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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS Technology and Creativity At the Beginning of the Next Millenium CURATORIAL STATEMENT

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Through the Looking Glass is an exhibition of exploration. In an age of emergent digital technologies like wireless networks and the Internet, our monitors and information devices are set before us like analogues of Carroll's mirror, beckoning us to explore the world on the other side. And, once inside, will we be confronted with a phantasmagorical land of wonders, or a terrain we never expected, such as the Brothers Wachowski's film, *The Matrix*. In looking at the landscape of technological art, TTLG attempts to explore the global digital scene, examine its questions of engagement and access, and capture a snapshot of the digital arts at the turn of the third millennium. When assembling this exhibition, I considered these issues in regards to a focus on personal, local, and global perspectives. In this way, TTLG is much like a fractal in which we can continuously burrow deeper into the rabbit hole. The surroundings may look similar, but something just a little 'different' turns up just around the corner.

When TTLG was first proposed, it was merely a two-man show of digital print. In discussing the possibilities with the art center's staff, it seemed to me that the potential for a much more encompassing show of work was at hand and the call for works went out on the international scene through the Internet. The response was overwhelming, as over 200 artists submitted works to the exhibit. Even at the point of the call for works, TTLG was envisioned as much more tightly focused show. But, in considering the theme as framed by the show's title, it seemed fitting that as the Internet has expanded at near-geometric rates, the criteria for the show should expand as well. An exhibition of diverse works, a tour of the world's static, electronic, and critical work on the digital medium; TTLG is atrip through the digital domain to examine how many artists are traversing it themselves in theory and practice.

Although there have been exhibitions including various forms of electronic art in Northeast Ohio in the past few years, and even a couple which have focused on the digital medium, none have attempted to address the physical, virtual and textual investigations of electronic art in such a broad scope. In so doing, TTLG also creates a media resource for visitors interested in a focused snapshot of digital art practice, and in this way I am very pleased in the way the show has shaped itself.

From a global perspective, TTLG probes the question as to whether the World Wide Net is truly worldwide. How deep has the globe been saturated by digital technology? Where are artists most engaged with technological art? What are the issues of politics, access, and language that limit the

McLuhanist vision of one world under the Net? Well, this is an article unto itself, but it was not surprising that language, politics, and socioeconomic factors limited the response I received from the Middle East, South America, Asia, and especially Africa. There is a certain myopia that technology places upon the First World that English is the lingua franca, and that the world itself by default should have universal access to the Internet at the year 2000. As revealed by the entries received, such is not the case, but certain areas, like Eastern Europe, were startling in the vibrant nature of their involvement in the digital arts.

This mix of global scope with localized involvement shaped some of my criteria for inclusion within the exhibition. For example, some of the work from Japan and Eastern Europe surprised me in its diversity in thought if not technique, challenged me to rethink my own views as to what constitutes art in regards to technology, especially the Internet. So, in response to this personal experience of reviewing these works, I once again broadened my criteria. This widening of criteria was done so that the visitor to this site (and the gallery), can consider the cultural matrix which created some of these works and contemplate how these issues of locality construct the basis of art, both traditional and electronic.

The practice of digital art, whether in the exploding area of Internet art or in areas of print, video, installation, or other genres, fills me with a sense of excitement and foreboding when considering the narratives of commerce, technological determinism/elitism, and acceptance (of the genre). The press release mentioned that Internet art is one of the new 'hot' areas of collecting, but are we not back to Warhol in its reproducibility? Also, in the highly capitalistic era of the turn of the millennium, we are confronted with the materialist issues of digital art and the funding for an ephemeral medium. Perhaps these models of funding are being rendered obsolete as technology is rendering itself obsolete every year, and maybe genres like Internet art are more like performance than painting, but this too is a subject for another essay.

The acceptance of any technology over a period of time gradually assures its ubiquity. The fact that electricity has been a commodity for slightly more of a century does not erase the assumption by many that since it has been part of our lives since birth, it has always been here. The same will probably become true of the computer, as there are already two generations that have not known a world without them. However, I wonder about the issues of control and expression that such a process might evoke. For example, will Internet art always be limited to Netscape and Microsoft browsers, should electronic art center on the computer, and is technological art always electronic in nature? We are in danger as curators, artists, and patrons of making these blanket assumptions as Western Society forges on into the Digital Age, and to do so would sadly limit our possibility for communication and expression. But, as virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier once said, "The

mindset that wins is usually the one with the highest 'coolness' factor", It will be interesting to see what we will consider 'cool', and who might define those cultural standards for us.

Through the Looking Glass, for me, is an exciting and sobering show. It showcases a wide spectrum of work in a dizzying array of media. TTLG is heartening in that it shows the burgeoning field of electronic art as a rich field of artistic inquiry that is only in its adolescence, and has far to go. However, it also shows the myopia of technology as it often fails to consider cultures outside the reach of the wires. So, in many respects, TTLG is the rabbit hole that begs for your entry. But it also asks you to question who owns the dirt the hole burrows into, how deep the hole actually goes, and who is allowed to go down the hole itself. It calls us to question the role of technology itself in the arts, and whether technology is only a reflection of the human condition, a glass through which we peer darkly at ourselves.

The glass is before you, will you enter?

Patrick Lichty, March 2000