

JOSEPH NECHVATAL INTERVIEW

On the occasion of his upcoming exhibition at Galerie Richard in New York (April 12th through May 26th), the recent publication of his new book *Immersion Into Noise*, and a concert of his remastered viral symphOny in surround sound, Joseph Nechvatal sat down with Taney Roniger to discuss his work. The following interview took place at Nechvatal's studio in lower Manhattan on Sunday, February 26th.

Taney Roniger (TR): In your previous book, *Towards an Immersive Intelligence*, you explored the shift in ontology that you saw emerging as a result of a nascent immersive consciousness connected to virtual reality. How did your interest in immersion come about, and how did it come to focus on noise, which is the subject of your new book, *Immersion Into Noise*?

Joseph Nechvatal (JN): It started, first of all, with my ideal for looking at most painting: that you *enter* the painting. Like Kandinsky said, he wanted to viewer to enter and sort of exist in, and explore, and be, and travel in a painting. So already I was on board with that. I just think it's the total use of your imagination as an artist or as a viewer of other artists, to give all and just get into it, and drop what you're doing and go there. But then it got more specific with my research with Roy Ascott for my Ph.D. There I wanted to take that immersive use of the mind and see how it could apply to new technology. So I started to study virtual reality and its ideals. And the idea for virtual reality is that you're immersed into a virtual world which you can navigate. I did my thesis on that topic, and I revisited art history and the history of architecture and ritual and different cultural manifestations through the wide lens of immersion. What I call the immersive impulse or desire for immersion. So that was where it became concrete, with the head-mounted device. And then I applied immersion to audio aspects when I created the viral symphOny. Then I started to write the Wikipedia page on the history of noise music. I did quite a bit of research on audio and sound art, and anything that was non-musical in terms of audio experiments and that's what led me to the book about immersion into noise. So then I could use some of the lessons I learned from the VR research, and that idea of environment, of ambience, of surround sound, and apply it to a noisy surround vision. Pushing our sensibilities behind our head as well as in front of our eyes. Trying to use the full instruments that we have available to us to feel. And that was the basis of the book *Immersion Into Noise*.

TR: What I see underlying your whole project is a kind of syncretistic vision in constant search of destabilizing rigid polarities. But it's not like you're bringing the two poles together in order to form some third neither-here-nor-there thing; you're putting the two together in a kind of dynamic tension...

JN: Dynamic tension! Beautiful. That's the noise aspect. It has to have a tension, a kind of provocational element. It's not trying to say "Everything is everything." That may be

true on one level, but we don't live on that level. I think it's more intellectual to perceive the minute differences, and that's what a connoisseur does.

TR: I think that's a really important distinction to make. It's not the unification of the two, it's the tension *between* them.

JN: I do think that's the real payoff for this – the knowledge that things can be contradictory and true simultaneously.

TR: Right!

JN: If you've got that, then your life opens up and you're far more tolerant and understanding, and a better human being and a wiser human being.

TR: Another thing that I definitely want to ask you about is digitization. You've called it "the universal technical platform for networked capitalism." It's also your chosen artistic language. Can you talk a little bit about what makes it the ideal language for you?

JN: Okay. It's the idea of the Trojan horse. If you're going to be an agent of political consciousness, of resistant awareness, of non-acceptance, you still have to work within the language of the power. Otherwise, you're immediately marginalized and cast aside and have no subsequent contribution that's recognizable. So I think, again, you have to be driving a Trojan horse; you have to enter the dialogue, the vocabulary, the system, the semiotics, and then from there subvert. In other words, you can't subvert from the outside. You have to subvert from the inside. This is Baudrillard. And I don't like a lot of Baudrillard, but I do think he was right in this case. Yeah, it's subversion from within. And that's really why I started doing the big blow-ups and got into the computer. If you read my artist's statement from Documenta, it's all about this subversion. Yes, I'm using the computer because the computer IS the dominant language of military economics, and we have to confront it head-on. So it is a kind of realism. Of course, you have to be very careful with that, but that was my intension. I mean, it's easy to make like an avant-garde stance and then end up just being swept up inside of some kind of slick production that plays along with the themes, so that all of your criticality is glossed over. And it's hard enough already to maintain criticality in cultural production, but once you're inside the slick game, you have to really be subversive. For me, of course, it really comes down to the imagery. I guess that's really why I decided the anus was an important image. It wasn't to be a sexual or provocative or funny image; it was to be a key portal to poke into the post-industrial information age.

TR: You've talked about things like "digital fluidity," which is in some sense an oxymoron. You know what I mean? Because digital language is binary. So it strikes me as curious that if what you're after is in some sense exposing the fallacy of rigid binary thinking that your chosen language is itself binary.

JN: The string of zeros and ones underlying everything – you can't get more binary than that. I totally agree. But that's almost like, water is made up of certain chemicals, but

what we do with water varies drastically - we swim in it, we brush our teeth with it, we pee in it... It's undeniable that zeros and ones make up the structure of the medium, but I think it's almost not important because the medium is so fluid.

TR: Well, talk about the fluidity, then. As a medium, it does lend itself to a certain...

JN: Transformation, metamorphosis.

TR: Yes.

JN: You can take the same data that's being produced, and you can output it as a visual or as an audio production. It's so easy to convert signals into whatever you want to. You just change the parameters. It's very, very easy to do – almost too easy. The question always comes down to: What are you doing? Why are you doing it? And not so much how you do it. But the fluidity part. So, of course when we think of the digital age, the fluidity of the internet, the networked connectivity, we think of flows of data. But for me it's an interest also in human potentiality, which is one of the reasons I got interested in cyberculture in the early 90s. It seemed like the platform for transformation. And that folded me back into my interests in Classical Greek poetry -- Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in particular – where things become other things, and flowers become people, and people become clouds, and this kind of super-fluidity, which we do experience in dreams sometimes, if we're lucky. But it has to do with a symbol, a poetic metaphor, for realizing our human potentiality and our full sensibilities towards our real life, the real people in our lives, our real politics – how we live our lives economically, and the decisions we make in the real world. So in that sense I'm a materialist. Actually, that's why I became interested in Speculative Realism, because they don't shy away from what they call transcendental materialism, which I really think kind of nails what I've been feeling and groping for. And it sounds of course oxymoronic, and certainly paradoxical – but maybe not! You have to dig in and dig around. Anyway, that kind of idea of human potentiality interests me. And I think that's the reason we have great art. I think art is to change consciousness.

TR: That was actually going to be my penultimate question. Because I feel like it's so important to your project, this idea of self-reprogrammability. I mean, that is such a crucial insight – that we can change, that we can be liberated from our conditioning. At a time when we're flanked on all sides by so many determinisms...

JN: The human spirit is being tapped down and down and down. We must strive to overcome the bullshit...It's a metaphysical battle. And each person, each woman and each man, is a soldier, and we all have to fight. And art I think is the domain for that.

TR: And you feel that – this potential to change – when you're with not only your own work, but when you have a profound experience with another work? You feel that it's changed you in some way?

JN: I do. Almost chemically. And it stays with you. And not that we don't outgrow our appreciation of certain artworks, particularly when you're young. In my case, I had a passion for Jasper Johns. I just couldn't get enough of him. I was in love with him, you could almost say. But then I outgrew it, you know? So that's part of the maturation period, I guess.

TR: Let's turn back to *Immersion Into Noise*. I just want to say that I found the chapter on Paleolithic cave art, where you describe your descent into the Lascaux cave (among others) so moving and so powerful.

JN: Thank you. I do think that's sort of the core of the book, and I try to make the case for the art of noise visually based on that, because I think it was the most concrete example – in immersive terms – that I experienced and that I could write about first-hand. I mean, as you can tell in the book I tried to write about visual noise from my travels and experiences. But yes, the cave of Lascaux was a transformative moment.

TR: One of the things I was struck by in this chapter was the element of danger inherent in making the descent into those caves. I mean, it wasn't exactly like stepping into the studio for a day's work for these early artists. I wonder if there's something of that element of danger, or fear, or incomprehensible enormity that attracts us to the internet. I think you've touched on this somewhere.

JN: I have talked about how computers stimulate us almost like sublime vastness, which is both enticing and scary. Your typical sublime reaction to enormity is a mix of attraction and fear. There is a reinterest in sublime art, as you might know, in Brooklyn with the metal group Liturgy and the movement called transcendental black metal music. They're connecting music back to the vastness of nature. It's almost Wagnerian in intentionality. And I found that very moving, and it was one of the influences on my show at Galerie Richard - nOise anasmOs.

TR: What were some of your other influences? How did you come up with the theme for this show?

JN: I was listening to a lot of that, and I was listening to a lot of Roland Kirk and late John Coltrane - all this avant-garde sax, and I was reading Manuel de Landa's book *Philosophy and Simulation*, in which he goes really into the cellular automaton as a general principle in the basis of geology, on the basis of tribal organizations and more - a whole historical re-analysis through the cellular automata principle, which is, again, using simple elements with enough frequency that emergent properties pop up. So he uses this as a principle of emergent social organization. So I was reading that, I was listening to this music, and I was in the south of France staying in a house in the country. I would look at the flowers and the seeds.

TR: And Speculative Realism? Did that play a role?

JN: Yeah. I'd already been reading Speculative Realism the year before, and actually I mention Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, which is the one that got me started into Speculative Realism. He's in a couple of footnotes in *Immersion Into Noise*. Actually, that book prepared me for all the other stuff.

TR: It seems there is, with Speculative Realism, a reintroduction of metaphysics into a climate that's been hostile toward it for some time now...Metaphysics is now okay again.

JN: Yes. I think that's the key thing. It's a hodge-podge. And in fact, Ray Brassier, who is the translator of the Quentin Meillassoux book, and who I've read (he has a book on nihilism, and he wrote a piece on noise music), he actually says that it's not a real movement, and that you can't lump these philosophers together. You have object oriented ontology, you have some neo-vitalism, you have transcendental materialism, and you have an interest in science fiction. No, it's a real hodge-podge, which I think is just grand. But depending on how rigid you are as a philosopher, people could be put off by that. I was prepared for this by Deleuze, because for him philosophy is the creation of new concepts.

TR: I recently read Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, and I was struck by what seems to be a movement toward becoming a little bit more friendly toward the object world – the non-human realm. It's not entirely off limits to us anymore, in other words – with our subjectivity “over here,” and it “over there.” That perhaps the twain can meet after all...

JN: Yes, that is central to the Speculative Realists. Their whole jumping off point is refuting Kant. Correlationism is the big thing they're trying to escape – where we can only understand the world because we have this human spectrum of perception, and so that's Being. And they say no to that, that being is post-human – it's much bigger than us. Again, that brings us back to the sublime and transcendental metaphysics and all that. So, in a nutshell, they basically say: We have to explore philosophy and being – ontology – outside of the Kantian strictures.

TR: And that we *can* do that; it's not beyond our capacities.

JN: And science fiction and speculation and art are all part of that because they're very much into systems, the environment, the cosmos. I mean, that's why I named my show nOise anusmOs, because it's anus and cosmos linked. It's a real area that we have to explore and try to comprehend but it is tough.

TR: I see so many parallels between what you're talking about and your working process. Here's my understanding of the process, and correct me if I'm wrong: You and your programmer author a piece of viral code, which is then inserted into a selected image from your database of previous works. As the viral code transforms the image by altering its colors and configurations, you select “stills” from the process from which paintings will be made. During the painting process, your hand does not touch the canvas; rather, the application is made by a robotic device acting on commands issued by the computer.

The whole thing strikes me as a sort of wonderful dance – a dialectic, perhaps -- between human agency and non-human processes. You don't seem to privilege one over the other; it's just this back and forth.

JN: I would not ever say a dialectic, because I don't believe in dialectics. Deleuze completely does away with dialectics. It's too limiting. Because you have all the little differences in between the polarities – all those micro-areas that are far more rich and interesting and complex. So I would say: dialogue, but not a dialectic. A conversation or dance.

TR: When you're selecting your host images for a viral attack, is it significant that they're always your own images, your own prior works?

JN: Yes. The only other example I used in an attack was two paintings of Andy Warhol's money paintings, which I just did for a short little YouTube thing, because that was a specific thing for the Occupy Wall Street blog that I was happy to participate in. Otherwise, no. It's got to be within the family. It's not applicable for all things, in my mind. Or it would lose its meaning, it would dilute its usefulness.

TR: You mean if you took an image from...well, from anywhere out there in the culture. You could conceivably do this to any image, right? And interesting things would happen.

JN: Absolutely. It could be any image. And then the question is why. That's why when I talk about losing focus and the impact getting lost, that's exactly what I'm talking about. If it's any image, then why any one image? So I'm trying to maintain its function as art. I think I talked about that in the introduction of the book that it's important to maintain this – even if artificially constructed – definition of art as something *other*. As a form of ideology. That's what artists are supposed to do: challenge ways of thinking.

TR: That certainly comes across in your work. So thinking about thinking is really important.

JN: I do think so. That's why I try not to make too much of a division between my philosophizing and my artistic creation. I mean, I'm not a philosopher, hard-core. But even Nietzsche himself said that the ideal philosopher would be an artist. And I'm trying to live that out, at least on a mini-scale, at least for my life. Yeah – keep it moving back and forth between the categories but not looking for homogenization, looking for those differences which make for creation, that suggest new avenues of creation. Difference is novelty. I believe that art should try to be something novel, and I do believe in innovation and invention. And I don't fall prey to these postmodernist myths of stasis and decay and repetition and simulation. That's a trap you can fall in if you want to, but I don't want to go there.

TR: You clearly traveled a lot while doing research for *Immersion Into Noise*. Travel is incredibly immersive.

JN: Yes, it's inherently immersive. Couple that with reading about what you're doing, the history of where you've been. I think that's true knowledge. And then having physical experiences in space, and the cultural things – the wine and art. The art is key for me. Looking at this painting here [points to painting in studio], it's easy for me to wrap it around my head. It's very easy. It's like this rectangle becomes a bubble that goes behind my eyes. And that's what I'm hoping that people can project when they look at the work – is to get *into it*.

TR: That's the thing. It doesn't have to be an installation environment for you to experience immersion.

JN: Right. I don't feel it has to be. It can be, and that's obviously the most literal. But the literal way isn't always the only or the best way. For me, I tend to use all-over compositions – not always, but often. That suggests that it could go on forever. I think in the chapter on Pollock I tried to make that clear. With the two museums that were proposed of his work – one by Tony Smith, a hero of mine. But they took that idea – the derogatory comment that Aldous Huxley made about Pollock's work at the Museum of Modern Art, saying "Oh, but it's quite a bit like wallpaper. It could go on forever!" You know, disdainfully.

TR: Aldous Huxley said that? Wow.

JN: Unfortunately, yes. And actually that's the power of the work. That's what Allen Kaprow saw in Pollock's show at Betty Parson's gallery, where he said: "Okay, I understand. It goes around the whole room, meaning it's all the world, meaning it's the street, meaning it's a happening." That's where he got his idea to create the happening, it was from seeing this exhibition of Pollock's. So this idea of expansion, of distribution, of availability all around us is really a suggestion that has many applications.

TR: So these new paintings, these are still part of the Computer Virus Project.

JN: Yes. Almost everything is now to some extent. Everything has something to do with the technique, at least. It's my vocabulary. I don't necessarily forefront that aspect of it all the time, but it's impossible to leave it out at the same time. Because I just find the viral techniques very valuable for getting unexpected results.

TR: To what extent is it important that people know how the paintings are made – your process, your involvement with artificial intelligence, etc.?

JN: Very important, and then I hope they'll forget it. Because I want them to go to their own place with them. I don't want to over-determine the interpretation of the work. At the same time I don't want to deny where it came from or how it's done – the virtual materiality it's embedded in. But it's more than that, so I don't want to be self-limiting, and I don't want to limit the viewer. It's complicated.

TR: I see such a consistency across all your various media. Your prose style in *Noise*, for example, is characteristically syncretistic, non-linear, “all-over” – in other words, it’s *noisy*.

JN: Yeah. I thought it would have been silly to do a strictly academic style, when you’re exploring something that is the opposite of that.

TR: It’s not like it’s stream-of-consciousness, with no punctuation...There’s certainly a structure there, but the voice is ecstatic, personal, mercurial, even. And the text moves in unexpected directions.

JN: I agree with you. I think it’s my allover approach to life that provides a moveable aspect that we’re talking about.

TR: Speaking of your “all-over approach,” you’ve also been involved with music...

JN: I have to say, I’m very excited about the re-mastering of the audio piece, my symphony, into a 5.1 surround-sound concert. Because I think when we’re talking about immersion, and we actually physically re-master something into an immersive environment, we’re getting closer to the book. Again, how form and content are trying to come closer together. I thought of this when you were talking about my method of writing the book. Because I think I brought my music closer to the book also, oddly enough. I realized some of the ideals in the book through this re-mastering of the symphony.

TR: And we will hear that soon?

JN: We will hear it as an audio concert, the night of the opening on the 12th of April at Harvestworks.

TR: You make it explicit that your subject matter is ideology.

JN: Yeah. That started back with the early drawings. And that’s why I started to draw these cliché images. When you look carefully at some of those – most of those – early gray drawings, they’re pile-ups of biblical imagery and Playboy imagery and military or “macho man” cowboys. Because I was trying to work on cultural ideology and the visual language in which it’s spoken.

TR: I know a lot of artists who wouldn’t want to admit that their work carries with it an ideology.

JN: Right. Because I think we’re talking about our own upbringing, our childhood, our relationship to our parents. Our relationship to our church, or synagogue, or whatever. Whoever – our boy scout master. Baseball coach – what else is there? All the adults that teach us how to live. Which is not a bad thing, obviously, but it’s something to be scrutinized. Particularly when you reach maturity. That’s just the power of scrutiny, of

self-reflectivity. That's how you can get to reprogramming yourself. First you have to get to what you don't want to do, and stop doing that.

TR: So that's what self-transcendence means to you -- moving beyond our unreflective cognitive habits, our conventional notions of the self, our utilitarian consciousness...

JN: Yes. And a kind of connection to the immanence of nature and materiality, the full vibratory spectrum. That is where it gets back to Speculative Realism, to understanding the limits of our perceptual spectrum and at the same time acknowledging that reality and being are beyond us while we still try to understand.

TR: That seems crucial.

JN: Yes. I think that's an important understanding, particularly in urban life, for people to reflect on. I hope that's what they'll get from this show. That's what my intention is -- that urbanites, sophisticated art viewers, will for one instance think about the grander beyond that and have appreciation of it. The great outdoors indoor. Yeah, connecting the anus to the cosmos is for that purpose. To place an extremely personal, sensitive, human aspect, in a poetic marriage to that divine humongous "beyond us."

TR: Huston Smith comes to mind: "The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder." Always expanding, but with full knowledge that there's always that "magnificent more," as you say.

JN: I see it in some young artists who are really trying to work with getting back to respecting the enormity of nature. And of course it has everything to do with a kind of dialogue with cyberculture. The insufficiency of cyber-interactivity and networking and all that. No one ever said that would be the be all and end all.