

CAA Conference Panel: "On the Subject of the Photographic"

Michael Goldberg

The Ghost in the Machine – Synthetic Photography and its Mnemonic Resonance

On the particular aspect of the photographic I've chosen, in which I'll include an example of my own work, I'd like to speculate on some ideas regarding the medium not as a discrete manifestation emanating from the photographic apparatus, but rather as a flexible framework that has been modified and expanded by digital technology. I'm going to look particularly at the phenomena of instantaneous global image distribution and the digitally generated images of simulation graphics – what new media theorist, Lev Manovich<sup>1</sup>, has termed *synthetic photographs*. Both these functionalities have irrefutably changed the nature of photography's influence and function in contemporary visual art.

But first we need to consider how the image has affected the topography of art practice. In her book, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Postmedium Condition*<sup>2</sup>, Rosalind Krauss comments on the omnipresence of images, particularly digital images, in a range of visual art strategies and approaches. Referencing Frederic Jameson, Krauss suggests that the image, whether produced by advertising, communications or cyber media, saturates cultural space and problematizes every aspect of the aesthetic experience, including the very nature of the individual work of art itself. Taking such a proliferation into account she thus proposes the notion of an environment where no one mode of expression takes precedence over another – a 'postmedium' environment.

Far from being restrictive, this environment suits the nomadic artist who intentionally roams between mediums. For example, I work with both still and moving images yet I don't consider myself to be a photographer nor a video or 'new media' artist. I subscribe rather to a flexible strategy representing the transfer from a firm-set, physical location such as the studio for example to a network of social, economic, cultural and political exchanges. I seek out a certain set of circumstances within which to position myself, recruiting whatever materials and media are expedient.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Postmedium Condition*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

A broader definition of photography has not escaped Baudrillard's scrutiny in the recent past. Questioning the relationship between photography and the digitally generated image he asks with regard to the latter, 'Can this be an image, where the technical fine tuning... is perfect [and] there is no room for fuzziness, tremor or chance?'<sup>3</sup> He has as much as suggested that digital multimediatizing constitutes an, 'opening up to the infinite', and that this deregulation is 'literally the death of photography by its elevation to the stage of performance'<sup>4</sup>.

If Baudrillard indeed declared the imminent death of photography, there is however no doubt that it still remains fully manifested in a host of mimetic algorithms embedded in digital hardware. Deregulation has also resulted in some very positive outcomes – among them the wresting of the image from the dominant control of media networks. This scenario is rapidly being realized in the interplay between the syndicated image content industry, as represented chiefly by news media, and the evolving social role of the newsworthy image within the public domain. The increasing democratisation of the image has been made possible by digital production and distribution applications such as moblogging (by which user-generated images and data are shared via cell phone cameras).

Before we proceed in looking at the relationship between syndicated and democratised media, I want to consider the historical distinctions between two modes of image capture and distribution that in part defines the two – *delayed-time* and *real time* transmission. It is in the difference between these modes that the quantum change in image theory and praxis has taken place during the first decade of this century. In understanding this shift it might be useful here to consider Virilio's differentiation between orders of image logic as he sees it, each corresponding to a particular stage of historical development<sup>5</sup>.

According to Virilio, the eighteenth century in the West provided the *formal logic* to be found in painting, engraving and architecture. Here, durational flow is of little relevance. The figure situated in a composition, arrested in the moment, is of paramount importance. Time, it may be said, is absolute.

---

<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005. English ed.), 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 110

<sup>5</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 63ff.

Photography and cinematography provide the framework in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries for the next stage – *dialectical logic*. Here the image corresponds to a specific event in the past, its transmission is essentially one of delay. It is this type of image that we have grown most used to as constituting documentary and news photography. On 11 September 2001, CNN and other major networks inadvertently extended these boundaries while covering news of the attacks on the World Trade Centre Towers by broadcasting their collapse in real-time.

This event, apart from constituting one of the defining moments to date of the twenty-first century, also initiated a transition in the primary production of news images. Significantly, the tragic event also marked the global introduction of the transmission of documentary or evidential images emanating not from network cameras, but from *handycams* in the public domain.

Thirty-eight years after the Zapruder JFK film, the era of the democratised image began in earnest.

The omnipresence of personal recording devices on the streets of New York that morning ensured a significant repository of images. Video cameras were rolling when the first and then the second plane slammed into the towers. The tapes eventually found their way to the news networks. But the real revolution – the real time, instantaneous transmission of news from the public domain – had not yet quite begun.

By the time those images were broadcast several hours later, their images had become fixed in time past, and so like the Zapruder film they were products of Virilio's age of cinematography. I say that the real revolution had not yet begun because the 9/11 happenstance image sequences gained their critical momentum not by their instantaneity, but by their constant iteration over the following days. The image loop became, as Virilio has observed, the ‘ “signature” of contemporary disasters... as though only repetition could remedy the inexplicable’<sup>6</sup>.

Over the seven and a half years since 9/11, the conventions of photography and cinematography have been progressively superseded by Virilio's third kind of image

---

<sup>6</sup> Paul Virilio, *City of Panic*, (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005), 85.

logic – the *paradoxical logic* of the digital age. Here, according to Virilio, ‘the real-time image dominates the thing represented... virtuality dominating actuality’<sup>7</sup>. With the development of optoelectronic devices such as photo and video-enabled cell phones, images of significant events are being captured by the public and transmitted in real time to a global audience, bypassing the syndicated networks.

One of the first demonstrations of this phenomenon attributed to a globally significant event was the spectacular and infamous capture and immediate distribution, by a witness’s cell phone, of video images of Saddam Hussein’s execution.

CNN reported what was termed a *Bluetooth frenzy* in Iraq as the images were transferred from phone to phone in cascades of real-time, streaming *citizen’s broadcasts*<sup>8</sup>. It then took only a short while for the images to be picked up on Google – the search engine inadvertently (or not) distributing what amounted to be one of the first overtly available *snuff movies*. The Iraqi government-sanctioned video, expunged of sound and the more graphic images, also made it to the mediasphere after being ‘leaked’ to Al Jazeera.

But it was the unofficial version with its unexpurgated audio of the taunted Saddam and the close-up video of his swinging body and contorted intra-mortem face that really shook the world. What is significant about this use of technology is that real-time news had been produced, not for consumers by media networks, but *for consumers by consumers*. This poses some very interesting challenges to the dominant face of global news syndication as we’ve known it. The rapid expansion of the *blogosphere*, especially the *moblog*, and the image sharing platforms, YouTube, Facebook, Flickr and Twitter attests to this.

Media networks have not yet given up attempts at coopting images emanating from the public sphere and controlling their distribution. On 20<sup>th</sup> January this year, CNN invited members of the public attending Barack Obama’s inauguration to use cell phone cameras to capture the moment the new president raised his hand to take the oath. Participants were to send to the network as rapidly as possible 5Mb wide-angle, mid-zoom and full zoom images of their points-of-view of the spectacle.

---

<sup>7</sup> *The Vision Machine*, op.cit., 63

<sup>8</sup> See [http://www.cameraphonereport.com/2006/12/cnn\\_saddams\\_cam.html](http://www.cameraphonereport.com/2006/12/cnn_saddams_cam.html)

An interactive digital composite of photographs was then created with Microsoft's Photosynth software and distributed virtually instantaneously on the Web. Anyone then able to download the viewing software, available free from Microsoft, could then navigate almost 360 degrees in and around the scene. It was CNN's intention to 'make average people virtual historians'<sup>9</sup> and to 'create the most detailed experience of a single moment ever'<sup>10</sup>. Although this moment would also mark an attempt by a syndicated network to reassert control over public distribution, the digital image has irrevocably established itself as a fluid medium, easily able to migrate between public, private and corporate domains.

Virilio's prophecy has been realized – that of the 'generalized tele-surveillance of a world' in which, as he puts it, 'the famous virtual bubble of the financial markets (has been) supplanted by the visual bubble of the *collective imaginary*'<sup>11</sup>. He posits the emergence of an organized public, comprising *virtual communities*. 'Communities of believers, organized in networks around the Internet... "telepresent" one to another'<sup>12</sup>, as Virilio describes it. He posits the creation of a *teletopographic locale... a new kind of space*, comprising real time image and audio streams functioning beyond the influence and authority of syndicated media. However, Virilio offers a note of caution for it is in this arena of immediacy that he identifies the hazard of what he calls the *fusion/confusion* of the factual and the virtual and the 'predominance of the *effect* of the real' over a reality principle<sup>13</sup>.

In my opinion, far from being catastrophic, it is at this very point of collapse that the democratised image can provide a potent contextual framework for application in the visual arts: to function as the basis of a reinvigoration of memory and a socially and politically charged re-examination of historical events.

I'd like to preface my speculation by referring to Gerhard Richter's 1988 painting series titled *October 18, 1977*. In his controversial book, *Doubt and Belief in Painting*, Robert Storr analyzes Richter's translation of the then-familiar media images of the supposed 'deaths-by-suicide' of members of the Baader Meinhof terrorist group.

---

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.cio.com/article/477176/Microsoft\\_CNN\\_to\\_Make\\_Historians\\_Out\\_of\\_Inaugural\\_Attendees](http://www.cio.com/article/477176/Microsoft_CNN_to_Make_Historians_Out_of_Inaugural_Attendees)

<sup>10</sup> <http://bradleycain.com/cnn-and-microsoft-to-capture-most-detailed-moment-ever-for-obama-inauguration/>

<sup>11</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, (London: Verso, 2000), 112ff.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 117ff.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Eduardo Kac, *Telepresence Art*, see [www.ekac.org/Telepresence.art.\\_94.html](http://www.ekac.org/Telepresence.art._94.html)

The power of Richter's images, Storr says, emanates from 'the contrast between the starkness of the reality Richter chose to describe, and the *lack* of definition' resulting from his particular painting technique. Richter 'created a muffled resonance between what the viewer can make out "inside" the picture, and what he or she actually perceives as an otherwise visually accessible painting'<sup>14</sup>.

Referring to the uncanny atmosphere of these paintings, Storr observes, 'it is as if an unbearable truth had suddenly been brought forward into the light, only to be screened by shadows'<sup>15</sup>.

To jump ahead some twenty years, this effect was graphically evident in the smudgy camera phone images taken by train passengers during the July 7, 2005 London subway bombings<sup>16</sup>.

Here, the *implosion* of the image and the real elicited anything but disengagement. Storr says, 'in photographs we can see death with a nakedness no other medium affords. But photography does not allow us to contemplate death'<sup>17</sup>. My curiosity here lies with Richter's ability *to open up the experiential space of the media image* – that which has been negated by constant exposure – and how this process aids in overcoming our distance and differences from its subjects. In order to achieve this empathic response, as is the case in Richter's paintings, there needs to be a deceleration or disruption of the rapid scanning process to which we have become habituated when dealing with a constant barrage of media images.

Interestingly, with their still somewhat compromised resolution, this disruption is a ready characteristic of the real-time, cell phone images we see distributed on the Internet. Countering Storr's limiting of photography's worth in contemplating mortality, I'm interested in how these almost painterly images might be opened up for contemplating our mortality, where 'the impossibility of seeing clearly is both frustrating and a reprieve' to quote Storr again<sup>18</sup>. Here, despite the 'real' being somewhat indistinct, there is the summoning up of an instantaneous and sometimes

---

<sup>14</sup> Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: doubt and belief in painting*, (Museum of Modern Art; London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 199.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.whoknew.us/archives/2005/07/> and <http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2005/07/08/blowback/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> *Gerhard Richter: doubt and belief in painting*, op.cit., 242ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

terrible intimacy and perhaps a need to comprehend, to become more than simply informed by these images.

I might go as far as to suggest that despite Baudrillard's foreboding the 'contamination of reality', its modelling by the media image and the resulting 'implosion of image and reality' begins to sound more and more useful – from an artist's point of view.

I'd like now to consider those extensive *communities of believers* for whom the *fusion/confusion of the factual and the virtual* represents not the highway to perdition, but rather the way to nirvana – and that is the mimesis of reality represented by the synthetic photograph in computer simulation games.

The object of these games is to render believable teletopographical locales into which players can project and apply a number of their senses. Players interact by means of *avatars*, personal entities that exercise one or several identities. During the process of gameplay anxieties, elation, and moral and ethical dilemmas are identical to those experienced away from the consoles. To all intents and purposes, the participant *is* experiencing reality.

But as Lev Manovich points out, 'what is faked is, of course, not reality but photographic reality, reality as seen by the camera lens... not our perceptual and body experience of reality, but only its photographic image'<sup>19</sup>. What makes these computer graphics images so compelling then, according to Manovich, is that, 'over the course of the last hundred and fifty years, we have come to accept the image of photography and film as reality'<sup>20</sup>.

However, the mathematical complexity of creating a complete representation of reality is, as Manovich puts it, *full of gaps*. The more precise rendering of certain aspects of reality comes at the expense of others. So, like real time images transmitted by camera phone, the realism in computer simulation is still somewhat uneven. We rely on memory to complete the ellipses.

---

<sup>19</sup> *The Language of New Media*, op. cit., 200.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

It is in these gaps and this state of continual becoming that I've explored the affective potential of synthetic photography in my own work.

In the installation, *Avatar*, I attempted to open up the experiential space of the constantly repeated barrage of media images emanating from the 9/11 disaster.

Using an off-the-shelf computer game, Microsoft Flight Simulator, I constructed a quasi-narrative sequence aimed at blurring the topographical and timeline parameters of the now iconic 9/11 images.

Baudrillard has described the immersive pull of the computer screen as being like 'a sort of umbilical relation'<sup>21</sup>, – a tactile connection through which the viewer can enter the *fluid substrate of the image*. It was my intention to insert into this circuit a factual, historical dimension *via* the virtual, and to establish within its gameplay, a site for memory, memorialization and critical reflection on our post 9-11 world.

*Avatar* visualized a 9/11 scenario, proposing as *Ground Zero* not New York, but my home city, Sydney Australia – 'a million miles away from care, beautiful one day, perfect the next' as the tourist blurb would have us believe. The target would be the Governor Phillip Tower, which houses key financial institutions and government offices.

Whether or not I was in breach of copyright or Australia's then new sedition laws, or both, was not an issue for me. It was important however, that I use software easily available to anyone and to image the unimaginable, as anyone might have the opportunity to do. I subsequently found out that after the fall of Kabul late in 2001, Western journalists reported having come upon editions of Microsoft Flight Simulator in what had been Al Qaeda safe houses<sup>22</sup>.

The core of the installation was situated inside an aluminum garden shed, which I wedged between two walls in the gallery. The banality of this domestic setting is suggestive of the clandestine preparations that might be taking place in a suburban setting somewhere – even as we speak. The installation featured a digital graphics sequence, viewed on a monitor set up on a workbench. The shelves carried a

---

<sup>21</sup> *The Intelligence of evil and the Lucidity Pact*, op. cit., 76.

<sup>22</sup> See [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/12/17/011217ta\\_talk\\_lemann](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/12/17/011217ta_talk_lemann)

computer, audio speakers and a utility box holding the sound components for an external loudspeaker.

The 12-minute looped graphics component was created using standard flight simulator protocols and commences with a twin-engine aircraft going through its pre-flight sequence outside a Qantas airfreight building at Sydney's international airport, realistically rendered in all detail. Accompanied by authentic air-traffic control exchanges, the plane takes off and heads north.

A short while after passing the Harbour Bridge, it turns sharply and the city comes into view from the cockpit. Air-traffic control requests radio contact, but there is no response. The plane gathers speed and, nearing the city's famous Opera House, it reaches the point of no return. It becomes apparent that the aircraft has become a projectile and the Governor Phillip Tower is now a target.

Expectations of a cataclysmic event follow. But there is no impact and no explosion; no fireball with showering glass. Instead dream-like the aircraft flies straight through the building as if it weren't there, with the trajectory taking it through the office blocks behind as well. The city has been spared as if by some miracle.

After completing its run, the aircraft heads back towards the airport where it lands, passing unscathed through fuel storage tanks and the airport building itself. Finally, coming to a stop in front of the control tower, the engines and instrumentation panel are shut down.

Then the entire sequence starts up again and continues in an infinite loop. The game's 'avatar' is never visible. It is defined by what it *does* rather than what it *is*: a vacant entity, available to be filled by anyone so inclined. The simulated camera's gaze in the sequence bears witness to reality, but the circumstances are clouded by the work's improbabilities.

In *The Spirit of Terrorism* Baudrillard asks, 'How do things stand with the real event then, if reality is everywhere infiltrated by images, virtuality and fiction?'<sup>23</sup> In *Avatar* reality and fiction *have* arguably become enmeshed, but then this is nothing new in the mediasphere – and now becoming increasingly apparent in the everyday world

---

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, (London: Verso, 2002), 27.

as our age of anxiety attempts to manifest Donald Rumsfeld's 'unknown unknowns... the things we don't know we don't know'<sup>24</sup>.

Manovich cites photorealism as the 'main goal of research in the field of computer graphics'. He adds, 'The field defines photorealism as the ability to simulate any object in such a way that its computer image is indistinguishable from its photograph'<sup>25</sup>. Manovich concedes that images generated by computer graphics will perhaps never be as 'realistic' in rendering visual reality as images obtained through a camera lens, but he goes on to suggest that, 'synthetic photographs are already more "realistic" than traditional photographs... In fact they are too real'<sup>26</sup>. In attempting to explain this apparent paradox I would argue that the synthetic photograph acts to *resonate* rather than simply to record reality. The affective potential of the synthetic photograph is thus activated through the invigoration of memory in order to *fill in the gaps* (as suggested earlier by Manovich).

To conclude: Baudrillard has suggested that, wrapped up in its own logic, the image has become 'devoid of any transcendent meaning, without any dialectic of history'<sup>27</sup>. Of course it depends how one looks at it. In my work, the allegorical interpretation of real events and processes *reassigns* rather than is subject to the imagery it employs.

Despite Baudrillard's scepticism, applications of real-time and synthetic digital mediums do, in my opinion, produce more than just fragmented and shifting information. Increasingly the popular reclamation or democratisation of the image generates the potential for significant political engagement and reappraisal of history, particularly through the realizable distribution of cultural product beyond the influence of the mainstream information and image content industry. And this particular cultural product embodies what Guy Debord called the 'flexible language of anti-ideology'<sup>28</sup> whereby instead of being *subject* to the image's authority its appropriation effectively *confiscates* that authority, re-assigning it to the social domain of art and life.

---

<sup>24</sup> Then U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made the following statement at a Defense Department briefing in February 2002: 'Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are "known knowns". There are things we know we know. We also know There are "known unknowns". That is to say We know there are some things we do not know. But there are also "unknown unknowns", the ones we don't know we don't know.'

<sup>25</sup> The Language of New Media, op. cit., 199.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>27</sup> *The Spirit of Terrorism*, op.cit., 28.

<sup>28</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit : Black & Red, 1977), 7.

Michael Goldberg  
Sydney, February 2009.

Acknowledgements and Reference List:

Linden Research Inc., San Francisco CA, U.S.A. *Second Life* screenshot.

Microsoft Corporation, Redmond WA, U.S.A. *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004* screenshots.

Valve Corporation, Bellevue WA, U.S.A. *Counter Strike* screenshot.

Wolfgang Staehle, *Untitled*, Postmaster's Gallery, N.Y. 6 October-6 September, 2001 (video projection)

BAUDRILLARD, J: *The Spirit of Terrorism*. Verso, London 2002.

KAC, E: *Telepresence Art*, [http://www.ekac.org/Telepresence.art.\\_94.html](http://www.ekac.org/Telepresence.art._94.html)

KRAUSS, R: *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Postmedium Condition*. Thames and Hudson, London 2000.

MANOVICH, L: *The Paradoxes of Digital Photography*,  
[http://www.manovich.net/TEXT/digital\\_photo.html](http://www.manovich.net/TEXT/digital_photo.html)

OWENS, C: *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*, in  
BRYSON, S., KRUGER, B., TILLMAN, L., WEINSTOCK, J. eds. *Beyond Recognition, Power, and Culture*. University of California Press, Berkeley 1992.

VIRILIO, P: *City of Panic*, transl. BERG, J: *Berg*, New York 2005.

VIRILIO, P: *The Information Bomb*. Verso, London 2000.