

Displaying Data: Micro, Macro, and Marco [Maggi]

By Robert Hobbs

In the wake of computer advances, some philosophers have attempted to develop a logical and consistent definition of human consciousness. But they have taken little comfort in the conclusion that human beings are able to assess their own limits while artificial forms of intelligence can only work within the constraints of a system defining them without being able to transcend it. Although these findings have represented an impasse for theoreticians attempting to differentiate people from machines, an appreciation for the redefinition of humanity that computers entail, including the hybrid and dynamic condition of cyborgs, has become a crucial and an exciting area of exploration for such a prescient artist as Marco Maggi. In his work over the past few years, he indicates that human capacities in the future will often need to be understood in terms of their own distinct limits. Instead of extolling as the standard for intelligence the digital realm of computers, which have ignored all numbers except for the binaries 0 and 1, he looks to humanity's original digitals, the incredible connection between a prehensile thumb and fingers that form the wondrous, yet still fallible machine known as the human hand. In the catalogue for his 2001 exhibition at 123 Watts in New York, entitled "The Pencil Monologues," he gently mocks current self-satisfactions with recent inventions by describing the archaic digital diversions that ensued after the invention of one of the first machines, the lever, which was then used in the form of pieces of charcoal to create drawings:

The pencil was born because of the intimate relationship between the thumb and index finger. A digital dialogue from prehistory to history. The new technology has yet to achieve a more digital instrument than the hand ¹

With a dry wit aimed at himself as well as others, he proposes a rudimentary cyborgian state of becoming machinic that attends these early revolutionary acts and continues into the present, representing an important duration whose full cycle is still in its early stages. In another statement that pokes fun at the current fascination with computer art, he compares his own activities on the Internet with those of the Paleolithic groups, who created cave paintings, to demonstrate how present-day advances are merely the rudimentary beginnings of a very long future facing humanity:

I look at my mouse and it looks like the Bison of Altamira. The end of history will not happen. On the contrary, we are experiencing the renaissance of prehistory. I recognize myself in the mirror: Cromagnonline. ²

In order to set Maggi's work in proper historic relief and understand its new approach to machines that at times parallels Gilles Deleuze's thought and more recently is informed by it, I would like to review the primary ways that twentieth-century artists regarded machines. Unlike Maggi, who is skeptical of the virtues ascribed to these devices, many Russian constructivists and Bauhaus-trained designers considered machines beneficent adjuncts capable of supporting and sustaining humanity's prominence, as well as serving as inspiring harbingers of future salutary developments. They found machinery wonderful teaching tools potentially able to help them eradicate such unnecessary and embarrassing human impediments as their penchants for deviating from established norms, tendency to slowness, capacity for inefficiency, and persistent inability to accord with the inexorable demands of progress and accept its decrees. The history of twentieth-century art has thus been an ongoing romance between artists and mechanics in which the former have courted the latter, and their alliance has been metaphorically metamorphosed into Duchamp's bride. This love affair took the form of an esthetics of functionalism in the late

teens and early twenties, streamlining in the 1930s, and aerodynamics in the 1950s and '60s.

In 1968, K. G. Pontus Hultén's ambitious and mainly European-oriented exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, entitled *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, surveyed ways that artists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have incorporated the aesthetics of technology and engineering in their work in order to support the ideology of progress. Though obviously intrigued with these advances, Hultén acknowledges that the major deviations from this sweeping project are the humorous, lumbering machines with vaguely anthropomorphic references created by Jean Tinguely. His elaborate contraptions questioned many truisms regarding the inexorable forward march of progress that new devices seemed to substantiate. His exhibition concluded on a positive note with a brief overview of the ambitious reciprocity between artists and engineers undertaken by the international organization Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.).

Today, the most progressive art concentrating on machinery such as Maggi's deliberately low-key, whimsical pieces is unmoved by these earlier claims. Instead of celebrating the utopianism that was considered a necessary concomitant of any machine style, he interrogates it. Rather than focusing on the newest technology and the most advanced of artificial intelligences as signs of progress, as have the curators of recent exhibitions at San Francisco MoMA and the Whitney, Maggi questions its assumed superiority. Practicing a mode of inquiry that we might term "deconstructivism" in deference to Derrida's prescient theoretical skepticism and also the work of early twentieth-century Russian constructivists, Maggi has found a way to reclaim the creation of machines as distinctly human accomplishments that transform humans at the same time that they enact changes on their world, thus forming a symbiotic and ongoing dynamic of becomings marked by differential durations. Maggi's approach differs markedly from that of Whitney curator Christiane Paul who organized "Data Dynamics" and describes new digital means as a form of progress: "Data are intrinsically virtual and exist as processes that aren't necessarily visible. The search for visual models that allow for dynamic mapping is inextricably connected to the attempt to visualize the nonlocality of cyberspace." Instead of writing off new data as ineluctable and fluid, Maggi makes a concerted attempt to understand them through his drawings, and his intricate exertion to do so defines his humanity.

No longer hampered by an ideological mindset geared to accept progress without reckoning its costs, Maggi recognizes that some innovations have exerted heavy penalties in terms of increased alienation. The estrangement that comes most under fire in Maggi's art is the one resulting from the new global networks that permeate national boundaries, setting up international flows that seem to move with incredible velocities that sweep humans along their labyrinthine channels while preventing them the privilege of confronting the powerful lines of flight assailing them. In order to combat the superannuation of humanity through the global networks that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have labeled "empire" ⁴ and also avoid succumbing to reactionary views pertaining to the indomitable might of a recalcitrant individualism, Maggi invokes as a working premise the fictive Uruguayan in Jorge Luis Borges tale "Funes, His Memory." Instead of focusing on the memory of this phenomenal autodidact as commentators of Borges' fiction have tended to do, Maggi dwells on Funes' incredible powers of perception that take empiricism to unheralded lengths. The passage most memorable to Maggi is the following description of Funes' ability to immerse himself so fully in the present that he is incapable of distilling his perceptions into generalities:

Funes, we must not forget, was virtually incapable of general, platonic ideas. Not only was it difficult for him to see that the generic symbol 'dog' took in all the dissimilar individuals of all

shapes and sizes, it irritated him that the 'dog' of three-fourteen in the afternoon, seen in profile, should be indicated by the same noun as the dog of three-fifteen, seen frontally. His own face in the mirror, his own hands, surprised him every time he saw them. Swift wrote that the emperor of Lilliput could perceive the movement of the minute hand of a clock; Funes could continually perceive the quiet advances of corruption, of tooth decay, of weariness. He saw - he noticed - the progress of death, of humidity. He was the solitary, lucid spectator of a multiform, momentaneous, and almost unbearably precise world. Babylon, London, and New York dazzle mankind's imagination with their fierce splendor; no one in the populous towers or urgent avenues of those cities has ever felt the heat and pressure of a reality as inexhaustible as that which battered Ireneo [Funes], day and night, in his poor South American hinterland. . . . He had effortlessly learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very good at thinking. To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract. In the teeming world of Ireneo Funes there was nothing but particulars - and they were virtually immediate particulars. 5

If we use this passage as a diagnostic tool for assessing Maggi's drawings, we find in them a similar conjunction of simplicity and acuity. Working with the modest and at one time ubiquitous materials of clay board used as backing for framed objects as well as with household aluminum foil, and pencils that together parallel the unprepossessing appearance of the crippled peasant Funes, Maggi then uses these materials in tandem with a magnifying glass to conceive ghostly drawings, resembling silverpoint, and miniature aluminum reliefs of such incredible delicacy and complexity that they severely challenge the perceptual abilities of the naked eye. In addition to recalling the visual perspicacity of Funes, these works approach the type of immanent empiricism that Deleuze describes. Their different realities suggest a perpetual semiotic of slipping signifiers that range from the unicellular to the mechanized and from teeming nebulae to aerial views of overpopulated metropolises. In these drawings Maggi folds near and myopic details into distant views that are then folded yet again into the flat surfaces of the material on which they are delineated. He creates in them a series of alternating enlargements and reductions that remind me of the potency of destabilized points of view that is the basis for the nine-and-one-half minute film, *Powers of Ten*, which the Office of Charles and Ray Eames made for IBM in 1977. In this film the same image is serially re-framed through ascending and descending views determined by the factor of ten. Similar to seeing *Powers of Ten*, the net result of looking at a Maggi drawing is a dramatic slowing down of the process of seeing - velocities, we might say, are replaced by viscosities - coupled with an astonishing series of folds comprising both intimacy and monumentality that are spatially perceptual concomitants of the new technologies. Although the gossamer webs of silvery lines approaching invisibility in his work suggests the influence of Sol LeWitt's early graphite wall drawings, which were intended to encourage thought about art's generative concepts through approaching its visual limits, Maggi refuses to succumb to the type of structurally based systems that underlie conceptual art. Maggi accosts viewers with a series of different possibilities for becoming that are predicated on radically shifting durations. Instead of creating art with a fixed goal, he assails viewers with different intensities and durations, encouraging them to see with increasing acuity by enticing them with hooks of even greater singularities. In these works, viewers are precluded from asserting a clear ground and instead are encouraged to assume a number of radically different subject positions that change not only their stations but also the nature of material being perceived. In Maggi's art, one scans and also scrutinizes the intricacies he has delineated. Ultimately, clearly intelligible forms are succeeded by densely congested passages, resulting in a collapse of vision tantamount to the Kantian sublime - a collapse that is also thematized in his aluminum or blind slide reliefs that reflect light rather than transmit it. Viewers are encouraged to study the visual information before them; then their awareness of their incapacity to discern all the conflated rhizomatic shapes in them initiates

an awareness of the threshold separating sight from blindness that serves as an analogy for the threshold marking off the personal from the global. It is as if the universe is both so vast and miniscule that we can only start to fathom it once we recognize our inability to do so visually. At that point vision approaches its limit, and the sublimity of the global network is intuited rather than directly perceived. Maggi sums up his approach in the following statement:

The earth and its inhabitants weigh 5,972 trillion tons. An incredibly heavy globe to approach with the point of a pencil. That's why myopia is the best response to globalization: reducing the visual field allows us to discover infinitesimal details in the space of a square inch.... I practice a new theory of focus: small-scale attacks against Xerox paper, Polaroid slide frames, Empire rulers, Reynolds aluminum rolls, Celotex insulation panels and Macintosh apples.... I define the current volume of information as intangible materialism. As access to information increases and its dissemination accelerates our uncertainty goes from macro to micro, from real to virtual. This new materialism is not historical; it's hypothetical.... 6

Rather than dwelling on the negative aspects of globalism, Maggi's art highlights those areas of the new technology most in need of human intervention and thus becomes a fascinating paean to the imaginative power and creative potential of human ineptitude. A primary area of investigation for Maggi is the science of collection management, including the organization and retrieval of the vast amounts of information, which computers both generate and store. Instead of privileging his own discrete insights as have romantics and their successors, Maggi undertakes the project of assessing ways that data is being organized and displayed and discovers the human role central to this elaborate process. An avowed futurist, Maggi intuits a cyborgian realm of becoming that comprises both organic and inorganic realms. He playfully looks back at the first commercially viable personal computer from the 1970s, Apple's MacIntosh, in terms of the organic equivalent that is grown in the region of Upstate New York where he has resided over the past few years and the biblical metaphor of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that Adam and Eve insisted on sampling. To make these pieces, he takes fresh Macintosh apples, scores them with incised markings suggestive of special yet unintelligible codes and lets them dry out so that they ultimately become as gratuitous as the first personal computers, now obsolete, that are named after them.

Contrary to traditional definitions of data that relegate it to the margins of dry scientific inquiry where it represents the mathematical tabulations of extensive experiments conducted under rigorous laboratory conditions, the term "data" now functions as more of a relative concept rather than a stable entity. It characterizes and qualifies a diverse range of information as raw material that human beings must categorize. The rationale for this new understanding of data comes from recent archival research that dealt with new types of information, including photographs, motion pictures, sound recordings, computer discs, and print outs. In Maggi's hands the management of data is shown to be a highly imaginative pursuit. Instead of reducing information to a common denominator, he scrutinizes one of the primary modes for recording it: reams of Xerox paper. He characterizes a medium for recording information rather than discerning any essential properties it might exhibit. The primary example in this exhibition is Hotbed, consisting of 196 reams of copying paper carefully laid out on the floor to create corridors and avenues of potential information. Instead of being printed on, these stacks are left in their pristine state. The only change enacted by the artist is that the top sheet of each stack has been marked with incisions, creating folds that rise above it. These folds seem to have a basis in Deleuze's book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* 7 that stages parallels between the terracing of levels and contradictions of inner and outer space endemic to this period style and discerns their recurrence in the modern and postmodern periods. The term "fold," which is taken from Leibniz, is significant since it points to discontinuities rather than absolute breaks and to parallel yet nonaligned durations that are

separated by different trajectories and lines of flight similar to the rearrangement of patterns on pleated fans. Each ream in Maggi's work exists as a potential that is whimsically beginning to be realized through the playful array of folds enunciating its top sheets and invaginating them. The Hotbed of his title is a multiple pun that points to seedbeds employed by plant nurseries as well as sites of lovemaking, and both meanings point to the potential insemination of the paper with information and its role as a record for this data.

Because of the information overload that defines our era as entropic, Maggi avoids ontological questions regarding a given subject's purported essence in favor of such capricious epistemological forays as we have seen in Hotbed. "Global Myopia," he recently wrote, "presents imperceptible archives on mundane materials: Xerox paper, ceramic tiles, slide mounts, apples and kitchen foil. A digital dialogue - based on minimum displacements of the index finger and thumb - registers a plot to read with no hope of being informed." ⁸ In his work, Maggi seeks to understand the very material categories or frameworks by which knowledge is ratified rather than assess its essential meaning, and he concerns himself with ordering and characterizing data, which he calls "dysfunctional information" ⁹ - a great term for human memory - rather than determining its specific contents. Since Maggi's work is art and not systems theory, he approaches, as we have already seen, this seemingly dry topic with irony, humor, and a sense of fantasy. Although the main categories for inventorying information are digital systems rather than analog ones, Maggi prefers the analog form of categorization since resemblance serves as a readily identifiable, if one-dimensional, key for storage retrieval systems and allows him to make his points directly and concisely. In marked contrast with analog schemes, digital sequences require data to be translated into discrete and yet easily manipulated bytes directly expressed as the digits of a binary code. Even though the digital form is now used by most computer retrieval systems, it is too indirect for art since it requires information first to be translated into a binary code and then classified according to a system capable of being cross-referenced before being retranslated back into a language comprehensible to laypersons. Even when Maggi deals with topics germane to digital processes, he relies mainly on resemblance as a key means for communicating his ideas, thus his references to "digitals" as fingers rather than parts of a binary code. Maggi's elegant pencil drawings call to mind analogies to microscopic circuitry rather than the bytes communicated by brief pulses of electricity or scintillas of light in computers. The conjunction of the cybernetic and handmade is a crucial factor of his art since it aims to differentiate human involvement from technological processes and to signify by analogy the important role that human beings still play in the construction of our world. This new deconstructivist art replaces ever faster computations with increasingly slowed-down creations that require time to be made and assimilated.

In conclusion, Maggi's work seeks to discern the human quotient in our highly technological world. It moves away from telepistemology - the study of knowledge acquired at a distance that was inaugurated in the seventeenth century with the inventions of the telescope and microscope - and relies on an even more radical empirical mode than has usually been construed as the art object's primary purview. What Maggi has in mind are the "immediate particulars" comprising Ireneo Funes' world in Borges' story - an immanence so dazzling and unstoppable and sometimes even ungraspable that it constitutes the exhilarating and sublime entropy of information overload. His art does so even as it defines humanity in terms of its capacities to flounder and forget, to seek variation rather than unanimity, and to become entangled in emotions that destabilize rigorous forms of artificial intelligence, putting them at risk.

Notes

1. Marco Maggi, *The Pencil Monologues: Micro Macro Drawings Retrospective 0002-9991* (New York: 123 Watts, 2001), n. p.
2. Ibid.
3. K. G. Hultén, *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968).
4. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2000). On page 197, they write, "The old feminist slogan 'The personal is the political' has been reversed in such a way that the boundaries between public and private have fractured, unleashing circuits of control throughout the 'intimate public sphere.'"
5. Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes, His Memory" in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998), pp. 136-7.
6. Maggi, *The Pencil Monologues*, n. p.
7. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). I thank Josée Bienvenue, the director of 123 Watts and Maggi's primary gallerist, for recommending this book by Deleuze.
8. Marco Maggi, E-mail to author, February 26, 2002.
9. Ibid.

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Robert Hobbs holds the Rhoda Thalhimier endowed Chair of Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University. Author of 20 books, including monographs on Edward Hopper and Andres Serrano, he has curated more than forty major exhibitions that have been presented in eleven countries. Among them are: *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years*, which was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, which was also presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art and subsequently was selected to be the official U.S. representation at the 1982 Venice Biennale. In 1996 he curated *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South* for the Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia. Other recent touring exhibitions include the Lee Krasner retrospective, which concluded its U.S. tour at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2000, and the Milton Avery: *The Late Paintings*, which completes its U.S. tour in 2002. Currently he is completing a major monograph on Alice Aycock and curating an exhibition of Anselm Kiefer's monumental woodcuts for the Trust for Museum Exhibitions, Washington D.C. His latest endeavor is serving as U.S. commissioner for the 2002 São Paulo Bienal where he is presenting the work of Kara Walker.