PARSING TRUTHS

BY JO-ANNE GREEN

"It is always too soon or too late to grasp presentation itself and present it. Such is the specific and paradoxical constitution of the event." Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*

In 1991, Tim Berners-Lee announced The WorldWideWeb project, which aimed to "allow all links to be made to any information anywhere." Around the same time, Lyotard described what has now become commonplace in our networked world: *simulacra* "rendered independent of the place and time of their 'initial' reception, realizable at a spatial and temporal distance." His concern was that such *writing at a distance* – machine inscription, memorization and recall made possible by computers and the Internet – would "furnish cultural models which are not initially rooted in the local context but are immediately formed in view of the broadest diffusion across the surface of the globe..." Indeed, two decades later, we are required to constantly question the authenticity of human experience as 'captured' by professional/citizen journalists and transmitted to us via ever-expanding digital networks. This is the context for Michael Takeo Magruder's news media artworks, which confront the accuracy, profusion and instantaneity of news in the Internet Age.

Frequently, Takeo arrests this often instantaneous, sometimes contextless 'reportage' and re-mediates it within a "contemplative space" in which deeper truths stand a better chance of being revealed and understood. He captures headlines and articles about worldwide, often catastrophic, events from the 24/7 "space of flows" (Manuel Castells), demanding that we *see*, *read* and *listen*. He juxtaposes/opposes multiple media streams – image, text, sound – within single works, bombarding our senses until we are able (if we are able) to separate the 'signal' from the 'noise': "narratives are like temporal filters whose function is to transform the emotive charge linked to the event into … units of information capable of giving rise to something like meaning." (Lyotard) While Takeo rescues some of these events from potential obscurity, he does not pretend to present them factually. He does, however, want us to experience them *authentically*.

Occasionally, Takeo leaves the news feeds in flux, allowing them to be of the 'now' – but people, places and events are compressed and combined, so that we cannot discern individual threads within the cacophony of data. Of his work ***Continuum...*** (2007), Takeo states: "Given that no individual can absorb and process the totality of this information, how do we form our sense of the present?" More and more, Internet media blur the distinction between information/disinformation, journalism/aesthetics and local/global. But, as Peter Lunenfeld writes, "the slashes turn out to be permeable membranes rather than leakproof barriers." If you are not 'here' or 'there', you are somewhere in the liminal space of digital networks, uploading-transmitting or downloading-receiving information. Often, we are doing both at the same time. Yet, Takeo sets himself the daunting task of asking people to slow down; to stop clicking onto the next thing; to be *here* now; to seek a context when none is offered; to discern truth from lies.

Indeed, the central question that surfaces time and again in Takeo's work is "what 'truth' can the artist relate that the journalist cannot?" It is as if his entire news media oeuvre represents a singular response to Paul Virilio's lament about the first 'televisual' war (Persian Gulf, 1991): "image compression, which allows information to be stored, has promoted the compression of history and finally the disappearance of the event!" In ***Co~dec*** (2003) – whose title refers to the processes of encoding and decoding digital data streams – the image sequences are so condensed that we are left with only vague traces of form and brilliant colour. Here, we must question what information is *missing*, and be aware of the danger of *leaving out*, of skewing history in favour of the loudest, most disseminated voices.

Events taking place elsewhere become 'real' by being photo- or video-graphed, even more so when they are *transmitted* in real-time. While 'reality' is Takeo's ground zero, he abstracts machine-generated simulacra by, for instance, removing all but one colour of the RGB spectrum – giving the effect of animated colour field paintings; or collaging texts in multiple languages into a single image – so that the text becomes an image; or texturizing visuals with text – where a raster-like cross-stitch pattern transforms the ubiquitous 'flat' screen into a dense, tactile surface, as in ***Reflection (hope and reconciliation)*** (2008). In artworks such as the ***/abstraction/*** series (2001), the boundary between text and image is virtually erased, allowing the viewer to experience language as visual form, out of which meaning can either be extracted or imposed. Here text functions as image, but in other works, like ***{Transcription}*** (2006), the flickering characters are more akin to machine-code, and as such, the majority of us view the oscillating lines as some kind of unintelligible, foreign language which we will never be able to decipher. We are simultaneously given time to watch and prevented from seeing clearly. The multiple channels of data partially obscure one another, vie for our attention and force us to extract our own meanings from the data fog.

Related to Takeo's question of 'truth' is: how can the artist change the way we perceive the lives (and suffering) of others, when the only way we experience them at all is telematically? Of photography, Susan Sontag famously wrote, "images have been reproached as suffering at a distance, as if there were any other way of watching. But watching up close – without mediation of an image – is still just watching." More and more of us have the technology to *watch*, in real-time, and from great distances. Has this 'presence-at-a-distance' made us more compassionate? More engaged? More able to respond? And, can people watching, reading and/or hearing events at a distance adequately filter the *accounts* of victims or witnesses who, themselves, use images, words and sounds to represent, record and recall these events? Furthermore, it seems that even those caught up in the real time and place of catastrophic events – as they unfold – experience them *as if* they are mediated. For instance, to many, the attack on the World Trade Center (WTC), New York, September 11, 2001, and the 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami in Japan – were like *watching a movie*. "We can perceive the collapse of the WTC towers as the climactic conclusion of twentieth-century art's passion for the Real – the terrorists themselves did not do it primarily to provoke

real material damage but *for the spectacular effect of it.*" (Slavoj Zizek) The task of conveying 'reality' in today's hyper-mediated world is almost impossible; yet this is Takeo's intent.

Although Takeo uses text and sound in many of his pieces, his works primarily stress the heavy emphasis our culture places on visual display. In 1995, Peter Wollen wrote that this excess (Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle") has "the effect of concealing the truth of the society that produces it, providing the viewer with an unending stream of images that might best be understood … as effacing any trace of the symbolic, condemning the viewer to a world in which we can see everything but understand nothing – allowing us viewer-victims, in Debord's phrase, only 'a random choice of ephemera'."

Photographic and video images are both objective (they are recorded by machines) and subjective (they are always *taken* from particular points of view). Thus, they are both copies/transcriptions of the 'real' and interpretations of it; for seeing is not only a physical function of the eye, but also the brain, where past and present converge to create distinctly individual perceptions.

Takeo's use of language – which is mostly meant to be *seen* rather than *read* – also serves to remind us that it is but one *visible* layer of a multi-layered text: the others remain unseen and are deciphered by the machine: these are the program language(s) and their most abstracted representation: binary code. Thus, for Takeo, all textual layers (natural language, code, and digits) are, for the most part, opaque: the opposite of what the 'Information Age' purports to be.

Encoded, digitized information is re-inscribed every time it is accessed. That is, the machine *performs* a set of instructions, in effect bringing them to life. This information is fleeting (not indelible), a mere trace of its original inscription, yet it is lodged in machine memory for years to come. It is past, present and future, "freed from the supposedly immediate conditions of time and space," re-producing 'signs' of past events as "available, presentable and reactualizable memory." (Lyotard)

Persistence and ubiquity have come to represent collective memory, regardless of 'truth' or context. For Takeo, news stories and their headlines serve different functions than captions; the latter hold more journalistic weight, since they traditionally state facts, such as names, places and dates. In ***Headlines...*** (2006) the only caption is today's date. Unfortunately, captions often mirror institutional or personal biases; and image altering has become increasingly common because of the ubiquity and ease of use of software such as Adobe Photoshop. Takeo asks us to be vigilant about both our news sources and the ever-present negation of 'truth' due to subjective labels, image manipulation and the immediacy with which lies are propagated online.

The majority of Takeo's works are set against a "black screen" that can be read as both negative space and the '0' or off-switch of digital code; but it also evokes the immersive space of the cinema, the wish to block out all light other than the light bouncing off the screen. However, the light of *live-broadcasts* – produced

by televisions and networked computers – "possess(es) that 'real hue' (of fiber optics) … that light of immediacy, that sudden credibility that neither painting nor photography nor even cinema ever had." (Virilio) Unlike cinema, these 'real hues' can seduce us into believing that what we are seeing is the 'truth'.

The blackness of the screen/browser window also frames the image. Takeo points to how "framing" occurs in the individual human choices (subjectivity) behind inscription and remembering. To select events to be remembered is to exclude others. Every view is a partial view. Every view is *tinted* (or tainted) by this subjectivity. Additionally, Takeo employs other formal devices – such as decorative geometric borders, binary animations, and in one case, text in the 'margins' – to frame his images. He overlays his images/texts with meshes or grids, sometimes barely visible, other times very well defined, to remind us that the seemingly organic shapes are actually millions of square pixels laid side-by-side. Finally, his text often functions as *texture*; it is as though his images were *hand-woven* rather than digitally processed and machine rendered; his attention to detail, too, reflects his preoccupation with craft and structure.

In Takeo's RGB-spectrum composition ***+Requiem+*** (2003), text is exiled to the borders. The images, in the centre, are 'bricked', red and black, and lament the inability of individuals to memorialize everything they 'should'. The work's framing captions reveal what the images do not; stories of violent and historic tragedies of our time. Conversely, in ***<event>*** (2004), the textual layer is integrated into the centre of the frame, acting as a type of structural mask that ironically (because we cannot read it) gives its cloudy visuals some clarity as we are allowed to select and apply different colour filters to the artwork's underlying video streams.

We can also choose between multiple versions of ***[Fallujah.Iraq.31/03/2004]*** (2004-5). In one, we watch the event through a framed mesh. The looped sequence is divided into vertical panels; the image never changes. Another iteration has neither mesh nor frame. We hear the same voice. The sounds are disconcerting. We observe a series of video clips, glimpsed as if through a smoky haze. Texts, in various fonts and sizes, are gradually introduced (and are briefly readable) and overlaid, eventually obscuring the images. The blackness of the window, and the various shades of grey characters *seem* to give the image more definition and depth, yet, eventually neither is readable. The shifting, unnatural hues of the images – purple/red, yellow/green, aqua/blue – give them an unreal and synthetic aura. We are both aware of the 'reality' of what happened and the way that reportage colours how we view the narrative.

Our senses are constantly assaulted by media, both in public space and on the Internet: "sound and image, voice and text have become mere effects on the surface, or to put it better, the interface for the consumer." (Friedrich Kittler) Conversely, new, portable, affordable technologies have made it simple for almost anyone, anywhere to record an event and immediately transmit it to a worldwide audience. Yet, as Takeo so astutely shows, neither the abundance of information nor the ability to broadcast it results in knowledge, liberty or understanding. His constant refrain is that it is now more important than ever to *parse* the data to arrive at our own truth.