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a digital crisis

The eco crisis to which Stephanie Britton and others have referred is the crisis which the majority of us are unwilling to act upon. Maybe this is because the crisis has always been with us – as a species we constantly demand a need to both extend our senses and register our presence as individuals. We develop new tools to achieve this extension and collect the materials to use the new technology – the crisis arises with the demand to supply the resources to achieve this end.

This "post-industrial" era in which technology enables the expansion rather than the contraction of the mass production of goods, and a culture which is based upon the consumption of machine-made artefacts, is clearly a non-sustainable means of registering our presence. Raw materials and the objects into which they are turned are finite.

The crisis of the object is also central to a history of the post-industrial countries and the making of art and craft throughout this century. Much gallery art from the latter half reduces material presence to a level that it relies on the ability of the visitor to bring with them, in memory or imagination, or knowledge of a "tradition", what is "missing" on the floor or wall. The crisis here is also one of

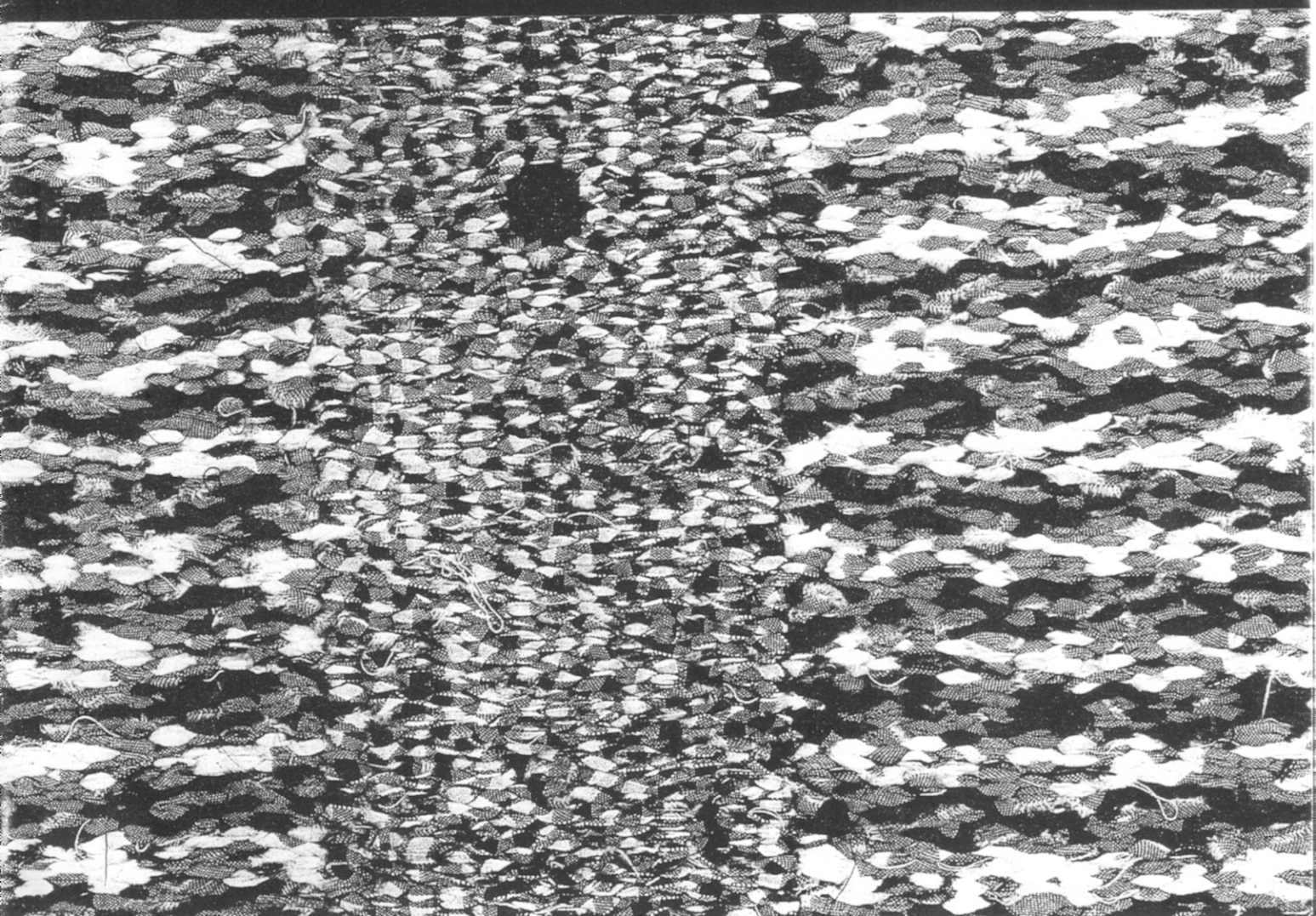
sustainability, though of a non-material kind. Many are heard to say: "I object ..."

The organisation of Material into the Object is leavened with many other ingredients: the aesthetic discourse of ideas, spirit and tradition; the envelope challenging assault on substances and methods, the special effects achieved signaling to us through the flames of our urban existence. Maybe the capacity to serve some function within the everyday round, lifting from the drear, helping to interrogate the crises of the moment. These are some of the qualities of the special object, assembled with guile by its maker, invested with so much meaning by its user. Touch, in these contexts, is vital to the appreciation of the object, particularly if it is one amongst many, an edition or a run. However, especially in the craft gallery, touch becomes a crisis, ameliorated only by acquisition. Shop, and then drop.

Digital media are not "new media". Like any tool used for the purposes of ephemeral communications and based on the movement of electrons (the telegraph is 200 years old), or photons (television is 80 years old), these media are efficient in re-using the materials to a whole variety of ends.

The television schedules address such variety, but require us to become a homogenous audience simultaneously – the human organism resists this behavioural corralling. The video cassette recorder offers some escape from this tyranny of centralism. The computer has been used for creative

Sara Lindsay. *The Roundness of Return* #5. tapestry detail, 1996



endeavour since the time of the appearance of the VCR. It was in the '80s that designers like Lyn Tune were innovating methods to expand the range of design approaches that could be taken as well as speed-up the process of manufacturing the best of the bunch. The more recent multimedia computer, as its potential becomes revealed, will become the receiving and dispatching point for information in many forms. This process will mature at some point in the future when the seeker, the sender and the designer have become integral with the interactive space, where objects are created and others work efforts experienced, where the interface, notions of work, objects and even tactility are redefined. What might we experience at this interface?

It is where working materials and the tools with which to manipulate them are co-located with the sender and the seeker. It is the ability to send and receive them in whatever form required, where they are all located in the same virtual space, and where they are both made and experienced.

It is not a technology which those of us who have been brought up with other technologies will ever fully comprehend as we try to make them provide the outcomes to which we were led by other materials and other tools.

Some call this space virtual, yet it is no more virtual than a gallery space populated by untouchable objects removed from their processes of making.

These are the new creative tools which are in the process of being defined and refined. It is not a technology which those of us who have been brought up with other technologies will ever fully comprehend as we try to make them provide the outcomes to which we were led by other materials and other tools — leave it to the generation who are currently being trained in its intricacies.

Among older generations the fear of the eclipse is profound, extinction more so. Yet few creative media have ever disappeared. Though it can be used for so much more, if the computer is only to be used as an entrance to the internet, this alone will nourish the development of niche communities and their obsessions that would otherwise have remained isolated and abandoned. Though the internet is described in macro user terms with figures of tens soon to be hundreds of millions, it is actually about linked micro audiences, minorities who share a stream of electrons, a "flux" as it is called by some. It is closer to the telephone in this sense and equally invisible, loosely regulated by government in its operation rather than controlled by commerce, as is the case with the content of cinema, television and publishing. The antithesis of the internet is the website entrance to a virtual museum or gallery.

Though in the case of the Web there is opportunity to

deploy special effects, many of the more successful sites are those that are primarily about communication. In some senses this highly (transparent) technical form is enabling a return to our earlier oral cultures.

One of the first websites established in 1993 during the first year of the emergence of the World Wide Web was named The Virtual Ceramics Exhibition, and was in part, more like an exhibition catalogue on-line. Its most imaginative component however, was a forum on ceramic glaze recipes and methods — artists in various parts of the globe (though the majority who were the first to access this technology were Americans) exchanged notes on a daily basis. The site still exists today, (www.uky.edu/Artsource/vce/VCEhome.html), and has been joined by many others. A browser search engine recently located more than 300 sites devoted to virtual ceramics including the CyberCeramics site originating in Victoria, (<http://home.vicnet.net.au/claynet/virtual.htm>) which features "quasi ceramic objects that have been created

partly or entirely on a computer" and are therefore intended to be conceptual pieces, or are awaiting the ceramic technology that will make them realisable materially.

K. Inoue's Virtual Ceramics site (www.bekkoame.or.jp/inoue_k/) makes it possible for the Japanese ceramist's work to be inspected interactively, with a virtual touch, in three dimensions. Drop and drop and never shop.

The potential exists for Robin Best to connect her CAD/CAM computer and its jolly-jigger cutting heads to the internet and enable a commissioning client or customer to participate directly in the production of a virtual experience, or even a real object.

The choice has to be made, the crisis confronted. Have the senses been extended sufficiently to allow the artist craftsman and their client the option of deciding not to commit materials to the realisation of the object?