

**Paul B. Jaskot**

## **Art, Technology and the Human Condition: localStyle's dancing cranes**

It is a truism that new technologies and mathematical principles have been the tools of art making since ancient times. In the modern era, industrialization has not only continued this development but expanded its pace and scope. Yet such changes as the industrial production of photo chemicals, the invention of the paint tube, the introduction of film or new ways of recording sound have not merely altered the speed and variation with which artists of multiple media work. They are also themselves products of an increasingly internationalizing mass society that forms the context and often the content of their cultural affirmation or critique. The digital video with sound piece **Dancing Cranes** (2003), by Marlena Novak and Jay Alan Yim (**localStyle**), can best be understood in these terms.

**Dancing Cranes** is both coolly analytical and lyrical, taking advantage of recent digital technologies but also referencing specific historical avant-garde traditions. Novak and Yim have drawn on a variety of influences to create a piece that is simultaneously strange and familiar. The structural frame of the audio and visual components rests on a clear system of proportions and geometries derived from such classic sources as the Golden Section, which grounds the visual and aural experience. They have complemented this stable foundation with an emphasis on allusions to important and canonical abstract modernist strategies established by groups like the Russian Constructivists and de Stijl as well as familiar musical and visual patterns from Japanese traditions. Yet the purity of structure, proportion, imagery and abstraction are themselves confronted by an equal emphasis on disruption, fragmentation and, above all, cultural fusion that draws attention to the disjunction between a clean faith in the purity of technology and the subjective aesthetic experience of the individual in modern society.

The structural clarity of the piece as well as its reliance on ideal proportions is evident from the opening, a series of vertical stripes that appear in consort with strong rhythmic pulses. Novak relies here not only on regular geometric forms but also, of course, on the strong clarity of the foundation of the composition in additive primary colors. These images and the attendant sounds begin on a single pulse, then one more, then two, then three, then five, etcetera, seeming to take their formal development from such classic mathematical formulas as the Fibonacci Sequence, which describes an infinite series in which the latest number is the sum of the previous two. This sequence is closely related to the proportions of the Golden Section, a guiding ratio that has been fundamental in artistic traditions going back to ancient Mediterranean cultures. The ratio of the Golden Section is not only apparent in the rectangular vertical and horizontal forms that vary and repeat throughout but as a structuring principle of the piece as a whole. In the 5:33 minute run, for example, a particularly important break of vibrantly moving and activated forms and sound occurs at 3:25, or 0.618 of the way through, marking a key proportion of the Golden Section. By utilizing these measurements in time and space, **Dancing Cranes** signals both its idealistic abstract purity of form but also the formal impossibility of achieving such purity, as the proportions (like Pi) are irrational numbers and irreducible. Stability and universality, as well as infinite variation and particularity are codified simultaneously. It cannot be reduced to a mere set of static numerical formulas, and yet there exists in the piece a sense of continuity and a solid foundation.

Through this complicated play between forms, sounds and ratios weaves the metaphoric significance of the title figure: the cranes. Taken from the origami form of the crane, the image appears throughout particularly as an interruption of the dominance of the vertical stripes. Its diagonal forms contrast with the other figures in the piece even while its underlying geometry balances with the overall composition. Novak brings the image more clearly into focus with the separate planar elements of the paper form that float as disjunctive but occasionally abutting shapes appear approximately 1/4 of the way through the piece and reappearing 3/4 of the way to the end. Variations on these forms punctuate the components of the piece, showing again continuity and variation simultaneously. More schematically, in several spots in the video where a vertically dominant motive is interrupted by horizontal lines, Yim reminds us in the soundtrack of the Japanese context of the stylized origami cranes by sampling from a digitized recording of a koto and a shamisen in the pentatonic scale here and in other key places.

These intercultural influences are both apparent and multilayered in their significance. The origami crane form refers to an old Japanese myth that the person who folds 1000 cranes is granted a wish. This became associated with an anti-militarist message

through Sadako Sasaki, a young girl in postwar Japan who, through her exposure to the atomic bomb, contracted leukemia. Before she succumbed to the disease, Sadako attempted to fold 1000 cranes during her illness in hopes of being healed; her story has inspired many to use the origami bird as a symbol for peace and innocence to this day. For Novak and Yim, such context is important as a starting point for the core message of peace and reconciliation. Yet, beyond this initial signal, there are subtle forms and decisions that work both for and against such an interpretation. So, for example, the tonal fusion of east and west can be extended to the visual fusion not only of crane-like forms but also of the prominent abstract traditions of Malevich, El Lissitzky and Mondrian, key modernists who produced works that sometimes complemented, sometimes contradicted the spiritual and visual abstractions of specific Asian traditions such as the Zen influence on art. Hence, while the piece is a synthesis of various traditions indicating its optimism in a globalizing world, it is never completely reconciled nor are the sound and visual components ever brought to a final resolution.

The tension, struggle and equilibrium that reference the desire for an expansion of social justice and peace signal as well the fundamental condition of art making in a world of expanding industrial technology and military conflict. This could be interpreted in relation to the dialectic between the machine's potential as a liberating force and its ability to reduce the human to a state of total alienation. The rationality of the forms, the colors, the sound and the digital technology seem to deny the agency of art making in their celebration of the triumph of the machine in an industrial age. Yet, Novak and Yim seem less interested in this dynamic than they are grounded in humanism, where technology is a tool of expression firmly controlled by the artist and reaching out to the common experience of the individual audience member. Such an interpretation is supported by the unusual use of the Adobe AfterEffects software, a "medium" that is more commonly employed for such purposes as special typographic effects and the construction of logos in Hollywood films, television and other commercial outlets. Instead of being used to dazzle and distract the viewer as per an alienating commercial technology, here the software is denied its usual market function in favor of the more idiosyncratic and creative potential of art making in the mode of abstraction, a particularly non-commercial choice in the image saturated world of popular consumer culture.

Novak and Yim are thus confronting a long line of significant strands of avant-garde thought that locates the machine and industrial culture in general as an absolute negative. Instead, they give us an image of the complexity of the technological and the social, one which firmly comes down on the side of their essentially affirmative ability to complement each other, even in the face of the awesome specter of their mutual antagonism with the crane's reference to nuclear war. While, in many ways, their work is ostensibly the epitome of art made to erase the human subject both through its media and its abstraction, the optimism of the piece pushes one to read that abstraction as a socially universalizing rather than as an alienating choice. Coupled with the playful use of the image of the crane and the variable but consistent fusion of cultural traditions, this is a piece that asserts a positive social message in spite of, rather than because of, the advanced technological world that has made the massive destruction of modern warfare and genocide possible. Intimate and communal, abstract and concrete, abstruse and rational, **Dancing Cranes** is a deceptively straightforward and stable piece that is, upon reflection, a deeply layered manifesto for contemporary aesthetic and social concerns.

Paul B. Jaskot  
14 August 2004

Paul Jaskot received his PhD in Art History from Northwestern University. He teaches courses on architectural history, modern architecture and urban planning, and German art with a particular emphasis on National Socialist Germany. In addition to his teaching, Jaskot is also the Director of the Wired! Lab for Digital Art History and Visual Culture at Duke. His scholarly work focuses on the political history of Nazi art and architecture as well as its postwar cultural impact. He is the author of *The Architecture of Oppression: The SS, Forced Labor, and the Nazi Monumental Building Economy* (2000) as well as *The Nazi Perpetrator: Postwar German Art and the Politics of the Right* (2012). He has co-edited *Beyond Berlin: Twelve German Cities Confront the Nazi Past* (2008) as well as *New Approaches to an Integrated History of the Holocaust: Social History, Representation, Theory* (forthcoming 2018). In addition, for the past decade, he has been a member of the Holocaust Geography Collaborative exploring the use of GIS and other digital methods to analyze the spatial history of the Holocaust. He contributed three co-authored essays to their volume, *Geographies of the Holocaust* (2014), the first book to address the analysis of Holocaust spaces with GIS. Currently, he is continuing his collaborative work in an analysis of the spaces of the Nazi ghettos of Occupied Europe as well as a solo-researched project on the history of the construction industry in Germany, 1914-1945. From 2014-2016, Jaskot was the Andrew W. Mellon Professor at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). He was also the President of the College Art Association (2008-2010).