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South African digital art practice: an exploration of the altermodern

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Appendix 1:

Interview Nathaniel Stern (email)

Email, 10 February 2012

Work: *Given Time* (2010)

Carly Whitaker: This questionnaire is in fulfilment of my (Carly Whitaker) Masters Research Paper titled *"South African Digital Art Practice: An exploration of the Altermodern"*. The Altermodern is a critical theory developed by Nicolas Bourriaud. The theory develops a new frame work for a new modernism which he has observed developing and places it with in a global dynamic. It is a move away from post modernism and post colonialism. He observes the way in which artists inhabit and navigate through the different cultures as traversing in space and time creating a global dialogue. My thesis aims to explore this theory in relation to South African digital art by providing an adequate framework for critical engagement and future development of the field.

This questionnaire aims to explore the artist's level of engagement conceptually within a global context and in relation to the digital medium by looking at their practice, process and work.

GENERAL

This section is focused towards a general understanding of how the artist perceives their own global context in relation to a South African one and in relation to the medium.

1. **Carly Whitaker:** Having been based in South Africa, you have been identified by yourself and the press as a South African artist concerned with digital media, how do you understand your practice and how it is received in a global context?

Nathaniel Stern: Joburg and New York are the two places I call home, that I know best, that I tend to consider most when critically examining my own work and practice. It's important for me to be in dialog with these places, among others, as part of my research and making. Given that new media communities tend to be international, and more US- and European-based, discussions of origin are rare, though living quarters are a little less so. Unless it pertains to the story the press is writing ("he spent 6 years in South Africa working on…"), I'm usually identified by others by the place I currently live: right now Milwaukee. But it was Ireland before that… When I first got to South Africa, I was labelled a New York artist, but that quickly melted away once I engaged the public personally.

2. **CW:** Do you perceive yourself as a global artist? How and Why?

NS: I'm not sure what you mean by global artist. I'm certainly internationally exhibited, and like to travel and experience and practice new things, but I always felt like calling oneself a "citizen of the world" was a bit presumptuous. I try to engage with various peoples and conditions, through research and provocation (etc), but it's most often targeted for deeper, rather than broader, impact, and so I consider my audiences contextually – sometimes that's geographic, other times it's a conceptual or aesthetic frame, etc.

3. **CW:** Do conceptually situate your work in a South African context?

NS: Often I do, yes. But I also bear in mind that much of the South African art-appreciating public is quite aware of global art history and international contemporary art, and their place within it. And so my references tend to incorporate both of these things. Giverny of the Midwest is a case in point: it references both the Impressionists in Europe and current home in the US, but began as a series through discussions and practices in South Africa, and so is very much understood within and beyond that frame.

4. **CW:** Has relocating yourself and your artistic practice affected the way in which you view your global positioning?

NS: Yes, absolutely. Everywhere I live and everyone I work with – especially since my practice is so collaborative – has affected my thinking, making, and dialog (exhibiting, talks, etc), and how I approach them.

5. **Carly Whitaker:** Does the use of the digital as a medium or a tool for your artworks influence your understanding of a global context?

NS: I understand this question from the trajectory of Manovich, then Paul, but want push this further out from the technology, and more towards the cultural layer of what technology affords once we forget it is there: from object to post-object and then to *situation*, from computer to interface and then to our embodied styles of *relation* within that situation. Is paint a medium or a tool? Really, it's a material with its own agencies, both as matter and as abstraction, and we work with it as tool, as medium, as matter and as symbol – just as it works and with around us in surprising ways. I tend to think of my work

with technology in the same way as of late – in many ways due to South African influences - and it's really changed my work in what I think are positive ways.

6. **CW:** Does the medium enable you to participate in a global dialogue or context?

NS: This is a harder question. The community of digital artists is more dispersed, so I suppose it's more global, but it's not any larger – is in fact smaller – so I wouldn't value this as either positive or negative. On the other hand, my work with technology to *distribute* and *dialog* about my work, which I suppose is part *of* the work, has certainly afforded me a much larger audience.

7. **CW:** Do you perceive South Africa as being part of a networked global culture? How?

NS: I think this question is a bit bigger than it needs to be. There are individuals and groups who take the time to invest in global discourses, whether as individuals or groups, or by bringing South Africans and South African artists and artworks to the fore. Those that do, often succeed. The first wave of post-Apartheid political art was hugely successful, and now there is a second wave of much more commercialized political art of a very specific type on the global scene. While I have reservations about international buyers deciding what's "good," and thus sometimes stifling other forms in South Africa, the general interest in the work is good, and eventually leads to more growth in the scene, and thus all forms.

WORK DESCRIPTION

This section addresses specifically the engagement with the digital and the work being discussed. It explores the technical process and engagement with the work.

Given Time is based on Second Life positions two virtual lovers, avatars opposite each other in what appears to be the same world, yet they are unable to reach other. There is a tension which is created between the unsaid dialogue which occurs between them. The screening of this scenario in real time with views of how each other would vie the other in the virtual reality, time and space become immaterial as they are transferred into our reality. The immortal nature of the two avatars when translated into our physical reality creates an interesting dialogue and dynamic. The mapping of our physical time is placed against their ephemeral time and space.

8. **CW:** Can you tell me a bit about **Given Time** and your process behind it?

NS: *Given Time* was mostly influenced by two works. First, Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, and second, Derrida's book *Given Time*. The former sees two identical battery operated clocks set to the same time, where they eventually fall out of sync, one dies and then the other. It was made the day Gonzalez-Torres found out his partner was HIV positive - a devastating revelation for viewers - and points to time, flesh and mortality. Derrida's book asks, among other things, what is a true gift? He poses that only when we have nothing to give - not time, not money, not bodies, nothing - can we truly give of ourselves. I reference the reciprocity and love of Gonzalez-Torres' work, but do so from Second Life as a conceptual space that has no time, no space, and no bodies. All the lovers can give is each other, and their reciprocal being-with.

9. **CW:** Can you define the role of Second Life in the piece (as a medium)?

NS: I think of Second Life as more of a material than a medium or tool – but as above, I tend to do this with all technologies, and I don’t think of any of the terms as

exclusive of the others. Although I don't spend much time in SL as a resident, for installations or machinia works, I think of it as quite paradoxical and thus intensified. It is a space made up entirely of relations between people, and people and technology, and we "see" each other as bodies in space. While Second Life could not exist without us and our bodies, without the matter of hardware and electronics and telecommunications and more, we experience it only as a window into a "virtual" world – both in the everyday sense of "virtual" (Internet) and philosophical virtuality, as in potential. It is far from the perfect medium for most art, but was an obvious choice for *Given Time*, once I decided on how the actors needed to perform.

10. **CW:** How does the exhibiting of the work alter the way in which it's manifested and received?

NS: I actually tended to think of the piece as highly conceptual and needing lots of explanation, despite its simplicity. But, like Gonzales Torres' work, despite it having depth, etc, most people responded viscerally with little explanation. It's a highly charged space for those that attune themselves to it. Yes, it was sometimes dismissed because of an unusual aesthetic or by technology naysayers, but mostly people had a fairly profound experience.

11. **CW:** What do the avatars do when **Given Time** is not being exhibited?

NS: Although I do not use monitors or projectors, the two computers for the lovers are permanently logged in, in my studio.

CONCEPTS and CONTEXT

This section explores the conceptual development of the work and the outcome of it in relation to the digital medium. It also looks at the global nature of the form in relation to the work and practice.

In **Given Time** concept such as **mapping, displacement, network, dynamic narratives, journeys and translation** are dealt with and emerge.

12. **CW:** Do you think that these concepts

    - **Mapping**
    - **Displacement**
    - **Network**
    - **Dynamic**
    - **Narratives**
    - **Journeys**
    - **Translation**

    which emerge are linked to your being a South African artist (well having such a close association to the country), the medium ,your global positioning all of them?

    NS: Surely these have influenced the work. Others that come to mind are generosity, reciprocity, personal politics, partnering and parenthood – all a part of my South African experience.

13. **CW:** Does the use of the digital as a medium or a tool for your artworks affect your concept? How and why?

    NS: I think I answered this question already.

14. **CW:** Does this relate to the global nature and characteristic of the medium? Why?

    NS: I think I answered this question already.

The digital as a medium is connected to the global dynamic, therefore working with this medium reflects this. I am interested in whether or not the artist makes this part of their process and intended outcomes.

15. **CW:** The medium is part of your process, for you does the work of art exist in the result and the outcome when you finally show your work (exhibiting) or does it exist in the process of creating, in the interaction that the medium allows for(within Second Life)?

    NS: I don't think of this as quite this binary. I don't have an image in my head of what the work will look like before I make it – the materials help shape the work. But then neither is the work in the "object" or "post-object" – the work that is the work of art happens *with* its viewers. To cite Brian Massumi, the work is an occurrence. This is why I spend a lot of time in the studio, with studio visits, doing viewings to watch and see how people watch and see, and allow that to feed back in to a given piece, and the next one. My practice is a series of questions where each leads to the next, usually after an exhibit.

16. **CW:** The digital medium is a networked medium and global form does your process reflect this, or is simply about the medium and exploring its own potential?

    NS: I'd have a hard time pinning down what my work, or digital art, is "about." I think we'd be better to think on individual pieces *within its category*, rather than trying to define or value it *categorically*. Even within the realm of Internet art, for example, my *Wikipedia*

Art is very different in form, matter, concept, and what it asks, then *hektor.net* or *Given Time*.

17. **CW:** Do you think there is a need to classify or position your work within a global context? Why?

NS: I think it helps in contemporary art to understand that we are all moving along a trajectory, various trajectories, of thinking and making, and to be cognizant of how we speak across global and local art history as well as global and local popular culture, global and local politics, global and local philosophy, global and local personal identities, and more. This is not to say that every artist needs to know and be every-thing, but to acknowledge the conscious and unconscious and affective potential in how we can experience and practice with art, given both its context and its possible decontextualization.

Thank you very much!