University Art Association Conference 2002, Calgary Alberta

Panel Title: Studio Practice in a Digital Age

Paper Title*: Impurity & Teaching Painting as a Subversive Practice*

This paper focuses on two painting courses that I've developed and taught in the Department of Visual Arts at York University; Painting; the Body and Technology and Painting: the Spaces We Live In. The ideas for these courses grew out of concerns in my own painting practice and the crisis in painting during the 1980's & early 90's when painting was again declared dead, considered an outmoded practice in contestation with newer, primarily digital technologies. These courses were an attempt to interrogate painting and the digital and to acquaint students with some of the major debates   through both practice and theory.

For the first section of this paper, I am going to present fragments of thoughts on painting, the digital and their relationships, some of these fragments came from a paper *Painting and the Terminal Syndrome,* that I wrote in 1997 for a former UAAC Conference*.* Here, the double meaning of the word terminal, end and computer terminal, more broadly, digitized technology and electronic communications, was meant to prompt an interrogation of the two meanings in relation to each other.

Part I: *Painting and the Terminal Syndrome* - the End of Painting

In 1985, the painter Sherrie Levine said, "My paintings are about death: the uneasy death of modernism". A number of articles from the early 1980's; 'Last Exit Painting' - Thomas Lawson, 'The End of Painting' - Douglas Crimp, 'Necrophilia Mon Amour' - Joseph Kosuth, ushered in a period of mourning as the aftermath of death. In painting, the death that we were referencing was

largely the demise of Greenbergian Modernism. The realization that it had been 'played out' signaled the end of the quest for 'purity' in painting. The linear progression of style beginning with Manet and ending with Post Painterly Abstraction resulted in the elimination of illusionistic space, tactility, chiaroscuro and any vestiges of subject matter other than self-referential formalism. The questioning of modernist ideals outside of art criticism, in the broader socio-political context, led to the realization that both the ideals and the structure of Greenbergian Modernist criticism mirrored modernist myths. A linear progression of styles towards 'purity' within art parallels the modernist belief in progress through increased modernization.   'Purity', the goal of Greenbergian Modernism can be compared to the ideal of a utopia. The binary relationships set out by Greenberg between avant-garde and avant-gardist art, between high art and kitsch are comparable to the binary way of thinking within modernism. The exclusion of non-European, non-white, non-male from his cannon of quality echoes the patriarchal, first world, colonialist attitudes of modernism. Returning to painting, what remained was an autonomous object, divorced from the social, the political, and by the 1970's devoid of both emotional and spiritual life. Exhausted, lifeless, this painting became a decorative commodity to hang in corporate offices, at best an unconscious simulacrum of its former self.

Part II: Painting and the Terminal Syndrome - Digital Technologies

We are experiencing an ever-intensifying loss of the real, of the social, a questioning of what it means to be human. Increasingly we are shutting out the 'real' world - real experience, real sex, real travel; we know ourselves and 'out there' through mediated or simulated experiences on the screen. Arthur Kroker's slogan "bodies in recline / bodies in decline", points to the consequences of our need to go virtual, to leave our bodies behind, to trash the world, to appear only as a telepresence. We hope, perhaps believe that the world of no consequences is here and we are shocked when an n event, such as the planes hitting the world trade center is actually real. Our immediate response is: it's a movie, a

video, and a digital fabrication.

Paintings, as opposed to digital works, retain certain features regardless of the style. These qualities began to be exposed by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". In painting the 'aura' of the original is an inseparable aspect of the medium. Within our hyperreal world, a simulation of the 'real' in the form of slides, films, videos and C.D.'s, is the most common mode of viewing both painting and everything else. We tend to forget that these media are not transparent. For the audience, what is lost is the evidence of the human, the trace of the artist's touch and body, the seductive immediacy of the paint and the quality of silence and contemplation which allows us to imagine, to dream, and to remember. In this way, the medium of painting itself critiques the virtual.   Painting becomes a metaphor for bodily experience and paint a stand in for bodily fluids. The act of painting can be seen as both mental and bodily expulsion: the more immediately expressive, and visceral the process the more abject the act. The mark one makes, the colour one uses has consequences – one can't get rid of it easily with the click of a mouse. Change is not rapid , possibilities are pondered.

iii. Painting as Counter-Practice

Within the condition that Fredrich Jameson describes as Late Capitalism, painting occupies a position of counter practice in relation to the dominant cultural role occupied by mainstream broadcast media, using emerging visual technologies of representation. The visual inscriptions attached to the use of images by these media affect the human subject through the constant and seamless portrayal of their own corporate ideals and norms. Within this closed system of international communications and global capitalism, painting can act as the static, the residue of the messy, the human. Painting in its slowness of making and viewing , refuses the speed of the present. Within modernity, the

Impressionists, the Futurists, painters such as Charles Sheeler & Georgia Okeefe, could engage with the dominant tendencies of the period: utopianism through progress, industrialization, and development. Although these ideas are in contention, mainstream digital media has retained these modernist ideals pushing them to an ever more ecstatic level, evolving to what Ernest Mandel, the Marxist economist, considers a 'purer' more all encompassing form of capitalism.

iv. Digital Media & Painting as Critique

Like painting, digital media has certain qualities intrinsic to the medium . In relation to painting it is non-visceral or clean, mediated through technology to a far greater extent than painting, it lends itself to the juxtaposition of images, collaging, and appropriation. Possibilities can be viewed, changes made with relative speed and ease. But, the digital and paint as media for producing art are not very different, but each holds within it, different susceptibilities. Work done with digital media can easily be a display of the latest technique and effect, and fall into the visual presentation of capital and power, what Guy Debord calls spectacle, becoming part of the mainstream advertising and telecommunications hype. Paintings can easily be worn out commodities, comforting regressions to modernist myths. But both are particularly suited for a critique of the present: The digital because one can use the same medium but in an oppositional way, against it's common mainstream usage and the manufacture of spectacle; Painting because of its silent refusal, its inherently human qualities, its need for slow contemplation.

v. The Interweaving of Painting & the Digital

By the mid 1980's, painters such as Peter Hailey, Sherrie Levine and Jack Goldstein, known as the *Picture Painters*, began to paint using simulations, already mediated representations, as their starting point. This was not a new process, Andy Warhol began his paintings from found media photographs, never meeting the people he represented. But the kind of simulated images the Picture Painters chose to paint were seemingly abstract, highlighting both the nature of the initial source material and the 'impurity' of their abstractions in relation to modernist abstraction. Since then, painting has been 'infected' by simulation, in the form of 'the look' of photography, video and digital media. And, some of the most interesting painting today, promiscuously interfaces with the digital in terms of style as content.

Part II: Teaching Painting in a Digital World

How do we teach painting today so that some of these ideas are brought forth in studio classes? At this point I'm going to describe two courses that I've developed and taught in which I've tried to answer this question. Both are hybrid courses combining both studio projects and a selection of readings that the students present to the class. They are each taught at the third year level with about twenty students in the class. The studio projects engage a diversity of painting approaches: installation, collage, appropriation, but digital technologies are not used in these courses. Each of the studio projects is introduced through a seminar. In the seminars the critical issues relating to the project are examined through the viewing of slides, videos, and/or websites of artists' works relating to the theme. This is followed by groups of students presenting one or two articles to the class that relate to the theme.
 At the completion of each studio assignment students will be expected to clearly present her/his work during a class critique.

A. Course Title: Painting: The Spaces We Live in

Through the practice of painting, this course focuses on contemporary concepts of space; the 'real' space of super modernity as experienced in large urban centres and virtual or cyberspace. The three studio projects examine the following themes: Exploring Urban Space: the Flaneur & the Flaneuse; The City as Panopticon; & Virtual or Cyberspace. This course meets four hours per week for twelve weeks.

-Examples of Students works to be shown

-Grading Scheme

    A. Three assigned studio projects each 20% - total 60%

    B. Group Presentation of selected readings - 25%

    C. Participation during critiques and seminars 15%

- Bibliography

    Selections from the following books and catalogues will be Xeroxed for a Course Reader.

Dan Graham: *Public /Private,* Exhibition Cat. Levey Gallery for the Arts, Philadelphia, 1993.

Marc Auge *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.* Verso, London, NY., 1995.

Paul Virilio, *Lost Dimension.* Semiotext(e) , NY., 1991.

The Vision Machine. Indiana, Indiana Univ. Press, 1994.

Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On vision and modernity in the 19th century.* Mass.,The M.I.T. Press, 1994.

Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art.* London, Routledge, 1988.

William Bogard, *The Simulation of Surveillance: Hypercontrol in telematic societies.* Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996.

Jean Baudrillard, *America.* NY. & London, Verso, 1988.

Arthur Kroker, *Data Trash: the theory of the virtual class*. Montreal, Quebec: New World Perspectives, 1994.

David Moos, *Painting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence.* Art & Design, Profile no. 48. London: Academy Group, 1996.

Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* : New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Louise Dompierre, *Press Enter, Between Seduction and Disbelief* : Cat. from the Powerplant Exhibition, 1995.

B. Course Title: The Body and Technology

This course will focus on contemporary debates surrounding the body and technology through the practice of painting. It is designed to further students' understanding of contemporary painting primarily through studio projects and secondarily through the viewing of works by artists who are examining these issues in their work and the discussion of selected readings.

The three studio projects will focus on the following themes:
1. The "Real" Body: Painting as a metaphor for the body;
2. The Cyborgian Body;
3. Super Modernity / Virtual Reality; The spaces we inhabit.

The studio projects will reflect upon current body/technology debates through a

diversity of painting approaches i.e. painting installation, collage, appropriation, but digital technologies will not be used in this course. Each of the studio projects will be introduced through a seminar. In the seminar the critical issues relating to the project will be examined through the viewing of slides/videos of works done by contemporary artists. Studen presentations of the assigned readings in subsequent classes will further examine the themes under consideration. At the completion of each studio assignment students will be expected to clearly present her/his work during a class critique.

Evaluation:
A. Three assigned studio projects each 23.3% - total 70%
B. Group Presentation of selected readings from the Course Reader - 15%
C. Participation during critiques and seminars -15%

Required Readings: (Selections from)
Arthur Kroker, Data Trash: the theory of the virtual class. Montreal, Quebec: New World Perspectives, 1994.

David A. Ross, Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1986.

Catherine Richards and Nell Tenhaaf, Bioapparatus. Banff Centre for the Arts, 1991.

Donna J. Haraway, Simians Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. New York, NY: Routledge, 1991.

Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet : New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

 Louise Dompierre, Press Enter, Between Seduction and Disbelief : Cat. from the

Powerplant Exhibition, 1995.

 Jessica Bradley, Perspective 96 : Cora Cluett, Eric Glavin, Angela Leach and Steven Shearer. Exhibition cat. from AGO Exhibition , 1997.

Jessica Bradley, Kiki Smith, Exhibition Cat. from the Power plant, 1995.

Louise Dompierre, The Age of Anxiety, Power plant Cat. 1995.

Gretchen Bender & Timothy Druckrey, Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology, Seattle: Bay Press, 1994.

Michael Benedikt (ed. by), Cyberspace; First Steps, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1991.

Featherstone, Mike. (ed. by) Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk.