

Settler Dread and Indigeneity: Digital Media Arts in Oceania

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Shown initially in somewhat reduced form at Te Manawa Museums Trust in Palmerston North, Aotearoa New Zealand, in 2006-7 and later at the 2007 Venice Biennale, Rachel Rakena and Brett Graham's video sculpture *Aniwaniwa* is built from fibreglass moulds, set with traditionally-derived carved motifs appropriate to treasure boxes, suspended from the ceiling. Placed in each treasure box is an acrylic dome screen showing projected elements from a bank of video recordings, for the most part shot underwater with performers in traditional dress. Both artists are Maori. Brett Graham's iwi, Ngati Koroki Kahukura, live around the town of Horahora, where his grandfather was an electrical engineer based at the town's hydro generating station which supplied power for the gold mines at Waihi. Horahora — 'spreading' — was named for the Tainui ancestor, Turongo, and his wife, Mahinarangi, who stopped there to spread the baby garments of their newly born son, Raukawa (founder of Ngati Raukawa), out to dry. Among the source materials are photos of Graham's family as children at the power station. This ancestral and childhood home was flooded in 1947 to provide hydro power for the new generating station at Karapiro. Because hydro plants were still rare in the Aotearoa of the 1940s, the Horahora plant was still supplying power to the grid as the waters poured in to form the new lake. As a last memento, Graham's grandfather left a motto on the dynamo cover: "Kia Kaha ake ake", "be forever strong". Local legend had it that the turbines refused to die, even when they were inundated. In an e-mail on 2nd October 2006, Graham notes of the loss of sacred historical sites in the flooding. "I had expected to be moved by this. I had not anticipated being moved by the fact that our people had mourned the loss of the power station and the community it had created."

Across the motifs engaged in the work, images of water and domesticity predominate; across them the intensity of the local experience is set in communication with traditions, notably the role of Tangaroa, water and sea, who is also the messenger and Tangaroa Piri Whare, who brings the news from shore to shore. The video element, like much of the carved work, speaks of riverbanks, and

in some imagery of the foreshore, subjects of extremely contemporary relevance to the political landscape of Maori-Pakeha relations and beyond them the conception of radio frequencies as taonga, traditional treasures like rivers and seas. In these relations of indigenous people to submersion we should read too not only the metaphor of drowned memories but the actuality of global warming and its specific threat to the Polynesian islanders of the Pacific.

I like the domain name for my next project: halo.gen. Aniwaniwa is the name of the rapids formed at Horahora, and means, among other things, 'rainbow' or 'halo'. Launched in 2006, Douglas Bagnall's online artificial intelligence *Cloud Shape Classifier* introduces itself with the cautiously deadpan phrase "Many people would like to see interesting clouds, but lack the spare time in which to look upwards." The system works on the basis of the mathematisation of images. Each webcam image is between 800 and 1000 Kilobytes, which the server reduces to a set of 57 numbers accounting for normal visual qualities such as RGB levels and contrast. Users set up a classifier, a multilayer perceptron neural network, which further reduces the 57 numbers to one, "which is used as a measure of goodness". Invented in 1957 and first demonstrated in 1960 by Frank Rosenblatt of the Cornell Aeronautical Laboratory, the perceptron was one of the first tools invented in artificial intelligence research. Comprising an input layer and an output layer, with all nodes interconnected, the perceptron applies a 'weighting' to each connection, weightings which can be altered through a process of training based on adding more 'weight' to connection patterns which approximate a desired result. Objects of Minsky and Papert's infamous assault on network solutions to artificial intelligence in their 1969 book *Perceptrons: An Introduction to Computational Geometry*, perceptrons fell out of favour for over a decade until brought back under the sobriquet of Hopfield networks. Multilayer perceptrons as used in Bagnall's AI differ in having non-linear activation functions, modelled on biological brain functions, which allow them to distinguish non-linear data: like clouds.

Hand coded on a Linux box, *Cloud Shape Classifier* might be seen as a low-tech parody of the wilder claims of the AI community. What makes a cloud ‘good’? What is the meaning of training a machine to find ‘good clouds’? The idea of training is multiplied in the network, where each classifier has access to several networks, each subject to mutation of the originating pattern from the user – “guesses” as to what might be a suitable cloud. The networks that most closely match the user’s choices are nurtured. The idea is that the user will inculcate their taste in clouds into the classifier. Of course, most users seem to come in with no idea of what that taste might be. Some classifiers have names suggesting they have been deliberately training for a specific outcome: dark clouds, for example, or images tinged with the rose light of sunset (or is it dawn?). But at this stage you begin to ponder where the user, who has so little time to look at the sky, gets the time to train her surrogate. Wouldn’t it, after all, be just as good to go outside and, well, look at the sky?

In 2006, a gallery version of the piece was installed as part of the ISEA2006/ZeroOne festival in San Jose, and in 2007 as part of the Shanghai Science and Art exhibition. In his notes to the gallery version, Bagnall notes that, “You see the same clouds as on the web”. Which begs more questions: what is the specificity of the camera involved? Where is it? How come it’s always daylight? Is the camera ever close to the user? Would they see the same sky if they went outside and looked up? Would it matter? The sky is one of our greatest emblems of freedom. Even in the 21st century, weather has an autonomy that no other part of the planet has maintained. Now we know about the Great Pacific Trash Island, and the mercury levels in the Antarctic. No matter where you stand, the same sky is above you. Under the sky we are all equal. But then, so are all places. The database, however constantly refreshed, is at heart a storage medium. These clouds have been: but they no longer are. My guess is that behind the dry humour — based in some sense of the disjunctures between a training in taste, the pretensions of AI, and the ubiquity of both the web and galleries as place-neutral frames for

experience — the loss of a contemporaneous moment for looking up at the sky is the central theme of the work, and the reason why it is more than the humourous candy-floss that first appears. This uncertainty about place distinguishes the pakeha sensibility as a settler culture, one whose relationships are more deeply with what is common and, as with the sky, universal to all humanity, and far, far less to the lived currents of history, aqueous and electric, which flow through Graham and Rakena’s work.

For indigenous, settler and migrant cultures, places operate very differently. Creating places in digital media is always a matter of transience for all three. This is not only a matter of the ephemerality of the medium. It concerns the relationship between the user and the artefact. The transient places created in digital media are not traditional, even when they draw on and place themselves in relation to tradition. Human life, Vilém Flusser argues in the essay “We Need a Philosophy of Emigration”, is contingent, dependent on the nature and culture where we find ourselves. The escape from this condition of contingency is irony, ‘This place that is free of things’ (2003: 21).

The movement into irony is an act of outrage. And with this motion a person rises above contingency. Movement away from irony is a form of engagement. With this motion the person returns to his state of contingency to change it. These two movements taken together are called freedom. Human beings are free because with this inexplicable and unpredictable movement they are able to become outraged about their contingency and to change it. Because of this potential, we are virtually free, and when we complete this action we are actually free (Flusser 2003: 21-2)

The works presented here are ironic in the sense that they take a step outside the contingent. They turn the

resources of the past into ironic commentaries on the present's contingency upon the past. They provide the grounds on which a future can emerge other than the eternal present of the circulation of commodities. Flusser offers to name the flight into irony emigration, and the return from it immigration. The exchange of one contingency for another is the possibility of irony, and of a critical commitment to the home or host culture. Of course, this will never be happy or safe. Rakena and Graham's work is not ironic in itself: it is a response to the ironic dis-placing of indigenous Maori culture which has uprooted their ancestral and modern contingency upon nature and culture. Bagnall describes the Nietzschean moment in which the settler is free *from* the European heritage, but has not, or not yet, committed to the host sky under which they now have their being. Bunting refuses the ease of uncommitted travel, uncommitted browsing, but slyly reveals both the artifice and the actuality of migration. Nonetheless it is the specific freedom of the migrant, whether in deep reflection on the changing contingencies of indigeneity, the critical observation of the settler's unhappy lack of

commitment, or the revisioning of migration against the rise of protocol as the typical informatic regime of contemporary power. Transience is not only the opposite of ephemerality: it is the opposite of contingency. Such freedom as the migrant has is the freedom each of these artists in their own appropriate ways explores: the deep curtailment of freedom which we demand of ourselves, when we recognise that personal freedom is worth nothing without ending the dependence of both home and host on the nightmare of history under industrial capital, or the eternity of the present under globalisation.

Note: This paper is part of the panel presentation —
Eastern-Western Interaction in Digital Media.

Flusser, Vilém. 2003. 'We Need a Philosophy of Emigration' in *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*, trans Kenneth Kronenberg, ed and intro Anke K Finger. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp 21-4.

Minsky, Marvin and Seymour Papert. 1969. *Perceptrons: An Introduction to Computational Geometry*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.