

ETC 2559

Interview for REBOOT v.2

Christiane Robbins interviewed by Tara McPherson, 2000-01:

1. Let's start with a fairly basic question: how did you come to work with computer technologies? What path(s) brought you to the practice of 'cyberart'?

*hmmmmmm ... "cyberart" .... digging into the memory banks .... and what version should I offer up?*

*Forgive me for dredging up such a tired argument but rather than go the Modernist route of medium defined art practice ( which is often the case in discussing art and technology, ) I'd prefer to state that I regard myself as a visual artist and media maker who engages with a variety of material conditions and practices predicated upon the conceptual underpinnings of the specific piece. I don't intend that to sound as pretentious as it might, rather it grounds my own practice in a blurred realm which is much more comfortable and aligned with whom I am in the world.*

*In connecting the proverbial dots, I came to use machines ... computers ... through a collaborative relationship with a video artist during the 1980's. I was first introduced to "digital imaging " through broadcast post-production facilities. We enjoyed a rather luxurious situation of literally being able to "play" with the computers and digital video during downtime ( often that meant between midnight and 6AM. ) I use the word "play" quite deliberately as it stages my approach to computers - to the digital realm - which is relatively irreverent and dismissive of the tropes that typically surround the technological impulse and paradigms. My work now engages a complexity of digitally based formal directions: imaging, facial recognition, emotional modeling, digital video, neural networks, telepresence, databases, netbased work, augmented realities, etc. - what ever seems appropriate.*

*More importantly, my work delves into the dissemination and trajectories of information - specifically mediated information; the manner in which knowledge is formatted and obtained; the discernment of fact and fiction; and how*

*imaging, sound, space and interactivity impart a different set of meanings than textual based narratives.*

2. Could you comment on your experiences of doing technical work as a woman? Put differently, how does gender shape both perceptions of you as an artist and your relationship to digital culture? Do you see new media as a particularly rich terrain from which to engage feminist ideas?

*As opposed to my doing technical work as I might imagine a man would ? These images are perhaps informed best through the U.S. magazine of Popular Mechanics - whose readership is overwhelmingly male. Not surprisingly, they now dedicate a high percentage of its articles to " new technologies ."*

*What strikes me is how the past 15 years have remained so rigidly gendered and, seemingly, essentialist these fields are rendered: technology = male / art = female. Quite obviously, this embodies the values and power dynamics of our socio-economic system. So ... when using the lens of convention to witness a woman artist successfully using instruments of technology and information systems, that artist becomes perceived as somewhat of an androgynous being - constantly negotiating and re-negotiating ( not to be confused with manipulating = the ultimate stereotypical "feminine" gesture! ) the space between these fixed identities and representations. It strikes me that a new set of relations [emerging around project work] ... is being established.*

*When I first began my collaborative video projects in the early '80's, I recall a discussion by a 1st or 2nd generation video artist (woman) being asked this same question. She referenced the fact that she had "gone into video" because it was a new media as opposed to film whose territory ( experimental and independent ) had already been colonized - staked out by men. So ... this same question is asked with the advent of each new media ... each new technology ... with the fervent hope that it will prove to be **the one** to be a " particularly rich terrain from which to engage feminist ideas ".*

*< Tara - can you please define those feminist ideas ???!>*

So ... yes.... I feel at this particular cultural moment – which is rare and surprisingly rich – as it lies in the aftermath of feminism having hit its popular stride. By this I mean that feminism and the conception of women's right and gender politics have undergone numerous changes and fractal intervals since the waves of the '60s and '70s and it remains a capricious and often contested site. But this work, as well as the past century of pioneering women's and men's efforts, have contributed to make my work plausible and, indeed, recognized by various audiences and communities.

This is not to take a Pollyanna view by any means, as we have now entered into a both overt and covert reactionary cultural phase that has been insidiously foregrounded and backstoryed into the neo-libertine realm of digital media. This comes as a byproduct of the introduction of market forces and the subsequent generation of wealth. Simultaneously, there are numerous people holding a good deal of cultural cache who do not share in that value system. To me, this all is indicative of a very challenging, conflicted, tense and very, very interesting time to be creating work.

3. How do issues of embodiment or corporeality surface in your work? How is the body an infosphere? Why is it important to remember the body in virtual practices? What strategies do you deploy in this regard? How is race addressed?

Probably the best way to address this is to say that my work addresses those rather complicated intersections of the mind and the body, as well as issues which reference the body, its cultural and existential identity.

In dealing with virtual spaces, one must remember that these spaces are constructed ... for our viewing pleasure (normally, a pay for view!). Therefore, these are representational spaces which we inhabit when entering virtual realms. These are spaces which have been predicated upon specific social and cultural codifications, entertainment tropes, and marketing strategies. We find ourselves orchestrated within that frame by the omnipresent gesticulations of interactivity. Whenever we find ourselves within any situation of hypereality – of simulation – our responses are more or less scripted/predetermined in accordance within that screen of social codes. I am not only referencing commercial works such as gaming, but also

numerous " art " pieces which use the very same programming and representational motifs, without any strategies in mind to displace or question the agency inherent in those codes.

( By the way, its important t to remember that most of these codes have been authored to appeal to a specific demographic - a market of 14- 25 year old males.)

**In regard to my own strategies, please refer to my project descriptions, especially " A Vous de Jouer ."**

**How is race addressed? :** " **Amidst the White Noise** " is a digital video intervention into the construction and discourse of virtual whiteness, the marketplace, and the specter of information circulating around our media-based events.

" Robbins' newest video work is an "experimental docudrama" critiquing the characteristics of race as it circulates through the media. Linking the broadcast of Roots to the equally popular televised pursuit of O.J. Simpson, a trajectory is traced invisible in its ironic whiteness." Steve Seid, PFA.

4. Cyberspace is often categorized as somehow beyond the physical, as immaterial, yet your projects challenge this view by re configuring space & time, imbricating the virtual within larger networks of geography and temporality. How important is installation or location-based work in this process of re-inscription?

*It is inconceivable to me to do this any other way ...*

*Oh you know ....its just following the newest genre ... that of theme park art!!= this is not serious .. I will answer this more clearly ... I promise!*

*I think that I am breaking my promise!*

5. Each of you seems to engage science and/or technology in your work, either directly or indirectly, blurring the boundaries between art and science? What's at stake for you in this boundary crossing? How do new media structure new possibilities for collaborative work with other disciplines? How has this collaboration been important to your work?

On an autobiographical note, throughout my practice I have always engaged ed with different technologies and different degrees thereof. Hence, to discuss these again within the strict parameters of discipline based constructs doesn't seem useful to me. I've always been intrigued by the nether space - by the in-between - this probably rigs true in every aspect of my life! This is most directly referenced by the name of my studio , JETZTZEIDT, the space between zero and one - a term originally coined by Walter Benjamin.

I've always worked collaboratively - specifically in Digital Media - with its growing complexities -I have somewhat appropriated the model of the film/video director/producer. I began my work in video working collaboratively and it seems to have offered a template for the past 18 years or so. My first experience in video was with video engineers and computer programmers who were doubling as graphic designers in a situation that was rare and somewhat luxurious. By that I mean that it was fostered by a corporate entity who had no restrictions on what was produced. This situation proved immensely successful and reciprocal. Certainly, it was one that left an imprint on my relationships to come.

<An aside: This interest in " art and science " is fashionable at the moment and it's important to recognize the complexity of this specific cultural moment. For the past twenty or thirty years there has been a concurrent sub-culture within the larger art/media scene that has posited the importance of "art and science" or " art and technology . " The fact that it has risen to prominence within this particular moment is of no surprise when one considers our overall cultural context. Not only is it timely with the rise of biotechnology , computer modelling, augmented environments, and the internet, traditionally speaking, computer-generated work ( and this is a gross generalization!) has been rather "safe", rather abstract , and/or representational within the "new age" codification of romanticized gothic religious iconography - concentrating exclusively on the aesthetic value of the image and little else. Simultaneously, another cadre of digital inquiry donned the white lab coats and horn rimmed glasses and tinkered within machinations of the technology itself or offered a black leather patina on a " rewired arty " spin on the legacies of science fiction.

Generally speaking, this did not substantively attach itself to any kind of "issue" oriented art, as traditionally computer-generated work had seen itself apart from the 'fine art or visual art' realm and in a rationalized, mirrored neo-libertine sense, saw itself as "free" of those considerations. Perhaps this was due to its prolonged lack of acceptance - the 'stepchild' effect, or the fact that it had been the recipient of so much "restricted" corporate funding of projects. It was as if this partnership with science took on the pretense of an almost spiritualized effort to serve our rather secular society and, thus, operated on the fringes of the art world system.

I say this not to diminish any of the aforementioned, rather I say this to point to the proverbial 'paradigmatic shift' that we have witnessed in the past few years. More recently, a number of artists are now working with digital media, as well as issues endemic to science and technology. They come from different disciplines within visual art/media practice and reference specific theoretical positions. This approach has been institutionally fostered by such places as the Banff Centre for the Arts, the Walker Art Center, and the Wexner Center - to name but a few. However, the funding for these projects comes primarily from corporate entities. The all too expected compromising effect remains to be seen, as these projects have been negotiated and championed by those whose commitment is without question.

To be clear, I've never bought into the 19th c myth of the angst-ridden, neurotic (being polite!), anti-intellectual, starving artist moored by aristocratic patronage. This rather twisted glamour of the iconoclast is double edged, as it contributes to not only the "petification" of the artist but also the genderization of the field itself. Artists and their production can then be dismissed as to not making a serious, valued contribution to society, as opposed to the highly eminent contributions of science and technology.

What "new media" offers in terms of the socio-political economy is a new positioning of the "artist" (albeit the commercial artist), as the demand for design and the characteristics accorded to an artist such as "thinking out of the box", adaptability and working in relative isolation, are highly sought

after in this specific labor market. " NetArt" is very much a case in point. As it is predicated on programming competencies and desktop publishing software programs, thereby making a craft like, skill-set imminently transferable to the marketplace. Never in recent history have artists been so much in demand. Ironically, this demand could not be more perfectly timed as it comes in tandem with years of drastic cuts in public funding for the arts and opportunities for artists. Thus, for some artists working in the digital realm, "new media" offers a very real mechanism for survival , as well as a rather compromised form of funding for their own visual art and media practice.

6. I love the way your work engages directly with corporate culture, teasing out and commenting on art's relationship to commercial practices while also reflecting on the increasingly global nature of corporate capitalism. Why do you take on corporate culture? What thoughts do you have on the increasing commercialization of the internet and other digital spaces?

Let's see ... looking at my practice through a conventional lens, one could easily say that I am a masochist ... spitting into the wind, so to speak ! In fact, an old lover admonished me for being too much of an idealist!

Why do I take this on ? I can only answer by saying how can I not take this on ?

The motivation comes from personal history and what I'd like to see as a some sort of principled commitment .... to what I'm not sure!!!

Again, for the past 18 years my work has attached itself to a critique of corporate culture, ranging from my early collaborative video work " Leaving the 20th Century" and "Perfect Leader" to " ID " to my more recent piece of "Amidst the White Noise" a digital intervention into the construction and discourse of virtual whiteness, the marketplace, and the specter of information circulating around our media-based events.

Offering a cultural analysis ... a critique, if you will ... is what I can offer as a counter testimony to the history and fictions of the " sanctioned story" - which , quite obviously, avails itself to certain interests. The

global culture in which we find ourselves is so very ubiquitous - and living within it so time consuming - that there seems little left of individual agency. My intent is not so different than others ... that my work will provoke questions - to jog that nagging doubt, suspicion or hope that things might be different - to encourage not only change but a way of thinking about the existence in which we find ourselves and, perhaps, a voice.

7. Despite the deeply critical edge to your work, you each seem to retain a refreshing degree of optimism in relation to the possibilities embedded in digital practices. Is this a fair characterization?

**More to come..... perhaps the question/answer above will answer this as well.**

8. You are each, to some degree, involved in university life. How can we prepare our students to engage fully and critically with the infoscapes of the twenty-first century? How can education help women and minorities become savvy high tech citizens?

By continuing to do our work, as artists, academics, writers , theoreticians, cultural producers of whatever ilk ! And by retaining , expanding and advancing the positions that we hold. It is common knowledge that this field - technology that is - is predominantly male. With the advent of interdisciplinary initiatives taking hold on university campuses, perhaps that cross-disciplinary fertilization will have some effect of what can only be called an arrested state of gender development within the overall field of technologies and computer science.

However, I find it interesting that so many women have become academics within very specific sub-genres of technology, i.e. visual art, media, critical theory ... perhaps this will be considered the "pink collar" ghetto of the early 21st century - just as visual art practice and administration was so defined by the NEA in the early eighties .

Since my move to Los Angeles, I've been utterly amazed at the number of dynamic women artists and/or academics who are engaging with digital media. That fact alone makes it a distinctly stimulating and enticing place to be right now.

9. What new projects are you working on now?

***see listing of projects sent to you earlier today....***

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