

■■■■■■■■■ **The World in 24 Hours**

It gets harder every day to remember what it was like to live and work in a time without photocopiers, personal computers or the Internet, but old films on late-night television can sometimes help by showing rooms full of clattering typists, telephone switchboards festooned with wires or computer rooms lined with gleaming grey cabinets. A good source of technical déjà vu are the reruns of the 70s Columbo TV series which often showed the detective confronted by some new-fangled device like a surveillance camera, computer terminal, video recorder, fax machine or other technical marvel of the emerging electronic age. Even in the late 70s very few people had ever seen—let alone used—a fax machine, computers were either huge mainframes or toys for electronic hobbyists, and modem speeds were, at best, 300 baud ... in case you had anything to attach a modem to.

This was the situation when I first heard about Bill Bartlett's networking experiments with slow-scan television and computer conferencing. In 1979 I took part in his computer conference "Interplay" and in 1980, the slow scan TV (SSTV) project "Artists' Use of Telecommunications." In 1981 Tom Klinkowstein and I organized a telefacsimile project between Vienna and Amsterdam called simply *Fax*. So by 1981 I had participated in 3 projects, each using a different technology, that demonstrated the potential of the telephone network as a medium for global interactive projects by artists. They also showed that there was a small, but growing network of artists capable of participating in global telephone-based events.

The World in 24 Hours

Christine Schöpf was present at the *Fax* event in 1981 and suggested that something similar would be interesting for the Ars Electronica Festival in 1982. The result was *The World in 24 Hours*, a project that attempted to combine SSTV, computer communication and telefacsimile in a global multimedia telecommunication project. The conceptual intention of *The World in 24 Hours* was threefold:

- 1) to demonstrate the global nature of electronic networks—and also the fact that most of the globe is missing from the network (all of Africa and South America and most of Eastern Europe and Asia),
- 2) to challenge the hegemony of the one-to-many broadcast media by using the telephone system for one-to-one multi-media interaction, and
- 3) to make a statement about a new role for the artist in the age of electronic media as a creator of the space for art rather than as a mere a producer of objects.

Equipment

While the telephone costs were paid by the Ars Electronica Festival and IP Sharp Associates provided free user accounts for computer communications, each location in the network was responsible for its own contribution including infrastructure and equipment. In Linz the equipment was installed in the circular foyer of the ORF (Austrian Broadcasting Corp.) regional studio and included a 3M portable computer terminal/printer for the computer conference (IPSA Confer) and Email projects (ARTBOX); a 3M 9136 fax machine plus a photocopier for fax exchanges; a mixing desk, tape recorder, amplifier and loudspeakers for sound; a video camera, Robot 530 transceiver and several monitors for SSTV. The 3 telephones were organized so that the computer terminal had its own line while fax, SSTV and sound shared the other 2 lines as required. Standing display panels had been provided by the ORF for the display of the fax pages and computer printout.



What happened ■■■■■■■■■■

The idea was to start at 12:00 CET on September 27 and to follow the sun around the world for 24 hours by calling each location at 12:00 noon local time. Of course it didn't work out quite so neatly because the communication globe is very different from the geographic one and our partners were clustered in only eight time zones: CET—Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Vienna, Florence; GMT—Bath; EST—Pittsburgh, Toronto, Wellfleet; PST—San Francisco, Vancouver; HAST—Hawaii; JST—Tokyo; AEST—Sydney; EET—Athens, Istanbul. Because we had 3 telephones in Linz, any location could, theoretically, transmit and receive for about one hour in 3 different media simultaneously. However only *Signal Breakdown*, a multi-media project (fax, SSTV and email) produced by the Toronto location, used all three phone lines in real time.

There were ten artists and art students working in Linz but not all of us were involved for the full 24 hours. Some had prepared works for fax and/or SSTV to be transmitted during the event. Because of the congestion in certain time zones there was often some overlapping of contributions and we divided up into teams to handle different media with different partners (e.g. a fax exchange with Frankfurt and telephone sound from Vienna—or SSTV from San Francisco and fax exchange with Vancouver). My role was to coordinate the project and monitor the network so I was usually talking on the telephone, working at the computer conference terminal or answering questions from the public and/or press.

As well as keeping the display panels up-to-date with fax pages and computer printouts we also contributed with fax, SSTV and computer conferencing in interaction with those remote participants who had interactive capacity. Everybody working in Linz was active during the afternoon and evening of the 27th when there was a lot of public interest—including television and radio interviews—but after midnight there were only 6 of us alone in the space and by about 08:00, when people began arriving for work on the 28th, there were just 3 of us.

Report ■■■■■■■■■■

In the report that accompanied the documentation package sent to all the participants in December 1982, I wrote:

The strain of 24 hours of non-stop activity on people and equipment is obvious in the uneven quality (and quantity) of the enclosed material... some things didn't get recorded or photographed ... the sound recording equipment broke down ... the person with the camera went home to bed, with the camera! ... we ran out of video tape in the middle of the night when everything was locked ... one telephone died and another got very neurotic in the early morning ... we all forgot and lost things, including telephone numbers.

and ...

Telecommunications, by artists or anybody, only gets really exciting when carried out on a global scale. But the price of global scale telecommunications projects is all the pain and problems of language and cultural differences, time zones, networking and night-working. On balance I think it is worth it ... looking through the material we received one can feel a new kind of art developing, a new medium. It's a very exciting feeling.

Epilog ■■■■■■■■

Ten years later all the technology used in *The World in 24 Hours* was obsolete except for the fax machine—an exotic technology costing upwards of \$ 5000 in 1980 which had become standard office equipment and uninteresting for art projects by 1992. Slow-scan TV or picture-phone never really became established and disappeared—except for the use of SSTV in surveillance systems (although it now seems to be re-emerging as a cell-phone/camera hybrid). Personal computers, little more than expensive prototypes in 1982, were to be found everywhere and by 1992 had killed off the timesharing systems along with mainframe computers and millions of office jobs. By the mid-80s the networking of personal computers in private bulletin board systems (BBSs)—with the use of increasingly quick and efficient telephone modems—was beginning to explore and define a new kind of communication space. When the Internet (the network of networks) until then still a mainly academic/military system, became available to the public in 1994, the BBSs, including many artist-run projects, rapidly mutated into gateways to the global Internet ... and the net.art story began.

So much for the beginnings—the end is not in sight.



http://residence.aec.at/rax/24_HOURS/

