

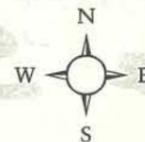
BROAD Sheet

Vol 23 No 2 Winter 1994

REGISTERED BY AUSTRALIA POST
PUBLICATION NO SBH 2695 CATEGORY B
ISSN 0819 677X



Dr Sadie Plant



Letter From Birmingham

...I do hope you're not too cross with me and also, of course, that you like the text. I couldn't get a photo through the fax (only joking - I haven't really got a suitable snap) so I hope you won't be left with a headless column.

I answer the phone. A friend from my nearest telecommunications link says: 'there are some faxes for you from someone called Lettuce in a language I don't fully understand... is it Australian?' and proceeds to read out snippets of what might well be amongst the most scintillating and effectively guilt-tripping prose ever to find its way up over (Or is there another polar opposite to down under?) 'It would be a hooter' is not the sort of line you often hear on the streets of Birmingham. Something stirs deep in the creative juice. A letter from the midlands begins its travels to Adelaide...

'No, but I've been through it...' is what most people say when you ask if they've been to Birmingham. They call it city of the roads, not because it's Birmingham to which they all lead, but because this is the place through which they all must pass. It's just a big place. A deterritorialised sprawl. A far cry from Adelaide, not merely on account of airmiles and heat. There are helicopters instead of parrots, a neon glow for the southern cross, and more slugs than passion fruit in my backyard. The city has just been declared the poorest city in the country, and gunfire is not as rare as it was. The motorway interchange known as Spaghetti Junction is one of its most distinguishing features, and when red stars marked Moscow city centre, Birmingham's glowing patch was the neon signature of a global

economy, with what was once the world's largest Coca-Cola sign plastered across the Rotunda, a building whose proportions gave it an uncanny resemblance to the world's largest Coca-Cola can. As though it might be anywhere at all. No roots, only canals, as Deleuze and Guattari would say.

Londoners tend to hate it for this. It has no soul, they say, no heart. And Brummies tease them in return. It's not for *people* they say with mock seriousness: the cars built this city for themselves. Maybe there is some truth in this: it is certainly difficult to get under any urban skin without encountering the possibility that cities are complex systems, always beyond the control of their planners and governments. Certainly there is a lot of talk about complexity, self-organisation, machine intelligence and virtuality circulating in this city. And if Birmingham once shared the dubious title of cultural desert with Australia, it seems that the hard rains of the future are opening some strange cracks and producing some wild blooms in them both. Perhaps it's not so far after all: Adelaide's *Future Languages* event brought me to Australia in February, and something of the same dynamism welcomed me back to the cold English spring.

Birmingham has a small but remarkable concentration of film makers and photographers, techno music makers and cyberpunk designers; its central traffic system is already mapped in cyberspace; and its universalities are developing dynamic cybercultural zones. As is the case with the city itself, this is increasingly a consequence of bottom-up demand rather than any form top-down control. Certainly it was students who organised the impressive and immensely enjoyable *Virtual Futures* conference at Warwick University, some twenty miles away, and what one newspaper recently described as 'home to Britain's most politically incorrect and hardest drinking phi-

losophers'. Manuel de Landa joined some excellent international speakers and an abundance of brilliant students to perform in the same space as Stelarc and Pat Cadigan, with virtual effects from Linda Dement and VNS Matrix and even a rave on Saturday night. And all this in a department of Philosophy, that great bastion of academic discipline. The times, it seems, are a-changing.

Not, however at an even rate. *Virtual Futures* was a very different occasion from that at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts the week before, where a far more carefully staged event had been organised on the theme of role of the academy and the intellectual in an information age. This meeting was prompted by the publication of *Imagologies*, a book compiled by Esa Saarinen, self styled media star, and the American philosopher Mark C Taylor. It's called 'media philosophy'. You can buy the shirt, hang the curtains and put the book on your coffee table. But you can't discover much about the media or philosophy on the pages: this is Baudrillard on a bad day with a good typographer. Not that this is a problem for the authors, who tell us that they no longer read books anyway, and - expecting you to pay the equivalent of some \$30 to do just this - have what might reasonably be considered the gall to say: 'If you read books, justify it.'

The text grew out of a trans-Atlantic exchange between Esa, Mark, and their students, and is well aware of the practical possibilities of the new conditions of telecommunication. But a rear-view mirror is firmly in place: the authors want socratic dialogues on the net, and are clearly far more interested in using new media for the support of old and established systems of thought than any pursuit of intellectual innovation. And to be the new intellectual, it seems, all you need are a few media-friendly wardrobe items and well cut clichés, and you

too can play the media game. Heaven forbid the possibility - or worse still, the necessity - of thinking something new.

Maybe it hasn't hit Finland yet, but *Virtual Futures* made it abundantly clear that pockets of British culture are already engaged in the emergence of something approximating to a new paradigm. A non-linear vocabulary cross-infects the disciplines as the influence of complex dynamics extends beyond and across the campuses, connecting artists, situationists, crusties (aka ferals), schizo-Deleuzians, hackers, techno DJ's, queer insurgents and a crazy paving of cyberpunk zones. They'd all like Australia too. But there's plenty of them who won't like me if I don't start marking their essays tonight...

... I'm ridiculously busy at this end, but just about (sometimes only just as you know!) getting everything done, and I'm off to a conference in Italy next month - maybe a letter from Bologna next time? Anyway, sorry to be in a perpetual hurry, but I'm due at yet another multimedia extravaganza in a couple of hours' time, so have to go... Speak to you soon, and with megabytes of good wishes to you all.

lotsa love,
Sadie