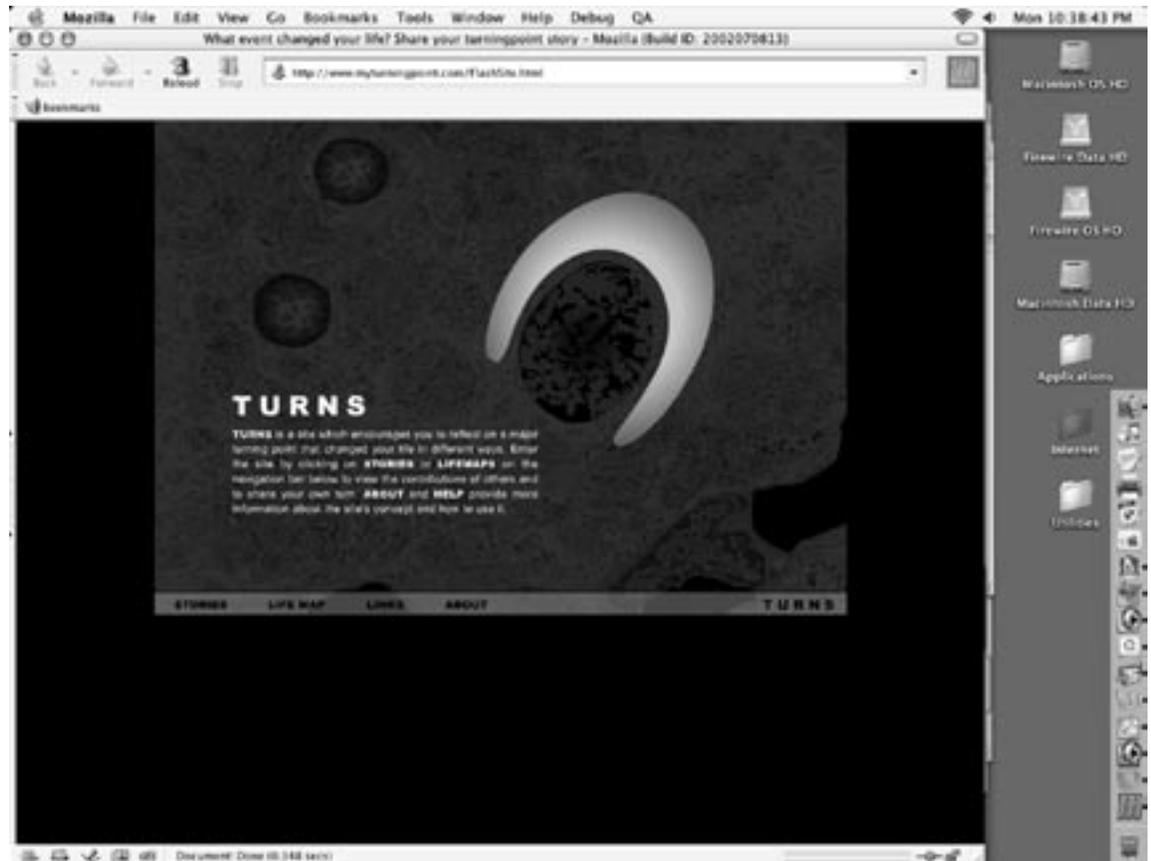


*“There is a photographic culture that permeates all of contemporary art”<sup>1</sup>*



The recent exhibit, *The Photogenic* at the ICA in Philadelphia explored the ways in which artists are influenced by photographic culture. The show required the viewer to extrapolate beyond the aesthetic or artist intent, to ascertain how culture is contrived through the metaphors of image and representation. The curator Ingrid Schaffner suggested that photographic metaphors include light, proof, pencil of nature, index and the blind spot.<sup>2</sup> I asked myself, “*What are the essential elements of this photographic culture? (Which perhaps due to our deep, blinding immersion, we take for*

*granted?) What are the intrinsic characteristics and processes in which we filter our critical gaze? How have new media artists been influenced by photography?”*

It is with this premise that I tackled the Whitney Biennial. Overwhelming by its sheer size, it was the largest Biennial since 1981, featuring 113 artists and collaborative teams from 23 countries, ranging in age from 24-71. There was an impressive diversity of artists and genres including the increased presence of sound, performance and Internet Art. The curator Lawrence Rinder gave himself and the other

curators the directive to expand the spectrum of what normally defines the contemporary art world and practices to showcase the diversity of American art. Christine Paul, the adjunct curator of new media arts focused on the variety of forms that comprise Net art and the emergence of themes such as data visualization, mapping, database aesthetics, gaming, agent technology and nomadic devices.<sup>3</sup> I decided to focus on Net art and determine if indeed the photographic culture and influence were evident in the works.

The veracity of representation, perception and illusion were photographic elements found in many of the Net art projects. Benjamin Fry's software experiment entitled, *Valence* creates a visual representation of large sets of information such as a text of a book or data from a website. His program transforms the way in which a person experiences information and makes connections between data, which is not readily perceivable to the viewer. One of the site examples was a visual mapping of Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*. Conceptually the idea was interesting, but I kept questioning the applicability of the end product. The piece didn't function as an aesthetic experience or as a

practical application. From an artistic perspective, the site was burdened with an overload of technical language and theory. Viewer interactivity (a key component in Net art) was also missing from the piece.

<http://acg.media.mit.edu/people/fry/valence/>

Like Fry's *Valence*, Lisa Jevbratt's *1:1* project reconfigures the ways in which viewers perceive information. The software program continuously scans web servers, collecting all of the world's websites. The artist created five interfaces, which provide visual databases of all the collected websites. The viewer can utilize these interfaces as an alternative means of navigating the web, bypassing the biased search engines driven by corporate advertising. Again, conceptually the idea was fascinating, but the actual pictorial representation was not visually interesting. While navigating the site, I felt like I was performing a data-gathering exercise for information that seemed random and irrelevant. Technically, there were a lot of connection errors, which proved frustrating.

<http://www.c5corp.com/1to1>

Josh On and the Futurefarmers' site, *They Rule*, investigates



the corporate power relationships in the U.S.. Like Fry and Jevbratt, On's website maps existing data to pictorially represent relationships otherwise unrecognized by the viewer. The figureheads behind the major corporations become visible, as do their connections to one another. The veracity of representation is explored and the "public" becomes aware of the inequities of power. By clicking on individuals, the viewer can research their bios, corporate donations, affiliations and "profiles". Viewers are encouraged to create their own "maps" based on a common denominator. The site's strength was in the visual representation of the information, as well as the immediacy and interactivity of the mapping. "At a moment when growing e-commerce turns us into transparent customers, *They Rule* subverts the use of the Web as a mere marketing tool and invokes its original promise as a democratizing medium."<sup>4</sup>

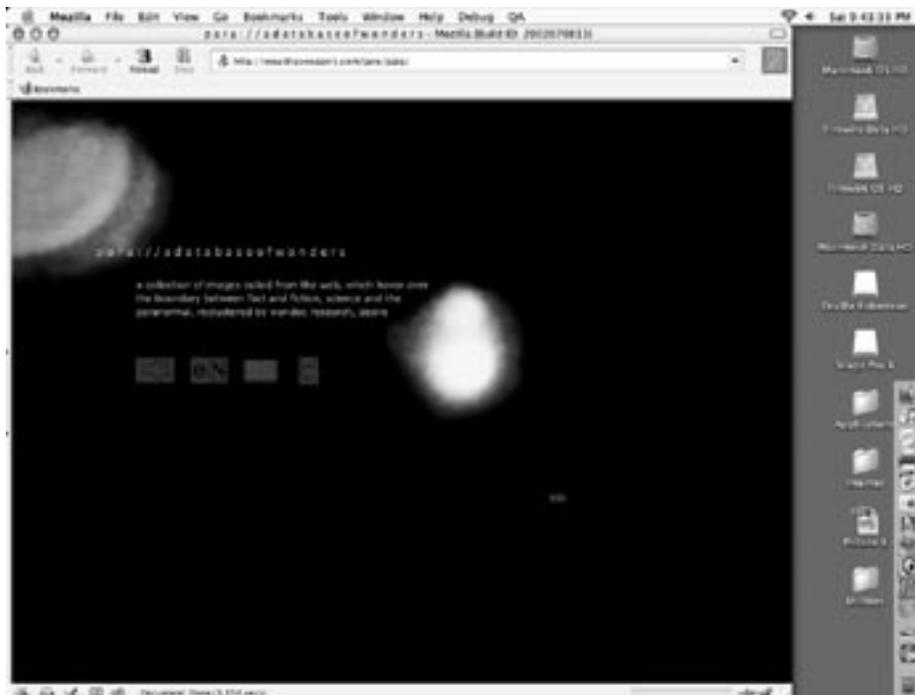
**<http://www.theyrule.net>**

Mark Napier's *Riot* is an alternative web browser. The program combines data from different websites, creating chaotic collages of mismatched information. Similar to traditional browsers, the viewer types in the various web

addresses. The resulting effect is a striking graphic representation of headlines, corporate logs and images recontextualized into a kaleidoscope of controlled randomness. The site challenges and dissolves traditional ideas of territory, ownership and authority.

**<http://www.potatoland.org/riot>**

Mary Flanagan's website offers multiple media projects. The work featured at the Whitney entitled *Collection* is a networked computer application that creates a virtual collective unconscious. It required downloading a program, which acts as a virus, gathering information from the individual's hard drive. After experiencing a recent virus, which destroyed my entire PC hard drive, I was reluctant to participate despite assurances that it was safe. I was quite taken with Flanagan's *Rootings* project, however, in which users explore the idea of time within the context of a set of interactive "games."<sup>5</sup> The viewer clicks on a circle with words such as consumer, faces, delay, bone memory, lost and night. Each word triggers a difference experience with text alluding to ideas from neurology, quantum mechanics, and string theory. The visually engaging site references dreams



and memory within non-specific narratives. The addition of slightly ominous, tonal sound effects add to the experience.

**<http://www.maryflanagan.com>**

*The Turns* website by Margot Lovejoy with Hal Eager, Jon Legere and Marek Walczak collects and shares personal stories of pivotal moments in people's lives. Users can browse through stories in twelve categories such as identity, relationships, education, immigration, family, finance, etc. They can also create a personal life map. Graphically, the images suggest both the micro and macro worlds. The evolving shapes resemble biological cells and an aerial map of a planet. Many of the stories were heart wrenching, dealing with issues of loss and tragedy from diverse perspectives and time periods. It is through the shared experiences and social memories that connections are made, developing a collective consciousness through virtual communities.

**<http://www.myturningpoint.com>**

*World of Awe* by Yael Kanarek is in contrast to the other Biennial artists in both genre and subject matter. Incorporating elements of fantasy and philosophy in a make-believe world called Sunset/Sunrise, the site takes the form of a travel journal documenting a traveler's search for lost treasure. Reminiscent of the *Griffin & Sabine* series, users assume the persona of the traveler's beloved, as they peruse the love letters describing the travels. Viewers may also subscribe to receive monthly love letters, updating them on the traveler's journey. (Much to my delight, I have already received two letters). Besides the journal, there is also a series of images called *Nowheres*, which are forty-eight 3D environments depicting the desert terrain. These imagined photographs document the existence of this in-between world. The ancient genre of the traveler's tale is used to explore connections between storytelling, memory, travel and technology. *World of Awe* speaks to the universal yearning for which we all strive to encounter awe and wonder in our daily lives.

**<http://www.worldofawe.net>**

Two other new media artists Zoe Beloff (whose film *Shadow Land or Light From the Other Side* was featured in the Biennial) and Jane Marsching (whose work was not featured in the Biennial, but should have been) also explore illusion and perception using a combination of science and mystery. Marsching's site entitled, *Para://*, a database of wonders revolves around the notion of pareidolia, a type of illusion or misperception involving the capacity of people to see

patterns in unstructured data. *Para://* collects data from the web and reconfigures, reclusters and reorders the information into new patterns, creating stories, images and journeys. Marsching combines science, art and the paranormal, asking the viewer to question their notions of the "truth". The images are both historical and contemporary from the first photographs in the 1840's to 3D visualizations of cosmic strings in theoretical physics. They represent humankind's desire to see the world around us, including the world invisible to the human eye. The garbled sound bites are bits of text taken from sites, which collect accounts of sightings of angels, ghosts, aliens, etc... The voice embedded in static adds to the feeling of communication from other worlds.

**<http://www.thesweepers.com/jane/para>**

Zoe Beloff's website hosts multiple projects, which investigate the paranormal and illusion. *Beyond* is a mysterious virtual world where the user encounters the artist's alter ego in the form of a medium that interfaces between the living and the dead. The piece explores the paradoxes of technology, desire and the paranormal from 1850-1940. Beloff incorporates clips from early home movies found at flea markets and from the Library of Congress print collection. The location of the virtual world is an abandoned asylum from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Informed by writings and theories of Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Raymond Roussel and his relationship to his doctor, Pierre Janet, Beloff takes the viewer on a journey to the unknown place where technology intersects with psychology. Other projects include the Philosophical Toy World, which depicts early illusionist children's toys and an interactive installation entitled, *The Influencing Machine of Miss Natalija A.*

**<http://www.zobeloff.com/>**

While net art is still developing its own syntax, differentiating itself from other media, it is evident that many new media and net artists draw from the photographic culture, exploring the photographic metaphors of the representation of truth, illusion and perception in their work. To research additional net artists, the following sites have archives dedicated to current work in this genre:

**<http://www.diacenter.org>**

**<http://collections.walkerart.org/>**

**<http://rhizome.org>**

**<http://www.franklinfurnace.org>**

**<http://www.turbulence.org>**



"The information bomb exploded in the early 1990's, when computer networks attained a critical speed and scale, flipping the gates wide open to unleash a torrent of blinding, deafening code—a thunderous explosion of advertising, entertainment, voice and data."<sup>6</sup>

### **Before and After the I-Bomb: An Artist in the Information Environment**

What were you doing when the I-Bomb exploded in the mid-1990's? Were you even aware of its existence or global impact? We live under the illusion that technology allows for more efficiency and productivity. Tom Sherman's new book, *Before & After the I-Bomb: An Artist in the Information Environment* addresses the technology explosion and its impact on society and culture; how we have evolved from managing technology to technology controlling our lives. The book encompasses over 25 years of Sherman's writings, but the majority of the essays were written over the last decade. The essays reflect Sherman's ideas, observations and passions, combining humor and irony with a distinctive voice. As a

video and performance artist, Sherman constructs layered narratives of an artist's perception of the world through the experience of media. His writings oscillate between speculative non-fiction and philosophic prose, questioning the role of technology as it relates to the workplace, psychology, nature and the future of art.

In the section entitled, *On the Future of Art*, Sherman muses on the multiple definitions of art, holds up a potentially bleak future for art and artists and then suggests invaluable strategies for threatened survival. In "Tweak" (1995), Sherman circumscribes art as a series of paradoxes, proving that art is tangible, intangible and not easily defined. "Art is the reconstruction of self. Art is the transformation of self into community. Art is devolution of self into personal substance without consciousness."<sup>7</sup> To tweak means to fine-tune, or endlessly adjust. Although tweaking is a small maneuver or gesture, its ramifications can be quite profound, much in the same way that art permeates all aspects of culture. "To tweak one's perception or experience or description of life is art."<sup>8</sup>

Tweak also refers to the ongoing process of creating art. Sherman further explores this theme in the essay, *The Finished Work of Art is a Thing of the Past* (1995). With the advent of digital technology, preceded by radio and television, art lost its corporeal body. Without permanence and materiality, how can an artwork sustain its value in a capitalist society? Sherman states that art has to be positioned and interpreted as information in order to have value in an information economy. The other issue with new technology is the illusion of finality of the product. With immaterial media such as performance, video and net art, the works are never finished. Depending upon the degree of interactivity between the audience and the artwork, works evolve, never attaining final closure. From an artist's perspective, this is a positive attribute. Shared authorship through audience participation causes a continuous transformation in artwork, extending its life and potential renderings.

In *Thoughts from the Antechamber (On the Future of Art)* (1995-6), Sherman argues a possible grim future for art and artists. He states that the world will continue to be ruled by Men without Art. The world is divided into the categories of managerial science and art, with managerial science encompassing the vast majority of society. In the future, art may even fall under the rubric of managerial science; thus nothing will be called 'Art'. This is already evidenced with the massive cutbacks in public arts funding and the conservative political regime that is heavily biased against conceptual and

cutting-edge art. There will be less human contact and less connection with nature. In order to survive, one strategy will be for artists to build subcultures to preserve history and themselves. Sherman warns that artists need to cease living in the past and avoid being caught in the "pigeonhole" of art; an 'Art' that becomes more and more like itself. He cautions about the dangers of making art out of art history or becoming ensnared in the conventions, clichés and traditions of the past. The ominous repercussions of not embracing the future and shaping alternatives will result in the extinction of art. "If there is so much hostility or indifference toward art, and the vast majority of artists "choose" to live in the past, then industrial culture will soon completely replace art as a commodity or service for the leisure class."<sup>9</sup>

I am drawn to the prophetic undertones in Sherman's

essays. His strength as a writer is in his ability to combine original insights with intellectual rigor, while maintaining a sense of sometimes subtle, sometimes outrageous humor. Sherman's writings require us to re-examine the ramifications of telecommunications and our dependence upon devices and networks. He leaves us with the thought that the two primary elements in our universe are memory and hope. "Hope can never be contained or terminated."<sup>10</sup> It is our task as artists and individuals to go forth and create worlds never before seen or contemplated, memories never envisioned, senses never experienced. 

To order the book: Banff Publisher's website is:

<http://www.banffcentre.ca/press/>

## Footnotes

1 Ingrid Schaffner, Senior Curator, Institute for Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Essay on the Photogenic exhibit.

2 Schaffner, Ingrid, "The Unphotographable: Notes on Photography and Dust," Art on Paper, March/April, 2002, p.60.

3 2002 Whitney Biennial Catalog, p. 17.

4 2002 Whitney Biennial Catalog, p. 64.

5 I used parentheses around games, because there did not seem to be any set rules and many of the games did not seem to progress to a conclusion

6 Sherman, Tom, Before & After the I-Bomb: An Artist in the Information Environment, Alberta: Banff Centre, 2002, p.2.

7 Sherman, p. 250.

8 Sherman, p. 250.

9 Sherman, p. 262.

10 Sherman, p. 368.

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