pushing technology to the minimum
vague terrain 05: minimalism: steve OR steven read
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People in the world today seem to have this incredible ability to quickly embrace and consume new technologies. It is built into the media and culture I constantly face, at least here in America. Call it a gadget religion. I find this fascinating. A somewhat obvious approach to this trend is a strategy of negation or rebellion, which is perhaps a thread of what we are calling here "digital minimalism".

I am not really interested in pixels, grids, bytes, or any such literal reduction in the materials of digital technology. I don't see the point in that. Of course there are layers upon layers of abstraction in this medium. That is a given. The layers can be incredibly interesting, I must admit, but for whatever reason I believe that instead I arrived at some sort of minimalist approach because I was looking for a way to find satisfaction within a demanding, ever-changing world of new digital tools and mediums. Each promises more and more comfort with their acceptance and inclusion in our lives. This creates a paradox when more comfort is constantly promised to us. Aren't I comfortable now? Wasn't I satisfied when I used my VCR or my Commodore 64 or my single tray CD player? When do I have enough?

Scores of people for centuries have brought up the issues and warnings of our becoming too dependant on technology. It's not a new idea. Many have found that technology gets very tiring to keep up with, and can become a contest. I see artists and designers working on the bleeding edge of technology, and I'm happy for them, but I won't try to catch up to them. I guess technophilia is just as valid as technophobia. I myself love new technology, but dislike excessive and garish uses of it for the sake of it (something I often call 'technology materialism'). Advertisers and

marketers love to do this. I find that there is often not a deep understanding of it, which is perhaps the case because that takes time to gain - and time is not on the technophile's side as there is a new revision or competitor coming just around the corner! So I prefer the no-contest approach, an embrace of technology but with caution, one that allows for at least some patience and understanding of the ever-changing medium.

Thus, I have begun to strip away what is not needed to achieve a satisfactory feeling from the technology. What I find is that not much technology is actually 'required' for this to happen. It would be nice if I could escape entirely from technology, and feel satisfied. I tried that, and failed. I ended up just feeling stubborn, disconnected, and stupid, as if I were lost. Yes, technophobia for the sake of it can lead to boredom, be warned! Pure negation of technology did not work for me, so I now go for something in the middle.

For instance, in a recent series of pieces generally entitled *The Color Channel*, the work's use of technology at first looks low-tech and minimal, yet there are some elements that appear to be high-tech or even digitally excessive. The broadcasted videos shown on old televisions resting on the floor use tens of thousands of computer generated images which are mixed into UHF signals in real-time, but the 'art' presented to the viewer at eye-level is mostly invisible. I displayed the piece in such a way as to focus on the airwaves as art medium. In the wall space where one would commonly see painting or photography, there are only simple antennae structures which are displayed in a rather formal manner, taking up most of the wall space, but just barely. The piece has been described as 'seductive', yet it was made mostly with technological detritus.

Another concept I like to use in my work that is possibly related to the minimal is the popular idea of 'noise' (as opposed to 'signal') which comes from information-communication theory. Noise as art just might be

the only thing which is impossible to do in art, but still we try. As so poignantly shown by John Cage in his famous piece *4'33"*, as soon as you focus upon the noise it becomes signal. Art is signal, because we as artists are asking someone else to receive it. For me, because I think a lot about this noise, which is in a way immaterial or insensible, it puts me in an essentialist mood. I realize that I do not need much to have a good signal because noise itself is on my side.

The piece *Photo Noise* tries to use noise to counter the signal created by the boundaries of a photograph. By algorithmically collecting and displaying an infinite gallery of photography from around the world, one can perhaps again find noise after a period of time. It has a minimal front end, disguising the reality that the photographs are borrowed without permission by the artist and his software algorithm. Many have said the visual format is "boring" and looks like nothing more than a mere slideshow program. I have found no good defensive responses to that – in the face of other highly retinal front ends seen in generative art, it's true that it's ridiculously simple. Yet I don't find it boring at all. I enjoy that the issues involved with the work are encapsulated by the interface. It is the same with the google.com interfaces – all the political, technological, financial, and social intricacies of that corporation are purposely hidden from the user and when using the application one can only 'imagine' that these issues might exist – there are no visual clues or hints of any kind other than a cutesy happy logo – its is pure deception, easy on the eyes, and fun!

8 bits of Infinite Contemplation is a piece that more directly references classic minimalism with a capital 'ISM'. Because it is a contemplative piece, there's not much I can say about it in words. I would say that I love the work of John Simon Jr., and this one is probably influenced and a little similar to his 'Every Icon' piece, but instead of

systematically calculating and displaying every possible image, perhaps it systematically contemplates them all.

A more recent piece that is also rather minimal is a 'screen burn' named *please wait*. Electricity and time did most of the work for me in this piece. I wanted to remove the hardware's dependence on software and electricity. I didn't need to use many images, materials, or clever techniques for that, so I didn't. I just wrote a program to be burned into the phosphor screen and ran it for 6 months. I used vintage hardware and software for this because I enjoy them, and because they are free, but mostly because they are the easiest types to burn (many of us might remember accidentally burning one). The result is a stand-alone monitor, forever freed from 'the grid', left with some sort of eternal ghostly message. Many that have seen it at first quickly gloss over it as just an old, blank, unplugged monitor, like all those museum goers who walk by the Ad Reinhardt and see it is as nothing but a big black painting.