On the art of tongue kissing during mouth-to-mouth resuscitation

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I have to say up front that I find the title of this event quite distasteful. Let me tell you why. Forget McKenzie Wark writing in the 1990s of “vectors” as an alternative to media, or a some article in Wired talking up the internet as a new “fearful sphere” made of information channels, the thought experiment of some latter day Blaise Pascal. Even fanciful notions of cyberspace could only temporarily add a liminal half-life to the fading sheen of the old. Since Socrates dismissed Phaedrus' excitement for the oracular medium of writing, the stink of odium has hovered around claims of the new, as well as the nomenclature of novelty that endows them with a limited shelf-life, in an already glutted infomarket and deregulated tweet-economy. How does it go again: Tinder, Viber, Instagram, SMS, Friendster, MeetMe. And something that was called “Myspace”. Somewhere in the annals of media archaeology you can read of CDROM, interactive multimedia and unencumbered virtual reality. But before you do, a cautionary word. Please don’t think of reviving any of them in the name of postmodern irony or remediation. They are all dead media in the age of “social networks”, or something.

So now I have exorcised my rather jaded spleen, let’s begin again. We simply can’t talk naively about media art any more, innocently, as if we haven’t already done with it yet, and are still trying to understand its nuances because we don’t know what it was, is or might become. We quite simply need to shut the fuck up about it. The term “contemporary art” in the title of this event I find far more
palatable to my admittedly jaundiced taste. And certainly far less odious. Contemporaneity is fleeting, temporary, transitory. It is the fragile holding still of a now that, very soon, will be in the past tense. So it is not always new, but rather is new, for now. Like the kooky shit that Ralph Rugoff speaks of so eloquently in his 1997 *Scene of the Crime*, such as bozos being shot in the arm as an instance of the forensic aesthetic, or the *Orgies & Mysteries Theatre* of Hermann Nitsch, or Arnulf Rainer’s catatonic body sculptures; both undistinguished drop-outs from what Robert Hughes derisorily referred to as the University of Southern Paranoia in his *Shock of the New*.

All art, as well as every historical period, is unavoidably caught up in the throes of its own imminent death, chaperoned by cultural theorists and aestheticians sifting through the ashes of its pyre in search of dead media. Which brings me to the *Carousel*. *Carousel* is a two-channel audio-visual lecture performance from 2011 by Dan and Dom Angeloro, otherwise known as *Soda_Jerk*. From their earliest work, such as their ongoing *Dark Matter* series from 2009, to *Pixel Pirates II* of 2011, they explore the anachronistic time-bending nature of media and its capacity to endlessly re-animate the dead, that which is in extremis and redundant. From persistence of vision technologies such as the nineteenth century zoetrope, to the latest gadget from the Kodak company in the 1960s, to side show titillation rides on the midway of hokey carnivals, as well as sci-fi cinema such as Michael Anderson’s 1976 *Logan’s Run*, the implicit semantics of sustaining life after death has driven the Madison Avenue ad-man zeal they appropriate to continually “make it new”. And a quick aside on that phrase let’s get hip once and for all: Ezra Pound didn’t invent it as a rallying catchcry for
modernism at the start of last century, an illusion that sustained its currency for years as a hot rod burnout worthy of the Futurists. Rather, Pound pinched it from an 18th century Shang Dynasty king, Ch’eng T’ang, so he could make it new. And contrary to its historical misreading of a call to arms in the name of revolution and novelty in the arts, it was about revitalising the dead and reanimating the purulent into a temporary half-life.

From Soda_Jerk’s work more generally we learn that we can’t talk of media art meaningfully any more since art has already traversed that vocabulary; certainly not in the spectacular manner of some kind of archaeological moment of “new media” during the 1990s, as if it really was like the invention of the printing press or the alphabet. Art, no less than history, manners, taste, fashion or iPhones, simply goes around and around, around and around like a carousel, tantalizing us with glimpses of the familiar and the unfamiliar in a danse macabre of apparent life emerging fleetingly out of a gore fest of death. The new is always already, and can only ever be, titillation in the face of imminent decline and fall, like tongue kissing during mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The tenuous and fragile membrane between animus and thanatos, between life and the death drive, is implicit in any medium and its tenuous relationship to being contemporary, to duration, history and eventual oblivion in the virtual waiting room of the dead. And resuscitation is never guaranteed. With a nod to Bruce Sterling and his ongoing Dead Media Project, think of the carrier pigeon, the teleharmonium or the pneumatic transfer tube that not so long ago was something to behold when you trekked from the northern suburbs to Dimmeys in Richmond.
In *The Carousel* Soda_Jerk inventively explore this historical discontinuity of life, death and rebirth. Detailing films such as *Logan’s Run, Queen of the Damned, The Crow, Game of Death* and many others, they tease out their shared diegetic grammar in relation to the contemporary cinematic apparatus, as well as the capacity of optical illusion to fool the eye in order to see the reanimation of the dead. Sorry to say guys but those famous animated birds on a swing died years ago and went the way of the zoetrope. I have heard more than one cinephile refer to still images and painting as nothing more than dead animation (one of whom may be in attendance today). And it is this rupture between animus and thanatos, the life and death drives, that Soda_Jerk explore in *The Carousel*. The Carousel, a circular technology for rotating slides patented in 1962 by the Eastman Kodak company, was designed to present still images in sequence, rather like looking at each individual frame in a strip of film. Automated to hold each slide in place for detailed consideration, its mechanics also allowed for brisk movement between slides that suggested the rhythms of stop motion animation. In the history of media archaeology its likeness to the 19th century zoetrope has not gone unnoticed, one instance among many of the remediation of an older technology by a new one. This foundation moment of patenting life in death is riffed in a 2007 episode of *Mad Men* called “The Wheel”, in which Madison Avenue advertising executive Don Draper is pitching a new product to executives at Sterling, Cooper & Partners sometime in the early 1960s.

[CLIP]

Consistent with the slick, fast talking retro-televisual-nostalgia genre, this sequence rehearses and remakes a key historical moment of innovation. But it
also ossifies the mortuary life of Heath Ledger, capturing it for eternity as pixels, binary code and even celluloid in its retro idiom. As with the carousel of *Logan’s Run*, the carousel in which Ledger and Abbie Cornish frolic in the 2006 film *Candy* resembles the spinning of a zoetrope. Reminiscent too of a circle Dante’s Hell peopled by martyrs, it is one stage of their journey in terms of the film’s mystery play motif, in which they traverse Heaven, Earth and Hell.

As the title of this rant suggests, the proximity of death and pleasure is haunted by distraction, the sinking feeling that it may end at any moment. That’s why television, cinema and computer games are still hanging around. They ain’t ready to give up the ghost… just yet. Perhaps some time in the future whatever succeeds Twitter will be going haywire, cheerleading a socially networked, crowd-sourced art installation of CDROM cover art of the 1990s in a burnt out warehouse in Footscray. And just pause for a second to think of the regret you would feel remembering that your own archive, once auricular like the plinth from Kubrick’s *2001*, is mouldering under decades of crap at Reservoir tip. I can only leave you with the hope that on some future trip to the Darebin Recovery Centre at that very facility you will find a copy of *Leisure Suit Larry* that you had given up hope of ever seeing again.