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NEW

INTERACTION

ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN THE NETWORK

EDITED BY AMY SCHOLDER
WITH JORDAN CRANDALL

EYEBEAM | atelier

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Interaction: Artistic Practice in the Network
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INTRODUCTION

JORDAN CRANDALL

THE INTERNET provides an extended studio for creative production as it compels one out into the world, into new kinds of cultural conversations and identifications. It is an environment for proliferating arrays of expressive means, a system for entirely new modes of exchanging goods, a vehicle for new forms of community structure and media strategy. It marks a volatile time that cries out for passionate critical and political debates. If the problematics of access, cultural bias, and media literacy were resolved, the Internet could very well become the ideal medium—an inclusive, global intertwining of the best that broadcast and interactive media have to offer. The question is: What will we say with it? What kinds of cultural questions will we ask?

The contributors to *INTERACTION: Artistic Practice in the Network* approach these questions as if the very public nature of the Net were at stake. They see the Internet as nothing less than a new kind of urban realm, or a vast extension of the urban, with all of its problematics, pleasures, and urgencies. The degree to which one feels and expresses this situation will be the gauge of artistic work that endures as we enter an accelerated century characterized by multiple inputs, attention wars, waves of desire-inducing stimuli, and the intoxicating instantaneity of all things digital.

For three months in the spring of 1998 an online forum called <eyebeam><blast> joined hundreds of participants across the globe. The discussions concern what it means to be alive at this historical moment, at the crossroads of so many profound changes. At center stage are the transformations wrought by the Internet, especially their implications for artistic practices. Emphasizing the material and the local—the sensoria and situatedness of everyday life across diverse regions of the globe—as it integrates with the displacement fueled by global networks, this forum is an elaborate social world criss-crossed with new kinds of presences. It has intersected with embodied realities in very complex and surprising ways, facilitating illuminating encounters with others. Studiously self-reflexive, it has generated passionate debates on precisely what constitutes this “other.” Playful and encouraging of experimentation, it has inspired artistic interventions that toy with questions of embodiment, identity, and locality.

Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger writes that the borderlines between aesthetics and ethics have to be renegotiated and re-attuned daily. Political concerns fuel the discussions because questions of identity and power are so acute, so near to heart, especially for those who sense the promise of the Net and the potential for its abuse. The relevance of artistic practice for cultures in transition, overwhelmed by the forces of globalization and grappling with new forms of cultural identity, is challenged. At the same time, the emergence of entirely new visual languages and the possibilities for artistic interventions in the symbolic fields of the Net suggest new directions for artistic work. Whether political or formal, art can help illuminate changes in perception and representation at the same time that it can offer new possibilities for critical endeavor. As Margaret Morse suggests, direct and symbolic forms of intervention are equally in play as the distinctions between symbols and realities increasingly erode. What volatile combinations are masked by this seemingly uniform space of the Net, smoothed over with a lulling glow.

The texts reproduced here represent only one possible journey through this forum. Many contributions have been omitted due to publishing constraints. We have regrouped the forum into seven thematic chapters—“Embodiment: Human-Machine Connection,” “Networks: Bodies, Symbols, Cities,” “Identity: Where is Global?,” “Institutions: Architectures of Attention,” “Language: The Tyranny of Theory,” “Disappearance: Art

on Life Support," and "Politics: Power in Cyberspace." Commissioned visual projects and essays elaborate on crucial themes initiated in the forum discussions, including the intersections of technology, body, and code; the aesthetics and politics of programming; the poetics of online communication; and the relays between urban structures and distributed networks. What emerges is an unequivocal assertion of the relevance of artistic practices at this moment in time, as we witness the corporate invasion of the Web, when new critical strategies need to be developed within market systems and the question of civil space must be situated across another private/public divide.

As Ursula Biemann reminds us, artists were never really able to access broadcast space as a medium. The possibilities of broadcast intervention were simply incorporated as "video art" and safely ensconced within the museum. Will "net art" meet the same fate? With the Internet, we have a vehicle of artistic production and distribution on a scale we have never known before. Its relationship to the museum/gallery system is not as urgent as the need for the continual development of inclusive platforms that take full advantage of networks—especially since, with media consolidation and rampant commercialization, those platforms are endangered. At the same time, the relevance of art must be debated in a US-dominated, globalized culture that, on the one hand has no use for art, and on the other hand regards everyone as an artist who can take advantage of digital tools.

At least in the wealthy countries, the tools are indeed in the hands of more people. One could celebrate this situation and say that, since there are more venues for creative expression on a global scale, the beleaguered context of art is rapidly expanding to a much more inclusive and democratic realm. Even business people—intoxicated with the revolutionary spirit arguably lost by the avant garde and the creative impulse for "thinking outside the box"—consider themselves artists today. While no one would deny the need for creative outlets, there is a danger in subsuming all artistic activity into a vast expressionistic soup. If everything is art—design, business, streamed videos, advertising, lifestyle ("the art of living")—what exactly does it mean?

On the other hand, as a culture of specialization, one could certainly see the context of art as rapidly diminishing. It is under siege as its western bias is undermined through the hard-won inclusion of alternate histories and as its elitist underpinnings are attacked in a consumer culture ever more hostile to the humanities and to intellectual pursuits. Just what is its relevance at this moment? What is the difference between expressive work and critical work? Between art work and "media practice"? Should these differences be fought for? How do we evaluate what is meaningful? In whose terms?

INTERACTION: Artistic Practice in the Network is engaged precisely with these issues, from diverse points of view and from various regions throughout the globe. Our contributors are artists, technicians, students, scholars, critics, architects, curators, and media practitioners from Russia, Brazil, Yugoslavia, United States, India, Japan, South Africa, Canada, Australia, Mexico, and many countries throughout Europe, linked across radically reconfigured geographies and shifting speeds of access.

Creating an instantiation of an online forum has been an enormous challenge, since online conversations are multi-threaded and anchored in time, poised somewhere between writing and speaking. Carlos Basualdo describes them in terms of voices coinciding and diverging, presences coming and going, and whole paragraphs migrating from one voice to another. For Myron Turner, these online conversations exhibit a structured unstructuring that allows participants to "move fluidly between the personal and the theoretical, from the formalism of structured thought to the tentative, untried thought spoken as an aside." Unfairly favoring those who write well in English and who have fast Net connections, they challenge one to meet the demands of accelerating, multitasked realities while at the same time to confront enormous divisions of access, literacy, and cultural bias. They show that forms of social organization across the diverse regions of the network—new kinds of communities, discourses, and friendships—can be vast and deeply etched onto this most transitory of landscapes. Since these interactions helped to launch an extraordinary new organization—Eyebeam Atelier—they also show the need for such inventive kinds of institutions, which are able to account for, and further, diverse community forms and media practices. With the dedication of such organizations, we will all surely encounter one another (and others) again and again, in the construction of this strange new networked urban space.