
ArtFutura 1991

Global Media and Common Ground

Art Futura 1991
Brenda Laurel

Tokyo Dreamspace

I'm standing at night in a public square in Shibuya on my first visit to Tokyo. Down the machine-straight streets off the corners of the square, as far as I can see, neon pulses in vertical collages, shooting animated afterimages off into the ambiguous sky. I think of the opening line of *Neuromancer —- The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel. . .* Perspective condenses the neon like sideways gravity. On the sides of buildings, diagonally right and left ten stories up, huge video screens paint the bare legs of hundred-foot women walking in slow motion, randomly jump-cutting to spinning logos and sleek speeding cars. Half a head taller in my heels than most of the Japanese who pack the square at midnight, I am seeing the place as one who looks into an aquarium at precisely the waterline; above, the photon storm of neonvideo light; below, people moving like fish, slowly, not looking up. I bob up and down, breaking and re-breaking the surface tension of the human sea, savoring the instant metabolic transformations. But I am left wondering, why have these people made this space? — *they're not looking at it.*

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan offers a notion of media 'temperature' as a way to characterize sensory, cognitive, and cultural effects. He seems to use 'cool' in two senses: *cool media*, which invite participation through low resolution and incompleteness; and the *cooling down* of one's senses in response to hot media. He treats the former as a generally healthy state, but the latter can become a kind of disease — *numbness* — that is a side-effect of the body's strategy for surviving media assault.

On rereading McLuhan after more than a decade, I wonder what he would say about the phenomena that we call *interactive media* today. One of the ways he distinguishes 'hot' media from 'cool' is in the dimension of participation. High-resolution media are anti-participatory in that there is less for us to fill in. In the '80's, interactivity was hailed by many as the antidote to the numbing world of TV. But do interactive media necessarily enhance participation?

In Shinagawa we visit the bowling alley — two hundred lanes, each with a video monitor mounted overhead. As a woman approaches the line, the monitor displays her in a frontal long-shot. As she releases the ball, sensors alert the system to cut to a view of the pins. The ball makes contact and the video cuts

again to a close-up reaction shot. The 'interactive' video processes the real-life interactivity out of the experience, like shining red light through a red filter.

Back in America, I turn these Tokyo non-sequiturs over in my mind. When I return to Japan a few months later, electro-lust draws me back to the neonvideo square. The second experience is deeper, more viscous — perhaps inner rehearsal has made me a better night-diver. There is the same strange and instant exhilaration, but now I am feeling it on my skin rather than in my head. I am inside the experience. I do not have ideas. Fragmentary messages drift by like flotsam in a phosphorescent sea. My senses are cetacean teeth, straining out bits of pattern. I sample indiscriminately. What was once hot to the point of fusion is now the ultimate cool, seen and forgotten in the same instant because there is too much to see, too much to remember. Juxtapositions in the mysterious underwater mind make intimate ephemeral poetry of what was once searing noise. I sweat and tingle, the exquisite feel of cooling off experienced as an inside-out creative act. This does not feel like anesthesia. What has changed? Have I popped out the other side of McLuhan's numbness? When we cool down, might the onslaught be transformed into a new form of inviting ambiguity? Or are we acting out a larger evolutionary pattern, emerging from and diving into stranger and stranger seas?

Many recent writings about 'virtual reality' invoke Lewis Carroll's looking glass as a way to describe the nature of the medium. I am reminded, like McLuhan, of Narcissus — the reflective surface traps us in an anesthetic trance. The deeper power of telepresence awaits below the waterline. One can imagine a transformation spawned by sensory immersion, like the Tokyo night, where the burning sky collapses in upon its content, driving meaning down into a realm that is entirely unsuspected, intimate, and vast.

Introduction

I'm reporting these experiences to you because they've caused some radical shifts in my thinking. Some things happened to me in Tokyo that led me to a new line of inquiry about the nature of art and experience. To provide some context for my remarks, I should tell you a bit about where I've come from and what I think I'm doing. Most of my background is in theatre. I began acting when I was a child and pursued this interest through graduate school. Somewhere in the beginning of my doctoral studies, around 1976, I took a job designing and programming interactive games and learning activities on a very early personal computer. That began my odyssey in the world of interactive media, a voyage that I now seem to be on for the rest of my life.

Until very recently, the focus of my work has been on integrating elements of dramatic theory and performance into the design of human-computer activity. A question you might ask is: why should we base our understanding of a new medium on the principles of an old one? And the answer is that recapitulation of

previous forms seems to be a necessary step in the evolutionary process. Human embryos have gills and tails before they take on distinctly human form; likewise television emulated vaudeville, radio, and film before its distinct identity could begin to emerge. When I began my work, personal computers were in their infancy and interpersonal connectivity was a gleam in the eyes of a small number of wizards, nerds, and techno-philosophers.

That was fifteen years ago, and both the world and interactive media have changed immensely. As these new media enter early adolescence, their distinctive traits begin to assert themselves, pushing through the vestiges of their predecessors. The emerging characteristics of interactive media today demand our attention in new ways. Accordingly, I have become a recovering Aristotelian in search of a new trip. As my field of interest has moved from computer games and theatrically based notions of interactive fantasy into the deep space of virtual reality, I find myself traveling in uncharted waters. Having just finished a book that I hope will encapsulate my work for the last fifteen years, this conference seems like a good place to launch into a fresh line of inquiry, and I am counting on your understanding and your questing natures as I grope around some of the new notions that have come to mind. What I want to offer tonight is a set of three observations and some questions about the nature of art and experience in a supermedia world. My Tokyo experiences serve as my field of reference in this exploration, and so I want to begin by identifying the aspects of those experiences that I find most intriguing.

I want to introduce these three observations and then return to each in detail.

One unanticipated and exhilarating effect of my encounters with Tokyo dreamspace that concerns what I call the supermedia environment is that sensory immersion led to submersion into a new interior landscape. It provided me sudden and deep entry into an intimate realm that has been only rarely accessible to me in the past, and never through anything but the most personal, solitary media experiences and contexts. In *Through the Vanishing Point*, McLuhan talks about the revolutionary impact of the development of the vanishing point in perspective painting. The supermedia in Shibuya Square accomplishes a revolution of similar magnitude by replacing my old experience of point of view with the experience of being *inside the viewpoint*.

A second arresting effect that concerns art in a supermedia world was the collapse of the overwhelming welter of sensory particulars into a larger pattern. Our brains dutifully try to interpret sensory data as pieces of information which may, if the transformation is successful, lead to their integration as knowledge or understanding. In a superabundant sensory environment, be it a media environment or a landscape, this strategy cannot work. Sense data must be coalesced or collapsed into larger patterns before they can be integrated, and before the question of meaning can emerge. The pattern that emerges from a view within the superabundant sensory environment replaces content with relationship as the dimension of meaning. It could well be that this fundamental

shift reveals the true nature of the landscape of global media, giving us our first view of the common ground of global consciousness.

A third observation that concerns the issue of common ground is the shared experience of this new landscape calls forth both dimensions of participation simultaneously: the deeply intimate and the super-personal. It is a form of experience unmediated by the self-conscious individual sitting inside a sack of skin, intentionally formulating and interpreting communication acts. It deals a death blow to the message processing paradigm of communication and it bypasses the repository of biases and constructs of western individualism which have led us, among other things, to the brink of holocaust in the Middle East.

The emergent goal, then, is connecting intimate personal experience to collective consciousness. The potential of global media to accomplish this connection coincides, not accidentally, with the necessity of doing so. As Timothy Leary puts it,

> "The changes that tomorrow's computer interfaces are going to cause in the minds of millions of people are good and necessary, considering the fact that we are entering the home stretch in our race against extinction. Personal computers that evolve from contraptions to companions in less than one human lifespan are part of an overall acceleration of the biosphere's systems for becoming conscious enough to take control. The cellular circuit resonates with the neural circuit, the communication circuit, the computation circuit, and the whole planet waking up to itself in the nick of time."
>
> — Timothy Leary, "The Interpersonal, Interactive, Interdimensional Interface," in *The Art of Human-Computer Interface Design*, 1990.

Timothy is hopeful. But as we all know, there are many reasons why things are not necessarily destined to happen just this way. The potential of television to draw us into a circle around a global campfire has been replaced by what Derrick de Kerkhove calls the rape of the boundaries of personal imagination. The power of institutional economics and bureaucracy can in fact diminish, distort, or destroy the powers that any medium might have had, even without intentional malice. Commercial television, advertising, and computer games are painfully clear examples. If we agree that the potential of global media to facilitate the coalescence of global consciousness is good and necessary, then the responsibility for creating and maintaining that direction lies, as it always has, with us as artists.

And if we share this goal, then there are several issues that we need to fundamentally rethink:

- what is the nature of the media environment?
- what is human participation?
- how can we do art in the context of supermedia? — and

- how can we as artists establish common ground for the growth of global consciousness?

The Supermedia Environment

I want to ask a question: how many of you have read McLuhan in the last five years? It had been fifteen years for me, and I had never read *Through the Vanishing Point* until last month. I think that, in many ways, McLuhan's ideas have even greater potency and relevance now than they did when most of us first encountered them. Thinking of Tokyo again, and trying to understand the nature of supermedia, I am struck by this statement from *Through the Vanishing Point*:

> Anything that raises the environment to high intensity, whether it be a storm in nature or violent change resulting from new technology, turns the environment into an object of attention. When it becomes an object of attention, it assumes the character of an antienvironment or an art object.
>
> — Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point*, 1968 (p. 247)

Supermedia is superabundant media. I'm not just talking about neon-video in public squares. In elevators and offices, grocery stores and airports, city streets and the corner video store, our senses are saturated with radio, television, newspapers, magazines, telephones, fax machines, Xeroxes, computer games, and the endless drone of public address systems. How does one see a Chagall print in the window of a shop on Times Square through the reflections of neon and the credit card decals? How can one hear Beethoven through the conversation and clatter of a department store and the frequency derangement of Muzak? How does one regard the lines of a great building through a forest of skyscrapers and the dragon's breath of air pollution? To its credit, Shibuya Square has a kind of thematic unity in the sources, forms, and colors of light that make up its media cloud. Not so the randomly assembled environments through which most city dwellers pass in the course of their day. The faces on the subway sleep, or turn down toward books and newspapers; scenery screams by unregarded and words announce the fiction of place in identical vestibules that mark, not places at all, but conceptual nodes in the network of travel.

Scott Fisher has said, "From inside the viewpoint the horizon is white and blindingly bright." This is the image of relativity, of the world both distorted and revealed by riding on a photon.

Superabundant media obviates the notion of individual contemplation. The warping speed of the computer metamedium guarantees the acceleration and persistence of the media storm. Yet Tokyo dreamspace suggests to me that sensory overload need not result in breakdown and numbness, but may lead to the perceptual and cognitive transformations that bring us closer to the conditions for global consciousness: namely, the mysterious linkage of the

intimate inner experience to the huge electrical handprint of the collective. As McLuhan puts it in *Understanding Media*:

> Having extended or translated our central nervous system into the electromagnetic technology, it is but a further stage to transfer our consciousness to the computer world as well. Then, at least, we shall be able to program consciousness in such a wise that it cannot be numbed nor distracted by the Narcissus illusions of the entertainment world that beset mankind when he encounters himself extended in his own gimmickry. If the world of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?
>
> — Marshall McLuhan,*Understanding Media*, 1964.

Art in a Supermedia World

When I begin to consider art-making in the supermedia world, I am intrigued by the role of ambiguity and imprecision. The phenomenon of media collapse means that the particular 'content' is in some sense unknowable, although like the invisible gene, it has its influence on the shape of the whole. One cannot participate with the particulars in order to derive their meaning; rather one must collapse the multitudinous specifics into a suitably ambiguous whole, cooling them down enough to enter in.

This process goes a long way towards explaining why interactivity as it is manifest in contemporary human-computer interaction has not been able to produce a satisfying successor to pre-computer art forms. Interactivity, in the form of menus, soft buttons, metaphorical tools, or even embedded 'user constraints,' surfaces the dimension of participation and objectifies it, over-specifying what people can do in relation to images or environments. In that way interactivity usurps the kind of deep participation that we have in paintings, films, poetry, or landscapes — the experience of the free imagination collaborating with the work. Interactivity stuffs cotton into the portals of imagination. Deep participation is, I believe, indisputably a human need; interactivity is a counterfeit solution.

Likewise, high visual resolution has the capacity to repel participation. McLuhan observes that "vision, as our only objective and detached sense, when in high definition, discourages empathy." [TTVP, p. 77] The ideal that is driving much contemporary work in virtual reality is what we might describe as the multisensory equivalent of photorealism. Yet the same theorists and technologists who equate high resolution with artistic impact compare the telepresence medium to film and theatre — dramatic forms that handle many aspects of action, time, space, and style in ways that are not even remotely 'realistic'. The role of ambiguity in inviting participation would seem to contravene the photorealistic ideal. The art of virtual-reality design is surely more subtle and complex. What the virtual reality artists have got right is the

multisensory imperative. To quote McLuhan again, "the interplay of all the senses creates an involvement that unifies the imaginative life . . . ." [TTVP, p. 207]

So taking a moment to collect these thoughts on art in a supermedia world, we suspect that reigning forms of interactivity and indiscriminate use of high resolution both serve to discourage deep participation. We are also in search of works that create that mysterious direct connection between intimate and super-personal experience. If all this is sounding awfully heavy and serious, perhaps we can lighten things up with an example — a little piece of Tokyo experience that I've brought along a tape of. It's a reel from a group called Hyperdelic Video, two young Australians named Andy Frith and David Richardson, currently living and working in Tokyo. Their performances have names like "Brainwash TV," "Spacemen Wear Their Gas Masks," and "LSD." They describe themselves as "video disc jockeys," combining scratching and mixing techniques with real-time video. Their stated goal is "MAXIMUM INFORMATION OVERLOAD," with this rationale:

> The modern generation of TV children, having grown up on a diet of fast-cut commercials, rapid fire news and increasingly larger amounts of compressed information relate well to the concept we call INFORMATION OVERLOAD. This concept parallels the movement in dance music of ever-increasing tempos in conjunction with layers of "borrowed" information — sound samples, vocal edits, and complex mixing and production techniques. [Hyperdelic Video, 1990]

Scott and I saw Hyperdelic Video with Joi Ito in a smallish basement bar in Rappongi, packed to the rafters with a mostly Japanese, mostly under twenty audience. Only at Grateful Dead shows have I seen a crowd move so much like a single organism. Despite our obviously excessive age, we were easily absorbed into the hypersensual center of the scene. I know that a videotape can only be a pale reflection of such an experience, but I think that some of its unique qualities may still be glimpsed. The performance is entitled "LSD," and Hyperdelics wanted me to be sure to tell you that the piece is not intended as an endorsement of illegal drugs.

[RUN VIDEO: approx. 5 minutes]

You may have noticed the occasional video image of the dancers incorporated in the work. It has quite an extraordinary effect when you are one of them. Computers and video create the connection between the inner experience and the collective. As Derrick de Kerkhove observes:

> . . . computers have created a new kind of intermediate cognition, a bridge of continuous interaction, a sort of 'corpus callosum' of exchanges between the outside world and our inner selves.
>
> — Derrick de Kerkhove, *Art Futura 1991 Catalog*

It may be that the computer is required as a conduit because the outside world to which we are trying to connect is radically different from the natural landscapes and cultural artifacts which constituted the world during the vast majority of the evolution of the human species. It isn't that we're intrinsically unable to connect inside and out; it's that our means of doing so is tuned to a vanishing dyad of landscapes. McLuhan's analysis in *Through the Vanishing Point* suggests that the rise of individualism beginning in the Renaissance, especially in terms of point of view, was perhaps our first ad hoc strategy for recalibrating to the accelerating changes in the nature of the outside world.

In the inside-out world of technology, our internal detectors of pattern are still hard at work, but the landscapes they confront have radically different contours. Technology changed the western notions of time and place irrevocably with telegraphs, telephones, and airplanes. McLuhan muses that "Once in the air a plane makes its own times and spaces, or perhaps one should say that it exists mainly in the dimension of time rather than space once it is off the ground." [TTVP, p. 217] I would add that the mysteries of time zones and jet lag obviate time as well; time is the duration of an experience in the non-place of an airplane.

In his essay entitled "Landscape and Narrative," naturalist/philosopher Barry Lopez explores the relationships between external and internal landscapes and the value and effects of those relationships:

> Among the Navajo and . . . many other native peoples, the land is thought to exhibit a sacred order. That order is the basis of ritual. The rituals themselves reveal the power in that order. Art, architecture, vocabulary, and costume, as well as ritual, are derived from the perceived natural order of the universe — from observations and meditations on the exterior landscape. An indigenous philosophy — metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, and logic — may also be derived from people's continuous attentiveness to both the obvious (scientific) and ineffable (artistic) orders of the local landscape. Each individual, further, undertakes to order his interior landscape according to the exterior landscape. To succeed in this means to achieve a balanced state of mental health.
>
> — Barry Lopez, "Landscape and Narrative," in *Crossing Open Ground*, 1989.

Order, pattern, truth — these are the concepts that Lopez sees humanity deriving from the external landscape. Truth, he says, is "something alive an unpronounceable"; the revelation of relationships in a landscape makes truth "discernible as pattern."

One way in which the landscapes of nature and those of the technological, supermedia world are similar is in the overwhelming abundance of detail. They cannot be fully comprehended on the level of the particular. And so something that we might learn from studying how people relate to landscapes is, what determines whether we see patterns, and what determines what patterns we will see? Why do we see faces in the rock? What thoughts, stories, and expectations guide us? What skills does a native person possess in order to see a tiny animal in a blooming summer forest? And could it be that art ultimately consists in

giving people knowledge, tools, skills, heuristics, or intimations that equip them to see patterns in external landscapes of whatever origin, and to connect them successfully with their inner lives?

I can offer only one clue, again from the work of Barry Lopez, in an essay about helping children to discover the woods:

> I have sensed that an extrapolation from a single fragment of the whole is the most invigorating experience I can share with them. I think children know that nearly anyone can learn the names of things; the impression made on them at this level is fleeting. What takes a lifetime to learn, they comprehend, is the existence and substance of myriad relationships: it is these relationships, not the things themselves, that ultimately hold the human imagination.
>
> — Barry Lopez, "Children in the Woods," in *Crossing Open Ground*, 1989.

To have seen a Mandelbrot set is to see coastlines and clouds in whole, and as part of a larger and most sacred pattern.

Common Ground

And so we return to the question with which we began: what may serve as the common ground of global consciousness? In conversation, the notion of common ground is employed by linguists Herb Clark and Susan Brennan to mean "mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions." A central act in conversation is the updating, revision, confirmation, and repair of common ground moment by moment. In this sense, common ground is a construct, mutually created and mutually inferred, that lives in the separate brain of each participant, but which is by mutual consent said to exist somewhere between and *outside* of both, but *inside* of the field of their relationship. It is, according to Clark and Brennan, the central, if ephemeral, artifact of the conversation; communication and relatedness occur primarily in reference to it.

In distant times and more grounded cultures, real places also serve as common ground: the kiva, the agora, the plaza, the marketplace. As landscape is in constant relation to the ecology of the mind, so such gathering places are the foundations of both external community and internal belongingness. In America, the idea of such places is disappearing. Small towns, once connected to shining rivers, mountain passes, and desert oases, vanish into the proto-Gibsonian sprawl of suburban development and the artifacts of commerce. One town either comes to look and feel like another, or it disappears. Any street five miles from the center of any city in America is practically indistinguishable from any other. Place is an office with standard cubicles, a home of predictable proportions, a freeway, a fast food restaurant. The marketplace is an infinitely interchangeable grocery store. Yet the sense of place is another of those indisputable human needs, and the surrogate places of the modern world once again plug our receptors with cotton.

Spend time on a computer network. People gravitate to net conferences and special interest groups as if they were places. Lucasfilm has developed a graphical computer network called *Habitat* that features a two-dimensional graphical universe with thousands of virtual places in it. People gather at agreed upon venues to engage in conversations and communal activities. On a net called TinyMUD people collectively invent places, complete with qualities, objects, and connections to the larger virtual landscape. As the geographical notion of place fades in American culture, it is enthusiastically revitalized in virtual worlds, but with this difference: the communities that gather in these virtual places do not depend upon accidents of geography to bind them together. These are volitional communities of interest, of affinity, of ineffable like-mindedness and emboldened curiosity. McLuhan foresaw the retribalization of people through electronic media; virtual places are both cause and effect of a new kind of ad hoc tribalism in global culture. As artists, it makes sense for us to study place as thoroughly and widely as we can, to know what characteristics of place-ness we might capture in order to offer a new kind of common ground.

And finally, back to Tokyo. Would I have had the same kind of experience in Las Vegas or New York? I "know" the American cities; I "know" the American matrix; they can no longer overwhelm me. It was the strangeness of Japan, all at once, that opened the door to my personal transformation. Tokyo is a counterenvironment for me in McLuhan's sense. It is the éclat of its strangeness that gives such an environment the power to transform us: as McLuhan says, ". . . the role of art is to create the means of perception by creating counterenvironments that open the door of perception to people otherwise numbed in a nonperceivable situation." But the idea of strangeness seems to be in conflict with the notion of common ground. Can they be reconciled?

It is an old conundrum. Aristotle's understanding of it is expressed in the idea of universality. In the colloquial view, something is universal if people from different cultures can all recognize it: a crying baby, for instance, or the grief of a widow. Things that are alien in terms of their *content* are *not* universal: the abandoning of a baby, for instance, or a man marrying his mother. But in Aristotle's view, universality consists solely in the revelation of *causality*. Any content is universalizable if the causal relations among events are revealed. Similarly, the Jungian idea of archetypes attempts to find common ground by reducing stories from their particulars to configurations of forces that are recognizable because they are hard-wired into the human psyche. Both Aristotelian universality and Jungian archetypes are manifestations of the larger idea of pattern. McLuhan observes that the act of perception entails the remembering of the sensory particulars of other instances of a given pattern. And so here is a solution to the riddle: sense data, immediate and remembered, serve as the intimate personal fuel for the seeing of patterns in the outside world.

Conclusion

Well, here are some beginning places. None of them are new, but much seems new by neonvideo light. It was never individual pieces of art alone that we were making, but the entire context of human perception — the common ground of the nondiscursive mind. McLuhan predicted, "Electronic Man approaches the condition in which it is possible to deal with the entire environment as a work of art." It seems now that the time has arrived. For the younger among you, I have a message from my not-so-lofty pinnacle of incipient middle age: we, all of us artists, are the wellspring; we, all of us artists, are the makers. It is time to begin afresh. While we may mourn what we have lost in our journey thus far, it is no accident that humanity has made what it has made of the world. There are even now, and perhaps especially now, new worlds to be built, and new tools with which to build them. Reality has always been too small for human imagination.