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A Virtual Artistic & Cultural Exchange

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How will the internet change the possibilities for sharing and exchanging artistic expression across cultural perspectives? How could it promote the concept of a global culture of diversity? a shared humanity? cooperation and understanding? And, thus, the creation of a cross-cultural bridge through the exchange of artistic expression in the new media?

“The European, at sea in a small vessel, tends to envisage his situation as one in which his craft moves towards, passes by, and then away from fixed islands. The islands are secure and he is in motion. But...the Puluwat navigator, once on course, inverts the concept and in his navigational system considers the canoe to be stationary and the islands to move towards and past him...We may surmise that a western Pacific islander in the past might well sail east or south or north in search of new land, confident in the belief that, as usual, islands would rise over the horizon to meet him.”

1 R.G. Ward and J.W. Webb From *The Settlement of Polynesia*,
ANU Press, Canberra, 1973

Big is little. Little is big. Just like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, sometimes we must change our perspective, turn inside out how we define the world in order to understand it better. There she was, on the other side of the Looking Glass, where Alice had decided to head off to a point in the distant horizon. Yet, no matter how hard she tried, each time she walked towards the horizon, she ended up right back where she started. Finally, heeding the advice of a “talking rose,” she decided to travel in the opposite direction. And, sure enough, she found she could finally reach her chosen destination.

It is these oddly different perspectives in thought that have always intrigued me. Whether it was discovering a differing philosophy in reaching a destination, as found in Lewis Carroll’s classic, or the Pacific Islanders’ cultural perspective on getting from point A to B as they navigate the great seas.

Since the dawn of mankind, we have sought to explain the forces of nature, the reasons for our existence, and the means by which the unseen, the future, the past, etc., all exist within our psyche of time and space. In the past, mankind's questions have been addressed and explanations offered in the form of scientific study, religious thought and artistic expression.

Mythology, religion, science and art all attempt to answer age old questions of the "why" or "how" of our existence. Or "why" or "how" things work the way they do? Such philosophies have been examined in great detail by Joseph Campbell, in his treatise *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, where he offered a comparative approach to world mythology and the various "answers" they proposed to these persistent questions. Whereas, notable science fiction/fantasy authors such as Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov have attempted to define a new prospective reality, creating ideas that have often lead to developments that have changed the course of history. And yet the creative expressions of art and science have often crossed paths throughout the history of mankind, manifested in the notebooks of such expansive thinkers as Leonardo DaVinci, where he detailed his many inventions that were literally centuries before their time. Or Galileo and Copernicus and their examination of the skies, their resulting conclusions so contrary to then-current church doctrine.

In Arthur C. Clarke's anthology, *Nine Billion Names of God*, the title story captures the imagination while crossing the borders of philosophy and technology. His story takes us to Tibet where a group of Buddhist monks has hired an American computer firm, modeled on IBM of the 1950s, to install an "Automatic Sequence Computer" in their mountain-top monastery. The monks believed that, using their special language and characters within a variety of permutations and restrictions, they would eventually be able to discern all "nine billion names of God." For centuries, they had been doing this by hand, passing the task down from generation to generation. However, with the new "super" computer, the task could be completed in only about six weeks. The monks also hired two technicians from the American company to install and maintain the computer during the initial six weeks of "testing." During their time at the monastery, one of the techs starts to ask questions about what the monks would do once the project was complete. The monk replied simply that "God's purpose will be achieved." A bit nervous about the inference, the tech looks forward to getting off the mountain. Finally, as he and his pal make their way down the mountain to the waiting helicopter, they estimate that their computer would just about be finished with its calculations. Looking up at the starry sky, they begin to see what the monk meant, as the stars...

Okay, okay. So I may have just given away the ending of this all-too-brief story. But my aim was to demonstrate that philosophy (i.e. general, spiritual), science and art are all interwoven and, at times, indistinguishable. What if the internet, a.k.a. the world wide "web", allowed a truly democratically accessible forum for this interweaving to continue? a forum that could cross cultural and geographic boundaries? This concept, of course, is not new. In the same anthology, Clarke explores the possibility of the "uncensored" sharing of ideas through the use of satellite technology. It is proposed in his short story "I Remember Babylon" first published in 1959 in *Playboy*, no less, and years before the first Telstar communications satellites were ever launched. Clarke claimed he was told by Comsat's first chairman that the story was now "required reading for his staff."²

In "I Remember Babylon," Clarke proposed that satellites could be used to broadcast around the world, without the threat of government censorship. The information could be broadcast without

restrictions and received by anyone who was interested (and outfitted with a satellite receiving dish, of course). How ironic, as I re-read the story for this essay, to see how satellites instead have become important instruments of manipulation, truly “censored” by the governments and mega-corporations who control the content beamed through them today. Americans, especially, have become cynical in their purchase of television content, the most visible facilitators of satellite technology today.

More than four decades after Clarke’s first proposal, we find ourselves at the precipice of a new frontier. Do we step off and fall deep into the melange of government control? Or do we embrace the potential freedom that this new media could offer? Still, we find the concept of this new media, free from censorship and control, the subject of contentious debate. Could we maintain its possibilities, enable the sharing of uncensored information, particularly the unfiltered creative expression of thought? Could we break down the barriers of access to this new media, as well as the sharing of creative expression that it offers? Can we overcome its “imposition” and instead, make it a welcome forum for exchange? The internet could possibly be used to overcome isolation. Would it also further impose it? It could also be used to help “preserve” cultural groups that might otherwise have disappeared. Or, would it instead hasten their demise? It could be used to re-connect and reunite cultural groups who have been scattered to the winds, as were the twelve tribes of Israel. These new “virtual” worlds that we create “online” could become meeting places, where members could come together to share customs, traditions, language, and art. The possibilities are unlimited. But so are the questions.

How would this new media, the internet/www offer a new forum for humanity’s need to redefine its place in the universe? It might allow the opportunity for the individual to voice questions in the form of spiritual and artistic expression, ones that are outside the cultural restrictions of their native realm. This new media could then offer the ultimate democratic forum for the exchange of ideas and self-expression (art, religion, science) across cultures in a global context. And, in the midst of that exchange, if it occurred successfully, the cultural context would change, depending upon the perspective of the viewer/visitor/audience.

Artists have long been the “visual theologians” or “visual philosophers” of humanity, exploring the meaning as to the “who” and “why” and “how” that science and religion also address. In a way, these three - art, science, philosophy -- are a sort of trinity of contemporary society. Their dogma is fluid, changeable, yet their impact and validity are hotly debated.

The internet, in all its incarnations, could enable the blending of artistic expressions, from different cultural and geographic backgrounds. It could allow them to share the oral, verbal, visual, literary, historical and philosophical expressions, creating a sort of morphing into a whole, new media. And with the sharing among the world’s citizens of this new expressive force, there could result a new understanding, and a breakdown of fear of the unknown, a truly diverse, but tolerant, global community. If we could enable people to express themselves in this new media, we could further promote understanding of the varieties of belief, and of other cultures. We open the door to cross-cultural expression, and a shared voice.

Wouldn’t it be exciting if we could open the doors so that everyone could share and attempt to understand each other? Maybe we could even break down the fear of “Them” who we do not understand.

We could design a means whereby artists of different cultural backgrounds, nations, philosophies could come together in a virtual world that would foster exchange. We could create a "Virtual Artistic Exchange" or a "Virtual Cultural Exchange." This new media could be used to allow the melding of many different artistic expressions into one forum that would allow the global exchange of artistic vision and cultural ideology.

In this new media, we can decide for ourselves, to choose where to visit, what to see, what to believe. The viewer may, in essence, have control of how they wish to interact with the resources and content available to them. My interest is in seeing how this freedom can become a forum for the arts, philosophy, and science in some kind of hybrid environment or expressive form.

In closing, I offer this prose used in a digital painting I created recently.³ The words were written in 1995 during a break between speakers, when I found myself at an educational conference presenting a paper related to distance education in the South Pacific.

Thoughts while sitting under a tamtam drum.

The tam tam looks down upon me with its weathered face and large round orbs.

"Could it be," he asks, "that the questions have become too difficult to answer?"

He continues:

"When my time was, I was both caller to task, and the cultural multimedia. There was no distance beyond the sounds of my drum. Before, in my time, the power to drive our thoughts came from within our hearts, from within our surrounds."

"No need for wires to connect us. We already were connected. In thought, in our hearts, in our goals."

So now he looks down at me, and I feel his slowly turning head, shaking in disappointment at the predicament I feel party to.

The lure of technology can drag us away, like a fly on a stream.

It can cloud our thoughts with its fuzzy logic.

It can lead us to forget that which we already had the means to do well. The further away we are carried, the closer we come to realizing how important it was, that which we left behind. That, which we long to return to...

Multimedia?

What does that mean to one who bathes in the stream, hunts for food in the woods, and gathers the family by firelight, many miles from the electric eclectic trappings of a city.

His multimedia is the tapping of the toddie for his wine, the pounding of the mallets for the tapa, the dreamtime he paints with pigments ground from the earth.

No electricity.

No high-tech support.

No batteries required.

He tells me: "Maybe you are not lost afterall."

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September 23, 1995
Port Vila, Vanuatu
(formerly New Hebrides)*

- 1. Many thanks to Dr. Epeli Hau'ofa for bringing this to my notice in his book *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*.*
- 2. Clarke mentions this in the pre-script to the story published in the 1974 Signet paperback version of his anthology titled *Nine Billion Names of God*.*
- 3. View the four-part digital painting called *TamTamedia* at in the exhibition "*Images & Transitions: A Digital Journey*." Mara J. Fulmer*