



web www.leoalmanac.org

email info@leoalmanac.org

phone +90 216 483 9292

address Sabancı University, Orhanlı - Tuzla, 34956 Istanbul, Turkey

LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: For Some Things, "You Just Had to Be There": The Net and Art

ISSN No: 1071-4391

Author: Harry Rand, Leonardo Honorary Editor, Email: randh@si.edu

Senior Curator, National Museum of American History Smithsonian

Originally published in: *Leonardo* Vol. 29, No. 3 (1996), pp. 171-172

Print: ISSN 0024-094X, Online : ISSN 1530-9282, DOI:

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/1576241.pdf?acceptTC=true>

People who like art or are interested in art do not kid themselves about its technological novelty. The problem with espousing this position is opposition from the blinding glamour of high technology-in every generation.

Ultimately, painting is a very old technology. It has hardly changed in 40,000 years. The pigments and the applications were worked out in Paleolithic times. The application by brush or airbrush, the contrast of line against shape and other technical and formal relationships were present from the earliest surveying examples. By the time of the last interglacial period, object-field relations were present in highly sophisticated renditions. Compositions that regarded the enframing edge, even on cave walls, seem to have been considered in the first extant works. Since then, visual art has only been refining and extending the virtuosity of application, exfoliating stylistic changes and following through the intellectual implications of those primordial issues. Art is very old.

Much evidence and data about art can be communicated to an interested public through new technologies. The allure of on-line electronic "virtual museums" and fancy access should not be too heady. We have been through all this exhilaration before as each new technology came on-line and the results were usually not what the inventors or promoters had in mind.

In fact, there have been a lot of "virtual" technologies, as each advance in symbolic manipulation is a virtual realm and-because these representations are an amelioration of the environment by artifice-symbolic manipulations are technologies.

Language is a virtual representation. The words *the White House* do a very efficient job of conjuring something not present to the reader. First used about 100,000+ B.P., speech is a "virtual reality" because saying the word "dinner" is not the same as eating dinner. After the invention of speech, perhaps 60,000+ years passed before graphic representations were invented. During the



interglacial and post-glacial periods, a widespread use of visual art developed representations for purposes unknown to us now. These cave paintings were virtual realities; they communicate something important at a distance from the original reference. Neolithic culture made the next advance in virtual reality. About 9000 B.P., in Sumeria, three-dimensional virtual emblems of sheep, crops, people and commodities came into extensive use. These tokens and calculi gave birth, over the next couple of millennia, to graphic language signs, or writing-another great step forward. This virtual reality was precise enough and sufficiently permanent to draft binding contracts (scripts were invented to write contracts, not poetry).

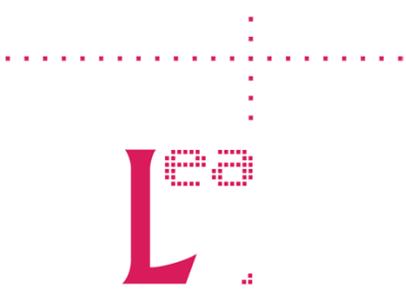
Sculpted and painted virtual food in ancient Egyptian tombs saved money compared with regular offerings and had the moral value of eliminating animal and human sacrifices to accompany the boss into the afterlife. Once again, as at Lascaux, art served as "virtual reality." Books are a virtual reality in that one kind of transient representation, speech, is made permanent, and thus within the book a single idea can be expanded beyond the limits of speech, so that a new, virtual kind of reasoning came into existence irrespective of speech acts. Thanks largely to books, writing is no longer graphically recorded speech.

Next (with some loss of definition but with the virtue of mechanically multiplied copies), prints, or graphics, circulated replicas of distant images. The original image stayed put and a print dispersed an image everywhere. Prints and books of prints afford viewers in different locales simultaneous access to an image.

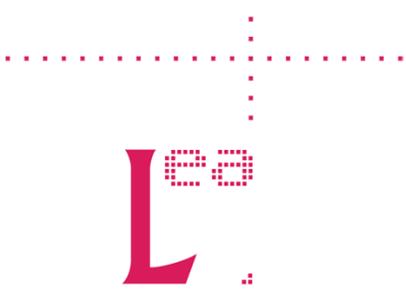
The resulting degeneration of the image cannot be ignored. A book of prints does not equal a virtual museum any more than an electronic reproduction does. The use of photography makes modern art history-with its highly exact comparisons of images-possible, but collected photographs do not equal a virtual museum either. Although the reproduced photographic image is less degraded than previous forms of printing, no one suggests that photos substitute for real paintings.

When a reference-a shoe or a pornographic image-ceases to serve as a mere stimulant to the referent (sex itself) we call the situation "perversion." The same is true of art. Nothing substitutes for art except at the cost of perversion-unless art was unattractive to begin with. Often the promulgators of high technology substitutes for art simply try to disguise their own discomfort with art. Counting log-ons to "virtual museums" quantifies our success with outreach programs but, in terms of actually acquainting folks with paintings, we might as well count people walking by our museums on the street.

There is a responsibility to the actual and potential museum-going public. When adopting the on-line crowd, we should remember not to equate the museum-going public with Internet hackers. We should present solid art history, zoology, geology, etc.-or at least offer shelter for serious art-historical research. Readers of *Leonardo* are among the most sophisticated when it comes to both art and science. Therefore, they should be at the forefront of sponsoring and encouraging new technologies while alerting all pertinent parties to the fact that such applications are not substitutes for



older art. New technology might generate its own aesthetic. All this has happened before and it will happen again.



Bio: Harry Rand is Senior Curator, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. His website is at <http://www.si.edu/ofg/Staffhp/randh.htm>.