Introduction
Museology & net.art
ZKPVI - Nettime reader

Lev Manovich,
The Death of Computer Art [Online], 1996 [revised 2001].

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Currently the art world is getting more and more interested in the computer art world. Will the two converge completely or will they retain their separate logics?

(In the following, I will refer to art world -- galleries, major museums, prestigious art journals -- as Duchamp-land, in analogy with Disneyland. I will also refer to the world of computer arts, as exemplified by ISEA, Ars Electronica, SIGGRAPH art shows, etc. as Turing-land).

The typical object which is admitted in Duchamp-land (i.e., counted as contemporary art) meets the following characteristics:

1) Oriented towards the "content." Or, as they say in Hollywood, "it's the content, stupid." The content may mean beauty (although towards the end of the century the arts have, by and large, delegated the function of providing beauty for society to MTV and fashion); "metaphors about human condition"; transgressing accepted cultural norms, etc.

3) "Complicated." This characteristic requires a further sociological and semiotic analysis, but here we can just say that it refers to the evocation of a multitude of cultural codes requiring to read the object as well as a particular, "post-modern" ironic attitude.

2) Ironic, self-referential, and often literally destructive attitude towards its material, i.e., its technology, be it canvas, glass, motors, electronics, etc. The examples are the awareness -- which has largely shaped artistic modernism -- of the tension between the illusion and the flatness of the canvas; ironic machines by Duchamp; self-destructive machines by Tinguely. Perhaps the best and most relevant example is the first exhibition of Paik where he screwed technology -- ripping open television sets or changing TV signals by affixing magnets to the monitors.

Let us now look at Turing-land. As we will see, Turing-land is characterized by directly opposing characteristics:

1) Orientation towards new, state-of-the-art computer technology, rather than "content." In the 1960s and 1970s it was exploration of algorithms and cybernetics, later it was computer graphics, few years ago it was CD-ROM and "interactivity" (which is a highly problematic concept because all modern human-computer interfaces are interactive, i.e. a modern computer is an interactive device by definition, so the word does not say anything more than simply that an artwork is using a computer); now it is WWW and "memes"; next year it maybe DVD (digital video disk) or super-high bandwidth networks or something else. In short, Turing-land functions as a place in society where the people from the worlds of culture and art play with latest computer technologies. Sociologically, this is exemplified by the historically changing categories of exhibitions such as Ars Electronica and ISEA: the category of "computer graphics" has been dropped in favor of a new category of "WWW art," etc.

2) "Simple" and usually lacking irony. See below.

3) Most important, objects in Turing-land take technology which they use always seriously. (This is one important difference between current computer art and art and technology movement of the 1960s.) In that, computer art functions exactly like computer industry. How often do you see computer artists seriously confronting and foregrounding the basic nature of computer technology -- that computers always crash; that computer programs run out of memory; that half of the links on the WWW lead nowhere, since nobody cleans up this gigantic dumping site of information site known as "World Wide Web"; that a typical VR user spends her or his time being lirerally lost rather than being engaged in "meaningful" interaction with a virtual world; etc. In short, our civilization is rushing to ground itself in a technology which can only be described as highly unreliable, transient, and incomplete. When computers don't work at a computer art show, the artists and the audience always treat this fact with horror, although they are present at an industry demo -- as opposed to taking this to be a wonderful Dada-like accident.

Perhaps only the artists from post-communist societies are ready to recognize that in an information society the noise is as meaningful as the signal, and that the nature of technology is that it does not work as it supposed to. As an example, consider the project (which I already mentioned in my previous post) presented by Russian conceptual poet Dmitry Prigov during ISEA '94. He used a business translation program to translate a Famous 19th century Russian poem from Russian into Finish, then from Finish into English, and then from English back into Russian (I may have gotten the details wrong but that should not matter). He then declared the mistakes made by computer program (which, designed to deal with business prose, was not very kind to Russian poetry) as his new work of art. Thus, the noise became the signal. (Significantly, this is something which Shannon's mathematical theory of communication, which forms the intellectual backbone of the information society, has recognized half a century ago).

But let us return to the battle between Duchamp-land and Turing-land. Shall I conclude from my analysis that now, as Duchamp-land has finally discovered computers and begun to use them with its usual irony and sophistication, gatherings such as ISEA and Ars Electronica should simply be abolished? Probably not. These gatherings do play an important function of being a buffer zone, an interface where the world of culture at large and the world of computer culture meet each other. Sometimes we even see artists genuinely pushing the boundaries of new media aesthetics, i.e. going beyond what is already accomplished by flight simulators, new computer games with their AI engines, MIT Media Lab projects, etc. In short, on occasion artists are able to compete with computer researchers, rather than simply creating new demos for commercial software, thus functioning as "memes" for computer industry.

What we should not expect from Turing-land is art which will be accepted in Duchamp-land. Duchamp-land wants art, not research into new aesthetic possibilities of new media. The convergence will not happen.

