

# NEW MEDIA AND NEW IMAGES

THE making of new images? From where do they arise, by what processes? Is the product of process simply imagistic - images for their own sake or rather the sake of captured audiences - or can they have meaning which is guided rather than directed, and function to elucidate and navigate, 'what is on the tip of the tongue'?

Those engaged with the contemporary arts and sciences, and others who are inspecting 'the new media', are completely up to date with the technologies and have helped to develop them but, paradoxically, that does not make us 'of these times'. We are part of the 5 percent of the earth's population who are extending our nervous systems whilst the majority are still waiting for clean water and electricity to be connected. We are not contemporary in this context, we just have the resources to be contemporary in our own. Yet new media technology's greatest claim to difference from previous new media technologies is through the potential to distribute that nervous system, in a fairly low-tech way, to everywhere on the planet to which a copper wire will reach.

Many years ago I received vocational training as a photographer. Later I specialised in cinematography. Soon after I worked as an editor, organising the film other people had shot, processed and printed - in the film and television industries you worked in a particular department.

With a group of film-artists we purchased obsolete processing and printing machinery and thereby gained access to the complete production process. We organised a cinema, publicity and an education programme. We set-up a catalogue and a distribution network. We took control of the entire process.

This was after all, the late 60s. And the end of cinema had been announced.

The arrival of non-broadcast industrial gauge video in the market place coincided with the advent of media studies in tertiary education. The extension of universal franchise through the democracy of the people's medium, television. The high capital cost of video equipment with low running costs (compared to film) also looked better on the college secretary's books.

Speaking as a practitioner, it's moments like these that I am confronted with the risibility of the 'new technologies'....

The computer arrived in the video editing suite in the early 80s and

prescribed the process of combining picture and sound images.... it was a bit like playing trains in a shunting yard. When it came to doing the final edit for broadcast, the cost of hiring the technology by the hour was so prohibitive that you were lucky if the final copy for transmission came out matching the working copy.

Those of us who have been keeping an eye on the creative and meaning-making possibilities of the computer since the early 70s, have always been daunted by the technology with which it is associated - and its cost, and the complexity of the meta-language. The multimedia computer of the past few years is now being marketed in a way reminiscent to that used for the selling of domestic video - as a universal enfranchiser. National suffrage that has given us, Australia's Funniest Home Video Show.

Purchasing the multimedia computer does however, promise to strip away the incantations of a generation of programmers who have required of us, until recently, to recite various command line liturgies. But in terms of computer useability, progress is at the rate that the market place commands, and the tendency towards the stonemason's craft and its associated hieroglyphic codes will remain with us, particularly if there is something unusual to be done like making art. Unusual in that the codes that need to be written, or software interfaces designed for lacemakers, need to be manipulated in a way often contrary to the codes of social interplay and interaction.

Simon Penny, the Australian artist currently associate professor in Art and Robotics at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburg, in his 1993 article, Working in Electronic Media, observes: "Making art that has relevance to contemporary technological contexts is an exercise fraught with obstacles, not the least being the pace of technological change itself. In order to produce an artwork with any (kind of) technology, the technology must be considered in its cultural context, in the way it functions in human culture, and the type of relationship that it can have with an artist and with a creative process. These things take time."

It is often asked: can the speed at which new software and hardware products are shipped, new services and add-ons are provided, can this rate of replacement of tools with which to work, distort reflection upon the outcomes of that creative process from the artist's viewpoint? Is the current gap between realising images and their critical

examination contributing images which are not, of society but are, of tools? Are the new images we have been making simply, about tools?

As the Peruvian novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa has observed by raising issues of the political control of cultural dissemination, and in defence of traditional tools;

"No great literary work erases or impoverishes one which appeared ten centuries ago".

I would suggest that our project is not about by-passing useful artefacts. The process is about responding to conditions that emerge for the exhibition, (and so production), of images and media, including the written word in general. The process is about the invention of new images:

- for the sake of exploring the potential of a tool;
- countering its negative and banal use, very often in the course of its purely commercial exploitation;
- more important, inventing systems within the technology which often, in spite of, rather than because of the artist's determinations, reveal the images we are seeking in a way only possible with a particular medium?

And anyway, when have we ever been able to resist new tools? Is it not an innate condition with which we have to cope?

Between paranoia of 'the new' and celebration of the novel, we are left wondering. Which direction to navigate? What strategy is best adopted?

In seeking navigational beacons we are between the sailor's analogue lamps and the aeroplane pilot's digital radio stream - to be guided by both systems, some users are equipped but not all. The 'real politic' of access to the images is lagging. At a recent demonstration of the World Wide Web to a meeting of museologists, many began to leave early - "... old hat; seen this..." They were on-line.

The WWW seems to me to be about the possibility of a return to something like an aural culture, richly permeated and inflected by images, after years of tyranny by the written word, as exemplified by the text-based codes used in computer programming.

The demonstrator meanwhile toured the sites devoted to matters of museums and art, of which there are now several hundred around the world, most of which have wheeled out their images in the last twelve months.

This precept, the establishment of such sites, has been established amongst us 5%. That session was squandered in mutual self-congratulation. No strategy was discussed for expanding the network, for extending that copper wire. The day before it had been announced that, following the takeover of the responsibility for running Aarnet by Telstra, all commercial traffic would be moved off Australia's part of the Internet and presented to a new service provider, Online Australia - read Microsoft - now that's just the style of federal government. My point is that this roomful of museum people had much to gain from lobbying, as the Broadband Services Group has done in its final report, for Aarnet to become the university and community network, to include all aspects of our 'non-

commercial' culture, which almost by definition is our national culture.

When a structure can be planned that will address the need from all citizens to access and navigate, then the notion of the interactive image takes on meanings way beyond our current modest beginnings.

"These things take time". But there's no time like the present when it comes to maintaining some semblance of influence over the larger things that affect our lives - like access to all aspects of our culture.

Many visual artists of course would describe their project as being about the ineffable - that which cannot be expressed in words. These words of course the exception!

Mike Legget



You read,  
as many shadows as I,  
tracing space,  
unfolding yourself.

*Book of Shadows* is the work of the Australian born artist Simon Biggs. Originally produced in 1993 as an interactive "book-like" computer installation, *Book of Shadows* has also been produced in a traditional printed book format (Oxford Brookes University/Film and Video Umbrella, London, 1995), and here is presented as an interactive "web-book". Besides this being a discrete artwork designed for the WWW, the Web site like several others, also offers other information about the artists and his work. In this sense, a Web site can be a virtual gallery, with the work and samples of work, the biography, copies of reviews and even at some point soon, a form that you can fill-in to pay for an art object, whether actual or virtual.  
<http://www.easynet.co.uk/simonbiggs/WebProjects.htm>



*Diversive Paths* is an experimental Web site at Syracuse University in the USA, set-up by the American artist, Bonnie Mitchell. It is a good example, and there are several of them now, that work on the principle of the on-line visitor browsing through a data bank of images linked together by a (diversive) path. They are accessed simply by clicking on the one that looks good, which leads you to another series of images, and so on. The interaction can develop by downloading a chosen image to the visiting computer and after working on the image with as much talent and imagination that can be mustered, uploading it again to the data bank for someone else to discover, and possibly repeat the process.  
[http://ziris.syr.edu/path/public\\_html/path.html](http://ziris.syr.edu/path/public_html/path.html)