Electrobricollage and Popular Culture

Escape from Never Never Land
It's about time we let the digital arts grow up. The term 'new media art' is out of touch with what's actually going on in digital culture, so out of touch, in fact, that its currency continues to portray digital art as the Peter Pan of postmodernity – the art form that never grows up. Any informed understanding and appreciation of the contemporary media arts scene needs to recognise that this neoteny has partitioned the digital arts from a rich and varied history of electronic arts practice. The electronic arts in Australia have a respectable longevity that has been sustained by a supple and enthusiastic responsiveness to change and an experimental desire to draw on other media. The so-called digital arts continue this tradition of intermedia practice, confirming that new media art is never new for long. Exit Peter Pan, to defunctive music.

Okay, so we've put novelty behind us. What is the stuff of contemporary intermedia arts practice in Australia? It's pretty clear that the inclusive, recombinant nature of digital technologies has whetted the appetite of a generation of artists saturated with media. These artists have very quickly intuited that digital technologies offer exciting new possibilities for invention, but they do so through their capability for combination, appropriation and re-use of different media forms. These artists have a voracious appetite for the street, to use William Gibson's famous metonym for the overwhelming stuff of popular culture. And the street, to complete the aphorism, always finds a use for things. Gibson’s cyberpunk credo attests to a DIY ethic that makes do with whatever is at hand, which for the contemporary media artist invariably means working with lots of media.

Remediation
Remediation is the name that has been given to this practice. As 'new' media theorists Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter have defined it, remediation relates to the ways in which media draw on and incorporate other media. For example, the collaborative work of Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski, such as User Unfriendly Interface (1994-1996), explores the notion of the interface between humans and machines and the manner in which we relate to them in terms of friendliness and usability. A work such as Fuzzy Love Dating Database, one of their Diagnostic Tools for the New Millennium (1997-1998) cleverly appropriates the automated photo-booths that are so much a part of the suburban shopping centre and video arcade, with their hokey portraits of previous visitors. I've always wondered what happens to the negatives in these photo-booths and Fuzzy Love, with its concealed data base of all who enter it and offer up their likeness, suggests that 'instant' photography may be less innocent than it appears.

On the Street Where You Live
Remediation has connotations of vestigial culture and the new uses to which the discarded, the decrepit and forgotten are put. Re-usability brings with it a kind of ethic that nothing is waste and nothing should go to waste. This is the aesthetic
principle of the work of Murray McKeich, for whom the detritus of the streets (battered hub caps), the remnants of consumption (flattened tin cans) and the miscellany of op-shop scrounging (old dolls, scraps of vintage fabric), form the basis of his sustained meditation on hybridity, the convergence of humans and machines. McKeich’s Digital Art Folio (1998), a cd-rom containing twenty-four two-dimensional images of sumptuous gothic detail, can be explored with the same interactive investment as a three-dimensional immersive environment. McKeich’s practice of placing objects directly on to the scanner to create these images, such as fish heads or chicken giblets, suggests that there is a visceral quality to remediation, in that the body, or parts of bodies, can also be re-used, re-formed or reconstituted. McKeich’s remediated forms are ambiguous chimera, part flesh, part metal, composites of working components and atrophied limbs.

Ian Haig’s work is also concerned with the body and in particular the corporeal impact of computer technology. For Haig the technologised body is a grotesque mutant, an aberration. His most recent work looks at the ways in which the human-computer interface has dramatically modified the way we do things in the world of the everyday. Its focus is satiric, in the tradition of Rabelais and Swift, in that it defamiliarises, through exaggeration and enlargement, aspects of our engagement with computer technology that we take for granted, to such an extent of forgetfulness that they have become second nature. Computers have undoubtedly made us more sedentary and as a consequence require us to sit for long periods of time in a particular way that doesn’t come naturally. Anti-Ergonomic Hump Machine (2001) parodies the 80s obsession with correct posture by re-defining the ergonomic chair as an instrument of torture. In this work bad posture is desirable and the anti-ergonomic chair, which resembles an inverted, contorted spine, is designed to create a hump, not prevent one. Described as an “alternative orthopaedic device” that guarantees "deformity, curvature of the spine and poor circulation, this Kafka-like construction insinuates something of the fear that has traditionally been associated with technological progress, the fear of decline into dystopia.

Haig’s sense of the perverse body extends to an even more intimate daily ritual than sitting in front of the computer. Excelsior 3000 – The Bowel Technology Project (2001) is based on state of the art toilets currently used in Japan and continues Haig’s interest in the extremes of techno-human interaction. In particular, this work dramatically uncovers one of the most ubiquitous, yet invisible sites of our involvement with media. Haig’s futuristic, “super interactive” toilets are advanced media stations, part extension of the body, part assistant to the body, complete with pleasing video designed to augment the task at hand (“The video sequences will depict different naturalistic scenes to aid the digestion and assist bowel movements”). A convergent medium, Haig’s super toilet brings together old and new technologies (the water closet and Digital Versatile Disk) to offer a glimpse of the lengths – or depths – to which our fascination with media may be taking us. In this the Excelsior 3000 project can be seen as something of a signature work for Haig, in that it incorporates themes that have preoccupied him for the last ten years. In
particular, it suggests that everything we do in the name of culture is not progressing but devolving in response to the surreptitious creep of technology.

The Event Is A Page
Along with the body, the other much-discussed casualty of technological diffusion is paper. For some time now cultural critics have identified the computer as the instrument of epochal change. References to paradigm shifts abound in discussions of the contemporary, one of the most profound being the shift from print to electronic culture. Phrases such as the 'paperless office' have been around a long time, though skepticism from download overload has diminished its currency. Of more recent coinage, historical rubrics such as 'the end of print', or 'the late age of print', are more vague and less easy to pin down in terms of specifics. It’s facile to note that such pronouncements are usually to be found in print (though it is a delicious irony that the dyslexic author of Being Digital, Nicholas Negroponte, sees print as the necessary and inevitable vehicle of the digital way). What is more interesting to consider is the way in which print has remediated the digital technologies that were, supposedly, in the process of killing it off. Ray Gun magazine (1992-1996), David Carson’s manual of style for the age of digital typography, appropriated the phrase 'the end of print' to invoke a sense of the dramatic transformations taking place within print technology. Impenetrable, often unreadable, the pages of Ray Gun heralded a renaissance of the magazine as art object, as cultural artifact in its own right, regardless of what it was about. Rather than a terminal event, the concept of the end of print became a galvanising talisman for magazine designers, a challenge to extend the limits of what a page could be and what it could do.

During the 1990s it was easy to see the impact that digital technologies were having on magazine design and production. One of the most conspicuous, in terms of style, content and overall production values, was 21C magazine. Publisher and editor in chief, Ashley Crawford, used to say that he wanted the magazine to look as if it had come from the future. And it did. Committed to keeping up with the social and cultural transformations wrought by scientific and technological acceleration, 21C was an international forum for discussion and critique of where the future was taking us. Art Director Christopher Waller gave the magazine its distinctive look and feel with his visionary epigram, 'the page is an event'. In 21C, Waller created a dynamic balance of word and image, in which illustration was no mere accompaniment to a story, but held equal weight as an art work in its own right, against which the text might be measured as an interpretation. Emulating the cinematic pan, double page illustrations would suspend the commencement of the story they were designed to headline, working like establishing shots in a movie, much to the ire of senior management, for whom such visual latitude was wasteful and excessive.

Crawford and Waller were fiercely parochial in their commissioning and nurturing of Australian digital art and introduced the work of established and emerging artists alike to an international audience. Along with its allied publication World Art
(superbly designed by Terry Hogan), 21C was a kind of portable, travelling exhibition that displayed and mentored the extraordinary work of artists such as James Widdowson, Gregory Baldwin, Elena Popa, Greg O’Connor, Troy Innocent, Rebecca Young and Andrew Trevillian. It allowed artists, such as Tina Gonsalvas, who had been working with video and digital animation, to experiment with the page as if it was an interactive space. Waller has noted recently that when working with artists on a brief, he encouraged them to think of the page as a kind of machine with working parts, an interface. Such an aesthetic suited Gonsalves’ remarkable, cut-to-ribbons style, which bristles with static energy and turbulence. In an essay on David Cronenberg’s film Crash, the image of a car crash screeches from recto to verso, as if the disturbing nature of the image has traumatised the conventional flow of a continuous double page spread. In another image, illustrating one of Kathy Acker’s many panegyrics to William S. Burroughs, the literary outlaw’s wan, strangely feline visage is morphed into swirling incarnations of his beloved cats. Dark and bug-like in their most extreme form, they poetically recall one of Burroughs’ most frightening, yet intoxicating images in Naked Lunch, the giant centipedes whose flesh is ground to form the psychotropic ‘black meat’.

The art work in 21C and World Art was so good that it has itself become collectable culture, cut out and posted on bedroom walls, quoted in other art work and, in the case of one particular Murray McKeich image, itself an advertisement, appropriated as a billboard advertising logo for a Melbourne thrash-funk band calling themselves Memory Trade. One of these posters, torn off a Chapel street shop front, is sticky-taped to my office wall. A dishevelled, toner-deprived photocopy announcing in pink texta the band’s next gig at the Armadale Hotel, it is a sign of the tenacious digestibility of remediation, when the work of media-savvy artists is itself recycled back into popular culture, to be re-used again and again.

In Nova Express (1966) William Burroughs barked the instruction, "Storm the reality studio. And retake the universe." Burroughs was writing at a time when electronic circuitry was taking media beyond mechanical reproduction to the subtle ambiguities of digital simulation, sampling and electrobricollage; recalcitrant practices that once and for all relegated the aura to the dustbin of history. Burroughs’ invocation to reclaim, with its image of reality as a space for doing things with media, was, and continues to be, most prescient. Perhaps in their voracious rummaging through the studio of popular culture, media artists may even stumble across the discarded aura and redefine its meaning for the postmodern ethos. Such things are possible in the age of technological remediation.

Darren Tofts.