

ROMANCING THE BLACK BOX

By Ian White , 15 October 2003

Buried away in the summer programme of the ICA, the new media show Radical Entertainment represented an ambitious attempt to anthologise recent interdisciplinary work focused on the digital domain. Here, Ian White reviews the exhibition and asks whether our *idées fixes* about the new media genre – its levels of ludic subversion, its critique of the institution of Art, its interactive nature – aren't misnomers in the face of the realities of the white cube. Instead, he suggests, we might view these 'black box' works as a revitalisation of the legacies of Romanticism

Exceeding the minor scale on which it occurred, and somehow moving beyond its host institution's low-key support, the ICA's July new media event 'Radical Entertainment' pulled off a small feat of transformation. The season may have explored the modifications of submerged and emerging technologies. It may have showcased the renegade strategies and cultural appropriations that a specific, dominant gaming culture has induced. And it may have done both these things in the context of the actual, reconstructed and ubiquitously mediated youth market in which this gaming culture thrives. But new media curators Lina Dzuverovic-Russell (formerly of the ICA) and Lauren Cornell (of Williamsburg's Ocularis screening house) managed, ultimately, to make this a festival about something much broader. Not so much a collection of parts as a collection of those parts' frames, their modes of exhibition.

> *Metapet* (2003), by Natalie

Brookchin..... In the ICA's digital studio, Natalie Bookchin's *Metapet* (2003) and Futurefarmers' *antiwargame* (2003) both position the viewer as gamer. Bookchin's game is seriously durational; in fact it's as endless as 9-5. As the manager of a virtual pet, a worker within a generic corporate structure, the viewer/gamer becomes complicit in a nexus of typing speed and pseudo new-age therapies, plastic surgery and morale boosting hair dos, energy dips, 'productivity' and the double-edged sword of go-faster pills. The level of commitment we're being asked to make here to keep our pet alive is clear: she'll require delicate and *regular* attention. The idiosyncrasies of managers being what they are, we each learn our own lessons. My own personal horror was that absolutely nothing affects how much your pet earns in the short-term.

