Metaphors And Meta-Experiences In Technology Side Effects: A Multimedia Exhibit

Petronio Bendito

Abstract

Society as a whole has come to accept technology without reflecting on its possible negative implications. *Technology Side Effects* invited the audience to reflect upon this issue and used digital projections, motion graphics (some inspired on advertising strategies), sound, images, and objects (e.g., cell phone, computer chips, monitors, wires, tv) as emotional simulation devices and recollection tools. One of the intentions of the show was to create a comprehensive environment in which the audience became immersed in what I term a "meta-experience" mode. This paper describes the nature of the visual metaphors employed in the exhibition and provides a definition for the term "meta-experience."

Art As Awareness

Purdue Galleries hosted my solo exhibition entitled *Technology Side Effects* at the Ralph G. Beelke Memorial Gallery from November 4-22. The show was inspired by the phrase "So… are we engaged in a cognitive-behavioral pattern of pathological technology use?" (Figure 1) and consisted of digital projections and prints, assemblage, interactive animation, video, motion graphics, and an improvisation event by a performance group named *Transonic* (Figure 11).

Technology-related pathologies—which I call "technology side effects"—permeated the body of work produced for this show. The works created for *Technology Side Effects* used technology to denounce socio-related pathologies connected to technology. In this exhibit, I explored how technology has changed the individual's perception of self, the relationship with the physical body, and the impact of technology on society and culture as a whole.

A major emphasis in the show was placed on many pathological behaviors associated with the Internet, such as compulsive online pornography usage, technology dependency, neglect of friends and family, sleep deprivation, decreased physical activity, online abuse and online-related identity crises.

Even though I am not against technology per se, I find disturbing the fact that society has come to accept technology without reflecting on its implications. The show was an opportunity for such reflection.

Influences

The conceptualization for this show was mostly influenced by Latin American educator and writer Paulo Freire, whose book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1997), calls for the experiencing of the world critically, in addition to calling attention to the awareness of self. From Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1997) I came to understand the impact that media has upon individuals, society and culture. From Donald Norman's works, such as *Things that Make us Smart: Defending Human Attributes in the Age of Machine* (1993), I learned that technological progress does not necessarily translate into better quality of human life. His design concerns related to human-factors brought to my mind the neglected "humane-factors" in a technologically-driven world. Brenda Laurel, in *Computer as Theatre* (1991), explains the implications of visual metaphors in human/computer interaction. Laurel is known for her work developed for video games—a potential tool of "slavery." The knowledge I have acquired from these and other sources was put to use in the *Technology Side Effects* exhibition as tools to promote self-reflection via socio-cultural awareness in works such as *There's a Computer Virus in My Heart 2.0* (Figure 3).

Soft_art_ware Concept: Art Form In Flux

For the *Technology Side Effects* exhibition I (re)created—upgraded—a piece titled *There's a Computer Virus in My Heart*. This work is part of a series I have continually upgraded as a software designer would upgrade products. This is a shift from the traditional notion that the work of art, once finished or documented, is "untouchable." With this approach, I also intend to illustrate the continual upgrading of socio-cultural patterns each time a new technology enters the marketplace.

Figure 1
Invitation Detail, 2003. Reprinted with permission of Purdue Galleries.
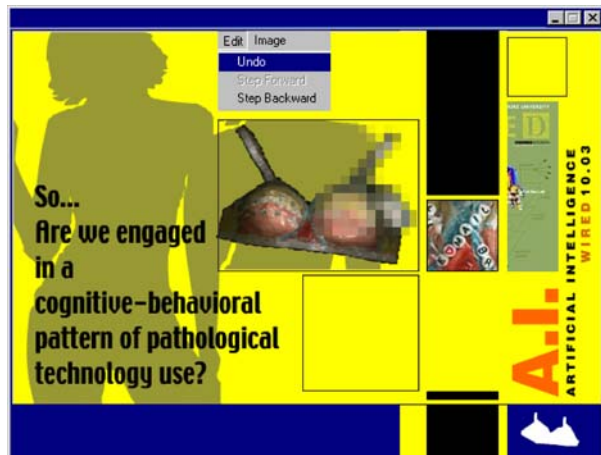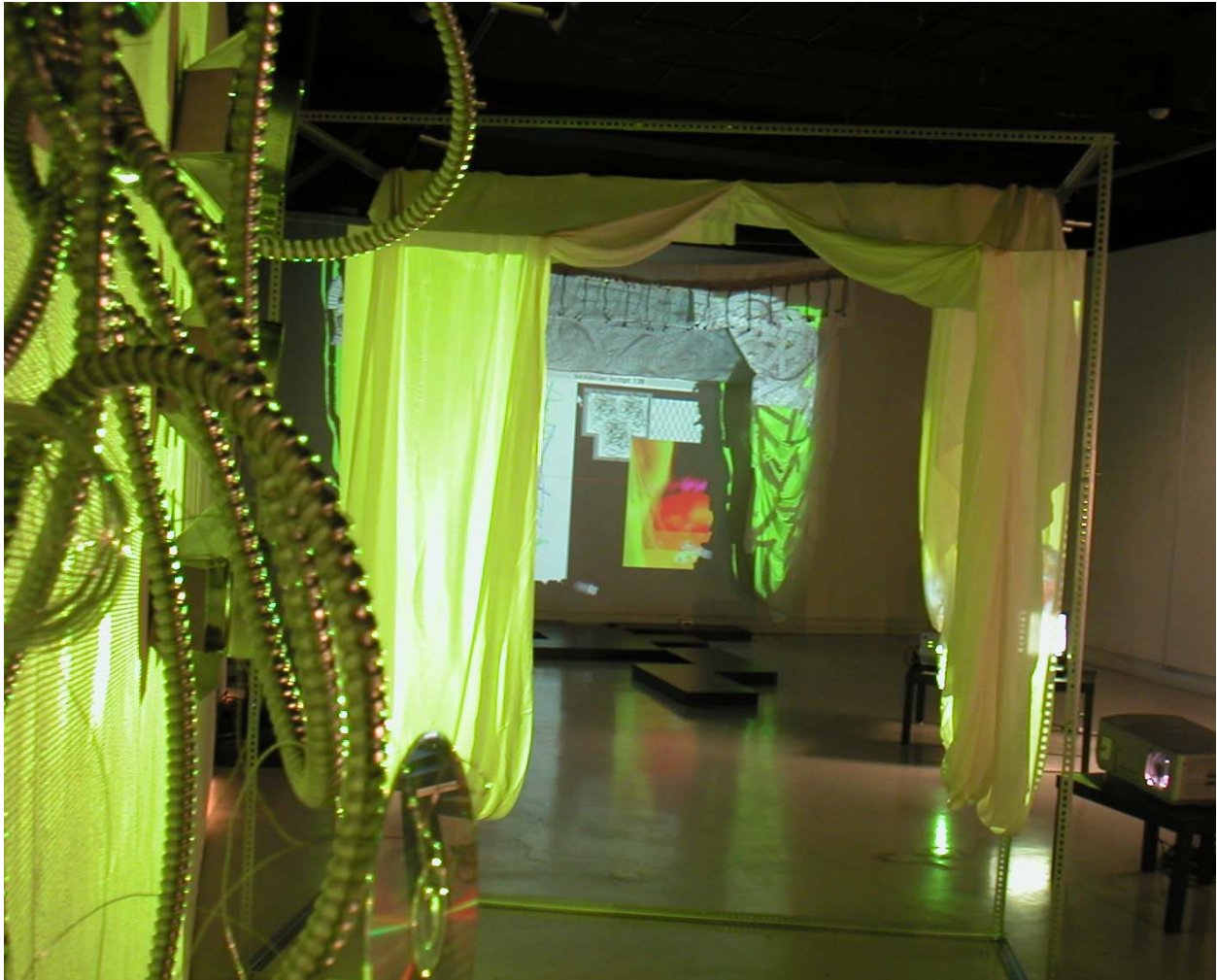
Figure 2
Installation View at Ralph G. Beelke Memorial Gallery, Nov., 2003.

The idea of "art as software" makes sense if the work created is based on a dialog with an audience, for dialogue is not static. Ideas are reshaped by different experiences. Similarly, if an artwork is a manifestation of an idea (or ideas), it may also be reshaped over time. *There's a Computer Virus in my Heart (v.1.0)*, an interactive art work, was designed to be displayed on computer monitors both in the gallery space and from domestic spaces via internet connections.

There's a Computer Virus in my Heart v.2.0 (Figure 3) made the 2D virtual world inhabit the real 3D space of the gallery via projections on three-dimensional structures, titled *Computer Theaters*, which exist as metaphors for how in virtual environments we are, to a certain degree, re-presenting.

This work makes the assertion that a work of art may be reconfigured and re-exhibited in response to the artist's ongoing insights. Similarly, the work of art may be reconceived in response to patterns of reactions observed in the audience.

The Gallery As A Thinking Laboratory

My intention with *Technology Side Effects* was to use the gallery space as a laboratory—a place where I could observe and learn from the types of interactions produced by the works and the reactions of the audience to them. This show had five major components: the artist, the audience, the manipulated space, the "props," and the socio-cultural context around which the experience was designed. Brief descriptions of these elements are provided below, within the context of the show as a whole.

Audience

The works produced for the show were aimed to appeal to a broad audience, from those who fear and avoid technology to computer aficionados, and even those

Figure 3
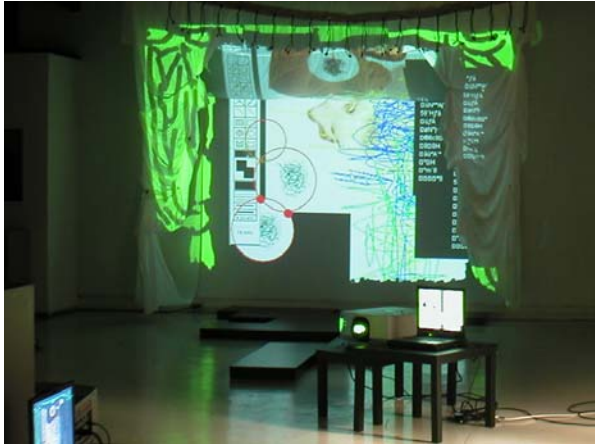There's a Computer Virus in My Heart v. 2.0

Figure 4
E-fetish/e-symptoms

Figure 5
Excerpts From Computer Theater (Detail)
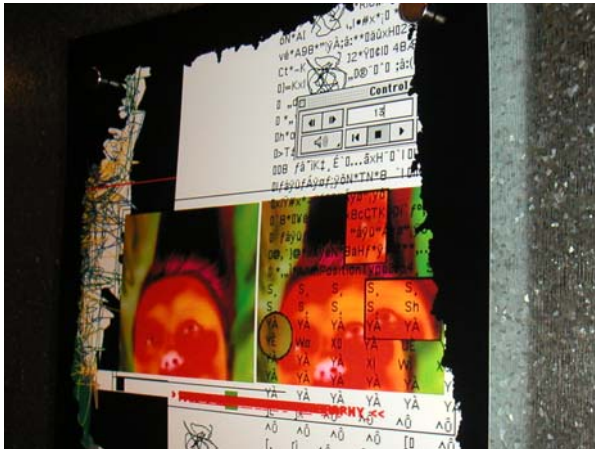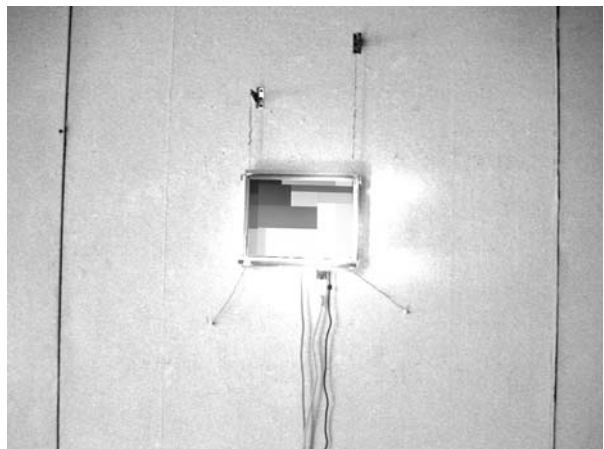

Figure 6
Digital Kinetic (Detail)

interested in educating a new generation of users shaped by technology usage via the internet, video games and cell phones. Because of its multi-sensory and conceptual approaches, my work intended to appeal to a wide range of age groups and educational backgrounds.

The Installation

The show took the shape of an installation and was conceived to immerse the audience in a meta-experiential mode (to be defined further in this paper). Sound, images, motion graphics, and other materials were used as emotional devices and recollection tools. Motion graphics pieces were installed in three-dimensional "computer theater" displays which brought the virtual into the real within the gallery environment. I labeled the final installation a "sanctuary of technology decay" (Figure 2) and was composed with the following artworks, which I would call in this particular context "props":

There's A Computer Virus In My Heart v. 2.0

This was a central piece in the show and consisted of digital animated projections onto a three-dimensional stage space complete with curtains (Figure 3). This work allowed user interaction via a mouse. For this piece, I produced an original soundtrack and sound effects based on distortion of my voice. I labeled the sound element *digital mantras*. This sound permeated the entire gallery space. The issues addressed in this work varied from online isolation, information disorientation, and human-computer machine symbiosis.

E-fetish/e-symptoms

An assemblage bra embellished with embroidered text published by Wired magazine (Bendito, 2002) under the title *Cross Platform* was manipulated to become part of a multi-media presentation. This site-specific projection (Figure 4) onto one large wall of the gallery space, in
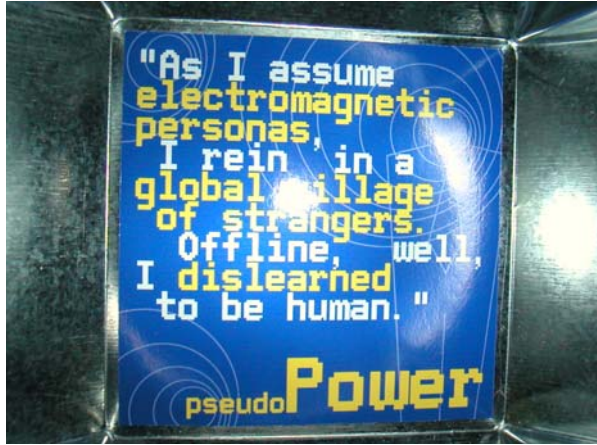
Figure7
E-symptoms: Exercises of Copyright Infringement

Figure 8
Digital Junk

Figure 9
Firewall

Figure 10
Unplug Yourself

which bands of shadow passed across a woman's silhouette wearing the assemblage bra, addressed issues of surveillance, voyeurism, an implied invisible male and a re-presented virtual female. A text describing computer-related pathologies ran across the work from left to right, mimicking banner advertisements encountered on the internet.

Excerpts From Computer Theater

These works (Figure 5), which exist as digital prints excerpted from the animation described above, provided an opportunity for the viewer/participant to look at frozen moments of some of the scripted events from *There's a Computer Virus in My Heart v. 2.0*. This project allowed for the comparison of dynamic and static media representation, since the images represented frozen moments of "digital performances."

Video Shorts

A series of short videos called attention to issues involving technology-related fetishes. A work entitled *Time_To_My_Cellph* played with words displayed on a cell phone to call attention the issues of resistance and awareness (Cellph = Self). In the video titled *E-fetish,* disembodied hands caressed CD-ROMs (which in this context resembled breasts) in a pathological displacement of pleasure and eroticism.

In the third video, *Displacement #1*, the disembodied hands slowly and reverently placed CD-ROMs on top of one another, resembling hosts presented to the congregation in a Christian mass. At the conclusion of the work, the stack of CDs are transformed into a functional object—a vase—in a motion that favors ambiguity and displacement in its final resolution.

Figure 11
Closing Reception with *Transonic* (Performer: Holly Jaycox), 2003. Photos by Xun Chi.

Digital Kinetic

A slowly-moving grid of RGB color ("sliced" from the "invisible" cube structure which exists in the digital realm as the generator of the color palettes found in, for example, Adobe Photoshop and other software programs) is positioned on a flat-screen LCD monitor (Figure 6). This results in another "displacement," as what is invisible inside the computer monitor is rendered not only visible, but also poetic. The works asks the viewer to "slow down," as a reaction to the shortening of attention spans caused by our contemporary world.

E-symptoms: Exercises of Copyright Infringement

The internet has raised many issues dealing with copyright laws. For these works, a collage of text and appropriated images created new dialogs when displayed inside of metal elements purchased from a hardware store (Figure 7). The metal pieces (shanty caps) featured a circular shape inscribed within a square, which reinforced the voyeuristic aspects of other works in the show. The use of appropriated text for the collage elements updated the use of appropriated images by artists during the postmodern period. The collages of copyrighted texts provided new contexts for the meaning attached to the original phrases.

Digital Junk

A pile of "dead" computers, circuit boards and wires confronts the viewer (Figure 8). A custom-made screen saver runs on the only working monitor, promoting the pixelized version of familiar icons (e.g., the trash can, file folders, etc.). This piece expressed the planned obsolescence of both hardware and software as new versions supercede old (but still functioning) ones, in order to extract more money from users interested in keeping current with technology.

Firewall

This piece (Figure 9) represents my visualization of an invisible dead end in the computer realm and tries to answer the question what would a firewall look like in reality? The fuzzy brightness of a "dead" computer monitor (without desktop) is reflected onto a stream of CD-ROMs strategically positioned on the floor. The result is a doubled vision of "snow," or interference in the digital realm.

Unplug Yourself

This work (Figure 10) was subtitled "An Unofficial Collaboration With Sprint" as a cell phone connected to Sprint (but no longer functional in the traditional sense, because the subscription to this phone's number had been discontinued). The phone was positioned in a glass case like a precious piece of jewelry. The cell phone display, which read "Unplug-Yself" registered the passage of time and urged the audience to reconsider their dependence upon technology and its various devices at the expense of human interaction.

Toward A Definition Of "Meta-Experience"

My reflections upon the *Technology Side Effects* exhibition (and a second show entitled *Hábitat Digital*, Brazil, Summer 2003) led me to define the strategies employed to engage the audience in what I call a "meta-experiential mode."

A description of my work by Terezinha Fialho (2003) has become the basis for the examination of elements used in the shows leading to my definition of the "meta-experience" effect. Fialho says:

"Bendito works with the architectonic space, colors, dynamic shapes, codes and scripts, and used the computer as his 'palette.' (…) in [the installation]

memories are collected as we walk through modular structures."

She then adds that the work...

"incites in the audience a subjective sensation that is both spatial and temporal. (…) The poetic electronic language articulated in this work must be experienced with the body in its totality, extending beyond the five senses. For this reason, the installation intrigues, evokes, and dares its audience. After all, what is real?"

From Fialho's text, I would like to emphasize the following terms: architectonic space, memories, spatial and temporal sensations, full body experience, including the mind. Calling attention to the immersive components of the experience, Fialho mobilizes these terms when she says that "memories are collected as we walk through modular structures." Therefore, we can categorize elements of her description into three broad-based categories as related to the concept "experience:"

1. mind/body state
2. suggestive reality (as opposed to factual reality)
3. conscious/unconscious knowledge acquisition mode

When Fialho says that the experience must encompass "…the body in its totality, extending beyond the five senses," she takes a holistic approach to the experience that directly relates to a "certain" mind/body state. When Fialho refers to experiencing the work beyond the "five senses," it may be inferred that what she says relates to unconscious modes of experiences, that is, beyond what we can understand through conscious presence.

These and other associations led me to rethink the meaning of meta-experience as applied to the works that I developed, which led me to the conclusion that in creating the meta-state of an experience (the *meta-experience*) several issues must be considered:

1. The audience is put in the position of a participant, instead of an observer.

2. A meta-experience must be an active full mind/body immersive experience in a 4D (3D+Time) space.

3. The factual elements of the experience trigger suggestive sensations in the participant.

4. Conscious and unconscious knowledge acquisition modes are activated.

5. Such immersive experience happens in a continuum that may range from low to high self-awareness, and from calmness to excitement.

The issues that were mentioned before led to the following definion I propose:

Meta-experience is a body/mind state of the participant in a 4D setting in which the reality of the experience is enhanced by metaphorical events that trigger conscious and unconscious patterns of knowledge acquisition modes.

It is this subliminal state of wonder, of knowing and not knowing, of understanding and not understanding, of being and not being, that produces a meta-experience in the participant. In the moment of the meta-experience, the viewer's belief systems are put to the test. This leads me to a further reflection which exists on one end of the meta-experience continuum. In news coverage of the *Technology Side Effects* show, a reporter stated that visitors to the exhibit "might be a little shocked." In saying this, the reporter Kevin Hunsperger (2002) alerted the audience that the show would not conform to traditional expectations and would challenge comfort zones. In order for an individual to succumb to a state of shock, the person must first be "pulled" into a state of mental (or physical) confrontation. Furthermore, the viewer's attention must be devoted to an object that challenges the *status quo*. As a result of the "Gallery as a Laboratory" status of the *Technology Side Effects* Exhibition, this observation has led me to propose, the creation of what I term an "Attention-Getting Model." This model, which is in progress, addresses key components of attention-getting devices from a visual and neurobiological standpoint.

Concluding Remarks

Each work in *Technology Side Effects*, whether humorous or serious, asked the viewer to reflect upon certain key issues relating to technology use and the overall effect of it on our environment as personal space. Where do each of us stand in this landscape of computer technology? Where are we heading? What will the future of the computer realm look like? The truth is that at this time we live, without necessarily reflecting upon it, in an overwhelming technology-absorbed world that has been imposed upon us under the guise of progress. By combining key metaphorical elements in my "sanctuary of technology decay," I learned to look more critically at these issues. May galleries be thinking laboratories!

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