

## **HYPERLUCID. Training to Live in a New Reality**

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Reality is no longer what it used to be. The media are increasingly infiltrating it, filling our dreams, which usually come when our eyes are open. Wide open. In the context of “Expanded Painting”, H Y P E R L U C I D is an exhibition of works born on the invisible edge between two different levels of reality (actual reality and media reality), and documenting the continuous transition from one level to the other. The boundaries are increasingly porous, and sometimes even the most lucid among us can’t help but wonder which level of reality we are looking at in a given moment. We all experienced this feeling when confronted with the 9/11 pictures. As Slavoj Žižek wrote in 2002: “Virtual Reality [...] provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the resisting hard kernel of the Real [...] Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being one. However, at the end of this process of virtualization, the inevitable Benthamian conclusion awaits us: reality is its own best semblance.” [1]

Instead of dealing with the virtualization of the real, H Y P E R L U C I D explores the actualization of the virtual. Media reality is reality. Media no longer produce simulacra: they produce events, history, life. The map doesn’t precede the territory, as Jean Baudrillard claimed [2]; the real still exists, and the map is now part of it. The media overwhelm us with icons, brands, pixellated images of torture, wars,

outrages. The hardest fight happens there. They help us to construct new levels of reality, both abstract and hyperreal, and to get used to them. Videogames and virtual worlds are our training grounds: there, through increasingly complex social and narrative dynamics, and through a photorealism which exceeds our playing needs, we forget how to recognize simulation, and we exercise our brains for the next step: the one in which, between tangible reality, simulated reality and media reality, there are no barriers anymore, but only the translucent, easily penetrable sheets of shadow theater. We took the last train to the world of Perky Pat, and there is no way back [3].

It is no surprise that videogames and virtual worlds play such an important role in H Y P E R L U C I D. It is hard for a visual artist today to escape their fascination. Eva and Franco Mattes, who were able to escape their Second Life, recently started to fight for a Half Life. If in the stylish, visionary world created in 2003 by the Californian Linden Labs they focused on identity, subjectivity and virtual life, in the ultra-violent first-person shooter (FPS) developed by Valve Software in 1998 they discovered the astounding beauty of the virtual landscape. When the spectator faces these silent “topographies”, which call to mind the sublime landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich, as well as the urban atmospheres of Edward Hopper and the Magical Realism of the Twenties, she could hardly imagine that to attain this peace the artists had to fight off hundreds of aliens and human enemies. In a narrative, the scenery is usually functional to the story, and videogames are no exception. Yet, in recent games they have acquired a life of their own; or, in other words, they are no longer sceneries, they are worlds that may – between one fight and one other – surprise the virtual hero for their gratuitous beauty and seamless existence.

Unlike the Mattes, Gazira Babeli can't escape Second Life. She was born there, and there she will live her avatar life till the end, playing the role of the virus in the system – or Neo in the Matrix – with her Keatonian sense of comedy. Gazira Babeli is the living proof that the separation between the so-called “virtual” and the so-called “real” is just an error of perspective, and that we can live just one life, the second, without appearing any less “real” for that. As she says, “My art consists in

experimenting in an ironic and ‘pop’ way with the complementary and often contradictory aspects of a ‘whole world’ which, despite being inhabited by ‘puppets’, hosts at least a million people. Real people.” Her movie *Gaz’ of the Desert* (2007) is the mythological, almost hagiographic transcription of her life, which in the series of prints “painted d’apres Delacroix” exaggerates the romantic, bituminous light of *Second Life*, ironically playing with the cultural stereotypes her world relies on.

A similar irony can be found in the recent work of Miltos Manetas, which turns Will Wright’s recent masterpiece, *Spore* (Maxis 2008), into an ambiguous garden of delights populated by hybrid creatures, apparently generated by the marriage between Walt Disney and Hieronymus Bosch. The naivete of these images, the pale, light colors adopted, and even the special technique used by Manetas in these and other prints (vibracolor print on super glossy paper) call to mind the delicate paintings of the Primitives, such as Beato Angelico and Van der Weyden. In the series *Gino De Dominicis (After Spore)*, these implicit references mix with a declared one, to the paintings of Gino de Dominicis; while the verticality of these images – actually self-portraits – and the precarious instability of the figures on their plinths, make them similar to the saints portrayed in the side panels of a polyptych, while their snouty noses and inscrutable ambiguity place them among the strange creatures portrayed by the Italian artist.

There is no irony, on the contrary, in Gerhard Mantz’s work. For years, the German artist has used software to generate synthetic landscapes able to withstand the closest scrutiny. But don’t talk about hyperrealism, baby. Hyperrealism is reproduction, 3D modeling is production. Mantz’s sunrises and sunsets belong to a world that was entirely created by him. They are too beautiful to be real, too realistic to be crafted. They remind us of the romantic landscape, but also Windows’ custom wallpapers; *Sturm und Drang* meets *Vista* on these big canvases. As he wrote: “My starting point is never a landscape seen in reality, but an abstraction, a constructed calculation of archetypal space. This construct is then transformed step-by-step through simulated light, atmosphere, water, terrain, flora and fauna to conjure

memories that translate as complex emotions rather than a specificity of place.”

But H Y P E R L U C I D is not about videogames, 3D aesthetics and so on; it is about an irritating awareness of the reality we live in, the unfriendly ability to penetrate its multiple layers. The term “irritate” is not used by chance here. The Surrealists wanted to “irritate” our perception in order to make the unconscious come to the surface. The artists featured in H Y P E R L U C I D do the same with our visual culture, in order to make these multiple layers visible. Alterazioni Video's tapestries are irritatingly similar to Alighiero & Boetti's ones, in a way that make them appear a simple work of appropriation, which they aren't. Here, Alighiero & Boetti is not referenced in a postmodern way, but is used and abused as a medium. One of the first and most dangerous computer viruses appeared in our mailbox as a romantic love letter; in a similar way, these tapestries are extremely dangerous because they are friendly and easy-to-get. They look like the same old shit, yet they are vehicles of the forbidden. Produced for an exhibition in China, they have censored information encrypted under their reassuring surfaces – information that can be decrypted using the right cultural code, or the right technical device. In the QR CODE series, for example, in order to access the information you just have to photograph one of the embroidery carpets with a smartphone and send this image to a specific decrypting software which can translate it and decodify the hidden information: and voila! access to pornographic web sites, contact information for political dissidents and activists, lists of forbidden words.

In the project Superenhanced (2009), the Austrian duo UBERMORGEN.COM address torture and its present use in both democratic and non-democratic countries, apparently presenting and promoting it with a striking visual campaign for the brand new service of “enhanced interrogation”. In the series, various forms of enhanced interrogation are played out directly by the artists and their daughters, in a kind of Kamasutra of torture that recycles media imagery directly from Guantanamo and other supermax prisons, glossing over the violence and replacing it with glamorous advertising aesthetics.

Lastly, Damon Zucconi and Shane Hope belong to a younger generation of artists interested in the vernacular of the Web, in the subcultures of techno-freaks that gather online, even though they reference them in very different ways. Damon Zucconi's works can be described as “meditations on contemporary visual culture”. He appropriates found material of any kind, usually through simple, almost fatuous means. In *Morris Louis; Dalet Kaf (Horizontal and Vertical blur)*, for example, he appropriates a painting by Morris Louis, probably found on the Net, applying a simple editing filter to it and then printing it out quarter-scale. *Pole Shift* (2008) is a video which treats a landscape photograph as a three dimensional space, deforming it in a slow, hypnotic movement; in *Slow Rave* (2006) he slow down the video of a rave party in order to mimic its participants’ altered perception of reality. *Sometimes Red, Sometimes Blue* (2007) is exactly what the title says: a web page conceived as a “color field”, which changes randomly at every access. Trained as a sculptor, Zucconi is interested in what lies under the surface of our visual culture: an “underlying problem” that a little manipulation of the surface brings to the fore.

With an almost opposite take, Shane Hope seems to look for a complexity that doesn’t even exist yet, belonging to a possible future or a parallel universe he may have visited... in his dreams, we would have said in the age of Samuel T. Coleridge’s Xanadu; through his laptop, we should say today. The artist has developed a personal, hybrid language full of misspellings, scientific jargon, and new kinds of slang in order to describe a reality made of materials, technologies, cults and possibilities not yet explored. In his work (which he usually describes as “speculative vernacular”) he mixes molecular prototyping and assemblage, miniature sculpture and animation, futurology and retrocomputing. His *Speculativernacular Blog Botherings* are paintings – outsourced to Chinese painters, of course – depicting blog posts written in a kind of alien English. Because a new reality deserves another language, and another stage in the evolution of man: bringing us a human with a hyperlucid gaze on a layered reality, whose language is a man-machine hybrid slang, and whose “mother is open source.”

Even if it is part of Expanded Painting, H Y P E R L U C I D does not gather paintings in the literal sense. Here, painting is not a medium, but a cultural frame, a context of reference for the new generation of image makers. The artists collected here no longer paint, even if they sometimes still do: they shoot, they manipulate, they code, they make scripts, sometimes they fight with other virtual characters. Yet, in the end, they produce images. Images where all the layers of reality collapse. Images that, like a Photoshop image, are made of different layers. Images to be looked through. They are not about reality, like a painting by Courbet. They are not about media reality, like Andy Warhol's Car Crashes or Richard Prince's Cowboys. They are not about the map, or the territory. They are about both, because the two have become one and the same thing.

## FOOTNOTES

[1] Slavoj Žižek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real", in *The Symptom*, Issue 2, Spring 2002, available online at the address [www.lacan.com/desertsymf.htm](http://www.lacan.com/desertsymf.htm).

[2] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation*, Galilee 1985. *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press 1996.

[3] Philip K. Dick, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, Doubleday, 1965.