

ZG

Special Double
Issue

\$8.00



ALTERED STATES

STEVE MILLER

I ncreasingly our picture of reality is a conceptual one, based on the abstract, numerically-derived evidence provided by an interrelated set of measuring and mapping systems. The data provided by these technologically-derived systems enable us to construct an image of reality based on a web of theory, hypothesis, and conjecture, which supplements and even contradicts the evidence of our senses. We have come to rely on the information provided by these devices, relinquishing the autonomy of our judgment to them: looking at an event has been replaced by looking at a digital readout. These neutral measurements allow us to categorize and discriminate among physical phenomena to an ever finer degree, and at the same time extend the scale of the physical world as we conceive it beyond the reach of our senses, into the microscopic and the macroscopic: we now speak of nanoseconds and lightyears, of atomic weights and megatons. Many of these instruments are not new, but with economies of scale they have been applied to an ever wider range of tasks.

The binary code serves as the language of this conceptual reality. The on/off, black/white, one/zero decisions that make up this code serve equally well as the basis for halftones and computers. These patterns can be replicated in a wide variety of forms, and can be manipulated mathematically as well; moreover, phenomena of different sorts can be reduced to the Esperanto of the binary code and compared with one another, so long as both are quantifiable. This capability of translation and comparison is central to the power of binary logic.

Steve Miller bases many of his recent paintings on this binary language, using the familiar forms in which the code appears to highlight its structure. The systematic storm of dots that trace across his silkscreened canvases suggest the texture of the video image—the grid of scan lines that forms the public face of information technology, whether TV or computers. In everyday applications the video grid is regarded as an

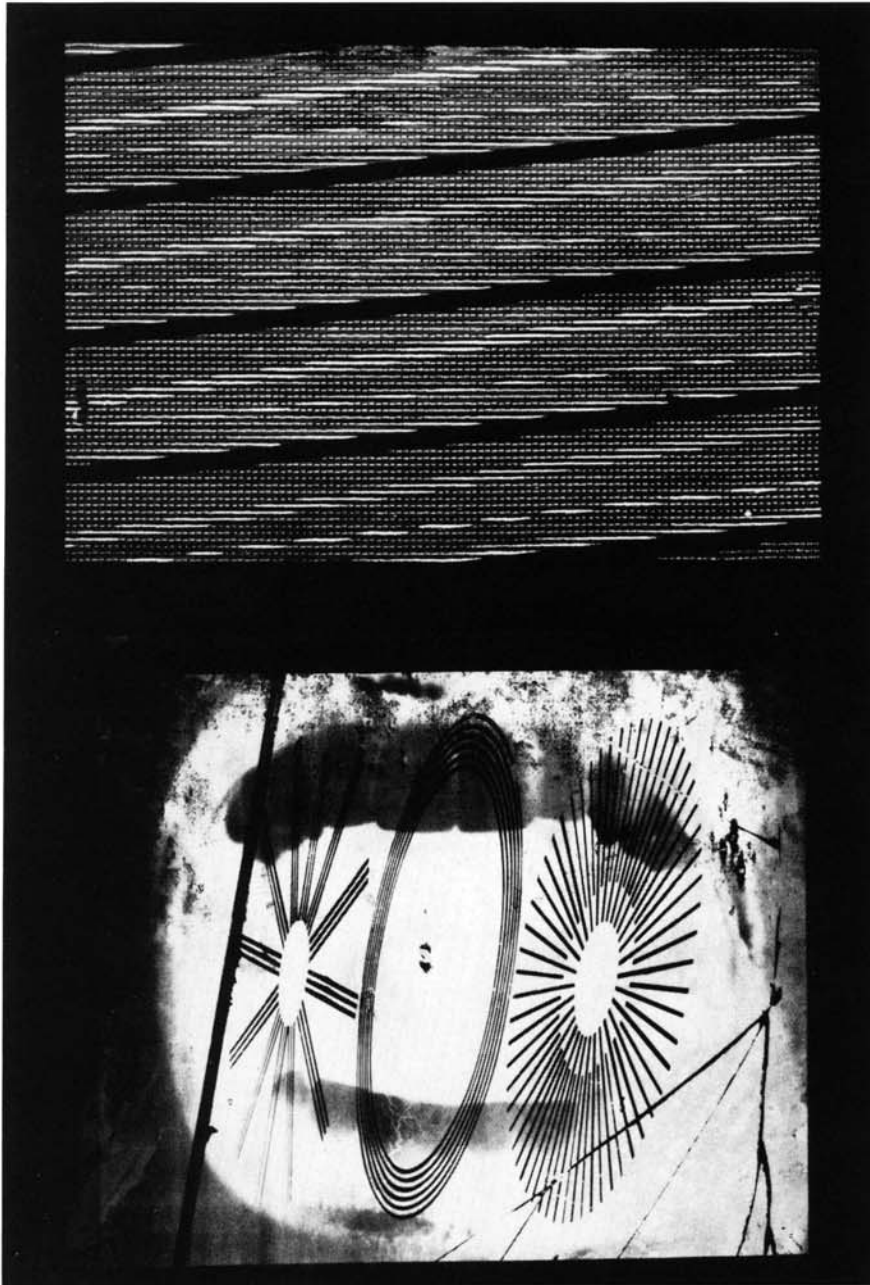
unfortunate byproduct of the method by which the images are produced; great effort is expended to increase the resolution of the display grid in order to make it sink below the threshold of human visibility. Miller, though, brings this signature of the apparatus—which normally serves only as the support for an overlay of information—to the foreground. His paintings are like skeletal outlines of the underlying rhetorical structure of the video image. Bunched below the surface of his scanline tracings, though, are turbid clouds of negative color. These underlying forms teeter on the verge of legibility, seeming now about to coalesce into meaningful shapes, now disappearing again behind the static of the electronic grid—as if the apparatus itself were dreaming. In other works Miller uses technologically derived images of other kinds, including a sonogram of an unborn child and fiber-optic photographs of the inside of a heart, emphasizing further the tremendous reach of imaging technology.

Miller based several earlier groups of paintings on the intentionally ambiguous inkblots of the Rorschach test. The range of potential interpretations of these standardized abstract shapes has been tabulated and categorized: if you see two birds you're normal, if you see a man and a woman fighting over a baby you're not. These works rejected the customary claims of abstract painting, that it conveys meanings that exist outside any standardized system of measurement and meaning.

In all of these works Miller applies the rhetoric of the technological, conceptual view of reality to art, which offers a different way of apprehending the world. In general, art continues to insist on the importance of the direct evidence of the senses—the retinal, in Duchamp's term—often to the point of denying the technologically-derived image of reality. But the evidence of the body, on which art continues to base itself, is ultimately subjective and open to challenge. In order to achieve social force it must somehow command communal agreement, but as our sense of community itself has become increasingly fragmented this has grown more and more difficult.

Charles Hagen

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Steve Miller *Untitled*, 1987

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The mapping and measuring systems that underlie technological reality substitute externalized, communally sanctioned units of exchange for the idiosyncracies of individual perception. At the same time, though, these systems are biased toward the easily measurable. Gerald Holton has argued that a crucial point in the development of the modern scientific method occurred at the beginning of the 17th century, when Johannes Kepler decided to limit his investigations into vision to the measurable optics of the eye, leaving aside questions about the nature of perception. This separation of physics from metaphysics is at the root of technological civilization. If a phenomenon cannot be readily quantified, it is hard to fit it into the conceptual picture of reality.

The technological systems behind conceptual reality are designed to be extensions of the body, but in a real sense they have come to supplant it, replacing mortality with the deathless, pristine perfection of mathematics and electronics. With its intoxicating powers this new, bodiless reality can cause a retreat into the quantifiable. We can become so entranced by these apparatuses that we fetishize even the look of information technology and fantasize about the good things it will lead to—or turn it into the romantic bogeyman of a seductive, apocalyptic vision.

In themselves, though, these systems are simply tools of a special kind. They can and are being used as technological bludgeons, to bully and dazzle us with their aura of omniscience. But behind the X-ray machine at the airport, behind every bank of surveillance monitors, is an underpaid, undertrained security guard lost in daydreams. The control of these tools is a political problem, not a technological one: the roots of our conceptual reality are in metaphysics rather than mathematics. What is needed are new metaphors through which to understand these systems, and to recognize our own desires for the mathematical order they embody. Like such other works as *Der Reise*, Michael Klier's videotape about the apparatus of surveillance, Miller's paintings both acknowledge and examine the power of the disembodied reality embraced so fervently by technological culture.