

Against an official contemporary art — for an actual art Fred Forest



Telematische Rituale für weiße Wolken, 1989

We would be making a very serious mistake if we thought that there existed only one particular reality. By allowing the invisible to become visible, artists of all times have already shown that, beyond the world of appearances, there is a multitude of virtual worlds, to which the force of their genius and skill have given a body. Scientific thinking itself, in the last 25 years, has accustomed us to the idea that reality is but a skin under which is to be found an endless series of other levels of reality. The technological instruments that are called upon to take over our everyday universe modified, in fact, our perception of that universe by giving us access, keys to other forms of the real. The propagation among the general public of devices for multi-sensory visualization and interaction will plunge individuals into "virtual" environment which will open up new fields for scientists, philosophers and, of course, artists.

The new frontiers of virtual space

The merit of the artist has always been, specifically, to look at the world with an "other" eye. The different suspicious eye on the one hand, by making us doubt our more established certainties, and, on the other hand, by substituting one reality for another, by asserting new representational codes. It is clear that today it has become easier for us to accept that the interpretation of the world is directly linked to a given form of knowledge, a given moment, a socio-cultural conditioning upon which our mental representations are highly dependent. The status attributed to the notion of reality is always defined through determination linked to a specific moment of history and knowledge. This moment is experienced by contemporaries as the sort of impetus, suspended and motionless in time, an illusion of a region of stability that appears as a frozen image. It is often the case that people, in their own time, at their own level, are anchored in knowledge and certainties, which only individuals of great stature, such as Galileo, have the impertinence to challenge, if at the risk of their life.

Since the appearance of Cro-magnon Man in the development of the human adventure, we have gone through successive "virtualities", which then turned into concrete "realities". What may be starting to change since the invention of the wheel, and notably with the multiplication of electrical and computing machines, is that the acceleration of the means has begun to make visible the movement itself! The frozen image of knowledge (and it was perceived as such) was nothing but a delusion inherent in the limit of our perception. Electronic machines possess other possibilities of evaluating their reality, and can modify our own mental structure.

The synthetic image changes our relation to the world by giving us the possibility of acting directly upon virtual worlds. In the virtual environment in which we have been so far able to experiment, the feeling of physical movement is given by two sensorial stimuli: one of these is based on total stereoscopic vision, and the other on the feeling of muscular correlation. The relationship between, on the one hand, the virtual space made up by the synthetic image, and, on the other, our own body, is established through cells which create an intimate hybridization between the body and the virtual space in which we are, so to speak, submerged.

An aesthetic of networks

All these electronic extensions allow us to see and touch the immaterial, which is becoming more "real" all the time - constructing a new place around us in which artistic practice will be able to experiment with a new field to produce the new models that are always necessary for a renewal of aesthetic pleasure. The concept of space, which was thought to be so self evident, is being transformed and enriched with aspects previously unimagined. The communication space in which we now live on a daily basis is no longer this classic space with which we were previously experimenting, but rather a hybrid, a symbolic form whose representation evades conventional criteria. The multiplication of the means of communication as a permanent environment places us in an informal frame which marks out a virtual space with abstract frontiers. It is the manifestation of this new space, its experimentation, that the artists of the movement "l'Esthétique de la Communication"¹, breaking with visual tradition, are trying to bring to our sensibility and consciousness.

Tangible changes in our perception and our relationship to the world proceed from this position, in our most commonplace behavior. They require specific systems, and bear witness to the birth of an aesthetic which is "other", where the notion of relationship takes precedence over the concept of object, and whose horizon lies beyond the visible.

The representations which the artists of "l'Esthétique de la Communication"² are trying to "figure", take route beyond the immediately perceptible real, beyond appearances, beyond the usual frame of perception. Technology and its instrument to a "grasp" of the world with the eye as a reference point loses its meaning and is replaced by electronic evaluation sources. Computer generated and videographic representation replace the materiality of distance with so much force that they are on a point of simply dissolving their referent. In the present state of things, between those representation systems which already belong to the past and those which are taking their place, it is necessary to find a compromise. Confronted with the complexity of their induced operation, we often have to delegate to the machine the responsibility of dealing with this situation. Representations of a traditional type are replaced by an intermediate approach through which we enter directly into the era of simulation. In this context, our bodies, joining up with the most ancient myth, can explore space in the form of an intimate experience, which breaks down all the constraints of our physical limitations. Thus, the notions of space which have been ours since our childhood are implicated in a fundamental way, and this is how we may discover new potentialities, with immense consequences. It is not so much that it is becoming difficult to differentiate between the true and the false, reality and virtuality, but simply that those notions are approaching equivalents.

The artistic challenge

It remains for artists, confronted with an immense field opened for them by new technologies, to resist the seduction of facile effects. It still rests with them, as in the past, to continue producing the symbolic, the imaginary, and the hedonistic. Of course they may cross the

border and go over to the other side, In doing this, they would be able to pursue their practice and produce fascinating works, but they would henceforth, be somewhere else.

They would be, for some people outside the field of art, which would then have to be redefined. And why not? To each his choice: this is not simply a question of terminology, it is strictly a personal matter. The protagonists of "l'Esthétique de la Communication" have chosen their side. They are working on the extraordinary possibilities offered by new technologies, and are using these possibilities to create a new type of artistic experience adapted to contemporary sensibilities. As Mario Costa has written in his most recent book, *Le Sublime Technologique*³, "l'Esthétique de la Communication" does not produce object nor work on forms, it thematizes space-time.

In a general sense, what the communication artists attempt to express through these actions is the fact that we are situated in the center of a global information process whose complicated functioning places the individual in a completely new position where he must necessarily invent new forms of regulation with regard to his surrounding and the representational model of a reality in constant crisis. The aim of the communication artist is to help us understand to what extent the whole field of sensibility has been affected, and how these new "forms of feeling" open up new æsthetic paths.

For an art of today

I cannot let this occasion go by without stigmatizing contemporary art, which is slowly falling into disrepute, made banal by the market, and strongly supported, in quasi-exclusive way, by international institutions⁴. This "official" contemporary art has now become purely academic and formal, concerning a micro-milieu of operators and consumers in the world at large. It is a sort of exclusive club, dramatically cut off from the public and from the advances of research and science, which are today placing humanity before fundamental questions. The artist of this fin du siècle finds himself at a turning point in the history of our civilization, where categories, including those of art, will have to be rethought and to be read in new ways. The end of linear thinking and the generalization of multimedia have led to "complexity" and to the end of narration in art. Without transition, we are flung from "representation" to "presentation", from "appearance" to "apparition". This means that what is to fixed is no longer the gesture, the object, the image, but rather the transformation process, which must be drawn upon as it flows back and forth.

This means that the status of this artist slides in a significant way from the position of the observer to that of the "acting" agent whose action transforms our perception of the milieu in which we are immersed. The Impressionists taught us to "see" and "feel" the landscape; the artist of today teaches us to become conscious of our technological context. We are no longer in a classical art problematic, that of the contemplation of appearances, but in a dynamic of how things emerge!

This in particular, the meaning induced by artists who maintain an interactive practice of networks, where the very notion of authorship, has become questionable.

With knowledge increasing at this current pace, art cannot continue to live on the gains of a bygone past. We are confronted with new ways of grasping space, where art has suddenly shown that it has become an inventive adaptation tool, capable of tackling the totally new situation with which humanity is confronted.

Our relationship with the world will never be the same, now that techniques such as digitalization, artificial intelligence, artificial life and the communications revolution have thrust themselves into our lives.

It is up to the artist, each in his own way, to reformulate the eternal question and to draw forth the necessary lessons.

1 An art group/movement founded by Mario Costa (Professor of History of Aesthetics, University of Salerno [Italy]) and Fred Forest in 1993.

2 See for example Opus International, n°94, Paris 1984. F. Forest: doctoral thesis, Sorbonne, Paris, 1985; Plus ou moins zéro, manifest de l'Esthétique de la Communication, n°43, Brussels, 1985; Art Press: " Dossier le l'Esthétique de la Communication "; n°122, Paris, 1988.

3 Mario Costa: Le Sublime Technologique, Edisud, Naples, 1990; see also " Dossier Art et technique contemporains " Quaderni, n°21, Autumn 1993, Département de Sciences Politiques, Sorbonne, Paris.

4 Fred Forrest, "Pour qui sonne le glas ou les imposture de l'art contemporain", "Dossier Art et techniques contemporains", in Quaderni n°21, autumn 1993, Département des Sciences Politiques, Sorbonne, Paris.