Amechan

The Creation and Packaging of Identity

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1999
PLEASE NOTE

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Multimedia item accompanies print copy
The Creation and Packaging of Identity

This paper, and the accompanying project Amechan explore the construction of "virtual" Identity on the Internet. It explores historic art trails and how they lead to the new frontier of web art, moving from the traditional arts to television, video to the Internet. It explores the need for alternative forms of art practice and art dissemination in contemporary society and it looks at what makes web art unique. It also explores the alternate realms of reality; our physical world, and the new world of the virtual. And how this has affected our notions of self, privacy, and narrative. And finally, it explains the construction of the Amechan site, both theoretically and practically. The paper has been divided into three parts:

**Part 1 - A Perspective of Web Art**

This section attempts to site the work within current art practices. It describes the evolution of art practices and the ways in which Web Art can facilitate further change. It looks at what has led to the construction of the web, and how this new medium has informed a new form of art. Finally, it details the unique qualities of web art and the future of the Web as a site and medium for contemporary art practices.

**Part 2 - A Personal History**

This section places Amechan into the context of my art practice, both in the art work I have produced and the political and social influences that have informed it; from 1984 until 1999. It looks at my ongoing exploration of narrative, installation and image/text, as well as my investigation of alternative art practices.

**Part 3 - Amechan**

The Amechan site was a serialized "homepage" created by a fictional character, a diaristic narrative of image and text. It initially ran from February 1 - July 31, 1999.

This section looks at the elements and themes contained within the Amechan site as well as the ideas that have informed the site in less discernible ways. It looks at the theoretical and practical concerns of creating and maintaining the site for the six months it was initially operating, and at the site as "installation". It also introduces an email correspondence between the fictional character of "Amechan" and an unknown correspondent.
Part 1 - A Perspective of Web Art

....some new fusion of artist and engineer.......¹

It could be argued that the most dynamic communication breakthrough of the end of the millennium - the internet - takes us back the full circle to a place we inhabited before. A place where the artist is a scientist, the scientist is an artist. "We have reached a point where the various media evolve so rapidly that the inventors and the practitioners have blurred into one holistic unit, like a science lab hosting a creative-writing seminar." ² The internet is a world where the rules of the real world dissolve and diminish. In this world, it is possible to subvert the realities of space, of time, of gender, of the relationship between artist and audience. This new medium offers us a chance to reinvent ourselves.

The shift in Art practices in the 20th Century

The art movements of the Twentieth Century have been distinguished by a gradual move away from a marginal position within society's writing of it's own history, toward a place that allows it to be involved in the creation of that history.

In the earlier part of the Twentieth century, the most popular art forms of the time, painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, were containable quantitative media that were easily controlled by the consumers of them. And those consumers were generally a small group of well-educated, financially independent elite for whom art was often a status symbol; a dead commodity.

At the top of the art hierarchy was the Museum, which collected and contained the art within a constructed historical context. As an institution it operated conservatively, looking for work which had been proven to be "valuable"; a collector, rather than a speculator. Next was the Art Merchant, who relied on this historical context to inform his business and to give credibility to his artists, but who was constantly searching for a new product to catch the eye of his clients. It could be said that both of these institutions fed off each other. And then came the consumer of art and the artist, who occupied a position of little power in this buyer's market. The artist worked within the constraints of a desire to be authentic and the need for success, whether it be creative, or financial. For many artists, there was no struggle here, but for others, it was a constant dilemma. As a producer of goods, the artist's work must be in demand to be thought of as "successful", and therefore must include the "saleability" of, or desire for the product within the creative process. Without outside support, it was difficult to continue to be productive, but that support might not be forthcoming if, for example, the work was perceived to be too raw, or too political, or even, at times, too "conservative" or "radical". The artist, situated at the bottom of the food chain, was in a position of little power.


Johnson, Interface Culture , p6-7
"Nothing will propel the interface toward the status of art more quickly than the development of a functional interface subculture - small pockets of designers working in opposition to the mainstream."

According to Steven Johnson, author of "Interface Culture - How New Technology Transforms the Way we Create and Communicate", "Coherent, self-styled avant garde first appeared in the metropolitan cities of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, most notably in Paris. The two worlds of subculture and mainstream have existed ever since in an uneasy, but generative relationship; the avant-garde's flair for novelty prodding the dominant culture's more conservative inclinations, a system of checks and balances that is by now so commonplace that we can barely imagine an alternative."

Avant garde movements were always searching for new ways of expressing their ideas, less affected than the mainstream by the desire for acceptance, less affected in their art practices by the need for financial remuneration. "What interests a Dadaist is the way he himself lives....." The separation of Product from Idea, of Beauty from Aesthetic, were major influences of the Dada movement of the early 20th Century, and influenced most art movements from then on.

These changes in art production affected not only the work being produced, but also the production of the work, and it's dissemination. From the 1960's the art collective Fluxus collaborated in many parts of the world on an astounding and prolific range of art projects; self-publishing artist books, producing mail-art, performances, installations; breaking through and moving away from the mainstream classification and division of art practices and artist-dealer-collector relationships.

Another shift in art practice to emerge at this time was the "Artist-Run Space". Groups of artists gathered together and found buildings in which to produce and show their art. As a strategy, it was effective in that the artists themselves could control the ways in which their work was seen and be less governed by the market place. But the audience in fact became more limited; to the truly curious, and to people personally interested. Without the budgets and the assurances of "quality work", it was difficult to attract a steady following. Artists began to look toward the growing potential of new technology.

**The Introduction of New Technologies**

"In general, video art was seen as a medium with radical potential. Filmmakers tended to react in a rather hostile way. They saw it as horribly ugly compared to film with it's grainy, fuzzy images. And for what was this aesthetic given up? The idea of some kind of entry into the world of television on the part of artists? That wasn't a place for artists to be."
In the 1960's and 70's, artists began to explore the medium of video and television, marking another shift away from the museum. Video was a medium tied to the mainstream, to television, and artists viewed it as a strategy to escape the confines of the Museum, and take their message to a broader audience. This strategy had limited success, however, as the focus on television was to provide sponsors with a large audience for advertising, and was therefore less inclined toward radical thinking than even the Museum. The medium, with such potential for "the ability to create a network outside the art world, to generate a true and valuable, nutritive relationship with an audience" ⁷, was hampered by the fact that whilst artists had access to the tools of production, they lacked the tools of widespread dissemination. Art Institutions were also inclined to avoid the medium, as it carried with it a lack of definable "authenticity"; it could be copied infinitely, with no trace of the author in it's production. In the same way that photography had been initially shunned by the art world as not "real" art, so video was stigmatized.

"An art form evolving within a system that is so fully totalizing and global that it contains within it every other known mass medium on the planet. It is Marshall McLuhan's dream come true or is he spinning in his grave at a rapid pace." ⁸

Computer technology was also advancing rapidly. From the original mainframe computers, huge and cumbersome, had evolved the smaller desktop computers, with a computing capacity many times that of the earlier models. And in 1984 Apple computers introduced the Macintosh computer, which differed from previous models in a profound way; the simulated desktop. The language, and the process, of the computation was now hidden by a new surface which presented information in a way that was radically different from the processing of it, but more "user-friendly". One had no longer to be conversant with the science of computer programming; it was simply a matter of understanding the functions available. This led to the development of visual software, for example Adobe Photoshop, which could be used to create and manipulate visual images. The medium was expanding, from it's numerical beginnings, into text, and on to become a visual language.

Twenty years ago, in 1979, the seeds of the Internet were created. Initially a text-based device that facilitated the flow of information between computers, it was created for the military; slowly this expanded to educational institutions. Eventually it grew beyond this, and became a space accessible to anyone, limited only by the need for equipment, and by it's own expansion and development. With advances in technology, software was designed that added easy-to-use interfaces (Netscape being one of the earliest). And with programs like "Photoshop", it was becoming also possible to create high quality graphics. The computer was fast developing into a medium of great interest and potential to artists.

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The new Medium

The qualities that the Internet had as a new medium were many. As a global system, it was able to break through social structures in an unprecedented manner. It was possible to be anywhere, to be anyone. It brought with it a sense of being a "new" space, and as such had it's own politics, it's own society, it's own aesthetic. It had an audience comprising an ever growing diversity of people, in ever growing geographic diversity. Although still ruled by business concerns, the manner in which business and personal use connected was in itself new. Rather than, as with Television, the commercial interests supplied the viewing material, on the Internet, individual sites were solicited by Advertising companies, in the hope that their viewers could be accessed. Although governments and corporations constantly sought, and continue to seek ways in which to control and police this space, its very size and design makes restriction and censorship difficult to enforce.

There were other advantages for the artist. This was the first medium where the tools of production and of dissemination were the same. And the first where the tools for viewing, for accessing; were also the same. Which meant that for the first time, the artist and audience were at the same point; the point at which interactivity and two-way communication, were part of the same package. Someone somewhere turns on their computer, connects to the internet, discovers a site. At the very least, they will be able to email the creator of the site and anticipate a quick response. In technologically advanced sites, the viewer will be able to insert their response onto the site itself, even alter the site to their own satisfaction.

This in itself is revolutionary. It means that there is a shift between the role of the reader and the writer; that one is able to influence the other. People are able to engage by entering the space and the medium. And the movement of ideas and information from creator to viewer and back occurs within the medium, at which point the interaction becomes part of the work itself. It is a collapse of the traditionally one-way creator/viewer flow.

One of the attractive qualities of the Internet for artists, is the ease with which it can accommodate the concept of the Artist-Run-Space. A huge sprawling artist-run-space that is less controlled by restrictions of time and physical space. Renting a building means that the artist must pay commercial rents, so to pay for the space, there needs to be some compromise with the amount of time an artist can use that space, and the amount of space the artist can use. With a Virtual Artist-Run-Space, there is potential for huge, epic works that can run for years and can include large amounts of material. Of course, the problem of a limited audience still remains, but is lessened; within the Internet, within that vast series of interconnected networks, the artist can search out a personal network of complementary sites and artists from almost anywhere in the world. A person searching the Internet can also search for relevant sites using a search engine, through links to other sites, or merely by accident.

The question of audience on the Internet is an interesting one. There is a playful dynamic between public and private in Web Space. Not only is it the most "public" space ever created, accessible to more people in more places than any medium of communication at any time, but at the same time a space that many people regard as private. This is highlighted by the sheer numbers of homepages, made by individuals,
families, small interest groups, intended for access only by members of their group. The enormity of the web means that there can be also great privacy. Below the great mass of advertised, promoted and heavily accessed sites, lie the secrets. The secret societies, with their various interests, putting themselves into a world so large that they can be invisible, almost untraceable. Most publicized in the media are the pornographers, the sexually curious and/or perverted, the racists, the terrorists, but in good company with them are the "normal" citizens with their own agendas and interests. It is possible to choose one’s audience to an extraordinary degree. The viewing space, too, is intimate. It is one-to-one, the space between computer and persona creating a personal dialogue, like reading a book.

The flow of information, which I have mentioned earlier in reference to the viewer/creator, is also of a different quality to most traditional media. Unlike media which flows in a linear fashion, the internet is filled with doorways to other places. On any one page in any position can be many links to other pages. Unlike a book, which in its traditional form has a logical flow of direction and narrative from the first page to the last, the Internet facilitates individual trails, created at random by viewers, through space and through time. A reader of a website can follow a link to an entirely different site, and then on to another; a virtual three-dimensional journal in which reader becomes meta-reader; the designer of their own narrative.

We make the Medium - the Medium Re-makes Us

Perhaps the most fascinating change that the Internet has brought is the breakdown of our traditional concept of the solidarity of one’s own identity. When we enter it’s space, we divest ourselves of most physical traces of our identity. We become ephemeral beings, able to re-construct and re-present ourselves. This space opens for us the possibility of simulation, it offers to us the chance to recreate ourselves in a new, "false" reality. Information can be realistically presented, information that has been falsified, distorted; parts of us can be submerged, other parts can be transformed, enlarged. In her book "Life on the Screen", Professor of the Sociology of Science, Dr Sherry Turkle, describes interactive sites on the Web, such as MUDs (Multi-User-Domains), in which a significant number of participants choose different gendered characters to represent themselves; "Among the registered users of Habitat, there is a ratio of four real-life men to each real-life woman. But inside the MUD the ratio is only three male characters to one female character." ⁹ Although the lack of authenticity checks can be at times dangerous and abusive, it can also give us extraordinary opportunities for playfulness and exploration. In ways that have never been practically possible in the real world, we are able to transcend ourselves.

"It's almost as if the electronic culture, which is today a big, actual, active energy is trying to be ignored by the reflective art of painting, sculpture, and photography." ¹⁰

Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen, Touchstone, , Simon & Schuster, 1995
Habitat is a for-profit MUD, created in America, now in use in Japan. There were 1.5 million users, at the time "Life on the Screen was written; therefore the number of people using a differently-gendered character was in the tens of thousands.
Although the development of the Internet has engendered profound changes to many aspects of contemporary life; business, communications, information flow, to name a few, it appears that its effect on the Art World has been relatively slight. There could be many reasons for this. Firstly, as we saw in the last century with the invention of Photography, and then in the 70's with portable video, there is a huge resistance to change in the art world. Part of this is perhaps skepticism with the predominance of novelty over quality in technology. Partly too, there remains a strong belief that an essential element of the creative process remains the "hand", the presence of the creator, the aura. And even less than video, can the web site be experienced as clay touched, or paper marked, by the hand of the maker. A site cannot be "found" in some kind of "original" state, because even on the computer it is merely a series of files that have been copied and processed. And of course, the traditional stance of the Museum in the acceptance of new ideas is a conservative one; which often delay incorporating new trends until they are accepted by the mainstream.

It is of course not merely the lack of this "aura" that makes web art so unappealing to many people. There is so much on the web, and so much of it is substandard, it is a daunting process to find sites of relevance; in fact my best source of information about sites has been not the internet, but newspapers and magazines and friends. And the nature of the medium itself seems to lend itself to distracted and limited attention. If a book works by focusing your attention on one linear narrative, and a newspaper gives you many small narratives arranged together, the hyperlink will take your from the middle of one narrative into another, and then on to another, so you need never reach a conclusion. The medium is about movement.

To make full use of the Internet, the artist must learn how to respond to that movement. This is not a place we have been before; this is not a medium that we can use with the old rules and the old traditions. To be effective web artists, we must understand the unique characteristics and the potential of the web. The Web is not a page, it is not a gallery, it is not a painting; it is a flow of information. And it is necessary for artists to evolve their own processes to move with this flow of information. Perhaps the best way to proceed is to form new collaborations with programmers, scientists, sociologists, psychologists, to work together to create new expression. The "fusion of the artist and the engineer" will allow us to learn how to move.
Part 2 - A Personal History

"What must be taken into account when reading accounts of history is that histories are the creations of writers, rather than re-creations of the past."¹

"(experimental art).....privileges idea above image, discussion above rhetoric and is antagonistic to the investment art market and the commodification of art."²

My art practice began in Brisbane in a time of great expansion and experimentation, and much as I've struggled to separate myself from Brisbane, both physically and emotionally, I must acknowledge it's influence on my life and art practice. When I speak of my art practice from 1985 until now, I feel that it is important to place it also into the context of my political and infrastructural practices as well. While I do not consider my work to be of a radical nature, it's earliest influences were of a radical nature, and this has influenced not only the work that I produce, but also the manner in which it is produced.

Contemporary Art in Brisbane in the early 80's was an extremely marginalized practice in a politically conservative and isolated State. A National Party Government headed by a despotic and corrupt Premier ruling for 19 years with a heavy hand meant that there was plenty to resist, but few means with which to do so. There was limited art funding, the southern States were largely disinterested in art from Queensland, there was little arts infrastructure; artists emerging from art colleges found themselves in a cultural wilderness from which the only escape was to flee south, give up, or put the bulk of their energy into the grassroots political and social network.

"...anytime anyone tried to organise anything that looked like a community arts organization or a union related to artists in Brisbane it really got stomped on by the (state government) secret police...and the police did follow people around. They set-up files on....anything that might rock the status quo."³

B. Gammage, *Historical Disciplines and Culture in Australia: an Assessment.* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press) p141

Urszula Szulakowska, *Experimental Art in Queensland, 1975-1995,* (Griffith Uni Print, 1998, Qld Studies Centre, Griffith University) p1

By the time I graduated from Art College, in 1984, Artist Collectives and Artist Run Spaces had begun to form, and to generate quite a lot of excitement amongst a small circle of young artists, performers and musicians. Artists such as Luke Roberts, Jenelle Hurst, Gary Warner, Adam Boyd, Barbara Campbell, Brian Doherty, Michelle Andringa, Peter Anderson, to name a few, were involved in a variety of projects; artist run spaces, magazines, performances, exhibitions. In 1985, a new Artist Run Space opened; That Space. Run by Paul Andrew, it differed from the earlier models in that it was more administrated, less chaotic. Paul’s stated goal for That Space was "to train artists in the business concerns of a professional art practice"4, and he worked to create a centre for artists to network, to gather information and help and stimulation. Inspired by the dynamic activity that we could see, three women; Anna Zsoldos and Robyn Grey and myself, with the help of many people, in 1985 opened our own space, The Observatory, a gallery whose focus was photographic based contemporary art. The Observatory ran until the end of 1986, when the building was demolished, but by then others had sprung up, and the community had focused much of it's energy on starting up the Queensland Artworker’s Alliance and Eyeline Magazine. The final exhibition at The Observatory, "The Demolition Show", was a group show highlighting the destruction of the Brisbane’s inner city area and the subsequent lack of spaces in which artists could affordably work.

At this time, having emerged from Queensland College of Art with a photography major, my own art practice was photographically based, but much more concerned with photography as a communicative tool than in it’s quality as a medium. Influenced by such artists as Cindy Sherman and Jenny Holtzer, the work quickly developed a strong concern with narrative and incorporating text. I became concerned with setting up an environment in which the viewer could best interact with the work.

During the brief existence of The Observatory, we had travelled to Sydney and put together a show of Sydney Photographers, organizing sponsorship to cover expenses. In response to this, the Curator from the Australian Centre for Photography made a brief trip to Brisbane and organized an exhibition of Brisbane Photography, called Occlusion. My work for this show, "Fear of Falling" consisted of six sheets of photographic images

Szulakowska, Experimental Art in Queensland, 1975-1995, p64
pinned to the wall with plastic sheeting covering them. The work dealt with "the fear of losing control; of one's life, self, emotions"; the recent death of my sister and my own fear and disorientation at being "lost" in the world.

With The Observatory finished, we no longer had a desire to be tied to the intensive effort required to maintain a gallery, and we decided to facilitate the flow of art and information by using whatever resources were already available. In 1986 I travelled to Canberra, and arranged an exchange show between That Space and Bitumen River Gallery, called Anywhere. The theme was in response to a review of Occlusion in the Sydney Morning Herald, which stated that "Most of these pictures don't relate to Queensland, they could have come from Poland, Nicaragua, or Britain.....Strange that such contents should emerge from a people so close to the earth." 6

My work in this show was a series of six small boxes containing text and photographic images. The images were small blurry city scenes, bleak and empty of people; the text read: "In the months that followed, I began to feel a greely numbing void where once had existed a painful clash of emotions for the place. I cold no longer understand why I stayed there. It was a place emptied of significance, any image I conjured up of previously loved characteristics were bleak, gray. For all I cared, I could have been Anywhere." 7

My first "one-man" show was in 1987, at a gallery called John Mills Himself. Called Selective Histories, it was an installation consisting of a wall of photographic images and two film loops. I had constructed a narrative, set in the 50's revolving around a woman struggling between her desire to be a good wife and mother and a writer. With a group of friends, I set up "film shoots" and then arranged still images into a non-linear narrative. The first film loop, which projected out the large window onto the street, was the face of the main "actor"; at first glance it resembled a still image, but occasionally the eyes would blink. The second film loop

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Lehan Ramsay, Occlusion, catalogue essay for the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, September 1986

Max Dupain, Realism shut out of Queensland Scenes, review in Sydney Morning Herald, October 14, 1986

Lehan Ramsay, Anywhere, text on photographic images, 1987
was identifiably the "train scene" of the photographic narrative but at times the camera would draw back, and it was possible to see the "set" and people in contemporary dress. This work is of particular interest to me, because many of the themes I sought to address in this early piece were again taken up in Amechan, my thesis project.

"The angst is tangling with the id, and believe me, the kookaburras don't sing anymore"

Also in 1987 I produced an exhibition called "Collaborative Photographic Works". Working with a small plastic "toy" camera I asked many people to turn it to their faces and take their pictures, and exhibited the results in John Mills Himself, strung on a line like washing. At this time, having returned to the Queensland College of Art to upgrade my Diploma of Art to a Degree, I was researching the disparities between the argument to maintain the "purity" of the photographic medium, as supported by my lecturers and such photographers and critics as Max Dupain, and my own growing disbelief in the "reality" represented by the photographic. On one hand, Max Dupain held up his "ideal" image of Australia, on the other, he had produced many of his images as propaganda for the Department of Information, during World War II, and for advertising campaigns. What then was the criteria necessary for a photograph to be "real"? What was a "real" self-portrait? Could it be "real" if nobody was behind the viewfinder to capture a "seen" moment?

"Psychologically there is a world of difference between a portrait and a self-portrait......When a person sits for a portrait they pose as they would like to be seen; they hope to reveal something "good" to an audience. In comparison, self-portrait is self-revelation; one attempts to reveal something to oneself. Looking at yourself taking a picture is like posing in a mirror....In not being behind the camera I have handed the moment over to the person; there is less of an awareness of myself in their faces therefore, and more of their own fascination of themselves."

I further developed this work in the exhibition "Lines of Force" in which I used six images from Collaborative Photographic Works, and interspersed a new "film-noir"-like narrative using the people from the Dupain, Realism shut out of Queensland Scenes.

Lehan Ramsay, Collaborative Photographic Works, catalogue, Institute of Modern Art, 1987
original images.

Three of the artists from Anywhere; Jay Younger, Paul Andrew and myself, concerned with the "twin issues of regionalist practice and marginalisation", decided to put in an application for the Peter Brown Travelling Fellowship at the Australia Council, to travel to New York, to investigate "a collaborative investigation of centre/ periphery relations...between Brisbane and New York". The application was successful, and we set off for New York in 1988. We took with us an exhibition of works by 30 Brisbane Artists in a "travelling format" (laminated A3 colour copies, able to be shown easily), a comprehensive catalogue of the work and other information about the Brisbane Art Scene. In the three months we were in New York. We showed this exhibition in artist run spaces (Gallery2B, in the East Village), in public spaces (blue-tacked to the outer wall of the Guggenheim Museum). We met with and interviewed many writers and artists, arts administrators and organizations working in New York, we conducted research, slide lectures and information exchanges and gathered as much information as possible. Upon returning to Brisbane, we disseminated this information by way of lectures, written interviews in Eyeline Magazine, and an exhibition in Arch Lane Gallery. In 1990 I was invited by the Queensland Artworkers Alliance to give a lecture tour on "Artist-Run Initiatives" in Northern Queensland.

In 1989 I was invited to exhibit at the Institute of Modern Art, in Brisbane. The show, Malice consisted of a wall of colour-copied images, nine small boxed photographs, and three short stories in a catalogue. Each colour-copied image was made up of 16 A3 images and glued onto the wall. The narrative dealt with "the feelings of alienation and dislocation prompted by departure and return". I made a video, again using "characters" and a "plot", shot slides from this video, and manipulated the images using a colour photocopier, again constructing a "filmic" narrative. The images were dark and grainy, captured as if from a video surveillance camera, so heavily blue as to seem monochromatic. On the other wall, were the small boxed images of seemingly relevant symbols and frozen moments. The three short stories had been a commissioned collaboration

Anderson, Axis Art Projects bulletin, self-published by Axis, p1
Anderson, Axis Art Projects bulletin, p1
Michael Richards, Creation a plea for awareness, review, Courier Mail April 11, 1989
from Brisbane writer Peter Anderson; I had given him a sense of what I wanted to convey without showing him the images, and asked him to write three short stories to accompany them.

"At night, alone in her hotel room, she tries to remember the events of the day. For some reason, she can't quite put her finger on it, none of it seems to cohere, in fact the whole trip is starting to take on the quality of a dream. She wakes, hot, the sheets sticking to her sweating body. Outside, in the street below her window, she can hear them all, still engaged in their nocturnal games of passion and desire. Lights and shadows flicker on the ceiling, things are happening, things that are not allowed to be seen. In the black doorway of the building opposite two figures can just be made out, they huddle, locked in some unintelligible, violent embrace. No one seems to notice anything at all. As she drifts back to sleep, she wonders what perverse attraction it was that drew her to this place."^a

Taking down the show involved destroying the work, and I photographed the process of destruction. These images were subsequently requested and purchased by the Art Gallery of South Australia, and the Queensland Art Gallery.

The Art scene in Brisbane was growing healthily and with that health came dissension. I no longer found it to be such a stimulating environment, and I was looking for alternative ways of showing my work. I was putting work in cafes ("Ravished", created for and inspired by The Cafe Europe) and in my studio, and making limited edition artist books. In 1990 I built a billboard in the front garden of my house, and invited artists to exhibit on it regularly. It was a very satisfying experiment, to see how responsive the neighbourhood was to this novelty. But the novelty was not enough to sustain my feelings of restlessness and so, I departed for Japan.

Initially I planned to stay in Japan for no more than a year. I had arranged with Michael Milburn Galleries to have an exhibition in September/October that year, and with the Institute of Modern Art to hold a small exhibition in its small gallery Below Zero. The Milburn show, "Difference", was a collage of 20 images taken in Japan, of people, of television, of trains,

Peter Anderson, The tour guide yells at everyone to stay close together, short story for Malice, Exhibition catalogue, Institute of Modern Art, 1989
dealing with "the continued feeling of surveillance; one's difference seems to be reflected by everyone and everything." They were exhibited inside of the large gallery space, the work hung so that most of the space was cut off from the viewer; they could only walk into the very end of the space, but they could see the large space behind. I was attempting to re-create a feeling of discomfort and claustrophobia similar to my own feelings at being cramped into tiny cluttered Japan. At the Institute of Modern Art, running concurrently, was "Acquiesce", an obscure work comprising many pieces of A3 paper with Chinese characters in the centre of them, and small English explanations underneath. What was never made clear was that the explanations did not concur with the Chinese characters, so the two languages were telling two stories. Of course, few people were able to know that. I considered that if one person could read all the texts and understand the ambiguity of the message, I could consider the work a success.

What followed, from 1992 to 1995 was a time in which I struggled with adjusting to Japanese life. Working, moving, attempting to learn the language, left me confused and disorientated and unable to express myself clearly in my work. It was difficult to find people with similar ideas and interests to me. The gallery system, overpriced, under patronized and irrelevant, was not one I wished to enter and I was at a loss. In 1993 I moved to Tokyo, and spent time being unofficial caretaker for the Australia Council Studio, meeting many artists who inspired and encouraged me. In 1995 I moved back to Kyoto, and briefly toyed with the idea of starting a cultural magazine, with a journalist friend. Researching this, I was introduced to a group of artists working here. This group, NAP, was circumventing the gallery system by using the promotional tools of the underground fashion and music scenes to show their work. They produced free art packs, small "books", calendars, t-shirt shops, live events of music and art. I was invited to be a NAP member, and found the experience to be vital and dynamic. At this time, I produced a collaborative installation in a forest on a mountain, called "Mesh". My work in Mesh was a series of images on small portable light boxes; images of women; a doll with, superimposed over it's face, fearful feminine images that lie beneath the acceptable face of women here. Artists David Haines and Michaela Coventry created a soundscape for the forest.

Lehan Ramsay, Difference, artist statement for exhibition, 1991
In 1997 I purchased my first computer, and began to experiment with the manipulation of photographic images via computer graphics. I found this an interesting way to produce images, and I was increasingly impressed by the fact that I could do all the work in my home, without relying on labs and printers. At this time, I collaborated with artists from Japan, Jamaica and Australia on an exhibition in Kyoto; "Hydrascope". Working with Australian Artist Kathryn Bird, we produced a body of work for the window of Arcs Locus Gallery that explored Identity and the Journey; a mixed media work incorporating handmade light boxes, colour copies, printclub, dolls and window display lettering.

In 1998 I began two major projects; a six month collaborative website, and my Masters. From April to September 1998 I co-produced, with Steve Jenks, a Collaborative Website project called Part1. "Part1 was born out of a desire for Space and Expansion. Space in which 15 people can present an evolving body of work without the physical, financial or time restrictions. Expansion into a new medium and a new working of technology and culture." This site incorporated the works of approximately 10 artists, who produced one site a month for six months, looking at the concept of Zones of Recognition, from the smallest frame of reference to the very greatest. We created an overall image design for the site and each monthly "issue". The project was completed in September 1998. This was really my first attempt to produce artwork for the web, and as such clearly documents clearly my attempts to make the medium work in a way in which I am comfortable.

From July to September 1998, I co-produced "Resonance", with Hiroshi Yasukawa, for the MAAP Inaugural On-line Exhibition. Resonance was created in two parts. The work was exhibited at the Queensland Art Gallery for the month of September, and as the exhibition would be stored on a computer rather than available on-line, it was necessary for us to produce the two bodies of work. Only the first was exhibited at the Queensland Art Gallery, but both were accessible on the MAAP/shoreline site. The Resonance work was a dialogue between myself and Yasukawa, crossing over barriers of language and culture yet still affected enough by.

Steve Jenks and Lehan Ramsay, Zones of Recognition, statement, 1998
http://www.part1.org/statement/index.html
them for us to constantly be surprised by the direction of each new page. The work incorporated a split screen; one of us would put up a page, and the other was required to produce a new page in response to the first, within 24 hours. The work was dynamic and evolving, and a challenging and exciting way to work.

Immediately after Resonance Yasukawa and myself were commissioned to produce a site for frAme, a multimedia web journal, part of trAce Online Writing Community, the site of Nottingham University, England. I collaborated on one, and produced another two works for this site. The work "A Personal History" contains the seeds of the Amechan site. It's a pseudo-biographical work, incorporating aspects of my life into a piece of fiction, using image and text to build up the narrative, forcing, through fades, the viewer to slow down and wait for the story to unfold.

The Amechan site was planned and written in late 1998 and early 1999. It began on February 1, 1999. I envisioned the site as a web based, time based "installation". Stylistically, it blended the personal "homepage" with a webzine format. From the initial cover page, the viewer moved into a contents page and accessed the different parts of the evolving story.

In describing this site, I use the term "installation". Not in the sense that it creates a "virtual space", but that it creates a "virtual presence". Working with the medium of the Internet, it is possible to avoid the physical limitations of space, to use the possibilities of time and of a kind of public anonymity. Rather than building up a space for the viewer to experience, I was attempting to build the sense of an identity; a virtual human, one with her own individuality and her own experiences.

The site itself was serialized, each new entry appearing on the first day of the week, ending on July 26, 1999. For another month, it remained in it's entirety; the whole unending story. And then I took it down, and on September 12 it started again, as part of the Asia Pacific Triennial, opening in it's eighth week, as if it had begun in August 2. Most of it is unchanged, except for references to the weather and yearly events. The site will continue until February 1, 2000.
Part 3 - Amechan

"I thought about Wilkomirski. Either he had been born in this country or he hadn't, in which case "Fragments" was a lie - his early lives were mutually exclusive. But "lie" might be too strong a word, meant for courts of law. Writing has milder terms. In writing, there is fiction and non-fiction. These seem clear divisions, but as any writer knows the boundary can be blurred, and nowhere more so than in this literary form "the memoir". Trying to evoke the past the memoirist needs to recreate it, and in doing so he may be tempted to invent - a detail here and there, a scene, a piece of dialogue." (Amechan, interesting thing, week 26)

22/2/99 Dear Amechan, I was required to read your website as part of a university course in Creative Writing in Hypertext. I must say I enjoyed the experience (which is more than I can say for some of the others that were included). You have presented aspects of yourself with great style Thank you for the sharing G

Amechan is a thirty year old Japanese Australian woman, living in Kyoto.

Amechan is a fictional character who lives out 26 weeks of her constructed life in cyberspace.

Amechan is both of these things. In cyberspace she is a living, breathing woman, in reality, she does not exist. Amechan is a construction of memory and autobiography, a construct of many voices. She's made her own personal website because there are things she wants to say. Some of these things are my things, but many of them are not. Because Amechan is her own person, a person who I am not and will never be.

Amechan is a fabricated personal narrative, existing only within words and images. In fact, given her background, as a woman with an Asian mother, it is doubtful that she would have the "voice" that she does. It is documented that American children with an Asian mother tend to be guarded and sparse with details of their childhood. "...The same characteristic was observed in Japanese children's narratives, in which they tended to succinctly talk about several isolated, similar events....most Japanese children made their stories straight to the point and very comprehensible" 3

22/2/99 Dear G, Thanks for your email! I'm so glad you enjoyed the experience...It'd be pretty awful to be the one on everybody's creative writing course that everyone hates! What University is it? Who's teaching the course? I hope you keep reading, and giving me some feedback. Amechan

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Elena Lappin, The Man With Two Heads, 1997
correspondence between "amechan" and "G"; a woman in Australia, 22/2/99. This woman was given the site to investigate as part of a HTML creative writing course. I did not know the person giving the course, nor did I ever find out who it was.
correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 22/2/99
In creating Amechan, I drew heavily from studies in memory and narrative; in particular, the book "Momentous Events, Vivid Memories", by David B. Pillemer. According to Pillemar, our memories are an integral part of our identities. "We remember by telling stories. Storytelling is not something we just happen to do. It is something we virtually have to do if we want to remember anything at all...it is in the storytelling process that the memory gets formed...To put this another way, the stories we create are the memories we have. Telling is Remembering." Storytelling is something we do particularly if we are women, because this is a form of communication that we are comfortable with. "Narrative as a form of expression used by women... relies on narrative, rather than argument, as a mode of discourse, but narrative is used as a collaborative way of thinking - thinking with, rather than against, the position one is examining, and using storytelling as a way of not just illuminating but of developing concepts."

23/2/99 Dear Ame, It is the Murdoch University - Perth Western Australia. We are doing an experimental course using hypertext in creative writing - this is only the beginning of the course. You need not worry about being the one that is most hated - on the contrary I found your page the most interesting of our first week of perusing - but of course that is a solitary experience. Thank you for your reply G

How do we construct a memory of our lives? By storytelling, and by the "memory props" we incorporate into our lives. We all have our photographs, our books, our momentos. Amechan too has her props. Her memory of her mother's childhood is prompted by the photographs of a 42 year old teacher living in Kyoto. Her own memories are prompted by the photographs of a 29 year old Japanese Australian woman living in Brisbane. And to supplement them, she has all the resources owned by me. Photographs, books, found objects, not to mention a vast array of my own memories with which to supplement her own. Many photographs were supplied by friends, many images and objects found or borrowed. Quotes were taken from reading material I came across in my daily life; in people's homes, in libraries, in my own collection of books.

24/2/99 Dear G I hope you don't mind me writing to you. But I appreciated your letter, and I wanted to set you straight on this. You see, I'm a fictional character. This is not my website. Someone else is making it, and me. I can only remember back as far as the site's been up for...a month. Please don't tell people about this, I'd rather it not get around. If they write to me, I'll tell them, too. But I don't like to live a lie. So far I'm only as real as a month in someone's life can make you. But we can still correspond to each other, can't we? I don't see why that would be a problem. The person who makes this website, she doesn't restrict me; I can talk to anyone I want. I hope I hear from you again. Amechan

Pillemer, Momentous Events, Vivid Memories, p127
Pillemer, Momentous Events, Vivid Memories, p191
correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 23/2/99 correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 24/2/99 In this letter I attempt to make clear that Amechan is a fictional character, but am trying to encourage G to continue writing.
"To claim entitlement or authority within a conversation, the speaker has the burden of producing a narrative that is rich in sensory and affective imagery - a narrative that indicates to the listener: This really happened and I remember it." When we tell a story about ourselves, we include seemingly irrelevant detail that accompany that story. Where we were, what we were doing. Describing the moment I learned that John Lennon was dead, I will describe myself at the age of 15, standing in a small boutique in Melbourne, a woman from the next shop rushing in to tell the shop assistant. It is these details that envelop the telling in nostalgia and relevance, not only in myself but in the listener, who will summons any memories of the event that they themselves might have. The real power of stories is not in what they tell, but in how they resonate with the listener.

"In story form, a memory has a coherent temporal and causal structure. If the recounted event is salient enough to be talked about or thought about by the listener, it will retain its organization in memory as an intact, rehearsable, recallable unit (Schank and Abelson, 1995)......... vivid details provide multiple opportunities for the listener to connect the story to her own particular life experiences; "We hear, in the stories of others, what we personally can relate to by virtue of having in some way heard or experienced that story before" (Schank, 1990, p83). These personal connections enhance the meaningfulness and affective intensity of the story and increase the likelihood that it will be revisited repeatedly in memory." 10

"On Sunday Jack came over. He hadn't been to my house since I moved in, and we'd made the date a few weeks back. Matty was away for the weekend with Paul, so we had a chance to spend a bit of time together. He seems busy, and I am, so it was very relaxing.

I mentioned I'd got a postcard from Michiko.

'What right, he said.

I gathered he hadn't, so I said no more.

After a while, he said "I don't think she's coming home, you know".

I didn't know what to say. There was a bird, on a branch, just above our heads, looking for bugs."11

How is it possible to "create" memory? It seems that it is not merely in the material presented, and the juxtaposition of that memory, but also in the material that is NOT presented, but which lies beneath. Amechan tells us her "history", and as we read, also constructs a history situated in the "present". Alongside that, she provides us, in her "interesting thing", an "unconscious voice", which feeds into and supplements her story. It is here that we learn what she reads, what she likes, what she is drawn to; we make connections between what is said and what is not.

25/2/99 Oh dear Ame, I am not sure about this. I mean all the one month olds that I know - know very little. Still I guess I can hang around for two more weeks just to see the first smile - you know that first recognition of humanity. No - maybe you don't. Hmmm - quite confusing really - what do you know in your month - I wonder. Anyway - if the person who has created you doesn't restrict

Pillemer, Momentous Events, Vivid Memories, p142
Pillemer, Momentous Events, Vivid Memories, p143
you - well cannot see the harm at all. So yes please write back and I shall watch your development with delight. G

"We can no longer accept that the identity of a man can be adequately established by preserving and fixing what he looks like from a single viewpoint in one place." 13

But amongst all this construction, how can we really get a sense that this life is not a construct, like a television drama? Television dramas rely on a constant stream of dramatic events to hold the viewer's attention. In the Amechan site, nothing ever really changes; no great dramas appear, no life shattering moments are exposed.

"I've been cooped up in this apartment forever! The air clings to my skin like a tight rayon pantsuit, and everything carries with it a heavy dampness. I guess I should have told everyone that I would be away for one week; now that I've told everyone, I'm unable to go far from my house much at all. Skulking down the road to the convenience store for another cold noodle bento. Listening to people calling my answering machine to invite me out." 14

27/2/99 Hi G well, when I say I only remember back one month, that's not to say that I'm only one month old. Actually I'm thirty. Or nearly thirty. I'm from Brisbane. Have you been there? My mother moved there before I was born. But we're both back here now, for a while, anyway. What are you studying, at University? amechan 15

There's a certain dis-ease connected to deceit. Amechan is happy in cyberspace, but back in the real world, she's likely to be considered either a lie, or a truly autobiographical element of myself. While I found it very satisfying to produce this "anonymous" site, I was not happy with the idea that I would be deceiving people. So in my correspondences with people in "realtime", I made it clear that Amechan was the construct; a "meta-authorship" 16, as described by Beth Jackson in her article in Broadsheet Magazine. This was one of the prompts for the sudden appearance, in week 12, of a second journal, in which Amechan packed up her bags and went back to live in Brisbane. This second site was a hidden one, taking up half of the site icon on the contents page. Viewers would suddenly find themselves in Brisbane, and then would the next week be back in Kyoto again; I thought that this would drive the curious to trying to find out the mystery. But in most cases, I believe it didn't. It was an interesting experiment for me, and one which ultimately highlighted the passivity of the audience.

correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 25/2/99. G seems amused by Amechan, who is telling her that she is fictional, and yet "real" enough to want to engage in realtime correspondance.
Amechan, Journal, June 7, 1999
correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 27/2/99. I am curious to know who this person is.
Beth Jackson, Art and Interactivity - Are We Game?, Broadsheet Magazine, Winter 1999. "What is perhaps interesting in the works "Transit Lounge" and "Amechan" is that the artists are engaged in a type of meta-authorship, which perhaps exists in other media practices but which becomes heightened in multimedia."
27/2/99 Hello Ame No - I haven't been to Brisbane. But I am aiming to go very soon - I have a weekend of pure delight awaiting me when I go - as I chat to quite a few friends from Brisbane on IRC. Do you use the chat channels at all? I study Philosophy at Uni - very interesting so far . The creative writing stream is my interest though. I, too, have a confession to make Ame. I am using you to try and reach your creator. I hope you don't mind - but, like you, I have this desire to be honest. I know it isn't very nice to feel used - but I hope in this case you will understand that you are my only avenue. In the hope that you will continue this correspondence - I hope that I will hear from you soon G

During extensive correspondence with an unknown viewer, I was surprised at how little attempt was made, once the situation was explained, to find out the identity of Amechan's "maker". It would have been quite a simple thing to achieve; Amechan was on the site of Part1, the collaborative project of which I was a member.

"All week I've been thinking about Michiko's story. When I was packing to come here, wandering round the house late into the night, I grabbed a handful of photos, that had been packed away in a box. I don't know why exactly; I'd had a picture of us looking over them, of Michiko becoming tearfully nostalgic and packing to come back. But I haven't yet showed them to her; somehow that idea flew out the window when I got here. I guess I'm showing them to her now."

Amechan was occasionally in dialogue with her mother, transcripts of which were stored in the talk archive. I was unable to contribute to it as regularly as I would have hoped. But it did serve its purpose, which was to introduce an element of interactivity within the text itself.

"Yes I have been thinking about your questions to me on the weekend. About your father. And it's difficult to answer. Why don't I want to go back? You might just as well ask me why I stayed with him. There was love, for a while, you know. But that didn't last. Then there was a kind of bond, that I'd never felt with anyone else, that I'd never imagine feeling with anyone else. And then there was just the ease of being around someone I knew, someone I didn't always have to explain things to. Well, and I didn't know what else to do, either! Couldn't come back to Japan."

28/2/99 thanks for your honesty, g. It's nice that people in this day and age are honest. I value that, in my friends. I'm getting a new look. Not that I thought there was anything wrong with the other one. All these makeovers...people will think I'm so vain. Still, this one's a little more career woman. And I like that. Let me know what you think, please, G. Anyway, things are pretty hectic around here right now; it's Sunday night, a deadline's looming! Hope you're well Amechan.
The Amechan site was constructed in a very simple fashion. There were few if any instructions, but the rules of navigation, once learned, were simple. There were two navigational devices; one that took one forward or back within the sub-site, or one that took one back to the page of contents. From the most recent page it was possible to move back to the beginning page and start from there. From the site guide, it was possible to access the archives of the site. Beth Jackson likens this to the devices used in "the computer game, the networked game, or playstation," that draw in the viewer with the challenge to understand them. "The method of understanding and experiencing a work through multiple levels, through short but frequent visits, and through meta-reading one's own pathways through the work, is a typical way to learn and access a computer game."  

28/2/99 I shall have to go and look - Ame - at your web page to see your new look. I am relieved that you value my honesty and still don't turn from me. That is also quite rare. I accept you for what you are really. After all I am probably made up as well - just for you. Please don't think you are vain - we all need makeovers. I have needed them more than ever since I reached my *mid life crisis.* I am trying to shift away from the *mama* image and go more for the - ummm - *free spirit* look. I am not into *career* images - too masculine - but I will reserve judgement until I look. What is your deadline? Over here it is a long weekend. I have been to a writer's festival - and between you and I - only a little of it was interesting. I have no deadlines until Thursday - I think I might go and party G.  

The pages moved slowly, controlling the time and order in which things were viewed. This element of control was important to me. I wanted the viewer to take time to see the work, to look at it in it's entirety, which runs against the inclination of most web surfers to cast a cursory glance upon a page and then move on. It was difficult to do this, because only after the image had moved away, were the navigational icons able to be used.

1/3/99 Hi G. My deadline was, of course, this site, upon which a new "issue" appears every Monday. What a gruelling schedule. No sooner have I finished one, but a new one must be started. Plus this week was my new look. Michiko says I look a little wooden. What do you think? Anyway, what does a "free spirit" look like? Amechan  

During the course of five months, Amechan had 7 "faces"; some were illustrations, some dolls, some taken from stickers or other found objects. They were chosen randomly, or donated by friends. Although I had photographs of the 29 year old woman in Australia, I was reluctant to put a "face" on Amechan that would prevent the viewer from creating her in their own image. These images were also used as the icons for navigation, so they had an important role in the structure of the site.

Jackson, Art and Interactivity - Are We Game?  
Jackson, Art and Interactivity - Are We Game?  
correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 28/2/99. It seems that G has accepted the idea that she can only talk to Amechan.  
correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 1/3/99.
1/3/99 Ame Hello again:) I have looked at your update - I wish you would leave yourself as was - I like the original somehow:) Michiko is right - too wooden. And really I have no idea what a free spirit would look like - bare feet and flowers - I guess - but who knows Why must you change this every Monday - is there some agenda I do not know about? Tell me more G

One of the problems with web art is that it is difficult to control the viewing conditions of each individual viewer. Monitors, differ, the text changes, the size at which the site will be seen is cannot be set by the creator of the site. This was a very frustrating problem, particularly in the beginning when I was struggling to make text that flowed through the site. Originally, the image and structure would appear, and then the text would begin to move through the page, scrolling from top to bottom or from one side to disappear out the other, or would appear and then fade away. But as I could not control the speed at which the text appeared and disappeared, I could not be sure that each reader could catch it before it disappeared, or not be forced to sit for eternity waiting for it to finish. The amount of text I could put on a page was a problem. Too much, and it would be too cluttered; too little and I would be unable to add the description and detail that I needed. My solution was to change the format of the page. Instead of being always square, it would be always the same height, but change in width depending on how much text needed to be included on the page.

2/3/99 oh G you, the one striving for change, should say that I should have kept myself the way I was! How are you ever going to know who I am if I can't show ALL my faces? That traditional look, it's a little too good-girl; after a while it starts to grate. The makeup, the hair pieces, you have no idea how uncomfortable it all is. Isn't it a shame that we see "free spirit" as "barefoot with flowers"? I'd like to see it as sitting around on a terrace all day on a Sunday with your friends eating great food, drinking great wine and talking about everything under the sun! But I guess that's just because I'm a product of mass media, and I think I'm in a TV commercial when really I'm in cyberspace. There are no terraces here. Just bits. Monday's deadline? Well, I've got a story to tell. And if you don't know when to look, chances are that you won't. Amechan

Visually, I wanted the site to be a hybrid of designs; part webzine, part homepage. I wanted it to look as "clean" as I could, so I kept to a short text and, usually, one image. But still this would be cluttered, and there would be little space, so I decided to make the image and text as separate as possible, one appearing after the other. This visual fading and moving also helped to "direct" the viewer. The visual format also became a lot more streamlined as the weeks passed.

3/3/99 Oh Ame You have a way of placing it back on me. Yes - I guess I should understand change more than anyone - I have changed beyond anything I could have reasonably expected within the space of 2 years. If you need to show all your faces - then you just go ahead. I may not like all of them of course - I don't really like all of mine - but I understand the therapeutic value of showing them nevertheless.

correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 1/3/99.
correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 2/3/99.
You are in Brisbane - you said - I fell in love with a Brisbane writer on the weekend - Nick Earls - have you met him? That boring writer's festival became quite exciting after a close up with him on Monday. I now have to read his writing and see if I love that as well - usually it is quite the other way around. I must admit - I love that idea of sitting on terraces - and I do that quite often. My idea of free spirit just reflects an earlier marketing strategy - I think - after all given the choice - I take the wine on the terrace as well.

Now I have my deadlines. Thursday comes tomorrow and I have to comment on all those websites I have looked at during the week. And my reason is even stranger than yours - all to get this degree. You telling your story is quite rational compared to that. Look forward to hearing from you G²

Amecan's story was serialized, and appeared every Monday of every week for six and a half months; 26 weeks. From my experience working on Resonance for the Brisbane MAAP festival, I was excited about the possibilities for a project that showed itself piece by piece over time. My own experience had been that when perusing the web, I went back only to sites that changed regularly, and thereafter developed a regular habit of returning when I knew something new would be up. At the end of the project I felt this to be successful enough to do it again, for the Virtual Triennial, in Brisbane; to put up the work week by week again, changing obvious references to events and weather. But that it works as a strategy for keeping a "steady" audience, I am less confident. According to the data supplied by the site co-ordinator, the number of hits stayed quite steady over the six months. So I can only assume that while new people were accessing the site regularly, when they returned they did so sporadically.

3/03/99 oh no - I'm not in Brisbane. I'm in Japan. Amecan²³

The site was almost entirely produced using Macromedia Flash software. This software enabled me to make animated sites, with quite sizeable images, that still managed to be light enough to download quickly. However, one of the drawbacks of Flash is that the viewer must download the necessary plugin, Shockwave, before they are able to view anything but the basic html format. There was a further problem with browsers, because earlier browsers are also unable to show Shockwave sites. People are usually willing to eventually download a new browser or plugin if they are using their own computers, but unwilling to do so on a computer they use at work. So I found that many people I was expecting to give me feedback on the site, were unable to access it in the six months it was up.

3/03/99 Sorry Amecan - I realize that now - unfortunately that is what happens when you get close to Nick Earls - the whole world has become a confusing place:) You came from Brisbane - so did he - and there is the connection. A link. Dopamine inflicted G²⁰

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Another aspect of viewer behavior that surprised me, but probably shouldn't have, was the limited number of viewers who did write to Amechan. It may have been possible to encourage more written feedback by making the dialogue more freely available. But I was concerned not only with the privacy of the writers, but my own privacy; to make a kind of bulletin board, for example, would have been to risk having friends enter into dialogue with me, rather than with Amechan. It would have then become more difficult to maintain the integrity of her character.

3/3/99 Oh I don't want you to get the wrong impression, G. This site is part of a degree too. But then just to get a degree, that's rarely the only reason we do these things. They're about transformation. This site has been 30 years in the making. And there's a lot of people in it; not just me, amechan. This is a story which drifts in and out of context. I'm not just the face of my "maker". I have a lot of faces. Amechan

As it was, I was facing a battle trying to keep us separate.

3/3/99 Amechan Maybe not - there is very rarely only one reason for doing anything. I can see that. But Ame - when I write to you - do I write to all those that are represented? Are you like me - or like one those many headed monsters that we fear at our deepest levels of whatever:) And what degree is this site part of? But wouldn't it be funny if at some time in the future we looked back - and found it was really only to get a degree - not transformation at all. that was the lie we told ourselves just so we could gain those little letters G

Eventually, my main correspondence with G faltered for this reason, and didn't reappear for another three months.

18/6/99 Dear G, This week I got a box of books in the mail from Brisbane. And there was a Nick Earls book in there, so I was reminded both of Brisbane and of you. Lovely writing. How are you? amechan

One of the most interesting areas of this project was the issue of audience. Over the six months, from February to July, the site was "hit" more than 1800 times. I did some research on getting the site up on search engines and promoting it outside the web. But what was interesting was to see how far it could go on it's own. Information about the Amechan site moved through word of mouth; she wasn't really stumbled upon. A review of the site in the trAce online webzine for a month made little difference to the numbers of visitors for that month; nor did the article in Broadsheet Magazine, nor, in fact, it's inclusion in the Asia Pacific Triennial.
18/6/99 Oh Ame This is what happens when I don’t answer emails straight away. The last time I was going to reply to you - I wanted to look at your site first and I couldn’t for some reason - and I never came back. But I was still going to - after I finished this writing course - it has been so hectic!!! You see - we were learning everything from scratch - including HTML and trying to write at the same time. I am still finishing the last assignment - throwing up screens everywhere:)) Otherwise everything else is going well. And how are you - what have you grown up into - the last time I looked at your site was over someone’s shoulder and you had changed quite dramatically from the first time I saw you. I will have to look again - but I have lost my ‘flash’ plugin - so it mightn’t look as good. Which Nick Earl’s book did you get? Hearing him read them was the big experience I discovered after purchasing Head Games. They are not quite the same read silently. Exactly what unit are you doing your web page for. I looked at some of your source code - beautifully done - so I wondered if you were on the programming side of things - or the literary side:) Anyway - this is getting too long for an email. Have you noticed they are not like letters? I hope you write again. Sorry for the delay in reply:) G 33

I must also add that the audience in Japan was also limited by the lack of translation. I had intended to make a Japanese translation for each page; in fact, I engaged a translator for the first two months. But there were problems that stopped me from continuing with my plan. I could not be sure that the integrity of nuance could be maintained in translation. To do the writing justice would involve subtle and poetic interpretation, and I was not confident that the tone could be maintained. Finally I abandoned the idea.

19/6/99 NO RECORD OF CONVERSATION 34

At the end of July, the serialization of the site ended, with no notification to the audience. It had run for 26 weeks, as planned. In it’s entirety, the narrative was cyclical; the history ending just before the journal had begun 26 weeks previously.

"The first thing that broke through the dullness was Michiko’s voice. The conversation I had had with her on the telephone before she left, telling me that she’d be back within the week. And when I thought back that week was long lapsed. And then I started to think about the house. She kept a clean house, always, but now when I came to think about it, when I had walked in the door, what had come into my mind was how she always prepared for a long holiday. Everything away, everything covered. She wasn’t coming back. I was sure of it." 35

19/6/99 Dear Ame, To hear Nick read his books is something else. He is doing some dramatic recordings with some well known band - So I will look forward to the CD. Hmmm - yes I am going to have to do something about Flash - like maybe purchasing it!! Are you missing Brisbane? Are you planning to return? You have written books - haven’t you - I do remember something about a correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 18/6/99. this email was lost.
book in a passing conversation. I am still working on this writing assignment and have started killing off characters for expediency. It isn't a bad feeling. Look forward to hearing from you. G

For the following month, the entire site was reformatted so that the entries started from an archive. In September, I took the site down and put the first 8 weeks up again, slightly modified, and Amechan started her life all over again.

13/9/99  Dear Amechan, Just letting you know how much I love your site! It is so elegant and gentle. I can't wait for the next installments! Have you written any books or stories elsewhere, or do you have any other on-line works that I can check out? Regards Erika.

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correspondence between "amechan" and "G", 19/6/99. The tone of conversation has changed since the correspondence began again, and is now definitely not addressing Amechan, but me. Correspondence from a new source, 13/9/99. The site has begun again, and is being shown through the Asia Pacific Triennial.
Conclusion - learning how to move.

The Amechan website was for me a space in which to re-negotiate the boundaries of my art practice. Physically, by creating my own virtual “artist-run-space” that could avoid the boundaries of space, time and location and creatively, by allowing me to move beyond the limits of self into a virtual world; a new narrative.

In order to produce Amechan it was necessary to learn a new way to move. I had to endeavour to learn new skills, master software, decipher html. To continue to keep track of a narrative that moved forward, back and sideways at the same time, was located in two different countries in two different eras, to allow a character that was part me and part everybody and nobody, the freedom to evolve into a character uniquely different from anyone I knew. Which often meant allowing myself no time to think about the construction of the weekly journal until it was time to sit down at the computer. My desire was to construct six months in Amechan’s life with the same chaos and lack of direction that affects us all from one week to another. I wanted her to live in two cultures at the same time, and have the freedom to survey those two cultures that I do not in this “real” world have. And, finally, it was necessary to sit at my computer every week for days at a time; as long as it would take to solve the newest problem, whether it be a design fault, a programming error I could not find, or a computer crash. Keeping a weekly deadline for 26 weeks was a great challenge. And creatively, it was often a battle, trying to somehow adapt my own three dimensional art practice into this new space. A battle between artist and engineer.

I spoke at the end of part 1 of “learning how to move”. This phrase evokes the image of a child taking it’s first steps, and for me, venturing into this medium was very much like that. Although enrolled at the University of Western Sydney, I spent the duration of my Master’s study located in Japan, where access to information and help in English was limited. So I am grateful for the assistance of Steve Jenks, Hiroshi Yasukawa, and my Supervisor Peter Charuk for their help and support and to many other people for their assistance and patience.

“Learning how to move” takes on a different aspect when one already knows how to move. If movement is already absorbed and invested with meaning, then it is necessary to unlearn. In order to really work with the flow of the virtual, we must divest ourselves of our set understanding of the meaning of time, of linearity and of reality. With this new world comes the realization that the rules we govern ourselves by are there because we know of no other way in which to proceed. There are new rules to be discovered.
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