THE BABBAGE DISEASE

THE IDEOLOGY OF INTERACTIVITY

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We seem to have a difficulty dealing with our past, mostly we ignore it, certainly no one has written a historical/critical textbook that I can use in my art history class. If anyone knows of one please tell me.

We seem to have adopted this future perfect/past imperfect stance from the people that engineer our tools for us.

This medium, the computer medium and the people that use it seem to be mesmerized by the future potential of it, it is rarely backwards looking and thus rarely reflective. A medium totally numbed out by it's own reflection and of course apolitical. Being apolitical is a choice but it is difficult to have freedom without a history to reflect upon.

We have come along way since the mid 70's when the field was totally open and untainted by the territorial markings of other artists and the dogma of other media. So surely we should have, by now, come to terms with our present condition. But no, we seem to be stuck in some future place were everything about technology is OK.

This seems to born out in the relationship we have with our audience.

I'm sure we have all had the experience in which a person at an opening takes you aside to inform you that you could make a lot of money off your product if only you would make certain changes to your piece. Or in your piece they see a brave new world, rarely do they see the work itself. But somehow the work is a point of departure into the near future. Even our public refuses to concentrate on that which is in front of them.

Where did this attitude come from? It would seem to be born into the technology at its earliest roots with Charles Babbage, who was awarded the first government grant to produce the first computer in the 1890's because the hand calculated logarithmic tables, in which the Industrial Revolution was to depend on, were full of mistakes. The navigation tables had ships running aground and the tables on iron plate stresses were blowing up steam engines.

His accepted proposal defined the difference engine, the first programmable calculator, but he abandoned it because he envisioned the analytical engine. Which would have been, although mechanical and steam powered, a true computer.

He felt very hard done by that he was being held to his original proposal. He did however advance the state of machine

tools which gave England a technological edge at the beginning of the Industrial revolution. The government was happy with this, so the pattern was set for technological development of the computer.

The Babbage disease runs rampant in our electronic consumer products even today, it seems that when ever I visit someone they ask me to program some part of their house, be it a thermostat, a VCR, Microwave oven, a digital voice answering machine.

The technicians and engineers that design these products have the Babbage disease, their focus is on chasing new gizmos not producing usable products. The products are abandoned with out a human interface because they come up with a better way to do it during the construction of the current project. The current project becomes unchallenging, uninteresting, part of the drab here and now. They finish it only because the company they work for must have something to put on the market. They are not very helpful to the poor technical writer.

My neighbour was just telling me about his new Vista 100 phone and all the features on it. I wondered why he bought it since many of the features are not available where we live in the country. I could see the Babbage disease at work in the consumer.

I my self am indeed guilty of building tools and systems. I don't believe that Lotus SmartSuite or some other product will be everything I need to use my computer to the maximum, I haven't really been effected by any computer technology since I saw the ad for the Altair. I am guilt of abandoning many pieces of technology just as I was getting to know how to use them really well. Only as I get older do I begin to dig in my heels and surf As Norman White puts it on the trailing edge of technology.

Interactive technology and much of its terminology comes from the militaries inability to couple competent computer recognition systems to their very effective weapons platforms.

There many distressing photos taken in the early interactive labs.

A particularly hideous image from the early sixties, is of a cat strapped into the nose cone of nuclear missile, doing its best to avoid electrical shocks by pressing switch pads that keep a dot of light centered on the cross hairs of the guidance Cathode Ray Tube. This is an image I try to recall before I convince myself to buy a new computer.

The latest airborne computers still have difficulty telling the tanks from the trees. So most modern weapons need a person crammed into it somewhere as an analog image processor.

High-tech weapons are made for war and as always to lull the public into a sense of security. Rather than follow a dry and well tread man-machine interface talk. I would like to talk about war and its relationship with the public perception of the moral. Just for fun I will trace the rise and fall of electronic art movements as they relate to various wars both hot and cold.

The first modern phase of technologically based art works was the short lived Futurist Movement in Pre World War one Italy. Technology and war, was thought of by these artists, as some kind of giant enema which would rid the world of priests and art galleries and pull Europe screaming into the twentieth century.

Unfortunately the mechanization of death by military technology was perfected in this war and the moral implications produced a rather infertile ground for public acceptance of technologically based art works. And besides many of the Futurists, who were among the first volunteers, died in the trenches.

This Luddism was broken after the Second World War, where the technological superiority of the United States was the seen as the reason for good triumphing over evil and saving the entire world. Immediately after the war, technology was put to work luring women out of the work force and back into the home via time saving appliances.

The cold war spawned the Internet and computer technologies. The Experiments in Art and Technology or EAT was instigated during this period. In it a large numbers of artists were directing the resources of the military/industrial complex to produce art works.

The Vietnam War which showed nightly, examples of a technologically illiterate people being annihilated by computer controlled bombers crushed this movement with only a few artists like Norman White and John Whitney Sr. (who had learned to use the technology on their own rather than direct engineers, surviving the moral backlash against technology.

The active portion of the cold war, the space race, and a number of renegade engineers brought about the microprocessor. A third wave of artists, full of McLuhan, Ted Nelson and technologically competent came out of the closet along with the miracle of the micro-computer.

In the present day the gulf war, who's heroes were patriot missiles and A-10 tank destroying airplanes has brought us to the current surge in popularity for artists working with technology.

There is a picture of Konrad Zuze building the Z-1 computer in his parents Berlin Apartment. Zuze is arguably the first person to build a working computer. The picture is dated 1939. While Zuze works totally absorbed on his machine, out on the streets the Brown Shirts are goose stepping down the roads and kicking in windows. This unwillingness to be engaged in the real world is something the electronic arts community is frequently accused of.

Before I dig a hole and bury the interactive art movement, I will leave us an possible out;

The last vestments of European colonial power reside within the language of academia and high art.

The new, world colonizing power is the culture of technology. Perhaps this is why art talk does not properly map onto "technological" art and why interactive artists have some difficulty engaging in a wider art dialogue. It could very well be that we just have to develop our own critical language, write our own historical texts and pray for some new colonial curators and critics.