The Virtual Sublime: Fraser Austin's 'Totally There'   Tim Gentles

Today we can only really know ourselves online. The same is true for the people in our lives; you can learn so much about someone by reading their twitter. Online we seem to confront our essence, the place from which our identity comes, the feedback loop in which we recognise that we've created ourselves.

While a lot of energy has been expended recently in the art and critical theory worlds explaining the significance of personal branding and self-fashioning in contemporary social-media informed self-understandings, questions about the body in the virtual era have lately fallen by the wayside.

Fraser Austin's work is concerned with these kinds of questions, using the trope of Photobooth as a literalisation of the way people behave online, and reorienting it towards an account of narcissism and the virtual body. In these works, Photobooth and Skype occupy the position of the inaugurating moment of an online identity and the primal scene of the digital economy.

The question here is of how we relate to the body when so much of our social, intellectual and psychic lives are embedded in online practices, and Austin answers it with his avatar. As a substitute to the real person behind the computer, the avatar has always functioned as a mode of self-representation , instilling an immediate gap between it and 'the real thing'. It is this relationship between a real, physical human body, and its virtual corollary-- the avatar-- that Austin's work is concerned with.

In a move characteristic of the digital economy, Austin seeks to invert this relationship, drawing attention to the ways in which our bodies are inseparable from our avatars. While the avatar's greatest strength is its mutability and the possibility of perpetual reinvention, Austin reverses this by rendering his as a hyper-realised version of himself, and in doing so, muddies the waters between the virtual and the real. Austin's avatar is both realer than real, and somehow more virtual than virtual. **B**y rendering his work using clunky and outdated 3D software, the effect is to evoke a hyperreal digital sublime.

In this regard, Austin's work may be situated alongside the concerns of a number of contemporary internet artists and musicians whose work has lately and somewhat vogueishly been dubbed 'post-internet', a term floating around in the digital ether in recent times to describe the products of a cultural moment that revel in inverting the ontological relationship between the virtual and the real.

A clear parallel can be drawn here with James Ferraro's work. His recent album 'Far Side Virtual' shares Austin's interest in the tones and timbres of an idealised, almost utopian virtuality. Both Ferraro and Austin draw on imagery that documents the nascence of the integration of digital/virtual culture into everyday life, evoking refined interfaces, a lifestyle-enhancing sense of functionality and a slick, corporate attitude. Austin's focus on the body as both an object of scrutiny and as something to be exposed, projected outward into cyberspace, acts as something like a repository onto which the ideologies of narcissism and virtual-capitalism are enacted.

The current interest in virtual sublimity-- an appropriation and fetishisation of the attitudes and iconography of the nascent computer/network-culture of the 1990s-- suggests the need for a reactivation of network culture's founding ideological framework now that the digital is so thoroughly interwoven with our daily lives. Austin's work looks back to this formative moment, while using the language of the present (Photobooth, Skype), to investigate these new taxonomies of curatorial and delivery mechanisms within digital and visual cultures at large. It hints at ways in which the contemporary moment can be articulated in the language of repressed impulses of the past, by reframing questions of originality and value in terms of velocity, intensity and spread.[1]

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1 The significance of velocity, intensity and spread to the digital era are explored in Hito

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Steyerl, "In Defence of the Poor Image," *e-flux* #10, Nov. 2009.