

New Media Forum c.1995 Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

Introductory notes

IS IT TIME FOR A NEW IMAGE?

Of course it is! We are after all, the New Media Forum!

The making of new images? From where do they arise, by what processes? Is the product of process simply imagistic, images for their own sake or rather the sake of captured audiences, or can they have meaning which is guided rather than directed, and function to elucidate and navigate, 'what is on the tip of the tongue'?

As those engaged with the contemporary arts (and sciences?), are we not by definition, up to the moment and therefore, engagé? I can see clearly now, that this group and those who are inspecting 'the new media', are completely up to date with the technologies many of us have helped to develop but paradoxically, that does not make us, 'of these times'. We are part of the five per cent of the earth's population who are extending our nervous systems, whilst the majority are still waiting for clean water and electricity to be connected. We are not contemporary in this context, we just have the resources to be contemporary in our own way. And yet new media technology's greatest claim to difference from previous new media technologies is through the potential to distribute our nervous systems, in a fairly low-tech way, to everywhere on the planet to which a copper wire will reach.

Many years ago I received a vocational training as a photographer - later I specialised in cinematography. Soon after I worked as an editor, organising the film other people had shot, processed and printed - in the film and television industries you worked in a particular department. With a group of film-artists we purchased obsolete processing and printing machinery and thereby gained access to the complete production process. We organised a cinema, publicity and an education programme. We set-up a catalogue and a distribution network. We took control of the entire process.

This was after all, the late 60s..... and the end of cinema had been announced.

The arrival of non-broadcast industrial gauge video in the market place coincided with the advent of media studies in tertiary education - the extension of universal franchise through the democracy of the people's medium, television. The high capital cost of video equipment with low running costs (compared to film) also looked better on the college accountant's books.

Speaking as a practitioner, it's moments like these that I am confronted with the risibility of the 'new technologies'.... The computer arrived in the video editing suite in the early 80s and prescribed the process of combining picture and sound images.... it was a bit

like playing trains in a shunting yard. When it came to doing the Final edit for broadcast, the cost of hiring the technology by the hour was so prohibitive that you were lucky if the Final copy for transmission came out matching the Working copy.

Those of us who have been keeping an eye on the creative and meaning-making possibilities of the computer since the early 70s, have always been daunted by the technology with which it is associated - and its cost, and the complexity of the meta-language. The multimedia computer of the past few years is now being marketed in a way reminiscent to that used for the selling of domestic video - as a universal enfranchiser. National suffrage that has given us, Australia's Funniest Home Video Show. Purchasing the multimedia computer does however, promise to strip away the incantations of a generation of programmers who have required of us until recently, to recite various command line liturgies. But in terms of computer useability, progress is at the rate that the market place commands and the tendency towards the stonemason's craft and its associated hieroglyphic codes will remain with us, particularly if there is something unusual to be done like making art. Unusual in that the codes that need to be written, or software designed for lacemakers, need to be manipulated in a way often contrary to the codes of social interplay and interaction.

Simon Penny in his 1993 article, *Working in Electronic Media*, observes: "Making art that has relevance to contemporary technological contexts is an exercise fraught with obstacles, not the least being the pace of technological change itself. In order to produce an artwork with any (kind of) technology, the technology must be considered in its cultural context, in the way it functions in human culture, and the type of relationship that it can have with an artist and with a creative process. These things take time."

(Penny 1994) I ask: can the speed at which new software and hardware products are shipped, new services and add-ons are provided, can this rate of replacement of tools with which to work, distort the reflection upon the outcomes of that creative process from the artist's viewpoint and contribute images which are not, of society but are, of tools? Are the new images we have been making simply, about tools?

As the Peruvian novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa has observed in raising issues of the political control of dissemination whilst at the same time defending old tools; "No great literary work erases or impoverishes one which appeared 10 centuries ago".*

I would suggest that our project is not about by-passing useful artefacts. The process is about responding to conditions that emerge for the exhibition, (and so production), of images and media, including the written word in general. The process is about the invention of new images: - for the sake of exploring the potential of a tool; countering its negative and banal use, very often in the course of its purely commercial exploitation; more important, inventing systems within the technology which often, in spite of, rather

* Sydney Morning Herald - Freedom and Literature – 13.9.1993

than because of the artist's determinations, reveal the images we are seeking in a way only possible with a particular medium? And anyway, when have we ever been able to resist new tools? Is it not an innate condition with which we have to cope?

As the three figures in Simon Penny's zone triggered installation Point of Sale enunciate, (among other things): "protect your image; your image is your property; you are being watched; you are being judged; "

Between paranoia of 'the new' and celebration of the novel we are left wondering, which direction to navigate? What strategy is best adopted?

Cyberflesh Girlmonster, according to the writer Vicky Riley in a recent article in Photofile, "has evaded the narcissistic 'designing a new and better imaginary space' which pollutes just about every artistic strategy behind Australian interactive electronic art" (Riley 1994).

She continues, "What is wholly interesting and significant about Linda Dement's work is that there appears to be no strategy and no narrative.....she is not interested in characters cute or fierce, nor concerned with utopian notions of subverting some imaginary mass media technocracy, gendered or otherwise." Later Riley observes that "For girls of Dement's generation...it is entirely effortless and necessary to include into one's art practice a healthy disregard or disinterest in the politics of representation, or affirmative narratives, which characterise feminist art from the prior two generations."

In seeking navigational beacons we are between the sailor's analogue lamps and the airplane pilot's digital radio stream - some users are equipped to be guided by both but not all. The 'real politik' of access to the images is lagging. At a recent demonstration of the World Wide Web to a meeting of museologists, many began to leave early - "...old hat; seen this..." They were on-line. The demonstrator meanwhile toured the sites devoted to matters of museums and art, of which there are now several hundred around the world, most of which have wheeled out their images in the last 12 months.

The WWW seems to me to be about the possibility of a return to something like an aural culture, (richly permeated and inflected by images), after years of tyranny from the written word..... The precept has been established amongst us 5%. That session was squandered in mutual self-congratulation. No strategy was discussed for expanding the network, for extending that copper wire. The day before it had been announced that following the takeover of running Aarnet by Telstra, all commercial traffic would be moved off Australia's part of the Internet and presented to a new service provider, Australia Online - read Microsoft. Now that's just the style of federal government. My point is that this roomful of experts had much to gain from lobbying, as the Broadband Services Group has done in its final report, for Aarnet to become the university and community network, to include all aspects of our 'non-commercial' culture. When a structure can be planned that will address the need from all citizens to access and navigate, then the notion of the interactive image takes on meanings way beyond our

current modest beginnings. Yes Simon, "These things take time".

"Interactivity that merits its name", according to John Conomos in the same issue of Photofile, "is more about self-directed creativity, connectivity and transformability than using the computer-screen interface as a means of reconsolidating the logocentric, masculinist and technophilic features of Western representation." He also raises two questions for the potential interactive multimedia artist: "Why am I using this particular media technology? What advantages does interactivity offer me not already evident in other relevant media?" Citing Simon Penny he asks,

"Do the interactive technologies represent old ideas in new boxes?" (Conomos 1994) Or some artists would describe their project as being about the ineffable - that which cannot be expressed in words.

Which seems the right point at which to introduce our speakers - John Colette is a media artist and lecturer at the College of Fine Art of the UNSW. Sally Pryor lectures at the University of Technology in Sydney and has worked for some years with computers both as an artist and a scientist. Darren Tofts is a lecturer in the department of literature and film at the Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. Jon McCormack is a computer animation artist and also lectures in the computer science faculty of Monash University.

Finally I'd like to introduce Jenni Robertson, acting director of ANAT, who is attending as a guest of New Media Forum. Jenni is travelling as a trompe l'oeil of Josey Sparks who we invited to give a presentation but who, at short notice, was also invited to attend the St Petersburg Film and Video Festival. June in the Baltic - which would you have chosen? Anyway, welcome Jenni, please convey our greetings and best wishes to our colleagues in Adelaide.

When we set up this forum we asked; 'Is it Time for a new image?' When I looked at the flyer I noticed this had elipsed to 'Time for a New Image?'. Between the appropriately distinct meanings of these two titles I would like to say finally that the aim of the forum is to establish an event that is primarily about creating an active environment for ideas and debate through discussion using the catalyst of challenging and provocative papers, of about 20 minutes in length.

The first paper is from John Colette. He has recently published a Cd-Rom, 30 Words for the City, a statement about the two cities of Sydney and Tokyo, which was part of his submission for a Masters in Fine Art at the UNSW. Commissions have included much of the digital construction of the newly opened Museum of Sydney on the site of the First Government House at Circular Quay. His paper is provocatively entitled:

Don't believe the hype: a new image is here alright, but who did you believe?

The second paper is from Sally Pryor explores one form of the new digital image - interactive multimedia. Although she sometimes thinks that this area is so hot that it's starting to give off a bad smell, it poses some very interesting challenges: does or can interactivity mean more than clicking on an icon and seeing or hearing something new? What about the language of the human-computer interface? She would like to explore its future by linking it with the past, specifically the earliest communication revolution - the development of writing.: ' Her paper is entitled: *Writing the Interactive Image*.

The third paper is from Darren Tofts, who astounded an audience at the recent Multimedia Conference in Melbourne by giving a paper, the first ten minutes of which was a video showing the cut-up sounds and images of Marcel Duchamp, John Cage and James Joyce. He completed the presentation of the paper by stating he preferred this version of the narrative as expressed by, the video.

His paper aims to bring together two conceptual formations of creativity within the cybernetic environment. One is informed by the work of Jon McCormack, and his notion of an art form unique to the computer. The other, derived from Derrida's reading of Freud's essay on the mystic writing pad, is the concept of the computer as a model of the psyche. From this convergence of ideas a link will be established between digital art and surrealism. Rather than being prescriptive, this paper seeks to reflect theoretically on how we might conceptualize digital creativity as an aesthetics of the marvelous and the unpredictable. His paper is entitled: *The Digital Unconscious: the Mystic Writing Pad Revisited*.

The fourth and final paper is from Jon McCormack. He graduated with a Bachelors in applied mathematics and computer science from Monash Uni, and a masters in animation from Swinburne. After several years in commercial computer animation production he began to develop work which examines and interprets nature and natural systems through computer algorithms. Jon McCormack's focus on something which may have a profound effect on how 'new' new images may ever be. One claim about the real revolutionary aspects of the computer in relation to art is its ability both to see and synthesis 'unimaginable things'. Using parodies of natural selection, or the graphical visualisation of higher dimensional and non-Euclidean spaces, for the first time we are able to not only to see, but to interact with computer constructed spaces. But how 'unimaginable' are the things created by artists using these techniques and how much more unimaginable could they become? The notion that they are unimaginable at all seems to contradict the fact that they are most often presented in terms that we can imagine and comprehend. This highlights a fundamental question about emergence - can the computer really create new 'things' that were not determined by decisions made by the artist/programmer using the computer to synthesise those things? Jon will speculate on the consequences of this question in terms of the 'new image'. His paper,

with I sense, a nod in the direction of Walter Benjamin is entitled:
Ways of Interacting: the work of art in the age of machine synthesis.

Notes

Penny, Simon, 'Electronic Arts in Australia' Continuum V8 No1 1994

Riley, Vicky, 'I Touch Myself' Photofile April 1995 No 44

Conomous, J. Photofile April 1995 No 44

THANKS

The committee who organised this the second forum were: John Potts; Rebecca Cummings, myself Mike Leggett, Nicholas Gebhardt and Maria Stukoff.

We would like to thank: Victoria Lynn AGNSW for hosting and supporting the event.

The AFC for providing most of the financial support. Other organisations assisting included Maquarie Uni; NAVA; the History Dep of Sydney Uni, Sydney College of the Arts and COFA at UNSW.

My personal thanks to Nicholas and Maria for undertaking most of the routine chores of a group like this; New Media Forum is an address list. Individual addresses with moments to spare are invited to attend the next meeting of the organising committee.

Finally, thanks to our guest, Jenni Robertson from ANAT; a special thanks to our speakers, John Colette, Sally Pryor, Darren Tofts and Jon McCormack who have attended in their own time and without payment. I hope they have derived stimulation as much as I have.