

World Skin

In 1997, in an exhibit in the Ars Electronica center in Linz, Jean-Baptiste Barriere and Maurice Benayoun created *World Skin: A Photographic Safari in the Land of War* in a CAVE, a projection system that can surround the viewer with an immersive virtual reality in three dimensions, such as the one in the Applied Mathematics building at Brown University. Barriere and Benayoun created a mock warscape—a landscape of destruction complete with tanks, fallen soldiers, squads of armed men, and debris that the participant can walk through. The landscape is composed of an “arrangement of photographs and news pictures from different zones and theaters of war [which] depicts a universe filled with mute violence” (Benayoun 1). The participant is armed with a mock camera that is connected to the exhibit, with which he can take pictures of any part of the landscape. But as the participant takes a picture of something, the subject of the picture disappears, leaving just the blank shape of the object without any graphic skin. This image which is removed from the virtual landscape of the art is then printed out on a printer outside of the exhibit, and the participant can pick up a paper with all the pictures he or she took over the course of his or her interaction with the piece.

In this paper, I will argue that *World Skin* is set up as an artistic experience which allows the viewer to distance himself from the suffering depicted through photography. The participant needs this distance in order to position himself in relation to the images that he is immersed in, to create a space in which the chaos of the piece (and the chaos of war) can be organized, where the emotional reaction

to the violence depicted is anesthetized and distanced. I will argue that this is allows us to experience and understand the process with which we have anesthetized ourselves to images of violence in every-day media.

This piece speaks against the mass desensitization to violence and suffering that has occurred in the age of the lens. Before photography, images of violence did not pervade people's conscious existence. Extreme violence was regrettable and distant, until the victim was you or someone near you, and then it was terrible and foreign. This is much different today, when we pay \$9.50 to see contrived explosions and death, and images of violence stream through our TV twenty-four hours a day. Many of these images are presented to us as cold reality—we get our fix of violence from CNN and Fox News. And, as we saw in the buildup and coverage of the recent war in Iraq, these images are now engineered reinforce the necessity of war; the government now gets the final say of what pictures of war we see, and TV news is complicit in manufacturing consent for the government to fight its wars. Thus, we are shown violence endlessly, but the context we see it in constantly reminds us that it is a good thing, that it is worth the price of the movie ticket or the many billions the government spends on war. This is a system of manufacturing consent through images. It relies on the proliferation of violent images; we must be immersed in violence in order to give our consent to its perpetration. If we are used to paying for the right to see violent images as commodities in movies, we are more likely to accept the real violence perpetrated by our government in foreign countries.

Kevin Robins, in his book *Into the Image*, argues that the audience that consumes these violent images (such as the ones that form the world in *World Skin*), is active in defending itself against shocking, violent stimuli. The images that we expose ourselves to in movies and on TV news should produce both physical and mental shock. Yet, we are able to continue consuming these images without going insane. According to Robins, this is because we seek violent images, but while we are consuming these images we are also active in anaesthetizing ourselves to reduce the shock, or in distracting ourselves through flooding our senses, which drowns out the real pain of the image. We are able to do this because the violent images that are produced on the screen are presented in a controlled, structured, mediated environment which we can comprehend and dismiss easily. We do this through technology—it is technology that mediates between the human senses and the shocks of modern existence and violence. Giorgio Agamben, quoted in Robins, argues that the modern world is characterized by the

expropriation of experience and the subsequent imposition of a form of experience as controlled and manipulated as a laboratory maze for rats. Standing face to face with one of the great wonders of the world, the overwhelming majority of people have no wish to experience it, preferring instead that the camera should. (Robins 113).

This touristic attitude is what allows us to consume and dismiss images of violence and suffering. We depend on other people's cameras to allow us to experience far-off misery. We seek the knowledge of this far-off suffering because of the human desire to know what happens in the world around us, and, for the liberal-minded,

so that we can manufacture a sense of empathy or indignation. But these experiences are always controlled and mediated by technology to the point where it is easy for us to walk away from the experience.

World Skin allows the participant to engage in these ideas through placing him in the position of the mediator—he is the photographer who transports the images out of the exhibit and can show his friends what the exhibit is like, in a miniature, more manageable form. It allows the participant to use photography to transport objects into images, making them abstract and less immediate. The photograph distances experiences, places it under a lens and allows it to exist in odd contexts. I have to teach myself to believe in realities that only another's lens can bring into my reality. I have to teach myself that an image is real even though it doesn't have an aura, and though that it is shown to me in a radically different context than it was taken in. And the photographer must constantly place himself in the perspective of the viewer of the photograph in order to frame pictures that will be comprehensible in another context. Thus, he is constantly divorced from the immediate experience of being in a virtual war-scape; he is constantly allowing his mind to wander back to the outside of the exhibit, to his friends waiting to see what he comes out of the exhibit to show them.

The experience of photography distances the photographer from the external reality that he is photographing. We can go back to the roots of photography to understand the position of the subject in relation to the reality being photographed in order to relate this to the position of the participant in *World Skin*. The camera

obscura was the earliest form of photography—it allowed light to be transformed into an image without being transferred onto photo-sensitive paper. It is basically a big black box with a little pinhole through which light shines through to project an image of the outside world onto the back of the box. Jonathan Crary speaks about the relation of the subject and object in a Camera Obscura:

On one hand, the observer is disjunct from the pure operation of the device and there is a disembodied witness to a mechanical and transcendental representation of the objectivity of the world. On the other hand, however, his or her presence in the camera implies a spatial and temporal simultaneity of human subjectivity and objective apparatus. Thus the spectator is more free-floating inhabitant of the darkness, a marginal supplementary presence independent of the machinery of representation. As Foucault demonstrated in his analysis of Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, it is a question of a subject incapable of self-representation as both subject and object. The camera obscura *a priori* prevents the observer from seeing his or her position as part of the representation. The body is then a problem the camera could never solve except by marginalizing it into a phantom in order to establish a space of reason. (Crary 41)

Like the camera obscura, the CAVE isolates the viewer, and disembodies him. And, like the camera obscura, the participant is disjunct from the operation of the device, and is there only to witness a new representation of the world (if *World Skin's* battle-scape actually is supposed to recreate a real war zone). He cannot fix himself in a single position of observer; the CAVE prevents the observer from seeing his or her position as part of the representation—the observer is constantly in the physical center of the representation, but the virtual space created by the CAVE has no meaningful center, it is an infinite three dimensional space with an arbitrary origin. However, unlike the camera obscura, he is not a free-floating inhabitant of the darkness, divorced from the image, but a free-floating inhabitant of the image

itself. He can choose to walk on the ground of a virtual world like the one created in *World Skin*, but he can also choose to float above it, and so he is constantly disembodied, drifting through a representation. Now, the problem of the body that Crary discusses is seen in inverse. Crary claims that the viewer must marginalize the body in order to establish a space of reason. However, since the body is immersed in the image in the CAVE, the viewer must marginalize the image in order to comprehend his relation to it—he must constantly remind himself that the world he is in is virtual, a phantom, in order to establish a space of reason and in order for him to make artistic meaning of it. And so, the participant of a virtual world walks through it and constantly pushes it away from him with the butt of a camera, constantly distancing it, turning it into a commodity.

Mock-photography is the perfect instrument for *World Skin* to give the participant to distance himself from the experience of the piece, because photography is the artistic medium of death and distance. It has traditionally been viewed as the medium of death because it always brings the past into the present—it records what was in front of the lens. Thus, the image becomes alienated temporally from its original context, giving the participant more distance between himself and the experience, and mirroring the experience of death and photography that we engage with every day:

All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt. (Sontag 1973: 15 qtd in Mirzoeff 73)

Photography is the medium of death because it brings the past into the present—every picture is, by definition, a record of what was in front of the lens, but is in all probability, gone or dead now. The photograph records and reminds us of the past. The very fact that it was photographed reminds us of the object's mortality. Thus, as Sontag says, 'all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.' This is emphasized in *World Skin* by the subject matter of the pictures that are produced—death and violence—and by the fact that the subject of a picture is blacked out once it has been photographed. The participant is forced to walk through the experience, killing it more profoundly than a gun would, actually depriving it of existence. "Precisely by slicing this moment and freezing it," the participant changes the state of the piece, and thus changes its place in time, helps it along in its relentless march toward a virtual world inhabited only by silhouettes, by holes where something ought to exist. Thus, through photography, the participant distances himself from the spectacle of suffering that the virtual environment of the CAVE creates. He has succeeded in separating the image from his body, in pushing the image away from his immediate experience, so that he can create a 'space of reason,' as Crary puts it.

One other way in which photography allows the participant to create a space of reason is that it allows the participant to own the image of the suffering that he is trying to distance himself from. As Benayoun says in their artist's statement:

Acquisition, evaluation and understanding of the world constitute a process of capturing it. Capturing means making something one's own; and once it

is in one's possession, that thing can be taken by another....In the case of a material storage medium, "taking" something is the equivalent of taking it with you. Photography captures the light reflected by the world. It constitutes an individual process of capturing and rearranging. (2)

World Skin allows the participant to own the images that he is confronted with, as if they were commodities that could be traded on the market. This enables him to organize and rearrange the shocking information that is being presented, and it allows him to exert power over that information. It allows him to have the same experience that he has when he walks into a shopping mall; he can choose what parts of the experience he wants to take with him out of the exhibit, what parts he wants to own for himself. Thus, the exhibit is comprehensible within the logic of the consumer, and we are very used to making decisions based on what we want to own. This provides a framework for the participant to engage with the piece in a comprehensible way. This is how we are trained to make sense out of our experiences and emotions—to assert our ownership and control over them. This also allows the participant to distance the images from himself and create 'a space of reason.'

However, the participant who is unfamiliar with the technology used in the piece will already be distant from the experience and the message presented by the piece. The awe of a machine like the CAVE will often be the star of any exhibit or installation of it. The CAVE creates a 3-D visual image right in front of one's face, which one knows is incorporeal, but which looks real anyway. This is an overwhelming spectacle in itself, and the first-time participant will need to

obsessively remind himself that he can put his arm through the tank in front of him. This piece recognizes this reality of the visual spectacle, and incorporates it into the exhibit itself. In some cases, the participant will be so excited about the spectacle of the new technology that during the experience, they will be constantly trying to figure out how they will articulate the experience and the technology of the CAVE to their friends. In *World Skin*, they even have a picture that they can show their friends. Art has to take a backseat to the newness of the technology, it relies on the technology to be avant-garde, and this exhibit allows that awe that most electronic art tries to suppress to flourish.

This awe which the first-time participant feels when he experiences the cave is the awe of the 'technological sublime.' The sublime is the awe that mankind feels when confronted with something that defies his imagination's limits. For Kant, the sublime was best seen in the infinite, omnipotent nature. However, according to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay in his article, *The Posthuman Sublime*, in the 19th century, the sublime came to mean the subjugation of nature under the control of mankind. And now, the sublime of the CAVE is the posthuman technosublime, where we are awed by seemingly artificial intelligence, by machines which can create virtual worlds. We no longer measure the technosublime in relation to its subjugation of nature, but as a new artificial immanence that creates and defines itself. The participant of any CAVE piece is overwhelmed by the technological spectacle the CAVE creates. This can distract the participant from the artistic content of the piece.

Benayoun's *World Skin* allows the participant to experience and enjoy the spectacle of the technosublime, but also controls the extent to which this takes away from the artistic experience of the piece. The final act of the piece is to deny the visual spectacle of the technology from the spectator more and more as the participant has more and more fun with the piece. Once they get really in to it, gleefully snapping shots off at every tank and soldier, they rip the visual skin off the world. They create big gaping holes in the virtual reality, and they feel more like an executioner than the soldiers they are taking pictures of—at least a gun allows reality to continue to exist, but the camera in this exhibit forces the participant to kill (virtual) reality, when their enjoyment of the piece comes from their enjoyment of the virtual reality around them. This is apt to the piece, because the participant should not allow himself to enjoy the experience of being confronted by fields of suffering and death. In this way, then, the fact that the skin is ripped off of the visualization is Benayoun's way of keeping the awe of the spectacle in check and keeping the participant grounded in the message of the piece. As soon as the participant begins to 'enjoy' the piece too much, as soon as they get carried away in their picture taking, there is no more virtual world to photograph.

Benayoun's piece depends on the participant pushing the harsh realities of war away from him. He needs to create a space of reason in which he can imagine his relationship to the images he is faced with, and also the technology that he is confronted with in the environment of the CAVE. He uses his role of

'photographer' to do this—through the camera, he is able to escape into the world of images, to manufacture images to show his friends at the end of the exhibit.

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