K-Rad Man: the reanimation of Ian Haig

By Darren Tofts

Kool It (Here Comes the Fuzz)

Imagine you are not reading an essay but watching and listening to a cartoon. A cartoon that fuses the visual styles of Tex Avery and Osamu Tezuka, with voice characterizations by Robert Plant and Michael Rennie, the music of the Aphex Twins and sound design by Davie Allen. It's fast, funky and doesn't let up. It tells a story of aberration and otherworldliness, freaks and fucked up weirdos. A story of creatures not of this earth, of mutated flesh and bizarre machines, of aliens and ectoplasmic splatter. After the opening credits and music ("Come to Daddy" cuts through chunky Shaft-like titles) a toy robot fidgets from side to side, its arms flailing in robotic, asynchronous panic (like the robot in Lost in Space). The colours are striking and assail the eye: metallic blues, bold reds, alarming yellows. Its robotic eyes suddenly burst out from their sockets in the fashion of a hydrocephalic Bugs Bunny(1). The whole scene morphs as the robot turns inside out, mutating into a book, the pages of which implode in a carnival of electricity, fuzz guitar and a mantra based around the number twenty-five(2). A snarling and salivating mouth speaks to us: "My work looks at notions of the monster, manifested through the cultural effects of technology. I'm also interested in devolution, technological dystopia, retro-futurism, Frankenstein and the grotesque".

Let's pause the tape here for a moment. This scene tells us a lot about the cartoon's creator. These are pretty full-on themes and any poetics of the monstrous runs the risk of being too serious for its own good and waterlogged with too much cultural theory. One of the great pleasures of Ian Haig's work is its playfulness, its sense of fun, its humorous and inventive exploration of the myriad themes seeping from the human interface with technology. Questions concerning what it means to be human are undoubtedly on the mind of anyone bothered by the speed with which we are taking the cybernetic turn. It no longer seems to be sufficient for humans to simply use technology, such as the computer network; we desire (beWithData) of it, producing what philosophers Deleuze and Guattari have called a "machinic assemblage". In his own way, Haig is exploring similar questions to the theorists of hybridity and his work represents a satiric engagement with the coming together of humans and machines in the techo-prometheum "body without organs". As well, Haig's sense of the absurd prompts him to identify with the strangeness of this coupling. His work is a kind of danse macabre of the otherworldly (the spectral, the alien, the viral, the mutation), the unforeseen issue that threatens to intrude into the world as we sing the body machinic.

The idea of technology as a perversion of the human is explicitly and literally explored in Super Human Factory Online (1999), a video piece with sound design by Philip Samartzis. In this work Haig explores the bizarre culture of Japanese sex museums and their exploration of technological breeding programs as the future of the evolution of the species. The idea of host bodies ("sexual bio pods") being
artificially inseminated, gestated and mutated by a team of "sexual co-workers" is a monstrous scenario. Haig's notes from this bio-industrial underground, though, are hysterical. He cleverly juxtaposes the grizzly machinery of artificial insemination with the way-out coiffure and ultra-modern clothing of the sexual co-workers, and the retro, "state of the art" computer banks of the super human factory. The whole thing looks like a bad re-make of Space 1999 directed by Ken Russell and Russ Meyer.

This broad technocultural scene is a dominant theme in the work of intermedia artists. The "becoming machinic" or the rise of the cyborg is treated with a mixture of ecstasy, dystopia, dread and quizzical uncertainty. What is particularly noticeable in the development of a "new media" art practice is a fetishistic over-identification with the computer as a medium (in the artistic sense of a device or tool with which something can be made). This is to be expected, since the intervention of any new techne into arts practices occasions a kind of probationary phase, a period of trying out and seeing what can be done with the technology. This is the craft stage of an emerging practice, when technological novelty overwhelms and subsumes creativity, when the various and multiple functions of digital rendering and manipulation are foregrounded, unwittingly or otherwise, as the dominant features of a work. Foregrounding eventually (hopefully) succumbs to technological foreshortening, as practitioners working in the new medium, having mastered its techniques, are less preoccupied with what the technology can do and become more interested in exploring what they can do with the technology. Ian Haig is a perfect example of an artist who has traversed this complex process and produced a body of work that can stand on its own three feet as art, regardless of the fact that computers played a part in its making.

What's New Pussycat?

Haig's sense of the way forward for intermedia arts practice is determinedly retrospective. This is a central and vital component of Haig's poetics. For him the real power of the computer as a medium is its recombinant flexibility, its ability to synthesize and remediate other media. I am using the term remediation in the sense that Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin have defined it in their book Remediation; that is, the strategies by which a particular medium draws on and incorporates other media. As an extension of this it is appropriate to think of Haig as a reanimator since, for him, any medium he works with is always already bound up with other media. Haig's aesthetic sensibility has been formed over two decades by a passionate immersion in and embrace of all manner of pre-digital media forms, from rock 'n roll and B-grade movie soundtracks, anime and manga, mainstream and underground cartoons, to '50s sci-fi, weirdo comics, slasher films and graphic violence. As well as a practising graphic artist and illustrator, Haig has also performed with a number of music groups (Cut Slash Kill, Ultra Vibe), including the noise group Sociocusis. He has also collaborated on many projects using different media with Philip Brophy, Maria Kozic, Philip Samartzis and Martine Corompt.

There is a very strong sense in his work that nothing is, per se, intrinsic to the computer in terms of its visual and sonic style: everything is up for grabs and there's a lot of media around to work with. As a curator Haig is also committed to fostering an awareness of the importance of thinking of new media arts practice as an act of remediation. As part of the 1998 Melbourne International Film Festival, Haig, with Martine Corompt, curated Mousetrap, the (marginalised) new media arts component of the festival. Haig made a number of observations concerning the current state of digital screen arts that can be taken as the discursive expression of his retrospective aesthetic:
... something strange has happened to the popular aesthetics of commercial digital media – it no longer looks like the future. Instead it now depicts a kind of nostalgic longing for potentially obsolete analogue materials, such as over exposed film-stock, yellowed paper and photographic grain. In a whirlwind history of computer mediated graphics we have gone from the brave flying-chromium frontier-land to a Microsoft la la land of soft focus and gliding poetic text. Gone are the days of computer graphics endorsing pristine surfaces, and uncharted algorithms, we now pine for an aesthetic that looks almost secondhand, tactile, decayed and disordered – as if its been touched also by the hand, rather than only by the mouse (Haig, Mousetrap exhibition catalogue, 1998).

In his notes for the Screening Program, identified the act of re-animation as a distinctive feature of digital screen culture, noting how many of the works in the program "employ digital tools to fuse together cell animation, live action, comics, stop motion animation and found imagery". For Haig the poetics of reanimation produces "new hybrid forms of animation, which would not have been possible previously".

In rejecting the slickness and three-dimensionality too readily associated with new media arts, Haig privileges flatness, fuzz, the rough edge, the hand-drawn. Low tech and the outmoded are, in Haig's hands, the signatures of funk, the beat of satire. He re-invigorates the sonic qualities of the medium by sampling the hokey, "computerized" beeps and boings of 80s Atari and Sega systems (3). Haig has on and off continued to use an Amiga 500 which, in terms of the nano-second shelf life of computers, would certainly be classified as a dead medium. As an artist with a retrospective on media arts culture (rather than a perspective), Haig has to have the right gear.

Haig reminds us in a number of his works that the not so distant ancestry of interactives is to be found in video arcade games (4), which are far from contemplative and seduce us along vectors of feeling that have less to do with the lure of technology than with competitiveness and agro. Haig's most conspicuously referential work in this respect is his 1992 interactive/installation Hack. In this work the computer assemblage is constructed to resemble the kind of fortune telling booth that once upon a time in America could be found at carnivals and fairgrounds. The user interaction with Hack is designed along the lines of an analogy with the computer hacker's search for data within a CNS (central network system). Faced with a grotesquerie of freakish heads, the user must find the code to reveal the concealed CNS (in this case brain or central nervous system). Subtitled "Interactive Mutant", Hack allows you to relish in the spectacle of mangled and distorted flesh, of extruded heads crammed with mechanical gadgetry and industrial detritus.

Haig's finely tuned sense of the ironic continues to inform his most recent work. A current work in progress is his Anti-ergonomic Hump Machine, which he describes as "an installation designed to produce bad posture and humps in the backs of its users with continual use". The idea of an "alternative orthopaedic device" that guarantees bad posture, deformity, curvature of the spine and poor circulation, is a poetic extension of Haig's prevailing interest in the impact of technology on the body. The ergonomics of the body are an integral part of the human-computer interface, a fact not lost on 1980s designers of "correct posture" ergonomic computer chairs. Haig's contortion of these sensible chairs into something resembling bonzai wiring for the body, metaphorically explores the devolutionary rather than progressive outcome of our decidedly sedentary relationship with computer technology. As Haig suggests in
his working notes for this project, "the adverse effects of computers on the body can be seen as desirable body modifications for the user to try to attain".

Haig's work is immediately identifiable and memorable for its impact and bristling, static-charged energy. His distinctive aesthetic of jagged action and buzzing alarm is a signature style highly sought after by publishers. In the 1990s Haig was a regular contributor to the pages of 21C magazine (5) and produced one of its most astonishing covers: a hot pink cybernetic elf high on psychedelics and cyberspace. His highly charged and angular visual style is rendered vivid by a texta-colour chiaroscuro that looks like its been applied by hand at the height of a red cordial binge. The same is true of his interactive and video work. K-Rad Man (1991-1992) is a brilliant animation notable for its exaggerated, dithering style and its crazy, though prescient narrative of a demented computer scientist exploring the outer limits of the human-computer interface. Experimenting with the fusion of a computer virus and a selected human subject (K-Rad Man), the hyped-up nutty professor dispatches a computer disk (by post, of course) that makes K-Rad Man's computer go troppo. Pulling the plug and dynamite won't stop the downloading of virus X-1K4, which eventually manifests itself as a holographic entity in the middle of K-Rad Man's lounge room. Typical of Haig's satiric vision, the virus has a mind of its own and is more interested in television than digital-molecular integration. Succumbing to the pleasures of popular culture, it uploads itself as broadcast data and drives off into the sunset in the kind of luxury car "as seen on TV".

Haig's most recent work continues to explore the parameters of the human-machine interface, vectors which represent a broader interest in the technologized body. Haig's current, _The Excelsior 3000: Interactive Super Toilets_, will be without doubt his most elaborate, large-scale installation. Your friendly toilet attendant (no tipping, please!) will direct you to your seat:

_The Excelsior 3000 will be a series of interactive video/sound installations which are based on the design and function of state of the art toilets currently used throughout Japan and will perversely play with one of the more basic concepts of everyday technology which our bodies engage with... The exhibition will see the construction of three large scale futuristic toilet installations or prototypes, resembling all purpose custom built media stations, more so than everyday toilets._

Toilets are without question technologies, in the strict Heideggerian sense of a device that enables, reveals, brings forth. But Haig is correct in reminding us that they are also media, an extension of the body (in this case the bowl and digestive system). Toilet technology is one of the great unsung watersheds in the history of the becoming machinic (certainly one that Donna Haraway seems to have missed). Are we cyborgs when sitting on the can? You better believe it.

The problem is, it has become too familiar. _The Excelsior 3000_ project will surely enable us to see clearly what we take for granted on a daily basis. It will also offer a vision of the future of toilet technology as it interfaces with the interactive media station, also, increasingly, an everyday, "invisible" site of techno-human interaction ("The video sequences will depict different naturalistic scenes along with videos to aid the digestion and assist bowel movements"). We forget that computers have made us more sedentary than at any other time in human history. That can't be good for the digestion. _The Excelsior 3000_ offers the prototype of a "new, modified, interactive toilet technology to possibly assist in the proper functioning of the technology of our changing bodies" (Haig, 2000, working notes for _Excelsior 3000_..."
The body in transformation is clearly a dominant theme in Haig's work. His most recent work is, in a very intimate way, generated out of a personal experience of the technologized body. Twelve months ago, during a trip to Mexico City, Haig took on board a hitchhiker, a *blastocystis hominis* intestinal parasite. Popular wisdom has it that in return for the ride the hitchhiker should leave their host with something that adds to their store of experience. In Haig's case it has been a lot of time spent in toilets; well, actually, a lot more time spent in toilets. Hence the motivation for *The Excellisor 3000 Interactive Super Toilets* project. In this sense, this is his most autographical work, a writing of his own modified, mutated body (the work is, appropriately, dedicated to the Mexico City water supply, colonoscopies, gastro-endoscopies, irritable bowel syndrome and lactose intolerant diets).

**Homer Is Still Waiting for His Tab...**

It is easy to take computers for granted. They have become so ubiquitous in daily life and, arguably, our use of them has been concretized into second nature. Ian Haig is an artist who continues to defamiliarize the technology of the computer. He consistently questions those default attitudes to new media arts that have quickly become orthodoxies. His work is, by his own admission, a reaction to and rejection of "the contemplative and seductive aspects of the computer art, interactive medium". In this Haig is arguably the first satirist of the intermedia arts. Haig has an impressive CV both internationally and within Australia. As a reanimator he has been exhibiting work since the early '90s, work that has been recognized with numerous national and international awards. As a reanimator, Haig has successfully synthesized into his practice his rich and varied background in film and video production, graphic design and music. In this he is an exemplary new media or, more accurately, intermedia artist.

Haig seeks out those features of computer animation and interaction that have become stylized, predictable and hackneyed through over-use. *In Trick or Treat*, a 1997 collaborative work with Martine Corompt and Philip Samartzis, Haig parodied the imperative of interaction with computer-based work by creating an ambient space that requires no interaction, in the usual sense that we associate with digital art. *Trick or Treat* is an installation combining a matrix of vaguely anthropomorphistic, munchkin-like forms created by Corompt, which are linked by a linelike to three foreboding progenitors. Samartzis' "granular soundscape" suggests an otherworldly language of communication within this strange brood, an ongoing ambience of process and animate gurgles. Emanating from the parental sentinels are Haig's Munch-like ghouls, which are projected on to walls and spectators alike. The entire space, then, is suggestive of technological process and digital imaging, yet there is absolutely no imperative to be interactive. It is more of a haunting or manifestation, an immersive experience in which captivation, the lure of the spectral, the paranormal and the phantasmagoric, prompts an active, imaginative involvement in the space, rather than interaction with it. It is also an iconic example of his interest in reanimation as an exploration of the links between media, animation and anthropomorphism, with its echoes of nineteenth century automata, magic lanterns and ghost shows. The idea of a medium, in this sense, has a resonant double meaning that the installation cleverly exploits in its exploration of the imaging of technology in human terms.

He will also draw attention to these features through exaggeration. *Web Devolution* (1998) is Haig's most ambitious work to date and certainly his most direct assault on
the cultural effects of the human will to be webmasters of the universe. The work is concerned with, in Haig's words, "digital evangelism and fanaticism". It appropriates the platitudes, patois and overall re-bop of the various techno-sages (Wired, Nicholas Negroponte) that would have us believe that the world wide web is not only our home away from home, but our future home. It also pastiches the DIY, homespun culture of web authoring, where hokey html and talismanic mentors of one's anti-social, sci-fi over-identified choice (Chewbacca, Darth Vader) reveal how the web has attracted all manner of hermetic introverts. And cults. The web has become a veritable recruitment platform for all manner of kooks and ranters. Where else, but on the web, would the Heaven's Gate cult's "earth exit" statement be listed as "Cool and No.1"? (Imagine what Jim Jones would have done with the web). Haig's intuition and skill as a reanimator is superbly exhibited in the extraordinary presentation of Web Devolution. A brilliant visual pun, the plinth that houses the interface is plonked in a shopping trolley; in the digital age, home is anywhere you want it to be. A more cynical take on William Gibson's cyberpunk credo, "The street finds its own use for things", this monstrosity is adorned with found objects at which even Duchamp would have turned up his nose. It is a veritable cornucopia of suburbananity, from megaphones, bulls horns, Trekie tokenism, CB radios, and heavy-metal mania. Like the Jesus freak that preceded them, the web evangelist is, according to Haig's accompanying notes to Web Devolution, "a new kind of social misfit", a "technological fanatic" who has seen every episode of Dr Who and is word perfect when it comes to Quatermass and the Pit.

Distortion is also an important defamiliarizing strategy. Mighty Morphing Muscle Men consists of a series of A1 Iris prints, depicting aggressively tumescent, musculatured bodies (exhibited at the "Nothing Natural" group exhibition in 1996). For Haig there is certainly nothing natural about the developed body. Body culture is a recurring theme among intermedia artists. In Haig's hands, the subject is taken to extreme levels of absurdity and comic monstrosity. There are as many layers of irony as there are accretions of muscle in these buzz cola beefcakes. The emphasis on the grotesque body in Haig's work is part of his overall interest in the trans-human, the evolutionary mutations of the becoming machinic, the culture of the cyborg. However Haig's particular angle on this process is not progressive but regressive; he doesn't see human-digital convergence as an evolutionary process, but rather a state of devolution. His Mighty Morphing Muscle Men are humans on the way to disappearance, de-anthropomorphising under the bulk of their technologically modified mass. In his 1996 video work Astroturf, we see a series of randomly selected moments from the unnatural history of the future, in which durable flesh yields to unreliable metal, automation numbs domestic life to new levels of banality, and no matter how smart the pet robotic dog is, if there's a screw missing the fucking thing don't work. Web Devolution is Haig's most explicit exploration of the regressive psychopathology of the digital age. Far from the "coffee coloured" global citizen of the networked melting pot, Haig sees cant and fundamentalism, crackpot utopianism, megalomania and centralized regimes of power as the outcomes of our love affair with connectivity. And, oh yeah, DIY html to die for!

As a satirist Haig is not playing some nasty game of hanging shit on things he doesn't like or disapproves of. Satire is subtle, suggestive rather than assertive, productive rather than destructive, and works dramatically to perform critique, not simply to criticize. In his written and spoken commentary on new media arts Haig is a reflective critic of the current state of digital art as well as an articulate observer of the social and cultural issues at stake in the human computer interface. As a satiric artist he achieves, through wit, incisive humour and skilful appropriation, an engaging, critical retrospective on the culture of being digital.
An alien, resembling Agarn in *F-Troop*, with Christopher Lee widow's peak and ray gun, blasts away at an unsuspecting Astro Boy. Recoiling from the force, our neophyte hero disintegrates into a parallel universe that resembles the Seaview Ballroom, circa 1982. In situ we find the director, Hitchcock style, eating carpet and frightening the punters with his peculiar brand of muzak, "The Girl from Ipanema" to a psycho-samba beat.

Footnotes


(2) Editor's note: when questioned for clarification of this reference the author said that it was self-evident and refused to proffer an explanation. My sources inform me that it is a reference to a statement attributed to Robert Plant, the lead singer of Led Zeppelin, and refers to the number of times he wishes to have sex on any given night.

(3) This quality of Haig's work is beautifully evident in *Hack* (1992), which also features a self-consciously "this is how computers talk" interface/personality that tells you what to do. It sounds suspiciously like the monotonous, staccato timbre of Stephen Hawking.

(4) In a slightly different take on this idea, Haig cleverly suggests in his 1996 3D animation *Astroturf* that the first "interactives" were banal and repetitive tactical games that simulated the kinds of amusements usually found in video game arcades. In this work a caveman, clubs himself into inspiration and invents *Pong*; in retrospect one of the most popular and banal computer games that has probably held the interest of more people than most of the interactives aspiring to the condition of contemplative art forms.

(5) In the 1990s Haig was the editors' illustrator of choice for R.U.Sirius' regular 21C column, "Thunderdome". His kooky overblown mutants and contorted psychedelic geeks were perfect signatures for the titles of Sirius' freaky countercultural rants, such as "chips'n'trips" (4, 1995), "in the future, everyone will be famous for being andy warhol" (2, 1996) and "transmutation: an extropian's strange pursuit" (3, 1996).

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