

Vintage net works



Since the mid-1970s, perhaps even earlier, I have involved myself in Community/independent media. From radio and public access video in my teens to computer networking in the late-80s. I have spent a good deal of my time producing collaborative media art works, combining interests in music, performance and public media.

In the past twenty years I have written and performed plays, joined and formed bands, written scores for television documentaries, penned countless songs, piano and electronic compositions experimented with recording and performance techniques. Each a journey of their own, each with their failures and successes, lessons learnt.

In 1989 I began working with computers and modems, integrating both my literary and political interests in the then embryonic Pegasus Networks. By 1990 I was based in Byron Bay, north coast of east Australia, assisting in the establishment of a network that would reach anyone, anywhere in the country for the cost of a local call. Pegasus became the first, and perhaps most underrated Internet Service Provider (ISP) in the country. We must have introduced thousands of people to their first modem, and many to their first computer.

Between 1990 and 1991, I published instalments of a novella I had been writing since 1986. *In August* was posted to the newsgroup, *visionary*, which was later changed to *gen.cyberculture*. Around the same time, I produced a “live to Pegasus” reading, *Poets at the Café Byron*; publishing text as it was being read by the author. These were sent to the newsgroup, *café.byron*. I recall that around six to eight people were online at the time. It was real-time, live to text broadcasting.

It seems quite primitive looking back at it now, but at the time it was empowering to simply expand the notion of place: we were in Byron Bay, but our audience was quietly reading our material in locations around the country we would have no hope to reach otherwise. Examples of other early arts practice on the net are provided in the paper, *Theatre as Suspended Space*.

During the 1991 Australian Federal Election, I had a live text-based feed from the Canberra Tally Room where I was posting updates on Green candidates to the Pegasus newsgroup, *café.australia*. I believe this may have been the first Internet connected election, and certainly well before it was referred to as the Internet.

Pegasus provided me with a base from which I could assist in the practical applications of low-cost networking in Southeast Asia. What I was not able to achieve in Australia I was able to do so in Brazil (Earth Summit 1992), Indochina (*IDRC PAN Asia Networking Report*¹), Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands (PACTOK Community Network).

I was not alone. I worked with a small number of ex-poets, writers, architects, engineers, mechanics and musicians: a community of network activists extending the capabilities of computers and modems and their use in the developing world.

In some places, I found modems as scarce and as much sought after as legal aid and medicines. My first trip to Sarawak resulted in a fund raising exercise to cover the cost of modems for an indigenous people's network. They really wanted modems! (See App. 3, *FIERCE/InterRave*.)

¹ PAN Asia, [online] <http://www.panasia.org.sg/> [Accessed July 2000]

My most recent trip to Sarawak involved a web publishing workshop and a visit to long house communities that inspired the netcast installation, *Tat Fat Size Temple 1* and the dark ambient sound machine, *Tat Fat Size Temple 2* (see *Outcomes*).

By 1994, the Web was starting to take off. I had spent several months travelling through Indochina and Southeast Asia, researching the status of networking facilities for the International Development and Research Centre (Singapore). From Nanjing to Phnom Phen, from Ho Chi Min City to Jakarta, the Web was catching on and I had to catch up.



Black Harlequin, Livid Festival,
Brisbane, Qld, 1993.
Photo. K Williamson

When I returned I commenced work on a web site that would be an online representation of my first non-traditional operatic work, *Black Harlequin*². {PRIVATE}*Black Harlequin* was originally conceived as a one-person *new media* opera, performed in sequence with video projections and soundscapes. Extracts from the opera were performed between 1991 - 94.

In 1994, much of the visual, sound, text and stage designs were archived on the web. This site is both a record of its creative life span as well as an exploration of the work contributed towards its fruition. In addition, it was the first of many interfaces I would design in collaboration with video artist and designer Kim Bounds. We were interested in an interface to unexpected pathways, perhaps taking the user to parts of the site they would not necessarily visit were the interface marked with signs pointing this way and that. We were of the opinion that content should be non-hierarchical and that an interface

should reflect this.

The *Black Harlequin* web site incorporated MIDI files of the score, which played in the background as pages were loaded. It also contained audio files in .wav format as well as RealAudio. The score and those parts of the libretto that I was able to record could be heard from a list of files, or from pages that contained individual components of the libretto. This index of sound material is the single most popular page on the site and is routinely among the top ten downloads on the Toy Satellite server.

When I first started using the net, these informal, low-bandwidth, text based networks quickly became what I considered to be the *most* public of public access media. Public broadcasting licences for television and radio are hard to get. At the time of writing one hundred and ninety permanent community radio and seven television stations hold broadcast licences. Another one hundred and fifty aspirant radio stations are bidding for a limited number of available licences and bandwidth, some able to broadcast in rotation, 6-8 weeks at a time.

The net took off. By the mid-1990s the *audience* was not only reading and listening, it was learning to participate, learning to publish online. Everyone with a phone line and an income to support a computer and bandwidth had in most cases become, or had the potential to become a media publisher to their own communities on the Internet. In 1995, as I commenced my MA, the production house, Toy Satellite, that I had formed with my partner, Justina Curtis, collaborated with Pegasus and the State Film Library on *Melbourne Online to Beijing*.

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) provided computer communication services to the NGO Forum and UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. To coincide with this project, a temporary public access Internet venue was created in

² Garton, A 1994, *Black Harlequin*, [online] <http://www.toysatellite.org/bh/> [Accessed July 2000]

Melbourne. *Melbourne Women Online to Beijing* consisted of eight donated computers, modems and phone lines; network access via Pegasus and a support group of dedicated volunteers. It was located at Cinemedia, formally known as the Victorian State Film Library.

Melbourne Women Online to Beijing began as an idea to provide women of Victoria free access to the proceedings of the Beijing Conference. It became a four-week institution, during which both volunteers and participants discovered a means to source information overlooked by much of the mainstream media. Although news about the events in China made the daily papers, information available via the APC and MWOB was rarely, if ever, covered by them. *Melbourne Women Online to Beijing* was described as an empowering experience for those who visited the centre. (See App. 3, *Report: Melbourne Women Online to Beijing*.)

It was with these varied experiences and influences of life within electronically mediated networks that I embarked on a journey, being *Ausländer und Staatenlose*.



TOP LEFT NGO Forum, Earth Summit, UNCED, Rio, Brazil, 1992.

TOP RIGHT SEAFDA Interdoc-Asia Conference, Manila, 1992.

MID LEFT Roberto Verzola, Email Centre, Manila, 1992.

MIDDLE Dominic and Jagdish, Pactok Hub, Sibul, Sarawak, Malaysia, 1993.

MID RIGHT Chinese students on IRC at Melbourne Online to Beijing, 1996.

BOTTOM LEFT Boy showing hand-drawn keyboard (used to teach himself computer skills with) to Shahidul Alam, (founder of Drik), Dhaka slum dwellings, Bangladesh, 1998.

BOTTOM MID Mole - Indonesia, East Timor FIDO gateway server, London, 1997