Discussion with Sawad Brooks, Daniel Canogar, Michael Ferraro, Andreas Froech, Greg Lynn, Joseph Nechvatal, and Bill Seaman
Moderated by Joanna Spitzner

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 J. SPITZNER: I have several topics to discuss rather than specific questions. My first thought was about the different sense of visuality, and visual pleasure in the works in this exhibition. This is drawing a bit from something Joseph wrote about, "immersion," and a sense of visuality that is no longer based on a fixed point of view, but more, spread out. I think there are aesthetic as well as social implications to that. Maybe, Joseph, you could comment on this first.

J. NECHVATAL: Well, I agree it is an important topic because with immersion, we are getting away from the Renaissance perspective which is so encoded in our society. From every photograph to every video that you see, generally they are concordant to a Renaissance three-point perspective, with the horizon line, a vanishing point. And I think with virtuality, the horizon line is no longer a necessity, it is almost an artificial device. So that re-scrambles that perspective and I think that we have a new perspective to explore.

M. FERRARO: I feel a little retrograde relative to that because we use pretty much traditional perspective technique and in fact get a little obsessive about fiddling with color and light, to the extent that we try to capture a little of the feeling of Fragonard's palette, using those very soft pastel colors. So the space that we use I feel cuts across that boundary, looking forward and backward at the same time.

J. NECHVATAL: I think the point is that it is now recognized as a convention, it is no longer a given. This perspective is a choice that an artist may or may not choose to use. It's no longer a kind of dogmatic, hierarchical expectation.

B. SEAMAN: What I've been thinking a lot about is that because computers are so mutable, and they present an environment where you can deal with language, image and sound very easily, but very tangibly. I've been thinking and writing about what I call recombinant poetics, about a kind of meaning-becoming, where the meaning is never fixed, it is always emergent in relation to the interactive.

J. SPITZNER: Greg has actually written about the "composition of bodies," this idea is no longer about reduction, but about many elements working together in a system. Joseph has written about excess, and so there seems to be this aesthetics of excess and abundance and multiple possibilities, none of them singularly fixed.

B. SEAMAN: This is a Deleuzian idea of the rhizome, where there are many perspectives, flows, different passageways, multiplicities.

G. LYNN: Just back to the visuality question, I think there is another aspect that is obviously in all of the interactive media, but hasn't been in architecture, which is the whole relationship of form to movement or motion. With a lot of the software we use as architects, it is the first time we as architects have ever used animation to generate building design, or animation to generate relationships of components. It brings up all kinds of interesting issues: how you look at motion and movement and store it in a form? Or, whether it is literally a moving form or whether it is a form that has a sequential or serial movement built into its components and the relationship between the components.

M. FERRARO: Actually the relationship of movement to architecture is one of the things that you explore, particularly in relationship of architecture and narrative; how architecture has implicit in it a narrative, in the same way we have this recombinant thing that you're talking about earlier. But I think architecture really held it for a long time, the way I think about is that if you walk through Grand Central Terminal through the front door, the way it is very orchestrated, very carefully managed story that you're being moved through, but which is quite different from the one you get coming up out of the subway and into that space. The crossing of the people in the center of that space, all is implicit in the architecture as a narrative, as story and then articulated in the movement through that space.

J. SPITZNER: Space changes, though, because, in Grand Central, it is dependent on the person moving through to create that narrative, but if you are thinking of spaces that also move themselves, then that changes the rules, or changes the boundaries.

J. NECHVATAL: It expands the boundaries, probably what we are talking about is a sense of feeling in a more vast area. As we move through a vast area, we are no longer satisfied with a boxed, constrained, packaged, data. We want data that we are inside of, and is around us. We want to be sensitive to the data that is around us. So I think it is a question of visuality, as you said, but it is also a question of cognition. So I think we can no longer separate vision from cognition. And this I think is a field that is opening up, a cognitive field of vision.

D. CANOGAR: I would add to that: I think the idea of bodies in movement become a very crucial, very interesting development of electronic technology. For me, in my own work, I want to put in the spectator movement, as they are looking at my work. One of the consequences of three-point Renaissance perspective was its separation, a very clear separation, of the spectator and what is being looked at, the spectacle. I think one of the possibilities that interactive technologies offer is a blurring of boundaries between one and the other, which I think is very interesting in terms of proprioceptor experiences of the image. I am also very interested in sensory bombardment as way of almost rewriting how a body feels within these new images, new visualizations. I think it is only recently that we are thinking about this more seriously than just special effects, or pure entertainment. I think that the special effects that one encounters in Hollywood production are actually interesting in how they rewrite the body in terms of the new technologies. I think that is ultimately what we need to do now, and we are doing, in this passage from analog to digital, in this rewriting of what it means to have a body within a digital realm. I think this show explores these ideas in many different ways in many different pieces.

J. SPITZNER: Tying into this, are notions of beauty. You bring up Hollywood, and there's a suspicion of beauty because of its controlling seduction. But I do think the artists in this show are concerned with beauty. [to Michael] In the Softworlds catalog, you noted that you wanted the images to very beautiful. And Joseph has a different sense of beauty, based more on decomposition, it is no longer a fixed, pure truth or transcendental-- or perhaps it is, I don't know. I was wondering how you have negotiated this, considering a critical notion of beauty but also to reinvent the kind of visceral and sensory response to the work.

B. SEAMAN: It seemed like conceptual art became a place where you could do anything. It became totally exploded. There was a beauty to the concept. Whereas, at a certain point I said, "Well, why can't there also still be beauty and a concept?" or a merging. And I went back and said okay let's have beauty and a set of ideas.

M. FERRARO: It's a very effective device to seduce the mind and seduce the imagination. The comment you were just making a few minutes ago reminds of something Marcel Duchamp had said, which was that painting is in the service of the intellect. Art functioning in the service of the intellect is such an important thing to remember. It is one of the most satisfying aspects of producing art, seeing art, and experiencing art. And using beauty as a vehicle to seduce and engage the intellect is really an interesting dialogue. While we talked about that in fairly abstract terms some years ago, I think there is a palpable reality now, when you start to use electronics and computers that are malleable and are mutable and you can engender the work in a very visceral and real way.

D. CANOGAR: I am actually quite interested in this idea of seductiveness and beauty. This is a general categorization, or a generalization, but in retrospect the hard-core anti-aesthetic conceptualism seems to me very Protestant and very Calvinist. I am Spanish, and in Mediterranean culture sensuality is still very important and still very present in our culture. As a student, I was made to feel that my work was a little on the seductive side, and now I respond, "Well, yeah it is." And this is very conscious and it is part of where I come from, and I think it allows me to bring people into the work, and then, hopefully, have the more cognitive, more intellectual process as well. It is hard to separate one from the other, but I think that a lot of the work that I am seeing comes out of electronic technology that is not afraid of being sensually beautiful.

J. NECHVATAL: Certainly we can't use the word beauty in a homogenized way. There are many levels and many aspects to what we might think of beauty. I believe we are probably moving away from the definition of beauty or the beautiful in relationship to the picturesque, and I think more and more in terms of what they call the sublime. I don't think we are going back to a kind of beauty of the picturesque, but rather more of an expansive type of beauty that perhaps has more to do with architecture and total environments and total art.

M. FERRARO: The fact that it's not monolithic is what is important. I feel that there's a certain amount of embracing of the picturesque that Janine and I engage in, but it's the fact that it is not monolithically so, that all forces are being built around that single principle I think is the important transition.

J. NECHVATAL: I agree.

J. SPITZNER: And also, in all this work, what is integral to it is a kind of participation of whoever is interacting with it, and that is also drawing from conceptual art and performance art, etc. The picturesque is about a person looking out onto a view, and this as very different -- if it is about entering the piece through seduction, then you are also becoming a part of the piece. The vocabulary really isn't there -- are you viewer, participant, critical person?

M. FERRARO: Well, I think that there are a lot of times when you look at allegorical paintings in which you can bring yourself to that same question. In literature, that question can be most clearly articulated by the opening of Moby Dick, where the author entreats you listen to his story right away by saying "Call me Ishmael." Immediately you are pulled into the story, you are no longer distant from it and watching it. So this whole process I view as a continuum being explored in areas for a long time, and I wonder even to what extent psychology speaks about that permeable and malleable difference, as to where the self is located. They've explored that for some time, and I think that that same

permeable layer exists within art as its moving forward, and isn't structured around single axes of focus.

D. CANOGAR: It's not a single viewpoint. It's an infinite--almost infinite set of potential viewpoints.

G. LYNN: Well, that's where I think that to use a term like beauty to me is troubling, only because in my own work I try to think of establishing an envelope of potential, and set of minimum and maximum limits, and interactions and a kind of network of possibilities. And out of that network of possibilities you get an infinite number of mutations. In that way it is at least a Darwinian model of organization, where the thing produced is the result of--

B. SEAMAN: -- You have certainly set up aesthetic parameters, there are lots of different ways that could end up looking.

G. LYNN: But to me it ends up all being, not, I wouldn't use the category of ugly, like the abject, but I would say it all ends of being ugly in the sense that everything is a mutation. In the nineteenth century you used to look at nature and say, "Nature is beautiful." After Darwin you look at nature and you say, "Nature is a horror show." Everything we thought was beautiful is the result of struggle, accident, all the things which wouldn't lead to perfection, synthesis and harmony. And so in that sense I would want to position my work outside of the category of the perfect or harmonic, and say well no, everything is a mutation, everything is equally . . . generic, I would say. A generic aesthetic.

B. SEAMAN: I think that there is a way to think about something as beautiful in its ability to communicate a particular thing. And so something can be extremely ugly or horrifying, but there is a beauty in the clarity of its content that it's getting at. Something can be extremely exploded and be beautiful. For me it's a different notion, it's a flexible notion or beauty.

A. FROECH: Beauty in architecture was introduced with the arcane, with proportion in the Cartesian, with the ideal section and the ideal proportions. And Greg is not working with these proportions at all, the work doesn't allow this. There is no question of proportion of the form, or of the result, because it is just changing, over and over. And these parameters, they never relate to beauty.

J. NECHVATAL: But there is a beauty in visualization of the mutation.

M. FERRARO: It's the difference between structural beauty and formal beauty.

A. FROECH: We say, when we have the system working "Wow, that's really beautiful." This works really well. It just works, the way it moves and translates into another sequence. And then we say that's really beautiful.

B. SEAMAN: That's beautiful in the tradition you were just speaking about, the golden mean.

G. LYNN: Usually when we say something is beautiful, it is the most tortured and ugly.

A. FROECH: The other thing is that we have to pick one moment in the whole sequence to actually get to the end product of the whole building. It is actually this freezing process, or finding this one piece that we think is the most appropriate. But we can never say that is not the most beautiful, it's impossible.

G. LYNN: If there was a notion of looking for structure in the notion of the perfect or the beautiful, there has been a counter tradition for four of five hundred years of teratology, where you look for structure in the monsters. Or you look for structure in the mutations. And I think with an interactive art, or an art that doesn't position itself as having an ideal interpretation, or even an ideal relationship to the object, then suddenly that opens up to where you have a teratological model, where you have to say well, it's interesting to see how the spectator deforms the work, or swerves the work, or does something unanticipated or unique.

J. NECHVATAL: I think instead of the word beauty we are talking about attraction. Maybe beauty doesn't work any more as a value. But I think we all are trying to set up a sense of attraction. Seduction, obviously is a part of attraction --

B. SEAMAN: Or sensual engagement, maybe that is what it is.

M. FERRARO: But also, it may be just simply a matter formal beauty versus a kind of structural beauty, where the structural is somewhat more abstract and the principles are somewhat more conceptual. And formal beauty follows more along the axis of tradition: notions of proportions, color, form and so on. But that relationship between structure and form, and actually the way art has dematerialized from over a long period of time to where it hit the apex at conceptual art in which form actually disappeared. And now we've sort of recombined it and gone through the other side, where we can use formal beauty and formal principles, but in the service of more structural, in which the content actually lies in the structural relationships, the form is incidental. And choosing beautiful form is an interesting vehicle, but not necessarily always appropriate, monolithic, it's just in the service of a more structural and conceptual role.

J. SPITZNER: It's no longer the goal, it is more of a tool or another element within a network or a structure.

M. FERRARO: But we have kind of sidestepped the issue of the commercial component has been somewhat driving that understanding of beauty and its value and its relationship to art and how the modernist and post-modern departures were reactions to beauty, partly because of the materialization of beauty, and the commodity that beauty establishes in a fairly conventional sense. That migration, that movement in and out and that reaction too, is still operative in contemporary explorations of art, the reaction to a conventionalized notion of beauty. Oddly, it takes on a real attraction partly because it is reactionary.

J. NECHVATAL: That is where the sublime is an interesting concept because it incorporates horror. Without horror, there is no sublime beauty. So you have to have an attraction that is also a repulsion at the same time. It's a very complex emotion.

J. SPITZNER: I was also thinking about issues of manufacture and fabrication within the work, which could be anything from modeling towards something that would be built, or even code itself as a manufacturing. It is almost crossing over into the mundane in the sense that it is pragmatic. These boundaries are not very distinct in the work.

J. NECHVATAL: The formal boundaries?

J. SPITZNER: The boundaries from the technical, pragmatic, the whole idea of manufacture, fabrication, and design, that I find everyone is working around and in and becomes a part of the creation of the work. Perhaps you could comment about how your paintings are ultimately produced?

J. NECHVATAL: As you insinuated, the actual core of the production is the code. We wrote this code to do a dastardly deed. And I show this on my website, and I've made pieces with the code because I wanted to acknowledge the fact that, if there is a formal element to my work, it is the code.

J. SPITZNER: And yet that is often hidden. And Sawad Brooks, who isn't here now, made a comment to me early in the week that there is all this code, which is literature. And what we need now is people who can approach code in a critical way.

J. NECHVATAL: That's a wonderful idea.

J. SPITZNER: There is such an underlying structure to most work, yet it's still so impenetrable to most people, it' something very hidden.

J. NECHVATAL: And there is a kind of "beauty" when you look at strings of code, even if you don't understand the beauty of the logic of the code, just the visual pattern it makes if often very attractive.

B. SEAMAN: I've been thinking quite a lot of this in terms of layers of code, and that what we're doing is: there are these very logical structures, and what we're doing is building a structure on top of that, a visual structure, that is punning in a sense. Outwardly to the viewer or user, it's artistic content, inwardly, to the system, it is the outer most layer of symbolic logic. It enables the system to become operative, and that's something I'm very interested in. Also the notion of having these construction mechanisms, incorporating these into the work, so literally there is this construction that is part of work. I think that's what you are doing in yours [to Greg]. But in mine, it is more operative where they're in there and they literally take an active role in the construction.

J. SPITZNER: Some Modernist, painting at least, was very much about revealing. Nothing was really hidden in a painting. But in a sense, there are so many different elements to all of this work that something always remains hidden and mysterious. In a way, it may even be culturally the way people to relate to technology.

D. CANOGAR: It's interesting in this line of thought that most of the installations have back rooms which are not accessible to the public. [Sawad Brooks enters]

B. SEAMAN: Also the notion of emergent content. For me it is very important that there isn't this fixed thing, that there are certain conditions where content arises out of the interaction with it. Or maybe you set up a system and the content arises out of the system.

J. SPITZNER: If it is about systems, then what is the manifestation of these systems? What form or sensibility do they take, there are so many possibilities? They are still rooted in photography and in film and the screen, but I think also trying to push into different forms. What do you do with these possibilities?

G. LYNN: The fabrication logic of posts and beams and infill panels and skins and fabrics, that logic of construction is so encoded in architectural drawing and modeling, that it's a tough thing to break out of. One of the things we tried to do with all these objects was never to revert to a two dimensional cut, but to always deal with a topology of a surface, from the conceptualization to the fabrication. Which is something architecture really hasn't tried--to execute a whole building topologically without going through a set of documents that are two-dimensional. And, I'm sure the photograph looms behind a lot of the other work in the show the

same way that post and beam looms behind the architectural contribution. We have to look at the fabrication not just in terms of "Well, now we can make crazy shapes because we have a computer," but to say "How does the computer think shape?" and how does that change our conceptual model?

B. SEAMAN: Of particular interest to me is how to find grammars that shape and define form as well as characterize style and characterize transformations of style. Some interesting developments are taking place. I think that architecture and computer science speak to a way of looking to the future of production of art in a very formalized way. This notion of language underlying--programs or codes--underlying the constructions of art is brought into very clear focus when you actually formulate a grammar for the construction of a particular work. People have done it for paintings, for music, for architecture, and they've been quite effective at it too.

J. NECHVATAL: Would we all agree then that we've moved beyond Deconstructivism to some poly- or hyper- constructivism at this point?

M. FERRARO: Well, I guess that depends on what you mean-- deconstruction in the sense of using a reversal, a hierarchical reversal?

J. NECHVATAL: That and making pains to reveal the means of production, to demystify the production, the work of art, the experience of the work of art.

M. FERRARO: I would consider myself still part of the whole notion of deformalization or the dematerialization of what is the essential moment of art. It has shifted out of the form into a kind of structural realm which is then articulated by various forms. So it winds up being a cluster of forms that wind up representing this concept. And you can articulate that in a kind of personalized way, but for me, and for Janine as well, retaining the notion of authorship is still very important. So I don't feel like we've surrendered the artistic experience to the viewer. I still feel a strong sense and a strong desire to author the experience, but in a way that has a malleability and flexibility and an organic variability that maybe it didn't have in the past. Although I still keep coming back to the fact a lot of what we're exploring has been explored in other ways, in the past. And I reference psychology as thinking about that, I think of gardens and fountains as being implicit narratives and implicit worlds that you come back to periodically and that are vastly different each time you come to them, but there are also, materially, very much the same. So in that kind of organic relationship I think the focus is shifting a little bit more into how to produce in a sustained way and in a controlled way more easily than constructing a park.

J. SPITZNER: Maybe we can backtrack. Sawad, earlier in the week, you spoke to me about code as literature. Maybe you could talk a little about that idea.

S. BROOKS: I learned to program rather early. I almost wrote code before I became a very good reader. I think of myself as learning to read well later on, and in particular I learned to read criticism later on, and to read critically. But I came to the sense that code was part of this long tradition of writing, but also part of the break in writing that the typewriter brought about. The importance of that of course is that you shifted from an experience of scribbling, making long analog strokes to doing this [mimics typing] to a machine. It's part of the whole cultural production that relates to handiwork. It is very much that kind of intellectual labor, still. Which is at the same time still very retro, even though it is very new. But what I think is interesting about it as a sub-literature is that it is literature that is written only for computers. But, because it's a human language as well, it is imbued with all this rhetorical baggage and so forth. Critics are very rarely able to read this sub-literature. I think in the coming years, I see younger people coming up that study both critical theory, and so forth, and also know how to program. And they begin to take apart that language.

B. SEAMAN: I think one thing we forget about computers is that there are many layers of authorship even in one keystroke. There's the hardware creation, the assembly language, there's some program, then there's some graphics program running in that and then finally we make some kind of gesture when then electrons move, etc., and it's hugely complex.

S. BROOKS: I would say though that it's very much the opposite. That particular machine brings about our awareness of the multiplicity of authorship in a word, even. Because, when we talk, there is a lot of reference that comes about in a word, and it's really a new machine, a computer, that becomes allegorical of that rich relationship that a single word can have. It links the history of a word to the history of machines. Where it's in machines.

B. SEAMAN: Or the history of technology.

J. SPITZNER: I think we'll end here. Thanks.