

PART ONE
Virtual Archive of Cultural Memories

Chapter One

1. My Story

My project is an autobiographical and inter-disciplinary one. In it I draw on personal, spiritual, philosophical, historical, and cultural resonances to question the uniqueness of the art object in the production of a creative digital program. The pursuit of knowing and recording oneself can never be a transparent act. It projects an illusory sense of self-mastery because it is political and subjective, an articulation of one's culture, mythologies, imaginaries.¹ The writing of women's lives, amongst others, has not always complied with the Aristotelian trajectory of narrative, where there can be a response to a demand put forth in the beginning. *blackBOX* extends the limits and conditions of the narrative structure in a non-sequential, fragmentary, and interactive environment, thus revealing the ways in which that structure engages with identity in and through representation.



Figure 5. Portrait of my grandmother Xenia (Ermoll) Ermolaeff in Shanghai,

¹ Joanna Woodall (Ed), *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1997, p1.

a Russian from China, circa 1930s

This interactive project traces an imagined history between the musical forms of *Rembetika*, *Hindustani* and *Jazz* music and dance cultures, by virtue of the protagonist Nina². The player's movement through the 'game'/ interactive work reveals Nina's hybrid origins. The metaphoric *dance* between *pandorasBOX*, *jewelBOX*, and *chineseBOX* sections experienced by the player in the program, simulates Nina's own discovery of these cultural forms, which in turn enables her to engage with her cultural origins.



Figure 6. Ileana Citaristi, Italian born classical Indian *Odissi* dancer 2002³

The objective of this creative research is to extend and complicate my earlier experiments with the music of the Russian diasporic people in China, through the production of an interactive non-linear multimedia work *Strange Cities CD-ROM*. This work is part of my on-going investigation into 'the song' as a mode of cultural expression, political persuasion, and propaganda, particularly in ethnic minorities. The

² The name *Nina* is serendipitously common to Russian, Indian, and Greek traditions.

³ Digital film of still Ileana Citaristi by Tatiana Pentes 2002.

daughter of a Russian from China and a Kytherian Greek émigré, growing up in Australia, I was disconnected from my parents' mother cultures. Early in my life, my parents separated and since then I always moved between two households, many languages and different worldviews. My engagement with 'otherness' began at a very early age with exposure to my father's practice of *Karate*. Growing up in Japanese occupied Shanghai, my father Serge Ermoll Jr learned and later taught *Shotokan Karate*, and it influenced many of his free improvisational jazz compositions. He often named the musical movements after the *kata* or bodily forms in *Karate*. Indeed, *Free Kata* the name of his spontaneous jazz ensemble, means *free* (as in improvised) and *kata* as in *Karate* movement (bodily form).



Figure 7. Serge Ermoll *Free Kata* album cover

My mother Matina Pentès worked from time to time in Indonesia and Malaysia, so I moved between and across those cultures. In 1981 I travelled to Ipoh, Malaysia with my mother and stayed with an Indian family. On this trip, I experienced my first classical Indian dance class in the *Bharata Natyam* form in an old school hall. I also experienced South East Asian ancient and contemporary émigré Indian culture, visiting the ancient Buddhist monument Borobodur Temple (built circa 7th/8th Century AD), and many Hindu temples on Java and Bali.

In secondary school during the 1980s, my friend Padma Raman's family virtually adopted me into their South Indian Australian home. Padma studied classical Indian dance. Padma had always seemed very 'Indian' to me, but intimate access to her family made me realise that, her 'Indian' culture was something her whole family worked at maintaining in Australia.



Figure 8. Borobodur, Dhyani Buddha statues and stupas⁴

Padma studied classical Indian dance and I participated in these dance classes and also learnt south Indian vocal music from her mother. I began to understand that this was what other Indian Australian families were facing with their own children, the struggle to maintain and pass on the language and the heritage of an 'Other' culture. Later I joined the *Odissi Dance Company* School under the tutelage of Nirmal Jena and Chitritta Mukerjee. The sense of disconnection with my cultures of origin and their 'otherness' and my search for identity was to some extent satisfied through the study of the *Odissi* dance. The spiritual and physical aspects of *Odissi* provided me with a way of expressing my inner doubts and conflicts. In the exploration of a culture other than my own, I found a way of re-discovering my own hybrid cultural mix. The rebellion against my own culture, and the seeking out of the Indian culture was a choice based in my earlier exposure to 'difference' as a place of refuge.

⁴ "The Borobodur Temple...built between the end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth century A.D...in Java (Indonesia archipelago)...the structure is in the form of a lotus, the sacred flower of Buddha." From Buddhist Art and Architecture <http://www.buddhanet.net/boro.htm> [accessed 10 June 2005].

These adolescent experiences had a significant impact on the production of *blackBOX*, where improvisation in dance and music are metaphors for the player/participant's movement through the electronic text. The form of the computer program has been designed specifically to embody these theoretical concerns of the research.

In an earlier work, I focused on an album recorded by my Russian grandfather Sergei Ermolaeff, which I stumbled upon after his death, "Strange Cities" (*Stranyie Garadnye*). This vinyl record formed a body of original compositions and folk ballads from pre-revolutionary Russia. Most songs, and the title track "Strange Cities", were the laments of people in diasporas, looking back to 'home-land' or in this instance to a 'home-town/city' St Petersburg, nostalgically longing for 'motherland', a place that was no more, *an imagined space*. Sergei, a stateless person, composed these in exile in the treaty port of Shanghai, China, and went on to record and play these songs in his adopted home Sydney, where he was a foreigner once more. *blackBOX* extends this investigation by incorporating the cultural expressions of the Greek and Indian diasporic experience through the music of these displaced peoples – *Rembetika* the Greek blues; the expression of 'Sanskrit' culture through the dance and music culture of *Odissi* and *Kuchipudi*. In *blackBOX*, the protagonist Nina discovers how these forms inform her cultural and spiritual origins.

In the production of a program that articulates expressions of the émigré Russian, Greek, and Indian music/ dance traditions, I have composed a creative work that incorporates and synthesises these cultural forms, to suggest the way in which music/ dance and ethnic traditions blend and become hybrid in cosmopolitan cities. This signals the specific cultural resonances that articulate the protagonist Nina and my own subjective ethno-cultural heritage.

In many ways old Shanghai, for me, symbolises this synthesis, as a cultural *locale*, historically and in film and literature. My grandfather Sergei Ermolaeff recalled, that in Shanghai during the revolution in China, before his immigration to Australia in 1950, all references to

decadent Western culture, music, literature, film and political ideas were banned by the new Communist government.



Figure 9a. Serge Ermoll and His Orchestra plays for Pathe Label, China, c. 1930

The existence of a French record label for Russian jazz music provided a material vestige of this period in Shanghai. Pasted with glue to Sergei's music room wall, peeling off after his death, the existence of this historical material culture articulates the East/West cultural dialectic providing a trace, a fragment of this decadent transient whirligig of "joy, gin and jazz"⁵ in the East.



Figure 9b. Portrait of Mao Tse Tung in the former Russian Orthodox Church spire, Shanghai circa 1998⁶

Memory and the piecing together of *fragmentary* material history, stories, and evidence have an uncanny resemblance to the way in which we input randomly accessed information using computer data-bases to construct non-linear/ non-sequential narratives in software programs such

⁵ Lynn Pan, *SHANGHAI: A Century of Change in Photographs 1843-1949*, Hai-Feng Publishing Co, Hong Kong, 1996.

⁶ Portrait of Mao Tse Tung in the former Russian Orthodox Church spire, Shanghai circa 1997, photograph courtesy Geoffrey Weary.

as Macromedia Director. These bring animations, digital movies, sound fragments and texts together in an assemblage or collage, just like the collages of photographs my grandfather Sergei glued to his music room walls in suburban Australia.

Opening up the virtual box in *blackBOX*, the player/participant is invited to ‘play’ with artefacts and objects that inform the player/reader of this new ‘text’ about the cultural forms represented in this program. Audio signatures of the respective ‘songs’ become associated with the various cultures (i) *jewelBOX*, or, *Sanskrit* culture; (ii) *pandorasBOX*, or, *Rembetika* culture; and (iii) *chineseBOX*, or, pre-revolutionary popular Shanghainese and Russian émigré culture. This strategy has been devised to explore the ways in which readers of the new digital text weave in-between/ in and out of the boxed narratives.

The ‘song’ and musical phrases are pieced together by the participant of this ‘game’, creating a genuinely unique musical representation with each rendition of the program every time the game is played. The musical phrases, derived from the three genres of ethnic music, are East/West hybrids in their derivations. Contrary to the concerns of European composers using ‘orientalist’ themes in opera, theatre, ballet or contemporary new music, these three ethnic genres have been used to represent my own ethno-cultural and spiritual heritage and development. The musical ensembles in this digital work are composed as referents to the dis/connected surfacing of immigrant *memories* and to examine the process of reflections on time past.⁷

In the search for my cultural origins, I realised that the choices I made were often arbitrary and personal. What had seemed ‘foreign’ to me and outside my understanding was now becoming integral to my experience and informing aspects of my own life world. At the same time, these ‘discoveries’ revealed the East/ the West distinction as a

⁷ “When to the sessions of sweet silent thought I summon up remembrance of things past...”, in Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, Great Britain, 1983.

dialectical relationship and analogous to that of Self and Other. At this point I returned to my father's place of birth as a point of departure, Shanghai, China, the quintessential 'melting-pot', and modern cosmopolitan hybrid city.

2. Writing the Self⁸

The moment of self-portraiture becomes the coincidence of the beautiful and the macabre, and of self-love and self-loathing.⁹

The first image was a portrait. In classical mythology, a lovely youth named Narcissus lay beside a pool gazing in adoration of his own reflection...In the bible St Veronica compassionately pressed a cloth against Christ's face as he stumbled to Calvary, and found His true image miraculously printed on the material...St Luke became a painter because having expressed a vision of the Virgin Mary, he was inspired to produce a faithful portrait of her.¹⁰

As explored in *Cruel Beauty* (1999), the autobiographical project to record and paint oneself falls into the category of self-portraiture. The genre of portraiture in the west has historically been regarded as a Renaissance invention, charting the emergence of masculine individuality. Patricia Simon discusses the assumption that a universal concept of individualism is a cultural precondition for the European portrait.

A particular kind of modernist, western, autonomous individualism is assumed, a sense of unique and publicly staged selfhood, so that the masculine agency is universalised as the norm...in an over-determined patriarchy, audiences were predominantly male and chiefly saw members of their own gender and class populating the spaces of the Renaissance city...¹¹

This trope can be extended beyond gender to incorporate class and ethnicity into the cultural dimensions of portraiture. This search for self-definition and representation of identity is articulated in *blackBOX*. However, the project also tries to extend the traditional generic codes of self-portraiture drawn around the modernist Western canon, as derived from a uniquely masculine post-Enlightenment self.

Tracing a historical map of the Western portrait genre consistently leads to the Renaissance re-discovery of the portrait in western antiquity and the early Christian world in the form of statues, busts, coins,

⁸ This research began in Tatiana Pentes, (unpublished) Master of Letters thesis *Cruel Beauty*, Art History and Theory/ Women's Studies, University of Sydney, 1999.

⁹ Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, The University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago, 1993, p242.

¹⁰ Joanna, Woodall (Ed), *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1997, p1.

¹¹ Patricia Simons, "Homosexuality and Erotics in Italian Renaissance Portraiture", in Joanna, Woodall (Ed) op cit p29.

sarcophagi and wall paintings.¹² The Renaissance notion of Man as created in the image of God is idealised in Durer's *1500 Self-Portrait*, where he is both created in the image of God and through the artistic production creates as God. "Durer mythicises the identity between image and maker... (celebrating) himself as a universal subject, whose all-seeing gaze is subject to none".¹³

The legacy of Durer in self-portraiture is manifest in the close analogy between bodies and texts, the artist's self-portrait and the holy image. The Renaissance painter's ascent from craftsman to artist celebrated art as the *Vera icon* (truth icon) of personal skill. In *Cruel Beauty*, I framed my analysis of the modernist paintings of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, and her repeated image of the incomplete and searching feminine body, within the Renaissance project to represent the human form as masculine subject. Kahlo's work influences the artistic creative production in *blackBOX*. I have sought to place the woman-child at the centre of the universe¹⁴, as universal all-seeing subject. Nina's search for self is articulated in the creation of a hybrid identity that is always incomplete and partial. This fluid identity, composed from her hybrid cultural origins is designed to be interpreted from many perspectives, and is thus embodied in the non-sequential 'game' structure of computer artwork.¹⁵

The title *blackBOX* gestures towards the photographic apparatus of the camera, and its visual elements have been influenced by modern photographic portraiture, extending into the post-modern realm of digital imaging and electronic painting. Digital media technologies have profoundly altered perception, creation and distribution and the truth-value of the image, contrary to the opinions expressed in Roland Barthes'

¹² Joanna Woodall op cit p1.

¹³ Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, The University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago, 1993, p242.

¹⁴ See Terry Smith "Frida Kahlo: Marginality and Modernity", *Making the Modern*, University of Chicago Press, London, 1993, p247-p281.

¹⁵ This research began in Tatiana Pentes, "Impulse to Represent the Self", in *Cruel Beauty*, Master of Letters thesis, Art History and Theory/ Women's Studies, University of Sydney, 1999.

modernist seminal piece *On Photography*. In his words: “Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse has its signs which have referents...Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that a thing has been there.”¹⁶ This notion, always problematic, has been vitiated in the wake of virtual reality and digital collage aesthetics.

blackBOX makes a collage of everyday imaginary and material objects, like the Mexican Catholic folk *retablos* mentioned in Frida Kahlo’s secular self-portraits, where the village artisan pins an object from an accident to the votive offering, eg. strands of a victim’s hair, or samples from a vehicle wreckage. The lens is turned back upon the viewer who is forced to apprehend the subjective gaze of Nina the protagonist. Thus the observer becomes observed, the personal becomes political, the interior self moves into the public domain. In examining the impulse of self-portraiture, the process at work in authorship reveals the autobiographical and *digital* writing of the text.



Figure 10a. *blackBOX* menu screen interface screen by Tatiana Pentes

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Flamingo, Great Britain, 1980, p76.



Figure 10b. *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* by Frida Kahlo
In secular ex-votive style from Martha Zamora, *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish* ¹⁷

¹⁷ from Martha Zamora, *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish*, Art Data, London, 1990, p60.