New Media,
Doctor Future

I am attending a smart cheese and wine party hosted by the Arts Council and one of their corporate sponsors when it is announced that the director of a well known North American art centre is present and is looking for new proposals for their artists fellowship programme. I have an idea that could do with some 'institutional support' so I decide to forego the race for the vol-au-vent and cross the room to introduce myself. I begin to explain my exciting new method of image synthesis but do not get very far before she makes her position clear.

"Is your project internet based?"

"No..."

"Is it multimedia?"

"er...no..."

"Well those are the only projects we do now".

In the corner of my eye I can see someone skewering the last savoury parcel.

In 1995 the grand daddy of electronic arts prizes, the *Prix Ars Electronica*, decided to drop its 'computer-graphik' still image category after suggestions in previous jury statements of a 'tiredness of creativity' and speculations on whether this form had 'outlived itself'. That year it was duly replaced by the new World Wide Web category. In addition, the computer animation section became increasingly dominated by special effects feature films selected by a jury made up largely of members of commercial production companies. Amidst timid jury statements questioning the wisdom of having to compare half a dozen Hollywood films made by Industrial Light and Magic with a short sequence made by a lone artist working out of their bedroom, Prix Ars reinforced the feeling that artists had gradually abandoned 'older' forms of 'new' media for the safety of emerging 'cutting edge' technologies before they too are 'professionalised'.

This year, the ISEA'98 revolution symposium distinctly positioned itself at the forefront of radical arts practice, brazenly featuring this quote on its call for proposals — "the opposition of writer and artist is one of the forces which can usefully contribute to the discrediting and overthrow of regimes which are destroying, along with the right of the proletariat to aspire to a better world, every sentiment of nobility and even of human dignity". Against this heady rhetoric, the invitation for exhibition proposals to ISEA '98 contained no mention of either still image work nor film and video art in its list of entry formats, presumably relegating such outdated forms to an earlier era of 'pre-revolutionary' practice.

So we are left to infer, perhaps, that a new medium can only sustain a period of true artistic innovation and challenge for a limited time before it is exhausted of radical ideas and has to leave centre stage. The new incarnation of progressive arts practice then rises into the sky on the wings of blue sky research labs while its decaying predecessors have their bones picked clean of creative meat by the vultures of venture capitalism. Film art begat video art begat computer art begat inter-activity begat the WWW. This cycle of birth and death has now assumed a familiar logic — artists need not worry as the routes of access to media production are closed off by the mainstream commissioning policies of the commercial industry. They need only wait for the next wave of media to appear and then to seize that window of critical intervention to undermine capitalist social relations before the corporations know what's hit them. The only article of faith that this requires is that technological progress march inexorably onwards, generating the raw material that can be used to subvert its own previously recuperated incarnations. Political innovation requires technical innovation.

The theoretical justification for this attitude is given in terms of art as a 'transformative practice' or aiming at a 'functional transformation'. It is a direct reference to Walter Benjamin's famous materialist theory of revolutionary art practice. This is expressed most concisely in his *The Author as Producer* lecture of 1934 where he formulates it in terms of a distinction between an art work that supplies a social production apparatus and an art work that tries to change a social production apparatus. What this means in effect is that it is not enough for, let's say, a writer to criticise the capitalist system in words if he or she continues to use a capitalist form of cultural production to publish those words. Benjamin warns that bourgeois culture is very capable of absorbing all kinds of revolutionary ideas without at any time allowing those ideas to threaten its power. Instead of publishing political arguments in the usual academic form of books and scholarly articles, the socialist writer should use new forms that change the writer's production relations, especially their relation with their audience, the proletariat. The newspaper, pamphlet, poster or radio broadcast were the most appropriate media in Benjamin's time because they could be used to reach a mass audience and avoid patterns of traditional cultural consumption that were rooted in class structure. What matters most in the political effectiveness of an art work is not the 'tendency' of its content but the effect on production relations of its 'technique'.

In contemporary times this translates into an oppositional arts practice which uses the most advanced materials of its time to demonstrate in a concrete way the direction in which society should be progressing. It challenges currently accepted notions of production, authorship and creativity by using new media to show how electronic distribution changes exhibition, interactivity changes authorship, sampling changes creativity. Technology is shown to possess the power to restructure these production relations and alter what people had previously taken for granted. And whenever production relations threaten to ossify into restrictive ideologies as newspapers are merged by press barons and radio airwaves are regulated then they can be blasted apart again by the socialising potential of each further technical development that can be applied to the mass media. All of which is fine except for the fact that this is not entirely what Benjamin meant.

Later on in his lecture Benjamin goes on to discuss some explicit examples of the effects of 'technical innovation' on the political function of culture. He use quotes from the musician and Brecht collaborator Hanns Eisler to show that concert hall music has entered a crisis caused by the advent of recording technologies which change the relation between performer and audience. "The gramophone record, the sound film, the nickelodeon can...market the world's best musical productions in canned form...The crisis of concert hall music is the crisis of a form of production made obsolete and overtaken by new technical innovations." But we are told that this is not sufficient by itself to transform music into a politically potent form—strategies such as the addition of literary elements like words are also necessary to help overcome social effects such as the breaking down of culture into isolated specialisations that occurs under capitalism. It is the transformation of this bourgeois musical form through words, 'interruptions,' 'making strange,' quotation and other modernist methods that eventually leads it to the form that Benjamin finds most exemplary—Brecht's Epic Theatre.

What is technically innovative about Brecht's theatre? It is not cinema, is is not radio, it is not mass media. But it does change the relationship with its audience, not by using film or broadcasting technology directly, but by adopting their 'techniques'. The principle technique is montage, the ability of modern media to fragment perception and then recombine it. In Brecht's theatre this is absorbed in the form of 'interruptions' to the dramatic action in order to create 'conditions' presented to the spectator that require a 'dialectical' response. In this way montage is

Old Technology

employed as an 'organising function' as opposed to a 'modish technique' used merely to stimulate the viewer's fascination. So we see that the actual works that Benjamin is interested in use new techniques at a variety of levels which can include different media, perceptual modes, 'organising functions' and aesthetic considerations. Contrary to using the latest technological means, Brecht is described instead of returning to the ancient origins of theatre, turning the stage into a simple podium for exposing present behaviour and conditions. New technique does not mean new technology.

Today we see digital artists driven onwards to become multimedia artists to become net artists and in their wake they leave a trail of unresolved experiments and re-stagings, unable to develop an idea through before the next software upgrade is announced. As if 'earlier' forms of new media had been 'outlived', no longer able to express the forms of subjectivity that are now experienced. But by picking up any magazine or observing any street advert we can clearly see that on the contrary commercial design and photography has continued to exploit and push the still image form way past the stage where many artists abandoned it in their move on to more 'revolutionary' media. Through this work we can still see the potential of continuing advances in the standard commercial digital software packages like Photoshop which has unfortunately now taken on the status of an office desktop accessory with many artists. The artists that have continued to work in areas that are almost unfunded have shown how much further image and print media can go in producing their own newspapers, fly posters, fax art, graffiti and underground cinema and in experimenting with alternative methods of distribution.

Similarly in moving image production, developments in digital image synthesis are amongst the most advanced technical accomplishments in the world today, but are only ever seen as 'special effects' in feature films or promos, a 'modish' or stylistic use of the medium as the new-as-always-the-same. It seems almost an accepted fact that the sophisticated logics created to structure image events such as dynamic simulation or motion capture can only ever be used for blowing up space ships or for the latest shoot-em-up computer game. It is as though they are perceived as so closely aligned with the interests of Soho art directors that they can never be quite new enough to escape from its orbit. Instead it appears far easier for arts organisations to develop schemes to support work made for a particular piece of hardware or software they have just seen on Tomorrows World than to look one layer below the surface to ask what techniques, like montage in the 1930s, are likely to have an impact on the function of many forms of practice. For it is surely the case that technical and aesthetic develop-

ments in the basic manipulation of sound and image are applicable to a wide range of media generally. Arts centres fall over themselves to attract work designed for the latest internet software, VR environment or multimedia platform but are not willing to consider projects in image or sound making that could radically alter the possibilities of all three.

There is an argument to the effect that by being involved in the early stages of a new medium that artists can exert some influence over the direction in which it develops. By getting in first before mainstream genre forms have had the time to become entrenched it could be possible to indicate alternative patterns, but it is still very difficult for artists to work as maverick researchers against a corporation's ultimate agenda. This approach also implies that media will inevitably develop into a single optimum commercial form without any further hope of an intervention, a kind of commercial determinism. In fact the computer industry seems to be distinguished for its continuing volatility just when everyone thinks the dust has settled.

I am reminded of a story related by Graham Weinbren, the artist who pioneered the use of interactive cinema in the late eighties. He and his brother had developed a system that allowed for real time transitions between different story streams and was demonstrating one of his first pieces to an audience of industry professionals. They were duly impressed by the speed and fluidity of the system and wanted to know the technical specifications. However, when Weinbren revealed that it was based on an old 386 PC, a machine already obsolete even in those days, their interest immediately cooled. The problem was that the logic of the commercial industry demanded that new products were always premised on the notion that they embodied nothing but the latest in technology and manufacturing. To revert back to a previous 'generation' of machines would have introduced an uncomfortable contradiction into that philosophy. Unfortunately this is also a philosophy that has now been taken on by arts organisations that feel that here is an easy way to align themselves with progressive media simply by pointing to new black boxes.

So artists find themselves running to keep still, trying to keep at bay the panic that they will be left behind in the latest hi-tech funding opportunities and consigned to the back room of old media. Condemned to chase a never ending succession of software versions and hardware upgrades, their practice is now so 'transformative' that it never gets past the round of demos and beta tests. By becoming fixated on the receding horizon of technological developments the space for consolidating what has been learnt is lost. The avant garde artist trying to lever an oppositional advantage at the fringes of advanced materials is replaced by the techno artist entrepreneur

providing research and development services for corporate sponsors. There is no reason to develop an idea beyond the point at which it can be sold.

During the seventies and most of the eighties artists that wanted to use computers were obliged always to be working at the frontiers of technology because there was practically no where else to be. Computing machinery was so limited that in a real sense the machine was the artwork because you would always be using it at the very extremes of its abilities. Such was the desire to escape these restrictions that faster and bigger architectures were eagerly sought after and resulted in the feeling that to produce the best art you needed the best computers. Nowadays this principle clearly sounds erroneous, partly due to the fact that desktop computers are so powerful that the 'best' in computing is accessible to the point of being unavoidable. But it has been surreptitiously replaced by a 'softer' version that implies that to work in the newest media you need the newest technology.

The effect is to divert attention from innovations in currently used media by implying that artists can only retain their radical credentials by concentrating on the 'cutting edge' of new technology. And, surprise, surprise, it is exactly this mythic trajectory of technology that commercial companies depend on to motivate the consumption of their endless releases of new products that allow you do the same thing more often. Both are now united in their quest for a Killer Art for the Killer App.