

INTRODUCING

## Brody Condon

BY HOLLY WILLIS



Robert Smithson may seem an unlikely inspiration for an artist whose work is largely informed by video games, but for Brody Condon, such an antecedent makes sense. Condon particularly appreciates the late artist's concept of site and "non-site" spaces inside a gallery to create a representational relay that muddies the boundaries between inside and outside, art object and its documentation. Condon posits game space as a crucial platform for the consideration of exactly this tension between spaces in differing registers; in the process, he invites us to rethink some of our most cherished ontological and epistemological conceits. The virtual spaces deployed by Condon act as supplements to real space, both enhancing and replacing it, and undermining the "real" as a natural ground or center, just as Smithson transfer the hierarchical status of a site to its non-site complement. For Condon, who grew up playing video games, there is no original, purely physical world. Virtual space in general, and game space in particular, function as nodal points, reconstituting our sense of the world to accommodate a new discursive regime.

Condon's practice began in the late 1990's and was greatly influenced by his location - Southern California - and the collision

of two disparate communities, namely that of media theorists and video game hobbyists. Two scholars who had an impact on the budding gamer were N. Katherine Hayles, a literary critic at the University of California, Los Angeles, who at the time was writing about post-human subjectivity, and Lev Manovich, a new-media artist and theorist at the University of California, San Diego, who was considering the database as a symbolic form. Meanwhile, the video game community was busily "modding" games such as Quake, Doom, and Half-Life by altering the gameplay and then sharing their ideas in online forums. "Being triangulated between these two," the artist recalled in an interview, "so that I was taking the technical skills from the hobbyists and an articulation of ideas through the theorists, was a way of stepping outside the boundaries and trying to do something else."

Condon was less interested in simply affecting the direction or outcome of particular games, and more intrigued by using games as a way to consider larger phenomenological ideas. Similarly, while he was immersed in theories of new media, Condon was not interested in merely a theoretical approach; he wanted to deal directly with the somatic experience of gaming, and develop a

theoretical understanding from that ground. “A lot of the early theory did not explain to me some of the most basic issues, like what it felt like to sit in front of a screen for 14 hours at a time,” he says. “And it didn’t explain the kind of symbiotic relation of the body and projection of it into this other space.” Condon found that bringing Smithson’s work, specifically Smithson’s phenomenological understanding of the body and his fascination with the play between presence and absence, was far more conducive to helping explicate his own game-centered experience and his own fascination with the play materiality and immateriality conjured by game space.

Smithson also helped Condon grapple with another key theme in his work, namely the force of trauma, both personal and cultural, and its ongoing aftermath. Again, Smithson’s piles of rocks offer a hand reference. Post traumatic stress counseling take patients into a trancelike state in order to elicit disturbing



memories. “Through a projection of self, your return to the that traumatic place again, go into shock, and then reprogram those moments,” explains Condon. Given that progression from memory to memory and revisiting of traumas in the present, where does the actual trauma reside? In the past? In the present? In memory? Again, Condon found that Smithson had considered these questions with site/non-site projects.

Condon used video as one tool to explore the return to original trauma, and then took all these ideas - of the relay from site to site, the relationship between absence and presence, and the notion of violent trauma itself - into game space, where he considers the temporal structures of games (their representations, for example) and notions of pro-

jection, as players identify with avatars, in an ongoing, deeply provocative recursive interrogation. His investigation, however, is less concerned with gaming and more interested in questions of being and thinking in a world that still hopes to attenuate or even repudiate the unerring force of the virtual.

This investigation reached an apex earlier this year with the display of a projection piece at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. The piece is among the latest in a body of work by Condon that productively aligns painting, sculpture, performance art, new-media theory, and video games to consider key questions of subjectivity, the body, trauma, and apocalypse. *The Last Judgment*, a triptych painted by the Netherlands artist Hans Memling between 1467 and 1471, was reinvented by Condon as *Judgment Modification (after Memling)* (2007), a digital animation that borrows elements of Memling’s painting, but restaged them within a video game vernacular.

the chimerical imagery includes an iguana, shards of rainbow colors, Saint Michael adorned with peacock feathers and holding a limp body, and the naked sinners, who now prance about on the portico of Heaven’s gate. Condon calls the project a “self playing” game, which means that it does not invite user interaction; instead it “plays” independently, leaving viewers to ponder their role in relationship to the project as game. Rather than manipulating characters or wandering within the space of the game, visitors instead consider the links among the projection, the painting to which it refers (an image of it handily posted at the project room’s entrance), and the space of the gallery itself. Condon’s work is often wryly humorous (his *KarmaPhysics < Elvis* [2004], for example, mods the Unreal game to display a bevy of floating Elvis bodies) but this work, as well as some of his earlier pieces, addresses complex issues: by emphasizing our own era’s apocalyptic iconography, especially as it is rendered in so many video games, it makes us aware of our desire to find some sense of bodily transcendence through projection into a game space.

*Judgment Modification (after Memling)* joins *Resurrection (after Bouts)* (2006) and *default-Properties (after Gerard David)* (2007) as revisions of religious masterpieces, finding unexpected resonance in visions of apocalypse and fantasy. “I was trying to understand the genealogy of the visual style of games,” Condon regarding the genesis of the series. “Most of it is so stepped in the genre illustration and fantasy, with the warrior chicks and guys with huge phallic weapons.” In trying to understand that history, Condon again studied an unlikely precursor, namely the





late medieval religious paintings of Northern Europe. “In the Southern Renaissance, painter were using new technologies, like oil paint and Cartesian space, in order to represent spaces in a more realistic fashion,” Condon explains, “but in the North, while they understood these new techniques of lighting and perspective, they would use them instead to heighten the reality of the religious fantasies they were creating.” Condon says he was struck by a similar lineage in computer games and the parallel increase in technologies of visual representation that are now so frequently deployed to depict elaborate fantasy realms within a cultural marked by war, destruction, and trauma.

Condon, who earned a MFA in visual arts at the University of California, San Diego in 2002, has consistently united unlikely elements and found surprising connections as a result. He is perhaps best known for the 2002 project *Velvet Strike*, cocreated with Anne Marie Schleiner and Joane Leandre, which modifies the first person shooter game Counter Strike so that players “shoot” out antiwar graffiti rather than bullets. Condon also collaborated on *Waco Resurrection* (2003), which invites players into the purview of the Branch Davidian leader David Koresh and his 1993 standoff at his compound with the FBI. In his DVD compilation *Suicide Solution* (2004), Condon collects

a series of documented suicides performed in first- and third-person shooter games, considering death in a realm where it has very different ramifications than in the physical world. In each of these projects, Condon mods a game in ways that fundamentally transform it, making it suit his conceptual goals.

Video games have reached a stage of maturity that allows for formal experimentation (although artistic adaptation is still largely the exception). Condon’s work is remarkable because it seeks to take these much-needed experiments and gestures of resistance to the next level, no longer simply reacting against social prejudices and commercial clichés, but pursuing a theoretically informed investigation of such larger issues as death, salvation, apocalypse, and resurrection. Condon is not afraid to dive deep into the ideological complexities of contemporary existence in a world increasingly mediated by networks and troubled by uncertain or multiple subjectivities. In an age when the collapse of high and low culture is no longer a disruptive gesture but a point of departure, Condon’s work may well herald a new general of complexity in thinking about video games and digital culture and their impact on contemporary ways of being in the world.

Condon found that Smithson’s fascination with the play between presence and absence helped his own understanding of the play of materiality and immateriality conjured by game space.

