

# Statement for a Sculptural User Interface<sup>®</sup>

Chris Burnett

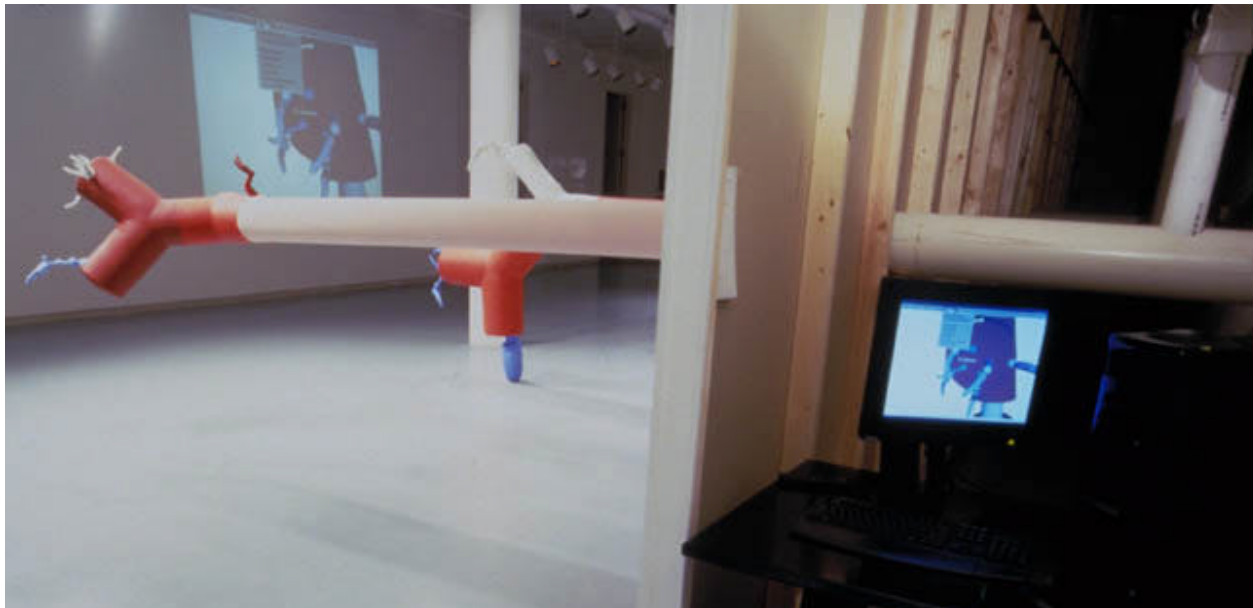
## Artificial Sculpture

Michael Rees with Chris Burnett

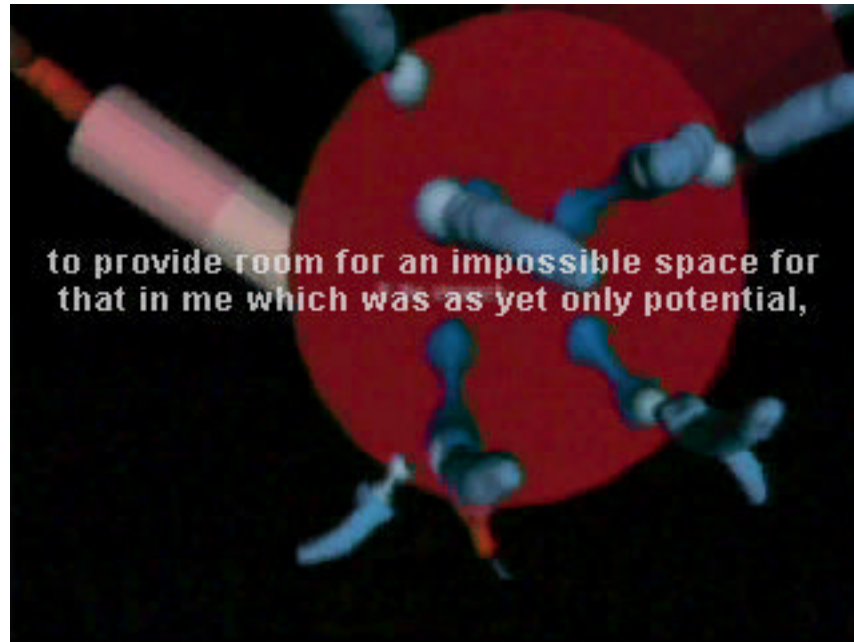
Forum for Contemporary Art, St. Louis

November 19, 1999-January 8, 2000

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Detail, Sculptural User Interface®, 1999

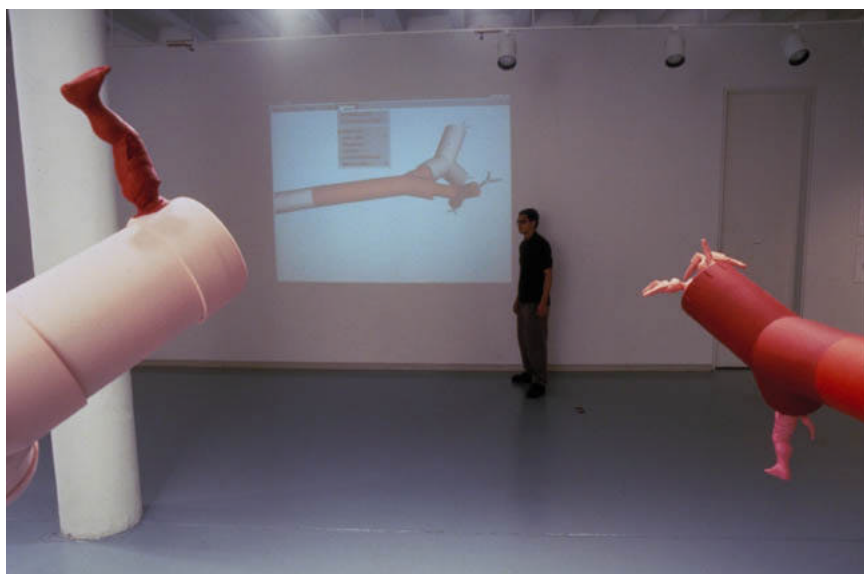
In working with Michael Rees on the Sculptural User Interface®, I'm stepping sideways somewhat from work and research over a number of years on the diversity of spatial representation, media and technology. I veer with considerable excitement knowing that at issue are perspectives, procedures and performances that pull at one persistent thread: how language activates a line between language, space and substance.

Since the mid-1980s I have been designing hypermedia, image sequences, and virtual reality programs that form, either individually or collectively, an eccentric geography. The territories in question usually involve a place uniquely formed by media and that, as mediascapes, require a unique kind of guide. They include, for example, the following: world's fair exhibitions, at a time when new media and simulation technologies were first appearing; a futures exhibition in Philadelphia; an artificial biosphere in Arizona; a decadent parlor at the turn of the century, the gambling capital of the world forever; and currently, the new urbanization on the frontier of our distressed cities. These places are out of kilter in time. I don't know whether they represent hopes for the future or nostalgia for the past, but I'm learning that language has a rooted place in that sprawling matrix of progress, history and landscape.

Arriving at conceptual tools of discovery, both for language and space, has been important along the way. The computer has been crucial in working alternatively as surveyor's tool, modeling device, publication agency and philosophical toy. I've called my form hypermapping to suggest not only an intertextual form of geography, using the links of hypertext and the bandwidth of multimedia, but also the liminal condition of immersion and the comprehension of space in space. Space mirroring space is a good definition of virtuality, but unfortunately that concept frequently misleads experimenters (e.g., Meredith and William Bricken) to conceive virtual reality apart from language, as if meaning can consist solely as polished indexical pointers in embedded space. Conversely, recognizing the nature of the computer as a manipulator of gritty symbols, an alphabetical space-time machine, comes into play through the process of hypermapping.

To give a more particular example, the nexus of mapping, social commentary and the virtual came together in *Western Skies* more than several years ago. This is a custom-produced vr program that dynamically presents my writing in a simulated network model of Las Vegas, Nevada. I met Michael Rees, while involved in the project, and we were both excited about the underlying architecture of dimensional typography. It had something to do with the double nature of letters in simulated space as both a materialization of language and an abstraction of substance that animated the discussions.

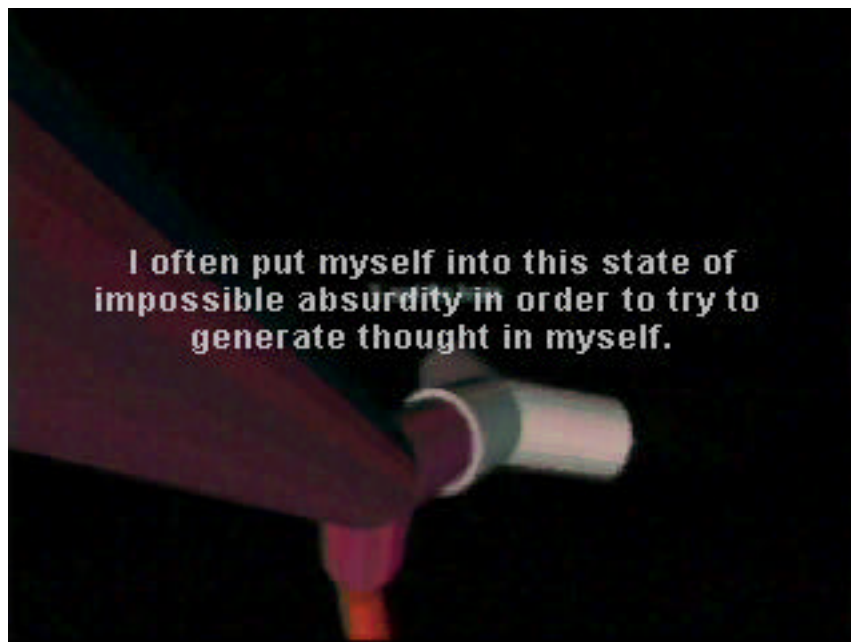
This dialogue has picked up again in the Sculptural User Interface<sup>®</sup> even though it may be one step apart from letters or from geographical space. Put into more extreme terms, the current project resembles a figure-ground switch where ideas and conditions about language and form, that I previously found in the background, now converge on the figure. An earlier piece, *Muto(scape)*, dramatizes the switch. Here I made an assemblage of backgrounds from cartoon animations, with figures erased, leaving only a false continuum. Within this panorama, I laid out a quirky encyclopedia that detailed at once a theory of cartoons as well as a cartoon of theories. My absencing, with digital erasure, those twisting, turning and morphing figures was my way of getting at them in spatial terms. Now I am up for a more direct encounter.



*Artificial Sculpture*, installation view, 1999.

The Sculptural User Interface® (SUI) will be an abstract machine for the production of virtual bodies, which I understand in a special sense as cartoon bodies. In view of modernism, cartoon bodies derive from the mechanization of fantasy — a product of the assembly line production of moving images, make believe characters and capitalist whimsy. Overlaying these forms of the fun factory, information technology equally suggests awesome non-linear processes of production and reproduction. Here, procedures and algorithms, though working in series, create fantastic branching effects and structures. The SUI® brings the registers of cartoon bodies together as mechanical and cybernetic assemblage. Rules determinantly produce the body but in reference to information that should create turbulence and logical oddity in the form.

The reference system explicitly involves language either generated within the program or introduced by the user (keyboard input, etc.). The parts are like letters and the body an utterance suspended in space. This vision is like the dimensional typography that we wondered about. Is it a locus of visual language that could be viewed from all sides (still a contingent sign, not hieroglyph)? With language materialized as sculptural body, I don't know where geography could appear except as an anatomy of the virtual.



Detail, *Sculptural User Interface*®, 1999.

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## Biography

Christopher Burnett is an artist concerned with relations between the art world, architectures of display, and the technological environment. Recently these concerns have led to recurring avant-garde issues, such as futurism and its connection to the cultural and spatial figures of landscape, literature and popular media. Educated as a photographer and critic (BFA, Rhode Island School of Design, 1975, MA and MFA, University of New Mexico, 1985), Burnett uses the computer for image and text montage, artists' books, hypermedia and virtual reality projects.

His books and computer interactive works have been shown nationally and internationally since 1987 in a variety of exhibitions influential to critical as well as aesthetic possibilities for computer generated artwork, e. g., *Photographic Book Art* in the United States, to 1995; *Off the shelf and on-line: computers move the book arts into twenty-first century design*, 1992; *Virtual Memories*, Summer 1991; *Digital Image/Digital Photography*, SIGGRAPH, 1990 to 1994; *Digital Photography*, Summer 1988 through 1989. His new work explores the contemporary technology scene through combined myths of futurism and decadence, especially new urbanism and the *degraded* utopias of the American southwest. A series of essays, "Las Vegas, Capital of the 21st century," is on the World Wide Web and in simulated 3D text using an original virtual reality program currently at the Neuberger Museum. He is also a software designer and technology consultant for the traveling exhibition *Virtual Nomad: Textiles and Technologies*.

These investigations involve research in art and cultural criticism working hand in hand with the writing and visual work. His essays on photography, art, and computer media have appeared in *Afterimage*, *New Mexico Studies in the Fine Arts*, *Spot*, *U-Turn*, *Views*, and *Visual Resources* journal. He speaks frequently at conferences and symposia on new media and textuality. He was a speaker at Text and Image, Text 21, A Symposium on the Future of the Written Word at Alfred University in 1995. His essays on digital communication received Logan Grants awards. In 1991 he received an Individual Photographers Fellowship from the Aaron Siskind Foundation and a Fellowship in artists books from the Massachusetts Artists Foundation. He teaches media and computer art at the Kansas City Art Institute.