

## Digi-Monde: 'Painters' of Modern Life

Orleans House Gallery, Riverside, Twickenham  
15 Feb – 4 May

IF THE NEOLOGISM 'Digi-Monde' led one to expect that the charmed quarters of the Orleans House Gallery were going to be humming with processors, what one actually discovered in this open exhibition was something very catholic and diverse. The application of scare-quotes to the subtitle might also have cast doubt on Baudelaire's injunction that artists be 'painters of modern life'. In the event, 'Digi-Monde' had no fear of traditional painters whatsoever. The brief was for artists to submit work that explores the impact of new technology on society and on current art practice, and the exhibition demonstrated that every medium has something to say.

One of the most poetic contributions came in the most traditional medium: Andrea Rossi's series of canvases, *Flirters Without Faces* (2002), show blank-faced figures, each notionally sitting at a keyboard and sending out messages into the ether – technology has its romantic, as well as its soul-

less, uses. Martine Dejeans and Madeline Strindburg also use painting to produce frankly positive images of technology as well: Dejeans' grids have a sunny palette which belie their chilly grid structure, while Strindburg brightened her abstraction of the central nervous system with a chain of fairy lights hanging on the surface like an electrified spine.

Photography – which might have been thought to have been at an advantage – didn't dominate the show, though one of the most powerful pieces was Naomi Tronski's *Typsy Spring Snow* (2002): a pale green plastic sheet writhes across a black ground scattered with breadcrumbs; the materials might have been impoverished, but the result was marvellously ethereal.

Film and video, which should also have been expected to loom large, again merely shared space with a wealth of other novel approaches, from Paddy Hartley's *Face Corsets* (2002) – sculpture-cum-couture



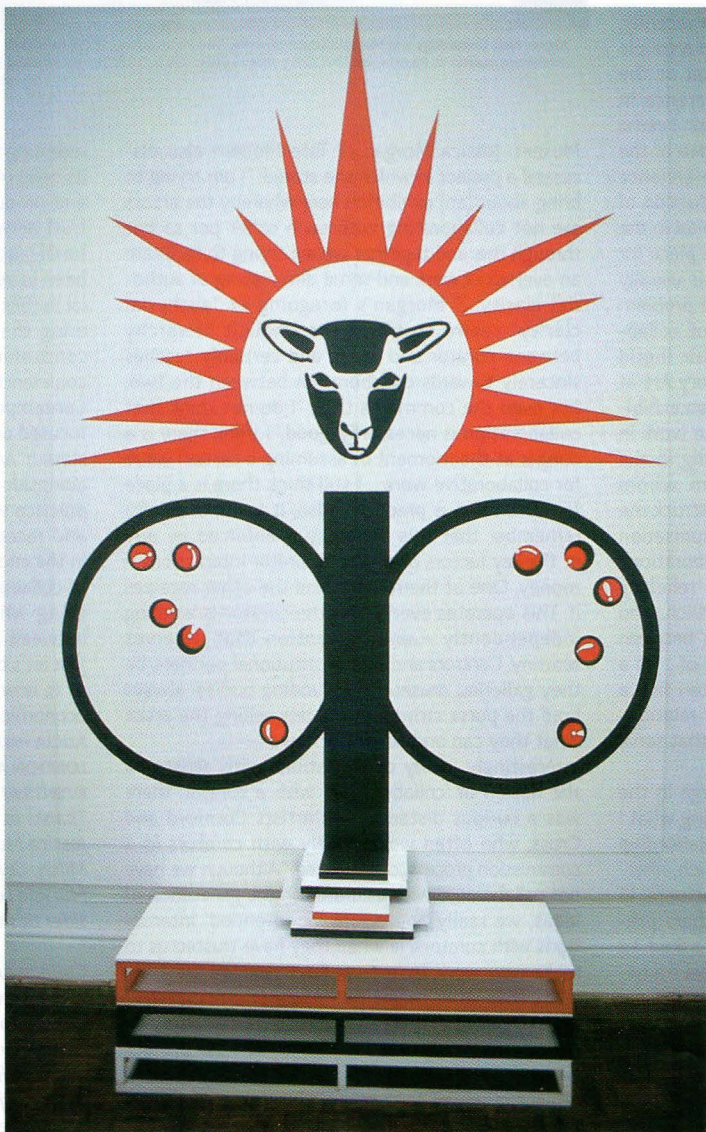
which scrunches up your features – to Ellie Harrison's delicious computer-based joke, *One Mega Bite* (2002), which showed a sandwich made and consumed by unseen hands in a matter of seconds. The two videos included did, however, prove compelling: Joanna Woodward's *Sally Down the Plughole* (2003) is an engaging, comic narrative; Margarita Kern's split-screen video mirrored an image of a woman exercising such that the two halves of her body double into four paddling arms and legs.

Considering the different contributions in each media was one way of singling out the quality in 'Digi-Monde', but it went against the structure of the exhibition which divided the work into sections – each looking at different aspects of the art and technology problem. Four categories addressed traditional themes, from the increase in participation – something new media art can encourage – to the invention of virtual realities; the impact on notions of the self, and the nuts and bolts of technology's use as a tool in practice.

This all made sense, but the practical problematics of dividing up the work within the gallery's two long exhibition spaces defeated the organisers, and a number of works that the press release proclaimed to be in one section, were demonstrably in another. Add to that the fact that the release also drew attention to a work that wasn't in the exhibition at all, and you had a mess in which the interpretative usefulness of the sections broke down entirely. All round, it would have been preferable to remove the interpretative props completely and let the art do its work: the profusion of lengthy, rarely helpful wall texts made the show seem teacherly; and the provision of reference copies of art theory bibles didn't help either.

'Digi-Monde' suggested that technology can still inspire diverse reposes, and these can be ambivalent and elusive to the usual pigeon-holes. It would have been better to leave them be as good as they are.

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Top: J.A. Nicholls, *Dream On*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2002. Left: Antoinette Hächler, *The sum of its parts, part 3, 2002*.