



## Leonardo

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Colonial Ventures in Cyberspace

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## COLONIAL VENTURES IN CYBERSPACE

In the spring of 1996, as part of a residency in the Departments of Sculpture and Painting at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia in Valencia, Spain, I curated an on-line exhibition of work by seven artists and critics entitled "The Homestead" (translated as "La Finca" in Castilian Spanish). Created on the World Wide Web as a "colony" in cyberspace, the Homestead (<<http://omnibus-eye.rtvf.nwu.edu/Homestead/>>) explores the effects of historical colonization on the technological present and the colonizing effects of technology. "Colonization" is deliberately used here as a provocative term, in opposition to "technotopia"—the idealized vision of technology offered by centers of economic and political power. Colonization implies borders, an "us" and a "them," a degree of violence. Identity is constructed on colony borders. On the border, objects and persons acquire names, differences are constructed. Only a fraction of the world's people have a presence in cyberspace: the rest are outsiders. Will the outsiders eventually participate? Will borders and differences persist in cyberspace? Who decides these issues?

Nearly all the work in the Homestead/La Finca was created digitally during late 1995 and early 1996. Roshini Kempadoo, a photographer from the United Kingdom working with digital imagery, composed a suite of digitally composited images and an essay, *Sweetness and Light*, in which she examines the history of the plantation system and its possible mappings onto contemporary power structures in cyberspace. Photographer Esther Parada, who teaches in the Department of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Chicago, contributed a hypertextual essay and series of digitally manipulated images on the scope of historical colonialism and its manipulation of the natural environment. Brazilian artist Rejane Spitz, who had been videotaping people learning to use automated teller machines (ATMs) in her country, used MacroMedia's Shockwave technology to create an ATM with the accents of northern Brazil. Richard Maxwell, who teaches political economy of global media and culture at Northwestern University, created his first hypertextual essay, "The Thicket," with the collaboration of Chris Young, a student in the department of Radio, Television and Film at Northwestern. Chris also provided production support throughout the Homestead project. Basing his project on Richard Dawkins's concept of memes, Steve Wilson, of the Conceptual Design Department at San Francisco State University, used HyperCard to create a Common Gateway Interface (CGI) application that would let people link to pages where new ideas might appear. Torrey Nommesen, a student at San Francisco State University, created a subtly ironic corporate site, "Tri-Angle Corp." Annette Barbier, who teaches in Northwestern University's Radio, Television and Film Department and whose work deals with domestic life, created an audio diary of her skirmishes with telemarketers by recording their pitches, often with hilarious results.

These seven different points of view are wrapped in a hypertextual space designed both to entice and to frustrate the viewer. We expressly wanted to create an exhibition environment that would be not merely presentational, but also continuous with the work. In the process of design, Chris Young and I rediscovered the virtues of narrative and its possible superiority to 3D virtual spaces as an instrument of seduction and paradox. The exhibition was complemented by a round table discussion in Valencia with presentations by Madrid electronic media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Roshini Kempadoo and Salvador Bayarri, a lecturer and researcher

at University of Valencia. Elsewhere (*Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, <<http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-journals/LEA/profiles/fincalea/>>) I have written about the challenges of designing a workable virtual space; here I will briefly consider the ambivalent nature of utopia as portrayed in the Homestead.

## TECHNOTOPIA, THE SHINING CITY

Throughout the European colonization of the New World, numerous utopian projects instrumental in opening up new territories sprang up in the hinterlands. Political movements engendered in industrial society also proposed their own versions of utopia. Communal utopian experiments have receded with the frontier, and political utopias have collapsed beneath the rationales of prosperity and economic expansion—but not without spawning countless orphans. Some have found shelter in religion; some in the rituals of popular culture. Technotopia, a future world redeemed by science (or more specifically, by engineering), has emerged as an official orphanage where stray visions may come to roost—provided they behave. The Homestead was established as an unofficial colony to take in the misfits, the ones who answer back, crack jokes, point fingers, poke holes, organize strikes or strike out on their own.

By a curious reversal of causality, the technotopian vision is portrayed as the motor of technological progress, while the relations of production that construct technological society—relations of class, economic dominance and cultural hegemony—sink below the level of social consciousness. This is strikingly clear in relation to the emerging networked communications infrastructure, where a stream of commercial propaganda portrays a world where conflicts and differences will vanish. What better reason to build technology could there be? Indeed, it becomes easier to adopt a visionary attitude with respect to technology than to untangle its infrastructure. Perhaps this reversal is a result of massive commercial hype—commodity fetishism on a grand scale. Yet to the extent that networks represent an extension of the human nervous system, more intimate sources of identity than material possession alone seem to enter into play. In buying into technology we construct our image as consumers, but then technology obligingly casts our transformed image back at us for our further edification. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker refer to this transformation as the “harvesting” of human flesh by technology, where “[our] minds and bodies are reduced to a database for imaging systems” [1]. Like the hallucinatory images that desire projects onto the waking mind, the harvested images can masquerade as real experiences, fooling us into accepting virtual representations as objective outcomes. As a totalizing system, utopia functions very well as a paradigm for technological progress, for both derive the meaning of individual actions from a teleological myth. If the *realpolitik* hidden behind technotopia appears ethically abhorrent, what strategies can artists working with technology adopt to combat or change it?

Clearly the traditional strategies of investigation, analysis, criticism and humor can still work—or so we hope! These are the tools of culture in which we retain at least a secular faith, even in this age of exhausted narratives, where “speaking with irony in a dead style permits speech in a situation where it would otherwise be impossible” [2]. The terrain into which the artists of the Homestead have ventured sits smack-dab in the melancholy swamp of information, where all events become equally trivialized as “data” and knowledge loses all significance. And yet they have raised islands above that flat perspective. One suspects they succeed, in part, by making a pact with a demon exorcised by Modernism, the perverse angel of subjective discourse. These are people with a point of view and the will to express it. They succeed, too, because they reflect upon the limits of their subjectivity. Facile judgments

cannot reveal the full extent of alienation. Finally, they point to the vitality of other histories, other cultures and other ideas that fall beyond the borders of the Information State. Even irony is only a device, the edge that holds the work together: one more border to cross. It is time to fall off the edge of the flat world and start living in the round.

PAUL HERTZ

*Curator and designer of the Homestead/La Finca*

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*Evanston, IL 60208-2270*

*U.S.A.*

*E-mail: <paul-hertz@nwu.edu>*

### **References**

1. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, "Code Warriors" in Lynn Hershman Leeson, ed. *Clicking In, Hot Links to a Digital Culture*, (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1996) p. 256.

2. Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974).

### **Editor's Note**

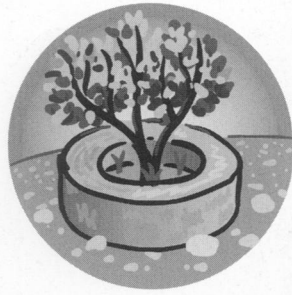
The figure captions of the works in this Gallery section include comments from the curator Paul Hertz, statements from the artists, and actual excerpts from the works themselves (in boldface type).



Entry into the Homestead, be sure to pay.  
The good artificer Daedalus built the original.

## The Homestead/La Finca Interface Traffic Flow

Design by Paul Hertz  
with the collaboration of Chris Young



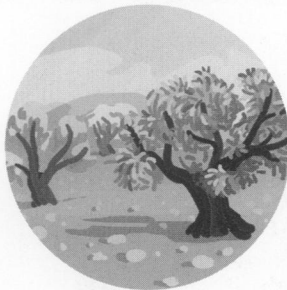
Anywhere or nowhere,  
a staging space

The Border, site of choices:  
jump into the Thicket,  
answer some questions,  
or sneak through the fence

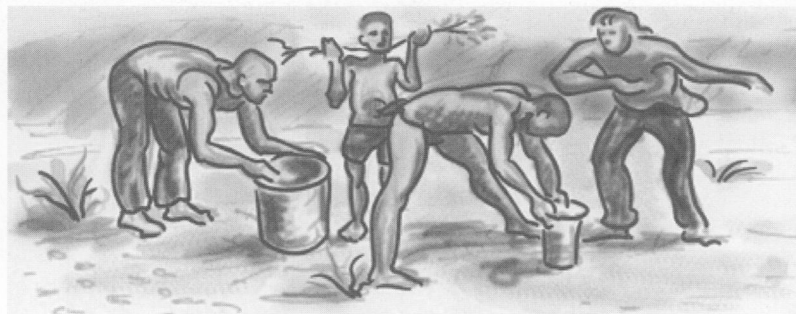
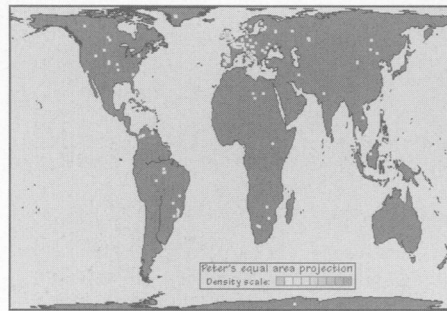


The Thicket, where the unwary  
get lost in semantics, can  
tangle you up if you don't  
take a chance on getting out.

Sneaking in, a journey from  
genetic code to binary code  
with a random jump at the end



Question: where did your ancestors come from?  
Click on the map, add your story.



With a bit of luck or sufficient respect for authority (you answered our  
questions) you arrive at the Clearing, where you can choose which  
artist's installation to view.

The Homestead: Interface Traffic Flow. Design by Paul Hertz with the collaboration of Chris Young. Shown here is an overview of the design of the Homestead, with images taken from the main pages of the project, which precede the individual artists' installations. The texts shown here are not part of the pages but are included to describe how each page functions within the whole design. The arrows indicate the path one would take through these pages, a path that in some instances doubles back, gets tangled or makes a random leap.



### Sweetness and Light by Roshini Kempadoo

*The essential thing here . . . is to answer clearly the innocent first question: what, fundamentally, is colonialization? To agree on what it is not: neither evangelisation, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease and tyranny . . . nor an attempt to extend the rule of law. . . . [T]he decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force.*

—Aimé Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (originally published 1955)

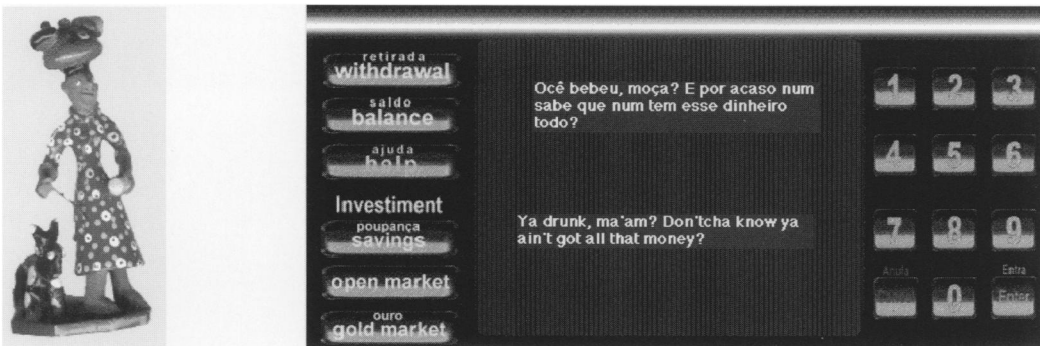
**Artist's Statement:** The work *Sweetness and Light* explores some thoughts about cyberspace from the position of someone whose ancestors were subjects of the colonial experience. Like all analogies, although there are some similarities, there are also some fundamental differences. I cannot totally condemn the development of media/cyberspace to a neat and simple comparison. Like all my work, *Sweetness and Light* needs to be seen as a statement or an experience—for now, it is a description that will be changed, is not fixed and should not be seen or experienced as a definitive expression. (See also Color Plate A No. 3).

—Roshini Kempadoo, 73B Madeley Road, London W5 2LT, United Kingdom. E-mail: <100737.2121@compuserve.com>.

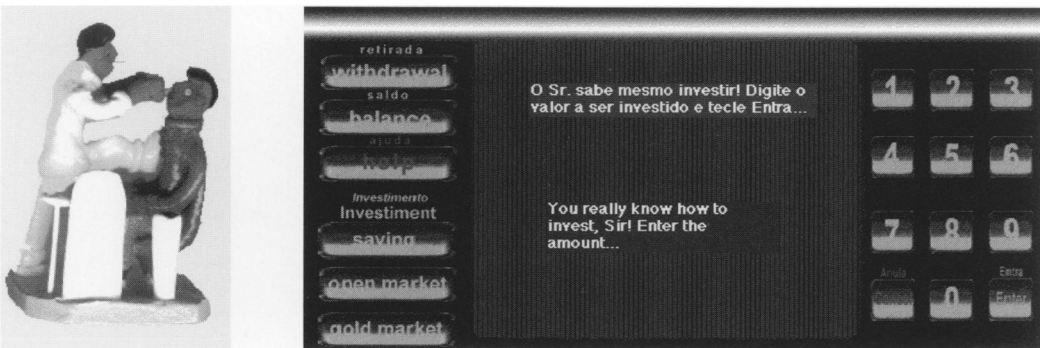
**Father Ezequiel:** For many years Father Ezequiel has said mass at Church and organized the parish festivals and processions. He gets along well with the ranchers and helps the small farmers. Even the hired guns confess to Father Ezequiel. In order to get everyone to attend mass, he has even made a deal with God and the Devil.



**Josefa:** A washerwoman, she wakes up early, fixes the kids' school lunches and goes out with a huge bundle of clean clothes balanced on her head. Her husband is retired, sick and bedridden. Dona Josefa bore 15 children, but four died before the age of one. The children work in the fields, the older girls work as day maids and help out, and the younger girls take care of the little ones.



**Dr. Murilo:** He's the most popular dentist in the area. He studied in the big city but came back to his hometown to treat his neighbors. Highly educated, he's a real bookworm. He can pull a tooth without making you flinch, and he doesn't charge people who can't pay.



## Private Domain by Rejane Spitz

**Curator:** Rejane Spitz's work, *Private Domain (please, keep off!)* displays an ATM with the accents of northern Brazil. Users adopt as an avatar one of several characters from the North and then try to manage the character's money.

**Artist:** This work is about those empty hands that are on the fringe of the Web. It is about those words that cannot be translated, about those emotions that cannot be shared and those meanings that cannot be understood by people from other cultures. It is about the richness of human beings living in their different realities, with their own systems of ideas, concepts, rules and meanings.

Who are you? You possibly do not speak my language, do not share my beliefs, do not look like me. But you may come in if you respect my feelings, my logic and my rules. If not, please keep off! This is a private domain. Information is never public or neutral.

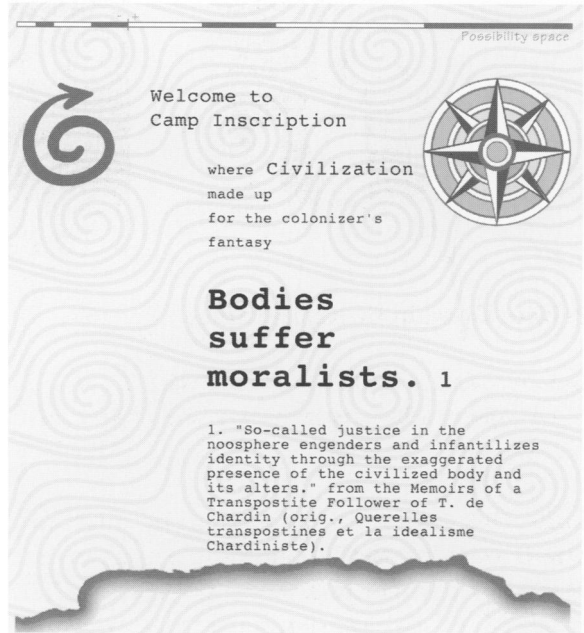
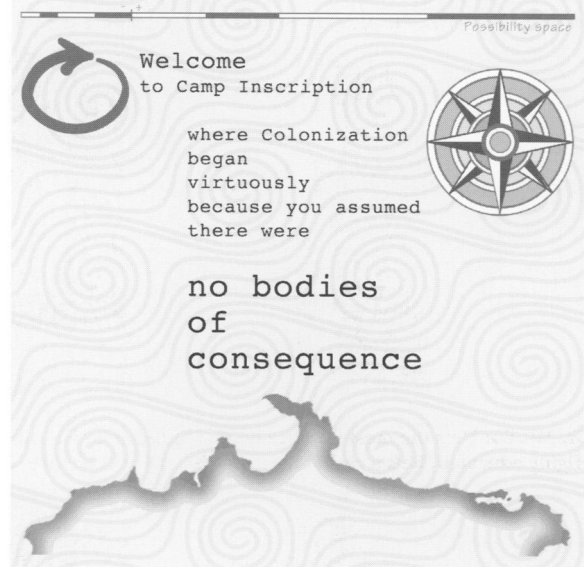
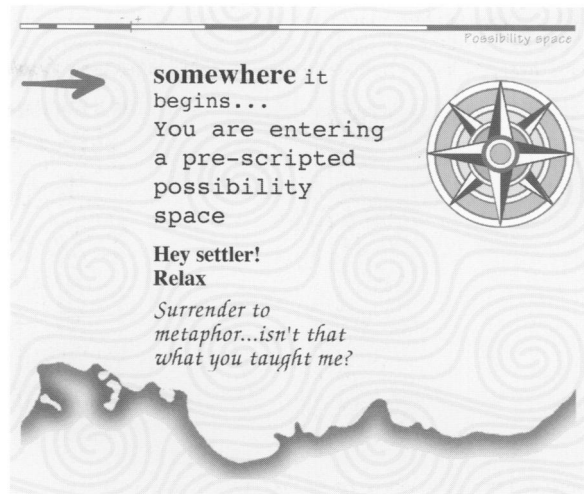
—Rejane Spitz, PUC-RIO, Departamento de Artes, Rua Marques de Sao Vicente, 225 CEP 22453, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. E-mail: <rejane@art.puc-rio.br>.

## The Thicket: A Possibility Space by Richard Maxwell

*Curator:* Intimately bound up in the design of the Homestead, Richard Maxwell's hypertext *The Thicket: A Possibility Space* represents a tangle of lateral branches where the unwary may get lost or emerge into unexpected vistas within works by other contributors to the Homestead. Left unattended, the pages of text will load at random, seizing control from anyone who stumbles into the Thicket. Nor will following the guideposts avail—escape from the Thicket is a matter of jumping out and trusting luck. The ironic structure supports equally ironic snippets of text, with digs at both the utopian and imperial aspects of colonization. This uncontrollable path could be a metaphor for the explosive growth of information space, while the leaps in logic within the Thicket and the leaps of escape beyond it suggest a non-hierarchical information flow, a rhizome.

*Artist:* The Thicket is a place between points of departure and arrival, where the Homestead narrative breaks off into nothing . . . a space of possibility, a journey without end, a moment without direction.

—Richard Maxwell, 5217 N. Magnolia, Chicago, IL 60604, U.S.A. E-mail: <rmx@nwu.edu>. Design by Chris Young, Department of Radio, Television and Film, Northwestern University, 1905 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208-2270, U.S.A. E-mail: <cwebbyoung@nwu.edu>.



A new idea colonizes mind space  
It can be a homestead at the tip of culture

Pick the category of idea you want to see

<input type="radio"/> Outrageous	<input type="radio"/> Bizarre	<input type="radio"/> Radical	<input type="radio"/> Paradigm shift
<input type="radio"/> Wierd	<input type="radio"/> Unprecedented	<input type="radio"/> Unconventional	<input type="radio"/> Fringe
<input type="radio"/> Heretical	<input type="radio"/> Foreign	<input type="radio"/> Exceptional	<input type="radio"/> New
<input type="radio"/> Extreme	<input type="radio"/> Provocative	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Ground breaking	<input type="radio"/> Iconoclastic

Find me links to these kind of ideas

- [Follow this link if you want to ADD the URL of a site that presents these kind of ideas](#)
- [Click here if you want more information about this event](#)
- [Other web art events and information about InfoArts program at San Francisco State University](#)
- [This event is part of an international Web Art Event exploring colonization](#)



### Homesteads in Mind Space: The Web and New Ideas by Steve Wilson

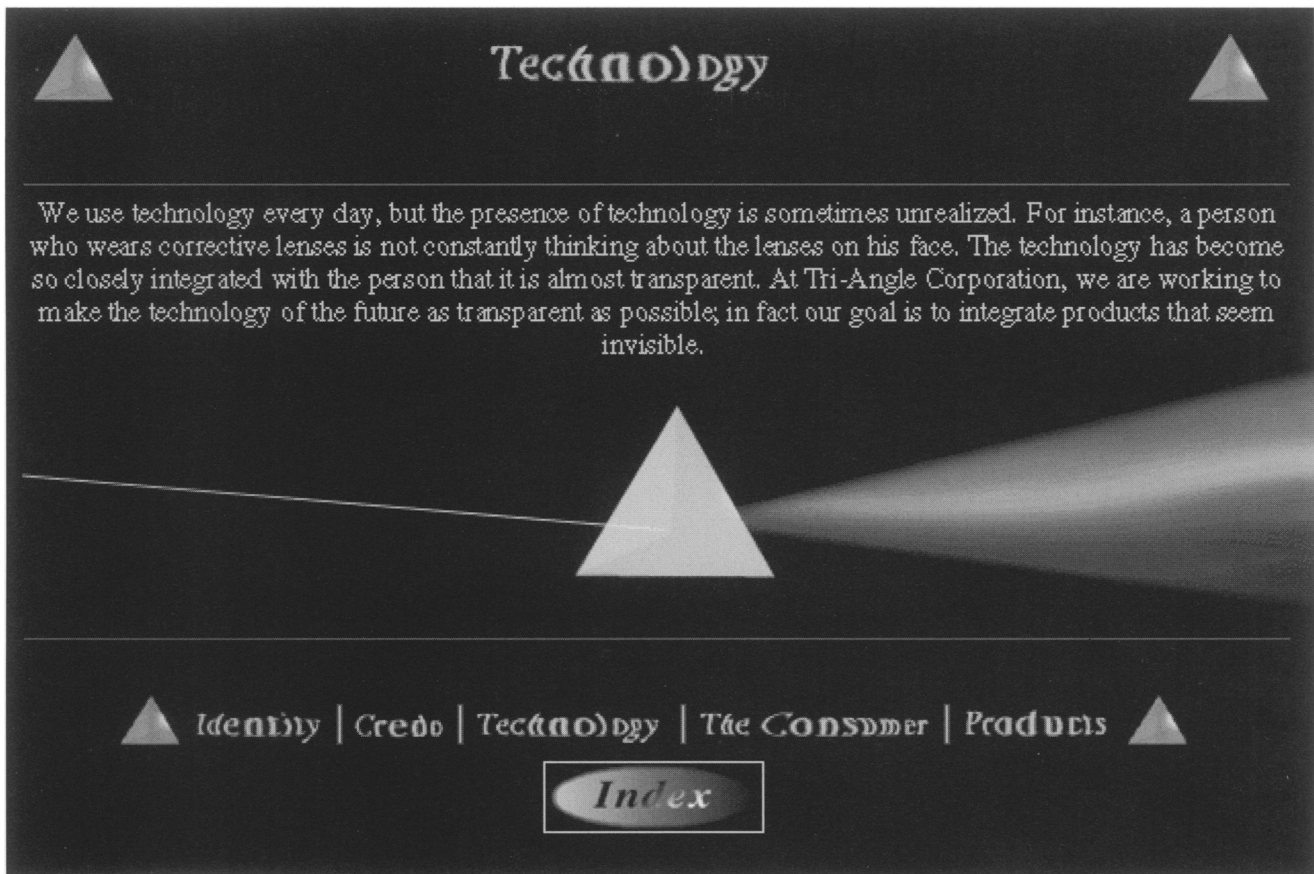
*Artist:* Evolution proceeds through the mutation of genes. New genes appear. Some end up being better suited to changing realities. These new genes become selected and become the norm. Older organisms die out and become extinct.

Some believe human cultures advance in a similar way. New memes (ideas, cultural forms) appear. Some are adopted because of their power. These new memes become the norms in culture. Older forms are abandoned and die out.

We could think of these new ideas as homesteads in cultural evolution. They *colonize* mind space. The process is hard to see from inside. Old forms are comfortable and do their work. New ideas can seem fanatic, alien, wild, fringe. . . . For a while, they are resisted and ridiculed.

Art has often been the champion of these unorthodox ideas. The Web could accelerate the pace of cultural evolution by making it easy for new ideas to be published and spread from anywhere in the world. But many ideas really are dead ends and lead nowhere. How can we tell which new ideas are the seeds of the future and which are doorways to nowhere?

—Steve Wilson, 74 Coleridge Street, San Francisco, CA 94110, U.S.A. E-mail: <swilson@sfsu.edu>.



### Tri-Angle Corporation by Torrey Nommesen

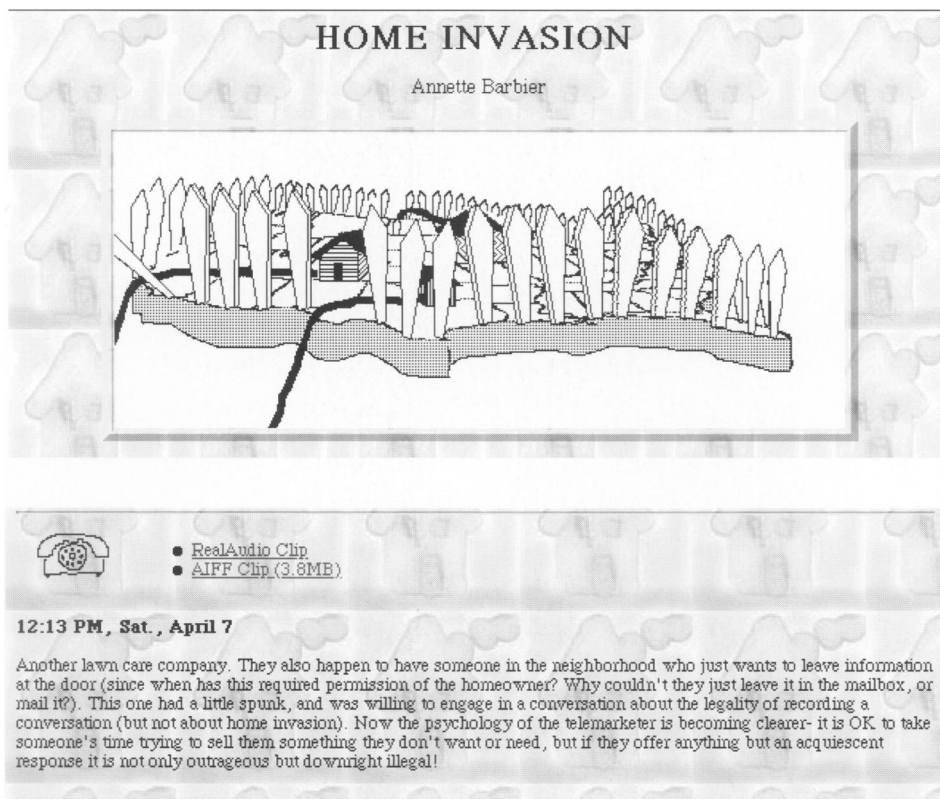
As a leader in innovative concepts and ideas, our corporation is proud to sponsor the Colonization in Cyber-Space effort. Equipped with knowledge as old and as ever-changing as time itself, we are working diligently for a better, more prosperous future. With technology growing at an ever-increasing rate, we feel that your knowledge base should match, if not surpass that of the cutting-edge technologies of today. We deal in knowledge, technology and the future. We are Tri-Angle Corporation.

*Curator:* This straight-faced corporate credo introduces Tri-Angle Corporation, ostensibly the employer of Torrey Nommesen, who is in fact its creator.

*Artist:* Information is power and currency in the virtual world we inhabit. Thus, he who controls information has power. Tri-Angle Corporation is colonizing cyberspace by gaining this power through information. Another sublevel in the project is that Tri-Corp. is not only a corporation, but also a religion. Throughout history, religions have colonized minds as well as actual physical territory in the name of god. Also, the idea of huge corporations claiming mental territory with the sort of motives they have is really scary to me. There are so many jingles and icons in the media that stick in people's minds. I have chosen the symbol of the spinning emerald triangle because it seems ominous and "slick" and I believe it will stick in people's heads.

This artwork is an attempt to deal with issues of the corporate colonization of our minds and, hopefully, poke fun at it. Though at first glance it may not seem a commentary at all, I believe it has deeper levels.

—Torrey Nommesen, 601 Van Ness Avenue, #E3721, San Francisco, CA 94102, U.S.A. E-mail: <carrot@sfsu.edu>.



**Annette Barbier: I'm recording this conversation.**  
**Telemarketer: Pardon me?**  
**AB: I'd just like for you to know that I'm recording this conversation.**  
**T: I don't think that's legal, ma'am.**  
**AB: You don't think it's legal? (laughs) In some states it's illegal to solicit people in their homes by telephone. . . .**  
**T: Can I get my supervisor and have her talk with you?**  
**AB: Well, if you want to. I'm not the one insisting on continuing this conversation.**  
**T: Well, I don't want to be rude and hang up on you either.**  
**AB: Well, you could just say good-bye and hang up.**

## Home Invasion by Annette Barbier

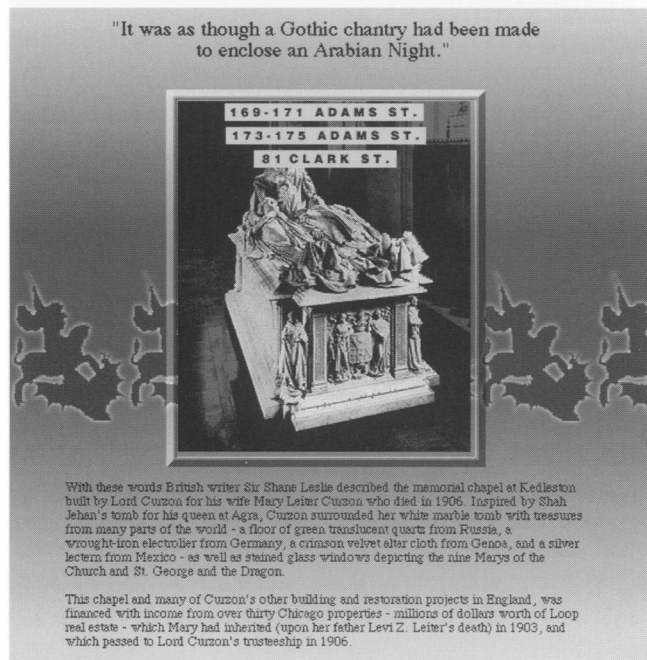
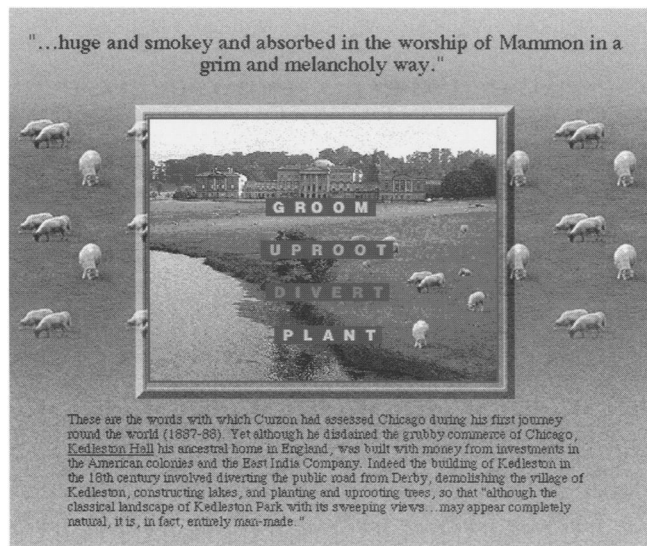
*Identity is not a thing but a process—a constant state of negotiation.*

—Schlesinger, 1987

**Curator:** Domestic space—formerly inviolable—is increasingly disrupted by electronic communication of all sorts, including radio, TV, email and the telephone. Perhaps the most insidious form of intrusion is telephone solicitation. This piece consists of recordings of conversations with telephone solicitors over a period of several weeks.

**Artist:** I am not sure when telephone solicitations became so popular, but they seem to have increased exponentially, as has the volume of junk mail, since I moved to the suburbs 5 years ago. Since leaving the city, I have become self-conscious about the level of consumerism rampant among my peers and myself. Even though my house is much smaller now and has no basement to store things, I seem to have acquired enormous truckloads of junk at the rate of about 1 ton per year. Telephone solicitations seem like an unlooked-for opportunity to buy even more junk. Not only that, I have begun coming home, tired and facing the dread question “what’s for dinner,” to a barrage of these calls that do not seem to stop until bedtime. This piece is a protest, although one I have not always been up to. It has involved psychological games that take a lot of energy to play.

—Annette Barbier, Radio, Television and Film Department, Northwestern University, Room 212 312, 1905 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208-2270, U.S.A. E-mail: <abarbier@nwu.edu.>.)



## Transplant: A Tale of Three Continents by Esther Parada

*Curator:* An examination of "networking" among the wealthy and powerful a century ago, Esther Parada's work *Transplant: A Tale of Three Continents* follows the marriage of Mary Victoria Leiter, a Chicago heiress, and George Nathaniel Curzon, a British lord who became Viceroy of India. Two plants, cinchona (quinine) and wheat, traverse the bounds of this familial, commercial and geographic alliance. Lord Curzon's stellar diplomatic career was launched with the aid of Levi Leiter's wealth, gained in part from speculation in the grain market, while the British presence in India depended on quinine for sustaining the health of its bureaucracy and troops. Parada emphasizes that this is no simple tale of morality, but one that can challenge the polarities through which we tend to view historical events.

*Artist:* Manipulation of the social and physical environment, while often carried out in the name of nature or neutral progress, was invariably in the service of particular countries, classes or elites. I discovered and explored these links thanks to an invitation from Montage Gallery in Derby, England (in conjunction with the Design Research Centre at Derby University). *Transplant* is part of a larger series called *Dig: Cultivation* (commissioned for the 1995 National Photography Festival in Derby), which examines connections between horticultural and cultural histories.

—Esther Parada, 901 N. Hoyne Avenue, Chicago, IL 60622-4902, U.S.A. E-mail: <eparada@uic.edu>.