The Last Generation

Culturally altered for better or worse, every day we are steps closer to the cyber-fictional world of man/machine. From 20th century analog bulk-mass and “slowness” to early 21st century speed and compactness, this transition hurtles us forward. At some point in the near future the analog world of the 20th century will be a distant memory.

Many of you remember:

There was a day when the phone rang, and was left unanswered if nobody was home. Then came answering machines, which brought the first wave of automation into the home. The LP record and 8-track tape were gradually replaced by smaller cassettes. One day after MTV hit, I walked into a major record store, and seemingly overnight everything in the racks was a sleek (wow!) compact disc, with the old technology overstock in leftover bins...

As the years flew by we witnessed a technological boom...ATM machines cropping up everywhere, satellite television installations in almost every home, and the pc revolution...

A phrase that most often refers to recently outmoded technology, a quick internet search on “The Last Generation” reveals thousands of references to videogaming, holocaust and A-bomb survivors, terminology that indicates an irrepressible change from past knowledge towards an encounter or collision with new ideas and altered forms.

Immanuel Kant set up a distinction between phenomena and noumena—“phenomena” being that which can be experienced, and “noumena” being things that are beyond the possibility of experience and transcend the vehicles of representation. In the phenomenal world we experience something that reaches the senses and clues us in to an added
dimension that leads to heightened perception. Videos, sculptures, and television monitors initially offer the viewer an analog (phenomenal) experience by virtue of their physical presence. Then digital compression takes over the information and a moment of conflation occurs, a seamless balance in the space/time continuum.

Situated on the axis of the phenomena/noumena, these works occupy the space where the raw materials of the analog world and the subtleties of the virtual interact, expand, and contract. The body is represented as a robotic tool that receives commands from an unknown source, coldly executing movements that (strangely) evoke human neuroses (Farrell). / Text references hypertext, physical aberrations of mass produced signage, and the structure of words as thought in constructed form and connotation (Mancuska, Myles) / The propagandistic visual sound-bytes of the media are enlarged to a colossal scale, compounding their power to induce fear and awe (Gonzales) / The retrieval of dreams from the database of the unconscious underscores the encoded narrative of sleep cycles and the search for their meanings (Montaron) / Simply animated characters move with analog-like slowness like our lowest common denominator, the consuming television viewer (Ezawa) / A vortex of complexity layered pop imagery references western philosophers, numerology, cognitive association, and spatial perception, mirroring the brain’s synaptic response to a flood of information and our ability to process it (Kerckhoven) / Eastern mysticism and metaphysical transcendence are evident in the landscape where a person dematerializes. Is this a romantic gesture or a hallucinatory moment in the virtual? (Halpern)

In the above-mentioned works there is a moment of cognition that takes the viewer from the alien to the familiar, a cause and effect within their mechanical analog/digital sleight of hand. As such, “The Last Generation” is for me the equivalent of a transformer of the perceptual. The rich tonality associated with the analog is present, as are the cold, unquantifiable depths of the virtual. A visual blueprint for the exhibition might look like an analog/digital converter where one form transmutes into another and a double take reveals more.

Distancing itself from nostalgia and aware of Modernity’s failed utopia, “The Last Generation” contains nonetheless a sense of the sublime. Not in the 19th-century Romantic sense, but by virtue of an intangible network of associations that push art further into the terrain of physics. As though gazing at a scaffold surrounding an invisible edifice, we experience the duality of nothing and something at the same time.

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1. In layman’s terms: analog is defined as a signal that has a continuously and smoothly varying amplitude or frequency. Digital is signal composed of electrical pulses representing either zero or one. Because digital signals are made up only of binary streams, less information is needed to transmit a message.

2. Nicolas Bourriaud has coined the term “altermodernity” which I interpret as a characterization of 21st century modernity: a modernity which is no longer a linear march forward but rather a revolving door that allows movement in either direction.

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