Introducing Beyond Cyberpunk!

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"At a certain point, I saw cyberpunk jump from being a literary description to being a description of something in the real world. I think the *New York Times* used it in a headline last year : "Cyberpunks [do something]" and I said "what ?" I thought they were referring to this group of writers I'm associated with, but in fact they were referring to outlaw hackers who had broken into someone's databank. And, I believe *Time* magazine used it as well in that sense. It's an interesting thing to see. I was happy to see it take on this new life in the world outside because then I felt I wouldn't be as saddled with it".
-- William Gibson

"It is significant that cyberpunk has become a buzzword in Hollywood. Its semiotic coloring struck the mind's eye; its freight of symbols came roaring home to us. Shades of Jung, the public had been waiting for it... Don't look for what it is. But look for what it portends. Up ahead, where the white dashes merge with the horizon."
-- John Shirley

"Models are not true or false, they are more or less useful."
-- Stafford Beer (cyberneticist)

That Goddamn Cyber-word, Again ?!

"CYBERPUNK". Is it a literary genre ? Is it marketing hype ? Is it the latest style in the culture industry ? Is it the apotheosis of post-modernism ? As Dieter, the German nihilo-art snob on *Saturday Night Live* would say : "Your questions have become tiresome". Regardless of what it is or isn't, Cyberpunk (also called "Techno-culture" or "New Edge" culture) has become a cultural phenomenon which bears looking into.

For a multiplicity of reasons, it has, in hardy memetic fashion, taken on a life of its own. This stack is an attempt at holding up, for further examination, some of the more interesting strains of this curious cultural mutation.

As we move deeper into the 1990's, Techno-culture has become "important". In the tunnels of the underground, in the halls of academe, and in pop culture, people are talking about Cyberpunk, taking it seriously. What these people are talking about has little to do with Cyberpunk as a literary movement. Those SF-ers who proclaim that "Cyberpunk is dead", are probably right. As far as literature goes. To the current generation of users, Cyberpunk is synonymous with the hacker underground, non-Luddite forms of anarchy, and the strategy (borrowed from Cyberpunk lit) of extrapolating "20 minutes into the future". Cyberpunk has come to mean simply the grafting of high-technology onto underground, street, and avant pop culture.

When we do bother to look into the future, we see business as usual, more of same -- only amplified : everything worse and infinitely weirder. And this "more of same" future is NOT acceptable to us. As the NeoWobblies like to say : "The best way to predict the future is to invent it !". We hope that *Beyond Cyberpunk!* will provide some nutritious food for thought and some helpful strategies for would-be rebel futurists.

This stack moves backwards and forwards. For its creators, it served as an enlightening meditation on where Cyberpunk came from and in what directions it has headed. We wanted to create a document that bounced off the diverse information domains that see Cyberpunk as an important aesthetic thread. We don't necessarily agree with everything that is said here, nor do we feel like we need to. It's a connect-the-dots picture, except the dots have no numbers ! The connections and the conclusions are yours.

Set for : "Self-Destruct"

There is a grave danger in labeling things. It's that old Map/Territory problem. "Cyberpunk" is totally meaningless outside of a meaningful context -- "Cyberpunk" is NOT the thing that it names. When it's used as a sexy-sounding word -- to sell books, movies, or pop culture product, then that's all it is : marketing hype. When it's used to point to something real and useful (e.g., hacker culture, the SF underground, a new strain of pomo cultcrit, post-industrial music, etc.), then it becomes more substantive -- a way of communicating a big bundle of ideas with one flashy word.

Recently, I participated in a "Cyberpunk Night" at a local DC night club/coffee house. At one point, a guy came up to me and started saying how stupid he thought it was that the event had been advertised as "Cyberpunk". "That word is so over-used", he whined. "I hate it". When I asked him what sort of stuff he was interested in, he said : "Hacking, industrial music, *Mondo 2000*, the underground scene (he had on a Lisa Suckdog t-shirt)". I asked "Then what word could have appeared in that ad that would have gotten you here, given the fact that all the things you just listed were on the evening's agenda ?". He thought for a minute, gave me a disgusted "You asshole" kind of look and walked off. Sure, other **buzzwords** could have been used : "Techno-Culture Night", "New Edge Night", "Industrial Culture Night", but nothing is as powerful and pervasive as "Cyberpunk". And that word filled the room to capacity with punks, rastas, hackers, SF fans, artists, nerds, and techno-hippies, who all had a golden opportunity to network with each other. The important thing is not to take ANY label too seriously. You have to shake off the bullshit periodically ('cause it can build up real fast). I'm satisfied with the paradox of never being satisfied with labels even as I continue to use them. Gregory Bateson, the Cyberneticist, used to say : "Tie your ideas with slip knots". It **should** make you feel a bit silly and uncomfortable when you say "Cyberpunk". When it becomes totally safe, acceptable, transparent, then it's time to blow it up and start all over (the fuse is burning again, by the way).

Perhaps the most brilliant thing about the dada movement was the concept of the self-destructive manifesto. Or, as Tristan Tzara described it : "The ultimate goal of dada is the destruction of dada itself". Punk music embraced this too (either consciously or libidinally). As I see it, this self-negation/self-destruction is not a fixed historical event, but rather a continuous, dynamic process of building, sustaining, and destroying. Manifestos, world-views, and mind models are useful ways of organizing experience and processing new information. But, without a self-destructive mechanism built into it, the world-view can quickly become a toxic closed system. The flux between mind models and mind bombs (irrationality, humor, boredom, intoxication, contradictory viewpoints) is where one can become comfortable with problematic labels such as Cyberpunk. As Kata Sutra, that mistress of recombinant phraseology likes to say : "Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow !".

Beyond Cyberpunk!

The essays contained in the Manifestos zone are a prime example of the diversity of opinions held on Cyberpunk and its mutant children. These articles deal with both SF Cyberpunk and the trend du jour known as

"Cyberculture".

The world of post-cyberpunk fiction is explored in Sterling's potent *Cyberpunk in the Nineties*, Di Filippo's *Ribofunk Manifesto*, Rucker's curious *Transrealist Manifesto*, and Andrew Mayer's *What the Hell is Cybergoth?*. Joan Gordon pragmatically examines feminism and Cyberpunk lit in *Yin and Yang Duke It Out*.

The real-world underground that derives its inspiration and aesthetics from Cyberpunk is covered in Richard Kadrey's *Scanning the Brain Box*, Bruce Kotz's pomo rant *Cyberpunk, Rock and Roll, and Radical Politics*, and Hakim Bey's *T.A.Z.* (Temporary Autonomous Zones). This zone's resource section contains books on the state of the computer underground, current directions in post-modernism and radical politics relative to our concerns here, and anything else that might provide theoretical traction in understanding Cyberpunk in the Nineties.

Perhaps the most interesting manifesto here is the stack itself. It offers a variety of core samples -- ideas, information, and resources that can be used in hammering out your own visions of the future.

The next zone, Media, is the germinal seed from which the rest of the stack sprung. While it would be misleading to portray street tech/cyberculture as a direct linear progression from cyberpunk literature proper, a huge amount of inspiration and reinforcement has come from the SF lit, films, comics, and fanzines that are covered in the Media zone.

The Street Tech zone covers the tools and hardware that are being used to construct a "cyberculture". The foundation for all this activity in the real world is the computer and how it is revolutionizing art, music, communication, the balance of personal/state power, and many other domains. Here we focus on the do-it-yourself end of the high-tech spectrum. While this section doesn't contain too much DIY technical information, its numerous essays and resources will point you in the right direction. This is all about building **active** culture.

Cyberculture is the lack-of-a-better-word label that is given to the place where computer technology meets popular culture. The current generation of young people have grown up with PCs, LEDs, and MTV. Technology is a seamless part of their lives. Computers are no more foreign to them than transistor radios were to the last generation. As technology has saturated it, youth culture (and avant garde culture) has started to express itself through a "techno-symbiosis". For good AND ill, a new cult of the machine is arising. This is an exciting time where a new domain of cultural expression is being created, debated, and negated. The purpose of this stack is to help fuel this critical debate in the 1990's.

> "Fractal Anarchists are the Hunter/Gatherers of Cyberspace."
> -- Kata Sutra Speaking at the Anti-Labor Union meeting. New Los Angeles Node, April 1, 2025.

Update Introduction

> "Does the name Pavlov ring a bell ?"
> -- Kata Sutra [Appearing before the Synth-Senate SubCommittee on Net Terrorism]

Citizens !

Welcome to Beyond Cyberpunk : the Update Stack, or "What happened to the future since last we talked".

So, what DID happen in the 18 months since we released the main BCP ! stack ? Well, almost all of the things talked about in Beyond Cyberpunk! (the net, VR, cyberculture, smart drugs, zines, and do-it-yourself reality hacking) seem to have become big news. Almost every major daily, plus *Omni*, *Details*, *Rolling Stone*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Utne*, and many others, ran articles on one or all of these topics. 1992 end-of-the-year "In/Out" lists included such "in" things as "cyberpunk", "VR", and "industrial music" (thanks to *Ministry*'s big splash at Lollapalooza).

What else ? : *Tetsuo* (1 & 2) happened, *Wild Palms* (ick !) happened, a director's cut of *Blade Runner* was released, along with *Lawnmower Man* and *Sneakers*. *Wired* joined the ranks of computer culture rags and a new, supposedly techno-hip, administration brought a higher level of credibility to the Electronic Frontier Foundation who moved from Cambridge, MA to Washington. Even William Gibson and wiseguy Bruce Sterling became Washington darlings with appearances before several Federal committees and educational organizations. The Internet seemed to be the most widely covered cybercultural news item, with articles exploring every business, recreational, romantic, and human-interest angle of the global net of nets and the coming "information superhighways". Interactive multimedia, the perpetual "next revolution in computers", stopped just being hype and started to gain fevered Zaibatsu attention in the form of big bucks. San Francisco jumped on the bandwagon by declaring itself the "Multimedia Gulch".

Even Beyond Cyberpunk! turned out to be newsworthy, receiving critical acclaim from the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Mondo 2000*, *MacWorld*, *MacUser*, *MacWeek*, and lots of other mags. We even roped in such celebrity macheads as HyperCard gurus Jerry Daniels and Danny Goodman, Robin Williams, film director John Badham, William Shatner, and Billy Idol. Some of the praise stunned us. Ric Ford of *MacWeek* said : "Beyond Cyberpunk! puts the Mac back on its revolutionary track". Brooks Landon, in an article to be published in the next issue of *Science Fiction Studies* calls Beyond Cyberpunk! "one of the first generation of canonical hypertexts", and says of the many authors who contributed : "...better Virgils to lead us through the zones of cyberculture will be hard to find". Yo, Baby ! Who cares if these log rolls are true or not, they have certainly kept our chins above water and kept us at our CRTs, late into the night, hoping to live up to such lofty praise.

When we started this project, we named it BEYOND cyberpunk, because we felt that the c-word was already a moldy sponge in need of a good squeezing. We wanted to pay homage to the early mappers of cyberculture (the Mirrorshades group, their predecessors and their emulators) and then track the many directions that mid-80s cyberpunk and hacker culture had gone in the late '80s and early '90s. Now, the wave on the second c-word (cyberculture) seems to have crested as the mainstream media and Hollywood have swallowed the entire "cyber" meme. The release of Billy Idol's album *Cyberpunk* was met with a hail storm on controversy on the Net, as young cyber-Turks whined about how he had ripped them off and destroyed their secret club.

It seems that now, more than ever, we need to destroy the labels that limit us and continue to focus on the ideas, issues, and possibilities that caught our attention in the first place (and got soaked up in the "cyber" sponge). It's foolish (and very un-cybernetic) to stand in the way of the pop/commodity culture Tsunami wave. It's all just more noise to feed back into the system, more media material to hack for your own purposes. I like that bumper sticker that says : "Don't like abortions ? Then don't have one !". The same can be said about the decidedly less controversial issue of "cyber" commodification. If you find it distasteful, then don't support it. Make your own culture and ignore what you can't directly change. That was the point of all this in the first place.

"Do-it-yourself", "hack the system", "surf the edge". While these have swiftly become clichés, the ideas behind them are as valid as they have always were. Beyond Cyberpunk!, and many of the ideas and resources presented here are dedicated to those basic ideals.

Kata Sutra sez :
"Keep moving, keep asking questions, and keep modeling difference".