

Under Fire: 3D Animation Pedagogy and Industry Complicity in New Media Education
Co-chair presentation by Claudia Hart



“Machina,” 2006, 3D animation, looped projection, 20 minutes

I like to tell the story of how I developed my current body of work - 3D animations that generally consist of a single female nude, moving slowly, languidly and in a sensual and accordingly erotic rather than an overtly pornographic manner. I developed it as a series of in-class tutorials for 3D character animation classes taught in – and here I use media-art pedagogical argot - what has come to be known as a “production” oriented art school. What this means is, in a culture that is vocationally oriented, and therefore engineering oriented - with the intention of training future digital workers to man proscribed stations in the carefully engineered production pipelines of multimillion dollar Hollywood effects films or elaborate shooter games. To put it as polemically as I possibly can, we are talking about boot camp for the armies of the military entertainment complex.

This was about ten years ago, a time, when it came to 3D animation or VR simulations, when I was not only one of the only women in the room, but also one of the only contemporary artists. Professional, mainstream 3D game culture was and still largely is homo-social –to put it bluntly, a hyper-masulinit boys club - and at best prurient. At its worst, my students who intend to join it are rigidly closed to the unfamiliar, to reflective thought, and resistant to an analytic reading of the world around them. By creating virtual images that were sensual but not pornographic within mechanized, clockwork depictions of the natural, I tried to subvert earlier dichotomies of woman and nature pitted against a civilized, “scientific,” masculine, homo-social world of technology. In my own way, with my intentionally feminine and slow moving animations (as opposed to the hyper reactive, violent, speedy world of games), I was staging a romantic rebellion against a technocratic and bureaucratic culture.

I must confess now, that in the beginning of my experience teaching 3D, I blamed the creation of its negative culture on the masculinist, militarist game industry, and without a doubt, this ethos contributes to its qualities. But, as I became more experienced, I decided that the 3D problem was as much a result of the pedagogical structures borrowed from a specific style of industry production pipeline, oriented towards large-scale effects films. These are films that are assembly line in their production style. This means that skills are taught with an eye towards narrow specialization. As a result, students are literally taught to resist big picture thinking, which also means to resist thinking conceptually, holistically and along with that, creatively. In one swoop, the baby AND the bathwater.

To keep the story personal, when I first started teaching at the School of the Art Institute, which is a humanities and conceptually oriented art school, to my surprise, I actually found that the 3D culture there was almost identical to that of the industry pipeline vocational schools I'd taught at. Few students with sophisticated or serious esthetic aspirations be they in fine art or high-end design ever took 3D animation classes. Where other forms of new media have blossomed in recent years, 3D at my school, just as in the vocational schools where I taught previously, did not manage to attract practitioners who might establish it as a serious artistic or esthetic medium.

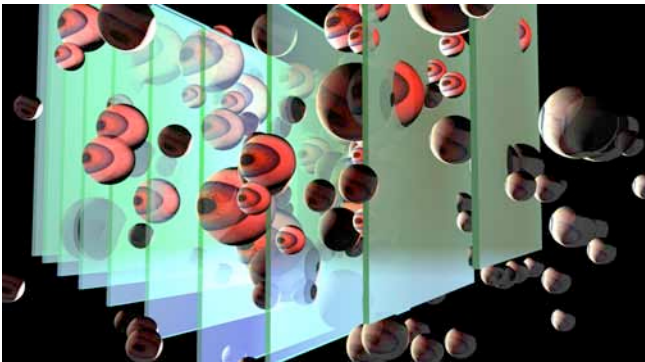
The potential of 3D animation within contemporary art practice is not yet fully realized. I believe this is because of the industry-oriented style of training. Students are offered classes with titles like: *Modeling, Rigging, Character Animation, Rendering, Texturing*, etc. These are classes named for specific technologies rather than their creative potentials. Educational on-line tutorials and the exploding DVD tutorial business offer a plethora of exercises as homework assignments: "Make a cartoon walk cycle," model a grisly humanoid monster, or create a highly lacquered sports car. This is an infrastructure that reflects an assembly-line consciousness that is microcosmic and lends itself to cog-like thinking.

These educational tools also result in the production of an unacknowledged "company style." They teach not just skills but the esthetics conveying the values and ethos of industry, but not the industry of design and high end consumer products but one which is without edifying aspirations. While the seduction of Hollywood with its perceived lifestyle of glamour and creativity is certainly the carrot on the learn-3D-and-make-it-big-in-the-entertainment-industry stick, I began to feel that it was actually the assembly line production model that was ultimately so deadening to students creativity and ability to push this new tool in the many directions possible, rather than endlessly repeating whatever ads they'd recently seen on TV. In response I developed a program – X3D – in which clusters of complimentary skills were grouped together for their esthetic and expressive potentials, and in rather unorthodox ways. To my surprise, students who normally never took 3D animation classes, ones without unrealistic Hollywood aspirations – students from the performance and painting and sculpture and experimental design departments – began taking the classes. The classes evolved into a laboratory, with the students creating things that surprised me. Many of these students became and will become artists, but others actually do enter industry, and easily, and in higher

positions, with portfolios that were fresh and unusual compared to the typical 3D portfolio reel. Two years after beginning the x3D project, these kinds of students, fill the Experimental 3D suite of classes.

This story was the inspiration for our panel. I invited Rachel Clarke and colleagues – contemporary artists who worked with 3D and VR technologies, whose work I admired - to share their own stories, and discovered in the panel open-call several pioneers in a field that I hope is just in its nascence. I think, however, that the story of 3D pedagogy is not merely one about a specific medium but really one about the liberating function of education in a frighteningly uniform, corporatized world – and I say this in light of the recent Supreme Court decisions striking down a hundred years of precedent to further unleash the corporate giants that color and control so much of our cultures and our lives.

Claudia Hart
February 8, 2010



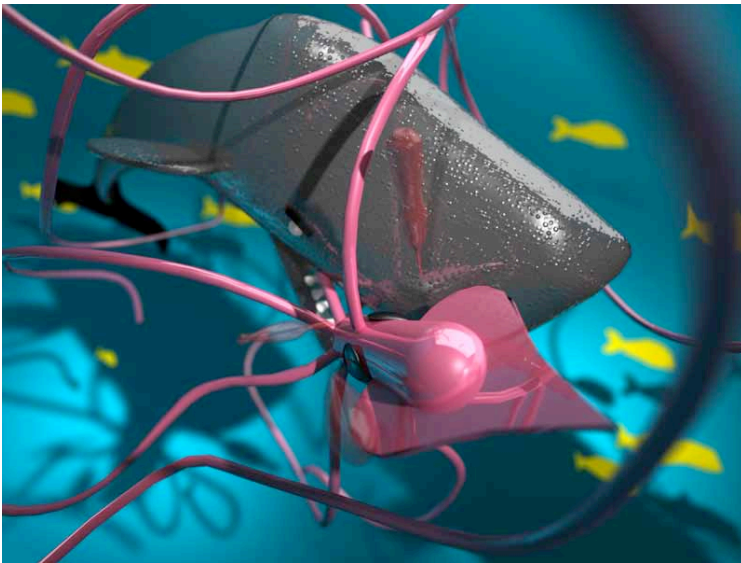
Intro to Experimental 3D: Angel Delgado, 2008



Intro to Experimental 3D: Jamie Lee, 2009



Intro to Experimental 3D: Yoshi Asai, 2008



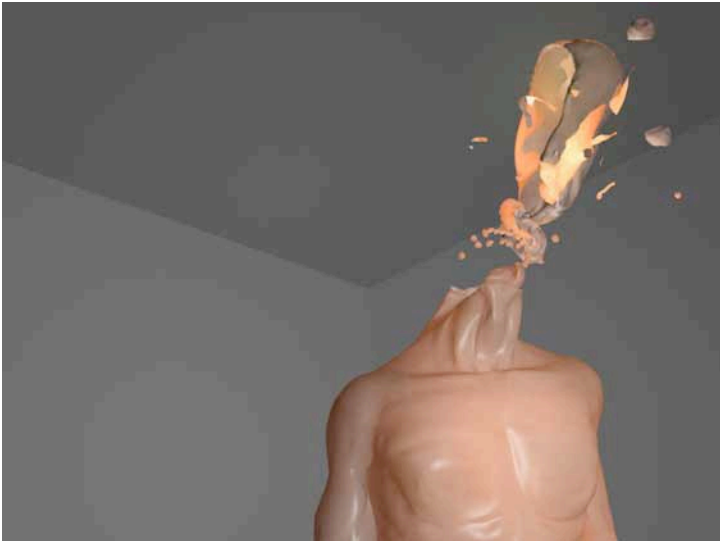
Intro to Experimental 3D: Mitchell Chan, 2009



Intro to Experimental 3D: Spencer Hutchinson



Digital Bodies: Cassie Jackson, 2009



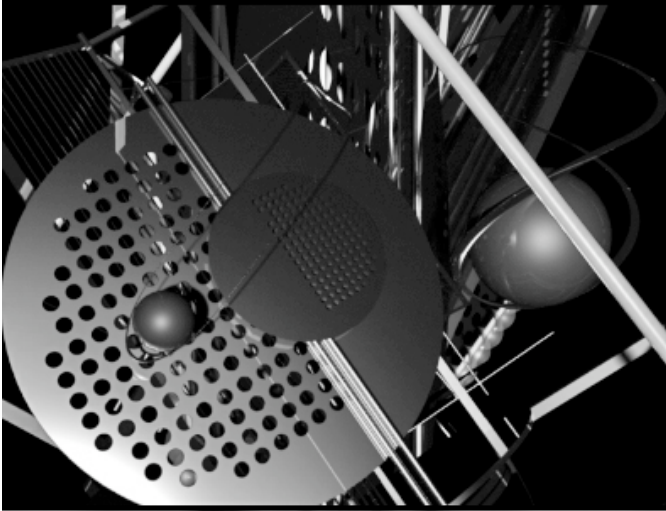
Digital Bodies: Ben Carney, 2009



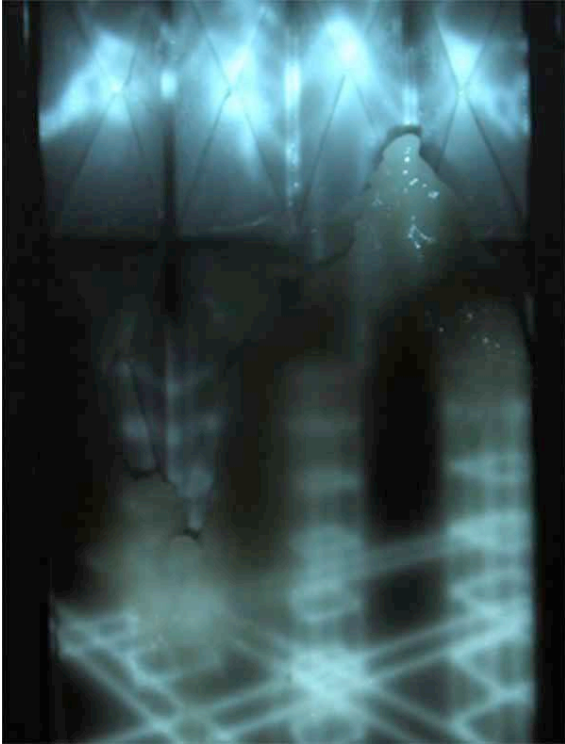
Virtual Installation: Florian Graf, 2009



Virtual Installation: Alex Lee, 2008



Virtual Installation: Alex Lee, 2009



Atmospheric Animation: Mik Kastner, 2008



Virtual Installation: Shane Mecklenburger, 2007



Virtual Installation: Micah Schippa , 2009



"The Seasons," 2009, 3D animation for projection, 10 minutes



"Empire," 2010, 4 Channel 3D animation for projection, 10 minutes



“Ophelia,” 2008, 3D animation, looped projection, 10 minutes

Claudia Hart’s mythopoetic projections... take aim at 3D rampaging, male avatar shooter and -rape games in which simulation fantasies depict female avatars virtually over powered, imprisoned and gang raped not only by male sociopath avatars, but by the millions of male gamers who operate and identify with them. I wrote earlier of the respite and resilience found by women in segregation from men. It is such recourse to sanctuary that informs Hart’s techno universe of female avatars, in her case automatons—the legatees of Donna Haraway’s feminist cyborgs... and their endorsement of technological advancement—isolated in their own alternate universes of serenity, beauty, and power. However solipsistic they at first seem, they have been constructed in reaction to the polarized clichés of amazons and victims. In Hart’s digital universe, automatons modeled after the myths of Persephone and Daphne, fleeing rapist gods, and Ophelia, who suffers the neglect and abuse of a narcissistic hero, find safety and empowerment in worlds without men. But rather than depict the female myths in flight from their abusers as male artists did, Hart depicts their avatars in clockwork sanctuaries from male rage and rape. Hart’s Ophelia, for instance, doesn’t drown but evolves into a water nymph in a sea of infinite digital possibility.

G. Roger Denson, “Advance of the XX Chromosocial: Forty Years of Women Artists Crossing the Homosocial Divide”