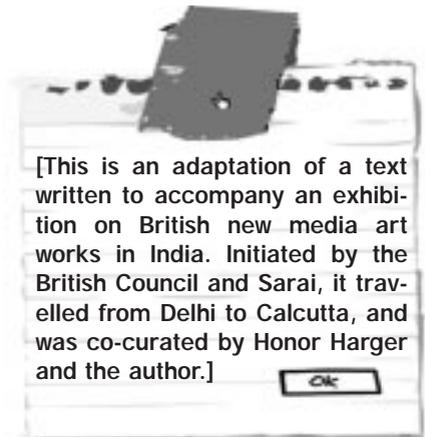


Waste Net, Want Not

Art and New Media in 90s Britain

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To write an essay on recent new media art from the UK invariably means promoting a definition of that category itself. In doing this, you inevitably run into the problem that new media does not respond well to singular classification. Beyond glossing over the heterogeneity of contemporary practice, such popular products of unification deceive by homogenising the many histories and trace routes that feed into a genre. This unfailingly consolidates narratives that confound the more elliptical movement of cultural history.

New media art, whose 'post-historical' status is attributable to new media's general claim of being a meta-medium capable of replicating and synthesising other media, appears even more bedevilled by this problem than other art forms.¹ This can be seen in its relationship to electronic art, arguably new media art's most natural antecedent. Electronic art's apogee occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s and coherently announced many of what are now perceived as new media art's characteristics; namely a preoccupation with 'interactivity' between author, viewer and work; a time based production/exhibition process; and a dispersal of agency across machine or network enabled systems. Yet the international group of artists who made their names with ludic feats of engineering, mythical constructions in outer space, collaborative global communication experiments, interactive installations, and basic video, TV and virtual reality projects seem strangely absent from contemporary critical discourse on new media art.²

Maybe the apparent disinterest of new media artists in the utopian interactive experi-

ments of their direct precursors should come as no surprise, and we should see the more conspicuous dues being paid to the 20th century's avant-gardes, traditions of performance, mail and conceptual art, or capitalist parody and institutional critique, as a negotiation of the vertigo of 'having never seen this before', and 'having seen it all before'; a critical but self-conscious eclecticism born of the net's notional post-historicity. After all, the radical new tools of self-historicisation, which the net and its ancillary networks granted artists (the mailing lists, community portals, individually owned web sites, and self-publishing projects)³ also knitted them into the "Total System" of globalisation and networked capitalism.⁴

As with classifications, one could of course argue that making any art-historical alignment based on such singular, strict and sequential periodisations is fallacious, and that trying to address that problem 'from within' is a game without end. All of history is encapsulated in the smallest object, act, and individual. Moreover, the insistent presentation of alternative histories for any contemporary cultural phenomenon itself tends to affirm a recursive logic of one-upmanship. This then merely aims for 'improved' hierarchies of valorisation that essentially work to reflect better the vested interests of the relevant artist, critic or historian, rather than the historical nuance or veracity to which the original contestation lays claim.

Any survey of recent practices, especially one artificially circumscribed by national boundaries and various practical contingencies (this selection, for example, focusses primarily on Internet based work), can easily misrepresent what is going on in a cultural field. Whether this occurs purposefully or through happenstance is immaterial as the understanding of it is tacit and cannot be properly disseminated beyond the originary group of artists and organisers.

The cultural histories produced by the institutions that now promote British New Media culture nationally and internationally illustrate this well, especially that of the stylistically disparate group of artists who came to be known as the "yBas" (Young British Artists).

It has been argued by Simon Ford and others that such institutions (business consortia, national public bodies) share responsibility for having exported an image of British art practice during the 1990s that was both politically motivated and misrepresentative of the art scenes it was held to mediate. As Ford states, "The yBa [was] called upon to justify increasing social division and disempowerment through a recourse to the values of self reliance and a rejuvenated entrepreneurialism".⁵ The confident, individualist art that was publicised internationally was certainly not one in which histories of overt collaboration, informatisation, social engagement, political, corporate and institutional critique found a place. In terms of the institutionally sanctioned framework of British art over this period, these themes were, in fact, conspicuous by their absence.

At this juncture, the first high profile acts of historiography are taking place for new media in the 1990s.⁶ They should not allow new media art to harden into the politicised corrective to yBa: it seems appropriate therefore to reiterate the truism that personal surveys such as this should function to challenge narratives of art-in-general rather than merely illustrate the recent movement of one artistic offshoot or sub-genre whose only role in an institutional setting is to further illuminate the rich soil in which the master narrative took root.

The new media art of the 1990s may be an unstable and historically contested category, however that is not to say that there are no coherent threads to be observed in its

development, nor clear lines of identification in existence between groups of artists – at national and international levels. In the context of British new media art it should be stated that, though far from insignificant, those that are more geographically bound are latent in as much as they lack a tight fix to its electronic frame. The most obvious of these are the associated 'services' artists provide (especially for public or corporate bodies), or the sites in which work is produced, discussed and exhibited. The artists' affective milieu has been distinctly marked by the proximity of the cultural and commercial sectors; the fact that the UK dotcom 'boom' was not only the first but the most exuberant in Europe; New Labour's use – from 1997 on – of the potent symbology associated with new technologies to reanimate its export industry under the sign of culture and creativity; and the deep permeation of public culture by the ideology of the Third Way.⁷

In the wake of the strategic slash-and-burn performed on it in the Thatcher era, New Labour's social and economic policies and its absolute orientation towards the media bore a comparable weight of influence over the production and lionisation of market-oriented subjectivities. Some remarkable ironies reside in the fact that persistent institutional marginalisation during this period has consolidated new media art's perceived radicality while simultaneously robbing it of the kind of mainstream cultural analysis that would allow for an informed debate on it. Conversely, that new media artists' oft cited collaborative impulse and engagement with social and technical systems paradoxically falls in line with the state's professional *ideal type* of a socially integrative creative practitioner, rather than the revolutionaries as which they are so frequently cast.

So what are the coherent threads that momentarily hold together the fledgling cultural form of new media art? Going back to those that are less geographically determined: one can point the way with well known projects, such as I/O/D's *Webstalker*, Graham Harwood's *Rehearsal of Memory*, and Rachel Baker's *TM Club Card*, which share a preoccupation with the denaturalisation of sovereign information systems. Each of these works is bent on disrupting that distended process whereby graphic user interfaces, software platforms, operating systems and even entire information networks are epistemologically normalised. Their functional inevitability is usually achieved by familiarity, practicality and a patronising accommodation of the user; the desired rupture is therefore often achieved by deconstruction or by making violent intrusions into the digital domain's illusion of seamless technological functionality. In *Rehearsal of Memory*, Harwood does this by inserting fragments of the flesh, trauma and language of sectioned subjects – culturally constructed as alien to the realm of CD-Rom technology. And in *Webstalker*, I/O/D does it by stripping away the retinal obfuscation of the Web's navigation icons – that strange maritime-administrative concoction of globes, windows, pages, houses, envelopes, and pencils – to reveal the underlying connective skeleton. Crudely put, this turns out to be an unstoppable structural birthing system in which informational wheels (web sites' internal links are displayed as spokes coming off a central core) beget wheels, beget more wheels (external links providing the various branches outwards). Stalked, the Web does not offer up the restrictive navigation of small slices of a domesticated terrain, but rather a view onto the infinite virtual territorial expansion that is its *raison d'être*.

If we accept the fact that these works are always already imbricated in the discursive

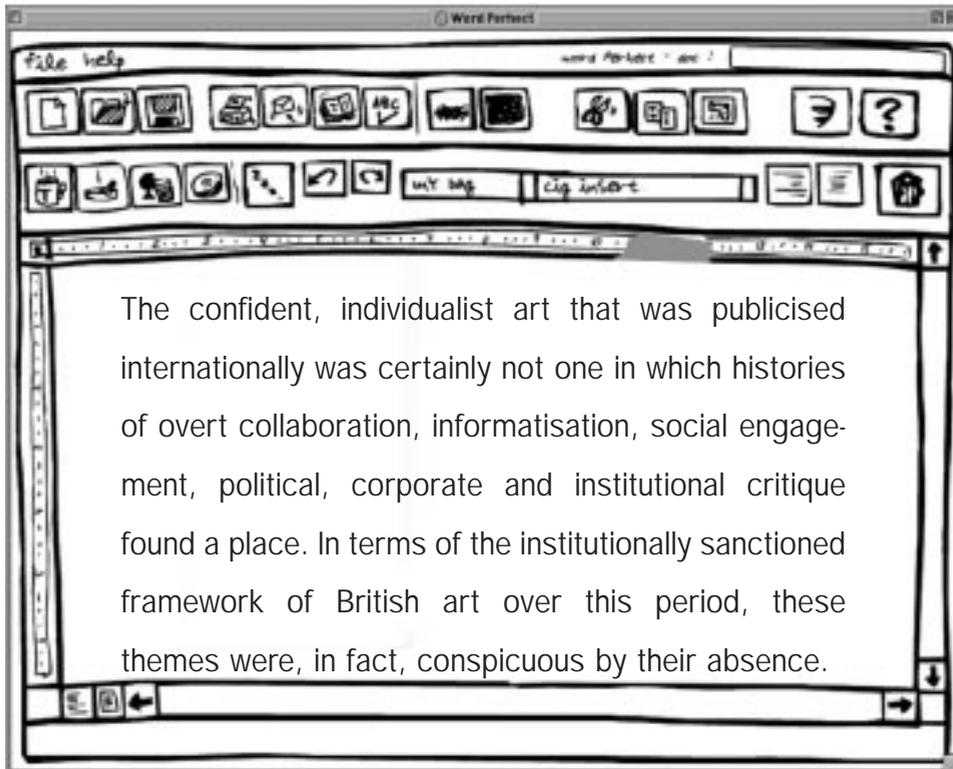
environments that help constitute artists' habitat, then they express their provenance clearly. Over the years of their production, levels of anxiety regarding the so-called 'corporate takeover' of the Net rose steadily. If any one aggregate force was regarded as being able to produce a dominant episteme, it was the corporate producers of information systems, together with the powerful clients that put them to use. Now that globalisation was coming of age, this unholy alliance with its handmaidens in press and multilateral organisations was symbolic of the ideological closed circuit of neo-liberal rule. Where cultural geographer Saskia Sassen railed against corporate globalisation's "new normativities", and *Le Monde Diplomatique* editor Ignacio Ramonet castigated the New World Order for its "Pensee Unique" (The One Idea system), new media artists engaged with an all-enveloping information environment to propose that, as the incipient anti-capitalist movement had it, "Another world is possible".

Of course, it would be inaccurate to suggest that an unfettered unity of purpose exists or existed between artists and activists, practitioners and theorists, the new media arts and their radical politics. But information networks have created unforetold proximities, and have therefore instrumentalised cross-fertilisation – of tools, organisational practices, aesthetics and purpose. In this context, the political ferment of the anti-capitalist movement could only act as a magnet – drawing social formations closer together, and amplifying their intent. Out of this process, interesting commonalities are emerging. In her work on cybernetic politics, Tiziana Terranova has discussed online activism's obsession with 'off-line' effectivity.⁸ Her characterisation of the virtual protest movement's constituencies, as well as their differentiated use of place and placelessness (i.e. the expanded socio-technical field of mailing lists, meeting places, mobile phone conversations, Internet sites and so on, in which globalised and localised geographies fuse) problematises the popular, reductive image of virtual protest as passive and overmediated. Cohabiting as they do, I think it's fair to say a comparable interest in effectivity permeates artistic production, and it is one that acknowledges but seeks to go beyond the historical dichotomy between the fine and applied arts as much as that between form and function. Artists continually modulate these with issues of complicity and autonomy to test the medium's ontology and implication in larger spheres of interest (be they corporate, state or other). Over time, these efforts have accreted an elaborate nomenclature. Some terms, such as digital art, have taken on universalist ambitions whilst others, such as software art, follow quasi-modernist, 'formalist' explorations of processes and tools. Though it has never carried this descriptive tag, the latter has its forebears in the work of Dutch/Belgian artist duo JODI (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans), whose html *détournements* are notorious for undermining the prescribed use value of everyday web authoring systems, forcing them to surrender a world of strange, alterior meaning.

Webstalker, which co-producer Matthew Fuller described as wanting to be "not just art", moved stridently on in the direction of a qualified applicability.⁹ In a recent essay, Saul Albert takes this premise and runs with it to chart a path wherein artists gradually step away from the game of gestural deconstruction and the concomitant rejection of cultural proprietorship and position themselves as the autonomous producers of *counter* code for the open market.¹⁰ After *Webstalker*, Albert sees the value of these works in "[seeking] to

be relevant in multiple contexts, [moving] between use value and conceptual value seamlessly... [rejecting] the dead end-dichotomy of culture vs. counter-culture, and [suggesting] hybridised, developmental, unstable cultural forms that can sustain themselves outside of art's frame of reference and financial backing".¹¹

To point the way further (and look at some works included in this selection) I'll return to themes of informational denaturalisation. Tomoko Takahashi's piece *Microsoft Herd*, for example, offers a playful parallel to *Webstalker*, as well as a less well known installation by Matthew Fuller, *A song for occupations*.¹² Others submit the tools of their trade to large-scale professional projects, such as group curatorship (Nina Pope and Karen J. Guthrie's *TV Swansong* took nearly two years to produce, combined on and off-line projects, and involved the creation of a nation-wide network of access points in libraries, galleries and educational institutions, as well as workshops for children and local communities, and massive outdoor music events).¹³ The managerial aesthetic that *TV Swansong* embraces returns in more schizophrenic form in Adrian Ward's software work, *Autollustrator*, which is a privately sold package whose 'Unique Selling Point' is its continual unhinging of the hierarchy of authorship. User, producer and platform are forced to constantly renegotiate the terms and conditions of production, as the first two are variously subjected to enhanced versions of the bugs and algorithms that commercial packages would rather hide from view. Having



positioned him/herself higher up in the productive tree than the media producer – who uses, rather than codes software, and has significantly less power to determine its application – it is incumbent on the artist-software producer to provide back-up and technical support.¹⁴ In the case of Ward's business, Signwave (a company run by one man), this means presenting a multiplicity of computer-generated aliases, whose answers confuse, illuminate and entertain in equal measure. Perhaps this is the "death of the author" so mercilessly parodied in Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead's piece, *Trigger Happy*, where icons of the early interactive age – lo-res space invaders – take pot shots at an earnest chunk of postmodern theory for long enough to make it sound like the incoherent mutterings of a pathetic authorial 'I' on the verge of dissolution.

Like *Autollustrator*, Richard Wright's project *Bank Of Time* and Heath Bunting's *BorderXing* resource flirt seriously with the myths of utility. Bunting's *BorderXing* resource – in which a range of sure-fire, personally tested European border crossings are laid out (complete with pictures, practical tips on what to eat, etc.) – does this by working against the grain of progressive computer culture's *idée fixe* of openness for its own sake. He skirts public net artists' implied responsibility to make her work available for domestic consumption by refusing access to all users whose access context can't be described as socially constituted. The work excludes every home browser on the planet and *includes* cyber cafés, schools, public institutions and so on (their necessary details can be inputted after e-mailing the author). Richard Wright's *Bank Of Time* instead cocks a snook at the sacred cow of productivity and resource management. It mimics computer sharing networks like SETI@Home (Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence), which tap more energy out of a decentralised net of privately owned computers than could ever be squeezed out of a centralised one – only to ignore these wonders of the world's central diktat.¹⁵ The extended screensaver *Bank Of Time* wants its users to do nothing more, or perhaps nothing less, than rear a family of computer animated plants whose 'life' is negatively indexed to productivity (when computers are used, their screensaver home is inactive and cannot tend to its plants; when they are out of use, it – and they – come alive and can grow). Albeit on a fictional plane, the attention economy's maniacal drive to annex every human life hour here comes full circle. In a dark combination of *Gardeners' World* and *Big Brother*, users submit the necessary details for 'the network' to monitor their digital labour – all for the price of simulations of the natural world it is fast making obsolete.

NOTES

1. The phrase 'meta medium' is meant to stand in for, and allude to, widespread theoretical tussles over the essential nature of computer mediated communication technologies. Specifically, I am referring to the discussion concerning these technologies' status as tools, media or meta-tools/media. Core questions in this debate are whether the capacity of computer based tools to digitally encode and hybridise other tools constitutes a historical, perceptual – and hence aesthetic – paradigm shift, and whether networked technologies' exponentially growing connections and their linkage to 'intelligent' machines creates an operational field whose properties are 'emergent'.
2. For contextualising material on the history and discourse of electronic art, see Linz's Ars Electronic Centre web site (<http://www.aec.at>). And for a better sense of continuity in its critical discourse over the last few decades, see Leonardo Online (<http://mitpress2.mit.edu/e-journals/Leonardo>).

3. In the absence of a family tree which accurately illustrates the fractal development of this discursive culture, influential platforms such as thing.net and rhizome.org, as well as mailing lists such as Nettime and 7-11 should be mentioned. Electronic journals such as *Switch* (<http://switch.sjsu.edu>) and *Telepolis* (<http://www.telepolis.de>) have also been instrumental in shaping a sense of collectively authored history.
4. Josephine Berry uses this Marxian term in her PhD thesis *The Thematics of Site Specific Art on the Net*. The chapter "Global Art in a Total System" deploys Frederic Jameson's description of new technologies' (and, as Berry suggests, later the Internet's) capacity to "think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system", to unpick the relationship of net art, globalisation and late capitalism. Berry, Josephine *The Thematics of Site Specific Art on the Net* (PhD, unpublished, 2001, Manchester University) p. 65.
5. Ford, Simon "Myth Making" (in *Art Monthly* No. 194, March 1996). For a glimpse of other critical sentiments stirred by the discussion on yBa, see also Beech, David "Chill Out" (in *Everything* magazine, <http://www.backspace.org/everything/e/hard/text/beech.html>).
6. Across the commercial, independent, and cultural fields, curtains are coming down on the new media boom. Symptomatic of this are the slew of post-dotcom books (Ernst Malmsten's *Boo hoo*, Rory Cellan-Jones's *Dot.bomb* and John Cassidy's *Dot.con*, to name a few examples), as well as more subjective accounts of the fledgling 'critical' new media scene, such as media theoretician Geert Lovink's *Dark Fiber*.
7. The New Labour government has come to be associated with the creative industries due to Tony Blair's creation of the Creative Industries Task Force in 1997 and their heavy-handed promotion of the term ever since. Importantly however, many of its policies express legacies of John Major's Conservative government.
8. Terranova, Tiziana "The degree zero of politics: virtual cultures and virtual social movements" (in *Network Culture: The Cultural Politics of Cybernetic Communications* Pluto Press, London, forthcoming).
9. *Webstalker* can be found at <http://bak.spc.org/iod> and Matthew Fuller's phrase "not just art" in the accompanying essay, "Means of Mutation" (<http://bak.spc.org/iod/mutation.html>).
10. Albert, Saul "Useless Utilities" (<http://twentiethcentury.com/saul/useless.htm>, 2001).
11. *Ibid.*
12. *A song for occupations* (2000) maps out the software package Microsoft Word. For the accompanying essay, "It looks like you're writing a letter: Microsoft Word" see <http://www.axia.demon.co.uk/wordtext.html>
13. *TV Swansong*, whose archive can be found at <http://www.swansong.tv> streamed the performance and video commissions of Jordan Baseman, Graham Fagen, Rory Hamilton and Jon Rogers, Chris Helson, Nina Pope and Karen J. Guthrie, Giorgio Sadotti, Jessa Voorsanger, Zoe Walker and Neil Brommich on one dedicated day (20 March 2002). The project intended to contemplate the past, present and future of television at a point where it might converge with other communication networks, and to demonstrate the potential of artists having control over a cultural space comparable to that of television. As it happened, technical problems meant there were numerous hiccups with the 'broadcast', though this seems to have only confirmed the febrile status of net and TV fusions. See also Nina Pope, Karen Guthrie, Rachel Whithers, Pauline van Mourik Broekman "TV Swansong – A partial view" (in Guthrie, Karen and Nina Pope (eds.) *TV Swansong* ARTicle Press, 2002).
14. This line of argument is taken from Saul Albert (*ibid.*) who uses the software industry's terms market share and mind share to demonstrate its hierarchy of productive power (mind share being the Orwellian mental correlate of market share).
15. SETI@Home (<http://setiathome.ssl.berkeley.edu>) functions by having individual users download a programme that can analyse radio telescope data, and pooling these resources in a massive parallel net.

