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## **Cyber Art: The Art of Communication Systems**

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### Abstract

Artists are using computer networks, and it is impacting not only their methods of dialogue and distribution, but their creative process and aesthetic output. In the cyberspace of computer networks, still so pervasively ASCII and ANSI, art works are not necessarily about visual images but instead communications -- many investigate interactivity, collaboration, interface, connectivity, and the relationship between artist, art work, and viewer.

### An Introduction to Cyber Art

Cyberspace is computer generated space that humans can enter and therein interact, and cyber art is art created and existing within cyberspace. Granting computer networks their due status as operational cyberspace, cyber art then includes the art formed via computer networks. In contrast to what is often termed computer art, computer graphic prints hung on gallery walls, cyber art is characterized by its lack of physicality and its experimentation with forms of communication. Rather than being static objects, cyber art works can be more accurately termed creative communication systems.

Like mass media, the development of Western art has followed

a hierarchical communications model -- an artist creates a work, an individual expression, that disseminates meaning to a public, just as mass media communicates a selective version of the state of the world to a vast populace. In both cases, dissemination of ideas is one-way. Artists working with telecommunication systems are experimenting with another paradigm for cultural production -- that of public participation in cultural activity.

### Interactive Art Communications

Artists began to employ satellite networks and slow scan television as elements for communication sculptures in the late 70s. These works involved geographically dispersed artists linked via networks or phone lines to exchange art works as communication or to directly interact in a shared synchronous electronic space. Though images were exchanged in some of these works, the artistic emphasis was on the form that emerged from many to many communications rather than the aesthetics of the individual images. An essential characteristic of telematic activity is interactivity, explored by artists as reciprocal or collaborative communications.

Perhaps the most well-known of the early telecommunication art events is "Hole in Space," a project organized by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz (founders of the Electronic Cafe) in 1980, which consisted of monitors and cameras installed in two storefronts -- one in Los Angeles and one in New York City -- that were linked via satellite, enabling passersby to interact with pedestrians across the country. "Hole in Space" investigated what Kit Galloway calls "a new way of being in the world" -- what could also now be described as inhabiting cyberspace, in which cyberspace is an electronic place defined by communications exchanged amongst individuals on all sides of the media.

The first international artists' computer network, ARTEX, started in 1980. It was organized by Robert Adrian X, and carried by I.P. Sharp Associates international timesharing network. Essentially an ASCII e-mail system, ARTEX facilitated a number of telematic art events during the 1980s that investigated the collaborative making of text-based works, such as: *La Plissure du Texte* (The Pleating of the Text), the collaborative writing of a fairy tale, produced by nodes of artists in Europe, Canada, the United States and Australia, organized by Roy Ascott; and Planetary Network, in which internationally located nodes of artists sent "news" to each other and to a central exhibition node in Venice, Italy.

In 1986, the Art Com Electronic Network\* began operations as

the ACEN conference on the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL). The WELL is a BBS system; its administration allowed us to design our own interface and program a branching system to access online art publications, art information, and art works that are computer programs. Like ARTEX, ACEN is a host for international art networking events. Unlike its precursors however, ACEN is durational rather than event-based, and its user community includes computer programmers, futurists, sysops, writers, lawyers...in addition to artists. These characteristics have resulted in art works that include in their conception a diverse audience as co-creators, art as a process of group interactions, art as the construction and evolution of links amongst communities that are culturally and or professionally diverse. Some examples:

Bad Information Base, produced by Judy Malloy was initiated as a bulletin board topic which invited users to contribute wrong, bad, silly, subject to misinterpretation information. Contributions have been programmed into an online database of bad information.

Das Casino, initiated by Carl Eugene Loeffler and Fred Truck, began as a bulletin board topic for virtual roulette. A random number generator determined the winning bets. Das Casino evolved into collaborative theatre as participants developed characters for themselves and described events which took place in Das Casino.

In the Heart of the Machine, conceived by Dromos Editions, an electronic novel that is continually in progress -- current chapters are posted online, along with an invitation to the reader to send in their biography to be used to create characters for subsequent chapters.

Virtual Cultures, an open invitation virtual panel I organized, in which WELL and USENET users contributed their thoughts about evolving virtual cultures, presented to offline readers at Cyberthon. An interesting side result was the crosslinking of the conference topic on the WELL -- from ACEN to Virtual Reality to Bio Info.

#### Art Networks As Cultural Communication Systems

For artists developing computer networks, the art work is the process and structure of building communities, of developing relationships between diverse groups. They are involved in expanding perpetual and affordable access between international cultural communities, and encouraging cultural groups to get online. They are also developing links between diverse online communities. Recent projects include: alt.artcom and rec.arts.fine, two internationally

distributed USENET newsgroups created respectively by ACEN and MATRIX Artists Network\*, an artists' BBS in Toronto, to facilitate communications with internationally-based users. Artists nets located and in construction in various countries are developing mechanisms for automatic data exchanges. Planet Communications is a project to be initiated this year by ACEN, with open participation, to develop a means for online ASCII communications to be understood across language barriers. Simultaneously, some culturally disenfranchised communities are using computer networks for cultural empowerment. One example is Native American tribes in Montana, who in collaboration with Dave Hughes and the Big Sky Telegraph are creating and distributing their NAPLPS artworks via the Russell Country BBS, and linking their tribes for communication exchanges.

### Cyber Cultural Futures

Communications technology appears to be constantly evolving in the direction of increased interactivity and multimedia, while rudimentary social and cultural applications are still forming, and not necessarily slated for horizontal public participation. Competing with the interactive public "nature" of BBS and networks are sticky issues like: Who pays cost of access? Will participatory media be participatory only to those who can afford it? Ownership and freedom of speech on privately run nets -- domestic interpretation of civil rights legislation applied to cyberspace. Jurisdiction. International communication regulations, international politics. Varying levels of technology. Some artists have envisioned a public cyberspace in which individuals of varying cultures and interests collectively and continually evolve new realities. Perhaps the most significant cyber art work of this century will be the development of interactive communication systems that are globally and socially inclusive and diverse -- a collaborative cross-community and cross-cultural project.

### Accessing Online Art

Here are some networks and BBS' that feature access and/or participation in online artworks:

#### Art Com Electronic Network1

Currently features a newsstand of online art periodicals; an Electronic Art Gallery of interactive works programmed by artists; a Graphic Art Gallery of downloadable graphics by artists; an Electronic Mall with an art bookstore, art video store, and art software store; art information bases; and bulletin boards. The

bulletin boards include discussions on a variety of art and technology topics, as well as collaborative art projects. The Art Com Electronic Network is located on the WELL, and also operates alt.artcom, an internationally distributed USENET newsgroup. Access: WELL, 415.332.6106 (modem), US\$10/month US\$2/hour (long range carriers such as Compuserve Packet Network and PC Pursuit are additional). Once on the WELL, enter:

g acen

at the OK: prompt.

USENET: readnews alt.artcom.

E-mail: artcomtv@well.sf.ca.us

or

couey@well.sf.ca.us

if your system doesn't receive alt.artcom.

### Matrix Artists Network BBS1,2

A project of Inter/Access, Matrix Artists Network BBS is based in Toronto, and features art periodicals from Canada, Australia and the U.S., information about artists' organizations and events, an art gallery, Matrix users toolbox, BBS discussions, and USENET newsgroups of particular interest to artists. Other than the long distance phone charges if you're not in Toronto, MATRIX ARTISTS NETWORK BBS is free. To access: 416.535.7598 (8N1).

### Russell Country BBS

Features "share art" works created by Native American tribes in Montana using NAPLPS. The system includes a downloadable shareware NAPLPS terminal program so that users can view the art online. You are encouraged contribute \$25 to the BBS if you download and keep the art frames. To access: 406.423.5433.

### Publications

The best resources for current art networking projects, theory, and discussions are the bulletin boards on the art networks.

However, the following publications are excellent resources for an overview of cyber art activity.

### ART COM Magazine

Electronically published and distributed monthly periodical on the interface of contemporary art and new communications technologies. Each issue is guest edited by artists. Projects and themes include: collaborative narrative, computer art networking, interactive fiction, cyborganics and robotics, art engines, ISDN and art, intelligent art, cyber art activism, social paradigms of computer networks. Accessible in ACEN's newsstand (current issue) and acm (back issues) on the WELL; in alt.artcom on USENET. To receive a free subscription or to guest edit an issue, contact: [couey@well.sf.ca.us](mailto:couey@well.sf.ca.us).

### Art + Telecommunications

Edited by Heidi Grundmann, Western Front/BLIX, ISBN: 0-920974-082  
Published in 1984, now virtually out of print. Essays by practitioners on early history of artists' use of telecommunications, includes projects, theory, visions, and substantial photo documentation.

### The Computer Revolution and the Arts

Edited by Richard Loveless, University of South Florida Press.  
Essays by artists, theorists on the impact of computers on artistic and cultural activity. In particular, essays by Howard Rheingold and Gene Youngblood address computer networking and the arts.

### Connectivity: Art & Interactive Telecommunications

Edited by Roy Ascott & Carl Eugene Loeffler, LEONARDO Vol. 24(2), Pergamon Press. ISBN: 0-08-041015-4. Published in 1991, the most comprehensive publication in print for art networking activity. Contains theoretical essays, project descriptions, book reviews by art networkers internationally.

The books are available from Contemporary Arts Press Distribution, P.O. Box 193123 Rincon Center, San Francisco, CA 941193123, USA; tel: 415.431.7524; e-mail: [artcomtv@well.sf.ca.us](mailto:artcomtv@well.sf.ca.us) or [couey@well.sf.ca.us](mailto:couey@well.sf.ca.us).

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Notes:

1. A number of artists come to computer networking from an activity referred to as correspondence art, or mail art, which involves the exchange of art through the postal system. Their offline but internationally dispersed community is termed: The Eternal Network. It is in the artistic interpretation of network as interactivity and collaboration, rather than its technical meaning, that explains the use of the term in the names of some artists' BBS projects.)
2. No relationship to Matrix Information and Directory Services.