

# Transient (Indigenous, Settler, Migrant) Media

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ITEM ONE Glen Harding of the Federation Square large screen in Melbourne notes the transience of audience attention as a major challenge for large screen operators in public spaces. Notorious apocalypticist Paul Virilio reads our civilisation as one in which speed in communication eradicates any sense of place. Journalistic and academic commentators on globalisation note the fluidity of what Arjun Appadurai calls ethnoscapas, the movement of people across the face of the planet. According to the 2007 UN Population Fund *State of World Population* Report (<http://www.unfpa.org/swp/swpmain.htm>), in 2008 "For the first time in history, more than half its human population, 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas". 190 million migrants (according to UNFPA's 2006 report) move countries every year, a figure that disguises internal migration and is likely to underestimate illegal figures. Rootless and distracted, the crowds, homeless and migrants of the contemporary world live intense and accelerating lives.

ITEM TWO In February 2007, Greenpeace issued a press release condemning Microsoft for the release of their new operating system Vista, on the basis that it would precipitate a mass trade-in of older computers. The Basel Action Network's 2002 report *Exporting Harm: The Techno-Trashing of Asia* estimated that between 1997 and 2007 more than 500 million obsolete computers would enter the waste cycle, releasing billions of pounds of lead, chromium, cadmium and mercury. The report was instrumental in the establishment of the Basel Convention banning the export of hazardous waste to heavily polluted recycling villages across Asia (a convention which only three countries have failed to sign: Haiti, Afghanistan, and the United States of America, which was estimated to trash 6,000 computers daily in 2002). Our digital machines – laptops, desktops and mobiles – are subject to a level of built-in obsolescence unheard of since the US automobile industry of the 1950s.

ITEM THREE Paolo Cherchi Usai of the Australian Film Archive estimated about 9 billion hours of film and television content produced across the world in 1999, a total which would require every man woman and child in Australia to spend eight hours a day, seven days a week to view. Meanwhile the Berkeley *How Much Information* project, which guesstimates

the amount of data produced in 2002 on the basis of a calculation incorporating the numbers of rolls of film, magnetic media, optical storage and paper produced, suggests that annual global information production is of the order of 20 exabytes (ten to the eighteenth power). The world's archives are incapable of storing such wealth, even if they could guarantee that the machines required to recover it could themselves be archived. Michael Ignatieff is one of the more articulate public intellectuals to bemoan the five-minute attention span, a figure which may well be diminishing to judge from the stickiness figures for even the most successful internet sites (two to three minutes in the case of the leading Australian newspapers: *The Age* 16 Feb 2007).

ITEM FOUR Discussions among historians and archivists of digital media arts at the Re:refresh conference in Banff late in 2005 suggested that ephemerality may be an integral factor in digital media arts; and that some form of (accidental or deliberate) canon formation, or at the least a system of random sampling (as already employed for long-running drama, news and sport genres in national television archives) is not only necessary but inevitable. Media critics at the event were urged to recognise their responsibility for what they celebrated: both for their choices of what to document, and for the detailed verbal description of the things they look at, given that the written word has a higher chance of survival than any of our more modern media, and might guide future attempts to reconstruct the contemporary media which we can confidently expect that the future will have lost, in the same way we have already lost Ivan Sutherland's *Sketchpad* and other pioneering works.

Artistic strategies in contemporary media arts have to operate across this volatile landscape, a volatility only increased by the art world's interest in the latest thing, and its readiness to shed investments in artists and movements that have passed their sell-by date. For many artists, it is a question of contemplating the ephemerality of their works, and making art that is addressed precisely to the present moment. This mode of ephemerality has been endemic to DJ and VJ culture for a decade, a process which allies them to more ancient traditions of performance and the performing arts. In certain respects, it may be perceived as a position of weakness. As temporary autonomous zone, the DJ set and the dance community it generates can offer a flavour of that 'realm of freedom' that otherwise we can have only cold intellectual foreshadowings of. But the art is tactical; it comes from the position of the weak. It cannot challenge for the high ground of the temporal regime or social chronoscape that is administered as perpetual present by global capitalism.

Perhaps more damning is the accusation that the dance floor TAZ is no more than the hedonistic privilege of the cosmopolitan elite, that its release is no more than a ritualised and commodified form of proletarian carnival, and that by its repetitions (the internal repetitions of the event and the external repeatability of the event itself) it annuls the future-oriented or history-blasting traditions of carnival in favour of a narcotic and de-differentiating mantra of peace, love, unity and respect. The visual arts' equivalent of these intense phenomenological events might be the distracted barrage of Flash animations, designer calling cards and video spoofs that form the onedotzero family of events and increasingly inform the aesthetics of YouTube.

While this may be too hard a critique of the dancefloor and design cultures of the turn of the millennium, it opens up by overstatement the possibility of clarifying an otherwise nice distinction between the ephemeral and the transient. Ephemerality is mayfly art, often knowingly so, art that pitches into the maelstrom of contemporary experience and perhaps tries to pry open an Adornian chink of otherness, either to make the darkness bearable, or to produce an inkling of what a different world might be like. Transient media, on the other hand, are media that articulate, and articulate with, the experience of transience, by which I mean a dialectically opposite experience, one in which the present is uniquely that which is never entirely inhabited. Ephemerality is an art of the perpetual present; transience is an art of the evacuated present, the present as transient, and as transition. The loss of place bemoaned by Augé and Virilio led to art dedicated to the making of places. Discovering the loss of the present has led to a new art of making present. But as invented places are no longer the same as traditional ones, so the invented present is no longer the easily inhabited time of our ancestors. The transient is an invention of another kind of present, one in which the past loses its nightmare actuality, its dead weight, to become a storehouse of potential. The present instant is then only ever virtual: the coming to actuality of a past which has become a malleable resource for making a future other than itself.

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Shown initially in somewhat reduced form at Te Manawa Museums Trust in Palmerston North, Aotearoa New Zealand, in 2006-7 and later at the 2007 Venice Biennale, Rachel Rakena and Brett Graham's video sculpture *Aniwaniwa* is built from fibreglass moulds, set with traditionally-derived carved motifs appropriate to treasure boxes, suspended from the ceiling. In each is placed an acrylic dome screen showing projected elements from a bank

of video recordings, for the most part shot underwater with performers in traditional dress. Both artists are Maori. Brett Graham's iwi, Ngati Koroki Kahukura, live around the town of Horahora, where his grandfather was an electrical engineer based at the town's hydro generating station which supplied power for the gold mines at Waihi. Horahora – 'spreading' – was named for the Tainui ancestor Turongo and his wife Mahinarangi, who stopped there to spread the baby garments of their newly born son, Raukawa (founder of Ngati Raukawa), out to dry. Among the source materials are photos of Graham's family as children at the power station. This ancestral and childhood home was flooded in 1947 to provide hydro power for the new generating station at Karapiro. Because hydro plants were still rare in the Aotearoa of the 1940s, the Horahora plant was still supplying power to the grid as the waters poured in to form the new lake. As a last memento, Graham's grandfather left a motto on the dynamo cover: "Kia Kaha ake ake", be forever strong. Local legend had it that the turbines refused to die, even when they were inundated. In an e-mail of 2nd October 2006, Graham notes of the loss of sacred historical sites in the flooding, "I had expected to be moved by this. I had not anticipated being moved by the fact that our people had mourned the loss of the power station and the community it had created."

Across the motifs engaged in the work images of water and domesticity predominate; across them the intensity of the local experience is set in communication with traditions, notably the role of Tangaroa, water and sea, who is also the messenger, Tangaroa piri whare, who brings the news from shore to shore. The video element, like much of the carved work, speaks of riverbanks, and in some imagery of the foreshore, subjects of extremely contemporary relevance to the political landscape of Maori-Pakeha relations, and beyond them the conception of radio frequencies as taonga, traditional treasures like rivers and seas. In these relations of indigenous people to submersion we should read too not only the metaphor of drowned memories but the actuality of global warming and its specific threat to the Polynesian islanders of the Pacific.

I like the domain name for my next project: halo.gen. Aniwaniwa is the name of the rapids formed at Horahora, and means, among other things, 'rainbow' or 'halo'. Launched in 2006, Douglas Bagnall's online artificial intelligence *Cloud Shape Classifier* introduces itself with the cautiously deadpan phrase "Many people would like to see interesting clouds, but lack the spare time in which to look upwards.". The system works on the basis of the mathematicisation of images. Each webcam image is between 800 and 1000 Kilobytes,

which the server reduces to a set of 57 numbers accounting for normal visual qualities such as RGB levels and contrast. Users set up a classifier, a multilayer perceptron neural network, which further reduces the 57 numbers to one, which "which is used as a measure of goodness". Invented in 1957 and first demonstrated in 1960 by Frank Rosenblatt of the Cornell Aeronautical Laboratory, the perceptron was one of the first tools invented in artificial intelligence research. Comprising an input layer and an output layer, with all nodes interconnected, the perceptron applies a 'weighting' to each connection, weightings which can be altered through a process of training based on adding more 'weight' to connection patterns which approximate a desired result. Objects of Minsky and Papert's infamous assault on network solutions to artificial intelligence in their 1969 book *Perceptrons: An Introduction to Computational Geometry*, perceptrons fell out of favour for over a decade until brought back under the sobriquet of Hopfield networks. Multilayer perceptrons as used in Bagnall's AI differ in having non-linear activation functions, modelled on biological brain functions, which allow them to distinguish non-linear data: like clouds.

Hand coded on a Linux box, *Cloud Shape Classifier* might be seen as a low-tech parody of the wilder claims of the AI community. What makes a cloud 'good'? What is the meaning of training a machine to find 'good clouds'? The idea of training is multiplied in the network, where each classifier has access to several networks, each subject to mutation of the originating pattern from the user – "guesses" as to what might be a suitable cloud. The networks that most closely match the user's choices are nurtured. The idea is that the user will inculcate their taste in clouds into the classifier. Of course, most users seem to come in with no idea of what that taste might be. Some classifiers have names suggesting they have been deliberately training for a specific outcome: dark clouds, for example, or images tinged with the rose light of sunset (or is it dawn?). But at this stage you begin to ponder where the user who has so little time to look at the sky gets the time to train her surrogate. Wouldn't it, after all, be just as good to go outside and, well, look at the sky?

In 2006, a gallery version of the piece was installed as part of the *isea2006 / ZeroOne* festival in San Jose, and in 2007 as part of the Shanghai Science and Art exhibition. In his notes to the gallery version Bagnall notes that 'You see the same clouds as on the web'. Which begs another question: what is the specificity of the camera involved? Where is it? How come it's always daylight? Is the camera ever close to the user? Would they see the same sky if they went outside and looked up? Would it matter? The sky is one of our greatest emblems of freedom. Even in the 21st century, weather has an autonomy that no

other part of the planet has maintained, now we know about the Great Pacific Trash Island, and the mercury levels in the Antarctic. No matter where you stand, the same sky is above you. Under the sky we are all equal. But then, so are all places. The database, however constantly refreshed, is at heart a storage medium. These clouds have been: but they no longer are. My guess is that behind the dry humour – based in some sense of the disjunctions between a training in taste, the pretensions of AI, and the ubiquity of both the web and galleries as place-neutral frames for experience – the loss of a contemporaneous moment for looking up at the sky is the central theme of the work, and the reason why it is more than the humorous candy-floss that first appears. This uncertainty about place distinguishes the pakeha sensibility as a settler culture, one whose relationships are more deeply with what is common and, as with the sky, universal to all humanity, and far, far less to the lived currents of history, aqueous and electric, which flow through Graham and Rakena's work.

Heath Bunting's *BorderXing*, commissioned in 2002 by the Tate Gallery and the Musée d'Art Moderne Luxembourg and undertaken in collaboration with Kate Brandon, is a document of illegal crossings of European borders together with a guide to people wishing to do the same. Everyone knows that borders exist to stem the movement of people. Money and commodities have no trouble moving from country to country. By the same token, everyone knows that the internet does not respect borders. Which is why it is so frustrating to discover, if you live in the USA, Western Europe, Canada or Australia, that the site is barred to you unless you present yourself at one of the accredited computers which the site recognises.

*Cloud Shape Classifiers* warns its users "The cookie your browser uses to identify itself to the server consists of an SHA-1 hash of your username, password, and some other text. It doesn't change between sessions. Passwords are initially sent in plaintext and end up in the server logs. This means it is quite possible (though unlikely) for someone between you and the server to masquerade as you and train your classifier to like horrible clouds, and just a little bit harder for them to discover your password. So don't use your banking password." and advises "Your cloud secrets are not especially safe." It is a jokey way of recognising the dialectic of secrecy and openness which operates throughout the internet. Vast tracts of netspace are closed, either by password protection or by firewalls denying access to unregistered users. Military, governmental, networked intranets, business-to-business and corporate sites and password-protected services (including much of the

academic publishing industry) head the list, far ahead of the 5 per cent or so of unallocated IP addresses used by spammers and in denial-of-service attacks. Early networks like Milnet have never formed part of the internet, in the sense that they have never been inter-networked. The myth of open access is a key target of *BorderXing's* online strategy. Where would-be migrants have to make their way to uncomfortably distant offices to get permission to cross a border, *BorderXing's* users have to make their way to networked hosts that may be far away – often in another country – and locate the fixed-IP computer in institutions often marked simply as "The University of Cambridge". Meanwhile the inhabitants of Botswana can get access: a demonstration of another myth of network culture: that the network does not know where a user's computer is. Underneath lies the dispute over top-level domain names which split the UN's Tunis World Summit on the Information Society. Lisa Jevbratt's 1999-2001 [*every: access*] already pointed elegantly to the phenomenon: each pixel, colour coded for a different IP address, links onward, and a vast number return closed server messages. Keeping *BorderXing* out of the public domain makes it even clearer that human movement, illegal movement, is freer than information after all.

Some elements of the *BorderXing* project are however in the public domain. The publication of the *Extracts from the Botanical Guide to BorderXing* gives, for example, the following description of wild strawberries:

A DELICATE, thin-leaved plant, has a white five petal flower, and then like jewels,scarlet berries,cone-shaped and studded with tiny,brown seeds.  
THE ULTIMATE AIM of postmodern border management is above all the filtering of presumably useful from non-useful border crossers.Wild Strawberries tend to choose positions of shelter in open meadows, along streams, light woodland and some grasslands.  
EDIBLE AND DELICIOUS; make use of food and water along the way.Obtain local currency before entering country.

It is hard not to visualise a refugee waiting their chance to sneak across, lying in a hedgerow, with this evidence of their very precise coordinates in time and space occupying their whole attention and affection while they wait for the propitious moment to move. And to imagine the same political and practical thoughts running through their minds about why they wait, and what awaits them.

For indigenous, settler and migrant cultures, places operate very differently. Creating places in digital media is always a matter of transience for all three. This is not only a matter of the ephemerality of the medium. It concerns the relationship between the user

and the artefact. The transient places created in digital media are not traditional, even when they draw on and place themselves in relation to tradition. Human life, Vilém Flusser argues in the essay "We Need a Philosophy of Experience", is contingent, dependent on the nature and culture where we find ourselves. The escape from this condition of contingency is irony, 'This place that is free of things' (21).

The movement into irony is an act of outrage. And with this motion a person rises above contingency. Movement away from irony is a form of engagement. With this motion the person returns to his state of contingency to change it. These two movements taken together are called freedom. Human beings are free because with this inexplicable and unpredictable movement they are able to become outraged about their contingency and to change it. Because of this potential, we are virtually free, and when we complete this action we are actually free (21-2)

The works presented here are ironic in the sense that they take a step outside the contingent. They turn the resources of the past into ironic commentaries on the present's contingency upon the past. They provide the grounds on which a future can emerge other than the eternal present of the circulation of commodities. Flusser offers to name the flight into irony emigration, and the return from it immigration. The exchange of one contingency for another is the possibility of irony, and of a critical commitment to the home or host culture. Of course, this will never be happy or safe. Rakana and Graham's work is not ironic in itself: it is a response to the ironic dis-placing of indigenous Maori culture which has uprooted their ancestral and modern contingency upon nature and culture. Bagnall describes the Nietzschean moment in which the settler is free *from* the European heritage, but has not, or not yet, committed to the host sky under which they now have their being. Bunting refuses the ease of uncommitted travel, uncommitted browsing, but slyly reveals both the artifice and the actuality of migration. Nonetheless it is the specific freedom of the migrant, whether in deep reflection on the changing contingencies of indigeneity, the critical observation of the settler's unhappy lack of commitment, or the revisioning of migration against the rise of protocol as the typical informatic regime of contemporary power. Transience is not only the opposite of ephemerality: it is the opposite of contingency. Such freedom as the migrant has is the freedom each of these artists in their own appropriate ways explores: the deep curtailment of freedom which we demand of ourselves, when we recognise that personal freedom is worth nothing without ending the

dependence of both home and host on the nightmare of history under industrial capital, or the eternity of the present under globalisation.

## References

Blount, Anna (2003), *Borders & Identity: A Discourse on Selected Works by Heath Bunting* 4/12/2003, [http://www.irational.org/irational/media/borders\\_identity.html](http://www.irational.org/irational/media/borders_identity.html)