean ... for I do have a theory or at least a very highly polished feeling, a long held

and considered intuition that all is not rosy or even what it seems to be in the realm of the digital or in the realm of all this relentless, unexamined technical progress.

I also believe that it would be a fairly naïve and unuseful an exercise for me to consider the single issues of distribution and reproduction of media art as if they existed in a purely model universe – suffice it to say that things will get copied and preserved and shipped and ripped off and collected and sold and hyped until the cows come home, or the chickens come home to roost with some god awful malady know one knows how to cure – I fully expect the emergence of a gulag of intellectual property offenders someday at the rate things are going, but the real work as the poet Gary Snyder reminds us is much, much closer to home.--

For at heart I am much more aligned with Henry David Thoreau than Negroponte or the people up late at MIT and Cal Tech. I perceive the digital promise as a facility that can easily masquerade as water logic when it is in fact more closely aligned with rock logic, accountancy, banking, co modification, global cannibalism, and a plethora of frightening side effects spinning off from the skewed triumph of floundering capitalism. Enough said.

Despite the fact that I have been actively using digital systems, effects, hardware and software for over 25 years, I am more keenly aware of the black arts and gray liminal zones of digital systems and the chimera of nano quantum technological redemption than I am enamored with the rosy dawn of unbridled technology.

Strangely, tonight while I am typing this my Blackberry does a vibration tango on the wooden table across the room and then begins to ring, when I pick it up instead of my wife's voice as expected, since I know she is the only one on earth with the number, a disembodied woman's office voice asks "are you Gabriel?" Stunned I ask her to repeat herself and I hear her dry voice echoing through the ether in a semi threatening monotone "are you Gabriel"? Then I flash back to when I bought this damn widget wonder and remember all the phone calls demanding payment for Gabriel's hugely bad debts. Gabriel was a number and if I had Gabriel's number then I must ipso facto be Gabriel. This time I remember how to respond, I bark like a junkyard dog...

No I am not Gabriel, and this is not Gabriel's number, and then I hang up.

I'm almost certain the woman and that trans national company she represents don't believe a word of this. To them I'm still Gabriel . . .

Who is Gabriel? Gabriel is a perfect example of how the screen world, the world of computer information concerning each one of us, has come to represent the final arbiter of truth. Remember the phrase your number is up? In the last 5 or 6 years I have been told by so called on line business representatives in Omaha, Bombay, Amarillo, Seattle and of late

Manila, that I could not possibly have paid a bill or requested a service or have that airline reservation whose receipt I hold clutched in my quaking hand!

because “ *Sir, I can see it right here on the monitor.....* I wonder how many of you have had the same experience after wading through a perplexing labyrinth of telephone choices, sometimes taking as much as an hour to reach someone. Welcome to the digital divide.

To begin I would like to consider some quotes from Henry David Thoreau from the *Where I lived and What I lived For* segments of his masterwork, *Walden*. For those of you unfamiliar with Thoreau, I invite you to treat yourself to *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience* two bijoux masterpieces of the 19th century. Thoreau was a strong and bold swimmer against the stream of quotidian somnolence

In 1848, the year my great grandmother California, who died 102 years later was born, Thoreau wrote this:

“ At present I am a sojourner in civilized life. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anyone else I knew as well. I have traveled a good deal in Concord and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? They have no time to be anything but a machine. And so it is with our hundred ‘modern improvements’; there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly. After all the man whose horse trots a mile in a minute does not carry the most important messages.

I first read Thoreau while living up in the Main woods in the early seventies as a way of putting my life back into some sensible order after surviving the Viet Nam war as a teenager. For over three years I lived without running water and electricity with a young woman I had fallen in love with during my stay in the military hospital where I had been a patient after the war. In North Dixmont, Maine we were off the grid in every sense; together we learned to build and use hand tools, to light with kerosene lamps, to carve wood to, grow crops, snowshoe, raise goats and identify wild foods among many other useful skills. Subsisting on about \$70. a month, this the figure the Veterans Administration thought a 30% disabled veteran should receive. During these years our only advanced technologies were a portable FM radio and a beat up chainsaw acquired towards the end of our sojourn.

I came out of that experience of war feeling completely betrayed, out of those long months in the hospital absolutely certain that it had all been about money, about commerce, about business as usual. During that time I was plagued by a repeating nightmare of my last day in the war...

The only way forward seemed to lie in removing myself from the economies that I felt had spawned the war.

Years later, I would read the following manifesto written by the retired Marine Corps Commandant General Smedley Butler posted on the wall of the men's toilet at the Visual Studies workshop in New York:

War is just a racket. A racket is best described, I believe, as something that is not what it seems to the majority of people. Only a small inside group knows what it is about. It is conducted for the benefit of the very few at the expense of the masses. The trouble with America is that when the dollar only earns 6 percent over here, then it gets restless and goes overseas to get 100 percent. Then the flag follows the dollar and the soldiers follow the flag. I wouldn't go to war again as I have done to protect some lousy investment of the bankers. There are only two things we should fight for. One is the defence of our homes and the other is the Bill of Rights. War for any other reason is simply a racket.

Twenty-five years ago this June with more than a little help from the emerging digital technologies I created a half hour video work whose aim was to examine the myths and realities of the American romance with organized violence. At that time in my life I felt prepared to pull back the curtain a little. I finished the work through the WNET TV-Lab experience and was able to achieve the strange verisimilitude of my lingering nightmare through the use of the recently released Quantel digital optical device. As I remember John Godfrey, then the chief technical editor at the Lab, kept the outer case off this \$150,000. time blender and had a small oscillating fan blowing air on the circuit boards constantly . . .



Smothering Dreams 1981 Production document and still image frame

Today, every day--

Somewhere 20 miles east of Washington the District of Columbia lies a once sleepy little military base called Fort Meade in the state of Maryland. Named after a Union General in the American Civil War, its current status has been upgraded severely since the terrorist rebirth of America. Fort Meade is now home on a daily basis to no less than 35,000 intelligence listeners, ordinary folks whose spouses are not allowed to know what they really do. What they really do is listen to anything suspicious in millions of communications daily. Their employer, the NSA or National Security Administration estimates that it can survey all communication on a daily basis in a few more years. Sound familiar? In the permanent state of war declared by the Bush administration there are a number of such centers around the continental US looking out for the interests of the corporate state. Try sending off a few email messages with the wrong or right set of connotations or code references and you might just get logged in None of this trawling could occur without the benefit of digital recognition and recording technology.

To illustrate the shifting ethical boundaries and paradoxical contrasts in the digital dilemma I would note that during the time I finished this essay while traveling I was able to reference major portions of Thoreau's Walden using my little Blackberry hand held device. A benefit to be sure.

Certainly for every negative effect of digital culture there is a promising if often weakened or degraded positive polarity. The internet, medicine, the arts, popular culture are only viable inheritors of what the technocrats have handed down, if we are not left out of the larger

decisions of polity and policy. At the moment things do not look good. In America it is clear to many that democracy has been harmed greatly by electronic voting fraud administered from above by the corporations and individuals who stand to benefit by the demise of authenticity and truth. There is more than enough information available to suggest that in the state of Ohio alone, the vote was manipulated for the Republicans through the use of computerized voting hardware and programs produced and controlled by allies of the ruling plutocracy. This is not the stuff of conspiracy theory.

National Database Identifying Terrorists

More than 8,000 people have been mistakenly tagged for immigration violations as a result of the Bush administration's strategy of entering the names of thousands of immigrants in a **national crime database** meant to help apprehend terrorism suspects, according to a recent study. The study, conducted by the Migration Policy Institute, a research group in Washington, relied on statistics released by the Department of Homeland Security that covered 2002 to 2004. The study found that the national crime database was wrong in 42 percent of the cases in which it identified immigrants stopped by the local police as being wanted by domestic security officials. The NY Times, December 9, 2005

Wednesday morning, 9:00 AM – I wake up shower make tea and turn on the Blackberry to see if I might check emails and do some online banking voodoo only to find the screen display is upside down and reversed – it looks like Cyrillic alphabet soup and is useless in every respect and I don't know if I should laugh, cry, stomp on it or attempt to debug it – Maybe it's malfunction is a warning from the people looking for that scofflaw GABRIEL -- but I always thought of Gabriel as the annunciation angel—the communicator -----some high class servant of the lord.

Yesterday in a high street bookstore fumbling with my cell phone while trying to pay at the register, I mutter about “*hating these things*” shaking the phone like an evil serpent -- the elderly cashier herself a secret luddite chimes in with a rich malty accent – “*Oh well love, you could just chuck it under a bus when you go out the door*”

She's right; only things are just slightly more benign here in the U.K. – try chucking a device under a bus in the States just now and you are likely to be gunned down before it clatters to the ground. In Miami this winter they shot a man in December right on the tarmac at the airport after he disembarked from a plane mumbling about a bomb during an

argument with his wife. Two sky marshals dropped him stone dead with their neat little 9mm automatic pistols, while his poor wife tried to explain that he was certifiable and under medication. The authorities said it was very regrettable but that “*the air marshals had been trained to react without thinking . . .*” Go back and watch Terry Gilliam’s film Brazil soon, strangely familiar

My wariness of the touted marvels of increased communication potential began years ago. In fact I who have been at times enslaved by the computer had often sworn publicly that I would have nothing at all to do with them. These cocksure pronouncements must be the precise coordinates where a kind of working humility is generated spontaneously?

In 1985, Just as I was leaving the United States for what turned out to be a 21 year absence I put my unease about what I considered to be the emerging Data / Power culture into a brief video essay with a short postscript from one of the oldest existing commentaries on human behavior the; Vishnu Purana.

By some deeply ingrained vestigial death wish lying imbedded in human consciousness or at least sedated American voter consciousness, Ronald Regan had just been elected for a second term and as far as I was concerned it might as well have been Donald Duck who would be flying to Camp David and negotiating with Breshnev. During this period the Reagan crew were pushing for billions of dollars to pursue what was then called the star wars space initiative and under the Bush junta has been rebranded as the strategic defense initiative. This is the grandest wet dream of the military industrial complex to date.

My visual critique, ultimately entitled *A Mosaic for the Kali Yuga*, began as a purely analogue video exercise that I pursued for a few weeks by isolating various small bursts of picture and sound precisely in the space that each occurred on the screen. This was achieved by very quick two to four frame edits inserted using a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch editing system and the employment of black masking wipes in a basic analogue vision mixer. It was a kind of video basket weaving. After the foundation segment of a minute or so was made, I laid the project aside and then took it up as a digital remix at the Matrix Online Editing program sponsored by NYSCA in New York City.

What fascinated me at the time was the mantra like repetition of the interchangeable words DATA & POWER resorted to by Reagan in his promotional speeches that amounted to not much more than snake oil hucksterism for a death ray to use on the reentry vehicles of what was then the standing evil empire. These code words Data and Power, along with the fabricated phrase STOP WAR IN MY TIME punctuate the hyper acceleration diminishing size and doubling that leads to the suggestion of eventual entropy.



A Mosaic for the Kali Yuga 1986

Thoreau: To make a railroad round the world available to all mankind is equivalent to grading the whole surface of the planet. Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts “All aboard!” when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over – and it will be called, and will be. ‘A melancholy accident.

I am bewildered by the ability of so much post-modern techno junk to simply not work - I mean right out of the box not work, or fail within days or weeks or skid into adolescent obsolescence and be rendered incompatible with Operating System X-15 that according to the promotional hoopla can not only outpace the competition at quantum speeds, but also will do your taxes AND faxes and even turn you into a nine year old Hindu boy as Tom Waits would have it. In several countries I have huge boxes, crates and trunks of kit, adapters cables, software, strange forgotten peripherals and data on every conceivable storage disk and backup medium ever created. Some of it was so utterly feeble that like some prototype flying machine it failed to even get down the runway, much less lift off into the blue.

James Fallows, in his New York Review of Books examination of the space shuttle disaster, defines these systems failures in five separate stages which make up what he calls the ‘*the military-procurement disease*’:

✘ *THE VEGEMATIC PROMISE* -- You know the one promoted on late night TV after the Love Songs of the 70’s collection, this is the essential kitchen gizmo that slices, dices, turns tomatoes into roses and so on. These are technical systems designed to prevail in all circumstances and optimized for all conditions and inevitably become wildly complex and expensive

✘ *THE ROSY PROSPECT* – advanced systems are justified through impressive projections taken from computer simulations rather than realistic tests – this is the something that will do anything better

✘ *THE BIG TECHNICAL LEAP* Think beating the Russians at something in 1958 or the latest Game Boy or the Dual Quad multi-tasking must have monstrosity that calls out for a new mortgage- think big plans made for their own sake rather than accomplishing something specific – think of car advertisements and face creams . . .

✘ *THE UNPLEASANT SURPRISE* This is the part of the sales opera where unexpected maintenance or compatibility problems have occurred and the software or hardware vendor is moving his tongue around like a shell hiding a virtual pea while he blames Microsoft, or if he is Microsoft blames the supplier, or if he is the supplier, blames the carrier or the developer, or your family, or your failure to understand or install the wonder worker 6.7 properly etc. Think of America bogged down in Iraq like some punch drunk Goliath stuck in an unfolding nightmare of its own making while so many of your ordinary friends and neighbors would have clearly advised against a preemptive invasion anywhere on earth, particularly Iraq, anytime.

✘ *THE HOUSE OF CARDS* the final traits of a complex military project (or a software – hardware boondoggle) are its brittleness and vulnerability to surprise. If all goes according to plan, **fine**; but when one thing goes wrong – a sandstorm in the Iranian desert, guerillas who won’t stay put to be bombed or a section of untried binary code – **many others do too**.

Sometime in the early eighties I was in Washington at the Library of Congress researching for a collaborative project when I happened on the shadow of an old technology in what was called the paper print collection. These were early films collected on deteriorating and volatile nitrate stock that had been contact printed on to rolls of paper to preserve the image and then eventually transferred back to 35mm gelatin based stock. What caught my eye in

the card catalogue was a title called simply enough, ELECTROCUTION OF AN ELEPHANT. For the life of me I could not imagine what this entry could represent. In fact it was what it said it was. When delivered, the little reel turned out to be the documentation of Thomas Alva Edison's efforts to promote his direct current form of household electricity over the rival and competitive alternating current.

His method of doing so was simple, cruel and crude to the highest degree. Edison would acquire old zoo or circus elephants and electrocute them in public using the competition's technology thus highlighting the safety and efficacy of his own system. As marketing campaigns go it was fairly straightforward. These bizarre episodes of public torture eventually lead to the development of the electric chair and the first legal execution by electric current of a condemned human prisoner at Sing Sing prison up the Hudson River in New York not so many years later. The rest is history. This tormented image opened a doorway that I had to enter. The original project I had been researching was dropped for budgetary reasons. I then went on to make a 45-minute work exploring humanity's flawed relationship to the natural world focusing on the elephant. The work was produced through the Contemporary Artists Television Fund and is entitled *Ganapati – A Spirit in the Bush*. In the final passage Federico Garcia Lorca's poem *New York Office and Attack* from his 1929 volume *A Poet in New York* is used as a powerful counterpoint to the imagery of unnecessary suffering. With great compassion he describes the Hudson as: *getting drunk on it's oil*. Six years later, at the start of Spanish Civil War, he would himself be executed at the edge of his beloved Granada for his homosexuality and unacceptable political views.



Ganapati / A Spirit in the Bush 1986

Thoreau:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and you have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is an incessant influx of novelty into the world, and yet we tolerate incredible dullness. I need only suggest what kind of sermons are still listened to in the most enlightened countries There are such words as joy and sorrow, but they are only the burden of a psalm, sung with a nasal twang, while we believe in the ordinary and mean.

Who remembers a fly by night company from Kansas, of all places, thank you Dorothy, called C-Ltd.? ---They made hard drives well at least they did for a brief window of profit taking. The C in the logo must have stood for CON --or Crafty -- or Conceptual. I bought my first hard drive from them in 1987 for an Amiga 1000 computer, an aptly named scsi 33 megabyte affair about the size of a dainty Prada shoe box it was. And it might as well have been a shoebox, or a fetish object, or a brick tied to my ankle for that matter, as the damned thing never worked, that's how severely limited it was. Not once, not a single .iff file or jpeg storing the bare outline of a single pixel line wide drawing of a drowning happy face clown ever disturbed it's heartless binary soul.

By the time a few weeks had passed and it began to dawn on my eternally optimistic brain that this was not much more than a rain soaked squib – lo and behold -- when I called C-Ltd. They were gone -- just like that, vanished vaporware, finished, out of business, unreachable, non-existent, bankrupt, KAPUT. And that was \$875. worth of wake up call . . . but I refused to listen, oh when things worked what marvelous things could be done with sound and pic . . .

Of course things have changed, improved, advanced and become relatively more affordable, but I think it's only a matter of degree. It's a question of scale; something basic has not changed at all. Almost 20 years later you can buy ten times 33 megs of storage on a combination corkscrew, utility knife, halogen light, battery charging, day glow doohickey for 21 Euros -- and that's a promise, because I saw it with my own eyes at one of those superb carnival like rest stops on the motorway between Cognac and Poitiers just last Saturday. It was in the impulse lane leading up to the caisse right next to the Chris Deburgh DVD's, stacks of caffeine gum and the hilariously whacked out truckers fleece jumpers that say in big faux stenciled cracked vermilion letters “ *always working better for a high quality life and the things you need to do now*” No joke there it was big as life.

Recently while living in France during the years that ADSL Internet service was brought to the farmlands of the Southwest, I was fixing, modifying, rejigging and otherwise struggling to make a simple Internet connection work for months on end. I remember thinking that it was like living in the 50's and having to repair your own phone seven times a month. In his book *Trapped in the Net*, the U C Berkeley physicist Gene Rochlin, shares his thoughts about computer technology:

“Only in a few specialized markets are new developments in hardware and software responsive primarily to user demand based on mastery and the full use of technical capacity and capability. In most markets, the rate of change of both hardware and software is dynamically uncoupled from either human or organizational learning logistics and processes, to the point where users not only fail to master their most recent new capabilities, but are likely to not even bother to try, knowing that by the time they are through the steep part of their learning curve, most of what they have learned will be obsolete.

While trying to understand where this feeling of malaise and false promise arises I made a suspects list of the negative aspects of so called digital culture. I won't explore many of them in this brief essay but they are worth thinking about.

- ✓ Manufacturing conformity
- ✓ Surveillance
Every time you use a credit card, smart card or mobile, or press the key fob to unlock your car, your exact position in the universe is logged and recorded and your movements and behavior can be established and followed in great detail. Take a simple walk down a street in West London and you will see sensors absorbing information and transmitting it to the public and private databases. Once the data has been recorded it can be shared instantly with the information industry and law enforcement. John Gibb –Who's Watching You 2005
- ✓ Privacy issues, electronic eavesdropping, social monitoring
- ✓ Criminalization of the ordinary
- ✓ Democratic manipulation - - reverse voter fraud
- ✓ The screen as the final arbiter of truth
- ✓ The commercialization of almost everything
- ✓ Militarization
- ✓ Intellectual property
- ✓ Data snooping and fiscal harassment
- ✓ Internet proscription censorship and control Virtual book burning
- ✓ Personal Data abuse and theft
- ✓ Degradation and creeping meatballism of culture
- ✓ Standardization and the law of diminishing returns

- ✓ The handmaiden of the apparent triumph of capitalism
- ✓ Keeping the rich supplied with poor
- ✓ Repetition of untruth leads to acceptance of misinformation
- ✓ digital the primary tool of globalization and disenfranchisement
- ✓ SPEED & FRAGMENTATION VS. BEING AND AUTHENTICITY

Gaming vs. reading or experiencing (put that 3,000 hours of combat simulation to work . . .)

Recently I saw a television advertisement in the U.S. that claimed the military life was a place where you could put those thousands of hours of simulation gaming to good use. It didn't elaborate on what you might do with a future with no legs or arms.

Last month I reconnected to an old friend from my time in the war after almost 40 years. I had been medivaced before him and had not realized that he had lost one leg and a good part of another. A fine writer, he shared with me his thoughts about visiting the main rehab hospital near Washington last autumn:

I see in the halls of Walter Reed hospital soldiers with leg braces and neck supports, soldiers with faces slashed by bombs and stitched up by doctors. Soldiers with legs terribly mangled, soldiers with no legs -amputees with short stumps, with long stumps, without any stumps since entire limbs are missing. A man walks by without an arm. I suddenly travel back in time to another war, to another hospital when I was one of those young men without a limb. But the human carnage and waste in Walter Reed is too overwhelming to escape for more than a flash of time. At the Army's flagship medical facility, where thousands of wounded soldiers pass through, there is no political spin, no media filter, no presidential lies, and no patriotism without cost as there is in America. There are only the wounded and mangled from Iraq. There is the ground zero for ugly war reality. Stewart Nussbaumer

Thoreau: Thus the State never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. I perceive that, when an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man.

From 1990 through 1995 I worked on a video work entitled *Obsessive Becoming* of which much has been said and written in terms of it's relationship to the field of digital art media. What I believe is more important in the context of this essay is how I pursued a decision to put the work together using emerging prosumer technologies. A prosumer technology is something trapped between broadcast and hobby, which is a kind of bizarre limbo itself, where items not quit born properly, come to rest. The main tools were based on a now long since departed computer system called the Amiga. Maybe the Amiga is the mullet haircut or the Edsel of digital creative modalities. There is something cosmically funny about the Amiga in that it demanded a weird allegiance and sported a cantankerous personality like a character on a train ride in a bad Russian novel, who you would never prefer to travel with if you knew where you were heading and what they would get up to. Perhaps because of its vaguely Spanish name, I think if the Amiga were caught in the act of fraud it would react with incredulous indignation with: *Badges! Badges! We don't need no stinking badges!*

After a while when a new Amiga would arrive in the Outer Hebrides where I was living, I learned that I would probably spend the next few days rebuilding it. And so it went. In any case I took that long ride for nearly ten years ending up with a house full of local area network linked Amiga Towers, replete with Macintosh Emulators, Canadian Personal Animation recording boards, sound boards, genlocks, graphic tablets, 24 bit frame buffers, and more half developed software and hardware than you could ever imagine.

Almost all of this gear is gone now but despite the struggle, the work, which looks deeply into the world of secrecy and denial in both the personal and historical dimension, has a life of its own.



Now if I may have intimidated you in any way about the binary world I want to close with two brief snippets from what I have discovered to be a most worthy journal, namely the American Scholar. The first is by Paul DePalma from his article The Software Wars, who I must credit for putting the wee notion in my head to put this down on paper.

But don't despair. If software engineering practice is out of reach, you still have other options. For starters you could just say no. You could decide that the ease of buying plane tickets online is not worth the hours you while away trying to get your printer to print or your modem to dial. Understand that saying no requires an ascetic nature: abstinence is not terribly attractive to most of us. On the other hand you could sign up for broadband with the full knowledge that your computer, a jealous lover, will demand many, many Saturday afternoons. Most people are shocked when they learn that their computer requires more care than, say, their refrigerator. Yet I can tell you that its charms are immeasurably richer. First among them is the dream state. It is almost irresistible.

And finally the closing remark is by one of our most brilliant essayists, Edward Hoagland, in an essay entitled; The Glue is Gone.

We learn to skitter underneath the radar nearly everywhere, in evading rush-hour highway jams or airport security shakedowns, tax audits, or a siege of downsizing or insurance cancellations. Being alert to the conveniences of anonymity, we want the camera's eyes to sweep over us without pausing, and the computer, if we're juggling plastic. We want our numbers to be in order ---- Social Security, passport, Zip and PIN, area code. Driver's license, E-Z Pass. Our divorce or retirement papers may be in a safety deposit box, but otherwise most people trust in a backup hard drive somewhere to record their bank balance, etc., knowing hunger is for other continents. God's imprimatur has been upon us. Yet we do sense that seismic changes will be necessary to address the jumbled emergencies arising unpredictably, from watering the city of Phoenix to salvaging Africa. We can map every yard of the earth from space, telephone from moving cars, melt the shelves of Antarctica, sock a cancer radiologically, and get a hard-on from a pill. But it's all pell-mell. Novelty as an addiction. Normality implies a permanence that people doubt, although their unease may be subterranean and perhaps they find the LORD on Sundays and tidy up.