“Peter Lunenfeld: Critic as Curator”
Roy Christopher, Follow For Now: Interviews with Friends and Heroes (Well Read Bear, 2006)

Peter Lunenfeld is the director of the Institute for Technology and Aesthetics (ITA) and teaches in the graduate Media Design program at Art Center College of Design. He is considered one of the preeminent critics and theorists of the intersections of art, design, and technology. Afterimage referred to his edited collection, The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media (MIT Press, 1999) as “the first printed book you read about the virtual world that does not merely describe it, but puts you there.” Snap to Grid: A User’s Guide to Digital Arts, Media and Cultures (aka S2G) (MIT Press, 2000) has been covered everywhere from Italy’s Flash Art to Britain’s New Scientist, the latter of which concluded its featured review by saying that artists and designers working with digital technologies “now have their bible, their Stones of Venice, their Ways of Seeing.” From 1998 through 2002, he wrote the “User” column for the international journal artext.

Recently, he developed the Mediawork Pamphlet Series for the MIT Press. These highly designed little books pair major writers with contemporary graphic designers to produce “theoretical fetish objects” in the tradition of The Medium is the Massage and War and Peace in the Global Village — where Lunenfeld plays Jerome Agel to the Marshall McLuhans and Quentin Fiores of today.

Roy Christopher: Can you briefly explain “Vapor Theory”?

Peter Lunenfeld: In S2G, I define Vapor Theory as “dialectical immaterialism, critical discussions about technology untethered to the constraints of production.” I started thinking about vapor theory back in the days of VR, when otherwise sensible people got misty-eyed about abandoning their identities and moving into fully realized, photo-realistic virtual worlds. They were saying this at a time when most of the VR systems that I was seeing demoed had limited interaction in and among a small library of graphics primitives. The vapor theory bought into the short slope concept of technological development — that just because people wanted something (in this case fully immersive virtuality) to happen that something would indeed materialize.

RC: Do you see this “flapping of the gums” subsiding with the recent fallout of businesses on the web?

PL: I remember Biz Markie’s old school rap that went through the usual enemies list of sucker MCs, claiming they all “caught the vapors.” Within a decade of the VR boom and bust, venture capitalists caught the vapors and funded the new economy business plans of the dot-comedy.

RC: With this fallout, the web (and the other “pop” aspects of computer science) has gone through what other relatively new areas of technological advancement (e.g., artificial intelligence) have gone through, but on a very condensed time scale. AI seems to have found its feet again (small and shaky as they may be). Do you see the web and other previously inflated digital arts going through a similar evolution (i.e., less hype, more real applications)?

PL: I’m fascinated by the postutopian periods of aesthetics and technology. The utopian moment of a medium or field is intoxicating, of course — when the cinema or AI, rock ’n’ roll or robotics, the portapak or the web, is going to change the world that very instant. But no one movement or technology can support that level of hype. Often, it’s after the general public’s attention has been raised and then dashed that artists, technologists, and yes, even entrepreneurs, can go back into the wreckage and make interesting, even lasting interventions.

RC: Where many on the art side of the fence see all commercial forces as the enemy, you contend that art and economics are symbiotic. Given that artists of all kinds need money to do their work, isn’t there still a line somewhere in there that shouldn’t be crossed (for art’s sake)?

PL: I’m regularly misunderstood on this point. It’s not that art and commerce are the same thing, just that all art exists in relation to the economic activity of its era. After Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons, it’s impossible to speak of lines between art and commerce that “shouldn’t be crossed,” because, after all, that’s one of the things artists do — cross lines. For thirty years or more, art historians and critics have been hashing this out, and it’s pretty hard to ignore this fairly obvious point when you talk about the complex intertwining of art, design, and commerce in the realm of the digital. One of the reasons that these

relationships were so contested in the boom years of the ’90s was that a huge number of people came out of art departments, or trained themselves entirely outside of the academy, and took jobs as designers either to support their art — a quintessential day job — or just because that was the hot thing to do at the time. So, they called themselves designers without much in the way of exposure to the ethos of design as a profession.

RC: Well, I’m one of those people. Thanks to computers, I’ve been doing print and web design professionally for almost eight years now. Though I’ve been through years of art school, grew up painting, drawing, and started making ’zines sixteen years ago, only a small fraction of this experience is used in my job as “designer.” The frustrating part is that this division between designers who are involved in the discourse and designers who aren’t is obvious, and the fact that industry that requires design work — for the most part — is completely unconcerned with the discourse. How can we bring the discourse inside the corporate walls?

PL: At the risk of sounding like a workplace psychiatrist, I’d like to talk about the frustration you’re feeling. Knowing something about the ways in which designers from earlier eras convinced their corporate clients of the validity of design research and experimentation might offer you, and others in your position, a way to approach these discussions. Certain designers have been able to shift the dialog from service to collaboration, staking out either new territory or reformulating the way the game is played (think Charles and Ray Eames). The computer democratized access to the tools of the professional designer, and brought about an amazing efflorescence of new styles and a deepened pool of people who, like you, consider themselves to be designers. Unfortunately, though, the democratization of digitization didn’t go hand in hand with any kind of informed discussion of the history and discourses of design as a field.

RC: Can you give me some examples?

PL: Let’s just talk about the web for example. With all the hype about Flash, and the concomitant backlash against it, this is precisely the time to revisit the debates about deep design versus styling. But, the very ones who should be talking about this haven’t got the vaguest notion of who Raymond Loewy was, much less that as early as the ’30s, he was talking about the designer’s role in “reconciling” people to new technologies through exterior styling. I’m not endorsing Loewy’s

position by any means, but I'd sure like to talk it through with Flash partisans and their detractors. How about countering the banality of the Nielsen-Norman rap on web usability by recasting Adorno's condemnation of functionalism? In the '60s, Adorno was dealing with the unintended consequences of modernism's reductivism: the creation of boring and inhuman living spaces. Connecting the dots from these historical arguments to a staff meeting is tricky, but it can be done. Essentially, it's about making history, theory, and criticism viable in nonacademic environments.

RC: Getting back to academe, Paul Virilio once said, "Play at being a critic. Deconstruct the game in order to play with it. Instead of accepting the rules, challenge and modify them. Without the freedom to critique and reconstruct, there is no truly free game: we are addicts and nothing more." Kodwo Eshun adopts the title "concept engineer" instead of culture critic. What's your stance on the role of critique and critics in this culture?

PL: Hats (berets?) off to Virilio, but these days, even porn fans understand the importance of critique. The motto of the rec.arts.movies.erotica newsgroup is cribbed from Pauline Kael: "In the arts, the only source of independent information is the critic. The rest is advertising." And, sorry to say, if "the freedom to critique and reconstruct" guaranteed liberation from addiction, those guys in the trench coat brigade might be able to get up from their sofas, turn off Edward Penishands, and go out and meet some real people. I'm a big fan of Eshun's redemptive approach to criticism, but I'm not sure exactly what he means by "concept engineer." As a label, it doesn't seem that much more helpful than lumping critics along with doctors, lawyers, and software designers together as "symbolic analysts."

RC: Can you talk about the relationship between a general social critique and the focus that you tend to put on art, design, and technology?

PL: It's hard to argue with Christopher Hitchens' claims that the critic needs to live "at a slight acute angle to society" if you're doing politically motivated criticism. In the realm of aesthetics, though, there has been such an explosion of cultural production of all kinds in the past quarter century, that I'm less interested in the model of critic as scold — castigating producers for their errors — than I am of the critic as curator. The curatorial function is one which brings together and juxtaposes objects, systems, ideas, and people to make a case. The

case I'm interested in making right now is that nostalgia for past glories is counterproductive, and that the contemporary world is in the midst of a ferocious pluralism of styles and media and aesthetics right now. There are wonders to be found in intriguing pockets, sometimes in full view, but often "at a slight acute angle." I hope that my methods and my writings can serve as something of a model about how one can curate compelling experiences with art and culture.

RC: Whom do you read and respect writing about new media (or whatever else) these days?

PL: I'm really interested in the work that's developing in Southern California. It's where I live, and I believe that people need to nurture local, as well as virtual, intellectual communities. Luckily, I'm in the right place at the right time. There's UCSD's Lev Manovich , of course, author of The Language of New Media (MIT Press, 2001), CalArt's Norman Klein who's been working on scripted spaces and special effects, independent scholar Margaret Wertheim who is writing and curating around the topic of outsider physics, and a passel of people from UCLA including film theorist Vivian Sobchack, Red Rock Eater News Service organizer Phil Agre, and N. Katherine Hayles, who holds a joint appointment in English and design/media arts. For fun, I've been enjoying independent publisher Tosh Berman's TamTam Books. Berman used to be the director of Beyond Baroque, the venerable Venice, California-based literary organization, but now he's putting out beautifully designed translations from the French of weird little books. The first three are Boris Vian's brutal noir I Spit on Your Graves (1998); Serge Gainsbourg's Evguenie Sokolov (1998), about an artist whose medium is farting; and Guy Debord's Considerations on the Assassination of Gerard Lebovici (2001), in which the Situationist reflects on being at the eye of the media storm that hit when Lebovici, his friend and publisher, was murdered mysteriously in the mid-'80s.

RC: Is there anything you're working on that you'd like to bring up here?

PL: I was trained as a film theorist, but haven't written about the movies in a long time. That's shifting a bit these days, and I've got an essay on "The Myths of Interactive Cinema" coming out in Dan Harries' The New Media Book (2002) for the British Film Institute. As a long-term project, I'm working on a new book about the aesthetics of information. Closer at hand, I'm putting together a collection of my

"User" columns from artext magazine which I'd like to see come out in 2003. And, I'm continuing to put out the Mediawork pamphlet series.

RC: What is the premise of your Mediawork pamphlets? What are you trying to achieve with these?

PL: Mediawork pamphlets pair major writers with contemporary graphic designers to produce 100-page "mind bombs" in the tradition of McLuhan and Fiore's The Medium is the Massage. These "theoretical fetish objects" cover art, design, technology, and market culture with verve and impact. The first, Utopian Entrepreneur, written by Brenda Laurel and designed by Denise Gonzales Crisp, was published in 2001.

RC: To be precise, it came out on September 14, 2001. What did it mean that a book written, and a series conceptualized, before the events of 9/11 were both seen, at least in part, as having something to say to that moment?

PL: We almost cancelled the San Francisco launch event that the International Academy of Digital Arts & Sciences was hosting for us, but Brenda, Denise, and I all drove up from LA to the Bay Area on the fifteenth to confront a San Francisco as empty as I'd ever experienced it. There was a sort of doomed solipsism in the air, as though the attacks on New York and Washington, though 3,000 miles away, were the logical conclusion of the meltdown of the '90s. The Bay Area and Silicon Valley, as the former epicenter of all new, new things, were confronted by the triumphant resurgence of Ford administration dinosaurs like Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld pulling back the curtain and reminding all us tech-heads who really runs this country. So, in the end, it was great to hear Brenda rally the troops and talk about a better future, and the still unfulfilled promise of (some) technology.

RC: What's coming up?

PL: In these slightly calmer times, we're finishing Writing Machines, written by N. Katherine Hayles and designed by Anne Burdick, for release in the fall of 2002. Paul Miller (aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid) is writing Rhythm Science for 2003, and we're trying to figure out the best designer to pair him with, which is one of the fun parts for me.