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Paradise Lost or Utopia regained?

Darren Tofts

The American literary critic Northrop Frye described utopia as a “speculative myth”, a concept that is visionary rather than grounded in the realities and realpolitik of social facts. It is designed to enable speculation upon what might or could be, under specific conditions. It is a myth in that it could never be real. Thomas More’s 16th century text that introduced the word utopia into the English language was an allegory for thinking about the Golden Age of the Tudor monarchy, a political commentary on its power and sovereignty on the cusp of discovering and conquering the New World. Like its Other, paradise, utopia bespeaks an ideal state of desire that may never be achieved, a projection of how we would like things to be. I’m afraid, though, that my gloss on it today leans more towards its ambiguous and less positive connotations of no place and nowhere, that which can be imagined but not seen or realised. For a couple of years now I have found myself reflecting that media art was, in fact, a speculative myth. In increasingly frequent moments of disquietude I would pinch myself to try and snap out of a delirium in which I was convinced that media art had never been; a confused, disorienting sensation much like those weird moments when we are not sure if we are awake or still dreaming.

For some time I took solace in reflecting that my lugubrious state of mind to do with the disappearance of media arts from the cultural landscape was isolated, was my
problem, the symptom of a bad attitude. Perhaps, like those hapless mariners who sailed into uncharted waters and failed to find utopia, I was looking in the wrong places for it, or not looking hard enough. Hence the optimism with which I anticipated the Re:Live 09 Media Art Histories conference in Melbourne last November. Surely here my fears would be assuaged, surely I would regain my confidence in the reality of this elusive thing called media art. Now as any student of rhetoric will tell you, more than one use of the adverbial entreaty “surely” spells trouble. Far from being reassured my fears were in fact accelerated when I participated in the Leonardo Education Forum, which preceded Re:Live. Now the Leonardo Education forum is, of course, a touring think tank associated with high profile, signature conferences to do with the techno and media arts, such as Ars Electronic and ISEA. Surely here Paradise would be regained. To my dismay, however, prominent media art historians and theorists, among them Oliver Grau and Ross Harley, spoke in very concerned tones about the need to integrate media arts into culture, the need to ensure that it finds its place—note the future perfect tense. They too seemed to be looking, searching for something that was nowhere.

Evidence given at this event for this conspicuous invisibility—and you will have to indulge this apparent oxymoron, since ambivalence is what defines utopian conditions, its Latin roots blurring the notion of ideal place and no place—was the international struggle facing media arts to be exhibited in mainstream art institutions. Indeed, the general feeling among participants in the forum was that media art had not yet arrived on to the international scene as a vital and
conspicuous branch of contemporary art. *Had not yet arrived.* At the end of my 2005 book *Interzone* I had gone on the record saying that media art was indeed in the process of consolidating its cultural as much as conceptual place in contemporary culture. And yet here, barely four years later, my colleagues were in fact reinforcing the miserable conclusion I had already reached myself since publishing *Interzone.* Trying to remain optimistic, I found myself, like previous navigators in search of ideal states, turning to deconstruction for solace. The struggle for presence, like arrival at a distant port, is always imminent, perpetually in transit, what Derrida refers to as *l'avenir,* that which is to come. What else but the sensation of imminence, the promise of that which is to come, sustained all the Renaissance explorers who never actually made it to the new world, yet died in the knowledge that it was somewhere, or rather elsewhere, to be found at another time, a potentially impossible time?

But rhetorical thought experiments aside, I was clearly not alone in my fears. A common theme emerged throughout the day’s deliberations and it centred on the need for an integrated network of media art practitioners, scholars, critics, historians, as well as curatorial and funding organizations. This need for a network, I now realize, was a yearning for paradise lost. This yearning amounted to a complex rhythm of feeling to do with the spectacular emergence of media arts at the end of the twentieth century and the falling away of its presence in the world; a feeling encapsulated in Oliver Grau’s assertion that it was no longer “self-evident that media art needs histories and archives”. In other words, it has to be justified,
explained and treated as a special case: like video art before it, it was the embarrassing idiot child of contemporary art that is kept forever out of public sight. Indeed, as Sebastian Smee observed of the future of media art in his review of *Interzone* in The Australian, “few people, apart from a few dedicated insiders, are going to care about much of it in a few years”. Oliver Grau argued that despite the fact that, in his mind, media art is “the art of our time”, we “still need” to integrate it into culture. This was reinforced by Ross Harley who characterized media art as a cultural “outsider”.

In another renaissance gesture to re-capture utopia, Paul Thomas spoke of the Australian-focussed NOMAD (National Organisation of Media Arts) and MASS (Media Arts Scoping Study) as responsive initiatives to the shared feeling of a loss of momentum and consolidated international engagement with respect to media art and media art histories— two important projects that I urge everyone here to support. As I reflected on what I had encountered at this event I must admit to feeling ambivalent, since I had constructed myself as the gatecrasher coming to spoil the party, to relay the bad news that media art was lost at sea. And I was not scheduled to speak for another two days. But the concerns of Grau and Harley did reassure me that I was not imagining things, that others had also noticed that something was awry in the world of media art culture.

Now remember, this dismal state of affairs was discussed prior to the actual commencement of the Re:Live conference, before the first words of a single paper
had even been uttered. And I thought I was going to be the voice of doom and
gloom. In my paper, which bore the unashamedly apocalyptic title “Writing media
art into (and out of) history”, I wanted to ask some tough questions of my media arts
colleagues, such as why the conditions of an emerging media arts culture in the
1990s had lost momentum and why, ultimately, the very notion of media arts had
become annexed as a minor moment in the history of the moving image. As
serendipity would have it, this paper uncannily forecast the deliberately provocative
theme of today’s forum, oscillating between the infectious enthusiasm and embrace
of the spectacular emergence of the new media arts of the 1990s and bemoaning its
decline into insignificance in the first decade of the new century. In the paper I
postulated five theses to explain this decline, two of which I shall reprise here, since
I think they go some way to explaining the climatic and climactic changes that have
impacted on media arts culture over the last twenty years:

Interactive fatigue
The first decisive feature of the emerging language of new media art, the point and
click interface, coincided with the emergence of the internet. Accordingly, the
surprising novelty of a new kind of agency in and aesthetically focused involvement
with screen-based art was rivaled by a more pervasive, utilitarian literacy aimed at
browsing, surfing and searching an equally new and globally significant
phenomenon: a World Wide Web no less. In other words, the distinctive cognitive
and imaginative force of interaction as an art concept was, after Marcel Duchamp,
that it was “definitely unfinished”. Pragmatic interactivity, such as trawling for
porn or topping up online TAB accounts, was habitual, repetitive and definitively finished (hence the relegation in IT-speak of any curiosity associated with dynamic screen-based media to “functionality”). It was becoming an ambient literacy to be used for purposes other than engaging with a distinctive form of media art. The attraction of interacting with net art, for instance, was aesthetically motivated, rather than instrumental or pragmatic. It was precisely its purposelessness that made it aesthetic, its grounding in an action that didn’t require a justification beyond itself. It was intransitive, a verbal activity of drama, curiosity and fascination that did not have to take an object. We look at a painting differently from the way we gaze upon a train timetable. Similarly, when I navigate an online hypertext fiction it does not have to be resolved against my encounter with an online news service. Yet I use the same ensemble of technologies for both purposes and in this the uniqueness of a specific means of relating to art, known as interactivity, was resolved into a broader techno-literacy, a vernacular competence akin to reading, writing and arithmetic.

Mobility

The global ecology of mobile telephony has détourned our prehensile dexterity acquired at the computer keyboard into the intimate realm of personalised gadgetry. A weird form of second nature has emerged. The interactive paradigm was premised on a form of agency in which you, the user, became an actor in a virtual world of expanding possibilities. As writers such as Brenda Laurel have eloquently explained, such agency heightened, rather than departed from, our
sensation of being transported elsewhere; or, in the spirit of utopia and with thanks to Talking Heads, on a road to nowhere. It enabled our sensation of immersion in imaginary spaces as well as the ability to affect outcomes within them. Mobile media, on the contrary, do not foster productive agency but rather banal urgency, the need to be in contact for no reason whatsoever. This equates to a crushing here and nowness, the fetish of which is a perpetual presence with others simply because we can. Many of you here, I’m quite sure, have overheard, without your consent, phone conversations on public transport that attest to this imperative of banal urgency and perpetual presence because we can can can! You don’t have to devote much thought to deciphering the interrogative alchemy responsible for “Not much”, or “I’m on the train”. And of course, mobile media also contribute to an equally pervasive sense of onanism and isolation, extending Eric Havelock’s concept of Renaissance possessive individualism and the “silent revolution” begun with the advent of writing and the downward gaze. The quiescence you see as people stand mute in public places or in the privacy of their own homes is not associated with prayer or other forms of transcendental experience. Nor is it a cipher of aesthetic experience. The expanding universe of “apps” for mobile media continues to multiply the availability of stuff, of things to simply do at any time of the day. Personalized, customized and increasingly solipsistic, app-culture realizes the kind of “anything instantly” commodity fetish that Ted Nelson forecast in the 1960s when he was developing his proto World Wide Web, otherwise known as Project Xanadu. Another of Nelson’s slogans was, presciently, “the world of you”. Now I ask you in
all seriousness, how can an emerging media artist possibly compete with iFart Mobile?

From a media theory point of view, interactive fatigue and mobility are technosocial developments that have inflected and contoured culture in intimate and indelible ways. From a digital poetics perspective it could be argued, as I have certainly intimated here, that they have distracted our collective attention away from an emergent practice based around screen-based interactivity, effectively detouring the conceptual and tactile habits associated with such art into more prosaic and ultimately banal pursuits. But with all lost horizons there is always hope. And that hope, of course, is to be found in the work of artists such as those assembled here for this discussion. Artists who continue to develop, mutate and otherwise experiment with the languages of media art, taking them into uncharted depths in which strange and unrecognisable shapes, forms and modes of interaction can be found. And, of course, the weirder the better.

I’d like to conclude by reading a short extract from a letter written by one of Henry the Eighth’s intrepid explorers from Seville in 1527. It crystallizes for me the incredible sense of wonder in the discovery of the new world and its bounty, its exotic otherness and sparkling novelty. But ultimately it reveals the drive and fascination of any human foray into imaginary, speculative or unfamiliar territory that I still encounter in media art today, wherever I can find it. It is, ultimately, a dogged refusal to accept that paradise is lost and utopia can never be regained:
It is a general opinion of cosmographers, that passing the seventh clime, the sea is all ice, and the cold so great that none can suffer it. And hitherto they all had the same opinion, that under the equinoctial line for much heat the land was uninhabitable. Yet since (by experience is proved) no land so much habitable nor more temperate. And to conclude, I think the same should be found under the north, if it were experimented. So I judge, there is no land uninhabitable, nor sea innavigable.¹