

Wrestling with Proteus: Net Art, the Antipodes and Beyond

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He will seek to foil you by taking the shape of every creature
that moves the earth, and of water and of portentous fire.

The Odyssey, iv, 415-417

You thought the leaden winter would bring you down
forever,

But you rode upon a steamer to the violence of the sun.

Cream, "*Tales of brave Ulysses*"

In 1967, the English rock band *Cream* produced their second album,
Disraeli Gears. Along with such classics as "Strange Brew" and
"Sunshine of your Love," the album also featured a song that, in the
idiom of psychedelic rock, revisited a very old story. That song,
"Tales of Brave Ulysses," celebrated the epic journey of Ulysses on

his return to Greece from the Trojan wars. Much of the song, like *The Odyssey* of Homer on which it was based, features the ocean as a turbulent force with which Ulysses must do battle, a force equal in character and strength to the Cyclops and the other supernatural beings he encounters on his seven year journey home. One of these was Proteus, son of Poseidon, the slippery, shape-changing sea god who never assumed a fixed form long enough to be useful to the weary traveler in search of information. Proteus is an appropriate figure to signal the idea of liquid identity that I want to explore in this essay. Along with the image of the ocean as an immense, shifting frontier of discovery and exploration, of separation and connection, Proteus is a useful metaphor for framing this discussion of Australian net art and the ways in which these artists have approached the internet as an aesthetic space.

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When *Cream* vocalist Jack Bruce was extolling the tales of brave Ulysses in 1967, the generation of Australian new media artists represented in *Under_score* was in its infancy. At that time there was no such thing as the internet and the rest of the world was, well, a world away, achieved via flight, ocean passage or telecommunications. The internet has dramatically revolutionized social and spatial relations throughout the world. From the point of view of living in Australia, the internet has without question made the

world a smaller place. Perhaps not yet a "global village," it has nonetheless extended the work of existing telecommunications – telephony, television, radio – in eliminating the vast distances separating Australia from the rest of the world. Historically, Australia's geographical location in relation to the rest of the world represented the paradigm of remoteness, a binary of presence (here) and absence (there). It is this remoteness that convergent technologies, such as the internet, offer the promise to overcome. The opposition between here and there, culturally entrenched as a determinant of identity, was succinctly captured for posterity in Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey's signature phrase, "the tyranny of distance." Australia was the antipodes, the opposite side of the earth. The origins of the term "antipodes" can be traced to the Renaissance age of ocean exploration and colonial expansion, to the time when Australia was discovered and identified as a British colonial territory on the other side of the world. Australian identity, up to at least the first fifty years of the twentieth century, was defined in terms of British culture. As an outpost of the British empire, Australia reproduced the values of its "home" country. Students of literature (or English Literature, to be precise), for example, exclusively studied the writing of British authors, which imparted the timeless wisdom of pastoral life and domestic manners. Timeless and wise, perhaps, but of little relevance to the realities of living in an island continent in the southern hemisphere. It was very

difficult to gain recognition of anything actually produced in Australia, as Australians themselves were in the grip of what was called the "cultural cringe," a powerful sense of inferiority, a loathing of anything produced locally. Culture, real culture, was to be the reflection of a remote, patrician homeland called England.

Things are a little different now. Australian identity has thrown off the shackles of its colonial heritage. A new found sense of worth in what it meant to be Australian was forged out of the post-war period, in which Australian art and literature played a decisive role in re-defining the antipodes, re-conceiving life at the other end of the world. No longer the tyrant to be overcome on the way to somewhere else, the ocean started to emerge as a way of defining Australia in cultural terms. It was a positive geographical feature to be identified with, rather than the force alienating Australians from the rest of the world. Telecommunications played a decisive role in changing the ways in which Australia sees itself in relation to the world and the internet has consolidated this. The internet, as has been noted many times, resembles ancient conceptions of the universe as a space lacking a circumference and whose center is everywhere. Australia is part of this emergent global utopia, this spatial nowhere, in which the local and the remote are one and the same thing. Colonial notions of empire don't hold up too well in such a world.

In a remarkable essay on the links between Australian identity and telecommunications, McKenzie Wark argues that the psycho-social experience of being defined by the ocean, a vast space to be traversed on the way to somewhere else, has been dramatically changed by the techniques of telesthesia, or perception at a distance. The most recent and dramatic of these, the internet, has displaced the very notion of the local into the abstract space of a different kind of flow, not of water but data, the flow of digital information. Once the spatial measure of cultural difference, antipodality, as Wark describes the experience of being at the opposite end of the world, has been compressed into the immediacy of being here *and* there. Under such conditions locality is conceived less in terms of place than a constant state of flux, a becoming in which "cultural differences are no longer so tied to the experience of the particularities of place."¹ Although the ocean has been replaced by the network as a space of movement elsewhere, its traces nonetheless persist in the ways theorists have imagined the digital assault on the tyranny of distance. Invoking Hegel's identification of the sea with notions of the indefinite, the unlimited and the infinite, Wark gestures to a concept of identity in which fluidity and multiplicity are the appropriate metaphors for thinking about networked identity.

It would be a risky business to suggest that Australian artists, given their antipodal heritage and contiguity with the sea, have some kind

of cultural patent on liquid identity; as if the experience of fluidity was some kind of cultural unconscious. We are not, to use Francesca da Rimini's tempting image, a "liquid nation." Well, not yet anyway. There is nothing essential or characteristically Australian about the ways in which these artists have understood or interpreted what the net has to offer identity and the concept of embodiment. However it is reasonable to assert that Australian artists working in an online environment have embraced the virtual non-space of the net as an unfamiliar, unsettling, yet enticing space of abstraction.

The idea of cyberspace as an otherworldly world-within-the-world, or an architecture of luminous brilliance, like a celestial city, have become stock figures for imagining where we are when we are online. But so too has the image of an immersive, dimensionless void that is not subject to the limitations of perspective, geometry and gravity. Melinda Rackham's *empyrean* suggestively brings this void to life by investing the two-dimensional screen with an illusory depth of field and boundless peripheral vision. The title of this work invokes an ancient notion of a zone of fire to suggest an immaterial environment that is at once intimate and immense, familiar and sublime.

empyrean is an interconnected series of penumbral, atmospheric worlds, as sheer and translucent as gossamer. The ability to constantly shift viewpoints creates a strange, otherworldly sensation of omniscience. However the deeper we move into these evocative

spaces, the more inaccessible and undiscovered they seem. In this "finite infinity of space," interaction is "flexible and fluxing," an e-scape of "viscous delirium" (to use an appropriately fluid phrase from Rackham's *carrier*, a work that interprets the body as a navigable zone or space of ethereal strangeness). In using VRML (Virtual Reality Modeling Language) as the architectural and navigational basis for this work, Rackham has created a tantalizing *trompe-l'oeil* that invests our visual perception of movement with bodily sensations of flying, yawing, gliding and floating. This synaesthesia, or interpretation of one sense in terms of another, intensifies the experience of the work as an exploration of a pulsing infinity of space.

It is a curious feature of the work represented in *Under_score* that themes to do with identity and disembodiment are distinctly protean in character, suggestive of change, transfiguration and mutation. Once upon a time, only Homeric heroes of extraordinary conviction could succeed in solidifying Proteus into embodiment, long enough to secure the information required to continue on their journey. Net artists have inherited something of this ability to capture and inflect the dynamic force of the old sea god's resistance to singular identity, to a fixed bodily form. This ambiguous, contradictory act of capturing flux is suggested in *SAND LINES* and *chromos*, the time-based, cellular automata of Paul Brown. These elegant, minimalist works

simulate the processes of generation in living systems, resembling chromosome strands, bacteria-like colonies and cellular activity.

Brown's ever-changing shapes work on the principle of variation within a finite set, enacting the vitality common to organic and artificial life. Brown's particles are a kind of primal matter and their status as life is constituted not in any material sense, but rather in their organization, their relentless and unpredictable permutation.

Here are microscopic glimpses of artificial life, whose medium is the abstraction of digital code rather than the petri dish.

It is an important telecommunicative fact of life in Australia that the net has contributed to an ongoing perception of a breakdown of the tyranny of distance (though the internet still has a long way to go to deliver the promises made on its behalf, the promises of universal access and global connectivity). It has, though, had a decisive impact on the hierarchical structure of center and periphery (remember, net space lacks a circumference and its center is everywhere). In contemporary discussions of identity and sexuality, to be marginal, rather than central, stands for a reclaimed empowerment in the name of a subversive politics. The work of Francesca da Rimini is an uncompromising incursion into the exploration of these politics, an extreme, often aggressive inscription of female identity as polymorphous, perverse and fucking dangerous. A founding member of the cyberfeminist collective VNS Matrix, da Rimini's work has been

actively committed to challenging and destabilizing the dominant, masculine stereotypes of centralized identity, power and control, particularly in respect to social exchange on the net. A key text, in this respect, is VNS Matrix's much quoted *Cyberfeminist Manifesto* of 1993, in which the struggle for identity and power is waged against the corporate monolith of Big Daddy Mainframe. Alarmed that the net is just another male dominated arena, da Rimini's work is determinedly adversarial and oppositional to the replication on the net of the sexual stereotypes of "real life." But it is also empowering as well, identifying the net as a space of reclamation for feminine identity, sexuality and eroticism. It is difficult and unwise, then, to discuss da Rimini's work in terms of discrete texts (*Dollspace*, *Identity_Runners*), as the *GashGirl* site is a serial, autographical space of interconnected, multimedia tableaux vivants. The one called "da Rimini" is a changeling and her various online personae, Doll Yoko, Puppet Mistress, the ghost, GashGirl, shift and weave through disconnected email dialogues, journal entries, strident manifestos and slogans, resisting singularity, celebrating difference. Da Rimini's aesthetic style of juxtaposing images with truncated, abrupt snippets of text, or devoting an entire screen to an aphorism or email message, endows her work with a collage-like beauty. Yet it is a beauty born of dislocated, often decontextualized images, interrupted sentences and unfinished narratives. This is a site in which the center does not hold. *GashGirl* articulates a disruptive, anarchic joy in the

"pleasures of the virtual flesh," a reveling in abstract sexuality that is at once welcoming and threatening: "Suck my code, baby!"

What kind of identity is implied in a virtual environment, the presence of networked communications? Identity, traditionally understood, is aligned with notions of presence, that which we carry around with us as corporeal beings. Virtual or terminal identity, as it is also described, suggests a profound and radical disembodiment, a notional, rather than physical presence, existing, somewhere, in the non-space of the net. Think of a telephone conversation to clarify the idea of two absent bodies communicating within a shared, consensual presence that we can describe as virtual: while you might be "there" and I might be "here" in a physical sense during a telephone conversation, where are "we"? Within a phone conversation, though, there is still "the grain of the voice," a trace of the physical presence of the speaker. On the net, the voice is represented in the silent inscriptions of text on a screen, by "signs on a white field." In this virtual sense of identity, text is a stand in for our physical presence, a surrogate representing our absent presence. In this sense, identity is decentered, separated from the physical presence of the speaker.

But even more than this, virtual identity can be an unsettling experience of fragmentation. The flow of digital information is never reliable. As Norbert Wiener, the founder of cybernetics, once observed, "All information has a tendency to leak in transit." When

identity is represented by the detour of the sign, by words on a screen, the process of decentering is ongoing and unpredictable. "I can't begin to describe what this does to my body," declares a troubled criminologist in Jason Sweeney's disturbing work of forensic aesthetics, *The Last to See Them Alive*. Shattered images of blood smeared youths coupled in erotic violence, reminiscent of Francis Bacon's gritty homages to Muybridge, are refracted through various protocols of representation associated with online desire and seduction (such as text-based chat spaces and "pick-up" joints). In seeking to interpret the exact nature of the scene, the narrator confronts the reality of disembodiment, the fragmentation of the body as it is distributed and dispersed across networks by technologies of surveillance. Sweeney is interested in the tele-visual dimension of the net, which, as opposed to words, at least offers likenesses, images of people. In particular, he is interested in the fuzzy, dithering visuality of web-cam streaming, which foregrounds the reduction of what were once whole bodies into pixels, cubist-like shapes that never fully reconstitute what they represent in their transmission. The body is, in a figurative sense anyway, reduced to bits. So, too, is any information that might be derived from the various textual and visual representations of a sexual encounter gone awry.

Fragmentation, as an index of place, home and identity, is also

imagined in *rice*; a lyrical, iconographic meditation on a white Australian woman's experience of post-colonial Vietnam. This experience is not represented by a narrative or travelogue, but is gestured to in terms of fragmentary memorabilia, such as gum wrappers, beer coasters, dice, a pressed flower. These ephemera trigger memories of a journey into a heart of darkness, a neighboring Asian country recovering from the ravages of war and incorporated into a power regime of which Australia was a contributing force. *rice* is suggestive of a kind of reverse antipodality, in that a proximate, besieged country is defined in relation to a dominant Australia. This is suggested in the way the work's author, Jenny Weight, has phoneticized her name (geniwate). In reverting to the base, phonetic dimension of language, geniwate eschews the arbitrary symbolism of written English, which abstracts the visual from the phonetic, from the fundamental act of speaking. It is a defiant act, an act of refusal to conform. It is also an act of identification with a subordinate culture, a culture defined as other by a dominant English speaking nation.

Identity, in this sense, is contingent. That is, it is conditional upon the complex dynamics of race, ethnicity, gender and nationality. While such factors are givens, to the degree that we "identify" ourselves in relation to a nation or a culture, they are not necessarily fixed. As *rice* attests, unexpected or dramatic change can impinge

upon who and what we are, or what we might, or might not, want to become. What is dominant can become other in an instant, and vice versa. Gary Zebington dramatizes this shifting dynamic in his transfiguring Rorschach blot, *Fossil*. Responsive to what visitors to the site see in it, the Fossil's sense of itself, of its identity, is either confirmed or undermined by the subjective inflections of visitors interacting with it. In this respect, the way in which *Fossil* interprets identity in terms of the reflections of others (a very antipodal concept), suggests that identity is not an essence, but is rather something that evolves in response to the perceptions of others. This notion of an evolutionary, responsive identity is resonant with the theme of fluidity and change. However it is modified by the lack of its own will in determining change. The Fossil's sense of itself is caught up in a kind of feedback loop, recognizing, in the interactions of every new visitor, perceptions of itself that have been noted before and stored in its memory. Its identity is nothing more than what Zebington calls a "reliquary of recorded perceptions." This idea, that we are what others see in us, recalls the notion of antipodal identity discussed earlier, in which the colonial self mirrors the cultural identity of a remote other. An inverse Proteus, who could change shape and identity with the force of his own will, Zebington's *Fossil* ossifies into a cache of received ideas and perceptions, a sterile, collective consciousness in which freedoms of appearance (ironically the import of a Rorschach test) are eliminated.

Contrariwise (the protean impulse easily accommodates opposites), the idea of difference and fragmentation is celebrated as enriched proliferation in the transformative hypertextual writing of *_the data* *[h!]* *[bleeding texts_*. It would be a nonsense to attribute an author to this work, as the concept of the author, with its connotations of origin and presence, don't sit well with the discontinuous poetics of Mez (a.k.a Mary-Anne Breeze, another shape-changer). Mez's e-deographic writing literalizes the dispersive nature of the network, elongating and dismembering language into an unreadable, unrecognizable syntax that is, surprisingly, rich and full of meaning. It is replete with puns, double entendres, indeterminate meanings and unexpected dislocations. Words are broken up into syllables, then broken down even further to particles. Mez's writing fuses the idea of the hypertextual with the abstraction of code, signaled in the prolific use of diacritic marks, such as brackets, apostrophes and underscores. The ungraspable, elusive quality of electronic writing achieves its most dramatic form in the exasperating dysrhythmia of *e.Motion.all. Weapon..Load.er*. In this frenetic work, we are confronted with a concussive experience of an interface that, like Proteus, literally eludes any attempt to be pinned down and interacted with. We have become so accustomed to point and click at things we are interacting with in the space of the screen. This work knows this and refuses to co-operate in any way.

"The nature of the universe," observed the 2nd century Roman orator Antonius Marcus, "delights not in anything so much as to alter all things, and present them under another form." No doubt inspired by epic tales of ocean travel and protean struggle, such a remark invokes a contingent, chaotic universe in which primal matter is volatile; a universe that is very familiar to our contemporary age of complexity. Net life is a constant commingling of strange attraction, though not all artists agree on its utopian possibilities. In thinking about what happens to us when we are online, John Tonkin, in his aptly named *meniscus*, uses the idea of physiognomy – the belief that it is possible to "read" a person's identity in their facial characteristics – as a metaphor for the human-computer interface. In both *meniscus* and *Personal Eugenics*, Tonkin satirizes the doctrine of technological progress, the promise of bodily transformation through bio-technics. His DIY (Do It Yourself) menu of characteristics, qualities and attributes enables the user to "Achieve in only seconds what would take nature generations." Interactivity and digital manipulation are, for Tonkin, parodic analogues of processes of natural selection: the pixel is to personal image manipulation what primal matter is to genetics. Tonkin's archive of modified faces and bodies is something of a bestiary, a net age version of the cabinet of curiosities, the freak-show and the beautician's salon. This vision of technology as aberration is the nightmare of being digital. Liquid identity, far from being a benefit or desirable outcome, is seen as a

form of monstrosity.

The idea of the perverse, mutational outcomes of technological progress underpins the dystopic, absurd world of Ian Haig's *Web Devolution*. In Haig's garish web-world of crackpot cults and technologically over-identified geeks, humanity is devolving at an alarming rate. The key indicator of this devolution seems to be an exaggerated exploitation of the web as a global platform for personal evangelism. In this *Web Devolution* is as much about web sites and the people who make them than anything else. It samples all the clichés of home-spun web design, from appalling color sense and typography, scrolling text and overdone animation, to excessive interactivity and proliferating hypertext links. This is digital connectivity gone mad, a prolixity which suggests that a little HTML in the wrong hands can go a long, long way. *Web Devolution's* promise of "Evolutionary New Bodies" smacks of a weirdo sensibility that has spent too much time watching *Star Wars* movies, playing *Dungeons and Dragons* and surfing the web for updates on doomsday. The "super connected individual" of *Web Devolution* is not the data angel of the cyber-celestial city, nor the liquid identity of the data-stream, but rather the ugly face of extremism and fanaticism: a mutant who not only believes in Heavens Gate, but is convinced that Elvis is already on board.

To return, then, to where we began. The local and the remote are the decisive terms of exchange on the net. Every center is a periphery, every periphery a center, the two terms commingling in the anti-spatial ecology of the net. From wherever you look at it, this is antipodality by any other name, in any other language. To acknowledge this is to recognize that antipodality is not, in advance, a distinctly Australian experience. It is a recognition of τ η λ ε (tele), that which is far off, the distance that bedevils communication beyond the range of physical presence: a distance, before telecommunications, as dramatic across the Atlantic ocean as the Pacific or, in a more distant time and space, the Aegean. This distance, for a time, situated Australia at the opposite end of the world. Now it is a distance on the way to disappearance. The works brought together in *Under_score* may well be from artists down under, but they demonstrate, eloquently, humorously, sometimes violently, that the terrestrial co-ordinates of longitude and latitude don't hold much truck in the ambience of cyberspace. The underscore in *Under_score* is an enigmatic cypher of this global *terra incognita*, the avatar of telepresence, synthesizing difference into proximity, yet retaining the traces of that difference:

ε βειψαμε λν τθρν α βεαρθεδλιον, α σνακε, α αντηερ, α
 μονστροθσ βοαρπηεν ρθννινγ σατερ ²

[1] McKenzie Wark, Suck on this, planet of noise! (Version

1.2), in David Bennet, ed., *Cultural studies: Pluralism and theory*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993, p.164.

[2] "He became in turn a bearded lion, a snake, a panther, a monstrous boar; then running water."

The Odyssey, trans. Walter Shewring. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, iv, 457-459.

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www.bam.org/under_score