iText 2: Andy Warhol, Inevitably

iTexts 1 to 6 are a compilation of related texts accompanying the exhibition iPod Killed the Videostar

Andy Warhol's famous dictum that in the future everyone would be famous for 15 minutes- may have instinctively predicted a situation in which technological advances enabled a kind of "garage media". It foresaw a new type of media in which the means of production was put into the hands of literally thousands of small-scale producers, each feeding its particular niche markets; creating "the famous" for hundreds of subcultures and distinct followings.

If Warhol's words, maybe the result of his own experiments with a home-brew fame factory, sensed the shift in the means of production, then these had only the realities of what now seem like clunky prototypes to draw on: the Xerox machine enabling fanzines, economies of scale enabling cheaper photo-to-print techniques and the advent of cheap Japanese imports in the areas of recording, film and photographic equipment.

Had he stuck around longer, Warhol might have observed that, in the future, we could be everyone famous for 15 minutes.

Today, rapid changes in technology have created the kinds of scenarios that excited futurology geeks in the late 1970's: micro technologies, home working and decentralisation.

The teen geeks of the late 1970s, hopped up on Toffler, did literally apply some of his predictions. Magazines that started out as almost hobbies relied on desktop publishing to transform the way in which individuals would come to consume fame in the 1980's and beyond. Filmmakers packing light and portable video equipment could rapidly create their new images of pop icons for consumption through new outlets afforded by cable and satellite broadcasting. Bands could record work on digitally enhanced instruments in relatively cheap studios or even the garage- and distribute them via small operation labels that relied on ever cheaper equipment to produce records and CDs.

Much discussion of these phenomena has focussed on the advent and popularisation of the Internet in the last decade, in an inevitable, narrow self-referential examination of the very recent past. However, the actual tipping point at least in relation to popular music cultures and their visual manifestations- was informed by narratives well established at least a decade before.

Let us not forget that the Internet remained, though widely affordable and available in much of the developed world in the early 1990's, the realm of computer nerds, academics, family-slaughtering otaku, gaming addicts, amateur pornographers and commerce. It's transformation to a cool and hip thing perhaps best visible in the more general phenomenon of "geek chic" in the late 1990's- largely goes hand in hand with its fusion with narratives already widely understood by that time. These were narratives of underground hipness, of ways to be famous partly by consuming fame; narratives of being famous, but only for the right audience.

The DIY culture of punk music and fanzines share something of a traditional anti-establishment sensibility with their predecessors, the small-scale underground magazines of the 1960's and the publications of the political counter-cultures of the 1970's. The music and publication cultures of all these movements shared an intention to change the world by resisting its structures; to oppose the establishment with words and music.

It is somewhat ironic then that they also served as a training ground for many writers, editors, publishers, designers, photographers and stylists who were to form the core of the next wave of underground publications. And, that these publications themselves would rise from the underground and morph into the next generation of media establishment. Despite all the subsequent recriminations and accusations of selling out to yuppiedom, the process by which this happened; the reasons why the angry young kids turned into the next trenche of media moguls is not as simple as a few embittered old-school punk journalists might have it.

Politics and personalities have been at the centre of this discussion; exactly who was seduced by Thatcher's promises of free-

market wealth or succumbed to the shoulder padded glamour of Reaganomics. Popular discussion has seldom examined the intrinsic role of technology in the story of how magazines like The Face, Blitz and I-D wedged themselves between the battle lines of high-end fashion magazines (like Vogue and Tatler) on one side and the credible mouthpieces of popular music culture (like the NME and Melody Maker) on the other, eventually striking fear into both camps.

In one sense, it is a story that might not exist if new technologies hadn't, on one hand, enabled these burgeoning magazines to develop new aesthetics in a viable way and, on the other hand, presented serious economic competition to the old-school glossy publishing giants.

New technologies made it possible for magazines like The Face and I-D to not have to look like the NME or Melody Maker. This was a fortunate state of play for the art school kids who wanted to produce something that reflected their interests in the visual as much as perhaps far more than- the textual.

The reducing cost of traditional newspaper-style printing had given an earlier generation an opportunity that naturally favoured the textual: enthusiasts who would write about music and bands coming from an academic or journalistic tradition. Whereas the reducing costs of printing in colour, desktop publishing, CAD and photography gave the first real mass opportunity to a generation of producers whose primary focus was the visual: to make images of their music, design and lifestyle cultures.

The "underground establishment" of newspapers and music magazines that were already established in the mid-1980's reflected the ability of certain groups to benefit from what was available to them. The typical staffers and contributors to these "underground" mouthpieces were well educated in the textual transfer of ideas; graduates of humanities, political science or journalism. The emerging state of technologies in the mid-1980's would mean that a new type of producer could have a go; the art school kids and design graduates eager to convey their ideas and thoughts visually.

And, if the preceding generation had expressed its resistance the predominant social and political structures in a more direct form, in well-argued, politicised articles and graphics drawing on traditions of easily understood political cartoons and images, the new generation were quick to develop a far more elliptical discourse of resistance. For example, although political statements and positions were not always absent, they were not usually fore grounded. Yes, The Face did show Kathrine Hamnet meeting Mrs Thatcher wearing her Frankie-Say-Relax t-shirts carrying anti-Pershing missile slogans. But, somehow one got the feeling that The Face thought that Kathrine Hamnett was more interesting than the issue of nuclear missile deployment

Much work has been undertaken on examining the way in which subcultures create a visual identity for themselves. And, indeed, the magazines that rose to prominence in the 1980s are often one of the rich research grounds for such areas of study. Resistance to the predominant social structures is not absent. It would be stupid to argue that the individuals that these magazines documented, sauntering about various cities in their distinctive outfits and elaborate hairstyles were seeking to avoid drawing attention to themselves. They clearly wanted to stand out from the crowd. They clearly wanted to be different. The clearly resisted the norm.

But, resistance is not necessarily a politicised or logically considered process. Whether most of the art school kids, snapped hanging around Hyper Hyper or hip nightclubs for I-D, could elaborate how their eccentric and creative outfits related to a political doctrine remains a matter of conjecture. The remaining back issues clearly show that a few tried, often with amusing results.

There were those who could make the connections between their avant-garde fashion choices and preceding art movements. Fresh out of art and design schools, high on the newly-discovered knowledge of movements like Futurism and Constructivism or Bauhaus, some of the young visionaries went onto shape the look of things to come. They could identify with the Utopian drives of earlier 20th century art and design movements to usher in greater social change. Whether it was because they

were na�ely optimistic perhaps even arrogant- or whether they simply cared less about larger political questions than creating new beautiful things, any contextual understanding of the preceding art movements often seemed notably absent.

The very library books and lectures from which they had learned would have talked of the failure of Surrealism and Dadaism to usher in a just new society or the failure of the Constructivists to convince the lumpenproletariat of the priority of design over bread. Yet, the visual language created by the new kids on the block referenced these movements and others with a ferocious seriousness that gave little indication that they were aware of the central failures of 20th century design and art movements to establish the importance of their manifestoes in day-to-day political terms. In the interviews they did of each other for their seminal magazines, the art kids gushed with a kind of enthusiasm about design and visual beauty that was oddly homogenous. Just as the way they pictured themselves in the endless portraits and other photographic projects they undertook with each other frequently gave hardly any indication of the cynicism and supposed irony that is so hip today. In this sense, it is almost as if they, learning through copying, naively regurgitated opinions expressed by their favourite Dadaist, Surrealist, Situationist and Constructivist heroes whom academic scrutiny had already identified as na�e and old-fashioned; of their time.

The new magazines became a playground for escapist exploration; a space where adult cynicism could be forgotten as they dived into projects where they fancied themselves and indeed represented themselves- as everything form Romantic poets and Hollywood screen sirens to angst-ridden exiles in Cabaret Voltaire. In hindsight it is interesting to note that some of these practices, at that time very much part of this new magazine culture, have shifted into the realms of visual arts practice, somehow too impractical for the world of 'real' commerce.

But at the time, as above, so below. If the punk experience had given a boost to the idea of a DIY culture, a scene that could be made without deference to record giants and media control, the post-punk environment contemporaneous to the rise of these new publications could make the playground even more exciting. All over the developed world, and even in parts of the developing world, nightclub cultures sprung up where the art kids could act out their fantasy selves. If they were lucky enough, they would be validated as reality in one of the new magazines that often ran features simply documenting the "looks" and thoughts of art kids out on the town.

At the epicentre of this new type of media, with an underground press behaving uncannily like the traditional society pages of publishing giants, London exerted an uneven pressure. Drawing heavily on its punk pedigree, it was one of the first centres to get its new breed of magazines international circulation.

If you were really hot stuff, you might be able to get your picture and a few personal witticisms into I-D or Blitz. Not only could you have your moment of stardom within your immediate circle, but, your youthful, apparent radicalism and sunken-cheeked looks could be exported to the provincial sleepers trying hard to establish a link with the mother of all 1980's clubland chic. You could be admired and copied or more usually, reviled and copied- in Barnsley, Australia, South America and most desperately, in the United States where the monoculture created pockets of resistance keen on signs of another kind of life beyond the endless prairie.

In hindsight, there is an odd continuity between this phenomenon and more recent utterings from artists and theorists. The fascination with Utopias of recent years and all the discussions arising out of it has often come back to ideas such as the autonomous realm of art, the idea that artists should have the right to operate in a realm of autonomy that disallows societies to impose its usual expectations of responsibilities and conformity.

In the art school nightclubs of Brussels, Antwerp, Hamburg, and London of the 1980s, the kids were already doing this for themselves. Not yet (and perhaps still not) respected enough culturally and not yet exerting the economic clout that they would once their bedroom glamour mags became the new market leaders, they seemed to spend little time discussing their right to autonomous exploration and simply got on

with it. They were simply Antonin Artaud or Tristan Tzara for a Thursday evening; turning into Dali or Georges Sands on Saturday. Had they had the power to do so, no doubt many would have courted the larger media frenzy that Madonna later invited once she made visual self-comparisons with Monroe, but at the time, they got on with clubbing and, yes, actually trying to behave like- Jean Harlow or Carol Lombard. And that was only the men...

Perhaps most importantly, none of this was 'academicised' at that time as "artistic practice". Sure, a few eloquent perpetrators, open-minded observers and, above all, the new types of publications championed that the antics or creative activities of the characters on these scenes should be embraced as part of the canon of artistic practice as they often are now. But, at the time, they were actually not. At least not by the mainstream art establishments. Despite the prevalence of 'performance art', the art world academic and commercial- only began to embrace these practices as valid and important long after these scenes had all but vanished. By that time a new professional sobriety had necessarily arrived at the publications whose rise to international recognition was so strongly connected with these exhibitionistic individuals.

Leigh Bowery was only a few years away from death his early death in 1994 before his performances were presented in a credible London gallery. Despite the endless international accolades as a "designer", Tony Saville has only relatively recently been elevated to the status of being represented by an insightful art gallery on the same footing as an "artist". And the cast of thousands that peopled this movement in the post-punk era, all having had their 15 minutes of fame, has inevitably moved on.

Some have gone on to bigger and better artistic things, directly into the limelight or behind the scenes, whilst the vast majority have got on with everyday lives, finding other paths. Many no longer even bother to buy the magazines they once rushed to buy just to see if they had made it into the issue. Others still do buy copies of the last publication remaining from that era, knowing that these days, they're more likely to find high-end sleek presentations of expensive couture and articles by established journalists than the quasi-documentary photographs of a hundred ungainly youths all trying to find an identity through a special kind of nightclub role-play.

In recent years, the advent of the Internet has given rise to a slew of discussions about the nature of identity and realities. Often these have postulateed that, somehow, the Internet has enabled the advent of possibilities for living other lives online, of being whoever we want to be within the confines of cyberspace. Questioning how such constructions come into existence in no way diminishes the actuality of "virtual reality" and "online identity". It does, however, seem rather odd that the Internet has been largely accepted in the last decade as the de facto technology that has alone created this possibility. In a sense, the popular vision appears to be one that envisages the Internet and its possibilities like the ancient Egyptian god creator Atum, masturbating the universe into existence where only nothingness had existed before.

Some attention has been given to examining how the Internet as we experience it today owes a heavy experiential debt to cyberpunk writers. In particular, the way that the Internet 'looks' and is experienced is the result of the geeks who 'made' it being influenced by science fiction that predates it, not vice versa. In other words, those with technological and applied science skills, being great fans of writers like William Gibson and Bruce Sterling made the Internet, partly influenced by the ideas of (science) fictional writers. This inversion of the popular chicken-and-egg scenario re-examines the idea that the Internet is that way it is because of "science", that it is the only possible scenario resulting out of a cohort of available technologies.

Even though the understanding of the role of the human imagination in shaping how technologies evolve is old news to science and technology historians, a blind spot seems to linger in the public consciousness. There is a general lack of understanding that the experience of an applied technology is largely the result of the ideas and thinking of those applying it and not the result of empirical research alone. Perhaps it's the fault of old school 1950's science, the propaganda that science alone could save and edify humanity.

The generation responsible for applying the technologies that would move the Internet beyond its first wave outside the realm of universities, government, industry and geek world- are the same Generation X (and Generation W) that experienced the rise of the new print media as part of their formative years. The generation of graphic designers that would work with programmers to come up with GUI's that even a grandmother would find easy to use are the same generation of designers reared on The Face and I-D, the same generation of designers exposed to the hipness of the pop video and the clunky pleasures of early gaming.

Maybe even more importantly, they would have been exposed to these cultural narratives at a time when computer technologies promising the opportunity to gun down Quake monsters at a machine in New York with the aid of your virtual mate in Tokyo were still a long way off. In fact, they were the generation of designers and programmers that turned the ideas expressed on paper into 'virtualities' expressed on screen. Blogs giving us an insight into a pop star's hectic day or porn feeds promising endless if no longer free pleasure were made by someone. In many cases, that someone will have been from the generation reared on magazines that presented images and spoke of lifestyles where we could be anyone we wanted. Perhaps we were even made to feel that we had to be someone else by the time the next issue came out.

Given all this, it would be worth considering the connection between Warhol's observation on the nature of fame - instinctively noticing that it was becoming easier to manipulate it much like any other consumer item- and the story of changing technologies. It intuits the shift in the means of production. It is a narrative intrinsically involving technology.

To view the current telematic technologies Internet, telecommunications and their wireless offspring- as being entirely responsible in themselves for how we use them to flirt with fame; to live out our fantasies of being rich, beautiful and famous, is to lack the insight into the evolutionary nature of technologically-enhanced fantasy.

The way in which we popularly learn to harness technology to serve mass pursuits and fantasies is a step-by-step process. It can be seen in the development of diverse communication technologies ranging from radio and film to Internet and television. The great-unwashed public is generally disinterested until it is shown a narrative of application; the story of how you can make it useful to your life and personal interests. Film for example, though popular as a sideshow attraction, failed to grip the greater attention in the broader public imagination and subsequently spurn a powerful industry- until technically skilled people had found a way to apply it to construct narratives that would grip the public imagination. In much the same way, the Internet, a place where, apparently, we can live as whoever we want to be, did not achieve an increased popularity, despite decreasing costs, until transitions could be made between the technology and narratives that had resonance for users.

One of the commonalities that many of the narratives building towards the Internet's increased usage and cool factor in the 1990s have in common is the overt "otherness" of the Internet. It became a place where one could spend literally hours doing nothing useful at all and somehow still not be bored or feel wasteful. And, the nature of the beast is that it is well suited for much of the content that would initially gain visibility as being hip and cool. It often came with the same DIY ethos that drove the textual content of punk underground publications and the visual content of post-punk publications.

In this new world, not everyone who had had his or her photo in I-D or Blitz in the early days was still on the guest list. Members of the younger generation knew that the new generation of print media giants no longer put the art kids on the street onto the pages, despite their histories. The Internet provided the perfect platform to tap into the narrative that had originally driven the application of cheaper print and photo technologies; the birthright to a media presence.

New and unstable media with virtually no set-up or maintenance costs saved time and effort. In the early days, buying a geek mate a drink for sorting you out with one of those URL registration things, enabled a revival of the narrative in which we could be editor-in-chief and, if we wanted, stars of our own media. From the inane to the insane, the ridiculing to the ridiculous, amateur writers

and professional photographers grappled on a democratised playing field to be Top Of The Clicks. Not surprising then that phenomena that had all but disappeared since the late 1980's suddenly remerged in a new form. Endless snapshots of people hanging out in what the web author purported to be the hottest nightspot Bratislava. Or painstakingly rendered graphics of a friend's experimental furniture designs and later, downloads of music by the site owner's band...

Perhaps too much attention has been focussed on the technologies themselves in an attempt to understand the form of the Internet manifestations. What, it seems, might be useful to understanding at least the re-emergence of a certain post-punk DIY visual ethos is the links it has to the narratives driving the original print media visual manifestations.

It was practically impossible for these web manifestations to have the same lucky break as the original print ones. This is already established. In the world of print where issues have deadlines and pages have a fixed number it has been difficult enough to survive financially let alone to maintain the heady position of the first wave of post-punk publications going mainstream. In a world of seemingly endless URLs and competition literally being uploaded every minute, the inevitable Dot Com Bust is almost something of a constant inconstant.

The aging art kids and the new art kids share cyberspace side-by-side under the impartial eye of Google and Yahoo, fighting with Christian fundamentalists and cycling enthusiasts; school sports clubs and pizza restaurants for witnesses to their played out fantasies. Andy Warhol never foresaw that in the future that we could all be everybody famous for 15 minutes. Then again, did he foresee that we could only really be famous to 15 people?

Ken Pratt