Tangible metaphors

by Michelle Irving

"One great thought can alter the future of the world. One revelation. One dream. But who will dream that dream? And who will make it real?" Ben Okri, Infinite Riches. [1998, Orion Books Ltd.] pp. 5

" We go on living as if history is a dream. The miracle is that we go on living and loving as best we can in this enigma of reality." Ben Okri, Infinite Riches. [1998, Orion Books Ltd] pp. 394

History seems to tell us one story of redemption over and over — the one where we try to start all over again with a clean slate, a new space, an empty(ied) map, the New World — not realizing the dirt we track in on our feet. At one time we imagined the Internet to be this empty space, a promised land for the free exchange of ideas unfettered by physical difference, distance, or market interests; anyone could be anything, do anything, in this abstract networked space.

The utopic dream was dispelled as reality appeared in the cracks where materiality and immateriality co-mingle. Such a complete historical break with the continuum of our social and economic relations was not possible. We forgot that the Internet, in its "virtuality", was tied to the production and assembly of silicon chips, wires, and a language of translation (0's and 1's). The ephemera of online communication became the exchange of goods, capital, and other social relations; this "free" space was restricted to those within the privileged seats of the global economic order.

Despite ongoing suspicion, the tools and trades of modern technology remain the dominant lens through which we transform our world and ourselves. In this particular technological paradigm "how" and "by whom" remains largely differentiated from "what" and "for whom", so that the consequences of our creative and consumptive actions may be concealed from us or at least held at a considerable distance. (Perhaps that between first and third world paradigms)

The work produced under the artists' umbrella, KIT, engages with the inter-related dimensions of technology and social life. KIT is a framework for collaborations among architects, writers, artists and programmers. The group is made up of collaborators and core members in Canada, Australia and the UK, and intentionally avoids gendered and identifiable authorship. Projects are developed and actualized from a range of perspectives and locations. The group uses various forms of online communication to plan and realize projects.

One theme that reoccurs throughout their collaborative projects is an exploration of how the intangible and tangible interact in the context of communications media like the Internet. KIT tends to tie online activity with "real-world" events. In their latest project, **Infrasense**, they use a fusion of art installation with a web-based interactive art component to link the virtual with the concrete.

Infrasense is a collaboration with Robert Saucier which draws upon the computer virus metaphors of the 'Trojan horse' and 'bug' to "take concepts from the digital world, render them as physical objects and then return control of the physical objects back to the digital landscape of the world wide web" . In this interactive installation the participant encounters several robotic Trojan horses and large bugs which are interfaced with a website that participants can interact with. The web-based interaction implicates the user in the creation of a computer bug or virus. This activity is articulated in the gallery through the generation of sound and movement of bugs in relation to the Trojan horses. The artists hope to draw attention to the experience of dissociation and distance that inhabiting digital space instantiates by extending virtual concepts into the physical domain of the gallery.

The metaphor of 'bug' or 'virus' was brought to life by computer hackers and, with Infrasense, Kit shows how this metaphor becomes a real presence with consequences that effects virtual and physical reality. In this way Infrasense functions as a sort of self-referential mirror that links the intangibility of social values and online activity with concrete materials and manifestations. It shows us that what we create and how we interpret that creation is a reflection of ourselves, our values, and beliefs. Real events spark metaphors. Metaphors become real virtual bugs that produce real consequences in our tangible world. Engaging with this web of relations is the beginning of understanding more about ourselves, and what we are dreaming into existence.

Infrasense