

Volume 35 Number 5 2002

THE MIT PRESS \$15.00

LEONARDO

Journal of the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology

Tenth Anniversary
NEW YORK DIGITAL SALON

Vectors: Digital Art of Our Time



Past, Present, and Future Tense

GREGOR MUIR

ABSTRACT

Given the task at hand, "to select new media works that have changed or are impacting the course of new media art and music," the author, along with his colleagues, set out to identify the fullness of the digital spectrum. The article explains his selections of artwork by consciously establishing a past, present, and future media collection. He begins with a 1965 piece from Nam June Paik and ends with JODI.org, acknowledging the large jump made from past to present media. Concluding the article with a look at the history of digital art, the author raises comparisons and dilemmas that allow readers to question and reflect on the status of new media art.

Embodied in the original invitation for entries to the New York Digital Salon's Tenth Anniversary Exhibition is a sense of the fullness of the digital spectrum, over time and across media. By way of reply, we felt that our shortlist should reflect what can and has been achieved by artists whose contributions have enhanced the development of digital practice. There are many—more than we could hope to be included on such a short list. Instead, we opted for a group of artists and works that lend an air of history and a lineage that can be traced back through the 19th and 20th centuries—an age of mechanics, mechanisms, and profligate electronica. In other words, to support an argument for old, middle-aged, and new media.

There was an initial strength of feeling when we included Nam June Paik—composer, performer, and video artist who played a pivotal role in introducing artists and audiences to the possibilities of using video for artistic expression—on our list. Active throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Paik extended his vision through an interest in dance and performance, marked by a reverence for the work of John Cage. In the early 1960s, Paik explored ways in which music, video images, and the sculptural form of objects could be used in various combinations to question our accepted notions of the nature of television. A view embodied in Paik's seminal sculpture *Magnet TV* (1965) consists of a large magnet atop a television set. The magnet is then moved about by hand to create abstract patterns of light inside the monitor. The work's brutal simplicity further advances discussion around the all-consuming media of television.

Heralded as the "Father of Cybernetic Art and Video Art," Nico-

las Schöffer was born in 1912 in Kalocsa, Hungary. Schöffer's work developed in three distinct phases: Spatiodynamism (1948), Luminodynamism (1957), and Chronodynamism (1959). He worked in a variety of media, often producing combined sculptural and electronic forms such as his 52-meter-high *Cybernetic Tower of Liege*, which consisted of 66 revolving mirrors, 120 colored projectors, photoelectric cells, and microphones. Schöffer's *Microtime Sculptures* were produced between 1968 and 1969 and consisted of black, neutral boxes containing stainless steel discs, conchs, and plates moved by programmed electric motors that reflected colored lights—some of which can be pulsed to produce a random light show.

Robert Adrian is represented for his pioneering work in the world of telecommunications. *The World in 24 Hours* (1982) was a worldwide 24-hour telecommunications project organized by Robert Adrian for Ars Electronica in Linz. Artists and groups in Vienna, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, Bath, Wellfleet, Pittsburgh, Toronto, San Francisco, Vancouver, Honolulu, Tokyo, Sydney, Istanbul, and Athens participated using any or all of Slow-Scan Television, fax, computer mailbox, or telephone sound. Each location was called from Linz at 12pm local time. The project ran from noon, Central European Time, on September 27 and followed the mid-day sun around the world, ending at noon on September 28.

In 1997, Slovenian-based Net artist Vuk Cosic shocked the art world when he created a complete copy of a Web site of Documenta, a major international art show held every four years in the German village of Kassel. The "theft," announced only hours before the closing of the official Web site of Documenta X, was officially denounced as an infringement of material copyright. The organizers of Documenta had planned to close the Web site and sell the pages as a CD-ROM. The Documenta site can now be found at the following address: <http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/dx>.

The Bureau of Inverse Technology (BIT) is a self-proclaimed information agency servicing the information age. In 1997 BIT, with the aid of two of its then most active agents, Natalie Jeremijenko and Kate Rich, produced *Suicide Box*. The video element of this project documents the set-up of a motion activated camera aimed at the underbelly of the Golden Gate Bridge, the intention being to capture on film anything falling off the bridge. One can

Gregor Muir, Kramlich Curator
Collections, Tate, Millbank, London, SW1P 4PG, U.K.
E-mail: gregor.muir@tate.org.uk
Web site: www.tate.org.uk

only assume that the blurred, unspecified objects shot from a great distance are people making the four-second descent from bridge to ocean. One suspects this to be true, especially with the view of the restrictions placed on the bridge. Subtitled throughout, the film informs us of bridge-related data: For instance, visitors can be arrested for throwing anything over the side or for appearing sufficiently despondent.

In 1997, the London-based agency I/O/D (Matthew Fuller, Colin Green, and Simon Pope) produced *The Web Stalker*—software designed to blow open the structure of the Web by stripping sites of all content and design, leaving only a two-dimensional mnemonic showing a skeletal map of how the Web is linked together. The first art browser, *The Web Stalker* is referred to by its creators as “speculative software” that refuses to show the surface of the Web sites, instead demonstrating their raw material (such as the code, the structure of the site, and the links between the different documents on the server). Other Net-related projects represented here include Olia Lialina’s site *Teleportacia*. Lialina was born in Moscow in 1971 and is known for her Net projects *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* (www.teleportacia.org/war) and *Agatha Appears* (www.c3.hu/collection/agatha). Lialina is also a film critic and curator, and opened Art.Teleportacia, the first online gallery aimed at selling Internet art in the late 1990s. Lialina’s *Will-N-Testament* project is an online will, constantly updated by the artist for all to see.

In 1998, Gebhard Sengmüller, in cooperation with Martin Diamant, Günter Erhart, and “Best Before” produced *VinylVideo*TM (1998), “a new, wondrous and fascinating development in the history of audio-visual media.” *VinylVideo*TM makes it possible to store video (moving image and sound) onto analog long-play records. Playback from the *VinylVideo*TM Picture Disk is made possible with the *VinylVideo*TM Unit, which consists of a normal turntable, a special conversion box, the *VinylVideo*TM Home Kit, and a television set. “With the extremely reduced picture and sound quality, a new mode of audio-visual perception evolves. In this way, *VinylVideo*TM recon-

structs a home movie as a missing link in the history of recorded moving images, while simultaneously encompassing contemporary forms of DJ-ing and VJ-ing.”

Pierre Huyghe’s *Les Grands Ensembles* (2001) is an eight-minute film of two tower blocks typical of the French housing projects that sprang up in the 1970s. Against a background of fog, windows light up and go dark in interludes marked by changes in atmosphere, enhanced by electronic background music by Pan Sonic and Cedric Pigot. Mist, rain, and snow engulf the blocks, while their inhabitants remain oblivious to the world outside. In fact, these buildings are meticulously conceived models, where the light show and weather conditions are governed by the artist’s hand. It is a mesmeric scene—a vision that speaks of the urgency of the urban condition and failed architectural visions.

At this stage I should acknowledge that my colleagues and I all felt that JODI should be present on our list. For several years now, JODI has been inspiring and enthusing the Net communities with their unique strain of Net art.

Dirk Paesmans and Joan Heemskerck have worked together on the Net under the name JODI for over five years. After leaving the Netherlands, they headed to Silicon Valley, California “to visit the place where Netscape lives.” As pioneering Net artists now living in Barcelona, Joan and Dirk’s Web site has an uncanny knack of generating suspicion and doubt in the user’s mind. As Heemskerck explains, “The work we make is not politically oriented, except that it stands in the Net like a brick.” JODI’s Web site simply refuses to conform to our expectations of how a Web site should behave. Confronted with a flashing screen and a stream of bright green code, the interface between user and site is immediately thrown into question, subverting our association with the Net as a user-friendly environment.

As Paesmans rightly points out, “People think, ‘There is a virus in my computer,’ or ‘What’s happening to my screen!’ This is because it cannot be grasped. You get these short, direct reactions from panicking people.” In keeping with the anarchy of their Web site, JODI’s *%Untitled Game* distorts

the rules of engagement associated with straightforward game-play. While being attacked by an on-screen graphic that appears to be half wolf and half bright yellow cube, we are prompted to examine the way in which we inadvertently mold our subservience to the world around us.

Moving from Nam June Paik to JODI is quite a leap, but it is through some sense of the history of digital art that the more interesting comparisons and dilemmas occur. Similarly, it might prove useful to put Robert Adrian alongside I/O/D, or Nicolas Schöffer next to Pierre Huyghe. Perhaps the spaces created between these artists, not necessarily shared, will open up a discussion during the course of an exhibition that for the time being can only be imagined. On reflection, a common denominator of some of the artists selected is their deftness at turning the media against itself. Many of the listed artists engage in some form of self-reflectivity—they are not presenting technology for technology’s sake. There are certain instances where the artists’ understanding of the technical and human parameters of digital media have been reflected back onto the media itself—the artist reconfiguring the technology through a critical dialogue with its materiality.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the New York Digital Salon for inviting Tate to contribute to its Tenth Anniversary exhibition, and to my colleagues Honor Harger (Tate Web-Casting) and Jemima Rellie (Tate Digital Programmes). This selection was compiled in consultation with Honor Harger (Tate Curator, Webcasting) and Jemima Rellie (Tate Head of Digital Programmes).

Gregor Muir was recently appointed Kramlich Curator of Contemporary Art, Tate, specializing in the area of artists’ media. He was previously the Curator of the Lux Gallery, London, where he staged exhibitions of works by international artists including Kutlug Ataman, Breda Beban, Carsten Holler, Uri Tzai, and Gilbert & George. He has previously written for *Frieze* magazine and *Parkett*, as well as writing monographs on artists such as Gary Hume and Richard Wentworth.

GREGOR MUIR'S SELECTIONS

Robert Adrian, Austria
The World in 24 Hours, 1982

JODI
%Untitled Game, 2000

Gebhard Sengmüller, Austria
VinylVideo™, 1998

Pierre Huyghe, France
Les Grandes Ensembles, 2001

I/O/D, United Kingdom
I/O/D 4: The Web Stalker, 1997

Nam June Paik, Korea
Magnet TV, 1965

Olia Lialina, Russia
Will-N-Testament, 1998

Nicolas Schöffer, France
Microtime Sculptures, 1968-1969

Vuk Cosic, Slovenia
Documenta Done, 1997

Bureau of Inverse Technology, United States
Suicide Box, 1997



Gebhard Sengmüller, Austria
VinylVideo™, 1998

Audio-visual technology

In cooperation with Martin Diamant, Günter Erhart, and "Best Before"

<http://www.vinylvideo.com>

© Gebhard Sengmüller

VinylVideo™ is a fake archaeology of media.

We designed a device that retrieves video signals (moving image and sound) stored on a conventional vinyl (LP) record. The discontinuity in the development of electronic film technology constitutes the historical background for this fictitious video-disc technology: Even though television, the electronic transmission of moving images, had been feasible since the late 1920s, storage of these images became possible only after development of the video recorder in 1958. Recording images for private use did not become available until the mass introduction of the VCR in the early 1980s (!). Before, the average consumer was confined to use Super-8 film, a technology dating back to 1900, usually without sound. Recording of television was not possible at all.

—*VinylVideo™* Press Kit