

Relational Synthetics

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The binaries of synthetic and natural, constructed and real, have become less and less helpful. The subtle negotiations between the fine grain have become the real-time experience itself. From the birth of cinema, through collage in film to media artists' manipulation of individual frames and sub-frames, moving image artists and technologists have invented and explored non-linearity, contributing to synthesized worlds of infinite hues and animated synthetic architectures. Our histories of celluloid, art and media have run parallel to the rise of industrialization and the exploitation of carbonfuels, and have been central to significant shifts in the philosophical and empirical understanding of the world.

Synthetic Times includes a broad selection of media art practice, reflecting the full range between the poles of the non-representational and the representational. In their engagement with the multiple and complex ways in which reality and representation interweave and interact in our mediatized world, the works in the exhibition resonate particularly strongly in Liverpool – a city which, arguably more than any other British city, demonstrates the power of story, of representation, even of myth.

Perhaps the first nineteenth-century supercity, and the third richest city in the UK at the turn of the twentieth century, Liverpool gained both commercial wealth and civic pride from its status and self-promotion as 'Second City of Empire', Britain's gateway to the New World. With the subsequent collapse of its economy followed by the rapid decline of its social fabric, anger-fuelled race riots and massive unemployment, however, a completely different story began to be told. Liverpool gained a reputation as an 'edgy' city,¹ symbolic of British post-war urban decay, suffering from negative press and at times appearing to vacillate between extreme self-confidence and equally extreme loss of self-esteem.

The story of Liverpool as epitome of urban moral decay reached its lowest point in 1993 with the murder of toddler James Bulger by two ten-year-old boys, an event that attracted huge media coverage. More recently, the high-profile press coverage and discussions surrounding the tragic death of Rhys Jones – a case of mistaken identity, a young boy in the wrong place at the wrong time – have reopened a debate around the impacts of the media and the effects, in a mediatized world, of constant exposure to violent imagery.² The fear of self-replicating behaviours is deeply alarming. Stanley Kubrick, director of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), withdrew his film from distribution following copycat acts of violence in Britain modelled on scenes from the film, and threats against his own person. The film is

¹ The 'Cities on the Edge' project, linking six European port cities – Naples, Marseille, Gdansk, Istanbul, Stavanger and Liverpool – seeks to explore the positive and negative aspects of 'edginess' in terms of both geographical location and cultural identity.

² Despite the high-profile negative coverage of recent events in Liverpool, however, gun crime in the city has in fact gone down in recent years, following the downward trend across England and Wales as a whole. See BBC News analysis, 23 August 2007 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6960431.stm).

based on Anthony Burgess's 1962 novel of the same title, itself the story of mimetic behaviour, suggesting image as virus.

On a more mundane level, within the first few months of artists Al and Al's residency in Liverpool, as they developed their new work for *Synthetic Times*, their production kit and data were stolen. It is hard to live in a city like Liverpool and not allow the familiar everyday interventions of life itself – as well as the more high-profile, shocking events – to be embraced and imported directly into emerging storylines, into artwork. Artists are good at this and, through sharing time and space, become documentors, reflectors and synthesizers, taking the rough with the smooth and connecting things together to make sense of them. The work Al and Al have created for the exhibition, *Eternal Youth*, features hollow figures, focusing on celebrity, fame and status gained through assassination and killing. The story is one that resonates strongly in Liverpool, with its love for John Lennon and the embedded memory of his murder by Mark David Chapman, another lost boy, obsessed with J. D. Salinger's novel of disaffection and alienation, *The Catcher in the Rye*.

The killing of Lennon was not just some random shooting; it was about immortalization through the technology of mediation. Religion, of course, always promised an afterlife, but belief has dwindled. The rise of fantasy film may have formed a new system of iconography, a surrogate religion, developed through our awareness of our own mortality and our need of a distraction. The history of cinema includes lengthy periods of escapism through entertainment, and much of that has relied on glorified imagery of death, destruction, war and gun crime. The slighter interest in news and documentary also includes its fair share of mass destruction. When the drip-feed of realistic deaths reaches saturation point, without analysis and connections made with local and global social conditions, of course it has already become culture.

The obsession with image, surface and appearance has led to our collective obsession with recognition, ownership of space, and ultimately the power that mediation through technology can bring. Social networking systems, Second Life and bio-technology open up amazing yet at the same time extremely dangerous possibilities. They take us one step closer to touching that fame, to being somebody, and I am one of those who has to own up to wanting to be somebody.

One of my own big realizations has been noting that only thirteen years had passed between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and my mother giving birth to me in 1958. As five-year-olds at school we drew stick fighter planes shooting each other down with hyphenated machine gun fire; although we ourselves had not lived through the war years, the impacts of a society at war, air raids, rationing and evacuation still made themselves felt. My mother's experiences as a young girl sent off to the South Wales valleys and parted from her own parents must have left a strong impression on me. As children we are not immediately cognisant of the events and environments our parents experienced; it is only later in life, when we begin to analyse our own cultural influences and ancestry, that the influences become apparent, though of course the material nature of our genetic composition has become inarguably verifiable.

I was born in Welwyn Garden City, one of Britain's first 'garden towns', home of pharmaceutical giant ICI, the inventors of polythene in the 1920s and the first to coin the term 'plastic'. (By-products of the Second World War included synthetic materials such as Terylene and the synthetic anti-malarial drug Paludrine.) It was a designer town, a place where everything was possible – a bright new post-war future, filled with optimism and fuelled by the belief that science could do anything. Accounts of the time described the 'Welcome to Welwyn Garden City' sign being graffitied 'Acid City' – another strapline the place would rather forget.

My father, Morris Stubbs, was a technician at British Rubber working on one of Britain's first electron microscopes developing new forms of rubber. Most microscopical work examined the relationship between structure and function. At British Rubber, the detail of the particle size and distribution of the various fillers such as carbon black, used in car tyres, could be visualized and studied for the first time. Rubber's crystallization behaviour in very cold conditions was also looked into. In the botanical field, it became possible to see where and how the rubber tree produced its latex, with a view to improving harvesting methods and productivity – the origins of synthetic biology and scientific imaging technologies.

Later, he worked at Unilever on one of the first scanning microscopes, which used spectral analysis and big computing power, technologies that would lead to computer animation. One evening my excited father arrived home and attempted to explain to the family the importance of Watson and Crick's discovery of the double helix, showing us images of 3-D molecular sculptures. As my dad puts it, 'Any scientist working in a biological field would have been instantly aware of the far-reaching implications, which have subsequently been realised – medicine, forensics, ancestry, population migration, animal welfare, etc.'. The notion of an evolutionary model of the world was permissible in our home, itself an unashamed synthetic version of post-war home life, escaping the constraints of faith.

This Christmas, 2007, my own daughters played Wii tennis, synthetic sport without synthetic gut using synthetic algorithms. After Christmas the national newspapers reported vast numbers of adults with new forms of muscle strains and tennis elbow. During the same holiday my children watched a giant multi-headed serpent fight with three young kids in the basement of a school (Hogwarts, Harry Potter). Games and 3D engines have become the norm and are utilized across different sectors of the entertainment industry to provide convincing representations of real-time movement and imagined narratives. We have moved from recording to synthesis, from Lumière to Méliès, across the supposed divide in film-making – to document, or to create illusion and fantasy.

CGI is, in some ways, the latest form of plasticine; although the hydra in *Jason and the Argonauts*, Ray Harryhausen's 1963 film (which received plaudits at the time for its frightening realism), might seem to us less convincing than today's CGI monsters, it had the same impact on the kids. Clearly the suspension of disbelief is contextual, and while innovation in structure and 'realistic' storytelling are forever developing, content and stories rarely do.

We are part of a society of un-happy consumers. Accepting remote operation without needing to see the connections seems a low price to pay for accelerated networks and multiple functions. We are the real-time experiment. 'A priori real time resists the freedom of interpretation. It happens too fast', claims Paul Virilio, the French theorist of speed and communication technology.³

We increasingly negotiate reality through the moving image; evidence alone is no longer proof. In other words, what you see isn't always what you get. Father Christmas and fairies were never evidenced, or proved, but well documented. God remains equally unproven, though certainly upheld for longer periods of our lives through manufactured consent. The ability to decipher and decode what is and what isn't real, particularly with so few 'given' references and so much information, makes context everything.

It is the dedication of the artists in this show to exploring the interrelations of the representational, the abstract and the real which makes their work compelling and difficult. They present a hinterland – liminal yet familiar through its references. Near instant access to information and the inter-cut ability to discover where we came from, who we are, what we might become, has enabled a zooming between memory and implanted cultures. This imagination of multiple understandings and surfaces makes distinguishing the authentic almost impossible; and with it, some might say, makes the cognition of reality irrelevant – until, that is, it is their child lying dead in the street.

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Until being jointly appointed Director & CEO of FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) and Professor of Art, Media and Curating at Liverpool John Moores University, Mike Stubbs was Head of Exhibitions at ACMI (the Australian Centre for the Moving Image), driving a hugely successful programme including award-winning exhibition *White Noise*. His work as Director of Hull Time Based Arts, including setting up the Time Base venue, EMARE (European Media Arts Residency Exchange) and the international ROOT festival, first won him recognition as a primary promoter of new media and performance art in an international context.

Stubbs' own internationally commissioned artwork encompasses films for broadcast, media installations for galleries and large-scale projections for the public realm. Much of this work has been made through a process of interdisciplinary research and residency.

In 2004 he received a Fleck Fellowship from the Banff Art Centre, Canada.

<http://www.fact.co.uk/>

http://www.forma.org.uk/artists/produced/mike_stubbs.html

³ Paul Virilio in an interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, at <http://www.ljudmila.org/scca/urbanaria/txt/e/virilio/htm>.