

Enabling the Disabled Voice:  
Issues of Disability in New Media Arts.  
By Patrick Lichty

In the technological arts, there have been recent initiatives such as the ISEA Virtual Africa project[1], where the primary goal is to foster greater diversity in the larger cultural discussion. Although projects such as this have created significant steps towards inclusion of a wider base of colleagues in the practice of new media art, I find that many diversity programs on the institutional level tend to focus largely on gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and race. Concerns related to disability seem to have less prevalence in contrast to these other initiatives, although they are not altogether absent. When television advertisements allude to the inclusiveness of online communities and the Internet, it seemed curious why there was not a greater representation of disabled artists online as such? Also in question are the representational practices that the disabled person would use in constructing their sense of identity as part of this demographic. In that my examination of disability and technological art is in its early stages, such topics appear as excellent starting points for inquiry.

In taking into account the role of the disabled in technological art, Paul Virilio's essay, *The Third Interval* [2] comes to mind. He writes of the convergence of cultural similarities between the technologically accelerated person and the computerized person with disabilities. According to Virilio, as we become subject to longer spans of computer access, the body is immobilized, as physical mobility becomes irrelevant. As the networked disabled get access to networked communications systems, their mode of functioning becomes similar, as both place their emphasis in cyberspatial mobility. Has the notion of disability become transparent within society as larger numbers of people gain access to Internet technologies? In order to consider this question, we need to address the question of access and the disabled.

Economic pressures frequently prevent the disabled individual from gaining access to the Internet. Although in some Western countries, disabled individuals may be eligible for assistance in obtaining computer equipment, even relatively inexpensive access charges can be problematic to those whose disposable incomes are frequently under ten to twenty percent of their monthly amount [3]. This is compounded further by the fact that many creative computer programs and peripherals are not covered under governmental disability programs, and are simply beyond the economic reach of the disabled. Perhaps one solution is that there are numbers of freeware Web authoring and media creation packages available on the Internet to allow creative expression in the areas of net.art and digital imaging. However, this also presupposes a certain level of facility with the equipment itself. This presents challenges relating to the actual act of interfacing with the disabled person.

There are physical obstacles to overcome for the disabled new media artist. Assuming that these are overcome to one extent or another, what are the representational issues of the disabled individual on the conceptual level? This idea can be contrasted with others by artists who have developed works based on social stereotypes, such as Gomez-Pena and Silfuentes, who have created sites such as the Temple of Confessions [4]. In the Temple, visitors confess their cultural 'sins' relating to their prejudices and preconceptions of cultural otherness. 'Confessions' addresses Latino and Chicano topics, but this author has, as yet, to see interactive sites that confront matters of disabled identity.

The traditional perception of the disabled person is that of those with impairments in mobility, as depicted by the international symbol for the handicapped; the person in the wheelchair. Although this symbol creates an easily identifiable metaphor for this demographic, it represents only a fraction of the entire population. Such a heterogeneous group can be difficult to define under any one classification. For example, many disabled individuals and artists have very different interfacing needs. These include amputees, the perceptually disabled (blindness, deafness), as well as those with mental impairments or disorders. Not only can these limitations impair the manipulation of the tools required for the creation of new media art, they also may alter learning curves for the gaining of expertise with software, etc. However, as an inclusive attitude in the arts does not imply equality as instilling similar amounts of disciplinary virtuosity in all people. A discussion of the disabled in new media arts must limit itself to those who first have a calling to the arts and the requisite creative desire, and to addressing those interfacing issues for those who do wish a creative voice in the emergent digital technologies.

Although my research in the matter of disabled identity in new media art is ongoing, a majority of responses that I have had from disabled artists relate to the social stigmas that are ascribed to them. An example of this is that of the association of the disabled artist with the state workhouse craft shop. This is understandable, as a professional colleague possessing a syndrome with symptoms similar to those of Cerebral Palsy was asked if he would speak English in conversation. Therefore, we can reference back to Virilio that in many cases the disabled artist chooses to pass in online culture. This agrees with Goffman's work on virtual identity and stigma [5], as the individual, when given the choice between the stigmatized identity and that of a virtual one that passes in societal interactions, frequently chooses to mainstream themselves. This is problematic in regards to advocacy for handicapped demographics, as in the act of 'passing', the disabled individual diminishes the visibility of their social group, often re-marginalizing their cultural issues.

As a cultural director of a foundation that seeks to advocate the rights of, and for the alteration of perceptions of the mainstream toward the disabled individual, the place within the emerging digital art world that the artist will take is of great

interest to me. There are some excellent groups that are working with artists and the disabled to explore the creative potential of the technological arts, such as Lighthouse Brighton[6], and Renga-Sense Of Touch[7]. However, it is my belief that disabled culture is, by and large, is not being addressed in many art genres, and in digital art in particular. These issues could be addressed through installation works, programs for access, and curated exhibits that center around the technologically-(re)enabled artist.

Enabling the voice of the disabled artist has obstacles stemming from socioeconomic, access, visibility, social stigma, and educational sources. Also, many artists of this group who do work in the digital arts distance themselves by eliding the issues of their own disability through the adoption of Turkle-esque virtual personae. It is surprising that even though there are a number of artists online who use technological media that few feel that such personal experiences are not germane to their work. However, in considering the role of the disabled in the furthering of a more diverse environment for the technological arts, there is a need for a larger dialogue than is already extant. And it is my hope that this brief discussion will pose questions that serve to open discussion of the role that the disabled artist plays in the larger cultural milieu.

#### References/Notes:

- [1] ISEA Virtual Africa Project, <http://www.isea.qc.ca/welcome.html>
- [2] Virilio, Paul. *The Third Interval*, from *ReThinking Technology*, 1993, ed. Verena A. Conley, Univ. of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN USA
- [3] Conversation with M. Cohn, CEO of Promote Awareness, a disabilities advocacy foundation, <http://www.promoteawareness.com>
- [4] Pena/Silfuentes, *Temple of Confessions*, <http://www.powerhousebooks.com/temple/temple.html>
- [5]. Goffman, Erving, *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. pp.10, 1963 Penguin. Harmondsworth, Middlesex
- [6] Lighthouse Brighton, <http://www.lighthouse.org.uk/>
- [7] Renga Project. *Sense of Touch*, 1998, Japanese collaborative, <http://www.renga.com>