

CONVERSATION

A conversation between Ceci Moss and Nicholas O'Brien

Ceci Moss: I wanted to begin by discussing landscape, as it's an ongoing theme in your work and this exhibition. Specifically, I'd like to talk about how a computer's orientation towards the world feeds into the artistic representation of landscape, in your own work and those of new media artists who have influenced you. I'm thinking of Phil Agre's notion of 'capture' discussed in his text 'Surveillance and capture' where he illustrates the mechanisms of control at work within information technology, and the unique way computers 'read' and in turn, regulate, human subjects. Under the capture model, human activity is reorganized in order to improve its legibility for computers, allowing the computer to track that behaviour. Beyond human activity, the logic of capture is also applicable to the surveillance of land and territory. I'm wondering if capture is a topic that comes up in your own research? What does capture mean to you?

Nicholas O'Brien: The orientation of the computer is certainly important for the ways in which I'm considering landscape. However, I tend to try to expand this notion of orientation beyond just the computer, and think about how technology in general – both digital and analog – have had a long history of shaping the ways in which we approach, discover, and investigate landscape. Capturing is a fascinating consideration when thinking about the ways in which we have built and constructed notions of landscape as an observable thing; a location of surveillance but also as an object of appreciation.

That process of turning wilderness into an object not only reduces the planet into pockets of data – visual and otherwise – but it also neatly domesticates the environment through intense compartmentalization. In other words, the capturing of landscape – be it through the frame of a digital video camera, or via a web app that turns data traffic into mountain ranges – results in a container that usually allows for easy visual digestion.

That being said, complicating this idea of capturing is important. It is a fairly faulty and, oftentimes, foolish endeavour. The continual artistic struggle of finding ways to capture landscape seems to again and again fall short of the actual, temporal experience of being immersed in wilderness. Instead of capturing, I tend to think of rendering as a better term – not only for technical purposes but also as a metaphorical device used to discuss how we go about digitally simulating the physical world. To render something in technical terms is to go about a computational process in order to visualize information in real-time play back; however rendering also can be seen as a ‘giving back’, or return, or restoration of some kind of debt. When thinking along these lines, not only does render mean to represent digital computation, but it can also be seen as an offer to the source from which it came. In this way, I like to consider how computers can be seen as not only as capturing devices – tools that withhold and keep contained – but can also reciprocate with nature and culture.

The subject of landscape is often interlaced with that of beauty. You bring this up in the accompanying curatorial essay for your show ‘Notes on a New Nature’ where you discuss the inevitable and continuing failure artists face, across history, in their attempt to represent the full beauty of nature. You argue that this failure seems to take on a strange, unique form within the framework of new technologies, such as computer simulation. In that exhibition, and in ‘The New Romantics’, there’s an acknowledgment of sublimity of natural beauty, as well as this persistent failure.

The topic of Beauty and the Sublime are becoming more pressing issues for myself and other artists in this exhibition. In the past, I’ve avoided taking on these topics directly for fear of getting mired in some of the more complicated philosophical material that accompanies these subjects; concerns like The Absolute, religion and God, Taste, and Terror have all been territories that for one reason or another I have felt either unprepared to discuss, or else unwilling to tackle. In some way collaborating on this exhibition has opened me up to be able to take on some of that intellectual material, but also I think more artists are ready to have that conversation within their own work.

Beauty and the Sublime have recently taken on more central roles for many artists working with digital technology. I think that this is partially due to a need to address the above mentioned concerns, but also as a way to address uncertainty as a larger issue within contemporary art practice. Allowing for this uncertainty keeps work fresh, and enables a community to develop in unexpected ways. The Sublime, then, is synonymous with the unknown and uncertain, and thus feeds nicely into my desires to maintain a certain rawness or looseness in the way that I work.

This process of looking back in order to understand the present is precisely the way that I choose to tackle issues of Beauty and the Sublime in landscape but also with technology. By looking back, I’ve noticed equivalences that

I want to draw between then and now, in order to create bridges of empathy between artists of the past and their contemporary unresolved fallout. For instance, thinking about how and why abstraction, metaphor and allegory seemed the most adequate way for romantic landscape painters at the turn of the nineteenth century to address the Sublime and the Beautiful resonates deeply with contemporary decisions of many digital artists working on similar issues and concerns. The ongoing failure of artists to fully capture the qualities of landscape that often astonish us is part of the central paradoxes of image making. The desire (albeit quixotic) for the arts to continue to approach the material of landscape through the lenses of the Beautiful and the Sublime is exactly the type of precarious pursuit that can sustain and fuel my desire to nourish uncertainty in my practice.

Since you've mentioned an engagement with art history and a 'looking back', could you talk more about how contemporary digital artists are working with practices coming out of the nineteenth century? What is the significance of these practices now?

I think I've told this story a couple of times recently, but I think it's still the best way of trying to talk my interests in this material: About five years ago I went to a lecture by T. J. Clarke in which he primarily discussed some of the modern paintings that had been recently rehung for the opening of the Art Institute of Chicago's Modern Wing. A good amount of this lecture revolved around the relationship that Cézanne had with his long-time mentor Camille Pissarro. When Clarke repeatedly mentioned how the stylistic split between the two rested on Cézanne's desire to capture the more 'virtual' properties of the landscape, a light bulb switched on in my head. This insistence of capturing the virtual properties of landscape resonated with me deeply since it delicately named a pressing problem that I was noticing within digital landscape representation. Even in the midst of high-res, procedural, real-time rendering, landscapes in various digital media – particularly in video games – were sorely missing elements of that virtual quality of place that often gets associated with the Sublime.

I started hypothesizing that these virtual properties could only be approached through modes of metaphor, allegory and abstraction. Just as Cézanne had opted for incompleteness in his later landscapes, and as many Romantics prior to him had delved into allegory, so too have contemporary digital artists resisted the need for high-resolution graphics and sophisticated physics simulation. It is as if there is an inverse relationship between 3D simulation software development and the visual output of artists working with these tools. That equation goes something like: as these rendering engines became more powerful in visually simulating landscape, artists have become less interested in using them to their full potential.

I think that's an interesting point, it brings us back to your first point that rendering works as a kind of 'giving back'. When a computer renders, what exactly does it return? How does this factor into how computers approach the 'real'? Or, as Baudrillard once theorized, are computers modelling devices that operate in the realm of the 'hyperreal'? I'm wondering if you can explore this thread of offering or giving back through rendering further, and how it pertains to some of the works in the exhibition.

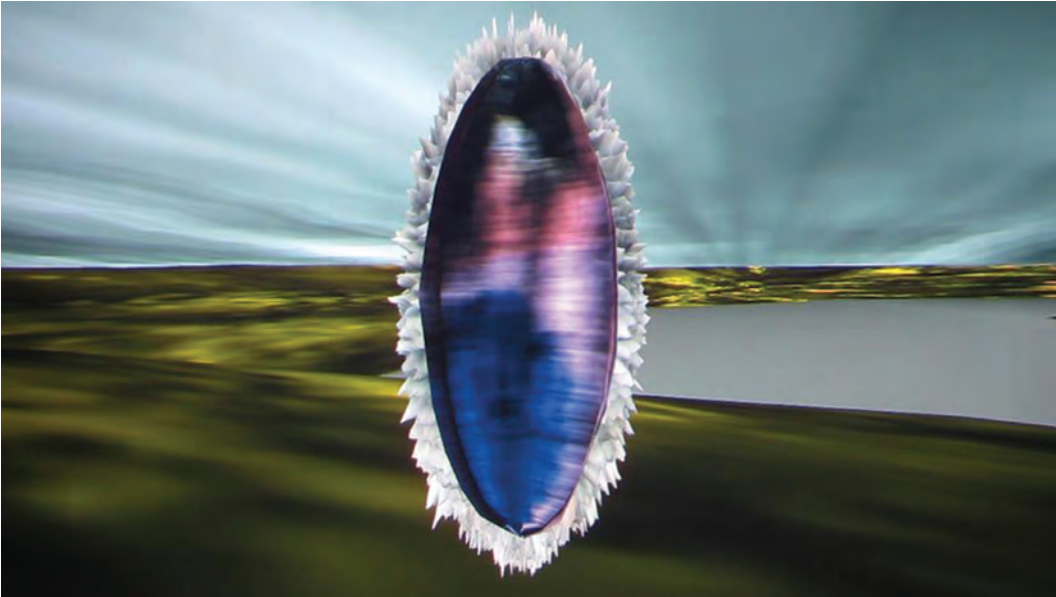


Figure 1: Spheres 1–20', Sara Ludy, still from HD video 1920×1080, © Sara Ludy, 2013. (Used with permission).

Although I think that the output of computer renderings – especially when thinking about software specificity or formalism – is important within many of the works of this exhibition. Works that employ certain code structures, or software features leave their mark on the work in very visible and conceptual ways. In some ways, I tend to think that the most successful works made with contemporary digital tools shed those kind of easily recognizable traits in favour of a deeply personal form of expression. Sara Ludy and Alexandra Gorczynski definitely come to mind in this regard.

In that way, I think I'm more interested in the the kind of works that can express their desire for feedback and reciprocity through multivalent ways. One such strategy for 'giving back' is that many works in the exhibition are attempting to bridge the gaps between moments in various histories and discourses. By creating a vivid link between the nineteenth century and the twenty-first century a kind of newfound relevance is relegated to both cultural moments. The problems of each time then become a common concern for both, and artists working now can create systems and narratives of affinity based on difference – a central part of establishing what McKenzie Wark would call a hacker class.

But this giving back relies on a kind of well oil-machine, where the input or source material fed into the creative process outputs something equally aesthetically enriching or intellectually nourishing. Computers – to a certain extent – provide specific channels of communication that heighten this process of feedback and giving back in such a way that an artist can continually hone and craft the way in which the 'machine' of their practice can become more 'efficient'. In that way, I feel as though the 'hyperreal' that gets processed by the computer is only as effective as the input which is fed into it.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Ceci Moss works as the assistant curator of Visual Arts at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. Her curatorial practice is informed by her interest in technology's cultural impact, and the neo-liberal and postmodern drivers behind it. Currently a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature at New York University, her academic research addresses contemporary Internet-based art practice and network culture, digital technology and perception, and the materiality of media. Moss' writing has appeared in *Rhizome*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Artforum*, *The Wire*, *Performa Magazine* and various art catalogues. Prior to her position at YBCA, she was the senior editor of the art and technology non-profit arts organization Rhizome, and an Adjunct Instructor at New York University in the Department of Comparative Literature. She also programmes a radio show dedicated to experimental music on the free form community radio station Radio Valencia called Radio Heart, as well as play music and DJ.