‘Nameless things and thingless names’
A review of the *Byte Me Forum*
Bendigo Art Gallery, Saturday 24 July 1999.

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During question time at the *Byte Me Forum*, a slightly peeved audience member charged the panel with ‘trying to communicate the uncommunicable’. Prosaic and a tad pejorative though her comment certainly was, there was also something of the sublime in her accusation: ‘Presenting the Unpresentable’ is how the French philosopher Jean-Françios Lyotard describes the sublimity of the *avant-garde*. For him, the beautiful art object is staid, reactionary and stultifying. Sublime aesthetics, on the other hand, offer the chance for a radical social critique.

It has, of course, become commonplace to define the interface between humans and technology as sublime. Where once contemplation of mountain ranges, canyons and precipices inspired the Burkean ‘delightful horror’; now it’s the unfathomable complexity of electronically mediated global financial markets or the advances in genetic engineering and biotechnological practice that inspire awe. Where ancient formulations of the sublime saw it as a function of rhetoric (one is ecstatic at the orator’s eloquence), contemporary theories reconfigure it as a celebration of the indeterminacy of language (one goes gaga for just the opposite reason).

Of these different historical versions of the sublime, what animates this century’s imagination is that heady conflation of the organic and mechanic. Refer to the hyperbolic sound bytes of Kroker and Baudrillard; quote something about cars and speed from The Italian Futurists (‘the intoxication of great speeds in cars is the joy of feeling oneself fused with the only divinity’); and *voila* ‘the technological sublime’. Or, as a recent book about ‘post-human pragmatism’ expresses it, ‘the permanent whines of its ferro-concrete intestines sets our ears bleeding as it ingests new fuels - old products. Sticky organs mesh indiscriminately with scrapyard debris, forming ephemeral syntaxes of hybrid cyber-circulation’. You get the idea.

Thankfully, most of the participants in the *Byte Me* forum and exhibition showed a little more critical decorum. Their discussions and art works, nevertheless, were informed by notions of the sublime as a problematic of representation. Exploring the gap between what is perceived and what is articulated and evaluating the transcendental dimensions of cyberculture informed much of the work of these practitioners. Curated by Anonda Bell, this event brought together a range of writers, artists and cultural commentators to ‘critique technology with media made possible by it’ as Bell put it. And one of the key concerns for the forum was what to call this new (ish) aesthetic. Darren Tofts, for example, began the forum by defining this business as ‘intermedia’. Replacing the somewhat tired and altogether amorphous ‘multimedia’ or the perpetual youth of ‘new media’, Tofts’ definition raises ideas of hybridity, the ‘bringing together of the eclectic and diverse’ and indicates a strange, indeterminate temporal frame that somehow escapes the binary of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media. As Kevin Murray observed, the language we use to describe these practices is neither stable nor particularly familiar, owing more to the vernacular of biology than the language of fine art. Intermedia, Tofts suggested

is always concerned with strangeness. It's not enough to bang on - whether exalted or enfeebled - about the convergence of flesh and machine. Rather, one has to defamiliarise those terms. It ought to be recognised that the current internalisation of technology has its historical precursors. The 'introduction of writing into oral cultures', as he suggested, 'was alarmingly high-tech and brought with it the same connotations we associate with the introduction of the computer'. Digital artist Peter Hennessey, on the other hand, plumped for the term 'new media art' but used it to discuss what he sees as 'the discourse of authenticity' - a pox on both old and new art houses. For Hennessey, 'poor gangly pimple-faced new media art' was born a teenager. Trapped in adolescence, it displays an obsession with and fear of self-identity. And these anxieties are expressed as a preoccupation with formal limits and generic constraints. When the authenticity of new media art is challenged, he argues, you get 'techno-formalism', where 'the work takes as its subject that which could be said to be its nature: wires, pixels, and the computer'.

The evolutionary path of 'new media art' was also the subject of Jon McCormack's paper and his exhibition installation. McCormack's work in *Byte Me* explores the role of natural history museums in popular culture to critique the relation between natural and technological life forms. There's something compelling about the peculiar and quite contradictory combination of representational modes in the museum diorama: I'm sure that gorilla's eyes are following me; hey, this button makes his mouth open, wow, what's that fur made of do you think? Faked nature, natural simulacra and hyperreal biology, the museum exhibition is an intriguing vision of technologically augmented naturally occurring phenomena. McCormack's installation, ***Universal Zoologies*** was a beautifully executed dramatisation of these themes. Occupying a large darkened space of the gallery, it operated as a 'parody of the museum diorama'. Instead of watching the simulated behaviour and habitats of animals, it was humans being put on show. Well almost human. Up there on a huge screen were two digital specimens who communicated with one another in series of randomly generated conversational fragments: 'I think I may be lost' says one. 'There is something wrong with your lens' is the interlocutor's reply. The presence and movement of the viewer, McCormack explained, triggers these actions. Suspended from the ceiling were several receptors that translated the movement of the spectator into digital screen action. Just as impressive, but in the low-tech old analog manner, was the way that one's shadow became part of the exhibition and a third member of this robotic group. That fusion - of wetware and software - is a sublime dream. As a number of cybercultural commentators have argued (most recently, Margaret Wertheim's *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*), this dream is one of transcendence and salvation where the flesh is forgotten and the immaterial self is elevated to a dimension of divinity, boundlessness and immortality: 'the matrix' and 'datasphere', for example.

Or ***Autosphere***. That's artist Patricia Piccinini's installation and there was a fair amount of technological yearning expressed therein. In fact, Piccinini's forum contribution and exhibition piece encapsulated the main themes of the event, albeit in a slightly problematic fashion. For Piccinini, the 'shining biomorphic surfaces of automotive forms' are 'profoundly symbolic and deeply moving'. Part of her installation was a collection of big, shiny, red objects - 'car nuggets' as she called them. 'Car nuggets are to cars what chicken nuggets are to chickens': all surface and appearance, fake and impure. Lovely they were too, very tactile and their blood-like ducos were almost visceral. Framing the sensuous splendour was a 'Don't Touch' sign;

installed by gallery not artist. About this incongruity, Anonda Bell observed insightfully that it created a tension between consumer desire and its denial. A desire for the fake and the virtual informs Piccinini's work and for her, the 'discourse of authenticity' is something to supersede. During question time, for example, she startled the audience a little with her claim not to have made any of the exhibits herself. The original idea was hers but, in a Jeff Koonsian manner, it was executed by others. Now, as it stands this is not a problem. Art history has plenty of precedents for this practice. But even Marcel Duchamp, (an obvious precursor) managed to acknowledge his plumber friend and almost by name. Piccinni, meanwhile, seemed a bit short on information about her assistant artisan, beyond their status as 'some panel beater'.

Nevertheless, her comments provoked much lively debate about the pomo rhetorics of ownership and appropriation. And part of that debate included the aforementioned sublime participant. Her accusations also elicited interesting discussion from the panel. Kevin Murray pointed out that sometimes the purpose of art is ***not*** to communicate and Darren Tofts referred to the work of Samuel Beckett. Quoting from the end of the novel *Watt*, Tofts answered that 'no symbols where none intended' might be an appropriate response to the charge of obscurantism. And I'd suggest another Beckettian *bon mot*, that seems an apt epigraph for a forum about representation, language and the technological sublime: 'there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names'.

References:

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