"Enemy of Nostalgia, Victim of the Present, Critic of the Future: An Interview with Peter Lunenfeld"
From Geert Lovink, Uncanny Networks: Collected Interviews with Media Theorists and Artists (MIT Press, 2002).

Peter Lunenfeld might not need to be introduced here, but I will do it anyway. Peter teaches in the graduate program in Media Design at Art Center College of Design. He is director of the Institute for Technology & Aesthetics (ITA), and founder of mediawork: The Southern California New Media Working Group. He lives in Los Angeles and is the author of Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Culture (MIT Press, 2000). Snap to Grid provides us with a broad and accessible introduction into the topics of electronic arts and new media culture. Lunenfeld hardly ever addresses the insider. As a contemporary cultural critic, he manages to create an overall context for the somewhat self-referential, isolated new media art world. Peter Lunenfeld edited The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media (MIT Press, 1999), writes "User," a column for the journal artext, and is the editorial director of the Mediawork Pamphlets series for the MIT Press, which he describes as "a collection of intellectually sophisticated, visually compelling short works that will unite contemporary thinkers with cutting edge graphic designers to create theoretical fetish objects." Utopian Entrepreneur, written by Brenda Laurel and designed by Denise Gonzales Crisp was the inaugural title. This interview grew out of e-mail exchanges, and public and private conversations spanning the years 2000 and 2001.

Geert Lovink: What direction would you like to see new media culture go?

Peter Lunenfeld: I don't think there's such a thing as a single new media culture. There may have been a decade ago, but by now digital technologies have so infiltrated advanced industrial societies that we have to speak of new media cultures.. What I see today in all facets of cultural production is a kind of ferocious pluralism.

GL: The subtitle of your book is "A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media and Cultures." Imagine if someone were indeed to read it as manual for an Internet startup? What recipes and tips do you come up with?

PL: I can't say I wrote Snap to Grid (S2G) with the thought of someone else taking it as a manual for a start-up, but that's provocative. So, what might the entrepreneurially inclined get out of the book? For one thing, they could get a deeper understanding of the aesthetics of demos, of how to communicate in real time whatever it is they've invented, or decided to bring to market. By running through some of the myths about interactivity, connectivity and virtuality, S2G might help them craft things and systems that people actually want. There's quite a bit in the book that amounts to what I'd call "understanding now." I don't know if understanding one's moment actually contributes to the bottom line and in fact, it may be the exact opposite, with those who most willfully ignore the present making the most money off of the future. Be that as it may, S2G does try to discuss emergent technological aesthetics in the light of the historical importance of the end of the Cold War.

GL: Do you see any possibility of a critical art praxis and the profit-driven network economy shaking hands?

PL: Art and economics are symbiotic, even when they are seen to be in opposition, so I can't see why a networked economy shouldn't spawn networked art. I think that this is still a fertile time for those with visual skills to be handsomely remunerated for certain kinds of design work, to take ideas, images and sounds and build products out of them, and even to create lasting equity in commercial enterprises. On the other hand, I've never thought that info-tech capitalist enterprises would enter into a direct payment system for artists' personal explorations – except, perhaps, as isolated public relations efforts -- much less support fully politicized critique. Getting back to your earlier question, S2G offers a way to think about culture in general after the wide spread of information technologies. It strikes me that we are all forced to engage with vastly broader ranges of reference than ever before, and that part of what we expect from the next generation of digital appliances is precisely the tools and methodologies to help us render meaning from the flux of information. Artists working in these areas may well be able to shake hands, as you say, with industrialists, but I'd recommend the artists bring intellectual property attorneys along with them to the meetings.

GL: In one of the best parts of the book, "Demo or Die," you portray the digital artist being crushed between their machines -- inherently unstable digital platforms -- and their clients -- ruthless transnational corporate capitalists. Instead of dismissing the demo as an unfinished

attempt you are arguing that "the demo has become an intrinsic part of artistic practice." Have the art establishment and their critics discovered this genre?

PL: I think that artists understand better than one might assume the intrinsic importance of the demo aesthetic today. As I note in S2G, the demo is closely aligned with the "crit," that staple of art school instruction in which students have to stand up and "defend" their work with colleagues and instructors. The contemporary art world has been dealing with the impermanence of performance for years, since at least the Happenings movement of the 1960s. As for design culture, I think that the expectation for commercial messages is so short that a demo aesthetic is almost built in: if the message sells, it stays, if it doesn't, that message is gone. Commercial culture has always lived by the Oulipian motto "prove motion by walking," even if the average advertiser could care less about Parisian literary experiments.

GL: Could we compare the status of the demo with, for example advertisements and other commercial short films? What happened to web design? And what will be the faith of the current Flash craze and their demo artists?

PL: I think that Web design calcified incredibly quickly, but that had a lot to do with bandwidth-backwards compatibility. Once an entire generation gets on-line with DSL or better connections form the home, I think you'll see another surge in Web design. I'm usually not so technologically deterministic about aesthetics, but in this case I think that the linkage is so strong between vision and bandwidth that the broadening of the pipe will bring about more design innovation. One of the utopian hopes that we all had for Web design was that the huge number of new voices entering the media would engender radical stylistic departures. On the other hand, the fact that so many of them are new to visual culture's rich and dense history means that too many of them are repeating – often pallidly -- other people's proven strategies and successes. Too few Flash animators know enough about the history of animation beyond Disney films and last year's motion graphics to sustain faith in anything beyond the "new." I hope that S2G can remind people that it's not enough to keep up with the tech, you truly have to love the art and its history (even if that love turns rabidly Oedipal and you want to set out to destroy all that came before you).

GL: Criticism and texts in general could as well have reached a "concept or die" level. Perhaps all texts are de facto hypertext, because they are read as such. Could you talk about this disintegration into "nano thoughts"?

PL: Like almost everyone who comes out of any kind of sustained discursive tradition, I'm wary of the ever more amorphous nano thoughts that fill the infosphere. But I strive to see if there is something to do about this besides keening for the lost era of 400-plus page books and well crafted essays. The Latin rhetorical term, "multim-im-parvo" or much-in-little, seemed to be one place to start. Like so many of my generation, I saw myself as a rediscoverer of McLuhan in the 80s and 90s, after his fall into obscurity in the 70s. He was fascinated by aphorisms, seeing them as probes that the reader needs to unpack and as a vastly more active than essays. It takes a sure hand to craft a compelling multim-im-parvo, though, and as I note in the book, even McLuhan – who was a master – flopped at least as often as he soared.

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