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A BRAVE NEW WORLD: LIFE IN THE GLOBAL METROPOLIS

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In the new millennium, digital artists are questioning the nature of human existence within the global metropolis. As a case example, digital artist Marnix de Nijs' uses interactive, responsive and cinematic media to explore notions of alienation, diaspora, flux and dislocation within urban contexts. His installations examine globalisation's affects – and in doing so – provide new ways for us to respond to its 'brave new worlds'. In this paper I present digital media as a unique mode of expression, borne of globalisation's *zeitgeist* and uniquely situated to articulate its human impacts. Most critically, I explore how interactive digital installations can re-imagine human life within the global metropolis.

Marnix de Nijs is a Netherlands born artist who uses dynamic mixed media. His artworks explore interplays between human body and machine. De Nijs tests the limits of physical endurance and survival, within a world dominated by high-speed technology and saturated media. In reflecting upon his works, the artist observes that '[t]echnology must literally merge, become absorbed into the body so that it becomes a co-determiner of perception.'¹ De Nijs' interactive installation *Beijing Accelerator* (2006) physically engages the individual, transforming them from a detached art spectator (in a 19th century sense), to an active maker and user. This re-arrangement of roles challenges the traditional binary, separating the artists from their audience.

Beijing Accelerator invites the user to sit on a racing chair, which is fixed to a motorised frame.² The frame spins clockwise and anti-clockwise, with a joystick controlling the speed and direction. A 160x120 cm screen is fixed to the spinning frame, which sits directly in front of the user. A square target on the screen must be matched with the magnified image, in order to facilitate alignment. The user's objective within *Beijing Accelerator* is to align the speed of

1 Marnix De Nijs, *Artist Website*, <<http://www.marnixdenijs.nl/>>, (accessed 30 September 2010).

² Marnix De Nijs, *Artist Website*.

the projected image with the chair's spinning momentum. Once the speed of the imagery and chair are aligned, the user can clearly determine the panorama (which alleviates any nausea caused by the disjunction). However, this remedy is short lasting: soon a new panorama is displayed, which flows by at an even higher preset speed. There are 6 levels for the user to complete.

Beijing Accelerator builds upon notions of urban tempo and technological change explored in his earlier work, *Run Motherfucker Run* (2004). *Run Motherfucker Run* featured projected images of a dark and ominous urban landscape, which changed in size and saturation in response to the user's interaction with the treadmill. Like *Run Motherfucker Run*, *Beijing Accelerator* projects images of a metropolitan Beijing. The installation was created after the artist's visit to Beijing and 'realization of how quickly the dynamics of a city could transform into such apparent modernism.'³ De Nijs observed rapid changes to the urban landscape, including the proliferation of new media and dizzying tempo of life within this global city.

In conversing with these urban changes, de Nijs' notes that '[o]ne of the characteristics of a technological culture is that change is constant. Everyone who wants to keep pace is continually required to adjust; which does not happen automatically and can, in time lead to cultural-pathological anomalies.'⁴ He locates technological change in historical terms, noting that 'travellers had to get used to the first trains and aeroplanes. The introduction of such travel technology initially led to disorientation and required a new outlook.'⁵

Beijing Accelerator was featured in the Strozzi Gallery Exhibition 'As Soon as Possible: Acceleration in Contemporary Society' (Florence, 14 May – 18 July 2010). The exhibition

³ Marnix De Nijs, *Artist Website*.

⁴ Marnix De Nijs, *Artist Website*.

⁵ Marnix De Nijs, *Artist Website*.

explored the idea that high-speed media and pervasive technology have altered urban life.⁶ Within the global city, professional demands and expectations have become so amplified, that we are physically unable to keep up. In the wake of this heightened tempo, many individuals are left feeling like time-poor ‘wage slaves’. The exhibition shows how this infiltrates almost all areas of urban life,

with such things as *speed dating* (for our love lives), *power naps* (for our health and exercise), *quality time* (for being with the family) and *fast food* (for staving off hunger). This desire to control and optimise every aspect of our lives is matched by a nagging feeling that we never have enough time.⁷

As De Nijs’ *Beijing Accelerator* explores through its physical simulation of these affects, the new speed of existence has critical consequences for urban life: it can lead us to feel dislocated, alienated, and physically ill. This reflected by our degraded environment, which is unable to keep up with our demands, and ‘by widespread anxiety and depression which are frequent indicators of the malaise of people living on the edge of their own potential in a high-speed world.’⁸

Cultural theorist Paul Virilio observes how technological speed and saturated media has significant affects upon urban life. As Rob Bartram writes, ‘Virilio has long argued that dromology, time compression and visualizing technology are closely linked concepts that together have created a new ocular reality.’⁹ Bartram builds upon this thesis and posits ‘that a

⁶ No author, *Strozzina Gallery Website*, <www.strozzina.org/asap/e_index.php>, (accessed 30 September 2010).

⁷ No author, *Strozzina Gallery Website*.

⁸ No author, *Strozzina Gallery Website*.

⁹ Rob Bartram, ‘Visuality, Dromology and Time Compression: Paul Virilio's New Ocularcentrism,’ *Time Society*,

new ocularcentrism has emerged in the last ten years that has reconfigured the way in which we view [the] world and dramatically changed the way in which we participate in it.¹⁰ There is a strong sense of ‘dromocracy’, or as Virilio terms, ‘the dictatorship of speed governed by the principle that "if time is money, speed is power"’.¹¹ This tension signifies a major shift in both the tempo and perception of metropolitan brave new worlds.

Marnix de Nijs’s *Beijing Accelerator* engages with altered senses of space, speed and time within the modern metropolis. Through simulating spatial dislocation, heightened urban tempo, and physical disjuncture, his installation interprets macro change through the micro perceptions of individuals. In reflecting upon this idea digital theorist Marc Hansen writes that through ‘placing the embodied viewer-participant into a circuit with information, the installations and environments they create function as laboratories for the conversion of information into corporeally apprehensible images.’¹² In his articulation of digital media, Hansen writes that what it ‘ultimately yields is less a framed object than an embodied, subjective experience that can only be felt.’¹³

Beijing Accelerator engages with this idea, through focussing upon physical encounters and subjective perceptions, which challenge static, framed, and macro assumptions about the global metropolis. Ultimately, *Beijing Accelerator* reflects De Nijs’ concern for the individual within the city: the spatial, temporal or technological impacts upon their body and perception. De Nijs contends that the notion of perception pertains not only to how ‘not external stimuli are interpreted by the five senses, but also the feelings that come from within the body itself, the information that is derived from one's own muscles and nerves (the technical term being

September 2004 vol. 13, no. 2-3, pp. 286.

¹⁰ Rob Bartram, ‘Visuality, Dromology and Time Compression’.

¹¹No author, *Strozzina Gallery Website*.

¹² Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, Cambridge Mass., MIT Press, 2004, p. 11.

¹³ Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, p. 14.

proprioception).¹⁴ In these ways, De Nijs' *Beijing Accelerator* provides fresh ways of understanding the global city, as a familiar but reconstructed realm.

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¹⁴ Marnix De Nijs, *Artist Website*.