
Grieve With a View

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Abstract

In this presentation the shifting limits of the tools available to the digital artist are presented as having rendered the creative landscape simultaneously infinite and barren. The creative strategies of the Singaporean art collective Grieve Perspective, of which the author is a member, are presented as a legitimate response to this dead-zone.

Keywords

Digital Art, Compositing, Singapore, Death.

ACM Classification Keywords

J5. Fine Arts.

General Terms

Digital Art, Compositing, Singapore, Death.

Introduction

Public housing in Singapore is scrupulously maintained so as to preserve ethnic quotas per floor, with no clear predominance of one group over another. However, the huge cemeteries (necropolises) in the far west of the island are equally scrupulous in the separation of their denizens according to faith. To paraphrase L. P. Hartley: death is a foreign country, they do things differently there.

In art, the dead and the dying (**Figure 1**) are there to reassure the audience that death is, in Douglas Adam's words, 'someone else's problem'.



Figure 1. Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), *Pollice Verso*, 1872

More unusually, death is presented as a place to go to and perhaps return from (**Figure 2**). In the film *Orphée*, by that arch melancholic Jean Cocteau, death is portrayed as a place in which it is even possible to set up a radio station from where signals can be broadcast to the living.

This idea was taken to sublime extremes by the International Necronautical Society (INS) which regards death as territory ripe for conquest. Its manifesto reads:



Figure 2. Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), *Isle of the Dead*, 1880

1. *That death is a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonize and, eventually, inhabit.*
2. *That there is no beauty without death, its immanence. We shall sing death's beauty - that is, beauty.*

The root cause of age-death in animal cells is oxidization, a similar process to that which happens when hemoglobin oxidizes to produce life-giving oxyhemoglobin. Life can therefore be regarded as a fire whose livid incandescence pre-determines its own demise. In light of this INS's second point of credo seems quite reasonable. But their first point is more compelling for it's sheer non-achievability. We can go to the moon and come back with samples, photographs and perhaps one day even snow globes, but the two immutable characteristics that we all share - gender and mortality - are beyond tourism. An altogether titillating restriction presents itself: that we may

photograph death but we can not *go there* and photograph it.

It is interesting that the INS frames its enquiry into death as an act of colonization. This betrays a lack of sensitivity towards the incumbent denizens, flora and fauna and promises to graft alien ways of doing things over the native. To colonize death by their terms would be to turn it into a form of life.

I am a member of the art collective **Grieve Perspective**, together with artist and curator Guo-Liang Tan, filmmaker Charles Lim and art historian Adele Tan.

Using INS's credo as a lever I shall position our work as an enquiry into space and argue that the digital domain is somewhere that only those born into it can thrive.

In our short video **loop 'The Life I Live...'** (**Figure 3**)¹ a piece of text revolves around the figure of a girl. The text reads:

'The life I live is a special kind of life. It is black and its name is death. The quick they dance without me but that is there right (and their duty) and I would not have it any other way'

It is an unwritten rule of our group that in the making of our work creative strategies are exchanged, cross-bred, accepted or rejected but the discussion of any ideas that might inform them is almost entirely avoided. For this reason an hysteric flavor imbues

much of our authorship: art is made, but never fully accounted for.

Given this working agreement, it is much easier to speak of our work in the manner of a post-mortem: as a corpse from which facts are culled, observations are made and larger creative vectors determined and it is in this form that I shall address it.

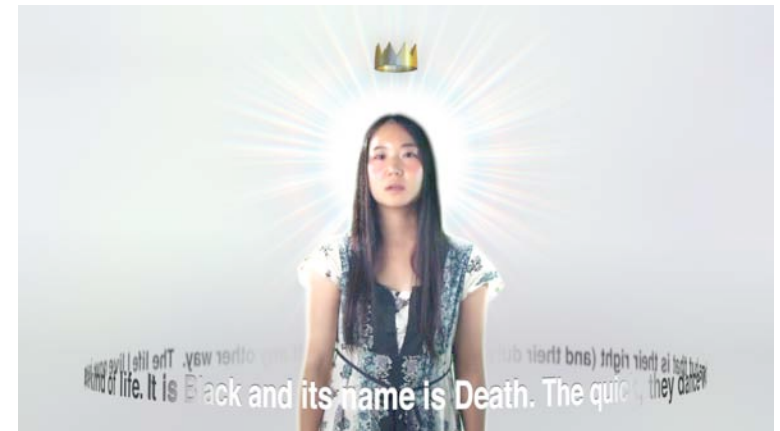


Figure 3. Grieve Perspective, *The Life I Live...*, Video loop 2 mins, 2010

'The Life I Live...' is, like all our videos, looped. This was done so as to avoid creating narratives within the work and thereby turning us into filmmakers. A node-based digital compositor (Figure 4) was used in its manufacture and files made in this way have the appearance of a tree, with data being sucked in by the leaves, processed by the branches and rendered out at the trunk.

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZtfpkOY8i8>

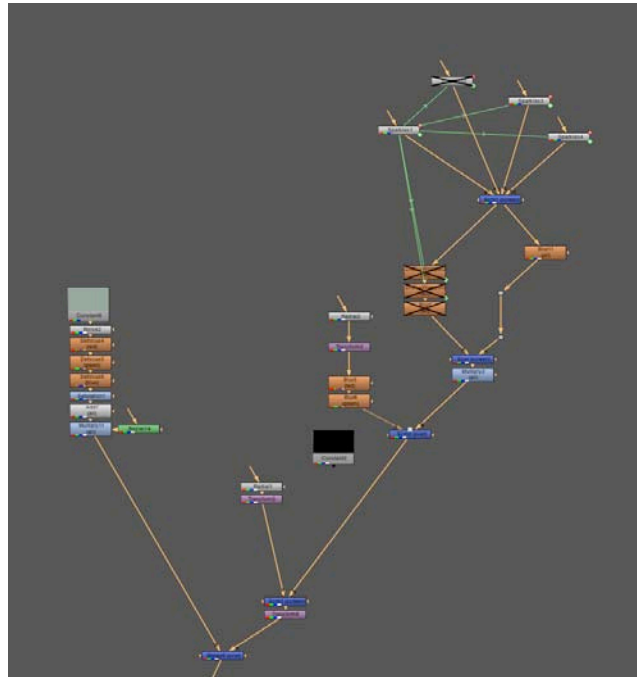


Figure 4. Node based compositor, detail of tree structure.

Node based interfaces are not new in digital art, for many years interactive media artists have been manipulating their data streams with max/MSP and Apple's Shake was used to make Peter Jackson's film 'The Lord of the Rings'. What is new is the ease with which these editors can now move between completely different forms of data. What once involved many editing and authoring applications and much stumbling around within awkward workflows, can now be done with ease without leaving a single window.

Their odd-looking interfaces do not visually reference their analogue precursors. However, they are far better at presenting to the user the numerical underpinning of the creative edit (the 'digit' of digital art) and in this number-verse all data looks the same no matter where it came from.

Though it is recognized that embedded in the DNA of digital moving images are elements of filmmaking, printmaking and photography, the strength of the new generation compositing tools are their ability to transcend the limitations that are the lifeblood of these traditional media.

The filmmaker's timeline is just another data-flow to be treated like any other. It can be acted upon by exactly the same editing operations that work upon the colors of the image, it can be reversed, sped up, slowed down or its values used to drive other editing operations.

Given the fact that it is so easy to manipulate the digital stream, it becomes almost impossible not to. This renders the photographer's authentic moment as mutable and as untrustworthy as any found on such scurrilous Photoshop wizardry sites as worth.100.com, somethingawfull.com or Fark.com.

The printmaker's fixation on artifact becomes a pointless thing in the face of the fact that 2D, 3D, anaglyphic and time based input and output all equally well supported.

The limitations of a medium are the environs in which dwells the art. The degree to which the artist has negotiated these limitations constitute its creative postal code, more often than not indicating somewhere

comfortable yet not too boring between the centre of town and its far outskirts.

It is not that the new media are without limitations (for no medium is free of those) but that their limitations are so mutable. Applications come in suites that output and input into each other, content can be culled from multiple sources and the number and form of spaces and boundaries that the artists can build is matched only by the endless ways in which they can be combined. An infinite city is antithetical to life. It is un-mappable, uninhabitable and a terror for the artist to engage with. It is, effectually, a necropolis.

It is no surprise that many digital artists pretend that the old city walls are still in place, a delusion the monolithic software companies are only too happy to serve. This is evidenced by the large number of editing tools in old-school applications such as Photoshop and Final Cut Pro that ape traditional analogue tools. Like the zombies in a George Romero film these artists shuffle around in semblance to their former lives: the cleaner still holds his mop, the policeman still wear his uniform and the babe still sports her miniskirt but their value to society is in the past.

Grieve Perspective have adopted a perverse strategy in dealing with the sense of impotence that technological omnipotence has dealt us: we decided to breed. The mechanics of our four-way collective authorship has produced a self-sufficient fifth agent. This wayward child is un-encumbered by the limitations that have hobbled its parents. Having been born into the void it knows no other space and does not feel the need to mourn its passing.

The two words that form the name of our group typify opposing ways in which to deal with the loss of certainty: to mourn its passing or to gain a distance upon it. This was intended to allow a space for either strategy to be adopted, however our child seems to have elected to cross-breed these two options to produce a third: it has learned to celebrate this loss.

Like the Florentine bonfire of the vanities or an ancient vanitas painting of a skull, celebration seems a perfectly appropriate response to loss. When Jean Cocteau was asked which of his artworks he would save if they were all on fire, he responded 'the fire'. An inverted response from an arch invert.



Figure 5. *Re-Think*, Video loop 2 mins, 2010

In '**Re-Think**' (**Figure 5**) a meteorite or missile crashes into Goldsmiths' College, London. The one thing that Grieve Perspective have in common is that we all received our education in the art schools of London. Like any successful education, this was ninety percent a destructive experience for which we were mostly grateful. From it we acquired a set of tools that might originally have had 'made in Britain' stamped on

their side but are well-enough suited to be used to carve a particular place within the Singaporean scape.

'The Heavens Belong to Everyone but the View Above is Ours Alone' (Figure 6) is a dark affair. It was made using a device called a 'time of flight light' camera that captures the 3D form of an object. It does so in much the same way as would a radar, but instead of a moving image it produces a sequence of 3D models. Footage taken in this way can be rotated and lit after capture.

When Orpheus was returning from the underworld with his recently departed lover, against advice he looked at her before she had fully returned to the land of the living. As a consequence, he lost her forever. If he had been carrying a time of flight light camera things might have turned out different. This curious camera/radar/scanner hybrid, able to see without seeing, is the perfect device to enable the liminal focus.

The installation which constitutes this work (figure 7), is composed of four, small wall-mounted monitors on which a magician's hands rotates in and out of view. They are playing with cards and belong to a student of NTU who is the Singapore champion 'flourisher'. Flourishing is the art of card tricks without the trickery and it is the magician's cardsmanship that is on view. The title of the piece is written on the wall. This numbers of characters in this sentence is contrived to be 52, exactly the same amount of cards as there are in a pack.



Figure 6. *The Heavens Belong to Everyone...*, Video loop 2 mins, 2010

The loop **Giù la Testa (Figure 8)** depicts a man climbing (endlessly) in and out of a hole. If he does it often enough perhaps it will become meaningful in the manner of a liturgic chant or a trance music track.

The subtitles in **Tomorrow is a Million Years** (Figure 9) count up from the year 2010 in bad Latin. If it is repeated often enough perhaps this morbid countdown will become meaningless in the manner of Andy Warhol's Monroe.



Figure 7: *The Heavens Belong to Everyone...*, (installation view) Video loop 2 mins, 2010

The looping of videos and the collectivizing of authorship are both strategies. These strategies are unoriginal, cowardly and crude and yet they offer a potentially effective way for a group of semi-lost artists to make something of significance. We look down at our hands and see naked sock puppets whilst our progeny is off having fun with the medium that we are too wise to enjoy and too old to trust. He is young, and as a consequence is reckless, confident and aspirational. He also, you may have noticed, enjoys wearing black.



Figure 8: *Giù la Testa*, Video loop 40 seconds, 2010



Figure 9: *Tomorrow is a Million Years*, Video loop 3 mins, 2010