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Global Eyes

ABSTRACT

It is a report about an artistic experience that
involved visual art and image media immersed
in a global telecommunications.

The enormous speed by which digital media reach previously isolated cultures around the world catalyzes a rapid integration of visual and media languages across the digital and physical spectrum. There is a need to understand not only ethnic cultures and the vocabularies of their traditional media, but also how these cultures and languages transform and are being transformed by digital media, especially computer graphics.

Most people in the world live and think locally, despite the internet. Many of the political and environmental problems we face are reflected in the complexities of global visual culture. The Danish Cartoon Crisis in 2005-6 showed how unprepared most people are to engage it. We are having a global multicultural visual discussion. It is so plural and so big, that it behooves us to learn as much as we can about the world and develop strategies, especially through visual art and image media, the core language of global telecommunications, for living together peacefully.

More than anything else, we need to learn the history of the world from the point of view of the people who live it, and this means engaging folk as well as fine art, and indigenous films. In the past, fragmentation and destruction of images and other forms of cultural memory was a main technique used by cultures in conflict to destroy each other. A clever strategy for survival was juxtaposition and syncretism (ie. when images appear the same one could survive by taking a new name or association). Fortunately we have surviving images from many otherwise disappearing cultures because of this syncretism as well as other creative forms of image transfer.

For a culture to survive, however, it needs more than just the images, it needs the meaning of the images, too. And this is encoded in stories, or

the narrative. That is why it is so important in new media for the images be brought to it by the native people, and through their own stories.

Now that we are in a much wider global cultural exchange with new possibilities for image transfer and integration, we can explore a range of methods for combining them. But we need to be careful to do this in a spirit of respect, and consider the consequences. The very same media that can destroy memory can also restore or reclaim it, and if we are clever, give it new life that can enhance rather than diminish our collective human heritage, building upon its great beauty and richness for the benefit of everyone.

MULTICULTURAL VISUAL THINKING IS A STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING LOCAL AND GLOBAL ISSUES. TECHNOLOGY IS PROVIDING US WITH POWERFUL TOOLS FOR PERCEIVING THE WORLD IN ALTERNATIVE WAYS. THESE NEW DIGITAL GLASSES ARE EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF OUR GLOBAL EYES.

Multicultural visual thinking is a strategy for addressing local and global issues. Technology is providing us with powerful tools for perceiving the world in alternative ways. These new digital glasses are expanding the scope of our global eyes.

We can begin to address the issue of preservation of handcraft, in particular, which is being replaced quickly by mass produced items, despite the fact that it is generally considered to be of much higher quality both technically and esthetically. We can develop respectful ways to transfer it to digital media that will not only give these media a much more human and natural quality, but will likely help establish greater appreciation for it. It will also help us to be more in contact with our material and natural world that we ultimately depend on for survival.

I think we will see that there is much in common across our many cultures, partly because of exchange of images and knowledge in the past, but also because of our common humanity. We need to reinforce this. By seeing through "other" eyes we will better understand that they are "our" eyes. Together, we are all one family of man, one people with many faces, all sharing a common destiny on our common planet.

Sanctuary is an interactive architectural installation based on cross cultural interpretations of 'safe haven', focusing on natural and spiritual sanctuaries,

and the common need for safety by all creatures of the world. Combining painting and photography, animation and documentary, the work employs tangible media in navigating images, sounds, texts, and movies recorded in many countries, including Italy, Bali, China, Japan, Denmark, France, Bolivia, and Brazil. The *midia@rte* Laboratory at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, (UFMG), provided important assistance in its realization, helping to make it a more inclusive global poem of peace. Professor Heitor Capuzzo was particularly helpful by guiding me to spiritual locations in Brazil that I would not have been able to visit otherwise, and also by offering assistance in post-production. His students Ricardo Sousa and Daniel Werneck were especially helpful in this regard. In addition, Professor Miller Puckette of the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), provided important technical assistance.

Completed in September of 2005, the World Premiere took place on October 17, 2005 at Gallery One-One-One at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada.



Sanctuary, 2005.

Sanctuary consists of a small house (20'wide x 20'deep x 14'tall) made of wood and natural materials, and 4 wall-sized screens (3 used in Canada due to ceiling height restrictions). The floor is made of wood and there is a special entranceway that allows people in wheelchairs to enter. Influenced by Japanese Buddhist Temples and Native American use of stretched hides, used both for writing and shelter, the piece appears to be a glowing and breathing small house. At times the wall-screens appear to be windows opening onto wide landscapes. Other times the 'windows' become surfaces, enclosing the space, making a contemplative place for interacting with thoughts, and living things.

Thousands of media elements from around the world, including digital photography and digital video, are rear projected onto the screens, and





Sanctuary, 2005.

acoustic and digital music, composed by Professor Shahrokh Yadegari of UCSD, move around the space. Text and poetry, including quotes from Native American thinkers, the Dalai Lama, the Buddha, and others, are layered over the images as people interact. In order to navigate and transform the digital media materials, people touch living plants, water, and physical objects, rather than joysticks or computer hardware. No encumbering equipment is worn by users/interactors, as capacitance sensors detect touch in transparent and non-invasive ways. Because combinatorics and indeterminacy are used in real-time processes running on the computers, an emergent system results where each interactor/user has a unique experience.

An alternative to and comment on the Virtual Reality 'CAVE', Sanctuary is not a closed box that isolates people from the immediate physical and natural environment. Instead, the sides are rotated open, and people can walk freely in and out, making a continuous integration of interior and exterior physical and digital spaces. The path, an entryway, has a table with a special bowl of water on it, and this prepares the visitor for entrance into a magical space where the mind, or soul, can be transformed. Like a ritual, the goal is to cause this transformation, step by step, of putting the person back into harmony with the universe. The water senses the person's hands touching it, and this causes initial changes in the sound environment. When people walk forward along the path, and enter inside the sanctuary, and sit, the surface of the stools are sensitive, and this too causes changes. When the person touches the living plants, selected for their special tactile and responsive qualities, this affects other changes. In general, by using organic materials and objects familiar to people in the physical world, they know implicitly how to interact. They

do not need instructions. Moreover, people from a wide range of backgrounds often feel more welcome, and more at ease, than in what can otherwise be an alienating high technology environment.

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Sanctuary is a dynamic multi-sensory environment where individuals as well as groups can contemplate, and interact in alternative ways. By including living plants, people are reminded that they too are alive, part of an ecosystem, and that actions have consequences that affect the whole. And like plants and all of life, people are fragile, and need a place of peace and safety in order to survive. The whole world is a sanctuary.

We all want a better world, but unfortunately instead of 'waging' peace there is a growing violence and sense of hopelessness, a worldwide cynicism in the face of on-going wars, lies and propaganda, and increasing environmental destruction, species extinction, and poverty. A trend towards techno-fascism is growing, and this is important to counter. To begin to reverse this, we need to demand limits on the use of technology for surveillance and its abuses. We need to support and develop alternative structures in technology, media, and society that reflect equality, inclusion, and democratic goals. They reflect and potentialize our collective human creativity and intelligence, and increase our knowledge. Our responsibility as citizens is to be informed and participate in social organizations, and work productively and positively for ethical change. This is hard work, a long term, step-by-step pro-

cess that requires patience and commitment. It means finding ways to work together locally and globally, as activists, including by using alternative networks. It also means helping people less fortunate than ourselves, especially those who are suffering from violence, poverty, and illness. Education is one of the best ways to accomplish this, and therefore more important than ever before. Through art and music, and by listening to the sounds and rhythms of our bodies in harmony with nature, we can heal the hearts and open the minds of people around us.

The larger question is how to bring our collective consciousness to our collective senses. By actively bringing the richness of the world's cultural traditions to the field of computer graphics and interactive media, we can catalyze understanding and collaboration across cultures, and contribute to development of a more intelligent, responsible, and democratic world language. Ultimately, the value of our technology and the strength of our institutions will be measured by their ability to contribute to these larger goals. For we are all indigenous to the earth, all citizens of the world, and all share responsibility for our collective future.