IMAGE [&] NARRATIVE

Home   Editorial Board   Policy

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The Myth of Presence. The Immediacy of Representation in Cyberspace

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Abstract (E): How is the effectiveness of a representation defined? It lies in its ability to make present that which is not, to ensure the illusion of a presence. A representation is only effective if it is able to convince a subject interpreting signs – a reader, a spectator or a witness – that something is starting to appear, something that has nothing to do with her, something that seems to possess its own dynamic, a relative autonomy and an undeniable transparency whose primary effect is the impression of a significant permanence.

Digital media are said to give rise to representations and effects of presence of an unsurpassed power. It is the myth of presence. I wish to explore this myth of presence that the digital brings to life. First, I will examine how digital media fulfil certain promises of the myth, thereby ensuring their credibility; and secondly, I will focus on their deconstruction to show their share of illusions. To do this, I will use a hypermedia work, entitled Adam's Cam. This work by Sébastien Loghman creates a very subtle effect, an illusion of presence, which sustains the myth, while never completely achieving it.

Abstract (F): À quoi reconnaît-on l'efficacité d'une représentation? C'est à sa capacité de rendre présent ce qui ne l'est pas et d'assurer l'illusion d'une présence. Une représentation n'est efficace que si elle parvient à convaincre le lecteur ou spectateur que quelque chose a commencé à apparaître et que cette présence ne lui doit rien, marquée par un certain dynamisme, par une relative autonomie et par une densité dont l'effet premier est l'impression d'une grande permanence.

Le numérique est dit susciter une représentation et des effets de présence d'un pouvoir inégalé. C'est le mythe de la présence. J'examinerai, dans un premier temps, de quelle façon le numérique réalise certaines promesses du mythe, lui assurant un crédit certain, et je tâcherai, dans un deuxième temps, de le déconstruire et de montrer sa part d'illusions. Pour ce faire, je pendrai comme exemple une œuvre hypermédiatique. Il s'agit de « Adam's Cam » de Sébastien Loghman. Cette œuvre parvient à susciter un très subtil effet de présence qui alimente le mythe sans pour autant complètement le réaliser.

keywords: Representation, digital media, effects of presence, myth, Sébastien Loghman.

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Article   How is the effectiveness of a representation defined? It lies in its ability to make

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Of course, the effectiveness of a representation relies in part on the medium or the apparatus brought into play. However, this effectiveness does not depend on the complexity of the medium itself or its devices, on their strength or novelty; it lies in their ability, through their continuous use, to allow the development of conventions, strategies and practices (literary, filmic or artistic). In this respect, a representation is effective only if the user's expectations are met.

Far too often, however, we confuse the effectiveness of a medium with its complexity or novelty. This is a recurrent argument in new media studies, especially when it comes to electronic media. Granted, its ability to render a diversity of signs (linguistic, visual and musical) into one binary language tweaks the imagination. We dream of representations with such an incredible effectiveness that they obliterate the space between subject and object, creating an illusion of presence independent of any context. We dream of an ideal representation, one that guarantees the perfect correlation between presence, immediacy, singularity and interactivity. The utopia of an ideal representation is based upon the convergence of these four elements, which enhance each other, ensuring a quasi transcendental experience. This is the myth of presence.

The Myth of Presence

The crux of this myth resides in the ability of digital media, and cyberspace as its specific outlet and communicative environment (Downes 2005: 3) A "real" experience is a situation where the illusion of the presence is such that it entails forgetting it is nothing more than a simulacrum. This myth is based on a correlation between presence and a series of effects; namely, immediacy, singularity and interactivity.

It is, beyond any doubt, a modern myth, at once true and untrue. True: digital media radically renew the modalities of representation, which does suggest new works of an unsurpassed effectiveness. Untrue: this renewal is still in its preliminary stage. The "real" experience of a transcendental presence is yet to come. As Richard Powers tells us :

We dream that a new tool might put us closer to the thing that we are sure lies just beyond us, just outside the scale of our being. […] Our dream of a new tool inclines us to believe that the next invention will give us a better, fuller, richer, more accurate, more immediate image of the world, when perhaps just the opposite is the case. Television does not improve on the verisimilitude of radio, nor

photography on that of painting. The more advanced the media, the higher the level of mediation.

Novelty and complexity do not make a medium effective. Rather, it is our habits, a collection of well-used conventions, strategies whose rudiments and presuppositions are well mastered by readers and spectators, that ensure the effectiveness of a representation. The new media, whatever their complexity and technical capability, i.e., the illusions their novelty inspires, will only become effective when they have allowed for new conventions and practices to take root. In the meantime, the illusion of presence they are said to impose is a myth – albeit a myth we need to analyze closely.

In *The Digital Sublime,* Vincent Mosco explores a number of myths related to cyberspace. These myths claim cyberspace as the end of history, the end of distance and the end of politics. This is of course a utopia as neither history, geography nor politics disappear into the pixel screen of cyberspace. On the other hand, it is true that the latter does transform the manner in which history, geography, and politics are practiced. It modifies the ways users think these aspects of their lives. These myths oscillate between the dream of a perfect projection and the inevitable distortions of human endeavors. If, according to Mosco, cyberspace "doesn't mark the end of history (or even the beginning of a new age), doesn't announce the end of geography (because more than ever places play an important role in our relationship with the world), and doesn't signal the end of politics (power always attracts power)" (2004: 28), this fiction of a heterotopia capable of overturning essential values of all social life (time, space and community) shows us the force of a medium that transforms the very material of human communication. Myths simplify to the extreme, while at the same time, they reveal what would otherwise remain taboo or implicit. They provide a tool for understanding.

Following Mosco's example, I wish to explore this myth of presence that the digital brings to life. First, I will examine how digital media fulfill certain promises of the myth, thereby ensuring their credibility; and secondly, I will focus on their deconstruction to show their share of illusions. To do this, I will use a hypermedia work, entitled *Adam's Cam (*http://www.incident.net/hors/nu/adamscam).
This work by Sébastien Loghman creates a very subtle effect, an illusion of presence, which sustains the myth, while never completely achieving it. But, let us start with a closer look at the notion of presence itself, and the conditions for its manifestation.

The Anatomy of Presence

How does something reveal itself to us? Georges Didi-Huberman, the French art historian, uses the example of dust suspended in air: "Dust" he writes, "shows us that light exists." He continues on to explain: In the ray that falls on the ground, from a window up above, the dust seems to show us the ideal existence of a light that is purified of the objects it illumines: tiny particles caught between an ether and a fluidity without direction. This is nothing more than a fiction as the object

has not been purified; it is there, and it is the dust itself. But it is a tangible fiction, or almost; ineffable, while still quite palpable. (1998: 57)

The dust suspended in the air allows us to grasp an elusive moment where a presence is revealed. Much like the aura that attaches itself to works of art, to use Walter Benjamin's notion, it is neither the dust nor the light, but the subtle and ephemeral relationship between the two that creates the effect of this presence. It is the contact between the light and the dust, a light segmented by the frame of a window and the dust suspended in the perfectly still air of a room, that allows something to appear. "What obsesses or threatens us", Didi-Huberman continues, "can just as easily exist, even autonomously, in the dust that dances above and all around us, this dust suddenly visible in a ray of light, this dust we even breathe." (1998: 57)

This somewhat familiar situation brings to light certain characteristics of the effect of presence: the singularity of the moment, the immediacy of the sentiment it evokes, the eventness of the appearance and the impression of feeling completely engulfed by it, and lastly, the necessary discontinuity for the presence to be felt. There can be no presence without absence. There can only be appearance if at first there was nothing.

Presence does not, in any way, imply permanence; it does however indicate a certain dynamism. An inanimate body is not present; it is at the limit of disappearing. It hides in front of our eyes. The effect of presence can only be understood in terms of discontinuity, interruption, or imbalance. It can only be felt at the junction between appearance and disappearance.

Strictly speaking, presence is what follows appearance, and what precedes disappearance. It is bounded by absence, time frames that can be constructed either in a mode of anticipation – that which is not there, but expected – or in a mode of recall – that which is no longer there, and whose absence is being felt. Presence is structured like the present, an interval of unstable time circumscribed by a future and a past, whose tensions provide it with form and extension. Presence is therefore circumscribed by two events, appearance and disappearance. If one of these two events no longer happens, presence ceases. If there is no appearance, it is the very limit of presence that is not achieved, unless we open the experience of presence to include mystic revelation, to the real presence of God for example, which requires no appearance for its presence to be established. In the same manner, there can be no recognition of presence if there is no disappearance. Permanency does not ensure the recognition of presence: if it is a condition, it is certainly not its principle. Permanency must be threatened, or presence fades from consciousness. Presence cannot remain static or inert. The effect of presence depends on disturbances to be felt. It requires events that ensure, even if negatively, its dynamism.

This clearly suggests the effect is a cognitive event. A wound, or a provocative image, make their presence known to us by imposing on our senses. This reaction can come from a natural phenomenon, but, more importantly for us, from a representation. In this case, presence appears as the illusion of a figure that emerges and seems real, even if it is only an illusion, brought about by devices and strategies. To create such an illusion, where a figure can emerge and impose itself, a representation – and more specifically a digital representation – must respect three conditions, which are in their own right forms of illusion. These are

immediacy, singularity and interactivity.

The first illusion, immediacy, is the impression that the figure present is offered without any mediation, that the medium completely dissolves in the representation. Immediacy implies transparency, a balance between the expectations of the spectator and the possibilities of the medium. This suspension of mediation opens up a hybrid time-space, made up in parts by the world of the spectator and the represented world, that merge to create a distinct and immersive experience.

Transparency requires an equilibrium that can only be attained when conventions are already shared, when the expectations of the spectator are structured to respond to the capacities of the medium. A referential illusion, no matter what form it takes, relies on a set of predispositions and habits that ensure its effectiveness. A spectator confronted with an unknown medium cannot identify with the world it tries to represent, because he or she doesn't know what to expect. If there is no experience of spectatorship, there is no way to correctly interpret the signs. As Richard Powers suggested earlier, all mediation implies a complex interface that requires competence, or what we can identify as an established set of interpretants, to use Charles Sanders Peirce term. The illusion of transparency in *Adam's Cam*, discussed later, cannot appear if the spectator doesn't already know how hypermedia art works. If I have no idea of the basic requirements to participate in Adam's Cam, if I don't understand that the mouse animates the sleeping woman, the work remains inert. Any possible illusion is forfeited before it can even appear.

The habits of spectatorship are necessarily anchored in a practice that gives experience both its density and meaning. However, these habits rely on assumptions that modulate the overall sphere. These assumptions and their subsequent expectations are shared both by the spectators-users and the producers of digital media. In fact, they are shared by the entire community of digital media, from the makers to the programmers. For Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala, the desire for transparency and immediacy is at the very heart of the current developments in computer technology and manifests itself as the contemporary actualization of a quest started long ago, the quest to reproduce as faithfully as possible the original non-mediated experience of the world. In *Windows and Mirrors*, they argue that "the myth of transparency is a story that artists and designers have told us (and themselves) in order to justify their designs." (2003: 48) Transparency is the primary criterion used to design interfaces.

The second illusion, singularity, suggests the situation of spectatorship is unique: this moment of a revealed presence is an exceptional event. Here, the figure is perceived as fragile and precarious. It can at any moment disappear, which accentuates the effect of its presence. Singularity can only be felt if transparency, or the effect of immediacy of the figure, is maintained. Obviously, the interactivity of digital media strengthens this effect of singularity as it gives the spectator the impression of a real connection between his or her actions and the world represented. However, singularity stems from the overall impact of the work itself, its ability to grab the spectator and bring him or her to fully participate in the representation.

Both literature and film have, over time, developed strategies to facilitate our adhesion to the universe they propose. One of the properties of narrative structure

is to grab the reader or spectator intellectually and emotionally through the creation of an intrigue, by giving him or her the impression of actively participating in the story and its reconstruction. We can readily see how the interactivity of digital media can accentuate this effect of singularity.

Interactivity itself, the third illusion, provides the spectator with the sense that he or she has a real possibility of interacting with the figure, and can, if so desired, make it react to her or his own commands. Interactivity is the most accomplished form of appropriation. The spectator is no longer content to project his or her intentions and desires onto the figure; he or she animates it to act as a consequence of his or her intentions and desires. The figure espouses the intentions of the spectator, and renders them in its own universe.

It is important here to distinguish between two levels of interactivity: a first level, the medium itself, encompasses the interface between human and computer; a second level, distinctly semiotic, comprises the relationship established between the spectator and the world represented (Archibald and Gervais 2006). For this second level of interactivity to be effective, the first level of interactivity must disappear; the media level must dissolve to give way to the semiotic universe projected. Interactivity relates primarily to the properties of the computer allowing a user to manipulate it, to set off actions, video sequences or the opening of other components or programs. At the semiotic level, interactivity is the fictional counterpart to this first property; it is the projection of various manipulations into a world of representation and their translation into action and events in that world. A symbolic or esthetic interactivity appears when the mediation provided by the medium disappears, letting the spectator both forget he or she is using an interactive device, and believe a direct relation between his or her desires and the reactions of the figures on the screen has been established. It is this symbolic interactivity that grounds the myth of presence, this illusion of a real experience that digital media provide.

Adam's Cam

From this perspective, we can now understand that the impact of Sebastien Loghman's hypermedia work, *Adam's Cam*, is due in large part to the effects of interactivity it generates.

The device is incredibly simple, at least in appearance. The browser window is entirely black, except for a rectangle at its center, an embedded window in sepia, where we can plainly see a woman laid out on a sheet. She is photographed using a three quarter mid shot; we can only see the upper part of her body, her trunk, her head and her arms. She is sleeping on her stomach and her face is hidden from us. The image itself is extremely stark. The backdrop wall is non-descript, no distinctive signs, no accessory is present that might allow us to date the scene. We are confronted with a minimal representation: a naked woman lying down and sleeping. And we can know nothing more. The only information available is revealed by a line of text beneath the window of the image. Here it is our own space-time determinations that are presented. We in fact see, written in red on black, the exact time our of our visit to the site, as well as the day, the date and the year.

Figure 1. *Adam's Cam*

The effect of presence occurs when, with the mouse, we move the cursor over the image. The usual cursor of most browsers transforms into a very small square, which seems to be inspired from computer programs used to transform images. The immobility of the woman is interrupted when suddenly, with the use of our cursor, we click on her neck or any other part of her anatomy. The sleeper awakens, slightly, and moves. The still body suddenly becomes animated. Like a jinn, we can discretely disturb her sleep, making her move, stretch an arm or turn onto her stomach. With the click of a finger, we can make her lift herself up on her forearms before falling back to sleep. The movements are usually irregular and it requires a bit of time before we master it, but there is no doubt, it is our actions that animate her; it is our hand that makes her turn in her bed. But is she really sleeping? Is she dreaming? Does she know we are the ones inciting her to move? Her vulnerability – her sleep is in our hands – makes her all the more desirable. And the absence of space-time determinations (Where is she? Where does she come from? Where are we?) propels us to invest – to fill this absence with our own determinations. We re-territorialize the scene, projecting onto this world our own data. This time is our own, this space is the one we wish it to be, thereby accentuating our adhesion to the representation.

The effect of presence is ensured by this interactivity that links our desires with her movements. If the limits of the program are quickly attained, the impression left by the discovery of the work confirms the initial effectiveness of the illusion. The interactivity accentuates the effect of immediacy, which ensures the transparency of the representation. The movements that mutually correspond (ours and hers) reinforce the experience of singularity. However, like all illusions, this one is precarious and quickly disappears on closer examination. But, before

exploring its limits, we can pay close attention to its strength, and how it participates in the myth of digital media as being able to transcend representation. From the outset, the title of the work itself sets the groundwork for this mythification. *Adam's Cam* is in fact Adam's webcam. It is what the first man on earth sees, what he can record with his digital camera. Obviously if this webcam belongs to Adam, this sleeping woman can be none other than Eve, the very first woman. By animating her ourselves with our cursor, we take Adam's place; we see through his eyes, his intentions become our own.

But what exactly is the nature of this gaze? Is it innocent or immoral? Obviously its nature depends on the moment and the type of relationship. It is innocent if Eve is sleeping in Eden; it is much less so if it occurs after the banishment, after she has tasted, and therefore us included, the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Everything tends to indicate the couple has long left the garden. The lens of the camera engages not only an objectification of Eve's body, it eroticizes it. She is not simply sleeping, she is offering herself to be seen, to be desired. Her nudity is an invitation to voyeurism. If she remains essentially innocent, our gaze directed toward her is not. It has been constructed, and is therefore devoid of any saving grace.

Whatever the final verdict may be, the symbolism of this primordial relationship is impossible to escape: we are at the origin of the world, the beginning of humanity. The window opens onto a myth of origins. The work uses this myth to hyper emphasize the singularity of its experience, its transcendent characteristic, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the illusion of presence. It is particularly fascinating to see how this apocalyptic imagination (the end of history, of distance, of politics), with which cyberspace is directly linked by Vincent Mosco, responds to the myth of origins in Loghman's work.

It is after all only logical these two imaginations complement each other: the end of the world is always a prelude to an origin; the new replaces the old. The end and the origin share the same space, mirror each other, because they are the two salient points of a single moment of transition, a liminal space where what is disappearing is relayed to what is appearing. The Time of the End, like the Time of Origin, are examples of Sacred Time, to use Mircea Eliade's concept (Eliade 1963). They are times of crisis which impose their own specific temporal and eventness logic. These time periods are favorable to apparitions, marvels and wonders, like inanimate objects coming to life by the click of our mouse.

The evocation of this imaginary in *Adam's Cam* helps create the effects of presence, which rely on the discontinuous and the intermittent, on this singularity that the urgency of the crisis only accentuates. The marvel of a woman who reacts to our desires, despite the distance the screen of a computer imposes, is reinforced by the fact that it is the first woman. This relationship we are establishing between her and us is potentially the start of a new world, a new reality. Our union is at the origin of a hybrid world, between the biological and the digital. If, as we mentioned earlier, this time is our own, it is transformed by our contact with the sleeping woman: it is no longer normal time, it is a transfigured time, the mythic time of origin.

Adam's Scam

The title of the work doesn't, however, have only a mythical dimension to ensure its instantaneous credibility. It also expresses an important poetic function, as defined by Roman Jakobson. 'Adam's Cam' is a paronomasia, a figure of style quite similar to paronyms. The paradigmatic example used by Jakobson is "I like Ike". This kind of paronomasia draws attention to its own composition, a reflexivity that is at the heart of the poetic function. However, this works against the wish to create an illusion of presence, which requires the medium become transparent and disappear to enhance the immediacy of the object represented.

The appeal of Loghman's work lies in its desire both to favor an illusion of presence and to induce its dissolution. It insists on reflecting back to the very processes involved, thereby creating a reflection on the representation itself. The paronomasia leads us to this critical turn, forcing us to reflect on the composition of the title, its signifiers, instead of its meaning. To reflect, and more importantly, to acknowledge a subtle word game based on homophones, for nothing can be phonetically closer to the webcam of Adam, Adam's Cam, than the ruse by the same man, Adam's Scam.

Sébastien Loghman's hypermedia work participates at once in the myth of a completely transcendent cyberspace, and its deconstruction. It exploits all its possibilities while at the same time, it undermines its very process. The interactivity, whose seductive appeal played such an important role in our initial adhesion, is quickly revealed as a simulacrum. An illusion. The woman, who will never reveal her face, remains insensible to our presence. If the unveiling or the anticipated awakening ensured the dynamism of our relationship and fed an illusion of a real interactivity, their indefinite postponement reveals their illusory character. To quote J. Hillis Miller's analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "The Minister's Black Veil", *Adam's Cam* is essentially about "the unveiling of the possibility of the impossibility of unveiling." (1991: 51)

The interactivity becomes undone, and with it the singularity of the experience and the effect of immediacy of the representation. If, as Baudrillard has said suggested, the simulacrum, "is not about imitation, mirroring or even parody. It is the substitution of the real with signs of the real" (1981: 11), the discovery of its limits brings about the deconstruction of the simulacrum itself. The myth dissipates. This is, after all, nothing more than a machine, a complex device, nothing more than a representation whose capacities can no longer allow us to believe in the absence of any mediation. And we come to realize that Eve will do nothing more than turn her back to us; she will continue to sleep and live in her world, a world of thought we never really had access to, as we were separated by a computer screen. Eve is nothing more than a montage of code; we are clearly out of Eden, forever banished from Paradise where communication with the other was said to be ideal, and is now revealed as impossible. The immediacy and the presence of this other were nothing more than simulacra, the result of a digital device.

15:15:55 Tuesday, 22 July, 2008

Figure 2. Adam's Cam

Adam's Cam plays on this regularly expressed desire to animate the inanimate, to bring to life that which is inert and without life. From the creation of Eve from Adam's rib bone to the Golem or doctor Frankenstein's monster, the examples are endless. They eloquently speak of this desire to give life, to see forms of life appear where they were least expected. However, if the figure of the sleeping woman takes its source from the Bible and other literary myths, the animated clips are a direct echo of a long celebrated cinematographic sequence. They can be seen at the heart of *La Jetée* by Chris Marker (1962).

In Marker's film everything is static, largely because the film is a slide show. Fixed images in black and white are presented one after the other, while a voice-over tells the remarkable story of a man who goes back in time to correct certain events with deleterious consequences. Everything is static and yet, at the same time, the magic of cinema combines with an incredible intrigue, which allows us to animate this universe, to give it a breath of life. This life is none other than our own. As the film progresses we forget these are fixed images, following one after the other, just like the reader of a novel forgets she or he is simply reading words. Suddenly, more than half way through the film, a miracle occurs. The woman, whom the man meets and seduces, is shown sleeping in a close-up. She sleeps and the images begin to blend with each other. She dreams, and the scenes become superimposed. Unexpectedly, too swiftly for us to anticipate it, she opens her eyes. A filmed sequence barely a few seconds in length is inserted into the fixed images and the inanimate is all of a sudden animated. The woman opens her eyes and the effects of presence are magnified. She is there, alive and palpably real. The unexpected has occurred. Something appears, and then almost immediately disappears, as if gripped by time, and this within a short interval between two sequences of fixedness, thus impressing on our minds an illusion of presence.

The filmed sequence is brief, it only lasts a few seconds. Immediately after, the

film returns to its initial slide show presentation. However, its impact is stupendous: it has created a simulacrum of presence. And it creates it with an exceedingly simple technique: all it took was the insertion of a short sequence of filmed images in a series of fixed images. But its singularity (it's the only animated sequence in the whole film), its eventness (it occurs when we don't expect it) and the effect of immediacy it provokes (the filmed sequence eliminates instantly the layer of mediation that we had become used to, producing a rupture) bring about an extraordinary effect of presence.

The same type of cognitive event is produced by *Adam's Cam*, where the illusion of an unexpected interactivity produces an effect of presence in cyberspace. However, there is a major difference with *La Jetée*: Loghman's Eve doesn't disappear at the end of the event. She stays there, silent and asleep, subjected to movements initiated by a fascinated spectator, but always present. This continuous presence helps deconstruct the effect that the interactivity helped create, as if some limit had not been respected. Eve becomes once again a simple image, and the myth regains its normal dimensions. The work does not disappear behind it's effects; it remains ostensibly present, thereby providing the means to critically grasp its components.

The comparison with the *La Jetée* by Marker clearly confirms that the effectiveness of a representation is indeed completely unrelated to the complexity of the devices and equipment used to create it. It is however clearly related to the general context of the work's reception, the horizon of expectations and conventions that guide comprehension. It is neither the complexity nor the novelty of a medium that ensures its effectiveness; it's through usage, or more precisely, the tradition it engenders and the environment it provides for works. Let us briefly investigate this environment.

Incident.net

In what cultural environment do we find *Adam's Cam*? In what context does the reception of this work takes place? It occurs in a cyberspace where bodies and nudes progressively impose their reign. *Adam's Cam* plays the card of voyeurism, the scopic drive that literally feeds Internet. Pornography, as we know, is one of the most important motors of Internet development. Literally, millions of sites propose bodies in any imaginable position: men, women and children, photographed, filmed, and even directly accessible with webcams, that is, digital cameras broadcasting directly on the network.

Before we access the window where Eve is dreaming, Loghman's site presents us with a homepage that identifies the work and provides us with a choice between two levels of interactivity. We can, in fact, choose between being a witness or a spy. The terms of engagement are predefined: our appreciation of the work is limited to that of the voyeur. All we can do is choose our attitude, and even this choice is deceptive, since our interactive possibilities remain the same. Whichever one we choose, Eve is always naked and vulnerable, always sleeping and desirable, always distant, if only because she is hidden behind a mountain of code. And she always reacts to our impulse. In fact, the only thing that differs between the two

choices offered are the window options. When we choose the witness option, a small window opens, while, when the spy option is chosen, a full blown window opens up. In either case, however, the active window remains the same size.
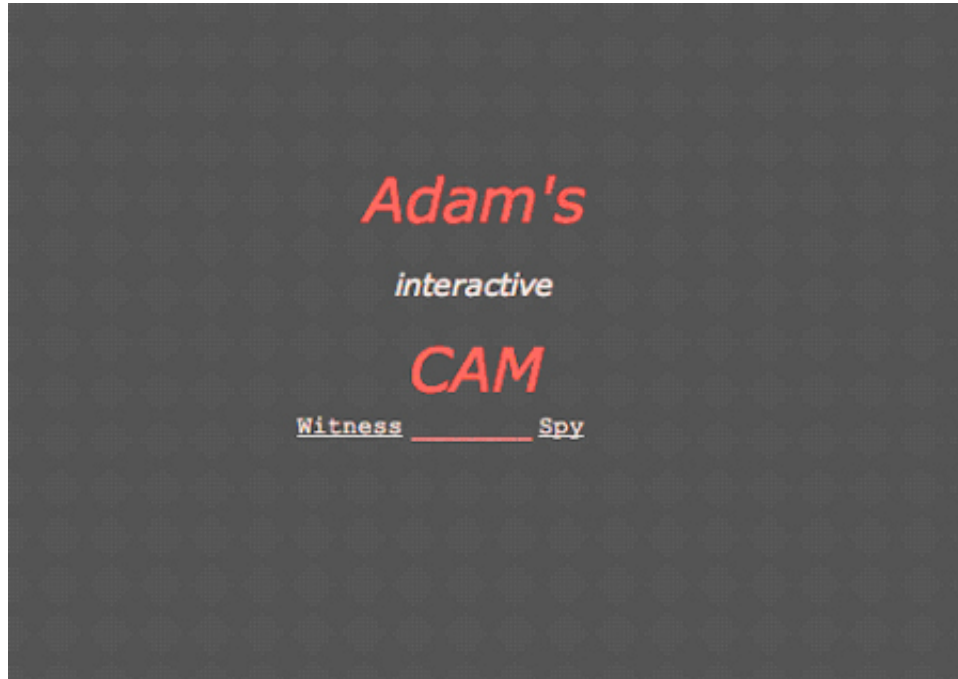

figure 3. Homepage for *Adam's Cam*

Eve is naked. This is the heart of this work: it gives it at once its meaning and its legitimacy. *Adam's Cam* is part of a virtual exhibition entitled "The Nude", hosted on incident.net. This site is a virtual gallery of hypermedia art. It provides information and space for artistic creation. The collective includes artists like Vadim Bernard, Gregory Chatonsky, Marika Dermineur, Reynald Drouhin, KRN, Julie Morel and Michael Sellam. Incident.net offers information, hypermedia works of art, video, audio, etc.

In this particular exhibit, thirty works are presented where nudity is treated in different yet innovative ways, whether it be with humor, tragedy, esthetics, or politics. Listed alphabetically, *Adam's Cam* is the first work listed. It is present, therefore, in a space dedicated to hypemedia art and, more specifically, to nudity and digital explorations of representations of the body.

If "the status of nudity has evolved through the ages", the introductory text to the exhibit reads, it "has often been the symptom of our ambivalence with images; between the purity of a body before the fall and the decay of a body covered with leaves or torn rags". *Adam's Cam* plays on this fall: his Eve is not shown standing, but lying down on the ground. She does not face us, having nothing to cover herself in her purity; she turns in part her back to us, hiding her face, as if she did in fact have something to hide. The body, naked and pure, has nothing erotic about it: nothing has marked it, nothing differentiates it from the nature that surrounds it. However, the body slightly covered incites itself to be uncovered, and therefore, creates an affirmation of desire and the need for an effect of presence. It is at the root of eroticism. And in Biblical terms, the fall is a prelude to desire.

Eve alone, amongst all women, has experienced these two states. The first, Eden, is marked by a body without sign or taboo, a neutral body, the same as every other living body in Paradise. In the second state, human, the body is distinguishable. It is a body no longer pure, a body constructed by culture. It is covered, transformed, adorned and especially, sexualized. Sometimes, we may well believe it is only that. It is an ancient paradox that the naked body disappears from sight, while the covered body can never stop showing itself.

By ensuring his work can only be experienced through an act of voyeurism (witness/spy), Sebastien Loghman plays with the fundamental modality of the sexualized body. Nothing ensures an act of presence more than the appearance of a sexualized body, that is, a body whose nudity is no longer a natural state: it is a spectacle and a sign. The effects of presence felt through the initial interactivity rely on the relative nudity of Eve, on the possibility that she might completely turn around so that we can see her face and her body, her breasts, and everything that has been undressed. As soon as we start moving our cursor over her body, trying to make her act, to wake her up or to show herself, we become voyeurs, hoping for the moment when the hidden will be revealed, as if the whole meaning of the work depended on this revelation. The effectiveness of this process lies in the dynamics created by every hermeneutical enquiry. The anticipation of the moment of return – in its literal and narrative sense here! – ensures the representation its eventness and its immediacy.

Infiltration

Adam's Cam fully exploits the principle of voyeurism. And, in fact, for a short time, Loghman's work was not only on incident.net, it was also listed on webcamworld.com, a site dedicated to webcams. *Adam's Cam* kept company with sites whose primary purpose is online pornography.

Adam's Cam walked on the wild side! On the homepage of webcamworld.com portal, the offer is explicit: a plethora of erotic webcams are proposed and the choice is overwhelming. Every available image is not necessarily pornographic, as this portal provides access to webcams throughout the world, classified by continent. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the sites listed do propose explicit images. Eve was lost in a mass of bodies. Her nudity didn't only rival other artistic projects like those found on incident.net. She was also made available in a global offering that has no artistic intent. And this was no accident. Her presence here was quite deliberate: *Adam's Cam* was registered on the site by a certain Adam, none other than Sebastien Loghman himself.
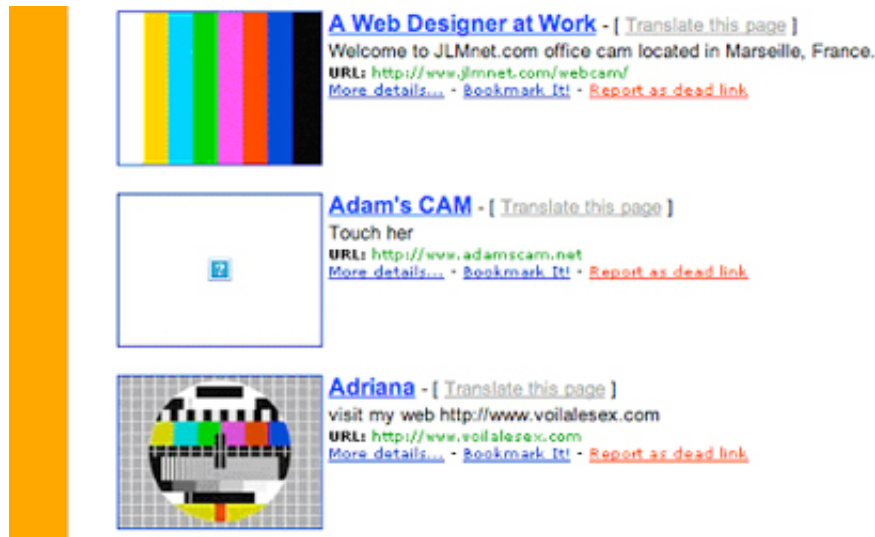
Figure 4. List on webcamword.com (January 2006)

In the domain of web art, artists have often used different strategies of infiltration, playing with the institutional limits of their work. The critical use of pornographic codes, for instance, is a prime example of these types of strategies, which blur the limits between art and non-art (White 2006: 57-84). Joanne Lalonde explains: "many of the most visited works of hypermedia openly exploit the libidinal visual curiosity of the spectator. Their success relies on two essential elements: sexual content and continuous transmission." The sites mentioned by Lalonde include *Jennicam* and *Anacam*, which continuously broadcasted images of the life of the artists, or sites like *Cup Cake* (http://www.sugarandspice.org/) and *Digital Diaries* (www.digital-diaries.com/), all of which deliberately exploit the frontier between art and erotica. The presence of *Adam's Cam* on the site of webcamworld.com participated in a similar strategy of infiltration; this time however it was not a question of reintegrating the world of art after having flirted with the limits of the pornography industry. It was a move to leave the art world to meander through the world of erotic webcams. By listing itself on webcamworld.com, *Adam's Cam* was trying to lose its aura, an aura that a site like incident.net easily provides. By mingling with this mass of webcams, by rendering Eve anonymous, Loghman attempted to pass the ultimate test: to have a representation play the role of an authentic communication. Was Eve equal to the Lolita's and Pamela's whose charms are offered without restraint? Was the experience she offered comparable to that of the others? What, in reality, distinguished *Adam's Cam* from ordinary webcams?

The answer is clear: it is the illusion of interactivity. With an erotic webcam there is no secondary level of interactivity. The woman is in fact present at the screen, linked to a computer by a sophisticated protocol of communication (a digital camera, a telephone connection, a network of information distribution, etc.). She has her own intentionality; she is not simply a fictional counterpart of the spectator. She can answer questions and accept to do what we ask her, but she is first and foremost alive and not controlled by the commands of a computer. Unlike Eve, she is not sleeping, her face is not hidden; on the contrary, her face is visible, as well as the rest of her more often than not. This is no longer interactivity. This

is interaction. It is no longer representation, it is communication. We are no longer confronted with a work, but with life. The effect of presence is neutralized because there is in fact, quite simply, presence. Other effects can appear, but presence imposes itself as reality, and this in itself subsumes all processes used to simulate its existence. The interactivity, in its secondary and semiotized form, is the quality that identifies the effectiveness of a representation to imitate an interaction. It disappears when interaction takes up it rightful place.

For a figure to be present and impose itself on our mind, for its effects of presence to be noteworthy, we need an absence, not a banal presence less and less meaningful. A figure is a complex sign that, like all signs, takes the place of an object whose absence it confirms, while giving the illusion of its presence. However, this presence is symbolic. It is a construction of the imagination (Gervais 2007). The Eve of Sebastien Loghman is a figure. There is no woman behind the code or the linked screen that gives her form and ensures her a presence – there is only a representation, a set of signs.

Eve is a figure that allows herself to be desired. She asks us to invest in our desire to manipulate, i.e., master her. The fact that she refuses to leave the realm of dreams that is hers, provides her with a great potential for meaning. Nothing is more present than that which makes itself desired. And at the same time, the effects of this presence are fragile. All sorts of errors (a damaged film, an interrupted communication or a computer virus) can put an end to her presence, casting the event of her appearance into the category of a simple memory. But, even if *Adam's Cam's* reliability is weak, its potency is great and its basic principles remain at the heart of our continuing fascination with digital media. But this fascination does not depend on the technical means or devices used. Rather, it is the capacity of the forms projected to carry elements of signification, or, more generally speaking, meaning itself. It relies on the narratives we create, and the myths in which we are ready to believe.

The Role of the Body

One last question begs to be asked. What role does the body have in this myth of presence that digital makes possible for us? "If artistic creation is an act of becoming naked," the introductory text to "The Nude" exhibit on incident.net tells us, if it is as much an unveiling as a veiling in the same gesture, where does our nudity lie today? What happens to the nude when the body can be industrially cloned and when nanotechnologies infiltrate the meat on our bones? What is the relationship between generalized nudity and this other form of being naked that awaits us with the experience of esthetic?

The twentieth century has put the body on center stage. It has brought it to the screen, it has slowly undressed it, and has exposed it in all its aspects, even the most private and secret. It has ravished and marked it, it has abused its limits and it has transformed it, and yet in every instant it has remained a spectacle.

The body is our singular reality. It is, for some, the incarnation of consciousness. For others, it is the ultimate limit that we cannot shed despite contemporary

fictions to the contrary. It is the last frontier: the skin, the body, the sexual act, orgasm, the transmission of bodily fluids. Eroticism signals the appearance of these things hidden for so long, with effects of presence of an incredible effectiveness. If an author like William Gass could lament the paucity of vocabulary for the body and its sexuality, insisting on the fact that there were more words to designate types of birds than there were to describe sexual relations (1978: 25), the end of the last century has taken his reprimand quite seriously and has multiplied its representations. In fact, the body has become an imposed subject. It is no longer hidden; on the contrary, we never cease exhibiting it, playing with its ability to capture our attention the moment its presence is most fragile. Showing the body is to inscribe its unveiling as an event. It's playing the game of appearing and disappearing, of presence and absence, of a gaze that is always surprised to see naked what society has clothed to protect it, even in its most vulgar moments.

Jean-Jacques Courtine, in his introduction to volume three of l'*Histoire du corps*, makes this observation:

> […] never has the human body known transformations of this depth
> and magnitude as those it has known throughout the century that
> has just ended […], never has the intimate sexualized body known
> such overt, obsessive exhibition, never have the images of war
> brutalities and concentration camps it has been subjected to seen an
> equivalent with our visual culture, never have the spectacles for
> which it is object approached the upheavals that painting,
> photography and cinema have brought to its image. (2006: 9-10)

We know the technologies of representation have multiplied; they have transformed the body into a privileged subject, a witness to the upheavals the medium and our society have known. The increasing importance given to the image, fixed and animated, have hyper accentuated an increasingly more explicit representation of the body. Digital and cyberspace have done nothing to attenuate this relationship. On the contrary, the reign of the image and the gaze has been inscribed in a new mutation: the continuous accessibility of Internet corresponds to an over abundance, an over exhibition of the sexualized body. And banality is becoming the primary mode of reception. The effects of presence are becoming attenuated. Meanwhile, the ever increasing banality of the sexualized body opens two distinct and yet opposite developments, clearly evident in our modernity: on the one hand, an exacerbation of the body, submitted to ever greater distortions, and a logic of appearance pushed to its extreme; on the other hand, a logic of disappearance where the body is renewed as taboo.

In the context of this polarization, Sebastien Loghman's sleeping Eve marks an incredible time-out. She reminds us of the simple truth that the reign of the image has helped us forget in its logic of showing: it doesn't take much to attract a gaze, and often the simplest devices or strategies are the most effective. His Eve is a woman that resists us despite her vulnerability. And we desire her the more because she is inaccessible. What is she dreaming of? In what labyrinth of thought does she wander? Is she trying to return to Eden, from where was she banished? The window of the computer that opens onto her lair appears as a perfect equilibrium between presence and absence, between what is offered and what is refused. And it is in this tension that nudity becomes an esthetic experience. A

woman dreams and we muse. We cannot deny it: presence is the effect that a spectator, absent to himself, feels when his mind it caught by a spark of truth or life, where there was only a moment ago, nothing but pixels on a screen.

n.b. This is the extended english version of an article first published in French, in *Archée : cyberart et cyberculture artistique* (n° 4, May 2007, http://archee.qc.ca/). It was translated by Kevin Shelton and Bertrand Gervais.

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