# The Whitney Biennial 2002:

The Era of Multi-Dimensional Sculpture Arrives
(An edited version of this review first appeared in Sculpture in October 2002)

A sculptural revolution has taken over the Whitney. I've read negative reviews of this Biennial, and they remind me of the negative reviews which greeted major advances of the past, such as Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism. It appears to me that the fundamental change in the basis of the art being exhibited is too radical for some reviewers to grasp, or appreciate, and so they attempt to dismiss it as mere novelty, or entertainment.

One New York Times critic, objecting to sound and animation in sculpture, insisted, "To restore silence is the role of objects." (1) If so, then these art works are more than mere objects. Their role was never to restore silence, but to break the sound barrier in art.

Part of this revolution is a return to an appreciation of entertainment values in fine art. We expect our serious playwrights, novelists and musicians to be entertaining; why should we object if artists adopt a similar standard, especially when such a change might bring back public support for fine art in the USA?

The head curator, Lawrence R. Rinder, set this as his standard, "Whenever you find a work that . . . seems to lie beyond the pale of the contemporary art world, stop to ask why." (2) He sees the results as dividing into three themes: Beings, Spaces and Tribes, and he has devoted a floor of the Whitney to each theme. However, this is like not seeing the forest for the trees. There is one theme that clearly dominates this show as a result of his open minded standard: the desire of contemporary sculptors to explore multi-dimensional media. A forest of such media fills the Whitney, and within that forest, Beings, Spaces, and Tribes are blooming among the groves.

I heard one artist/critic say this Biennial is based on television, not painting. (3) Exactly right, and I believe it describes a revolutionary change. Ancient man expressed himself with the materials at hand: pigments, wood, stone, etc. Today artists live in a digital world, and artists who use the materials at hand to express today's world are building sculptures on armatures more complex than clockwork.

Twentieth century sculptors who were interested in the power of moving images had begun to experiment with multi-dimensional media. The transition has taken at least a century, but for the first time we have
a survey show where multi-dimensional sculptors dominate traditional sculptors in sheer numbers. This marks a turning point in the history of art. If this heralds the start of a new art era, history will ultimately decide what to name it, but I'll begin the debate by calling it the Era of Multi-dimensional Art.

In the past, man recognized three dimensions, and sculpture was the art form that explored them. After Einstein, it was clear that time was also

a dimension, and sculptors in the 20th century had already begun to explore work that changed over time: kinetic sculptors such as Calder, video sculptors such as Nam June Paik, digital sculptors such as James Seawright, Net sculptors such as Adrienne Wortzel, and the first artist to sell a website to a collector, Douglas Davis, were among the pioneers. Thomas Wilfred's "Lumias," Jean Tinguely's kinetic sculptures, and Robert Rauchenberg's E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) were also noteworthy. They will be among the founding artists if this Biennial marks the transition to an era of multi-dimensional sculpture. (4)

A digital theme is announced from afar by Erwin Redl's "Matrix VI" installation, in which three grids of light emitting diodes (LEDs) are suspended in front of the Whitney. LEDs represent a major step forward in light technology. For tens of thousands of years, man created light by burning something: camp fires, torches, candles, even light bulbs burn up their filaments. LEDs directly transform electrons into photons. The grid epitomizes the Digital Revolution, suggesting the system of coordinates invented by Descartes, which is the basis of digital image reproduction. LEDs in a grid are an icon of the Digital Age. Yet Redl claims to avoid content in his grid. If indeed there is no content to his work, then it seems likely it is the dimension of light that accounts for its iconic power, for it looks strongest after dark when the light defines the work.

Jim Campbell's LED's begin to add the information Redl stripped from his

grid, and the result is astonishing. In each of the three sculptures in his "Fifth Avenue" series, Campbell places a diffusing surface in front of his LED grids. By varying the intensity of the LED's over time, their

fluctuating light strikes the diffusers, and creates moving images before our eyes. In a red blur that merges pointillism and expressionism, we recognize people moving. His subjects are humans walking down Fifth Avenue. These sculptures are at once a testament to the power of digitized images to convey life, and an exploration of the dimensions of time and space and light.

Ken Feingold endows two automatons with artificial intelligence in "If/Then." Two identical disembodied heads protrude from a carton filled

with packing material. The heads carry on a dialog, their silicone lips

move, their glass eyes blink, and they try to make sense of the situation they find themselves in. And we, in turn, try to make sense of

the situation we find ourselves in: confronting artificial life forms contending with life. Automatons date back to at least the 18th century,

but artificial intelligence only became practical after the computer revolution of the 20th century. On one hand this work is only possible through multi-dimensional media, on the other hand it goes beyond multi-dimensional sculpture, raising the issue of life-forms as media.

Tim Hawkinson also gives us an animated head. A larger than life face is

created by collage and mounted in a frame. Each element of the collage is motorized, from the eyes, eyebrows, eyelids, to the elements of the nostrils, to the segments of the lips. The elements of the collage move,

seemingly randomly, producing the effect of distorted grimaces. We see

the entire mechanism animating the head: Photosensors attached to a TV monitor respond to images on the screen. When a light area on the screen

triggers a photosensor, it causes a motor to turn which drives one of the features of the face. The random flow of images drives the face into

continuous distortions. It's titled, "Emoter." Is this a metaphor for the artist's heightened sensitivity to the images the media (represented

by the TV monitor) use to trigger our responses? We are left to ponder the metaphor this sculpture suggests for an era in which we are all occasionally moved by multi-dimensional media. Meanwhile, the owner of this
piece will need a full time mechanic to maintain it because it is so wondrously mechanically complex.

Forcefield is a collective that has worked together to create a dark installation which strikes me as a psychedelic fun house. Standing in a semi-circle are life sized figures which are shamanistic in appearance, albeit by shamans of a psychedelic cult. Yet the work goes beyond traditional shamanism: the sculptures emit synthesized sounds, there are lights in the sculptures, some glow, some pulse, some flash. One statue turns out to be a real human in costume, and a screen is continually showing pulsing abstract animation. Traditional shamanism meets multi-dimensional sculpture. It suggests the psychedelic period as a transition from artists' devotion to traditional media to artists' exploration of multi-dimensional media.

Peter Sarkisian takes video installation to new limits. In the center of

a dark room we find a white cube three feet tall. Five video projectors cast images on each face of the cube, and the top. The projectors are synchronized, and represent front, back, side and top views, so that we can walk around the cube and contemplate the illusion of a 3D projection

(or actually a multi-dimensional projection). The video begins in slow motion. A woman appears to be crouching inside a Plexiglas cube. In her lap is a child of at least a few years. They are both naked. As the video sculpture progresses, they begin to explore the cube they are trapped in. The naked child crawls over his mother's naked body, riding on her back, rubbing against her body, at one point grasping at her breast. Is this natural, merely exploitative, or worse? The video speeds up and builds to a frenetic burst of escape activity which does not seem optimistic for the mother, or child, and then they suddenly vanish. Though it pushes the limits, it seems to avoid violating the law. On second viewing the activity seems natural and innocent. The artist and his actors will likely get away with their bravado. And the potential of multi-dimensional video will likely be remembered even if this work is not.

Lorna Simpson offered a small animated sculpture and a video installation. The sculpture takes the form of a hexagonal music box. Each of the six sides revolves, revealing an inner side with a semi-circular pocket, or a flat outer side. The mechanism that produced

the music could not be seen, but the sign identified it as a CD player, leaving the viewer to contemplate the artist's intent in juxtaposing the

centuries old technology of the music box with the modern CD. The video installation divided a video projection into 15 segments, three across and five down. Each frame focused on a pair of lips. The 15 lips were

humming in unison. Again the viewer had to contemplate the juxtaposition of a primitive form of music making with the modern technology that allows projecting 15 synchronous images. I found the effect mesmerizing.

Robert Lazzarini's distorted telephone booth, "payphone," is one of the most striking sculptural images in this biennial. It might seem to be traditional, in the sense that it doesn't involve movement, light, or sound, but in fact, it is based on digital art, and the digital distortion of the three dimensional planes in a CAD program. In the "BitStreams" show at the Whitney, his distorted "skulls" were a hit. In that work the fabrication was done directly from distorted CAD drawings via digital processes that fabricated the skulls from ground up bones. Here the fabrication is more complex, involving distorted advertising transparencies outside the booth, the distorted metal fabrication of the

booth itself, the distorted plastic phone handset, and even a distorted xerox flyer taped inside the booth. After the "skulls" I wondered how far he could carry such distortion before it began to seem like a gimmick, but this telephone booth proves he has ample territory before him. The phone itself was a technology that revolutionized society, and phone bills printed on computer punch cards were many peoples first introduction to the Digital Age. Lazzarini's sculpture manifests the distorting effects advertising, telephones, and the Digital Age have on our daily lives.

Anne Wilson's "Topologies" uses black lace as a medium, arranged in patterns over a large white surface, much like a topographical map. Yet she too has digital concerns. We are informed that she, "scanned and processed lace patterns with her computer." (5) I was reminded that the automated loom is commonly considered the origin of computer technology.

Her lace creates grid patterns which remind one of the grid at the basis

of digital imagery. We are further informed that "Wilson employs lace as

a medium for both the exploration of new technologies, and the expression of contemporary social concerns." (6)

It was at this point that I realized "the exploration of new technologies" applies to most work in this show. Rosie Lee Tompkins quilts also explore a fabric technology. The installation of the collective Destroy All Monsters includes murals and a video. Chemi Rosado Seijo's installation includes obscured magazines and a television. The Rural Studio's presentation involves a video, and their building materials involve "new technologies." Lebbeus Woods' sculpture,

"Excavation," involves illumination, Plexiglas, and a new technology of fractured architecture.

Even Chris Johanson's stairwell sculpture reveals itself in multi-dimensional levels: as you climb the stairs the work moves from a subterranean world in which pipes and cables are represented by wood constructions, to the next floor where the network of streets and highways are represented by wood constructions, to the next floor depicting the solar system and beyond. At each level of the stairs, the scale of the sculptural representation expands exponentially. The work could only be viewed in its entirety during the climbing of the stairs, so the dimension of time was built into the sculpture, as well as multiple dimensions of space represented on each floor. Thus all the issues of multi-dimensional sculpture apply to this work executed simply

in paint and wood. This demonstrates that multi-dimensional art doesn't require video recorders or computers, but only a willingness to look beyond three dimensions, as Calder discovered early on.

One work in the Biennial was either the lowest tech, or the highest, depending on how one looked at it, and that dichotomy may be the reason for including Karin Campbell's performance art as a gallery piece. She sat with her eyes closed, but her eyelids were painted as if her eyes were open. She would speak if spoken to, gladly talking about Biennial art, her work, and other questions spectators raised. Her work can be described as a program, which involved rules, such as never opening her eyes. Compared to the other interactive technologies, this performance piece was the most interactive, and including her performance with multi-dimensional work invited one to make the comparison between artificial intelligence and actual intelligence. In a sense, her performance was what the multi-dimensional work was striving toward. If multi-dimensional sculptures are objects, they are at least performing objects, and their desire to perform for us is rooted in the human experience of their creators.

Only a handful of artists were exclusively doing traditional painting, or drawing. Technology was involved in all other work: printing technology, fabric technology, stained glass technology, photography, video, digital audio, digital images, computer art, and Net art. Judging by this survey, the era of traditional art has climaxed in the eyes of these curators.

Net art is a separate category in this biennial, but the Net artists had

their work running on computers throughout the show. John Klima's "Earth" was among the most sculptural. A computer projected the earth on

an inflated sphere mounted overhead. The viewer, working at a computer below, could move through various 3D topographical maps, and zoom into land masses to view greater detail. This is a sculpture built from data. It reveals the power of computers to turn data into a virtual reality that a sculptor can explore interactively. The only thing more I could wish is that the viewer/participant controls become more intuitive.

Mary Flanagan's computer work also seemed clearly sculptural. It projected computer images on the surface of a round table from below. Again we saw data move through the virtual multi-dimensional space of the projection. But here the data consisted largely of graphic phrases. This data had been "harvested" from the disk drives of people who logged

onto her website. The images reminded me of the pioneering digital graphic animations programmed by A. Michael Noll at Bell Labs in the 1960's, here skillfully turned into colorful, slightly voyeuristic, "coffee table art."

The other Net artists were less obviously sculptural, but never-the-less, I believe their work can most accurately be described as

sculpture. You touch an interface, typically a keyboard and/or mouse, while you watch another world through a screen. Aside from the 4 dimensions on your side of the screen, you can move through multiple dimensions of the virtual reality on the other side of the screen.

At a recent talk Mark Napier stated that "programming satisfies a

sculptural way of thinking." (7) Napier's work in this biennial is "Riot." You type in a URL and images from it are collaged upon layers of previously entered URLs on the screen. This carries on his "Potatoland" work of layering image upon image contributed by the viewer. But here the viewer/participant gains a sense of becoming an "action collagist" as each mouse click adds layers to the virtual collage.

Margot Lovejoy's "Turns" website could similarly be visited online by a viewer at the Biennial. It invites viewers to share turning points in their lives, and/or read the stories of people's turning points. In some ways it comes closest to capturing raw human drama in an electronic medium, a cyber documentary in the form of a multi-dimensional bulletin board.

The work in this biennial extends into Central Park. At the Bow Bridge we encounter "Waylay," an installation by Brian Tolle. At first I was only aware of splashes in the water. Were those fish? No, they were jets of water orchestrated by the artist. Looking closely at the surface of the water, one could spot the submerged spigots on the days the water level was low. The artist had used not just the dimensions of time and space, but also the mass and momentum of the water jets. Because the elements of this installation are predominately water and the surrounding park, the viewer sees multi-dimensional art sculpting the forces of nature, something the computer based work in the museum couldn't quite convey.

Further south one encounters "Bluff," a stainless steel tree by Roxy Paine. The artist is known both for his digitally controlled machines that create paintings, and for his artificial plants and fungi (such as poppies and psilocybin). This seems to be his most ambitious plant yet. The trunk is composed of sections of stainless steel pipe, flawlessly welded together, and perfectly polished, so that it resembles the growth spurts of a real tree. Unlike his previous plants, which appeared real, this tree is clearly stainless. The issues of artifice, so apparent in the machines that paint, are clearer in this steel tree that approximates nature, than in his artificial plants which duplicate nature. There seem to be analogies between the digital code that controls his painting machines, and the DNA code that controls plant growth. The steel tree was obviously manufactured, but manufactured according to plans of living trees, suggesting that the coding which controls manufacturing, and so many modern processes, mutated from the DNA code that creates all living things.

Textiles spread as table cloths in the Leaping Frog Cafe are Kim Sooja's work. They are traditional Korean bedcovers. In retrospect we can look at textiles as the computer art of their day, because automated looms were the precursors of computers. These textile art works were never meant to be subjected to the dangers of the dinner table. Kim has deliberately placed them in peril, titling the piece, "Deductive Object." I'm made aware that these manufactured textiles had become part of a tradition the artist is testing. That a technology can become so intertwined in our lives that it becomes a tradition is a key issue in understanding why so many sculptors feel compelled to explore technologies as art media.

With Kiki Smith we step back it time. Not just because of her technology

(bronze castings), but her subject matter: Sirens and Harpies from ancient Greek myth. The Sirens are bird sized castings, bird bodies with

human faces and breasts, perching on rocks outside the Zoo. Three of Smith's visions of Harpies stand on the Zoo's entrance pillars. They seem reduced to flightlessness: they lack wings and have only a few feathers stuck to them. It appears the artist has passed judgment on them, punishing them for their legendary avarice, leaving them only a few feathers to remind them of the power of flight she's denied them. If Smith has offended the ancient gods of Mount Olympus by usurping their powers, I plead that Zeus have mercy on her soul. This genetic re-engineering of myth, transcribed in bronze, raises astonishing questions. Smith's work reminds me that each age has had its technology, beliefs, and art, and all have evolved dramatically.

The sculpture farthest from the Whitney, "Emil Dobbelstein and Henry Drope, 1944," at the Fifth Ave. and 59th Street entrance to Central Park, appears to be a traditional war memorial. However the bronze soldiers Keith Edmier has mounted on granite pedestals are only 3/4 scale, and do not represent famous war heroes, but rather his grandfathers, who both served in World War II. This diminutive personal

memorial suggests that some sculptors will continue to find new uses for

traditional technologies, even as more sculptors in the 21st century feel compelled to delve beyond three dimensions, and thereby define multi-dimensional sculpture.

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1. Roberta Smith, "Bad News for Art," New York Times, March 31, 2002, Section 2, page 33

2. Lawrence R. Rinder, "Introduction," Whitney Biennial 2002 Catalog, page 11, Harry Abrams, N.Y.C.

3. Steven Harvey, "Realism Now II," ATOA Panel Discussion, April 5, 2002, Phoenix Gallery, N.Y.C.

4. "Multi-dimensional art," rather than "4D art," or "time based art," because mathematics suggests that multiple dimensions are possible, and the work of these artists suggests that many dimensions are being explored.

5. Anne Wilson, Whitney Biennial 2002 Catalog, page 231, Harry Abrams, N.Y.C.

6. Anne Wilson, loc. cit.

7. Mark Napier, "Martin Wattenberg and Mark Napier," the artists speak about their work, April 18, 2002, Bitforms Gallery, N.Y.C.

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Flash Light
artist, NYC