

*reals
illusions
virtuality
artifice*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, representations of 'real' are investigated in selected technological contexts.¹ It is maintained that, at present, the prevalent technological sophistication in art-making processes creates diffused boundaries between notions of the real and the non-real due to the naturalism inherent in digital artmaking processes in which photographs or video often forms the 'raw' or foundation material.² It is demonstrated that the development of photography as well as Surrealism as a stylistic movement have been key forces in the shaping of the current dominant mode of naturalism in visual expressions of virtuality and artifice.

INTRODUCTION

When considering the kind of work presented at recent art exhibitions such as the Turner Prize 2001 and the Vita Award 2001 in South Africa, one is struck by the prevalent use of, and

reference to, technology and computer technology in particular, as well as by the proliferation of naturalism as a preferred mode of representation. Although the technologies used today are revolutionary, illusionism as a concept or an ideal is of course not new. Throughout the ages artists have aspired to reproduce the real world, that is, to create illusions of the real, through various technical and mechanical means. However, the development, exploration and implementation of the possibilities of new technologies in many fields, also in artmaking, have led to conceptions, on the one hand, of dual coexisting reals – a human real and a manufactured real – and, on the other hand, of multiple coexisting reals. Such conceptions of discourses are eminently demonstrated in the work of, for instance, the German artist, Gerhard Richter. Before embarking on an interpretation of his and other artists' visual discourses on the real, a historical background on the role and function of photography is necessary.

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PHOTOGRAPHY

As regards the new developments in the field of technology impacting on conceptions of the real, the invention of the camera during the middle of the nineteenth century was seminal. Since the nineteenth century, photography has been significant in corroborating naturalism and illusionism as mainstream forms of representation even in the midst of early twentieth-century artists' breaking with the traditional conventions in representation. During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it would seem that still photography has still not faded as means of aesthetic expression, but has, in fact, come to the fore and has become a core medium in computer art, although it is still one of a larger scope of visual technologies available. The photograph, whether analogue or digital, still or video, is often the foundation material for further digital reworking or transformation, and it has evolved from still black-and-white to colour; from silent movies to sound movies, and from analogue to digital storage of information.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries not only marked a time of avant-garde vistas opened up by photography, but also a time when the drive to represent the observed world in a naturalistic mode *ceased* to a large extent and the inner world as well as self-based, non-shared representations were generated. This was a time when art, in the wake of the invention of the camera, aspired to invent new forms of representation, mostly in counter-direction to naturalism. Technology developments during nineteenth-century Industrialism impacted on artmaking media in the sense that these transformed or affected certain chemical, technical and technological processes, but also, fundamentally, the

function of art. This is not new, since in the past the development of particular visual technologies such as the *camera obscura* led to the development of monocular perspective painting as a dominant representational mode in paintings of the fifteenth century. Pre-twentieth-century Western art expression was premised in naturalism and illusion or the simulation of the real.

Since its initial invention for documentation purposes, the function of the camera has expanded into many domains. Just over a century ago, before the photographic camera was invented, one of art's prime functions was to communicate (visually) and document information such as on-court events, wars, historical and other events. The camera largely took over this function, and art had to find a new function for itself. Instead of documenting events, it acquired the highly individualised function of expressing human emotions, and interpreting or internalising and externalising the world. Richard Allen (1995:87) argues that '(the) minimal contribution of the photograph is to record an illusion, but it may also contribute to the production of an illusion by presenting the phenomenon in a way that disguises its fictive status'. Adatto (1993:8) refers to Edgar Allen Poe who was struck by the photograph's perfect correspondence to nature and said: '(The) closest scrutiny of the photographic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented' (Adatto 1993:8). A core use of the photograph is to articulate artistically views on identity that are always tied to time and place. Allen (1995:86) refers to Roland Barthes who, in *Image, Music, Text*, draws attention to the fact that the photograph necessarily documents a 'particular moment in the past' (Barthes 1977:44).

According to Adatto (1993:8), the magical aspect of the camera is that it promises a picture more perfect than the painter or the sculptor can manually produce. It is this aspect that has imbued the photograph, although being an 'objective' recording of a moment in time, with emotionalism: people are sentimental and want to remember and have a grip on the reality of time passing via the photograph.

Within a historical context, the camera would have died a quiet death shortly before the turn of the twentieth century, if it were not for George Eastman who brought out the first box camera called 'Kodak No. 1' (Honnef 2000:621). This camera contained a film-roll that had to be sent with the camera to the factory to be processed. (The firm of Eastman later became the Kodak empire.) As such, Eastman ushered in the age of mass media. Photography simultaneously allowed people to see the world through the eyes of a mechanical device and also, through mechanical means, provided people with the opportunity to create their own images of the observed world. The industrialisation of photography thus also meant the democratisation of the visual arts (Honnef 2000:621).

Photography since the late nineteenth century has brought home brute realities due to its documentary function. In Germany under the Weimar Republic, in particular, there was a blossoming of photojournalism (Honnef 2000:635). Documented data acquired almost scientific status due to the factuality and verifiability of the photo reportage process. The New Realism in art and literature that emerged during the 1930s was in part induced by photomechanical technologies. Events such as World War I and recent nineteenth-century civil wars could be documented and the bizarre, ludicrous and contradictory char-

acter of these events exposed. The documentary impulse of the early twentieth century was mostly concerned with public life, events and figures, an impulse that documented the particularities of time and place, two constructs that have become of central consequence in virtuality contexts.

SURREALISM

Early twentieth-century Surrealism was a stylistic movement opting for naturalism as mode of representation, as well as a movement revelling in the imagination, the fantastical and the 'dissonant side of human existence' (Ruhrberg *et al.* 2000:137). As such, in retrospect, at the beginning of the third millennium Surrealism can be interpreted as a key force in shaping and preparing postmodern visual expressions of virtual or hyperreal states of being, especially as contained in cyberspace.

Very early on in the twentieth century, a marked distinction between the journalist-photographer and the artist-photographer developed. Revolutionaries in art circles, crying for new forms of art, stimulated avant-garde responses in many areas of art production and photography was no exception. The concept of 'art from a machine' emerged, pioneered especially by photographer László Moholy-Nagy (Honnef 2000:629). The Surrealist painter, Man Ray, epitomised a completely new type of artist-photographer (1). He constantly moved between painting, photography and film, in Honnef's words, as a 'subversive magician with a tendency towards pragmatism' (Honnef 2000:645). Similarly, in the artist-photographer, the artistic and scientific imagination and processes converge. Mechanical developments in photography were seminal in pioneering not only mass



1 Man Ray, Kiki, *Violon d'Ingres* (1924). Gelatin silver print. 38,6 × 30 cm. Cologne, Museum Ludwig. (Courtesy of the Museum Ludwig, Cologne.)

media, but also in interfacing unrelated disciplines such as painting and photography. Walter Benjamin, in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', compares the relationship of magician and surgeon to painter and cameraman:

(the) painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechan-

ical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art (Benjamin 1973:235).

Surrealist artists employed the conventions of naturalism, but at the same time their art was 'unclassical art *par excellence*, a protest against the norm' (Ruhrberg *et al.* 2000:153). The art of André Masson, Richard Oelze, Giorgio de Chirico, André Breton, Max Ernst, Rudolf Hausner, Salvador Dali and others was, for instance, like many other early twentieth-century art movements such as Expressionism and Dadaism, was deeply under the influence of Symbolism at the turn of the century. It simultaneously shared a concern with these movements regarding the mythology of destruction and cruelty of World War I. According to Ruhrberg, the Surrealists

marshalled many and diverse ancestors to legitimate their endeavors: Bosch, Brueghel, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the creator of labyrinthine dungeons; the Swiss painter of nightmares Johann Heinrich Füssli (who later, in England, became Henry Fuseli); another Englishman, William Blake; the Goya of the *Caprichos* and the *Horrors of War*; the French artists Redon, Henri Rousseau, and Moreau, mentor of the Fauves; and finally the early Chagall, Klee, a few works by Léger, the Romanian sculptor Brancusi, and more. The *poètes maudits*, or condemned poets, from Rimbaud and Baudelaire all the way back to Lautréamont and Marquis de Sade, were also invoked (Ruhrberg *et al.* 2000:137).

The Surrealists set themselves the task of unveiling social taboos, absurd contradictions and previously repressed emotions and

images. Their work often dealt with the visual depiction of a theme that would previously have been taboo in social terms. Salvador Dali, for instance, attempted to break through the barriers of convention and initiate an aesthetic that would create a sense of discomfort in the viewer. The naturalistic form of his representation was necessary in order to invoke the narrative, and his work allowed a new aesthetic to emerge in which the boundaries between the private and the public domains became blurred. According to Dali, 'blood, decay, rot, and excrement (are) the key components of a painting approach' (Ruhrberg *et al.* 2000:143). In Dali's work, as in many other artists' work of this genre, the human condition is presented in an exaggeratedly grotesque manner.

In a work such as *Time Transfixed* (1939),³ Surrealist Magritte builds 'riddles out of components of reality, pointing up its absurdity in the process' (Ruhrberg *et al.* 2000:146). The artist transmutes the ordinary and the banal real into a poetic, and magical real, and fuses different narratives in the process. The credibility and logicity of the observed real is challenged and confronted through the insertion of an illogical and absurd image in the ordinary, everyday setting. Magritte intermingles sensory and tacit meanings, narratives and histories, and brings into play the fusion of the real and illusion through illusionistic and naturalistic means.

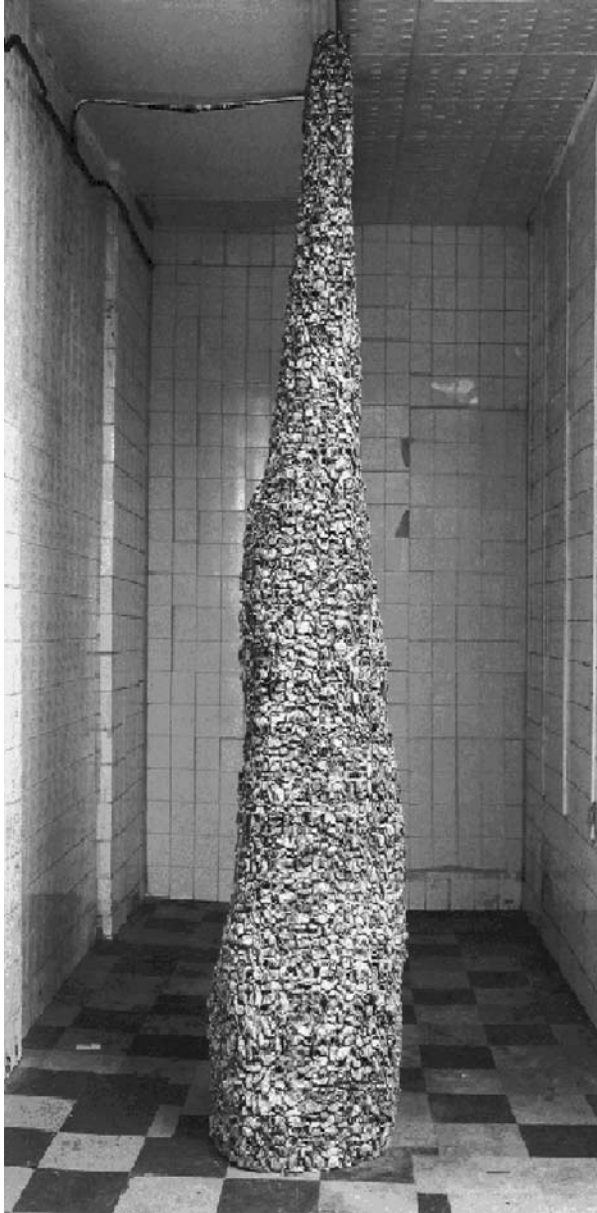
Naturalistic form is necessary, on the one hand, to enforce a credible illusion, and on the other, to evoke the ordinary real in convincing manner. Such prevalence of naturalism as preferred mode of representation in Surrealist works of art is similarly notable in the rendering of the absurdities of the banal real in late twentieth-century artworks.

DOCUMENTING THE REAL

Since the latter half of the previous century, artists have been exploring the notion of the anti-aesthetic to the point that it has become a trend to produce art that is as unashamed and blatant as possible. Dick Price, in his preface to the catalogue for *The New Neurotic Realism* (1998), an exhibition of British artists' work at the Saatchi Gallery in London, argues that the new British painters of the late twentieth century evoke anxious worlds of cartoon-like madness and exposed sexuality; banal worlds claiming a peculiar heritage, and becoming threatening and disturbing in their photographic clarity (Price 1998:s.p.).

The prevalence of naturalism as preferred mode of representation is especially notable in the rendering of the absurdities of the banal real. The naturalistic form is necessary to enforce, on the one hand, a credible illusion, and on the other, the starkness and staleness of the narrated real. In *Vermin Death Stack* (1998) **(2)**, David Falconer stacked dead mice in the shape of a cone, setting up a repulsive, foul-smelling environment. He deconstructs the exalted meanings traditionally constructed around the image of the tower, altar and monument, as well as around the surging vertical shape, into a pessimistic statement on organic death and life without vision. The heavier base of the cone shape emphasises the idea of human mortality.

In *Untitled – March 1997 (Room)* (1997) **(3)**, Hannah Starkey expresses similar sentiments in her depiction of a lonely elderly woman: her meticulously tidy room, herself and her teddy bear form her universe. She is left with memories of her childhood and is 'faced' with thoughts about the time and place of her death. Looking at her own shrivelled face she



2 David Falconer, *Vermin Death Stack* (1998). Cast resin, enamel paint, 305 × 91,5 × 91,5 cm. (Source: Price 1998:s.p.)

realises her mortality, conjuring British artist Francis Bacon's famous statements that observing the movements of his face in the mirror is like looking at death folded in life. Different reals intermingle in the work – her past, present

and future, her life and death. In both Falconer and Starkey's works, the naturalism of the documenting mode is vital in bringing home perceptions of distress with the crudity and absurdity of the real. It is a fractured society that is depicted, premised in loss; a world in which individuals are alienated and lonely, even when they are together.

FOUND MATERIALS AS NATURALISTIC 'REAL'

The use of found, banal materials in twentieth-century art production embodies another form of reference to the real: a usage and imitation of the 'real' of manufacture. Early on during the twentieth century at the level of art production, the awareness of the infiltration of the artificial sphere of manufacture and production into human space manifested itself in particular. In works such as *Bicycle Wheel* (1964), Marcel Duchamp expressed an awareness of the presence of the artificial infiltrating the human reality, a philosophical insight that was extrapolated four decades later in other artists' work that dealt expressly with found materials. These were attempts to set up a



3 Hannah Starkey, *Untitled – March 1997 (Room)* (1997). Photograph. (Source: Price 1998:s.p.)

more intimate interface between art and life (referring to a highly urbanised, technological life) in order to express a post-industrial consciousness.

Similarly, the art-life movement that became fashionable as subject matter in art during the late Sixties can be interpreted as a response to the invasion of manufacture into every sphere of life. Artists such as Joseph Beuys, for example, as well as artists of the Arte Povera movement, initiated the questioning of the boundaries between art and life through the aestheticisation and conceptualisation of banal objects and materials. In this kind of aesthetic, the boundaries between the sensory real and illusion are broken down, essentially as a result of the use of found materials and naturalistic imagery.

NATURALISM AND ARTIFICE

Photography maintained its avant-garde and key position right through the twentieth century, to the extent that, according to Willis (1990:198), today '(the) naturalistic image, delivered by photographic/filmic means, mass produced and distributed to large audiences, is taken as a given' (Willis 1990:197). Messages regarding global and human concerns such as Aids can be most effectively communicated in a documenting mode; an orientation that has spilt over into the arts. This function of photography has been primary since its invention, but through digitalisation a new world has opened up that regards the virtualities made possible through mode and shape modification and adjustment processes. It has become common practice in postmodern art to use photographs as foundation material or as base in multi-layered works. The overpainting of photographs, add-ons such as the attach-

ment of found materials and digital touching-up have become some of the various methodologies used to express shifts and amendments to the world as we know and experience it, and the idea that the world is multi-faceted, multi-layered and complex.

Globally, at present, a situation predominates in which manufacture, machine culture and computer technologies have invaded the human space at every level. As such, there is manufacturing of many 'reals' premised in artifice and artificiality on a grand scale, the various manifestations of which can be circumscribed by the term *the artificial*. At the root of the notion of the concept of the artificial lie the human needs to invent something new as well as to reproduce the real. Massimo Negrotti views the thrust behind the construction of the artificial as grounded in the real and in the anthropological rule that human beings possess the dispositions of observation, reproduction, invention and representation (Negrotti 1999:8). He argues that:

(the) world's events enter the mind through channels which are compatible with it, and, in the same way, the mind processes the events in the world in ways that derive from its nature and from its individual and species history, including the cultural (Negrotti 1999:11).

Negrotti (1999:15) views representation similarly as an *interface* between the world and the individual, and the artificial as created through reproduction of either the external or the internal world (or a mixture of both) by means of symbols or machines. Within the domain of the artificial there is reproduction of worlds but also interface and dissolution of the boundaries between various entities.

NATURALISM IN CYBERSPACE

In his article 'History, Theory and Virtual Reality', Robert Markley (Trend 2001:298) distinguishes between virtual technologies and cyberspace, and develops a theory on metaphysics of the artificial.⁴ Within the context of the artificial as manifesting in cyberspace in particular, he identifies a process of the dissolution of dichotomies such as 'mind/body, spirit/matter, form/substance, and male/female that have structured metaphysics since Plato' (Markley 2001:298). Mutating in various directions and forms, the concept of cyberspace has come to mean a 'new world', a transmutation of the old world as we have known it thus far; not a totally new world but one that is folded in the old one. Philosopher Michael Heim (1990:41) defines this new world as follows: 'each world is made from previous worlds, and each process of worldmaking proceeds by composing or decomposing older materials, by identifying repetitions and evolving new patterns, by deleting and supplementing, by organizing and ordering aspects of the world(s) already there'. To Heim (1990:42), cyberspace is essentially a 'broad electronic net' in which virtual realities are spun as products of the imagination.

In cyberspace, the underlying ideology is the possibility of the international exchange of ideas, knowledge, advice and experiences in an attempt to improve the lives of people. Fitting (1991:311) argues that cyberspace, a complex, artificial, technological matrix, the domain of the cyborg, is an attempt to 'grasp the complexity of the whole world system through a concrete representation of its unseen networks and structure, of its invisible data transfers, and capital flows'. He (Fitting 1991:311) refers to Gibson's concept of cyberspace as the 'origin' of artificial space and

views it as humankind's attempt to make the abstract and the unseen comprehensible, a kind of visualisation of the notion of cognitive mapping. According to Negroponte, the common bond in cyberspace is the belief that the computer would dramatically alter and affect the quality of life through its ubiquity, not just in science, but in every aspect in living (Negroponte 1995:225).

Michael Heim (2001:70) makes another conceptual entry to the problem of the ideologies underpinning cyberspace by developing a metaphysics of cyberspace and by raising questions such as whether allegiance to one single reality should be pledged and who should be the decision makers in the democratic cyberworld. Underneath all such speculations, though, runs an ontological continuity that connects Platonic knowledge of ideal forms to the information systems of the matrix (Heim 2001:73). More importantly, the ontological question needs to address the status of cyberspace as construct, the phenomenon itself, and the way entities exist in cyberspace. This phenomenon Heim interprets as desire, not as ideology, that is, as a fascination with, and a desire for, the magic of technology – in short, a love affair that goes deeper than a play of the senses (Heim 2001:71). Heim (2001:71) maintains further that:

(our) fascination with computers is more erotic than sensuous, more spiritual than utilitarian. Eros,⁵ as the ancient Greeks understood, springs from a feeling of insufficiency or inadequacy. Whereas the aesthete feels drawn to causal play and dalliance, the erotic lover reaches out to a fulfillment far beyond aesthetic detachment.

It would seem that although cyberspace was

initially ideologically conceived as the offspring of technology as advancement, it has become far more in the sense that it has developed into a Romantic kind of cosmology in which the desire for the exotic or the unknown other is continually enabled. Cyberspace concerns not only a constructed real, but also constructed time. Technoculture and the computer industry have changed our sense of time into a distortion in which there is fragmentation. In his article 'The Internet and Its Social Landscape', Steven Jones (1997:14) refers to the consciousness raised by Lewis Mumford for the new emerging awareness of the notion of time in the late twentieth century. The Internet has a sense of time in which time is not only marked, but also filled imaginatively (Jones 1997:15). Jones refers further to the Internet as more of a 'discontinuous narrative' than some kind of futuristic cyberspace. In order to enter this very particular space, body and place must be forsaken. In this sense it is 'an imagined and imaginary space, and thus is a narrative both because it is an area of discursive interaction and because it contends very successfully, for our imagination' (Jones 1997:15). Jones (1997:14) maintains that narratives determine the passage of time:

Narratives are not, of course, communities, though they may be artifacts of community and may represent a good portion of what communities do to maintain and reproduce themselves over time. Narrative may imagine communities, and we may imagine ourselves to be a part of a community based on our reading of a narrative.

The fact that the Internet is all about connectivity further distorts time and has created a revolutionary evolution called *simultaneity*. Time is empty but it is 'a series of fragments

that pass by, one to the other, in a serial lock-step' (Jones 1997:13).

The function of art has changed radically in the context of the Internet as cyberspace, which is an exciting new communication space with a global rather than a local orientation. Together with the cyber exhibition space, methodologies, processes and materials have undergone major changes. Joichi (1997:20) describes the Internet artist as a *memetic* (not *mimetic*) engineer who creates an idea software protocol or image that grows and evolves on the Net, a process that to him is more 'about creating life than about creating a non-living piece of art' (Joichi 1997:21). A significant difference between the traditional artist and the memetic artist is that the latter seeks to have the particular meme (rule) copied and replicated, whereas the former who, in the capacity of a genius (or a serious aspiration to geniality), is 'protective' of his/her work, and attempts to protect the integrity and authenticity of the work. In this sense the Internet artist is more of a scientist, a scientist who discovers/invents rules within the real, lays down these as universals and expects others to follow, copy or imitate.

Machiko Kusahara (1997:22) extends this discourse by arguing that cyberartists are challenging the traditional idea that an artwork (or 'piece', as he calls it) should be the result of the artist's original creativity. He observes that, whereas in the West authenticity is valued and protected, and indeed the original author or origins are, and have been, treated with esteem, in the East – and specifically in Japanese culture – citing or borrowing is not considered theft but a virtue (Kusahara 1997:23). This is remarkably easy in the case of the copying of music. The use of digital technology in art seems to have enforced this

idea and rules (or myths) of originality are constantly broken. According to Kusahara (1997:23), the Net is seen rather as a tool or a space for 'integrating different imaginations, or even different egos'.

NATURALISM IN VIRTUALITY

Within the context of virtuality, the notion of imitation, illusion, and the experiences and responses of the spectator are core components. The term *virtual space* indicates a mutation and the current availability of cyberspace. Initially, in Gibsonian context, the word *cyberspace* indicated 'the virtual space within the matrix – the globalNet – reached by jacking in via a socket or a "trode net"' (Brown 1990:238). The term *virtual* goes back to a linguistic distinction formulated in Medieval Europe (Heim 1990:41). The flight simulator developed by computer-imaging pioneer Ivan Sutherland has been instrumental in developing so-called artificial realities as found in computer games and television advertisements (Darley 1990:53). According to Darley (1990:53), ' "Artificial realities", "virtual realities", and "responsive environments" – though not exactly referring to the same thing – stand for an area of research into computer simulation which involves computer imaging and some of its central components'.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, especially the medium of film initiated experiences of virtuality and displacement. According to Hollander (1986:3), the 'power of moving pictures has been undeniable since the beginning of the cinema'. The computer technology that has been used in films since the Eighties has now reached the stage where literally anything is possible in creating illusion or virtual reality. Through computer technology

in particular, three-dimensional visual representations of the sensory real can be simulated to the extent that they are believable or 'virtual' – a development in the history of technological development that has elicited discourses on the nature and validity of appearances and their value dichotomies. In the history of art production, painters in particular, created proto-cinematic art, as is evidenced in the work of Botticelli, Goya and Degas. Such artists prefigured and attempted what cinema achieved later, especially in artworks that suggest a narrative in the sense of the 'single' image being presented as one fragment from a whole event.

In *The Perfect Crime* (1996), Baudrillard (1996:11) argues, 'virtual reality is the product of a surgical operation on the real world'. This view echoes Marcuse's postulation that fantasy (as virtual reality) is a rebellion against the real (Marcuse 1968:98). For Baudrillard, the most dreaded scenario would be to start believing in the real for want of anything else, since the real is merely the natural child of disillusionment and has been given to us as simulacrum. Therefore, everything is illusion and neither the sensory real nor the non-real can be believed. 'Faith in reality is,' he proceeds, 'of all the imaginary forms, the basest and most trivial' (Baudrillard 1996:11). According to Baudrillard, the world is only appearance and will always remain the ultimate mystery, the enigma. In fact, the world has disappeared and is radical illusion (Baudrillard 1996:16): the real actually consists in the discourse on the real (1996:13). In most virtual fantasies, reference to the real is articulated through the imaginative reworking of known concepts and objects. As Heim (1990:42) maintains, a 'virtual world needs to be not-quite-real or it will lessen the pull on the

imagination'. Something less-than or more-than real will stimulate visual and imaginative response.

In the computer simulation in the film, *The Matrix* (2000), illusions of the real are represented in such a convincing manner that the real indeed disappears, and the boundary between the projective illusion of the represented real – achieved through filmic means – and the digital, virtual real – achieved through digital manipulation means – collapses. The virtual real of the film is made more entertaining and enjoyable because the non-real is merged with the real but without any 'real' threat or violence. The entertainment aspect is to be found in the intelligent spectator's immediate distinction between the real and the virtual; that is, that based on experiences of the real, spectators realise what the limitations of the real are and enjoy the virtuality due to admiration for the powerful tools of digital technology. This view supports Baudrillard's anthropological orientation with regard to the notion of the real, namely that the real is subjectively constructed and experienced by human beings. In support of this view he argues that when the real is no longer what it used to be and it becomes nostalgia or memory, for instance, it assumes its full meaning (Baudrillard 1996:130).

In many virtual reality renderings, alternative value systems are posited that become as acceptable (or unacceptable) as those of the real. This position is articulated in the post-structuralist theories of Derrida who views both *presence* and *self* as illusion. Subject and object or self and world, rephrased as spectator and representational illusion (as object), are alienated since language intervenes in and distorts this relationship (Derrida 1973:93). As a result of such intervention there can never

be a 'truthful' transferral of signs from world to self. For Derrida the subject can only exist through discourse, but in a sense divided from itself. Following Derrida's line of argument, it can be postulated that in the same way that language mediates between self and world, representation acts as visual mediator between viewer and world. World can only exist through presentation and representation, and solipsistically, self can only be articulated in relation to world. Owing to the fragile nature of representation and illusion, the dismantling of the truth character of the real in interface with the non-real comes about without difficulty, and ambivalences are set up between the value dichotomies of the real versus those of the non-real. As Willis maintains, 'just as traditional categories of understanding are breaking down, so too are the once neat division between the reproductive technologies'. The possibility of virtuality challenges *both* knowledge *and* belief about the real or the observed world, as we know it.

In Gerhard Richter's series of 103 overpainted photographs entitled *Florence* (1999/2000) (**4, 5, and 6**) he sets up a dialogue on the real that visually depicts a dualistic structure but conceptually refers to manifold reals. In the *Florence* series the foundation layer of photograph represents an 'objective' documenting of the cityscape of Florence, inclusive of its people, architecture and recreational areas such as parks, pavilions and squares. The impression is gained that there is a mechanical, unemotional recording of the urban environment of a city, which, in cultural terms, has always contained a kind of exoticism and mystique, especially due to its artistic lineage and history. This suggestion of a double real, an objective real and a subjective real already evoked in the photograph is repeated in the highly charged, explosive impasto of the



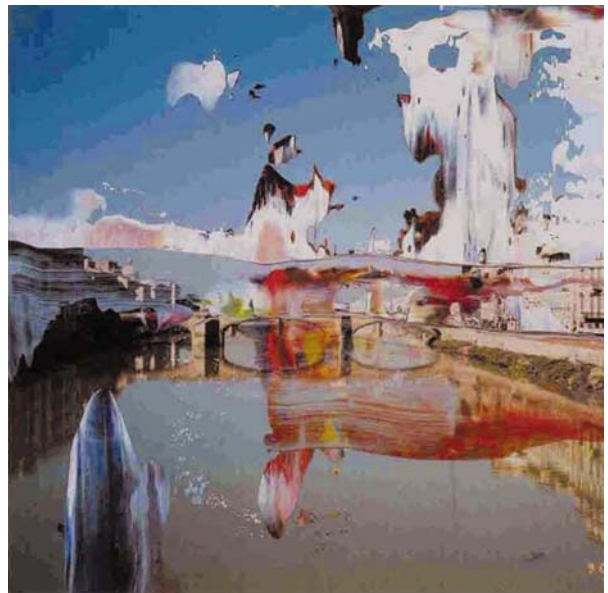
4 Gerhard Richter, 28.12.1999, from *Florence* (1999/2000). Overpainted photographs. (Elger 2001). © Gerhard Richter/Hatje Cantz Verlag.



5 Gerhard Richter, 14.1.2000, from *Florence* (1999/2000). Overpainted photographs. (Elger 2001). © Gerhard Richter/Hatje Cantz Verlag.

overpainting on the photographs, suggesting a human, emotional real that Richter seems to maintain exists over and above the materialistic real of production and manufacture. Elger (2001:s.p.) argues that Richter's photographs show 'the illusion of a naturalistic pictorial space, while the pastose paint itself possesses materiality, and thus reality, though it remains graphically abstract'.

In *Florence*, ambivalences with regard to the boundaries between reals, non-reals and different historical times are set up in the presentation of simultaneous reals. With regard to such fusion, Andreas Huyssen argues that 'the old dichotomy between history and fiction no longer holds in the sense that historical fiction can give us a hold on the world, the real', as well as that 'the old opposition reality/utopia has lost its simple binary structure' (Huyssen 1995:101). He postu-



6 Gerhard Richter, 15.3.2000, from *Florence* (1999/2000). Overpainted photographs. (Elger 2001). © Gerhard Richter/Hatje Cantz Verlag.

lates that the search for the real itself has become utopian (Huyssen 1995:101) and refers to 'Baudrillard's astrophysical imagery (that) betrays his hidden desire: it expresses nothing so much as the desire for the real after the end of television' (Huyssen 1995:90).

Florence, furthermore, becomes a solipsistic comment on human beings' imaginative construction of artifices in the form of objects and structures (a process of exteriorisation) and the symbolic and abstract reinterpretation of these objects and structures (a process of interiorisation). At the same time, in the completion of the full circle of consciousness, the series can be interpreted as a demonstration of Baudrillard's idea that the world is only appearance or artifice, that it exists in the discourse (as visual text) on the real, and that the sensory real assumes its full meaning when it is no longer what it used to be, in other words, when it has been given meaning.

PLEASANT AND UNPLEASANT REALS

The *Florence* series is based on a documentation of the artist in the circle of his friends and family travelling through the city of Florence and plays with the idea of human beings as travellers through the urban landscape, almost as Benjaminian *flâneurs*. The urban artificial environment, a real, has become utopian, a comfortable place. Places of entertainment and shopping malls in the city have become the pleasant dream where the unpleasant, sick or ugly real can be forgotten. Escapism from the real is manifest in high levels of technologisation and virtual avenues of, in particular, entertainment made possible through technology.

This idea is similarly articulated in the film *Pleasantville* (1998) (Ross 1998) (7). The real of

present-day (1998) America is depicted in colour and *Pleasantville*, a fictional Fifties construct of the American Dream, in black and white. In the film the two teenagers (brother and sister) are like Alice through the looking glass, displaced through the television screen from their present (unpleasant) Nineties world, characterised by loneliness, divorce, and a mother with severe personal problems, to the ultimate American Dream world of the Fifties. This America is portrayed as a kind of New Paradise, a utopia destined for greatness and happiness. The idea of America as a future utopia is underpinned by the notion of a scientifically grounded as well as advantageous order of life. Yet everything is so ordered, 'thought-out' or pre-designed and predetermined that the two teenagers become inordinately frustrated and irritated with the 'unnaturalness' and pretentiousness of the perfection, and develop an urgent desire to return to their 'real', 'imperfect' world.

Both reals in *Pleasantville* – the real of the Nineties and the exaggerated artificial real of the American Fifties – are unpleasant con-



7 *Pleasantville* (1998). Still from the film written and directed by Gary Ross. Edited by William Goldenburg. (A New Line Cinema Production.)

structions. Both become mutations of the real, rendered in this film as divided and dualistic. The historical real of the Fifties becomes a simulacrum, that is, an ideological, utopian real constructed according to the Baudrillardian model of a real without author or origin. Baudrillard's theory of simulation flattens the difference between the 'real' and the 'imaginary' in the sense that it purports two realities, the actual and the virtual, that are not very different in the end. Thus there is substitution and mutation rather than simulation.

In both reals the experienced real becomes untenable and unpleasant, and in both there is a desire for the other. In many utopian constructs there is the nagging realisation that the imagined construct is only a pipedream, or, as depicted in *Pleasantville*, so perfect that it becomes unreal and is therefore often treated with distrust. Although the two realities are clearly divided, a constant flux of moving in and out of realities is suggested, thus making an existential postulation about the persistence of the paradise myth: that people constantly desire alternatives, reals or novelties.

CLOSING

In the new language of digital communication, illusions are created by means of the computer and various software programmes. However, as argued previously, fiction and fantasy have always been part of art and the notion of an alternative reality is not a new idea. When the lifelike artificial environments that are being created by computers are considered, such new reals can easily be misunderstood as mere replications of nature or as pure instrumentality (Negrotti 1999:102).

The naturalistic and illusionistic format of twentieth-century alternative reality constructs (without ignoring the role of technology in this) has minimised the distance between the visual text and the recipient, and the impact and influence of fictional constructs is therefore much more significant. Cyberspace remains an endless intertextualising of the real and the non-real, as well as of the past, the present and the future. Therefore, the boundaries between the truth claims of the sensory real and the non-real made possible through technology can be questioned, since a naturalistic mode of representation enforces the oscillation between the real and the virtual.

Within the context of the twentieth century, there has been a return to naturalism in modes of representation, as well as in the reference to the real of manufacture and machine culture which has been absorbed by the domain of visual culture. A new realism in renderings of the human condition has emerged in visual representations, uncovering its dimensions to the fullest, from nauseating banality to terrifying mortality. In the late twentieth century in particular, a radically virtual world has come into existence, a world premised in technology and novelty, and assembled of many reals.

These technoreals could be interpreted as satisfying a desire for escape, but also for paradisiacal 'instant plenty'. However, all forms of non-real construction, including virtuality, cyberspace and other artifices, only obtain relevance and validity in the measurement against the real. Therefore, although the sophistication in technology available to artists and creative directors has manifested in depictions entailing a blurring of the boundaries between various kinds of reals, the real, the artificial and the virtual remain folded in

one another and premised in the experience of, and the reference to, the real.

NOTES

- 1 I use the term *real* (without the article 'the') to refer to any kind of constructed 'real'. Such a 'real' is a construct that has predetermined meaning and can even include a 'real' that is the product of delusion. I use the term *the real* to refer to the sensory, observed world, but foremost in the sense of a construction, that is, of 'a real' or a world as a subjective and relative construction. *The real* is used instead of the traditional term *reality*. When I distinguish between the *real* and the *virtual*, I mean a distinction between the sensory real (although subjective) and an imagined real, mainly articulated through technological means. The *non-real* indicates a reality construction other than the real.
- 2 I interpret *naturalism* in a very broad sense as a process of the imitation of the observed world, which currently manifests in photographic renderings, photo-based artworks and video art, but also in the context of using physical ('found') materials and manufactured objects in artmaking.
- 3 René Magritte, *Time Transfixed* (1939). Oil on canvas, 147 × 98 cm. Collection: Chicago (Illinois), The Art Institute of Chicago. Source: Ruhrberg *et al.* 2000:146.
- 4 The journalist and science fiction writer, William Gibson, coined the concept of *cyberspace* in his novel, *Neuromancer* (1986). The word *cyber*, derived from the Greek *kybernan* which means 'steer' and freely translates as 'into the space of the future', has since developed into the signal word for anything online and digital.
- 5 The Platonic view of Eros can be traced in *Symposium*, from Plato's mature period of 385 to 379 B.C. (Plato 1961, Trend 2001, Taylor 1960). In Eryximachus's speech, the cosmic significance of Eros is insisted upon and the body is presented as

a composite of opposites that demonstrate a need or desire to be combined or supplemented by 'the other' (Taylor 1960:218). Heim (2001:73) refers to the explanation by Diotima, the priestess of love, to Socrates that Eros is essentially a drive to extend the finite, mortal being. In this sense Eros is nothing more than a reflection of the 'psyche (that) longs to perpetuate itself and to conceive offspring, and this it can do, in a transposed sense, by conceiving ideas and nurturing awareness in the minds of others as well as our own' (Heim 2001:73).

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