

# AWEI: CONTENTS

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AWEI (Art Will Eat Itself) is a look at the future of montage, discussing the possibility of an emerging 'information aesthetic' and the certainty of information overload and "World Wide Web" explosion.

AWEI's research has included looking at the previous montage aesthetics of Dada, 'Neo-Dada' or so called Pop Art and 'Eisensteinien montage'. The project also looks at contemporary digital art in order to contextualise itself as a product of the 'first information age'.

AWEI is the development, extrapolation and interpretation of contemporary society – taking as its source material information in all its forms. AWEI is both a process of creation and the result of its own process, it is a playful paradox. Art Will Eat Itself.

## Introduction : AWEI

We live in a society where information is king, it's no longer who you know but what you know, and if you don't know it you know where to find out.

In a decade that has seen the "commodification of bits"<sup>1</sup> through television, the Internet, news papers and of course CD-ROM there exists a backlash. A small glimmering hope that maybe that last 6.3 gigabyte hard disk you purchased wasn't in vain.

"Zeros and ones will take us there" – Jesus Jones, *Zeros and Ones*

Who is behind this seemingly endless torrent of data, this geyser of bits and bytes? Maybe we need look no further than our very own metaphorical 'desktops'. In order to stem the flow of useless, bothersome information we must lead by example. Do I really need that text file, can I live without that QuickTime?

If the answer is no read on.

"Science will never achieve its aim of comprehending the ultimate nature of reality. It is a futile quest, although most scientists do not acknowledge this yet. The universe will always be more complex than we will ever understand. It is dishonest of scientists not to admit that total understanding of the universe is their aim. It is even more dishonest not to admit that it can never be achieved."<sup>2</sup>

On a train journey during the Christmas period of 1996 between Plymouth and Cambridge the idea of AWEI came to me after reading an article in WIRED (5.04 US) magazine about "Sim Tunes" a product based on Toshio Iwai's "Musical Insects" (1992). It was after reading the article that I became first fascinated with the project and then the artist. Here was an artist I could relate to. Somebody that had created a new frontier of interaction, somebody that blurred the distinction between self and world, world and virtual world – the idea of AWEI was born.

I am bound to partially cover certain areas, and miss others, however what you will read about in this discourse is an investigation into the 'future of montage', 'ecologically friendly uses for redundant data' and a new emerging 'information aesthetic'.

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, W.J. (1995) *City of bits*, Cambridge Massachusetts, The MIT Press

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<sup>2</sup> Pepperell R. (1995) The Post-Human Condition, Intellect

## Creating new meaning: a brief history of montage

Exploring themes of montage throughout history...

In order to frame and contextualise my project 'Art Will Eat Itself' I am first going to look at one of the key elements within the project, montage.

montage *n.*

1. the art or process of composing pictures by the superimposition or juxtaposition of miscellaneous elements, such as other pictures or photographs
2. such a composition
3. a method of film editing involving the juxtaposition or partial superimposition of several shots to form a single image
4. a rapidly cut film sequence of this kind

[C20: from French, from monter to MOUNT]<sup>1</sup>

[The German word **Montage** is an engineering term, meaning fitting or assemblage.]

AWEI uses the idea of layering, pasting, mounting and manipulating information/data in the form of text, sound, etc. to create an extended meaning. This extended, or third meaning, is implied through the act of montage.

This concept will become more apparent if I first sight some examples and individuals that have pioneered the use of montage throughout different mediums.

### -Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) - Film Montage

Sergei Eisenstein wrote and theorised about the idea of "montage" in film and theatre. As well as theorise Eisenstein made films and drew copiously trying to emulate, some would say, his great hero Leonardo da Vinci.

However it was his ideas of montage that will be his greatest testament. This idea of film or theatre montage in which a group of contrasting images is shown in rapid succession was first used in his film *The Strike* (1925) and later more famously in *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) – the *Odessa Steps* scene.

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<sup>1</sup> Collins English dictionary, Third edition, London:HarperCollins Publishers 1992

This form of early 'editing' or 'montaging' was to shape film for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Eisenstein's style of 'montaging' imagery was to be emulated in other films such as *The untouchables* and *Don't look now* (Appendix i).

Eisenstein during his lifetime developed a 'language of montage', taking into account many methods. These included metric montage, rhythmic montage, suspension of time, shock attraction, tonal montage, cutting to form, and overtone montage.

These theories, or language, not only looked at the physical layering of frames or images but scenes, sequences and plots. This all helped turn film from 'animated postcard' into involving contextual narrative. It could be said that the early work of Eisenstein inspired many different fields not just film. When looking at areas or individuals it is so easy to look at them as isolated phenomena. Only by overlaying or 'montaging' these investigations do we see a broader picture take shape – a canvas or mosaic. To explain this a little more I'll extract a quote about 'kaleidoscopic narrative' from "Hamlet on the holodeck" a book exploring the future of narrative in cyberspace;

"One way to understand the new narrative environment is through the metaphor of the kaleidoscope. As Marshall McLuhan pointed out, the communications media of the twentieth century are mosaic rather than linear in structure, as compared to the printed book. Newspapers are made up of many stories calling for the attention on a single page, films are mosaics of individual shots, and television is even more mosaic in the age of the remote control than it was when McLuhan wrote about it."

Murray H. J. (1997)<sup>2</sup>

Or looking at the situation conversely "Compare a real football match to a televised one. The first is "hot", emotional and "choreographed". The second is modulated – a montage of play-backs and close-ups"<sup>3</sup>.

**-Roland Barthes** (1915-1980)- 3<sup>rd</sup> Meaning

In 1963, Barthes book *Sur Racine* (On Racine; 1964) met with controversy in the academic world. In line with newly introduced structural methods he explained that the elements of a literary work must be understood in reference to other elements of the same work, and not to some context outside of literature.

His ideas of looking at elements as a new whole rather than as a sum of the parts was revolutionary. His idea of a 'third meaning' implied through the juxtaposition of other

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<sup>2</sup> Murray H. J. (1997) *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, N.Y.: the Free Press

<sup>3</sup> Horrocks C. and Jevtic Z. (1996) *Baudrillard for beginners*, Icon Books

meanings was to an extent montage. Barthes approach was a theoretical rather than a more 'literal' layering of physical 'things'.

It is the implicit meaning of seemingly unrelated elements to create a new meaning that was to be one of AWEI's key narratives, semiology, syntactics, pragmatics and semantics all pierce the heart of the project. For beneath every piece of digital data with which we 'deal' there lies a hidden agenda, a unique motivation for being. This is not to say that there is one all encompassing motive, but many – a mosaic.

Part of the problem of information overload is that we are all promoted, from our first tentative steps on the internet to the day of our first fully fledged CD-ROM; to create for ourselves, that is to say 'give back what we have taken away' from the digital realm.

Somehow we kid ourselves into thinking that other people are REALLY going to be interested in our favourite colour, or what we did last Tuesday. Where as in reality they're not, far from it, they're all too busy writing about *their* own experiences and favourite colours – and so it goes on, ad infinitum until we reach 'information glut'.

When it comes to information, it turns out that one can have too much of  
a good thing" David Shenk (1997)

-**John Heartfield** (1891-1968) - photomontage.

Leading on from Barthes, Heartfield, A German artist, pioneered the usage of photomontage a term coined by the Dadaists (below) of whom he was a member (Berlin). Very much a political artist his work was often used to 'caricature' and undermine the propaganda of the day - put out by the Nazis. His work could be described as "one mans war against Hitler"<sup>4</sup> (appendix i).

Heartfield's ability was that of being able take photographs, images, maps etc. and composite them in such a way that what Barthes (above) would say, 'a 3<sup>rd</sup> meaning' was created. Not only was the content undermining Nazi authority but as McLuhan mentions in his book *Understanding Media* "the medium is the message"<sup>5</sup> (1964), the unique aesthetic was a message in itself.

Another 'element' of photomontage is that of embedding the title of the montage into the image. The effect is that of imposing a meaning onto the image so that the resulting "**Lesebild**", or picture-to-be-read, has an unambiguous message.

An exhibition of Heartfield's work at the London Barbican art gallery in 1992 saw some of his most famous works on display. One of the best features of this exhibition was the way in

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<sup>4</sup> John Heartfield, an Exhibition; organised by the Akademie der Künste zu Berlin, at the Barbican art Gallery 1992.

<sup>5</sup> McLuhan M. (1964) *Understanding Media*, London: Routledge

which the gallery organisers were sympathetic to the artist's work. Wondering through the gallery was like turning the pages in a 'scrapbook'. The 'splatter-gun' layout of the gallery really emphasised the impact of the images themselves, adding yet another layer of montage to the work. Even after the last 'decollage'<sup>6</sup> has been 'laid' it is not the end of the work. It is only then that montage can be placed into what McLuhan (1964) might call a 'mosaic' of media.

One can only wonder what Heartfield would make of modern day photo-manipulation packages such as Adobe PhotoShop, he'd probably conclude that we are all absurdists. With our computers we can now twist distort and bend the truth, creating our own realities, 'hyperrealities', born from our favourite TV channel, clothing brand and pop group like never before, we live in an "iconic age"<sup>7</sup> (some sort of MTV image here).

The ability to construct our own convincing 'montage' of political figures is now so easy no one even bothers, the closest we get is "slap a spice"<sup>8</sup> (appendix).

As the 'death' of satire occurred [during the late eighties early nineties] we said goodbye to TV programmes such as "spitting image" and "new labour new danger" billboards. A subtler, more 'Tony Blair' aesthetic now surrounds photomontage - in effect killing it off. Photomontage is now seen as almost as 'passé' one could say it has "liquidated itself by its own success"<sup>9</sup> (appendix).

#### **-Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948) – Collage**

"'Everything the artist spits is art', said Kurt Schwitters. It is not the form, the matter, the content, the category, the skill that make a product art but that the artist knows his art."<sup>10</sup>

Best known for his collages and junk sculpture Schwitters began painting as an Expressionist, but in 1919 he turned to collage. His works have incorporated such ephemera as train and bus tickets and newspaper cuttings, which he exploited for their colour and texture and sheer incongruity (see Appendix ii).

Before starting AWEI my aim was that of trying to recreate the incongruity of mixed media in 2D virtual space, a [computer] graphic montage. However trying to sum up a feeling of texture and surface within multimedia is quite difficult. For instance your results are nearly always framed by a cream border, and always set behind tinted glass.

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<sup>6</sup> A term coined by the Nouveau Realists and Fluxusists during the 1960s.

<sup>7</sup> McLuhan M. (1964) Understanding Media, London: Routledge

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.urban75.com/Punch/spicebelt.html> "Slap a spice" – a shockwave created by Paul Maguire in which members of the spice girls, and Margaret Thatcher, pop out of holes, the aim of the user is to slap them about the face as they do so. The product is born through the backlash surrounding the group because of their near-constant media coverage.

<sup>9</sup> McLuhan M. (1964) Understanding Media, London: Routledge

How then can AWEI address this issue? The aim was to look beyond the superficial 'oil on canvas approach' and layer 'sources' of information together. In a sense collage, but collage looked upon as the notion of sources of information. I.e. From the web, the desktop, floppy disk, etc. rather than simply 'texturous' entities overlaid – the aim of which would have been a specific aesthetic, no more.

#### **-Dadaists - Photo Montage**

Leading on from Kurt Schwitters we see Dada. The term *dada*, the French word for hobbyhorse, is said to have been selected at random from a dictionary by the Romanian-born poet, essayist, and editor Tristan Tzara.

The Dadaists coined and invented the use of photomontage. It basically consists of a method of creating an image by assembling several photographs, or juxtaposing parts of photographs, and re-photographing or retouching the result so as to give the impression of an original composition.

The term itself was coined 1918 by the Berlin Dadaists to describe their experiments with photography (see John Heartfield above). The Dadaists regarded themselves as engineers rather than artists, and saw in photomontage a mechanical method of producing anti-art. In a sense indicating that all 'art will eat itself' and "Art for Art's sake is a philosophy of the well-fed"<sup>11</sup>.

This identifies another key element within the AWEI mosaic. AWEI becomes a process, a mangling device, extracting and extrapolating data - a way of producing anti-data. I will look into this further later on, however experimnts such as "Shredder"<sup>12</sup> have already, touched upon this theme of 'ecologically friendly data' devices and 'finding new uses for old algorithms'.

#### **-Cubism – 4<sup>th</sup> dimensional montage (object over time).**

Developed largely by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, cubism was primarily concerned not with lifelike representation but with the depiction of subject matter by breaking its form down into basic geometric shapes. By overlapping or interlocking these shapes, Cubist painters also attempted to depict objects from many angles not simultaneously visible in reality but arranged so as to form a unified composition. The affect was that of viewing the object(s) over time, 'montaging' these elements to give a new unseen physical presence.

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<sup>10</sup> Lynton N. (1989), *The story of modern art*, London: Phaidon Press

<sup>11</sup> Wan Jiabao the Chinese playwright (writing under the pseudonym Cao Yu) taken from the quote by

Victor Cousin (1792–1867) French philosopher. Lecture, Sorbonne, 1818 "art for arts sake".

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.sil.at/m/AV/menu.html>

As well as the idea of a 4<sup>th</sup> dimensional montage the images themselves would absorb the material they studied in the form of collage, for instance in many images Pablo Picasso would use newsprint (appendix).

Again this was an element I wanted to integrate into AWEI. AWEI not only studies data but absorbs it, changes it, becomes part of it, so that ultimately there is no distinction between 'self and world'.

#### **-William Burroughs (1914- ) - Cutups (narrative montage)**

Burroughs was the inventor of the *routine* (a satirical fantasy the author composes through improvisation), the *cutup* (a collage technique applied to prose writing in which the writer literally cuts up and recombines text), and *pop mythologies* (mythologies the writer creates using material from popular culture).

Many other artists including David Bowie use this technique of taking 'prose', 'cutting it up' and rearranging to form random narrative structure. It could be looked upon as 'narrative montage'. In juxtaposing words, sentences and paragraphs a new structure is created. It could even be looked upon as redefining the way in which language is used. A token gesture toward contemporary writing, cutups look forward at a more visual more iconic society, prose not as language but as aesthetic chunks.

Once again the idea seem to 'stem' from dada. This shock attraction of two, possibly contradictory; definitely indecipherably, different sentences laid one beneath the other is as close as you'll get to the "nonverbal"<sup>13</sup> thought processes of the brain.

#### **-Robert Rauschenberg (1925- ) - mixed-media assemblages**

The creator of "assemblages" and "combines" Rauschenberg creates his work using forms of collage – usually in three dimensions. Rauschenberg was one of the key players in the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art. His early works included boxes of blue prints, black and white images and objects, indicating a fascination with the juxtaposition of not just 2D imagery but 3D objects, and objet d'art.

Rauschenberg seemed to want to montage the realms of 2D and 3D to create a new world in which his work emerged into the surroundings. Dada or so called "neo-dada"<sup>14</sup> ideology meets late 50s homogenisation, and the commodification of art (appendix).

Rauschenberg also experimented with silk screen printing, in which the repetition of the imagery was a key element, but it is his paradigm of 3D montage that concerns us here.

In 1955 Rauschenberg made his first "combines", three-dimensional assemblages in which paintings were combined with found images, such as photographs, and objects of popular culture—traffic signs, light bulbs, Coke bottles, radios—to create ironic or ridiculous effects.

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<sup>13</sup> McLuhan M. (1964) Understanding Media, London: Routledge

These hybrid works, emphasising mass-produced objects, had a strong influence on the Pop Art movement of the 1960s (see Appendix iii).

**Richard Hamilton** (1922- ) – Pop Art.

Richard Hamilton was a British painter who pioneered the development of Pop Art in Britain in the 1950s. The *Independent Group*, of which he was a member with other artists, critics and architects, was interested in mass-produced urban culture, for example, cinema, science fiction, billboard advertising, and machines. It also rejected the distinction between highbrow and popular taste.

Hamilton was, and still is, most famous for his collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956, Kunsthalle Tübingen, Germany), it consisted of an inventory of Pop images that contained the fundamental motifs of English and American Pop Art ["sex, technology, entertainment and the mass media – drawing on photography, comic books, pin-up magazines, consumer products and other sources to be so successfully mined by Hamilton himself and by his colleagues"<sup>15</sup>] (appendix).

Through Hamilton we see photomontage and collage take a different, more commercial route – montage seems to have 'come of age'. Where as the earlier 'neo-dada' and dada artists such as Heartfield would use their imagery to influence society, pop artists' 'role' was more as a mirror on society. For example another piece of Hamilton's work *She* (1958-1961, Tate Gallery, London), draws attention to the erotic use of the female figure in advertisements for toasters and vacuum cleaners. Where as before montage was an end, through Pop Art it became a means to an end (see Appendix iv).

"The electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no content. And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all. For it is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium."

McLuhan M. (1964).

As we move into the digital realm, the realm of AWEI, we see the slow emergence of a new aesthetic. The Dadaists were concerned with the 'shock attraction' attained by juxtaposing images together. Whilst Heartfield for example would use the new 'montage aesthetic' to a political end - "the medium is the message"<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> The Pop Art Show – Royal academy of arts 1991

<sup>15</sup> The Pop Art Show – Royal academy of arts 1991

<sup>16</sup> McLuhan M. (1964) *Understanding Media*, London: Routledge

As we look further into the equation we see cubism using the 'suspension of time' to wonder around an object, 'montaging' individual faces and nuances, to form a new 'third meaning', 2D VR (two-dimensional virtual reality). Where as it could be argued that Burroughs, in using 'cutups', and Rauschenberg in using 'found imagery' were again taking a similar approach to the Dadaists. Rauschenberg for instance would mix organic with inorganic<sup>17</sup> in his "assemblages" – creating a shocking and absurd result.

So what of the 'digital montage'? Does this realm use a 'sharpen' filter to harden the divide between individual composites, or a 'gaussian blur'?

In my opinion the purpose of a package such as Adobe PhotoShop, by it's own definition a 'photo retouching program', is to evaporate from the process becoming transparent in its use, taking the pop artists position of collage as 'a means to an end' to its logical conclusion. Rather than physically affecting the aesthetic PhotoShop's role is one of vapid anonymity. Yet as it does this it leaves a distinct 'fingerprint' on 'it's' work, a style. If we now see a [computer generated] photomontage, we subconsciously seek out "jaggies"<sup>18</sup> ["jagged edges of a digitised image resulting from low-res bitmapped graphics. Always plural"<sup>19</sup>] and imperfections, for in the digital realm where there exist word processors, 'edit menus' and 'undo's' there is no excuse for error or imperfection.

What I hope this first section indicates is that AWEI is not some kind of nihilistic entity born through random chance and LINGO programming but a product of artistic routes, embedded in and part of Montage.

The difference is the currency in which AWEI deals - it's not 'artistic commodities' or photos themselves, but 'information' which may, in turn, take on the form of photographs or 'art works' there exists however a subtle distinction.

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<sup>17</sup> *Monogram* (1955-1959, Moderna Museet, Stockholm), features a stuffed goat with a tyre around its middle<sup>17</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Hale C. (1996) WIRED style - principles of English usage in the digital age, HARDWIRED

<sup>19</sup> Hale C. (1996) WIRED style - principles of English usage in the digital age, HARDWIRED

## Information Montage: The late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Phenomenon.

"It is the powerful mosaic and iconic thrust in our experience since TV that explains the paradox of the upsurge of *Time* and *Newsweek* and similar magazines. These magazines present the news in compressed mosaic form that is a real parallel to the ad world. Mosaic news is neither narrative, nor point of view, nor explanation, nor comment. It is a corporate image in depth of the community in action and invites maximal participation in the social process."

Marshall McLuhan (1964)

What we see all around us is continued and contrived juxtaposition. Be it walking down the street reading bus stop posters<sup>1</sup>, 'a-board' news headlines or watching the ad breaks between programs, we live and swim in a later-day media montage soup.

In many ways the Internet is yet another version of the broad sheet in as much as TV is as well; data and information jockey and vie for attention. "NEW" and "FREE" are just harbingers of impending "spam"<sup>2</sup>. There exists no content only coverage.

"The limitation is part of the nature of our demonstration. We don't claim invention of the style or the techniques. We have no patent on the politics or the designs."<sup>3</sup>

Some people refer to the Internet as being infinite this is a fallacy, it is however vast. To say that there is a beginning and an end is also untrue. The Internet is parallel, 'multi-parallel', decentralised, partly organic<sup>4</sup> and by its own definition a 'web' of interconnections. It takes McLuhan's idea of a mosaic to its ultimate conclusion – a 4D mosaic spread across '180 countries, encompassing more than 30 million users'.

What have we lost from this 'autonomous' process of montage? Montage has in effect been stripped from its own context, recontextualised and given a new aesthetic. The political aim of montage was always to decontextualise famous figures, dictators and the enemy of man by placing them in a new absurd alternate reality undermining both their opinions and beliefs. It would seem montage has become 'liquidated by its own success'. Montage is filled with montage.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the finer examples of 'Read me' posts was one for a local church that read "CH\_\_CH what's missing? UR"

<sup>2</sup> Branwyn G. (1997) Jargon watch – a pocket dictionary for the jitterati, HARDWIRED

<sup>3</sup> Crimp D., Rolston A. (1990) AIDS demo GRAPHICS, Seattle: Bay Press

In effect what we have created is information montage. Juxtaposing media; MTV, pop videos and computer graphics; news casts and web casts, themselves montage; layering the information to create a new hypermedia environment. More media than media as Baudrillard might say. According to Barthes we have created a new 3<sup>rd</sup> meaning within the 'mosaic' of media. Yes the media is the message, in fact the coverage is the news. We have shifted from news as education to news as commodity.

This is no longer confined to television and newspapers – our [computer] screen architecture has also become overwhelmed. We have created a "...powerful mosaic and iconic thrust", information stripped of meaning; the "medium is the message"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> I shall elaborate on this later.

<sup>5</sup> McLuhan, M (1964) *Understanding Media*, Routledge

## Undermining the value of information.

“It was a virtual war of information, electronics and images – not primarily of force. The more we had access to “live” war events, the more the reality became information – which quickly affected how the event was conducted.”<sup>1</sup>

As Baudrillard (1995) said “The Gulf War did not take place”. However according to the media it took place during the January and February of 1991. Our enemy was Saddam Hussein our hero US General H. [stormin’] Norman Schwarzkopf.

What we actually received was media coverage, media speculation and foreign correspondents opinion. The evidence of a war amounted to little in the west. It is true we were bombarded with pictures, reports – our newspapers talked of nothing else - but was it *real*, where was the evidence of a real war? Shoddy ‘in-flight’ pictures of supposed Iraq installations seemed only deepen Baudrillard’s theory of a virtual war, taking place not in Baghdad but in a mediaspace created by CNN (appendix).

There were no ‘real’ casualties, no real winners, just hostages – millions of us, forced day after day to watch countless news reports and speculation. It was as if it had been a simulation taking place in virtual reality – ‘Cyber Swindon’. The Gulf war was, according to Baudrillard (1995), a simulacrum of war not the real thing. And then it was over as suddenly as it had begun – game over, ‘insert credit to continue’.

What Baudrillard was trying to illustrate was that the media, and in turn information, becomes a self-sustaining prophecy. It only needs a small spark for the giant ‘news dissemination wheels’ to grind into action. Once they have started there is no stopping them until a new, more sensational, more ‘important’ story comes along that dwarfs, and finally extinguishes it’s predecessor; the whole process is orchestrated by the media for the media.

“The continuous pressure is to create ads more and more in the image of audience motives and desires. The product matters less as the audience participation increases.” Marshall McLuhan (1964)

What we now focus on is not the story itself but its coverage; the story matters less, the coverage matters more. CNN are in fact selling sand to the Arabs – or in this case news to the well informed. News readers, correspondents and journalists have all become the ‘media celebrities’ of the 90’s. ‘Journalists’ such as John Simpson now present ‘chat shows’ on

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<sup>1</sup> Horrocks C. and Jevtic Z. (1996) Baudrillard for beginners, Icon Books

television channels such as BBC NEWS 24 –itself an offspring of the media culture we are sustaining. News has in effect become as *unimportant* as the products in television advertisements.

“The steady trend in advertising is to manifest the product as an integral part of large social purposes and processes. With very large budgets the commercial artists have tended to develop the ad into an icon, and icons are not specialist fragments or aspects but unified and compressed images of complex kind.”

Marshall McLuhan (1964)

We are fed montage daily from the time we get up until the time we go to bed; placated by news, adverts and lifestyle programmes. Ceaseless, mundane, vapid diets of ‘high calorie’ information glut.

In response we have become immune, ‘switching off’ to the constant bombardment. In short the real information has been undermined by the ‘glut’. Now we ‘see’ and hear news subconsciously, it never seems to have our full attention, instead we pick out headlines, bulletins and reports from an almost inescapable ‘news soundtrack’ that follows us throughout the day.

“Ads are not meant for conscious consumption. They are intended as subliminal pills for the subconscious in order to exercise an hypnotic spell...”

Marshall McLuhan (1964)

News too has become a victim of its own ‘commodification’, “liquidated”. There is now so much of it on terrestrial television, cable and satellite news channels, radio and newspapers that we absorb information rather than watch and learn from it – we are no longer informed, simply overwhelmed.

There is now the danger of over coverage, over exposure. News becomes senseless, asynchronous contradictory – is Diana dead or is she alive. It now becomes possible to piece together a story from fragmentary pieces of video footage, from which you can draw your own conclusions.

For instance I recently decided to find information about the so called ‘Bill Gates Pie attack’, a story in which Bill Gates was hit in the face by a performance artist who ‘pies’ famous celebrities. I coupled together three different videos, from three different sources in three different formats [QuickTime, MPEG, and AVI].

Bizarrely it was like reconstructing the JFK assassination. Only instead of the Zapruder cine camera footage I had news extracts from new channels from around the world all freely available on the Internet (appendix).

With such a wide spectrum of information not only can we channel hop but 'media hop', surfing data sources to compile our own unique individual news reports, not merely those offered by the BBC or CNN. If the old adage 'the camera never lies' was true up until today, it will certainly be dead by tomorrow morning.

We now have so much information it becomes valueless – Like Palimpsest simply scrubbed out and replaced, updated, forgotten and lost. Delivered over transient mediums – television, the Internet and newspapers, what was of importance today will be forgotten by tomorrow (appendix). We are bordering on the notion of editing for ourselves, entering a realm of passive interaction and 'auteur theory'. We now choose the content, its source and its format. However, does this make the news any more or less valid? - in my opinion less so. We now have the ability decontextualise news and data items, stripping them of their meaning – in effect jumping to our own conclusions and creating our own realities in which to exist. What I like to call the 'wrong end of the stick phenomenon'<sup>2</sup>.

Information overload doesn't merely subvert the truth it implies that there wasn't a truth to start with – in effect decentralising news and disassociating it from its origin - story. We are in the midst of the first "information consumer age".

"...the information ecosystem is a ferociously Darwinian place that produces endless mutations and quickly weeds out those no longer able to adapt and compete."

Mitchell W. J. (1996)

We are, in theory, steering away from the idea of hierarchical information and heading towards a more complex, chaotic system of data – an information food chain; a Darwinian 'info-evolutionary' system in which only the fittest, most sensational, most prestigious information survives. A system where the instructions travel from the bottom up rather than disseminate from the top down in a rigid hierarchy.

In the same way in which we can look at plants as carnivores - the way they feed from other dead or dying plant matter to produce new leaves, stems and flowers, so AWEI feeds from the 'data-forest' floor of the internet. It uses nuggets of data to grow and evolve, producing new relationships between 'data detritus' decontextualising, recontextualising before finally 'montaging' and 'collaging'. The result is information devoid of meaning, in effect mirroring

society and the media – AWEI produces the pop art of the nineties “commodified information”.

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<sup>2</sup> One could reply “it depends on who the stick belongs to” but let’s not stretch the analogy too far.

## **The birth of information overload:**

“One may say that time had a beginning at the big bang, in a sense that earlier times simply would not be defined.” Stephen Hawking (1988)

In much the same way we theorise that time and space began with what is most commonly referred to as a ‘big bang’, so information began with a similar ‘explosion’ involving the Internet and the home computer revolution.

Internet technology was created in early 1973 as part of a project headed by Robert Kahn and conducted by the Advanced Research Projects Agency, part of the United States Department of Defence. In 1984 the technology and the network were turned over to the private sector and to government scientific agencies for further development. The growth has continued exponentially. Service-provider companies [CompuServe, MSN, NetDirect etc.] who make “gateways” to the Internet available to home and business users enter the arena in ever-increasing numbers. By early 1995, access was available in 180 countries and encompassed more than 30 million users. Current projections indicate that 100 million computers will be connected via the Internet in the year 2000.

“The old idea of an essentially unchanging universe that could have existed, and could exist, forever was replaced by the notion of a dynamic, expanding universe that seemed to begin a finite time ago, and that might end at a finite time in the future” Stephen Hawking (1988)

We look upon the internet as a global information resource, for that’s what it is. We also look upon it as if it had always been there and always will be. But with more and more information in greater volumes [Real Audio, Shockwave, Flash, QuickTime VR] we are heading towards what analysts might call ‘information glut’ or ‘gridlock’.

### **“Information Gridlock**

The traffic jams on the information superhighway that may eventually lead to full-blown Net collapse”<sup>1</sup>

“Whether one is packing a suitcase or making a sundae at a self-service ice cream bar, the temptation to keep piling on is often irresistible, and is invariably followed by feelings of deep regret.”

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<sup>1</sup> Branwyn G. (1997) Jargon watch – a pocket dictionary for the jitterati, HARDWIRED

David Shenk (1997)

We find ourselves in an environment where we can have “virtually”<sup>2</sup> anything. The chances are if you’re interested in something, some one some where is also interested in it – and usually has more information than you. It’s simply a matter of entering the ‘query’ into a search engine database and waiting for the results appear before your eyes – like a Polaroid image. With such a bewildering array of choice one finds oneself arriving at a seemingly endless vista of information.

“Magazine features have long employed the pictorial treatment of themes and news. Side by side with these magazine features that present shots and fragmentary points of view, there are new massive iconic ads with their compressed images that include producer and consumer, seller and society in a single image.”

Marchall McLuhan (1964)

McLuhan (1964) discusses the mosaic of information in newspapers and magazines vying for our attention. Often these articles and pictures are simply fired onto the page using a ‘DTP gun’; no one article or picture is made any more important than another. We are presented with a meaningless montage of factual and non-factual information through which we must sift. Our duty to find factual information is made all the more harder by the alluring ‘iconic ads’ that pander to our every need.

Exactly the same is true of the Internet; no *one* web site is any bigger than any other in terms of ‘Internet presence’ – only this time its ‘banner ads’ that hamper out progress. To explain this it is best to imagine the Internet as a two-dimensional plane. As we look at this plane we see entities or sites covering its surface. These ‘entities’ represent the machines hosting information for large companies such as Microsoft<sup>3</sup> or small ‘home pages’ like my own<sup>4</sup>. No one number<sup>5</sup> is any more important than any other. Beneath this plane lies the content, the information, it is here where certain sites dwarf others, it is here where we can begin to make distinctions. (appendix)

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<sup>2</sup> ie. as long as it exists in cyberspace we can own it, or at least a copy of it.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.microsoft.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nostromo.ndirect.co.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> Internet Protocol (IP) number eg. 141.163.211.23

### **"Link Rot**

The process by which links on a web page become obsolete as the sites they're linked to die or change location."<sup>6</sup>

It would seem this is partly the problem. With the ability to upload, download or surf anything that interests us the amount of data available is growing exponentially [some of it our own]. As the volumes of data go unchecked so the Internet spirals out of control, we head towards information overload.

Because of this we are slowly distancing ourselves from the acquisition of data in using web-bots, search engines and other 'tools'. We are seeing in effect the death of learning. With the ability to simply 'hyperlink' to another document, we are slowly becoming more dependent on these hyperlinks, 'structuring' our lives around them. So then, if we were to suddenly remove these hyperlinks, and systematically delete 'bookmark files' where would we be? Our reliance on these 'information acquisition tools' will be our ultimate downfall. The Net would slowly stagnate and so would we.

This is not so ludicrous. I suggest that the Internet is as much a part of our bodies as it is 'subterranean cables' and "Dark Fibre"<sup>7</sup> - therefore we are mutually dependent on each other. We currently consider the Internet to be confined to these realms of digital data, however the Net is as much a part of our bodies, pulsating through our veins and internal organs as it is 'nodes', 'repeaters' and 'hubs'. In short it is partially analogue or organic. Without us [humans] ('its' creator) the Internet would be nothing, it would slowly stagnate and die. Only as it travels through our bodies does it gestate, grow, expand assimilating more information, growing ever larger – in an absurd way each one of us is a small part of the Internet, we become components.

"As computers develop to be more like humans, so humans develop to like to like computers more. This is especially apparent in youth culture where the aesthetic value of what the computer does, in music, in image generation, in design, in games is increasingly appreciated."

Robert Pepperell (1995) – "The post-human manifesto" no.15

So how do we deal with this new-found wealth. With not only the internet but satellite and cable TV [and in 1999 digital terrestrial TV] offering us a greater variety of choice, what is our solution. Answer; we introvert, we simply stick to what we know. And why not, this is what the large conglomerates want, in fact they counted on it. Narrow casting, niche marketing, they

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<sup>6</sup> Branwyn G. (1997) Jargon watch – a pocket dictionary for the jitterati, HARDWIRED

now know where and when to find us any time of the day or night. Rather than the broadening of choice in actual fact we see it narrowing and the emergence of more and more cliques, newsgroups and 'minority channels'. Rather than being 'given' a bag of 'pick'n'mix' we are 'forced' to have one flavour at a time 'and like it'.

With so much information we can't possibly amass it all on our hard drives or CD-ROMs, the idea of internet backup software is absurd, it would be like trying to empty all the oceans of the world into a goldfish bowl.

So now Rather than consigning redundant information to the 'data landfill sites' of the internet people are starting to readdress the balance. Creating new, 'virtual-environment'ly' friendly applications that recycle data and language, not simply create or download more of it.

An example of such a program is "Shredder". Shredder takes text files and ASCII data and reorders it for reuse – it is a 'green application'. (appendix)

"The texts will be decomposed to its elements, letters and punctuation marks. Therefore the user receives the same amount of letters, but now in alphabetical order, ready to serve as raw material for new texts: ArchiVirus plays with the relation of the mental processes of FORGETTING and REMEMBERING to the computer processes of DELETING and SAVING. Superficially considered, these notions are related analogously, but: we are able to remember, what we deleted and to forget, what we saved..." - Shredder (<http://www.sil.at/m/AV/menu.html>)

Similarly one of AWEI's objectives was to find new uses for 'old' data, rather like the way Rauschenberg created "combines" and "assemblages" out of 'junk' and detritus. It is during this process that absurdity of montage becomes apparent. The way in which many textures and styles amalgamate to form a new aesthetic – an information aesthetic. Like the Dadaists before who were fascinated by the absurd relationships between their juxtaposed imagery so AWEI's meaning is born through the contrasting sources of information it finds.

### **"Web Brownouts**

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<sup>7</sup> Branwyn G. (1997) Jargon watch – a pocket dictionary for the jitterati, HARDWIRED

Network slowdowns that are occurring as more and more people access the Internet with higher speed connections and more requests for capacity-hogging multimedia files."<sup>8</sup>

As Hawking (1988) explains we are all heading toward a 'big crunch', maybe Information montage signals the beginning of the end for the Internet. Or as Kurt Schwitters might say today; 'everything I spit is information', and this it would seem is the whole problem.

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<sup>8</sup> Branwyn G. (1997) Jargon watch – a pocket dictionary for the jitterati, HARDWIRED

## **Lack of synchronous 'communication' - the consequence of information overload?**

"Answering machines and voice mail systems eliminate the frustration of telephone tag. You can attend to your e-mail whenever it is convenient to do so, not when you are unexpectedly and arbitrarily interrupted by a telephone ring. We are discovering that strictly synchronous communication is really just a limit case of asynchronous communication."

William J. Mitchell (1995)

With so much "spam"<sup>1</sup>, junk, and useless email arriving daily and in extreme cases hourly, it's no wonder we are experiencing information overload. This coupled with the fact that seemingly with every day that passes a new television cable operator, television service or television channel emerges. We are in the midst of a digital fog so dense it is difficult to see where we have come from and where we are heading.

Our lives are now so hectic, so chock-a-block that we need digital accoutrements to help us function properly as human beings. PDAs, digital watches, pagers, mobile phones all ensure that we can arrive at our next appointment, or our next meeting on time; whilst still pertaining to be anthropoid. This, of course, takes place alongside our interesting and varied social lives... it simply isn't possible, something has to give.

"Digital technology – which makes possible the conversion of words, sounds, pictures and moving images into coded digital messages – is driving the computing and telecommunications worlds into ever closer contact, and networks allow this data to be distributed."<sup>2</sup>

The first solution is to communicate asynchronously. I.e. communicating with others when you are able to, not when you are forced to. If we look at the telephone for example, its logical ancestor would be mobile communications or electronic mail. With the latter, as Mitchell (1995) explains, it is equivalent to answering telephone calls not when the phone rings but when you decide to pick up the receiver - there now exists a temporal 'slippage'.

The next solution is to exist in our own time zones, and conduct asynchronous lives; not just communication, travelling, eating, working and shopping not when everyone else does but when we want or 'need' to. In short we are on the verge of destroying synchronousness forever.

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<sup>1</sup> Branwyn G. (1997) Jargon watch – a pocket dictionary for the jitterati, HARDWIRED

<sup>2</sup> Rowe C. and Thompson J. (1996) People and chips, London: McGraw Hill

When Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1877 we were able to speak to people who didn't occupy the same physical space as ourselves. As phones became ever more complex, stretching first across countries then continents; changing from analogue technology to digital we were able to speak to people who were in far away countries. This did of course bring problems.

It is all very well picking up the telephone and calling a friend or relative, but if they are in a different country the chances are they'll be in a different time zone – this means they'll be less than willing to talk to you at 2am in the morning on a week day. The solution is to arrange, beforehand, a mutually beneficial time to converse. This does however defeat the objective of a totally synchronous conversation, creating if you like a pseudo-synchronous conversation – a 'pre-planned live event'.

“Once, places were bounded by walls and horizons. Days were defined by sunrises and sunsets. But we video cyborgs see things differently. The Net has become a world-wide, time-zone-spanning optic nerve with electronic eyeballs at its endpoints.”

William J. Mitchell (1995)

We are slowly heading towards total abandonment of time zones, GMT, EST. etc. adopting our own individual time zones, or 'bubbles'. We are in effect already doing this. For instance I have three digital watches; a wall clock, alarm clock and a computer, all of which are synchronised. I could say to be operating "Will Time". It matters not to me that my clocks aren't in exact synchronisation with GMT, only that they are in synchronisation with each other. I now know when and 'where' I am at all times.

There are less extreme variations of this in action already. For instance a number of people structure their lives and free time around the programmes they enjoy watching [this is to a certain extent still true even if we take into account the video recorder]. The fact that all the shows are unified by one time zone, one time, matters less than the fact that each show acts as a marker for their individual clock - like the minutes in an hour. People are slowly beginning to weave their own fabric of time. Structuring their lives not around the rising and setting of the sun over the horizon, but by the number of jobs they have to do in a day or the number of programmes they want to watch in an evening.

### **Social Circles and media Spaces.**

In this world of asynchronous media spaces created by individual time zones and the activities of individuals, what of the threat to democracy? Where is the accountability in a

politician who attends surgeries not in real time but when (s)he 'wants' to. The internet already poses a significant threat to this accountability already.

If for instance one poses a question over email to a local MP, the onus is on them to reply. However if the question is banal or perhaps too difficult, they may decide not to reply. The same scenario could not take place in a real-time face-to-face transaction where the politician would be obliged to reply.

Finally what of chance encounter and face-to-face contact. It is through both of these events that we broaden our horizons and develop our social skills. Can we really expect asynchronous VR spaces to act as surrogate experiences? Would the shock of real-time conversations to those exposed to avatar asynchrony be too much? Is the chance encounter of the future going to be limited to the 'wrong number'<sup>3</sup>.

This is where I leave the trail open for others to follow, as I return to the realm of AWEI. What I hope to have achieved in this section is widen the potential for AWEI, looking at it's juxtaposition in a future society; understanding its temporal relationship to the individual in the 'first information age'. In short open up yet another framework; that of the temporality of data. As we use a greater variety of mediums in our 'information aesthetic'<sup>4</sup>, so each element has a unique pocket of time – a 3<sup>rd</sup> meaning. We are now no longer simply creating a 2D or 3D information montage but one that spans the 4<sup>th</sup> dimension as well.

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<sup>3</sup> I.e. those chance conversations with people you will never meet over the telephone when they are expecting to talk to someone else.

<sup>4</sup> I shall develop this theme later

## Information is the Pop Art of the 90's:

"Many new names were suggested for the trend. Some, like 'New Vulgarianism', expressed the American critics' disgust; others, like 'New Rationalism' and 'Neo-Dadaism', suggested links with art history. The name Pop stuck because it appealed to the media, which rallied to celebrate this art movement as they had never rallied to any other, because it was entertaining as well as slightly shocking and, of course, because the media could see themselves as its collective father."<sup>1</sup>

As the art, and processes of art became automated so we saw the birth of 'commodified art'. A fresh crisp comparison to the 'dribbles' of abstract expressionism that had preceded it. Rather like most [artistic] movements it was a slow transitional phase rather than a clear and precise paradigm shift leading through from Rauschenberg to Lichtenstein. Although it can be traced back to key individuals such as Jasper Johns, whose pigment and wax "Three flags" identified the movement for what it was (appendix); incongruous, an enigma on canvas.

Later 'icons' of the media such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley were incorporated into what became a visual montage of the movement. Self referential, self-acknowledging, all conquering Pop Art; a montage of 50s and 60's America fed back into the world.

Now it is the information that is self-referential and all encompassing. Information has become the Pop Art of the nineties – 'Pop Information'; or information as art, 'info-art'. "Icons"<sup>2</sup> of the multimedia age are the commodity, the bits and bytes; zeros and ones of the 'information age'. This time there exists a mosaic of the media. Not merely an artistic movement coined by the media, but media created by the media for the media. A 'movement' of hyper-information fed to us via Internet and television; radio and newspapers.

"The most blatant appeals to mass imagery were those of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, one borrowing wholesale the visual language, subjects, and techniques of the comic strip, the other the ubiquity and drumming repetitiveness of advertising."<sup>3</sup>

Information has become pop art, replaced it even. Our new postmodern perspectives have created a new amorphous entity, mass-multimedia. AWEI looks at this cyclic self referential

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<sup>1</sup> Lynton N. (1989), The story of modern art, London: Phaidon Press

<sup>2</sup> I.e. the physical representation of files, folders and applications

<sup>3</sup> Lynton N. (1989), The story of modern art, London: Phaidon Press

creation process becoming an 'info-art' or 'pop information' generating 'device'. In doing so we have come full circle; AWEI is autonomous, it is the ultimate gestation of Warhol's idea. Only rather than "post-painterly abstraction"<sup>4</sup> AWEI is post-media, hyper-media reinterpretation and extrapolation. The humdrum day-to-day information of the Internet is reused, and recontextualised. It's 'frame' is that of 'information', the way in which we now try to break everything down into it's smallest most finite elements, it's border is the desktop; an abyss of metaphors and icons.

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<sup>4</sup> Lynton N. (1989), *The story of modern art*, London: Phaidon Press

**A new "information aesthetic":**

information *n.*

1. knowledge acquired through experience or study
2. knowledge of specific and timely events or situations;  
news
3. the act of informing or the condition of being informed
4. a. an office, agency, etc., providing information  
b. (*as modifier*): *information service* .
5. a. a charge or complaint made before justices of the  
peace, usually on oath, to institute summary criminal  
proceedings  
b. a complaint filed on behalf of the Crown, usually by the  
attorney general
6. *Computer technol*
  - a. the meaning given to data by the way in which it is  
interpreted
  - b. another word for data (sense 2)

`infor-mational *adj.*<sup>1</sup>

aesthetic *adj.* *aesthetical* or *U.S. (sometimes)* *esthetic, esthetical*

1. connected with aesthetics or its principles
2. a. relating to pure beauty rather than to other  
considerations  
b. artistic or relating to good taste: *an aesthetic  
consideration*

aes-thetically or *U.S. (sometimes)* es-thetically *adv.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Collins English dictionary, Third edition, London:HarperCollins Publishers 1992

<sup>2</sup> Collins English dictionary, Third edition, London:HarperCollins Publishers 1992

In other words data masquerading as beauty, sought after for its artistic worth. What we see is a new emerging information aesthetic.

If you're still not sure what it is or where to find it, look around. It is the fabric of everyday society, the framework to which we append our lives. It is the diet of media that we are fed day after day. The rolling credits, the mindless voiceovers, the product placements and endorsements the 'can't innovate won't innovate' mentality that runs ripe through our society and future tradition.

The information aesthetic is the new-media world. It is the commodification of this information, the feeling of data ownership and responsibility. We all own a piece of it, and as I mentioned earlier we are all a physical part of it. The information aesthetic is the condition we find ourselves in; post-human, post-modern, pre-millennium. The information aesthetic is the 'montaging' of everyday slogans, adverts and television into a new 'data packet', delivered to us by the same medium(s) that created it. The media recognises this – and, rather than slow down its production, it speeds it up; churning out more 'garbage'. We find ourselves suffocating in "information pollution". In much the same way as too much sound becomes sound pollution or too many toxins in the air become air pollution; so too much information has the same undesirable effect. The information undermines itself, contradicts and conceals the real, the valuable.

But rather than counter the invasion by turning off our TVs and refusing to check our email, we make our own programmes on public access cable or "Video Nation" shorts, we send more data over the internet and create our own web spaces [homepages]. In short we are filling the digital oceans in which we will eventually drown.

Maybe we don't notice; as William J. Mitchell (1995) puts it "we are all cyborgs now". With our digital watches, walkmans and more recently PDAs [Personal Digital Assistants] and mobile phones, we have become nothing more than data hungry machines. Not only are we being absorbed into the internet but the internet is spilling out into us, we have become its "exonerves"<sup>3</sup>.

One of Lichtenstein's main thrusts throughout his career was his fascination with the frame. His pop art works were like "visual puzzles"<sup>4</sup>, although physically they were never framed themselves.

The digital data we receive is inescapably framed; be it television or computer, we find ourselves bombarded with metaphors; desktops, icons, folders, pointers etc. The 'message is framed by the medium' ([appendix, three windows](#)).

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<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, W.J. (1995) City of bits, Cambridge Massachusetts, The MIT Press

<sup>4</sup> Serota, N et al. (1993) Roy Lichtenstein 17<sup>th</sup> February – 18<sup>th</sup> April 1993 gallery guide, Balding and Mansell plc

We have also seen the personification of data and products. Take for instance "Gotan" the orange tango 'doll' (appendix BCT & Gotan) or the more cryptic approach offered by Sony in the 'symbols' ads for the PlayStation. These ads make no mention of "PlayStation" or "games", often we are simply confronted by "circles", "squares", "triangles" and "crosses". (appendix) We are finding new ways to package the information, we are giving it an aesthetic frame.

The commodity for montage and juxtaposition is now information; this in turn creates an information aesthetic. Rauschenberg would create his "assemblages" and "combines" with what he called 'found imagery'. This took the form of textile, newspaper cuttings or photographs. In a sense he was attributing a sense of ownership to the ownerless. Combining this imagery to make a new 'Pop Art'.

Now it is not the 'art' aesthetic that we use but an 'information' one – a new aesthetic for the information age. This is in effect the purpose of AWEI. To seek out the 'found data' and recombine it using an information aesthetic, to produce new 'information art'; in a sense reusing the reused. Only the commodities aren't a palette of Pop Art icons the likes of which Richard Hamilton used, instead it uses the everyday new-media, the humdrum banner ads and corporate web pages; desktop icons and 'found files' that is AWEI's currency – Art will eat itself.

## Contemporary Digital Art:

Contemporary digital art that is, 'art' created in the digital realm, has one underlying and common thread running through it, Information. Nearly all the experiences created in the digital realm are consciously or subconsciously concerned with the representation of information. Not through their own fault each work is primarily motivated by the mechanics rather than the experience, one is not left wondering about the piece but it's digital representation. It is in effect self-defeating.

OSMOSE – Char Davies

" ...By changing space, by leaving the space of one's usual sensibilities, one enters into communication with a space that is psychically innovating. For we do not change place, we change our nature."

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1964

Osmose is a fully immersive 3D environment. The environments; "earth", "tree", "water" and "air" are a fusion between cyberspace and scuba diving. "immersants" breathe in to float up through the VR environment and similarly when they breathe out they sink down. The environment is a mass amalgamation of sensors, stereoscopic sound projection and state of the art 3D graphics.

The work communicates the idea of creating a world so immersive you simply don't want to leave. It is a dream-like world, constructed not from total imagination but from the documentation of the real. Osmose has become the hyperreal. It tries to accumulate enough information, so as to 'fool' its immersants and observers into thinking they are having a real experience. The project becomes an exercise in representation, One of the worlds is made up of Cartesian grids another language; Data spans in all directions overloading the senses. Osmose therefore becomes primarily about the representation of information in virtual space rather than the virtual space itself.

Resonance 4 – Toshio Iwai

This is a four-part installation by the Japanese artist Toshio Iwai. It's experience relies on the co-operation of 4 participants, each of which stands at their own 'station'. The work is intuitive, and involving. Each participant's grid is made up of musical tone, bass, rhythm and melody. By clicking the mouse the user has the opportunity to add or remove small squares from their station, each of which represents a musical note. The four stations play-back in harmony the notes the user has drawn creating a resonance that is quite powerful. There is

not only the ability to create collaborative music but 'distributed music' over a small 4 station intra-net.

This project, like Osmose revolves around the representation of information. This time it's not the environment, but sound specifically that the artist is trying to visualise. His intuitive interface allows each participant to create a small mosaic of information that is played back to them, along with another three in real time. Iwai also creates the feeling of ownership and loss when you retire from your platform to give another participant a try. The data you have just created is transient, and like palimpsest drawn over, scrubbed out and replaced.

### The Legible City – Jeffrey Shaw

"In his work the psychological identity of 'the city' is made tangible as a three-dimensional literary architecture through which the spectator travels interactively on a bicycle."<sup>1</sup>

Shaw's piece is unique in that it blurs the line between reality and virtual reality. The user sits on, and navigates using a real bicycle. However the bicycle is immobile, linked to large graphics workstation with an array of sensors, the output of which the participant uses to navigate through a number of cityscapes. The cities themselves are represented by textual information, in the form of stories and interviews gleaned from the actual physical location. As the user rides along (s)he is able to read for themselves data about the virtual environment through which they are travelling.

Once again this piece explores motifs of representation and information, in effect talking less about the spaces it represents and more about the technology that makes it possible.

To say that all contemporary digital art is about digital technology would be like saying that all paintings are about paint. However there is a problem with digital art similar to that which the 'photomontagists' discovered when creating political imagery. When using paint to depict political imagery there is always the association with art. In using photos, the final montage created refers back more to the actual event, reality, than it does art or painting.

It is for this very same reason, contemporary *digital* art will always be about the technology rather than the space or place it is trying to create/represent. In actual reality to create immersive works it would not facilitate computers but real locations and objects placed in different contexts.

Finally often we are invited to bring our own concepts to postmodern works (so called conceptual art), in comparison to the earlier approach of the 'photomontagists' who would

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<sup>1</sup> Popper F. (1993) Art of the electronic Age, London: Thames and Hudson.

build specifically unambiguous images. When we arrive at these new digital art works we are immediately reminded of our asynchronous reality outside of the art gallery. In effect we are bringing the concept of technology to the technology, there exists an almost inescapable paradox.

## The creation of AWEI: What's in a name

Art Will Eat Itself (AWEI) was originally named Interactive Art (IART); although AWEI is fast becoming IWEI – (Information Will Eat Itself) as its emphasis changes from art, to the representation of art. AWEI/IWEI is an ongoing process and investigation.

By using the word 'art' in the title I really stunted my initial progress. I tried to do the impossible and invent, as a nihilistic entity, my own art movement from scratch. I came into conflict with fellow peers so many times and took so much flak that there were occasions when I wish I'd called the project 'Cornflake Sim' or something equally banal. Once I got over what turned out to be a rather large 'creative block' I was able to continue. Below is the progress of the project charted in more or less chronological order;

I originally conceived of the AWEI idea shortly after reading an article in WIRED (5.04 US) magazine about

"Sim Tunes" a product based loosely on the interactive contemporary digital art piece by Toshio Iwai called "Musical Insects" (1992).

My initial idea was that of a cutesy 'multi-tainment' package, altogether rather innocuous and vapid. I later developed the idea taking into account what was current popular culture such as "Tamagotchis" and the "PlayStation". The influence was most definitely coming from Japan with small "Manga" characters selling everything from digital watches to soft drinks (appendix).

My research then led me towards games and game design. I 'foresaw' that games would become the new art. People would reject 'conceptual postmodern works' in favour of purely aesthetic and technical ones. This was once again rather naive. Although I carried along this tack for quite some time as whilst I was investigating this field – looking at the raised media profile of games characters such as "Lara Croft" in *The Face* magazine (appendix) – an exhibition called "serious games" arrived at the London Barbican art gallery. The exhibition featured among many other exhibits Char Davies' *Osmose* and Toshio Iwai's *Resonance of 4*.

I then developed the project further whilst rekindling my interest in Pop Art of the 50s and 60s. I decided I wanted to adapt AWEI to be some kind of 'Pop Art device'. Manipulating contemporary imagery as artists like Warhol had done, producing new 'dynamic' Pop Art images – 4D Pop Art in effect using QuickTime videos and stills. This idea too, became flat and lifeless – it had all been done before.

AWEI turned its last corner midway through the second semester of my final year. I had investigated the motives and ideas of the Pop artists, looked at their aims, their ideals. I came upon the idea of still creating 'Pop art' although I would readjust the commodities. It was the commodification of art that was one of the key themes of the movement.

And so AWEI became IWEI (Information Will Eat Itself). Information was the Pop Art commodity of the late 90s. It would be information that was to be manipulated, 'montaged', overlaid and decontextualised. AWEI had become a self referential creative process. Creating in effect 'anti-information', it's name was AWEI it's purpose to disseminate information as recklessly as those who created it in the first place.

This is where IART (Interactive Art), AWEI (Art Will Eat Itself), or IWEI (Information Will Eat Itself) comes in. The ambiguousness of the project's name is all part of the process that stimulated its creation.

Finally, AWEI would make reference to and be absorbed by 'information pollution' and 'information glut', whilst at the same time becoming 'contemporary digital art'; acknowledging however, that it was, and always will be about, information.

## What is IART/AWEI/IWEI:

AWEI lifts the manhole cover on the subterranean activities of the Internet, the optical cables, hubs, repeaters and us its living hosts. Through the metaphor of the desktop we peer down through a safe observation platform at the rivers of information, data currents; swirling torrents of zeros and ones.

What we see is a reflection of ourselves, our own society. In much the same way the Pop artists used icons of the 50s and 60s to reflect contemporary society, so AWEI uses information. In effect we stare into the screen and see ourselves staring right back at us.

“Everyone and his auntie wants to make a CD-ROM – not necessarily because they have some compelling artistic reason, but because they think everyone else is making one”<sup>1</sup>.

What exactly is AWEI? That’s up for debate – currently I consider it to be an ‘information montage device’ awaiting a specific application. Like many applications, and devices of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century AWEI was created awaiting a specific task – a meaning in life. It is the case that many pieces of software are written with organic and evolutionary objectives, AWEI was no exception.

Why has it been created? – To service the ‘addicted’ individual, an individual who seeks, craves and absorbs information, like an addict they’re dependent on data – so called data junkies in much the same way as ‘news junkies’ subscribe to CNN and BBC NEWS 24.

AWEI can best be compared to the aims of Brian Eno’s (1996) ‘perfect CD-ROM’ in which he outlines the future of the medium. It was only after creating AWEI that I read his diary and discovered that both his and my aims were almost identical.

“I have a proposal for a completely new type of CD-ROM – something based not on loading the ROM with prefomed chunks of material (music, videos, texts) through which a user navigates, but instead making a series of generators of new, unpreplanned material over which the user can choose various degrees of control.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eno B. (1996) A year with swollen appendices, Faber and Faber

He describes the advantages of this method as being :

(1) "The computer is dealing with manipulating small sets of rules or recipes (i.e. the instructions responsible for generating material), rather than huge blocks of data (such as premade bits of video). This immediately gets around the sluggishness associated with any current CD-ROM experience. The computer is doing what it is good at – playing with numbers – rather than what it is manifestly hopeless at – playing surrogate video-player or hi-fi system. The amounts of data that the computer needs to handle are vanishingly much smaller, and therefore more of the computer can be engaged in doing something interesting: growing the whole thing anew before your eyes. I want to do something that's like juggling seeds rather than moving mature forests."<sup>3</sup>

(2) "Perhaps more importantly, this gets round the biggest limitation of Roms – that quite soon you've been through the archive and seen everything you're going to see, and your only choice is to see it in another order. My proposed CD-ROM offers an always new experience, since it does not rely on chunks of preformed material (which, being so memory-intensive, can only be few in number), but is always generating new material – limitlessly. There is no possibility of having an identical experience twice."<sup>4</sup>

(3) "It dispenses with the awful tedium of 'interactivity'. What I want is something you could, if you choose, just switch on and allow to run-free, confident that it would self generate something worth watching. But, coupled with this, you could make the whole computer 'live' – so that any key you touch, any mouse movement you make, will cause a reaction in the program. Again, this is easy and fruitful to do with generators and tedious to do with playback systems, which is what most CD-ROMS actually are. You don't need to spell out these connections, but allow

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<sup>2</sup> Eno B. (1996) A year with swollen appendices, Faber and Faber

<sup>3</sup> Eno B. (1996) A year with swollen appendices, Faber and Faber

<sup>4</sup> Eno B. (1996) A year with swollen appendices, Faber and Faber

them to be discovered. It should be sufficient to know that each control-source is connected to a particular parameter in the program, and, in any given scenario, is always connected to that parameter."<sup>5</sup>

With AWEI the framework is always the same however it is the content, the most important part of the project, that is dynamic and organic depending on it's location. AWEI sucks in from as many different information sources as it can 'unperformed' data, that is, data not of it's own making. It then uses this data to create, juxtapose and display the multimedia mosaic-montage material it has just 'created'. What I didn't want to create was a dead CD-ROM, a Time Capsule.

"A CD-ROM is a locked storage device and when used as a ROM is a closed entity incapable of being developed. In this sense the CD is a time capsule, sealed and immutable."<sup>6</sup>

The actual project can best be broken down into three main areas; "Content", "interface", "bots".

Content:

This is the 'found data', in much the same way Rauschenberg would use 'found imagery'. Coupled with this is hard disk information, date, time, images, text, code, in all a montage. A new 'data aesthetic'. Always different the content is gleaned from the most appropriate source available, thus depending on what type of machine it is run on the results will always be different. It is the content that is AWEI.

Interface:

This is the locking mechanism, the box in which to put everything in. Using Lichtenstein's themes of frames AWEI is bordered, pinned and contained. For without the interface there would be little to distinguish AWEI from a file destroying virus.

Bots:

The bots, are little 'underlings' or apprentices carrying out work for the 'master' i.e. the person who invoked the program. They are also the Iconographic representations of web bots or spiders, a manifestation of the ideology of an intelligent agent rather than a more

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<sup>5</sup> Eno B. (1996) A year with swollen appendices, Faber and Faber

<sup>6</sup> Bryant K., (1996) Palimpsest - an exploration into digital documentary, p26

literal resemblance. Disseminating information these are the link between user and content, AWEI and user.

The rest of the project is entirely in the hands of user interpretation. Some may see the process as 'random' others 'contrived'. One thing is for sure AWEI does not seek to avoid definition, merely to absorb it – Art Will Eat Itself.

## Conclusions:

I have far from exhausted the avenues in which I have begun investigation. Another person approaching this project would undoubtedly bring his or her own unique perspectives and ideas to the title, and as such I feel the project could be developed further.

Although I have pointed fingers, and gesticulated in the general direction of things to come I think I should clarify where I see things going.

The future of CD looks bleaker than ever. What 'the audience' wants is not "preformed" data but dynamic 'content'. This however is in danger of being swallowed up by the vast 'information smog' that is out there right now. The future of multimedia lies not in the CD-ROM but on the Internet, a living breathing web of data. This multimedia too must evolve, using as its content other multimedia, creating a self sustaining process of death and rebirth. Rather than create new we must reuse the old, delete the redundant and forget about the lost. One thing is for sure; Art Will Eat Itself.

Suggestions for improving AWEI. – Future developments for someone else to carry on...

- Random Choice of URLs based on keywords found on the 'host's' hard drive.
- Tailoring of the interface to the host's machine. I.e. using fragments of 'file structures'; 'found imagery' and data to construct a 'cut-up', dada-style 'bowie-esque' interface.
- some method of storing the 'last position' of creation so that rather than starting from scratch the 'work' is on-going, organic, evolutionary. A Darwinian product in which the most successful 'bots' survive and the least successful ones die away.
- Somehow AWEI would feed back onto the internet to maintain the equilibrium as it were. Replacing as much information as it takes thus, like sustainable digital forests; imagery, text, video and sound will always be found in abundance.

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