

Souillac II - Final Report - 7

"Instrument Makers", An Art Exhibit

For Building a New Space of the Imagination

One of the most enthusiastically discussed ideas during the two weeks of the Souillac meeting was the organisation of an art exhibit demonstrating the little known artists' role in the evolution of the tools of the new technologies and the impact it has had on the innovation of those technologies and on society itself.

Preliminary Project

"Instrument Makers" was proposed as an important international art exhibition, both historical and contemporary, with one of the objectives being to trace the topography of artistic activity engaged in using, developing, reappropriating and reinventing the technologies of a given period. It would attempt to show the impact of artistic practice and exploration throughout the century on the development and innovation of technique and technology and illustrate the on-going dialogue between art, science and technology. It would be a fundamental re-examination of art history, as well as the history of science, during the last one hundred years with, as background, the reinvention of the space of the imagination of western society. It would highlight the parallels existing between art and the development of different mathematical and scientific models which have radically transformed the way we conceive space and time.

The project is based on the idea of instruments, either of artists or engineers, or both, which have had the singular effect of transforming or opening up the artistic process between one discipline and another and of promoting transdisciplinarity between art and science, creativity and technique. The exhibition will put the accent on work more transitory than fixed, defined by the process of its generation - both artistic and technical, rather than as something solid and immutable. It will underline the passage from a universe of fixed categories to a universe of moving references.

Instrument Makers: Relating Art & Technology

The exhibition should show how artists - by assimilating and mastering, then rerouting technologies - have contributed and continue to contribute to technical progress and the evolution of the tools and expand their potential. This aspect should be of particular concern to industry but is often unknown to it. One of the fundamental objectives of the exhibition is to present this artistic demarche, becoming more and more evident today but whose roots run throughout the 20th century.

In its historical dimension the exhibition should take into account the aspirations of cinema and the electromechanical recording of sound and voice. Furthermore, electricity - the domestication of the electron - seems to be at the heart of a paradigm change in constructing art history for the last one hundred years. The application of electrical, electronic and digital technologies to artistic ends has grown with the advancement of the 20th century, and the passage from analogue to digital points to one of the key ideas of McLuhan. He saw that passage, starting from the predominance of vision in the perception and conception of the universe - first in the invention of the phonetic alphabet, then the movable type of the Gutenberg press, up to electricity and the media growing from it - as a new synthesis in relationships, favouring a mix of disciplines and the meshing of technologies by the artist.

Instrument Makers: Relating Art to Art

The exhibition should show how, with the arrival of digital technologies in the service of all forms of creativity, artists have overcome the barriers existing between different forms of artistic expression and fuse them in the process of making a work. The appearance of the notion of space-time in our civilisation has provoked and accelerated the synthesis between the arts, plastic arts and performing arts. The new technologies have encouraged that synthesis in a more direct manner, freeing art from older forms.

Just as there exists in music an obvious relation between the instrument and the sound produced, a new relation has developed at the end of this century in the visual field in the production and creation of images. Just as new tools allow composers and musicians to model sound objects the way clay was modelled in making sculpture, in visual creation they permit the artist to conceive an image as something not fixed but as part of a process which converges toward the development of new visual languages.

Instrument Makers: Relating Art & Science

The exhibition will attempt to show how certain artistic experimentation posed the same questions as parallel developments in 20th century science.

During the period covered by the exhibition, artists and scientists in parallel have participated in the invention of a new space of the imagination whose characteristics are very different from the mechanical space inherited from the first Renaissance: a space still not fully defined, but clearly interactive, which proposes relations of a different order, at once conceptual as well as practical, between individuals and between people and their environment, both natural and artificial. The view of the artist as researcher, similar to the scientist - a researcher into the sense of things, expands the role of the artist - art as research.

Instrument Makers: Relating Art/Science/Technology - Society

The exhibition will attempt to show that certain values implicit in the work of artists, with parallels in science, for example interactivity and transdisciplinarity, can generate new organisational structures, both social and intellectual.

Through the work of artists in our era, as with a majority of scientific propositions, we are confronted by new metaphors, new relationships. The concept of the interactive network and the new space of communication is becoming the metaphor for our civilisation and its geometry the geometry of our imagination. These changes correspond to an epistemological shift in the concept of space and time, and among the repercussions is the emerging technological infrastructure of telecommunications which pushes us more and more into a universe where time and space have become mutable entities. These technologies have today, and will undoubtedly have even more so in the future, a profound impact on the functioning of our society, and because they are technologies of communication, they are the means by which we manifest our culture. The electronic media have intervened in the structure of the human senses and the function of art and artists is to give witness to the resulting disruption.

Given that, and in particular the extreme newness of the information society - the world of new media and telecommunications - artistic and in general human awareness must rise to the occasion and start drawing the first road maps of that new territory. Marshall McLuhan wrote already in 1964 that the role of the "artist is indispensable to the orientation, analysis and comprehension of the form and structure created by the technology of electricity."*

The exhibition will call on those artists who have both modified our vision of the world as well_reconstructed the tools of artistic expression: as reference, the chain of inventors from Marcel Duchamp to Nam June Paik, with Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy, Takis, Woody and Steina Vasulka, Norman White, etc.; in the field of music, innovators such as Scriabine, Varèse, Cage, Moog; and in the reinvention of the space of dance, Wigman, Graham, Nicolais, Cunningham... Other art forms have also worked in the same perspective and newer generations of artists, through their mastering of science and technology, are accelerating this process of transformation and innovation.

The exhibition, planned for 2002, will be above all an exhibit of artistic work and performance and will include an important section of historical and contemporary documentation.

The preparation will take one year completing the following stages:

- Production of the exhibition concept with an historical text and bibliography
- Selecting the teams, (scientific and artistic committees), deliberations and mandates
- Selection of participating museums
- Selection of historical work (preparing requests for loans)
- Selection of contemporary artists (commissions of work)
- Selection of artistic events (productions)

- Develop the budget, financial structuring, negotiation with funders and potential partners

The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology and the Sophia Antipolis Foundation have expressed their willingness to support the preparation of the exhibition by financing the preliminary stages necessary for its organisation. Jean Gagnon of the Daniel Langlois Foundation and Don Foresta are responsible for the first preliminary phase.

Leonardo/The International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology has expressed its interest in contributing to the exhibition, in organising workshops, meetings and conferences exploring the central themes, also in providing publication venues through Leonardo magazine, the Leonardo Book Series at MIT Press and their web sites in Europe and MIT Press. The Association is presently developing a documentation project on those artists pioneering in technological innovation.

The Smithsonian Institute in Washington and the Visual Institute of the ZKM in Karlsruhe have also expressed an interest in the exhibition.

The exhibition will be aimed at industry as well as the general public. A suggestion was made that it could be inaugurated during the ITU Telecom Interactive in Geneva and then travel throughout the world to reach larger audiences.

* Marshall McLuhan, "Understanding Media", 1964, "Pour comprendre les médias", 1968, pages 84-85.

Contacts:

Jean Gagnon
fondlang@total.net

Don Foresta
foresta@wanadoo.fr