

ARTOF COMMUNICATION – ART OF NETWORKS - NET ART

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“I think that every new medium is only a materialization of previous generations' dreams.” Vuk Cosic

The 20th century posited that anything could be the material of art. The reality was that not all the technologies invented by this prolific century were appropriated by artists. However, the technologies of communication were particularly prominent. I will leave the explanations to the sociologists and anthropologists, but a simple enumeration is eloquent. The telephone, from Moholy-Nagy's 1923 *Telefonbilder* to today's SMS works (SMSMS. *Short Message Service Mediated Sublime*, Maurizio Bolognini), via Fred Forest's actions with this medium (*Le rallye téléphonique*, 1986; *Ballade pour changement de régime*, 1989). Radio, from the *La Radia* manifesto (1933) and the radio “scores” by the Italian Futurists, to the *Radiotopia* project for Ars Electronica 2002 and E-Lab's net radio. Then there is television (Fred Forest, *La photo du téléspectateur*, 1976), fax, notably the *City Portraits* (1989) developed by Karen O'Rourke and the Art Réseaux group, slow-scan (the 1990 project for an exchange with Dakar artists by the Pittsburgh group DAX founded by Bruce Breland) and satellites (*Phase I – Send/Receive Satellite Network*, Liza Bear & Keith Sonnier, 1977). And then of course there are electronic networks with the first projects by Bob Adrian (Artbox, on the I.P. Sharp network) and Roy Ascott (*Terminal Art*) in 1980, not forgetting the good old French Minitel which, in terms of artistic practice at least, has become

part of what Bruce Sterling defines as the “dead media.” However, between 1978 (when it was put in place) and 1989, when the Internet took over, artistic experimentation in this medium was very much alive, not only in France but also in other countries such as Brazil (Orlan and Frédéric Develay’s *Art-Accès* journal, 1985; *Labyrinthe* by Marc Danjean, 1983; *La vallée aux images* by Jean-Claude Anglade, 1988; *Zénaïde et Charlotte à l’assaut des médias* by Fred Forest, 1989).

Finally, many old and new projects have used these media in combination.

Art of communication crystallized at the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s. Here means of communication were not perceived as the support for transmission of a message (a work) but as the very material of art. This period saw the organization of a number of landmark events and exhibitions: among these, *Electra* in 1983 and *Les Immatériaux* in 1985 presented Minitel works. In 1982 Bob Adrian organized *The World in 24 Hours* for Ars Electronica. In 1986 Roy Ascott, Don Foresta, Tom Sherman and Tommaso Trini showed their *Planetary Network (Laboratoria Ubiqua)* at the Venice Biennale. 1985 saw the first edition of *Artmedia* and the subsequent constitution of the *Aesthetic of Communication* movement co-founded by Costa and Forest.

“I went to the art show *Les Immatériaux*. Part of it was a collaborative writing project, where French thinkers discussed via the Minitel-System. Lyotard had introduced 50 terms like ‘absence’ and ‘navigation,’ topics that are still up-to-date today. You could participate in this at the museum. I personally couldn't even use French keyboards, but it left a huge impression on me.” Heiko Idensen

Today’s net art is in part the offspring of the practices of the 1980s. But a child is an autonomous being who invents his/her own history. Determining points of convergence and divergence is no light matter. This is one of the things that we

will be trying to do by analyzing various projects at *Artmedia VIII : From Aesthetics of Communication to Net art*.¹

Experimentation, the dichotomy between a formal aesthetic approach and a more sociopolitical approach, and ludic, ironic, provocative and jubilatory qualities are all shared features. The heritage also includes concepts and forms that were elaborated some twenty years earlier, such as the notions of connectivity, virtual community, distributed self, ubiquity or telepresence, and hypermedia (*L'objet perdu*, a telematic novel developed by Chabert, Martin, Philibert and Horvilleur for *Les Immatériaux*) and, above all, the invention of "plastic" spatio-temporal forms that fluctuate to the rhythm of network flux.

Whereas art of communication put the emphasis on the creation of *contexts*, it would seem that some net art is about creating *contents*, singular Web-based objects such as Web cinema and some of the Flash animations. Likewise, art of communication, and particularly the *Aesthetics of Communication*, called for an aesthetic of the event in which art took the form of *actions* and not objects. This resulted in ephemeral works of which only documentary traces remain. But while a major tendency of net art is exploring this direction, another is producing more durable works.

The evolution of metaphors in the field is also interesting. The art of communication of the 1980s was aerial and orbital (*Artsat*, Richard Kriesche, 1991; *Aspects of Gaia*, Roy Ascott, 1989; *Sculpture téléphonique planétaire*, Fred Forest, 1985). The idea here was to make visible the invisible meshing of the planet, which was taking place in an immaterial ether similar to Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere. Initially, the net surfaced with aquatic metaphors (surfing, the French *navigation*) and then dug into the subterranean world of the rhizome. From the awareness of a network woven together, we have moved towards the programming of this network, in the depths of the machine and computer codes and languages; from establishing meshes, links and nodes, we have gone to a space to be inhabited, albeit one of a different nature. Acculturation has led us from a change of perception to a change of consciousness,

towards cyberperception and telenoia, to use Roy Ascott's terminology.

Connection established - All channels open.

Creation is more alive, prolific and diverse than ever. So, to your keyboards. Oh, and don't forget your brain—its' not included in the operating system.

Translation, C. Penwarden

¹ From November 29 to December 2, 2002. Program and information at www.olats.org