SEVEN QUESTIONS WITH BRIAN KNEP
by MATTHEW NASH

In the last issue of Big RED, I reviewed the exhibition Intimachine *at Art Interactive. During the opening, I was introduced to the artist Brian Knep, whose work is included in the show, as well as the exhibition* FEED *at MassArt. After talking with Brian, and experiencing his work and the other pieces in the show, it became clear that the role of interactive media is very much in the air and unresolved. I asked Brian to talk about his views regarding interactive media, his "Healing Series" body of work, and the general state of new media.*

BRS: *Regarding your "Healing Series", you frequently refer to the interaction with these pieces as 'wounding' the work, and the piece then 'heals' itself. But I've also read that you want the experience to be 'playful'. I was wondering how you reconcile the idea of wounding, which we generally consider to be something negative, with playfulness?*

Knep: That's a good question. There's a couple of answers to that. First, I think that the meaning of the piece has evolved for me. When I first got interested in this kind of work, it was really about healing. And not so much physical healing, but more psychological. There was some physical healing but the metaphor was very strong for me and resonated very deeply, but after I made the pieces they became more about change and more about the healing than about the wounding: the idea that the pieces do heal themselves.

This idea that you and I are having an interaction right now and both of us are changing on some level from that interaction, and we're both integrating those changes into our personalities and our view of the world. That's more of what the pieces are about.

So with each piece I'm trying to distill some way people try to integrate particular changes into their lives, or different ways of doing that.

So, I still use the language of 'healing', and that is kind of a problem. But part of the reason I use it

Interacting with *Healing #1*

Interacting with *Healing #1*

is that people get it right away, and its much easier to say 'It's healing' or 'It's wounding' than to talk about these ideas of world view. Often when I talk with people about the work, like this interview or artists talks, that's when I delve a bit deeper into it.

Playfulness to me is fine, because it's like you are playing with this organism that is then changed and modified by your actions, then healing itself and integrating your actions into itself. I see that the pieces have different levels of entry, and I'm okay with that. One level is that it's totally playful; you come, you have a good time, then you leave. But, the level I'm more interested in is when people have a moment to sit and watch it, watch the interaction, and watch it actually heal itself. Particularly in this piece, "Healing #2" (this is my favorite of the three pieces), when you step off it, and you watch how it forms these patterns, I think that's the piece, really, when you watch it heal itself.

Interacting with *Flower (Umbilicus)*

So, it's something I'm struggling with a bit. The piece does allow people to come and immediately grok something about it, and if they walk away with only that it's somewhat sad to me, but on the other hand it's okay, at least they had some experience.

BRS: *Some of the pieces are changed forever by the interaction, while others are ultimately left unaffected. "Healing #2" ultimately goes back to whole eventually, while some of the others are visually permanently changed. Do you see this as a metaphor for cultural and social experience, where it is possible to meet people or groups of people that ultimately leave us unchanged? Or, do you believe that every single interaction, no matter how small, affects a person?*

Knep: I honestly believe that every single thing affects you. But, "Healing #2" is a bit about this ideal, perhaps it's a Buddhist ideal (and I'm probably completely distorting Buddhism), but I see that piece as very accepting of the interactions and the changes you have made to it. You wound it, er – you have a change (see I'm still using that language) - you wound it and it's okay with that. Then it slowly goes back to the way it was before, to this meditative state. That's kind of what that piece is about. I don't think it's really attainable.

The pieces really work together as a series, to see these different ways of dealing with changes. Personally, I think that every change does affect a person permanently, but this second piece I still find intriguing.

BRS: *Are you looking to give your technology a 'soul'? Do you see technology as a way to look at the human 'soul' (or lack thereof)?*

Knep: I think both of those are true, and this comes back to when I first started bringing my creative side to the forefront I started doing more crafts. I did pottery for a while, and I found with pottery that there are a lot of things that are great about it: it's very process oriented; you are working with physical materials. But, there's this part of it that I find particularly lacking in computers, which is that I can look at a piece made by a potter and feel that a little bit of that potter is in the piece. I find a lot of technology is very soulless in that way. I'm using the word 'soul' from your question. But it's this idea that somehow a bit of the person has rubbed off on their creation. I think a lot of technology lacks that. We find that particularly in new media art. I don't know if I'm solving it, but that's certainly an overall goal of the kind of work I want to do. I want some of myself to be in the piece.

One of the ways that I can do that, or try to do that, is to make sure that the pieces have a deeper meaning to me. That's the problem with technology art in general, and technology in general, is that there is a fetishism of it: people really are just attracted to it because of the 'coolness' of it, and they don't go a level beyond that. For the work to be satisfying to me, and in order to get a little bit more of this idea of 'soul' I'm talking about, we have to dig a little bit deeper and wonder 'Why does it have this feeling for me?' or 'Why is this so cool?'

When I first saw these reaction-diffusion systems that I use in my work, immediately I saw it made beautiful graphics and I said 'Oh, this looks so neat. They look organic.' But it wasn't until I saw a piece that felt like it resonated on a deeper level, with these concepts of wounding and healing, that I felt that there was something worthwhile to explore.

BRS: *Continuing with that, there's something about 'soul', which is the word we've been using, or even less than soul. Perhaps just 'personality,' which is another layer of interaction. There seems to be, on that level, always an element of 'judgment' – 'I approve of this, or I disapprove of this' – and "Healing #2" seems to be the one that passes the least 'judgment', whereas some of the other pieces in the series, that have more pronounced scarring, almost seem to pass 'judgment' on the viewer and their choice of interaction. Do you feel that it's relevant to the piece that the viewer feels that the work itself has an opinion about what they've done?*

Knep: That's interesting. Let me think on that for a minute.

It's not so important that the user feel that the work has an opinion about them, but I like that the user feels that the piece has a goal, which is 'To Grow' or 'To Live' or 'To Heal Itself Completely.' But, I actually write my pieces to have a sort of sense that the don't really want to be interacted with, that they exist even if nobody were around. It's sort of like the question 'If a tree falls in the forest…', but I feel like these pieces are kind of organisms, I'm not trying to make artificial life but they have a sense of organism and they're happy the way they are. When you walk across them you disturb them, and now they have to sort of regroup. The first piece ("Healing #1") is perhaps the most playful, so if we're talking about judgment then I guess it's okay with your interacting with it. The other pieces I think a little different: the second piece doesn't really care too much and the third piece is actually really aggressive.

There is another piece I've done, when I was really trying to get to the essence of this idea, and I made a piece called "Big Smile". It's a smiley-face that only smiles when no one is looking at it. What I was trying to get at there was the idea that the piece doesn't really want you to even look at it, when of course it's an art piece and it doesn't really exist unless you're there, but I wanted to play with that idea.

BRS: *Many of the elements in your pieces resemble simple organic life, like protozoa and jellyfish. How much of this is due to technology and algorithms you are using, and how much of this is metaphor? Is interacting with your work the equivalent of kicking over an anthill?*

Knep: For a lot of people, the first time they interact with it, particularly kids, it is definitely kicking over the anthill. People spend a lot of time trying to destroy the whole thing. Hopefully, after that, they will go to a deeper place and watch it heal, or step back and watch other people interact with it.

That's a problem with a lot of interactive art. It's hard to get away from the video game mentality. People try to understand the rules and then manipulate them toward some kind of goal. These pieces are much more experiential, rather than narrative, and while you can create that goal of destroying the piece but it's not really the main thing. Although, I will say that all the pieces do come back even after you destroy them, which is an important part of the pieces – that you can't actually destroy them. Eventually they will heal.

The first part of the question was about organisms, and I think that it's just part of my general aesthetic. I just like those organic shapes. I'm really intrigued by the idea of how to create complexity out of simplicity, how to create infinite out of finite. Part of this is wondering about what types of things make us think that something is alive or organic. What kinds of visual aesthetics please us?

A lot of these pieces deliberately use these algorithms and these behaviors that we interpret as organic. It's a cycle, it's not as if I say I want to create a piece that's about artificial life and healing, then go out and look for the technology. And it's not that I see the technology and immediately the piece comes out of that. It really is a back and forth.

BRS: *After my review of the show Intimachine here at Art Interactive, there was a lot of discussion in our Forum about what interactive art is, or can be, and how best to frame that work in terms of*

exhibition, explanation, etc. It seems as if there is a shifting 'point of entry' for interactive works, and often audiences don't understand the work because they cannot find the way in. What, for you, is an important and fundamental element of making interactive work in terms of conveying your ideas to an audience and having that audience experience the work as art, but also as an interactive experience? How does the technology factor in?*

Knep: On one level, interactivity is a great way to engage people, an easy entry point like you said. On another level, I think a lot of pieces are about interaction on some level, so it's very natural to make them interactive. With "Healing #2" I'm talking about what happens when two entities interact and how they're both changed. Another way to make that work is to illustrate that metaphor though, say, painting in some static way. Or helping people enter into an interaction with each other, which is another great method. To me it seems very natural to do it with interactive technology.

It's also something I'm very interested in exploring from a media point of view. This is getting to the second part of the question, how does new media fit into it? I don't think new media is tied to interactivity at all, I don't think it's required at all. It's just that we now have this power and these tools to do so many things. We can be aware of where people are in the space, what they're looking at, how many people are there, how loud they're talking, and then use that to change the art. That's what technology is really good for.

BRS: *Can you expand on what you said about how interaction isn't mandatory?*

Knep: Well, it depends what you're trying to do. I've identified myself as an interactive artist, I've talked about myself that way, but recently I had a piece at MassArt that's not interactive. I really like the piece, but it took me a while to be okay with that. I don't think it needs interactivity, I could certainly force interactivity into it, but the piece that I made doesn't need it and I think it's alright without it.

There's definitely a push in the new media world to make everything interactive, and sometimes I really don't think it fits. In fact, in relationship to your bigger question about new media, I have a love-hate relationship with technology. I tend to hate a lot of it, but it's my media, it's what I use. I don't think it's necessary to have some great experience with an art piece, interactive or not, but I think it's a great tool and we can use technology to make art that is dynamic. It can be very powerful.

BRS: *My last question is about the 'big picture.' Essentially, a lot of the history of the arts is the history of technology. At one point a lithograph was cutting-edge, or even bronzes and metal work, or stone-work if you go back to the caves. Each of these things has represented the cutting-edge of technology, but eventually they just get folded into the lexicon, standardized, and our expectations and our readings and points of entry become fixed. Can you address that concept in terms of where you see that we are now with new media?*

Knep: In some ways, to kind of put down myself, I think that a lot of the new media we are seeing is just picking the low-lying fruit. It's so new, and there's so much amazing stuff out there, there are a lot of things you can do that seem cool. We were talking before about that level, about how something can sometimes just be cool as a technology, and that's okay. Sometimes it's really simple like the "Mona Lisa" piece (by Shawn Lawson, also in the *Intimachine* show), taking a portrait and animating it. It's a simple idea, but you have to do it and maybe push it a little bit.

My hope is that we can use technology to dig a little bit deeper. That's what it comes down to. We should make things that really have a depth to them that the painters of yesteryear had.

In terms of where I hope things are going, the one thing that has been great lately is the reduction in prices. I can buy these projectors for far less that I could just a few years ago. The computers I am using for this piece allow me to do stuff I could not have done five years ago. No way. But now I can afford all this on a relatively modest budget. Hopefully that will get even cheaper and cheaper.

That's one thing. Another is the making of the tools to be even easier and easier. In a way, that's not something I care about as much, because I am a tool-builder, and for me much of the art of

this is the craft of writing the software. That's part of what I do, but I consider myself a craftsperson as well. That's writing the software, creating the rigs, doing the hardware and the technology.

BRS: *Is part of what is appealing about new media the 'brave new world' element, the possibility to carve out something new that isn't staid, and expected and established?*

Knep: Exactly. There is a lot of that. There's pressure on a number of levels. There is fetishism of technology, there is pressure from the art world. People keep talking about the death of painting, which I think is bullshit. I think many paintings are incredible, and they still speak to me on a deep level.

As an artist, like I said I have done pottery for a while, but I could study pottery for the next twenty years and never be great. I just happen to be in the right place right now where my skill-set and what I'm interested in sort of sync up in an interesting way with this new media world. This is what I'm doing, and I think I can make a much bigger mark doing this stuff. That's a lot of why I'm doing it, and it is very much the 'brave new world' stuff.

One of the things I'm finding I'm up against is that there is a sort of ghetto of new media art. This is probably not your audience, but certainly other people when they think about Art Interactive and interactive art, they are often thinking about games and fun things, entertainment. I've mostly shown in shows that are new media shows, and when I don't I find that the context is really nice because people approach the piece in a different way. They approach it as an art piece, and are a bit more open to having a transforming experience or seeing it in the way that I want them to. Whereas, if its only in an interactive gallery, I think that people often come with the mentality that I'm going to play and have fun and that's it.

In fact you see that a lot when I show this piece ("Healing #2"). If there are kids around, playing on the piece then the adults stay back. It becomes a kid piece. If there are no kids there the adults are much more likely to play on it. It sets the tone.

BRS: *Thanks for talking with me.*

Links:
Brian Knep's website
Art Interactive
Big RED & Shiny review of *Intimachine* at Art Interactive
Big RED & Shiny review of *FEED* at MassArt

"Intimachine" is on view through January 30, 2005 at Art Interactive.
"FEED" is on view through December 8, 2004 at MassArt.

All images are courtesy of the artist.

Matthew Nash *is the publisher of Big, Red & Shiny.*