"Technofornia" is a metalepsis, a virtual exhibition about the virtual. It brings together the conceptual and the electro-mechanical, thus circumventing the problem endemic to technologized art — making it work. A virtual exhibition is also a way to elide the ire- some criteria usually used to evaluate new media (novelty, interface, and speed), opening up a space in which to address a more expansive set of questions. "Technofornia" concerns the extent to which the computer has shifted or accelerated the inclusion of technological elements in contemporary art practice. California serves as a test site for these transformations, with two very different communities — Los Angeles and San Francisco — offering a range of work and, just as important, a shifting series of contexts for the reception of this work. That state — larger, more powerful, and more divisive than most nations — should serve as the backdrop for this brand of practice is not surprising, as the computer is central to the Golden State's psyche. Silicon Valley birthed the personal computing revolution; San Francisco's Digital Gulch is awash with twentysomethings who have given up slacking to open electronic design studios; and Hollywood executives have decreed that the future of entertainment is inextricably tied to the computer, though few of them could explain why.

This "Aperto" segues from the material to the portable to the immaterial. It opens with a series of installations — objects and site-specific experiences which the culture easily constitutes as art. It moves to a selection of artists' CD-ROMs — portable media sources that blur the boundary between object and experience. And it concludes with the World Wide Web — dematerialized sites accessible from anywhere in the wired world.

Jennifer Steinkamp's lush imagescapes immerse viewers in shimmering fields of color and form. Her site-specific projections are predicated upon a finely focused production process, which involves 3-D modeling of the exhibition space, the rendering of animations on high-end hardware, the melding of image and sound, and finally the transformation of inert white walls into extruded, pulsating abstractions. Swell (1995) evokes the "pure" filmmaking of Paul Sharits, and the optical trickery of the light and space movement, but there is also a feminist edge to the work that addresses the gendered conditions of space and vision.

Sara Roberts' Elective Affinities (1994) is one of the most elegant and successful artworks to incorporate interactive narrative structures. The exhibition is confusing at first: in front of a wall-sized projection of a moving roadscape there are four large black pedestals, with four translucent faces floating above them. As the viewer walks from one face to another, she triggers switches bringing up interior monologues from each. After two or three "encounters," the viewer comes to realize that these are characters in a series of romantic triangles, and that Roberts has created an idealized voyeuristic experience — a road trip in which what is heard are the characters' intimate thoughts about one another. Elective Affinities draws from Goethe's little read novel of...
the same name, daytime soap operas, and America's romance with the automobile to create an interactive, televisual melodrama of remarkable intensity.

Mike Kelley is known for his engagement with the abject and the profane, but his work also investigates the arena of technology. In a solo show in LA, Kelley created a mixed media installation of painting, electronic objects and sound pieces that evoked the miasmic world of UFO conspirators and alien abductions (all works 1994). The walls were hung with round panel paintings on aluminum, looking like nothing so much as alien battle standards. Some of these were outfitted with antennae and hard-wired to boom boxes, which sat on the floor broadcasting intermittent, otherworldly sounds. The rest of the space was filled with the sort of home-brewed mechanical contrivances with which Kelley made his reputation, but this time the objects evoked the pseudo-science of ufologists and other investigators of paranormal phenomena. The show embodied the chiliasic irrational, but here the fascination with endtimes played itself out within the realm of farcical technologies and the science-fictional imaginary.

Rebeca Bollinger's Dorothy's Room (1995) is a CD-ROM which explores the use of three dimensional software (here, "Quicktime VR") to reflect and estrange architectural space. The piece refers to Dorothy Draper, who designed the interior of San Francisco's famed Fairmont Hotel in the 1940s. The vast expanse of carpet in the Fairmont becomes a texture map to flow through and around; the people and furniture in the lobby function as disruptions in the decorative abstraction; and the fact that nothing "happens" in this CD-ROM is precisely the point.

If Dorothy's Room evokes the stately past of Northern California, then Todd Gray's
Michael Jackson Reconsidered (1996) is immediately identifiable as an orchid from LA's media hothouse. His CD-ROM draws from the archive of images he amassed while working as the King of Pop's personal photographer through the 1980s. Gray conflates the hysteria of new technologies with the hysteria of celebrity, using non-linear technologies to juxtapose the on- and off-stage worlds of entertainment capitalism. He contextualizes these images within issues of rela- 

tiveness, blackness, and the thirst for assimilation.

The CD-ROM can function as a souvenir from "Techno-

fornia," but the Web makes the very notion of a show based on locality a moot point. In the TeleGarden (http://www.usc.edu/dept/garden) (1995), Ken Goldberg embraces the paradox of immaterial physical environments. A UC Berkeley roboticist and artist, Goldberg (with a team including Joey Santarromano, George Bekey, Steven Gentner, Rosemary Morris, Carl Sutter, and Jeff Wiegley) created a small plot of petunias, peppers, and marigolds, installed a robot arm to seed and water the plants, and rigged a live video feed to keep watch. In linking their garden to the World Wide Web, and creating an intuitive interface for the control of the arm and camera, Goldberg and the others transformed what most would consider a fit of over-engineering into a subtle rumination on the nature of the commons. Anyone with a Web browser can access the site, and the rights to water and plant are given to those willing to make their e-mail public to others in the co-operative.

The emerging digital culture has to this point been more conducive to systemic analysis than critical writing about individual art works. "Technofornia" is a step towards delineating objects, spaces, and sites worthy of consideration in their own right, rather than simply as manifestations or harbingers of things to come.

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Photo Robert Wedemeyer.

Courtesy ACME, Santa Monica, CA.
"THERE ARE PEOPLE IN THE STREETS WHO'VE NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO SPEAK": JAMES BLUE AND THE COMPLEX DOCUMENTARY

PETER LUNENFELD

Tangled Up in Blue

The "immediacy" of television is much discussed and rarely achieved. Television too often fulfills its local public service requirements with off-hour, well-meaning panel discussion shows, which are, in essence, studio shots of talking heads. Local prime-time documentaries are often no better—devolving into excuses for mediocre journalism. James Blue was one of the very few medi makers able to see past the limitations of nonfiction television as it is constituted by the market and thereby offer hope for the medium.

An award-winning narrative and documentary filmmaker and a brilliant teacher of media, Blue developed a new form for local television in the late 1970s. He called his work "complex documentary" because it was a process-oriented form of production involving high levels of reflexivity, formal experimentation, and audience feedback. Blue's friend and colleague Gerald O'Grady points out that "'complex' referred to the nature of the subject, multiple social, economic, and cultural forces all overlapping and impacting at once, necessitating someone's sorting them out and putting them into a structure that would reach an audience."1

In the last interview before his death in 1980, Blue addressed the narrow focus of his television documentaries. Asked why he worked on parochial questions rather than on larger issues for national distribution, Blue responded: "I don't think the national documentaries teach us much of anything, because they're too general. They have to be too general."

To tighten the focus of television documentary, Blue created a forum for area residents to express their problems and aspirations personally—in other words, to exploit the medium's capacities for intimate engagement.2

The Complex Documentary

In 1977, Blue completed Who Killed the Fourth Ward?, a three-part series about the neglect and decline of a poor African-American neighborhood on the outskirts of downtown Houston. Instead of constructing the series around a predetermined agenda, Blue treats the demise of the neighborhood as a mystery. For Blue—a white, nonnative resident of Houston—the situation was in fact a mystery. He announces early on that the work is not intended to be an expose, or to be taken for the whole of the truth; it is, instead, a story about forces and processes. Here, Blue refuses to function as an omniscient director of the action; he becomes, first and foremost, a witness.

The function of witnessing is vital because it supports the theoretical preconceptions of the complex documentary itself. Blue
and the film crew discover the boundaries of their documentary only after interviewing those facing difficulties on the one hand and those setting policy on the other. Besides shaping the basic structure of the work, the detailed interviews offer a chance for people to be heard: “There are people in the streets who’ve never had a chance to speak.” Blue helps these people find their voices.

Blue followed Who Killed the Fourth Ward? in 1979 with The Invisible City, a collaboration with Adele Santos, then professor of architecture at Houston’s Rice University. The Invisible City concentrates even more closely on questions of process, making it a more accomplished complex documentary than its predecessor. Once again, Blue eschews a grand topic, looking rather at the incipient housing crisis in Houston toward the close of the 1970s. In part an outgrowth of the concerns raised in Who Killed the Fourth Ward?, The Invisible City is a prescient analysis of what was to become one of the nation’s major controversies in the 1980s—homelessness in the midst of seeming affluence.

When Blue made The Invisible City, Houston was still in the midst of the oil and construction boom that busted by 1982. It is a measure of his instincts and savvy that he was able to convince Houston Public Television to air this five-part series on urban housing in August and September 1979 in the midst of what seemed to be the best of times.

If we were to categorize complex documentaries by their homological relationships to other television forms, Who Killed the Fourth Ward? would be considered a detective story, complete with Blue acting the role of Inspector Columbo, and The Invisible City would be a phone-in talk show, an interaction between a host, a panel, and the viewers at home. The Invisible City is about collaboration, both creative and interpretive.

Very few documentaries are wholly products of a single vision. Instead, they are collaborative projects, between the director, cinematographer, editor, and so on and, very often, between makers and subjects. The Invisible City focuses on the means by which a documentary collects, sorts through, and renders meaning from information. Blue began the process of making the documentary by announcing its theme in various community centers and media outlets. He then went out to talk with those people who had contacted him with ideas and complaints. It was only after this stage that he began filming interviews and gathering the materials that were then edited to create the opening installment. At the close of the first show, there was a number for viewers to contact with comments, suggestions, and critiques. The next program was constructed by following up on the leads callers offered. All the programs that followed pushed hard against their deadlines, so that postproduction continued right up to air times. The series showed Houston a side of itself that it may not have wanted to admit existed and served as a warning to those who looked to Houston as a beacon—Northeasterners who saw the city as the last haven of the jobless, and city planners who touted Houston as the model of laissez-faire growth.

Blue developed a sophisticated understanding of the nonfiction form through a combination of study, practice, and teaching. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, he interviewed other documentarians in radio, video, and print. His production experience was vast, ranging from shorts to feature-length documentaries and narratives, and from boutique work for Hollywood productions to ethnographic studies of African tribes. Blue made films independently, under the auspices of the U.S. Information Agency, within university environments, and in media access spaces. Blue was still developing the complex documentary, both in theory and in practice, when he died in 1980. Nonetheless, this nonfiction television formulation was the single most important contribution of his long and varied career.

To laud Who Killed the Fourth Ward? and The Invisible City, two obscure television documentaries, at the expense of Blue’s Cannes Critics’ Prize-winning narrative, Les Oliviers de la Justice (1962), or the Academy Award-nominated documentary, A Few Notes on Our Food Problem (1968), is obviously polemical. Regardless, it is extraordinary that a filmmaker with Blue’s credentials would direct the full range of his energies, craft, and talent toward developing television documentary aimed at local audiences about local problems. It is more extraordinary yet that these two complex documentaries are so involving on formal and narrative levels.

As I continue to emphasize, however, the complex documentary exists on many levels. Who Killed the Fourth Ward? and The Invisible City must not be regarded simply as self-contained documents. They are, as well, methodological treatises, exemplars for both university-based media education and community-driven access spaces. Therefore, the complex documentary must be analyzed within its particular matrix of production, distribution, and consumption. The complex documentary’s key innovation is the creation of three interlaced and nested levels of self-reflexivity: (1) within the work’s formal construction of visual style and narrative coherence; (2) in its foregrounding of the conditions of production; and (3) in its encouragement and incorporation of subject and spectatorial feedback.

This interlaced self-reflexivity not only transmits informational content; it dismantles viewers’ collective misconceptions about how documentary films are made. This reorientation, in turn, serves a deeper purpose: the complex documentary offers the viewer a strategy for looking beneath the seamless surface of other sources of (mis)information broadcast on television. While acknowledging Walter Benjamin’s aphorism that “it is inherent in the technique of film... that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is something of an expert,” the question is always to what degree and what effect (231).

Beyond Formal Construction

For Blue, it was vital to demonstrate the nature of the filmmaking activity both to the audience and to those directly affected by the material. “If you can’t show the event as it is, if you’ve got to tamper with it to give it significance, then you’ve got to say what you are doing” (Bannon 11). While self-reflexivity in documentary has been much commented on, the primary focus has been on formal elements at the expense of the specifics of practice and reception. In “The Voice of Documentary,” Bill Nichols cites Who Killed the Fourth Ward? as one of the films “instrumental in formulating issues of self-reflexive documentary” (62–63, n2). Concerned with creating an overarching theory of the form, Nichols catalogues styles and their “distinctive formal and ideological qualities” (48). These include the by-now familiar tropes of Griersonian direct address, the “transparency” of cinéma vérité, and the testimonial style of the “witness-participants” films of the 1970s. Yet the complex documentary demands consideration of the conditions of production and the particularities of the viewing experience alongside the exigencies of form. Even a cursory analysis of its visual style reveals Blue’s attention to questions of process.

Sound technicians are visible in shots, boom mikes hang in view during interviews, and focus and mike checks are left in the final edit. Throughout Who Killed the Fourth Ward?, Blue continually inserts into the narrative just those “accidents” that work to disrupt the false unity of other kinds of documentary. Yet Dziga
Vertov (and even the Dziga Vertov Group) notwithstanding, it is now very difficult to claim that any particular formal strategies of media-making, even self-reflexive visual styles, are in themselves inherently progressive. Audiences have become inured to the faux-verité of the nonfiction telecast. The occasional hand-held "investigative" pieces on tabloid shows such as A Current Affair rarely contribute to deepening the spectator's reception of the material. And, as critic Jay Ruby points out, such "accidents" have become simply "signs of the direct-cinema style," clichés of the documentary movement (73).

With the advent of The Invisible City, Blue moved beyond constructing merely a "self-reflexive" look, concentrating on the relationship of the work to its audience, incorporating interactive feedback, and reflecting these processes through the construction of whole episodes rather than simply at the level of the composition of the shots. Blue strove to incorporate stylistic reflexivity within the overall narrative structures of his complex documentaries. This is most evident in a sequence covering the deteriorated physical state of housing in outlying Houston neighborhoods. Blue creates an accelerated visual montage of the decrepit housing by displaying a different house every four frames. These visibly decaying structures are juxtaposed with a deterioration of the soundtrack's voice-over. The narration, which at first lays out the facts and figures concerning the decay of the city's properties, then degenerates into silences interspersed with split-second sound samples.

As Blue acknowledged, this sequence owes much to the avant-garde flicker films of Paul Sharits, which concentrate on the fragility of the sound/image matrix. The lightning speed of the visual montage, in combination with the unexpected breakdown of the voice-over narration, foregrounds for the spectator the disaster of Houston's housing in ways that a more conventional documentary would and could not.

There are express political and aesthetic purposes in Blue's references to technology. Throughout The Invisible City, he cuts to shots of himself sitting in front of a 3/4" videotape deck inserting and ejecting cassettes. Blue positions himself this way not to show off his technical gadgets, like the brief long shots of the network news anchors surrounded by monitors and telephones on their sets, but to break down the sense that documentary shows an objective, "god's-eye view" of the world, free of human modifications. Blue also has an explicit narrative function in mind with this incorporation of technology: "We start out with the notion of a field of videocassettes, and retrieving coexisting data, rather than simply dealing with a linear structure" (Bannon 13).

Blue's conscious positioning of himself in front of the tools of the television documentary maker's trade is reminiscent of Edward R. Murrow's set on See It Now. In the famous March 9, 1954, episode on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, Murrow sits in front of monitors and a tape recorder cueing film and audio clips; Murrow even points to a stack of newspapers to buttress See It Now's attack on the inconsistencies and bullying tactics of the junior senator from Wisconsin.9

Historical antecedents aside, Blue plays with the expected form and style of the television documentary in ways that Murrow never did. Blue was deeply troubled by the conventionalized presentation of nonfiction work on television. He developed a philosophical and aesthetic stance against documentary work which created an air of studious objectivity and apparent balance through narrative strategies of containment.

To understand the difference between Blue's achievements and standard television practice, one need only look at the television documentary in its most popular form in America—60 Minutes. 60 Minutes is the most successful documentary forum on television in terms of ratings and public recognition. The show fulfills the ambitions of its creator and executive producer, Don Hewitt, "to package sixty minutes of reality as attractively as Hollywood packages sixty minutes of make-believe"—especially if "attractive" is defined by percentage of market share and the question of "reality" is left unasked (27).

60 Minutes's standard operating procedure is to select a subject with a strong vision of the final product already in mind and to generate preproduction scripts and outlines based on research put together by an experienced staff. The actual shooting involves collecting the necessary visual and aural documentation to bring the production in on time, to support the segment's preordained thesis, and to make the network correspondent appear tough and compassionate. The footage typically includes limited interviews with the "victims," to justify the show's nobility of purpose, and interviews with the "perpetrators," who conveniently expose their guilt on camera. The segment thus concludes with a payoff justifying the viewer's involvement in the show.

Blue's notion of the complex documentary stands in opposition to the practice on 60 Minutes because Blue is interested in the process of moving more than he is in moving toward an end product. The complex documentary calls for the maker to do more than simply choose an area to investigate, film prearranged interviews to buttress a thesis, and then assemble and edit the final work. It is essential for the maker to reassert to the viewer the nature of the media-making activity itself. Blue, in his own words, was "moving more and more towards how to solve the problem of
transmittal of complex notions, and less towards recording events” (Bannon 11).

A Narrative of Process

As mentioned earlier, Who Killed the Fourth Ward? is a narrative of discovery, a mystery. But this mystery does not conclude with a grand revelation. No truly complex situation can ever be so tidily solved. The lack of closure in Blue’s complex documentaries was a response to the experience of making the portrait film Kenya Boran (1974), a collaboration with ethnographer David MacDougall. The two filmmakers were searching for a single event that dealt with “one or two people, which would reveal to us the whole pain of modernization.” Yet by the conclusion of shooting, Blue learned a lesson that he brought with him to his television work: “trying to find that one event, what we were really asking for was a Greek tragedy, which would have all the unities right there in front of you. But you can’t do that in the real world” (Bannon 11).

Who Killed the Fourth Ward? is emphatically about the real world, about “what forces are at work.” Concentrating on these political, social, and economic processes allows the discourse to move beyond simplistic dichotomies—question/answer, cause/effect, victim/villain. The complex documentary offers a model for those who work within the legacy of direct cinema without relying on what Stephen Mamber identifies as the “crisis structure” of so many of that movement’s documentaries.

In discussing the early Drew Associates work for television, and specifically films such as On the Pole (1960), Primary (1960), and Jane (1962), Mamber analyzes three justifications for structuring documentaries around a specific moment or series of crises: first, to lessen the subjects’ awareness of the actualities of filming; second, to reveal the “true” nature of the subject under pressure; and third, to ape the logic of traditional dramatic narrative’s arc of development, crisis, and resolution (Mamber 71).

The problem with the crisis structure is that it is not well suited to the discussion of ongoing problems and processes. Taking the three primary concerns of Who Killed the Fourth Ward? and The Invisible City—homelessness, laissez-faire urban planning, and gentrification—and conceptualizing them in terms of crisis may maximize the drama but not without minimizing understanding. Crisis necessitates closure in terms of cataclysm; the complex documentary argues for something less spectacular: a plodding movement toward awareness, and even change. It is the concentration on process, rather than the discrete action or event, that makes up the core of the complex documentary and that prompts Blue to abandon the pat conventions of narrative.

Reception/Response/Incorporation

Blue encourages self-reflexive reception; his hope is that spectators will react to the material instead of passively absorbing it. To this end, he offers viewers models of active spectatorship within the narrative, while incorporating viewer response into the very structure of his complex documentary. His strategy is to find knowledgeable people to offer input and to react to the material he collects. This process is refined from the first to the second complex documentary.

In Who Killed the Fourth Ward?, Blue concentrates this function in a single individual, Tom Wright, an African-American journalist with roots in the ward. Wright is adamant that a coordinated conspiracy of the rich and powerful is under way to eliminate his community. Wright's opinions and attitudes are heavily influenced by his closeness to the situation. Tom Wright’s intense involvement points to a danger the documentarian must face—that well-motivated subjectivity is just as distorted as “balanced objectivity.”

In The Invisible City, Blue moves beyond the use of an individual guide and instead assembles a group of people to analyze the footage and to offer their subjective analyses of the evidence. This group functions as a collection of fact checkers and discussants—advisers, who in turn become a part of the work’s structure and narrative. Blue encourages these men and women to process “what are the essential questions and what are the consequences of those decisions.”

There is admittedly a very thin line that separates the advisers in a complex documentary from the omniscient “experts” who infect the media’s coverage of everything from sports to warfare. At times Blue does give the group more weight than he should. Although the group does not distract too much from the primary evidence collected in the interviews, their presence does problematize Blue’s utopian vision of a nonhierarchized process of investigation. If there is one way in which Blue falls short of giving the “people in the streets...a chance to speak,” it is when he has his advisers speak for them.10

At their best, however, these advisers serve as models of involved spectatorship. In The Invisible City, Blue intercuts the accelerated montage mentioned earlier with reaction shots of the advisers, demonstrating the way the formal construction drives home the decay of the relatively young Houston housing stock. By showing the advisers’ animated responses and interactions as a group, Blue demonstrates
for the television audience the process of active viewing, encouraging those at home to move beyond mere acceptance of narrative.

Although Who Killed the Fourth Ward? does not incorporate a panel of advisers, it contains one sequence of such powerful self-reflexive reception that it deserves a separate reading. In trying to determine why the Fourth Ward's fortunes sank so low, Blue arranges a series of interviews with public figures. One such figure is the dynamic young mayor of Houston, Fred Hofheintz. Hofheintz is quick to blame the displacement of the Fourth Ward on "the natural forces of the market." It is at this point that Hofheintz reveals something unsaid publicly in the Fourth Ward debate: he holds out no hope for the neighborhood. The mayor is unwilling to spend money or to flex political muscle in hopes of retaining the area for African-American, low-to-middle-income people.

To this point, Blue has merely elicited unusually candid comments from an electorate, an audience filled with local residents. The reaction of these people to Mayor Hofheintz's remarks about the neighbor-hood's decay is powerful. Here are disenfranchised citizens watching a politician talking about them and their problems—not at them or around them. The camera probes the faces in the pews, revealing shock and then despair. The television audience witnesses the rupture of what civic faith they had retained. 

Not all documentaries will have such a dramatic representation of involved spectatorship; these congregants are forced by circumstance into an active viewing role. In The Invisible City, however, Blue encouraged his television audience to emulate the congregation by establishing a phone line to take viewer responses. The calls ranged from reactions to the material already screened to suggestions for other areas to investigate in the remaining shows. The technophiles of the entertainment industry often weave tales of wonder about the coming era of interactive television, when fiber optic cable will bring us high-bandwidth communication. Unfortunately, one gets the sense that what excites them most is the populace ever more tightly into the intricate bondage of postindustrial consumption. Working only with the simple twisted copper wires of the telephone, Blue pointed to the greater possibilities of a responsive media.

Complex Conclusions

What impact did the complex documentaries have? If they are judged solely by their success or failure to effect change in the public sphere, we may not be getting to the most pressing issues. Blue's television work was seen by a small audience over a decade ago and has since been fairly obscure. On the one hand, there is always something admirable in bravery, and in the go-go years of Texas real estate, Blue was courageous even to mention the issues of coordinated urban planning and increased taxation. On the other hand, Who Killed the Fourth Ward? neither halted nor reversed the decline of the neighborhood. Likewise, in The Invisible City, neither Blue nor the panel comes to any miraculous consensus about solutions, beyond establishing a more coordinated plan for urban growth and creating a better safety net for the poor workers who were flocking to Houston from the Northeast in search of Sunbelt jobs. In terms of its effect on public policy, it is fairly evident that The Invisible City has become the invisible nation and that the homeless are still just that. Yet it is vital to think of the complex documentary in terms of process, holding it accountable neither to the demands of the media's market economy nor to the stakes of political infighting.

In Who Killed the Fourth Ward? and The Invisible City, James Blue brought the issue of housing to the public years before the nation took notice of its homeless citizens. In both works, James Blue enacted the role of the mediamaker as ombudsman—a sympathetic observer who responds to community problems by investigating and showing how people are being wronged. Blue's viewers are active spectators involved in a process of exploration and, crucially, the denaturalization of both urban politics and the media. In making complex documentaries, James Blue's focus was empowerment. What he wanted was to have "not only the subject, but the audience, seize control of the endeavor." The process begins with investigation and continues through some form of exposition, with the goal of effecting change, starting at the level of the viewer's perception.

An environment devoid of people interested in making or viewing such works, and without the facilities for the production and dissemination of independent media, is unlikely to bring about such perceptual evolution. So it was that through the 1970s, first at Rice and then at the State University of New York-Buffalo, Blue developed a specifically activist approach to the teaching and making of documentary. He was instrumental in establishing Houston's Southwest Alternative Media Project (SWAMP) and worked closely with the access space Media Study Buffalo. For Blue, a media center "was a tool for democracy, a vehicle for access to, control, and distribution of film and video information" (Bannon 9). From the start, the complex documentary was designed to make use of the university's mix of production facilities and eager student mediamakers and to take advantage of the familiarity of those in alternative spaces with the local urban landscape.

The complex documentary's conceptual rigor buttresses the filmmaker's attempts to deal with the superdense information environment of the city while at the same time acknowledging that the very rendering of meaning from such a site is a process worthy of discussion in its own right. An intermeshing of complexities is evident in all aspects of this television work: in its sophisticated formal construction; in the foregrounding of the subjective nature of documentary narration; and on the level of spectatorial reception. Breaking these down more specifically, Blue's complex documentary announces itself in the following ways: on the formal level with visible focus checks, hanging boom mikes, and nonnaturalized camera moves; in the self-conscious artifice of the editing techniques; through the foregrounding of the documentary form's subjective narrative process; with the presence of a panel of fact checkers serving as a guide for involved spectatorship; and finally with the incorporation of viewer response into the fabric of the shows themselves.

In a farewell to Blue written after his death, Gerald O'Grady, the founder of the University of Buffalo, summed up the impact of the complex documentary. It "located film in a more concrete interaction with political culture. It was invested in promoting community efforts to examine social and economic issues by presenting and analyzing them through community-based media. [Blue] had transferred his hope to the process through which a work, by attracting and holding an audience on television, could move its members towards participating in solving the problems presented" (O'Grady).

More than 10 years after O'Grady identified the core of the complex documentary, the need for an independent media culture that will be able to make meaning in an increasingly cluttered and stimulating technologically mediated society has grown rather than lessened. Though the call for "meaningful" media has long been a rallying cry for the populist or progressive elements of the film and video community, there are new ways of con-
then to material on the mayor that he has shot which has an immediate impact on the residents of the Fourth Ward and their perceptions of their shared situation.

13 We can, however, somewhat gauge the reactions of the international independent film and video communities to Blue’s work. Colin Young, who had brought Blue to teach at the National Film School of Great Britain in 1980, described the response to the complex documentaries during a posthumous retrospective Blue received at the Cinéma du Reel Festival in Paris in 1981: “[They] were completely unprepared for the Houston tapes, finding it hard to conceive of a television system in Europe which would be open to such work. We explained that James had helped create the points of access in Texas and elsewhere—that everything had to be fought for” (Jackson 5).

14 In *Strange Weather*, Andrew Ross begins to formulate a “green theory” by drawing from the work of writers such as Murray Bookchin.

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THEORIZING IN REAL TIME:
HYPERAESTHETICS FOR THE TECHNOCULTURE

PETER LUNENFELD

NEO-LUDDITES

All technologies should be assumed guilty until proven innocent.
-Jerry Mander

There are those in our culture who do not suffer from what Alouette Rosanne Stone refers to as "cyborg envy": "the desire to cross the human/machine boundary" that computer technologies and their interfaces seem to promise. Books like War in the Age of Intelligent Machines (1991, by Manuel De Landa) and Cyborg Worlds: The Military Information Society (1989, by Les Levidow and Kevin Robins, eds.) offer arguments that the new cybernetic technologies are not removed enough from their origins in the military's obsession with C4I (Communications, Command, Control, and Intelligence) to be seen as entirely beneficent. Yet as cautionary as these critiques are, they still do not go as far as others. In deference to the Luddites, those early nineteenth-century bands of English mechanics and their supporters who set themselves to devastate the manufacturing machinery in England's Midlands and North, this farthest wing of techno-critique can be called "neo-luddite." Neo-luddite thought approaches digital-socio-cultural manifestations as phenomena that must be examined with the focus firmly on the past—looking at historical and even pre-historical models of a view of the relationship between the environment, culture and technology. Neo-luddites do more than risk the approbation of the technophiles—they court it. Authors and provocateurs, including Tim Birkhead, go as far as smashing computers with sledge hammers during public lectures.

When impassioned ex-advertising executive turned director of the ecologically-minded Elmwood Institute, Jerry Mander, maintains "the importance of the negative view." He is expressing exasperation with the pro-social rhetoric of the twentieth century's technology boosters. Philosopher Langdon Winner succinctly questions: "Is there any kind of world we are building here?" Though there is no catastrophe for the neo-luddites, they could agree that theills of the future/present's post-industrial revolution can only be solved by attention to the lessons of the past. Groups ranging from Earth First! (the radi-
LEXICOGRAPHERS OF THE FUTURE/PRESENT

Reconciler—A compulsive digital manipulator. A Photoshop

To enter a community and to practice its crafts, an individual must learn to speak a specific language. Eric Raymond, the editor of The New Hacker's Dictionary (1993) writes of the inscrutable community's "almost unique combination of the... enjoyment of language-play with the discrimination of educated and powerful intelligence" to account for the prodigious rate at which it composes new words, acronyms and slang to describe and comment on the systems it creates and utilizes. Critical discourse's adoption of the hackers' vocabulary is a paradigmatic instance of the digital frontier's "inclusiveness and openness to perspective focused on the past." As the future/present barrel along, the critical community follows the lead of developers and hackers, rephrasing language to account for the novelties it confronts. This accounts for the neologisms' fascination with the immediate present. These scholars are engaged in a breakneck race to enunciate the immediate moment. Yet one of the features that stand apart from the forum is that novelties— and the vocabularies that grow with them— have ever-quickening half-lives before they enter into mainstream consciousness and annihilate cliches. Less than a decade after the release of William Gibson's Neuromancer (1984), the term "cyberpunk" was already beginning to seem quaint. When a movement makes the cover of Time, it is usually over before it even enters into evidence is the February 8th, 1993 cover blurb: "Cyberpunk: Virtual sex, smart drugs and synthetic rock & roll! A futuristic subculture erupts from the electronic underground." This feature—which could have borne the alternate title, "Are Cyberpunks a Danger to Your Kids?"—was "a Time-Warner Guide for Parents"—served to foreground the problems of culture and use of computer-inflected media technologies. Theorists contemplating the future/present should ground their insights in the cross-streams of practice, speculating after thorough investigations, not before.

Subsuming the neologism and science-fictionalized discourse to the investigation of new media production, consumption and use of computer-inflected media technologies is a strategy that I have previously labeled "digital dialectics." The digital dialectician educates his or herself in the ways of these new technologies, thinking not only of their theoretical potentials but also of their practical limitations. Here, for example, is critic Tim Brookes, who in calling for a new approach to interactive art forms also requires a thorough investigation of the modes of production and dissemination of this: "A model of interactivity will have to include an assessment of the fragmentation of knowledge, a reformed concept of narrative discourse as well as the creation of a new model for accessing and distributing."

The unmediated hereof new technologies also change the parable in critical vision. The position of the critic with regard to the culture is always in flux. Driven by the market and the laboratory, technologically oriented culture is constantly mutating—leading cultural critics like B. L. Ruttan, Jim Lawrence: "We don't read science fiction so much as live it." Ruttan maintains that it is a concrete to imagine that we are capable of stepping outside the future/present to comment on it from a "slab" position unsupported by material underpinnings.

through the adoption of virtual identities, as though this
were technically feasible, or even likely to move beyond
most margins.27
The term "teacher academics" has been coined to
describe that segment of the professorate that consists
itself with fashion, theory and media. The digital frontier
seems to be attracting such academics at an ever escalating
rate. Williams College's Mark C. Taylor and the Uni-
versity of Helsinki's Esa Saarinen headed in the mediati-
omen's attention for the requisite 15 minutes when they
conducted an educational experiment in 1992. They
col-
taught students in America and Finland; linking their
classrooms together by computer networks and phone,
fax and video transmission. Two years later they pub-
lished their on-line teaching methods in an over-
designed volume entitled Image and Philosophy
(1994). Taylor and Saarinen demand that we "move beyond existing institutions to imagine and fashion pos-
sibilities that might be" by ending rigorous investigations of what "was" and what "is." No less than the neo-luddites and the hypertextual neo-luddites, those who practice a sci-
ence fictionalized discourse about the digital frontier need to readjust their temporal focus.

crumpleware:

n. 1. Software that has some important functionality deliberately removed, so as to entire
potential users to pay for a working version. 2. [Cambridge] Guiltware that extorts you to
donate to some charity (compare careware, nagware). 3. Hardware deliberately crippled, which
can be upgraded to a more expensive model by trivial change, e.g., cutting a jumper.

From the New Hacker's Dictionary (1991) by Eric Raymond

HYPERAESTHETICS IN REAL TIME

When a poetic structure obtains a certain degree of concentration or social recognition, the amount of commentary it will carry is finite.

-Norbert Frey

TRADITIONALLY, THE STUDY OF AESTHETICS is the study of stable forms. In literature the traditional genres of the epic, lyric and the dramatic still generate, divide and subdivide in the postmodern age. The concept of "aesthetics" has been a central concept in the study of art and architecture. The advent of the computer, however, is something quite distinct. As "a block box recovered from some unspecified disaster," Agrippa opens up to reveal charred-edged pages, covered with repeated six-letter phrases: "AATTAG/TACCGTTC/"

After a moment, a realization comes that these are not merely couplets of concrete poetry, that, in fact, they are the signifiers of the genetic code, sequences of deoxyribonucleic acids, DNA. The pages of DNA codes are interleaved with Ashbrough's engravings of subjects ranging from guns to plumes. Embedded within Agrippa's back cover is a computer disk that contains the text of Gibson's poem. What is unusual is not simply that the text is designed to be read only on the screen—many hypertexts are written to be read this way, such as Gibson's own--but that the floppy disk is programmed to destroy the text as soon as it is read.

The sweet hot reel/Of the electric sawing/Into decades.


The computer's impact on culture in general. These have
proven to be insufficient because their scope is simply too
small to encompass the total temporal focus which is
also narrower and not suited for dynamic reevaluation. What is called for is not simply the building of a metacultural language, but a work-
in-progress perspective. Theory in real time is designed as much for its use value for the artist as for its usefulness for the theorist.

From the New Hacker's Dictionary (1991) by Eric Raymond

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