The word is out, and the word is wrong. ‘Interactive is the wrong word’. This is Brian Eno’s damning assessment of the state of CD-ROM technology. If interactivity is meant to imply some kind of conversation, some kind of mutual emergence between human and machine, then we simply do not have it. When it comes to describing the experience of fossicking around your average CD-ROM, stimulus-response would be a more germane concept. From Grolier’s Encyclopaedia to Microsoft’s new World History (in nine versions, complete with a different set of events for the nation reading it), we have descended into a pit of baubles and bright links, a Pavlovian universe of point’n’click which requires no input on the part of the user aside from a trigger-happy mouse finger and an encyclopaedic desire to extract information. The technology is about as ground-breaking and participatory as a soft-drink vending machine, and while we are employing this analogy, requires significantly less sensory-motor skill. But this is not to damn multimedia outright as a creature dulled by the full-bellied inertia of consumerism. Tradition assures its own overturning insofar as it creates margins, and margins speak.

Digital art often positions itself on the margins of Multimedia As We Know It, utilising current technology to rock the sedentary order from within, creating new spaces for experiment and play. And Australian d-art is no exception. In fact, we’ve quite an international reputation for creating alternative interfaces and mediascapes which critique the consumerist (an)esthetic before it has even taken root (witness Adelaide-based group Mindflux’s 1992 CD-ROM, Mindvirus, for instance, the world’s first electronic magazine, and certainly the first to feature its own industrial anti-aesthetic, which had a generation of clubbers running around with gas masks on seeking wild man-machine mutations while the rest of the world was still unpacking what Donna Haraway meant by the word, ‘cyborg’).

For me, the dLux Media/Arts ‘D.art 99’ CD-ROM exhibition was an opportunity to reflect yet again on how well Australian d-art sits with and against international work, and how firmly it pushes against the (an)esthetic of mainstream multimedia. So humour me if I wax lyrical over the Australian content of what was an international showcase; to my view, some of the best work was (and always has been) home-grown.
The exhibition was held at Artspace in Sydney, and comprised a selection of thirteen works submitted by emerging and established artists in response to an international call for entries for experimental CD-ROMs which best demonstrated a ‘creative use of the medium’. The works engaged the user on many levels, in many ways working around and over the more domesticated circuits of sight by employing senses often marginalised by mainstream multimedia: sound, spatial perception, proprioception, the play of fingers across the keyboard. But this was less a collection than a concoction, a complex, de facto mix of hyper-textual fictions, games, fictocritical works on gender politics, sound machines and, above all, perspectivalising machines. Like a menagerie that puts the bats with the birds and the dolphins with the fish, the only thing that seemed to tie the works together was the medium, and the fact that they nudged the envelope of this in a creative (and often beautiful) way.

I was particularly impressed by the work of Victorian artist, Chris Henschke, whose tightly designed virtual environment, Orchestra of Rust (1998), casts the user into a landscape of industrial decay, the images and sounds for which were sourced from an ironworks factory, abandoned machines from old warehouses, a jackhammer, sugar and oil refineries and an empty factory tower in Abbotsford, Melbourne. These were all cobbled together to create five rusty machines which sit in a virtual factory, covered in grime and an aura of technological obsolescence. The user can navigate around these and pull steel levers, push rusty buttons and slide knobs, activating sample loops which develop in a stream of successive, mutable templates to create an ‘orchestra’ of decay. Remixes of the performances can be found in other parts of the factory, along with interesting historical notes on the machines. I found myself twitching convulsively to the bassy rumble, and stuck it out for at least half an hour, twiddling knobs and pulling heavy levers, listening to the whir and clang of a distant era. Music for the close of the Mechanical Age. Entropy, decay, obsolescence. Heavy machinery. Images and sounds which shadow the clean lines and invisible workings of the information age, and especially the manicured surfaces and bright lights of multimedia, a hall of mirrors which would deny the monsters and machines found in old factory basements.

Another work which utilises sound (and technological imagery) in a novel way is Wade Marynowsky’s Diaspora 2000 (1999), an insane beatmix of sample loops and images weaving in and out of Olympic City Sydney.

A play of fingers across the keyboard directs a slide-show which spins images of ATM machines, Olympic construction, disembodied faces and various other samples of urban anxiety into one big neurotic mess. Gritty electronic music bites give depth to the neurosis and contextualise the images back into the techno-hysteria from which they were lifted. As a Sydneysider, I related to this one in a big way. If you let your fingers break loose across the keyboard, the resulting hallucination gives a fair indication of what it’s like to live in the middle of a city desperately trying to dream itself and its inflated Olympic budget into the next millennium. Insanity at an urban speed, music to self-destruct to. Also to be commended for its use of sound is English artist Chris Hales’s Tallinn People’s Orchestra (1998), a work which lands the user in a market square in Tallinn, Estonia, on the gulf of Finland. People walk naturally across the scene and pigeons flit across the built skyline in what appears to be a typical day in the town. Thirty-seven elements of the scene have been isolated and assigned a musical leitmotiv, elements of which can be activated at random to produce a ‘deconstructed jazz ballet’, as the program eloquently puts it. The sounds in this one are simply beautiful, and attach themselves to various ‘everyday’ incidents in the market square, which can be mixed and activated to unfold at the cultivated, cultured pace of the country. Playing with this directly after Marynowsky’s Diaspora is like emerging from a noisy traffic jam onto a quaint little side street caught in a time warp, where chaos is a form of music and walking is an art.

In the realm of amusement and gameplay, we have Kathryn Mew’s Muto (1998), Mark MacDonald’s UN-icon (1999) and Tim Lycette’s PlayThing (1998), all hailing from Victoria, land of RMIT and crazy architecture (digital and otherwise). UN-icon contains an interesting series of animations using those pedestrian icons we are all familiar with: the magnifying glass, the arrow, the cursor, the hand. They are reinscribed as symbols of semi-otic expression in their own right as they chase each other around the window, generating all manner of patterns and scenes. PlayThing is a carefully orchestrated meditation on gender and identity masquerading as a game, and explores the connection between technology and identity-construction in a refreshing way (a theme which reverberates through a number of these works, as we shall explore presently). I was particularly taken by Kathryn Mew’s Muto, which lands the user in an artificial ecology populated by bizarre indigenous life forms which look in turn like amoebae/circuit board mutations. These creatures can be created, cultivated and destroyed in the manner of an a-life program. Apparently there is some concept of reward and punishment at work here which is meant to direct gameplay, but I got so carried away with my God’s eye view, dragging amoebae/circuit board mutations across each other and spinning the microscopic planet around like a coloured top that I think I missed the object of the game. The visuals are rich
and beautiful, the sort of gems which would feed techno flyer design teams for the next ten years should they ever get a hold of the game.

Special mention should be made of the collaborative project from the Netherlands, Gender Media Art (1999), produced by Axis, the Foundation for Art and Gender. Mixed into some excellent text, short films and spoken narrative by some of the world’s finest queer theorists, virtual and performance artists (eg: Annie Sprinkle, Darryl Hill, Sadie Benning) is a selection of twelve engaging projects exploring the construction of sexuality, identity, gender and the transgressive worlds between at the close of the Mechanical Age. Frankly, a momentous task. And it is carried off beautifully. The projects are so diverse it would be inappropriate for me to try and wrap them all up in a few words: find this CD-ROM by hook or by crook, and explore it yourself. One of the navigational centres, the ‘Universe’, is a floating soup of faces and half-images which seem to waft and shift around the mouse like iron filings to a magnet; I found myself going back there not to find my bearings, but to chase spectres around the screen (a metaphor for the construction of identity in a post-human culture, perhaps?).

And on that note, there were several other works which explored gender politics, lewd sexualities and build-your-own identities: Spanish artist Cristina Casanova’s Vamos a Contar Mentiras (1998), NSW artist and theorist Wayne Stamp, Lloyd Sharp and Panos Curos’s Basilisk and a Universe of Dirt (1999) and Marita Liulia’s Son of a Bitch (1999) from Finland. Again, in these works, we find ourselves asking: do terms such as ‘masculine’, ‘queer’, and indeed, ‘identity’ have any meaning in a culture where labels seem to spin in and out of existence like particles in a photon chamber? In each of these projects, I found it particularly ironic (and appropriate) that such questions were explored using digital media: electronic text is unique in its evanescence, its ephemeral quality, each screen washing away what was and replacing it with itself. The screen is a present-tense palimpsest, and the task of construction and understanding occurs only in retrospect, when we link up all the fragments in our memory to form an identity, the body of the text. Vamos a Contar Mentiras explores this idea of construction-in-retrospect, specifically the construction of the masculine, by presenting the tales (and, as the name suggests in Spanish, lies) of a group of boys who went to school together and meet years later to spin their wild yarns about ‘football, skirts and impertinent teachers’. The graphics are kitsch and colourful, cartoonish images which look like Frida Kahlo’s take on the Bobbsey Twins. Nonetheless, they betray a sense of nostalgia, or more accurately, fragility. The stories that we tell and that tell us do not always hold together seamlessly.

Masculinity has become a popular topic over the last five years. Where is it? Or rather, what is it—are there one or multiple masculinities? Careful not to generalise. And try to maintain a sense of humour. Freud probably will not help you, but psychoanalysis is a bit of a tar baby, so it is unavoidable. If you’re looking for some ideas, you might want to check out Marita Liulia’s Son of a Bitch. Dr. Jack L Froid, the world’s foremost expert in masculinity, has mysteriously disappeared (as has the illusion of incontrovertible identity), and his discoveries are waiting for you. In fragments, like slips of the tongue. But to cut loose from the whole framework of lacks and gaps, the Adamic ego and identities lost, repressed or found, one needs to wander in a nomadic fashion, and produce an entirely new Universe of reference. This is what Wayne Stamp, Lloyd Sharp and Panos Curos’s Basilisk and a Universe of Dirt sets out to do. This work explores partial subjectivities—pre-personal, polyphonic and machinic—from a queered perspective, replete with stunning visuals. We might say that somatic subjectivity is inherently queer, if we take ‘queer’ to mean an ecology of sexualities which write themselves across history, the body and the screen indiscriminately, desiring nought but the transformation and proliferation of their own capacities. Basilisk is a long- overdue meditation on machinic desire in a medium particularly suited to such an excursion. Floating amongst audio-visual gems lifted from (what look like) mediaeval physiology books, illuminated religious texts and archaic histories which seem to bump against and cross-infect each other, is a fragmented commentary on contemporary nomadic theory, obviously bolstered by Wayne Stamp’s scholarship in the area (he recently completed a doctorate on art and subjectivity derived from the work of Deleuze and Guattari).

On the historical contagion tangent, there is one more project in this collection which deserves some attention. Gary Zebington’s Termite (1999), home-grown here in NSW, is a mutant world history-generator which hyperlinks famous statements and events across time, exchanging terms to produce new and twisted histories. Termites are released across temporal connections created by random names/deeds the user enters (for me, Freud and the Pope), and they infest these connections with a colony of words (‘Freud will eat the Pope’ was my mutant statement—and indeed, he has and will). The graphics bob and float on a dark background like ancient green letters on a Commodore 64, and as if to emphasise the technological lineage, the termite action conjures memories of Pacman, Donkey Kong and kin. Most entertaining.

And as identity and history can cross-infect one another, so too can our own memories infect our experience of the present. It is the action of memory, said Henri Bergson,
which interpolates the past into the present, and hence springs every kind of perceptual illusion. Two of these works explored the phantastic ideas that memories rouse and the manner in which we use this process to contextualise ourselves here and now: Victorian artist Michael Buckley’s *The Good Cook* (1998) and NSW artist Tatiana Pentes’s *Strange Cities* (1999). Again, the choice of medium was particularly appropriate here—both projects were a collection of traces, of audiovisual fragments/rememberings that had no centre, just peripheries that circled back upon one another, and each time the user re-encountered a fragment, her perception of it was changed. This exploited the non-linear, associative potential of hypertext links to re-embody reading as movement, as an action rather than a thing (as hypertext author Michael Joyce might say), much like the process of remembering itself. In *Strange Cities*, a young woman, Sasha, presents us with the discontinuous fragments, dreams and memories she has of her grandparents, who were survivors of the Russian and Chinese revolutions. It is up to the reader to piece these together—knitting music samples, personal effects and photos steeped in sepia into an understanding.

*The Good Cook*, a work which first surfaced at the ‘Being Connected’ conference in Melbourne last year, has a similarly dreamy overtone; it is the story of a cook, who is haunted by the phantoms of his reveries during a long and neurotic night of insomnia. Memories circle round and round like a swarm of flies trapped in his skull, and the architecture of the CD-ROM is designed to accentuate this feeling. The night is divided into hours (2 o’clock, 3 o’clock... etc.), and each slow hour is filled with a fitful mix of short videos, animations and insane sound loops (in one, his father’s voice repeats over and over, ‘like a bottle of piss, like a bottle of piss’). If you spend more than ten minutes exploring the labyrinthine clips and links, you feel yourself slipping into his fevered consciousness, and the mouse begins to jar and waver beneath your fingers. The night is peopled by thoughts of a kitchen hand, his father, himself as a boy and a woman (the ‘siren’), whose comments and images complicate his attempts to get to sleep, and ultimately, to find meaning in his life. This is a damn fine CD-ROM, and a good place to refer your lover if he/she is wondering why you pace around the room at night garbling to yourself like someone with Torette’s Syndrome.

For me, this exhibition was an expression of belief in the fact that multimedia is not lost to the full-bellied inertia of consumerism, that it is our task as artists, critics, readers and wanderers to write ourselves back into the medium, or at least, to pay attention to the gaps and spaces from which new ideas and embodiments arise. Our dreams and rememberings, our mutant histories and our sexually marked bodies; these must have a place in the electronic text.

**Endnotes:**