

## REVIEWS

### Mark B Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*

(Cambridge Massachusetts: Routledge,  
2004)

By Bridie Lonie

*New Philosophy for New Media* is an interdisciplinary study of the implications of the idea that new technologies produce new experiences. Written by an associate professor of English at Princeton University, it draws upon the work of theorists from virtually all relevant disciplines as it explores media which are video and/or digitally based: virtual reality, computer games, immersive installations and images which are produced in digital rather than analog fashion and are therefore qualitatively different. These have been around for decades and practitioners wince a little at the use of the term “new media”. But, Lev Manovich, whose *The Language of New Media* has become required reading in this area, is chastised by Hansen for the way his understanding of cinema is passive, and for his subsequent use of cinema as a model for understanding new media which obscures the transformative nature of this media.<sup>1</sup>

The suggestion that new media are transformative immediately raises the issue of the condition known as the “posthuman”. A simplistic reading of this term suggests that relations between humans and technology spell the end of the apparently self-sufficient

condition or way of being we call, with much ethical investment, “humanity”. Hansen follows N. Katherine Hayles, a key interdisciplinary thinker, whose work bridges chemistry and cultural theory.<sup>2</sup> Hayles proposed that a better understanding of the ways in which new technologies affect human consciousness, life and engagements with the world, would be to regard the phenomenon as “post-humanist”; a change in emphasis rather than identity.<sup>2</sup> An understanding of human experience as essentially individualistic is replaced by a concern with interaction. New media then become ways of enabling, literally, new perspectives.

In order to explore these perspectives Hansen uses artworks, because they are characterised by “affect” or embodied emotional response. Hansen’s argument, summarised in the excellent foreword by Tim Lenoir, is that the dystopic universes comprising of nothing more than streams of data unmodified by human interventions suggested by, in particular, Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin and Friedrich Kittler do not take affect into consideration. The subjective element implied by the artwork counters the sense that new media are simply about data entry.

Earlier theorists of new media considered it in terms of its relation to a true/false apprehension of the world; how many degrees away from an original experience was an image, for instance; how “real” was the experience one was having while watching it? Hansen’s strategic omission of Baudrillard’s position allows him to side-step political issues such as the global control of information. Instead, he considers how new media produces experiences that cannot occur naturally, in particular those which deal with time and the unfolding of information. For instance, using the example of artist Bill Viola’s high-speed filming and normal speed play-back of groups of characters, Hansen argues that the information thus pre-

sented to the viewer produces sub-perceptual experiences that engender “affective anticipation”, which he characterises as “a particular perceptual experience mediated by the process of non-conscious neural dynamics from which the ‘now’ emerges continually and perceptually.” (253)

He also writes of the way in which digital imaging can produce a representation of a point of view which the viewer standing in front of the image could never achieve. Here I feel he does not take sufficient account of Renaissance and Baroque experiments with perspective: programmes that rotate the viewpoint of the imaginary viewer as based on earlier experiments with anamorphism. Also, there is a slightly mechanistic element in his discussion of affect though, evinced in his concern with the significance of proprioception, and his conflation of duration with movement. These occur as he considers the re-evaluations of time and consciousness proposed by Walter Benjamin, Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze. Hansen’s premise is indicated in the following discussion of the work of Derrick de Kerckhove:

(Interactive systems) teach us how we can adapt ourselves...to new sensory syntheses, new speeds and new perceptions. And they do so, specifically, by catalyzing those bodily “senses” – proprioception, interoception, affectivity – that allow us to orient ourselves in the absence of fixed points or external schema, or, in other words, through the internal, intensive space of our affective bodies. (195)

This space is achieved as our consciousness operates through the space/time manifest in the experience of, in this instance, new media artworks and their ally, virtual reality:

[Fa]r from inaugurating a form of machinic vision, VR is simply the most advanced instance of such co-functioning: what it facilitates is not a becoming-inhuman of

perception but instead a technical extension of the (human) domain of absolute subjectivity and of the (human) capacity for affective self-intuition. (196)

Discussions around affect enable an understanding of relationships between emotions and information, and are therefore of primary concern for artists, art theorists and theorists of consciousness. Hansen acknowledges the more pragmatic science of neuro-anatomy though a discussion of another interdisciplinary thinker, the neuroscientist Francisco Varela. Varela’s work on time-consciousness draws on the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and contemporary advances in the neuro-anatomy of consciousness. (252) Again, Hansen draws on Bergson’s understanding of the ways in which consciousness is incommensurate with scientific time, enlisting the notion of autopoiesis, an organising intelligence which operates through the body but appears to extend it.

The stakes are high in this argument. For Hansen, the conjunction of aesthetics and ethics counters dystopic visions of the downloading of intelligence and its consequent augmentation or loss via the postmodern sublime, the ether of information theory. Instead, he provides a fascinating and rewarding exploration of theories of consciousness and time which uses new media as its stamping ground.

- 1 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).
- 2 N Katharine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago, 1999).

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## **Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back***

(London: Routledge, 2000)

By Jane Venis

Born in Mexico City in 1955, performance artist, writer and self-confessed Chicano ambassador and provocateur, Guillermo Gómez-Peña has spent 20 years negotiating through and around the borders, cultures and relationships of the United States and Mexico. His book, *Dangerous Border Crossers* similarly crosses and permeates many borders, cultural and geographical. Navigating the distances between the cultures symbolised by the political border and the plight of Chicano bodies as “wetbacks” is one of the central concerns in his hugely creative body of work. His practice encompasses the overlapping territories of a myriad of media including performance, installation, film, radio, robotics, and cyber-performance.

The dissolving borders between new technologies and traditional societies have been addressed in many of Gómez-Peña’s works over the last decade and is a recurring

theme in this book. He describes himself as a “web back” which colourfully and succinctly articulates his wish for a borderless society which still embodies his origins. This is one of many examples of the hugely enjoyable way in which he plays with language, in texts that effortlessly traverse the terrain between academic and colloquial voices. His writing is simultaneously theoretical and accessible, rigorous and personal, and seamlessly woven with English, Spanish, Spanglish and other entertaining hybrid language forms of his own making.

This is a very personal book packed with insights into Gómez-Peña’s performance practice during the nineties. It is a loosely structured collection of his writings in the form of diary entries, poems, essays and texts. This is a book that can be dipped into with ease at any point, yet each offering, whether it be poem, essay, interview, or recollections of past performances is packed with information, humour and irony.

He discusses the motivations and intentions behind the imagery and personas in his performances, actions and collaborations, delighting in what he describes as “adding layers of contradiction or complexity to traditional images until they implode resulting in genetically engineered Mexacabilia.” (112) His ultimate goal is to create “...images that create a disturbing sediment in the consciousness of the spectator.” (112)

The hunger to create imagery and situations whereby the audience is confronted and cannot easily escape their own fears and prejudices could result in a didactic tone. What saves *Dangerous Border Crossers* (and the performances it details) from this fate is the acerbic humour and sheer absurdity of many of the persona and once again, the clever use of language.

Gómez-Peña embraces his Chicano machismo by employing a series of performance personas that question, highlight and try to permeate the borders between peoples, countries, art, languages and technologies. He embodies stereotypes and propels them to absurd new levels with the intention of their eventual dissolution. The text is peopled by such unforgettable performance personae as *Border Brujo*, *Superendo Ranchero*, *El Pre-Industrial Cannibal*, *El Mad Mex*, and a whole raft of *Mexterminator* “ethno-cyborgs” created by anonymous internet users and then embodied by Gómez-Peña in subsequent performances. Below are the characteristics for one of these cyborgs, *El Mucho Macho*, listed as a pseudo-gaming character:

El Mexterminator (Homo Fronterizus: ethno-cyborg #187) as seen on the super-nintendo video game ‘killer instinct.’ Habitat: The American borderlands. Features: illegal border crosser/ highly infectious/ extremely politicised/ unnecessarily violent and hyper sexual/ speaks Spanglish only. Indestructible! Multiple identities: Karateca, marksman, stuntman, curio shop shaman, Tex-mex rocker, drug and jalapeno pusher, undercover activist. Wanted by the INS, the DEA, the FBI and the Smithsonian Institution. Political project: To redefine the West and invade the North. (114)

The performance practice of Gómez-Peña has led to many collaborations, most notably with Roberto Sifuentes and Sara Shelton-Mann (forming the nucleus of performance group *Pocha Nostra*); and also with Coco Fusco and Não Bustamante. It is the practice with Sifuentes and his alter ego ‘El Cyber-Vato’ that forms the bulk of the discussion in this book. The two Chicanos take to the road and traverse the dangerous borders of small-town America. This book chronicles the risks involved in embodying stereotypes so successfully that

some audiences are unaware of the subtexts, whilst others may react violently and unpredictably. These unpredictable and sometimes violent reactions highlight the essential concerns of Gómez-Peña’s practice: migration, alienation and mistrust of aliens. In one of several interviews collected in *Dangerous Border Crossers* in the form of a conversation between members of *Pocha Nostra*, Sifuentes says of their work

It’s not autobiographical. We’re not performing our authenticity as Chicanos; what we’re doing is performing the multiplicity of mythologies and perceptions of Mexicans and Chicanos in the US. Unfortunately, some audiences don’t think of Chicanos as ‘cultural thinkers’ or ‘conceptual Artists,’ so when I first began to portray ‘Vato’ (street hipster) covered in tattoos, wearing baggie clothes, and manipulating weapons, many audience members and even some journalists thought I was a Latino gang member brought to town and put on display by Gómez-Peña. (170-171)

Although the performances are not autobiographical, the personal nature of some of the writing provides an insight into the everyday experiences of the artist that fuel his practice. In the chapter “New World Border”, for instance, he recalls being accompanied on his travels by a blond blue-eyed child and being apprehended and questioned by the Mexican police on suspicion of kidnap. The child was in fact his son.

Gómez-Peña has written a book that is political, confronting and full of merciless uncompromising humour, but he also speaks gently of the personal insecurities and uncertainties that accompany him on his myriad border-crossings. This is an excellent book which seems not to have been extensively reviewed yet.

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