



Michael Takeo Magruder

THE CUTTING EDGE WITH CUTTING ROOM: A REVIEW OF DUAL AT NOTTINGHAM PLAYHOUSE

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Friday 12th October 2012

Currently displayed at Nottingham Playhouse is *Dual*, the second exhibition organised by local digital arts platform, The Cutting Room. Over the next year, The Cutting Room, themselves based within Nottingham Playhouse, will provide three exhibitions of digital art works, with the central aim of engaging the Playhouse audience. The exhibitions promise to be innovative and interactive.

Dual, the first in the three part series, is inspired by a Nottingham Playhouse production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play laced with double identities and subterfuge. Despite the common idea of double identities, this is where the similarities stop. Compared to Wilde's farcical glance at social structures, this exhibition provides us with a serious discussion of dual lives. Through manipulation of many digital techniques, interactive devices and even telematics film sets, this exhibition discusses the concept of our contemporary existence within two realities: the virtual and the physical.

I began my exploration of the exhibition at the top, climbing the stairs up and away from the busy reception of Nottingham Playhouse. At the top of the stairs I entered Michael Takeo Magruder's *Deconstructed Metaverse*. Magruder's concept for this section of the exhibition is the construction of a seemingly boundless world entirely contained within a single microchip. Though at times uncanny in its aesthetic similarities to Nottingham Playhouse (an intentional effect as the designs are directly derived from the physical structure), this world is beautiful, serene and limitless. At the centre of the display, there is a computer through which the viewer can explore this world, controlling the movements of the avatar with keys on a pad. Next to this screen, the viewer can access a dissected and deconstructed view of *the* microchip. Though impressed by the intricacy and detail of this work, the piece that most enthralled me was possibly the simplest of all. In the panels between the modernist pillars of Nottingham Playhouse, Magruder has installed a broken horizon view of the virtual world. This large-scale piece is totally beautiful and free on first impressions, yet on closer look it becomes even more impressive; the scene entirely built from a matrix-like textual weave. The alternating sections of physical and virtual work create a fascinating visual effect and seem to epitomise the concept of the display.



Michael Takeo Magruder. Deconstructed Metaverse, 2012

Back down the stairs, leaving behind Magruder's ephemeral virtual world, the display continues with *Mirror on the Screen*, a piece by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould. This work continues the idea of the viewer controlling an avatar within a virtual world. The piece consists of what seems to be a photographer's backdrop, montaged and photoshop-ed to resemble a jungle scene, in front of a computer screen and camera. The viewer is invited, again, to explore a virtual world, this one far livelier than the previous, with bright colours and animal sounds. A surprise occurs when the on-screen avatar is confronted by a reflected image of the viewer. Here the concept of this piece is clear: a unification of avatar and human self, a joining of the two worlds.



Paul Sermon & Charlotte Gould. Mirror on the Screen, 2012

Signa 6, by Kim Stewart, is the third piece I experienced. A film work, at first the powerful story line seems like a classic sci-fi film: the battle to break out of the enforced regime. The 'story' itself is engaging; I happily sit down to watch the female protagonist's cyclical struggle for a higher status in a world where the lower classes are marked with one shape on their chest, and the higher are marked with another. This piece echoes common attempts at self-betterment, and the very real sense of the struggle to the top. However, what I found most interesting about this film was the merge of virtual, video-game human forms with real video extracts of Kim herself. This combination of virtual and physical footage links cleverly with the previously seen *Mirror on the Screen*. Despite the slight discrepancy at the finish, with the final and most sinister character lacking the desired graphic definition, and looking instead a little like 'Morph', the visual effect of combining virtual and physical footage creates an interesting and truly sinister atmosphere.

Also on display within this exhibition are three short films created by emerging local film artists. These films again explore ideas of dual identities, while also allowing the artists to stretch their creativity, pushing the boundaries of film art. *Participation*, by Brendan Oliver, is a beautiful and lively piece. Situated in the Cast café, this work allows the participating viewer to see their body 'particulated'- broken down into colourful particles. Interesting, fun and beautiful, this piece is ideally situated in the welcoming and busy café, and is a lighter take on the idea of a virtual reality.

On leaving this exhibition, I feel a little relieved to return to the outside world. The experience of exploring this exhibition alone on a quiet Tuesday morning was incredibly intense. I had the chance to directly engage with these works on a highly cerebral level; no distractions meant complete immersion. This exhibition is a true experience and really has to be seen to be understood. Though for me the work of Michael Takeo Magruder over shone the work of the other artists, this exhibition still clearly showcases a whole variety of talent. On display until the 30th of October, *Dual* at Nottingham Playhouse is an experience not to be missed.

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