

Can environmentally damaging material practices be replaced by new virtual lifestyles?

Targeting tourism as a particular material practice, designers, cultural theorists, information junkies, environmentalists and tourism experts engaged polemics, flights of the imagination and some nagging doubts about how we might design information technologies to create a more sustainable future.

Kevin Murray reports.

Director of RMIT's Key Centre for Design, Chris Ryan, opened *Where Worlds Converge* by questioning the implicit values behind the words 'material' and 'immaterial'. Tourism traditionally celebrates world history as a monumental theatre of architecture, sculpture and sublime vistas. How might it be reconfigured as a digital event, participating in a world made real through information rather than substance? The urgency of this question was addressed by director of the Netherlands Design Institute, John Thackara, who recounted narratives of imminent environmental decline and the 'last chance' opportunity of the Factor 20 solution.

Confessing a lagging technological proficiency, and a 'late' acknowledgment of green politics, Thackara cautioned against the production of more manifestos. Far better to involve others in a series of creative challenges than cajole change through anxiety and guilt.

Multimedia laboratory director and cybergoddess, Allucquère Rosanne (Sandy) Stone, demonstrated Thackara's argument with an artful style of academic theatre. Her performance treated the political challenges of environmental change with alluring tales of magical self transformation. Sandy Stone pulled out all her narrative stops: we heard tales of those who left their normal identities behind to enter the carnivalesque worlds of CompuServe Forums, phone sex and voice prostheses. As a consummate storyteller, she continually played a narrative 'hide and seek' with the audience, interrupting her threads with the phrase, 'this will be important later'. In a conclusion filled with American hope, she made a stirring call to seize the future through individual quest.

Dutch interactive designer Dick Rijken presented a more sober demonstration of the design problems of interactivity. This ranged from the operation of buttons on screen to the responsibility for virtual animals on a zoo web site. A more theoretical and cautious message followed in the observations by Australian cultural theorist Meaghan Morris on *Life as a Tourist Object*. Morris represented the other side of the tourist equation: those who actually live in the sites that have been included on the tourist itinerary. One example was her home town of Maitland which, with the decline of the mining industry, must today reconfigure itself for the tourist gaze. Her stories of

white Australian males now championed as 'blokes' brought into question a wide range of assumptions. Critically, Morris addressed the judgment that only indigenous cultures possess the cultural difference sufficient for world interest. The traditional Anglo workers left culturally in the shadows by this assumption were evoked by Morris in a futuristic scenario of the massive white underclass in *Robocop*. On an optimistic note, she pointed to the new possibilities of self-determination offered by tourism, pointing, as an example, to a video of a trip by an Aboriginal group to Malaysia.

From a more global perspective, Director of Toronto's McLuhan Institute, Derrick de Kerckhove, addressed how interactive art might lead to new appreciations of the finite nature of the planet and the collective responsibility for its future welfare. The star of his presentation was *TerraVision* by the Berlin group, ART+COM. This technology transformed the standard globe into a spherical binocular, allowing viewers to zoom into different locations, moving from satellite, to bird, to worm's eye view. Use of the World Wide Web guaranteed that this information spectacle was fed by live links. It was very tempting to imagine the possibility of such a globe, pulsating with live information, sitting beside our armchair. With traditional globes, we are normally restricted to a question such as "Where is Timbuktu?". *TerraVision* offers events where there were simply locations: "What's happening in Timbuktu?". De Kerckhove was careful to see *TerraVision*'s purpose to reinforce the impression of international environmental responsibility by placing local activities in the context of global trends.

Similar spatial manipulations of imagination were presented by Melbourne architect, Jennifer Hocking, who reviewed some of her own speculative work on sites such as the Statue of Liberty. By ornamenting the various viewing positions inside and outside the statue, Hocking proposed ways of interpolating the body of the viewer into the tourist spectacle. Her work demonstrated the role of architects in producing a more self-reflective version of the colonial gaze. On a less material plane, English designer Jeremy Quinn demonstrated the work of multimedia design in tense but ultimately fruitful collaborations with large corporations. His web sites and CD-ROMs, including *Burn Cycle*, *Virtual*

*Nightclub*, *Exquisite Corpse* and *Anti-CD-ROM* provided information landscapes for adventure, propaganda and partying. Quinn's work was guided by a mission to 'bootstrap tribalism back into modern culture', providing a digital turn to McLuhan's dormant prophesies.

In a focus on Australian design practice Rob Flynn showed how the travel publisher Lonely Planet was utilising World Wide Web to form a community of virtual tourists. Gerry Mussett provided some practical examples of new interfaces designed for contemporary information-hungry tourists. Penny Figgis returned to the question of offline travel by looking at the new marriages between ecology and tourism. Finally, Harold Furber explained how Aboriginal groups were utilising information technology through the Tanami network.

The concluding panel discussion provided an opportunity for the audience to pose the questions that had been held back during the course of the conference. The first question concerned the environmental damage caused by the very devices that are required to engineer this virtual future. The pollution involved in the production of silicon chips must certainly be addressed if this venture is to have a clean start. A more complicated concern arose in the plight of those left unemployed by the demise of manufacturing jobs. This will no doubt be one of the many burdens carried by a social change of such magnitude. Finally, a more ontological question was posed about the future of 'hard reality'. A lively exchange followed where Sandy Stone mused on the need for a 'hard currency' of experience, to which John Thackara hypothesised on the 'inflation' of virtual realities, leaving Derrick de Kerckhove finally to pose the solution of 'printing more reality'.

As a quintessential fin de siècle event, the conference speakers for *Where Worlds Converge* evoked a mixture of utopia and trepidation. Everyone converged on the urgency of environmental change. It was left to participants in the Collaboratorium to demonstrate the potential of information technology to deliver its goods.

Dr Kevin Murray, a freelance writer and curator, was invited by Centre for Design at RMIT to document the Design Winter School. He is currently working on a book, *Shock of the Old*, looking at material practices in a global village.

where worlds converge

TerraVision by ART+COM



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