I Am An Invisible Man
30th November 2012

Speech given on the occasion of the opening of the New Media Arts graduating class Exposed Exhibition at the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, Australia

I am an invisible man. Or rather, I am an invisible artist. My colleagues from the valleys and alleys and squats of my leaner years in Palm Beach and West End and Birmingham would perhaps not recognise me now.

As delighted as my father might be that I have a steady job and a neat crop of hair, my comrades would no doubt despair. No one ever wants to change, and no one really ever does. But costumes change, we morph considerably through the first, second and third acts, some more gracefully than others. The shackles of your formal education are now falling away, the next act beckons you, *how* you manage this change will be truly definitive.

We have heard all of this before. Education is a life-long pursuit. An artwork is never completely finished. A well-told joke never truly wears thin. For we discover as we move through the phases of our life's education that change is inevitable on the outside, that what is accepted as quality or as being in-vogue are in a constant state of flux, but it is what lies at our core - the timber of our emotional pitch - that renders us whole.

And so, come what interpretations my own spots may engender, I do not operate on the periphery anymore. I have had numerous "careers" around the edge of what could be termed "digital media" and what might be a "higher" state of learning. I have made money, good money but not a lot of money, enough to support myself and my significant others (habits, lovers, and the like), I have funded projects through awards and wages and kindness, and I have managed to shift territories when the status quo would not suffice. There is a sense of satisfaction that comes with that. Of being nimble. Of being a part of a global community. Of being a "practitioner", plural.

I no longer feel the need to scream from the rooftops my gigantic yawp as one once did, bristling with youthful frustration. I have found more subtle ways to shift public opinion. My scream is now a meme.

Now, I do it by pixels, I do it by proxy, I do it by PowerPoint. I have not attained success in any formulaic popular sense of the word – and there is certainly more work to do, there always is - in other towns, in other cities, in other skins - the spots will be refreshed and re-rendered many times over. What I have accumulated over the years are granules of credibility, little gold stars perhaps, recognition that the work that I do, the words that I write have purpose and have meaning and in some small way, find an audience.

(Sometimes they are organic, at other times they are trapped, as you are now).

We, that is my colleagues and I, have graduated from the trenches and moved on from two minute noodles and instant coffee. We move at ever increasing velocities and ever more widening circles of experience: we are in Melbourne, we are in Sydney, London, Birmingham, Berlin, Turin, Hong Kong, Beijing, Bathurst, Wollongong, Canberra, Cairns, Townsville and imminently, Portland Victoria. We critique online, we gather online, and we share online. Our generation found the Internet at some point in the early 1990s - we used

it, we subverted it and we figured out how to make it work for all of us - all of us that is, together.

If we were the ground hogs of the network, hacking the space, bending the tables, cursing the code, and messing with compression at a time when it mattered then the likes of Stuart Brand, Bruce Sterling, Ted Nelson, Geert Lovink and John Perry Barlow were our icons - guides, beacons, seers – our mythical guild.

They too ran in intersecting circles and vectors, bouncing among the same cloud systems – irrespective of age, culture or geography - their fingerprint files are all over the machinations of what is deep and thoughtful and provocative about the web.

Not that any of us knew this of course. We were largely ignorant of such things as we surfed pharmaceutical websites, cribbed Shakespeare interpretations, downloaded mods for *Doom* and shared obscure Devo tracks on *Limewire*. But we were operating – essentially - in the atmosphere of their laboratory.

Stuart Brand in particular, formerly the publisher of the *Whole Earth Catalogue* in the 1960s and more recently co-founder of the *Long Now Foundation*, is the lightning rod for the predominately Californian DNA of technological innovation and ecological awareness that permeated the network zeitgeist of this period.

He has a direct connection to Ken Kasey and the Merry Pranksters, Cybernetics 2.0, the MIT Media Lab and recent efforts by his foundation to build a 10 000 year old clock in a the side of a mountain in central Nevada. In 2010 the edge.org website, which is administrated by another of Brand's 60's contempries John Brockman, posed the question: "How is the internet changing the way that you think?" In response Brand spoke of his "Guild". Of affecting change. Of taking an idea and exploring this via the minds and personalities and logic of his peers. They are a disparate group, as much as they are integrated yet independent.

Brand writes, *"Our association is looser than a team but closer than a cohort, and it's not a club or a workgroup or an elite. I call it a guild. Everyone in my guild runs their own operation, and none of us report to each other. All we do is keep close track of what each other is thinking and doing. Often we collaborate directly, but most of the time we don't. Everyone in my guild has their own guild---each of theirs largely different from mine.*

One's guild is a conversation extending over years and decades. I hearken to my gang because we have overlapping interests, and they keep surprising me. Familiar as I am with them, I can't finish their sentences. Their constant creativity feeds my creativity, and I try to do the same for them."

For Brand and many people like him, and I include myself in this logic - the web, email and the mobile phone have become the consciousness for our creativity and our research. Feedback and critique is never too far away. This can sometimes be confronting - embarrassing even - as much as it can be immediate and inspiring.

But me, myself, I am largely invisible.

Begrudgingly I partake in the new system of the top-down iconography which characterises the contemporary user experience: Web 2.0, "social media". These systems are useful but

not malleable. Widely used but not user centric. We complain that it is both out of our control and too controlled. Therefore, it is in our nature – and in our best interests - to define our own space. To design the message. To badge our territory.

I am a logo. My research has a catchy name, a provocative tag line and of course, it has a logo. My web journal has a logo. As does my Vimeo and YouTube accounts. My ABN number has a logo. My 9 month old daughter, I reluctantly admit, has a logo and a Twitter account. But the physical me - the educator, the film maker, the media artist, the thief, the poet, the other … is largely invisible.

My online profiles are variations on Edvard Munch's *The Scream (of Nature)*. A 2bit black and white rendition of *The Scream* for Twitter. Homer Simpson as *The Scream* for Facebook. That scary dude from the movie *The Scream*, as *The Scream*, for general purpose web profiles. A play within a play, that functions as a virtual caricature of myself solely for the purpose of deflecting attention away from the author and throwing the trolls off my trail. My online identity therefore is densely layered, integrated but essentially vague. There is a distance and obscurifaction going on as I reluctantly participate in the new economy of artistic self promotion.

This is a luxury and a theoretical trick. Cute. Obscure. Playful. But not helpful if you wish to build up a mass cyber audience. You, of course, cannot afford such an indulgence.

What it means to be an artist in this post millennial soup carries an entirely new set of requirements than has previously been the case. Certainly Leonardo Da Vinci had to market himself and protect his brand. Warhol was the brand. Banksy proved to the Hipsters that branding could be ironic.

But you are practitioners. Plural. You are graduating as multi-instrumentalists, what you lack in specificity… you have gained in dexterity. But this is a double-edged sword. What you also crave – and what the future demands - is visibility.

You cannot afford to be vague, obscure or ironic. Not yet. You spots are not even dry.

You have been told that you are Digital Natives, Millennials, a Y on the generational Lickert Scale – as if that means something. Of course it is just lazy journalism and a convenient catch all for marketeers and policy wonks at universities. I suspect the Baby Boomers just never got over the stigma of their own brand and are desperately seeking to shift the attention elsewhere.

For you operate within an environment that is hard to interpret from the outside looking in. More so, I would argue, than has ever previously been the case. And increasingly this view is becoming less individualised, less personal and more hegemonic as the logos of globe-spanning web applications become the locker rooms for our memories, the testing grounds for our dreams and crucially for us – the marketplace for our creativity.

If there is something digital – or natural, depending on which side of the century you sit – about being born after 1989: after the fall of the Berlin wall, after the launch of the first web browser, after the cancellation of *Young Talent Time*, but before *Achtung Baby*, before *Ray Gun* magazine, before the Cohen Brothers; it is this:

You are on a precipice of profound change. But unlike those who have gone before you, you are beyond the code. You do not see the code you do not need the code. It has become invisible. But the key difference for those who will follow in your steps, is that you know the code is there. As a media artist you know it can be – if you are brave enough – manipulated to your own ends. You can choose not to buy an off-the-shelf solution. Through your own ingenuity and awareness of the systems that surround you, you can become visible in profoundly new ways.

As demonstrated by the work in this room. Some of you are already doing this. You are making a conscious decision to use an opportunity – which is open to everyone – to bend the moment to your own ends. To showcase your creativity and demonstrate the depth of your professional persona. Your username, your profile, your icon, your avatar, your logo.

In February this year, the *Atlantic Monthly* published a manifesto by Piotr Czerski a Polish artist and commentator, it was called: *We Are the Web Kids.*

He writes, *"We grew up with the Internet and on the Internet. This is what makes us different; this is what makes the crucial, although surprising from your point of view (- and here he is speaking back to the system, back at the establishment -) the crucial difference: we do not 'surf' and the internet to us is not a 'place' or 'virtual space'. The Internet to us is not something external to reality but a part of it: an invisible yet constantly present layer intertwined with the physical environment. We do not use the Internet, we live on the Internet and along it. If we were to tell our (coming of age tale) to you, the analog (version), we could say there was a natural Internet aspect to every single experience that has shaped us. We made friends and enemies online, we prepared cribs for tests online, we planned parties and studying sessions online, we fell in love and broke up online. The Web to us is not a technology which we had to learn and which we managed to get a grip of. The Web is a process, happening continuously and continuously transforming before our eyes; with us and through us. Technologies appear and then dissolve in the peripheries, websites are built, they bloom and then pass away, but the Web continues, because we are the Web; we, communicating with one another in a way that comes naturally to us, more intensely and more efficiently than ever before in the history of mankind."*

I choose to be invisible. I choose to access and manipulate the systems around me – at a distance, outside the circuitry. But if we are in the machine, if we are the system, how do we make the distinction from one circuit to the next? How do we engage an audience outside of this loop? How do we disrupt the signal without cutting one's self off from our guild?

Because, as evidenced by the relationships in this room, our guild, our collaborators are very important cogs in this rather symbiotic relationship we have with the network. You may choose to flourish on that network, or choose to remain largely inconspicuous.

There is no right or wrong in this. We choose our moments.

I choose to be invisible. Because right now, that suits me just fine.

What do you choose?

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