SCREEN DANCE
Cultural mirroring through movement and ambience

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Life at times seems to be a sequence of anecdotes,
little innocent stories that happen to us
and only later we realize the potential and meaning
and danger and sorrow hidden in such stories.

- Frieder Nake, Would You Do It?, Eyeo Festival, Minneapolis 2014

This is not about advertising, but it probably should be.
This is not about content either, but again it probably should be.
This is not even about image quality – and that is something we should definitely be talking about.

I have been wrestling with the concept of ambience for a number of years after it first came to my attention as an extremely useful concept at the Media Architecture Summit in London in 2007. Malcolm McCullough gave one of those withering attacks on the concept of media facades not as a glorious progression of media architecture design but as another invasive form of visual noise in the urban space. Given the context it was quite a brave presentation, but he was invited and I guess he decided to let them have it. I did wonder after the fact whether the semiotics of the conference web banner had fuelled his dystopian vision.

I certainly don't plan to be anywhere near as abrasive as McCullough but there was something that stayed with me from that paper – this notion of "perpetual overload" – that was generated by the rise of computers in the hands of designers running expensive software packages in the late 1990s. Not that that is necessarily such a bad thing, nor is the technical accomplishment of unleashing executables onto circuit boards linked to thousands of tiny electric diodes attached to blinking lights. This is seriously nerdy stuff with an artistic sensibility at its core and such things should be encouraged. It is what you do with them and critically who is paying that is the important thing.

McCullough felt strongly that information should be designed; it should have context and meaning and not act merely as a seduction. He would later reference the information ethicist Luciano Floridi's definition of information as being 'true semantic content.' (Floridi, 2007). McCullough writes:

> With certain exceptions (such as sunrises), being informed
> generally involves linguistically encoded meanings, at appropriate

> levels of abstraction, all made intelligible by frames of knowledge.
> Without these, transmissions that are meaningless or false may
> too easily be (mis)taken for information. (McCcullogh, 2013 p.36)

McCullough goes on to introduce the idea of 'intrinsic information' and its relationship to learned surroundings and our ability – or inability as it may be – to transmute meaning from mediated objects. There are lessons to be learned here, not only in terms of our cultural experience of intrinsic information, but also in terms of our ability to identify and adapt to change. His fear is of an increasingly mediated urban environment that is substituting intrinsic informational structures that rely on knowledge and context – what he calls 'embodied information' – with an information space that lacks this symbolic interface.

> As new forms of packaged information arise, in ways that reduce
> cognitive load and that appeal to the senses, it seems important
> to uphold the importance of the intrinsic structure, and to find
> fascination with it. The unmediated world would suffice as the
> ambient, but only to those whose culture provided ample
> experience with intrinsic information, as reflected in street sense
> or traditional folklore … Pervasive media could assume its form as
> a double, but in doing so it might mask it. Technologically
> dependent sensibilities become less inclined to notice much else.
> (McCcullogh, 2013 p.39)

It's not all doom and gloom though, and McCullough is positive about the journey that architects and designers have taken in the last decade with regards to being cognizant of the environmental atmosphere in urban spaces. This was his real bugbear in 2007, perhaps because The London College of Art where he was speaking is situated just off the Underground junction of Kings Cross and St Pancras stations. A site in which the ambience is intensely mediated and overtly commercial, where bollards restrict traffic flow and electronic billboards of West End blockbusters bellow adjectives. He acknowledges that architecture has matured and that digital media design has re-orientated itself towards "more slowly knowable atmospheres in space." (McCullough, 2013 p.173)

It is little wonder then that McCullough cites Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* installation in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern as a work that not only enhances one's individual experience of reality but creates a signless mental representation of that reality. The luminescent sun-like orb, the mirrored ceiling and the clouds of mist, become seamless components of a new atmosphere. A particular type of installed ambience. Eliasson's work has a contradictory appeal imbuing at once a sense of mystery and one of creeping dread. *The Weather Project* produces a different type of

environmental effect however, one that mirrors our instincts for survival against the backdrop of the permanent going down of the sun while idealizing a sense of romance for the golden hour that transcends both night and day. In his later work from 2010, *Your Blind Passenger*, the intense cloud of vapor and the slow colour transitions echo a myriad of media objects from our recent collective past and numerous as yet unresolved futures.

Such grand phenomenological constructs are well-understood by sections of the gallery going public and there are certainly many public sites around Melbourne where this can be enacted yet it is the urban space in which we transit, work and gather in the ritual of capital exchange that presents the biggest challenge. The current malaise of mostly semantic and predominately situationist screen-based media augmentation is a primitive bi-product of this exchange and the forces that drive it. In this clash of media objects the economics of advertising and consumption converge with the business of media broadcasting and production. In this seductive hybrid screen space, Paul Virilio's notion of the broadcast 'image loop' becomes a hyper-loop of reflexivity: communication, navigation, documentation, worship, mourning, intimacy and surveillance become one. This screen dance is difficult to escape as modes of broadcast are inserted into everyday activities and everyday objects. Link this practice with aggregated data and embedded modes of transmedia production and the augmentation of digital objects across the physical and virtual environments we inhabit become incredibly dense. Sure, its a snug fit, if you are not freaked out by the proximity and the creepy algorithms. The appeal is at once physical in terms of industrial design and sensual in terms of the aesthetics of the code.

Obviously, all of this is extremely helpful in numerous core activities that we may conduct on any given day, such as communication and wayfinding, but the pay-off for the service provider is immense. The corruption of power and the inequality of wealth and resources that is fueling all manner of political shapeshifting and putting into question the very nature of information authorship and exchange is also playing itself out – in just as stark terms – below the surfaces of the screens we hold in our hands. Within media design as much as within the conflict minerals that make their display tactile and responsive, the augmentation of the physical by the virtual is fraught political territory. This virtual white cube – this black mirror – presents designers, media artists, journalists, historians – all of them story tellers of one vocation or another - the challenge of authoring genuine intrinsic mediated experiences in the urban space. To do this however is to understand what this space is and what it is not.

Early digital art pioneer, Frieder Nake, speaking at xCoAx16 in Bergamo, Italy takes this idea of

displacement and masking a step further by distinguishing between the analogue device and the digital media file as a "surface-and-subface" relationship. Here the digital file is a shadow of the algorithmic structure it is based upon. Rather than providing clarity the data obscures. This not only scrambles the reality – indeed the origin – of the image from its context but strips it of its legitimacy further inhibiting our meaningful and ongoing relationship with the image.

> Images as digital images are not visible… The image in postmodern times, in times of algorithms and computations exist in a double mode. I usually call it, algorithmic sign… We can deal with it as a digital image only if we consider it to be a pair of a visible surface and a manipulated sub-face. The surface is analogue, the sub-face is digital. (Nake, 2016)

What this contextual negation does however is make the consumption – and to some extent, the manipulation – of media via screen-based devices not a consequence of physical place or cultural geography but a process of aesthetic appeal and to an extent, device intimacy. Our connection with the media is further scrambled by the stripping of its meta-data, the digital origin story of any media object, and replacing it with a globalised corporate design aesthetic – whether that be Facebook, Twitter, CNN or YouTube.

(In an age of #post-truth and #fakenews one wonders what Ted Nelson is making of the current debate around the veracity of news and information gathering and the rise of the political manifesto as a mode of communication design? If Nelson's holistic alternative proposal for internet protocols and file systems had been adopted this whole sorry episode may have been avoided. We would all be receiving micro-payments for our photos and our posts and our shares. The meta-data trails of all digital objects would be indexed, visible, verified and at our finger tips. Instead it is the other way around …

Think about that for a second: currently we give our fingerprints to Apple to sign into an iPhone, we give our facial data to Microsoft to log into a Surface Book and we dutifully supply Facebook and Google our dates of birth, our residential address, our locational data and even a detailed history of our financial and social interactions. In Ted Nelson's alternate reality, his Xanadu system would not only ensure transparency and accountability but information would be contextual and monetisation would be a two-way street. Data would have consequences, it would be traceable and verifiable and the value of information exchange shared with the many rather than the few. Yet, I digress …)

The repackaging of information is not only a question of aesthetic manipulation and embellishment it is also one of verifiable data as media appropriated and repurposed for device consumption literally becomes a shadow of its former self. Frieder Nake, again:

> This phenomenon of duplication is, of course, a characteristic of the entire plethora of things and processes as they become subject matter of algorithmic treatment … In effect, the algorithmic revolution makes things and processes disappear from their existence as perceivable by our senses. And it lets them re-appear perceivably but only after having spun (off) their other that will from then on become their permanent companion. Their digital (algorithmic) shadow. (Nake, 2016)

Of course, this is indicative of the primacy of the device and our perception of screen media as a tangible knowable thing – after all it has been shared / curated / searched – but, as Nake notes, it is in fact algorithmic and a sub-surface construct from the network but lacking network protocols. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings on perception tell us that our experience of the instrument and – in this case, the illusion of – our manipulation of its internal structures makes the mobile screen a part of our physical sensibilities and by extension the digital a part of a conscious exchange. (Ponty, 1945) We see this everywhere, as the digital image as delivered by the screen becomes the referent rather than the sign that informs the narrative. Furthermore, if as Sherry Turkle has observed, we "fall into" the simulation then the screen is in fact a vital reflexive space, a socio-cultural mirror that is at once personal and global – however flawed its semiotics maybe. The question is how do we overcome this perception and begin to understand that this is not a cybernetic connection with the source but a seduction by an inferior duplication? (Turkle, 2009 p.50)

Yarra Yarra, the land that we gather on, is a Kulin nation meeting place pre-contact. It was formerly made of considerable stretches of swamp, undulating land and wide waterways. The land protected and nourished the indigenous people of this area and performed an intrinsic function in what was a shared relationship between the environment and its caretakers. Water was a strong spiritual force for the traditional inhabitants of this area and it is a vital signifier for not only how Yarra Yarra came to be but also how they managed and lived by the land. It informed when they sowed their crops of yams, hunted wildfowl and fished for eel. It also governed when and where they conducted business between family groups and organized their seasonal migratory patterns. A waterway still runs beneath Elizabeth Street, flowing out into the present day Yarra River's drastically altered configuration via a large cement drain below Flinders Street. When the wet really comes to this place they now call Melbourne – a stone and metallic grid overlaid upon the landscape – the water returns

to the surface.

Like much of Australia's contemporary urban sprawl, Melbourne clings to its waterways from the Merri Creek to the Yarra to the Bay and out to the sea. Stefan Helmreich in his essay, *Intimate Sensing*, notes the importance of the sea as both an "immersive medium" and a conduit to the living world:

> From Frued's "oceanic feeling" – a human nostalgia for a lost communion with a watery mother nature – to Jaqcues Cousteau's contemplative scuba diving and reverence for the underwater realm, European and American culture overflow with images of the sea as a zone in which boundaries between the self and world dissolve. (Stefan Helmreich, 2009 p.129)

Indeed, our cinematic cultural dreaming is embedded with the notion of liquid as not only a life force but a guide – a pathway perhaps – to something deep within ourselves and the technologies that sustain us. Embedded in the media dreamscapes of the digital image are the foundation principles of an aesthetics of data as liquid. The art direction is often blue and luminous in tone, it is always found at the core of a film's novum and often takes on a kinetic electrical form. It is as if these digital artefacts – reaching back to the earliest uses of CGI have their own cultural memory. Disney's 1982 film *Tron*, which can be viewed now as a somewhat nostalgic template for the back-end wire mesh of contemporary 3D design, is the first time we are introduced to the notion of liquid as a digital aesthetic. In one scene, the central characters – who have been "digitised" and are now fugitives inside a computer program – stumble upon a rippling stream of fresh water. In a peculiar, almost childish manner, they rush to the water's edge and gleefully begin to scoop up the liquid, drinking from the shimmering water. While it's possible to deconstruct this as a type of "in-game reward" i.e. water, the giver of life, conveniently appearing in the path of the game players, it offers perhaps a symbolic bridge between being human and being digital. This is one of the earliest cinematic manifestations of the liquid electric form, its properties giving life to the digital, giving human-like attributes to the errant computer code and like the social animals we have become, giving forth the waterhole to which the hive is inexplicably drawn.

Appearing in all manner of image constructions digital media's liquid electric turn makes its most urgent call through cinema's representations of machine intelligence. Here the liquid electric is presented as the source code - the host, the conductor, the original data set – of our very human struggle with technology and evolving notions of artificiality. We see this trend in art direction in a roll call of contemporary Hollywood parables: *Avatar, Pacific Rim, Prometheus, Gravity, A.I.* and

Minority Report to cite the obvious. Each of these films seem to recognize the very gothic anxiety we hold for our environment as we try to resolve the relationship between the physical and virtual space. The liquid electric becomes then not just an aesthetic turn or a narrative device but an explicit visual sign – nature's digital blueprint – reminding the audience of the precarity of existence in both the realms of the virtual and the real.

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In the introduction to his book, *The City as Interface: How New Media Are Changing the City*, Martijn de Waal poses a critical question: How does 'urban media' influence the way that the city functions as a community? Urban media objects whether they be digital, printed, or sculpted certainly perform the function of generating and maintaining the flow of capital (and by its nature credit and debt). In the context of an increasingly network dependent city like Melbourne software applications and data analytics connect to and respond to the physical environment in the background and on our behalf. This is the hidden and relatively autonomous data layer of the screen dance - a dance that is both seductive and distracting. The tech-valley press and mobile-app start-ups have been promoting these wares since the iPhone made the scaling-up of such technologies viable. A relatively tired and lazy innovation narrative that is still being pushed. It is a narrative that has benefited from almost ubiquitous device deployment and petabytes of user data and feedback. While these processes certainly make a multitude of administrative tasks, information requests and communication processes easier, quicker and more personal they are the base line foundations of a reliable and robust networked society. And are to be expected. To counter Malcolm McCullough's dystopian fears, we have to look beyond the algorithmic seduction and recognise that these seemingly invisible functions behind the screen are "not necessarily magical processes" that simply just happen. Only a society that is cognisant of its environment with pro-active users who have some sense of ownership of the network can we manage the next layer of technology in a way that places community at the heart of screen culture. As de Waal cautions, "regardless of our role as designers, citizens, policymakers, or consumers – we can make choices about the way we want to deploy technologies. These choices are, in turn, related to the way we think a city should function as a community: ideology rather than magic is one of the central forces behind the way in which technology changes our lives." (Martijn de Waal, 2014)

We must identify therefore the duality of sites where we intersect with technology as individuals and as part of a rich tapestry of place-making communities. We must also recognise that each community, in one way or another, is a global one as well as local one and sometimes the two are

intrinsically connected. Friends both close and far away are as equally intertwined with the network of screens we inhabit, as are the strangers on trams, in office towers, in restaurants and in shopping malls. All of whom contribute to the complexity of the data set that is Melbourne.

To that end, I shall close with an observation on the importance of the lived-in environment; and I suppose, the lived-in screen moment. The urban habitat that is enriched by both human occupation and the repetition and familiarity of ritual – the humble neighborhood. It is here that we gather amidst the screens, organized and filtered by the algorithms. It is also in this place that we can begin to reconnect with the land and its history. Both challenge and opportunity await the slowly maturing emergant network culture. As John Friedmann writes in *Place and Place-Making in the Cities*:

> The neighborhood is cherished for very different reasons: because it has places of encounter where people reaffirm each other as who they are, or comment on the day's events; because life has a certain rhythm with which all are familiar and to which all expectantly look forward; because there are places that are "sacred" to the people; and because there are special places of gathering where events important to the community transpire. It is this rhythm, these repetitive cadences that are always the same and yet a bit different as well, like a seasonal festival, that is a measure of a neighborhood's vitality. (Friedmann, 2010)

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