

HYBRID—living in paradox

Hybrid—living in paradox, the theme of Ars Electronica 2005, examines the implosive tendencies that digital technologies impose on the world, bringing cultures on top of each other and flouting boundaries: national, material, technological and psychological. Hybrid creations and creatures, identities and cultures emerge from recombinations of our three basic codes: numeric, genetic and atomic.

Digital media art itself is a hybrid born from the connection of art and technology, accumulating diverse modes of expression and demanding a unique crossover of expertise and knowledge.

Hybrid—no other word is better able to signify this most characteristic conditions of our time.

- The Drivers and Patterns of Hybridization
- Hybrid Economies and Politics
- Hybrid Cultures and Identities
- Hybrid Creatures and Ecologies

Hybrid—no other term provides such a consummately appropriate and comprehensive description of the highly paradoxical current state of our world, one that is characterized by interrelationships that, among other things, are extraordinarily contradictory while at the same time displaying superb operative effectiveness:

- Annulments of boundaries, mergers, fusions and crossovers resulting in new economic and political coalitions and alliances, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration in the arts and sciences.
- Global cultural amalgamations as outgrowths of the worldwide circulation of people and products, as well as systems of signs and bodies of information.
- Symbolic as well as physical penetration of the human body by machinery ranging from bionic prostheses and neuro-implants to cyborgs and trans-genetic chimera.
- Sampling, collage and re-mix techniques, as well as consistent cross-compilation and re-contextualization of the means, forms and genres of artistic expression.
- Escalating battles to prevent contamination of the self by the other.

The hybrid is the signature of our age, emblematic of the casualness with which we have established ourselves in real, physical habitats as well as in digital, virtual domains, of the way that dealing with and reconfiguring cultural differences and antipodes has become a matter taken completely for granted, and of the disturbingly routine nature of the way we play with the building blocks of life.

The cultural history of hybridization, from the husbandry and cross-breeding of plants and animals, the mechanical, electrical and digital simulation and replication of nature, and now to the arrogance of modern genetic engineering, has also always been an expression of humanity's age-old longings to rise above itself and to modify and correct nature.

And just as every organism mobilizes the forces of its immune system to fight off intrud-

ers and foreign bodies (even in the case of a life-saving organ transplant), every instance of cultural or social hybridization summons forth attitudes of resistance and defensive action: fundamentalist purism, efforts at exclusion resulting from the fear of assimilation, or a sense of skepticism that sees hidden behind these “new” forms of integration nothing but innovative elaborations of the same old divisive forces.

Hybridization as a cultural process can be calculated and controlled only in the rarest of cases. Its productive powers are mostly the outcome of happenstance or even in some cases the conscious wish to achieve differentiation; they are often byproducts of subversive action. This is especially evident in the successful culture jamming found in youth culture and pop music, but applies equally to numerous applications of digital technology. After all, nobody planned SMS or the dynamic, potent emergence of citizen journalism in the form of blogging, RSS-feeds and podcasting. Their emergence is also a hybrid that was most certainly foretold by visionary artists and cultural theoreticians, though not by the marketing gurus of the New Economy.

The fact that, ultimately, a way is always found to commercially exploit the derivatives that are engendered in this way does nothing to diminish the inclination, pleasure and energy to go on sampling, remixing, contaminating and abusing; at best, it provokes the redoubling of such efforts.

The first hybrid is the human. And living in paradox. A mix of mind and matter, a translating device, a handshake from mind to matter and vice-versa, humankind is in a permanent state of hybridization, consciously and unconsciously.

Why then focus on such a pervasive condition? Because new drivers of hybridization have emerged that make the hybrid condition always more evident-and more uncomfortable for some. With globalization comes implosion, all cultures and time zones piling up upon each other. When imploding, things either integrate or break. Another driver is digitization, inviting an infinity of recombinations, all hybrids, carefully cultivated with software, like flowers.

We live in paradox, in a suspension of disbelief that will last until the dust settles and the contradictions between self and other, between nationalisms and globalism, between democracy and state control are resolved. And the contradictions between the power of media and that of the state. And the contradictions between science and the economy generating hybrids for all purposes with a clear bias towards profitability over service to humanity. And the contradictions ...

Art is the food of hybridity. It is translating and transporting the modes of one culture into another, lifting bits of both and mixing. Sampling is not just one of the techniques of the digital, it has become a way of life. And we have DJs of culture, albeit operating at longer-term rhythms. What can people do but sample in an environment where everything is always available?

Derrick de Kerckhove

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald