

Wired World

Susan Fereday, catalogue essay for "Wired World," exhibition by Simon Maidment and Paul Shephard at Conical Gallery, Melbourne, 2006

Power Lines

Above-ground telegraph lines, power cables, telephone lines, wire fences, what have you, stretch across this wide brown land this white burnt land this browned dirt land this place in every direction. Criss-cross. Just try driving anywhere and there they'll be, marking the road or out on some tangent probably as the crow flies, from bush to habitat from here to eternity. Infrastructure. The road map of colonisation.

Up and Down

New mobile-phone towers rise above us, surround us. It seems every church has a new patron: Saint Mobile. Crucifixes to science, the old religion murdered by the new one. Spires and steeples that once stretched toward heaven, now face the financial bottom line.

Not as dubious as the church I saw in Vienna with its billboard for Johnny Walker whisky, or the one in Berlin with Claudia Schiffer in lingerie for God knows why, but I can't help pondering the Church's willingness to accept the social imperative: 'We must have more phones!'

Like the electric lighting strewn inside the great mosques in Istanbul. Oodles of 15 watt light globes threaded together by tangled cables in mock chandeliers, hovering just above head height and seeming to form a barrier between prayer and ceiling, between thoughts and things.

It feels like God has fallen down. Or, at least, no longer flies as high.

Energy Grid

We call it an energy Grid, but that's not right. It's more like a ball of yarn. No. Like the seed head of a dandelion. Yes. Frangled, and stretching from centre to periphery. Like the mycelium of fungi beneath a forest.

World Wide Web

Also not really a Web. Apparently the World Wide Web is more like a big bow tie with tendrils hanging off it. The knot in the middle is where all the connections are. One side

of the bow tie is all the incoming-links, the other side those domains linked by the core but not back to it. The stringy bits are dead ends.

The Web's associations and connections are also often likened to a network of friendships. That's me: dangling. No one calls me.

Stranded

The network, the wiring-together of people, cities, small towns, seems to highlight their existential isolation. It measures the vacant space between one body and another.

Bouncing along like radio waves from clouds. Power circulates, the margins are at the centre. Communication. Network. Global. Those words go around belonging to no one.

Wireless World

In the era of the wireless network, why does my house look like some giant spider has spewed in every corner? Or someone has scribbled in the air near the floor with fat textas: white, grey, black. Every power point extrudes cable, and it's growing, writhing between each electrical device in some manic profusion. I leave the house for a few hours and come back to find messages in the coiled mass.

'Go out', it reads in squiggly cord. 'Moomba'.

Sure, one device will talk to another through the air. But they all still need a power source, a rechargeable battery or docking station. Still need cables for electricity. No way around that yet, Mr Tesla.

The proof is in the chaos. The laptop we buy for mobility - 'I can work anywhere in the house' - and the masses of cable we need to support it. More cables than a rock band. The hub of essential communication devices: mobile phone, modem, computer, mouse, keyboard, laptop, television, speakers, clock radio, MP3 player, DVD player, electronic diary, digital set top box, telephone answering machine, fax, printer, scanner.

I'm just here to keep the LED displays blinking.

Remote

I can't even work the TV anymore. Five remotes and when I press their buttons either nothing happens or too much at once. I was beginning to wonder whether ABC voice-over had become standard on American sit-coms.

(You can stop that. Just press AV > Up VCR 3 on the small grey remote, + 7 Menu Off on the bigger black one, and I think there's another way but I don't know what that is.)

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, thunderous voices will start-up in the living room. They seem so self-confident, bombastic even, or shamelessly argumentative. They are loud and don't care what time it is. I wake in shocked stupor and have to switch the AV box to 1 or 3, but never 2.

Answering Machine

It was 1985 and I was at art school when I first heard someone people talk about having an answering machine. I asked a fellow student what an answering machine was, how did they work?

She told me her mother had one.

'It can just go off at any time. You can be standing in the kitchen and it will just suddenly go off.'

A lecturer listening-in saw the confusion on my face and tried to help.

'It's like a phone, but with a remote. You don't have to be home. You can be at work, anywhere, and people can get you.'

I imagined something between a model aeroplane and an exploding toaster.

Telegraphy

'Telegraphy' (from the Greek words *tele* = far and *graphein* = write) is the long-distance transmission of written messages without physical transport of letters, originally over wire. 'Photography' (from the Greek word *phos* = light) is the process of making pictures by action of light.

But don't we also read a photograph across the distance of time and space? And don't optical cables now carry images? The old technology haunts the new one.

There is No Cat

When asked to describe radio, Albert Einstein replied:

'You see, wire telegraph is a kind of a very, very long cat. You pull his tail in New York and his head is meowing in Los Angeles. Do you understand this? And radio operates exactly the same way: you send signals here, they receive them there. The only difference is that there is no cat.'

I got the bit about the telegraph and the cat, Mr Einstein. But it wouldn't take a genius to come up with a better metaphor for radio. A missing cat? Just because a person discovers $E=MC$ squared and fright hair, it doesn't make their thinking fool proof.

Radio on Ice

Guglielmo Marconi, inventor of the Wireless Radio, became a hero in 1912 when the new Marconi wireless equipment aboard the sinking Titanic alerted the world to the ship's plight. Distress signals were relayed to the Carpathia, a passenger ship traveling nearby, which rescued the lucky few who made it into lifeboats. Suspicious failings on the part of the wireless technology were overlooked at a commission on the Titanic disaster, and Marconi received a gold medal and rousing investment.

Water Memories

In his later years, Marconi became obsessed with the idea that the voices of the dead at the sinking of the Titanic were still trapped in the arctic ice. Marconi thought it was simply a matter of finding the right equipment - an aquatic microphone of the right design - to unlock the voices stored in icy water. Marconi believed water was an excellent medium for recording sound, a bit like a phonogram, maybe, or a wax cylinder. In 1921, sailing in the Mediterranean on his experimental yacht the Electra, Marconi claimed to have received radio messages from Mars. But, significantly, no one from the Titanic and no cat.

Spooky

Inventor Thomas Edison believed that telephones could contact the dead and that one day electronic recording devices might capture these messages. Uncannily anticipating the newspeak of our own era, Edison preferred to call the dead 'the living impaired'.

Lines of Sight

What if we could see them? Sound waves, I mean. Or more particularly, voices. Voices streaming, straining, stretching from lip to ear. Yarning.

Or crisply forming in the air like ice crystals between speakers in very cold climates, a phenomenon called 'the whispering of the stars'.

Or would they always be directional, like lines of flight, an arrow, flying across the table or around world? A narrative arc, a path of intent, looping desire between people. Vibrant and sparky, like the threads of an interesting discussion.

But, disappointingly, I'm told the sound waves would probably look more like soup. In scientific presentations electro-magnetic radiation is always depicted as haze. Amorphous, imprecise, indirect, formless.

Fibro Lamp

A cord of ancestral connectivity links my aunty directly to me. And a bundle of fibro filaments.

Decades ago, when she left Telecom after forty years' service, my aunty requested her retirement gift be a fibre optic lamp. Spooky, since she could not have known then that the future of telecommunications would be fibre optic cabling. She had once been a telephonist - in those days of fabric-covered black cords and wall-grid switchboards. She travelled to remote areas of Australia to teach people to work their first telephone.

She'd say, 'When it rings, lift the receiver and speak loudly: "Good evening, 276 - 176 - 0". If no one is there, hang-up and wait.'

Speechless

My favourite aunty is speechless now since her stroke. What is the silence like for her, the gap from which she can no longer summons words, the wiring in her brain now damaged beyond repair?

Not as black as all that, probably more deep blue, and hazy. But dark, certainly, dark like a rat trap but twice as slack. Sinking, solvent. Like unexposed film maybe, milky and opaque. Like a photograph that takes its shape from exposure to light, and records a something before the lens, something illegible and unnamable before it is processed. Always at the core of the photograph this Thing, haunting it: a trace of something now somewhere else.

Spectral

On Sunday evenings in my childhood, my aunty would switch on her fibro lamp for us and the tiny motor would slowly turn its hundred delicate glass filaments around its metal base. The fibres would glow and mutate fabulously in pastel shades from pink to blue to green to yellow.

It's mine now. It goes around. And changes colour. And I can still hear my aunt's voice when it turns. 'Mustn't have it on too long. Don't want to waste it'.



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