Carolyn Guertin

Queer Hybrids
Cosmopolitanism & Embodied Arts

Hybridity is often used to refer to "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation" in an age of globalization [Ashcroft et al 118]. Cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, is the happy mingling of cultures that emerges from the cross-pollenization of traditions. In fact, if globalization is the medium, as Eric Kaufmann observes, then cosmopolitanism is the message. These two forces have different origins: globalism is the political impulse for domination; cosmopolitan is the emergence of cultural minglings from the alchemical transformation of the global citizen through education and the media (Kaufmann 33). Ever since the wandering cynic Diogenes coined the word to proclaim himself a "citizen of the world", the person who passes through the membrane between cultures has been seen as a sophisticated traveller who can navigate the complexities of diversity and difference. More and more, as educated citizens of an urban landscape under the shadow of globalism, we are all becoming immersed in the vast web of a networked and familiarized global cultural framework. By definition, though, that means that we must also stand simultaneously outside of all systems by virtue of our cosmopolitanism: in exile as a queer agent in the contact zone.

These contact zones have generally been sites of violence and transgression, but cultural actions—hybridized actions—take place in the otherwise inaccessible space between cultures, nations, peoples and bodies. But what happens when this contact zone is our own skin? Marshall McLuhan wrote in his book *Through the Vanishing Point* that the artist's role was the creation of counterenvironments, third skin spaces that make us more receptive to outside ideas and offset our unconscious biases that come with our cultural mindset. He also believed that as our culture accelerates, our need to perceive the spaces increases. Likewise, Char Davies notes, theorist Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* calls for "the production of anti-environments and 'counterspace'" to offset the numbing effects of Western metaphysics (Davies 328). The tried and true method of enhancing our perceptual abilities is through the stimulation of our sensory receptors—and the media is the surefire way to create that effect. The environment engages us so directly because it shocks. Being literally "sensational", it draws us into an interactive and immersive space by speaking between mediums and across discourses in startling ways. Artists and poets intuitively understand this and have traditionally served a mélange of mixed media with their art as a result to force us to cross our modalities and to encourage new ways of seeing, and feeling.

Marshall McLuhan called this a "hybrid technique" that is essential to creative exploration (1964, 63). He elaborates:

> The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born. For the parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms … The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses (1964, 63).

Feminist and queer—or estranged—politics in digital environments use this meeting of a collectivity of media (by definition multimedia) to shock us, as a means of social critique and commentary, and to engage us in conversation. Using the mainstream media's tools against itself, feminist Virtual Realty artists Char Davies and Brenda Laurel incorporate everyday

sensations and make them strange and new through startling juxtapositions that affect us on the level of sensation. This is a synaesthesia so tactile that it stings the eyes, ears and mind simultaneously. Situated knowledges like these are Donna Haraway's call for a feminist "embodied objectivity" (189) that allows for a "particular and specific embodiment" with a physically grounded perspective providing truer insights (190). To this end, Laurel and Davies both set out to create exploratory environments that alter the way we inhabit our physical bodies.

In Gertrude Stein's eyes, the only thing that changed from one generation to another was our sensory perception. She defined vision as the dynamic in the creative system that transformed our sense of time and produced new schools of thought and art (513). Feminist philosophers who came after have expanded such thinking. Theorist Luce Irigaray rejects disembodied vision because patriarchal hierarchy privileges the gaze of ownership over all other senses. In overtly feminist work, the movement is towards sound and touch, senses that are particularly privileged in the virtual spaces of Laurel and Davies' works. Donna Haraway calls for re-embodied seeing as a kind of re-connection to the material and technological worlds. Technology too, of course, is a boundary object or interface between worlds and when worlds are created new tools, languages and gestures must be devised to speak the hybridized nature of the experience. It is hybridized precisely because we can never speak something entirely "new" or its very newness would render it incomprehensible.

American multimedia artist Brenda Laurel is a pioneering feminist who explores and extends the senses and notions of embodiment. *Placeholder* (1992), one of the earliest virtual reality experiments, invites the interactor to inscribe herself in a mythic environment while inhabiting one of four totem avatars with physical abilities outside the human: raven, snake, fish and spider. This work allows the interactor actively to engage as a cosmopolitan subject across the species barrier in its own environment, to engage with the virtual characters and landscape features she finds there, and to deposit her own story or stories in the voice recording box as she traversed the space. Canadian Char Davies's two virtual reality experiments, *Osmosis* (1995) and *Ephémère* (1998), are also immersive hands-free environments, and they are peopled with transparent objects and landscapes. In a conscious rejection of the controlling nature of the phallic joystick, the user interfaces requires the immersant to use her breath to navigate: "breathing in to ascend, out to descend, learning to change directions" (Davies 329). Davies describes the work this way:

> The public space is filled with sound, as it is generated in real time by the immersant's behavior in the virtual space. One of the screens is a stereoscopic video projection of the three-dimensional world as it is experienced by the immersant, enabling museum visitors to vicariously witness each immersive journey as it takes place in real time. The other bears the projected shadow of the immersant's silhouette as he or she moves and gestures in response to the work. The use of this shadow silhouette alongside with the real-time video projection serves to poeticize the relationship between the immersive body and the work, drawing attention to the body's role as ground and medium for the experience (Davies 329).

Drawing us in as a member of her experience, the immersant and her split subject shadow become two different citizens of the world who experience (or who seem to experience) their environments through different dimensions.

How we move through the world, of course, determines what we will find there just as it simultaneously maps our shadow back onto the landscape we traverse. Our presence alters

the places we visit. Our situation is guided as much "by displacement as by stasis", according to James Clifford in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (8),* and uses multiple modalties to find ways of making sense of our location in space. Attempting to reconcile the local and the global, as queer subjects we speak both the colonizer and the colonized. Marshall Soules observes that:

> the currency of culture and identity as performative acts can be traced to their articulation of homelands, safe places where the traffic across borders can be controlled. Such acts of control, maintaining coherent insides and outsides, are always tactical. Cultural action, the making and remaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones, along the political and transgressive intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples, locales. Stasis and purity are asserted—creatively and violently—against historical forces of movement and contamination (Soules n.p.)

We are contaminated by the unexpected forces of these worlds we have entered. For Clifford, location is "an itinerary rather than a bounded site-a series of encounters and translations" (11) that we experience as a perpetual state of flux. In immersive space, location becomes a contact zone that creates collisions between expected behaviours and physical laws and large forces of oscillation and contamination that challenge our perceptions of our physical world, our bodies and their boundaries. Queer theorist Sue-Ellen Case argues the performative gesture creates territory: "performance is tied to the establishment of another land, another kind of territory. Within territories dedicated to another kind of ownership, the body could be productive. Processes of de- and re-territorialization provide a space for cultural production" (147). Using her body to generate her own queer space and language of navigation, the browser as a performer writes the territory of her own agency through her movement (rather than territorial conquest, as the patriarchal 'frontier' model dictates). The original theorists were "tourists", too, who practised "active observation" (Ulmer 12). Theirs was "a perceptual system that included asking questions, listening to stories and local myths, and feeling as well as hearing and seeing. The world theorists who travelled around 600 B.C. were spectators who responded to the expressive energies of places" (Ulmer 12). They pose a useful model for thinking of our browsings in the fluidity of perceptual and sensual, extra-textual and supra-visual space-a space we feel our way through as we perform our sensations. This is nomadism. Rosi Braidotti sees in "nomadic consciousness" "a form of resisting assimilation ... into dominant ways of representing the self" (Braidotti, 1994, 25). Queer cosmopolitan citizens might use this positioning to rebel with counter-discursive weapons or "subjugated knowledges" (1994, 25) from their fluid position as hybrid subjects on the move. Rosi Braidotti says:

> The nomadic tense is the imperfect: it is active, continuous; the nomadic trajectory is controlled speed. The nomadic style is about transitions and passages without predetermined destinations or lost homelands. The nomad's relationship to the earth is one of transitory attachment and cyclical frequentation ... (1994, 25).

An immersive environment, where such countercultural speaking is possible, offers the potential to act as a fluid gesture where an immersant, who is constantly "in transit" (Braidotti, 1994, 93), can break out of the gravitational pull of conventional narrative expectations and teleological forces. Here is the agency in the browser's journey, the ability to choose to move in her own way.

This is a queer journey, of course, for it needs must stray off the map of expected and predictable behaviour. In *Tendencies,* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick constructs queerness as the ultimate cosmopolitanism, writing that queer can open the door to a full range of possible promiscuities including the fluidity of palimpsest thoughts, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, resonances, erasures and excesses of meaning when gender and sexuality are expressed in their full complex range of emotions and behaviours (8). She expands queer beyond the bounds of same sex bodies and finds queerness to be about performative behavior rather than sexual mechanics (Sedgwick 8).

Performative acts resonate. Resonance is a process that writes itself on the body as the body is written by the gestures of its movement in space. As the vibrating living record of the song of the journey and our transformation therein, resonance is the first step towards the rupture of the fabric of an environment where we are transported by our desire to another dimension or a sensual and perceptual plane. This is not disembodiment but re-embodiment—meta-embodiment. We inhabit our bodies differently as global citizens when we are oscillating in virtual narrative space outside of the parameters of the old globalized world of forces, flavours and cultural boundaries we knew. When we inhabit other bodies, we come to understand their situation. The ways of moving in virtual space are directed and mapped by the nature of Laurel and Davies' environments, but without queer movement we cannot read these works. Movement is engagement and agency, but it is never linear trajectory. In virtual space, it is irregular mirrorings, spiralings, floatings and the surprising cultural freedom of bodies set loose to breathe, drift, crawl, fly and freefall in elemental spaces.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects,* Columbia, New York 1994

Clifford, James, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century,* Harvard UP, Cambridge, MA, 1997

Davies, Char, "Landscape, Earth, Body, Being, Space and Time in the Immersive Virtual Environments", in *Osmosis and Ephémère. Women, Art, and Technology.* Ed. Judy Malloy. pp 322–337. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003

Davies, Char, *Osmosis and Ephémère*. 1995 and 1998 respectively. See: *http://www.immersence.com*

Haraway, Donna, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women,* New York 1991 (deutsch: *Die Neuerfindung der Natur: Primaten, Cyborgs und Frauen,* Frankfurt/Main und New York 1995)

Kaufmann, Eric, *The Rise of Cosmopolitanism in the Twentieth Century West: A Comparative Historical Perspective on the United States and European Union*, 23 May 05

http://www.bbk.ac.uk/polsoc/download/eric_kaufmann/RiseCosmoTwenCent_HPUSEU.pdf

Laurel, Brenda (with Rachel Strickland), *Placeholder. A Virtual Reality Environment,* Banff Centre for the Arts,1992 *http://www.tauzero.com/Brenda_Laurel/Placeholder/Placeholder.html*

Laurel, Brenda (with Rachel Strickland, *The Placeholder Archive*. 1992. Supplemental materials on CD-ROM. By kind permission of the author.

Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space,* Blackwell, Oxford, 1991

McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* Toronto 1964 *(Die magischen Kanäle,* Düsseldorf/Wien 1968)

McLuhan, Marshall and Harley Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point,* Harper & Row, New York, 1969

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Tendencies,* Duke UP, Durham, NC, 1993

Soules, Marshall, "Reading the Signs on the Walls: Unsanctioned Images in the Public Sphere, Part I". in *Visual Culture Conference*. 10 March 2005. 31 May 2005 *http://cdhi.mala.bc.ca/signs/Presents/MSKansas.htm*

Stein, Gertrude, "Composition as Explanation", in *Selections: Writings 1903 – 1932*. Pp 520 – 529. The Library of America, New York, [1926]

Ulmer, Gregory L, "Grammatology Hypermedia", in *Postmodern Culture*. June 1997 *http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.191/ulmer.191*