

Riding the tiger

Jon Winet

From 1993 through 1998, as part of the artist collaboration Margaret Crane|Jon Winet I was an artist in PAIR, Xerox PARC's Artist in Residence Program. What started as an anthropological lark, slated to last no more than a year ended up as a defining five-year experience.

A.

Earlier, we had worked for a corporation on a 1992 domestic violence awareness project through Y-Core, a trail-blazing agency acting as the broker-and buffer-between artists and corporations on projects in 'strategic philanthropy' and 'cause-related marketing.' (When we first heard these two terms we were chilled to the bone, not unlike the first time we heard ourselves identified as 'content providers' in the Silicon Valley a few years later. In both cases the language and the approach it implies suggest a worldview radically different from our own.)

In retrospect, we now realise that Lynne Sowder, Y-Core's visionary co-founder and curator, shepherded us gently through the experience, limiting our direct contact with the corporation, Liz Claiborne, Inc., the well-known multinational clothing, accessories and perfume giant. Lynne generously ran all interference for us, and in the process, afforded us the luxury of a lengthy and untroubled

research period combined with ample resources to work on the project.

Our research resulted in over a dozen prototyped approaches to the campaign, from which two were selected for display on 30 11' x 22' billboards throughout the bay area.



[Figure 1: Lethal Weapon 11' x22' four-colour offset edition of 15 1991-1992]

While ideal in terms of a creative working situation, Lynne's tender care also left us blissfully unaware of the dynamics of a less protected, less mediated relationship with a corporation.

I. Getting there

An equally visionary arts activist, Andrea Juno, former co-founder/co-publisher of ReSearch Publications, a transgressive outfit championing urban primitives, body modification and incredibly strange sub-cultures, nominated us as potential PARC Artists In Residence (PAIR) artists. With commendable vision and self-understanding, PARC researcher Rich Gold who both conceived of PAIR and acted as its principal advocate and pitchman, recognised

the need for outside expertise in deploying an arm's length selection process to identify potential artists.¹

Q: *How can you tell if an engineer is an extrovert?*

A: *When he talks to you, he looks at your shoes instead of his own.*

As is articulately described in both Rich's cartoon-enabled slide presentation *The Dialectics of PAIR(s)* on the web site <http://www.pair.xerox.com>, and in the 1999 MIT book *Art and innovation: The Xerox PARC artist In residence program*², the selection and interview process were an integral part of the program.

Rich often used extended metaphors of romantic relationships and marriages to describe the program. Our first experience involved a daylong series of pre-arranged 'dates' with prospective PAIR spouses from among the brilliant, eccentric, cubicled research staff of PARC.

As artists from outside the culture of corporate technology research, we were proverbially 'blown away' by the seriousness of our dates, the awkwardness of our exchanges, the bizarreness of the situations and locale, and the fact that these phenomena all appeared invisible and unnoticed by the 'locals'.

From fifteen or so candidates we were among four artists selected as full resident artists. We were ultimately picked to work with not one but two researchers: Dale MacDonald, a self-avowed art and technology 'Swiss army knife' and Scott Minneman, an equally brilliant industrial designer whose business card read: 'Indentured Brain'.

We were quite surprised to be chosen. Dale, a man of few words and Scott, a lanky, charming but distracted rock climber, gave no discernible clues at the time that either were remotely interested in us as collaborators.

II. Being there

‘The best way to predict the future is to create it.’

Rich Gold quoted visionary PARC alumnus Alan Kay thusly³ on our initial tour of Xerox PARC as we overlooked the Silicon Valley from the building’s many terraces.

The name Xerox PARC conjures up an image of photocopiers dotting a pastoral landscape. The truth is not quite so idyllic. While the building has a strange Mesopotamian appeal from the outside, with its six terraced ziggurat-like connected structures, its innards composed of endless corridors and cubicle size offices are deeply depressing. During our five-year stint there its palette went from a ‘Last Days of Disco’ orange to a dreary fiesta-patterned blue – to no appreciable improvement.

Environment matters and our ultimate inability to reckon with the anaesthetics, to borrow a term astutely repurposed by New York writer David Levi Strauss, definitely contributed to an unease we rarely dodged while working at PARC.

III. Working There

The goal of the residency was intentionally vague. While the lack of direction and the lack of a production quota were often welcome, the former also led to no small amount of confusion, and some occasional anxiety about roles and expectations.

Corporate culture is finally exotic, enigmatic and if not indecipherable, then certainly difficult to decode.

Cloaked in symbols of power – a badged security environment, a slick ‘visitors only’ reception area, a repressive and repetitive design landscape, all contributed to a degree of intimidation.

A sense of not belonging, self-generated as much or more than it was imposed externally made many days in residence something less than an exercise in the politics of ecstasy.

Not surprisingly we were most effective in our own research and production and in positively influencing our immediate environment when we were also at our most focused, exhilarated and confident. Achieving and maintaining that state is a tall order, but one to strive for in a milieu that universally breeds some degree of alienation in its occupants.

At this point in this brief account, the reader may well be wondering, in light of its tone and content, how we could possibly have stayed on for five years. While we wondered that ourselves at times, the reasons are resounding and clear.

What made it so maddening at the beginning-an alienating environment, a near complete disconnect on communications – a nearly total inability on all our parts to accurately interpret each other’s cues – also finally forced us to forge a fierce and highly productive collaboration. The rock to push up the hill was so large, so heavy and so unwieldy, and required such a large number of false starts, faulty steps and lost days, that once overcome, we were conditioned and capable of meaningful research and creative production.

Along the way, we identified strong similarities in the cultures of experimental research and contemporary art practice: the fascination with the unknown and the joy of discovery; and the commitment to open-ended research. Neither the artists nor the researchers had the slightest interest in working on projects for which the outcome was known. Perhaps of near equal importance in cementing our collaboration was a shared regimen during intense production time: a willingness to stay up for days on end and the maintenance of a strict diet based on the three essential food groups-chips, chocolate and Diet Coke.

Over the five years, which not so coincidentally paralleled the early ascendancy of the web, we produced projects which if not always successful, consistently held our interest and attention while going at times timidly, at times boldly, where PARC researchers – nor few artists – had ever gone before. (note that I now include Scott and Dale, our PAIR research partners in this first person plural.)

Operating at the intersection of art and technology, we explored the impact of the internet and interactive media on public space. Our first project, *General Hospital* launched in 1994, explored mental health and care delivery systems, while testing the viability of the then new world wide web as a new forum of public art and social issues.



[Figure 2. detail from *General Hospital* web site]



[Figure 2b. detail from *General Hospital* 1994 installation at the Pasadena Armory Arts Center. Computer with internet connection and internet facilitator, photographic prints, hypnosis wheel and conference table.]

A few years later, we revisited Joseph Weizenbaum's legendary 1960's Artificial Intelligence psychotherapy program, adding an image track to the program and in the process, a new wing to the 'General Hospital'.

1996's project titled *Conventional Wisdom* brought real-time reporting on the web, using an early custom-built Java application to produce a dynamic display of texts and images live from the Republican and Democratic national political conventions.⁴

Nightfall, a 1998 sentient multimedia narrative installation presented at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, examined personal relationships against the backdrop of social

malaise and psychic unrest in the waning moments of the twentieth century.

Sunset, a related project, was an interactive branching narrative triggered by garage door openers. ‘Sunset’ was displayed on two Sony JumboTrons on Hollywood’s legendary Sunset Boulevard as part of SIGGRAPH ‘97’s Electronic Garden. Drivers passing by could affect the narrative by clicking their garage door openers at the screens. The technology developed for the project was later awarded a U.S. patent in 2001.



[Figure 3. *Sunset* Exterior of Billboard Live nightclub, Hollywood, California.1997]



[Figure 4. *Sunset* detail: 'Julie's Dream Sequence.' Clicking at the screen caused one of the imbedded movies (eye, text, colour circle) to change or move the entire narrative to move to a new scene. 1997]

The projects briefly touched on in this essay were at the end of the day only faint documentary evidence of a genuinely vital, passionate and complex interdisciplinary collaboration operating out of a corporation's research centre. ⁵

'No one knows who discovered water, but we're quite sure it wasn't a fish.'

Curator and arts writer Marcia Tanner quoting Jon Winet quoting Victor Burgin quoting Marshall McLuhan in a 1994 Artweek article on the PAIR Project.

In retrospect, the value of the PAIR was at least in part to in fact identify some of the failings in the culture of PARC *and* the often isolated culture of contemporary art practice, and to encourage creativity and new modes of hybrid thinking and working among its participants. In the process, a new and appreciative audience for our art and technology efforts was created.

Where are they now, I

Sadly, in early December 2001, the staff of Studio RED and with it Rich, Dale and Scott, representing over 30 years of research at PARC – just among the three of them – was fired and the project disbanded, the result of Xerox's continuing financial under performance – and the general financial times. During our years at PARC the Silicon Valley went from a culture of value, with fresh-faced enthusiasm applied to technical innovation and an inclusive broadening of research and involvement, to a culture of profit, fuelled by the Valley's own success. This led to a massive capital run-up, unprecedented economic growth, the ascendancy of the dot.com economy and its subsequent crash.

Where are they now, II

Margaret Crane|Jon Winet continues to attempt to navigate corporate waters. At the time of this writing we are negotiating with fxpal (Fuji-Xerox Palo Alto Laboratory), just down the hill from PARC, to join a team working on the development of a radical automated digital video editing system. Subject to funding and the ironing out of a licensing agreement, the system will be included in *Northern Exposure*, a multi-media project on cultural regeneration and the unique culture of Newcastle that we're producing with Locus+. *Northern Exposure* is scheduled to launch in June 2002.



[Figure 5. detail from 1998 sentient Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco installation *Nightfall* reconditioned filing cabinet with proximity sensor and video projector]

Power Points

(For artists contemplating work with/in a corporate environment. Note: some of the points below may be contradictory)

1. When you're holding a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

Anticipate a change in your work practice. Our tenure at Xerox, 'The Document Company' has forever changed our work and our appreciation of the document and its relationship to artwork.

2. Language is Power.

3a. Play Ball

Attend meetings, holiday parties, presentations. Infiltrate the culture.

3b. Stay in Touch

Maintain communications with your natural affinity groups: fellow artists; bohemian environments; life outside the corporate cocoon.

4. Get a day's pay for a day's work

Regretfully, respect and value in corporate culture are measured to a great extent by the compensation. At the end of our day, we existed below the salary line, averaging less than US \$100 a month over the life of the residency.

While tens of thousands of dollars were thrown at our projects, much of it in in-kind Dale and Scott's staff research time, our compensation, left us operating in a different economic universe than our collaborators.

5. Think Different

Resist assimilation. Resistance is not futile and your outside perspective is likely why you've been brought in – and your greatest strength within the corporate environment.

6. Always leave while the party's still fun.

Better to leave ten minutes early than to realise you stayed an hour too long...

7. Bite the hand that feeds you.

There's a strong argument to be made that riskier corporations – or riskier elements within them – invite artists into their midst out of real sense that something is lacking in their culture. Operating from this assumption, our jobs as artists are to at least in part to observe, critique and argue for change within the environment.

8. Make change.

See 7 above.

9. Question the values of the corporation.

'The future is already here. It's just unevenly distributed.'

I first heard this from Steve Dietz, Walker Art Center New Media Curator while quoting writer William Gibson. It resonated mightily as we worked in the rarefied environment of the research think tank, surrounded by resources barely imaginable. The quote takes on extended meaning in the broader context of a consideration of the technology gap and

the unequal distribution of wealth in the
global economy.

Jon Winet is an American artist, new media researcher and producer. During spring 2002 he is at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, teaching classes in electronic media and culture while in the initial stages of production on a Margaret Crane|Jon Winet multimedia project exploring images of power and government in Washington, D.C. and Hollywood.

His ISP, XO Communications is on the brink of filing bankruptcy. In lieu of links to his soon to be evicted web sites, he submits the email address jonwinet@yahoo.fr

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Notes

¹ It's also interesting to note that this policy was later abandoned. At the time PAIR took form and took off, Rich operated out of CSL, the Computer Science Lab. Working with a number of PAIR-identified PARC researchers, including Dale MacDonald (Electronics and Imaging Lab) and Scott Minneman (Information and Systems Technology Lab), Rich started a Creative Documents Group (CDI) that later became the Research in Experimental Documents group, thereby claiming the more radical title and acronym, Studio RED. At the same time, the PAIR program withered, and by year four, Margaret Crane|Dale MacDonald|Scott Minneman|Jon Winet remained as the only functioning pairing. While RED went on to produce some remarkable projects, notably *XFR (The Future of Reading)*, a dynamic and provocative multi-media exhibition inaugurated in 2000 at the Tech Museum in San Jose, California, and now touring the United States, I think its aesthetics suffered from a lack of outside input by artists and non-Xerox collaborators.

² Harris, Craig (ed), *Art and innovation: the Xerox PARC artist-in-residency programme*, MIT Press, 1999

³ Dale assures me that the actual quote by Alan Kay was the somewhat less ominous ‘The best way to predict the future is to invent it.’ This more precise version certainly is less creepy and suggests the passion-and integrity-of PARC’s pioneering researchers

⁴ Given the computing power required of ‘Conventional Wisdom’, only a few hundred visitors were able to view the work fully. Consistent with much of PARC’s research, the promise of *Conventional Wisdom* was only realised four years later with *Democracy – The Last Campaign*, a post-PAIR project hosted by the Minneapolis, Minnesota Walker Art Center. The project was easily accessed and scored thousands of hits from site visitors.

⁵ And I think it’s important to underscore the rarity of the opportunity to create art in a corporate setting *and* the inherently exceptional nature of a corporation interested in working with artists in the open-ended fashion afforded us by Xerox, PARC and PAIR.