

Station Rose in the Social Web

Station Rose/John Coate

After numerous performances, symposia, exhibitions, clubbings and day-to-day station work, 1991 saw one of the most momentous events in the activities of Station Rose: Migration. At the Cyberthon festival, a cyberspace and virtual reality marathon, Station Rose appeared in San Francisco in 1990 with their Public Brain Session. We were the only European artists to perform at the 2 a.m. part of the programme; there were demos, shows, performances, VR applications, lectures and the WELL info stand round the clock.

Soon after moving to Frankfurt we conducted the research assignment "virtual reality as a new borderline area" for the Austrian Ministry of Science and Research; the results of this study in 1992 were among the first art CD-ROM to be published in the German-speaking world.

That took us back to San Francisco. In addition to Howard Rheingold, Timothy Leary, and the gang at Mondo 2000, we also met John Coate whom we had got to know a short time previously at the Cyberthon. As the then Managing Director of The WELL, he explained to us the philosophy and the laws of the virtual community of The WELL.

Back home in Frankfurt we experienced for ourselves what it means to be part of a virtual community. The day-to-day exchange of thoughts with people in cyberspace gave us just as much a feeling of being at home as did personal contacts with people in Frankfurt. In 1991 Frankfurt was just as new to Station Rose as the Net. Only two months had passed since our move to RL and our net hook-up.

John Coate I first met Station Rose in September 1990 a few days before the Cyberthon event in San Francisco.

That year was my fifth as Conference Manager for The WELL in Sausalito, California. Cyberthon was the legendary 24-hour continuous demo/ presentation/networking festival held in an industrial warehouse down by the dock of San Francisco Bay. Station Rose had travelled from Vienna to perform one of their Public Brain Sessions of light, sound and consciousness in the 2 a.m. part of the program.

But they didn't have a place to stay. So the event sponsors arranged for them to stay at my girlfriend Calliope's house. Calliope and I went to pick up Gary and Elisa at the airport with no real idea of what they looked like. So we went to the luggage carousel and looked at the luggage as it came out knowing that it would be some sort of heavy-duty equipment cases. Sure enough, this hip couple with bright-colored clothing and outrageous good looks picked up the stuff. We went over to them and said, "Station Rose?" They said, "yah ... yah!" and thus began a great and lasting friendship that grew and matured through shifting space, both real and cyber. Over the years they have visited us three times while doing field research for their projects.

We connected them [Station Rose] to the San Francisco cyber-community which became an intrinsic part of their world-wide network matrix.

They arrived right when The WELL was in its heyday.

The "virtual home" grew alongside our "analogue" home. We talked about The WELL in the clubs and restaurants of our exile home. A basic need for social contact was satisfied in cyberspace, a powerful feeling of belonging evolved, an attachment — in a word, a virtual community.

After 5 years on the net, Howard Rheingold invited us to host the Frankfurt Conference in his online project Electric Minds in autumn 1996. We had already worked together on Brainstorms where we had devised a kind of "editorial jam session", supplying multimedia contributions in HTML to his online project through the Net that were then edited by Rheingold.

Electric Minds offered us the opportunity to put to the test the multimedia skills of Internet communication we had learned. In addition to monthly text contributions to the World Wide Jam in which we report on interesting facts from the close global setting, Station Rose's task consists in keeping the "Frankfurt Conference" going.

At that time we had about five thousand paying subscribers, we were recently profitable as a small business and we had a core of many hundreds who all knew, each in their way, that they were involved in something exciting and meaningful. Here were a whole bunch of smart interesting people using computers to meet and converse and it was revolutionizing their lives. We were connected to each other and we were connected to the early Internet and we were high on the global conversation. We didn't confine our interaction to just online conversation, either. We had parties every month and sometimes we had wild happenings with our own rock and roll bands and floor shows. We had picnics and weddings and funerals. We helped each other find work. It was clear that the relationships were the source of the magic and the technology nurtured it.

Special software developed by The WELL [Well Engaged] not only allows visitors to contribute text. Rather, the make-up of Well Engaged allows the user to integrate HTML commands. This is why almost every topic of our "Frankfurt Conference" is a multimedia blend of images, sounds, animations and text.

At this point we would like to detail the outstanding feature of Well Engaged, that is the possibility of social interaction. Well Engaged lifts Electric Minds to the next level of communication within the World Wide Web, the level of the Social Web. Chatting is taking a step forward, is being augmented by intensifying personal, social interaction within the virtual community — as we have seen in conference systems à la Well and chat forums — but with the additional feature of publishing in real time. Here, sitting down together and telling each other stories round the campfire means "telling" stories in images, sounds, gif-anis, text and links which does better justice to the high demands of the World Wide Web, i.e. the claim to being a multimedia structure.

Just to remind you — homepages are multimedia showcases that offer information to look at and listen to, to download, but not the possibility of interaction. Homepage up-dates need off-line support; a conference in Electric Minds, on the other hand, needs online support.

Soon we blurred the border between a "virtual" community and an actual community. Our new society seemed to have an amphibious quality, a bilingual nature. You could interact virtually or actually ... and you got to decide for yourself how much or how little of each one you wanted to do. I had sort of stumbled into the online business. I was hired in 1986 when The WELL was a one-person business and very few people knew that computers had

anything at all to do with communication. I didn't know anything about computers when I started, but I did know some things about how people in groups can get along with each other better. This came from having lived in communal situations, both rural and urban, from the time I was nineteen until I was thirty-two. During that time I had lived on buses with as many as ten people, large army tents with up to twenty, urban households with more than thirty, and big ramshackle country hippie houses with over forty people, adults and kids. I had been a farmer, a mechanic, an interstate truck driver and a carpenter. Most of this was down at the Farm in Tennessee, which was the largest single intentional community in America during the Seventies, and up in Washington DC and New York City. Along with all the people I lived with, we were always providing lodging to guests who wanted to visit us and talk about what we were doing. After thirteen years of living wired-up to hundreds of other peoples' lives and minds, I came to The WELL and felt amazingly at home. My job put me in the middle of this new "virtual town square" that was forming. Mainly I helped introduce people to one another and encourage the positive care and feeding of the relationships.

The conference system of Electric Minds has realised the idea of real time by making it possible to post multimedia data immediately. The aesthetics, the art form, that this produces is different and new when compared to "classical" online publishing. This form is also still very young and could embark on completely new, undreamt-of paths thanks to its untamedness, in an interplay with other new possibilities such as webcasting.

Formation of your own virtual community, as is the case with our "Frankfurt Conference," is a far-reaching fact and most definitely has consequences, seeing that it makes social behaviour transparent. At the beginning of Electric Minds, a lot of users had come so as to have been in on it from the start. Some of them only came once, some came several times, and others still keep coming. This last group feels a need for global communication, together practising human, digital behaviour, experiencing that tingling online feeling.

So naturally, when I, along with Calliope [who is now my wife] met them and we saw how well we understood and liked each other, we introduced them into our circle of friends and companions including Howard Rheingold, Freddy "Are We Really?" Hahne and Mark "Spoonman" Petrakis. We were all pretty much children of the Sixties with a love of group consciousness, positive energy and psychic adventure. Our interest in boundaries and limits was to go beyond them. So we had a common frame of reference that was exactly attenuated to the benefits that communication in cyberspace could bestow. And we have gone on to start other online projects such as Electric Minds and the SF Gate that derive their philosophies directly from what we had learned together. We learned it, it worked, we know it's real and we still act according to it. It lives at the essence of how we function as social, artistic and economic beings. What could be better?

For Station Rose, the "Frankfurt Conference" is the next step towards responsible handling of the Net, active integration of the Net into daily life, far removed from the homepage consumer society of criticising web-potatoes bemoaning the lack of speed or other sporting shortcomings.

For Station Rose, the "Frankfurt Conference" is the next step towards an online home after having been part of the online community The WELL for 6 years now. The conference is a day-to-day obligation. A conference needs to be taken care of. This obligation only makes itself felt over the months. People cultivating online friendships across the globe.

Circumstances led us to turn our back on our home country in 1991 so as to offer ourselves new homes. The online home provides space for existing & new relationships and parallel to that a suitable setting for producing and showing art. Together with "webcasting", which Station Rose is in the process of launching right now, the social web offers undreamt-of possibilities of multimedia interaction, new languages and new relationships. It all depends on how we behave towards each other and how we wish to interact in real-time. Bad times could be on the way for web-potatoes.

But the great event that has happened since the explosion of the Internet in the 90s is that these networking tools are increasingly available to everyone and people are more able than ever to turn them to their own advantage. Email, chat, conferencing, voice, video, and personal home pages are now seen by millions as a way to meet new people and connect to those we already know. Cyberspace has no flavor and no energy of its own. It is only as good or bad as the people who inhabit it. Problems abound, and anytime you get a public gathering that develops some good social energy, people come along who are so starved for attention or so in need of being the lone dissenter or defender of their principle that it becomes argumentative. And the online world is a place where even the simplest conflicts can seem impossible to resolve because it is so easy to misunderstand. But, over time, with patience and perseverance, people can find their commonalities by discovering and discussing their differences. And relationships of all kinds can be developed, strengthened and nurtured. Real life and real magic, in the virtual world, is now easy and available to anyone who wants to take the journey.