

processual editing and -empyre- soft-skinned space : a personal account

<http://www.subtle.net/empyre/>

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-empyre- is a process based listserv on media art and culture, based in Sydney, hosted at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, and founded in 2002 by Melinda Rackham. I found out about it accidentally just as it began, upon stumbling into Melinda's network based project "Contagion" featured on an online magazine, no longer extant, called chairemetal (metal and flesh). Somehow the imaginative connotations of 'contagion' moving about inside a vast 'empyrean' or empire of the sky appealed to my sense of irony and adventure in equal doses, as I set about to try to figure out what new media might be. So without even knowing what a listserv was or, barely, a hypertext, I signed up, and joined in conversation with Melinda's first guest, Ollivier Dyens, who, as it happened, was the author / editor of Metal and Flesh and author of an eponymous title with MIT Press (2001).

In the coming months, -empyre- revealed itself to be a most marvelous way to learn almost effortlessly about what was quickly developing into the topic 'new media', about projects and people; fueled with a hopeful optimistic energy, -empyre-'s almost casual, self-effacing style (Melinda in those early days refused to even sign her name to her moderating posts) was most infectious like its forebear 'Contagion'-- the soft-skinned space as a benevolent viral bubble emanating from the Southern hemisphere. At first I imagined it being like the Yellow Submarine, possibly carrying on board some weird, oddly pleasant pathology, or media path-lab. The next

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year (2003), when Melinda needed time off to finish her doctoral dissertation, she asked me to program many months of -empyre- in her stead. I was game; it was fascinating. I could pick a topic I was burning to find out about, contact people I'd met at media conferences, or just had encountered their work, and convince them to take the stage for a brief period, to show off a bit and to let themselves be available to a latent, rather befittingly 'subtle' readership of some thousand souls around the globe. Melinda was always sorry we had to seemingly patronize the 'imperial' English language, and we gamely tried to clean up automatic Google translations as best we could from Spanish, Portuguese and French..

Our readers started in the south, but spread everywhere, and soon the list had moved beyond Oz and the Kiwis, while still retaining the laconic pithy tone of Down Under sensibilities. We attracted after a bit other moderators, still almost all from the Americas or the Pacific Rim--though not by design. Our guests came from all over the world, from a broad range of practices, from critical theory to computational poetics, from political hacktivism to industrial design. It was the mix that counted, and still does, as we've found that the best way to keep the flow going is to pick a broad topic or question to which we ask the guests to write specific responses and provocations. As they respond, there can be an almost Fluxus-like event cloud unfolding on the listserv; participation occurs both through the 'algorithms' set up by the guests themselves as they put content out into the list milieu, so by design, but also by semi-random commentary and reaction on the part of the readers. You never know who among the readers will get fired up and start writing seriously, upping the ante on the official guests of the month. You never know when the list will go from mix to remix, from a simple set of themes to a fugue state. I find this exciting: if the -empyrean- implies a space of x , in the heights or the sky,

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then here we discover the unpredictable moves of communally-generated narrative by multiple authors who all have a stake in the making the story interesting, who aren't bound by any format other than the announced thematic; while possible transformations of the theme occur across a triple register of moderating, guest posting, and reader posting, a music of the spheres. This mood keeps -empyre- contentious but rarely arrogant; argumentative and lyrical by turns.

As a moderator, I soon realize that I am deep into a kind of processual and collaborative editing, in which the readers become writerly and vice versa; in a space where guests and readership alike starts to try to perform a special kind of tactical writing together, call and response, in waves. The guests have a privileged voice-space; they can write in the vanguard of everyone else; at the same time they have the obligation to respond, not to drop out or disappear, during the time of engagement with the -empyreans-. Among the special guests, this dynamic of obligation 'lite'-- a sort of volunteer slavery to the list for a short time, brings out competition and generosity in equal measure. You get the sense that there is attentiveness in free flow, a hum of reading, thinking. If anything the -empyrean- soft-skinned space (so named by Melinda to denote its multilateral, participatory sensibilities) is a chill performance space, more than open mike, but not so hyped as a conference; maybe, as Jordan Crandall once said about moderating listserv conversations, like a dinner party, only you can switch around where you sit and which dishes to pick-- doesn't matter what or if you choose to eat, so long as you make conversation.

I've been interested in the remix like everybody else in new media. but it seems important to try to do something beyond just recontextualizing information. There is no dearth

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of opportunities for communicating online so it's really about what makes people want to contribute, to write, even formally, or more conversationally, in an open self generative work that still stays somehow grounded. It seems so important to get past the tyranny of presets in digital media, the multiple choice aspect of everything web 2.0-- and so the leanest most minimal structure, or rules of the game, seem delightful and even fanciful-- if there is not a 'formatting' issue or a cgi interface for selection among predetermined choices, will people want to play? So the whole idea of -empyre- has til now been to keep things really nonvisual, focussed on the word, on a sort of expanded even trippy aesthetic of letter-writing. It's so old school it's almost Jane Austen.

Much virtual ink is bled over the problem of how to establish transborder dialogues, how to create a public 'heterotopia' and this is a desire with more than political and aesthetic overtones, indeed reaches into the realm of magical thinking: as if, we wish to believe, we can overcome the loneliness, isolation, and profound distraction secondary to the media glut, by the strange harmonics of a conversation through as archaic and nonvisual a medium as the lowly email. I subscribe wholeheartedly to these fantasies. Or they may be the symptoms of an incipient delirium-- a fever of desire for some harmonics across a spectrum of human speech far wider than the normal audible range of the internet. Wider in the sense not of bandwidth but of the human spirit--I hope for a kind of expansive mood of play to take hold amongst this self selected, mostly silent group of a thousand readers/writers. For me as artist and editor this hope carries out through seduction and juxtaposition. I try to entice special guests to give of their time and to meet and respond to other guests whom they probably do not know personally, or have never met, and who are not necessarily likely to share a common argot. I

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remind them to post often and with generosity, and without expectation of response from the elusive -empyrean- readership, whose silence is the norm. The silence is a kind of nurturing presence: you get the feeling, when you write on -empyre- that many are paying close attention, or that perhaps your thoughts are winging into their drifts-- as they access email on high speed bullet trains via blackberries and pods. Or there is another kind of space on -empyre-, at times, a not-silent, ricochet space like a handball court where furious volleys rebound and strike. =empyre- is not a space of understanding, it does not explain itself. It does not require cooperation nor endorse neutrality. Posts, like hard balls at high speeds, smash at each other. Often on my watch this condition of almost violent play erupts unexpectedly. There will have been long silences on the list, practically nothing happening, and then someone takes up the game.

I've been thinking a lot about Ant Farm lately. The late sixties/seventies subversive architecture group was, in their own view, a self-described "art politics". Asked to comment on "Media Burn", an installation in which Ant Farm members drove through a wall of flaming televisions using only a video camera mounted on the back of the car hood for guidance through the flames, one Ant Farm member, "Uncle Buddy" responded with reference to a kind of detournement of cars and televisions into a (literally) explosive transposition: "the idea of looping back into television the destruction of television." Like Ant Farm whose interest to break up television in order to release, as it were, video for provocative deployment, using the old industrial image of wrecked and flaming cars, =empyre- declines the apparent totalizing affectivity of the internet just by exercising (or exorcising?), post upon post, the literary style of the brief (the formal letter), if anything a communication that reaches its apotheosis in

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eighteenth and early nineteenth Romantic writers at least, sort of like stacking a string of wrecked cars. As one of the producers of this latter-day 'media burn' I just try to light a couple of fires on peoples' laptops and see who drives through and what happens when they do., The 'image' or 'afterimage' is the witness of the hypertext itself.

More on -empyre-'s mechanics, simple rules of the game, and past and current glories, searchably archived and otherwise, are online at <http://subtle.net/empyre>. The list is archived by Cornell University Libraries/ Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art, and with the Pandora Archive, National Library of Australia. The list is currently moderated by Melinda Rackham (AU), Nicholas Ruiz III (US), Christina McPhee (US), Marcus Bastos (BR), Jason Nelson (AU), Renate Ferro (US) and Tim Murray (US).

*The quotes from "Uncle Buddy" on *Media Burn* and context on Ant Farm are from Felicity Scott's new book, *Architecture or Technoutopia*, Chapter 8, "Shouting Apocalypse," p. 138. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.

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The year 2008 involved many major movie events. Its highest-grossing films included *The Dark Knight*, *Kung Fu Panda*, *WALL-E* and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. 2008 has been widely considered to be a very significant year for cinema. The entertainment agency website IGN described 2008 as "one of the biggest years ever for movies." It stated, "2008 was the year when the comic book movie genre not only hits its zenith, but also gained critical respectability thanks to *The Dark Knight*"

9 December 2008 Avian influenza "situation in Indonesia" update 45. 2 December 2008 Cholera in Zimbabwe. 3 November 2008 Yellow fever in Burkina Faso. 30 October 2008 Yellow fever in the Central African Republic. 13 October 2008 New virus from Arenaviridae family in South Africa and Zambia - Update. 10 October 2008 Unknown disease in South Africa and Zambia. 29 September 2008 Cholera in Iraq - update. 29 September 2008 Melamine-contaminated powdered infant formula in China - update 2.

The Recession of 2008 (also called the Recession of the late 2000s or the Great Recession) was a major worldwide economic downturn that began in 2008 and continued into 2010 and beyond. It was caused by the Financial Crisis of 2008; it was by far the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The worldwide recession hit bottom in December 2009; however after five years there were few signs that the American economy started moving upward again. Five million of the 8 million jobs lost did 2008 (MMVIII) was a leap year starting on Tuesday of the Gregorian calendar, the 2008th year of the Common Era (CE) and Anno Domini (AD) designations, the 8th year of the 3rd millennium, the 8th year of the 21st century, and the 9th year of the 2000s decade. 2008 was designated as: International Year of Languages. International Year of Planet Earth. International Year of Sanitation. International Year of the Potato. January 1 "Cyprus and Malta adopt the euro.