

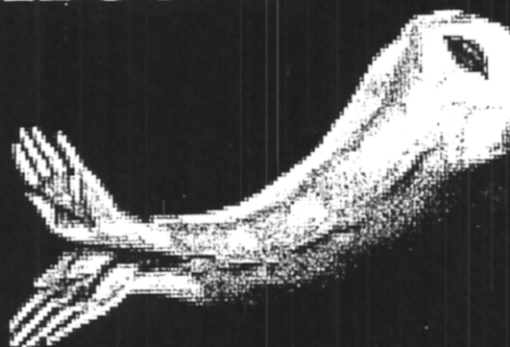
Burning the Interface <International Artists' CD-ROM>

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linda wallace

A characteristic of the virtual class is that it is autistic. It's an absolute meltdown of human beings into these autistic, historically irresponsible positions, with a sexuality of juvenile boys being happy with machines. Shutting down the mental horizon while communicating at a global level and preaching disappearance. And why not, because you've already disappeared yourself... But as the guide at Xerox Parc said, "Who needs the Self anyway?" Privacy for these people has always been imposed on human beings by corporations, it's not something they claim they wanted. The Xerox Parc of the future is not about copying paper anymore, but copying bodies into image processing machines. And who needs privacy in such a situation? They are not employees anymore but missionaries. Think about the various stages of repression, from primitive capitalism, to the limitation of social choices. None of those limitations apply to the virtual class. Their form of domination is psychological repression. They don't have a clear class consciousness. They truly believe that technology equals human freedom.¹

squatting the media



Linda Dement, *Cyberflesh Generator*, 1995, still from interactive CD-ROM (detail)

A quick scan around most CD-ROM titles does not give an overwhelming impression of technology equalling human freedom. There are only a few titles which actively try to engage the viewer in a different way, and by doing so, critique the notion of the 'virtual class'. The CD-ROM titles showing as part of the *Burning the Interface* exhibition at the MCA, curated by Mike Leggett and Linda Michael, all do this, albeit in a variety of ways.

It is unlikely that any of the titles in *Burning the Interface* ever made any money back, let alone enough to cover the vast amount of work which has clearly gone into every one of them. To produce works such as these, a new level of technical literacy is demanded of artists, and a new kind of humility. For the CD-ROM of today is extremely

limited in what it can technically do—it can only carry around 650 mb of information, so movies are reduced to postage stamp size; it is dependent upon good hardware, so if you view the CD-ROM on anything less than, say, a double or triple speed drive, you are likely to grow irritated with the time it takes for a new image to resolve itself.

All the artists featured in *Burning the Interface* are working within the bounds of a technology, which, in its current form, is no doubt soon to be rendered redundant. It is a (near) dead technology. Either new data compression algorithms or new ways of putting down (burning) information will be developed. In fact, this is on its way with the Digital Video Disc. So what we have here is a slice of technological history—yet these artists have managed to take this soon-to-be-archaic technology, and entwine its surface with informational intricacies with which to amuse themselves and those eager to become dangling flesh from one of the

many Apple Mac terminals by the waterfront at the MCA.

I have been to see this show a few times and every time the terminals are crowded, with those waiting a turn perched like vultures in anticipation of a viewer growing tired of the assortment of ROMs on any given machine. Often the older passers-by in the museum seem to prefer to watch from afar, foregoing their chance for ROM fascination. Maybe it takes a particular mindset to see these works as interesting, although some are more interesting than others.

There are many ways to begin to critique the works: one can consider the conception of the interface, the navigation tricks and labyrinths, the

use of time, the use of sound as narrative structuring. In retrospect I like to consider where the various works allowed you to go—that is, to go liminal inside your own RAM brain.

ScruTiny in the Great Round is a pleasurable work. The CD-ROM began as an artist's book in 1992, and grew into a collaborative effort between Tennessee Rice Dixon, Jim Gasperini and Charlie Morrow (USA). It has a medieval sensibility of rich and fecund images on which are superimposed brambles and decay; mythical animals transforming into other equally evocative creatures. This work has an opiated dreamzone feel about it; ironic, given its production was made possible by the sophisticated artefacts of late 20th century rationalism.

Passengen by Graeme Ellard and Stephen Johnstone (England) takes as its starting point Walter Benjamin's use of the metaphor of panoramic vision and the labyrinth in his unfinished text *The Arcades Project* (*Passengen-Werk*). Starting on the tourist platform of, say, the Eiffel Tower, with its ecstasy of aerial vision, the work asks the viewer to follow a series of slowly unwinding threads which end in the depths of the city, usually in the underground railway system.

John Colette's work *30 Words for the City* is another which shares this sense of unfolding intimacy. One of the first CD-ROM artworks produced in Australia, it presents a menu of 'words' through which the viewer can navigate into the experience of life in the subtle body of the hard/soft cities of Tokyo or *someplace*. It is a poetic and singular piece, almost lonely: as the individual body moves through space, stories unfold as poetic images, text and sound.

The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers by Bill Seaman evokes a similar dreamlike quality. Made up of a menu of 330 words, during the interactive process a viewer can construct word/image/sound 'sentences'. An installation version of this work was exhibited at the Art Gallery of NSW, as part of the 9th Biennale of Sydney in 1992/93. To see it in the small intimate space of the computer is an altogether different experience—the viewer is in control, which is probably the point of many of these



Brad Miller, *A Digital Rhizome*, 1994, still from interactive CD-ROM

works. They are small and personal, the dialogue is immediate and intimate.

It may be a cliché, but it is clear that Australian artists are at the forefront of international electronic arts. Revisiting the Kroker text, perhaps we—global leaders in our rate of take up of new technologies—are also at the forefront of the development of the so-called 'virtual class'.

Some Australian artists maintain a position of 'honoured collaborators' with technology, a kind of technological evolution, while others, like Brad Miller, Linda Dement, SASS, Gerald Van Der Kaap and De-Lux'o seem to reject this notion to take a more non-compromising position—one more akin to the notion of 'Squatting the Media'. As Kroker contends:

when Karl Jaspers wrote Man and the Modern Condition he said that the fundamental act of political rebellion today is the human being who refuses, who says no. It marks the end of any hegemonic ideological position and the beginning of politics again. "Squatting the Media" represents a refusal, and marks a return of morality into politics. It would be important to take practical examples of subversive intentions that operate deeply in cybernetic language itself, not outside of the media-net but inside it.²

It could be argued that Linda Dement's work does this. *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* is a relatively small file size packed with power. Dement scanned in a range of women's body parts during the 1994 Adelaide Festival Artists' Week. Conglomerate bodies were made using the scanned images. These 'monsters' were then animated and made interactive. When a viewer clicks on a body part, the words attached to it could be heard or seen, a video may play, a story may appear or medical information about that particular story may be displayed. Dement says "the user moves blindly between these. There is no menu system or clear controllable interface".

It seems that *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* burned through the interface of public decency. The work had to go before the federal government's Office of

Film and Literature Classification and although not technically classified 'R', it received the equivalent of this rating. The MCA had to 'lock off' the work: anyone who wanted to view it had to ask an attendant and keeper of the password to open it for them. To prevent anyone 'impressionable' from seeing the work, the computer shuts down automatically if it hasn't been interacted with for a few minutes.

Since this is a work which invites the viewer to read and linger over information for some time without necessarily interacting, this regime radically interrupted the user's relation to *Cyberflesh Girlmonster*—an intervention in the interactive process completely at odds with the artist's intentions. *Cyberflesh* was shown at last year's Perspecta at the AGNSW with none of this censoring. It seems that the censors have suddenly realised that new media exist, and want their two cents' worth. This problematises the status of the art work: new media works are censored in a popular cultural context, yet exhibited openly in a more rarefied 'art' context. It is also curious that many female artists who work with technology produce work which is a bit too hot for mainstream galleries or exhibition spaces to handle. Without doubt the female interface will generate lots of heat in days to come.

LINDA WALLACE is an artist, curator and writer.
email: hunger@sysx.apana.org.au

notes

- ¹ Geert Lovink, interview with Arthur Kroker, 'The Theory of the Virtual Class', on-line in CTHEORY. CTHEORY is available, free, by email; send a message to ctheory-request@concordia.ca with the word "subscribe" in the body of the message. You can contact CTHEORY through ctheory@vax2.concordia.ca
- ² *ibid.*



ScruTiny Associates, *ScruTiny in the Great Round*, 1995, still from interactive CD-ROM