12-2015

Benjamin Edwards in the Information Age

Leda Cempellin
South Dakota State University

Recommended Citation

Cempellin, Leda. Benjamin Edwards in the Information Age (interview). Juliet Art Magazine no. 175, December 2015-January 2016: 85.

BENJAMIN EDWARDS

IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Interview by LEDA CEMPELLIN
Associate Professor of Art History at South
Dakota State University

Are you idealizing, or rather criticizing the increasing influence of technology in our lives?

For a long time, in the mid- to late Nineties, I always took the position of ambiguity, since it was still forming. We didn't really know what the Internet was going to be. Over the years, as technology advanced and infiltrated into everybody's lives, I see our danger as a society in having a blind faith that technological advances are automatically going to translate into progress as a society. However, if you connect it to the global economy, what's happened with climate change, you see that the virtual world is not this kind of magical existence separated from the physical world, rather they are very interconnected and in ways that we did not necessarily understand as a culture twenty years ago. Technology creates a complex new reality that everybody has to adapt to, it changes our fundamental idea about reality at any given moment. That is my view: not necessarily being overly optimistic or overly pessimistic about technology, rather trying to give a more realistic look at where it's going and what the effects are going to be on us as a society, both good and bad.

When and why did human characters enter your work? Are your avatars meant to be heroes and heroines, or rather common folks? What is the role they play?

In the year 2001 until 2004-2005, I started using 3d modeling. The big change happening when you start working in a virtual space is that it's not two-dimensional any more, rather it is an environment where it's possible to put in there everything you want. Then I reached the point where I needed to move past that: it's not enough to just create a world, you need to know what's going on in that world, how did it got to be the way it is. In 2005-2006, I was looking for whatever 3d models I could scoop up and I was shopping for body parts so I may have the head from *World of Warcraft*, the face from *Second Life*, a foot from the *Sims*, and so on, and I was putting them back together. I remember the first one that I made was kind of shocking to me (laughter): it was this mythical figure, a strange-looking new character. I was fascinated by it, I didn't understand it: this led me to look more and more at mythology, and in particular Joseph Campbell. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, the scene of it is a pre-technological fantasy, a different time, a lost time, a sort of Tolkien kind of fantasy theme. And then you contrast that with the thought that the medium that you are operating in is highly technological, you are using the computer and high-speed Internet. This contradiction is very interesting. So, who these avatars are and what are they doing has been something that I have been working on a lot over the last ten years.

What is the project you are currently working on?

I have been working on an online ongoing project that you can find in my website. It's called the *Abacus*, where the narrative is unfolding. This online format is a way for me to tell the story of how what you will see in a painting came to be, hopefully in a few years from now. It all comes from a simulations program that I wrote about a year ago, which I call *Logos*, using simulation software called NetLogo. My program takes as a starting point a very famous computer game, called *The Game of Life*, inspired by the mathematician John Conway. It's basically a system of cells in two states, either alive (black) or dead (white). There are simple rules to have these cells change from state to state: if a dead cell has three neighbors that are alive, it will become alive by reproduction; if a live cell has more than three neighbors, it will die due to overcrowding, and if it has less than two, it will die, due to under-population. On this very simple idea you can move from state to state, and the design of the black squares will evolve and develop consistent patterns. I extrapolated upon that, so I don't just have black cells, but I have white cells that stand for energy, red cells for food, blue cells for water, and so on.

I see list of instructions and then images. How does it work?

If you click on LOGOS on that side, you will see a translation of the computer code. I went through line by line and I basically wrote in English what that line in code means. The images in the simulation move forward from state to state, so the website shows you everything that happens, numbered from the 0 state, which is the beginning, and by adding a T in front of it, which stands for time, so T_0, T_1, etc. Right now, I am at T_{16}. As you scroll down through all the images, you are going back in time, and the environment changes according to the rules and the actions of the agents within the program. Within this virtual world, there are narratives that start to creep in from state to state. In the most recent entries you are looking at a male and a female; in the future entries, you will see how they will start interacting with the environment, so this is something that will unfold over time.

Our gratitude to Marc Wehby (Kravets Wehby Gallery), for facilitating our contact with Benjamin Edwards and thus making this interview possible.

Benjamin Edwards' website and *Abacus* project:
http://worminthemachine.com/
http://freedomthroughorder.com/

"The Triumph of Democracy" 2007-12, oil on canvas, 84" x 252", ph David Edwards, courtesy of the artist