

## Harwood/Mongrel National Heritage turns to InfoWar



As the InfoWar leaflet states, the information society is "no longer a vague promise of a better future, but a reality and a central challenge of the here-and-now". A challenge like, How can we trust the people of the "better future" when they are the ones who left us out of the past?

In its own little way, National Heritage has been waging an InfoWar — against the racially exclusive, US west coast utopianism that suggests information technology is inherently capable of producing a better world, or against the euro-authoritarian here-and-now use of technology proposed by a speaker at Imagina 97: "Now that the time of pioneers and prophets is over, it is time for mastery - political, cultural, social and creative mastery. We must lay the foundations for the cyber-civilisation which is about to be born". Mongrel is attempting to perform an abortion on this kind of cyber-civilisation, having diagnosed it as a miscarriage of wealthy elitism.

Mongrel addresses the computer's ability to reproduce infinitely its masters' image. Mongrel's repeated nagging-and-stabbing at the bloody miscarriage of cyber-civilisation is forcing into view the images of those being reproduced so purely and "cleanly", and is checking the wallet of those who would benefit. Mongrel is attempting to look these questions in the face and to discover that face's colour.

We have been examining the specific social relations that surround the new media and in particular how this new media works to construct images of race, eugenics, and conflict within populations:

Constructions of race in the form of mental images are much more than simple indexes of biological or cultural sameness. They are the constructs of the social imagination, mapped onto geographical regions and technological sites. These fabrications of race have traceable links to historically specific relations, from those informing about the experience of slavery, migrant labour, colonisation, to those affecting friendship and family life. Racial images are pregnant with the social and political processes from which they emerge and to which, in turn, they contribute, and images of different races articulate the political and economic relations of races in societies.

A mere look at the Sunday papers may reveal, for example, scenes of poor black, brown or yellow babies waiting for charity along with scenes of white babies waiting for their over-full nappies to be changed — disposables, of course, costing more than a life-or-death dinner for one of the non-white babies.

If such patterns figure in wider society generally, then what insights can we gain by looking more specifically at the images in Cyberland? Some pretty specific questions can be raised, such as, When was the last time you saw someone black, yellow or brown in the Apple developer mag? Or, Why was the Nippon operating system so expensive in Japan? Although some magazines favour images of Japanese women fondling their modems, CyberEurope and CyberUSA offer us an almost complete absence of mongrelised, black or Asian images and, for that matter, a lack of any impure or "filthy" social relations. This lack, or strategic forgetting, of mongrel images in the techno-cultural sphere goes far beyond simply reflecting the self-interest or distinguishing experiences and aspirations of the authoring "Digirati" and their stuck-up class of consumers. The new techno pure-breds are actively ritualising the "CyberNation" into an ethnic bleaching — a kind of ethnic cleansing but a little less discriminating, and much cleaner.

At the turn of the century, the construction of the Chicago skyscrapers marked a similar, albeit less ambitious, attempt. Then Chicago's elite merely tried to to rid itself of the butchers' stench from America's biggest slaughterhouses with the watchwords "Let's not deal with the rotting carcass. Let's build a palace in the sky."

Now, dominant racial and cultural groups in society act as an audience to their own techno-cultural-media product. Bleached images of self-congratulatory ritualised distancing symbolically install these groups as the right people to control, restrict and censor Cyberland.

Digital cloning has helped call into question accepted notions of originality and genius, allowing a re-evaluation of the codes of cultural production — just so long as this does not include the filth of uncomfortable social relations.

Given the racialisation and elitism of most electronic art events, attendees might still think that underneath they're all still loveable. The multicultural lets-get-on-with-each other-and-get-happy number has for a long time been one of the main tactics for hiding hard, difficult debate under a sixties-style love-in. Mongrel cultures have come too long a way in intellectual rigour to be fobbed off with a flower pushed up the barrel of their gun. This is, as the info-war leaflet says, "a battle in which the power of knowledge is managed as a profitable monopoly".

Societies seem to have learned nothing from the tragedies of this century, now compounded by the military technologies from which the new media have arisen. Are we now about to remake cultural spaces in thrall to the same arms-dealer classes that profited before from war, slavery, migrant-labour, poverty, death and disease? Or are we to dirty up their future a little and complicate their desires with a dose of the same uncomfortable social filth?

### **Cultural Prestige and English Art or ignorance and filth**

In the UK, art's central positioning on ideas of race, racisms, and national identity was for a long time overlooked. While many black artists have been active in this field, the work produced rarely positions itself against the aesthetic and administrative modus operandi that houses it. One consequence is that a self-image emerges in an art public among whom it is usual to assume that those participating in "intellectual pursuits" and attending "culturally prestigious events" are above the mundanity of racial conflict and who indeed positively cultivate the view of themselves as "anti"- or "post"-racist.

Giving a few black British artists the odd bit of gallery space is then used as a pretext for the careful shunting of these problems out of the "purified" high-cultural sphere. Racism is thereafter located only in the vast majority of people not in attendance during events of cultural prestige — or, in other words, those people who live in subordinate English street cultures. Exclusion from this elevated world can thus be written off as self-inflicted. As a result, it becomes "common sense" then that such English street cultures are racist get-togethers of ignorance and filth and that to produce a work of art, in a culturally prestigious location, about race, racism and national identity is unnecessarily preaching to the converted.

But the politics of race and culture have changed. The idea of a narrow, self-righteous, art-loving post-racism is — frankly — laughable. The self-confidence of subordinate English street cultures in dealing with racial issues is demonstrable in their endemic philosophy of mixing it up and in their mongrel anthems. This is not a suggestion that racism has declined in any measurable form, but that the ground on which it build their foundations is shifting. Artworld post-racism is made all the more comic by the self-righteous moralism of the evangelical art-cadres that espouse it.

In considering alternative technological arts practice and its relationship to cultural privilege, it is important that we think again about the principles that underlie artistic judgement. The idea of universality in art forms the basis of aesthetic judgement. It is the root onto which are grafted the principals of taste. Cultural domination is achieved by taste's acting as a measure of distance between those of us who have taste and those others who have not.

Universality is a convention that was itself constructed out of debates in which racial difference was a central issue. Long before scientific racism had gained an upper hand, Hegel was arguing that the central difference between black and white races was a cultural and perceptual one. Hegel wrote that blacks "do not have the ability to appreciate the necessary mystery involved in the creation of truly symbolic art, thus placing them outside the realm of

authentic aesthetic sensibility". Critical dialogues in the English art scene between its professionals — curators and artists — and its audience clearly rely on a set of historical principles produced during Hegel's era, a period when slavery, bond servantry and forced child labour were still a large part of western civilisation. Aesthetic judgement remains a fundamentally political concept.

We need to destroy the boundaries put into place by specific arts discipline, professionalisation and the hierarchy of taste. We can start by inviting in the mongrel forms of culture with their diverse and inclusive "filthy" social relations. We can deal with the rotting carcass of Hegel's "truly symbolic art" by burying it.