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FREE FALL - an introduction to digital media

Freefall suggests the desire for a lack of boundaries and open space, whilst predicting a fall to earth. In order to predict where we are to land, we need to know where we started. It's about vectors. Yet this isn't a historical survey show more of a quick overview of some things happening in new media and by its nature runs against the grain of a reductionalist classification.

I am pre-play station. Myself an old analogue boy (coming from a background of celluloid film and analogue video) -adapting to the digital has been evolutionary. Its Xmas, I have just walked through Queensgate, Peterborough (Britain's biggest shopping centre circa 1982), like headless chickens digital cameras, DVD players and other tat is being snaffled up by insatiable shoppers. Many of us are stuck in the trap of chasing down the latest 'upgrade', technology and its apparently seamless integration into most objects has us at its mercy. Ubiquitous and taken for granted. This is where Simon Poulter artist in residence will be throwing a spanner in the works, reminding us that shopping is one of the oldest constructs, making his miniature and online shopping centre – *Rome Wasn't Built in a Day*...Simon wants to engage with people through the process. Likewise Rtmark and Bill Drummond use their artwork strategically, part of a culture of resistance and parody. It is not the pack of cards or video as art object that interests Drummond (AKA KLF), more of how it can be used as a strategy to shift people's consciousness and re-visit their own relationships with others and the world. Silent Protest forms part of a series of actions asking how to stop war ("Which war? - Whichever one you want to stop: the one in your family or bedroom, the one at work, or the war in a far flung land. You choose."B.D.) It is the bigger questions that excite him and realising that he can intervene and make things happen in the world. Previous projects included KLF publishing a book '*How to have a Number One the Easy Way*', (then having one - *The Ancient Justified of Mumu*). Other works of note included Watch the K Foundation Burn a Million Quid and the K Foundation (£40,000) prize for Britain's worst artist (Turner prize winner, Rachel Whiteread) and all this announced and documented on live network TV. Likewise Rtmark's *Foodbomb* references current conflict and comes from a lineage of media intervention. Some of their better known works include encouraging consumers to and swap voice boxes in Ken and Barbie and then return the dolls to the store as unwanted and *GWBush.com*, a website that at first glance appeared to be that of Republican Presidential candidate George W. Bush, highlighting some of his less attractive aspects, leading up to the last presidential election.

Recently I overheard a woman on a train ironically remind her colleague (who seemed to design websites for a living) how he had once said, "computers

would never catch on". Do you remember the yellow and red Musicians Union sticker "keep music live"? Musicians feared automation and computers as the death knell of music - the reverse has happened - alternative forms of distribution via internet, bedroom recording studios and marketing enabling a massive swathe of creative output (across media) to the extent where media overload and time limitations make time, choice and selection increasingly valuable. Technology in itself is of no lasting interest. Parallel to this boredom in the fetish, new media art is now maturing, tricks and effects no longer cut it. And as the same technologies become ubiquitous and feature in most aspects of many lives. Pushing further at the edges of what they can be means extending both capability and context of hardware, software, content and 'client'. Whilst Richard Brown is genuinely experimenting with artificial Intelligence and Michael Pinsky has collaborated with programmers at V2 media lab on developing new interface for 'visioning' journeys, artists such as Ben Woodeson (who also makes tomato powered radios) and Bob Levine have gone low tech. Levine takes the notion of unlimited data storage to the other extreme – an analogue, a cymbal cut like vinyl with the sound of itself being *Cymbal* is elegant in its simplicity.

Freefall presents a range of digital media sometimes termed 'new media' - by way of introduction to some of the issues, technologies and themes artists have been wrestling with over the last 10 years. It has been in the later quarter of the last century that innocent technological promises of liberation, an easy life and with it, the potential for networked global harmony proliferated. Yet this introduction is written on the eve of world war. Roney Fraser Munro raises questions as to whether our quality of life is really improved through the machine. "...All money, pain and emptiness...". Can we possibly understand the complexity and interconnectedness of a universe continually being re-defined and in such a state of flux? Freefall considers a range of issues facing individuals, artists and society: separation, connectedness, individualism, identity, technology, distance, networks and interaction. Work made over the last few years by artists who mostly represent a 2nd generation of media artist – interested in tool making, politics of networks, digital manipulation, exchange and the discursive. Work that challenges the relationships between the viewer and audience, that is made and participated using generative processes and allowing differing degrees of interactivity (an often a hollow promise fluidly highlighted by Ah Bin Shems *Just Click* !). Much of the work allows the 'user' (rather than viewer) to draw multiple understandings of what is going on. Thomson and Craighead use existing networks and appropriated web cams to re-narrate imagery with their own browser technology, in doing so creating what they term, *Template Cinema*. Both Heath Bunting and Simon Yuill have shared a long-standing interest in building networks – whether information on what is worth scavenging from London skips to building sets of tools and databases for other artists to use. The current resource displayed (purposefully located in the public library) shares a similar politic to audio/web work of Zoe Irvine, that of borders and attempts to cross them. Her subtle intervention of cycling in the

region around the Sangatte refugee centre, collecting recordings of conversations and the discarded ephemera of the internals of audio cassettes is both performative and process led. These sounds are re-woven, re-corded and then archived on her website, demonstrating her interest and identity as much as an archivist as artist.

Many of the creators included have broken away from traditional perceptions of the artist and with it marking a break from story, representation and meaning. Perhaps (unwittingly or just part of the process) new media artists rejected the 19th century version of artist as individual genius. An emergent process, symbiotic with a culture from a generation dissatisfied and distrustful of the historic political systems and hegemonies. The big influences in the development of the current phenomenon: Marcel Duchamp, Bertolt Brecht, Jon Luc Goddard, John Whitney, Nam June Paik, Afrika Bambata, Jodi. Deconstruction, challenges to truth and high art. Digital Re-construction and Networks. Leading the way to a time when anything goes: artists making biotechnology, open source tools, artificial Intelligence and coding. Cross-disciplinary practice is increasingly interesting to scientists and artists alike. Pernille Spence collaborated with a skydiver in making, *I Look Up, I look Down*. Gina Czarnecki has been working with genetic engineers at the Sanger Genome Sequencing Centre and the forensic science department of her local police station, in making work that explores genetics, mutation and the body. Her work *Infected* creates a digital being, exploiting and confusing the highly mobile body of a performer fused with digital editing.

Everything has limitations and the material nature of the technologies of data processing (computers) and image displays (projectors and monitors) - costs money and time. The relationships between the economies affording a new media art are difficult to separate from its means of production. Programming is expensive because it takes time. Computer hardware is often cheap because workers assemble it on extremely low wages. The history of the Internet and many technologies are related to military research and development. Throughout the 20th century: petrol engines, washing machines, telecommunications and computers have promised greater freedom to save time and travel more easily. But it's a question of whose time. Things appear seamless – but they are not. The need of escape and unlimited freedom is relative. It depends who you are and whether you want to be there. One persons leisure time is another's prison. Who does not use a keyboard or a screen in some aspect of their work? How many times did you log on today?

In 1984 William Gibson wrote the classic cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer* inventing languages that would signpost and define a new space - cyberspace. I found this inspirational and it coincided with my early learning the Internet and all of its possibilities of speaking with people across great distances in almost real time, permitting new language and circumnavigating existent power structures. Or is this nostalgia ? That time has gone. Filters are in place. My Inbox is full.

Fear, legislation, control and surveillance have become ubiquitous. This is the land Dan Watkins dryly sends up with simple Flash animation in his homemade Kafkaesque office environments. The development of a new media art is symbiotic with a history of late twentieth century, a period when scientific and philosophical stretching of time and space occurred. New media is non-linear. The various strains of new media on display come from a background of contemporary art and media which are not tamper proof. Artists will continue to make experiments in inventing and re-wiring systems of communication and structure, new forms will emerge.