THE WIG.

Journal of Experimental Scholarship

She dances with robots

by Jean Detheux

(from Socrates to FishArt
and crashing pianos,
a search for meaningful ways to
ground our work, digital, or other)

Abstract: A candid examination of the importance of the world-view the "operator-performers" bring to the Art world, and how they may shape it accordingly. Will the "plumbing" eventually dominate, or does poetry have a chance to survive?

Socrates?
FishArt?
Crashing pianos?

Well, one thing at a time: FishArt is basically what got me to write this paper by way of meeting Tony Brooks, on the web, a few months ago.

We were both responding to some lame animation set "literally" to music, he with pointing to a "FishArt video" on YouTube, I with my usual references to phenomenology "à la Husserl," with inevitable touches of "Merleau-Pontyfications."

My first reaction to Tony's FishArt was one of righteous indignation. "What's with these guys; what are they doing in my world?"

However, I must have been tired. I did not jump to my keyboard as swiftly as I would have when I was younger. I actually looked beneath the first layer of FishArt and discovered some fascinating research, some really meaningful work: ArtAbilitation.

Sometimes, arthritis and old age have their benefits. . .

My discovery of Tony's work, our ensuing conversations, his visit to Montréal last Fall, and my recent trip to Esbjerg, Denmark, (to take part in the DigArt Symposium), have all brought up some issues I would like to examine here but, as Merleau-Ponty would have it, I would like to do so "obliquely."

(Word of caution, this is going to border on being a "subjective rant," and I take full responsibility for that as it is pretty much what this paper is all about.)

So, here goes: why is it that, in academic pursuit, one is so often confronted with the following choices? The first is to follow one's heart and, therefore, to often be subjected to some kind of rejection as in, "this work does not really fit within the definition of…" or, what is much worse,

"this research seems highly subjective…"

The second is to silence one's heart and proceed by way of "habitual research," which guarantees acceptance, even acclaim, but leaves one swimming in very sterile, unappealing waters, waters almost totally devoid of personal content.

Why is it that, so very often, one needs to do "dead work, worshipping dead gods," in order to survive in the "publish or perish" jungle, while one knows there are so many vibrant paths, "paths with a heart," that beg to be explored, that call for our gaze, but which do not readily fit within the well-established "academic categories"?

So many of my (academic) friends, still trying to survive in this or that institution, "trim" their research in order to have it conform to niches that they know are far narrower than what their full exploration could warrant.

And yes, they do so knowingly. They need to do so in order to obtain the funding for research they do not really care about or at least, not fully, always hoping to sneak in some bits of what truly interests them.

It seems to me that, at the root of the above dilemma, is whatever it is we take as our starting ground. We've accepted a definition of "the real" that is so very remote from what it is we know we are living. There is a widening rift between the societal "real," and our personal "truth."

We do know that life is a mystery. We do know that we are a mystery to ourselves. We do know we haven't got a clue where we come from nor where we are going, and yet, we act "as if…"

We act as if "all that" was known, under control, or at least, knowable, "control-able," as, for example, with regard to visual perception. So many people believe that "the eye works like a camera, and that we all see the same thing."

It seems rather obvious to me that starting from the assumption that we "know" (what) "reality" (is), inevitably traps us in that "knowledge." When the "container" of what we are doing is taken for granted, we can hardly reach beyond its confines.

And yet, isn't our very appetite for the "unknown" (or "not-known") that which is fuelling our work, our life?

If so, why are we limiting ourselves to merely rearranging the furniture in a taken-for-granted room? Can't we find it "in us" to question that room (and "the world" it stands in) as well?

Isn't that the very kind of curiosity that got us to do some form of research/creative work in the first place?

At all times, aren't we faced with this choice between normative societal models, and the evidence of our own perception?

What do we contribute of any worth when we dump in yet another take modelled on the same old societally accepted tune?

Wouldn't we be truer, happier and contribute more, if we explored our own unknown, on our terms, rather than continue to pretend, along with so many others, that the emperor's clothes are beautiful?

For decades, I have firmly believed (almost always) that "my unknown" held more "truth" for me than somebody else's "known." I've almost always believed that my purpose in life, for my personal as well as the common good, was to explore and make "it" ("my unknown") visible.

And as strange as this "position" may sound to some, I constantly find out that I am not alone;, so many people around me express the same feelings.

Many years ago I had a very close friend, a brilliant professor of philosophy (José Huertas-Jourda) who used to tell his students to "trust their (your) darkness."

What a remarkable thing to say; what a worthy piece of advice!

We are so keen on bringing light into a darkness we haven't really looked at as darkness.

We have developed a severe societal disease: we can't leave well-enough alone. The moment we look at "something," we want (or feel obligated) to "do something with/to it."

Husserl's "to cater to the appearing as it appears" seems forgotten, and yet…

And yet, isn't it time to rethink our way of going about our work? Aren't we by now sufficiently aware of the limitations we impose on our potential to finally "come to our senses" and demonstrate not just "common-sense" but, more importantly, "proper-sense" (with all due respect to Miguel de Unamuno)?

It is indeed possible to do good and serious work with an attitude that does justice to all that we know about ourselves but too often push aside for fear of being accused of "subjectivity."

If indeed "perception is constitutive" (Merleau-Ponty) means that we are subjective beings, then we cannot take ourselves out of the equation. Attempting to do so is akin to sawing the branch we stand on.

Yet, most people, scientists and artists alike, act as if "the real" were identical for all, and that "our eyes work like a camera and we all see the same thing."

The exchanges we witness most of the time are not based on becoming aware of and sharing "a new point of view on the world" (Merleau-Ponty). Rather, common practices are focused on sharing (relatively) new ways to "do something with/to 'it,'" an "it" we do not (must not?) question.

And yet. . .

If we immediately jump "beyond" that which gives itself to us – as it gives itself – and engage into "the world" with intentions, expectations and all sorts of ideas, aren't we overlooking something extremely fundamental, something that, though it sustains everything we do, is

nevertheless almost always escaping our attention?

In essence, we are not exploring "the real as infinite manifold" (Husserl) but rather, as a finite entity we need, lest we die of boredom, to continuously invent new variations thereof (as in "modify/improve upon").

This assumption, that "the real," as experienced by me, holds nothing worthy of any serious attention leads to attitudes like, "Life is a bitch, and then you die."

Go to any art school and look at how life drawing is taught most of the time: the figure is that which we have to learn to draw, not one's perception of *this figure, this time,* but some kind of generic idea of a figure, "out there," the same for everyone.

This, of course, plays right in the hands of the 3D applications gurus. For example, nothing beats a sure thing that fits in easily and conforms to the x, y and z parameters. Apprentice artists/plumbers are already sold/hooked on that front that makes the rest of the work a lot easier.

However, what if Socrates was right?

What if the primary role of education (and Life?) should indeed be "Know Thyself"?

If so, what are we doing to ourselves if we constantly replace "Thyself" with "plumbing"?

I recently heard a beautiful story: somewhere in Africa, a wealthy man brings his son to the top of the highest hill, and as he shows him the landscape, he says: "Look my son, most of this is yours, and if you work hard, one day all of it will be yours."

A very poor man brings his son to the very same hilltop, and says: "Look!"

Long ago, I was fortunate enough to attend Art school when "Socrates" wasn't yet (again?) a dirty word, and the very idea of "life drawing" was to enter and nurture one's perception of "the real," irrespective of how "different" from an idealized human figure one's drawings might be(come) in the process.

This places me in a rather peculiar position in relation to the digital Art world. Bells and whistles do not talk much to me unless they address the human "side" of things, those "dark and mysterious forces by which we are lived!" (Freud)

This means that events like SIGGRAPH appear to me to be some kind of aberrant Wal-Mart of the digital mind. They bring together the mega-plumbers and other high-priests of technological deception who come equipped with a huge technological plumbing background. They manifest, however, an almost total illiteracy when it comes to being aware of genuine "first-person experience."

For proof of this, take a good look at first-person video games or the vast majority of graphics applications and non-linear video editors. They amply demonstrate the severe alienation of their makers relative to an awareness of their own pre-verbal and "unmediated" experience.

Digital Art is plagued by the plumbers' anal concerns about "how it's done," especially the "what it's done with," instead of opening up to "what it is doing"!

So, when I accepted an invitation to attend the DigArt Symposium in Esbjerg, I expected to find myself in the midst of such people, and yet!

In Esbjerg, I saw a great presentation by Sita Popat and Scott Palmer who showed us some of their research, and much of it was plain remarkable. They showed us how a dancer (Liz) danced with a robot (Zephyrus), and, "dumbing herself down" to the very reduced mobility of that very rudimentary robot (think of a "stick crab on a compressed air diet"), she enriched herself by those reduced possibilities. She brought to the robot movements it could accomplish, but which its own creators (in attendance during the experiment) never imagined and, therefore, never thought it could perform.

I received this exchange between Liz and her robot as a great example of what can be accomplished when artists and scientists work together, on an equal footing, especially if the parameters of "the possible" are left undefined, especially if what is to be explored is just like our "real," an unknown, an "infinite manifold," and catered to as such (this is what the DigArt Symposium made most obvious to me, and what makes me hope it will be repeated).

The way Liz identified with the (reduced for her) mobility of the robot, and became one with it, *while retaining her own frame of reference*, broadened the horizon of possibilities of the robot (via its makers) as well. All that was a demonstration of "how it could and should be done."

Scott Palmer showed us, during the same presentation, how he could create situations in which all involved operators became performers. Indeed, even computer operators could – no, had to – during the events Scott staged, get involved and demonstrate an ability to partake of the improvised dialogue being created between (for example) dancers dancing to the graphics generated by the computer operators-turned-performers.

Improvisation was required at all times from all participants.

However, beyond the really exciting prospects these approaches made manifest, what struck me then was how, once again, and beyond the parameters that sustained the work *while being left undefined*, all the openings were likely "restricted to the imagination/perception of the participants," and that, no matter how great an opening Scott (and Sita) could generate, it would almost inevitably go only as far as the performers were capable of reaching, even with capable help.

Which is really what I want to talk about here, and I'll get to that a little bit later (I'm on an "oblique progression," remember?).

And there's more: I learned that this whole research exercise was actually presented as "undefined" right from the outset, and yet, it did receive funding!

I don't know if this is pointing to a significant difference between the situation of research-funding in the UK and that in North America. I see so many friends here beat their brains trying to come up with language and project descriptions that will satisfy the money bearers ("know where you are going and define what the results will be"), but which have very little to do with

where my friends' hearts really are and with what they really want to do. I would like to know Sita's and Scott's secret grant getting recipe, and pass it on.

But back to perception and how what we do, as artists, is limited by our imagination/perception and that of our viewers.

This is no small potato, especially if, gladly moving along the path traced by Sita and Scott, we see "operators" increasingly become "performers." We therefore need to address the world-view (Weltanschauung) these operators/performers come "with."

And that, quite frankly, is scary!

Let's face it, as I stressed already, most technologically inclined people, especially those who went through schools to become technologically savvy, are "plumbers" not "poets."

Actually, I just realized that the same can be said of most "school certified artists." The control of the art departments by the high-priests of the "conceptual agenda" is so strong that most graduates are, in fact, certified (conceptual art) plumbers, not poets.

I here publicly and totally subscribe to Robert Pirsig's statement in which he said, in an interview many years ago, that "inevitably, his brightest students all flunked school, they could not put up with the system."

Ditto here. . .

By "plumbers," I mean people who have subscribed to the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," that well-established faith in an objective world, in which experiences are transient ("subjective") and the object of experience finite ("objective"), "the same for all."

This fallacy of misplaced concreteness is a sure way of always placing individual experience in the "erroneous" category, or as Noam Chomsky made it clear, ultimately turn us all into "mindless consumers" (always peripheral to the origin of meaning).

By poets, I mean those who sense that there is (or even "should be") more to it than "that," people who, at the very least, give the (their) "subjective experience" the benefit of the doubt or better yet, have the intuition that this very subjectivity is, in fact, a door to the true universal. This is the access to that "transcendence in immanence" that our society is so quick to ignore and dismiss.

Isn't it time to acknowledge that we do not know who we are, that we do not know what it is we are living, that we do not know what "reality" is, and that this very "not-knowing," far from being something to crush, to run away from, or cover up, is our primary rapport with "the real." It represents our only chance to enter our own uniqueness ("alone with others"), to explore it as it gives itself to us ("to cater to the appearing as it appears") and to share with others. Will we not, in this process, discover that it is, indeed, the best we have to offer?

And by "knowing," I point to that significant difference between "knowing," and "understanding."

Plumbers do not want to have anything to do with that. This posits a world in which all is always unresolved, in flux, yet-to-be-done, again and again, a world in which, as Camus said, "we must imagine Sisyphus happy!"

That's quite a twist on the "pursuit of happiness" isn't it?

We should happily be "miserable"?

But if we are willing to replace "happiness" with "meaning," Camus' statement acquires quite a different density, doesn't it?

And that brings us to the crux of my paper/rant, basically: "What are we in this "..." (here add "life" or "job" or "relationship," whatever) for?

Don't run away from that question, it sustains everything we/you/I do; it opens and closes doors; it basically is the underlying structure of our living.

If, as most of our schools do nowadays, we place "plumbing" above "poetry," we create a society, a world, in which the dehumanization is only bound to grow, and the "human will (continue to) be increasingly taken out of the artifactual."

Isn't Art that to which we turn to reconnect, to resource ourselves, to recharge our creative batteries?

Robert Filliou said it so nicely: "Art is what makes Life more interesting than Art."

But if the creation of Art is now in the hands of "plumbers," what are we doing to ourselves?

If you don't understand this, think of Cinema as an Art form, and then look at most of Hollywood's track record.

I can say the same about "Animation." Here's an exciting and so very promising Art form, but it has been mostly taken over by the slaves of linear story-telling, with visuals almost totally deprived of ("negating" even) all that has been made visible by painters over time.

If you don't see this, think of how much painting has reached a state in which "foreground" and "background" have become "reversible," going from traditional "positive/negative space" to a state of "a-dimensionality," "equivocal space" as it has sometimes been called.

Where is that to be seen in most animation shown today, digital or not?

And what about the relationship of music to images, and the ways in which they inform each other?

How about that magic Merleau-Ponty talks about, always present, whether we know it or not, in our rapport with our reality, and that filmmakers like Federico Fellini and Krzysztof Kieslowski knew so well, that of "sense-giving" and "sense-receiving" and the qualitative relationship between the two?

How often do we witness clear and unmistakable evidence, in (digital) Art, of that relationship between "sense-giving" and "sense-receiving"?

All that "knowledge" I talk about above is not "book-knowledge" only. It is, above all, knowledge that comes from a Socratic approach to one's own experience, the very kind of approach our educational system no longer makes room for.

It is this very approach and its ensuing knowledge that escape plumbers, almost by definition.

So, if we are entering the age of "operators-performers," aren't we in danger of witnessing the birth of the domination of "operators/performers-plumbers" and not that of "operators/performers-poets"?

However, this is where experiments like that of Sita and Scott become even more interesting, even necessary: it is possible that a plumber who would be confronted time and again by the need to make creative decisions in real-time performances, pulled along poetic space by genuine artists, partners in the act of creation, would finally drop much of the plumbing "filters" and (re)connect with his/her own sense of poetry (always available I believe, and often accessible through one's doubt, one's "darkness").

There (hopefully!) may be a therapeutic aspect to experiments like those of Sita and Scott, and if so, their research reaches far and wide and should even be declared of public interest.

Especially now that access to very powerful digital tools is so easily within the reach of so many! ["Science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'âme." – "Science without conscience is the demise of the soul." (Rabelais, in Pantagruel)]

When, 30 years ago, I moved to New York to teach at the NY Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture (it was a great school then, not yet a degree-granting institution), I had colleagues, "old-school painters," who had started to notice the influx, in the city, of university-produced "artists," and there was a joke going around: "The MFAs are coming, the MFAs are coming!"

Well, they did come. They are now everywhere!

Yet, to quote my old friend and mentor, Mercedes Matter (Dean of the Studio School at the time, in a quote from a famous article she wrote for The New York Times in September 1973): "To have a degree in Art from some university is almost a sure sign that one did not study Art at that institution."

So, after the MFAs, are we now witnessing "the invasion of the (digital) Art world by the (digital) plumbers"?

Some would actually say that the digital Art world itself is a creation of the plumbers, that the point is moot!

But, plumbers or poets, I mean this as a serious question: what are we going to use all our constantly increasing digital power for?

Is that which sustains our work, our life, related to, stemming from, "Life is a bitch, and then you die"?

Or is it related to what T.S. Eliot expresses so well thus:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
> Through the unknown, remembered gate. . .

> — Little Gidding V, Four Quartets (1943)

When I talked about the plumbers' Weltanschauung earlier, I was also thinking of their intentionality (they go hand in hand), of our intentionality, and this is what I am trying to reflect upon: what are we, what am I, aiming at?

"Through the unknown, remembered gate. . ."

When, forced by sudden allergies to painting materials, I made the transition from natural media to digital tools (a little over a decade ago), I was not yet aware of what was at stake for me, for my work. Increasingly, the potential of the new (to me) medium has become clearer, and some of its pitfalls are also becoming fairly obvious. There seems to be a split between the high-priests of the digital realm and those who are using the digital tools to discover more about the human experience, about their experience.

Art can be, and has been (should be?), a near clinical "mapping" of human experience ("to make the visible visible").

But digital Art is mostly involved with "doing something with/to" human experience. As it often is controlled/manipulated by people (plumbers) who are near illiterate when it comes to being aware of human experience in general, and their own experience in particular, we are looking at a possible repeat of the disaster caused by the apprentice sorcerer.

To "do something with/to" something we do not "know" is indeed a dangerous activity.

So the problem here is similar to that of previous increases in man's ability and power to affect his/her environment, and the key question seems to be, indeed, that of intentions, of consciousness and, of course, of awareness.

When we see what we already have done to our planet, there's not much ground for optimism; we may not have ("be?") the problem for much longer.

Yet, it could be that, by having the plumbers experience the joys and pains of creation, of making decisions on the spot while in the midst of unbuffered experience, of the immediate need to meet creative "obligations," we may witness a transformation, that of plumbers becoming poets, that of "objective reality slaves" coming to their senses, increasing their ability and willingness to live in/with an unbuffered experience of an unresolved/undefined "real," finally connecting to their own *feelings*, bereft of the filters they have accumulated.

I once read a great definition of intelligence/creativity: "Intelligence/creativity is not demonstrated by how much one knows and can do, but by how well one can function when no longer knowing what to do!"

And if an "unmediated experience of the real" is an impossibility, "getting closer to it" is nevertheless possible, and that "progress" should be "good enough" for daring to attempt the impossible.

As Giacometti said: "Whether it fails or succeeds, that is secondary!"

Or it could be that graffiti scribbled everywhere during May '68 and which has been with me ever since: "Be realistic, go for the impossible!"

That is utopian, granted, but I honestly and most sincerely believe that the alternative is so atrocious, I pray that that utopia will become more of a reality, and soon.

If Art, and the artists (digital and other) cannot help *transmute* the plumbers into poets, our world will become even more the end-result of the "vision" of plumbers, and the drabness of it will only increase our need for *transcendence-as-a-reclamation*, a *transcendence-reclamation* which will, again and again, drive us to keep on searching for it in all the wrong places. We will continue our ill-fated attempts at "doing" something to the world, trying to add to it that which is "always-already-there."

"Transcendence in immanence" is not a pipe dream; it is our only (access to) reality.

Digital Art brings nothing new if it continues to spread the faith in the fallacy of misplaced concreteness; yet, with all of its growing power and speed/immediacy, it can be a privileged means for revealing to us the actual state of the emperor's clothes, a necessary step in making the visible visible.

So, in closing, if I did manage to talk about FishArt, Socrates and more, I left out the crashing pianos.

It's "only" one crashing piano actually!

But, that is another story. . .

* * *

[As a footnote, I did go back to Esbjerg since writing this article, to conduct workshops (Aalborg University). I also took part in SIGGRAPH 2009 in New Orleans where I presented a course ("The Making of Shade Recovered") and had a film ("Shade Recovered") in the Computer Animation Festival. Something changed at SIGGRAPH, at least this time: Visual Music and Music were very much present and gave birth to several very exciting presentations, reaching far beyond the usual plumbers' agenda. Poetry was indeed alive and well, at least for a while, in that large conference.

Whether the experience will be repeated remains to be seen...]