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The Business of Electronic Publishing

review by Stephen Stockwell

The Business of Electronic Publishing
John Colette and Meredith Quinn
AFTRS/Allen & Unwin 1997
RRP $35 244pp
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The information revolution is hyped as being as significant to humanity as the industrial revolution but rarely is the question asked: where is the money coming from? Of course the real money in computers is in the hardware and in the control of information distribution channels but these areas are already dominated by major players with extensive capitalisation. However, encouraged by Keating's *Creative Nation* scheme, many Australians are looking for employment opportunities at the softer end of the software business. They are punting their superannuation on the business of 'electronic publishing', which is a phrase that covers a grab bag of activities including the production of CD-ROMs and internet web pages. It's not writing the 'hard' code that made Bill Gates rich but producing the content that will give people a reason to spend their money connecting to the net.

But be warned. Info guru George Gilder has estimated that when the 'sweat' equity of all the flops is taken into account, the computer software industry is still running at a loss. One Bill Gates does not make up for the thousands of would be cyber-tycoons who have returned to selling do-nuts. And you can have that in aces for people writing content a long way from the money pots.

To maximise the reader's chances of turning a profit from electronic publishing, Colette and Quinn have pulled together a useful account of how people are making money out of the creative end of the information revolution.

Colette begins by looking at the big picture: how the industry is developing and the opportunities that suggests. He then moves on to discuss various production models that may be useful in establishing an electronic publishing house: straight publishing, filmmaking, 'hard code' software development. Each has some contribution towards understanding how electronic publishing might become a viable business.

Other writers look at the role of the producer, sources of government funding, how to write a business plan, copyright and the market for electronic publishing. Perhaps the strongest parts of the book are the case studies interspersed throughout the text that show how some people have made money from the business.

Overall, this book is a useful guide to the practicalities of a developing industry and would be a most useful text for a tertiary subject on the business of electronic publishing, a subject that would appear essential in the multimedia and internet publishing courses that are sprouting all over the country.

The only criticisms one might have of the book are that it is just a little Australian-centred for a discussion on a business in an avowedly international market and that, as the technology and politics move so quickly, it is in danger of being outdated all too soon. It is ironic that this material may have been better presented as a website which could be subject to constant improvement and updating, but then the authors would be hard pressed to get anyone to pay $35 for the privilege of visiting their website.

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A Wank On the Wild Side - Not!

review by Barry Westburg

The Virtual Republic: Australia's Culture Wars of the 1990s
McKenzie Wark
Allen & Unwin
RRP $19.95 314 pp.
ISBN 1 86448 520 5

I was there, too, that evening, the very night Helen 'Demidenko' was awarded the Gold Medal of the Australian Studies Association. The storm had not yet broken. All I remember was that I was astonished that someone of her young age could be awarded such an august award by such an august body in the month of August. Maybe the quiet guy at the dinner table (there were eight of us, only one of whom was a stranger to me) was Ken Wark himself, the very man whom, on his book jacket is touted as the guy who 'makes postmodernism sexy.' Had I but known that such a sex-beast was seated there - if he indeed was, and that it was not Ken Wark does not really matter in either a postmodern or a Pickwickian sense - might I have reacted differently when Darville/Demidenko and her young male blond brute of a companion marched up and asked to join us? I knew that at least three of the folks at the table were Jewish, so I preserved a timid silence while they indicated as politely as possible that two tall, slim, blond aryans could unfortunately not be accommodated just now. So Darville and her Muscular Christian cohort stomped out of my life forever. (Tall, slim, blond: tall like Goebbels, slim like Goering, and blond like Hitler, *nicht wahr*?) But it was not until reading Wark that I discovered I had at that moment missed the train for the - Virtual Republic!

--Virtual Republic? What's that, son?

--You'll never dig it, Daddy-o!

Ken Wark, you see, is a defender of Demidenkoism (demidenko: scientific term for the smallest particle of truth). I am not a very good Virtual Republican because I agree too much with everything I read. I agree with almost everything that Wark writes, on most subjects, particularly on Demidenko, which he takes as a test case for proving that Australia is a fully-functioning 'Virtual Republic.' A virtual republic is a take on Society that sees it as something like a democratic forum in which ideas circulate freely and are just as freely criticised, and that means everywhere, not just at august gatherings and not just in universities. It is a postmodern republic, where a thousand voices contend in myriad mediated forms. This old Internet is a perfect example of a site where the virtual republic can realise itself.

The first half of the Wark work is called 'Roots' and that's where you find the theory bits, along with the autobiography of the theoritician himself. Wark is good at constructing sexy chapter headings, and I guess that is a postmodernist skill. The content beneath the headings I found to be uneven in quality, and were there time I would be a worthy Virtual Republican and engage in counter-argument. Two things I would look into, if I did not have an important lunch engagement today with Professor Bogart and if the deadline for this review were not yesterday:

The apparently unexamined valorisation of the Young - call it 'age-ism' if you will be unkind - that permeates the book. Perhaps only codgers, 'sixties leftovers will bridle at this, or even notice it. One is better than one's masters (except for the very young ones and the females), but one's students are better (streetwiser?) than oneself - never mind why. To mix a few metaphors, this apparent prejudice adds a bit of chili con carne to his cultural target practice: by sticking to the familiar cultural sphere, the Public realm, he takes on easy targets like David Williamson and others who call into question the sanctities of cultural studies and postmodernism in general. (He lets Helen Garner off lightly, on this occasion, and fangs the male miscreant instead).

The other thing I would look into, were I in a fit state after lunch at the T-Chow, is Wark's polyanna-ish view of what our universities have become since the fading of the Whitlam era and the ensuing double whammy of Dawkins and Vanstone policies. There is also his claim that Political Correctness, postmodernism, and feminism have never done any documented harm to their opponents. Here Wark should have applied the same criteria that he rightly extends (in the adjacent chapter, the one on Demidenko) to the Holocaust sufferers. It is wrong and inhuman to expect documentation from the silenced victims. Even if there were no documented lives lost in the academic wars, there might be other kinds of injury, abuse and cultural loss: as one small instance of this, see *Europe: A History* (written by a 'young' historian, no less), where Norman Davies analyses what happened to the Stanford University history department when it decided to accommodate the demands of student activists.

But - hey - read this book and relive the eighties and nineties! Look back in anger, look forward in angst! The important chapter for teachers of writing is the one on Demidenko, because it opens up the arena of the Possible for

writers. The future of writing in a media age is worth rethinking along Wark's lines. Perhaps even more valuable for writers and students of writing is the chapter 'A Secret History', where good examples of postmodernist writing show it to be alive and well - at least until post-postmodernism comes slouching from Bethlehem, crying to be born. Or is it already here, in the 'young' writing that some call 'grunge'? (Alas, all I can personally hope for is an era when geriatric grunge might become the *dernier cri*.)

And so to lunch.

Barry Westburg's most recent publication is Rage of Angels*, a collection of short fictions published by Wakefield.*

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On the edge of the edge.

review by Komninos Zervos

Improvisation hypermedia and the arts since 1945
Hazel Smith and Roger Dean
Harwood Academic Publishers 1997
RRP Hardcover AU$168
ISBN 3 7186 5878 X
RRP Paperback AU$58
ISBN 3 1786 5888 7

Having read an advance reference to this publication in an article in the magazine *21C* I asked my friendly bookseller, Guy Coaldrake, to order me a copy, as it was scheduled for publication in May, 1996.

To my disappointment the publication date was put back to August, and so I had to wait.

My own particular field of academic study is performance poetry in Australia since 1945, the overseas influences on and development of the skills by poets for the public presentation of their work in the sixties, the more direct involvement of poets in the publication of their work in the seventies, the emergence of 'career' performance poets in the eighties, and the global presence of Australian performance poets, by means of the internet, in the nineties.

So Hazel Smith and Roger Dean's book seemed like the book for me as I was not only interested in the changing role of poet in Australian Society, but also in the skills poets had to develop along the way and the influences of other media on the style and content of poetry being written.

I waited and I waited and I waited and each time I'd ask Guy or Glenys they'd report a further delay in publication date. My interest in reading this book increased as my experience on the internet was opening my mind to the new possibilities of delivering art across the internet. And my expectations of it grew.

Late in 1997, Tess Brady handed me a copy of this book for review for *TEXT*. I was elated as I packed the book into my hand luggage and boarded the British Airways flight for London. It will be read by the time I reach Heathrow, I thought.

But this is by no means a light book for recreational reading; it is a densely written academic text, I assured myself as I made my way through customs and onto the tube, knowing I had only read the introductory chapter.

London would be my home for the next four months and as Artist in Residence at Artec, a multimedia training and resource centre in Islington, I would have plenty of time to give this book the thorough reading it deserved, I thought, as I ploughed through chapter two, 'Improv(is)ing the Definitions'.

Over Christmas I took my children to Greece to show them where my grandparents, and their great-grandparents, had come from. The book was carefully packed so that I could perhaps read it in a more relaxed state of mind far from the city on an idyllic Greek island surrounded by the tranquil blue waters of the Mediterranean. But I found it difficult to get past the first two chapters, I kept re-reading them over and over again.

Something was stopping me from going deeper into this book, there was something I wasn't getting. Maybe it's me, I thought, maybe I've built up my expectations for this book so much that it's not living up to them. Maybe, because I have worked as a performer, I may have thought there were inconsistencies between what I was reading and what I had experienced. Maybe it doesn't relate to my field of study at all and I am trying to make sense of it in terms of what I know about performance poetry. Maybe I'm not cut out for academic theory, I thought.

Maybe I should just go fishing with the kids.

But maybe it's the book, I thought. Maybe the authors are in fact confused and are not presenting logical arguments, after all as I read further into the first two chapters I keep ending up at the start of chapter one with the definition of improvising that constitutes the first sentence of the book.

A very simple definition of artistic improvising is that it is the simultaneous conception and performance of a work.

This definition and my previous conception of improvisation places it in the category of art of the moment and, in front of an audience, an art on the edge of the edge.

Smith and Dean spend the rest of the first two chapters altering this definition to include forms of improvisation that we might call other things. They make the point that improvisation has other forms, that there is 'pure' improvisation and 'applied' improvisation which is conceived of in the moment but re-worked and rehearsed and performed. There are also recordings and transcriptions of improvisations which are different again. Smith and Dean even challenge the notion that improvisation has to happen in front of an audience.

Surely they are describing the artistic process, the process of creation of art, the process of composition where artists come up against the restrictions of an art form and push against the rules and definitions that exist and navigate their art into previously undefined areas. Since both authors are also practitioners of improvised performances surely they are trying to present an academic justification for the work that they do. What is so different about the process of pure improvisation that separates it from life itself? Chapters one and two had me going around in circles as the authors set up definitions only to challenge them and bend them even more.

Back in Australia, and confronted with the urgency of a deadline for this review, I read the next section of the book which is different in form and conception from the first two chapters. What follows is a very thorough breakdown of The Arts into monomedia (sound, word, body and visual art), bimedia (sound/word, sound/body, word/visual, etc.), polymedia (theatre, film and multimedia), and the historical aspects of the influence of improvisation techniques by practitioners of the various art forms.

With my swirling concept of the definition of improvisation gained from the first two chapters I became even more convinced that what the authors were really describing was the creative process. Through the historical tracing of improvisation through many art forms, its association with avant-garde and experimental art movements, they had convinced me that improvisation, pure improvisation as a process, existed and that it separated itself from life by calling itself art, as all art does, and separated itself from composition by being practiced for its own enjoyment. Their strongest argument for pure improvisation in performance was in the field of improvised music, but in every other field they convinced me of the importance of improvisation in the creative process.

For many writers, improvisation is probably now a technique available in a palette of compositional procedures (including some revision) rather than one to which they rigidly adhere.

What I had seen in chapters one and two as the authors blurring any definition by challenging their own definitions was in fact preparing me the reader, the practitioner with already rigid ideas on the creative process and improvisation, to be in a state to accept that improvisation extended (undefinably) into all art forms and was at the basis of most creative processes.

In effect the writers actually presented their conclusions first; and that is why I was having so much trouble getting into the latter part of the book, the body of evidence for their arguments. The authors obviously did not want to take the traditional journey through evidence to arrive at a conclusion but rather challenge the reader's perceptions from the start, opening up the reader for the concepts they wish to present.

They also did not present their theories on the much-debated essence of the creative process and then attempt to convince the reader of the significance of improvisation in this process.

By the time I read the chapter on 'Computers and Improvisation' I was fully prepared to accept the possibilities presented: to see it from the perspective that improvisation will in fact determine the creative processes that develop from the introduction of this new tool to artists and the creation of the new space, cyberspace/the internet, for their art to exist in and be performed in. It may even be that the computer will allow the original definition of improvisation presented in this book, pure improvisation, to be the art, rather than a part of the creative process that creates the art, to be the simultaneous conception and performance of a work.

I am hesitant to accept the authors' implications - in the section titled 'Other Uses of Improvisation', or 'But Wait - There's More, Steak Knives, Steak Knives, Steak Knives' - that like religion, education and literature, improvisation may well be seen as the panacea of society in the future.

I do, however, after reading this book, see the value of the pedagogical uses of improvisation.

Since improvisation can be identified to be at the root of most creative processes, greater emphasis should be given to developing improvisational techniques at school rather than presenting rigid definitions of art, i.e. this is a painting, this is a poem, this is a play, etc.

If you can visualise art as an object, like a sphere that contains all the forms of art, you can see improvisation either as sitting at the edge of the blurry edge between art and not art or you can see improvisation as the very centre of the sphere from which all the other mass is generated.

This book has allowed me to see it both ways.

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