

blackBOX:

Painting A Digital Picture of Documented Memory

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ABSTRACT

BlackBOX[1a]: Painting A Digital Picture of Documented Memory: Digital Identities – The City, Composition & Migration is an experimental interactive disc based & online work authored for delivery on the Internet and site specific installation. This immersive digital story emerges from protagonist Russian/Greek girl's movement through the metropolis. The objective for the player/participant is to explore the interactive Metropolis, through the digital experiences and sensations of the girl, and to discover three metaphoric 'Chinese Boxes' that contain three symbolic performances. The girl is documented making a digital journey from the interior of her urban apartment into the city. The cityscape becoming haunted by traces of her past, the memories projected onto the surfaces of her city. What is the girl searching for and what does she discover in the metropolis? – performances from three 'imagined' Australian diasporic communities, resonating for the girl & making sense of her cultural identity and identification with the culture in which she is immersed. The participant/player is provoked to discover & experiences performances from - (i) Rembetika – the Greek blues; (ii) classical Indian dance & music (Odissi & Kuchipudi traditions); (iii) fragments of Australian jazz performed by musicians from Russian origins. The work is simultaneously a digital archive and a critically reflective documentation of the metamorphosis of traditional cultural and musical forms, given the creative potentials opened up for cultural producers in the digitally manipulated performance, sound, image, and text environment of interactive multimedia.

This research project examines the ways in which discrete (traditional) musical & dance forms are transmuting in the current multicultural Australian context, creating a hybrid of different cultural forms.

1. EXPERIMENTAL ONLINE PROJECT OBJECTIVES

blackBOX will offer the viewer fragments of re-playable sound & image (with the potential to download, archive & re-play area of the program content). Moving between narrative & documentary forms, the performances are divulged through the exploration of four interactive 'compositions' - choreographed for the player/participant to explore and move in and out of inside the electronic text. These 'compositions' providing perspectives on the emergence of a uniquely Australian contemporary sound/ culture that is an amalgam & integration of three diasporic genres of music.

The work is inspired by the music brought to Australia after the second World War by (a) Greek economic migrants/ refugees – Rembetika the Greek blues; (b) a form of Jazz music that traveled to Australia with the Russian refugees from China; & (c) more recently the dance music culture that has emerged from the Indian communities in Australia via Fiji, Singapore, Malaysia & immigration from the Indian Sub-continent. This interactive project traces and creates a cultural dialogue between Rembetika, Hindustani & Jazz music culture in Australia. In the contemporary technological environment convergence has delivered new possibilities for the creation of non-linear programs, in their production, distribution, and reception. The internet as a site for the broadcast of digitally produced interactive media has transformed the ways in which programs are being conceptualised, and the production non-linear narrative experience, where the participant/player is engaged to explore and participate with screen events.

The interface design metaphor for *blackBOX*: Painting A Digital Picture of Documented Memory is an electronic stage/screen surface where performances appear as if conjured from

a dream. The participant/player can explore the digital surface of the stage to reveal musical & dramatic performances; interact with a dynamic interface revealing interviews with the musicians and dancers, documentary fragments of performances; statements by artists and uncover hyper-text documents, newsprint articles, radio archives, televisual material, and other archives of related material. This is achieved through the device of iconic symbols & hotspots exposing layers of material beneath the surface of the experimental documentary. Traditional modes of story-telling & music are challenged in the interface design, where the user is provoked engage with the music and performances.

2. METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS & RATIONALE

2.1 THE COLONIZING GAZE:

Diaspora dance/music culture

THE ELECTRO-LIBRARY

THE BOOK Topography of typology 1923

...the new book demands the new writer. Ink-stand and goose-quill are dead...The printed sheet transcends space and time. The printed sheet, the infinity of the book, must be transcended...

EL LISSITZKY From Merz, No.4, Hanover, July 1923.[1b]

This writing documents the production, methodology, and theoretical concerns involved in creating an interactive multimedia work – that articulates the negotiations involved in representation of ethnicity. There is the implication with this project of image-making, an ideological agenda to interrogate the “... colonial constructions of racial, cultural, and geographic difference... (examined) ...through the channels of photographic production and consumption.” [2] The parallel discourse weaving its thread through this creative work and writing is to make visible the construction of identity as a fragile relationship between observer and observed, the colonizing/dominant gaze and the marginalized ethnicity, the subject envisioned as both “racial inferior” and object of fascination. [2] In taking up new media to represent my own subjective ethno-cultural identity, as image-maker I am necessarily playfully disrupting the subject/object dichotomy, and simultaneously by articulating

my own ethno-cultural hybrid (masala mix) [3], I am attempting to reveal the social contract (collusion) of racial stereotypes as a cultural, social and political fabrication. Inside this intertextual work, fascination with the ‘spectacle’ of Other is manipulated – through fetishisation and repetition where “...the image of the colonial Other becomes a trope of desire for the Western viewer...Through repetitive, fetishistic dissemination of stereotypes, the colonized subject becomes “mummified”. [4] The creation of an artful game, the player/participant is motivated to engage with a program that makes visible the artifice of representation. Historically, the representation of the marginal can be traced back to essentializing ‘scientific’ recording methods of physical anthropology, especially the hierarchical categorization of human specimens, to the popular commercial formats of collection and display: cartes-de-visite, tourist postcards, photograph albums, photographically illustrated books, and magazine advertisements... [pervasively used for the] symbolic and scientific uses of photography for the verification and justification of colonial rule, [addressing] the complex ways in which photographs assist in the construction of a colonial culture.” [5] **blackBOX** does this by reflecting on non-Western (Indian) musical and cultural forms and contemporary jazz music, including the incorporation & appropriation of Hindustani music as a model for improvisation, and Australian “Rembetika” music – coined the Greek blues.

The research methodology is based on participant observation, working with (beside) and documentation (film, video, sound) of the music/dance performances. The work I am making and the creative research focuses on imaging (imagining) & representing through the production of a non-linear interactive multimedia work:

(1) ‘the Box’ as symbolic reference to software/aesthetics & what can be revealed/unfold in the interactive environment, additionally the Box as that which marks us out from ‘others’ as part of a distinct group, or scientific categorization;

(2) ‘the Song’ as a mode of cultural discourse/cultural expression, political persuasion,

propaganda, particularly in relation to ethnic minorities;

(3) 'dance forms' as a symbolic strategy for moving in-between theories & cultural practices;

(4) the digital 'journey' as a metaphor for discovery of this new media & the different cultural forms;

(5) image/ sound/ text assemblages, juxtapositions, arrangements as analogous to the compositions both musical/painterly & choreographic in dance forms;

(6) a self-reflexive program articulating the 'open', ambivalent', & fragmentary' formal qualities of the non-sequential narrative [6]

(7) 'Migration' as migration of people, music, memories, and the migration of the old media into the new media

This research and creative production is not particularly focused on exploring existing forms of representation on the Internet, but rather, an attempt to depict traditional representational practices in the new media context of interactive media. This research also contributes to the study of "migration and cultural change", that is looking at the relationship between immigrant cultural production, the host nation, and cultural change.[7] This is achieved specifically through the creation of 'electronic writing' – assembling the ensemble of fragments into image/sound/text 'compositions', where the musical analogy is an apt metaphor for the kinds of processes involved in the creation of the new media text.

The new media text is simultaneously non-linear narrative and intertextual, having its origins in modernist collage and montage aesthetic practices. There are a number of traditional media paths that can be traced which are brought together in this new form of electronic writing. One can trace the modernist practise of visual montage to the film concepts espoused by Sergei Eisenstein in the early 20th century in Russia. Editing sequences in film, utilising cutting strategies that juxtaposed images, sounds and texts to create dramatic meaning within the cinematic frame have now been synthesized in the virtual editing environment of computer software non-linear editing interfaces. Imaging and audio software programs [such as Adobe Photoshop in combination with special effects programs such as Adobe After Effects and Director MX, Flash

MX and SoundEdit or Pro Tools audio editing software] simulate the multi-track environment codified and theorized by Eisenstein in his early film work. The convergence of media into the software environment has transformed the capabilities for digital media production. It is possible to shoot a digital film/video and post-produce the media on the desktop of a multimedia computer.[8]

The objective of this work is to take up interactive media to produce a creative interactive work (image/text/sound), that articulates and reflects on the construction of self, representation of identity and the documentary form in the new media environment. In the process, this research includes analysis of existing representations of ethnicity on the World Wide Web, and the creative component - a program that is self-reflexive, in relation to new media as a medium that can articulate the 'open', 'ambivalent', 'ambiguous', and 'fragmentary' formal qualities of the non-sequential narrative.[6] In the contemporary Australian context, the project of representing the dance and music culture of diasporic communities in relation to other forms of émigré music culture - namely the incorporation, appropriation, and expropriation of non-Western (Indian) musical and cultural forms and representation of jazz music by the Russians from China – reveals 'the West'/'the East' distinction as not purely a geographical terrain, but a cultural locale upon which complex desires are played out.[9]

This work extends my earlier experiments with the music of the Russian diasporic people in China, through the production of an interactive non-linear multimedia work STRANGE CITIES CD-ROM –focusing on an album recorded by my Russian grandfather Sergei Ermolaeff, which I stumbled upon after his death – vinyl "Strange Cities" (Stranyie Garadnye). This creative work is informed by the multimedia design I developed in collaboration with Professor Andrew Jakubowicz for the MENORAH OF FANG BANG LU interactive documentary project <http://www.transforming.cultures.uts.edu.au/ShanghaiSite>

an online project exploring the lives of seven families and structured around seven cultural & social themes, evoking the complex and multidimensional fabric of Shanghai as a

crossroads for the Jews of China – and those who came to Australia. [10]

3. THE OBSERVER/ THE OBSERVED INTERACTIVE DEVICE

The work will unfold metaphorically from a set of ‘Chinese’ boxes but will be configured inside the ‘performative’ frames – marking “this is ritual” & that all things operating within these frames represent serious things.[11] In turn opening up creative narrative potentials for the electronic non-sequential narrative/text. The protagonist Nina provides the character through which the player identifies and observes in the unfolding of the program. It is through her eyes that the events are perceived, translated, and it her projected imaginary/dreams that form the narrative cohesion of the story.[12] The areas of interactive program content are mediated through the Nina’s voice, the voice of a Chinese woman, the voice of an older Russian woman (Xenia the grandmother), the voice of an Indian woman, and the voice of an older Greek musician. The voices are integrated with archival voice-over material, and atmospheres, suggesting the space of reflection for the stories.[13]

Visual & sonic devices form signatures marking out the areas of program content & creating an immersive environment for the player/participant. present (time) denoting a recollection of previous events : METROPOLIS; CHINESE BOX; JEWEL BOX; & PANDORA’S BOX

4. CONTENT – INTERFACE METAPHOR

The action/performance appears within the immersive environment of a series of Byzantine (Greek), Sanskrit (Indian), and 1930s Chinese inspired screen frames. Electronic text scrolls across the screen in various assemblages, readable and often with hypertextual qualities.[14] The digital video sequences appear and disappear inside the frame as conjured memories or dreams juxtaposed with animations, still photographs, graphics and interactive sound elements. The graphic interface is constructed from the documents, documentary materials, surface of the photographs, sheet music from the compositions, publicity material, and cultural iconic imagery.

5. AESTHETICS OF INTERACTIVE MULTIMEDIA

The ‘immersive sensory experience’, Melanie Swalwell argues in her thesis *Aesthetics and Hyper/aesthetics: Rethinking the Senses in Contemporary Media Contexts*, [15] of the interactive environment of convergent media, (mediated through the intelligent technological systems of the computer) has produced new kinds of artificial (virtual) engagement. “...[the] ability to provide a greater range of sensory stimuli, all at once. As a result, claims were made by promoters of various media – new and old – that consumers were ‘driving’ convergence by their demands for “more realistic and ‘immersive’ (multisensory) experiences”, [16] with the implication that immersion resulted from stimulating all the senses, often to heretofore unimagined degrees. “The production of creative and experimental interactive art, draws from a multitude of disciplines – and has a number of various outcomes which include - cyberart, digital art, web art, information art, interactive art, active art, reactive art, and connective (networked art). [17] However these categories, under the rubric ‘digital artifact’, and non-material (art) object can be traced back to experiments in modernist avant-garde conceptual art “...interrogating the relationship between ideas and art, conceptual art de-emphasizes the value traditionally accorded to the materiality of art objects. It focuses, rather, on examining the preconditions for how meaning emerges in art, seen as a semiotic system.”. [18] The experimental meeting of “software”, “information technology”, and “art”, can be traced to a number of sources but was pioneered in the *museum* environment by Jack Burnham in the late 1960s . Specifically with his curation of the exhibition *Software, Information Technology: Its New Meaning For Art* at the Jewish Museum in New York (1970).” Burnham designed software to function as a testing ground for public interaction with “information systems and their devices”. ... Burnham conceived of “software” as parallel to the aesthetic principles, concepts, or programs that underlie the formal embodiment of the actual art objects, which in turn parallel “hardware”. [19] [see “The Aesthetics of intelligent Systems”; “System Esthetics” (1968); and “Real Time Systems” (1969). [20]

CONCLUSION

The contemporary links between these three genres of music/performance culture are specifically the protagonist Nina (standing in for myself) and the hybrid form created within the digital media 'game' environment. The analysis of these hybrid forms is always through the lens of my own cultural experience and therefore a form of self-analysis. A dialogue between classical Indian dance/music and the modal music of Rembetika the Greek blues, and modern jazz forms travelling to Australia with the Russian émigrés from China, is traced in my project blackBOX. This In the search for cultural influences, Rembetika is musically connected with Hindustani music as it has developed from the music that was brought with Turkish migrants to Greece and is allied to the ancient Arabic classical tradition, the melodies of which conform to a 'modal' type. [21] The music is not based on scales, in the Western sense. *Taximia*, the elaborate *improvisational* introduction to a song, mirrors the introductory *Alaap* in Hindustani music. Rembetik, (the Greek Blues), traveled to the United States in the 1930's with the Greek economic migrants/refugees. Conversely, Black American Jazz traveled across the pacific to the Japan, and the treaty port of Shanghai, where Eastern European, Philippino, Jewish and other immigrants took up the jazz form. There are many comparisons between the cultural conditions for the evolution of Rembetika (Greek Blues) and the evolution of African American music and jazz culture.

Improvisation in this music/dance and in 'composition' with the digital media provides a means of appropriating and translating media representations of race and ethnicity. By exploring the cultural productions of minority groups, it is also a means of participating in the representation by taking up digital media to expose the gaps & margins. [22] The production of a creative work that engages with difference, the production and outcome becomes a 'participation', a point of struggle, negotiation.

FOOTNOTES

[1a] "The first mortals lived on earth in a state of perfect innocence and bliss....when Pandora expressed a strong desire to peep into the contents of the mysterious box...no sooner opened, than all these ills flies out...in the guise

of horrid little winged creatures...pricking & stinging them mercilessly...It was well for Pandora that she opened the box a second time, for the gods with a sudden impulse of compassion had concealed among the evil spirits one kindly creature HOPE!..." from H.A. Guerer, The Classical Myths of Greece & Rome, Senate, London, 1994, p17.

Mapping a history of the term 'blackbox' comes to incorporate an investigation of the *technological* implication of the notion 'box', a device, an instrument, & an *idea* created as a piece of *equipment*, a vessel for containing cultural artefacts, in the contemporary sense both in the physical, virtual, and thinking realms.

[1b] El Lissitzky, "THE BOOK: The Electro-Library, Topology of Typography", Merz, No. 4, Hanover, July 1923, in El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts, Thames & Hudson, Great Britain, 1992.

[2](Eds) Eleanor M. Hight & Gary D. Sampson, Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and place, Routledge, London, 2002, p1.

[3] masala (Hindi Indian word denoting spice mix, having culinary usage).

[4] (Eds) Eleanor M. Hight & Gary D. Sampson, Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and place, Routledge, London, 2002, p3.

[5] Eds) Eleanor M. Hight & Gary D. Sampson, Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and place, Routledge, London, 2002, p6.

[6] Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity", in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (Eds), Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies, Routledge, London, 1996.

[7] Robert van Krieken, Philip Smith (et al), "Migration, Ethnicity and Australian Aboriginality, in Sociology: Themes and Perspectives (2nd Edition), Australia, 2001.

[8] Lev Manovich, "Avant-garde as Software", From "New Vision" to New Media, <http://www.manovich.net/> ARTICLES 18 November, 2003.

[9] Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity", in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (Eds), Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies, Routledge, London, 1996.

[10] Andrew Jakubowicz, "The Menorah of Fang Bang Lu", *The History of Jewish Diasporas in China* 2002 Symposium, Nanjing, China, May 5-8 2002 & Andrew Jakubowicz, "From Shanghai to Sydney: sociology as

cultural multimedia”, *Campus Review*, June 11-17, 2003, p8.

[11] (Ed), John J. MacAloon, Rite, drama, Festival, spectacle: rehearsals Towards a Theory of Cultural Performance, Institute for the study of human issues, Philadelphia, 1984. p259-260.

[12] Tim Caulton, “The personal context to museum learning”, in Hands-On Exhibitions: managing interactive Museums and Science Centres, Routledge, London, 1998, p18. The subjective figure of the protagonist, the girl Nina, through which the player experiences the virtual spaces has been informed by Piaget’s ‘taxonomical’ understanding of cognitive learning, affective learning, & psycho-motor development. “Piaget argued that learning occurs as a direct result of interaction with the environment, and he traced children’s development into continuous and consecutive phases from birth to maturity. His research suggested that, in the early years, children predominantly explore their own motor and sensory skills; from age 2 to 4 they begin to explore their place in the world around them, and from 4 to 7 *they become less egocentric as they begin to have more contact with others* According to Piaget, children learn from actions rather than passive observations, and so construct knowledge and understanding themselves...”

[13] Jean-Paul Satre, “From One China to Another”, Preface to *D’une Chine a l’autre*, by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Jean-Paul Satre, Editions Robert Delpire, 1954 in, Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism, Routledge, London, 2001, [my parenthesis], p2

[14] Eastgate Systems online journal <http://www.tekka.net/> defines the the open ended hypertext as prefigured in Medieval manuscripts and attributes the following characteristics: a. *Non-linearity*; b. *Multi-vocality*: the several relationships that are possible between the text and the illustrations; c. *Inter-textuality*: references to other sources mentioned explicitly in the text or implied in the text; d. *Decenteredness*: the lack of one dominant, unifying center and the ability of the text to offer different paths of investigation to different readers. Tekka, 134 Main Street, Watertown MA 02472 USA. email: editor@tekka.net info@tekka.net voice: +1 (617) 924-9044 (800) 562-1638

<http://www.tekka.net> 2 October 2003

[15] Aesthetics and Melanie Swalwell , *Hyper/aesthetics: Rethinking the Senses in Contemporary Media Contexts*, PhD Thesis, Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney, 2002, p3.

[16] No author given (press release) (August 1997) “Philips Digital Convergence Product Defines Multimedia Home Cinema”, <http://www-us.sv.philips.com/news/press>, accessed 18/7/00, quoted in Melanie Swalwell , *Hyper/aesthetics: Rethinking the Senses in Contemporary Media Contexts*, PhD Thesis, Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney, 2002, p3.

[17] Gerhard Bachfischer, “A Constant Flow of Thoughts”, unpublished creative journal, Master of Interactive Multimedia, Institute for Interactive Media & Learning, UTS, 2002, p12.

[18] “...the “dematerialization” of the art object theorized by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in “The Dematerialization of Art”, *Art International* (February 1968) and reinscribed in Lippard’s *Six Years: The dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1872* (1973), [where] “dematerialization of art” can be seen as a “strategy for repositioning art in relation to politics – not a shift from material per se, but a shift from an artworks value as an object of commercial exchange to its value as aesthetic and political interchange”, quoted in Edward A. Shanken, “Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art”, *Art & Culture Papers, Electronic Art and Animation Catalog: SIGGRAPH*, 2001, p8-9.

[19] A. Shanken, “Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art”, *Art & Culture Papers, Electronic Art and Animation Catalog: SIGGRAPH*, 2001, p9.

[20] J. Burnham, “Notes on Art and Information Processing”, *SOFTWARE: 10* quoted in Edward Fry, *On the Future of Art*, Viking, New York, 1970, p119.

[21] Gail Holst, Road to Remetika: music of a Greek sub-culture, songs of love, sorrow and hashish, Denise Harvey Publisher, Limni, Evia, Greece, 1994, p64.

[22] Linda Leung, “Tactics and Technologies of Resistance: the Web as Minority Media”, in *Where Am I? Locating Self and Ethnicity on the World Wide Web*, PhD Thesis, University of East London, May 2001, p48.