reviews
Book

[Editor's Note: The publication of Grau's book was the subject of an agent.netart evening in New York City a year ago. Although the book is not 'new,' it directly relates to the 3D/VR thread of this issue and makes a significant contribution to the discourse on this subject - P.L.]

"…virtual image spaces of the computer…(are) not the revolutionary innovation its protagonists are fond of interpreting it to be. The idea of virtual reality only appears to be without a history; in fact, it rests firmly on historical art traditions, which belong to a discontinuous movement of seeking illusionary image spaces."
Grau*, Virtual Art,* p. 339

In this statement, Oliver Grau sums up what is probably the most significant contribution this book makes to the study of New Media Art. With many instances of novel technologies, creative or otherwise, proponents have asserted that current practices constitute the pinnacle of human knowledge to date or represent a degree of novelty that distances them from history. The examination of the historical context of technological media, especially in the arts, has been scant to date. In this book, Grau brings a refreshing perspective to the topic by illustrating that the genre of immersive spaces has been actively pursued since classical times, and, I might even argue, since the caves of Lascaux were painted. This approach refutes the Fukuyama-esque assertion that new media art is either separate from history or a terminal point of the same. Conversely, Grau points to Adorno's admonitions about placing contemporary art in a continuous history, suggesting that there is nothing new under the sun. What needs to be considered here are the points of difference in the sites throughout history, and this is one of Grau's other points.

Grau begins his analysis of immersive spaces throughout pre-modern times at the Roman *Villa Dei Misteri* at Pompeii, an initiation site for the sect of Bacchus, and moves on to Bismarck's commissioning of the grand panorama of *The Battle of Sedan*, which was completed in 1883. From Pompeii to Berlin, Grau constructs a narrative of the context of the culture, politics, and representative function of the various spaces -- from the ecstatic to the devotional to the propagandistic -- and reveals how the various techniques of construction reflected the agendas of the constructors. The idea that new technologies have largely served to inscribe agendas of power upon the masses is not new, but used as an analytical context for this subject from ancient Rome to today raises important questions about the social function of immersive spaces.

From *Sedan*, Grau takes a relatively brief sojourn through Modernist immersive spaces, including Monet's panorama

in Giverny, Prampolini's polydimensional Futurism, Schwitters' Merz theatre, the Cineorama, the Futurama, Heilig's famed Sensorama, leading up to the contemporary IMAX theatre. In his (rather brief) exposition of these modern spaces of immersion and illusion, there is a distinct shift from the panoramic rendering to the expansion of the cinematic as space of illusion, and to Sutherland's development of the Head-Mounted-Display, which brings the reader to the contemporary era.

To contextualize the issues of immersion in contemporary virtual works, Grau considers numerous pieces of virtual art, including Davies' *Osmose*, Benayoun's *World Skin*, Naimark's *Be Now Here*, as well as other spaces that consider the role of immersion in the representation of identity, the political, and the monumental. In many of these cases, such as Shaw's *Place 2000*, and Benayoun's *World Skin,* the agendas of power are translated quite clearly from antiquity. However, in the case of Benayoun, this is done more subversively as the
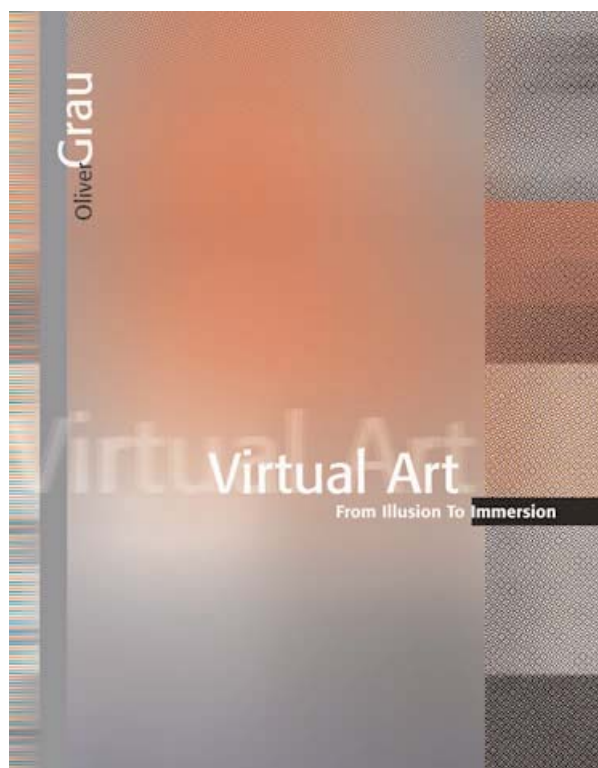
virtual 'photographers,' in a direct metaphor taken from Marey's photographic gun, literally create 'holes' in the landscape through their act of taking snapshots of the landscape. Grau relates this metaphor once again and brings the virtual into a historical context quite nicely while illustrating contextual differences in the cultural and technological functions of the work.

The remaining segments consist of sections on telepresence and genetic art, covering most notably Penny's *Traces* and Kac's *GFP Bunny*. Although meticulously researched and well framed in the rubric of illusionism, Grau falls victim to the fin-de-millennium tendency in new media scholarship to be overly inclusive in light of a movement (i.e. New Media) which is so chimeric and multifaceted as to make any comprehensive analysis difficult at best. Although Grau does wonderfully at making a case for the inclusion of the telepresent and the genetic in his text, this seems to come at some cost to expansion on the rich history of immersion in the 20th century. Likewise, the sociopolitical analysis constructed in the pre-modern section shifts to a markedly theoretical treatment in the postmodern era. Although this may be indicative of the cultural framing of the periods involved, or the fact that the book is a translation of a recent revision, I felt a desire to read Grau's analysis of the differences between the pre- and postmodern spaces of immersion; not for the purpose of merging current VR into a unified historical discourse, but for examining the issues of difference amongst the various installations, so one could see the continuities and discontinuities between the various periods.

Virtual Art is a landmark volume in that it is one of the first to begin placing new media works into a historical framework with a sensitivity to the shifts in expression that are evident from antiquity to the present day. In an era that often considers history to be measured in months or decades, Virtual Art lends a sense of perspective and insight that is sorely needed in new media discourse. As a reference work, the massive bibliography is truly impressive, and is worth the price of the book in itself. However, if there were to be further incarnations of the book, I would love to read more on Modern-era immersive spaces, and have more comparative analysis between the pre- and postmodern while staying firmly in the realm of VR and the panoramic.

Perhaps I might seem a bit critical in places, but it is only because the book held my attention for over three hundred pages over a period of three months. Grau has created a volume that will likely be used as a canonical text in the study of virtual reality for some years to come, and will probably not gather much dust on my shelf, as it will be a valuable resource in my further research of the past and present of virtual reality.

Patrick Lichty