

On Gardens of Negotiation

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Mirosław Rogala's *Gardens of Negotiation* takes the simplest, most archetypal of images—that of an apple—and puts it through a succession of kinesthetic transformations and variations. They at once create abstractions from the image of the fruit itself, but also emphasize concrete elements of detail and texture. Using animated imagery projected simultaneously on four monumental screens, Rogala puts the image of the apple through computer processing that rearranges and shuffles the pictorial elements of the photographed object. These transformations increase in size some parts of the image and decrease others, or allow what had been negative space to become the dominant shape within the image, or change the sphere of the apple to become a different shape. Interspersed among these images of apples are playful, animated, large-scale question-asking texts, as well as other contrasting footage, some taken looking out the window of a train, some transformed imagery of the Berlin Wall or heavily pruned trees. The accompanying music by Noah Creshevsky complements the imagery by presenting fragments of a musical composition that have been electronically pulled apart and reassembled in a kind of musical deconstruction and reconstruction.

The result, on the one hand, provides for a dazzling of the observer's senses, but also raises important issues about the roles in artistic creation of time-based movement, scale, and polycopic, multiple screen imagery. These three artistic tactics all merge to interrogate and question the whole nature of a "garden" of "negotiations."

Gardens of Negotiation might be characterized as a study in movement of a still image or a work that creates movement out of a still image. It is not so much a film or video as it is a digital time-centered arrangement of images. The work grows out of Rogala's previous experiments in the use of special computer software¹ to transform still post-photographic images. Rogala takes a still photographic image, which we often come to think of as a capturing of a moment of time and space, and stretches it, not only in time by transforming it before our eyes, but also by multiplying it over four screens. His digital playing with the image causes it to seem to move, creating a sense of movement where there was none before. It is, of course, not the apple that has moved, but the image of it, or more precisely, the flickering of the pixels that comprise it. Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest have observed that "Time is the most often discussed aspect of photography" (64) in that the photograph is always interpreted in relation to the frames and contexts around it. Rogala allows time to unfold in an even longer period of time than that of the still photograph that provided the base material for the work.

This movement becomes even more exaggerated by the large, immersive scale of the piece. The apple becomes not just an apple, but an enveloping apple, an apple (or four apples) that overwhelms the human observer. In a sense the scale of the apple and the scale of the viewer change places and with that change comes a sense of change of who controls whom. We feel humbled by the apple. At the same time, the projection on four large screens creates an architectural space which contains the audience. Again there is a reversal. The apples form a wall around the audience. The audience becomes the garden. The audience must negotiate the changes in power.

Finally, the use of four screens creates something akin to polyphony in music. The four apples move in harmony and/or counterpoint to one another, yet unlike in music, where we could hear all four voices simultaneously, we cannot see all four screens at once and still be seated in the viewing area. The work is thus a different work for every viewer, and a different kind of negotiation must occur. The viewer must choose which screen or screens to look at, which to ignore. This connects directly to

Rogala's concept of "outerpretation," whereby the meaning of a work of art becomes the sum total of all of the individual and differing perceptions it produces in its viewers (21). Creshevsky's music provides a unifying experience, drawing this four-part visual harmony and counterpoint together.

And how do these relate to the nature of a garden? One can see the garden or farm as a boundary area between the home and nature. It is a place neither of complete civilization nor a place of wilderness. To borrow a conceptual framework from film critic Jim Kitses, it is like the boundary area of the frontier in the American West, a place in which refugees from urban life can find peace and fecundity, but one that borders on a countryside, real or mental, that may be fraught with danger and uncertainty. The garden becomes a place of negotiation between our biological origins and our digital realities. Do the walls of the garden protect us or imprison us? Was the garden inside or outside the Berlin Wall? These are themes that Rogala has been pursuing further in *DEL + ALT + CTRL*, an eight-act media opera still in preparation.

The garden provides the space for negotiation between nature and civilization. The very concept of negotiation is one that sides with civilization because it suggests the resolution of difference and difficulty through peaceful means. One thinks of philosopher and literary critic Kenneth Burke's contrasting of "identification" (whereby we relate to and appreciate another's values) and "division" (whereby we oppose and critique the values of another). Negotiation becomes the process of turning division into identification. Yet Burke is quick to point out the ambiguities that operate here, for when two countries go to war, there is both identification (as different factions within a country may put aside their differences to form an army and unite) and division (whereby the two warring factions hold out no hope of compromise or mutual understanding). (19-26) War is thus both a force of nature, and, in its employing of technology for destruction and killing, the dark side of civilization. The peaceful garden is the place where nature is tamed, but civilization and technology are kept at arm's length.

Rogala leaves questions unanswered. Are there four visions of one apple, or are there four apples? Are there four gardens of negotiation, or is the audience a garden, or each audience member a garden? Is the apple offered to us by a serpent, or is it simply a Cezanne-inspired sphere? Rogala has used digital means to transgress usual boundaries of space and time. If she had been thinking of autumn at the time, Gertrude Stein might have written "An apple is an apple is an apple." For Rogala, the same holds true, but the apple changes and transforms with each reiteration.

Works Cited

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Footnote

¹360 degrees MEV/ Mind's-Eye-View perspective software developed by Ford Oxaal