

CARTES PRESENTS:

Carrizo-Parkfield
DIARIES
CHRISTINA MCPHEE
Video installation at WeeGee Entrance Hall 9.5. - 5.9.2006

P-wave from Parkfield, California. Magnitude 6.0.

Fault Finding

THE STORY OF THESE ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF HUMAN MIND AND NATURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IS A COMPLEX ONE OF ACCOMMODATION, RESISTANCE, AND APPROPRIATION.
— MICHAEL LEJA, *REFRAMING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM*

Christina McPhee starts with just the facts.
"It just happened. The ground is still moving."

Just the facts: it sounds like a classic of detective fiction. In this two-part essay, I want to uncover its narrative – and the body. In the case of *The Carrizo-Parkfield Diaries*, the facts have an unquestioned pedigree, but are they for real? And what does the question say about the claims of digital art to map a virtual reality?

I shall imagine a viewer questioning the data and, from that beginning, the processes underlying a digital work. I shall argue that one cannot simply oppose data structures to narrative ones or the literal to the metaphoric, and not one of these structures implies a restriction to a linear unfolding. Rather, the translation of data into image and interaction amounts to a progressive layering of representations, including the artist's self-representation. Through that layering, art has the power to watch stories unravel and return like memory.

Faulty data

One might call the data underlying McPhee's Web-based work unquestioned, but hardly faultless. Her title refers to north-central California, where for three million years the San Andreas fault has been slipping about two inches a year. One does not often feel its tremors, perhaps ten thousand in a single year, no more than one can feel one's fingernails grow at roughly the same pace. Yet from its shocks, great and small, McPhee purports to visualize an active landscape.

The Carrizo plain, straddling the fault zone, has become a national monument more for its geology than for its scenic beauty or still-recovering ecosystem. The narrow mountains to either side, the Caliente and Tremblor Ranges, could well stand for California's twin terrors of drought and disaster. Their very names invite one to feel the heat and the trembling. Parkfield, roughly halfway between Monterey and Bakersfield, could in turn stand for the state's notorious transience and anonymity. *The Diaries* translate real-time data for both sites into shifting images.

McPhee relies on data from the U.S. Geological Survey. She takes her visual vocabulary, however, from her own **abstract paintings and past new media**, as well as from drawings and photographs made on the spot:

I incorporate layers of field observation within a dream-like sequence of abstract images, where passages of linear structures and shadowed mass allude to ruins and debris in the wake of recent tremors. By means of architectural scale, at 72 to 92 inches, each print is like a page torn from a cinematic notebook – film stills from an event-scene that has almost materialized, laced with traces from geomorphologic maps. Flash animations trigger from a selective crashing of online live data against archived data from the recent 6.0 quake at Parkfield.

For comparison, the damaging 1994 Northridge quake had a magnitude of 6.7. Reconstructions of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake place it anywhere from 7.7 to 8.3. The largest magnitude

ever recorded, in Chile in 1960, reached 9.5. Anything greater than 6.0 officially ranks as strong.

Like her concept and materials, her language in describing the work moves readily across media – with references to painting, drawing, earthworks, architecture, prints, film, and video in only three sentences. It also mixes naturalism and fantasy, materials and their traces, present and recorded or remembered experience, brute calculation and an artist's power of selection.

Can digital art lie?

Do the results, however, really reproduce the landscape, and how? Do they serve as a vision not unlike traditional landscape painting, a scientific or architectural model, or a personal diary of displacement and terror? Do the data at their heart give the representation special authority, or do they suggest the potential for the virtual to displace the real?

Do the data, in fact, even exist? What if McPhee is making all this up, if images spin out on screen according to her whim or at random? Would that make her representation less reliable, or would it make them closer still to the entropic, emergent patterns of life?

I shall argue that experience of the work involves a weighing of all those claims and all those patterns of representation. Moreover, it requires understanding those patterns as the work's description of itself and the world, with all the arbitrariness that implies. As in every classic of detective fiction, the arbitrary moment of entry already propels a story – and demands questions.

Too often, digital media has seemed above that kind of scrutiny. Between the language of data sets on the one hand and virtual reality on the other, it begs for the aura still accorded both **science and art**. In the world of random access, one can easily forget the symbolic strategies that enable access in the first place. And a good way to begin to locate, revive, and unravel the narrative is to ask first if digital art can lie.

Of course art lies, as Plato notoriously objected. Artists have always created images and objects. They have invented or adjusted represented scenes. They have evoked, parodied, and sustained myth, mistaken beliefs, and outright propaganda. When looking at "realistic" art, it pays to ask what constitutes realism. It also helps to expect multiple answers.

From the very start, then, one is talking about representation, narrative, metaphor, and their criteria. Database-driven art does not change that. It does, however, relate to claims to the literal truth particular to art of the last half century or so. Like much conceptual or Minimalist art, digital art comes with directions for its own making. Again the medium's authority has run into a problem – a family resemblance to older practices. A more thorough questioning must therefore begin with *them*.

A metaphor, by definition, amounts to a yoking of disparate ideas. In effect, the work of art is not just metaphoric, but a yoking of disparate metaphors, a metaphor of a metaphor. Already, then, one has a vital antecedent for the role of data in digital art, including the risk that the data may lie. One has an urgent case for seeking out symbolic structures, linear and nonlinear – including those representations drawn from science and representations of the human body. Indeed, if art appears to generate artificial life forms, Hal Foster has recently noted that Modernism's twin fascinations with the body and the machine age leads to frequent nightmares of prosthetic parts combined with the dream of the superhuman. Consider next some more chalk drawings, drawings that play with exactly all these representations of data and of life.

I am back at last to where I began. McPhee can work not just with rules, concepts, and images available to sight, from memory, or in photographic prints – but with any signs she chooses. And McPhee, too, really could lie in the interest of self-exposure.

More to the point, because the input comes from an existing physical model, rather than solely from the artist, the disjunction between the metaphor that goes in and the metaphor that comes out becomes more apparent. Not even the most innocent eye can see the landscape of The Diaries as a window onto nature. I do not question that science and art serve as fully adequate models of phenomena, even if **their intersection** has a way of disturbing both. I mean that the data themselves do not have a natural, phenomenological relationship to landscape. They, too, arise in context of a methodology, model, or metaphor.

In other words, digital art does not eradicate or naturalize representation. Rather, it has the potential for making representation an even more vital part of the work than ever before, as well as an extension of the artist's self-representation. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich sees database-driven art as intrinsically nonlinear, owing to a computer's *random access*, its ability to read and write data anywhere in a file rather than sequentially. He contrasts this with narrative, and he asks provocatively for art that will include both. But that art is everywhere. An artist cannot access a database or give it compelling visual form without a concatenation of metaphor in the first place.

The Diaries build on three layers, every one visual and every one a model of the world. McPhee starts with landscape data and produces a picture landscape, mediated by processes of chance on the one hand and by her intervention as an abstract painter on the other. She does not dismiss images from her imagination but disperses them. The ultimate representation extends her body, lies as flat as an actual landscape, and bears traces like both. She accentuates the crossing of media further by blacks that take on the coolness of a photographic negative. She speaks of "a screen so vast it becomes a night city."

Recall her description of "selective crashing of online live data against archived data." Manovich identifies the syntax of digital art with the computer's file structure, much as Noam Chomsky sees innate syntactic structures in human language. However, the word *crashing* slips in its referent between the Earth's plates and components of the artist's thought processes. It encompasses the machine's internal processing of data, the collisions of online images with the viewer's perceptual field, all too real dangers to people from natural hazards and incompetent planning, and unarticulated terrors evoked by the work of art.

I have discussed *The Diaries* as recreation of a landscape, as a layering of metaphors, and as care to create resonance and disjunctions between the layers. I noted an opening of boundaries as itself a metaphor for self-exposure, a flattening and distorting of the artist's body on the bleak space of a video screen. I have mentioned Hal Foster's attention to Surrealist prosthetic and superhuman body parts, as in the work of **Pierre Molinier**, and McPhee has herself used the metaphor of the *cyborg*. One should also not forget a long history of identification in art between woman and landscape, as in the work of **Ana Mendieta**. However, the work also sustains that awareness of loss inherent in a record of archival traces.

The work's subject comes down to physical damage to the Earth, and its tremors serve as metaphors for psychic shocks. McPhee says that she imagines the landscape as both architecture and

somehow "live and breathing," what she calls a "psychic architecture." The work loops back again and again – from landscape to data, from data to representation, and from representation to landscape. Like memory, it enacts a return to what the mind alone cannot fully recover. If this sounds like a detective story after all, a related video and performance work gives an earthquake the appearance of a criminal act.

Salt opens with real quake damage, in which two women lost their lives – damage centered on the Carrizo plain, which happens to begin at salty Soda Lake. However, the empty lots and the strands of police tape, the figure bent as if in a search for the evidence, and heads poised as if for a press conference testify to the conventions of crime-scene investigation. The denatured color of outdoor digital photography also relates to televised drama. As the body in question turns up, the montage of artificial lights, underscored by chilly, repetitive piano music, takes on ghostly echoes of film noir.

Of course, the body in question is a woman's – presumably the artist's. An erotic and elusive image of woman's hair serves as a transition from the earthquake's daylight robbery to the nightshades of McPhee's abstract painting. The text refers to "traces of her presence in fleeting gestures and in spaces that extend beyond the browser, as if there is a screen so vast it becomes a night city." A Californian, McPhee also finds beauty in the landscape's desert grasses, "reaching toward heaven," perhaps even after an aftershock and as the promise of recovery. The transparency of the woman's hair to the empty scenery identifies her with the cracked landscape, like Lot's wife reduced to a pillar of salt.

John Haber

www.haberarts.com
New York, 2005

9th May - 5th September 2006

WeeGee Entrance Hall, Ahertajantie 5, Tapiola, Finland

Exhibition is open from 11 to 16 every day apart from Monday. Open late Wednesdays until 20.

Free entrance.

Christina McPhee Artist talk 9th May at 17.

Opening of the exhibition on 9th May 18-20 with the Artist present.

The exhibition is opened by Cultural Director Georg Dolivo.

Greetings by Councillor for Press and Cultural Affairs

William Davnie, U.S. Embassy Helsinki



The exhibition is supported by The American - Scandinavian Foundation, New York.



Our world as we have learnt to know it is currently rapidly and radically changing. Similar advancement can be detected also around and within the communication technologies, our new means to re-construct time and space, memory and forgetting. **Phenomenology of place** is attaining new spheres where boundaries between real and virtual are becoming transparent.

In this first exhibition proudly presented by Cartes at the newly restored WeeGee, Christina McPhee tracks seismic presence **through intimate studies of site** in California and aurally as well as visually transposes them into the Digital world.

Welcome! Tervetuloa! Välkommen!

Maria Tjader-Knight

Director, CARTES

www.strikeslip.tv

CARTES Centre of Art and Technology, Espoo,

Finland, operates mainly within the fields of electronic and media art, aural and visual. Cartes was established in 1989 by the City of Espoo, Helsinki University of Technology and Sibelius Academy.

The role of Cartes is critically productive, by presenting site specific projects as well as 'traveling' productions it strives to challenge interdisciplinary encounters between the many actors of culture and technology. In the new media art and design of today, the recent shift of focus from 'interactive' to 'participatory' media signals a new sensibility. Through user-centered design and technology development enlaced with media art the productions of Cartes are at the focal point of the research projects, artist installations, festivals & workshops carried out or governed by Cartes. The challenge is to invite the audience to think, feel and act - the search for the new always involves the questioning of the status quo of existing models and practices.

Christina McPhee's cinematic landscapes reflect on seismic memory.

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