

THE VIRTUAL SENSORIA: NOTES ON NEW MEDIA ART

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The Multimedia Thing

Multimedia: nobody is quite sure what it is, or why it is so sexy, but everybody wants to get a piece of it. The Australian government's Creative Nation cultural policy statement promised to pump over \$60 million into it. About 150,000 Australians already own computers equipped to run the stuff. Educators, film makers, artists and con-artists are rushing to make interactive multimedia titles.

Yet nobody really knows what it is that the public is supposed to want out of it. To be educated? Why not read a book. To be entertained? Why not watch TV. To be engaged 'interactively'? Well, why not go down to the local bar, coffee shop or laundromat and chat somebody up?

When the Australian Film Commission held a conference in Melbourne on 'multimedia and interactivity', over 500 people turned up. Everybody wants the phantom multimedia users who are supposed to be populating this new market to want something from it, but what?

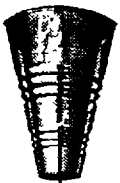
The arrival of a new medium provides the opportunity to think again about what it is the user of the medium wants. How is the desire of the film goer or the interactive user engaged by the form? It also provides the opportunity to think again about what the resources are that are buried in the great traditions from which contemporary media draw.

Let's take the second issue first. It is usually the job of a critic to rank works within their genres, and to rank genres too in order of significance. It is also the traditional business of the critic to define what it is that constitutes a good novel, for example, or a classic movie.

Now, all that is fine if one presumes either that the 'platforms' upon which culture — and critics — stand is stable, or ought to be stable. But if it isn't stable, and one has no interest in it being so, then the job of the critic looks quite different.

So rather than try to nail down what a novel is, and why it is in some sense better than the lyrics to pop songs, its time to reverse the critical engine and produce something quite different. This is a cue for something like cultural studies, with its open minded approach to issues of how culture works and who benefits from it. But the cultural studies mob, with a few excep-

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tions, stick to the margins of present and past cultures. Regardless of what the newspaper columnists say about it, it really is a pretty traditional outgrowth of scholarly knowledge about culture.

Perhaps the instability in media forms at the moment calls for a more radical approach still. Rather than all those hierarchies of culture, all those ideal forms of how things should be that we hold in our minds unconsciously, lets think about culture as a bubbling goo of cultural forms, high, low, popular, marginal, commercial, subsidised, everyday, ritualised.

Every time a new technology comes along, the creative and commercial people alike will dredge through that goo looking for forms that might suit the new media vector. Those who can do this with the least preconception will most usually come up with the weirdest and the most original new forms. This is why I think the novelists and the theatre people were not very successful in Hollywood when the talkies came in. They were too snooty. The journalists, who practiced a low and despised craft to begin with, had nothing to lose and dove straight in.

At present, we are confronted with the opportunity of writing for, and teaching about, a new medium, and with a vast array of genres, games and stories that might be the raw goo out of which we make interesting multimedia.

So far, the exploitation of traditional game and story formats has concentrated on examples of games and stories that are already closely linked. This is particularly so with fantasy, horror and epic stories, which for a long time have had associated with them various role playing and treasure hunt types of games.

There are some stunningly original examples that go beyond that. One of my favourites is *Lemmings*, which turns a particularly silly bit of Disney nature film make believe into a quite remarkable game principle. Here's a game where you have to stop something — the *Lemmings* — exceeding their limit, whereas the most usual game paradigm is to get something up to the limit.

In order to come up with new connections between the game and the story principle, we need to think a little more about the kinds of desire that the user invests in the medium. There are very few examples of multimedia that allow for anything like the investment of sexual desire that cinema allows, and video and TV retail at a cut rate. We now know, or think we know, that this process is extremely polymorphous and perverse. We don't always fancy who we are supposed to in the movies.

One would think that there would be an interesting trade off in multimedia between the lower resolution of the image but much greater flexibility in positioning oneself and choosing kinds of interaction and kinds of character to interact with.

Unfortunately, there's been some pretty cheap and pretty straight porn stuff authored on cd-rom, but not much that really draws from the rich soup of narratives of desire that exist in popular culture broadly conceived, if not in the mainstream of Hollywood.

It would be a shame if the kinds of story and play that people try to fit into multimedia were only those *prefiltered* by cinema and video — completely different media.

Desire for empowerment is another logical application for multimedia. In cinema philosopher Gilles Deleuze's terms, video games construct movement-images. The world seems to hang on one's actions, and collapses when one's character dies. There's a certain dark pleasure in this, in seeing whole video worlds wink off the screen because the Prince of Persia bought the farm. But once again, all we have so far are puzzle solving, dexterity and shoot em ups. What other traditional game-skills might one put in place here as the pleasurable process via which one gets to play at exerting power over an environment?

Desire to become someone or something, desire to have power over someone or something, and also possibly desire to be somewhere — else. The idea of multimedia as landscape bears looking at, and revisiting as a popular tradition, the tradition of the heterotopia. The fun park, the Persian carpet, the hall of mirrors, the folly. There's a rich tradition there that I would love to see connect to the notion of the simulation. I mean, *Sim City* is fun and all that, but I'd rather build the kind of cities that exist only in movies like *Barbarella*, or in Prianesi's drawings or in the work of Archigram. The cartographic desire is, I think, the least explored here.

Might we discover new desires in a new medium? I suspect not. But we might rediscover some old ones. The movie-TV-video trajectory pushed to the edges a lot of marginal and quirky desires that, for example, traditions of carnival, mardi gras, or very elaborate and non-linear narratives like the 1001 Nights or the Mahabharata kept fully in play. One of the cool things about multimedia is that it allows us to reassess our assumptions about these cultural traditions, give them a new interpretation and a new lease of life. I would love to see the epigram reborn in multimedia, for example. Or the haiku.

As with previous new media, I think whoever does the most open minded research into the kinds of cultural resources that are lying around untapped, in the archives, in folk culture, in the margins of pop culture, will come up with the most original and challenging stuff, and who knows? Perhaps the odd killer app. We can comfortably assume that the combined corporate might of Hollywood and Silicon Valley — Siliwood, will turn even *Natural Born Killers* into a really lame cd-rom. With a bit of luck, talent and cultural policy guidance, we might get to do some cool stuff around the edges of that.

The one truism one hears all the time about multimedia is that it is more 'interactive' than TV or cinema. The user has more choices than the viewer. TV and cinema are passive mediums for spectators. Multimedia is an active medium for users. This is one truism that is absolutely untrue. All of the qualitative research into what people actually do with TV and cinema shows that the audience is an active participant in the production of meaning in these established media. It may flatter the vanity of screen writers, directors and producers to imagine that there is a great pile of squeegees out there ready to soak up the juice of whatever fantasy they wish to purvey, but that is not how these media work. And I don't see how we can even begin to appreciate how new media differ from old media if we begin from fundamental misconceptions about the old media.

Audiences negotiate meaning. They accept, resist or negotiate what they see and hear depending on how it suits what they know of the world and what they want to imagine in their heads. This is already what happens when people watch TV or go to the movies. They choose to identify with Roseanne against her kids, or with one of the kids against Roseanne. They choose to see Roseanne as an indictment of all that is banal and detestable in work-a-day family life; they choose to see it as a celebration of all they love and cherish about exactly that kind of life. They might identify with Sandra Bernhard, the lesbian-next-door. They might not. This is how culture works. As Orwell said, cultures are not manufactured. They grow of their own accord.

Conversely, far from giving the user more 'choices', multimedia can be seen as empowering the creator and restricting the user's choices. An author can't control the order in which a reader reads the pages in a book. If we want to read the ending first, nothing can stop us. If we want to skip a chapter that bores us, we are free to do so. With a 'non-linear' book, like Adorno's magnificent collection of epigrams *Minima Moralia*, nothing stops us skipping the ones that bore us. But with a multimedia title. All this can change. The creator can hide the ending from the user. Or insist that certain screens not come up except via other screens. Or one can demand that the user make the 'right' choices in order to avoid being sent straight back to the start. There's a great text-based work by VNS-Matrix on the Mindvirus disc that does exactly this. If you don't get your head around the aesthetics and ethics of the cyberfemme Q back to the start you go.

So please: let's not go making assumptions about new media, on the basis of old media that are themselves pure prejudice. In fact, let's make as few assumptions about new media as are absolutely necessary to begin to experiment with it. The 'multimedia thing' is at present of unknown shape and size. Let's keep it that way for a while.

In sum, there is only one thing I can say for sure, and that is that our understanding of the past of culture, and the breadth

of culture, will be changed by multimedia. As with all emergent cultural forms, it shapes our sense of the residual cultural forms we leave in our wake — half remembered and half forgotten. Perhaps in 50 years time we will have a culture where everybody knows what midrash or golliard writing is, but is no longer very interested in the novel. Now that would be interesting!

2. Art Goes Interactive

There's something about new media and artists that make them get down with each other as soon as the possibility arises — think of those fabulous dada and surrealist 16mm films. As soon as light, cheap, mass produced cameras were on the scene, so were the artists. Likewise, now that cheap(ish) mass produced multimedia interactives are a possibility, it's also an art. The curators, the critics, the editors and other aesthetic gatekeepers will wake up to it sooner or later, but the art is happening and redefining what art might be.

With a Mac, a scanner and a few off-the-shelf programs like Macromind Director, Photoshop and Hypercard, anyone can do it. Which means anyone is doing it, which means there's a lot of trash out there, both on the commercial multimedia market and in the electronic art world. The success of the cd-rom game *Myst* has created the first multimedia hit, and every record company, publishing house and video-game firm in the military-entertainment complex of our time is out there looking for the next 'killer app' to bust this market wide open.

It may be a long time coming. In the mean time artists around the planet are using multimedia tools to create an aesthetic exploration of two related problems. Those problems are, firstly, what is multimedia art good for? What does it do that other media don't do? Secondly, what does making something in this media tell us about the context for making art today? What does it make us think and feel about the information landscape of our time?

Linda Dement's *Typhoid Mary* cd-rom interactive strikes you first with the intensity of its cathode colours, the lushness of its forms. Erotic and abject elements of the female body entice and repel, but always fascinate. You wander over the images with the mouse as with a virtual hand, not quite sure if you are allowed to touch. Clicking the button shifts the images along, or reveal scraps of text, some borrowed, some by Dement herself, fragments of personal diaries or public pronouncements on the management of bodies. Rather than feeling disjunctive, the whole thing seems rather fluid, an aesthetic out of Irigaray, aware of but indifferent to masculine principles of order, seeking a connection between the feminine and the digital where both become something else in the process.

It would be nice to see Dement's work alongside Christine Tamblyn's as it is a sort of alter ego to it, concerned in a more didactic way with the relationship of the female body and technology. Dement wants to explore what's possible there, Tamblyn

wants to critique what's gone before. The opening screen presents floral arrangement of pixelated petals, click on each and a link in the daisy-chain of images that link the bodies of women and machines presents itself. Since the only universal history, Deleuze and Guattari tell us, is the "history of contingency", then it makes sense to retell histories in the space of multimedia, where networks of links bind together particulars that could illuminate many different stories. Let a thousand past flowers bloom.

The Deleuze connection is much discussed in the theory of hypermedia, a more textual cousin to the more image and art practice based multimedia. Brad Miller's Digital Rhizome cd-rom straddles both nebulae. As a last nod to appropriation art, Miller rips a few pages from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, and scans them into the digital realm. There, where there is no physical scale, no breathing time, they become philosophical talismans of a world to come, an ever purer zone where intensities gather along and every line of relation. Following those plotted by Miller takes you in and through the body and on into the universe, for scale, boundaries and identities are all put in flux.

If Miller's version of the emerging digital landscape is a cheery one, Jon McCormack offers a more irksome vision with *Turbulence*, a cd-rom driving a touchscreen interface and a collection of McCormack's intense animations from laser disc. Trained in cinema and mathematics, McCormack has a unique grasp on both the logical and visual dimensions of the artificial-life terrarium he creates, using a mix of off the shelf and self-authored software. In *Turbulence*, one has access to a set of 'scientific' looking records of life in a virtual world. Strange phyla not only dwell here, they grew here.

McCormack convincingly shows a world that is more than human-made, it is self making, where the creator seeds a space with agents that grow and change and adapt of their own accord. The animations give a particularly uncanny image of this world. Strange triffid-like species grow and pulsate with almost nauseating fury. What is even more disturbing is that the point of view from which we see these creatures belongs also on the 'other side' of the monitor, for no human eye and camera could dwell in this space, and McCormack accentuates rather than hides this aesthetic and theoretical problem. By creating and visualising the possibility of another nature, McCormack obliges one to reflect on what is left of our strange relation to this one.

Where McCormack uses the logical properties of the digital realm to create another nature, Bill Seaman uses it to create another language, or more precisely, another logic for this one. His Two-screen cd-rom installation *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers* presents a series of perfectly grammatical but not necessarily meaningful English sentences, each word of which corresponds to a video image and a sound. With the menu screen, you can use substitute parts of one sentence for another. You are stuck with the grammatical form of the sentence, but you can

make up a hell of a lot of sentences, all equally grammatical, all strangely senseless, and each creates a new 'sentence' of images and sounds.

Its a highly formal work, rigorous in principle and consistent in execution, and it uses the interactive form to explore that most interactive thing of all — language. In doing so it throws into relief the experience of that which has a grammar — language — in contrast to experiences that don't — what they eye sees, what the ear hears. Its a subtle evocation of the way language orders the other senses, where 'orders' has the double meaning of enforcement and sense.

Similarly formal in a sense is Marta Guitart's *Please, Touch Me...* Three screens all show much the same beating heart, floating in the phosphorous-white space of the screen. But touch each one in turn, and each responds to the touch differently, as if it were an individual presence, not a perfect digital replica. The work plays on the distance between the quirky personality we all attribute to computers and their mass produced identical identities. Where McCormack wants to explore to the max how different the digital world can be, Guitart draws attention to how we colonise it with our anthropomorphic assumptions.

The digital world can be a space into which we project bodily desires or rational plans, or it can be a world where the infinite combinations of media imagery play free. Troy Innocent's *Idea-On!* presents a digital infoscape where the extreme possibilities of mutation and relation between pop imagery creates a space beyond irony, where nothing appears any more to be 'out of place'. *Idea-On!* is the most inventive work I've seen yet in terms of the kinds of virtual geography Innocent has created. There were at last count four separate domains within the work, each organised around its own spatial metaphor of movement. Innocent has also come up with an aesthetic that makes the most of limitations of cd-rom media: bold, back-lit colours and graphic shapes gambol gayly in a world beyond fear or hope, in a theme park designed by Nietzsche rather than Disney.

A more modest work is Innocent's interactive techno-tune on a floppy for the Shaolin Wooden Men's song *OHAR*. Sponsored by Ollie Olsen at the techno dance label *Psy-harmonics*, the Shaolin are a techno band who's public appearances are all handled by cartoon characters of Innocent's design. They appear in the video and on the floppy, and will even be downloadable over the net. Its a perfect commission for Innocent, who's work with the *Cyberdada* collective and on his own has always imagined the world as a digital realm in which the simulacrum is pushed to the limit. Here he gets to make a little piece of it that will be commercially released in what is still nostalgically called the real world, or as one says on the internet — RL.

The mutation from art to commerce is also happening to the body of work of Toshio Iwai. In his Amiga based work,

four 'insects' crawl across the screen. By putting coloured spots in their path, you can make music, as the insects trigger sounds as they cross the coloured spots. This is loads of fun, and its popular in any gallery where it is installed. It's nice to see kids having fun in an art gallery, unphased by their surroundings but engaged in a new visual experience. Spotting the potential of Iwai's artwork, Nintendo plan to market it commercially. The insect music game will be supplemented by more typical Nintendo style games in the finished product, but it will be the first art-on-a-cart in 16-bit video game culture.

One art work that could easily be developed as a kind of alternative game culture product is *Game Girl* by the women's multimedia art group VNS-Matrix. This cd-rom is a somewhat didactic corrective to the boys club game culture — its project is no less than a game space of entirely female principles. In this game you have to "infiltrate Big Daddy Mainframe and subvert his core architecture." Work by VNS-Matrix, Linda Dement and Christine Tamblyn help to dispel the presently popular notion that this is an inevitable feature, overcome only by the negative step of censorship.

VNS propose that we look at the questions of relation, between body and technology, male and female, inner and outer states, from other perspectives, and that multimedia is as good a place as any to do so. But there's more: maybe women can make new relations of difference, between images, bodies, identities, artefacts through this media. As cyberfeminist theorist Sadie Plant suggests, its *masculine* orders of time, place, relation that are threatened by the proliferation of digital difference, so maybe women gotta get with the digital flow...

"Cyberfeminism suggests there's an intimate and possible subversive element between women and technology." Plant, who teaches at the famous Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, features in *Mindvirus*, a twin-floppy interactive "datazine." This neatly packaged interactive hypes itself as "an alternative media source. It uses its hosts to replicate covertly and it feeds on its own hype. The mutation continues upon contact with the user." By making cyberpretension ironic, then folding the irony over again and presenting it as is, *Mindvirus* creates an aesthetic aura for itself that rises above the now routine cyberboredom. The optional 'randomiser' is a nice touch too — with the click of the mouse you're off on a serendipity ride through the stacks, or dumped into the 'cow zone'.

There's a hypermedia version of the VNS All New Gen work on *Mindvirus*, one of the most succinct versions of the recursive, hyperlinked story I've seen. VNS use this model to build in links that short-circuit straight back to the start, but also links that extend the story, weaving deeper into the maze. So far from offering the user a free space to control, it rewards some story-choices with more story. Think like a cyberfeminist, and more is revealed. Think like a dick, and its all over in seconds.

This is the cyberfeminist aesthetic ploy — use the desire to know and to see built into patriarchal thinking as the hook to shift the user's desires elsewhere, or simply shrug them off if they don't get it. "In the space between words she searches for clues. The virus of the new world disorder takes on the transglobal fathernet of power and ambition. Dirty work for slimy girls." The wit of VNS is this combination of being down with what market culture has done to the law of desire with a subtle morphing of that law against itself. This is art that anticipates a market — that's my hot tip for culture capital investors!

Its an open question whether interactive digital art really needs a market at all. David Blair's *Wax Web* is a hypermedia version of his extraordinary video work *Wax: Or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees*. Anyone with access to a nice, high bandwidth internet connection can connect to *Wax Web*, which is based on the popular MOO environment. You can read the script, look at clips, add your own annotations, in what Blair hopes will be a collective interactive embroidery on the *Wax* world.

The Amsterdam-based magazine *Mediamatic* included a free cd-rom with their last winter issue, 'produced' by Gerard Van Der Kaap. The works compiled on *BlindRom* are of variable quality, but the interface to them has a zany, hit-and-miss quality, like that Monty Python record that had two grooves on the one side, so you never quite knew which you were getting. *BlindRom* is that multiplied by a factor of ten, which is what taking the idea of truly random access from the analogue to the digital realm can do for you. The idea of artists compilations, 'produced' so that they form one matrix is a good one, though. *BlindRom* is at least less annoying and more creative than *Blam!*, an American concoction that seizes hold of your Mac and won't let go of it for its dazzling display of petulance.

Up til now art has remained a resolutely analogue affair. Paint brush moving on canvas, video camera panning across a body, performance art of gestures and sighs. In the appropriation art of the 80s the disjuncture and combination of images emerged as an aesthetic. No longer this image or that image, but the relation, the space, the suggestion in between. Digital media make that inbetween the whole of the art.

There's not much to be said for the quality of the images one can put on a monitor — issues of quality in an image are an analogue notion, all fine gradations of line and shade. No matter how fine those gradations get with each quantum jump in computer power, its still pointless to compare digital images with their analog predecessors. What's needed instead is a new aesthetic. I don't mean a new aesthetic theory, although that will come, but a thumbnail aesthetics, a set of rough benchmarks to hold up to the new digital realm.

The first word in that thumbnail aesthetics is relation, the inbetween of images. What can the relations between images

signify about what difference is in the digital realm, and what can those differences say about the culture on this side of the screen? This side of the screen is increasingly invaded by things created on the other side. A lot of Jurassic Park came out of the terminal gardens of the digital world, as we know. The aesthetics of interactive art can be an exploration of what those relations in that black box are about, a communication of those explorations back to physical space and time, and a meditation on what may yet come out of the black boxes of the military-entertainment complex, coming to RL near you.

Its not that multimedia is somehow more 'free' than any other media, or somehow 'more' interactive. Interactivity is a quality, not a quantity. Multimedia offers different kinds of interaction, not more of it. Indeed it may even offer less. Brad Miller's Digital Rhizome is considerably less interactive than reading passages in the book for yourself. Multimedia can actually put some of the control of relations between different elements of the aesthetic experience back in the hands of the artist.

That may indeed be why it appeals to artists. You can have your lateral thinking rhizome but make 'em use it the way you intended too. The trade off is that one can have relations between texts, images, sounds, movies, or one can use an interactive to drive other devices like McCormack's laser-disc animations. We don't yet have much of a concept of what kinds of grammars sounds and shapes might have, but an art of relations will invent them. Bill Seaman's work already does.

In multimedia art, the artist exerts more control over the flow of time compared to a book or a sculpture, but without strapping the user to a relentless linear flow of time, as in a video or performance. Its a hybrid, somewhere between a 'time based' and a 'space based' art form, in Lessing's terms. And as Lessing argued, there are things each form does best, or at least one can so argue. Sculpture may lend itself to drama better than comedy, and to landscape not at all. Poetry can be lyrical but rarely succeeds at being monumental or didactic, and so on. So what I'm proposing is that multimedia lends itself best to an art of relation and to imagining topographies of relations that transgress those of the physical world. That at least is what the best multimedia art at the moment does.

3. The New Abstraction

"We have to discover everything about everything."
Godard

If multimedia promises anything it is the coming of a new abstraction. Images and sounds dematerialise, lose all meaning, lose all sense of origin and authorship. That much we already know. But while images and sounds become as nothing, the *relations* between images and sounds become the last zone in which an aesthetics is still possible. The object has disappeared. The image is disappearing. The artist is dead. The

context has become the infinite slippage of intertexts. But the relations *between* Q those remain. Bear with me for a while and I'll explain.

Plunge down one of the 'shafts' in the CD-ROM called Blam!, and you find yourself transported at random to any one of a number of cuts on the ROM. The soundtrack is something like the attack of a dozen paint guns at point blank range. A cut up of a cut up. You may find yourself reading Thom Metzger's 'This is your final warning'. Bored, I click on the Blam! icon to go back to the start. Only I don't get back to the start. The screen informs me that I'm to be subjected to 'Devil in a dead man's underwear', an even longer Metzger poem, which is "brought to you as your punishment for not finishing This is your final warning." {sigh} That's the way it is in multimedia.

The one truism one hears all the time about multimedia is that it is more 'interactive' than TV or cinema. The user has more choices than the viewer. TV and cinema are passive mediums for spectators. Multimedia is an active medium for users. This is one truism that is absolutely untrue. All of the qualitative research into what people actually do with TV and cinema shows that the audience is an active participant in the production of meaning in these established media. It may flatter the vanity of screen writers, directors and producers to imagine that there is a great pile of squeegees out there ready to soak up the juice of whatever fantasy they wish to purvey, but that is not how these media work. And I don't see how we can even begin to appreciate how new media differ from old media if we begin from fundamental misconceptions about the old media.

Audiences negotiate meaning. They accept, resist or negotiate what they see and hear depending on how it suits what they know of the world and what they want to imagine in their heads. This is already what happens when people watch TV or go to the movies. They choose to identify with Roseanne against her kids, or with one of the kids against Roseanne. They choose to see Roseanne as an indictment of all that is banal and detestable in work-a-day family life; they choose to see it as a celebration of all they love and cherish about exactly that kind of life. They might identify with Sandra Bernhard, the lesbian-next-door. They might not. This is how culture works. As Orwell said, cultures are not manufactured. They grow of their own accord.

Conversely, far from giving the user more 'choices', multimedia can be seen as empowering the creator and restricting the users choices. An author can't control the order in which a reader reads the pages in a book. A curator can't control the way a spectator walks around an exhibition.

With a multimedia title. All this can change. The creator can hide the ending from the user. Or insist that certain screens not come up except via other screens. Or one can demand that the user make the 'right' choices in order to avoid being sent

straight back to the start. There's a great text-based work by VNS-Matrix on the Mindvirus disc that does exactly this. If you don't get your head around the aesthetics and ethics of the cyberfemme Q back to the start you go.

So here is a medium that gives one thing, and one thing only, back to the artist. The ability to determine relations. And of this it is possible to create meaning. Signs proliferate, mutate, their relations with each other, promiscuous and obscene. Audiences shimmer like a mirage on the horizon. They warp into black holes or become polyvalent creators of their own sense and sensibility. Objects dematerialise into digit bits. Everything a copy of a copy. Everything is permitted, and so nothing is true, not even to itself. But wait! Along one dimension and one dimension alone, the possibility of constraint returns. And with constraint comes the possibility of making meaning. That one dimension of the manifold, almost infinite dimensions of aesthetics is relation. Relations between sounds, images, movements, words Q between any and every form. Now the artist can install a limit within the work to the omnivorous desires of the viewer, listener, interpreter. The god-like power of!

the other on the end of art to paw at the object, flip through the pages, flick their eyes over the artwork and on to the next can be taken back and given to the artist.

A great example is the CD-ROM work *Cosmology of Kyoto*. I don't much care for the look or the sound of it, although it is a nice design all round. The truly remarkable thing about it is that it has reproduced a simulacrum not only of what Kyoto in the Heian period looked and felt like Q but what the worldview was of the people who lived there.

There's a handy reference work appended to the CD so you can learn about Buddhism, or the customs and superstitions of the time, but that is not where the work is truly great. Watch anyone use *Cosmology* and like any contemporary art-devourer, they skip and scan, frantically waving the mouse and staccato clicking on the button. We are impatient gods when we sit down to chew on other people's vision and thought.

No, what makes *Cosmology* truly remarkable is that as you enter the town and interact with its inhabitants, you have only two choices. You can, in your arrogance, remain as you are, a contemporary Japanese or American, for example. And you won't get very far. The structure of relations that are the real art of the work won't let you. It does not allow this nonchalance with meaning. A more interesting choice is to try and understand the world as it would have appeared to a person of the time. Then you start to make your decisions, when you meet the guard, or the priest, or the gambler, according to someone else's meaning making map of Kyoto, and indeed of the world. You work within the constraints the artists have placed in the matrix of relations that are the art of this work. The look and feel of it are just window dressing. They are not art, they are design. The art is the in the relations. Follow along the line of those rela-

tions, and you learn what it means to be in the world as the world appears from the point of view of Pure Land Buddhism.

Relations, meaning, point of view Q constraints placed on any casual play with signs. If this were a book or a show, you could just take yourself off to the last chapter or the last chamber and see what enlightenment is. Only there would be nothing there to see. Enlightenment is not something that can just be had. But if you learn to live within the constraints of this work, you might just get a glimpse of where enlightenment lies.

We here a lot these days about how multimedia is all about 'content'. Every conference I go to on it has people jumping up and down going, "but what about me! I've got content!" Musicians, visual artists, designers, script writers, sculptors. Everybody's got content. Only multimedia is not about content. Content is irrelevant. You could pillage a heap of broken images from anywhere Q like the makers of *Blam!* did, and still make meaning. Because that with which one makes the meaning is not the images, or the sounds, or the user friendly interface, its the relations between.

This is where critics like David Cox who insist on the importance of the video game paradigm have a really good point. Cox cops flack where ever he speaks or writes for introducing notions from the trashy world of video games into the rarefied domain of digital aesthetics. Metaphors for what the new media might be about drawn from literature are OK: "Hey, Moby Dick is non-linear!" From the visual arts is OK: "Virtual gallery!" From some dead domain of culture: "I found this old book by Frances Yates everybody's forgotten on Giordano Bruno and the art of memory!" But frankly, the best way to understand what multimedia does best is to think about games and sims.

Games are important because of the way they structure meaning through constraints. Its very simple. You don't get to the next level until you figure out this level. You might need to work fast within those constraints, as in a shoot 'em up. Or you might have the contemplative puzzle solving of *Myst*. It depends on how arthritic your joystick hand is. But either way, a funny thing happens. By constraining the omnipotence and the omnipresence of the user to see what they like, the game convinces the user to see things in terms of how the other wants them to be seen. Either you kill that boss thing at the end of this level or you just don't see the next.

Now, most games don't have much to offer in terms of a view of the world. Unless of course they happen to be *Cosmology of Kyoto*. But the possibility is there for many more games like *Cosmology*. Games that oblige you to see from the point of view of the other, in order to see at all. Of course, games are just media. They can't compel you to agree with that point of view. But given one very important condition, they can oblige you to see things *from* that point of view. And with a bit of luck, once you see things from the point of view the artist has made

for you, you look back on yourself as an other Q now isn't that one of the most sublime goals of the aesthetic?

That one very important condition is desire. One must have the desire to see, to hear, to feel whatever it is one believes is buried within a CD-ROM, just as one must have that desire to watch Godard's '2 ou 3 Choses Que Je Sais D'elle', or to read Moby Dick, to chose examples at random from the mess of books and videos and ROMs and stuff on my coffee table at the moment. I can fast forward the video (it bores me). I can flip to another part of the book (because I feel like it). But I can't do that with a well crafted CD-ROM or a video game. But I want to! Constraint creates desire. The very fact that I can watch what video I want, how I want. The very fact that I am inundated with books of every kind. That my own apartment is a museum without walls Q bores me. I am not more cultured for not suffering the scarcity of good books and art that plagued, say, Diderot or Kant. I am more bored. But that I *know* that there is something hidden in this CD-ROM, that excites me.

Something similar happens with sims. A sim is not a game, because games have levels and scores and all the paraphernalia of measuring achievement. A sim is a bunch of algorithms that make a bunch of factors all vary in relation to each other. So if I tweak this variable, all the others are affected. Which is all a bit too abstract for most people, except if I make the variables a tax rate and a few different kinds of expenditure and a set of flows in space. Still too abstract? OK, here's a bit of land on your computer screen Q now build a city. Or here's a nice place for an ant colony Q let's be ants! Sim City, Sim Ant, Sim Tower, there's a bunch of these on the market now. Whatever the window dressing, they are basically about relations, just like Blam! or Cosmology. You make choices within a set of constraints that gradually reveal themselves in the way events unfold on the screen. Most Sims are pretty unimaginative, although there is something about learning how ants think that I find radically othering.

The possibility is there to make an art of pure relations. The various cellular automata programs that you can get come even closer, but they are a little too lacking in concrete detail to be really aesthetically interesting. Its getting the combination of concrete particulars with very abstract relations that is the aesthetic problem for our time.

Linda Dement's work *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* is another take on this. Like cyberfemme theorist Sadie Plant, Dement has drawn a positive connection between the otherness of the point of view of woman and the space of multimedia. Forget the tentative steps in this direction of Donna Haraway. Dement has the will and the nerve to *become* the monster, the cyborg Q the artist. In her CD-ROM body parts form weird and mutant couplings with each other. It is as if they separated themselves from their host bodies. It is as if each expressed a desire of its own. And yet they are not set free entirely. If they did succeed

in freeing themselves entirely from an order, they would cease to mean, and Dement is no deconstructionist. The disordering allows a reordering, around a deviously dyky desire for an other order of the body. *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* is all four of those terms, dismembered and remembered in a new set of relations.

Again, its revealing to watch a work like this being used. Perhaps multimedia only becomes art when it ceases to be merely an art object or a text and becomes a vector Q when it becomes a relation between the actions of a user and the reactions of the work. (Or should that be the other way around?) But I digress, and as this is not a hypertext essay, you will have to imagine where that thought might go, were I to pursue it. Were I to *let* you follow where it goes as you click away on your mouse...

So there's Dement's work, with a warning sign on it that it "may offend." So of course the group of teenage school boys on an excursion to the gallery zero in on it and play with it eagerly. And it excites their desire. But they don't get it. They don't want to get it. A cyberlesbian remapping of the relations of the visceral with the sign is not something they're ready for yet. And yet it touches their desire. Around and around they go, learning how to make it go back and back and back to the screen that shows the little line of throbbing cartoon cocks. Stuck in an infantile repetition, the rest of the work remains a mystery to them. And so it should. Not by the coercive prohibition of censoring the image Q people often complain about Dement's work and ask that it be removed. But the work itself involves a constraint. You simply don't get to read her fantasy stories, or see the mutating flesh of images, if what holds you endlessly fascinated is the dancing line of harmless little penes, all wriggling in a row.

For an image too remain sacred, there must be a limit to how it may be used, or where it may be used, or by who it may be used. The avant garde aesthetics of confrontation, of shock, of exposure with which Blam! still flirts now needs its complement. To go with it we need to create a space in which certain images may be restricted in terms of the kinds of relations they may enter into in the world. It doesn't matter which images. The sacred is a kind of relation. What is sacred to a western desert Aborigine is different from what is sacred to a redneck fundamentalist. But both preserve a certain limit to the relations images may enter into. There is no contradiction between wanting to free one's self from institutions like the church or state that coerce obedience to a certain content of the sacred, and wanting the right to restore the condition of being sacrosanct to certain images. That making sacred, by limiting relations, is what multimedia can do. Precisely because multimedia is nothing but relations.

Abstraction, as it was conceived in the 50s, was still too tied to the materiality of the art object, the specificity of art history and the context of fine art institutions. Abstraction has

nothing to do art for its own sake, self consciously reflecting on its materials, its history and its context. That was not and is not abstraction, that is a rarefied and ultimately uninteresting formal game. To abstract is to free relations from *any* impediment, not just conventions of representation. To abstract is to free the aesthetic from art itself. Which is precisely what has been happening on the fringes of every new media form that technology and the market has cooked up in modern times.

But how free do the relations between any possible sign have to be before we start to desire something different, something perhaps quite the opposite? The World Wide Web is a little glimpse of what a pure rhizome of dematerialised vectors might be like. What if everyone in the world had their own Web site? (According to the Lycos Internet Catalogue, there are already 3.6 *million* Web pages out there...) Millions of little bunches of relations between words and images and sounds, all freely pillaging and reacting and relating to each other! No more materiality of the aesthetic object Q any image can be copied from anywhere to anywhere. No more ownership or moral right in the creation Q anyone can do anything with any work as they please! No more division between the artist and the audience Q everyone is equally a creator! The result? The abstraction of art from art itself Q the end of meaning.

Already there are some dangerous attempts to rope of possibilities, and some done in the name of the 'sacred'. Like the sacred right of media conglomerates to make money off their stockpiles of images. Or the policing of what images and stories can lurk out there. Child pornography! Recipes for drugs and bombs! There will be many more battles on what one can do with what images and sounds, where and with whom. For it is in creating restrictions amongst these relations that institutions and communities prove to themselves that they exist. We are what we prohibit ourselves from becoming; we prohibit ourselves from becoming by not even knowing that there may be something else to desire to become Q and we do that with a ban on certain images.

Perhaps artists today need to fight on two fronts. One is defending people's right to put up on a Web site or in a gallery whatever the hell they like. Personally I would like to see Serrano's *Piss Christ* and a few choice Mapplethorpes copied and recopied and distributed digitally all over the planet. But on the other hand, is it not time to offer the possibility of participating in the mystery of the sacred? The desire that *Cosmology of Kyoto* answers is actually the same as the desire *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* answers. The desire for relations between images and words that may be different, but which have certain disciplines and constraints programmed into them. A sacred space in which one must make ones self become what the other wants in order to accede to one's desire for it, rather than always being able to have the other any way one chooses.

We have to discover the limit to discovering everything about everything. We have to rediscover the joy of the unknown other, hovering on the other side of discovery, always pure, always unobtainable, always barred by relations we have yet to understand. If we reimagine the limit, transgression too might seem interesting again. And in multimedia, we have the most perfectly abstract space to date with which to do it.

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