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[1]
In Absentia: anxietate și distanță în opera lui Ken Goldberg

de Dana Altman

"În toate artele există o componentă fizică ce nu mai poate fi considerată sau analizată așa cum se făcește pe vremuri și care nu poate rămâne neafectată de cunoașterea și puterea noastră modernă. În ultimele două decenii spațiul și timpul nu mai sînt ceea ce au fost din vremuri imperioase. Trebuie să ne așeptăm la mari inovări care vor transforma întreaga tehnică artistică afectînd astfel creativitatea însăși și chiar schimbînd în mod ulterior noțiunea însăși de artă." 


Ken Goldberg distinge arta computerizată de alte forme de artă prin capacitatea lor de a avea drept produs final un obiect, definit prin masă și perceptibil prin intermediul simțului tactil, cu alte cuvinte, al componentei fizice. Rezultatul procesului de creație al picturii sau sculpturii tradiționale, așa cum le cunoaștem, este un produs final care poate fi definit, printre altele, prin aspectul fizic: e ceva care poate fi atins, mirosit și are o anumită masă. Privitorul nu percepe doar o idee, ci și un alt component, măiestria artistului de a comunica ceva semnificativ prin intermediul tehnicii sale personale. Secole de istorie a artei au fost dedicate elaborărilor asupra aspectelor cromatic sau noutăților compozitional. Ce se întîmplă însă dacă această componentă fizică devine mai puțin importantă? Sau dacă arta devine capabilă să abandoneze corporalitatea, fără a o înlătura neașteptat cu altceva, și să ne arate semnificația într-un mod care are de-a face puțin sau chiar deloc cu acest aspect?

Există mai multe tipuri de artă pe internet: animații, care sînt de natură iconică și au drept rezultat, în ultimă instanță, un obiect, precum și arta conceptuală. Aplicînd un set de instrucțiuni, cel care le urmează creează ceva. Acel ceva poate să fie un obiect sau nu, iar distanța spatială pare să nu aibă un impact prea mare asupra acțiunilor utilizatorului, atât timp cât ele sînt posibile de punct de vedere tehnologic. Dar cum putem fi siguri că această creare să fie suficientă condiția existenței fizice, în loc de a fi doar o altă imagine dintr-o bază de date situată undeva la distanță? În situația "tele-epistemologiei," studiul cunoașterii obținute la distanță, problema referinței devine inevitabilă. Referința este un concept pe care semiotic încercă să îl clarifice foarte mult timp. Filosofia analitică afirmă că referința este relația dintre o expresie și obiectul pe care îl denotă. Orice tip de discurs poate fi însă despre obiecte care nu există, iar situația devine mai complexă și chiar arbitrară cînd obiectul denotat este sau poate fi o fantasmă, sau cînd realitatea sa depinde de tehnologia folosită pentru a-l investiga și/sau produce. În același timp, o dată ce o realitate este creată, utilizatorii tind să se identifice cu ea, stabilind reguli și un spațiu comun de operare, protejîndu-și domeniul, de fapt întârînd un referent consolidat care s-ar putea să nu existe, dar care reprezintă un argument în plus în favoarea permanentei novi umane de a cuceri, de a apropria și de a îmbînzi spațiul nefamiliar.

Evenimentele zilnice pot fi percepute doar prin filtrul subiectivității, fenomen cu implicări imense: umanitatea se refu-
In Absentia: Anxiety and Distance in the Work of Ken Goldberg

"In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art."


Ken Goldberg talks about the difference between computer art and other forms of art in terms of their capacity to have as a final product an object, defined as something that has a mass and can be perceived by means of our tactile senses, that is, by their physical component. The result of the creative process of traditional painting or sculpture, as we know them, is a final product defined, among others, by physically itself: it is something which can be touched, smelled and has a certain mass. It is not only the idea that comes across to the viewer, but also another component, the mastery of the artist to convey significance by means of his personal technique. Centuries of art history have been spent elaborating on chromatic aspects or on break-throughs in terms of composition. What if this physical component becomes less meaningful? What if art is able to shed this corporeality, not necessarily replacing it with something else, and show us meanings that have little or nothing to do with such an aspect?

There are various types of art online: flashy animations, iconic in nature, that deliver in fact an "object" and then the conceptual art. By following a set of instructions, the user can in fact create something, which may or may not be an object, and the spatial distance seems to have no implication on his or her action, as long as the action itself is technologically possible. But then, how can one really be sure that this creation fulfills the condition of physicality instead of being just another image pulled from a distant database? In the situation of telepistemology, or the study of knowledge acquired at a distance, the problem of reference is bound to occur. Reference is an issue that semiotics has been attempting to clarify for a long time. Analytical philosophy states that reference is the relationship between an expression and the object it denotes. Discourse of any kind can also be about non-existent objects, and the situation becomes even more complex and maybe arbitrary when the denoted object itself is or may be a phantasm, or when its reality depends on the technology used to investigate and/or produce it. In the same time, once a reality is created, users tend to identify with it, establishing rules and environments, protecting their domain, and actually strengthening a consolidated referent that may not exist, which only proves the permanent human need to conquer, appropriate and tame unfamiliar space.

Every-day events can only be grasped through the filter of subjectivity, which has immense implications: humanity takes refuge in mediated experiences, most often without questioning credibility aspects too much. This is probably the main reason of the fascination exerted by the ever-present surveillance cameras, reality shows and internet peep games, which shrewdly pretend that mediation does not exist and provide immediate referentialization. Viewers tend to willingly ignore that everything evolves according to master-scripts allowing a certain degree of combinatorial straying but ultimately a limited number of options. Raising the question of mediation and the play presence vs. absence, here vs. there and now vs. then to the level of an art form is a strong statement about the postmodernist world, which could be described as a parallel space generated by snippets of images and information from various sources and marking, as Jean Baudrillard states, the shift from real to hyperreal, which occurs when representation is replaced by permanent simulacra of a non-referential world.

Ken Goldberg's art is about this electronically-created mediation, and plugs into the postmodernist anxieties about distance, presence and absence, referentiality, individual loneliness and technological isolation and the "global society" with its way it might influence our every-day life. His robotic projects exploit the firm belief that the online "reality" must exist somewhere, in a space where tactile contact is possible, so that the user can relate to something physical instead of a sequence of pixels on a computer screen, and can actually communicate with it and alter it, appropriate it and create a familiar space. "Memento Mori" records the movements of a seismic fault, providing data visualization; "Tele-garden" is agriculture by remote control and implies full personal responsibility for the absent living space; "Ouija 2000" is a game board with a robotic arm controlled by the vote of the users, while "The Dislocation of Intimacy" is a detective game prompting the user to discover hidden objects revealing only their shadow, a philosophical concept that goes to the roots of human thought. Human beings seem still more at ease with tactile contact in order to relate themselves to the others and to the surrounding universe. The real question raised here is if this new 'reality' exists or not, and in the same time if this matters since its corporeal absence may influence us as much as its physical presence would. All that is left for us is to believe that our actions really shape something which exists in the physical dimension, and not only in our mind's eye.

Dana Altman is theoretician, writer and curator. Worked in research and teaching, studying linguistics and text history in Exeter College, Oxford, UK and has a doctorate in linguistics. Since 1997 is assistant director of Westwood Gallery in New York. She writes contemporary art criticism and fiction. She is co-editor of artophoto. Lives and work in New York.
“tele-actor”, installation + online installation, 2002.
Credit: the artist.
Photo: Bart Nagel. See www.ken.goldberg.net for details.
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Ken Goldberg

mori (1999, installation and internet-based earthwork), [with Randall Packer, Gregory Kuhn and Wojciech Matusik].
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Credit: the artist. See www.ken.goldberg.net for details.
"Tele-Twister", installation: game designed for the Internet, 2003.
Credit: Ken Goldberg. See www.ken.goldberg.net for details.
"Tele-Twister", installation: game designed for the Internet, 2003.
Credit: Ken Goldberg. See www.ken.goldberg.net for details.
"Ouija", installation + online installation, 2000.
Image from Ouija installation at Berkeley Art Museum.
Credit: the artist. See www.ken.goldberg.net for details.
"Ouija", installation + online installation, 2000.
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