Bubbly: The Utopian Impulse in New Media Art Discourse

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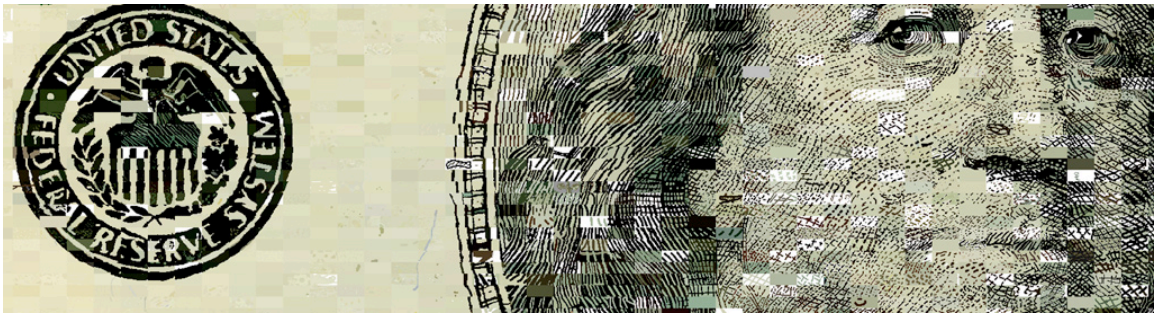

Aaron Koblin: *Ten Thousand Cents*, 2009 (detail); Internet art

Abstract

It should come as no surprise that communications emanating from Silicon Valley, in the form of hi-tech industry marketing and talks delivered by "visionary" CEO's, is typified by a certain amount of techno-positivist hyperbole. New media art, in particular Internet art or "netart", grew rapidly during the same time as the tech bubble (1995-2000) in an ideological and logistical embrace with hi-tech that continues today. Partly because of this, the discourse of new media art is conflated with that of the tech industry; in particular, both are inflected with a strong utopian impulse. This is not to say that everyone involved in the hi-tech industry or new media art participates in carnival barking. Many in the hi-tech industry are familiar with the Gartner Hype Cycle (Gartner, Inc.) a simple chart predicting that most hi-tech hyperbole goes through five stages; the technology trigger, peak of inflated expectations, trough of disillusionment, slope of enlightenment, and plateau of productivity. In the world of new media art, as early as 1995, the Critical Art Ensemble published a paper entitled, "Utopian Dreams - Net Realities" that attacked inflated utopian discourse, but did not disavow entirely the promise of new technologies for artists. However, despite occasional critiques, the utopian impulse has remained a defining characteristic of the both discourses.

In this paper I will extend earlier critiques of this utopian impulse through close analysis. Specifically, I will employ art historical theories and methodologies to examine the nature of the relationship between the hi-tech and new media art discourses and to unpack the utopian strategies of new media art. I will look at how the utopian impulse plays out in the practice of new media art (since practice is integral to art discourse). To illustrate this I will provide examples provided by several new media artworks to demonstrate how this discourse resonates throughout the field, and then I will focus on one work, *Ten Thousand Cents* by Aaron Koblin, to provide more in-depth analysis. Toward these ends, I will draw primarily on relational aesthetics, but I will also deploy neo-marxist theories, post-colonial critique, and the theories of Foucault and Lacan. It is my hope that these investigations may improve our larger understanding of how new media art functions as a critical tool for social analysis. I should admit that, while I object to uncritical glossolalia, I am committed to the utopian impulse in art and new media art in particular. It is not my intent here to refute that spirit, but to refine it.

Evidence and Initial Analysis

The American narrative has always contained a strong utopian element, from the founding of a new form of government based on Enlightenment principals to experimental utopian societies such as the Quakers or Mormons, to Manifest Destiny. These developments were not utopic for slaves, women, or Native Americans, so we might say that utopia has been used to paper over the cracks in the American narrative; still, utopia maintains a strong presence in the discourse. Technology is central to this utopian narrative (Segal 1-9). The telegraph, repeat-action firearms, and the train are often credited with enabling the vision of manifest destiny in the nineteenth century and our inventors such as Edison are our national heroes. When one frontier seems exhausted, America seems just finds another; in fact every century seems to provide its own frontier waiting to be conquered with technology. The eighteenth century offered a new world to be tamed, the nineteenth century went westward, the twentieth century sent American "voyagers" and "pioneers" into space, and the twenty-first century provides a frontier conveniently created with the very tools that will wrestle it into the national history; computerized information and communication technologies. Seminal hi-tech organizations signify this epic narrative in their names, such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and popular media continues to characterize the Internet as "the wild west".

Perhaps it comes as even less of a surprise now that the discourse of the hi-tech industry is heavily inflected with the utopian impulse of the techno-positivist variety.

> "Everything is possible"
> - Hewlett Packard corporate tagline (Hewlett Packard)

> [The digital revolution will bring] "...social changes so profound their only parallel is probably the discovery of fire."
> - Louis Rosetto, founding editor of Wired magazine (Rosetto, 10)

> "We are as gods and might as well get good at it"
> - Stewart Brand, founder of the Whole Earth Catalog, Long Now Foundation, and Global Business Network (Brand, 1)

As Mark Surman explains in his conference paper, "Wired Words: Utopia, Revolution, and the History of Electronic Highways",

> Not surprisingly, the language of the wired world and the electronic highway reemerged in the early part of the 1990s. Magazine racks and TV screens filled up with news about the "new" highway. Headlines screamed "Welcome to the Highway of Hope" and "The Info Highway: Bringing a Revolution in Entertainment, News and Communication." (Globe and Mail, May 13, 1994, cover and Time, April 12, 1993, cover.) Conferences were organized to talk about wired cities, and the most popular, profitable, new magazine of the era was just, well, Wired. … "Everything has changed in the Wired World: technology has reinvented how we live, work and play" and "We are in the midst of sweeping technological changes that will affect our lives even more than the industrial revolution."

> (Globe and Mail Information Highway supplement, May 1995, cover, and Futurescape, p. C4.)

The discourse of new media art often does not stray far from the mothership.

> The Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai proudly presents 'Merging/Emerging-Art, Utopia and Virtual Reality' from the 8th of March. This new media art exhibition combines art with technology and delivers to the audience the creative power of a new era….. Merging/Emerging-Art, Utopia and Virtual Reality brings out a global perspective that transcends art movements, races and countries. …. It transcends the boarders of art and music, to create a utopia of an 'all-encompassing' art, allowing the audience's imagination to run free. (MOCA Shanghai)

In the hands of a theoretician, the discourse can be more subtly intoned while retaining its utopian inflection.

> The modern political era, which came into being with the Enlightenment, was based on the desire to emancipate individuals and people. The advances of technologies and freedoms, the decline of ignorance, and improved working conditions were all billed to free humankind and help to usher in a better society. ….It is evident that today's art is carrying on this fight, by coming up with perceptive, experimental, critical and participatory models, veering in the direction indicated by Enlightenment philosophers, Proudhon, Marx, the Dadaists and Mondrian. (Bourriaud 11-12)

In addition to mirroring the others' utopian tone, hi-tech and new media art discourses also find several specific points of agreement in content. Later, I'll offer some examples of new media artworks that translate these ideas as strategies, but before that, let me offer some sample points of concurrence between hi-tech and art discourses.

Information Wants to be Free

Stewart Brand once quipped, "Information wants to be free." (Brand quoted), a sentiment that directly informs new media art's resistance to copyright and its adoption of the idea that the Internet has an inherently democratic nature. For instance, that social media facilitated recent student protests in Iran is seen to reflect the inherently power-leveling nature of the Internet, while Google's collaboration with the Chinese government to censor Internet access is seen as a corruption of that nature.

Everyone is a Creator

Apple Computer's promotes their video software, iMovie, as a technology that transforms the average citizen into a movie director, "Make home movies look like Hollywood masterpieces." (Apple Computer) This notion of consumer-as-producer has a direct equivalent in the Beuysian notion that everyone is an artist and this egalitarian idea is especially popular in interactive and participatory new media art.

Twin Mavericks

The tech industry positions itself as existing outside mainstream industries (ahead of them, of course). For instance, the regular economy is too cumbersome for hi-tech so they birthed the "new economy". Similarly, the Dow Industrial Average was linked to the industrial revolution, so the stock market developed the Nasdaq; a new stock indicator specifically for hi-tech. Many hi-tech founding CEO's are labeled visionary, and the whole industry positions itself as maverick. Similarly, in bypassing the artworld's institutional filters and constraints and going directly to the people, Internet art claimed a similar maverick position for itself. Both hi-tech and new media art gained from these positions the freedom to innovate outside old and restrictive institutions, but for each there was a cost. Hi-tech did not avail itself of tested business models and the result was an industry-wide economic crash in 2000. New media art did not avail itself of theoretical models that had been developed in the art world over centuries and so that methodological gap was filled with the ideologies of hi-tech.

The hi-tech industry and new media art share more than a few high-level concepts. They are also conflated at the operational and logistical level; something that must be considered in the larger field of cultural production (Bourdieu). First, and most obvious, is the fact that new media art makes use of technologies (and their implied practices) developed by the hi-tech sector. New media art also produces content that often shares its format and distribution mechanisms with hi-tech's commercial and entertainment content. This creates a direct and ongoing conversation between an artform and an industry that characterizes cinema and is almost absent from gallery art. Hi-tech and new media art also share bodies. Many new media artists have the requisite skills to land themselves jobs in this related industry from where they further conflate their work and artistic practice. Because of their hybrid existence and maverick status with regard to the art world, these artists often organize and show their work not in art galleries, but at industry events like the long-standing SIGGRAPH conference, further mixing the relative discourses. Lastly, in the tech bubble years of 1995 through 2000, the mainstream art world itself caught tech fever and pursued an imagined generation of maverick-millionaire donors. Wunderkind museum directors who harkened the information age were lead by Max Anderson who quickly rose from director of the Emory University Art Gallery to director of the Whitney Museum. This chasing after Silicon Valley money must be credited in no small part with the mainstream art world's eventual acceptance of new media art, signaled in 2000 by simultaneous large-scale exhibitions of new media art on both coasts; *010101* at SFMOMA and *Bitstreams* at the Whitney Museum.

The previous paragraph brings us up to 2000, the end of the tech bubble, and this is a good time to disambiguate chronology in relation to my argument. The discourses of hi-tech and new media art that are my focus were originally articulated during the bubble years of 1995-2000. While significant social and economic factors certainly differentiate the bubble years from what has come after, the utopian impulse survived that transition and remain a defining characteristic of both discourses. For instance, in 2004, author and economist Howard Blommenstein seemed to admit the crash and hang on to the utopia at the same time,

> Of course, the worldwide crash of high-tech stocks in 2000 chilled the hype about a "new economy" that seemed to be emerging at the "end of history." But falling share prices should not blind us to the fact that on top of the ongoing information revolution, three fresh waves of revolutionary technology are poised to hit: bio-technology (including new medical technologies and genetic engineering, such as the creation of human embryos through cloning), nanotechnology, and robotics. Each is its own industrial revolution, and will profoundly alter our lives and ways of thinking. (Blommenstien)

Following are examples of new media art projects, from bubble and post-bubble years, whose strategies build on the utopian discourse element outlined so far and whose practices further it. Each is accompanied by a cursory suggested theoretical framing that provides a launch-point for my later in-depth analysis of the work by Aaron Koblin.

Distributed Authorship

The World's First Collaborative Sentence (1994), is a netart work by Douglas Davis based on a simple idea. Davis started a sentence on his website and then allowed anyone to add to that sentence. The only rule was that no contributor could end their contribution with a period (which is why this work is sometimes known as "The World's Longest Sentence".) This early netart work proposed that everyone can be an artist and suggested a re-distribution of capital by questioning the notion of private (intellectual) property and copyright. It proposed that viewing art was concomitant with creating its meaning or completing the work, a view that can be seen to echo the theories on the death of the author by Barthes and Foucault.

Interactivity as Power Exchange

"Interactivity" is perhaps the most touted feature of hi-tech, and new media art was quick to leverage it. Many new media artists use interactivity to model power relationships. *Carnivore* (2002), by the Radical Software Group, obtained FBI network surveillance software (that has been de-classified and released by the FBI). They modified the software and allowed anyone to download it and create their own local network surveillance. RSG's implementation differed from the FBI's in that, rather than enabling private/secret network surveillance, Carnivore routed surveilled data to a public website on the local network that the artist could customize to create their own readings or even abstract data visualizations. This artwork shared authorial power by positioning itself as a toolkit for others and implicated the everyman-as-artist in a project to move power from the hands of the state to the hands of the individual and of re-directing the gaze. These practices can be read in light of Bourriaud's theories of relational art and Lacan's theory of the gaze.

Economic Alternatives

New media art, like hi-tech, attempts to position itself outside of its economy, and, in the case of new media art, that means the art market. In one of my own netart works, *Internet Art for Sale on eBay* (1999) I auctioned an earlier netart work of my own on eBay in a symbolic gesture that attempted to hitch new media art to the then "new

economy" and it's poster-child, eBay. This work took advantage of the unique ease of duplication and distribution of new media art to forge a new economic model where art is signifies and realizes economic value through plentitude rather than scarcity. The theory was that anyone could buy an artwork for $5 since there was an infinite possible number of copies. This performative gesture attempted to re-position art vis-à-vis its audience/collectors, but in the end only one work sold (for $52.50). New media artists continue to struggle with utopian visions of art for free (the hi-tech gift economy) or art subscriptions (the software model). Although this is the least-realized strain of new media art to date, it suggests that new media art, like mechanical reproductions of art, has no aura, thus liberating it to form a new relation with capital as outlined by Benjamin.

The World as Site

Netart offers artists the unique situation that every aspect of their art may be globalized cheaply and instantaneously. Netartists cleaved to this one-world vision quickly. They created artists groups qua performance works, such as *Apsolutno* (1993) that began in Yugoslavia, and whose members were dispersed across the globe, but who regularly collaborated in real-time to produce joint works. Netart of course appealed to a global audience for its participatory production and it's reception, making the world the site of production and presentation. And many early netart "superstars" came from places that were not considered the art centers of the world, Dragan Miletic from then Yugoslavia, Yong Hae Chang from Korea,Vuc Cosik from Serbia, and Olia Lialina from Russia. While a global art strategy developed in the mid to late 1990's might imply that post-colonial theories were at work, the elephant on that table was, and continues to be, the digital divide. Still, whether realized or not, the utopian impulse was at play in these practices and thus the discourse of new media art.

Para-Institutional Heterotopias

Deploying a populist art strategy, netart sought direct access to audiences that by-passed the filters of the art world. Netart websites like *Adaweb* (1995) and *Rhizome* formed online heterotopias that allowed artists to convene and experiment outside the rule of the art world. This practice could be read in light of Foucault's theories of power and institutions and in light of the art genre of "institutional critique". It is worth noting here that Andrea Fraser, exemplar of institutional critique, published an article in ArtForum that claimed that as long as artists are part of the discourse of art, they are never really "outside" the art world. So, while these netart heterotopias may not have been as removed as first thought, they did escape some of the specific effects of the institution such as the white cube and a concentration of curatorial purview.

Power as Subject

Of course some new media and net art doesn't beat around the bush, but comes right out and treats power as an explicit subject. *They Rule* (2004) by Josh On created an interactive map that allowed the viewer to trace the overlapping memberships of dozens of the world's largest corporations, government committees, and educational institutions. On makes clear the explicit intent to reveal, and thus to make actionable, the hidden social structures of power.

> These people run the most powerful institutions on the planet, and we have almost no say in who they are. This is not a conspiracy. They are proud to rule. And yet these connections of power are not always visible to the public eye.

Related to Foucault's assertion that modern power is hidden (Foucault, Discipline) and to the democratizing nature of the Internet, new media would here seem to promise that "all secrets will be revealed"; a common ideal of religious enlightenment and of earthly utopias everywhere.

Ten Thousand Cents

An in-depth analysis of *Ten Thousand Cents*, by Aaron Koblin will reveal how several of new media art's radical strategies, outlined above, play out in a single artwork and will further unpack how art practice, as discursive practice, helps to create the utopian inflection.

Koblin provides an exemplary case study for several reasons. His work, especially *Ten Thousand Cents* engages with many popular and indicative tropes of new media, including; "digital labor markets, crowdsourcing, virtual economies, and digital reproduction." (Koblin, website) Koblin is situated at the intersection of hi-tech and new media art in that he works as lead designer for Google while he also creates and exhibits artwork. Koblin's work takes aim at some of the latest techno-social phenomena that have direct implications for any utopian project. For instance, *Ten Thousand Cents* makes tactical use of Mechanical Turk (Amazon), an online service that allows anyone to post a job that can be done online and anyone else to complete that job online. The jobs are usually a discrete part of a larger project - a line or two of programming, a small drawing – and these information laborers are compensated with micro-payments from a few cents to a few dollars. Mechanical Turk represents a new labor market and thus a new social order.

As we've seen, the utopian impulse characterizes new media art discourse and, insofar as the discourse/text creates the author-function as much as the author creates the text (Foucault, Author 305), any work of new media art may be read in this light. In addition to the reasons offered above, this might be enough to implicate Koblin's work in an examination of new media art's utopian discourse, whatever his intent. But, if we needed yet another reason to identify *Ten Thousand Cents* in this context, Koblin makes it easy for us by positioning *Ten Thousand Cents* as a socially progressive project. In an email interview with me, Koblin wrote of Mechanical Turk,

> I'm sure it's a romantic notion that there was a time of specialists who created custom goods and services which reflected their creativity, heart, and soul while enriching them with purpose and inspiration. However, it seems clear that this extreme version of capitalist intellectual industrialization bears none of those traits (not to mention a working wage, insurance, or social security.)

For *Ten Thousand Cents*, Koblin created a digital image of a hundred dollar bill. He divided that image into a grid of 10,000 parts and created 10,000 jobs on Mechanical Turk; each asked a worker to reproduce, by drawing online, one of those 10,000 parts. Koblin later re-assembled those drawings into a new image of a hundred dollar bill. Each worker was paid one cent. The completed work was presented by Koblin as a projected image and prints of the resulting image are available for sale at $100 each. This work attempted to literalize what Koblin saw as the main function of Mechanical Turk, "making money." Let's now turn to how this project embodies some of the utopian strategies outlined earlier.

Distributed Authorship

> "Q. Did people know what they were submitting to?
> A. Thousands of individuals working in isolation from one another painted a tiny part of the bill without knowledge of the overall task" (Koblin website)

Keeping his "collaborators" ignorant of the context of their task furthers Koblin's intellectual project of illustrating how workers in the early information age are not so different than those of the early industrial age; they labor at machines whose purpose they don't understand in return for meager wages. But this same strategy undermines the ethical dimension of his project in that he revisits upon real people the historical offense he is using them to illustrate. This strategy does problematize the new media trope of crowdsourcing in an interesting way. In much new media art, the crowd of participants is presented as a mobilized democracy in which everyone is a co-equal author-citizen. However, Koblin initiated a one-to-many relationship between himself and the crowd, creating a differential in the power structure and suggesting that other crowdsourcing art projects that privilege one author/initiator may also resemble the one-to-many power structure of a monarchy more than a democracy. Instead of presenting his distributed co-authors as subjects, Koblin denies their subjectivity and presents them as a faceless mass of objectified Others. Writing about the audience's role in producing elements of performance art, Bourdieu penned this cautionary sentence that may be equally applicable to the discourse-element of crowdsourcing, "The audience concept must not be mythicized-the idea of a unified "mass" has more to do with a Fascist aesthetic than with these momentary experiences where everyone has to hang on to his or her identity" (Bourriaud 61). Occasionally, the faceless workers in *Ten Thousand Cents* attempted to assert their individuality anyway, by submitting questions instead of labor through the Mechanical Turk system. One worker asked of his mysterious task, "Why are you doing this?" and another proclaimed, "$0.01 ?!? Really?"

Interactivity as Power Exchange

The main way that *Ten Thousand Cents* is interactive is in creating an economic relationship with workers via Mechanical Turk in which, perhaps for the first time in a new media artwork, a specific value is placed on their "interaction". But this economic relationship is more complex that it first seems. Workers each received one cent for their participation. Koblin paid $100 for the production of the work, yet he receives $100 each time a print is sold. The inherent reproducibility of new media benefits him alone since

the workers were paid only once. Koblin is releasing the prints in a limited run of 10,000. That means that the project stands to generate, theoretically, up to one million dollars. Each worker could have been compensated with up to $100 (or whatever figure reflects a representative portion of the actual income from the project.) Mechanical Turk even allows additional payments after the fact. Seemingly to mitigate the power relationship that is being modeled here, Koblin re-directs all proceeds from this project to the 1-Laptop-Per-Child charity (that used to be called, coincidentally, the $100 Laptop Project). In a classic Marxist nightmare, these workers would seem to be laboring to (ultimately) produce products they cannot afford (at least in the context of this project and the economic relationship it established; their value is lifted off them and realized elsewhere). If the goal of *Ten Thousand Cents* is to represent a dystopia, then re-directing the profit to a charity undermines that goal. If the goal was, instead to mitigate the real-world effects of modeling a dystopia, then sharing the profits with the workers would seem a much more direct form of redress. However, I should not imply that Koblin is unique in this regard; modeling a pointed but harmless power relationship is a problem shared among artists who tackle the social implications of Mechanical Turk. For instance, artist Michael Mandiberg had proposed to put a human face to the system by creating jobs that asked workers to tell their story, thus developing a demography that united the workers. However, in his proposal for project funding, Mandiberg revealed that he would use project funds to pay himself minimum wage but pay Mechanical Turk workers $1 for their participation (Mandiberg). Artist Jeff Crouse admitted his own agency in approaching Mechanical Turk,

> After doing several projects using crowdsourcing (Dirt Party, Invisible Threads, You're So VIP) that essentially use workers as a faceless labor force only slightly better than a computer, I wanted to do a project that was about the actual people who are doing these tasks. Who are they? Where do they come from? Why do they do these jobs?..... Most of the workers who respond to my requests are very excited to have been asked to do something that requires a little more creativity and thought. (Crouse)

What is at issue in these projects, the power relationships they model, and, ultimately in their impact on the utopian discourse, is that participatory art deals with real people. It models interactions rather than representing them and so it has a semiotically indexical relationship to people rather than a symbolic one. This direct relationship is similar to the one manifested in photography and, as with photography, participatory art entails an added ethical dimension that must be considered part of the dynamic of the work if not its raw material. Lastly, participatory art should not imply interactivity only at the tail end with gallery visitors, but should consider its interaction with people at every stage in its production. Nicolas Bourriaud, author of Relational Aesthetics wrote,

> "As part of a "relationist" theory of art, inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, which is its "environment", its "field" (Bourdieu), but also becomes the quintessence of artistic practice." (Bourriaud 22)

World as Site

The site of production for *Ten Thousand Cents* is the world.

> "Q. Where are these people from?
> A. People from 71 countries participated." (Koblin website)

In *Ten Thousand Cents*, Mechanical Turk is a digital sweatshop, a new tool for trans-national colonization, and a threat to the utopian project of new media art. Warning of the dangers of new technology in general, Bourriaud wrote,

> Instead of culminating in hoped-for emancipation, the advances of technologies and "Reason" made it that much easier to exploit the South of planet earth, blindly replace human labour by machines, and set up more and more sophisticated subjugation techniques, all through a general rationalisation of the production process. (Bourriaud 12)

Writing specifically about Mechanical Turk and *Ten Thousand Cents*,

> Human labour atomized and exposed through an API turns the old science fiction nightmare of humans being reduced to components in computer-run machinery into a market reality. (Myers)

> Yes, my first reaction to the Mechanical Turk was that it's a very bizarre thing -- treating people like machines -- further, treating people like machines that are acting like people. More than just the blurring of those distinctions though, I was particularly anxious about the ramifications of this kind of labor - work where the workers are completely disconnected from their product, in isolation, with virtually no context. (Koblin, interview)

The workers of Mechanical Turk don't know the context of their labor. They are unable to communicate with each other to present a unionized force. They do not share in the wealth they create proportional to the value their labor contributes. Their labor, the only raw material in an information economy, is often exported to another nation where it is assembled and where the true value of the end-product is realized. And they are represented in the system not as subjects, but as machine-objects. This is not the emergent "hive-mind" imagined in the discourse of new media art, but a new decentralized colony. The utopian discourse of new media art produces positive inter-subjective relational models as red blood cells that sustain the body, but this discourse also produces white blood cells that parody and attack dystopic models which threaten the health of the body.

Power as Subject

As I mentioned earlier, techno-utopia is part of the national narrative of America. But every national narrative and every utopic narrative produces their counter-narratives.

These counter-narratives are often presented by the subjugated Other and these counter-narrative may in turn alter the narrative's authors such that the two narratives become hybridized. The counter-narratives to earlier American utopic visions have been well-articulated elsewhere. *Ten Thousand Cents* and other dissonant notes in the discourse of new media art are only beginning to form the counter-narrative to America's latest utopia; hi-tech. For instance, the utopic vision of the hive-mind, the wisdom-of-crowds, and crowdsourcing sees it's counter-narrative in public parodies of a networked labor market where faceless information workers earn Dickensian wages. This counter-narrative may not destroy the original narrative, but may blend with it to create a more nuanced understanding. In this sense, *Ten Thousand Cents* is an effective manifestation of new media art's utopian impulse, but how does it fare in its content tactic of parody? Pierre Bourdieu wrote in "The Field of Cultural Production" that avant garde artists "'get beyond'…the dominant mode of through and expression not by explicitly denouncing it but by repeating and reproducing it in a sociologically non-congruent context, which has the effect of rendering it incongruous or even absurd." (Bourdieu 31). I wonder if *Ten Thousand Cents* presents enough incongruity to read as parody. It was created by Koblin who works in the hi-tech industry and it has been shown at industry events where most are likely to know about Mechanical Turk and to uphold its generally positive reception in that community. There's scant social incongruity in deploying Mechanical Turk for SIGGRAPH. Nothing in the artwork's minimal didactic materials explicitly indicates that *Ten Thousand Cents* is not creative crowdsourcing, but dystopic parody. Perhaps, simply in framing the work as "Art", Koblin sets it enough apart from its tech industry context to at least invite alternate readings.

Conclusion: Can We Get There From Here?

I hope I've demonstrated, in this short space, some ways in which art historical methods and theories might expand the discourse of new media art, help to disentangle it from the discourse of hi-tech, and refine its utopian strategies. Again, I'm not the first to embark on this project,

> The need for net criticism certainly is a matter of overwhelming urgency. While a number of critics have approached the new world of computerized communications with a healthy amount of skepticism, their message has been lost in the noise and spectacle of corporate hype-the unstoppable tidal wave of seduction has enveloped so many in its dynamic utopian beauty that little time for careful reflection is left. (Critical Art Ensemble)

But, we need more than skepticism and criticism toward the hyperbole of hi-tech; we need new media art discourse to embody an "institution of critique" (Fraser) that is honed in critiquing new media art's own practices too. For instance, post-colonial theories could greatly inform new media art's global undertakings and help it address the digital divide.

New media art, everyone in its field and of its discourse, seems faced with a dilemma; allow every utopian gesture to be read as a signifier for the discourse of hi-tech

- or - distance itself with a radical break in which the most identifiable trope of hi-tech, utopianism, must be left behind if not denounced outright. Of course this is a false dilemma, and I propose that by explicating and disambiguating the two discourses, new media art may not only retain but refine its utopian project. Not all utopian strategies need be overtly political, didactic, or even positive if nuanced readings are available. Even negative positions can help to intelligently edit a utopic vision (though exclusive use of dystopic parody leads to nothing but a mirror-image of the status quo and that does not move forward the utopian project.) Informed tactics, such as using interactivity to model inter-subjective spaces with audiences, could re-position the discourse of new media art in relation to hi-tech and every other discourse in the field of positions.

The relationship between the discourse of new media art and that of hi-tech could itself be defined as an inter-subjective space rather than fall into another false dilemma, the binary trap of self/other or criticism/object where hi-tech is cursorily vilified and utopia is transformed into an object of study instead of an object for mutual action. I would argue further that in relating the two discourses, it would be unwise to position hi-tech as hypocritical and, in truth, dystopic (vis-à-vis Mechanical Turk) and new media art as heterotopic. As Bourriaud writes, "Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modeling possible universes." (Bourriaud 13) A dystopic/heterotopic duality is another binary trap that leaves utopia nowhere in the space of possibilities. Heterotopia is too often conceived as a space without consequences. This is the pitfall of the white cube that net.art sought to escape, opting instead to be out in, and of, the world. Being of the world in this sense means modeling ethical, inter-subjective relationships with real people in the form of art audiences and participants as well as with the authors of hi-tech discourse. It means interacting with consequence as an aesthetic material in order to avoid Koblin's mis-steps in an otherwise provocative project. It means imbuing the utopian discourse with the commitment that there is no "outside" where the "other" lives; there can be no one left behind in a utopic commitment.

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