Quixotic Seahorses
AND THE LUDICROUS FIVE

A Mini-Novel by
Brent Arson

sponsored by Digital Dialogues
CHAPTER 1: ALLOW MYSELF TO INTRODUCE....MYSELF

They sure don’t make a fourteen week term like they used to. They used to last a lot longer.

Just kidding.
I had just barely started to realize this was a class I was in. I’d just been coincidentally coming to campus every Monday morning to catch these free lectures on design, and it turns out it was a formal class! No wonder that guy who always interrupts the speakers would try and call on me to answer his questions. He probably thought it was funny when I would act all annoyed after being called on, because I was like, “What? I’m just listening in as a guest,” and he was all “Why don’t you answer this totally hard, vague question for me?” And then I was all “Well, why don’t you ask someone else for a change?” and he was like, “Fine.” Then he would always ask Sharon or Shirleen or whatever.

But seriously, technofolks, I really like the name of our class, Digital Dialogues—but don’t you think that since the dialogue has to be surgically extracted from us under a powerful heat lamp, it should be called “Mandatory Dialogues?” That way people wouldn’t be under the misconception that the word “dialogues” is just a suggestion. I know I’m part of the problem too, but I mustered up all the scraps of cognitive thought I could for a Monday morning. And some of the speakers—whoa! Ever been in front of a class before? Did you rehearse at least in front of a mirror? For the love of Pete! No, I’m joking again. It’s hard for me to stay on track sometimes.

CHAPTER 2: FAMOUS DESIGNERS, FREEZING AUDITORIUMS, AND ME

I was hoping to see more from the legendary Lev “Manwich” Manovich. I think he was as tired as I was that day. I could tell there were some good ideas there. Since I don’t feel I got a good enough taste of Manwich, I’d like to focus a little bit on Rosemary “Thyme” Camella. (As an aside, I’d like to point out that the speakers got much more interesting as the term progressed, for the most part. Well, Miltos and DJ Spooky were fantastic, and so was Eric Paulos, so I guess my comment here is directly related to the first two, and their presentation skills.) Rosemary’s work was very engaging, considering it was an interactive film, “The
Decay of Fiction”, made by a real director, and put together by a real interactive designer. The navigation of the hotel environment was an intriguing metaphor for navigating the project (I like direct metaphors most of the time, and especially well-executed ones,) and the film itself looks interesting. I thought the arrow as the only navigation was a little too 1998, and totally Macromedia Director (some may say, “Duh, that’s what she was using,” but then I would say “Hello, I know, but do you think she could have hidden that fact a little more?”) I really like the randomness of the earthquakes, the way they would distract you from getting to your destination, creeping up on you at any given time. I think there should have been more similar features scattered throughout the project, just to make it interesting if you’ve already been through it several times.

It was really hard to stay absorbed in her comments the whole time, though, because she was hiding behind the desk and the laptop. It was really just a hands-on demo of the Labyrinth project. I wished I could have navigated the thing myself, and listened to her talk more in depth. Her few comments on how the project was made, the re-creations of historical moments and people, and the hotel itself were highly interesting. The methods Pat O’neill uses (the optical printer) to make his films are curious when juxtaposed with the all-digital Labyrinth Project. It's good that he doesn’t fear technology, but maybe someone should tell him about Final Cut Pro. Boy, would he save time.¹

It's no small thing to have presentation skills, to move around while talking, and to direct the attention of the audience to more than one object. Also, showing a little enthusiasm for the project that envelopes one’s entire work existence would help audience members appreciate it more. Maybe Rosemary could have shown us her screensaver (no, that’s not a euphemism for anything.)

I was a little disappointed when I heard about the topic for this paper, because I knew that I had already discussed two of my favorite speakers, DJ Spooky and Miltos Manetas, in the last paper, and without repeating all the comments I wrote about them, how was I possibly going to make up 6-8 pages of
stuff about those other guys? Well, I've dug a little deeper into the well (I've got
tens and tens of ideas in there!) and I have a little more to say about Paul Miller
AKA That Subliminal Kid AKA Dj "Peruvian hat wearer" Spooky.

I have a problem with this latest movement in popular (at least with
college-aged people) music, which is the rise of the DJ-as-musician. I actually
like most DJ and dance music, but what I have a problem with is the fact that so
many DJs don't innovate. When you're just playing other people's straight house
music, which is probably a remix of someone else's music, with the 4/4 beat
booming away, you're not being much more creative than the guy who throws on
an old "REO Speedwagon" LP on his wood-grain cabinet-enclosure Hi-fi in the
basement. Or anyone who just plays music, whatever form that may be, now that
there's the ability to automatically cross-mix and fade songs in most MP3 players.

This is why DJ Spooky is so much more than a DJ, and why he transcends
mere DJ status as an experimental musician and an artist. He takes other peoples'
sounds, and remixes and transforms them (through unexpected juxtaposition)
into something (usually) better. He creates, and invents, rather than just
replaying remixes of songs. Sorry, kooky ravers.

I was divided on the issue of his concept of the "artist as font" and "artist
as shareware." On the "pro" side, I think that new art forms are more readily
found when they incorporate existing ones. Not that there shouldn't be any totally
original concepts in music or art, but it's nearly impossible to create works that
don't refer to or draw from some other source. Nothing comes from nothing. So, to
all the artists and songs that DJ Spooky mixes into his Spooky 100-ingredient
Soup™, I say "Let him cook." He finds ways of combining musical elements that no
one else does—at least not as well.

On the other hand, I, myself, as an artist or designer, would be
uncomfortable if someone was taking bits (or huge chunks) of my design work,
placing it next to a giant inflatable octopus² (to make a totally random, non-
musical analogy) and calling it genius. Also, the fact that someone is
appropriating my work as merely a "font" for their work could be an unspoken commentary on the supposed superiority or greater conceptual weight of their piece. I might say, “Just because DJ Spooky put that thing next to my poster doesn’t mean he should get all the credit!” But maybe my poster is just a mediocre, sarcastic, ironic meta-commentary on drugs and their narcotic splendor, and no one really likes it that much. Then, when That Subliminal Kid puts the big purple blow-up sea animal right next to it, people start saying “Check out this totally nihilistic commentary on the needless waste produced by our modern post-industrial society!” and my poster gets more attention that it ever would have otherwise.

The point here is that DJ Spooky is pushing boundaries, and in a positive way. The more he (and others like him) experiment with sound frontiers, the sooner we’ll come up with a brilliant replacement for boy bands.

I must say that Paul Miller’s presentation skills were great. He was engaging, relaxed, articulate, and communicated clearly. Also, he had a heinously grotesque neo-medieval-mechanical custom interface "skin" for his Mac OS, which stole the show whenever he looked for stuff on his computer, and provided hours worth of conversation in subsequent design classes. I think his skills as a writer (and hence a communicator) contribute well to his ability to speak in front of a large crowd. He’s probably used to speaking and performing in front of hordes of people, and it comes across in his smooth, relaxed, entertaining delivery.

**CHAPTER 3: ENOUGH ABOUT THEM, LET’S TALK ABOUT ME**

I know we’re supposed to talk about our own work and how it applies to what we’ve heard this term, but I’m shy, and too timid to talk about myself.¹

So, if I had to pick the ideal presentation or demo style that we’ve seen these past 14 weeks, to emulate or incorporate into my own speaking skills, I’d have to say, if I could capture a fourth of the energy and enthusiasm that Mark
Pesce has for the far-out things he says, I’d be well-off. Maybe it’s because he’s speaking about such grand, majestic concepts (the end of the world,) but he seems to really be excited about them (and, incredibly, he leads us to think that he actually believes what he says!) When he actually got around to talking about what he’s done, which is invent VRML, it was sort of a letdown. But in a good way. He’s not above self-deprecation (which I appreciate,) having that “feral geek quality” that he does, and is quick to point out his shortcomings as well as others’. Plus, his last name means “fish” in Italian.

I remember having a conversation last term in a class called “History and Theory of New Media.” One day we were talking about what we wanted to get out of our education at Art Center. I pointed out that if I could build up my communication skills and talk about my own work in a compelling and professional way, I’d be set. Well, I still want to build those skills, and I want to have the same power as DJ Spooky and Mark Pesce (with a little of Ron Jones’ eloquence thrown in) to talk about my work. I think I am learning these things, but it’s slow going.

Maybe it’s because I don’t drink coffee (or maybe it’s because I go to bed at 2 AM every night,) but I find that it’s hard to keep up the level of enthusiasm and creativity for doing great work (and speaking about it) on a day-to-day basis. I think it’s in my personality to do so (I know it is,) but it’s hard to do that every day of every week. It has been an eye-opener to take these theory classes and to have to discuss deep issues so often here at Art Center, because I’m not a very deep guy. It’s hard for me to take one topic and expound on it for more than a paragraph. It’s been really hard (but really educational) to try to become a critical thinker and to participate in the discussions in Digital Dialogues. I know that learning to think and communicate critically and dialectically (even though I don’t understand what dialectics are) can only improve my design practice.

The question we should have asked in this class is “How does not doing design research contribute to Brent’s mediocre fine art practice?” I’ve learned so much about design process since being in grad school. I’ve learned that taking a
step back at the beginning of any project, and making a detailed conceptual plan, whether it be sketches, writing, or an outline, is the best way to achieve great results, or at least something close to what you wanted to be great. I've always known this, and no, it wasn't a huge shock, but it's nice when you finally make it work. By nature I'm impatient, and so when I start a project I want to see it done as soon as possible. I'm easily distracted, and sometimes I get carried away in the production and typefaces of a design piece rather than the idea behind it. Most, if not all of the speakers we've heard this term have shown good examples (at least the finished products) of planning and conceptual thinking.

I know the Young Berliners were not part of our class, but I think I gleaned the most inspiration, and a rebirth of wanting to do great work from them. The deeply conceptual and innovative thinking that goes into their work (mapping out three-dimensional space through time is the project I remember most) is truly inspiring. Not only was their work impressive, but their presentation skills were equally amazing—specifically the guys from Art+Com. The tight integration of the prescribed oral presentation with the videos and images they showed combined for a very powerful and memorable message. It made me want to be better, to try harder to break outside the normal design ideas that sometimes become the default response. If we as designers do not constantly try to stretch the boundaries of our profession, we'll become stagnant, and we might just as well have gone to get a MBA in accounting. Not that there's anything wrong with accountants, it's just that doing great design work is a little more inspiring to me.

I dream of one day being part of a small design collective like Art+Com, or e27, or pReview. I dream of having the enthusiasm and communication skills of Mark Pesce. I want to be able to have complete control of my business, and to be able to explain, promote, and defend my work. I look forward to the rest of my experience here at Art Center, what I will learn, and where it will take me.
FOOTNOTES

1 The author of this paper is fully aware that Pat O’neill is fully aware of Final Cut Pro, but probably chooses not to use it. Either that, or he’s a total Luddite.

2 I know it’s a strange analogy, but some of the musical combinations that emanate from DJ Spooky’s wheels of steel are just as wacky.

3 Yeah, I know, and Ron Jones has long, luxurious, sexy hair, too.

4 I know, I know. Get up of the floor, and wipe the look of shock and horror off your face.

5 Except for tax accountants. There’s definitely something wrong with them. Who would want to do that for a profession?