



# Virtual Futures '95

Virtual Futures '95, held at Warwick University, assembled some of the greatest philosophers, futurologists and seers from across the globe, to discuss the implications of new and future communications technologies on society, politics and self-mutilation!

**F**or all of the intellectual fluff conferences like these produce, Virtual Futures '95 proved to be one of the most exciting events held this year. This was no hardware show, there were no revolutionary pieces of technology on display, nor any hard sell – this was pure 'ramification', thoughts on the consequences of revolutionary technology.

As such there was a fair amount of science fiction and humbug. Some speakers used the conference to plug their deeply dippy beliefs – switching off their audience in less than a nanosecond. Some attempted to be clever, mixing videos, slides and music in with their 'lecture', often with disastrous results. Some merely hid behind an over-stylised script, their lack of any message only partially hidden by their droning, monosyllabic voice. But still there were enough speakers who really delivered, and it was they who made this a Future worth having...

## Themes

Unsurprisingly, one piece of technology dominated Virtual Futures '95 – the Internet. Unfortunately for many it was obviously just a 'concept' to be used and abused. "Have you ever been on the Internet?" someone asked. "Yeah it was completely boring – full of useless information," came the reply. Of course, no speaker would have admitted such a 'terrible' truth, but you could see that, for many, playing with the idea was infinitely more enjoyable than using the thing. [One speaker did admit that he didn't even have a computer – "but then neither did Gibson when he wrote Neuromancer." So that's all right then.]

With so many Internet-ignorant speakers, perhaps it was unsurprising that one of the abiding themes of the conference was the 'abandonment of the body'. The general idea is that eventually 'cyberspace' will offer all that you'll ever want or need, so no one will want to spend any time in RL. No one actually said anything as crass as this, of course, but you could, nonetheless, see it behind many of the arguments.

In fact two speakers, performance artists, Orlan and

Stelarc, almost 'embodied' this dream. Orlan spoke of a "body without organs", while Stelarc displayed his 'third arm', a mechanical structure that, despite looking like something you'd find in Blake's 7, excited the interest of NASA itself. "The body is weak," he said, "it can die if its temperature varies one or two degrees away from normal... or with the loss of a few fluid ounces of water. So we need to redesign it."

Stelarc's current project is to provide a means to control 'distant bodies'. He already has the basic means – strap electrodes onto certain parts of the body and with electric 'shocks' you can make them move. Later in the year he plans to have a World Wide Web site up and running that will allow users from the other side of the world to dictate his body movements. We'll be following this event in later issues...

## Implications

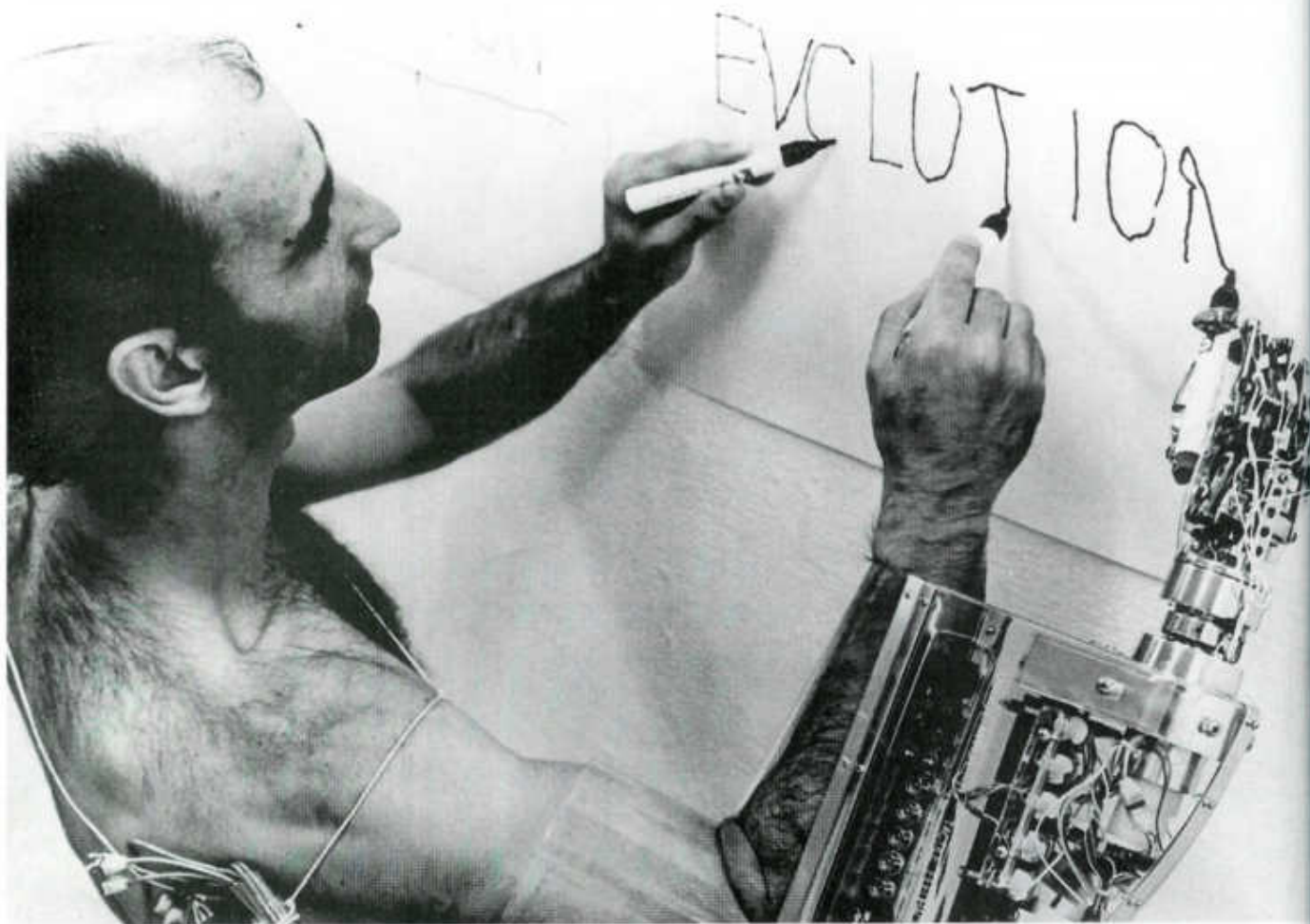
Stelarc was reluctant to talk about the moral/political implications of the chaotic sprawl of new technology, something that seemed to be the priority for everyone else. The only personal crusade offered was Orlan's, an artist in the process of redesigning herself to make herself look *conventionally* 'ugly'. Her lips have been blown up out of all proportion, two lumps inserted in the side of her face, and for her next operation or 'performance' she plans to have the size of her nose increased to the maximum her face can support. We were told all of this as the (quite painfully explicit) video of her previous operations played in the background – her 'feminist' reaction to the imposing norms of society seemed just a bit too radical, even for many of the feminists in the audience. Many of them had, in any case, already left to throw up.

Slightly more prosaic, but infinitely more useful, were the more cerebral musings of the likes of philosophers and cultural theorists, Manuel DeLanda and Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. The latter pair held the opening session and

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Stelarc demonstrates the independence of movement that can be achieved by his third arm.



both should have been prodding wood for dear life. Their flesh as the Machine became all-important. Unfortunately, five minutes into their presentation the video recorder broke down, someone's tape recorder went into spasm and the lights blew...

The Krokors also prophesied the encroachment of conservative values on the Net, believing its present liberal structure to be a passing phase that will end when the likes of Time Warner and MacDonalds (though not with macdonalds.com!) get their hands upon it. It was like a call-to-arms, although the way it came over suggested that there was no real point for the Net community to get too

agitated, that we couldn't survive the onslaught of such beasts. Fortunately few people seemed to take them seriously. Their text lacked clarity, and relied far too heavily on weird mini-movies and a babbling techno soundtrack to carry it off successfully.

**Stelarc plans to have a Web site where his body parts can be remotely controlled by Netusers.**

Manuel DeLanda broke with the flow and simply tried to explain his position. With jet black hair pulled back in a pony tail and the coolest suit of the conference, he deconstructed the way we have seen the world over the last 2000 years with ease. Society is not evolving in the way we have traditionally been taught, he argued. There is no use seeing things in terms of great systems, gradually being constructed. Capitalism itself



**NICK LAND** is the Chris Evans of modern philosophy. Loved and hated, revered as a genius and condemned as a charlatan, this praying mantis of a man bases his thought on dance music and techno culture, all ways of producing the 'intensities' that are his credo and his rallying cry. I tried to find out if there was a position for the Net in his techno-run 'feel-good factory'...

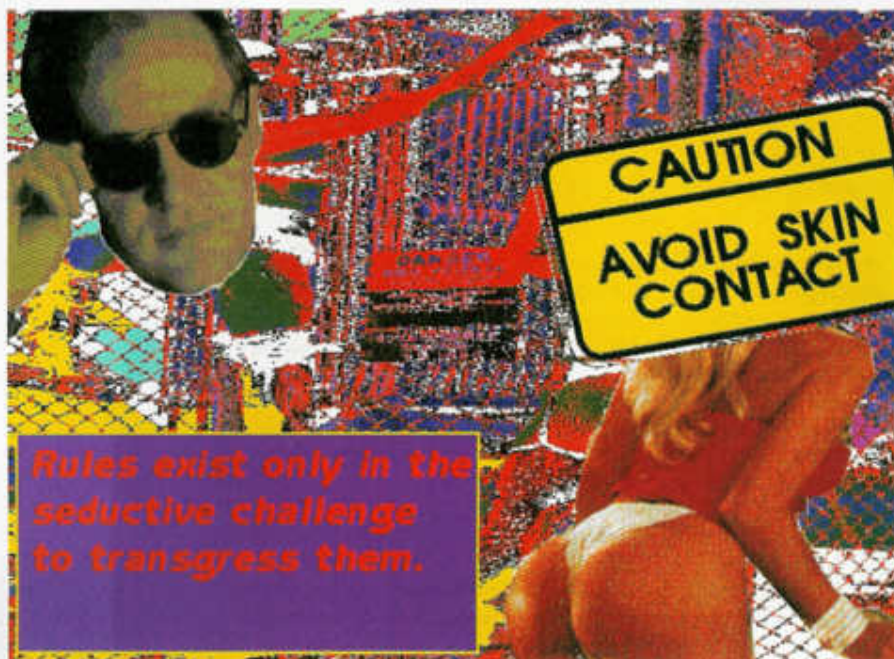
**NICK ON 'Identity after Techno'**

When things are really moving to the point where the boundaries of self and everything just become completely mixed up - that's when the interesting questions and processes will happen... when we don't know where we begin or where we stop. When the question of WHO we are becomes REALLY troublesome and intensely sub-intellectual, then the processes of boundary collapse and spasm and also speed, will be shattering.





This image, by 0(rphan) d(rift>), is from the brochure for Virtual Future's '95.



*Rules exist only in the seductive challenge to transgress them.*

hasn't been organised and created by one central authority, but instead has evolved and continues to evolve by constant interaction with the world – just as biological or geological structures do, (and just as the Internet has done). The problem today is that information and money move around the world so fast that evolution can now happen in 'real time', in minutes rather than over a number of years...

The humble hacker also let his presence be known at Virtual Futures in the form of Mark Ludwig. Mark argued that viruses will eventually be intelligent enough to make themselves useful or attractive. "Imagine," he says, "that a virus gets onto your system, remains inert while it monitors your behaviour. After a few days it flashes a picture of girl onto the screen. Underneath is written: 'If you click the mouse button I will undress her...' Would you click the button, or delete the program?"

### Unintentional Arts

As well as the performance artists and the multimedia presentations from 0(rphan) d(rift>) and TechNET, there were also some unintentional displays that really set the audience alight. One discussion on 'Future Music', hosted by a journalist from ID Magazine (Tony Marcus), broke down after five minutes, with someone in the audience standing up and saying: "You're talking bollocks!". The rest of the audience promptly took their cue, and the Future swiftly became anarchy.

Nick Land, "the cleverest man in the UK", according to one of his students, was another victim to technology, and to his


own 'intelligence'. The idea (I'm guessing here) was to have a live 'techno' track at the same level as his mike, in the hope of creating an atmosphere of increasing disorientation, and the breakdown of traditional structures within modern life ("is rubbish"). To add to the atmosphere all the lights were turned down.

Problem (1) – none of the speakers had yet evolved sufficiently to be able to see in the dark and so couldn't read their 'script'.

Problem (2) – the balance wasn't right, and no one could hear anything anyway – except for occasional soundbites like: "masturbating machines replacing real intercourse, social and sexual, no longer alienation – but alien." Sounds as though it would have been good, doesn't it...

Finally, the final pienary on the future was called off. I guess you could say that the future never happened...

### Rosy Futures

Yet despite the many things that went wrong (or maybe because of them) this was a conference to relish. No one's feet became sore after the first hour, and the beverages didn't cost you a month's wages. Slightly more importantly perhaps, the conference left you buzzing with ideas, and a real enthusiasm for the future – in particular Virtual Futures '96. 



### Virtual Features

Virtual Futures has experienced meteoric growth, exploding from 30 people three years ago, to well over 300 this year. No doubt the number will double again next year. To find out more about the conference you can access their pages on the WWW at

[http://www.warwick.ac.uk/WWW/fa/culties/social\\_studies/Philosophy/vf95/web.html](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/WWW/fa/culties/social_studies/Philosophy/vf95/web.html).

For a more comprehensive overview of the conference go to <http://www.gold.net/fflames/>

### NICK ON 'The new Infomedia'

In the past we have had this tendency to have a group of experts telling you about things. This is over. I mean, people talk about Techno-Shamans and those sorts of things. But the point about those kind of things is finding out yourself – about everything. Anyone who thinks that you can go straight into the media system and get anything out of it is deeply deluded. It's rather a question of just getting on to the nets which can actually sift out the charged material. This is done in a distributive fashion – everyone inevitably gets exposed to a kind of low-grade media culture... but every now and then there is something that you recognise as useful and it's this that you pass along. Think of notions like friendship or something – its that sort of reciprocal activity.

### NICK ON 'Technology'

Technology is what produces and infects control into the Net, whatever IT is. So that is not a word I would ever use enthusiastically. What does excite me about it is just that it opens up this huge zone of experimentation which I think is just so unimaginably just amazing. It just knocks me out... it is so dynamic...





## Jargon

At the 'Virtual Futures' conference every other word seemed to have a meaning totally divorced from common usage. So if you want to play along at home and make up your own theory about the Internet, here's an idiot's guide to present major thinkers and their ideas...

**Manuel DeLanda. Author of 'War in the Age of Intelligent Machines'. MIT 1992.**

**KEYWORD: MACHINIC PHYLUM (Pandemonium/Neural Nets).**

**HUH!** A term borrowed from Gilles Deleuze referring to 'the overall set of self-organising processes in the universe'. Reality – i.e. the 'machinic phylum' – decides itself what it is doing, what it wants to do, and human beings are completely immaterial. At base there is 'just chaos', anarchy and war, yet somehow from all this mess the phylum creates order. DeLanda admits that 'it is easier to say what the machinic phylum is not, than to specify precisely what it is'. By getting access to it we will be able 'to create robotic intelligence to get humans out of the decision-making process'. Perhaps the easiest way to understand this machinic phylum is like a huge alien intelligence, a bit like God... but true. DeLanda says that a good example is the Net which in key parts (neural nets) is now independent of any user. It is alive...

**Jean Baudrillard. Author of 'Xerox and Infinity'. Touchopas Press 1988.**

**KEYWORD: SIMULATION.**

**HUH!** A term that attempts to describe the mutilation and havoc the future is wreaking upon current reality. The point is that it is no longer possible to say what reality is because images, hallucinations, and hype so pervade reality that all that is left is that image. Life is a mess, a lie, yet it is impossible to get back to what is 'behind' the hype. Thus Baudrillard writes that the USA and Disneyland are one and the same thing. The Internet thus becomes a machine you plug your brain into and from which you never escape; the body simply shrivels and decomposes....

**Gilles Deleuze. Author of 'Difference and Repetition'. Athlone 1993.**

**KEYWORD: DIFFERENCE/BODY WITHOUT ORGANS(BWO).**

**HUH!** A term that describes the monster that lies behind the words that we use. When we talk about a dog or a cat we are usually referring to our own pet e.g. Rhubarb or Arthur. But Arthur is different from other Cats, and Rhubarb from other Dogs. Thus all we know is language as a common denominator of lots of differences. It all gets a bit complicated after this but the key point is that your cat and dog, outside language, are aliens. If we could get at them in a pure way we would see the monstrosity/chaos that lurks behind the fictions that make up our perception of reality. If all of reality were to be seen without the spectacles of language, Capitalism and other fictions, we would have before us a terrifying and vile landscape which we would blur into. The best way to get a hold on this is to think of the fact that reality is made up of sub-atomic particles which we can barely see, let alone control. Add to this the fact that we have microscopic insects crawling all over us and you have a good idea what the BWO is. The BWO is usually the point of attack of Materialists against those Idealists who think that the Internet is a good thing because it gets rid of the body. For Deleuze there is no escape from the body; the Internet too is made up of protons, electrons and positrons as well as sub-atomic monstrosities – this time inside the brain.

**Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Authors of 'Capitalism and Schizophrenia' (2 Volumes). Athlone 1989.**

**KEYWORD: ASSEMBLAGE.**

**HUH!** A term used to explain how 'we' – humanity – have been made the subject of a huge lie. That lie says that there are things in the world such as people, cars, apple pies, etc. and that a car cannot be a pie, a dog cannot be a cat. Deleuze and Guattari say NO... reality is made up of **Assemblages**, i.e. DOG-CATS-PIES, all joined together. There is no such thing as a dog, or a person. There are only impossible (i.e. impossible to understand) objects. We try and make reality too simple, and thus manufacture a world that lies to us. The truth is that every action affects something else. If I throw a stone through a window, I become a **ME-STONE-WINDOW** and the effects will not just be a broken window, but may be a nuclear explosion in the Pacific Ocean. The Internet is a vital Assemblage in so far as you do not see it as a 'thing' made up of individual people communicating on individual machines. Humanity IS the Internet, or more accurately, Man is a Machine.

**Nick Land. Author of 'The Thirst for Annihilation'. Routledge 1994.**

**KEYWORD: VIRTUAL REALITY/NOUMENON/DANCE**

**HUH!** Land writes "There shall be new and terrible monsters". Nounenon refers to a machine-reality, like Hell, that lies hidden beneath the ravages of the post-modern world around us, a world structured by the family, human beings, political morality, Christian values, and a media that believes that it uncovers truths. All these false parts of our world are, for noumenal explorers, merely **IDEAS**. They are based on a consensual hallucination that the body does not exist. Desire, Death and the noumenal **REAL** are hidden by a veneer of social conformity. **DANCE**, through the acidic rhythms of e.g. techno and jungle, are the way that the body, the **UNKNOWN**, can be forced into our reality. Land argues that this process is happening now, and is irreversible. One of the things that noumenal exploration allows is control of time. Writing from 2025, Land has warned that in this year humanity will effectively disappear into the Nounenon. The Internet is important because, whilst making people think it is just a venue for the exchange of ideas, it is in reality a process in which peoples brains are plugged into the noumenon so as to extinguish Ideas/thinking, leaving only the convulsions of a body that was **NEVER OUR OWN**.