

Archive Montage Network
The art of Linda Wallace
Opening Remarks
Montevideo
11 March 2005

The imagery in Linda Wallace's new work, **LivingTomorrow**, presents a kaleidoscope of green fields, blue skies, popular television and urban environments. These still and video fragments pivot in and around one another. They are cut up, mirrored, re-played and set into visual echoes across the screens. In some passages, the imagery is like patterned fabric gently swaying in tune with the body. At other moments the picture reverberates like an interrupted broadcast signal.

Linda has commented: "We live life inside a vast labyrinthine media-datascape, coiled around the planet and beyond".¹ As in previous works such as **eurovision** and **entanglements**, in **LivingTomorrow** Linda's source material is television. While **eurovision** appropriated the song contest, and films by Bergman and Godard, and **entanglements** drew on news broadcasts, **LivingTomorrow** pivots around four scenes from the popular soap opera, the *Bold and the Beautiful*. In response to the dominance of this 'vast media-datascape', she fragments, re-mixes and re-dubs the televisual image. Through this juxtaposition of frames next to and within other frames the artist introduces a spectrum of meanings back into the digital screen. Rather than presenting us with an homogenous vision, data is splintered, disrupting the flow of easy narratives. This is not to say that she is attempting to reinstate a kind of 'truth'. Rather, her project reveals how meaning is realised in our mediated landscape – that it is temporary, emergent and contingent.

¹ Linda Wallace, Ph.D thesis, p.34, www.machinehunger.com.au/phd

The media image has become so pervasive, in fact, that the philosopher Vilem Flusser has suggested “instead of representing the world, [images] obscure it until human beings lives finally become a function of the images they create”. He goes on to say that “the technical images all around us are in the process of magically restructuring our reality and turning it into a ‘global image scenario’”.² The ‘global image scenario’ that is within Linda’s radar, is a scenario in which commercial television actively maintains conventional and homogenous categories around identity, politics and gender.

I’d like to use the time I have here this evening, to consider **LivingTomorrow** in the context of three concepts: the archive, montage and network. Each of these concepts has had a strong bearing on contemporary electronic media arts, and each concept is also undergoing paradigm shifts as a result of digital technologies.

Archive

There is a festival coming up in Germany later this year entitled **Forget It! Don’t Trust Your Archives.** (<http://www.garage-g.de/call05>) It takes the view that the increasing obsession with collecting data (which seems to have gone hand in hand with advances in visual technologies) is linked to notions of security, and is antithetical to risk, imperfection and spontaneity. It is true that the notion of the archive has been associated with the idea of nationalism – keeping secure records to document a nation’s history. The term ‘archive’ derives from the Greek *arkheion*, meaning a public office where documents were filed. As Jacques Derrida has highlighted, however, the term not only signals a place, it also suggests a set of protocols or laws about how the archives are to be used.³

² Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London: Reaktion Books 2000, p.10

³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (trans. E. Prenowitz), The University of Chicago Press, London & Chicago, 1995

Artists have, for a number of decades now, taken issue with the objectivity of the archive. In particular, they have sought to unravel its inherent biases. Based on shifts in both feminist and post-colonial theory, artists as diverse as Fred Wilson, Susan Hiller, Joseph Kosuth, and in Australia Fiona Hall, Barbara Campbell and Jon McCormack, have reconfigured existing museological, scientific and anthropological archives.

Archives are not simply an engine of the state. Consider the personal archive, which is as much about creating a story as an official government record. American Pop artist Andy Warhol created a personal archive. At the end of each day, he put all the materials from his desk – a day's thinking and working – into a box and preserved it for future reference. And today's internet is populated by blogs, "individual site diaries which assemble fragments of the lives of their creators"⁴ – perhaps not quite as interesting as Warhol's boxes, but nevertheless archives of a kind.

It is a paradox that with the improvements in data storage methods; the increasing speed and sophistication of digital visual technologies; and the rise of the computer network, the future of the archive is in question. As Susan Sontag and others have argued, the documentation of memory through the image can be considered a complete construction or invention. Today, not only can the digital image, sound or text be mapped onto variable forms of data, they are also subject to invisible alterations in the process. The archive today does not only reside as physical evidence in a nation's vaults, it also has a presence in the globalised zone of cyberspace. Moreover, the digital artefact can exist in more than one place at once. And we have to ask, what this means for nation building...what this means for memory...and what it means for 're-remembering'.

For **LivingTomorrow**, Linda Wallace has created an archive of images which are transferred into Mpeg2 files that then (in Linda's words) 'peel away' from the

⁴ Stefania Garassini, 'The Database of Life' Domus Online 22 April 2003

database, 'streaming' (metaphorically) into the three separate yet connected screens you see here. The work is designed so that at some point in the future, when broadband technologies are more sophisticated, the images can also be sent from a computer server to a remote location. This process of 'peeling' that Linda refers to is the mode by which the image literally reaches us as well as the mode that determines the timing of each image.

This process of 'peeling' that Linda refers to is the program, the search engine, that enables the image to reach us. The question raised by the work is: where does the archive begin and end and where does the interface to it begin and end? They are in a symbiotic relation which is forever re-forming. Linda's work demonstrates that the contemporary digital database is a site of creative potential: "[the] potential assemblage of thoughts and associations...."⁵ Her method is to dismember both the archive and the image in order to remember.

Montage

And this is in fact the basis of the montage in the work.

Sergei Eisenstein wrote in his 1923 manifesto *The Montage of Attractions* that meaning would be at its most powerful (and this was in a communist climate of propaganda) through the juxtaposition of conflicting images and scenes. The combination of conflicting images is of paramount importance within the history of modernism. Think of the collages of Kurt Schwitters, the photograms of Laszlo Moholy Nagy, the dadaist poems of Tristan Tzara. All these artists were in search of an art that would exist beyond conventional categories.

To create a digital montage today is perhaps to achieve that original modernist goal while, as Lev Manovich points out, "discarding [the modernist] demand to

⁵ Bill Seaman, *Recombinant Poetics and the Database Aesthetic*, Ph.D

forget the past”.⁶ The digital ‘stream’ makes montage dynamic. While a collagist travels through imagery and memory at their work table; an electronic media artist can travel through imagery within space and time, distorting, reversing, editing, remixing, splintering, fragmenting, pivoting, mirroring, masking and layering through software filters.

In this context, I want to return to the earlier work **eurovision**. In this 2001 piece the screen was divided up into many smaller rectangular screens playing fragments of appropriated imagery. **eurovision** offered a conceptual prototype for video streaming over a high bandwidth connection. In reality, the work composited a number of fragments into one stream of footage, what Lev Manovich refers to as the ‘spatial image’, but in theory Linda proposed “literally separate image streams, discreet units of footage streaming ‘into place’ over the internet and into one frame (or one screen).”⁷ She says that **eurovision** was “compositional research – how to devise templates and compositional strategies for such multiple streams into the one frame – streams which would in fact be being called from a database and ‘slot into’ templates or otherwise unique compositions.”⁸ **LivingTomorrow** is also conceptually designed to realise the next stage of this investigation into what I would term ‘streaming montage’.

In **LivingTomorrow**, the meanings created are therefore ‘temporary’ and at times contradictory, especially as we witness the same *Bold and Beautiful* scene over and over again, with different sub-titles and sub-plots at play. In this work, the act of montage is in itself a metaphor for the act of displacement. American artist Bill Seaman has commented that “displacement illuminates placement”⁹. And indeed, the subject of this video is only glimpsed in a kaleidoscopic wave of rhythmic fractured, and indeed, displaced imagery – the veiled Islamic woman.

⁶ Lev Manovich, Info Aesthetics (see website)

⁷ Linda Wallace, Ph.D report, www.machinehunger.com.au/phd

⁸ Linda Wallace, Ph.D report, www.machinehunger.com.au/phd

⁹ Bill Seaman, Pattern Flows: Notes Toward a Model for an Electrochemical Computer – the Thoughtbody Environment

What does it mean to veil? The scarf is a symbol of race, identity, gender and faith. E. Wilson suggests that dress 'links the biological body to the social being, and public to private...dress is the frontier between the self and the not self'.¹⁰ Who is displaced in **LivingTomorrow**? It is difficult to say, because instead of presenting an homogenous, unified vision, Linda presents us with a number of intersecting communities and emerging narratives: the Islamic women; the *Bold and the Beautiful* characters that we know as American idols but who are being beamed to Dutch audiences from a future episode; the *Bold and Beautiful* characters as they are reinvented through the artist's subtitles. In this work one character can live inside another. Through the strategy of digital montage, Linda Wallace's **LivingTomorrow** holds within it an underlying sense of alarm; who speaks for whom? If the body is trapped in what Linda terms the 'vast media-datascape', it can only exist as data and as intellectual property.¹¹

Network

Intellectual property is one of the many contentious issues raised by the advent of the world wide web. This network is a dematerialised space – a space that is at once here and there. It has created new kinds of behaviour, not only for how we communicate with one another, but also for how data is stored and accessed. From a utopian perspective, the electronic network provides the opportunity for developing communities to emerge and evolve. But sceptics ask what kind of communities are they? It has been suggested that in cyberspace "there is on-line communion, but there are no residents."¹² Furthermore, electronic communities

¹⁰ E. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, (Virago: London 1987 (1985)), p. 2-3.

¹¹ (A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, p 276). according to Jill Didur and Teresa Heffernan (Cultural Studies 17 (1) 2003, p. 5

¹² Kevin Robbins, 'Cyberspace and the World We Live In', (1996) David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (eds) *The Cybercultures Reader*, Routledge London and New York, 2000. p.89

are increasingly under surveillance and tighter controls. This has paralleled the extreme fear of that other network in our midst: terror.

A key strand in **LivingTomorrow** is the racial tensions at play in the contemporary immigrant city. This too is a network. Indeed, the immigrant city is the place where archives, montages and networks are in full operation. Today the city is a place of differences where diverse cultures and languages collide and interact. **LivingTomorrow** suggests that we cannot consider ourselves to be separate from, or outside, this assemblage of visual symbols. The late Jacques Derrida commented that the archive is “the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow”.¹³ How we survive in the future, how we “live tomorrow” is a matter of how we read these differences as part of a new language.

¹³ Derrida, J., *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (trans. E. Prenowitz), The University of Chicago, Press, London & Chicago, 1995, p. 36