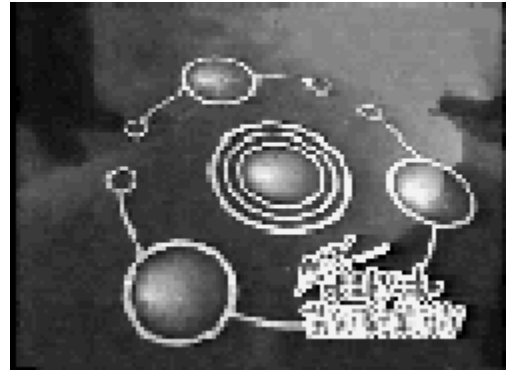


“Virtual Morality”: A Quaker in Cyberspace

an interview with Ebon Fisher

by Esther Mürer

Right: Bionic Code: "Bypass Elitist Node." Fuji Television, "Oh My NY!" — a live broadcast by satellite from Galapagos Artspace in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, to 10 million Japanese TV viewers. September 1997.



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Ebon Fisher is, among other things, a meme breeder. Born in 1959, he was raised a Quaker, and is a member of Germantown MM in Philadelphia. He holds a master's from MIT, where he worked in the Media Lab until he decided he wanted to foster the interactivity of people, not just computers. He now has a studio, Nerve Circle Creations, in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, NY.

Ebon has long been fascinated with biotechnology, which he sees as a model for cultural evolution. In the early 1980s he began experimenting transferring biological language and symbols into a wider cultural context. Spray-painting stylized brain cells on bridges, golf courses, and abandoned cars was the first of many attempts to remove biological language from its scientific context.

More recently he has devised a series of media organisms (memes) which he calls *bionic codes*. "I am not interested in simulating nature," Ebon says, "but in incubating bio-technological processes in an actual media culture. I want to grow things in a petri dish of living communications."

The bionic codes are computer-generated images which he has disseminated in such diverse media as stickers, T-shirts, nightclubs, installations in museums, the internet, and happenings ("web jams") and an interactive multimedia environment ("the AlulA Dimension"). It is Ebon's hope that the memes will reproduce themselves, mutating to adapt to different media to create a sort of "virtual morality."

Ebon prefers “media” to “art” as an umbrella word for a democratic, inclusive sphere of activity. Both the art world and pop culture take art out of its cultural context--the former by focusing in the artistic expression of the individual, the latter by focusing on the desires of the consumer. In both cases art is divorced from its social functions. Ebon wants to find a third way which involves mutual nurturing of whole systems of socio-ecological organisms.

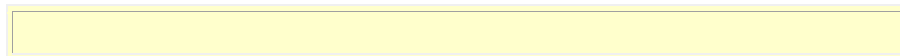
Ebon sees his projects as Quakerism in action. He says that Quakers are too hung up on print to the exclusion of other media. He is trying to translate Quaker spirituality and testimonies into logos, simple symbols which will cut through media noise and permeate the subconscious of our culture. He pointed out that most of the codes are circular in design, like a Quaker meeting for worship. “The void is a strategic part of Quaker social experience,” he says. “People use their own bodies as a transmitter, the whole group is creating transmissions.”

The bionic codes are part of a broader, evolving philosophy of “nurturing the fluid, dynamic liveliness which might be described as Spirit.” Ebon calls this philosophy “Wiggism.” (I can’t begin to do justice to Wiggism here, but some of its flavor is shown in [the box following this article](#) .):

Like many of us, Ebon struggles with a feeling that Friends don’t perceive the link between his Quakerism and his art. At times his Quaker upbringing surfaces as “...a bizarre sense of failure for having dedicated my life to the pursuit of ephemera, and not wholeheartedly of explicit social change. I can intellectualize to myself that what I do does count politically in an indirect sort of way, but there is always that nagging sense that I am enjoying myself too much! The hedonism inherent in being in touch with my feelings--a necessary mechanism for mediating between audience, medium, and content-- seems somehow threatening, or even worse, frivolous, to certain Quakers.

“They don’t always take contemporary artists seriously. Only the classical ‘top 40’ are sufficiently preppy. It makes me feel invisible, inconsequential, in the Quaker sphere. However Japanese Television and the Guggenheim Museum Magazine have been very perky. Does that mean I’m becoming Buddhist or Lutheran?! No, of course not. But it does secularize me. I’m extremely fond of my Quaker roots, however, and still consider myself a Quaker in the most elemental sense.

But then, he reflects, “perhaps the Quakers are no different from other traditional religious groups. The Arts can be seen as a threatening, emerging religious order with its own set of priests (artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers), bishops (curators), and houses of worship (galleries, nightclubs, cafés, museums). There are, however, interesting cross-references between philosophies of creation and older religious orders. The artist-as-genius mold can be traced to priest-oriented religions. Everyone-is-an-artist movements such as Dada, Fluxus, and ecstatic nightclub dancing scenarios (including jazz, the blues, folk-rock, grunge, and rave) have evident links in my mind to the Quakers and other egalitarian movements. It’s too bad the Quaker influence on culture cannot be more strongly present as [is] its influence on non-violence, social service, and environmental issues.”



WIGGLISM

TO NURTURE THAT WHICH WIGGLES

*We loop into vital coilings, this coiling, our coiling.
We spark the fibrillations
of a vague biological embrace.
We nurture that which wiggles—of flesh or steel,
sinew or circuit, mud or imagination;
transmuting art into a zoology of spirit.*

FOR THAT WHICH WIGGLES IS AMAZING

*We dissolve every bloodless workstation, artwork,
and module of consumption,
into the acids of living ritual. We grow connections
in an ecology of twitches and presences;
soaking tendrils of thought and conscience
in a spray of fibrous feedback;
infusing phantoms and facts
with equal measures of visceral significance;
writing among the rivulets and curls
of screaming knowledge.*

*We breed turbulent creatures in a mongrel jungle
of plasma, machines, and minds.
We struggle to love these creatures, these convulsions,
to keep that which is lively, and that
which sustains life, in supreme focus.
May the lethal pomposities of art and science
disappear in the surrounding blur.*

*So let us gently secrete
every milky ganglion and wire
into the quivering wilderness;
let us siphon every atom, and theory of atom,
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melting into the monstrous, pulsing mystery
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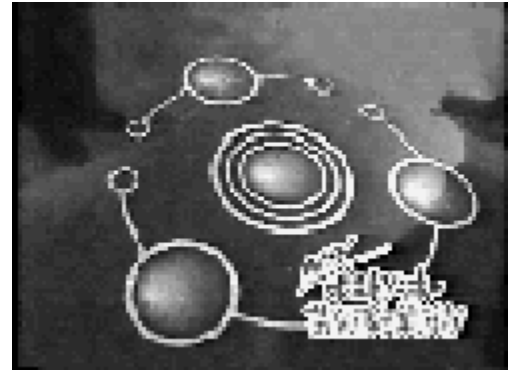
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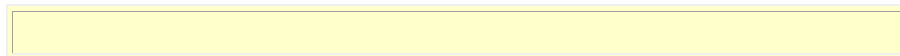
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Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS
Issue #8, Winter 1997-98



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

Reflections on Anger

Hurt at Friends' failure to perceive our art as a valid form of service or witness is widespread among us. What kind of support we can legitimately ask from our meetings is a question leading into deep spiritual waters. For openers I feel led to share the following, adapted from a piece I wrote for the Central Philadelphia MM newsletter.

The creedless nature of liberal Quakerism inevitably carries with it the dangers of Ranterism—the tendency to interpret any impulse coming from within as being Spirit-led.

A religion based on premises that are both unstated and unexamined invites me to project my own content on it, so that the "community" becomes an extension of myself. When I can't see the boundary between me and not-me, discernment and accountability are impossible.

Is Ranterism more of a danger for artists than for others? Are we especially prone to conflate our inner vision and the community's unstated premises? I don't know, but the question is worth asking.

Certainly many of us are angry at our meetings, or with Friends. This anger often has a subtext which goes something like this: "You neither know nor care where I really live. As a member of this community I have a right to be understood!"

When I'm in this mood it generally turns out that what I crave is not help in growing into greater obedience to the leadings of the Spirit, but support for my rebellious self-will, my spiritual pride, my flight from the Hound of Heaven.

In learning to understand and deal with my own anger I have found the following quotations to be valuable touchstones. The first is from Paul:

Pain borne in God's way brings no regrets but a change of heart leading to salvation; pain borne in the world's way brings death. —2 Corinthians 7:10 (REB)

The Greek word rendered here as "pain" (many translations use "grief" or "sorrow") covers a wide spectrum of physical and mental anguish, from grief to resentment to outrage. Compare the use of the word *sore* in the second quote, which comes from the "step book" of Alcoholics Anonymous, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

It is a spiritual axiom that every time we are disturbed, no matter what the cause, there is something wrong *with us*. If somebody hurts us and we are sore, we are in the wrong also.

When I'm mired down in anger I need to ask myself wherein I am wrong, and what kind of change God may be asking of me.

I often discover that God is trying to tell me something I don't want to hear, and that I'm looking to the Meeting to shield me from having to hear it. I am trying to get the meeting to support a false self, to abet my resistance to God's will for my life. When that doesn't work, I blame the Meeting.

If, on the other hand, it does work--if I receive the support I'm asking for--that just makes things worse. The result is a sort of spiritual arms race in which my demands that the meeting shore up my defenses against God escalate in a vicious circle.

Closely related is the "Let's all get together and do my thing" ploy. I hear what I am being called to do, but I don't have the courage to do it alone and face the possible negative consequences. From the Meeting I don't just want clearness or encouragement or support; I want everybody else to hear my call as theirs, to rescue me from the consequences, *to bear my cross*. When this doesn't happen I start muttering things about a prophet being without honor in her own country.

In both these cases my anger may be justified, but it is misdirected. I should be mad at God, not the Meeting. God can make the most outrageous demands. If I take time to have it out with God, then I do undergo a change of heart; I see that I must stop grumbling and get on with minding my call. And, as George Fox would put it, "then content comes."

I bear pain in the world's way when I use my anger as a defense against hearing or minding my call. I bear pain in God's way when I mind my call and accept the cross involved.

Paul is right: on the all too rare occasions when I've managed to bear pain in God's way, I have never regretted it.

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