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LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: Renaming the Future

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In August 2003, the Leonardo/ISAST Governing Board approved the name change of *Leonardo Digital Reviews* to *Leonardo Reviews*. The removal of the adjective “digital” may seem a trivial reduction but it was the consequence of some extended reflection by the editorial team and others on the history and the future of the project. What had begun as a relatively small project for Leonardo has developed in recent years and currently draws on the insights of a panel of around 80 artists, scientists and academics in the humanities distributed over five continents. In the past 2 years this panel has been generating between 10 and 20 reviews a month, all of which are published on our web site. Some are also featured in *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, and others are published here in *Leonardo*. Whatever the destiny of the reviews, the intellectual diversity of the reviews panel has become consolidated over the years into a significant source of commentary and discussion that reaches out to a wide range of topics. Clearly, while the name change is intended to reflect this realignment, it also is a response to a more universal shift in the way that we understand the cultural and intellectual relationships among art, science and technology in the light of current research.

Two decades ago, the advent of relatively accessible personal-computer technology and developing communications networks promised such radical realignments in our intellectual interaction that some of us launched into the prediction business without much regard to that other future—the one where our promises come back to haunt us. Now, 20 years on, much that once seemed obvious has turned out curiously otherwise. Expectations of the paperless office and the demise of print have proved as unfounded as the gloomy predictions that television would bury Hollywood, or that tape recorders would silence Tin Pan Alley. Never has the cinema been more profitable, the music industry more healthy or the paper merchants so happy. For at least four centuries it has been clear that when technologies of reproduction amplify the possibilities for collaboration and distribution, they become “antiparasites” stimulating new appetites for the very aesthetic forms that they threatened to



destroy. Somehow, in our roles as historians and futurologists, we should have known that.

One reason we forgot was due to digitization's radical confrontation with all that was certain and philosophically secure, which seemed to suggest that the familiar patterns of the history of technology were no longer sustainable. For one thing, never before had technology been able (or so it seemed) to rewrite its contract with reality. Not only was digital information no longer chained to a referent, it was indifferent to the very idea of signification. Information flowed autonomously, interacted with itself and was transmuted regardless of a human interpreter. Machines seemed happy to assimilate any input into their reality of pulses, while the sadly limited receptors of embodied human intelligence merely inconvenienced the coherence of the system by demanding printouts, visual displays and vibrations. Not surprisingly, many of us saw a brand new world opening before us, in which the dominance of history was dissolved. The narrated past was swept away as the decaying body ceased to be the primary custodian of knowledge. However, just as the impact of computers, with all that logic and ordering, has been to make philosophy more organic and messy, so digitization stimulated a revival of both a popular and academic fascination with overlapping worldviews that included the metaphysical, spiritualism and the supernatural. The apparent discontinuity between the digital and the analog appeared to reiterate the unsustainable rupture in reality that strained classical science a century ago. The enormous energies expended on the denial of immaterial dimensions during the closing decades of the 19th century all but derailed the scientific project and almost certainly stunted the development of art as it prioritized the material and the concrete over the fugitive and transcendental. The legacy of this confrontation with spirit, which lies at the core of our current technologies, has, if nothing else, exposed the history of dubious assumptions, strains and asymmetries that lay behind the insistence upon any single reality. Such critical revisionism has shown that digital reality itself is not immune from such scrutiny, and its privileged position in the forefront of cultural theory has collapsed as a consequence of its own intellectual gift to its host. The ecstatic dream that we may one day "jack in" to technology and "mainline" information in a seamless act of union is now better understood as a future prospect in biochemistry and nanotechnology rather than electronics, and the "digital" is becoming recognized as continuous with what was formerly bracketed as the analogical—nothing more or less than another phase in the infinite spectrum of reality(ies). This intellectual revision and the ensuing concept of the postdigital analogue as a description of this enriched reality underlie the future direction we envisage for Leonardo Reviews. Thus, while continuing to review artworks, scientific commentaries, interventions in the humanities and technological topics that are manifest in what may turn out to be predominantly digital modes of production and distribution, we are better described as Leonardo Reviews as we try to synthesize and respond to what seems relevant to the ISAST community, unconstrained by our history.



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