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U R UR Own Computer

SARAH ZURAT

This paper will begin with a discussion of the inspiration for the project, Howard Finster's "I am my own TV." Then, I will explain the project itself, with discussion of the process, the intent behind the methods, and the overall meaning and experience that I hope people will gain from viewing "U R UR OWN COMPUTER."

At first, Finster's "I am my own TV" seems crude and simple, but it is full of meaning underneath all its beautiful simplicity, as is the case with most of his work. To analyze Finster's "TV" piece, it is important to identify the components. Finster holds the frame of an old television around his face. The television frame is a found object; it is something already "found" in the world. It is not made or crafted by the artist; it is taken from the world, and then manipulated by the artist. Often, artists use these found objects in very different or unusual manners from the object's original intent.

Finster's piece calls for audience participation. "I am my own TV" is interactive on different levels—style and content for both the creator and viewer. First, it is interactive on the level of the artist. The creator is interacting with the materials she is using to make the art. The painter interacts with the paints and canvas. The sculptor interacts with the clay or wood or stone, or in this case, found objects that she uses.

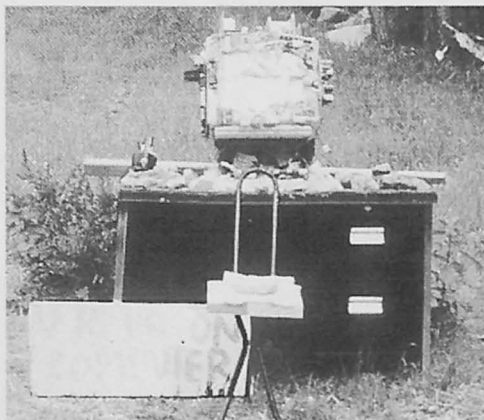
Finster takes this interaction and manipulation of materials a step further. By putting his actual face in the picture, he makes the piece direct and personal. The head is not an unknown face cut out of a magazine, nor is it a nondescript face made out of other materials, for example from carved plaster or wood. No matter how symbolic or precise a carved face may be it is not the same as seeing an actual face. The face in Finster's piece is his own. It is symbolic of everyone's face, yet at the same time, it is so direct that the viewers react differently to it than they would to just another, unidentifiable face. This can be compared to a written theory; it may be difficult for the reader to really get a personal feel for what the writer is trying to convey when only abstract theories are discussed. Yet, when a direct example is used, the audience can then more easily relate, understand, and respond to the example. The same is true of Finster's work. The viewer can feel a more direct connection to the art by seeing Finster's face in the piece.

Furthermore, Finster's work is interactive through the use of the found object, the television frame. We, the viewers, have all watched a television and can identify what the television frame is. We are all seeing the *same* television frame, but at the same time we are seeing something *different*. Each of us has our own way of identifying and relating to our unique idea of what television means to us.

Interaction has been described in terms of the medium and the style, how the artist uses the materials. The next level is through the content, or the meaning behind the style. The purpose of Finster's work is to call us to be active, not be passive in our lives or our stimulation. He is questioning how we can sit in front of a television, passively receive all the images and information, and be "entertained" without thinking for ourselves. Finster is calling us to be our own stimulation, showing us that we need our own imagination for entertainment and learning. He is encouraging us to look inside ourselves for insight and inspiration, not just at a TV screen full of advertisements. He is calling us to be active according to what we find within ourselves rather than just passive receptors to whatever is broadcast upon us. Thus, the meaning of Finster's piece is calling us to be more interactive, with our own imaginations, and with the imagination of others.

U R UR OWN COMPUTER was first thought of when I saw a slide of Finster's "I am my own TV." I saw the slide and instantly something clicked. I wanted to create my own version of that but I wanted to use a computer. As television has been the most influential media in the last few decades, the computer is taking its place. I wanted to somehow convey the feelings of being more imaginative through your computer, as Finster had with the television. Since that day in class when I first saw the slide, this project has been taking shape in my head and physically in the form that it is today.

U R UR OWN COMPUTER was created from an old computer monitor and pieces of the insides of computers. I considered hollowing out the monitor, and using the frame to surround a cast plaster head of myself or some other type of head. I would call it, "I am my own computer", but that seemed too close to Finster's piece. I wanted to do something different and express my own interpretation of the computer media and our interaction to it. I began to ask, "what makes the computer what it is?" The computer has no identity just by itself. The computer is only useful in terms of people. People are the ones who make, design, engineer, and market these machines. Computers are made to help people do work, and



do it better. People create computers for people. Humans are behind the machines. With that in mind, I began to think of the human interaction with computers, both sides of it: humans are not only behind computers, but also in front of them.

I sit in front of my computer as I write this. As I press the keys, I am making an imprint into the computer. I am writing pages, creating files, using different applications, and choosing what program to use, how to use it, and even how to change it to my specifications. My impression, what I have browsed, and what I have written or what I have created, is left on the computer. This led me to the idea of the computer being a reflection of the person who is using it.

Placing pieces of a mirror on the monitor screen is meant to provoke people to think about the reflection of themselves through the medium of the computer. Is the computer a reflection of you? If yes, how so? If no, why not? How accurate is this reflection? I wanted to use broken, mirror pieces so that the image looking back at you would be distorted. How does the computer distort or fragment your sense of yourself? How does the computer distort or fragment, or perhaps bring together, perspectives or objects in the world?

The outside of the computer is covered with the internal pieces of motherboards and other bits of the insides. I like the idea of turning things inside out. I question the typical conception of the object, once I see the what is usually not seen. Viewing the insides- the messiness, chaos, precision, organization, and the unexpectedness of what is behind the shiny metal or plastic, can change one's perception.

In the case of this computer sculpture, I was hoping to show that those square shapes of motherboards and bits of chips and circuits are all that is physically within the computer. What is inside a computer is not some miraculous, magic, mysterious material that makes this machine do wonders. (Although, a computer can be all of those- miraculous, magical, and mysterious, and do wondrous things if used or perceived in those ways.) All that is inside the computer that links us to thousands of web sites, that delivers us to enormous amounts of information, and that gives us phenomenal communications, are just some chips and circuits. That is it. These motherboards have their own beauty of complexity with simplicity, but they are not what make computers so essential and beneficial, or potentially harmful. What makes computers what they really are and what makes the Internet an unbelievable force are people. The humans behind, or in front of the machine, are really what make the machines and the entire system work.

In addition to the personal aspect of the computer, I am hoping that *U R UR OWN COMPUTER* prompts viewers to think more critically about their own computer, Internet, and technology use. How much time do I spend every day on a computer? What exactly am I doing all that time? How much time do I spend interacting with people through email or instant messenger, rather than face-to-face conversations? Am I getting more isolated, or more "connected", or both at the same time? What do I hate about using the computer or Internet? What do I enjoy the most? How am I learning, not just being entertained? How am I being active, not

just a passive browser on the Net? What can I do to make my computer and the Internet a better community? I hope that people ask themselves these questions all the time. If my piece encourages these thoughts, then it has been a success.

