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Marille Hahne
Coded Characters: Media Art by Jill Scott
Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2003
ISBN 3-7757-1272-0 239pp. 400 figs (200 color) + DVD, $35

Joshua Berger
XXX: The Power of Sex in Contemporary Design
Rockport Publishers, Inc. 2003
ISBN 1-56496-947-9 191pp., $50

"... I passed a little gallery and in the moment of passing saw a painting
that had more power to stop me than I had power to walk away. ...
What was I to do, standing hesitant, my heart flooded away?
I fled across the road into a bookshop." (Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects, 1995)
In her introduction to *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, Jeannette Winterson talks about the plight of the words person who decides to expose herself, at long last, to visual art. "Art, all art, not just painting, is a foreign city, and we deceive ourselves when we think it is familiar." Winterson is looking for a guide and finds — a book. If you want to look at a picture, a sculpture, a piece of media art, a book is a good place to start.

A piece of art may suit a personal taste, match a sofa or trigger a memory, but to really appreciate it, to esteem its quality, more than a little knowledge is needed. If "nothing is an artwork without an interpretation that constitutes it as such" (Arthur Danto), then one cannot appreciate an artwork without knowing at least the interpretations that surround it. It's too bad most museums are such sullen affairs. They cater to the connoisseurs, those who know the work, the school, the artist, the scene, and who come only to pay homage to the original.

But what about me? What about the majority of the audience of a given exhibition who are merely interested laymen? There must be more to communicate about a painting or an installation than a name, date and title, and a note about the materials used in the making and the cost of acquisition. Exhibitions are products of choices made. At least tell me why you chose one piece over another.

Exhibitions of interactive or performative art should be easier to fathom than, say, a picture gallery full of Abstract Masters. Most of the time, they aren't. Interactive art should be easy to grasp, because, well, you can grasp it. But the well-trained museum-goer stays on the path and won't touch exhibits, even if they ask to be touched. After all, imagine the embarrassment of trying to interact with the one single work in an exhibition that's not for touching, or having the the guard swoop down on you when your interaction with a computer installation happens to crash it. A CAVE is a taxing thing: if it fails to enlighten, maybe you failed to react adequately. At least in front of a painting, you can stand clueless without anyone even noticing. I've seen one too many empty, idling interactive artworks with people standing on the fringes, admonishing their kids not to interfere with museum property. And once the crowds find a work that seems unthreatening, undemanding, and unbreakable, the queues match those at fairground amusements and every attempt at exploration drowns under cries of "But it's my turn now".

This is a problem of current museum culture. When I first encountered Jill Scott's INTERSKIN on exhibition at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, the experience was frustrating: one of the booths was broken and the info board did not say whether the number of booths was integral to the experience or just a concession to the crowds a curator had expected.

In fact, INTERSKIN, a fusion of Turing Test and meditation on Western, Eastern and alternative medicine that explores body and gender identity, needs the three booths as well as two communicating "players". The lone visitor has little chance to figure out what this installation might be about. So people stepped into the booth, waved the doctor's torch, shrugged and left. Better on-site documentation might have helped. But a book does the trick, not by remedying individual shortcomings, but by providing a starting-point for those stuck in the word-world thinking about visual, physical, mobile forms of representation.

Coded Characters

Coded Characters: Media Art by Jill Scott, edited by Marille Hahne, is a retrospective of Scott's work over the past three decades and across three continents. The book introduces her major work in performance art (analog figures), video art (digital beings) and computer art (mediated nomads). Photo documents, production sketches and short texts for each artwork presented and introductory texts for each epoch comprise the bulk of the 239 pages. They are framed by an interview and three introductory essays ("of continents, decades, bodies and technology, an interview" by Robert Atkins, "body, memory and times zones" by Anne Marsh, "video — the

reflexive performance of media images" by Yvonne Spielmann and "progressive ideals and political engagement in jill scott's art", again by Robert Atkins) and supplemented by two short introductions (one by Roy Ascott and "Coded Characters" by Scott herself), biographies and credits.

Despite its fluid, border-crossing subject matter, the book appears, above all, to be solid and solidly made: the compact proportions of the hardback, the internal structure readily visible in the coloring of the cut, the clear page layout, the legible typography. Though the books seems not to have been compiled for an identifiable audience group, it is obvious that Mareille Hahne aims to present Scott in a good light and a clear light, to place her work in a context that makes it understandable without imposing interpretations. The result is a good balance of (bilingual!) text and image. Scott's comments on the works presented here complement the essays, and the DVD, again, complements the snapshot style of the photos and sketches.

The essays by German, American and Australian researchers are, by the way, an interesting little study in international academic style. While the English-language originals adopt a friendly, conversational tone, weaving the personal and the contemporary into theory, Spielmann's reflection on video art is highly abstract, displaying rather than fostering knowledge. Jill Scott is admittedly interested in and influenced by contemporary philosophy, especially postmodern and gender theory, as well as politics. Her works are often based on her reading:*Construction Part Three* on Foucault's "Discipline and Punish", *Double Dream* on McLuhan's concept of hot and cold media, and INTERSKIN on Turing's Test. Scott's work is formed, of course, by her experience as a woman, and her coping with breast cancer. So the biographical approach of *Coded Characters*, no matter what one may think of it in other contexts, is certainly in keeping with this book's subject matter.

The supplementary DVD contains more of the same: short, filmed features about selected works. This is good, because it shows these works "in action" and permits a glimpse of performances long past, like Scott's first acclaimed performance *Taped*. It is an adequate mode of presentation for her video art, of course. But it is also sad, because one would certainly hope for a bit of hands-on interaction. Admittedly, most of Scott's interactive pieces involve (and need) several interactors and come with equipment that is an integral part of the experience. Still, even without the suitcases, I would have liked to play *Frontiers of Utopia*, a single-user piece about cross-cultural and intertemporal communication and exchange, on my computer.

XXX

Coded Characters is a pleasure to look at and touch, but it's also a good read. One wouldn't normally expect this much accessibility from an academic arts background. In fact, one would sooner expect it from a project like *XXX: The Power of Sex in Contemporary Design,*by the design

form PLAZM. But the Oregon-based PLAZM team seems to have reached too high, or, perhaps, too low.

XXX has been praised as an eye-opener about the underlying politics of sexy advertising, conventional and fringe alike. Both the foreword by sex- columnist Dan Savage and the introduction by PLAZM author Sarah Dougher characterize the project's aim as educational:

"To understand how the sexual images work on us" (Savage).
To "show how radical design often contains conventional assumptions about sex and sexuality" (Dougher).
But this is hardly news. That sex in advertising is stereotypically recreating an image of women as object is probably only revolutionary to the advertisers who design this stuff. And we know by now that the label "fringe" or "radical" or "left" or even "gay" isn't always free of misogyny or power gradients. We have known this since the student movement and the inception of the second wave of feminism, and it's simply not enough to invoke Judith Butler or Judith Halberstam, mixed up with a bunch of academic treatments of gender, power, and capital. This was probably supposed to lift *XXX* above a mere picture book, but it really works against Dougher, whose theory simply does not go very deep.

The structure the authors attempt throughout the introduction quickly falls apart in the execution. The six subsections of the book

- Gender: Masculinity, Femininity, Duality

- Representing Desires

- Power Dynamics: Age and Race

- Fetish and S&M

- Romance and Fantasy The Sex Act

are associative, not cognitive or conceptual. This is not what we've bargained for. To talk about power and capital on the one hand, and then to reduce the subject of S/M to a (gay) fetish must leave the intelligent reader disappointed.

Instead of promising some lofty (though disclaimed) theory she cannot deliver, Dougher should have secured her basics first. Above all, I'm left wondering: is "contemporary graphic design" really 100% equivalent to advertising? And why? Are record sleeves and magazine covers advertising? If we are talking about gay iconography, wouldn't it be good to know whether an image was created before or after, say, the mid-1990s? If we are talking advertising, is there no difference between the mainstream of big media marketing and the radical fringe flyer scene? After all, the reach of a campaign determines how formative its images can be. If we're talking gender and sex, finally, does it matter whether we see a man or a woman? And how far does gender matter to sex in advertising, beyond a bit of fashionable crossgendering?

"The power of sex in contemporary design" is a fascinating topic — of which Plazm's *XXX* only scratches the surface. Which is fine. Or would be, if it didn't promise something else. The collected visuals are certainly impressive —and could be useful, if someone had thought to supply some dates.

Don't Judge a Book By Its Cover

XXX stinks. Literally. Its cool, pseudo-S/M-fashion black plastic cover emits a sickly, chemical smell, even after months of wear and tear.

I probably wouldn't mention this, if this effect wasn't so symptomatic of the sex/advertising-complex.

And while I'm taking looks literally, and if I may dare to generalize from just two specimens, *Coded Characters* and *XXX* may stand symbolically for the observation that visual art has found ways to represent, express and undermine the prevalent relation of sex, gender and power, while the advertising world has only begun to smell the coffee.

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