

Art, Media and Telematic Space

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It has been said that using media for making art is a contradiction in terms. I'd be tempted to respond: What do you suggest we make art with, if not media? "Media" (from the Latin "means") is the plural of "medium" : "intervening substance through which impressions are conveyed to the senses", "agency, means, as by, through"#. This term, which in communications theory refers to the technical or physical means of converting a message into a signal to be transmitted through the channel, is employed in art writing as a generic term for the material or technique used in an art work, eg. "mixed media"#. Indeed "technique" brings us to the other term of the contrast since it is derived from the Greek "tekhné " which means "art" or "skill". These last two words are often given as synonyms#. All art works require some kind of medium to get made, whether it is oil paint or telephones. Thus art (skill) and media (means) would seem complementary : art is an ability in the maker, media whatever he manipulates to make what he makes.

I

The example you give suggests the "mass media", means of imparting information to a very large, popular, and often geographically dispersed audience. You evoke television, which some consider to be responsible for keeping people away from the theater and the concert-hall, and for endangering even such domestic arts as dinner-table conversation. In this restricted definition of media, telecommunications are a borderline case. Although they do sometimes interrupt conversation at meal-times, they are mass media only in the sense that, like paper and pencil, they are used daily by millions of people. In broadcast television, one emitter can reach millions of receivers#, whereas telecommunications induce a one-to-one relationship between users. Until quite recently, the telephone was a very unreliable way of getting a message out to a lot of people at once#. The children's game of "telephone" illustrates this one-to-one, one-at-a-time communication : the message is gradually distorted as each receiver in turn becomes emitter, introducing still another mediation. It is really only when telecommunications technology is used in broadcast television or radio (as in debates bringing together people in different places) that it participates in the mass media. But isn't any technique used on television (eg. caricatures which appear on the screen as they are being drawn) subsumed by the broadcast medium?

Telecommunications, which include telematics (the confluence of telephone and computer technology#) and older media such as fax transmission, do introduce a particular kind of mediation which is characteristic of all the "screen" arts#. These arts would appear to be in conflict with the traditional "fine arts", such as painting, theater or literature (here again to oppose art and media would be misleading : certainly no one would deny literature's right to be called "art", yet its mode of distribution, the book, is a mass medium). If these older forms of culture require active construction on our part as "receivers", the video screen would seem to encourage us to become passive consumers. No conscious effort is needed to "read" the image since, as Les Levine points out, it "reads itself for you"# (=it is formed by electronic scanning). When we read a book, our eyes are more or less free to roam over the page, we turn the pages as slowly or quickly as we like, we can open it up in the middle or take a quick glimpse at the end. More importantly, it is left to us to create our own mental picture from the author's indications. Even if television is not really the "non-physical me-dium" Levine maintains it to be (like any other form of energy, electromagnetic waves, made of particles, are also matter), it is certainly "pervasive", assailing the senses with its continuous flow of imagery, taking over our living rooms and our lives, dispossessing us of ourselves: "A good TV producer tries to erase entirely the space that the viewers are living in. The TV program has got to pull the viewers' minds out of their own living space and pull them into TV space. Now they are on the air. Floating the same way the TV signal is".

"TV space", as the images of Timisoara showed us so vividly, tends also to blur the distinction between "reality" and "fiction". Media coverage has created "pseudo-events" (Boorstin) like press conferences, a suicide can be programmed for "live" broadcast, while most terrorist acts are perpetrated with the evening news in view, for maximal effect. For the producer, the job is the same, whatever the program, whether it's 60 Minutes or a "sitcom": "get the viewer inside that TV set mentally. It has to seem to be happening directly in your mind"#.

In what way do telematics participate in this "mediatisation" (and consequent "de-realisation") of reality? The use of scrolling and other interactive devices such as buttons one clicks on to view another screen or file interchange among members of a groupware network would seem to be intellectual activities which involve choice and discrimination. Sending a fax usually involves writing or drawing something, receiving one calls for some kind of interpretation. Navigating in data-space, wandering through hypertext or hypermedia displays mobilise the paradigmatic, metaphorical modes of reading usually associated with poetry. So shouldn't these media have their place on Culture's side of the tracks?

The widespread use of the video screen in much telematic exchange introduces the hypnotic scanning associated with television. TV space, in dissolving distances, bringing far-away places and people into our living rooms, creates others close at hand : with our minds in Timbuktu, how can we hear the kids screaming in the next room? This is also true of telecommunications. These media put distant interlocutors in a paradoxical situation of simultaneous presence and absence. Like television and radio which combine in the same fabric live broadcast and prerecorded material (programs which are themselves recorded to be rerun, that is re-presented, at a later time), telecommunications art has an uncertain status, being both ephemeral performance which takes place in "real time" and functions according to codes of presentation, requiring the physical (or mediated#) presence of the authors, and representation, involving the construction of images capable of signifying in the absence of their authors, of preserving the experience and extending it into another time frame. As with much video art and to a certain extent live television, the medium and its mediation, its technological constraints, become an integral part of the work; in many cases one can no longer distinguish between the object transmitted and its transmission.

When artists exchange images by telecommunications (eg.fax, exchange of computer files in real time as opposed to electronic mail), the supposed presence of the correspondent at the other end is felt to be real. He is there but not available, he is "with us" on line, now but not for long. This very impression of presence makes any subsequent absence so noticeable : we "miss" someone who may not even exist, what we took to be a person may have been the automatic function of a fax machine programmed to send an image at a prearranged time. Not seeing this faceless correspondent, in many cases not even speaking with him (and even if we did, who could say that it was not a synthetic voice?), leaves just that much more room for projection#. The videophone, despite the often rather primitive quality of the image, gives a still greater impression of reality, but this too can be thrown into doubt by the introduction of prerecorded material or simulation devices.

If the media epitomise the "era of technical reproducibility" (W. Benjamin) which began with the invention of photography, the art object is supposed to contain the "aura" of a unique, individual presence. Although this distinction has been blurred in contemporary art by the massive introduction of multiple techniques such as photography, serigraphy and book-art, it still informs such practices as presenting photographs or video in the form of "installations" and making only one print from a negative. In telematics, as in other computer-based media, the reproduction no longer refers to an original, the image is virtually the same in Graz or in Paris, a series of algorithms describing the location of pixels on a geometric plane.

II

In telematics as in broadcast media, the diffusion of the "message" throughout a global network is as important as its content. However in telecommunications art the construction and subsequent functioning of this network is quite unlike that of TV. Television is always a hub with spokes radiating out in many directions, whereas artistic networks can take on different forms according to the type of project undertaken, from tree-like ramifications (which still maintain a certain hierarchy of information, as in the Gilberto Prado's Chain Reaction) to circular structures (the same artist's Connect). The image is co-constructed by the various participants at each stage in a telecommunications work. This qualitative difference in the nature of the medium is one of the main reasons artists have taken an interest in it. Looking at, interpreting, archiving these images are activities as important for artists as making them in the first place. Some would even consider their organisation into interactive hypermedia displays to be an art form in its own right (for example Liliane Terrier's Metaphora series or Christophe LeFrançois' Infest). This mode of presentation allows the work to continue to evolve: navigating in the display of G. Prado's Moone project (which originally took place in June 1992), the viewer can choose to make his own "moon", and add it to those already on file. This, however, creates another problem, typical of our "information age" : what would have happened if the thousands of visitors who saw the exhibition Machines ^ communiquer at the Cité des Sciences de la Villette (Paris) had all added something to this display? Would it be possible to keep all their responses?

As I write, the world-wide scope of telecommunications art is far from being a reality. Certain artists in certain countries have access to compatible equipment and networks, while others don't, and probably won't for a long time. Although these issues are not confined to telecommunications art - how many artists in developing countries could afford to make a piece using two Volvos (Ange Leccia, Arrangement, 1986) or fifty movie projectors (SÉance, 1985)? - they just become more visible here, as telecommunications "networkers" purport to communicate on a global basis, whereas artists like Leccia address a small, art-world elite. In fact the use of very sophisticated equipment (not to mention the telephone bills this entails) is often not within the reach of artists even in rich countries. So they often find themselves looking to sponsors to finance their projects. This is not done without the risks we all know#. And if by chance a lucky few are able to get access to equipment, they are faced with the proverbial problems of compatibility (when it's not the computers, it's the video signals or the telephone networks which are incompatible), making global "connectivity" something everybody talks about but nobody really practices. To take an optimistic view, with Eduardo Kac, we might say that it is "perhaps exactly because of these problems, and not despite them, (that) artists are using today's techniques to discuss today's issues"#.

III

Although some theorists would refuse art the function of communication, in the sense that it has no "message" which can be transmitted from an emitter to a receiver, others find this definition of the term "communication" too restrictive, even erroneous, since according to them, "communication creates what we call reality" (P. Watzlawick). As objects, works of art are of course physically verifiable (first order) realities, but when considered as art, they become second order realities, resulting from social construction, given meaning through communication and cultural consensus#. As if to confirm this idea, Tom Wolfe (was he thinking of Einstein's famous statement "it is the theory that decides what we can observe"?), asserts that without an accompanying theory, we can't see a painting#. In the same way we could maintain that outside the space in which it operates, any art object becomes invisible. This is why much art which ventures out to meet the media on their own ground often finds itself swallowed up by its object#.

What is this space which gives art its meaning? If one defines art by the space in which it is shown#, which separates it from everything that is not art, then this space is epitomised by the museum. As the instance which arbitrates in cultural matters, the museum since its inception has been given the job of selection: to include some works (which are automatically valorized by their inclusion) it must necessarily exclude others. A "universal museum" which included everything would have no reason for being. If the art world is defined by its "frame", the museum wall, then telecommunications networking will have trouble fitting in that frame. It's not that the museums have been "behind the times" in introducing this kind of art in their space. On the contrary. One of the first museum shows, "Art by Telephone", goes back to 1969. At that time it was, as E. Kac observes, the invited artists who for the most part failed to exploit the innovative potential of this theme. However, since the late 70s when artists began experimenting with the interactive possibilities of telecommunications, a number of attempts have been made to exhibit networks. These exhibitions were based for the most part on a misunderstanding. The result has been shows of equipment (telecopiers, computers, video screens etc.), artists "at work" (fingering keyboards, chatting on the phone etc.), traces of previous exchange (fax scrolls, computer hard-copy, screen photographs etc), various kinds of actions (most of them using video), while the network remains out there somewhere, invisible (except in its effects), unexhibitable. It is possible to play on this absurdity: Fred Forest showed a telephone which, when the viewer dialed a number, by a complicated process involving calls from one automatic answering machine to another around the world (we had to take his word for this; a description was given in a diagram on the wall) came full circle to... turn on a water faucet.

In fact, the network is a way of working, a way of life, a fact of life in today's world, it can't be cut up into art and non-art, as one element always leads to another and if you include one you must include the other. In most art forms there is either a discrete object (whether a painting or 50 cubic centimeters of Paris air in a glass bottle), or a representation of some thing (photos of Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty) or even an individual doing something (Michel Journiac celebrating Mass for a Body) which can be separated out from the others. With networking, there is no longer even a "gap" or a "no man's land" between art and life where artists can operate : the two are tangled up together.

The space of art today also encompasses the media. Art works can be made directly for the mass media, rather than being exhibited and then written about (eg. the works made to be "shown" in the pages of the magazine ArtForum). Here perhaps telecommunications art has fared somewhat better as these media necessarily imply network. The most innovative work has been done using telematic space itself, for example works distributed on the ArtCom network, such as Judy Malloy's "online narrabase" Uncle Roger#.

When art is not defined by its space, it is by its creator. It was Ben who signed God, not Joe Blow. Art would then be certain kinds of things made by people called artists. Who are these artists? The question of limits comes up again. How can one distinguish an artist from a non-artist? Here telecommunications art confuses the issue. Unlike most forms of (visual) art-making, telecommunications events necessarily involve more than one author. Even artists who sign their works individually solicit the participation of others, whether former girlfriends (whose voices on the phone formed the soundtrack of Tom Klinckowstein's video "parallel" between private break-ups and the (public) explosion of the space shuttle Challenger), student press agents (who processed the public's news items in Fred Forest's Stock Exchange of the Imaginary, 1985) or people on the street (in Hole in Space, 1980, Sherrie Rabinowitz and Kit Galloway set up a satellite connection to allow passers-by in New York communicate via video with others in Los Angeles). Just as ancient Chinese manuscripts could be annotated by each reader in turn, and the Bible itself is a vast palimpsest of texts by different authors written over long period, each one adding his contribution to the whole, so too hypertext or hypermedia displays today (in principle at least) as well as works in more "traditional" media like the Patchwork. (1992) imagined by Isabelle Millet, a multi-level crossword puzzle made layer by layer from incoming faxed images whose senders specified only the coordinates of the square each one was to occupy. People who "access" these works thus participate in their making and continue the (visual or verbal) "multilogue" begun by others. Does this make them all artists? Or do their virtually unlimited numbers not dissolve the concept of artist as a professional category? Such assertion may be premature. Instead of expressing himself by making objects, the "artist" now creates situations or contexts in which

objects can be made and others can express themselves The initiator of a project sees himself as its "conceptor": both its "composer" and its "conductor", and so it gets labelled with his name#. In this way the division of labor booted out the front door would appear to slink back through the rear door. But, however the roles are distributed, telecommunications-based art remains a particular kind of collective venture. These events can and do escape the control of their "conceptors": it is difficult for anyone but Ben to "sign" objects he has never seen and of which he is perhaps even unaware.

IV

The positive aspect of postmodernity is the absence of certainties. In the face of recent geopolitical events, it has become difficult to maintain hard-line "purist" positions. Postmodern theory has exposed the underpinnings of the myth of progress and its concomitant linear, unidirectional sense of history. The fact that, like the other primates, human beings have a "territorial instinct" will probably always mine collectivist aspirations. If networking is to be a viable alternative to conventional art-making, this must be kept in mind. Without defending either a new individualism or a sort of generalized, baroque "impurity", it would seem possible to make art using (telecommunications) media, if one sees art as a particular kind of skill and these media as offering the possibility of articulating individual and collective approaches.

Recent research# has postulated the existence of three human cognitive capacities : perception (the recognition of forms), imagination (a kind of perception in which one makes mental simulations of the outside world) and manipulation or "bricolage", which is the distinctive mark of homo faber. This faculty of manipulating one's surroundings, taking things apart and rearranging, reordering or recomposing them, is necessary for the constitution of culture in general and for artistic practice in particular. Telecommunications networking offers an approach in which this "deconstruction" and subsequent re-construction can be undertaken from different locations and consequently from different viewpoints.

In acts of perception, an outside stimulus excites a captor which propagates the change throughout the nervous system from one unit to the next, provoking a series of modifications which continue until a new equilibrium is found. This new stability functions as a "representation" of the events outside the system which triggered off the original reaction. Like these captors, the artist, placed at one entrance into a larger system, sets off a process which he doesn't control#.

This generalized "connectivity" is not without danger. Communication brings with it its share of misunderstandings and short circuits (indeed much of it is even built on them), networks can also be coercive : "on line" can be another way of bringing people "in line". "So near - so far" was the theme of Michel Suret-Canale and Marie-Dominique Wicker's Telematic Banquet. (1992) in which a lone telecopier isolated behind a glass window printed out faxes received from banquet guests all over the world, none of whom could actually communicate, either with each other or with the exhibition visitors on the other side of the window. This piece is usually understood to bemoan the fact that as our "machines for communicating" become better and more ubiquitous, we communicate less and less. But it could also bespeak the only space of freedom left to us, as if in some not-too-distant future we all had the one-way telephones we often long for today.

Instead of a conclusion, I would prefer to give another example. In a recent "personal" project, *Trois pas plus* (1993), Christophe Le François used working methods derived from his experience with the group Art-Réseaux. In this exhibition he not only presented individual art works made according to the principle "three not more", but also asked Marie-Dominique Wicker to create a work based on this rule. She in turn invited other artists, dancers, to participate.

Le Rayol, April 1993

Notes and references

#The Concise Oxford Dictionary 5th Edition, Oxford, 1964.

perhaps by contamination with another sense of this word as referring to the substance used to dilute paint.

#ibid.

#This one-way communication is not as totalitarian as it seems. In democratic societies, the audience is consulted through opinion polls and marketing surveys. And if nothing else there is always the power of zapping.

#Now of course messages (advertising "mailers") can be bulk-faxed to large numbers of receivers or "stuffed" into electronic mail-boxes.

#The term "tÉlÉmatique" was coined by Simon Nora in 1978, a conflation of the French "informatique" and "tÉlÉcommunications". It is often used now to designate any kind of remote transmission of information.

#Fax is not strictly speaking a "screen art", but it does involve a similar kind of mediation. Also fax is more and more associated with computer technology (eg. fax-modems which can be placed in the computer or facsimile machines with hard discs which memorize incoming documents etc).

#"One-gun Video Art" in G. Battcock ed., *New Artists' Video*, New York, 1978.

#ibid.

Television, radio and telecommunications have been classified together as "mechanical media" which transmit both presentational and representational media, using channels created by engineering.

#as several episodes of the popular series, Columbo, have shown. This effect is not limited to telecommunications, nor is it a recent discovery. Eduardo Kac describes how, in 1938, a radio broadcast version of H.G. Wells War of the Worlds (directed by Orson Welles) exploited the codes of live news bulletins so effectively that listeners all over the U.S.A. were persuaded that a Martian space ship had in fact landed near Grover's Mill, New Jersey. See E. Kac, "Aspects of the Aesthetics of Telecommunicationc" in Visual Proceedings, ed. J. Grimes and G. Lonig, ACM Siggraph 92, Chicago, Illinois, 1992

#Among others, that of serving as a cultural alibi to improve the public image of a firm otherwise known for its questionable business practices (but this is also true of institutions, as Hans Haacke has shown) or quite simply that of becoming another advertising medium (eg.art works shown in trade fairs).

#ibid.

#See Paul Watzlawick, How Real is Real?, New York, 1976.

#The Painted Word, New York, 1975.

#With perhaps the exception of the media "events" of an artist like Fred Forest who explores the limits between the two (although even his work needs relay by art-world institutions).

#See Jean-Claude Lebensztejn's essay "L'espace de l'art" in Z, Paris,1981

#See her article in "Connectivity: Art and Interactive Telecommunications" (eds. R. Ascott and C.E. Loeffler, Leonardo Vol.24, N;2, 1991,pp.195-202.

#This may be why, as Maria Matuck points out, the Reflux event (a sort of super-project where participants' telecommunications works could be realized) organized by her husband Artur Matuck for the last Sao Paulo Biennial received more project proposals than images realised for these projects. See Reflux Interactive, an electronic catalogue by Maria Matuck and Diana Bajzek, 1993.

#James L. McClelland and David E. Rumelhart, Parallel Distributed Processing. Explorations in the Micro-structures of Cognition, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1986, see also Pierre LÉvy, Les technologies de l'intelligence, Paris, 1990. .

#This approach must be differentiated from that of Anne Cauquelin when she likens the art world to a closed network in which the same information circulates continuously, see L'art contemporain, Paris, 1992.