10

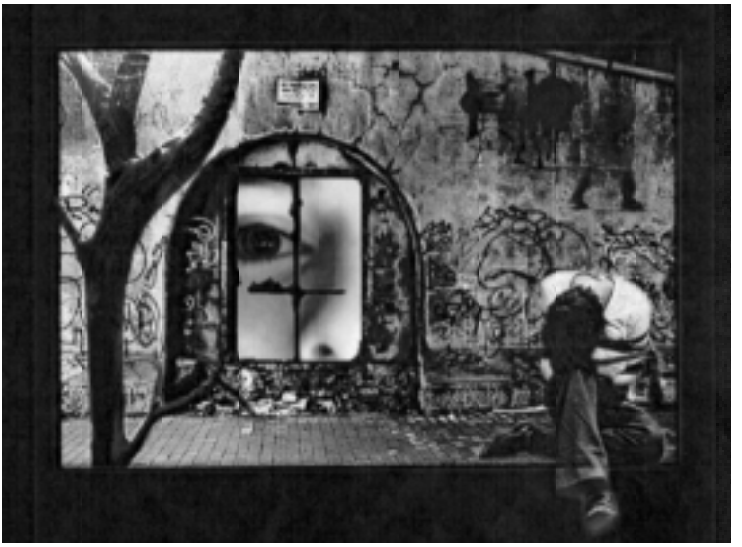
Black High-Tech Documents

ERIKA MUHAMMAD

Technology is changing at a more rapid pace than our society has ever experienced. Digital tools enable artists to produce work that is more conducive to collaborative art processes. Consequently, artists encounter new challenges and opportunities as they work to build and define what are proposed to be the most sophisticated and powerful communication networks our culture has encountered. Issues of media access and empowerment are integral to the work of African American artists as they examine how digital and electronic culture influences the production of knowledge as it relates to theories of race and nation. In effect, their work explores the nature of identity formation as our understanding of communal exchange evolves. Though techno-muse Lynn Hershman Leeson asserts that "communities once delineated by physical space and geographic territories are now located by connectivity, access, and linkage,"[1] our increasingly electronic culture has led at the same time to more solitary activity. This chapter will offer examples of work by African American artists who build digital habitats and lay political foundations in spirit and space, employing new media tools in creative and progressive ways.

Artists Pamela Jennings, Philip Mallory Jones, and Reginald Woolery use computers and other digital and electronic technologies to create "High-Tech Documents."[2] I treat "High-Tech Documents" as a deliberately resilient designation that reflects the continual change of technology. As artists have always employed "new media" to comment on the character of society, their dexterity with the new forms has encouraged and inspired ideas and propositions about the nature of cultural production. This inherently reciprocal exchange creates dialogue

and work that constitute a sense of the contemporary. The artists discussed herein not only use digital media to comment on digital culture, but they also employ digital tools to comment on the chronicling of history and to anticipate future realities. When we discuss the effect of new media technologies on the production of black documentary texts, the direct reference is to a larger discussion of document standards. Our memory of and familiarity with old technologies allow us to navigate this new terrain. Consequently, critics with the technological know-how and theoretical savvy pose provocative questions about the effects of new media on the dynamics of cultural hegemony. Overall, this chapter will explore the application of new media technologies that, in essence, document the history and social culture of diaspora life.



Screen shot from "the book of melancholy," part of the CD-ROM *Solitaire: dream journal* by Pamela Jennings.

PAMELA JENNINGS

Pamela Jennings is an electronic media artist whose work explores narrative structures for new media. In her essay "Narrative Structure for New Media: Towards a New Definition,"[3] Jennings suggests that the narrative structures of non-Western cultures offer languages compatible with the sophistication of new Western technologies. Specifically, she articulates the idea that the theories and processes of African oral

literature provide a suitable foundation for such a narrative model. "With the advent of computer-based interactive art and information systems, many issues arise concerning the use of alternative engines through which narrative information may be created,"[4] she says. "Our culture is presently experiencing a shift in the organization of knowledge away from the linear motif."[5] Jennings's work challenges both the notion of the traditional book in this century and the notion of narrative theory. She asserts that nuance, indeterminacy, and polyventiality are major players in her work.

Jennings's CD-ROM project *Solitaire: dream journal* (1996) mixes the metaphor of the game board and the book. *Solitaire* takes the user through what its designer describes as "a haunting journey in quest of peace with oneself and connection with others."[6] A three-dimensional solitaire game is the engine that moves the player through the journal.

The solitaire board is designed as a tetrahedron (a three-faced pyramid), whose triangular sides correspond to the themes of melancholy, flight, and balance. A move made on one side of the tetrahedron randomly opens up a chapter of the three corresponding "books": "the book of melancholy," "the book of flight," or "the book of balance." The idea is to see how many pages you can access. The better your strategy, the more chapters you will be able to enter and explore. These chapters (windows) make it possible for *Solitaire* to place you in several contexts at the same time. In the game, your identity is the sum of your distributed presence. *Solitaire* is a document of self-discovery—the documentation of Jennings's narrative with a player's credits creates an aesthetic of recovery that unfolds dense layers of heterogeneous material culled from personal and popular memory. Mathematical and statistical "facts" are presented not objectively or subjectively, but rather conceptually, so that the player becomes involved in a thick discursive text.

A compelling idea that arises in Jennings's piece is the idea of magic, which can be understood as a space of possibility. An exercise more than a game, *Solitaire* awards the user not with points, but with beautiful, visceral images akin to the soothing elements of yoga or meditation. It's an exercise in patience—a sleight of hand at the mouse invokes a mystical charm that is enchanting. The feeling of "What happens next?" that is reminiscent of a good mystery novel is at the core of Jennings's piece. The player participates in the construction of the narrative as he or she surrenders to the collaborative task of delivering the story. *Solitaire* is a prime example of the success of the elliptical nature of digital documentation: it is a demonstration of both the nature of CD-ROM interactivity and the nature of the person who plays the game.

Like Philip Mallory Jones, who will be discussed later in this chapter, Jennings is also heavily influenced by the tropes of art cinema. With a background in experimental video and installation, her move into new media is simply another vehicle through which she can articulate her cultural obsessions. Attention to audio resonances in visual images is her main interest. "Music is universal," she says. "I like to think of my work as opuses to make an analogy with the structure of classical music."[7] *Solitaire* is a composite of graphic synching, animation, music, and the principles of checkers. "I lay a lot of my personal stuff out in my development process, and I like the idea of transferring this 'personal quest' to the user,"[8] explains Jennings. Her work is "open" in the sense that she allows players to explore her psyche, and consequently the game is very difficult. She confesses, "If I'm inviting you to come and view what's going on inside my head, you will have to work for it."[9]

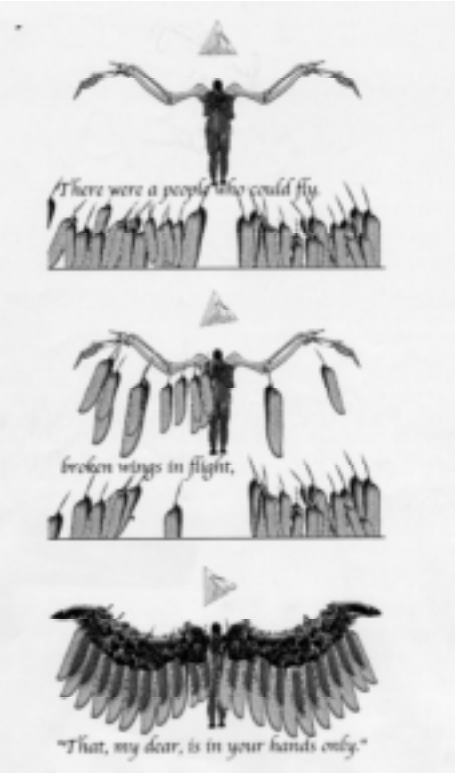


Image from Pamela Jennings's CD–ROM *Solitaire: dream journal*.
Screen shots from "the book of flight," part of the CD-ROM
Solitaire: dream journal by Pamela Jennings.

Sound is a crucial element in *Solitaire: dream journal*. To create nuanced layers of tone, Jennings used combinations of her voice, sampled sounds, and algorithmically controlled serial interludes. Jennings's influences come more from performance and dance critical theory or computer games"that gouge your eyes out and defeat your imagery stuff. I think the intensity of many of the action computer games is detrimental, not only to words, but it creates a more violent being and awkward social environments." Accordingly, *Solitaire* relies much more on concepts of music and sound as a binding force—there is a continuous line of sound that runs throughout the piece.

Solitaire led to Jennings's next computer-book project, *the book of ruins and desire* (1996), in which she created a kinetic, interactive, mixed-media sculpture that explores issues of desire and communication. The reader stands before a table on which rests a sculptural object with hinged metal leaves (pages). From inside the surface of the case, a voice whispers "Touch me." The sound piques the reader's interest, aurally conveying permission to interact with the book. As you turn the book's metal pages, you begin an exploration into its multiple layers, composing your own collage of Jennings's imagery and text. Jennings admits that *the book of ruins and desire* was a product of her consideration of the word "book." A lot of the research that she was doing on the concept of the artist's book was quite fascinating to her. With an artist's book, the reader can actually handle—finger, stroke, rub, and manipulate—the story or narrative that is contained within the binding. In this way Jennings's book is about the body and offers an example of how we can make our digital experiences corporeal.

"For the past ten years, artists have been pondering how to do an electronic book—they were being very literal, but were not succeeding with the physical execution of the idea,"[10] explains Jennings. She was hugely influenced by Peter Greenaway's film *Prospero's Books*, which is his version of *The Tempest*. Greenaway created very elaborate prototypes (animations) of the books that Prospero took along with him on his voyages. For example, "The Book of Motion" stood on a podium that wouldn't stop shaking. "When I saw Greenaway's rendition of an electronic book, I decided that I really wanted to make [construct] that type of concept," she adds excitedly. "But not with movie magic."[11]

The degree of a turned page and its velocity are calculated in a fuzzy logic inference engine programmed into a microprocessor. The fuzzy logic component of *the book of ruins and desire* creates the numerous experiences (or stories) a person can read. In traditional logic, there are zeros and ones—on and off—true and false. Fuzzy logic looks at and considers the gray points between zero and one. If you want to look at

it objectively, it offers more possibilities because it processes information not in terms of on and off, but in terms of the *degree* of on and off; and on that basis, it will provide a unique experience.

This information (the result of the degree at which the reader turns a page) is fed to a Macintosh computer running the MIDI programming language Opcode MAX. MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) is the standard communications protocol between musical instruments and computers.[12] Programmed as a video and audio switching device, MAX determines which images and sounds are played back (which the reader sees and hears via a small LCD monitor and embedded speakers). MAX also regulates the qualitative dynamics of the media such as volume, video direction, and playback speed. In addition, MAX is programmed to create MIDI interludes (background music when the book isn't being read) via freeware serial music libraries. As a sculptural artist and digital musician, Jennings is akin to the underground MIDI musicians who hold jam sessions on-line; they lay down MIDI tracks providing a framework for various types of music to be made. In the same vein, Jennings's installation piece allows players to "make music" (or "perform data") improvisationally.

Jennings says that the metaphors of "ruin" and "desire" relate to her psychological state of mind at the time she designed the pieces. "For instance, with ruins, I find actual architectural ruins quite beautiful, and I like to stand in the middle of them and imagine the energy that once inhabited those environments. It's like I can look at the structures and imagine the desire that was there before."[13]

Jennings creates some of the more progressive works in the canon of new interactive art by artists of color. Her use of iteration, serialism, open structures, fuzzy logic, language, desire, and interactive media proves to be a potent combination.

The development of new tools—or a rethinking of how we use the tools we already have—will be crucial to the development of interactive designs that push the horizon of storytelling and image-making in new media. As Jennings maintains, "It is a waste of energy and resources to make applications that merely imitate media that exist in other forms, such as print, television, and film. The early television industry, for example, quickly learned that radio plays don't work on TV."[14] But just as photography prepared the ground for the moving image, today's digital tools are the forebears of a new age of interactive communications.

Pamela Jennings is a graduate of The School of Visual Arts, NYC and works in Silicon Valley. She is interested in defining narrative media and the mapping

of ethnography in digital space. Jennings is currently a MPhil/Ph.D. candidate at The Center for Advanced Inquiry in Interactive Arts (CAiiA) at The University of Wales.

PHILIP MALLORY JONES

Having worked in video as an art medium since 1969 and incorporated digital tools since 1990, Philip Mallory Jones is one of the most prolific and transnational black video artists working today. In the late 1960s he was drawn to video because of an attraction to machines and gadgets, as well as the appeal of working in what he describes as a "videomatic" medium he could help define. Jones was profoundly affected by Jean Cocteau's film *Beauty and the Beast,* which is reflected in his use of surreal and abstract imagery in such works as the interactive CD-ROM *First World Order* (1994), *Paradigm Shift* (1992), *Mask* (1991) and *Dreamkeeper* (1989). These films exhibit the dense yet comprehensible complexity that is his trademark.

Image from Philip Mallory Jones's CD-ROM
First World Order.
Image by Philip Mallory Jones, 1994.

Jones's body of work explores "the development of codes, based on emotional progressions and an African sensorium, without dependence on specific language comprehension."[15] Using video and digital interactive media, he experiments with the development and composition of a technological language derived from ancient and surviving African

symbolic conventions and codes. *First World Order Project Development* (1997) is a CD-ROM and Web site that explores the cultures of the African diaspora and communicates their common, often encoded knowledge in a way that traverses cultural barriers. The project illuminates a complex global diaspora, originating in Africa but transcending race and ethnicity, which is defined in terms of modes of expression, paradigms of perception, and systems of symbolic communication. "Integral to my work is the notion that communication happens vertically and horizontally. Horizontal communication represents linear, spoken language that we normally use; vertical communication is related to instinct and intuition—a way to knowledge and understanding that I feel is more powerful than intellect."[16]

As local and national identities diversify and villages grow smaller as a result of the advances of new media technologies, Jones's work creates a new kind of language that redefines the diasporic cultural landscape. Like Reggie Woolery's work, which will be discussed shortly, Jones's work probes the reconfiguration of social and political identity formations. Both artists' work raises questions about the types of cultural borders that are crossed and the production of knowledge created at the intersection of the digital and the real. As a scholar of iconography, Jones is sensitive to the underlying non-verbal connections between societies scattered across many continents and separated by diverse histories and languages: "As a digital media practitioner and instructor, I am ideally equipped to create a means of cultural communication that transcends these differences. My works address the problem of appreciating and understanding world cultures by rewriting world history."[17]

"Digital technology," he notes, "is capable of expressions which are outside of the conventions of Euro-American media."[18] Jones finds that multimedia allows him to "create pieces which incorporate the ancient and surviving codes to tell stories, without verbal language dependence, which are interpretable in various African cultures."[19] As Jones manipulates video, sound recordings, and computer technologies, he realizes that the uncovering of cultural identity is not an essentialist practice. Rather, he states, "It is a way to communicate the stories of the past and imagine the narratives of the future."[20]

"The perception, or assumption, that 'narrative' and 'documentary' are somehow more relevant is part of larger issues affecting artists of color," says Jones.

> We are generally expected to speak about people of color in terms of sociopolitical issues or problems. This limits the scope of our discourse. Representation of African and diaspora peoples and cultures is not necessarily the *raison d'être* of a work by an artist of color. Portrait artists working in paint

> and photography, for example, will sometimes use these subjects as a vehicle for exploring the characteristics of the medium. Hopefully, an artist's work expresses truth, which need not be the same as objective reality. People of color and our culture are well served by the mature and well-crafted work of media artists producing in the full spectrum of genres.[21]

His work shows that all aspects of life and experiences of people of color are relevant subjects for expressive considerations; so too is the full spectrum of approaches valid. People of color are vastly varied, and not everyone's story can be told the same way.

Jones's 1992 video *Paradigm Shift*, a prime example of the artist's pioneering work, employed the latest in digital video technology—morphing, layering, rotoscoping, composition—to form a sequence that is complex, subtle, dense, and non-linear. Special effects allow Jones to neutralize "documentary truth" by emphasizing the inconstancy of the "real." Because Jones uses representational imagery in an approach that is not narrative, his work often gets lumped into a "documentary bag" by critics. But conventional documentary is not what Jones practices, for he feels that no media can offer an objective reality. What Jones feels he can process is a greater understanding of how digital media works, and he thereby has also come to an understanding of his own self. Jones refers to his works as essays, poems, or portraits, for he wants the audience to come to their own truth.

Paradigm Shift was broadcast internationally on venues such as MTV and Canal+ in France. Because his audience was international and multilingual, Jones used the opportunity to create a computer-modified video that would communicate complex global cultural connections and ideas non-verbally. He wanted the piece, which lasts only a minute, to have the same level of impact as an effective television commercial. In a 1995 interview, Jones admitted that his challenge with this video was to "grab [the audience's attention], so that the piece will mean something to somebody, even though they won't have any idea of what it is while it's happening—it's going to happen and then it's going to be over." Communicating subliminal visual information, Jones saw, was a definite capability of video that could be further enhanced with artistic computer animation.[22] Through the use of morphing, Jones performs what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam refer to in *Unthinking Eurocentrism* as anthropophagy. That is, he "assumes the inevitability of cultural interchange between 'center' and 'periphery,' and the consequent impossibility of any nostalgic return to an ordinary purity. Since there can be no unproblematic recovery of national origins undefiled by alien influences, artists in the dominated culture should not ignore the foreign presence but must swallow it, carnivalize it, recycle it, for national ends, always from a position of self-confidence."[23]

The sequences in *Paradigm Shift* are not just an idle jumbling of imagery. Every pictorial selection is entirely intentional—and the intention is that by composite, morph, juxtaposition, association, and sequence, a relationship between the images can be uncovered, discovered, and recognized. For example, in the video we see iconography symbolic of a mother and child from several different cultures and historical periods "morph" into each other. Morphing allows a transmutation (surface manipulation) of the mother and child figure, as the software provides a cross-dissolve allowing the key features—nose, eyes, and ears—to stay in place as the transformation takes place. In conceptualizing the video, Jones used a theoretical model based on the hieroglyphic system, in that he rationalized the images as symbols. He points out that the hieroglyphic system is the oldest symbolic system in the world, and that it was never a spoken language. It was an entirely visual language, in which meaning was evoked from the way the icons were organized. "The ancient icons of Russia are another symbolic language," argues Jones. "They are in fact a transmutation of the hieroglyphic system—that is, you don't have to explain the images to know what they are."[24]

If the spectator can identify one of the symbols in *Paradigm Shift* through the benefits of morphing, he or she will eventually know the whole. In essence, the audience will recognize one image and see that it is analogous, or that it relates something about the other images. Jones insists, "If you know one, you know all of them. It's right there. They look the same, it's the same postures—an organized posture. But it's also more than that—it's about how people express and see. They are all talking about a principle as well. So someone may not have encountered images from the Nile Valley or natives cultures in this hemisphere, but they have seen an African icon of a woman and her child. What I want to evoke is a community of ideas that can open up other doors of recognition, embracement, understanding—if that can happen on some level, then the exercise has been successful."[25]

Writers Robin King and John Lansdown have looked at how computer technology can be categorized within the visual arts and design and their studies provide a useful model through which we can further understand Jones's video work.[26] King provides a model that suggests four stages of application: *mimetic, derivative, innovative,* and *emergent*. *Paradigm Shift* is mimetic because the images Jones uses are replications of images produced in other media—in the case of *Paradigm Shift*, photography. The derivative stage is recognizable in Jones's work as he is trying to establish his own stylistic conceptions of the computer-generated work. For example, although Jones works within a hybridized genre that necessarily preserves its discontinuities and multivocalities,

Paradigm Shift reveals that history and memory are not contingently constructed, that they are produced through a concrete system of codes with an absolute foundation. *Paradigm Shift* is emergent in that the video is characterized by the unique properties of the morphing software, embodying simulation and intelligence. The fluid nature of the video reveals an ideology that suggests a need for united political action without asserting a belief in a transcendent aesthetic. Instead, Jones offers us a selected modification that realizes that the construction of history and memory is malleable and particular. Artists such as Jones are involved in the "repudiation of both naively 'democratic' and cynically eclectic strains of postmodern pluralism, [while] at the same time they retain a postmodern suspicion of modernist master narratives and claims to aesthetic transcendence."[27]

Jones uses the computer as a tool to continue what he has already been doing but enhances the efficiency, reliability, speed, and accuracy of his work. He asserts that he works with what is available to him in terms of tools, materials, and skills, as his quest is to manifest his vision. As an artist, he asks certain kinds of questions that he endeavors to answer through media—whether writing novels, making sculpture in plexiglas, creating 16mm animated films, or working in the darkroom or in the digital realm. Making media for Jones is about exploring the nature of the medium and bringing something new into the world. From the beginning of his work in media in 1969, he was attracted by the possibility of "invention" afforded by a medium (video) that, for the first time, allowed a synthesis of many artistic forms. There were very few rules, and those who worked in the field defined the medium through their work. Consequently, because of the constant and rapid changes in technology, this frontier still exists.

A consultant to various art museums, foundations and universities, Philip Mallory Jones serves as a Senior Lecturer in the College of Fine Arts at Arizona State University.

REGINALD WOOLERY

Reginald Woolery's *Keep Your Handsa Off the Park: A Role-Playing Game in Real and Virtual Worlds* (1997) is tri-elemental in nature and can be played as a board game and/or on the Internet. In the game, the mayor of New York City has decided to privatize the maintenance of Tompkins Square Park. Three groups express interest in the job, and game players decide if they want to be members of big business, small business, or the community (local residents and the homeless). There are also two variables involved, government and the press, who act as

information facilitators and sources. For four weeks, using a game board, the Internet, and physical spaces in the local community, the members of each group role-play and strategize to come up with an ultimate narrative of why their team should control the park. At the end of the four weeks, each group presents a proposal before an impartial tribunal at a public hearing—sort of a "High-Tech" town meeting. The challenge for the players is to pose the best case to a planning board so that their team can gain control of the park.

The game brings community land issues down to a level where individuals, business leaders, and politicians can learn from one another. It offers an opportunity to reinfuse our democratic public sphere with unbiased participation, suggesting an end to both corporate special interests and community apathy. The game is framed within the circumnavigation of urban spaces, which in this instance is Tompkins Square Park—the largest public square in Manhattan, which is now infamous as a result of the Tompkins Square Police Riot in 1988. Located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, it is the neighborhood where immigrants have settled in tenements for 150 years. The poverty and decay notwithstanding, for decades it quartered an extraordinary conglomeration of ethnic groups, including Slavs, Poles, Ukrainians, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, Jews, and several generations of bohemians. These were all communities within themselves that lived side by side but did not mix. In the 1940s, when small industry moved out and veterans of the war left, thousands of Puerto Rican immigrants arrived. However, with no major industry or business to employ its people, the neighborhood began to deteriorate. In the late 1960s, groups such as the Black Panthers and Young Lords roamed the area, and in the 1970s, hundreds of neighborhood buildings were abandoned, an example of how the lack of social mobility leads to geographic immobility. In the late 1980s, wealthy harbingers of change came together to gentrify the neighborhood. With no rent control standards, ethnic restaurants and small businesses were forced out, and the homeless took to the park, sharing its space with the neighborhood folk who refused to go.

There are many different people with various needs who congregate in Tompkins Square Park: homeless, multicultural ethnic groups, skinheads. Middle-class families live in overpriced homes overlooking the park, and students and working-class professionals rent apartments from landlords who would love the chance to evict them and triple the rent. In the summer of 1988, New York mayor Ed Koch imposed a curfew on the park, forcing the homeless out and into the streets nightly at the stroke of twelve. The ensuing tension erupted on August 6 after a riot squad evicted dozens of homeless in a brutal battle. On May 31,

1991, another violent outbreak occurred when Mayor David Dinkins sent police troops in full riot gear to roust the homeless from the park and barricade its entrances during a concert. In the aftermath, various community groups representing different constituencies have been battling among themselves for control of the park.

Interested in issues of urban economics and democracy playing out on the World Wide Web, Woolery was attempting to merge his interests in access, urban renewal policy, and digital multimedia spaces to create an exercise about democracy. The long history of Tompkins Square Park, as a social and political space in transformation through internal and external pressure (i.e., privatization of community gardens), provided the perfect context for his needs. In 1992, Woolery saw a documentary on public television that profoundly inspired him, entitled *The Betrayal of Democracy*. Produced and narrated by journalist William Grieder, the film traveled through the heartland of America while its host interviewed citizens about the deep sense of betrayal they felt toward elected officials and the political process. Mindful that Grieder did not resort to stereotypical analysis of this country's woes (by pinning them on the underclass and minorities) but rather suggested that the distance between elected officials and the population was a result of the increased relocation of governmental offices outside communities (and the delegation of critical oversight on issues to the media), Woolery saw the opportunity to play with the idea of electoral and visual representation through a role-playing game.

Keep Your Handsa Off the Park came together conceptually while Woolery was a student in a race and urban renewal policy class taught by Stephen Gregory, assistant professor of Africana studies at New York University. There, at Woolery's urging, Gregory decided to transform the last weeks of his course into a role-playing performance with Tompkins Square Park as the focus. "In a game design course, I focused on strategies that made people engage with computers beyond just browsing the Web. I learned how to create digital / real environments [which] people want to go to and have an investment in. My utopian aim is to translate this investment into *'real world'* activism."[28]

By allocating bonus points for application of the game's strategies to real-world spaces, Woolery allowed players an opportunity to realize that their efforts in cyberspace could translate into cultural and political change in the "real" world. In American society, public space and citizens' participation in politics continue to decline dramatically because the industries that employ (and consequently lay off) citizens represent the labor-displacing technologies of the post-industrial era that have led to the annihilation of reform-based social contracts. *Handsa*

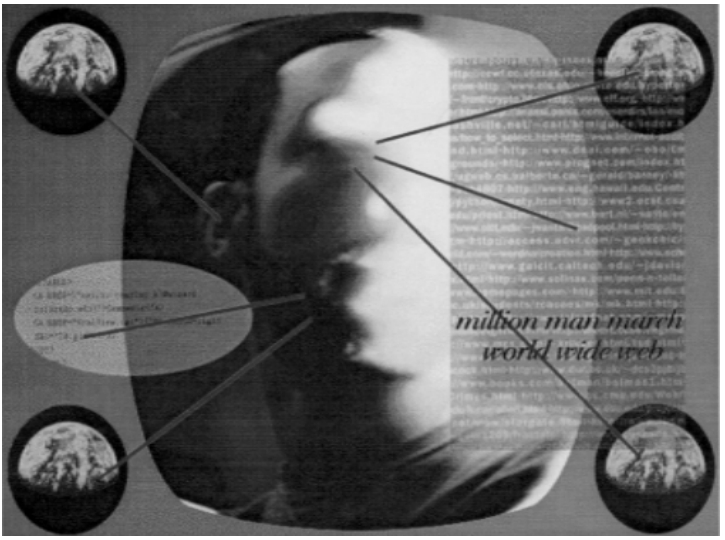
is informed by an understanding and a rendering visible of how political knowledge is secluded within institutional structures that both privilege and exclude particular bodies, voices, aesthetics, and forms of authority. Woolery problematizes this practice and history of social alienation in New York and visually develops a participatory ethical and political discourse.

Woolery describes *Keep Your Handsa Off the Park* as a mixture of *Sym City* and *Dungeons and Dragons.* Yet the latter reflects an interesting dynamic of the African American community. "We are not a homogeneous group," says Woolery.

> And in regards to imaginary worlds, there are cultural things we consider before we get involved. In designing this game, I realized that it's easier for folks to play role games than to play a fantasy-driven game like *Dungeons and Dragons.* However, we are used to the shedding of identity in our culture. For example, children tag a person 'it' and you can shed this identity. The whole medieval stance of *Dungeons and Dragons* invalidates something cultural about us. To be candid, folks of color don't necessarily play around with the devil. But I like to use the example of gangsta rap and the use of techno-turntables as a form of role-playing similar to that in cyberspace. The reason I think gangsta rap was an important form is because people responded to it cross-geographically. Furthermore, performance on the net is really an exercise in signifying and personas.[29]

Owing to the political realities of "haves" and "have-nots" (of phone lines, on-line services, and computers), Woolery is quick to admit that the creation of "Black High-Tech Documents" will be successful if artists and producers continue to find innovative ways for cyberspace and virtual reality to extend into real life. *Handsa* is based on the assumption that participants care about the outcome of the game. "We need some sort of consumer appeal that will allow all players involved to accept the outcome of the game," he says. "It has to be something that they want to participate in, so they'll be willing to take the time. The same thing that attracts people to play lotto every week—having a stake."[30]

A precursor of these new developments in digital media is black video. Initially it was critiqued as a body of work that seemed doubly marginalized—not only was it black, but it had been forced to build its audience in ever more diverse venues with little institutional support. In this era of decreasing congressional support for the NEA and a continually diminishing pool of arts and media funding, many critics, riding the hype of new media, have ironically abandoned the study of video because they perceive it as a dying art form. However, it is important to define video and cinema's interface with digital/interactive



Screen grab from Reggie Woolery's CD-ROM
World Wide Web/Million Man March.
Reggie Woolery, producer/designer.

media as worthy of continued practice and critical consumption. For example, Woolery makes a definite connection between his work and activist video, with many of the formulations of *Keep Your Handsa Off the Park* being contextualized in activist media, whose topics concentrate specifically on the social, political, and cultural issues facing communities of color in America.

Woolery's CD-ROM *World Wide Web/Million Man March* (*WWW/MMM*) (1997) juxtaposes two identity / community formations: (1) the backlash against black male masculinity centered around the 1995 Million Man March in Washington, D.C., and the first O.J. Simpson verdict, and (2) the vocal opposition to the Internet due to issues of pornography. Woolery witnessed a sense of paranoia and utopia around these two identity formations and wanted to place them in tandem. Having come back from the March and realizing that the popular media had defined the critical space within which he could talk about his experience, Woolery attempted to speak to that experience through the voices of others, refusing to present a closure or solitary definition. "I don't describe this work as a CD-ROM because a CD-ROM is basically a storage device. This is a non-linear piece which allows me to work out a number of ideas. All my work has probed the possibility or the impossibility of identity, in particular constructions of whiteness and blackness, femininity and masculinity." Woolery said that the topic of *WWW*

/MMM provided an opportunity for him to examine questions of spectatorship and what an audience brings to a work.

Reginald Woolery, a writer and digital artist, is a 1998–99 fellow at the Society of the Humanities at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, exploring the theme of the virtual, old and new.

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Discussing the works of Pamela Jennings, Philip Mallory Jones, and Reginald Woolery sheds an interesting light on the policy implications of current demographic patterns of Internet access and usage. The aforementioned artists are highly privileged individuals because of their access to the tools and resources of the institutions that they are affiliated with. In *Bridging the Digital Divide: The Impact of Race on Computer Access and Internet Use,* Vanderbilt University professors Thomas P. Novak and Donna L. Hoffman affirm that "the Internet is expected to do no less than virtually transform society, [and] key demographics variables like income and education drive the questions surrounding the Internet."[31] Artists working in the digital realm like Jennings, Jones, and Woolery "cross" the "digital divide," and their work reflects the information of a growing number of "haves" usually viewed as "have-nots." In their 1997 study, Novak and Hoffman found that "Over 5 million African-Americans have ever used the Web in the United States as of January 1997"[32]—a number, they point out, that is considerably larger than the current popular estimate of 1 million (at this writing) frequently reported in the press. "While income certainly matters, education is what counts." They state that increasing levels of education positively influence both computer access and Web use. "Access translates into usage. . . . Access to a computer at home, work, or school is currently the dominant mechanism by which individuals gain access to the internet."[33] Consequently, they concede, the policy implication is obvious: to ensure the participation of all Americans in the communication revolution, it is critical to improve the educational opportunities of African Americans.

n o t e s

1. Lynn Hershman Leeson, ed., *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), vii.

2. The term I use to define Jennings's, Jones's, and Woolery's work, "High-Tech," has what Woolery refers to as "boy toy" connotations, which is

indeed a legitimate critique. The female and black perspectives are increasingly marginalized in these discussions.

3. Pamela Jennings, "Narrative Structures for New Media: Towards a New Definition," *LEONARDO* 29, no. 5: 345–350.

4. Interview with Pamela Jennings, conducted by Erika Muhammad, September 5, 1997.

5. Ibid.

6. Jennings, "Narrative Structures for New Media," 345.

7. Interview with Jennings.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. In "Narrative Structures for New Media," Jennings provides a definition of MIDI adapted from Christopher Yavelow's *Macworld Music and Sound Bible* (San Mateo, Calif.: IDG Books Worldwide, 1992), 34. Developed in 1982, MIDI is an international specification used by musical instruments that contain microprocessors to communicate with other microprocessor-controlled instruments or devices. MIDI communicates *performance data,* not actual sound.

13. Interview with Jennings.

14. Ibid.

15. Interview with Philip Mallory Jones, conducted by Erika Muhammad, April 15, 1997.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. "State of the Arts: Artist Uses Technology to Tackle the World," *College of Fine Arts Newsletter,* Arizona State University, 1994–95, 2–3.

23. As articulated by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 307.

24. Interview with Jones, conducted by Muhammad.

25. Ibid.

26. As cited by Robin Baker in "Computer Technology and Special Effects in Contemporary Cinema," in *Future Visions: New Technologies of the Screen,* ed. Philip Hayward and Tana Wollen (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 32.

27. As articulated by Judith Wilson in her discussion of contemporary visual artists and global histories in "New (Art) Histories: Global Shifts, Uneasy Exchanges," from the exhibition catalogue for *New Histories* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1995), 15.

28. Interview with Reginald Woolery, conducted by Erika Muhammad, May 15, 1997.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Thomas P. Novak and Donna L. Hoffman, "Bridging the Digital Divide: The Impact of Race on Computer Access and Internet Use," can be found on the Web at <http://www2000.ogsm.vanderbilt.edu/>. Novak and Hoffman co-direct Project 2000 at Vanderbilt University.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.