

Is there love in the telematic embrace?

Roy Ascott

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Ascott's collected writings

<http://www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/8867.html>

Edward A. Shanken on Ascott

http://telematic.walkerart.org/timeline/timeline_shanken.html

The past decades have seen the two powerful technologies of computing and telecommunications converge into one field of operations that has drawn into its embrace other electronic media, including video, sound synthesis, remote sensing, and a variety of cybernetic systems. These phenomena are exerting enormous influence upon society and on individual behaviour; they seem increasingly to be calling into question the very nature of what it is to be human, to be creative, to think and to perceive, and indeed our relationship to each other and to the planet as a whole. The "telematic culture" that accompanies the new developments consists of a set of behaviours, ideas, media, values, and objectives that are significantly unlike those that have shaped society since the Enlightenment. New cultural and scientific metaphors and paradigms are being generated, new models and representations of reality are being invented, new expressive means are being manufactured.

Telematics is a term used to designate computer-mediated communications networking involving telephone, cable, and satellite links between geographically dispersed individuals and institutions that are interfaced to data-processing systems. It involves the technology of interaction among human beings and between the human mind and artificial systems of intelligence and perception. The individual user of networks is always potentially involved in a global net, and the world is always potentially in a state of interaction with the individual. Thus, across the vast spread of telematics networks worldwide, the quantity of data processed and the density of information exchanged is incalculable. The ubiquitous efficacy of

the telematic medium is not in doubt, but the question in human terms, from the point of view of culture and creativity, is: What is the content? In essence, the question is asking: Is there love in the telematic embrace?

In telematic art, meaning is not created by the artist, distributed through the network, and received by the observer. Meaning is the product of interaction between the observer and the system, the content of which is in a state of flux, of endless change and transformation. In this condition of uncertainty and instability, not simply because of the criss-crossing interactions of users of the network but because content is embodied in data that is itself immaterial, it is pure electronic difference, until it has been reconstituted at the interface as image, text, or sound. The sensory output may be differentiated further as existing on screen, as articulated structure or material, as architecture, as environment, or in virtual space. The metaphor of a semantic sea endlessly ebbing and flowing, of meaning constantly in flux, of all words, utterances, gestures, and images in a state of undecidability, tossed to and fro into new collusions and conjunctions within a field of human interaction and negotiation, is found as much in new science – in quantum physics, second order cybernetics or chaology for example – as in art employing telematic concepts or literary criticism that has absorbed philosophy and social theory into its practice. As communications networks increase, we will eventually reach a point where the billions of information exchanges, shuttling through the networks at any one time, can create coherence in the global brain.

Just as one of the great rituals of emergence into a new world – that of the American Indian Hopi – is centred around a sacred connection to the Underworld of power and transformation, so our emergence into the new world of telematic culture similarly calls for celebration at the interface to those systems that can link us with superconnectivity, mind to mind, into a new planetary community. And just as the Hopi seek to exploit the full measure of their expressive means by joining image, music, chant, and dance into a holistic unity, so we too now seek a synthesis of digital modes – image, sound, text, and cybernetic structure – by which to recontextualize our own world, that numinous whole of all our separate realities.

Digital futures

<http://www.digital-futures.net/>

The emerging new order of art is that of interactivity, of "dispersed authorship", the canon is one of contingency and uncertainty. Telematic art encompasses a wide array of media: hypermedia, videotex, telefacsimile,

interactive video, computer animation and simulation, teleconferencing, text exchange, image transfer, sound synthesis, telemetry and remote sensing, virtual space, cybernetic structures, and intelligent architecture. These are simply broad categories of technologies and methodologies that are constantly evolving – bifurcating, joining, hybridizing – at an accelerated rate.

At the same time, the status of the art object changes. The culturally dominant objet d'art as the sole focus (the uncommon carrier of uncommon content) is replaced by the interface. Instead of the art-work as a window onto a composed, resolved, and ordered reality, we have at the interface a doorway to undecidability, a dataspace of semantic and material potentiality. The focus of the aesthetic shifts from the observed object to the participating subject, from the analysis of observed systems to the (second-order) cybernetics of observing systems. Thus, at the interface to telematic systems, content is created rather than received. By the same token, content is disposed of at the interface by reinserting it, transformed by the process of interaction, back into the network for storage, distribution, and eventual transformation at the interface of other users, at other access nodes across the planet.

A telematic network is more than the sum of its parts, more than a computer communications web. The order of perception it constitutes can be called "global vision", since its distributed sensorium and distributed intelligence – networked across the whole planet as well as reaching remotely into galactic space and deep into quantum levels of matter – together provide for a holistic, integrative viewing of structures, systems, and events that is global in its scope. This artificial extension of human intelligence not only amplifies perception, but is in the process of changing it. The transformation is entirely consistent with the overarching ambition of both art and science throughout this century: to make the invisible visible.

It must be recognised that our human cognitive processes are rarely carried out without a computer being involved. A great proportion of the time that we are involved in communicating, learning, or being entertained entails our interaction with telecommunication systems. Similarly, artificial sensors of considerable subtlety are becoming integral to human interaction with the environment and to the monitoring of both internal and external ecologies. Human perception, understood as the product of active negotiation rather than passive reception, thus requires, within this evolving symbiosis of human/machine, telematic links of considerable complexity between the very diverse nodes of the worldwide artificial reticular sensorium.

Telematic culture means, in short, that we do not think, see, or feel in isolation. Creativity is shared, authorship is distributed. Telematic culture amplifies the individual's capacity for creative thought and action, for more vivid and intense experience, for more informed perception, by enabling a participation in the production of global vision through networked interaction with other minds, other sensibilities, other sensing and thinking systems across the planet – thought circulating in the medium of data through a multiplicity of different cultural, geographical, social, and personal layers. Networking supports endless redescription and recontextualization such that no language or visual code is final and no reality is ultimate. In the telematic culture, pluralism and relativism shape the configurations of ideas that circulate in the system. It is the computer that is at the heart of this circulation system, and, like the heart, it works best when it becomes invisible. The computer is the agent of the datafield, the constructor of dataspace.

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To the objection that such a global vision of an emerging planetary art is uncritically euphoric, or that the prospectus of a telematic culture with its "Gesamtdatenwerk" of hypermediated virtual realities is too grandiose, we should perhaps remind ourselves of the essentially political, economic, and social sensibilities of those who laid the conceptual foundations of the field of interactive systems. This cultural prospectus implies a telematic politic, embodying the features of feedback, self-determination, interaction, and collaborative creativity not unlike the "science of government" for which André Marie Ampère coined the term "cybernetics", a term reinvigorated and humanized by Norbert Wiener in this century. We will have to accommodate notions of uncertainty, chaos, autopoiesis and contingency to a view of the world in which the observer and observed, creator and viewer are inextricably linked in the process of making reality – all our many separate realities interacting, colliding, reforming, and resonating within the telematic noosphere of the planet.

Virtual space, virtual image, virtual reality – these are categories of experience that can be shared through telematic networks, allowing for movement through "cyberspace" and engagement with the virtual presence of others who are in their corporeal materiality at a distance, physically inaccessible or otherwise remote. But the very ease of transition from "reality" to "virtuality" will cause confusion in culture, in values, and in matters of personal identity. It will be the role of the artist, in collaboration

with scientists, to establish not only new creative praxes but also new value systems, new ordinances of human interaction and social communicability. The issue of content in the planetary art of a telematic culture is therefore the issue of values, expressed as transient hypotheses rather than finalities, tested within the immaterial, virtual, hyperrealities of dataspace.

The telematic process, like the technology that embodies it, is the product of a profound human desire for transcendence: to be out of body, out of mind, beyond language. Virtual space and dataspace constitute the domain, previously provided by myth and religion, where imagination, desire, and will can reengage the forces of space, time, and matter in the battle for a new reality. With the computer, and brought together in the telematic embrace, we can hope to glimpse the unseeable, to grasp the ineffable chaos of becoming, the secret order of disorder. And as we come to see more, we shall see the computer less and less. It will become invisible in its immanence, but its presence will be palpable to the artist engaged telematically in the world process of autopoiesis, planetary self-creation.

So, to link the ancient image-making process of a Navajo sand painting to the digital imaging of modern supercomputers through common silicon, which serves them both as pigment and processor chop, is more than ironic whimsy. The holistic ambition of Native American culture is paralleled by the holistic potentiality of telematic art. More than a technological expedient for the interchange of information, networking provides the very infrastructure for spiritual interchange that could lead to the harmonization and creative development of the whole planet. With this prospectus, however naively optimistic and transcendental it may appear, the metaphor of love in the telematic embrace may not be entirely misplaced.

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The original essay

<http://www.digital-futures.net/online/telematic/webobjects/WEBOBJECT2/TelematicEmbrace.pdf>