

## Ouroboros by Paul Young

In the mid-1960s the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins coined the term “intermedia” to describe an approach to art making that opposed traditional Greenbergian formalism, that is, it wasn't about exploring the meaning of a particular medium or material but about how to use it in a way that falls squarely in-between traditional methodologies. For him Duchamp's work remained far more vital and interesting than say, Picasso's, because it existed “between media” as he said, or “between sculpture and something else.” That gave it a nuance and tension that could never be fully resolved, and therefore it remained in constant motion—literally and figuratively—and thus timeless.

For Higgins, that idea of an artwork that cannot resolve itself was the ideal for any artform, whether it was visual, literary, musical or architectural. “That's the intermedial approach,” he wrote in 1966, “to emphasize the dialectic between the media.”

The LA-based, French born artist, Marc Fichou can be seen as an heir to Higgins' intermedia artist. For his exhibition at the gallery, Fichou has decided to focus on the idea of feedback as a central theme for a wide array of installations and objects. For him, feedback is the best way to find and expand on the intermedial. Yet at the same time for Fichou, and a number of theorists (such as Douglas Hofstadter), the idea of the infinite loop also has larger implications for everything imaginable--from the cosmos to aesthetics, biology to perception.

Feedback occurs when two open systems bump into one another and suddenly lock into—and engage—with one another. We use the term colloquially to describe the active participation of a listener—or someone who “gives feedback”—to a speaker or group. But we also use it to describe electronic feedback, such as when a musician points a microphone at a speaker or when a video camera points to its own display. In both cases the output signal starts echoing itself instantaneously, as the output suddenly becomes input and vice versa, and that in turn produces what is generally seen (or heard) as noise.

Musical acts such as the Grateful Dead, the Velvet Underground and Sonic Youth have long exploited feedback to create beautiful, semi-controlled, abstract sounds; while video artists such as Nam Jun Paik in the 1960s and Steina and Woody Vasulka in the 1980s have used it to create the visual equivalent. (The former used to place feedback loops in New York cafes while the latter used it for academic research).

Fichou's interest in feedback dates back ten years, back when he started exploring reflective surfaces and mirrors. And now, after working with it for years, he has

found a way to produce surprisingly curious images. He still points a camera at its own display, but now instead of "noise" his device produces images that are as formally beautiful and structured as anything found in nature, yet as delicate and individualistic as snowflakes.

Ouroboros is a term that is often symbolized by a snake eating its tail (an image that Carl Jung claimed had an archetypal significance to the human psyche). Fichou uses that idea to not only refer to feedback, but the very act of artmaking itself. The gallery is filled with a wide array of mediums and materials including photographs, overlays, transparencies, glass plates, drawings, paintings, prints and of course videos. But Fichou is quick to point out that he didn't create or "design" any of them. Rather he only 'found' or 'curated' the works as they appeared on his screen over the course of the last 6 months. Thus, his approach bridges multiple art-historical approaches. In terms of a modernist perspective, he's using the medium to realize itself, in a way that only an electronic medium can. Yet in an obvious nod to the structuralists, he's eliminating himself as the author. (the only forms that are produced are produced by the medium in and of itself.)

What's more, there's a durational, performative quality to the exhibition as well. After all, Fichou has set up a special camera/screen device inside the gallery (which he has named "the artist"), that will produce new forms and images each day, all day long, 24/7. And when Fichou arrives each morning to restart the camera, he's able to catch a small glimmer of light, which in turn starts "echoing" on the screen over and over until new forms begin to appear. Yet no two patterns are alike, since the "artist" is surprisingly sensitive to small fluctuations in the room—whether it's the people present, the temperature, changes in voltage and/or small vibrations. Thus, with a running time of 9 weeks, the piece begins to make a conscious nod to such major durational works as 4'33" by John Cage or the real time video works of Wolfgang Staehle.

Yet feedback is not the first thing a viewer sees upon entering the gallery—or so it seems. Rather one sees a room filled with prints of every sort, much like Fichou's studio. Each was made by Fichou's "artist," and yet not one of the images looks like feedback at all. In fact, most will assume they're looking at seashells, hurricanes, trees, plants, and/or other natural phenomena. And yet they're in fact found in Fichou's feedback loops, including images that look like exactly like fingerprints, letters and/or forms of code. For Fichou, that adds a particular meaning to the work that needs to be negotiated by any viewer. "Any association to known images or archetypes is a purely associative reflex," he says. "Like the many forms produced by nature, these virtual images are self-generated: they are neither created nor programmed by man. They have no referent. In other words, they are originals."

And this is where Fichou's project starts to expand into something much larger. After all, despite the fact that technology is now fully integrated in our lives, we still feel that there's a division between the technological and the natural. And yet his practice seems to suggest the contrary: that nature might operate in exactly the same way. After looking closely at all the forms produced by Fichou's "artist" one might be inclined to think that a similar form of feedback—whether it's on the molecular or the cosmic level—might have influenced the very shapes and forms of the physical world that we all know. And if you take that a step further, you might apply that to ideas, thoughts and perception too. Woody and Steina Vasulka used to claim that they explored feedback in their own work in the 1980s because it was the best representation of the mind/technology relationship that they could think of. "The feedback loop," they write, "not only expands and flattens space simultaneously, but extends and contracts time in the same manner. That has implications for the way in which we apprehend and comprehend our world through various mediums."

But if you look closer you can also say that feedback might also be the best model for the mind itself. After all, the two hemispheres of the brain are in effect, in a constant state of feedback, and that in turn might have something to do with both, the nature of perception and reality itself. That is partly why Douglas Hofstadter, one of the key thinkers of the post-modern age, would use feedback as a central metaphor for *I Am a Strange Loop* (2007), his follow-up to the Pulitzer-prize-winning book, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. "In the end," he writes, "we are self-perceiving, self-inventing, locked-in mirages that are little miracles of self-reference." – A fitting description for Ouroboros.