Artweek
October 1998
p. 16

A conversation with Jennifer Steinkamp, artist.
By Holly Willis

Los Angeles-based media artist Jennifer Steinkamp makes large scale light and sound installations composed of projections of computer-generated imagery. Entering a project that she has created is like walking into a virtual space, one creating the effect akin to being literally immersed within an image. Steinkamp's interest in light and projection began in a class taught by Gene Youngblood. He introduced Steinkamp to the work of animators like Ed Emshwiller and Oskar Fischinger, and she was completely swept away. She began making her own films, and then began working with computers. She studied at CalArts and Art Center, as well as on the job at various companies where she had access to high-end tools. She eventually returned to Art Center to teach, and has to date produced a number of exceptional installations and performances. U2 recently hired Steinkamp to produce images for a concert tour, and on October 9, Steinkamp's newest installation, titled The TV Room, will open at the Santa Monica Museum of Art.
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Holly Willis: What would you say you are doing when you're working with light?

Jennifer Steinkamp: Basically, I use light to dematerialize architecture. I do this by placing an illusionistic space inside of a real space. The imagery comes from the computer, I image the geometric space of the computer and remap it into architecture with projection, this creates an in-between space, a space between the computer and the real. In this process, the architecture has been transformed into a hybrid by projected imagery. As a result an intriguing phenomenon occurs, light which is not physical creates a physicality.

Willis: Would you say you are influenced by anyone in regard to ideas about light?

Steinkamp: In painting there is a lot of discussion about the representation of light. I recall studying the Impressionists and how some of the artists emphasized light over form or subject. Certain ideas capture your fancy, and I've always been intrigued by the idea of representing light because it is not corporeal.

Willis: Can you talk about how people become part of the projects? It's almost as though you're immersed in the image itself.

Steinkamp: When I'm working on a project I begin with the space. With "Smoke Screen," 1995, there was this ridiculous pole in the middle of the room, I didn't want light to hit it, so I placed the projectors off to the side at extreme angles, avoiding the pole. When you project at an angle, the image distorts, I compensate for the distortions with the computer. There were two projections from angles, when a person stepped in front of one projector, the other projector filled in their shadow, so in a way the viewer became interlaced in the work. I have used this technique many times, where the viewer's shadow becomes part of the image. The projectors are often placed low so the viewer has no choice but to become part of the work. Children immediately understand that they are expected to play in the projection. Humor and play are important aspects of the art, these are ways of involving the viewer as part of the work. As the viewer internalizes the image in her mind, she also experiences it physically in real space as she sees her shadow.

Willis: Do you map all of this out ahead of time?

Steinkamp: I create a virtual diagram of the installation space on the computer, or a simulation of what it will be like. I can calculate where to place the projectors and predict projection distortions using the computer. Fortunately there are tools in the software that work well for calculating projections. Obviously, reality is different than virtual reality, but I can get a pretty good idea of what the installation will be like.

Willis: What are some of the things you actually do working on the computer?

Steinkamp: I play with various software tools and try to create a lifelike motion -- a motion that works, 'lifelike' is the closest term that describes the feeling I am after. Sometimes I feel at a loss to describe what the animation can do best, I wish more people theorized motion, people like Gilles Deleuze, who's philosophical discussions of movement and time-image through cinema have influenced me deeply. In my piece, "A Sailor's Life Is a Life for Me," 1998, I use a tool called a warp. The warp is a primitive shape, in this case a sphere which sculpts the surface, I started with a flat plane. I positioned five or six warps bobbing along, creating waves. I generated eight wave strips reflecting different colors, I then cut and pasted the strips together into another scene. It's sort of a 2-D, 3-D effect because it's not really representing a 3-D space. It's more of a collage. The image is a collage and the multiple projections are collaged throughout the space. It's a piece that can be presented in many different ways depending on where it's shown.

So, in a way, the software company is a collaborator, I try out many different tools. One of the ideas I consistently experiment with is manipulating the Cartesian coordinates that make up 3-D graphics, I play with them in different ways, distorting them, messing them up, and basically changing the dimensions so that I'm no longer limited to a 3-D space. When you fool around with Cartesian coordinates this allows you to reconsider the relationship between the viewer and the subject. Subject and object are no longer a singular binary relationship.

Willis: What do you like about working digitally?

Steinkamp: Well, I've tried painting -- it drives me crazy because I can't control the paint to my satisfaction. With a computer you can't control the image necessarily, but you can repeat the process until you get what you like -- there is not as much precision as you would think with the tools I use. You can run a simulation, let it calculate, and see what you end up with. If you don't like it, you change it, and so on. With "Sailors...," I received many comments about it seeming painterly or more hand done. I thought that was interesting because I didn't set out to do that, the hand-made quality seems to be antithetical to people's conception of computer imagery.

Willis: How interested are you in exploring new technologies like virtual reality?

Steinkamp: Well in a way my work constitutes virtual reality but it's not produced in real time. Eventually there will be more computers available that can generate complex imagery in real time. Brian Eno talks about and creates generative art which is a media art form where new images are constantly created; it's never the same, much like some of his music. I find this idea thoroughly intriguing, the animation has a life of its own.

Willis: Where do you see your own work taking you?

Steinkamp: Lately, I've been approached by architects like Stephen Perrella at Columbia University, who are interested in similar ideas, Perrella calls this hypersurface architecture.

Willis: What's that?

Steinkamp: Hypersurface architecture is what I do, really. One example would be to take the face of a static building and re-surface it with moving images. It can be an amazing experience to see a building pulsate as if this solid inanimate object could move. Rather than making a building come to life, it is more a transformation, it is a between-state, a re-dimentionalization of something already existing in space.

It is the future -- that's what our cityscapes will look like soon. It's definitely the next wave for architecture, the non-static meeting between cyberspace and real space.

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