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Introduction to Nicolas Clauss

By Jim Andrews

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More often than not, Nicolas Clauss's work involves collaboration. He and Jean-Jacques Birgé do considerable work together; Birgé composes the audio and sometimes contributes images and, no doubt, much else; there are others, as well; Clauss has collaborated with Antoine Schmitt in a piece called "Dead Fish", with Lamarque for a Pianographique piece called "Sudden Stories", and with Durieu on "Dark Matter" and "Sorcière". You find collaboration present with a wide range of people as you visit flyingpuppet.com, Clauss's site.

Though he isn't a programmer, he does know enough Lingo (he uses Director) to do what he wants, it seems. Durieu taught him Director—one could not wish for a better teacher. But if you look at Durieu's work as well as Clauss's, you see that Clauss has gone his own way. Which is of course as it should be. And let us pity the poor student who admires Durieu's work enough to try to follow in his footsteps without being a trained programmer and mathematician. The path to despair, surely. Some go where they cannot be followed.

No, Clauss has gone his own way. His Lingo is all in the frame script, in the code of his I've seen. What this means is that the action and interactivity is all controlled by one script, the puppet master script, as it were. Rather than creating more or less independent objects with their own behaviors, Clauss's works are 'single script' works in which the individual media elements are subordinated to the overall behavior of the piece.

This can mean that the works are successfully cohesive. And that is what happens in some of his work. It also can mean that the programming is limited in scope. But innovative programming is not what he's after. In the below interview, we find the following exchange:

Andrews: Some of your recent work such as "Before the Night" and "The Sleepers" involves an interesting notion of interactive cinema, to me. Do you think that's an accurate characterization? What are your aspirations with that type of work?

Clauss: Yes and no. I would say interactive motion picture more than cinema which I'm not sure can be interactive. It is something new of it's own kind

between experimental movie and painting. My aspiration with it is to experiment with the space between video, interactivity and painting and I find it very exciting.

"Before the Night" and "The Sleepers", especially "Before the Night", I felt, do show real interest in this regard. The painterly aspect of "Before the Night", with its textures overlayed over the more photographic images, are strong in what they say about the aspiration Clauss articulates above.

This is, of course, a very different approach to the influence of painting on digital art than we find in the work of Mark Napier, for instance, who is/was also a painter. But that is New York, this is Paris. And one also gets the impression that Clauss still takes painting seriously in a way that Napier can no longer bring himself to do. But, also, Clauss is working with video and photography, whereas Napier is more intent on bringing the art of programming out of the dark. Are they now more different from one another, as artists, than they would have been as painters? From painting, through many other influences, and then to the monitor with both of their work. The frame is larger and smaller in the case of both, than if they had remained painters. The frame of the world now involves computers rather prominently. And the differences between them concerning what ends up on the monitor? And at the fingertips...and where and how it is seen...its full-world context.

One of the interesting things about this loosely-affiliated and often-collaborating group of Parisian artists we're featuring is the range of the artists in the arts, media, but also programming and mathematics. And not just the range but the intensity of each of them. The level of artistry and skill therein, passion, and productivity. Clauss makes up for his lack of programming and mathematics skills with a vision of experimentation "with the space between video, interactivity and painting" and much experience and dedication to various arts. And with an unusually strong ability to make collaborative works. And of course, he has a 'poetical' eye and ear. The desire for wholeness that people and ages experience is being fulfilled in quite a beautiful way in the collaborative work of these artists.

It will be interesting to see, as his work proceeds, whether he is able to sustain invention without getting into programming more deeply. What often happens to digital artists who can't program whatever they want is that they hit a point where they begin to repeat themselves, unable either to implement what they imagine or, worse, sometimes unable to imagine beyond what they know.

Although Clauss is "not interested in code", looking at his work, it isn't hard to see that it depends on the code in important ways. Also, the 'code ideas' are not of the variety we see in the work of Schmitt, for instance, who is working out algorithms that will be useful not only in his own work but concerning human motion more generally, in other applications. It is a kind of combination of art and research that spans art and programming. Similarly, Napier's 'code ideas' often revolve around

client-server technology and involve general algorithms for various types of data exchange over the net, in the context of art. Clauss's 'code ideas' are more oriented toward what we might describe as 'narrative issues' and 'digital painting' issues. His synthesis is entirely within the arts.

There are code similarities between "One Day on the Air" and "Massacre". One is about painting and the other about radio. The nature of the interactivity in both creates a kind of rhetoric of transition, different in each case. It is a kind of poetical narrative machine. The interactivity drives these works like verbs drive a sentence. It's good for two works because each work is quite different in what it reveals about the range of the interactive idea as narrative or rhetoric machine. These forms have a certain range.

There is also an interesting repetition between the effect of 'painting' in "Before the Night" and "Dark Matter". The textured effect when clicking, at times, is used differently in the two different pieces. The effect in "Before the Night" reminds one of the effect overexposure can have on photography. The effect in "Dark Matter" is more explicit about using Director 'Inks' in different ways, but it is also intriguingly a kind of painterly+programmerly mixture of code painting. Clauss experiments with Director's inks like a painter experiments with paint.

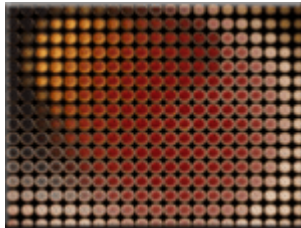
One is struck also by the excellent synthesis and experimentation with sound in Clauss's work. But also with code in pieces like "Dark Matter", which is a collaboration with Durieu and Birgé. The different arts and media work well together. And the artists themselves collaborate well together.

Clauss's aspiration to experiment "with the space between video, interactivity and painting" is exciting and he has already done some intriguing work in this regard. His work has relation with the work of Michiel Knaven of the Netherlands, who also uses Shockwave, and Germany's Reiner Strasser, who is perhaps by now the granddaddy of this type of work for the Web. Also, Clauss is constantly collaborative; he is among a group that ranges brilliantly through the arts, media, programming, and mathematics. His is an art not only between arts, but between people.

Also, as he says in the interview, he is at it full-time. This requires a special confidence and a special determination to make this leap with no safety net and stay in the air. May he continue to fly high and be nobody's puppet!

"It is something new of it's own kind between experimental movie and painting. My aspiration with it is to experiment with the space between video, interactivity and painting and I find it very exciting."

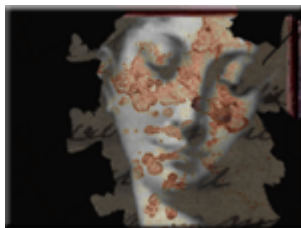
Nicolas Clauss



Dark Matter



One Day on the Air



Sorcière