

CYBERSPACE: OUR CREATIVE LIVES HAVE CHANGED

EXTRACTS

...The future is now. Life in cyberspace is already giving today's "consumers" the possibility to be artists, to tell the stories that were never told.¹ It holds the potential to produce the true Jeffersonian ideal: "a system that promotes grassroots democracy, diversity of users and manufacturers, true communications among the people."² In so doing, it has debunked the classic Laserfeldian model of communication, for it is no longer the institutions that send messages through technologies to audiences, but the individuals who are making the messages. This bottom-up approach argues for the demassification of the communications model and has inherent implications about the creation of new communities, new roles for the artist and for art itself.

...But as Melissa Valdez points out, what multimedia really means, is the potential of a computer to handle multiple mediums as input and then output them in as many forms.³ So, no longer is the artist restricted to one role, one art form (painting, photography, etc), but is permitted to explore many. The "multimedia artist" once again becomes a generalist, able to cross frontiers no longer built of stone. Certainly, it can be argued that the artist really becomes a specialist . . . of computers! But, this tool is "user friendly", one that is not only simple to use, but fast becoming ubiquitous - whether it be on the job, in the store, at home or at the bank. Moreover, it allows access to art forms that formerly were restricted to true specialists (designer, musician, photographer, etc.). In essence, we are all (fast becoming) specialists of computers, the multitude sending pictures and stories to the multitude. Since the artist/consumer is on familiar ground (the computer), diversity can once again be liberating:

"Software to handle photographic imagery, software for video, software for text, animation, graphics . . . we are free to EXPLORE."⁴

The "Computer collagist"⁵ is born. This is a "virtual" breakthrough for those of us unable to define our work as just one thing. The consumer can now access this world via the familiar computer, to enter creative, artistic expression that had previously never taken form.

In an age represented by the blurring of the distinction between public and private,⁶ multimedia work will not only be a creative reflection, but an interrogation of social and political transitions. It already is so today. The explosion of video art,

installations and multimedia work since the 70's, has consistently shown that the personal can be universal.

Multimedia "personal" documentaries, exploring seemingly isolated cases, are but reflections of recent societal breakdown of family, identity, religion, etc. In other words, artists/consumers are expressing what is "really" happening in their lives, and are less likely to embrace the dominant ideology, promulgated mostly by network television. By recuperating this former ideological role of network television (which still lingers on, in particular with sports, soaps and sitcoms), the multimedia artist can be his/her own "myth" maker, or "ritual bearer," telling stories based on his/her own concrete, real life experience. The success of such artists and of video art in general, which has moved out of the museums and into the homes via cable broadcasts and rentals, is because what is closest and dearest, is also what is most universal. The work of Su Friedrich, Vanalyne Green, Mona Jimenez, Terri Getter, Cecilia Condit, Dan Reeves, Lynn Hershman, etc. touches us because it is personal. We all have family, identity crises, death, loss, love, etc. We learn from these tales as they relate to our common experience in society.⁷

Cybertales can be told visually, orally and/or by text. But they all pass via computer. The medium is the message. The power of the stories told on computer bulletin boards lies in part in the facelessness of the audience the message is sent to. Who in fact is the audience? Directly, it is the computer screen. Like the blank page of a personal diary, one writes to oneself, to express the pain or joy of the moment, to relate an anecdote, experience, argument, or philosophical musing . . . in the hopes that one is not alone. Stories that echo themes of the beginnings of storytelling. The proof that these innermost thoughts are what in fact makes us closest to each other, part of the human race so to speak, is the outpouring of response to these electronic messages, sent like bottles, into the ocean of cyberspace. "Cybertowns" of support are built this way, where story leads to story of sympathy, criticism or support. There is always a response.

According to Jon Katz, "cyber-towns are not about technology. They are about something much more basic and timeless. People get excited about one another's tales and ideas . . . the stories are told, not written."⁸...

FOOTNOTES

1 Katz, Jon, "The Tales They Tell in Cyberspace Are a Whole Other Story," NY Times, Jan. 25, 1994, p. 30.

2 Kapor Mitchell, "Where Is the Digital Highway Really Heading?" Wired 1.3 Magazine, p. 11.

3 Valdez, Melissa, "What is Multimedia?" The Mediator of 07M: Eye on the Arts, Vol. 1, Issue 2, Feb. 1994.

4 Ibid.

5 My terminology.

6 For an excellent discussion on this see Rosler, Martha, "Video Art: its Audience, its Public," The Independent, Dec. 1987. She asks, for example, how can there be said to be a private sphere when millions are told simultaneously to insert suppositories to gain hemorrhoid relief?

7 Martha Gever, in an article attempting to find commonality among female video artists, finds tendencies to "dissect pathological dynamics common to the 20th century Western nuclear family," to question identity and the prevalence of performance as a dramatic strategy to connect the emotional content of individual (autobiographical) stories to the larger social configurations of power. For more, see Gever, Martha, "The Feminism Factor: Video and its Relation to Feminism," p. 233-234.

8 Ibid., p. 30.

9 "griot" = African storyteller.

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8. Gever, Martha, "The Feminism Factor: Video and its relation to feminism," p. 226-241.

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10. Kapor, Mitchell, "Where Is the Digital Highway Really Heading?" *Wired Magazine* 1.3.

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