

Apeshit v3

A computer-based installation by Leah Gilliam

Thread Waxing Space, New York

September 30 - November 20, 1999

Artist's special flipbook project published in conjunction with
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Review by Cecilia Dougherty
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Apeshit v3, an installation by Leah Gilliam of 5 vintage previously owned Macintosh computers, provided a disconcertingly unglamorous perspective on homemade virtual environments, using an Afro-central political reinterpretation of themes basic to the *Planet of the Apes* movie series. After a lot of testing and trouble-shooting Ms. Gilliam chose 68030-based Macintosh "Classic" models, specifically wanting to use all-in-one models, combining hard drive and monitor. The computers and keyboards were mounted on unpolished metal platforms welded to thick piping, all of which shot up unapologetic from a floor of live grass. Small speakers on the floor in the back of the space murmured an original four-track mix of recorded environmental sounds and an appropriated riff from Led Zeppelin's *Heartbreaker*. The walls of the gallery were painted a metallic bronze, like the set for a 1960s sci-fi television program. Past, present, and future seemed to occupy the space simultaneously, but not in terms of nostalgia, presence, and science fiction. A new dialectic prevailed as obsolete objects and the outdated humanism of POTA became portals to the logic of the new future.

Each computer station ran a loop of a specific battle scene from *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (1973, J. Lee Thompson, Director) according to its innate hardware capabilities - memory, resolution, speed and bit-depth. The scene, however, was not appropriated

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from a tape or print of the film but from a found Super-8 reduction print. Reduction prints were movie trailers aimed at home movie buffs and packaged as promotional items with Super-8 projectors. The results for *Apeshit v3* are evocative reconstructions of already degraded imagery and text (subtitles), since each Mac's hardware capabilities emphasized a different aspect of the scene.

Ms. Gilliam refers to the non-interactive displays as "kiosk style movies," created in Macromedia Director and loaded into the hard drives, "that would behave like individual applications on each computer/station in the show." She calls the installation itself "a physical-nonlinear environment, a low end VR." After a couple weeks, the grass floor was earthy and golden, providing a literal analog surface for the piece. The installation changed almost daily, and the computers were sometimes re-arranged in the space as Ms. Gilliam continued to work on the piece throughout the duration of the show. The keyboards were for her, not us.

Each computer interpreted the imagery in a range that ran from fuzzy but readable color clips to a totally abstracted high contrast black and white pixel display, which moved in a continual reinvention of the content. The distance achieved in the appropriation provided a counterpoint to the immediacy of the viewing experience. One knew the story, recognized the characters and could follow the action, even when the "action" consisted of watching a battle of black and white pixels.

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The analogies to both human evolutionary theory and civil rights philosophy were prominent. The feeling of distance that pictorial abstraction provided from the source of the imagery represented a distance from the ideas of racial harmony, equality and integration. As Ms. Gilliam herself says, "*Apeshit v3* puts forth tolerance as an outmoded technology." As the viewer moved from monitor to monitor, he or she could decipher the codes of the imagery. A new language was being produced in the moment, in five parts. Eventually the dialogue becomes evident.

The center of gravity for this work is race-based identity politics. Identity politics guided much of the independently produced performance, video, film and photographic work from the mid-1980s until recently. As a movement it is, in fact, over, and is already being catalogued with other late 20th Century art movements. Artists have gotten the message to abandon the discourse for more contemporary ideas, or more lucrative practices. But Leah Gilliam moves deftly around circular arguments of art, politics and obsolescence by incorporating all of them into her work. *Apeshit v3* renders a realignment of Afro-centered identity into retro-futurist terms of analysis. It broadens familiar art political theories based on understandings of centrality, marginality, perspective, perception, identification through medium, identification through context of viewing, and representation based in perception of/from a place of otherness. It shows us, with a good deal of intolerance, a vision of the present.

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Not to be overlooked is a flipbook entitled *Apeshit* that accompanies the installation. One can purchase the flipbook and take it home for endless repetitions, forward and backward, of a key sequence from the battle scene. The book, which is quickly becoming a collector's item, is published as part of program called Project Rooms by TRANS>arts.cultures.media, a bilingual not-for-profit print journal dedicated to American cross-cultural dialogue. The flip book contains an informative essay entitled "NOVA" by Thread Waxing Space curator Lia Gangitano. *Apeshit v3* will be installed as part of the "Demo or Die Festival of New Media" in Buffalo (March 15-26, 2000).

Apeshit-related web sites:

www.afrofuturism.net - great links, good info

www.pays-nomade.com/afro.html - fabulous essays

www.foxhome.com/planetoftheapes - official site, gorgeous graphics